The Shadow Lines: The Creation of Nations Boundaries

*The Shadow Lines* (1988) is the second novel of Ghosh which focuses on the narrator’s family in Culcutta and Dhaka and their connection with an English family in London. Ghosh juxtaposes the lives of two different yet intertwined families— one Indian and one English— to question the boundaries between their cultural and geographical settings. The title allowed to the blurring of the lines between nations and families, as well as the blurred lines within one’s own self-identify. Ghosh depicts the characters of the novel as caught between two words and the struggle to come to terms with both their present lives as well as their past forms the core of the narrative.

*The Shadow Lines* is a highly innovative, complex and celebrated novel of Amitav Ghosh. It has won the prestigious *Sahitya Academy Award*. It is a book that captures the times and events of the permanent rapture that was caused by the partition of the country not only in terms of the division of the sub-continent but also with regard to the permanent dislocation of the individual psyche that it brought about. The novel is about the shadowy boundaries of nation states which have created real boundaries among individuals.

*The Shadow Lines* has come to be regarded as one of the canonical texts dealing with the experience of the partition of India. Not only literary critics but also some noted litterateurs have acclaimed it for what it has been able to achieve as work of art. Its focus is a fact of history, the post-partition scenario of violence; but its overall form is a subtle interweaving of fact, fiction and reminiscence. It is a novel in which Ghosh has realized his artistic conception of an art form, which is cohesive.
In *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh unfolds various notions of freedom represented by the characters in different time span. Ghosh’s brilliance manifest, as the readers experience, different places and times. The Sahitya Academy award winner has done justice to the novel as the characters are well defined and hold different notions of freedom, divided into two parts ‘Going Away’ and ‘Coming Home’ which has its own tangible significance. The protagonist Tridib is the narrator’s uncle his impact on ‘Undefined’ narrator’s life is significant. The ‘Undefined’ narrator gets the picture of outside world. The narrator was trained to look through the eyes of Tridib’s evidently highlighting narrator’s dependence on Tridib. The narrator was enveloped in the protective shell of his protagonist Tridib. Ghosh writes:

. . . working on Ph. D. in Archaeology something to do with sites associated with the sena dynasty of Bengal. But this earned him very little credit in my grandmother’s eyes. Being a school teacher herself she had an inordinate respect for academic work of any kind; she saw research as a life-long pilgrimage which ended with a named professorship and a marble bust in the corridors of Calcutta University or the National Library.(8)

Ghosh sees history as the trajectory of events that cause dislocations, disjunctions, movement and migrations and eventually replacing solid markers with shadow lines, destabilizing our notions of the past in the reverberations of the present. Hence, his narratives offer a sensitive and multifaced view on the contemporary problems of the world. He writes about when asked as to what extent his background as a historian, journalist, an anthropologist and has affected his work and whether his novels are entirely the works of fiction, he answered:

For me, the value of the novel, as a form, is that it is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life history, natural history, rhetoric, politics
beliefs, family, religion, love and sexuality. As I see it the novel is a metal form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kind of writing rendering meaningless the usual work day distinction between historian, journalist, anthropologist etc. (Ghosh, Caswell 8)

This highlights the generic heterogeneity as one of the most important characteristic feature of writing. It further enables him to retain sensitivity to the various kinds of discourses, voices and agents while narrating into existence the unforeseen connections between them. In his book The Shadow Lines Ghosh deals with issues of identity vs. nationhood, the representation of history and ultimately conclude that all borders are imaginary constraints. He dismantles history, the frontiers of nationality, culture and language. The novel is a manifestation of the desire to validate the post-colonial experience and to attempt a reconstruction of public history.

There is no such thing as objective or factual truth. All truth in our world is created by the context within which it is experienced or observed. The novel endeavors to reconstruct history on its own logic of individual memory and interpretation. The Shadow Lines depict the suffering, the death and devastation caused by a shadow line of division that could not undo the shadow line of connection. In the novel, the past merges fluidly with the present as it reflects the restlessness and turmoil of the times and its meaning in the present context. The novel deals with the history of the World War II, the freedom movement, the partition and the subsequent command outbreak. Amitav Ghosh explores the historical variables, the meaning of contemporary India, the cross culture friendship and feelings.

Ghosh as a traveler, travelling, therefore is not just between two geographical locations or two points in history, but is the ability to shift from experience to experience, both in terms of time and space imaginatively
replacing the shadow line between two people’s cultural and traditional
experiences in disparate geographical contexts and at discrete historical
junctures, and time surpassing into the formidable or forbidden domain of
people who are shattered higher or lower in the hierarchy of class and race.
Meenakshi Mukherjee says, “Real journeys within the country and imagined
travels to faraway places outside national boundaries have always fascinated
the Bengali middle class.” (*Maps and Mirrors: Co-ordinates Meaning in the
Shadow Lines* 257)

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh weaves the temporal and the spatial
dimensions into a personal texture on which the anonymous narrator builds
his identity. The narrator or the ‘I’ the central voice powerfully controls the
meaning and understanding of the novel. The novel narrates the history of an
Indian family that lives in Calcutta but has its roots in Dhaka on border of
Pakistan. The assassination of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 and
the violence and the unrest that have contributed the background of the
novel.

The story line juxtaposes the lives of two different families, one an
Indian family and the other an English family. This sort of story-structure
questions the boundaries between the people of the geographical setting that
they inhabit. The story that shifts from London to Calcutta to Dhaka is told
through the point of view of a contemporary Indian male, although the real
luminaries of the plot are the young man’s grandmother and his cousin,
Tridib. The stories interweave life in Dhaka before partition, life in London
during the war and the life the narrator leads in Calcutta during the 1960s
and his life in London of the 1970s. The anonymous narrator recounts in
flashback the people and places. Tridib had described to him twenty years
before and the heady life of modern London that signified the centre of the
universe. It is an undeniable fact that the narrator considers his imaginary reconstructions of the past as more real than that of the present. It is because he lives through the stories of other people. He strongly believes that the actual present alone can serve as an impulse for the narrative construction of memories. His outlook of life is quite contrary to that of his cousin Ila who believes the actual present alone is the real one unlike the narrator, she does not take refuge in the past.

The novel refers to the blurred lines between nations, land and families as well as within one’s own self-identity. Ghosh depicts the characters of the novel as caught between the two worlds. Hence they struggle to the core to come to terms with both their present as well as their past. Like Gandhi, Ghosh is opposed to the political discourse as well as the haphazard division of land and human communities that are required to form a nation. Ghosh’s tale dramatizes the dissimilar yet related cultures as well as the outward conflicts between friends and families that have been inflicted by geopolitical discord.

*The Shadow Lines* spans three generations of the narrator’s family spread over Calcutta, Dhaka, London and his English family friends, the pries, written against the back drop of the civil strife in the post-partition, East-Pakistan and riot-hit Calcutta. The narration of the incidents begin in 1939 (the year World War II broke out) and ends in 1964. The novel depicts riots at three levels. There are riots between religious communities within one nation or state, riots between religious communities in to states and there are riots between different communities and the government; Robi, one of the narrator’s cousins, describes his experience at the time of acting as a government official:
'I’d have to go out and make speeches to my policemen saying: You have to do your duty you have to kill whole villagers; if necessary. We have nothing against the people. It’s the terrorists we want to get, but we have to be willing to pay a price for our own unity and freedom. And I went back home I would find an anonymous note waiting for me saying: We’re going to get you for our freedom. It would be like reading my own speech transcribed on a mirror. (246-47)

Ironically, both the terrorist and the government troops are acting to secure their freedom, which as a construction of nationalist ideology, is only an illusion. Thus, with the eruption of cycle of violence both in India and East-Pakistan his boyhood experiences during wartime London and his violent death twenty five years later in Dhaka constitute the end point of the novel’s essential narrative.

The historical and ethnographical events revolve around Mayadebies’ family, their friendship and sojourn with the English friends and Tha’mma-the narrator’s grandmother’s links with Dhaka, her ancestral city. The novel takes us into mnemonic fund of a young narrator who as a wide eyed adolescent, hero worshipped his uncle Tridib who fed him on the memories of his one visit to London during the war and Tha’mma his grandmother, who shared with him her nostalgia of East Bengal where she was born and spent her childhood. And then there is Ila, the daughter of Tridib’s elder brother who travels all over the world with her diplomat globe-trotting parents and occasionally come home to tell the wonder struck by the account of her peregrinations aboard while the narrator’s experience is traveling in the mind through imagination. Ila’s experience of traveling is based on the actual traveling in person through reality. The narrator acknowledges that he has created his own secret man of the world. Their memories, says the narrator, “from a part of my secret map of the world, a map of which only I
know the keys and co-ordinates but which was not for that reason any more imaginary than the code of a safe to a banker.” (196)

The story of *The Shadow Lines* told in first person is of a growing boy who lives in the shadow of the man he idolizes; and of an individual’s drawn into history as well as social and political turbulence. Tridib gives the young boy *world to travel in and eyes to see them with*. Ila also contributes to the narrator’s voyage of self discovery. The narrator’s grandmother Tha’mma is the third pivotal character to the structure of this novel. It is through the vivid and almost an animate imagination of the world of an eight year old child, as an eight year old boy, the narrator sees England through the eyes of Ila and Tridib. Thus, there exist a subtle medium of sophisticated comment on current realities. It is ultimately the narrator’s growing imagination, empathy and intellectuality that lead to the exploration and understanding of complex themes in the novel.

The post-colonial approach of Ghosh propels him to portray the widespread prevalence of sadness in *The Shadow Lines*. There is the sadness of inaction, failure of materialism, disappointment, constant search for truth and identity, unrequited love, etc. similarly the theme of borders and maps occupies a prominent place in the post-colonial context of Ghosh because he believes that his people have suffered due to the divisions created by geographical boundaries. As the novelist has no faith in national borders and geographical cartography that divide and separate people, he considers that all as mere artificial lines created by the superficial politicians who have no genuine interest in the welfare of the people.

The novel also provides an insight into the history of colonization legacies. The death of the main character at the border is the realistic
portrayal of the suffering of the people who have to endure the pangs of separation and the aftermath as they move between the borders of homeland. Said echoes Ghosh’s opinion in culture and imperialism by describing imperialism as an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted and finally brought under control. A critic Mondal observes:

The publication of The Shadow Lines coincided with academic interest in the interrogation of nationalism and nation identity, which were fast developing into a major concern within post-colonialism criticism and post-colonial approach. Ghosh emerged as a unique literary genius whose innovative textual experiments offered new insights and openings into the cluster of conceptual theoretical concept that had been developed to describe, analyze and interpret the complex of colonial and post colonial relation. (The Publication of The Shadow Lines 164)

Thus, the post colonial history that is depicted in Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines reads history not from the centre but from the margin’s discarded spellings. It presents the history of the colonized people written by them in the language of the colonizer as a reply to the colonizer. Thereby he enabled the study and understanding of history and heritage of the post colonial nation from the point of the view of the colonized people rather than the colonizer. The point of the view of the colonized people reflecting the contemporary trend of post colonialism displaying resentment against the colonial regime is very much explicit in Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines.

Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines is best read as a novel that interrogates a political consciousness baptized in the crucible of national divides this theme reasonless with concern and orientations linked with the emergence of a new world situation brought about by a transformation
within the capitalist world economy. The trans-nationalism of the force of production and the widening cosmopolitan scope of the market are rapidly pushing the world beyond familiar national dimensions.

The most significant effect of this new world situation is that it has resulted in a reorganization of the earlier conceptualism of a social relationship particularly those in which the nation was taken for granted as the structural unit of political organization. Ghosh’s narrative which tears from one of the part of the globe to another with breathtaking speed collecting in the process within its global sweep artifact and experience from a different civilization and culture is a fictional rendering of such an international credo. It is a potent expression of a new civilization ethos conditioned by the overwhelming dynamics of globalization set into motion and propelled by the irresistible forces of international capitalism. The ability to create sense of community, according to Meenakshi Mukherjee, “The Shadow Lines is not only an attribute of the epic and the oral tale but one of the major powers of narrative fiction even today” (Review in India Today 17). In order to drive her point she observes:

All narratives are to be read in the context of a specific time and place but we must remember that while these narratives emerge out of a culture they also contribute towards the construction and definition of These culture, stories and communities are thus bound together in a symbolic relation, stories can draw people together, make them perceive how their present flows a common past. . . (18)

In the case of Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines what is posited as an ideal form of existence is ‘a world beyond nation’. The coming into being of such a world would be highly desirable from the point of view of the forces of international capitalism for such a world would automatically imply the
establishments of a global market free from the obstruction of national frontier that trend to impede the free flow commodities across the communities. In fact, the dynamics of globalization is so overwhelming and the tendency of nations to submit themselves to the power of capital is so obvious and common place that Eric Hosbown, the most eminent of the contemporary of the Anglophone sociologists, even goes to the extent of locating the nation on a declining curve of historical viability. He argues that ‘the nation is no longer a potent vector of historical development’. But the development in Eastern Europe during the last decade of 20th century and the various identity movements plaguing the earth demonstrate the myopic nature of Hasbown’s claim.

In Ghosh there appears to be awareness of this limitation of Hasbown’s argument, for he realizes the utopian dimension of the ideal of a world beyond nations. At the end of the novel Tridibe who aspires to become a global citizen-a man without a country -meets his tragic end at the hands of a rioting mob in Dhaka. His vision seems to succumb to the brute force of reality and it ultimately acquires a mythic rather than a realistic and plausible stature.

*The Shadow Lines* takes us across the international border, continents and culture, child time and adult time, past and present with such case that one is simply intrigued. In the novel, there are some epiphany moments or highpoints both at the personal and political level which suddenly illuminate such chunks of virtual time and life. Many of the important characters in the novel, the narrator and his grandmother, for instance are locked in specific historical moments so that for them the passage of time becomes irrelevant, for the old lady, her real home exist only in memory and she is unable to recognize Dhaka when she finally sees it, ‘where is Dhaka?’ is her
‘constraint refrain’. For the narrator too, all places, including Dhaka are alive in the present just as they exist in the past, through description given by others, “she had talked to me so often about that house and that lane I could see them myself, though only in patches for her memory had shame upon them with the uninterrupted brilliance of a light house beam.” (18)

Further, the text continuously subverts notions of truth- notions that are rooted in cultural, sociological and historical realities while it exposes the arbitrariness of many kind of lines, borders both personal and political, strangely the lines in the novel that divide people, places and realities are both not only arbitrary and shadow like but also fixed and difficult to cross. Although the personal and political are intertwined in this novel, the personal story really recedes into the background and it is the public face of the text that assumes primacy. In this complex fictional pattern, notion presents itself as a crucial strand on the reader’s sensibilities.

In *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh has woven fact and fiction in a complex absorbing narrative that mirror lives across nations and spans almost half a century of recent Indian history, examines the questions of fidelity and accountability of tradition and modernity of freedom and its evanescent quality. Ghosh believes that the atmosphere of violence created by religious fundamentalism in India is chilling and fearful. When the enemy is identified not as an outsider but one living within one’s own country, then the country can only be seen as going downhill.

We see such violence and chaos through the eyes of the uncomprehending innocent children. Religious riots suddenly breakout in Culcutta in free India. In their classroom, the children find it difficult to
concentrate upon their lesson. Voices could be heard outside the window, quit different from the orderly roar of demonstration:

A shout followed by another and another in a jaggedly random succession and then, suddenly, silence and just when they seemed to have died away, there they were, one voice, followed by a dozen, and there again a moment of silence. (201)

Ghosh’s novel incorporates all these traumas, Tha’mma, the narrator’s grandmother, born and brought up in Dhaka, has to accept the grim reality that after 1947, Dhaka is no longer her home she might have well asked, “who am I”? Am I an Indian merely because I am Hindu and live in Calcutta?” (82)

In Calcutta where she settle down after the sudden death of her husband, she lives in the less affluent locality of Bhowanipure, Dhaka, would remain a ‘home’ only in her memory, a ‘home’ that she could not go to. Ila longed for liberation, liberty from the restrictive custom that delimits individual activities.

Ila free from Indian custom and culture apparently leads an existing life aboard contrasting to the character sketch of narrator, Ila remains unimaginative and static as she fails to comprehend the emotion and passion in narrator. Ila devoid of roots attempts to find herself in insignificant political activities in London trying harder to be part of European history rather than being a part of her own country. Ila, a product of colonialism reject her roots, past and community which further makes her ‘greedy little slut’ in the eyes of the Tha’mma she’s gone there because she is greedy:‘she’s gone there for money’.
‘Lack of Rootedness’ and ‘Culture Contradiction’ in Ila, later makes her pay the price as she was cheated by milk price. She shrugs off the past with her notion of freedom that was merely viable in her own ‘make belief’ world “I’ve chosen to live in London? Do you see? It’s only because I want to be free. Free of what? I said free of you! She shouted back .Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you.” (88-89)

In contrast Tha’mma belongs to the generation that uprooted itself in 1947. Ghosh’s juxtaposition of history, realism with the notion of freedom is brilliantly manifested through the character of Tha’mma. Going back to the partition of Bengal Ghosh shows cases of Tha’mma’s character that was to run between her place of birth and her place of living. For Tha’mma’s freedom is something to be won through bloodshed and violence. Ghosh writes:

Do you really mean Tha’mma. I said, ‘you would have killed him? But I would have been frightened, she said. But I would have prayed for strength and god willing yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free’ Tha’mma imagination is enslaved to the notion of Nationalism. To be noted Tha’mma failed to see that nationalism and it’s her own notion of freedom that has destroyed her home. We have to kill them before they kill us. (87)

Unfortunately, Tha’mma failed to carry this out, an idealist who thought reality as fundamentally mental, mentally constructed, or otherwise immaterial, who dreamt world without boundaries was killed for Tridhibarbed boundaries and barriers were shadowy a mere construction of mind, ‘delusionality’. This view was farther supported by lunatic Ukil-babu who isn’t believed in India-Shindia; ‘it’s all very well, you’re going away now. But suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line
somewhere’? A brilliant relation can be drawn between Saddat Hussain to *Toba Tek Singh* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, a madman who fails to recognize boundaries and barriers over there behind barbed wire fence lay Hindustan and over here behind barbed wire lay Pakistan, in the middle on a strip of no man’s land lay *Toba Tek Singh*.

*The Shadow Lines* then sets out to uncover and confront fearful suppressed memories in an attempt to unsettle the simplified, seamless narrative of national identity. The unnamed narrator of *The Shadow Lines* comes in contact in different often contradictory, versions of national and cultural identity through the main character in the novel his grandmother, Tha’mma, his cousin, Ila and his uncles Tridiib and Robi. Growing up in an upwardly mobile middle class professional family in Calcutta, the narrator acquires the sensibility of a metropolitan, bilingual, English speaking post-colonial subject; his interactions with his cousin and uncles whose fathers are globetrotting diplomats, and his own stint in London for research work make his attitude and approach to issues of nation and culture more cosmopolitan. One of the most powerful influences in his life as a child, however, is his grandmother, a fiercely independent militantly nationalist woman.

Tha’mma is an embodiment of the national and cultural identity constructed by the dominant state ideology, which in turn is propped up by the accepted national historiography. Tha’mma is always presented usefully employed. Her austerity and rigid work, ethic forms an essential part of her idea of the modernity and progress of the country.

Ghosh uses the character of Tha’mma to serve as a mouthpiece for the dominant discourse of the nation, one that produces knowledge about
national identity by focusing on the moment of its birth through the blood-sacrifice of war and depends it in geo-political terms through its boundaries that serve to exclude others while bestowing unity and brotherhood on all those included within. He then exposes the instability of this discourse through Tha’mma’s nervous breakdown when she is forced to confront the falsity of her illusions.

Tha’mma’s settled convictions about nationality, religion and belonging start getting disturbed when she returns to her birthplace in Dhaka, Bangladesh, after a gap of many years and for the first time after partition firmly entrenched in the belief in notions effectively separated by borders. She is startled when told that she would not be able to see any dividing distinction between India and East-Pakistan from the plane since in the modern world borders are crossed within airports when disembarkation forms are filled out with information about nationality, date of birth, place of birth etc. The narrator says:

My grandmother’s eyes widened and she slumped back in her chair. . . It was not till many years later that I realized it had suddenly occurred to her then she would have to fill in ‘Dhaka’ as her place of birth on that form and the prospect of this had worried her because she liked things to be neat and in place and at that moment she had not been able quiet to understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality. (155)

Tha’mma’s quandary is paradigmatic for millions of people on the subcontinent, and it is an attempt to deal with this situation of being ‘messily at odds’ that the discourse of nationhood places emphasis on the corporeality of space and distance and places its faith in the infallibility of the shadow lines of border. Tha’mma finally loses her grasp on reality when Tridib is
killed in post-colonial Dhaka by a violent Muslim mob which has organized itself like other Hindu and Muslim mobs, across the borders, independently of the state war machinery. The Hindu-Muslim riots then, are a manifestation of violence that is not organized and contained by a state, indeed has escaped the authority and control of the government. The eruption of this violence lies outside the rhetoric of organized warfare with enemies across borders and thus destabilizes the settled discourse of nationhood. Piecing together the story of Tridib’s death many years later, the narrator says of the riots:

But for these things we can only use words of description when they happen and then fall silent, for to look for words of any other kind would be to give them meaning and that is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness. (228)

Ghosh makes his remarks on violence while recounting the events leading up to the killing of Tridib, Jethamosai and Khalil, the rikshaw-puller. The following song of John Lennon that stirred a generation might have inspired Ghosh when he created the character Tridib:

Imagine there’s no countries/ It isn’t hard to do/ Nothing to kill or die for/ And no religion too. Imagine all the people/ Living life in peace[…] Imagine no possession/ I wonder if you can/ need for greed or hunger/ A brotherhood of man/ Imagine all the people/ Sharing all the world. . . . (Arvind Chaudhary, Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines 80-81)

The last glimpse of Tha’mma in the novel is when the India-Pakistan war of 1965 is declared: she is standing with her hair hanging in wet ropes over her faces, eyes glazed, spectacles fallen off, smashing the glass front of
the radio and gouging out flesh and blood against it. She says hysterically, “we are fighting them properly at last, with tanks, guns and bombs.” (238)

Ghosh emphasizes the precariousness of the narrator’s class status as it depends solely on his access to an education. On a trip to visit poor relatives in a lower class section of Calcutta he says:

> It was that landscape that lent the note of hysteria to my mother’s voice who she drilled me for my examinations; it was to those slopes she pointed when she told me that if I didn’t study hard I would end up over there, that the only weapon people like us had was our brains and if we didn’t use them like claws to cling to what we’d got, that was there we’d end up, marooned in that landscape. (138)

The indication of the novel is very clear for the middle class society that education, knowledge and skill are the strong weapons in the hands of the poor or weaker section of the society; so it is need to strengthen so that the people can uplift their social and economic condition in society. In *Studies in Heterogeneity: A Reading of two Recent Indo-Anglian Novels*, P. K. Dutta argues:

> One of the preoccupations of this novel is the logic of one and its other, sameness and difference with its moorings in the epistemology of binaries. *(Studies in Heterogeneity 67)*

Dutta establishes his argument by focusing on the human relationships, which he sees as structured around the different families in the novel towards the end of the essay, Dutta asks:

> [But] what does one do with differences that are based on differential access to social power to which the institution of family is not immune? It is significant that Ghosh does not extend the problems that emerge from
the narrator’s social difference with his slum-dwelling refugee aunt. Further the capacity of the family as an institution to exercise oppression and control is not something that enters the terms of Ghosh’s enquiry. (70)

In this way we can say that the narrator tries to show the real picture of past with the help of different characters, live events of the past through his art of writing. His historical and ethnographical explanation of the past happenings which presents everything that is real and this is not only the past reality but the burning issues of the present world. The present world is totally under the grip of riot, terrorism, violence, cross-cultural crises, linguistic crises etc.

Ghosh’s art of writing seeks the contemporary challenges of the world. He tries to depict the problem that he faced in his life with the help of his characters in the present novel Tridib, Tham’ma etc.

Ghosh travelled across culture, continents and centuries the in print of time and culture remains embedded in a narrative. He tracks the presence of the Indian story telling and the elasticity of the form. In the present novel fictional fields such as history, ethnography and anthropology played an important role. About the concept of post-colonial novels of Ghosh, Partha Chatterjee writes:

The colonialist discourse we have heard so far is a discourse about women; women do not speak here. It is a discourse which assigns to women a place, a sign, an objectified value; women here are not subjects with a will and a consciousness. We now have to ask very different questions to allow women in recent Indian history to speak for them. (Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonial zed Women 622)
Ghosh narrates the past from multicultural multiple perspectives. He became a mouthpiece for usually silenced voices of the working and lower-middle class women, peasants, tribal peoples and other minorities. He opened the closed chapter of history and ethnography that show the free liberal collaborations with the Arab and Chinese world. In this context Meenakshi Mukharjee says:

> The construction of a nation is a two way process, entailing on the one hand a broad homogenization despite seeming difference; of what lies within the boundaries and a projection of aliveness upon what is situated outside. *(Maps and Mirrors 98)*

The novel details historical events and private tragedies recounting incidence of seventy years through the memory of the characters and their narrator, which is then recollected by the narrator to us. The novel fuses the differences between the self and one’s mirror image and provides an escape from the superficial shadow lines that divide people on the basis of their religious affinities. The narrative does not pass any judgment on events, people or their eccentricities leaving the readers to judge the novel by him or herself. Being a postmodernist novel, the conclusion is left open ended and no perceptive is forced up on the readers in the denouement. Thieme’s remark can be correctly used in concluding an analysis of Ghosh’s novel:

> In a boundary between territories, between history and fiction, he has managed to develop a mode of writing, which, despite the generic variety of clinches of post-colonial theorizing and yet consistently addresses the issues that such theorizing has fore grounded as central. *(The Journals of Commonwealth Literature 46)*

The meandering, lopsided and asymmetrical narrative puzzles the reader and is equally interesting. The fun in the reading is putting the jigsaw
puzzle together and coming to a conclusion. Ghosh also exhibits an interest in the nature of language, sexuality and discourse and the ways in which human perception, comprehension, and experience is invariably shaped and to varying degrees, determined by them. The narrator is able to understand the true meaning of life and attains maturity with the realization that the division, boundaries and borders present in the world are purely shadows and one can transcend and traverse these confining and dividing man-made borders through imagination and creativity. The novel can be read as an inverted bildungsroman, a coming of age of the narrator through pain, violence and suffering. He learns that the ability and freedom to tell one’s own story in his own words without being trapped in other’s arbitrary stories make a person truly free a kind of freedom that is timeless and known no restricting borders. “Everyone lives in the story. . . Because stories are all there are to live in, it was just a question of which one you choose.” (109)

Amitav Ghaosh’s _The Shadow Lines_ is a story that arises out of the narrator’s reminiscences recollected in tranquility and looked at with all the wisdom of the hind - sight. In his _Modern Political Geography_, Richard Muir defines, “Boundaries occur where the vertical interfaces between state sovereignties intersect the surface of the earth. . . As vertical interfaces, boundaries have no horizontal extent. (Modern Political Geography 172)

‘Real’ life enters fiction and a history treads cautiously into the orbit of narration when a historical novel touches a real life event. _The Shadow Lines_ is woven around the historically real incidents with complete details of their occurrence everything is treated in such a manner that the reader is forced to suspend all disbelief effortlessly. Ghosh’s treatment of history in Calcutta and in Dhaka is so vivid and centre of east and west especially through the characters like Tridib, May Price, Nicke etc. _The Shadow Lines_
interweaves fact, fiction and reminiscence exploring issues of nationhood and diasporas of language in India. Amitav Ghosh explores the ideas of nationhood and diasporas, ideas that involve relationships between individuals belonging to the same or to different communities that sometimes transgress and transcend the shadow lines of political borders.

*The Shadow Lines* probably represents Ghosh’s most direct confrontation with nationalism and national identity. A man’s entire entity of present, past as well as future is associated with his own country or native land or homeland. *The Shadow Lines* is a narrative of events which are related to each other. Most of the narrative in the physical world is set in Calcutta, Delhi and London and at often time uses as backgrounds, various historical events that defined the Indian Sub-continent like *The Swadeshi Moment*, the partition of India and the communal riots of 1963-64 in Calcutta and Dhaka and also to some extent of *The World War II*. The novel at it very outset has a multicultural and multispectral appeal. Timothy Brennan writes:

> Race, geography, tradition, language, size or some combination of these seem finally insufficient for determining national essence, and yet people dies for nations, fight wars for them, and write fictions on their behalf.”

*(Post-Colonial Novels 49)*

Ghosh’s text dramatically demonstrates how quickly people are separated by the creation of border lines. Apart from their engagement with history and ethnography, Ghosh’s works also contain a wealth of almost encyclopedic information on other subjects. If in *The Circle of Reason* we find ornithology, phrenology, the etymology of cotton, *The Calcutta Chromosome* has microbiology, genetics, and linguistics and computer science. *The Glass Palace* shows familiarity with teak logging, elephant lore,
rubber plantations, photography, jungle warfare and regimental traditions in the army, while changing automobile models mark the passage of time. These elements are introduced smoothly into the narratives: there is no pedantry as showing off, just the joy of discovering and sharing knowledge.

The very simple idea of crossing borders, in practice as well as in the imagination, with the stories of far-off places, is a hallmark of Ghosh’s writing, although writing specifically about Indian partition, India’s harsh social realities, or as a mindless celebration of the cultural ‘hybridity’ promoted by globalization. Gyanendra Pandey writes about the novel:

What is involved here is more than the drawing of new lines on a map, the unfurling of new national flags and the installation of a new national government. What we are dealing with is the tearing apart of individuals, families, home, villages and linguistic and cultural communities that would have been called nationalities; and the gradual realization that this tearing apart was permanent and that is necessitated new borders, communities, identities and histories. (The Three Partition of 1947 in Remembering Partition, Violence 21-22)

Indeed The Shadow Lines approaches the destructive power of borders by exploring the 1971 creation of Bangladesh, the split that solidified erst while East- Pakistan’s political sovereignty and its permanent break from Pakistan and India. The novel proceeds to highlight the suffering and destruction caused by partition rather than credit the political independence of the new nation.

The contradiction inherent in the term ‘nation’ is projected through the complex form of this novel. Although the nation is crucial to the conceptualization scope and structure of The Shadow Lines, somewhere along the way it becomes an elusive and shadow entity, as the principal
protagonist in the drama are unable to make sense of its resonant contradiction.

In the present novel the grandmother who had passionately clung on to her space in the historical narrative, and who understands the forces of history seeing them as catalysts of social change, is dead; and the younger persons in the novel are unwilling to take on the mantle at this stage. They want to be individual rather than be aggressive citizens with unconditional allegiance to the nation state. Ila, Robi and the narrator different versions of the post-colonial Indian, try to grapple with the reality in their own way although they would like to believe that the boundaries between nations are like shadow lines, they find that precisely these shadow lines precipitate divisiveness and violence.

The form of the novel may be linked to a complex jigsaw puzzle with its piece seemingly with haphazard randomness but it really has a carefully crafted structure. Both the narrator and the reader discover through this artistic form that the world is not a simple place that can be seen in an atlas. Though the solid lines that divide the nation may not be clearly visible, they are in fact an inexorable fact, as they lead to political aggression and violent bloodshed. *The Shadow Lines* remains incomplete without looking at the class-politics of the novel. A very distinct class line that can be found in the novel is the characterization and in the event and in the narratives.

*The Shadow Lines* makes impossible coexistence and disrupted metaphysical boundaries into real struggles both for its narrator and its readers. In the first section of the novel Ghosh examined the process of ‘going away’, of the dispersal of his characters across continents and how interpersonal bonds across cultural boundaries can/cannot be sustained. In
the section ‘coming home’, he examined the backdrop of political events spanning about two decades, the post-colonial culture displacement and the loss of the cultural communality of the subcontinent. Points of fixity which were earlier determined by one’s birth or one’s home or even one’s country have now become shadow lines. The novel is full of symbolic references to houses, old and new, maps and mirrors, borders and boundaries; all these symbols in one way or the other deal with the theme of man’s search for identity, his search for his roots.

*The shadow Lines* concerns the actions of the principle characters, specifically how we can equate May and Nick’s behavior to the English treatments of India. Ghosh also uses the theme of architecture to address political questions of partition and post-colonial diasporas. The novel furthermore addresses the gap in thinking between India and England by highlighting how the interpretation of an event is affected by the nationality of the observer.

Ghosh draws attention to the separation created by borderlines expounding on the ‘divide to unite’. In case the illusion to India was not explicit enough the narrator adds, “in 1947 came partition, and Dhaka became the capital of East Pakistan. There was no question of going back after that . . .” (125)

Indeed, Indian partition is the closing moment for the family history, as it is no longer possible to seek reunification. *The Shadow Lines* demonstrates how Indian identity is shaped by the 1947 and 1971- partitions and the ensuing creation of borderlines. Here ethnographical approaches are very strong behind the partition on the basis of history as the grandmother and Jethamoshai; both the characters are created by their understanding of
historical spaces and entities. These are spaces which they are unable to transgress for their grandchildren; the power of the borderlines continues to provide a shaping influence, which, for most of the character, is an accepted part of life. In this sense, the novel balances discourses of personal identity struggle with national and political issues, exploring both the creation of nation, nationality, and nationalism while also probing personal identity constructions.

The combination of interiority and exteriority makes the novel a particularly rich post-colonial text that demands reading on several levels. Ultimately, Ghosh’s work succeeds in exploring the creation of identity by investing the shadowy black line on the map, a line that conceptualizes where one branch of humanity begins and another ends. This discovery is particularly useful because in this instance, it is specifically the national boundaries that create national history and ethnography based nationalistic identity constructions. The novel goes beyond merely presenting the problem by posing challenges to this phenomenon namely in the imaginative power to deconstruct these shaping influences and transgress them. In his article *Are there Good and Bad Nationalisms*, David Brown has pointed out: the illiberal atavistic cast of ethno-cultural nationalism and the progressive nature of civic nationalism. The nation has been described as ‘Janus-faced.’ (Brown, *Are There Good and Bad Nationalism*; Nations and Nationalism 127) As Anne McClintock puts it:

The temporal anomaly within nationalism [...] nostalgia for the past and the sloughing off of the past – is typically resolved by figuring the contradiction as a natural division of gender. Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition [...] Men by contrast; represent the progressive agent of national modernity. (Cusack, *Janus and Gender* 545)
Ghosh is addressing crucial issues concerning the writing, and the role of historiography in relation to the ways in which historical and ethnographical national identity are constructed. He is attempting to uncover the silence and omission of the dominant historiography and the influence of these suppressed memories on the commonly received notions about the nation and it are past. The rewriting of history has acquired an urgent due to its appropriation and dubious revision by political parties and more significantly its use in election campaigns and in inciting inter religion hostilities. Ghosh attempts to represent a past, and an ethnographical identity, that is multilayered, complex, and interwoven rather than binaries.

Ghosh an amazing writer who writes about the history and ethnography so vividly that reader seems to believe that story in real. He uses his narrating technique so effectively that no one stops himself to praise his style and themes which he uses in his all works. Culture differentiation is scattered in his novel In an Antique Land and in the present novel also. Out of a complex web of memories, relationships and images Amitav Ghosh depicts in an absurd manner in which ‘your home can suddenly become your enemy’. The discussion can very well be completed with the comments of A. K. Ramanujam:

*The Shadow Lines*  weaves together personal lives and public events. . . with an art that I think is rare . . . The book is ambitious, funny, poignant (Ghosh) evokes things Indian with an inwardness that is little and darkened by an intimacy with elsewhere. (*A Lecture on Anglo-Indian Novels* 36)

This is not a story of the grandmother or Jethamoshai, but it is the story of special kind of historical and ethnographical concepts of past realities and happenings. It is the story of every man who turns between the
past and the present, between the nation and the state, between the motifs of history and ethnography etc. The novel ends but does not conclude. It raises serious questions about our roots, our identities and at the same time questions, “Why War? Why Riot? Why Partition? Why Borders? Why Shadow Lines?” (Malathi, *Post-Modernism in Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines* 66)