

Liminal Subjectivities and the Cartography of Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract: *Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines presents a complex and compelling study of identity, belonging and cultural hybridity in a postcolonial context. Through characters like Tridib, the narrator, Ila and Tha'mma, Ghosh explores how diasporic consciousness and fragmented and liminal geographies shape multicultural identities. Drawing on the theories of Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Benedict Anderson and Salman Rushdie, this paper explores how the novel navigates the in-between space of postcolonial hybridity. The study also integrates recent critical perspectives about postcolonial memory, narrative and the politics of borders, demonstrating how The Shadow Lines remains a relevant and powerful text in contemporary literary studies.*

Keywords: Postcolonial Identity, Cultural Hybridity, Diaspora and Memory, Multiculturalism in Literature, Borders and Belonging

1. Introduction

Postcolonial literature often grapples with questions of identity, belonging and the legacy of colonialism. In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh interrogates the arbitrariness of political borders and the instability of cultural identities. The novel, structured as a series of memories and stories recounted by an unnamed narrator, moves between Calcutta, Dhaka and London, blurring geographical and temporal boundaries. This paper argues that Ghosh portrays postcolonial identity as inherently hybrid, shaped by cultural collisions and personal dislocations. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space", Frantz Fanon's notion of mimicry and alienation, and Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, this paper examines how Ghosh's characters embody the contradictions of multicultural belonging.

2. Literature Review

Recent scholarship has expanded our understanding of *The Shadow Lines* as a postcolonial narrative of memory and identity. Shashikant Suryawanshi emphasises the role of memory in constructing hybrid diasporic identities, noting that "personal histories in Ghosh's novel often counter official narratives" (Suryawanshi 45). M. Prabakar and M. Rajaram highlight the fluidity of borders in the novel, arguing that Ghosh critiques the nation-state's fixation on rigid boundaries (Prabakar and Rajaram 12).

Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity provides a foundational lens for reading Ghosh's characters. According to Bhabha, hybridity is a site of negotiation, where the colonised subject inhabits a "third space" that destabilises colonial authority (Bhabha 56). Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, discusses the psychological impact of colonial mimicry, asserting that the colonised subject "will find himself neither here nor there" (Fanon 89). Meanwhile, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* offers a useful framework for understanding the novel's treatment of nationalism and identity. Anderson argues that nations are socially constructed through shared narratives and collective imagination (Anderson 6). These theories collectively inform our

understanding of the hybrid, fragmented identities in *The Shadow Lines*.

3. Analysis

In *The Shadow Lines*, characters struggle with questions of belonging, identity and the meaning of freedom. Ila, for example, represents the paradox of cosmopolitanism. Raised in international settings, she is physically mobile but emotionally unmoored. She marries an Englishman and lives in London, seeking freedom from the constraints of Indian social norms. Yet, her rootlessness renders her culturally alienated. As the narrator observes, "She wanted to be free... a freedom that is really rootlessness" (Ghosh 89). Ila's dislocation aligns with Fanon's theory of mimicry, where the colonised attempts to imitate the coloniser but ends up in a state of ambivalence and psychological fragmentation.

Tha'mma, in contrast, clings to nationalist ideals. Her distress at writing "Dhaka" as her place of birth underscores her discomfort with a fractured identity. She cannot reconcile the idea that her birthplace has become foreign due to partition: "She liked things to be neat and in place... she could not understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality" (Ghosh 151). This disorientation highlights the instability of identity in the face of geopolitical changes, resonating with Anderson's idea that national identity is an imagined construct.

Tridib and the narrator, by contrast, embrace hybridity through imagination. Tridib teaches the narrator to "use his imagination with precision", constructing vivid geographies from stories rather than maps. This mental migration allows them to transcend fixed boundaries. As Bhabha suggests, the "third space" is a realm of cultural negotiation and resistance. The narrator's identity is shaped not by physical movement but by the imaginative reconstruction of space and time. For him, belonging is not tied to geography but to narrative.

The Price family, particularly May Price, serves as a bridge between the coloniser and the colonised. Ghosh avoids portraying them as mere agents of imperialism; instead, he humanises them and integrates them into the Indian narrative.

May's tragic involvement in Tridib's death symbolises the entanglement of colonial histories with postcolonial realities. According to Pooja Sancheti, May's role reflects "the emotional and historical costs of cross - cultural engagement in a postcolonial world" (Sancheti 27).

One of the most powerful scenes in the novel involves Ila's confrontation with patriarchal norms in a nightclub. When she attempts to dance with a stranger, Robi physically restrains her, stating, "Girls don't behave like that here. . . That's our culture; that's how we live" (Ghosh 88). Ila's retort – "Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London?. . . because I want to be free" (89) – exemplifies her rejection of restrictive cultural expectations. Yet, her freedom is undercut by her isolation, suggesting that cultural hybridity is both enabling and disorienting.

The novel also critiques the notion of borders as definitive markers of identity. The 1964 riots, which claim Tridib's life, reveal the arbitrariness and violence of these divisions. Prabakar and Rajaram argue that Ghosh "uses personal tragedy to expose the fallacy of political boundaries" (14). The titular "shadow lines" symbolise these illusory separations, which exist more in the imagination than in reality.

The narrator ultimately comes to understand that identity is constructed through stories, memories and relationships, rather than geography. His cosmopolitan consciousness allows him to "belong" to multiple cultures without being fully claimed by any. This resonates with Rushdie's assertion that "our identity is at once plural and partial... we straddle two cultures, at other times, we fall between two stools" (Rushdie 15).

4. Conclusion

The Shadow Lines offers a rich exploration of postcolonial identity through its nuanced portrayal of hybridity, displacement and memory. Characters like Ila, Tha'mma, Tridib and the narrator illustrate the complexities of multicultural existence in a world defined by historical trauma and fluid borders. By drawing on the theories of Bhabha, Fanon, Anderson and Rushdie, this paper has shown how Ghosh constructs a narrative that both critiques and transcends the limitations of nationalist discourse. As contemporary societies grapple with questions of migration, identity and belonging, *The Shadow Lines* remains a profoundly relevant and insightful text.

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