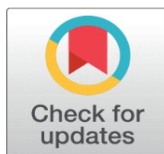
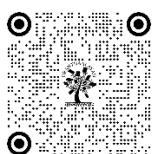


ANALYZING BINARIES AND BOUNDARIES IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE SHADOW LINES

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the intricate interplay of binaries and boundaries within the novel. Amitav Ghosh masterfully explores the fluidity of identity and the arbitrary nature of borders, both physical and psychological. Through a fragmented narrative that intertwines personal and historical timelines, Ghosh challenges the reader to reconsider the distinctions between reality and imagination, past and present, and self and other. The novel's structure, divided into "Going Away" and "Coming Home," reflects the blurred lines between these concepts, as characters navigate their identities amidst shifting political and social landscapes. The protagonist's journey, marked by his identification with his mentor Tridib and his eventual union with May, underscores the theme of interconnectedness that transcends geographical and temporal boundaries. The metaphor of 'shadow lines' serves as a powerful symbol of the illusory divisions that separate people and places, highlighting the shared human experiences that unite them. By examining the characters' struggles with displacement, memory, and belonging, this paper aims to shed light on Ghosh's critique of nationalism and the concept of fixed identities. The analysis will focus on how the novel's fragmented structure and narrative techniques underscore the interconnectedness of individual lives and broader socio-political contexts. Ultimately, this paper argues that *The Shadow Lines* asserts the transformative power of imagination in transcending the limitations imposed by arbitrary boundaries, offering a nuanced perspective on identity, and belonging in a postcolonial world.

Keywords: Binaries, Boundaries, Identity, Borders, Fragmented Narrative, Interconnectedness, Displacement, Memory, Belonging, Nationalism, Postcolonial Imagination

1. INTRODUCTION

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh masterfully employs the novel form to articulate his political vision, one that critically examines the significance of freedom and isolation on both personal and societal levels. Ghosh's narrative technique, described by Meenakshi Mukherjee as a "zigzag in narration jumbling the past, present and future," traverses a vast temporal and geographical landscape. This includes pre-independent undivided India, Britain during the Second World War, and contemporary India, Britain, and Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan). Through this intricate narrative structure, Ghosh underscores the futility and inherent meaninglessness of the metaphorical 'shadow lines' that divide people and nations. From a historical perspective, the narrator perceives these divisions as inseparable and identical, akin to one's reflection in a mirror. The 'shadow lines' serve as a potent metaphor for the illusory boundaries that separate individuals who share profound commonalities, to the extent that they appear as reflections of one another. The novel thus enables the protagonist to recognize and transcend these divisions, suggesting a deeper interconnectedness that defies the superficial separations imposed by political and social constructs. Ghosh's exploration of these themes is not merely a critique of geopolitical boundaries but also a profound commentary on the human condition. By juxtaposing personal narratives with historical events, he reveals how individual lives are inextricably linked to larger political movements. The novel's fragmented structure mirrors the fragmented nature of memory and

history, challenging the reader to piece together a coherent understanding of the past and its impact on the present. Furthermore, Ghosh's portrayal of the interaction between public and private realms highlights the complex interplay between personal identity and collective history. The characters' experiences reflect the broader socio-political changes occurring around them, illustrating how personal and public spheres are intertwined. This interplay is particularly evident in the way Ghosh addresses themes of displacement and belonging, as characters navigate their identities in a world marked by shifting borders and allegiances. By questioning the relevance of freedom and isolation, Ghosh invites readers to reconsider the nature of these concepts in a globalized world. The novel suggests that true freedom lies not in isolation but in recognizing and embracing the interconnectedness of all human experiences. Through his nuanced portrayal of characters and events, Ghosh challenges the reader to reflect on the arbitrary nature of boundaries and the potential for transcending them through empathy and understanding.

Beginning in the colonial era, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* intricately weaves the narratives of two families: the Dutta-Chaudhuris of Bengal and the Prices of London. Their relationship spans three generations and involves numerous journeys between India and England. Despite the stark differences in disposition and circumstances between the narrator's displaced grandmother, Thamma, and her sister, Mayadevi, the two-family lines converge through blood relations. The child narrator poignantly observes them smiling "in exactly the same way as though there was a mirror between them," symbolizing the deep, albeit complex, connection between the families. The novel thus embarks on a quest for reconciliation across borders. The 'shadow lines' in the novel serve as powerful metaphors for the boundaries that separate reality from imagination, events from memories, and the past from the present. The narrator-protagonist endeavours to blur these lines, seeking to transcend the limitations they impose. The child narrator, who closely identifies with his mentor Tridib, confesses, "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with." Even before physically leaving Calcutta, his imagination had already transported him to distant places like Cairo and Colombo. Tridib had instilled in him a desire that could transcend "the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and even... to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror." In *The Shadow Lines*, distance is perceived as a challenge to be overcome through imagination and desire, until the concept of space itself dissolves. The protagonist's attempts to cross these invisible demarcations between reality and imagination result in a more profound understanding of the world than that of Ila. This process of crossing boundaries is facilitated by the narrator's continuous fusion with Tridib, as he admits, "I had decided that he looked like me." Ghosh's narrative technique, which intertwines personal and historical timelines, underscores the interconnectedness of individual lives and broader socio-political contexts. The novel's fragmented structure reflects the fragmented nature of memory and history, compelling the reader to piece together a coherent understanding of the past and its influence on the present. Through this intricate tapestry of personal and collective experiences, Ghosh challenges the reader to reconsider the arbitrary nature of boundaries and the potential for transcending them through empathy and understanding.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the 'shadow lines' serve as metaphorical representations of the boundaries that separate reality from imagination, events from memories, and the past from the present. The narrator-protagonist endeavours to blur these lines, seeking to transcend the limitations they impose. The child narrator, who closely identifies with his mentor Tridib, confesses, "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with." Even before physically leaving Calcutta, his imagination had already transported him to distant places like Cairo and Colombo. Tridib had instilled in him a desire that could transcend "the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and even... to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror." In *The Shadow Lines*, distance is perceived as a challenge to be overcome through imagination and desire, until the concept of space itself dissolves. The protagonist's attempts to cross these invisible demarcations between reality and imagination result in a more profound understanding of the world than that of Ila. This process of crossing boundaries is facilitated by the narrator's continuous fusion with Tridib, as he admits, "I had decided that he looked like me." Ghosh's narrative technique, which intertwines personal and historical timelines, underscores the interconnectedness of individual lives and broader socio-political contexts. The novel's fragmented structure reflects the fragmented nature of memory and history, compelling the reader to piece together a coherent understanding of the past and its influence on the present.

In the novel, Amitav Ghosh illustrates how people respond to similar events in similar ways, transcending national boundaries. This theme is poignantly highlighted through two of Tridib's stories. The first recounts Mayadevi's conversation with Lionel during her visit to London in 1939. She observed that the impending war had fostered a sense of charity and solidarity among people. Tresawsen, who had recently returned from Germany, remarked, "it's the same over there—in Germany. It was odd coming back here—like stepping through a looking glass." This comparison

underscores the universal human response to crisis, suggesting that empathy and communal support are not confined by geography. The second story draws a parallel between the Blitz in London and the riots in Calcutta. Both events are marked by public violence and the resultant anxiety of mothers for their children's safety. Whether it is the fear of poisoned water tanks or bombs hidden in coffee tins, the maternal instinct to protect transcends time and place, uniting people across different contexts. This connection between disparate events highlights the shared human experience of fear and the instinct to safeguard loved ones. Ghosh's narrative thus challenges the notion of rigid national boundaries by emphasizing the commonalities in human behaviour. The metaphor of the looking glass is particularly significant, as it suggests that despite apparent differences, people on either side of a conflict or border are reflections of each other. This idea is further reinforced by the novel's exploration of memory and imagination, where the past and present, reality and perception, intermingle to reveal deeper truths about human nature. By weaving these stories into the broader tapestry of the novel, Ghosh not only critiques the artificial divisions imposed by political borders but also celebrates the resilience and solidarity that emerge in times of crisis. The shared experiences of fear, empathy, and communal support serve as a testament to the interconnectedness of human lives, challenging readers to reconsider the arbitrary lines that divide us. Through this nuanced portrayal, Ghosh invites a critical reflection on the nature of boundaries and the potential for transcending them through shared human experiences.

Amitav Ghosh further employs the historical contexts of the Chinese aggression of 1962 and the Indo-Pak War of 1965 to underscore the complexities and ironies of conflicts fought by people in regions that were once unified. The narrator's grandmother, Thamma, who resides in Calcutta but was born in Dhaka, struggles to reconcile how her birthplace has become so discordant with her national identity. Ghosh evokes a profound sense of distrust, loneliness, and fear that arises from the dissonance between "oneself and one's image in the mirror." For safety, Thamma attempts to persuade her elderly uncle, Jethamoshai, to relocate to India in 1964. However, he staunchly refuses, declaring, "I don't believe in this India-Shindia... you're going away now, but suppose when you get there, they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? ...I was born here, I'll die here." Jethamoshai's refusal to accept these 'shadow lines' highlights the arbitrary nature of political borders. Through the tragic deaths of Jethamoshai and Tridib during the civil strife in Dhaka, which was triggered by riots in Srinagar, Thamma reluctantly learns that borders, while intended to affirm differences, also serve to confirm identities. The Indian subcontinent, amidst civil strife, violent riots, and looming war, becomes "a land of looking glass events." The distances between cities become inconsequential as the narrator unravels the mystery of Tridib's demise. The repercussions of the Srinagar incident extend across national borders, revealing that 'distance' is not a tangible substance but an illusory concept. The narrator later measures the distances between cities on Tridib's atlas, placing countries within a compass circle, and discovers that so-called foreign cities are closer to Calcutta than Delhi. The events surrounding Tridib's death further illustrate those cities like Dhaka and Calcutta, despite the 'shadow lines' that demarcate them as separate national entities, remain intimately connected. The narrator reflects, "I in Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka... each city was the inverted image of the other." The novel's fragmented structure reflects the fragmented nature of memory and history, compelling the reader to piece together a coherent understanding of the past and its influence on the present. Through this intricate tapestry of personal and collective experiences, Ghosh challenges the reader to reconsider the arbitrary nature of boundaries and the potential for transcending them through empathy and understanding.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh frequently underscores the sense of likeness, suggesting both closeness and similarity among characters. The narrator's gaze upon his beautiful cousin Ila evokes a memory: "when we were children, she and I were so alike that I could have been her twin." This resemblance hints at his growing longing for her. Despite Thamma's disdain for Ila, whom she labels a 'whore,' and Ila's reciprocal hatred, calling Thamma a 'fascist,' they share common ground. Ila, as a product of colonialism, rejects her past and community, striving in vain to internalize and participate in the colonizer's world. Conversely, Thamma embodies the dangers and emptiness of distorted nationalism, freedom, and selfhood. Both characters suffer from a profound sense of exclusion from 'home.' Thamma's failure prefigures Ila's rootlessness, as both are devoid of a natural home and seek to create one in vain. Their passionate quests for freedom are misinterpreted—either as an escape from the past and its constraints or as something to be achieved through 'violence and bloodshed.' This leads to lives that are ultimately unfulfilled and destructive. Thamma's attempt to free Jethamoshai from his roots on either side of the border, "drawn with the heroic blood of the struggler," culminates in the tragic deaths of Jethamoshai and Tridib. This mirrors the destruction of Nick, Ila, and her hope of creating a home alien to her roots. Ghosh's narrative technique, which intertwines personal and historical timelines, underscores the interconnectedness of individual lives and broader socio-political contexts. The novel's fragmented structure reflects the fragmented nature of memory and history, compelling the reader to piece together a coherent understanding of the past

and its influence on the present. Through this intricate tapestry of personal and collective experiences, Ghosh challenges the reader to reconsider the arbitrary nature of boundaries and the potential for transcending them through empathy and understanding. The sense of likeness and the shared struggles of Thamma and Ila highlight the complexities of identity and belonging in a postcolonial world. Their experiences reflect the broader themes of displacement and the search for home, illustrating how personal and political histories are deeply intertwined. Ghosh's exploration of these themes invites a critical reflection on the nature of freedom and the ways in which it is sought and understood. Through the characters' journeys, the novel delves into the profound impact of colonialism and nationalism on individual lives, revealing the enduring quest for identity and belonging amidst shifting borders and allegiances.

Thamma has long dismissed memory as useless, asserting, "Nostalgia is a weakness... it is everybody's duty to forget the past and look ahead." However, her return to Dhaka reveals her inability to draw a clear line between past and present. Ultimately, she realizes that her childhood Dhaka exists only in her memories. The deaths of Tridib and Jethamoshai further illuminate the futility of her concept of 'freedom.' Robi, while recounting the details of Tridib's death, articulates that contemporary violence stems from a senseless pursuit of freedom: "Why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It is a mirage... How can anyone divide a memory? If freedom were possible, surely Tridib's death would have set me free." Both Robi and May's inability to free themselves from Tridib's memory underscores the impossibility of achieving true private and political freedom. No lines of demarcation can separate memory from existence. Thamma's journey back to Dhaka, intended as a quest for closure, instead becomes a poignant exploration of the inextricable link between past and present. Her realization that her childhood home is now only a fragment of her memory highlights the enduring impact of historical and personal events on individual identity. Ghosh's narrative technique, which intertwines personal and historical timelines, underscores the interconnectedness of individual lives and broader socio-political contexts. The novel also critiques the notion of freedom as an absolute concept. Thamma's and Robi's experiences reveal that freedom is often an illusion, complicated by historical, social, and personal factors. The idea that drawing new lines or renaming places could change anything is dismissed as a mirage, emphasizing the futility of such attempts to impose order on the chaotic and intertwined nature of human existence. Through the characters' struggles, Ghosh invites readers to reflect on the deeper meanings of freedom and the ways in which it is sought and understood in a world marked by division and conflict.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh illustrates how the distance in time and place becomes immaterial in uniting or separating people by highlighting the similarities between two houses: Mrs. Price's London house with its cellar and the Raibazar house with its underground room. As children, both Ila and the narrator played in the underground room of Ila's ancestral house. This room reminded Ila of the cellar in Mrs. Price's house, where she played with her son Nick. In London, the narrator finds himself twice left alone with Ila in the cellar room, each time evoking memories of the underground room in the Raibazar house and his feelings of being overshadowed by Nick. The 'looking-glass' image is employed to illuminate the narrator's relationship with Nick, whom he perceives as his rival. Despite never having met Nick, the narrator feels Nick's presence as a constant, spectral figure in his life, "growing with me but always bigger and better." This rivalry is not just a personal struggle but also a reflection of the broader themes of identity and belonging that permeate the novel. The recurring motif of the 'looking-glass' serves as a metaphor for the ways in which characters perceive themselves and others. The narrator's sense of rivalry with Nick, despite the physical and temporal distances between them, highlights the illusory nature of these boundaries. This rivalry also underscores the narrator's internal struggle with his own identity and self-worth, as he constantly measures himself against an idealized version of Nick. By drawing parallels between the two houses and the experiences of the characters within them, Ghosh emphasizes the universal nature of human experiences and the ways in which they transcend geographical and temporal boundaries. The novel invites readers to reflect on the deeper connections that bind people together, regardless of the distances that separate them.

Thamma's astonishment at the lack of visible markers such as "trenches, soldiers, guns pointing at each other, or even just a barren strip of land" between India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) reveals the deeper truth that 'shadow lines' are not merely physical but also psychological. These lines exist within people's minds, fostering the belief that "across the border there existed another reality." The partition of India was a profound shock, as it could "exclude people on the other side of the border but could not include everybody on this side of paradise" (Sharmila Majumdar). This highlights the arbitrary and often cruel nature of such divisions. In the narrator's diasporic perspective, these 'shadow lines' are blurred. The relief work, organization of peace marches, newspaper reporting, mutual accusations, and

ultimate sacrifices by both Hindus and Muslims reflect a mirror image of each other. These actions reveal the shared humanity and common struggles that transcend national boundaries. The narrator's outlook challenges the notion of rigid borders, suggesting that the true divisions lie in the minds and perceptions of people rather than in physical demarcations.

Ghosh's narrative technique, which intertwines personal and historical timelines, underscores the interconnectedness of individual lives and broader socio-political contexts. The novel's fragmented structure reflects the fragmented nature of memory and history, compelling the reader to piece together a coherent understanding of the past and its influence on the present. Through this intricate tapestry of personal and collective experiences, Ghosh challenges the reader to reconsider the arbitrary nature of boundaries and the potential for transcending them through empathy and understanding. The novel also critiques the concept of nationalism and the idea that borders can define identity. Thamma's confusion about the lack of visible markers between India and East Pakistan symbolizes the deeper, more insidious divisions that exist within people's minds. These internal 'shadow lines' perpetuate a sense of otherness and separation, despite the shared histories and experiences of the people on either side of the border. By highlighting the futility of these divisions, Ghosh invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of partition and the ways in which it has shaped individual and collective identities. The narrator's diasporic outlook, which sees beyond the physical borders to the underlying connections between people, offers a hopeful vision of a world where empathy and understanding can bridge the gaps created by historical and political forces.

The anonymous narrator, who has long sought to emulate his mentor Tridib, ultimately steps out of Tridib's shadow by uniting with May. Tridib, described as a "man without country," is haunted by memories of his childhood encounter with May, "the woman across the seas." Through his persistent identification with Tridib, the narrator finally connects with May, who is significantly older than him. This union recreates the scenario envisioned by Tridib, where the two survivors of Tridib's imagination meet like "strangers across the sea" in a timeless and placeless 'ruin.' This union is not merely physical but also a profound spiritual experience. The narrator reflects, "I could tell that she was glad, and I was glad too and grateful for the glimpse she had given me of a final redemptive mystery." This moment signifies a journey beyond the self, exemplified by Tridib's enigmatic sacrifice. Tridib's willingness to give himself up underscores the mysterious nature of true sacrifice, which transcends rational understanding. Ghosh's narrative technique, which intertwines personal and historical timelines, underscores the interconnectedness of individual lives and broader socio-political contexts. The narrator's union with May serves as a culmination of his journey of self-discovery and his quest to understand Tridib's legacy. This relationship, marked by its spiritual depth, highlights the themes of redemption and the search for meaning in a world marked by loss and displacement. The narrator's experience with May offers a glimpse into the redemptive power of human connection, suggesting that true understanding and fulfilment lie beyond the physical realm. Through the characters' journeys, Ghosh explores the complexities of identity, memory, and belonging in a world marked by division and conflict. The novel invites readers to reflect on the deeper connections that bind people together, regardless of the distances that separate them. By delving into the spiritual and emotional dimensions of the characters' experiences, Ghosh offers a nuanced critique of the ways in which personal and collective histories shape individual lives.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the two sections titled "Going Away" and "Coming Home" do not remain distinctly separate in terms of plot and structure. Memories seamlessly connect both parts, effectively erasing the 'shadow lines' that might otherwise divide them. The internal distinction between 'going away' and 'coming home' becomes blurred, as illustrated by Thamma's uncertainty about whether she is "going to" or "coming to" her home in Dhaka. The phrases 'going away' and 'coming home,' which involve two verbs of movement, ultimately converge in meaning. The novel's structure, with its interconnected parts, mirrors the thematic exploration of blurred boundaries. The narrator's superimposition of Tridib on himself, along with the projection of characters, events, and places against one another—such as the narrator and Ila, May and Nick, Dhaka, and Calcutta—reinforces the shadowy nature of the borders that separate people, places, memories from realities, and the past from the present. This narrative technique underscores the fluidity of identity and the interconnectedness of human experiences. Ghosh's novel ultimately asserts the supreme power of imagination, which liberates individuals from the false distinctions and fixed notions of selfhood. By crossing beyond even one's image in the mirror, the characters in *The Shadow Lines* demonstrate the potential to transcend the limitations imposed by arbitrary boundaries. This imaginative journey allows for a deeper understanding of the self and the world, challenging the reader to reconsider the nature of identity and belonging in a world marked by division and conflict. Through this exploration, Ghosh invites readers to embrace the fluidity of identity and the interconnectedness of all human experiences.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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