

Chapter Three

Transcending Boundaries

The Shadow Lines

Human experience is finely textured, dense and accessible enough *not* to need extra-historical or extra-worldly agencies to illuminate or explain it. — Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

[...] true reality being discoverable only by the mind, being the object of a mental process, we acquire a true knowledge only of things that we are obliged to recreate by thought, things are hidden from us in everyday life. — Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, III

We live in a world of imagined communities. We are also policed through a world of fixed state borders. Accustomed as we are to the fluidity of our own imaginations, we are also, increasingly, being accustomed to negotiating borders, and using the one to serve the other. — Abena Busia, *ALA Bulletin*

The Shadow Lines (1988) is Amitav Ghosh's acclaimed masterpiece. The novel won the Sahitya Akademi award, India's most prestigious annual literary prize, as well as the Ananda Puraskar in 1990. Engagingly, *The Shadow Lines* has had a diverse critical reception. For Maria Elena Martos Hueso, the novel is "structured as a *bildungsroman*, as the unfolding of the narration reveals the maturing progression of the narrator's consciousness" (198). Going a step further, Meenakshi Malhotra believes that "it is possible to wrench a female 'bildungsroman' out of the narrative of *The Shadow Lines*" (166). Ian Almond, on the contrary, thinks that although the novel "does narrate the development of an imagination", it is "not quite a *Bildungsroman*" (61). If for R.K. Dhawan *The Shadow Lines* is a "family saga" (20), for Indira Bhatt it is a "'once upon a time' type of story narrated autobiographically yet with a multiple perspective" (33). The novel brings together "the forms of the autobiographical novel and the family chronicle", counterclaims Louis James "to subvert both" (158). A counterblast to all this is Arvind Chowdhary's assertion that the novel is "neither a novel of character nor a novel of plot but a 'novel of ideas'" (5).

Like its form, the novel's theme too sharply divides its critics. "Sadness [...] is the key function of *The Shadow Lines*", contends Ian Almond, "the epitomizing theme of the book" (58). Ulka Joshi, conversely, examines the novel's subtle humour in "family jokes and gossips which are cherished in family gatherings" (101). While Seema Bhaduri focuses on Ghosh's treatment in *The Shadow Lines* of the "changing middle-class ethos in India during the pre- and post-Independence era" (105), Shubha Tiwari believes that "childhood" is a "major theme of this book" (23). Alpana Neogy explores in the novel the "theme of being an exile or being at home through three generations of women" (216). Claire Chambers examines the novel's representations of the phenomenon of post-1947 communal violence. For her the novel "revolves around the trauma of the 'vivisection' of India and its continuing reverberations decades later" ("Riots, Rumours and Relics", 37). Interestingly, despite Amitav Ghosh's avowal that "[by] instinct I'm non-political" ("Shadow Script", 32), Novy Kapadia asserts that the "overall focus" in the novel is on the "meaning and shades of political nuances in contemporary life" (122). Indeed, *The Shadow Lines* is so intensely orchestrated that it can sustain interpretations from disparate points of view.

The memories of the 1964 riot haunt the narrator but he successfully suppresses them. A chance remark in 1979 by his friend Malik prompts him to delve into the past and unpack the trauma of his uncle Tridib's death in detail. Here, too, as in *The Circle of Reason*, Ghosh's fascination with chance is quite evident. This is reminiscent of the chance memory that launched the narrator into a journey backwards in time in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Embarking on his project the narrator realizes the enormity of the task before him:

Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence. It is a struggle I am destined to lose – have already lost – for even after all these years, I do not know where within me, in which corner of my world, this silence lies. (*The Shadow Lines*, 218)

He acknowledges his defeat to this insuperable "silence" because "it is not a presence at all; it is simply a gap, a hole, an emptiness in which there are no words" (*SL*, 218). The narrator shockingly realizes that the riots have disappeared into a "volcano of silence" (*SL*, 230) and are preserved only in personal memory. He thus boldly outlines the thrust of his micro-historic project and engages with the occlusions of nationalist historiography. Interestingly, Ila, the narrator's

doppelganger, informs him that “nothing really important ever happens” (*SL*, 104) where he lives. She expresses the metropolitan’s disdain for the periphery in her dismissal of the pettiness of the lives “lived out in the silence of voiceless events in a backward world”:

Well of course there are famines and riots and disasters, she said. But those are local things after all – not like revolutions or anti-fascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that’s really remembered. (*SL*, 104)

Furthermore, the narrator reflects on the most terrible of all silences, “the silence that lies in the gap between words and the world”:

This is a silence that is proof against any conceivable act of scorn or courage; it lies beyond defiance – for what means have we to defy the mere absence of meaning? Where there is no meaning, there is banality, and that is what this silence consists in, that is why it cannot be defeated – because it is the silence of an absolute, impenetrable banality. (*SL*, 218)

One of the great quests of modern philosophy has been to discover how language is able to generate meaning, and what meaning actually is. Tridib’s appalling death is a certain moment where language fails; it is an abyss that language is unable to bridge. Meaning can only be formed when there is perfect correspondence between the world and the word, between the world of experience and the method of representation. Nationalist historiography and newspaper reports create gaps and fissures because by excluding the reports about the riots they push the riots into the “chasm of that silence” (*SL*, 219). Reports about party congresses and elections are foregrounded in newspapers and histories “as though words could never exhaust their significance” (*SL*, 228), but for these riots “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” (*SL*, 228). The riot in question is an unreconstructed subaltern past which remains an unassimilated fragment inexplicable in the language of modern history and the political logic of the nation which is the “theatre of war, where generals meet, [...] the stage on which states disport themselves” (*SL*, 226). Historiography reduces “the lives of men and women to the play of material interests, or at other times to large impersonal movements in economy and society over which human beings have no control”, acknowledges Gyan Pandey, which “often leaves little room for the emotions of people, for feelings and perceptions” (40-41). Official histories

can offer only silence and absence of meaning. The narrator's father had no inkling of the turn of events because the Calcutta based newspaper "run by people who believed in the power of distance no less than I did" (SL, 227) did not mention it. He was "merely another victim of that seamless silence" (SL, 227). So complete is that "silence" that it takes the narrator fifteen years to discover that there was any connection between his nightmarish bus ride back from school in Calcutta and Tridib's death in Dhaka. Confronted with this paralyzing silence the narrator can "only describe at second hand the manner of Tridib's death: I do not have the words to give it meaning. *I do not have the words*, and I do not have the strength to listen" (SL, 228, italics original). By allowing stories to be told in the victim's own voices – Robi's account of his dream and May's reportage of Tridib's death – the narrator hauntingly evokes the horror and meaninglessness of Tridib's death. Urbashi Butalia stresses the importance of orality in remembering the trauma: "Stories are all that people have, stories that rarely breach the frontiers of family and religious community: people talking to their own blood" (253). This is perhaps an appropriate way to narrate Tridib's predicament as he believed that "[e]veryone lives in a story [...] because stories are all there to live in, it was just a question of which one you choose" (SL, 182). Thus by relying on the dynamics of memory, the narrator proposes to recapture the absences of written words and by coalescing both "analytical" and "affective" histories create "humanely constructed and independent histories that are fundamentally knowable, although not through grand theory or systematic totalization" (Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 377). The past is represented through an amalgamation of official history and personal imagination, and "each of these [...] realities must imagine its own discursive-epistemic space as a form of openness to one another's persuasion" (R. Radhakrishnan, 61). The narrative thus becomes the whole which interweaves "history, the discipline, and other forms of memory together so that they can help in the interrogation of each other, to work out the ways these immiscible forms of recalling the past are juxtaposed" (Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 93-94).

Tridib, the narrator's mentor, himself constructs the personal history of an English family in England on the eve of the Second World War. He clearly imagines the lives of Tresawsen and his friends from photographs at Mrs. Price's home. Tridib constructs for the narrator the minute details of the lives of Alan

Tresawsen, Francesca Halevy, Mike and Dan, their petty arguments and jealousies. While Tridib is aware of the unfathomable depth of the human mind to recreate the past, he also knows that the “clarity of that image in his mind was merely the seductive clarity of ignorance; an illusion of knowledge created by the deceptive weight of remembered detail” (*SL*, 67). He stops at a certain point because he has no idea of the emotions of the remembered individuals; he cannot plunge into the consciousnesses of the people who are devastated by a global war:

The realities of the bombs and torpedoes and the dying was [sic]easy enough to imagine – mere events, after all, recorded in thousands of films and photographs and record books. But not that other more important reality: the fact that they *knew* [...] in all probability they themselves, would not survive the war. What is the colour of that knowledge? Nobody knows, nobody can ever know, not even in memory, because there are moments in time that are not *knowable*: nobody can ever know what it was like to be young and intelligent in the summer of 1939 in London or Berlin. (*SL*, 68)

Since the past leaves its traces on the present, the shaping power of imagination can construe some sense of the “colour of that knowledge”. Tridib’s weaving the “web of trusts and affections and small jealousies that held them together” (*SL*, 67) is an alternative narrative in defiance of the metanarrative of History. In the novel Francesca Halevy, a victim of physical and psychic displacement, prefigures Thamma and Ila as displaced persons. Tridib inspires the narrator to construct his own narrative in order to avoid getting entangled in someone else’s oppressive stories, be it that of nationalism or communal factionalism. The alternative to inventing one’s own story “wasn’t blankness – it only meant that if we didn’t try ourselves, we would never be free of other people’s inventions” (*SL*, 31). The narrator’s endeavour to write “the human history” is one way of establishing Ghosh’s credo: “It’s about finding the human predicament; it’s about finding what happens to individuals, characters” (“The Shadow Script”, 30).

The son of a diplomat, Tridib rejects his father’s peripatetic life-style, and lives in Calcutta pursuing his research in archaeology. Thamma discards research as a “lifelong pilgrimage” (*SL*, 7) and dismisses Tridib as a “loafer and a wastrel” (*SL*, 3), “an essentially lightweight and frivolous character” (*SL*, 6), an irresponsible man “determined to waste his life in idle self-indulgence” (*SL*, 6). Unlike Thamma, who thinks that Tridib’s wasted time stinks, the narrator delights in Tridib’s stories: “he never seemed to use his time, but his time didn’t stink”

(*SL*, 4). The range of Tridib's intellectual interests is matched by his fluid personality. To his *adda* acquaintances, he is anyone from a slum-dweller to an aristocrat. What the narrator likes best in Tridib is his detachment, his "difference" from others. For him, Tridib's stories are a gateway to the world.

The archaeologist Tridib, endowed with an imagination *par excellence*, instills in the narrator an obsession with the past. Tridib teaches the narrator to use his imagination with so much precision that the locations envisioned in the mind "were infinitely more detailed, more precise than anything I would ever see" (*SL*, 29). Cultural space can be configured and the unknown can be experienced "concretely" (*SL*, 29) in the imagination. After all, "a place does not merely exist, [...] it has to be invented in one's imagination" (*SL*, 21). Tridib points out places on the Bartholomew's Atlas and also tells him stories about them: "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with" (*SL*, 20). This gives wings to the narrator's cartographic imagination which leads to the dissolution of spatial boundaries. The details of the story of Tridib's stay in London during the Second World War are so indelibly etched in the young narrator's impressionable mind that he empathizes with Tridib thereby dissolving their selves: "I have come to believe that I was eight too when Tridib first talked to me about that journey. [...] I had decided that he had looked like me" (*SL*, 3). Tridib's and the narrator's prioritization of the mind and the imagination conform with the idealist perception of knowledge, to the mystery of the relation between an object and a consciousness. For Georges Poulet the entire issue boils down to the question: "how can an exterior object be transmuted into this interior and immaterial thing, as intimate to us as ourselves, in which the mind freely plunges, moves, takes delight and life" (164)? A detailed explication of the spiritualization of the object is found in Proust. "All impression", says Proust, "is double: half enveloped in the object, and half produced in oneself" (545). Attention is usually paid to the exterior part of the impression, which teaches us nothing of its nature or of ourselves. When by an act of the imagination the interior part which is truly ours is extricated, then this "pure and disincarnate" essence withdraws from the exterior object and also from the temporal groove becoming thereby a free production of the mind. For "the act of imagination or of memory is nothing other than that: to oppose to the exterior perception an image which might be our own creation; to raise up the impression into an expression; to find the metaphor. Such

is the spiritual effort every tangible object demands of us" (Poulet, 166). Central to Tridib's conception is his passionate wish to know and understand the other:

He said to me once that one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. (SL, 29)

What is manifest here is Tridib's curiosity to transcend the limits of the self into the other, to become a part of the other. This identity and correlation of the subject and the object is well enunciated by F.H. Bradley: "To know a not-self is to transcend and leave one's mind. If we know the whole, it can only be because the whole knows itself in us, because the whole is self or mind, which is and knows, knows and is, the identity and correlation of subject and object" (324). Thus through generosity the world of the self widens to welcome the dimension of the other; the self's homeland has become a haven for the other, "subjectivity" is presented "as welcoming the Other, as hospitality" (Levinas, 27). Under Tridib's tutelage, the narrator recognizes the contemporaneity of the past and the lines that demarcate imagination and reality, the self and the other are blurred.

Tridib is anything but a romantic dreamer of utopian fairy lands. On the contrary, his imagination is shaped by the specificities of material culture. What delights him when Ila's mother narrates their gripping adventures in Sri Lanka is not the monitoring lizard, but the sloping roofs of their houses very different from the flats in Calcutta. When the narrator reflects on Tridib's minute observation he feels that "I too could see how much more interesting they were than the snake and the lizard, in the very ordinariness of their difference" (SL, 29). Tridib's imagination thus not only fuses spatial boundaries but is also aware of the differences in cultures. Moreover, through his narrative Tridib is able to bring alive a space to the narrator. The latter is able to consolidate all of Tridib's stories about wartime London into his memory atlas. He impresses everyone in London with his accurate descriptions of the hitherto unseen underground chambers, house designs and lanes. For the narrator, however, this is not at all an arduous task because "having seen it first through Tridib's eyes, its past seemed concurrent with the present" (SL, 31).

Tridib, the inspired lover, seems to have chosen to live the story of Tristan, a story that cannot be plotted on any map. The story defies any spatial and temporal specificity:

It happened everywhere [...]. It was an old story, the best story in Europe, Snipe said, told when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries – it was a German story in what we call Germany, Nordic in the north, French in France, Welsh in Wales, Corn in Cornwall. (*SL*, 186)

Tristan's is a very sad story about a man "without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across-the-seas" (*SL*, 186). The romance of Tridib-Tristan finds its consummate object in May. In his fourth letter to May, Tridib gives an elaborate, pornographic account of the sexual love of two strangers in a bombed-out theatre in war-time London. He rams home the point that that is how he desires to meet May, "as a stranger in a ruin": "as the completest of strangers – strangers across the seas – all the more strangers because they knew each other completely" (*SL*, 144). What is more he wants to meet her in a place "without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers" (*SL*, 144). Like Tristan who is a man without a country, Tridib's imagination enables him to think beyond the boundaries of cultures and nations, time and space. Hence, his craving for an ahistorical meeting place. He longs for a transcendental state outside ordinary human experience, beyond the realm of distinctions where opposites cancel each other out. Tridib's passion becomes an analogue of ecstasy whose power dissolves the world, "the others' cease to be present; and there are no longer either neighbours or duties, or binding ties, or earth or sky; one is alone with all that one loves. 'We have lost the world and the world us'" (Rougemont, 146). Such is the nature of this ecstasy. It is indeed ironic that a person who desires absolute freedom, who like an artist creates his own world in order to be free of others' inventions, who transcends arbitrary borders and distinctions and hatreds in search of a truer sense of commonality, finds himself entangled in communal riots. May once abused Tridib as an incompetent person: "All you're good for is words. Can't you ever do anything" (*SL*, 173). The same Tridib, urged by May, heroically steps out of the car in Dhaka to rescue the nonagenarian Jethamoshai and is slaughtered by a frenzied mob.

If Tridib is the narrator's mentor, Ila is the narrator's antithesis. Like Tridib, Ila is the child of a diplomat, a world traveller. But she is the obverse of an

imaginative traveller, her consciousness is the product of a “worldwide string of departure lounges” (SL, 21). She might have travelled all across the globe, but she is so insular that “although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all” (SL, 21). The places went past her in an “illusory whirl of movement” (SL, 23). On the contrary, the narrator passionately believes that “a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one’s imagination” (SL, 21). Ila’s presentism blunts her vision and cramps her to make any inter-cultural negotiations. What she remembers are excitements triggered by the “shifting landscapes of her childhood” (SL, 20). Hence, the lack of concreteness of her imagination:

Ila lived so intensely in the present that she would not have believed that there really were people like Tridib, who could experience the world as concretely in their imaginations as she did through her senses.[...]

For Ila the current was the real: it was as though she lived in a present which was like an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of the past and the future by steel floodgates. (SL, 30)

The narrator travels in the mind, in his imagination, clinging to influences coming from outside (Dhaka, London, foreign places on maps) while Ila travels actually in person. The migrant subject does not necessarily need to move physically or geographically as Ila does, but he/she may be migrant on the social and cultural level like the narrator. Ila has no sense of identity and continuity with the past. The temporal perspective in her life has become so foreshortened that she lives in a perpetual present, not the experiential, qualitative co-presence of all the elements constituting the past recaptured by memory. Her peripatetic lifestyle has enlarged her mastery over physical space but has also confined her “increasingly to the *mental* and *emotional space* of the momentary present devoid of continuity and significant relations with past and future” (Meyerhoff, 111). Hence, Ila’s dimension of mental “space” has contracted to the fragmentary moment of the present.

The game of Houses that Ila plays with the narrator enables her to evade the troubles of reality and escape into the world of wishful fantasy. Ila’s imagination is dictated by her life abroad. The “house” they inhabit in their play is in London, the fantasy child Magda is a beautiful blonde. No one has ever seen “anyone as beautiful as Magda. They had never seen such deep blue eyes, nor

cheeks as pink and healthy and smiling as hers” (SL,73). Ila’s narrative about Magda-Denise-Nick Price compensates for her bitter experience of racism in England. She projects her own self on Magda, a symbol of beauty and therefore of goodness and happiness. Ila idealizes Nick as a chivalrous figure who saves her from the torments of the racist Denise. In reality, however, Nick proves to be an unheroic figure that shies away from protecting Ila from such racial abuse. While Ila’s fantasy conjures Nick as “a boy in shorts [...] his head a blaze of yellow, rescuing a little girl from her tormentor” (SL, 75), May confesses that “Nick didn’t want to be seen with Ila” (SL, 76), an Indian. Ila’s love for Nick suggests a kind of colonization of the imagination. Psychological colonialism, as Ashis Nandy perceives it, “colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all. [...] The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds”(xi). Ila shares a house in London with a group of people who are activists in various movements like the Fourth International and the Anti-Nazi League. Her roommates regarded her as “our own upper-class Asian Marxist” (SL, 97). She takes a lot of pride in her belief that their endeavour will become a part of history. Such is the extent of her psychological invasion by the West that she dismisses her native country as a place where “nothing really important ever happens” because it belongs to the “third World”: “there’s a joy merely in knowing that you’re a part of history. We may not achieve much in our little house in Stockwell, but we *know* that in the future political people everywhere will look to us – in Nigeria, India, Malaysia” (SL, 104). By the end of the novel, Ila is deluded as she become a victim of Nick’s fecklessness. But to maintain an air of superiority over the narrator she creates stories to cover up her disappointments abroad:

You mustn’t pay any attention to what I said the other day, [...]. I was just overwrought, and it made me suspicious. Nick wouldn’t dream of doing anything that might upset me, really, believe me. You mustn’t believe a word I said. I made it all up. That’s what I did, I made it all up. That’s the truth of it. [...] It’s all fine now. We need a little holiday, that’s all”. (SL, 248)

Ila, the most deracinated and dislocated character in the novel, is also the most self-deceived.

Ila, however, plays a pivotal role in the narrator’s life because she originates his sexual desire and also its suppression. When his mother blurts out that the child-narrator has impatiently waited to meet Ila, he feels exposed and

embarrassed. Ila's knowledge about his feelings gives her the ascendant position in their relationship: "she had given Ila the knowledge of her power and she had left me defenseless; naked, in the face of that unthinkable, adult truth: that need is not transitive, that one may need without oneself being needed" (*SL*, 44). When they grow into adulthood, Ila appears as enchanting to the narrator as ever: "She looked improbably exotic to me, dressed in faded blue jeans and a T shirt – like no girl I had ever seen before except in pictures in American magazines" (*SL*, 81). While Ila is obsessed with the white-skinned Nick, the narrator's conception of Ila emphasizes her Western ways. The narrator's love for Ila, however, remains unconsummated. He is forced to suppress his feelings for Ila when he realizes that she is deeply in love with Nick: "I knew that a part of my life as a human being had ceased: that I no longer existed, but as a chronicle" (*SL*, 112). The narrator's dilly-dallying about whether he should proceed or recede in his relationship with Ila leads to a schizophrenic split within his mind, whose resolution ultimately paves the way to his spiritual evolution.

Ila is a transgressor whose migrant, multicultural worldview counterpoints the traditional Indian bourgeois outlook of Thamma. Ila's absorption of Western values and Western life-style antagonizes Thamma to such an extent that she calls Ila an "English whore", a "memshaheb whore" (*SL*, 90). Thamma and Ila are oppositely oriented towards the concept of "freedom". The nationalist Thamma conceives "freedom" as independence from centuries of colonial oppression; for Ila it is liberty from the baggage of culture as also from patriarchy. Ila's estrangement from Indian cultural traditions comes to the fore when she goes to the nightclub of the Grand Hotel in Calcutta along with Robi and the narrator. Robi not only refuses to dance with Ila but also restrains Ila from dancing at the discotheque. When the defiant Ila begins dancing with a stranger, Robi pushes him away and drags Ila out saying "girls don't behave like that here" (*SL*, 88). What Robi asserts is cultural difference: "You can do what you like in England. [...] But here there are certain things you cannot do. That's our culture; that's how we live" (*SL*, 88). Since "context" had no place in Ila's judgments, for her "morality could only be an absolute" (*SL*, 92). Ila vehemently opposes Robi's patriarchal authority and enforcements of national difference by boldly declaring her personal freedom: "Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free. [...] Free of *you!* [...] Free of your

bloody culture and free of all of you”(SL, 88-89). Ila’s transgression reveals the metamorphosed autonomy of the female self. For the parochial Thamma, Ila lives in a country where she doesn’t belong only because of material comforts. When the narrator sympathizes with Ila and points out that she desires personal freedom, Thamma scoffs at him: “It’s not freedom she wants. [...] She wants to be left alone to do what she pleases: that’s all that any whore would want” (SL, 89). Thamma strongly disapproves of a freedom that could be purchased for the price of an air ticket because “she too had once wanted to be free; she had dreamt of killing for her freedom” (SL, 89). Ila achieves her goal in London beyond the reach of the restrictive, patriarchal Bengali society, but ultimately is stifled between the culture that she rejects and that which rejects her. Her marriage to the promiscuous Nick, instead of assimilating her to Western culture, only perpetuates her marginalization: “Could I ever have imagined, [...], that I, Ila Datta-Chaudhuri, free woman and free spirit, would ever live in that state of squalor where incidents in one’s life can be foretold like teasers for a bad television serial” (SL,187)? The narrator’s sadism, or perhaps vindictiveness, can be presumed in his pinching statement that Ila’s “sins have finally come home to roost” (SL, 188). The rootless Ila haplessly vacillates between her “London” and “Indian” selves: “You see, you’ve never understood, you’ve always been taken in by the way I used to talk, when we were in the college. I only talked like that to shock you, and because you seemed to expect it of me somehow. I never did any of those things: I’m about as chaste, in my own way, as any woman you’ll ever meet” (SL, 188). When the narrator leaves London, Ila is so much at the end of her emotional tether that she is almost in a state of hysteria. Ila “of whom it was said when we were children, that she and I were so alike that I could have been her twin” baffles the narrator with the “mystery of difference” (SL, 31). Ila desires to be free from the double ties of conservatism and patriarchy. For the narrator, freedom exists within the individual, in the mind. His soul has so much assimilated Ila’s self that there is a feeling of oneness between the two: “You can never be free of me. [...] If I were to die tomorrow you would not be free of me. You cannot be free of me because *I am within you* [...] just as you are within me” (SL, 89, italics original). The boundary between the two selves is a mere shadow line.

Throughout the novel the narrator conceives himself to be the mirror-image of an other. He decides that at the age of eight he looked exactly like

Tridib. When they were children, Ila and the narrator were look-alikes. But the character with whom he desires synchronicity is Nick Price who

became a spectral presence beside me in my looking glass; growing with me, but always bigger and better, and in some way more desirable. [...] I would look into the glass and there he would be, growing, always faster, always a head taller than me, with hair on his arms and chest and crotch while mine were still pitifully bare. And yet if I tried to look into the face of that ghostly presence, to see its nose, its teeth, its ears, there was never anything there, it had no features, no form; I would shut my eyes and try to see its face, but all I would see was a shock of yellow hair tumbling over a pair of bright blue eyes. (SL,50)

Since the narrator conceives Nick as the competitor for Ila's affections, he always imagines Nick standing beside him. Ila tells the narrator that Nick's yellow hair comes over his bright blue eyes. Like Ila, he is also mesmerized by the exotic appeal of the white skin. The narrator, believing in the truth of Ila's narration develops a relationship with an imaginary figure whose presence remains largely undefined. When the narrator's father informs him that Nick intended to travel around the world like his grandfather Lionel Tresawsen, the narrator conceives Nick to be a fellow romantic. Nick thus becomes not only a "spectral presence" (SL, 50), but also his "kindred spirit" (SL, 52). He believes that Nick has left for Kuwait for his love of travel. In reality, Nick has taken up the job of a chartered accountant in the Middle-East for the lure of money. He is forced to quit his job because he is caught out in a case of embezzlement. Back in London, to cover up the whole truth, he cooks up the story that he returned home voluntarily. It is May who bursts his bubble by pointing out that Nick almost believes the lie that he has conjured: "Nick, isn't it time you stopped lying about this Kuwait business? I was willing to go along with it when it was just a lie meant for other people. But you've begun to believe it yourself, and you shouldn't, you really shouldn't. You ought to be able to stand up and tell the truth" (SL, 109). After a series of failed enterprises he comes to sponge on his wealthy wife, Ila. A failure in his professional life, Nick proves to be an unfaithful husband as well developing a succession of affairs. Nick's code of morality differs radically from his sister May's who rams home the point to the narrator: "He's different; he's not like us" (SL, 189). The person with whom the narrator had developed a spiritual kinship even before seeing him proves to be the inhabitant of world miles apart from his own. While Ila aspires to be a free spirit with scant regard for territorial and

cultural frontiers, Thamma is an advocate of exclusivist nationalism. Thamma was a college student when terrorist outfits like the “Anushilan Samiti” and the “Jugantar” recruited youngsters as their cadres. She tells the narrator in his childhood the incident of how one of her classmates was arrested by the police. A shy, quiet, bearded boy, the young patriot seemed an unlikely terrorist but he showed great resolve. His impassive face and “clear, direct and challenging” (SL, 39) gaze was fixed on the policeman. Inspired by Bagha Jatin and Khudiram Bose’s patriotism Thamma wanted to do something for the militant nationalists. She mused that “if only she had known, if only she had been working with him, she would have warned him somehow, she would have saved him, she would have gone to Khulna with him too, and stood at his side, with a pistol in her hands, waiting for the English magistrate” (SL, 39). Wholly committed to the nationalist ideal of independent India, Thamma would have done anything to be free from colonial oppression.

Thamma’s anti-imperialism determines her conception of nationhood which is very much a part of the entire project of modernity. She believes in the rigidity of national boundaries and its difference from the other. A visionary for a secure national identity, Thamma believes in the necessity for war in the making of a nation and also the inappropriateness of immigration:

Ila has no right to live there. [...] She doesn’t belong there. It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and blood-shed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother’s blood and their father’s blood and their son’s blood. They know they’re a nation because they’ve drawn their borders with blood... War is their religion. That’s what it takes to make a country. (SL, 77-78)

She urges the narrator to achieve for India a unity which dissolves all religious differences. She herself has discussed the unity in diversity of the country with her Home Science students in school. She spells out her dogma to the narrator that one “can’t build a strong country [...] without building a strong body” (SL, 8). Thamma’s assertion stems out from her celebration of “Ksatriyahood as true Indianness” and her nationalistic zeal to “beat the colonizers at their own game and to regain self-esteem as Indians and as Hindus” (Nandy, 52). Thamma admired Robi not only because he resembled her but also because he is an exemplar of hyper-masculinity or hyper- Ksatriyahood: “he’s *strong*; he’s not like the rest of you in this country” (SL, 35). She disliked Tridib because she believed

that Tridib wasted his time: “For her time was like a toothbrush: it went mouldy if it wasn’t used” (*SL*, 4). Thamma’s utilitarian conception of time is actually what Meyerhoff calls “the social meaning of time”: “A ‘waste of time’ was sinful – a negation of productivity and value, not a welcome opportunity for leisure and enjoyment” (108). Thamma exhorts her grandson not only to militant nationalism but also to the productive use of time.

Born in Dhaka, Thamma migrated to Mandalay because of her husband’s profession. After her husband’s death, she joined a school in Calcutta as a teacher. This provided her with some stability in her rootless existence. While in Moulmein and Mandalay she lived in “a succession of railway colonies” (*SL*, 124) which made her life very uneventful. To her “nothing else in that enchanted pagoda-land had seemed real enough to remember (*SL*, 124) apart from hospitals, railway stations and Bengalee Societies. Interestingly, in this she resembles her opposite Ila whose peripatetic lifestyle forbids her to attach herself to any place. The bloodshed of the Partition severs Thamma’s connection with her ancestral home in Dhaka. However, a chance meeting with a kin makes her know that her nonagenarian Jethamoshai still lives in their house at Jindabahar Lane in Dhaka. What is more, she is horrified to learn that their whole house has been occupied by Muslim refugees from India. Throughout her life, Thamma never displayed much family feeling. In fact, “she was extremely wary of her relatives; to her they represented an imprisoning wall of suspicion and obligations” (*SL*, 129). However, consanguinity propels her to dismantle this “imaginary barrier” (*SL*, 129) and she decides to travel to Dhaka to bring her Jethamoshai back to Calcutta.

Thamma’s journey to Dhaka, her birthplace, initiates her education in the artificiality of the nationalist construct. Her neat and orderly mind seems to be in a quandary when she tries to solve the puzzle “how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality” (*SL*, 152). Thamma has a hard time coming to terms with the technicalities of passports and visas and the politics of international borders. For her, travelling to Dhaka was different in the pre-Partition era when she could “come home to Dhaka” (*SL*, 152) whenever she wanted. The fact that her journey to Dhaka is not only physical but also epistemological is revealed when the young narrator teases his grandmother out of her thoughts: “How could you have ‘come’ home to Dhaka? You don’t know the difference between coming and going” (*SL*, 152)! Years later the mature narrator

realizes that his grandmother's journey not only destabilizes her fixed conceptions of "home" but also exposes the faults of a language system:

Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all; a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement." (SL,152)

Thamma's conceptions of home as a place of stability and coherence thus shattered, she receives a further setback when her son exposes the limits of her exclusionary nationalism. Her naïve belief in the existence of borders corresponds with Anderson's conceptualization of the nation as "*limited*" with "finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (16). When she expresses her curiosity to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane, her son humorously asks her whether she thought that the "border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas" (SL,151). When she learns that neither trenches nor soldiers with guns pointing at each other separate the two countries but there are only green fields with no distinct demarcation zones, she discovers the limits of her brand of nationalism:

But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between? (SL, 151)

The modern political border, as her son explains to her, doesn't exist on the frontier but in the airport. One crosses it when he fills in the disembarkation cards and the forms demanding one's nationality, etc. This aspect of international boundaries determines the limits of a sovereign authority.

As an old guard nationalist who once dreamt of a new nation, Thamma "believed in the reality of nations and borders" beyond which "existed another reality" (SL, 219). The only relationship that existed "between those separate realities was war or friendship"(SL, 219). The partitioning of the Bose family house in Dhaka is itself an allegory for Thamma's self-other conceptualization. Whatever exists beyond the other side of the partitioning wall is an inverted image of theirs which is the epitome of normalcy. The upside-down world seems to be a safe place to escape to when problems surface on their own side. The unseen,

unknown other part of the house is a source of immense interest for Thamma and Mayadebi and the “strange thing was that as we grew older even I almost came to believe in our story” (SL, 126). This self-other dialectic permeates Thamma’s conceptions of nation and nationalism. In her imagining the community of the nation, Thamma is certainly not, in Ila’s words a “fascist”, but as Tridib sums it up “only a modern middle-class woman”:

All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle-classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power: that was all she wanted – a modern middle-class life, a small thing that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it. (SL,78)

This patterned orderliness and stability that Thamma seeks is dismantled when she lands in Dhaka airport. The first question she is prompted to ask, confounded by her present surroundings, is “Where’s Dhaka? I can’t see Dhaka” (SL, 193). Thamma’s Dhaka is confined in the localized surroundings of her ancestral home in Jindabahar Lane which had “long since vanished in the past” (SL, 193). This past/present disjuncture leads to her confusion. Her quest for the idyllic, pre-Partitioned Dhaka of her childhood is projected as a nostalgic return to her ancestral roots. Throughout her life Thamma has contemptuously dismissed nostalgia as a “weakness, a waste of time, that it is everyone’s duty to forget the past and look ahead and get on with building the future” (SL, 208). Compelled by circumstances, she now realizes the gravity of her predicament that she has “no home but in memory” (SL, 194). Thamma’s Indian citizenship now confronts with her strong loyalties and affiliations to the solidarity of her ancestral home which she evocatively remembers:

It had evolved slowly, growing like a honeycomb, with every generation of Boses adding layers and extensions, until it was like a huge, lop-sided pyramid, inhabited by so many branches of the family that even the most knowledgeable amongst them had become a little confused about their relationships. (SL 121)

Her alienation from her homeland is pointed out to her by Tridib’s teasing remark that “you *are* a foreigner now, you’re as foreign here as May – much more than May, for look at her, she doesn’t even need a visa to come here” (SL, 195). Nevertheless, Thamma perceives her visit to Jindabahar Lane as her “homecoming”. Dressed in a white sari with a red border she is “going home as a widow for the first time” (SL, 205). After meeting Jethamoshai she emotionally

declares that they have “come home at last” (SL, 212). The contradiction between Thamma’s going and coming, home and abroad, local and national identities surfaces in her resolution to bring her Jethamoshai to “where he belonged, to her invented country” (SL, 137). However, Thamma’s glorification of the myth of the nation is punctured by her senile Jethamoshai’s stubborn refusal to migrate:

I don’t believe in this 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? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I’ll die here. (SL, 215)

Thamma’s “home” turns unhomey when the car in which she was returning along with Jethamoshai in a rickshaw is attacked by some frenzied rioters. Tridib rushes out to save the old man but both of them are brutally killed along with the rickshaw-puller Khalil. Thamma’s ancestral birthplace is also the city of the fanatic rioters which now is transformed into the split space of home/not-home. Tridib’s violent death instills in her a hatred for “them”. Hence, when war breaks out with Pakistan in 1965, she donates her gold chain, her late husband’s reminiscence, to the war fund: “For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out” (SL, 237). She takes solace from the fact that it’s not a street ambush but an organized war “with tanks and guns and bombs” (SL, 237). Throughout the novel Thamma remains an exponent of territorial nationalism and also learns its limitations.

The first-person narrator in *The Shadow Lines* is a dual persona. He is at once a youthful, naïve actor in the novel and its mature, disillusioned narrator. The experiencing and the narrating self exist mostly in two different times and have two different perspectives. As in any character-narrator, the “I” shuttles back and forth between the past and the present, thereby betraying the temporal and psychological distance between his two roles. Hence, “I” the narrator is also the detached commentator of “I” the character, reflecting on past events, putting together pieces. The former plays the “role of the interpretative consciousness in the drama before us” (Goldknopf, 31). The straddling of two times and two perspectives on the part of the character-narrator is the defining feature of the first-person retrospective narrative which *The Shadow Lines* is. The encounter between the “I”’s opposite selves is presented when the narrator reflects on his grandfather’s imported table in the Raibajar cellar: “I used to wonder later

whether this was merely a legacy of a child's foreshortened vision: an effect of that difference in perspective which causes all objects recalled from childhood to undergo an illusory enlargement of scale" (*SL*, 48). This is how Ghosh brings out "a natural dualism in the figure of the narrator: he both narrates and experiences, he is both old and young; it is certainly a case of identical persons and yet they are not the same person" (Romberg, 36).

The unnamed first-person narrator "belongs to the represented reality, the fictional world in which the characters live" (Stanzel, 70). Sharing with the characters their ontological status, the narrator is on intimate terms with all the principal characters – Thamma, Tridib, Ila and May. Hence he is able to report on the characters firsthand. But his position as an embodied self imposes on him some constraints which are the inescapable price for "the powerful circumstantiality of eye-witness narration" (Scholes and Kellogg, 259). The narrator's physicality restricts him to a particular time and place. To obviate these exigencies, he draws upon the testimony of secondary narrators. Tridib relates to the narrator his experiences in war-time London. Thamma narrates to her grandson her own past in pre-Partitioned Dhaka. Tridib's death in Dhaka is presented from multiple perspectives – the silence of the newspapers and official histories, Robi's narration in the form of a dream years later in London and May's personal version on the eve of the narrator's departure from London. Tridib's pornographic letter to May and her response to it are presented from a third-person perspective. Thamma's visit to her ancestral home in Dhaka is narrated in third-person but through what Henry James defined as a "focus", or "mirror" or "center of consciousness". The entire episode is filtered through the perceptions, awareness and responses of Robi – "Later, one of the details Robi remembered about that day" (*SL*, 205), "Robi scanned the streets as they drove through them, watching alertly for signs of 'trouble'" (*SL*, 205), "He knew then, because of the chill that was spreading outwards from the pit of his stomach, that trouble had come to him at last" (*SL*, 218). Apart from the affirmation of individual subjectivity, there seems to be a craving for an ethical inter-subjective space which transcends the boundaries of separate subjectivities. Meenakshi Mukherjee has succinctly observed that although the narrator appears to be a transparent "lucid reflector", he also functions as an "agentive site" for other lives which "lets different persons, events, places luminously enter his story, and find new

configuration there; or, altering the metaphor, it is possible to see the narrator's consciousness as a porous space that absorbs other lives and other experiences until they leak into each other to reveal a pattern" (140). This multiplicity of narrators makes the novel dialogic.

The narrative moves from a London restaurant in the 1980s, the narrative present, to the Calcutta of the 1950s and 1960s when the narrator was a student and even further back to London in 1939. These multiple narrative strands are held together by the central narrative voice which remembers and seamlessly weaves the narrative in a complex web. Malik's chance remark in 1979 at the Teen Murti House Library in New Delhi triggers the narrator into recollections of the Calcutta riots in 1964. Different temporal and spatial contexts coalesce in his mind as he recalls his relatives and his conversations with them. Similarly, a chance remark in 1981 by Rehman-shaheb, a Bangladeshi restaurant owner in Clapham, transports Robi back to the events in Dhanmundi in Dhaka in 1964 and Tridib's violent death. Meyerhoff argues that "[c]reative imagination is creative recall". Recollection is "an activity, an operation – not the passive reproduction of habitual memory responses. To construct a work of art is to reconstruct the world of experience and the self" (48). The act of creative recall when translated into artistic creation possesses greater unity and continuity than the self in immediate experience. The self thus re-created illustrates the Kantian "synthesis in imagination" leading to the unity of the subject itself. The "true self" that is recaptured from different sense impressions and memories is the self which provides this multiplicity some kind of unity. "Through this act of creative imagination (memory) and organization", asserts Meyerhoff, "the identity of the self is exhibited and demonstrated within the work, though all the elements composing it are characterized by 'distinction and difference'" (48-49). These unique events lodged in memory are metaphysical "essences" for Proust. They disclose the self's functional unity:

For the most part – and for most people – they are "forgotten", lying dormant, buried in the unconscious; fortunately, they may also float back involuntarily or erupt violently into consciousness, to be seized upon by the *conscious*, creative imagination of the writer as a key to unfolding the unitary structure and continuing pattern of his life. (Meyerhoff, 49)

This is analogous to Thomas Wolfe's efforts "to *organize* the whole series [of impressions] into a harmonious and coherent union" (cited in Meyerhoff, 45).

Hence “A single minute released from the chronological order of time”, believes Proust, “has recreated in us the human being similarly released” (*RTP*, II, 996). Furthermore, “All the memories following one after another were condensed into a single substance” (*RTP*, I, 143). The narrative of *The Shadow Lines* works out this philosophy. The sum total of the narrator’s life is co-present or simultaneous with his involuntary recollection of the riots in Calcutta in 1964. The fusion of times, places and even persons can best be illustrated when the adult narrator in the cellar of the Prices’ house in London recollects the details of his childhood in the cellar in Raibajar. Ila’s remark “So here we are, [...] Back in Raibajar” (*SL*, 181) makes the past burst into the present:

Those empty corners filled up with remembered forms, with the ghosts who had been handed down to me by time: the ghost of the nine-year-old Tridib, sitting on a camp bed, just as I was, his small face intent, listening to the bombs; the ghost of Snipe in that far corner, near his medicine chest, worrying about his dentures; the ghost of the eight-year-old Ila, sitting with me under that vast table in Raibajar. They were all around me, we were together at last, not ghosts at all: the ghostliness was merely the absence of time and distance – for that is all a ghost is, a presence displaced in time. (*SL*, 181)

The boundaries between the past and the present are rendered shadowy in the narrator’s private or psychological time, in his consciousness. “Simultaneity”, observes Ziolkowski, “is a mode of perception, not of action” (208). Another name for this simultaneity is timelessness.

Temporal simultaneity is complemented by identical spatial realities across the “looking-glass border” (*SL*, 233). London and Berlin, just before World War II are mirror images of each other with the same “exhilaration in the air” (*SL*, 66). Travelling between the two capitals Alan Tresawsen felt that he was “stepping through a looking-glass” (*SL*, 66). Calcutta and Dhaka serve as mirror images of each other during the riots in 1964. The communal frenzy of “Hindu Calcutta’ and “Muslim Dhaka” resembles “the war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror” (*SL*, 204). The adult narrator, after making a series of connections listening to others’ perceptions and experiences, realizes that Tridib and he were in the same predicament in two different cities: “I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other” (*SL*, 233). While in London, the narrator perceptively discerns identity and difference between Gole-Park in Calcutta and a London street-corner:

And so it was, with exactly the same laminated counters and plastic tables; exactly the same except that it was built into a terrace of derelict eighteenth-century London houses, and there was no paan-shop at the corner, and no Nathu Chaubey but instead, as Nick pointed out, hanging over it was the great steeple of Hawksmoor's Christchurch Spitalfields. (*SL*,100)

The narrator who as a child believed in the reality of nations and space, "that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance [...] that across the border there existed another reality" (*SL*, 219) realizes at the end of the novel the falsity of these conceptions. The borders between nations in his Bartholomew's Atlas turn into glass, the compartmentalized world turns composite. As he tries to "learn the meaning of distance", he perceives "that within the tidy ordering of Euclidean space, Chiang Mai in Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi is; that Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is" (*SL*, 232). Since Chiang Mai and Chengdu are located outside the political map of the nation-state the geographical proximity between Calcutta and those two cities is often overlooked. The rigid demarcating lines of Euclidean space which segregate spaces are rendered absolutely meaningless by identical human experiences across the borders. Through the circles that the narrator draws on the atlas the geographical compartmentalization of nations is obfuscated as they occupy one transnational space. The extent to which the architectonics of space dominated Ghosh's imagination is revealed in his confession to Hawley that his "ambition was to do with space what Proust had done with time: that is, to make completely different instances of a continuum immanent in each other" (8-9). The "silent communion" (Anderson, 6) which glues individuals living miles apart from one another across territorially demarcated spaces makes the borders that separate them "shadow lines".

The narrator's belief in the absoluteness of cartographic divisions thus shattered, he learns that the separatist logic of frontiers cannot enforce cultural difference. Ironically what establishes the identical nature of realities on both sides of the border between India and Pakistan is self-destructive violence. The sacred relic known as the Mui-i-Mubarak disappears in Srinagar and riots break out in Calcutta and Dhaka. The administrators who drew the boundaries between India and Pakistan believed in the "enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had erected their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland"

(*SL*, 233). The narrator discerns a profound “yet-undiscovered irony” in the political separation:

the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map, when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lives – so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free – our looking-glass border. (*SL*, 233)

Paradoxically, the communal riot indicates the deep emotional involvement of the Hindus and the Muslims alike. The communally constructed national border which separates the two nation-states fails to split the original Indian Self, which was created by the plenitude of religious communities, the two largest of which are the Hindus and the Muslims. The animosity between them exists only in the nationalist discourse; in practical reality there are people of both communities on either side of the border. The national and communal identities mix with one another. What palpably exists on the other side of the border is not an other, but rather the divided communal Self.

Sudhir Kakar, in his influential book *The Colours of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion and Conflict*, distinguishes between pre-colonial “religious” conflicts and post-colonial “communal” violence in the Indian sub-continent. While religion is “a matter of personal faith and reverence for a particular set of icons, rituals, and dogmas”, asserts Kakar, communalism entails one’s “exclusive attachment to his or her community combined with an active hostility against other communities which share its geographical and political space” (13). The overarching identities as “Muslim” and “Hindu” were highly charged by the divisiveness of the Partition of 1947, “the most momentous event in the shaping of Hindu-Muslim relations in independent India”(37). The bitter animosity between these two communities is an off-shoot of the imperialist policy of divide and rule by setting one against the other. The presentation of the post-Partition riots in Calcutta expatiates Kakar’s observations. The young narrator’s school-bus is more than half-empty as the majority of the students are confined at home because trouble is apprehended in Calcutta. Rumour spreads that “they” have poisoned Calcutta’s water supply. This incident echoes the rumours in war-time London that German aeroplanes were dropping toffee-tins “to demoralize the population by getting at the children” (*SL*, 184). The children “huddled together” (*SL*, 189) in

the bus in Calcutta immediately comprehend that the vague identification “they” refer to the Muslims. The “us” and “them” binaries are crystallized when their own friend Montu is perceived as an “other” because he is a Muslim. When the adult narrator recalls the incident he reflects on the extent to which children had internalized this self/other split:

I remember we did not ask him any questions – not who ‘they’ were, nor why ‘they’ had poisoned their own water. We did not need to ask any questions; we knew the answers the moment he had said it: it was a reality that existed only in the saying, so when you heard it said, it did not matter whether you believed it or not – it only mattered that it had been said at all. (SL, 199-200)

The riots transform the city. The frightening sound of voices alternate with random moments of silence to produce “the authentic sound of chaos” (SL, 201). When the children return home their well-known streets seem completely unfamiliar. Even the positioning of a rickshaw at a street-corner expresses a threat: “had it been put there to keep Muslims in or Hindus out? At that moment we could read the disarrangement of our universe in the perfectly ordinary angle of an abandoned rickshaw” (SL, 203). The narrator’s “fear” of the city that “had turned against us” (SL, 204) is described thus:

It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world – not language, not food, not music – it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror. (SL, 204)

The contention that riots are exceptional to South Asia is repeated in *In An Antique Land*. Not to speak of communal tensions, micro nationalist factions subvert the myth of the homogeneity of the Indian nation-state. Robi reflects on how terrorist and separatist outfits in Assam, the north-east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura utter the rhetoric of freedom to fragment the nation: “And then I think to myself, why don’t they draw thousand of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every place a new name? What would it change? It’s a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory? (SL,247). This clearly resonates with problems of contemporary India, where the tension between the state and the numerous ethnicities is evident. The state uses its power

to keep the nation together as a political concept, while the various religious communities tear it apart.

Territorial space can be demarcated by lines but the collective unconscious remains indivisible. The separatist strategies of the politics of national boundaries epitomized by the Partition fail to suppress syncretic possibilities. The ecumenical Hazratbal shrine is revered by Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists alike that challenges the “Christian sense of the necessity of quarantine between doctrines”. The synthesizing quality of the shrine is stressed when the theft of the relic brings about “a spontaneous show of collective grief”. Maulana Masoodi, “an authentic hero, forgotten and unsung today as any purveyor of sanity” (*SL*,225-226), united the various Kashmiri communities in their demonstrations. When the relic is recovered, the Kashmiris erupt in joy. However, this exemplary secular tolerance and cultural syncretism is marred by a violent riot in distant Khulna. But “[a]s always, there were innumerable cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives, and equally in India, of Hindus sheltering Muslims” (*SL*,229-230). Unfortunately, no Martyr’s Memorials were erected for these unsung ordinary people. Just as the partition of the Bose family in Dhanmundi fails to prevent relatives from being involved with each other, so also the arbitrary division of the country fails to slice one community apart from the other. Ghosh himself experienced a similar situation when riots broke out in Delhi in November, 1984 after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. What he remembers is not only “the horror of violence” but also “the affirmation of humanity [...] the risks that perfectly ordinary people are willing to take for one another” (*II*, 61). Such people demonstrate “the indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments” (*SL*, 230). Eventually, *The Shadow Lines* “became a book not about any one event but about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them” (*II*, 60). Jethamoshai, the lone, left behind member of his family, is looked after by a Muslim rickshaw-puller Khalil. His children look up to the old man as their grandfather. Theirs is a family based not on kinship but on love and solidarity, the very basis of community formation. Ghosh’s stance on inter-community solidarity and his assertion of humanity exposes the parochialism of nationalism. The dangerous potential for violence and aggression in the creation of exclusivist collective identities is succinctly explained by Regina Schwartz: “Imaginary

identity as an act of distinguishing and separating from others, of boundary making and line drawing, is the most fundamental act of violence we commit”(187). Celebrating “the complex web of relationships between people that cut across nations and generations”, *The Shadow Lines* thus becomes, argues Robert Dixon, “a fictional critique of classical anthropology’s model of discrete cultures and the associated ideology of nationalism”(20).

In Ghosh, the male protagonists are rationalists/idealists. Conversely, the female protagonists are pragmatists/humanists. They are more successful than their male counterparts because they are more in touch with life’s reality. May occupies a distinctive position in Ghosh’s gallery of women characters which include Zindi in *The Circle of Reason*, Dolly in *The Glass Palace*, Nilima in *The Hungry Tide*. As an integral being, May is a champion of humanity. She tirelessly collects funds in London streets for providing housing to the earthquake victims in Central America. In Raibajar, she dismisses the narrator’s grandfather’s huge imported wooden table as “utterly useless”, as a “worthless bit of England” (*SL*, 49). She wonders that the amount of money squandered on the table would have provided shelter for a lot of people. She displays courage and compassion in killing the dying dog in order to spare it from more pain. But the defining moment in May’s humanism comes in the narrow Jindabahr Lane when the hostile rioters set upon the old man and his rickshaw-puller. While Thamma, the old man’s blood relation, wants her driver to drive away, the determined May jumps out of the car to defend them: “Your grandmother screamed at me. She said I didn’t know what I was doing, and I’ll get everyone killed. I didn’t listen; I was a heroine” (*SL*, 250). In the scuffle that follows, Tridib is killed. For seventeen years after the incident May holds herself responsible for Tridib’s death. Unlike Tridib, she never felt insecure in the mob because “they wouldn’t have touched me, an English memsahib” (*SL*, 251). She finally realizes that Tridib “gave himself up; it was a sacrifice” (*SL*, 251-252). If her self asserted itself in Dhaka – “I was a heroine” (*SL*, 250) – after the incident she becomes selfless. She is committed to her altruistic mission, a commitment which even intrudes into the private spaces of her domestic life as she sleeps on the floor: “After all, this is how most people in the world sleep. I merely thought I’d throw in my lot with the majority” (*SL*, 158). While Tridib’s death hardens Thamma’s rigid binaries of “us” and “them”, May’s attitude towards life becomes transnational as she tries to fuse the

Self/Other dialectic. This fusion reaches its zenith in her sexual union with the narrator. Aziz and Fielding's friendship in *A Passage to India* came to a sad end because Aziz could not purge his anticolonial spirit: "Down with the English anyhow. That's certain. Clear out, you fellows, double quick, I say. We may hate one another, but we hate you most. If I don't make you go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it's fifty five-hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishmen into the sea, and then [...] you and I shall be friends"(Forster, 317). May and the narrator meet as free citizens transcending the divisions of colonizer/colonized, white/non-white, self/other. Through his union with May which melts all boundaries, the narrator is granted "the glimpse of [...] a final redemptive mystery" (SL, 252), the mystery of the depths of human experience and the achievement of the self's reciprocal relationship with the other.