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Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow Lines' : A Study of Symbols and Motifs

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Abstract

The 1989 Sahitya Akademi award-winning novel by Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, is a postcolonial, postmodernist, historical novel that takes us on to a roller-coaster ride through different time zones of history, unravelling the experiences of three generations of three families spread across three countries. It gives us an insight into the life and times of people during and after the country's division into two nation states. It is about blurring borders, sectarian violence, love-across the borders, metaphors of madness. There is a subtle interweaving of politico-personal facts with fiction that are revealed through a series of reminiscences from the unnamed narrator as he comes to terms with his own sexuality. He leads us to decipher the meaning behind the binaries of "us" and "them" as his family members get caught in a vortex of violence on either side of the borders. The age-old notions about nation, nationalism, freedom get debunked and man's search for identity continues. As such, in Ghosh's words, it is "a book not about any one event, but about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them." Ghosh's descriptive writing style, his digression-in-digression technique, his stream of consciousness mode throws open some very pertinent, unexplored, and veiled meanings before its readers. The narrative lingers in the shadows between illusion and reality, past and present, lending it a newer perspective with each subsequent reading. This paper tends to explore Ghosh's masterly strokes as he uses motifs and symbolism to add greater depth and meaning to his narrative.

Keywords

Symbolism, Motifs, Imagery.

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1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (TSL) is a 1989 Sahitya Akademi award-winning novel that weaves together a vibrant tapestry with its rich symbolism and powerful imagery. Set against the backdrop of freedom struggle, partition and communal riots, the narrative takes us on a roller-coaster ride down the memory lane through different time zones of history, unravelling the concerns and experiences of two families, one Indian and the other English. Ghosh reveals the humungous, far-reaching impact of political turmoil on human relationships and seeks to delve into various meanings of nationalism. As Ghosh writes, TSL is "a book not about any one event, but about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them." It is about blurring borders, sectarian violence, love-across the borders, metaphors of madness. It is a coming-of-age story about a young narrator with whom we constantly undertake many a flash-backs and flash-forwards as we move through time and memory that link the past, present and future together. The stream of consciousness technique combined with his digression-in-digression narrative, keeps the readers on their toes, inducing them to connect the dots that lie scattered. Each subsequent reading lends the narrative a fresher perspective.

TSL has invited a plethora of responses and critical commentaries from academics across the globe. Nivedita Bagchi in her paper titled "*The Shadow Lines : A Novel of Memory and History*" discusses the use of memory and history in creating a complex narrative that questions the validity of borders and boundaries. Padmini Mongia challenges the notions of nationhood, postcoloniality and gender in her article "Postcolonial Identity and Gender Boundaries in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*", and argues that the novel uses the concept of shadow lines to question the validity of borders and boundaries, both physical and psychological, that divide people and cultures. Ajanta Sircar analyses how *The Shadow Lines* represents India as a heterogeneous

and contradictory culture that is shaped by multiple socio-historical processes through her paper "Individualising History: The 'Real' Self in The Shadow Lines." The author contends that the novel rejects the idea of a monolithic, authentic cultural past and instead proposes a history that can account for the diffusion and diversity of origins. Dhawan establishes a link between various locations and characters in his essay "Space as a Metaphor."

Through this paper, I intend to focus on how Ghosh expresses his inferences and imageries through his masterly strokes using figurative and descriptive language, adding greater depth to his narrative. His work abounds in visual and sensory imagery. Through his motifs and variegated symbolisms, he instils meaning into shadows that linger between reality and illusion. Each subsequent reading unravels a newer perspective every time. Nothing that comes from Ghosh's pen seems extraneous or irrelevant.

2. Going Away and Coming Home

The two sections, "Going Away" and "Coming Home" are symbolic of the insider/outsider dilemmas of the colonized people, revealing their ambivalences about home, belongingness, and identity in a postcolonial society. "The headings of the novel's two sections, aptly sum up the post-colonial condition where, especially for the immigrant, 'going away' and 'coming home' challenge essentialist notions of belonging and identity" (Roy, 40). Imagination and memory negotiate the feelings of belongingness. Thamma is caught in that dilemma when she asks, "But where is Dhaka? I can't see Dhaka" (Ghosh, 193). The sight and smells of her childhood Dhaka "have long since vanished into the past." The borders between the nations have turned her into an outsider, a foreigner in her own hometown. Tridib tells her: "But you are a foreigner here as May-much more than May, for look at her, she doesn't even need a visa to come here" (Ghosh, 195). According to Roy, Thamma's "search for the pre-partition Dhaka of her childhood and youth is projected as a nostalgic return home." She wants to identify herself as "a native Dhakaian from the older parts of the city, who is contemptuous of the alien inhabitations of new residential localities" that have sprung up and "demonstrates her amnesia to her new Indian identity when confronted with the more compelling claims of an older solidarity" (Roy, 39). The borders fade as Thamma gets entangled in 'going' and 'coming'. Rama Kundu writes, "In view of the persistent infusion of

spaces, the titles of the two parts of the book - *'Going Away'* and *'Coming Home'* become ironical because the impression that emerges from Ghosh's handling of experiences is that one can neither 'go away' nor 'come home.'

3. Cellars & *'Game of Houses'*

"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...the ghost of 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 absence of time and distance-for that is all that a ghost is, a presence displaced in time" (Ghosh, 181).

The cellars provide an alternative space, away from the prying adult gaze, giving a peek-a-boo into the unfulfilled desires, repressed passions, and make-believe worlds of various characters. They become catalysts to arouse memories from the past and at times jolt the characters into realizing "the inequalities of their needs" (Ghosh, 112). It is in the cellar of Tridib's Calcutta home that the narrator experiences his first sexual arousal and realizes that it had no future, "I knew that a part of my life had ceased; that I no longer existed, but as a chronicle" (Ghosh, 112) for Ila was completely oblivious of the effect that she had on him. It is here that he is introduced to Nick Price, who remains with him like a "spectral presence" throughout the narrative.

The childish game of family romance called "Houses" gains significance in the scheme of things as it becomes symbolic of Ila's pathetic plight in her adopted country. At a tender age, her mind has developed its own mechanism of coping with the vicissitudes of life. The readers get an insight into the psychological trauma of rejections, racial slurs, discriminations that she faces in England through her shared experiences of Magda.

4. Magda : The Alter Ego of Ila

In TSL, Magda is Ila's doll, her make-believe baby, created out of her fantasy to embrace the western world, the world that has failed to embrace her back. Her contempt for her own subaltern Asian roots has turned her into a highly complexed individual. She finds herself caught in the cross-currents of two different cultures - one she rejects and the other rejects her. She wishes an alternate dream-life for

herself wherein she is the cynosure of all eyes and narrates made-up stories about her exotic experiences to the wide-eyed narrator. She fantasizes of a life where the most handsome boy is her boyfriend who drives a sports car that is 'red like a lipstick' (Ghosh, 23). It is through her doll Magda and her experiences that her fantasy comes alive. Magda's blond hair and blue eyes are suggestive of her subconscious desire to be an English woman. Although Ghosh devotes only a couple of pages to Magda in his entire 253-page novel, but the ramifications go deep. Magda turns into Ila's alter ego whereby which she fulfills her deep-rooted desire of living in the safety of her English identity.

The first reference of Magda is seen when Ila and the narrator are in the basement of Tridib's grandfather's home in Raibajar, where they end up playing a game of 'houses'. Magda is referred by Ila as the "baby of the house" and she describes her experiences to the narrator, the man of the house. She draws lines on the dusty floor depicting an imaginary room in an imaginary house for their baby. Though these lines represent safety and security from the outside world, they also speak of her isolation and alienation as well.

Magda is described as the most beautiful, most intelligent girl of her class, even her teachers are in awe of her beauty and brains. She is the one who has all the answers. The blue-eyed blond is the one whom everyone wants to befriend. On her way back from school, she gets manhandled by a jealous classmate, but is rescued by Nick Price. Though Magda's appearance is very English, in her dream narration she is maltreated as a subaltern Asian and Nick emerges as her savior against the physical assault revealing Ila's deep-rooted desires to be noticed, saved, and taken care of.

Ila bursts into tears after narrating the story, leaving the narrator perplexed. He was able to decipher the mystery of her tears many years later when May, Nick's sister, makes a revelation, saying,

"that wasn't quite what happened [...] Nick didn't stop to help Ila. He ran all the way back. He used to run back home from school early those days. [...] I think Nick didn't want to be seen with Ila. Ila didn't have any friends in school, you see. Perhaps it was just that she was shy. But after she began going to school, Nick used to come home earlier than he used to" (Ghosh, 76).

Both Ila and Magda undergo the same experiences, but the outcome is different. Magda serves merely as an extension of Ila's

unfulfilled desires. She projects her own identity as a despised Asian on Magda, turning her into a metaphor. But interestingly, the real gets befuddled with fantasy and what we have before us is a highly complexed character of Ila who feels alienated and alone, disliked and shunned by Nick for whom she nurtures a soft spot. She faces discrimination, and abandonment. She yearns to be an insider in London but ends up in getting further alienated. According to Roy, "Ila's story about Nick and Magda shows that it is not 'just a story' but a most traumatic reality blurring the distinction between life and storytelling" (Roy, 41). Ila could never foster a sense of "belongingness" anywhere. She is contemptuous of her roots and wants to be "free of [Indian] bloody culture" (Ghosh, 89). Her Eurocentric values only bring her alienation. "Ila walking alone in a drizzle under that cold grey sky, because Nick Price was ashamed to be seen by his friends, walking home with an Indian" (Ghosh, 76).

5. The 'Upside-down House' : An Inventive Reimagination of Familiar Space

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

Thamma's Dhaka house, where she lived in an extended joint family with hordes of cousins, soon became a bone of contention for the two branches of the family. Since both the brothers came from "litigious stock" (Ghosh, 123), the situation turned peculiarly vicious and resulted in the construction of a wooden partition wall between the house dividing it into two portions. The lawyer-like precision led to the division down to the minutest detail.

"When the wall was eventually built, they found that it had ploughed right through a couple of doorways so that no one could get through them anymore; it had also gone through a lavatory bisecting an old commode. The brothers even partitioned their father's old nameplate. It was divided down the middle by a thin white line, and their names were inscribed on two halves-of necessity in letters so tiny that nobody could read them" (Ghosh, 123).

This ancestral house becomes a prototype of the fractured nation with an inherent suspicion towards 'the too-well-known other'. The brothers get rendered insignificant in the entire realm of things. They think that peace would prevail, but it turns out to be an illusion.

Thamma invented stories about the other side of the divided house to frighten her younger sister, Mayadebi. She invented this upside-down house where "they" did things in an upside-down manner, they slept under the beds and ate on sheets, they wrote with umbrellas and went walking with pencils etc. thus introducing some humour to the narrative. The children invented absurd and strange stories of inversion of normalcy on the other side of the dividing line which continued to proliferate into their lives over the years, "and the strange thing was that as we grew older, even I almost came to believe in our stories" (Ghosh, 126). The children were too young to comprehend fully the cause of their antagonism and grudgingly accepted the changed status from playmates to adversaries. Thamma's imaginative faculties found an outlet and she soon began reconstructing an alternate world where the rules of the familiar world were not applicable for them. What does the other side of the border hold? The fictitious inverted inventions present a justification for the border between two houses or two nations and Jethamoshai's portion of the house becomes the symbolic 'Other,' 'the unknown' - inspiring fear, curiosity, and humour in two sisters. This metaphor of the "upside-down house" is also suggestive of the fact that such differences are mere fabrications and are not as authentic as they have been touted or imagined.

The "upside-down house" is not merely a consequence of the separating wall that was constructed between the two brothers, it is also a by-product of the inventive reimagining of familiar space. It challenges the notion that fracturing the nation was the only option left to bridge the inherent differences in socio-political religious aspirations of two communities that have a shared history of living amicably under one roof practicing their own ways of life. There are enough and more instances of 'saanjhi-chat', 'saanjha-chulha', 'Ganga-Jamuni tahzeeb'.

This upside-down house can also be seen as a trope for the disastrous events surrounding the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and for the disintegration of a community that so far enjoyed strong cultural ties. The great rift is rationalized by

elaborating and exaggerating the dissimilarities that are common in culturally diverse population. It encourages homogenization of seeming differences within the boundaries and alienation of what lies outside. The division of the ancestral house is symbolic of the great divide that ruptured the nation into two separate entities, India, and Pakistan. These two new nation states are like conjoined twins joint at the hip. They are two children sharing the same womb, as such know each other inside out too.

Through his narrative, Amitav Ghosh raises some very pertinent questions about the entity called 'nation'. What is nation? What binds the people and nations together? Are the questions of 'home' and, 'belongingness' connected to one's place of birth? Are the national borders sacrosanct? What would happen if "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 will die here" (Ghosh, 215).

Through Jethamoshai's beliefs, Ghosh also provides another understanding of the ways in which nation states come into being. They originate as much from the supposed shared similarities of a group of people as from the perceived unsurmountable differences that separate them. They are further strengthened by the perceived rivalry with the other. Nationalism has "its roots in fear and hatred of the other," (Anderson, 141) and that Other can be racial, linguistic, religious, or cultural. These differences are constantly reinforced through the presence of arbitrarily drawn border lines. As Gellner opines that nationalism "invents nations where they do not exist" and that it "masquerades under false pretences" that he assimilates "invention" to "fabrication" and "falsity" rather than to "imagining" and "creation" (Anderson, 6).

Old Photographs of Alan Tresawsen, Dan, Mike, Francesca allows us a peep into the past of these friends, the happy times that they spent with each other and the underlying tensions of their relationships as well. It becomes a means of knowing about the distant past when Tridib was a young boy in war-torn London. This simple photograph encapsulates the history of turbulent times that England was going through during the World War. It leads to Dan throwing an extremely loaded question on coming to know of the Indian identity of Saheb, Tridib's father, "Killed any Englishman yet? ... So, what makes you an Indian then?" (Ghosh, 63). Dan's brand of militant nationalism

mirrors Thamma's retort when she says, "We have to kill them before they kill us" (Ghosh, 236). Such images become symbolic of the fact that nothing has changed. Things have remained status-quo.

6. Bartholomew Atlas

Tridib's Bartholomew atlas is yet another important symbolic device used by Ghosh in his narrative. It is suggestive of the arbitrary nature of manmade boundaries wherein countries and maps are merely social constructs. These nationalized cartographies eliminate people from its reckoning, focusing only on lines and states. The narrator realized it when he drew a circle on the map with his compass. "It seemed to me then that within this circle there were only states and citizens; there were no people at all" (Ghosh, 233).

The atlas was given to the young nine-year old Tridib as a birthday present by S.N.I. Price when he had gone to London during the Second World War with his family for his father's operation at the insistence of the Price family. Its tattered form resurfaces forty years later in Delhi at the bottom of a bookshelf. Through this symbolic device Tridib's experiences get passed on to his nephew, and become an integral part of his own lived experiences as he could visualize in all its graphic details "the ghost of nine-year-old Tridib, sitting on a camp bed...his small intent face, listening to the bombs" (Ghosh, 181).

It was on this Bartholomew atlas that Tridib used to point out places to his young mentee, "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with" (Ghosh, 20). Tridib had taught him "to use his imagination with precision" and had pointed out places like Cairo, Madrid, Cuzco, Colombo etc. where his cousin Ila stayed with her globe-trotting parents. These places become exotic places, "magical talismans" (Ghosh, 20) for him and he is able to see them with his mind's eyes in much more detailed a manner than Ila. Ila was merely a person imprisoned by her present. Maps, atlases, memories, dreams did not hold much relevance for her. In fact, these cities where she lived in "went past her in an illusory whirl of movement, like those studio screens in old films which flash past the windows of speeding cars" (Ghosh, 21).

7. Maps & Borders

Maps and borders are symbolic of the dichotomy that exists between different states. They create the divide between people,

categorizing them into “us” and “them.” In the fateful year of 1947, these cartographic lines fractured the Indian subcontinent and carved out two nations, causing untold miseries, violence, death, and destruction in its wake. The two children born out of the same womb have never been able to break free of their umbilical cord ever since, they know each other inside out and hence the enmity between them too is multi-tiered and enormous. Through his narrative, Ghosh seeks to describe the utter senselessness of creating such artificial divisions and seeks to transcend these arbitrary lines to embrace transnationalism.

The best of the brains fail to grasp the magnitude of instabilities created by these lines of demarcation. Thamma is one such victim. How can Calcutta and Dhaka be at odds with one another? “If there aren’t any trenches or anything, how are people to know?” (Ghosh, 151). “...the borderline cannot destroy the fundamental identity of people on both sides of the boundary...it reveals the fragility of Partition’s borders between nations as etched out in maps, and of the frontiers policed by nation states that separate people, communities, and families” (Kavita Daiya). Tridib’s death changed her concept of borders, radicalizing her further. Like Manto’s Toba Tek Singh, Jethamoshai also refuses to move to Hindu India, saying,

“I don’t believe in this India-Shindia ...what if they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere ...” (Ghosh, 215).

Though touted to be senile and insane in popular parlance, both Jethamoshai and Toba display earthy wisdom as they debunk the notion of partisan nationalism.

For the narrator, on the other hand, these very geographical boundaries are rendered meaningless because his mentor-cum-uncle had inspired him to see the world differently. It is through his eyes that the narrator views the world and gradually pieces together memories, incidents, and reactions of people he comes across. It may be his own individual hyper-sensitive observations and consciousness that enables him to connect all disparate pieces into a coherent whole, but he also throws open collective consciousness and history of a nation.

His horizon is expanded much before he can move out of Calcutta. It leads him to conjure places, stories and histories

connected to them, bringing them all alive for his audience. He imbibes the cartographic knowledge of places he has never visited, poring over the A-to-Z street atlas of London until he knew the Prices' area, "page 43, square 2, by heart" (Ghosh, 58). Ila, on the other hand, is contemptuous of the narrator's ability to imagine far-off places, "All those hours with Tridib did you no good" whereas the narrator is appalled by the fact that for Ila "Cairo is a place to piss in" (Ghosh, 21).

8. Mirror Motifs

The mirror motif finds a repeated presence in the novel. People, places, and events achieve their symbolism and significance as they get refracted through other's experiences, observations, and comments, and become "looking glass events" (Ghosh, 225). The motifs of time and space, illusion and reality get mirrored through people's eyes in a very complex and interesting manner. Time plays a significant role in adding and reformulating viewpoints, thereby adding deeper existential and epistemological implications that go beyond critiquing colonialism, partition, or nationalism.

Words are laden with perspectives. It took the narrator nearly 15 years to decipher the connection between the disappearance of *Mu-i-Mubarak*, the sacred relic of Prophet Mohammad from the Hazratbal shrine in Kashmir and the violent communal riots in Calcutta and Dhaka. The events that transpired in both these cities across the border were identical - mirror images of each other. Robi's nightmarish dreams, May's reclusive behaviour, Tridib's death in Dhaka and the narrator's near-death experience in Calcutta were all intrinsically linked. Ghosh writes that they were intertwined "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" (Ghosh, 233). The situation wasn't any different in Germany and England during the World War. Alan found it was "like stepping through a looking glass" (Ghosh, 66).

9. The Title

The title of the novel is metaphoric in several ways. It critiques the notions of nation, nationalism, and border lines. The lines drawn across nations are elusive and blurred. They are forever in a flux, shifting places, leading to greater disintegration and disharmony.

Borders are socio-political constructs which are twisted and manipulated by the dominant powers to exercise control and realize their ambitions. They create artificial political units across the globe and divide the people ostensibly to project that this would lead to better harmony. The title is symbolic of these very arbitrary manmade divisions that have no place for the complexities of inter-ethnic concerns. It merely creates the binaries of "us" and "them," resulting in fear, paranoia, distrust for the "Other." This becomes evident in the brutal way in which Tridib and Jethamoshai are killed. The meaning of nation, nationality, home, border radicalize Thamma, transforming her for ever, "we have to kill them before they kill us" (Ghosh, 237). According to her freedom had to be earned with blood and sacrifice.

Borders provide safety and security as well and restrict the violence at the margins of the nation. Kaul writes about the indispensability of such violence in nation-building, saying that it "ratifies boundaries and deepens the ideological and inter-national oppositions necessary to mould an internally-coherent national identity" (Kaul, 136). Its critique gets further manifested in Thamma's Dhaka visit. The issues of nation, nationality, place of birth, home, borders, visa etc. make her jittery and she ends up thoroughly confused as to whether she was 'returning home' or 'going home'. She has accepted the fact that partition was a necessary consequence of religious differences and that India was her home now. To visit the place of her birth, she requires visa. Although she has forged a new home for herself in India, she could not erase old memories and associations which were a very integral part of her growing years and makes a Freudian slip when she involuntarily says that "earlier they could come home to Dhaka whenever I wanted" (Ghosh, 152). The exigencies of job had displaced Thamma much before partition. As such, her "vision of freedom from colonial rule included a vision of a national identity- citizenship that articulated a homeliness and sense of belonging" (Daiya, 51).

Jethamoshai too is caught in a time-wrap, he refuses to acknowledge any entity called India. He could see through the politics of drawing lines, the vested political interests. Nation or nationality can never be forged according to people's whims and fancies. It is an integral part of one's identity, like having a name.

The nationalistic discourse prospers and flourishes in inventing and highlighting the 'otherness'. This is where it draws its sustenance

from. This has kept the “enchantment of lines alive” (Ghosh, 233) thinking that they would steadily drift apart. But when the narrator draws a huge circle on the atlas, he realizes the utter meaninglessness of violent communal riots that rocked Khulna, Dhaka and Calcutta killing many innocent lives.

10. The Riots of 1964

The riots that rocked cities on both side of the border expose the deep-seated animosity, abhorrence and mistrust that crept between the two factions of Indian populace post its partition. Tridib’s untimely death in the communal violence across the border in his own grandmother’s hometown is symbolic of how innocent lives get sacrificed at the altar of such vitriolic hostility. Tridib’s death in the riots itself holds a lot of symbolism in its fold. Was it a simple killing of a stranger in a strange land? Or was it a sacrifice? Did he deliberately offer himself to the raging crowd to be consumed by the madness? Was he aware of the repercussions of such an act? The key lies in that fateful trip which he had undertaken with his beloved, May Price where she had forced him to stop their speeding car and put the dying dog out of his miserable plight. Again, it was at the behest of humanitarian May that Tridib gets down from the Consulate car to save Jethamoshai and Khalil from the communal onslaught, only to be devoured by the crowd. May was the “English memsahib,” who was relatively safe but Tridib was a Hindu from across the border. The soul-shattering turn of event transformed many lives in a single stroke. It turned Robi into a nervous wreck. His recurrent nightmarish dreams left him miserable and grandmother’s mental status was never the same again. May became a recluse, and could never overcome the guilt of having caused him his life. “But I know now I didn’t kill him; I couldn’t have, even if I’d wanted. He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can’t understand it, I know I mustn’t try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery” (Ghosh, 251-252). True to his name Tridib which means HINDU TRINITY, stepped in to save others. He sacrificed his life to save humanity from the clutches of madness and illogical communal hatred, thus turning into a prophetic figure.

11. Conclusion

Ghosh’s works have been very often placed in the center of the postmodern and postcolonial discourse. The variegated symbolisms

and rich allusions of the narrative instil meanings into shadows that linger between reality and illusion. *The Shadow Lines* take the readers on an intricate journey where newer inferences are unraveled with every successive reading. His narrative abounds in metaphors that throw open different perspectives on nation, nationality, nationalism, transnationalism, home, homelessness, rootedness, and rootlessness. Even the most insignificant trivia finds relevance in the greater scheme of things in Ghosh's narrative, be it the huge table in the basement of their Calcutta home which Tridib's grandfather had imported all the way from London that arouses a smirk in May as she calls it "a worthless bit of England" or the site of Victoria Memorial, which reflects the remnants of colonial legacy, or the old photographs or the imagined upside-down house. The fact that the narrator is unnamed also hints at the fluidity of his characterization. He is the mouthpiece of grandmother, Tridib and Ila, who zealously takes the narrative forward. He becomes the alter ego of Tridib, and unconsciously take over his persona. The transformation reaches its culmination towards the end of the narrative when he sleeps with his mentor's beloved. "[...] when we lay in each other's arms quietly, in the night, I could tell that she was glad too, and grateful, for the glimpse she had given me of a final redemptive mystery" (Ghosh, 252).

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