

Chasing Shadow Lines: Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh

Review by Ramlal Agarwal

The *Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh takes its readers back and forth from Dhaka to Calcutta to London, from the past to the present, with a gathering of characters from three countries and three generations who connect with one another notwithstanding differences of nationality, colour or religion.

It starts with the family of Justice Chandra Shekhar Datta, Chaudhuri, and his brother, Gostobihari. Justice Datta-Chaudhuri has two daughters, Tha'mma and Mayadevi. Tha'mma is married to an engineer working in Burma, and Mayadevi is married to a famous advocate. Tha'mma's husband dies of pneumonia, and she comes to Calcutta with her son, daughter-in-law, and grandson.

The novel is the autobiography of Tha'mma's grandson, who remains anonymous. In Calcutta, Tha'mma works as a school teacher to support her family. She is very proud and self-reliant and does not seek any help from her rich sister. Mayadevi has three sons. Her eldest son Jatin works with the U.N.; her second son Tridib is an archaeologist engaged in research; and her youngest son Robi is in the civil service. Tridib does not wear his scholarship on his sleeve. Tha'mma thinks he is a wastrel since he has no job and idles away gossiping with boys in the street. The grandson of Tha'mma is very fond of Tridib, which Tha'mma dislikes. Unmindful of his grandmother's disapproval, the child clings to his uncle. Tridib, too, is very fond of the child and tells him about famous places, famous sights, and buildings in vivid detail, recreated in his imagination. It gives the young lad a strong desire to visit those places. He is also very fond of his cousin Ila, and they engage in games that children play. He also takes a liking to her. Likewise, Tridib has a fancy for May Price, the daughter of Mrs. Price, a family friend of the Datta-Chaudhuri family since her father-in-law, Mr. Lionel Tresawson. When May returns to London and Ila to her father, both Tridib and the young narrator long for their company. Tridib writes in May. May works for an orchestra and collects funds for destitute children, and Ila makes friends in her school and moves with her father's postings. In one of his letters to May, Tridib writes how a couple gets desperate for sex and seeks an awkward place in a theatre in war times. He describes the act in all its details, including the movements of their bodies.

At the end of the letter, he wrote, it all happened so long ago that he did not know whether it really happened or he had imagined it. But he did know that that was how he wanted to meet her, May, as a stranger—strangers across the seas—all the more strangers because they knew each other already. He wanted them to meet far from friends and relatives—in a place without past, without history, free, really free—two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers. May stops reading the letter as Nick appears in the doorway. Later, her mother asked her "What did Tridib say in his letter? and May said "He had invited her to India". Her mother said, "She should go". May was also doing research on a musician who was influenced by Indian music, and she decided to go to India.

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When she arrives in India, she is received by Tridib and the narrator. Once, as they were speeding along the road, they came across a badly mangled dog writhing with pain. The sight does not affect Tridib, but it touches May, and she stops the car and goes to the dog and helps it die without prolonged suffering.

A similar incident occurs later, when the family is in Dhaka. The narrator's interest in Ila wanes as she shows photographs of friends, describes her adventures with them, and finally marries Mick Price, the son of Mrs. Price. He left and became a mere chronicler. In the meantime, the war between India and Pakistan broke out, and Bangladesh came into existence. Dhaka is now a part of Bangladesh and mutated beyond recognition. After the death of H. Datta Chaudhuri, Gostobihari, called Jatha Moshai, acts as the head of the family. He is alone, and his health deteriorates. The Muslim migrants from India flood Dhaka, and Jethamoshai provides shelter to Khalil, who runs a cycle rickshaw. Khalil is grateful to him and takes care of the old man during his disintegration.

Robi, who is in Dhaka, informs his mother and Tha'mma about the old man and how he needs help from his relatives. So, Tha'mma Maydevi, Tridib, and May reach Dhaka to fetch the Jethamoshai. The old man refuses to leave Dhaka. Then Khalil suggests that he take him in his rickshaw and follow their car, and the plan works.

They hardly make a move when a group of rioters attacks them. Fortunately, they had an armed guard with them who fired a shot in the air, and the rioters dispersed, but soon they saw the rickshaw and attacked it.

Tha'mma wants to get away from the place at the earliest, but May stops the car and rushes at the rioters. Tridib follows her, pushes her back, and surges ahead. Soon the rioters disperse, but not before they have slashed three men dead: Tridib, Jethamoshay, and Khalil.

Soon after the incident, May returns to London. The narrator is told that Tridib died in an accident. Later, the narrator gets a scholarship and goes to London. He meets May, for whom he has taken a fancy. He tries to force himself on her, but May jerks him away, and he apologizes for his indiscretion. May forgives him, and they are together for a blissful night. May also tells him how Tridib died in Dhaka.

Amitav Ghosh draws his characters realistically. Tha'mma is prejudiced against the family of her sister because it is more affluent and successful. Her prejudice against Tridib and Ila is peevish. She acts like a villain when she writes to the principal of the narrator's school to expel him because he has taken to visiting women of ill repute. She shows no concern for her uncle when he is attacked by rioters. It also leaves a bad taste in the mouth. She is so materialistic and flippant. She cries bitterly for her husband's faithlessness and soon forgets it all. However, their shortcomings look insignificant compared with the redeeming qualities of May Price and Khalil. Their humanity and kindness touch the hearts of the readers.

Tridib and the narrator play a vital role in the novel. Tridib plays the role of the teacher in the formation of the narrator into a mature man. He defines the shadow lines, the title of the novel, as the shadow lines that

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mark history, which hides truth and serves the purpose of the present state, nationalism, national borders, and wars and riots, which serve the purpose of dividing people and impinge on humanity, human happiness, and friendship among human beings.

The novel is loaded with intellectualism and postmodern experimentalism.