

SHADOW LINES OF KINSHIP: FAMILY, DESIRE, AND THE UNEXAMINED DOMESTIC IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE SHADOW LINES

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines (1988) has attracted sustained scholarly attention for its treatment of borders, nation, and communal memory, but its representation of family — as a structure of kinship, desire, and generational fracture — remains critically under-explored. This paper argues that the novel stages a crisis of the Indian family through three interlocking registers: the narrator's unrequited desire for his second cousin Ila, which exposes a tension between cosmopolitan individualism and normative kinship expectations; the fractured household of Thamma and Jethamoshai in Dhaka, where familial partition prefigures national Partition; and the unconsummated cross-cultural bond between Tridib and May Price, which tests the limits of kinship across civilisational divides. Drawing on Partha Chatterjee's distinction between the material and spiritual domains of anticolonial nationalism, and on Eleanor Newbigin's analysis of the postcolonial Indian family as a site of contested sovereignty, the paper contends that Ghosh's families do not merely reflect the national fractures the novel is celebrated for depicting; they constitute the very ground on which those fractures become legible. What the novel reveals, read from this angle, is not a normatively "aberrant" family but a family form caught between incompatible orders of belonging.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh; *The Shadow Lines*; family; kinship; postcolonial domesticity; Partition.

A curious silence has settled over the domestic interior of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Published in 1988 and awarded the Sahitya Akademi Prize the following year, the novel has been read and re-read with great critical energy — but almost exclusively on the axes of nation, border, and communal memory. Suvir Kaul's early reading treated the novel as a meditation on growing up "inter/national"; Padmini Mongia explored its postcolonial reconfiguration of gendered identity; and the broader critical consensus, shaped by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Homi Bhabha's vocabulary of hybridity, has placed the novel firmly in the territory of nationalist critique. These readings are not wrong. But they have, collectively, walked past what lies in plain sight: that *The Shadow Lines* is, before it is anything else, a novel about

families — about the bonds that hold them together, the desires that strain them, and the ruptures, both private and political, that tear them apart.

This paper takes the novel's families seriously as objects of critical attention rather than as backdrops against which the more prestigious theme of nation unfolds. Its central contention is this: the domestic arrangements in *The Shadow Lines* — the narrator's longing for his cousin Ila, the physical partition of the ancestral house in Dhaka, the impossible relationship between Tridib and May Price — do not merely accompany the novel's political argument but constitute its deepest register. Ghosh does not write about families as a way of getting to the nation; he writes about the nation as a way of understanding what has happened to the family. The two are not separate. They cannot be prised apart. And the failure to read them together has impoverished the critical conversation.

Partha Chatterjee's well-known distinction, in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, between the "material" and "spiritual" domains of anticolonial nationalism provides one entry point. Chatterjee argues that Indian nationalism conceded the material domain — the economy, the state, technology — to Western modernity while jealously guarding the spiritual domain, which included the home, the family, and the position of women within it. The family, on this account, was never merely private; it was the sovereign territory of cultural self-definition, the one space the coloniser could not reach. If Chatterjee is right, then any postcolonial novel that disturbs the family disturbs the deepest structure of national self-understanding — and that is exactly what *The Shadow Lines* does, repeatedly, and without apology. Eleanor Newbigin's archival work on the drafting of post-independence personal law confirms a related point: that the Indian Constitution of 1950 deliberately retained colonial-era legal frameworks for family governance, making the family not a space of liberated postcolonial identity but a continuation of colonial regulation by other means. The families in Ghosh's novel inhabit precisely this contradictory terrain.

DESIRE ACROSS KINSHIP LINES: THE NARRATOR AND ILA

The narrator's longing for Ila is the novel's most sustained emotional current, and it is a longing that runs along a kinship line. The two are second cousins: the narrator's grandmother, Thamma, and Ila's grandmother, Mayadebi, are sisters. Their fathers are therefore first cousins. In the legal terms of the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, this relationship falls well outside the "degrees of prohibited relationship" and the "sapinda" restriction, which extend only to certain prescribed generational links. Second-cousin unions are not prohibited under Indian personal law, and in many Indian communities — notably across South India, and among several Bengali bhadralok families — they have carried no social stigma at all. The narrator's desire for Ila is not, in any legally or anthropologically precise sense, incestuous. And yet — this is the complication the novel

insists upon — it feels transgressive. Not because a rule of blood is violated, but because the desire crosses a line of asymmetry: he needs her, and she does not need him.

Ghosh gives this asymmetry a single, devastating formulation. The narrator arrives at the recognition that “need is not transitive, that one may need without oneself being needed” (44). That sentence deserves to be read slowly. It is not a statement about kinship taboo. It is a statement about the non-reciprocity of desire within a kinship structure that assumes mutuality — a family is, after all, the social unit most fundamentally organised around the expectation that caring will be returned. What the narrator discovers is that the family bond guarantees proximity but not reciprocity. Ila is his cousin. She will always be his cousin. She will never be his lover. The kinship relation holds him close enough to suffer but too close to be desired.

Ila, for her part, represents a cosmopolitan refusal of the very kinship structures the narrator inhabits. She grows up abroad, the daughter of a diplomat, and her relationship to place, family, and belonging is defined by mobility rather than roots. Where Thamma clings fiercely to the ancestral house in Dhaka, where the narrator maps the world through Tridib’s stories and never leaves Calcutta until adulthood, Ila moves through Cairo, London, Colombo as though geography were merely wallpaper. Her eventual marriage to Nick Price — a man outside the kinship network, outside the culture, outside the shared emotional grammar of the family — is the logical extension of her trajectory. She does not rebel against the family in any dramatic sense; she simply steps outside it, as though it were a room she had been visiting rather than a house she lived in.

The narrator’s reaction to Ila’s engagement to Nick is telling. He does not object on grounds of kinship propriety. He does not invoke family honour or cultural duty. His anguish is personal and possessive: it is the pain of someone who has been passed over, not the outrage of someone whose norms have been violated. And this is the point. Ghosh refuses to stage the narrator’s desire as a conflict between tradition and modernity, between Indian family values and Western individualism. He stages it, instead, as the failure of a human being to make himself necessary to another human being. The family structure provides the scaffolding, but the drama is existential, not sociological.

There is a moment early in the novel when the narrator hums the film song “bekaraar kar ke hamein yun na jaiye” while thinking of Ila. The song, from a Hindi film of the early 1960s, is a plea against abandonment — do not leave me in this state of restless longing. The narrator inhabits a culture saturated with this rhetoric of amorous helplessness, and his love for Ila borrows its vocabulary from Bollywood rather than from sacred scripture or caste regulation. The family connection is what makes the proximity possible, what keeps drawing them together at weddings and visits and holidays. But the desire itself operates outside any kinship grammar. It is stubbornly individual, stubbornly modern, and stubbornly unrequited.

THE FRACTURED HOUSEHOLD: THAMMA, MAYADEBI, AND JETHAMOSHAI

If the narrator's longing for Ila represents a crisis of desire within kinship, the ancestral house in Dhaka represents a crisis of kinship itself — its physical dissolution. The house in which Thamma and Mayadebi grew up was divided, years before Partition, by a wall built between feuding brothers. Thamma's father and his brother Jethamoshai quarrelled, and the quarrel was settled not by reconciliation but by architecture: a wall down the middle of the house, splitting it into two domains. The family partitioned itself before the nation did. Ghosh never underlines this parallel with the heavy hand of allegory; he lets it sit in the reader's mind, accruing its own significance.

Thamma is the novel's most formidable character, and she is formidable precisely because she embodies a set of values — self-reliance, frugality, fierce nationalism, suspicion of indulgence — that are rooted in the fracture of her own family. She lost her husband in Calcutta and raised her son alone, without accepting charity from her more prosperous sister Mayadebi. She is a woman who has learned to survive the collapse of domestic security by converting deprivation into principle. Her nationalism, which strikes the narrator and Ila as rigid and archaic, makes perfect sense as the response of someone whose family was torn apart long before the border was drawn. The partition of her house preceded the Partition of India by decades, and for Thamma the two are inseparable: family, house, and nation are all structures that protect you until someone draws a line through them.

Mayadebi occupies the opposite position. Married to the Shaheb, a diplomat, she enjoys the privileges of mobility and stature. Her sons — Tridib, Jatin, and Robi — grow up in a cosmopolitan household connected to the Prices in London. Where Thamma's life contracts around the loss of her husband and the defence of her independence, Mayadebi's expands into a world of visits, friendships, and cross-cultural ease. The contrast between the two sisters is not merely temperamental; it is structural. Mayadebi's marriage gave her access to the material comforts of postcolonial diplomatic life, while Thamma's widowhood locked her into the austere domestic economy of the Bengali middle class. The family, which began as one household in Dhaka, has been split by circumstance into two entirely different social worlds.

The figure of Jethamoshai, Thamma's uncle, provides the novel's most haunting image of this familial dissolution. When the family travels to Dhaka in January 1964 — the journey that will end in Tridib's death — they find Jethamoshai still living in the old house, now surrounded by strangers. He has not left. He has not crossed the border. He has simply stayed, like a relic of a family structure that no longer exists around him, insisting on inhabiting a space whose meaning has been evacuated by history. The attempt to bring him back to India, to reunite the family across the border, precipitates the riot in which Tridib is killed. Kinship, here, is not merely disrupted by

political violence; it is the occasion for political violence. The family's effort to repair itself triggers the catastrophe.

TRIDIB, MAY PRICE, AND THE LIMITS OF CROSS-CULTURAL KINSHIP

The relationship between Tridib and May Price offers the novel's third interrogation of kinship — not within the family but at its borders. Tridib and May are not related by blood; they are connected through the friendship between Tridib's grandfather, Justice Chandrashekhara Datta-Chaudhuri, and May's grandfather, Lionel Tresawson, who met at séances in London before the Second World War. The bond between the families is affective, not consanguinal. And yet it carries a weight that mirrors kinship: it produces obligations, expectations, and a form of emotional debt that persists across generations.

Tridib's attraction to May is never fully articulated in the novel, and this reticence is itself significant. Ghosh withholds the interior of their relationship, filtering it through the narrator's reconstruction from fragments, silences, and May's eventual confession at the end of the novel. What we know is that Tridib died trying to save May from the mob during the Dhaka riot, and that May has carried the guilt of his death ever since. The relationship was unconsummated. It existed in the space of possibility rather than fulfilment — a kinship-that-might-have-been, suspended across the civilisational divide between an Indian intellectual and an Englishwoman whose families had been entangled for two generations.

Homi Bhabha's concept of "the third space," articulated in *The Location of Culture*, offers one way of thinking about what Tridib and May inhabit: a liminal zone that is neither Indian nor English, neither family nor not-family, but something produced by the encounter between the two. Bhabha argues that such spaces are where cultural meaning is negotiated rather than imposed, and Tridib, more than any other character, embodies this principle. He is the character who teaches the narrator to see places through imagination rather than experience, who brings London alive for a boy who has never left Calcutta. But Tridib's liminality is also what kills him. He dies in a space between communities, attempting to bridge a gap that the riot has violently reopened. The cross-cultural kinship bond, which his grandfather's friendship with Tresawson had created, cannot protect him from the force of communal violence that recognises only one kind of belonging.

May's guilt, disclosed to the narrator on his final night in London, adds another layer. She tells him that when the mob stopped their car, Thamma was prepared to abandon Jethamoshai. May tried to intervene. Tridib stepped in to protect her and was killed. The moral calculus here is excruciating: Tridib died because May acted on an impulse of individual conscience, while Thamma, governed by an older logic of family preservation, was willing to sacrifice the elderly

uncle to save the others. Neither position is presented as simply right. The family logic protects the group by sacrificing the expendable member; the individualist ethic insists on protecting every person, regardless of cost. Both fail. Jethamoshai dies. Tridib dies. And the family that tried to heal its oldest wound — the partition of the Dhaka house — is broken more completely than before.

THE NATION AS FAMILY, THE FAMILY AS NATION

Ghosh's treatment of the 1963–64 riots — triggered by the disappearance of the Mu-i-Mubarak relic from the Hazratbal shrine near Srinagar on 27 December 1963, and spreading through Karachi, Khulna, and Calcutta — illuminates the connection between familial and national fracture in its starkest terms. The novel tracks the way communal violence moves across borders like contagion, each riot triggering reprisals elsewhere, and it exposes the failure of official narratives to account for the suffering. As Ghosh shows, the Calcutta newspapers gave space to the start of a cricket Test match in Madras in January 1964 while remaining silent about killings in the city's streets. The point is not simply that journalism failed; it is that the institutions of public narration are structurally incapable of registering the domestic, the familial, the intimate dimensions of political violence.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument in *Provincializing Europe* that the discipline of academic History carries the marks of its colonial origin is relevant here, though it requires careful application. Chakrabarty's point is that History as a knowledge-form privileges certain kinds of events — wars, treaties, parliamentary debates — and marginalises others — the domestic, the religious, the affective. Ghosh's novel performs an analogous critique at the level of the newspaper. The riot that kills Tridib does not make the front page. A cricket match does. The hierarchy of narration mirrors the hierarchy of knowledge that Chakrabarty identifies: certain things count as events and others do not, and the family, with its intimate catastrophes, falls consistently below the threshold of the narratable.

What *The Shadow Lines* ultimately proposes is not that the family has been damaged by the nation, though it has, nor that the nation has colonised the family, though it has done that too. It proposes, rather, that family and nation are the same structure seen at different scales. The wall through the Dhaka house is the border through the subcontinent. Thamma's refusal to accept help from Mayadebi is the nation's refusal to accept that its peoples were once one community. The narrator's unrequited desire for Ila is the desire of a divided culture for a wholeness it can imagine but never possess. Robi's anguished question — voiced in the novel's closing pages — about why the subcontinent cannot simply draw thousands of little lines and give every place a new name, followed by the devastating recognition that “the whole thing is a mirage” and that no one can

“divide a memory,” applies as much to the divided house as to the divided nation. Memory does not respect the wall between rooms any more than it respects the border between countries.

The Partition of Bengal in 1905, which Ghosh invokes as a precursor to the Partition of 1947, established the template: a political division dressed up as administrative necessity, justified in the language of efficiency but motivated by the logic of divide and rule. The families in *The Shadow Lines* live within this template. Their separations are not natural. Their estrangements are not inevitable. They are the product of lines drawn by other people for other reasons, and the tragedy is that these lines, once drawn, become real — as real as the wall through the Dhaka house, as real as the border the narrator’s grandmother must cross, passport in hand, to visit the house where she was born.

CONCLUSION

The critical literature on *The Shadow Lines* has given us sharp readings of borders, memory, and national identity, and those readings have earned their place. But they have also, inadvertently, reproduced the very silencing the novel protests. They have treated the family as furniture — the backdrop against which the real drama of nation and history unfolds — when Ghosh himself treats it as the stage. The narrator’s desire for Ila, Thamma’s war of self-reliance, the split house in Dhaka, Tridib’s sacrifice for May: these are not minor domestic subplots. They are the novel’s argument, condensed into lives.

What this reading reveals is not that the families in *The Shadow Lines* are “aberrant” — measured against some timeless Indian standard of kinship propriety — but that they are caught in a historical crisis of belonging for which no existing kinship grammar, whether traditional or modern, Indian or Western, proves adequate. The narrator cannot have Ila because desire does not follow the map of the family. Thamma cannot save Jethamoshai because the nation has redrawn the map of home. Tridib cannot love May without stepping into a space between cultures where the old protections do not hold. Each failure is specific. Each is irreducible. And each points toward the larger condition the novel diagnoses: that in the postcolonial world Ghosh inhabits, the family is not the refuge from political disruption but the place where disruption is felt most intimately and most inescapably.

Chatterjee warned that the spiritual domain — the home, the woman, the family — was the terrain nationalism reserved for itself, the one space it would not yield to Western modernity. But *The Shadow Lines* shows what happens when that terrain is already fractured from within, when the family has already been partitioned by its own quarrels, its own migrations, its own impossible desires. The nation does not invade the family. The family was never whole to begin with. And the shadow lines of the title are not only the borders between countries; they are the

invisible, taken-for-granted, and yet entirely consequential lines that run through every household — between sisters who married differently, between cousins who wanted differently, between generations who remembered differently. Those are the lines Ghosh makes visible. That is the reading still waiting to be done.

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