Separation Anxiety: Growing Up Inter/National in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Suvir Kaul

> Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality.
>
> Ernest Renan[1]

> I can only write about it [the past] ... by bringing it in some relation to my present-day thoughts and activities, and then this writing of history, as Goethe once said, brings some relief from the weight and burden of the past. It is, I suppose, a process similar to that of psychoanalysis, but applied to a race or to humanity itself instead of to an individual.
>
> Jawaharlal Nehru[2]

Do you remember?—in *The Shadow Lines*, this is the insistent question that brings together the personal and the public. It shapes the narrator's search for connections, for the recovery of lost information or repressed experiences, for the details of great trauma or joy that have receded into the archives of public or private memory. As the repository and archivist of family stories, stories told by his grandmother Tha'mma, by Tridib, by Ila, and finally by Robi and May, the unnamed narrator of *The Shadow Lines* is constantly engaged in the imaginative renewal of times, places, events and people past. This remembering is often tinted with the sepia-tones of nostalgia, often darkened by the dull shades of grief, but in each case it is fundamentally a search for meaning, for explanations and reasons, for the elusive formal and causal logic that will allow the narrator's autobiography (and equally, the national biography that is interwoven with it in the novel) to cohere, to make sense. In *The Shadow Lines* the shaping force of memory is enormously productive and enabling,

but also traumatic and disabling; it liberates, and stunts, both the individual imagination and social possibilities; it confirms identities and enforces divides. Memory is, above all, a restless, energetic, troubling power; the price, and the limitation, of freedom; the abettor, and the interrogator, of the form and existence of the modern nation-state.

The pressure of this question—do you remember?—generates the form of the novel: its partial answers, its digressions, its looping, non-linear, wide-ranging narrative technique. These formal features are apposite to its larger project, for *The Shadow Lines* is an archaeology of silences, a slow brushing away of some of the cobwebs of modern Indian memory, a repeated return to those absences and fissures that mark the sites of personal and national trauma. As the narrator discovers, this is no easy project, for the silences he uncovers are not contingent or accidental, but are *constitutive* of the nature of Indian modernity, indeed of the identity of the post-colonial sub-continental nation-states of India and Pakistan. To articulate these silences, to give them a language, to ascribe to them a causal and structural place within the syntax of the modern nation, is to acknowledge a difficult and often repressed truth, that states, and 'citizens', are founded in violence. However, to acknowledge is to take the first step in the process of mourning, and perhaps of recovery, and it is this process that *The Shadow Lines* represents to its readers.

In this section of the essay, I will examine several connections between the *bildungsroman* elements (the coming-of-age themes) in the novel and its meditations on nationalism, nation-states and international relations. I will suggest that in *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator's itinerary into adulthood, in India and abroad, is necessarily framed by these larger public questions because the novel also examines the development of ideas of modern Indian citizenship and national identity.[3] The narrator's contact with other characters and their lives traces the political, social, intellectual and emotional parameters of an English-speaking, bi-lingual, metropolitan, middle-class Indian

subjectivity. This is a subjectivity formed, in part, by ideas inherited from the history of anti-imperialist activism, but one which comes to recognize how closely its 'Indianness' is a product of images and desires whose origins lie far away across the seas, and that the 'colonial' and the 'independent' in India are marked not so much by a breach as by structuring continuities. It is a subjectivity marked especially by a growing sense that the logic of the modern nation-state is necessarily at odds with various forms of sub-continental commonality, and that to be 'Indian' is to perversely, and perhaps unsuccessfully, define oneself against one's mirror-image from across the border. Finally, it is a subjectivity scarred by perceptions of violence, not so much of the violence orchestrated by the state in the service of its ends, as that spawned by people mobilized by some form of shared hatred or empathy.

Central to the narrator's self-conception is his sense of the strange, not-quite-dialectical logic of identity and difference that marks his growing up. Even as he is rooted in Calcutta, his imaginative universe knows few boundaries—he is transported by Tridib's stories, and by Ila's, to places and times which come alive for him with a powerful immediacy. For the narrator, Tridib, who insists on a precision of observation and recollection, is the author of this immediacy: 'I could not forget,' the narrator says, 'because Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with' (26).[4] Ila, on the other hand, functions for him as the obverse of the imaginative traveller. She is, as the daughter of a diplomat, a world traveller, but one whose ever 'shifting landscapes' (26) seem to demand the fixities of the banal and the pragmatic—memories of airport lounges and the locations of toilets stay with her, and for her the London Underground is just a mode of transportation. Not so for the narrator, who believes passionately that 'a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination,' and whose sense of wonderment includes a philosophical faith that Ila's 'practical, bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more or less true, only very far apart' (27).

Ila, in this context as in others, functions very much as the narrator's double, her likeness close enough for her differences to cause him to reflect upon himself: 'And so, as always, it was Ila—Ila of whom it was said, when we were children, that she and I were so alike that I could have been her twin—it was that very Ila who baffled me yet again with the mystery of difference' (36-37). In the dialectic of his identity, of his imagined self, she functions as the negative pole, structurally necessary, and to be superseded. He learns all manner of lessons from his relationship with her, lessons about asymmetrical emotional relationships, about cultural dislocations and maladjustments, about the compromises that accompany life lived at home and abroad. Most of all, however, he learns from her (at first not entirely consciously) a conflicted idiom of sexuality, particularly insofar as that language of desire is a central element in the complex of ideas that demarcate, for him, home from abroad, the Indian from the foreign. As I will go on to suggest, in *The Shadow Lines* differentiated sexualities are a key element in the discourse of nationality and even (or especially) nationalism. A quick instance of this is the question Tridib is asked the moment he begins to describe a (make-believe) trip to London and the Price family and May to his acquaintances at the Gole Park adda: 'And what is she like? ... Sexy?' The spontaneity and impersonality of this ribald vulgarism offers a cultural gloss on the remarkable fact that in this novel, the discourse of male sexuality is derived from its conflicted or romanticized sense of the 'foreign' female body: for Tridib, May is foreign and desirable, a figure of romance from far across the seas, as Ila is (somewhat differently) for the narrator. In fact, *The Shadow Lines* describes no sexual or romantic relationship between two people who share an obvious identity of nationality, race or cultural experience—desire originates, and finds its object, across borders.

When they are sixteen, Ila and the narrator are embarrassed by their memory of sitting, as children, on a park bench by the lake 'with our arms around each others waists, pretending to count the birds on the little island' (24). In the narrator's

memory, Ila is the one who initiates such play, who makes possible the little-understood frisson of his sexual awakening. On a visit to Calcutta from her life abroad, she plays house with him, slipping off her dress to mime her changing in the morning (76). He, intrigued by her bare chest and a mole above her nipple, reaches out and fondles her—in moments like this, as he plays the husband in the family romance that Ila directs, she becomes for him the object of great desire.[5] At the heart of this family romance, however, is an ineluctable foreignness, for the 'house' they inhabit is in London, and Magda, their fantasy-child, is blue-eyed and blond: no one had ever seen 'anyone as beautiful as Magda. They had never seen hair that shone like hers—like a bright, golden light. They had never seen such deep blue eyes, nor cheeks as pink and healthy and smiling as hers' (77). This scenario is dictated by Ila's life abroad, in particular by her need to compensate for her experience of racism in England.[6] But even as they grow into adulthood, the narrator's desire for Ila is always couched in terms that emphasize her 'Western' ways: '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' (85).

Within the narrative, Ila thus becomes the focus of desire, anxiety and mystery, and for those reasons, a figure central to the novel's account of norms—sexual, cultural and 'national'—and their transgression. Even as *The Shadow Lines* features characters who learn an easy familiarity with two cultures, Ila's cosmopolitanism is suspect, because it is not rooted in a full observance of 'Indian' norms. For Tham'ma, Ila is firmly outside the pale, her looks and her clothes inappropriate to her Bengali bourgeois origins: 'her hair cut short, like the bristles on a toothbrush, wearing tight trousers like a Free School Street whore' (84). When the narrator argues with his grandmother about Ila, telling her that Ila lives in London not because of the allure of money or commodities, but for 'freedom,' Tham'ma's response once again is couched in a vocabulary that interweaves the sexual and the national as the warp and woof of this fabric

of difference: 'It's not freedom she wants .... She wants to be left alone to do as she pleases; that's all that any whore would want. She'll find it easily enough over there; that's what those places have to offer. But that is not what it means to be free' (93).

However, it is not only for Tham'ma, the matriarch of a Bengali family, that the gestures and vocabulary of deviant (that is, openly expressed) female sexuality offer primary distinctions between national cultures. Both the narrator and Robi, metropolitan in their sensibility and open in their experience (the narrator goes to whores while at college in Delhi), turn into enforcers of patriarchal authority and national difference when it comes to Ila. When the three of them go drinking in the nightclub of the Calcutta Grand Hotel, the two men refuse to dance with Ila, and, when she gets up to ask a stranger, a businessman, to dance with her, Robi restrains her and pushes the businessman away. Later, in answer to Ila's irate question, 'What did you think you were doing?', Robi says 'Girls don't behave like that here,' and then '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' (92). As she runs away from them, Ira's final shout to the narrator confirms this thematic of cultural distinctions: '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 your bloody culture and free of all of you' (92).

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ila's 'transgressions' are thus crucial to the concerns of the novel. Equally, as the narrator continues to recount her centrality to his coming-of-age, we become aware that Ila also functions as a narrative scapegoat, a figure who acts as a lightning-rod for a great many sexual and cultural anxieties, and the telling of whose unhappy and even sordid itinerary, especially her relationship with Nick, takes on all the cautionary tones of a modern fable. The narrator's fascination with Ila is always leavened with his sense that she is hiding something, and that her stories compensate, in ways that he discovers, for her disappointments abroad. At fourteen, he sees through her claim that she has a dashing boyfriend, whose picture she shows him

in her school yearbook (28-29), thus beginning a pattern in which he discovers her lies and evasions (about other men, in particular) even as she tries to keep her miseries from him. The unspoken suggestion seems to be that it is her dislocations, her not being rooted in any one culture and its ways that haunt her. From her childhood, we see that her relationship with Nick is founded on illusion, and it comes as little surprise when the adult narrator discovers that Nick sleeps with other women even after being married to Ila. When the narrator, thinking of the sexually expressive, even promiscuous Ila about whom he has always fantasized, laughs and says to her that her sins had finally come home to roost, we hear a vindictive undertone. Ila's reply locates her dilemma even more firmly within the cleft between her 'Indian' and her 'London' selves: 'I wish it *were* like that.... You see, you've never understood, you've always been taken in by the way I used to talk, when we were in 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' (190).

Thus, *The Shadow Lines* represents Ila as bearing most heavily the burden of other people's expectations, and her unhappiness as the product of deep cultural contradictions. For the narrator, who suffers their asymmetrical relationship almost throughout the novel, the final bind (with Nick) that Ila finds herself in allows him to feel sorry for her, but his sorrow is not separate from a minor cultural triumphalism: he thinks he can say nothing to her 'that would console her for the discovery that the squalor of the genteel little lives she had so much despised was a part too of the free world she had tried to build for herself' (190).[7] By the end of the novel, Ila's self-assurance is stripped away as she becomes the victim of Nick's fecklessness. She tries, without conviction, to tell the narrator that all is well between her and Nick, and on that despairing note, unable at last even to say goodbye in person, she exits the narrative. The contrast between the deluded, trapped female subject, and the narrator's

knowing, empathetic subjectivity (in part enabled by his contact with her), is never more pronounced.

The seductions of 'foreignness' for the male imagination—the possibilities it makes available—characterize the May-Tridib couple too. When Tridib is twenty-seven and in Calcutta, he initiates a correspondence with May, who is nineteen and in London. His fourth letter to her (the first three have been thin) is a long, pornographic account of coming to frenzied sexual awareness as a child in war-time London, where he witnessed the coupling of casual strangers in a bombed-out theatre (143-47). In case May does not quite get the point, he makes it clear that:

> that was how he wanted to meet her, May—as a stranger, in a ruin. He wanted them to meet as the completest of strangers—strangers-across-the-seas—all the more strangers because they knew each other already. He wanted them to meet far from their friends and relatives—in a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers.
>
> But of course, if that was to happen, she would have to come to India. They would find a place like that somewhere; he was an expert on ruins (147).[8]

The romantic, rather florid prose he writes her, as the sexual invitation he proffers, has a childhood London origin, in a story Snipe told him about 'a hero called Tristan, a very sad story, about a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across-the-seas ...' (188).

In *The Shadow Lines*, the questing romance of Tridib-Tristan finds in May its object across the seas, but it also finds in her a figure for the deluded idealism, the cultural dislocation or incomprehension, that sets the stage for personal or public tragedy. Her uncompromising humanitarianism requires that she force Tridib, while they are on a drive, to stop to let her put out of its misery a dog lying half-dead on the highway, even if it means sawing at its jugular with a penknife. That same humani-

tarian instinct comes to the fore when they have to face a rioting mob in Dhaka, overriding all the concerns of the rest of the party. Many years later, as she relates the circumstances of Tridib's death to the narrator, her memory of her own role in it is ironic, and pained: 'your grandmother screamed ... I didn't know what I was doing, and I'd get everyone killed. I didn't listen; I was a heroine.... But she knew what was going to happen, Everyone there did, except me. I was the only one who didn't' (250). The price of her not knowing is the death of Tridib, the consummate knowing, empathetic male subject in the novel. Torn by her memories, May believes for a long time that she killed Tridib; only much later does she find a language to assuage some of her torturing guilt: Tridib must have known that she, 'an English memsahib,' would be safe from the mob, but that he, following after her, 'was going to die. For years I was arrogant enough to think I owed him his life. But I know now I didn't kill him; I couldn't have, 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' (251-52).

Later that night, as they lie together, the narrator echoes her words, and their hope of healing: 'I could tell that she was glad, and I was glad too, and grateful, for the glimpse she had given me of a final redemptive mystery' (252). The end of the novel, with the narrator and May lying peacefully in each other's arms—this time, she has asked him to stay—offers a catharsis of the narrator's violent, drunken, earlier attempt to force himself upon her (161-62). For this, as for her account of Tridib's love for her and of his death, he is grateful. At this moment, when the narrator most fully inherits Tridib's mantle, he does so via the second of his formative triangulations: he sleeps with May, his uncle Tridib's love from-across-the-seas. But the 'redemptive mystery' (252) she shows him is only part sexual, and is in fact more her providing him with an emotional vocabulary that has allowed her, and will allow him, to think of Tridib's murder as a 'sacrifice'.

What is Tridib's death a sacrifice to? Before I address that question, a brief account of Tridib is called for. The son of a diplomat, Tridib is well-travelled but chooses to live his life in Calcutta, where he works at a Ph. D. in archaeology. For Tham'ma, he is the very type of irresponsible man, one who seems 'determined to waste his life in idle self-indulgence' (12), one who refuses to use his family connections to establish a career, and to 'live like a lord and run the country' (13). For her, Tridib wilfully exempts himself from the various serious tasks of nation-building, and is thus to be kept at arm's length, and even feared. For the narrator, on the other hand, Tridib's stories are a gateway to the world. Unlike his grandmother, who thinks that Tridib's wasted time 'stinks,' the narrator loves to listen to Tridib: 'he never seemed to use his time, but his time doesn't stink' (10). The range of Tridib's intellectual interests and conversation is matched only by his chameleon-like social profile—living in a heavily class-stratified society, where the markers of class are sharp and obvious, he could be, to his adda-acquaintances, anyone from the son of a wealthy family to a slum-dweller (16).[9] Above all else, he is a voracious reader, and that reclusive vocation enables him to be a storehouse of recondite information. For the narrator, Tridib's lore has a very important end, one different from the collection of facts and figures. What Tridib wants to teach him is to 'use [his] imagination with precision' (29), which means to be able to recognize the contemporaneity of the past, to be able to see historical memory as vital to any understanding of the present, and to be able to see different times and places as inextricably intertwined with one's own.

These, eventually, are the lessons of *The Shadow Lines* too. That these are difficult lessons to learn is made clear to us via the novel's account of the national adventure of anti-imperialism, the creation and defence of frontiers between India and Pakistan, and the fomenting of international and internecine hatreds, which in the case of the subcontinent, turn out to be much the same thing. In the novel, the exemplar of militant nationalism is

Tham'ma, who has lived the nationalist dream and experienced the set-backs and successes that give it its character. Her faith links the national and the domestic, public service and personal activity. Each evening she insists that her grandson go for a run: 'You can't build a strong country, she would say, pushing me out of the house, without building a strong body' (14). Tham'ma was in college in Bengal in the early decades of the century when terrorist societies like Anushilan and Jugantar recruited their cadres from amongst her fellow students, and she tells her grandson the story of how one of her classmates was arrested during a police raid on their college. He seemed an unlikely terrorist, shy and bearded, but while being arrested he does not show his fear or allow his gaze, 'clear, direct and challenging,' to drop from the British officer's face (43). Tham'ma, brought up on stories of Khudiram Bose and Bagha Jatin, had expected a nationalist terrorist to be 'a huge man with burning eyes and a lion's mane of a beard,' but dreams of being of help to her shy little class-fellow anyway: '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 ...' (44). When her astonished grandson asks if she would really have killed, she responds directly: 'I would have been frightened, she said. But I would have prayed for strength, and God willing, yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free' (45).

This personal history of anti-imperialism sharpens her sense of nationhood and of the formation of the Indian nation-state. Of Britain (and of the inappropriateness of Indian immigration—and Ila's presence—there) she says to her grandson:

> It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. 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 are a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood.

> Hasn't Maya told you how regimental flags hang in all their cathedrals and how all their churches are lined with memorials to men who died in wars, all around the world? War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what *you* have to achieve for India, don't you see? (82)

To such militant nationalism, and to a nation whose borders are confirmed in war, she exhorts her grandson. These, after all, are the values she learns from her youthful desire to be free, where freedom was forged in the crucible of often violent anti-colonial struggle, and, once achieved, maintained by extending the same antagonistic logic to the construction of the nation-state. War against a common enemy unites, it ratifies boundaries and deepens the ideological and inter-national oppositions necessary to mold an internally-coherent national identity, it legitimates the claim of the state to be the sole agent and authority of violence. Tham'ma's ideas here are couched in the language of modernity and modernization, which, particularly in its colonial derivation, requires the syntax of good citizenship and an exclusive national pride. For her grandson, the failure of her faith is thus the tragedy of an entire class: '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' (82).

Tham'ma's nationalist faiths fail her because, as she comes to realize (in what is surely one of the most moving sections of the novel) that borders have a tenuous existence, and that not even a history of bloodshed can make them real and impermeable. Lines on the map are the handiwork of administrators and cartographers, and they do not mark much more than the will of

the state. In 1964, as she plans to fly to Dhaka, she wonders if 'she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane.' When her son laughs and asks her if 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,' she says: 'Of course not. But surely there's something—trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land. Don't they call it no-man's land?' When she is told that she might see some green fields, her musing response sums up the pathos of an exclusionary nationalism that, in the period after independence, discovers its own shortcomings:

> 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 will 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? (154-55)

Born in Dhaka, separated from her birthplace by a history of bloodshed and lines on a map, Tham'ma loses her grammatical coordinates as she thinks of 'home.' Her neat and orderly mind seems momentarily unable to understand 'how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality.' In her confusion, rather than say that she would *go* home to Dhaka, she says that she would 'come home to Dhaka' (155). Her grandson instantly fastens on to this slip, teasing her about not knowing the 'difference between coming and going.' Caught between memory and nationality, between belonging and citizenship, the certainties of the language of differentiation and distantiation slide away from her. As an adult, the narrator is able to provide a gloss on her slip: '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 that 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' (156).

Once in Dhaka, Tham'ma tries to persuade her senile old uncle to leave the decrepit surroundings he lives in to move to India, where she thinks he belongs. However, like another more-than-sane literary character, Saadat Hasan Manto's Toba Tek Singh, the old man refuses: 'Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: 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 ever have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here' (216). The logic of the nation-state in the subcontinent demands that Partition be read as a single, necessary, originary act, one never to be repeated because in a post-partition, post-independence India, citizenship and national borders will be immediately, magically co-extensive, but the act of Partition itself, as the old Jethamoshai insists, suggests otherwise. Borders and frontiers, shadow-lines etched on maps, sustain political separation, but even more strongly, teach the inevitability, and even absoluteness, of socio-cultural difference across nations.[10] The narrator, like any other child of 'independent' India, accepts these distinctions as natural: 'I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship' (219). What the narrator learns is that the separatist political logic of the nation-state cannot enforce cultural difference, that some 'other thing' (219) will always connect Calcutta to Dhaka, Bengali to Bengali, Indian to Pakistani, as images in a vast mirror.[11]

Ironically the separateness that is sought to be defined through state-sponsored violence—wars at the borders—is subverted, mocked by another, more anarchic violence, that of riots at the heart of the nation. Riots break out in a perverse

mutuality of response (the Prophet's hair disappears in Srinagar and people die alike in Calcutta and Dhaka) that makes nonsense of any claims of a singular, exclusive national identity, of any belief that Srinagar exists in a different relationship to Calcutta than it does to Dhaka. Ironically, it is through self-destructive violence that the people of the sub-continent assert a common inheritance and affiliation; in the near-symmetry of their killing of each other they deny that they might be different in the first place.

In his meditation on these issues, the narrator wonders about the form of 'modern' political organization the creators of India and Pakistan had learned from Europe. This form, he realizes, is very much a part of the entire project of modernity, of the technological rationality that supposedly informs the conception of the nation-state: 'I had to remind myself that they were not to be blamed for believing that there was something admirable in moving violence to the borders and dealing with it through science and factories, for that was the pattern of the world.' The borders between India and Pakistan had been drawn by administrators who believed in 'the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders on the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland' (233-34). But, as the simultaneous riots show, there is a profound historical irony at work:

> there had never been a moment in the 4000-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 lines—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. (234)

This is then the special legacy that we in the subcontinent share, the interdependence confirmed for us by the violence of indepen-

dence, the bonds fashioned for us by the coming of freedom. Partition is the watershed between the colonial and the post-colonial, and the riots and pogroms that marked its passage taught people a terrible fear: 'a fear that comes of 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.' In *The Shadow Lines* this fear is understood as formative, and enduring, for it is no less than the fear of oneself: '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' (205). Nationalism, militant and brilliant in its anti-imperialism, is tarnished in its need for defining oppositions within, and enemies across, the borders. At the origin of India and Pakistan lies the national trauma of Partition, a trauma that freezes fear into silence, and for which *The Shadow Lines* seeks to find a language, a process of mourning, and perhaps even a memorial.

In the novel, the narrator's coming to maturity involves his extending the lessons of the shadow-lines that Tham'ma reluctantly learns, as she moves from her nationalist certitudes to an awareness that borders confirm identity even as they are meant to affirm difference. Even as she loses her belief in the ability of borders to demarcate that space called home, she recovers the faculty she had repressed as useless: memory. She had long insisted that 'nostalgia is a weakness ... it is everyone's duty to forget the past and look ahead and get on with building the future' (209), but her return to Dhaka reminds her that dislocated people like her 'have no home but in memory' (196). Once in Dhaka, she asks constantly for the Dhaka that surrounded her family house, but that home-town now exists only in the stories she tells her grandson, and in his ability to 'see' the house and its lane, 'for her memory had shone upon them with the interrupted brilliance of a lighthouse beam' (195).

Perhaps the crowning irony of *The Shadow Lines* is that almost as soon as Tham'ma realizes that the legacy of her birthplace is not separable from her sense of herself as a citizen of India, her nephew Tridib's death at the hands of a Dhaka mob confirms her in a pathological hatred of 'them.' In 1965, as soon as the war starts, she gifts her only gold chain to the war fund: 'For *your* sake; for your freedom,' she tells her grandson, 'We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out' (238). Hysterical from the memory of the rioters who killed Tridib, she takes comfort in the organized propriety of war: 'We are fighting them properly at last,' she says, 'with tanks and guns and bombs' (238). For Tham'ma here, as for the nation-state, the theatre of war cleanses, cathects the messy violence of the streets. This is how the narrator puts it:

> the madness of a riot is a pathological inversion, but also therefore a reminder, of that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of government, for it is in the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between people.
>
> The theatre of war, where generals meet, is the stage on which states disport themselves: they have no use for memories of riots. (231)

Nor, for the most part, are such memories preserved in public discussion. They are repressed because the modern public sphere has no use for disruptive evidence of its inability to fully transform 'people,' with their local or transnational identifications and communities, into disciplined citizens who identify solely with the protocols of the nation-state. Riots must thus have no 'meaning' in the lexicon of modernity, except in accounts of their suppression. Once they are over, and the task of description is finished, they disappear from public conversation, for, as the narrator suggests, to keep talking about them would be to 'give them meaning, and that is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness' (228). Thus, when *The*

Shadow Lines remembers, memorializes, searches for an analytical or eloquent representation of such disruption, it also interrogates some of the key certainties of modern nation formation. It shows us, powerfully and movingly, an (Indian) nationalism discovering its limits, limits that are often the residue of those ineffable shadow-lines, the boundaries of the subcontinent.

If, by the end of the novel, May has learned to think of Tridib's death as a sacrifice, it is because Tridib, in his memory of the Tristran story, is 'a man without a country' (188), a man whose imagination and cross-cultural identifications enable him to think beyond frontier limits. The narrator recognizes in Tridib's desire for a space without history, for a time free of the ravages of collective memory, a refusal of instrumentality and of the limits of practical reason:

> 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. (35)

Tridib's yearning, addressed to a time and space before subcontinental borders, before the historical alienation of culture and self, exists as an unqualified, untrammelled, trace-memory of psychic wholeness and identity. Such desire can of course only exist prior to historical or geographical calculation, and is manifestly unrealizable. In its function as critique and as utopian hope, however, it is quite as real as the shadow-lines that mock the limits of our political consciousness and imagination.

I wish to end this essay with a comment on subjectivity and form, on the representation of women and men and the narrative of *The Shadow Lines*. The novel is, for the most part, an extremely self-conscious meditation on the themes of nationality, internationality, cultural and historical self-determination, as

also on the conflicted transition from the temporary certitudes of the nationalist freedom struggle to the disillusions and discontents that have marked India as an independent state. As critical analyses of Indian patriarchy (in both its historical and contemporary variations) have taught us to expect, the weight of sexual and cultural definition is borne unequally by men and women, with men as the putative agents of socio-cultural transition and women as its more or less traumatized subjects. In this novel too, women—Ila in particular, but also Tham'ma and May—are represented as carrying the greatest burden of historical dislocation, and it is their 'missteps' that lead to personal tragedy, as also trace the rocky paths of larger national and international conflicts. The novel offers a radical critique of political boundaries, vaporizing their rigidities into shadow-lines, but its account of the relationship between women and culture is less hopeful—for them there are no transformations of cultural frontiers, only inelegant transgressions.

In *The Shadow Lines*, it is of course the male narrator's growing imagination, empathy and intellectuality which allow for the exploration and understanding of complex themes. As his horizons expand and become international in scope, his questions, memories and experiences provide the structure of the narrative. But even as his consciousness mediates and frames other voices, stories and experiences, we become aware that some of these voices speak in a counterpoint with his narrative, and interrogate his telling of the story. The narrative of this novel, not unlike the process of sub-continental independence, engenders and empowers political subjects unequally, and indeed represents them asymmetrically. However, in the many stories of this novel—overlapping at points, mis-matched and contentious at others—*The Shadow Lines* becomes not simply a male *bildungsroman*, an authorized autobiography, with its obvious agendas and priorities, but also a dialogic, more open-ended enactment of the difficult interdependencies and inequalities that compose any national biography.

Notes

1. Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?', trans. Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 11.
2. Jawaharlal Nehru, 'The Burden of the Past,' in *The Discovery Of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 36.
3. The narrator of *The Shadow Lines*, a finely etched and nuanced character, is never named. If nothing else, this omission imposes a stylistic awkwardness upon any commentator on the novel—'the narrator' is not a particularly elegant way to personalize the protagonist.
4. Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (London: Black Swan, 1988), 26. Future references are to this edition and are incorporated into the text.
5. For the narrator, Ila is at the originary moment of his discovery of desire, and of the frustrations of desire. When his mother tells Ila about the excitement with which he has waited to meet her, and she responds with a shrug, the child-narrator is embarrassed into great insight: his mother 'had made public, then and for ever, the inequality of our needs; she had given Ila the knowledge of her power and she had left me defenceless, naked in the face of that unthinkable, adult truth: that need is not transitive, that one may need without oneself being needed' (49).
6. This is also how the narrator comes to know, and feel an ambivalent kinship with, Nick Price (an older, childhood playmate of Ila's who becomes her lover and then husband in adulthood). For the game that Ila plays with him in Calcutta she plays with Nick in London ('somewhere dark and secret', 74), and when the narrator dimly objects to Nick's having originated his role, as it were, Ila's response ('You're just jealous') locks him into a competitive triangulation with Nick: 'After that day Nick Price, whom I had never seen, and would, as far as I knew, never see, became a spectral presence beside me in my looking glass; growing with me, but always bigger and better, and in some ways more desirable—I did not know what, except that it was so in Ila's eyes and therefore true' (55).
7. At this moment, the narrator's pathos for Ila and her life with Nick swells over to include Nick. In keeping with his long identification with Nick (as the man in Ila's life) he feels sorry for Nick's economic dependence on her, and on the 'punishment' she would mete out to him for his extra-marital sexual activities: 'Looking at him, I tried to think of the future as it must have appeared to him: of helpless dependence coupled with despairing little acts of rebellion. I wanted to get up then and hold him, chest to chest, his shoulders to mine' (191). This unexpected act of homosocial fellowship derives from the narrator's continuing sense of Ila as

a disturbing figure of female power, able to unsettle and even deny male desires or comfort.

8. Ironically, the 'ruin' they find for themselves in Calcutta is the Victoria Memorial, itself a pseudo-mausoleum for empire. Not a 'place without a past, without history,' it is in fact a monument to the particular colonial history that they inherit differently, and which brings them together.

9. In this, Tridib seems a reworking of two different ideals of bourgeois 'classlessness'—the nationalist and the communist (particularly Naxalite)—where socially committed activism was understood to be a means of effacing some of the ineluctable markers of class identity and allegiance. Tridib is of course no activist, but the extent of his knowledge and empathy functions as a substitute, allowing him to mimic similar middle-class aspirations to a politicized classlessness.

10. The partitioning of the Bose family home in Dhaka functions as an allegory of such misconception. Once the wall is in place between the two halves of the house, the young Tham'ma invents, for Maya's benefit, stories of the 'upside-down world' across the fence. The unseen other side becomes a source of endless fascination for the two girls: the object of laughter, but also an imaginary haven from family problems on their own side (129-30).

11. In a parallel instance, the 'exhilaration' that Mayadebi finds in 1939, pre-war Britain, is reflected in Tresawsen's account of Germany: 'People don't believe me ... but its the same over there—in Germany—though of course in a more grotesque way. It was odd coming back here—like stepping through a looking glass' (70-71).