

Crossing the Shadow Lines: Essays on the Topicality of Amitav Ghosh's Modern Classic

edited by

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THE TOPICALITY OF *THE SHADOW LINES*

Bordering Texts and Foreshadowed Contexts

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Amitav Ghosh's second novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988), was notoriously conceived in 1984, in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination, when Delhi was upturned by bloodthirsty mobs that attacked the Sikh community killing, raping, and looting. This was the "madeleine" that brought the would-be novelist (he was halfway through writing *The Circle of Reason*) back to 1964, when a similar mob attacked Hindus in Dhaka, where Ghosh, then a child, was living with his family. Thus *The Shadow Lines* became a historical novel about Bengal in the Sixties, a portrait of post-Independence India, a *Bildungsroman*, or indeed a *Künstlerroman*, about a young Bengali, an Indian reply to both *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1915) and *Remembrance of Time Past* (1922) that enthused a generation of Indian intellectuals. Indeed, *The Shadow Lines* is the first and so far only novel by a living author to be included in University syllabi all over India. Unsurprisingly this is, among Ghosh's books, the most written about, especially in South Asia.

At the beginning of the 1980s, *Midnight's Children* (1981) recounted the story of Indian Swaraj in a kind of mock-heroic poem that sardonically encompassed several decades in hundreds of pages virtually launching that mode of writing that Linda Hutcheon would later categorise as historical metafiction. Rushdie's novel problematised the possibility of writing history through his famous metaphor of chutney. Like fruit in a chutney jar, historical facts can indeed be preserved for the future, but only a whiff remains of their original taste. Nonetheless, they may be delicious in their new way. *Midnight's Children* reacted to the corrosive critiques of the very possibility of writing history presented by Nietzsche and his disciple Foucault. History is teleological, Nietzsche would argue, always written by the winners to magnify the present. Every historiography is but a narrative that connects odd facts chosen in order to prove a certain theory, mostly that the present is better than the past, and the present rulers have a moral right to be in their position. Thus the English narrative in the XIX century implied that India was going through a decadent period when the British arrived and rescued it, helping Hindus to regain their old splendour. Nothing could be better for Indians than the British Raj, which guaranteed peace, equality (among subjects), legal rights, and the liberty to cultivate ancient Indian wisdom and philosophy. Nationalism exposed the hypocrisy of this view but appropriated the English ability to manipulate history and created the Partition, the secession of Bangladesh, the fighting over Kashmir, the War with China. The generation

of intellectuals born after the Partition had to deal with a very discredited notion of history. Instead of refashioning history in a postcolonial way, Rushdie chose to mock historiography, thus weakening the prosopopoeia of nationalist discourses. Nothing seems able to resist Rushdie's deflating prose. Few readers have noticed that Rushdie's short story "The Prophet's Hair," collected in *East and West* (1994), tells the same story of the stolen relic that triggers the riot in *The Shadow Lines*. Completely ignoring the tumults, Rushdie imagines that the purloined relic turns those who come into contact with it into religious zealots, no matter how secular they were.

Aside from Rushdie's undisputable bravura, mocking history was a comparatively easy task for someone based in London and speaking from the position of an English-educated expatriate. At the end of the Eighties, writing from Delhi, Ghosh faced the same problem with history and its biases, but he could not express himself in the same sardonic way – though his previous novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986), had been closer to Rushdie's magic realism. Ghosh was conscious that words, or the lack thereof, in that situation, could cost lives. He wanted to deflate Hindu nationalism and to deprecate violence, without making a mythology of violence. Writing this novel was like treading on eggshells. Ghosh strove to find a new poetics that could accommodate his different compulsions. As a result, *The Shadow Lines* is a historical novel without the details of history, a novel on memory without the vagaries of memory, a novel on communal violence without the actual violence, a *Künstlerroman* without a *Künstler*, a political novel without politics, a love story without lovers. Long before Calvino wrote his *Memos for the New Millennium*, Ghosh had found his own way to lightness. The novel carries the emotional weight of traditional genres, but it deftly avoids the pitfalls of hackneyed literary *topoi*. Unlike Ghosh himself, who used to play the violin in his young years, the protagonist of the *Shadow Lines* does not play any instrument, and yet the entire novel is like a musical composition. The enigmatic character of May, a musician turned social worker, may reflect the author's perplexities.

May is not the only reflection of Ghosh's complex views. The protagonist, a Calcutta boy slightly older than himself, is another alter ego, and so is Ila, the daughter of a diplomat, who spends her childhood and teens living in different countries – just like Amitav himself. Robi, who studies in faraway Delhi, and, of course, Tha'mma, with her emphasis on discipline (it takes a lot of discipline to complete a novel like this) and her nostalgia for the simple heroic times when there was only one recognised enemy, and, last but not least, the intellectual bookworm, Tridib may all be considered author's reflections. All these characters exhibit signs of the different intellectual and psychological compulsions that prompted Ghosh to write the novel. Thus the novel does not capture the plight of Ghosh's generation only in the young and clumsy protagonist. All characters somehow partake in the bewilderment of those who were born after Independence and had to strive to find an identity that was neither shaped by nationalism, nor by antinationalism, neither by religion nor by Western liberalism. An identity that was secular and yet deeply rooted in *ahimsa*, firmly attached to the town of Calcutta and yet cosmopolitan.

The Shadow Lines has gained enormous resonance in postcolonial studies as it touches upon some of the major issues in the fields of colonial history, national identities,

memory, and borders. Likewise, the novel has been seminal in the definition and discussion of a postcolonial geography that challenges the current cartographical order. Indeed, it has inspired reflections even outside the field of postcolonial studies, as in the case of border theory. The scenes of Tha'mma's bewilderment as she is going to fly over the border bound to Dhaka, and the final scene, when the protagonist is toying with an atlas and a compass, have been cited countless times, and our readers will see that they have not exhausted their meanings yet. Besides, the novel has been studied from the perspective of trauma studies, as an attempt to move beyond the trauma of 1984 Delhi riot, which recalled Dhaka 1964, which in turn recalled the 1947 Partition trauma. Indeed, all these episodes are offshoots of the India-Pakistan Partition. Other scholars have tackled *The Shadow Lines* from a feminist perspective, highlighting cousin Ila's plight as a postcolonial woman and Tha'mma's patriarchal stance. Informally talking with Indian students, one may come across never published stern critics of the novel too. Young millennial women complain that Ila is given the stereotypical position of a sexy but vain coquette, and eventually poetic justice punishes her for not being like the male protagonist. Dalit students complain that the novel magnifies the urban upper middle class, as if it exhausted all that India has to offer and addressed all of Bengal's major problems. Surely, they have a point when they complain that it is a pity that books by Mahasweta Devi have not won the same position as *The Shadow Lines*, which, however, certainly never aspired at addressing all of India's problems. Ironically, another eminent Bengali scholar has criticised Ghosh for not upholding and defending the *bhadrasamaj*, namely the social class to which Ghosh himself belongs, together with Tagore and Satyajit Ray.

Three years ago, as the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of the novel was approaching, the three editors of this collection were discussing the influence of *The Shadow Lines* after one generation. We realised that the novel could be tackled from different viewpoints, other than those mentioned above. We also reflected upon the novel's topicality and its position in the subsequent production of the author. What has been the literary impact of *The Shadow Lines* on Indian literature in these decades? How can it help us read Ghosh's later production, and how can later novels help us read *The Shadow Lines*? Can new ways of reading be applied to this postcolonial classic? What books, even outside the Anglosphere, have influenced or have been influenced by *The Shadow Lines*? An international conference issued from our questions. It was celebrated at the Universities of Milan and Turin in November 2018. Among the keynote speakers were Silvia Albertazzi, Supriya Chaudhuri, Anna Nadotti (Ghosh's lifelong friend and Italian translator), and John Thieme, while speakers convened from Europe and South Asia. As we dealt with one novel only, each paper responded to the next, and each received the deserved attention. We also informed Amitav Ghosh, who kindly sent us a memoir on the novel printed for the first time following this introduction. Besides, Ghosh sent us some typescript pages of the novel that are also included and discussed in this collection.

Most of the essays that follow originate from the discussions that took place on those two days and engage *The Shadow Lines* as a classic: in its genesis and its topicality. We have divided the essays into two sections entitled "Bordering texts" and "Foreshadowed contexts". The former deals with literary techniques and texts that have influenced the author, or that have been somehow influenced by this novel. Philology, intertextuality,

narratology, and rewriting are the focus of the research. The second section discusses several of the themes brought up by the narrative both in the context of the 1980s and in the present through cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and more recent research fields such as world literature, literary geographies, and ageing studies.

Bordering Texts

The first section begins with Supriya Chaudhuri's reflections upon the title and its resemblance to Joseph Conrad's novella *The Shadow-Line* (1917), which can be seen as a sort of shadow behind Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988). However, some textual clues should be noted, for example the omission of the hyphen in, and the plural form of, Ghosh's title. As the scholar argues, the devices of psychic hyphenation, and reflexive self-duplication, as used by Conrad to depict the career of his hero, are transferred in Ghosh's novel to the Indian subcontinent, rather than the history of any single individual. Thus, the shadow lines of Ghosh's title divide populations and territories, and yet, like the border between India and Pakistan, cannot actually be seen. They may also refer to the web of relations and interconnections between persons and events, generating a network of broken or fractured lines where the conjunctions (the hyphens,) must be supplied by the indefatigable memory-work and research of the unnamed narrator (who is himself like a hyphen in his linking function). However, for Chaudhuri, Ghosh's decision to omit the Conradian hyphen is deliberate because it opens up the title to nuance and ambiguity, and disclaims investment in hyphenated identities as such. Ultimately, as the scholar holds, the novel encourages us to go beyond borders and identities, and to learn to live together.

The focus of Alessandro Vescovi's article lies not only in the consideration of the text as a quarry of meaningful elements, but also in the genetic process by which a narrative text achieves its final, and official, version. In scrutinising the digital version of some of the original pages of the typescript of the novel, Vescovi applies a rigorous genetic methodology to track down the multiple variants (and lives) of the story, and its significant transformations through Ghosh's corrections, substitutions, and changes. The results of this exploration are then discussed with reference to three specific critical frameworks. The first deals with the implication of naming, and a look at the pathway that leads to the choice of particular names for characters; Tridib, Ila and Tha'mma, for example, reveal an interpolation of Sanskrit and other references, but also illustrate and problematise the logic of perfect binaries. The second framework is concerned with the key role of plot construction through its kernels and satellites, or scaffolding and fillers in Moretti's terminology, whereas the third illuminates the stylistic patterns that operate at the micro-level of the sentence, and that originate from the changes made on the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes.

Eleonora Sparvoli is one among various scholars who tackle the aspect of the influences on Ghosh's writing. In particular, she envisions *The Shadow Lines* as somehow indebted to but also throwing new light on Proust's *Recherche*. If Ghosh claims that Proust showed the way for an alternative Modernism, Sparvoli detects how the narrative-within-the-narrative, or narrative mediation, is a key function of this "Proustian method". Consequently, both places – and place names – and actions – historical ones as well as

private ones – resonate in a sort of *déjà vu*, both in Proust and in Ghosh. Furthermore, Sparvoli illustrates how the paradigm of the *désir triangulaire* discussed by René Girard is a working device for both authors. A reality effect is reached by both of them through the narrations of others, but never fully nor satisfactorily. Similarly, it remains ultimately also beyond the reader's grasp.

Another form of influence is investigated by Vishnupriya Sengupta, who considers Amitav Ghosh's admitted debt to V. S. Naipaul. While considering nation-building narrative as a project for both authors, she claims that the main difference between them is recognisable in Ghosh's universalist faith in humanity. In particular, the scholar concentrates on Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967) in relation to *The Shadow Lines* to show how these novels offer contrary perspectives on the imagined nation and underline man's inherent aptitude or inaptitude of inhabiting diverse cultures with unconditional tolerance.

By adopting a stylistic and narratological perspective, Federica Zullo investigates the shapes of "mind style" elaborated by Ghosh in his novel, with particular regard to the idea of terror and its narrative rendition. As a matter of fact, since his first novels and essays written in the early 1980s, Amitav Ghosh has shown a keen interest not in war itself, but in its more varied and contemporary version, that is social and political turmoil, small conflicts, communal violence, "incendiary circumstances" (Alexander 2003). *The Shadow Lines* brings to the fore the fear of the mob, together with the fear of the Other, of the terrorists, of the poisoning, or no fear at all: the diegetic development of these issues affects the reader thanks to the use of effective stylistic devices such as parallelisms, alliteration, repetitions and similes, and the over-lexicalisation of certain words. The analysis intends to show Ghosh's aim while writing *The Shadow Lines*: to find a suitable literary form and, at the same time, a suitable literary and linguistic form to illustrate social and political dramatic situations, with the intent of providing the reader with alternative trajectories, across the possibilities of language.

According to Asis De and Nirmalendu Maiti, the main nucleus of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* lies in a philosophical understanding of the significance of borderlines between nations and their people on politico-cultural levels. The political and ethno-religious contexts of post-Partition Bengal, in the eastern part of India, is the means to bring home the cultural significance of the "Partition" between the Bengali-speaking people of two different religions across the border of two nations. Through the analysis of Ghosh's narrative, the two scholars interrogate the very meaning of national borders (which Ghosh likes to describe as "shadow" line) in post-Partition Bengal, paying attention to the ideology of the Other. From this angle, the concept of the border becomes plural and can also be applied to the distinction between the human and the non-human, or the human exploitation and the violence exerted on the non-human and the environmental anxiety, which significantly reverberates in later works by Ghosh, both fictional and non-fictional, such as *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *The Great Derangement* (2016).

Lucio De Capitani's essay closes the first section focussing on this type of environmental anxiety and on the representation of riots in *The Shadow Lines*. The author convincingly argues that this establishes a narrative mode in Ghosh's corpus, where crowds, mobs, and collective agency are perceived as dangerous, threatening and violent. De Capitani detects traces of this "pessimistic" portrayal in other texts by Ghosh – both

essays and creative works. Analysing and connecting this view to the more recent representations of environmental movements in Ghosh's critical works on the subject matter of climate change, De Capitani critically questions the fault lines of Ghosh's substantial scepticism towards the effectiveness of politically engaged activism.

Foreshadowed Contexts

The second section opens with John Thieme's essay. The British scholar contextualises the pervasive metaphor of the Lacanian mirror in Ghosh's novel. Amitav Ghosh deploys an extensive use of the metaphor, characterising divided spaces – a house and a country; Calcutta vs. Dhaka; India vs. England – while doubling up characters – the protagonist and Nick, the protagonist and Tridib, Ila and May, old Tha'mma and old Jethamoshai. The journeys back and forth from Calcutta to Dhaka and from Calcutta to London best represent geocriticism, while drawing new topographies and exposing the entanglements of colonial history and its consequences after decolonisation. The encounter between Self and Other cannot be, in the end, but a recognition of a mirror image.

Silvia Albertazzi considers *The Shadow Lines* as a compendium of postcolonial crucial issues such as identity, the need for independence, the difficult relationship with colonial culture, the rewriting of the colonial past, the impulse to create a new language and a new narrative form. Departing from Conradian echoes, Silvia Albertazzi critically elaborates on Salman Rushdie's ideas on frontiers and homelands to reach a deeper scrutiny of *The Shadow Lines*. In the text, she detects a central concern in searching for and in providing the meaning for historical violent events and their effects on individual lives. The power of invention and imagination seems to be the sharpest tool in the hands of postcolonial writers, in dealing with that kind of postmemory.

Binayak Roy's contribution adopts a located perspective by mapping out the notion of *adda*, which is – in the Indian and Bengali cultural context – a kind of a hobby, a pastime pursued for its own sake, or a kind of collective talk in a group of intimates. As the scholar demonstrates, *The Shadow Lines* is deeply rooted in the Bengali literary tradition in its examination of the multifaceted nature of *adda*. The range of Tridib's intellectual interests, for example, is matched by the fluidity of his personality and performativity in his Gole Park *adda* sessions. *Adda* as a form of speech contributes to the consolidation of group identity/community. In that sense, *adda* is an oral performance involving self-enrichment and emerges as a powerful narrative stratagem, which permits to evaluate issues like the post-liberal political economy and disintegration of the Indian nation-state. As the narrative recognises the place of *adda* in modern-day Bengali society and its key role in the identity formation of diasporic Bengalis, its effects also indicate a process of hybridisation of modes of expression. Though *adda* is primarily a Bengali institution, the use of English codes and contexts make it transcend its Bengaliness and become transnational.

Carmen Concilio selects a comparative approach to explore the similarities between Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Caterina Edwards's *Finding Rosa* (2010) by resorting to Border studies and Ageing studies. Despite temporal and geographical distance, the two novels denounce the effects of a geography disfigured by history. Partition in India and the question of Istria in Italy turned the homes of hundreds into a

foreign country, due to contested borders. In the two novels, two elderly women, one old and confused, the other suffering from Alzheimer's, embody the displacement and disorientation of migrants and expatriates. Their linguistic and sentimental attachment to their homes is particularly dramatic because of ageing, partial memory loss and cognitive impairment.

In her paper entitled "Significant Geographies in *The Shadow Lines*", Francesca Orsini argues that approaches to world literature are often orchestrated as binaries of local/global, major/minor, provincial/cosmopolitan, taking them as given positions on a single world map. However, in *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh seems to adopt a more complex and interesting view of space, the world, perception, and narration. In the novel's multi-layered narration, space, time, and the self are always mirrored through other people, times and spaces whilst places, too, acquire reality and meaning only after they are first narrated and imagined, often several times, and before they are experienced directly. From this scenario a type of positioning emerges with deep existential and epistemological implications that reach beyond the mere critique of colonial and national border-making. From this perspective, the article aims to chart how (and which) spaces become "significant" in the novel, and how the novel's approach to space can be productive for thinking about world literature.

Like Binayak Roy, Sumit Ray reflects on what might be called a glocal anthropological paradigm: the Bengali *bhadralok* or the genteel Bengali class that emerged from the influence of colonial education in the nineteenth century. The genealogy of the *bhadralok* goes back to Raj Rammohan Roy, and includes such intellectuals as Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray. One distinguishing feature of the *bhadralok* is his cosmopolitanism and hence his partiality to travelling, which Ghosh himself shares. The essay convincingly argues that *Tridib* is framed by this mode of representation in *The Shadow Lines*. Travels across borders and nations and globe-trotting in general are major *topoi* in this kind of narratives, so typical of Bengali literature and culture, but easily exportable and above all so infectious for all the characters in that same novel.

Last but by no means least is Anna Nadotti's essay, written almost entirely in Italian, which she means as a homage to Amitav Ghosh's achievements in that language, as she explains in her introductory paragraph in English. We differ with her choice of not using the English critical koine, but not to the point of depriving our Italophone readers of this contribution, which is also a valuable testimony. In her role as official Italian translator of Amitav Ghosh's works for the past forty years, Anna Nadotti writes about her experience in reading, besides translating, Ghosh. She first underlines the author's attention to, and recreation of, languages and idioms which characterise his aesthetic research, while reaching its apex in the *Ibis* trilogy. In relation to *The Shadow Lines*, Anna Nadotti follows a chain of suggestive cross-references and "quotations" from both Indian cinema and Hollywood's films and stars. Particularly, she concentrates on the iconic episode taking place inside a bombed London cinema: a *mise en abym* of a love scene as if feebly lit by a light beam coming in from a hole in the half-demolished wall, where the projecting machine had stood.