
Threads of Liberty: Tracing Violence and Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines*

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Abstract:

This seminar paper will explore the concept of freedom in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, focusing on how the novel will examine this theme across multiple layers—personal, social, political, and historical. Through its intricate narrative, the book will juxtapose the past and present, individual lives and collective histories, offering a rich exploration of freedom's role as both an internal and external force. Spanning three generations and bridging two distinct cultures, the novel will present freedom not as a singular, fixed idea, but as a complex, ever-evolving force that plays out differently for each character.

The central characters will embody various aspects of freedom in their own unique ways. Tha'mma, the grandmother, will be driven by a deep sense of political freedom, while Ila will seek a more elusive form of personal, moral, and social liberation. May and Tridib will also navigate their own quests for freedom, though it will remain something that they can never quite grasp.

While the theme of violence will often take a backseat in discussions about *The Shadow Lines*, it will be a crucial element in understanding the novel's deeper structure. Violence will serve as a recurring motif throughout the story, not only as a tangible force but also as a metaphor for the complex and often contradictory relationship between freedom and conflict. Ghosh will explore this connection on both a personal and societal level, showing how violence masquerades as a means of achieving freedom, even as it often undermines it. The exploration of violence, intertwined with the ideas of nationhood and the complexities of historical memory, will play a pivotal role in shaping the narrative's broader themes.

Keywords: Freedom, Violence, Partition, Diaspora, Nationalism etc.

Introduction

I thought of how much they all wanted to be free; how they went mad wanting their freedom; I began to wonder whether it was I that was mad because I was happy to be bound, whether I was alone in knowing that I could not live without the clamour of the voices within me. — Amitav Ghosh, The Shadow Lines

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a nuanced exploration of borders, both physical and psychological, and the human desire for freedom that often underlies, complicates, and contradicts them. In this richly layered narrative, Ghosh delves into themes of partition, displacement, nationalism, and personal identity, all while examining the deep yearning for liberation in a world fractured by artificial boundaries.

The idea of freedom in *The Shadow Lines* is not presented as a singular or straightforward concept. Instead, it is multi-faceted, elusive, and often paradoxical. Ghosh uses historical memory, familial stories, and intergenerational narratives to interrogate what it means to be free: free from colonial rule, from imposed borders, from inherited trauma, and even from the self. By juxtaposing the past with the present, and the private with the political, Ghosh reveals that the pursuit of freedom is rarely a linear journey. It is marked by contradictions, sacrifices, and, most crucially, by violence, both visible and invisible.

While much of the critical discourse around *The Shadow Lines* focuses on the themes of nationalism, memory, and subjective history, the novel's treatment of violence and freedom deserves equal attention. Freedom is not only a central concern of the narrative; it also serves as a structural and philosophical framework within which other themes unfold. In this way, freedom is both subject and medium: a theme that sustains the narrative while also being scrutinised by it.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first explores the various manifestations of violence in the novel, particularly the violence that arises from human efforts to define and control the world through borders, ideologies, and narratives. The second part considers how this violence functions within the novel's larger meditation on freedom, memory, and identity.

At the heart of the novel is a deeply unsettling realisation: the most enduring forms of violence are not always physical. The title *The Shadow Lines* itself gestures toward this idea. A "shadow" is cast when something obstructs light, which serves as an apt metaphor for the subtle yet insidious ways in which human beings interrupt the natural order of coexistence. The "lines" refer to the borders we draw between nations, communities, and even within ourselves. These borders are rarely natural; they are human constructions, often justified in the name of security or identity but underpinned by fear and exclusion.

The very act of drawing a border is, in itself, an act of violence. Once such boundaries are established and legitimised, whether geographical, political, or ideological, they

lay the groundwork for more visible forms of violence: riots, wars, displacement, and communal hatred. Ghosh illustrates how these so-called "shadow lines" become internalised by individuals, shaping how they see themselves and others, often with tragic consequences.

By capturing the lives of characters who move across continents and generations, Ghosh challenges the reader to reconsider the meaning of freedom in a world governed by invisible yet deeply entrenched lines. He suggests that to truly understand violence and liberation, we must look beyond maps and into the stories, personal, fragmented, and often silenced that reside within them.

This study aims to demonstrate that the very idea of freedom, especially when it remains unattainable can be powerful enough to destabilise the human psyche. *The Shadow Lines* presents this notion through contrasting understandings of freedom, particularly those held by Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother, and Ila, his cousin. Their differing perspectives offer insight into how concepts of freedom are shaped by generational, cultural, and political contexts. Additionally, the study will examine how the novel portrays violence, beginning with the symbolism embedded in its title. The "shadow lines" drawn across nations are themselves acts of violence, arbitrary divisions that fracture human relationships and shared histories. Once these constructed boundaries are legitimised by collective consensus, they inevitably give rise to other forms of violence, including wars, riots, communalism, nationalism, and racial discrimination.

Objectives:

1. To show how the idea of freedom is different for every character
2. To show how communal violence can lead to tragic death and rumours leads to broken friendship
3. To show the correlation between freedom and violence in the novel

Research methodology:

The study falls back on secondary materials. Apart from the text, other reference materials and inputs will be made use of.

Analysis

Redefining Freedom

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh masterfully intertwines historical reality with fiction, crafting a narrative that stretches across borders and generations to reflect the transformations of modern Indian history. Set against the backdrop of the British Empire's decline and the violent partitioning of the Indian subcontinent, the novel captures how national and political upheavals reshape the lives of three generations of a Bengali family scattered across India, Bangladesh, and England.

When the British departed and boundaries were redrawn, countless people were uprooted from their ancestral homes, forced to redefine who they were and where they belonged. Ghosh's narrative focuses on this dislocation, not just of land but of identity. In an article published in *The Times of India* soon after the novel's release, Ghosh referred to contemporary India's ongoing turmoil, terrorist attacks, communal riots, and the unrest in

Kashmir as manifestations of a deeper crisis. What many dismiss as endemic violence or a cultural flaw, he sees as a symptom of something more profound: the unresolved struggle for identity that continues to haunt the postcolonial nation.

Ghosh suggests that the roots of this turmoil lie in 1947, the year of independence and partition when political freedom was achieved but emotional and cultural unity was shattered. The traumas of that moment reverberate throughout the novel, particularly through the experiences of Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother. Born and raised in Dhaka, she is forced to confront a painful truth after independence: the city that once defined her sense of home now belongs to another nation. Her identity becomes fragmented, caught between memory and geography. In her confusion, she could well ask, "Who am I now? Am I Indian simply because I live in Calcutta?" (82)

Though she builds a new life in Calcutta's modest Bhowanipore neighborhood after her husband's death, Tha'mma's heart remains tied to the Dhaka of her youth. That lost home becomes a symbol of what freedom took away from her, the emotional and cultural wholeness that borders destroyed.

Through her story, Ghosh delves into the complex meanings of *freedom* and *identity*, themes that resonate far beyond politics. The independence of 1947 was celebrated as a triumph of equality and self-rule. Yet, as Ghosh demonstrates, legal freedom does not automatically translate into lived freedom. The newly liberated nation remained divided by class, gender, religion, and region. The same society that claimed independence from colonial power continued to imprison its people within invisible social and ideological walls.

Ghosh further explores this paradox through his female characters Tha'mma, Ila, and May, who represent different generations, cultures, and understandings of liberty. For Tha'mma, freedom is collective and patriotic; it demands discipline, sacrifice, and loyalty to the nation. For Ila, who grows up in cosmopolitan settings, freedom means personal autonomy, the right to choose her life, love, and place in the world. For May, coming from a Western background, freedom is intertwined with moral responsibility and the burden of historical guilt. Each woman's perception of freedom is incomplete, revealing how deeply it is shaped by culture, history, and circumstance.

Ultimately, *The Shadow Lines* questions whether true freedom can ever exist in a world defined by invisible borders between nations, between people, and within the self. Ghosh's narrative reminds us that liberation is not merely about political sovereignty; it is an ongoing quest to reconcile identity, memory, and belonging in a fragmented world.

Claiming Freedom: Tha'mma's Story

Freedom holds different meanings for different characters in *The Shadow Lines*, depending on the historical moments they live through. Tha'mma grew up in Dhaka during the peak of India's freedom struggle. She later witnessed the creation of two nations, felt the pain of Partition, and took part in the new political order that emerged from it. As a young student, she was deeply influenced by the nationalist spirit spreading through Bengal. She

wanted to take part in the revolution, running errands for the rebels, joining protests, spreading messages, and even making bombs, but she could not simply because she was a woman.

Bengal's history is full of brave women who played active roles in the revolutionary movement of the 1930s. Listening to such stories shaped Tha'mma's beliefs and ideals. She tells her grandson many years later that one must be willing to die for the nation, even to kill if necessary, when he tries to explain that Ila stayed in England because she wanted to be free. Tha'mma lives a disciplined life, avoiding comfort or luxury, and works hard. For her, political freedom won after years of struggle demanded responsibility and commitment from every citizen.

However, the independence of 1947 did not bring the peace or unity she had imagined. Instead, it created new divisions and hatred through artificial borders. Though she was an Indian citizen, her birthplace, Dhaka, now lay in another country. Her confusion and sorrow become clear when she has to fill out a disembarkation form on her way to Dhaka and finds that she cannot "quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality."

Tha'mma's disappointment deepens when she realizes that her sacrifices were meaningless:

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'll 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. (167)

After Tridib's death, her idealism begins to fade as she witnesses growing chaos and violence. Her nationalism turns fierce, so much so that Ila calls her "a war mongering fascist." She donates her jewellery to the Defence Fund, believing that the country must be protected from its enemies. For her, it becomes a matter of "us" versus "them," with "them" being those who now live in her former homeland. To Tha'mma, freedom is not just something to be celebrated; it is something to be defended, even at the cost of bloodshed.

Claiming Liberty: The Story of Ila

For Ila, who belongs to a later generation, the spirit of nationalism that once inspired Tha'mma no longer holds meaning. Born after Partition, she grows up in a world where that patriotic zeal has faded. She cannot adjust to the values and expectations of independent India, so she escapes to a different world with a new social system and set of beliefs. For both Tha'mma and Ila, the idea of freedom is shaped by their personal experiences and the very different worlds they live in. Ila is a complex and puzzling character. She wants to be free and feels out of place in India. Yet, the foreign world she chooses as her own also feels strange and distant. She tries hard to be accepted by the people in her adopted country, but deep inside, she knows she will never truly belong. Even as a child, when she studied in different schools abroad, she always stood apart in class photographs, slightly separated

from the group.

She tries to convince the narrator that she was liked and accepted by her friends, but in reality, she suffered from racial discrimination at her school in England. Her classmates' rejection left her physically and emotionally hurt. She grew up feeling lonely, isolated, and unhappy.

Ila believes in living in the moment and enjoying life through experiences. During one of her visits to India, she insists that Robi and the narrator go with her to a bar. They agree, though unwillingly. When Robi stops her from dancing with a stranger, she becomes angry and expresses her frustration with Indian society's conservative attitude. She cries out, "Do you see why I have chosen to live in London? It's only because I want to be free... free of your bloody culture." (88–89)

Ila shows no understanding of the *bhadralok* way of life in modern Bengal, which blends both tradition and modernity. In this society, people may appear Western in their speech and dress, yet they hold on to traditional values about family and morality.

As an adult, Ila seems unsure of what she wants. Before getting married, she spends time with a group of young activists who organize pickets. They talk endlessly about practical matters such as what pens to use for posters or how to arrange meals, but they never discuss real politics. The narrator quickly notices that Ila is treated like a guest, someone who adds glamour rather than substance. Yet Ila believes she is politically involved. Her understanding of the world remains shallow, much like in her childhood when she associated Cairo only with the location of the "Ladies" at the airport. Tridib once remarked that although Ila had lived in many countries, she had never truly travelled.

Ila refuses to see India as her home because she has never truly lived there or connected with its culture. Yet she also knows that the Western world she admires does not fully accept her either. She feels like an outsider everywhere. In her attempt to build a life in the West, she marries Nick, an Englishman. But he betrays her soon after their marriage. Despite her pain, Ila chooses to remain in England and continue the relationship, unwilling to return to India.

Her disillusionment exposes both the strengths and weaknesses of Indian and Western cultures. Ila finds Indian traditions too confining, yet she discovers that freedom in the West also comes with emptiness and instability. In India, marriage is generally seen as a stable institution, while in her adopted world, relationships lack trust and permanence. Although Ila rejects her Indian roots, she eventually finds comfort in her connections with Robi and the narrator, her family members who share the same loss of Tridib.

Amitav Ghosh does not portray one culture as superior to another. Instead, he explores the modern struggle for freedom and belonging. Ila's fight is against the limitations of a

traditional society, and she believes that by rejecting these, she will find her true self. However, she fails to understand that in seeking freedom, she has become trapped by new forms of restraint— emotional emptiness, betrayal, and loss of identity. In her search for personal freedom, she is confronted with a different reality: the absence of trust and loyalty in her marriage, which leaves her more lost than free.

Tridib and the Idea of Limitless Freedom

Tridib's idea of freedom is deeply personal and spiritual. He dreams of meeting May, who has come from England, as a complete stranger in a place untouched by history or memory. He wants their meeting to be pure and free, where both of them are "really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers." For Tridib, true connection between two people can only happen when they rise above the limits of their individual selves.

He tells the narrator 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." (24) This belief shows how deeply he values emotional truth and genuine human experience. May also shares this understanding of love and freedom. Tridib was eight and May was a baby when he first went to England. When they meet again as adults in India, she is nineteen and he is twenty- seven. They had exchanged letters for years, but when they finally meet at the railway station, they act as though they have known and loved each other forever.

Tridib often speaks of going to a place where there is "no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror." This reflects his transcendental idea of freedom, a state where a person becomes whole, without separation between the inner self and the outer world. Such a person can truly reach out to others. Sadly, Tridib achieves this unity only in death. When he tries to rescue an old man from a violent mob, he knows he might not survive, yet he does not hesitate. In that final act of courage, the border between "oneself and one's image in the mirror" disappears for him. His death becomes his moment of redemption.

Tridib spends most of his life living within his imagination, often staying in his room at Ballygunge place or among ruins, building an ideal world in his mind. He longs to extend his thoughts and feelings to distant times and places, away from the divisions and conflicts of society. But since such a perfect world cannot exist in reality, his life ends tragically. His death becomes symbolic - the death of a dreamer who believed in the power of imagination, freedom, and human connection even in a world divided by violence and boundaries.

Mapping the Violence

In *The Shadow Lines*, violence appears in many forms, and its roots lie in the human tendency to interfere with the natural order of life. The title of the novel itself reflects this idea. The word "Shadow" suggests the violence of blocking light, while "Lines" represents the violence of creating divisions and borders where none originally existed.

The “shadow lines” that separate countries are themselves acts of violence. Once such divisions are accepted and justified by society, they lead to other forms of violence, wars, riots, narrow nationalism, and racial prejudice. These outcomes are the natural results of a world built on separation and fear.

This idea becomes clearer when the grandmother, out of her strong patriotic feelings, sacrifices her husband’s cherished gold chain, something she had held onto even through her widowhood. She donates it to the war fund during the 1965 Indo-Pak conflict, declaring, “I gave it away she screamed. I gave it for the fund of war, I had to do it don’t you see? For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out.” (237)

Her words show how deeply nationalism can blur moral boundaries. What begins as love for one’s country turns into a justification for destruction. The grandmother’s passionate belief that violence is necessary to protect freedom reveals the disturbing transformation of patriotism into aggression. Through such moments, Amitav Ghosh exposes how political borders and national pride can fuel endless cycles of violence, both within and between nations

Bloodlines and Boundaries

Communal violence and riots are important themes in *The Shadow Lines*. Such violence often feels uncontrollable, and even the state struggles to contain it. One example is the unrest following the loss and later recovery of Mui-i-Mubarak in Kashmir, which created disturbances in Khulna, East Pakistan. Despite the deployment of armed forces, the situation quickly got out of hand. As the book notes, “Once the riots started in Khulna the government of East Pakistan lost no time in sending the army to put down the ‘disturbances. But it was already too late.” (214) This attack on the Hindu community was followed by a violent and vengeful retaliation in Calcutta on 10 January 1962. “Mobs went rampaging throughout the city, killing Muslims, and looting their shops and their houses.” (233)

Communal violence often spreads through rumours, which intensify fear and hatred. In this instance, the violence also echoes the Partition of 1947, a time of widespread bloodshed. “In Calcutta rumour’s were in the air especially that familiar old rumour, the harbinger of every serious riot that the trains from Pakistan were arriving packed with corpses.” (228) Through these events, Amitav Ghosh shows how communal violence is not just spontaneous but also fueled by fear, mistrust, and the lingering trauma of past conflicts.

Echoes of Loss: Tridib, Jethamoshai, and Khalil

Amitav Ghosh addresses the theme of violence most clearly in the account of the deaths of Tridib, Jethamoshai, and Khalil, the rickshaw-puller. Tridib had always imagined “a better place, a place without borders and countries.” He felt most comfortable in neutral, impersonal spaces such as coffee houses and street corners, as if he wanted to maintain a distance from the people around him. His journey to Dhaka was motivated solely by his desire to be with May. May’s visit to India was planned, but her trip to Dhaka was not. Moreover, there was no direct connection between Tridib, May, and Tha’mma traveling from Calcutta to Dhaka in early January 1964 and the theft of the Prophet’s hair from the Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar. Yet, Ghosh demonstrates how these separate events, spread

across time and space, become tragically intertwined.

Tridib's death is the central tragedy of the novel. His presence and later his absence affect the reader from the beginning to the end, creating a sense of mystery around the circumstances of his death. His absence, and the violent way in which he dies, embodies an unspoken grief, a silent suffering, and a suppressed cry. When Ghosh finally recounts the killing of Tridib, the violence becomes unavoidable, showing the vulnerability of an individual against the uncontrollable force of collective rage.

Lines of Loyalty: Montu, the Narrator, and a Divided World

While examining how violence begins in society, Ghosh shows that parents sometimes plant seeds of mistrust in their children without meaning to. In early January 1964, the narrator, still a boy, takes the bus to school and notices only a few boys sitting together at the back. In a 'tearful, sing-song sound' (which the narrator still remembers as an adult), one boy tells him that his mother would not let him drink water that morning because she had heard that they had poured poison into Tala tank, that the whole of Calcutta's water supply was poisoned.

After this, the narrator is accused of being a friend of the 'enemy.' His friend Montu is a Muslim. To protect himself he lies that he haven't met Montu for months and is accepted again as 'one of us.' Relief replaces the shame of denial and betrayal. "I was very glad he hadn't come," (23) the narrator says, relieved that he will not face any more embarrassment. As people begin to divide along religious lines, distrust and conflict naturally grow in the community.

The narrator does not seem to feel guilty for betraying his friend; he only feels relief that he belongs to the majority. This is similar to how Nick might have felt when he ran home from school knowing that Ila would be attacked by another English girl. He wanted to avoid getting involved or noticed.

Unlike war, which changes history because it is remembered and recorded in a biased way, riots are easier to forget and rarely get much attention in official history. There are no reliable estimates of how many people were killed in the riots of 1964. The number could stretch from several hundred to several thousand; at any rate not very many less than were killed in the war of 1962. This may be because riots, though they have causes and effects, do not usually have a clear goal like wars do. Another disturbing fact is that victims of riots are not publicly remembered. The following lines sum up the oblivion that covers riot victims: "But they were ordinary people-, soon forgotten-not for them any Martyrs Memorial or Eternal Flame." (229) This makes the darkness of riots even more shocking than the violence of wars. "The theatre of war, where generals meet is the stage on which states disport themselves: they have no use of memories of riots." (230)

Ghosh also suggests that terrorist groups who use violence to advance their aims can be a result of the borders drawn between nations and between self and other. The

narrator's grandmother expresses the deep anger caused by past injustices when she is asked whether she would have killed the English magistrate at Khulna like the shy, wispy bearded boy from her class. Her

answer shows how strongly people felt about freedom: "I would have been frightened. 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." (39)

Conclusion

The theme of Freedom and Violence is central to *The Shadow Lines*, highlighting the futility of believing that the borders we create between nations, and between the self and the other, are real or absolute. Ghosh explores this idea through characters such as Ila, Tridib, and the narrator's grandmother, among others. These characters illustrate how violence and freedom interact when humans try to impose boundaries where none naturally exist.

Ila seeks social freedom by breaking away from the patriarchal rules of Indian society, but she faces another form of restriction in England through racial discrimination. This shows that no matter where she goes, she encounters social limitations, suggesting that the borders defining one nation against another are often artificial and blurred. The narrator's grandmother, in contrast, equates freedom with patriotism and sees it largely in nationalistic terms. Her view explains her opposition to Ila's concept of freedom and her belief that violence is necessary to build and maintain a nation. Tridib represents another perspective, one in which freedom and nationhood exist beyond socio-political and cultural boundaries. He envisions a world without divisions between places, people, or linear histories. However, this ideal is violently challenged by his untimely death, questioning the practicality of such freedom in real life.

Ghosh also reflects resistance to arbitrary boundaries in the structure of the novel itself, which lacks clearly defined chapters and punctuation to separate different characters' voices. Violence shapes several characters in the book. For the grandmother, it becomes a key way of understanding both nationhood and freedom. By the end of the novel, she is deeply affected by the deaths of Tridib, Jethamoshai, and Khalil during the riots. Any mention of these events upsets her, yet the violent loss reinforces her nationalistic beliefs, as seen when she donates the chain for the war fund.

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