



# MEMORY BEYOND BORDERS: HYBRIDITY AND THE THIRD SPACE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES* AND *THE GLASS PALACE*

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**ABSTRACT:** Literary texts often provide a powerful medium for reinterpreting history and identity. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and *The Glass Palace* (2000) offer profound reflections on nationalism, borders, and identity by weaving personal and familial narratives across generations. Through the lens of personal memory and storytelling, these novels open up a space for rethinking official histories. Ghosh interrogates the rigid construction of identity. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh explores the trauma of Partition and its aftermath across three generations of a family, using memory to mirror the fractured identity of the nation. *The Glass Palace* traces the displacement of the royal family and ordinary Burmese natives affected by British colonialism, highlighting how inherited memory shapes postcolonial identity. By questioning the concreteness of borders, Ghosh constructs hybrid identities that transcend fixed boundaries. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of "hybridity" and the "third space," this study examines how the intersection of historical events and personal memory enables the formation of hybrid identities. A close literary analysis of the narrative structures reveals how memory becomes a site of resistance and a means to critique the violence and exclusions inherent in nationalist discourse.

**Keywords:** Memory, Border, Identity, Storytelling, Hybridity, and Third Space.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has long served as a medium for reimagining and reinterpreting historical events. In the context of postcolonial South Asia, the role of fiction is particularly vital. British colonization is often linked to the consequences of Partition in the subcontinent. The 1980s witnessed a boom in nation-centric narratives, or *nationsroman* (Joshi 260). However, postcolonial literature is not merely a retelling of historical events; it represents an attempt by postcolonial writers to foreground marginalized voices, personal memories, and family stories. As Sharma observes, writers such as

Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor often fall short in their attempts to uncover the micro-narratives of the nation (Sharma 129–130). Among postcolonial writers, Amitav Ghosh stands out for his engagement with memory, displacement, identity, and political borders. Ghosh is known for his attention to small, nuanced details through his characters, which lends realism to his narratives.

This paper examines two of Ghosh's acclaimed novels, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and *The Glass Palace* (2000), and explores how Ghosh constructs hybrid identities through the interweaving of memory and narrative. Both novels attempt to address the displacement of individuals caused by imperialism and nationalism. Rather than depicting events in a strictly linear fashion, Ghosh presents memory as personal recollection. His works explore geographical entities, displacement, and the fluidity of time and space. The identities of his characters are not anchored in any single nation or ideology. Instead, Ghosh attempts to reshape identity through cultural memory, inherited trauma, and narrative imagination.

This paper employs the theoretical lens of Homi K. Bhabha, particularly his concepts of hybridity and the third space, to examine Ghosh's works. According to Bhabha, colonialism is not solely rooted in a binary division between the colonizer and the colonized; rather, it is produced in the in-between spaces where cultural identity becomes fluid, negotiated, and hybrid. This third space allows for the emergence of a new form of identity that is inherently hybrid in nature. The identities of Ghosh's characters are shaped by

memory, exile, migration, and cross-cultural contact. The third space in Ghosh's narrative is both historical and imaginative—a space where memory and storytelling become tools of survival.

*The Shadow Lines* employs a non-linear narrative. The story engages with three generations of an Indian and a British family who have experienced the Partitions of 1947 and 1971. The unnamed narrator explores the aftermath of Partition and the hollowness of lines and orders. The novel is constructed through family anecdotes and fragmented memories, highlighting the problems of categorization that emerge as a result of Partition. The memories of Tridib and Tha'mma depict the boundaries between past and present, personal and political, and real and imagined. The novel critiques the absurdity of borders and challenges the historical narratives upheld by nationalist discourses. Ghosh's use of memory serves as both a weapon and a wound. The grand narratives of nation and nationalism are displaced by the intimate functions of family storytelling, resisting factual histories and revealing the complexities of postcolonial identity.

Similarly, *The Glass Palace* is an attempt to locate history and time through memory. The novel explores three generations across Burma, India, and Malaya, illustrating how the saga of a family can challenge dominant historical discourses. It adopts a multigenerational storytelling approach, focusing on colonial characters like Rajkumar and Dolly, who are forced into a world of cultural dislocation and memory. The opening scene sets the tone of the novel, which engages with themes of war and its futility, the concept of boundaries, displacement, and hybridity. The exile of the postcolonial subject becomes vivid when Rajkumar, the protagonist, is addressed as *kaala*. Like *The Shadow Lines*, this novel demonstrates how individual memory and family history can challenge colonial and national narratives.

By analyzing both texts, this paper argues that Ghosh uses storytelling and memory as narrative strategies to interrogate postcolonial identity. Memory becomes a means of traversing time and space, and the postcolonial character's memory becomes a powerful metaphor for the identity of a nation. Ghosh, through his works, questions the very nature of identity. For him, identity is constituted through memory and narrative. His characters resist the fixity of political identities. The identities of the unnamed narrator in *The Shadow Lines* and Rajkumar in *The Glass Palace* emerge from the *third space*—a discursive realm that is hybrid in nature. Therefore, borders and boundary lines come to symbolize the instability of fixed national identities. Thus, this paper is to illustrate the vital role of memory in resisting dominant historical narratives and the rigid constructs of national identity.

## II .MEMORY, BOUNDARY, AND NATIONAL ALLEGORY

Postcolonial literature relocates the traumatic disruptions caused by colonialism and nationalism. Borders become symbolic, carrying meanings tied to livelihood, identity, and belonging, especially for immigrants. The narrative often charts a transition from the identity of the individual protagonist to the broader identity of the nation. Ghosh's works deeply engage with the themes of memory and nationalism, where personal memory becomes a metaphor for the traumatic memory of a nation. Memory is not merely a means to revisit the past; it serves as a force to challenge dominant historical narratives of the nation and its borders. In this sense, memory plays a crucial role in the formation of identity—for both individuals and nations—in the postcolonial world. The dislocation of characters, their inherited memories, and their lived experiences act as a form of resistance against the formal documentation and rigid constructs of nationhood and nationalism.

*The Shadow Lines* offers a non-linear narrative. In the novel, memory becomes the primary tool for constructing identities. Divided into two sections, "Going Away" and "Coming Home," the novel fosters a heightened readerly consciousness of time, memory, and identity. The unnamed narrator, through the memories of his uncle Tridib and grandmother Tha'mma, explores the absurdity of national boundaries. All the three generations of the family have different memories and understandings of nationalism. For Jethamoshai, borders have more meaning than just a draw of a single line. In this context Ghosh explains:

I believed that across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship. There was no room in it for this other thing. And things which did not fit my vocabulary were pushed over edge into the chasm of that silence. (*The Shadow Lines*, p.219)

Borders have traditionally defined relationships in geographical and political terms, yet they can be reinterpreted through memory. *The Shadow Lines* offers an illustration of mapping and the creation of borders that limit relationships and human connections. The novel engages with national issues and explores ideas of nation and nationality through its events and characters. The narrator's understanding of borders is shaped not by political maps but by personal recollections. The narrator, who is deeply connected to his uncle Tridib, is left grappling with the "necessity of mapping" after Tridib's tragic end. At one point, the narrator opens an atlas and remarks that mapping is ultimately a futile attempt to divide and sever relationships. The structure of nation and

border is explored more explicitly in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1988), yet Ghosh's work stands out for its intimate portrayal of how memory and narrative interact. This interplay draws attention to the divergence between official history and personal identity. The creation of borders is portrayed as a burdensome legacy of colonialism—our current maps are colonial impositions. As Shohat notes, “lines drawn in sands still haunt Third World geographies” (Shohat 99). The riot that claims Tridib's life in Dhaka continues to haunt the narrator, who reflects on its implications for memory, loss, and identity.

The simple fact (was) that there had never been a moment in the 4000 years 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. (*The Shadow Lines*, p.234)

Partha Chatterjee, in *Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India*, discusses the symbolic meaning of ‘home,’ associating it with nostalgia. He writes, “The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self. One's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interest, where practical considerations reign supreme” (Chatterjee 624). Similarly, the memory of ‘home’ in both novels carries the weight of dislocation and migration.

Tha'mma's inability to understand the need for a visa to enter her birthplace exemplifies how the past continues to haunt the present for every immigrant. Set against the backdrop of the Partition of 1947, Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* critically examines the notion of borders. The allegory of “shadow lines” suggests the absurdity of drawing arbitrary boundaries. For Ghosh, culture is never independent—it is always historically entangled. The partition lines reflect the narrator's futile attempts to draw boundaries on maps, which ultimately cannot contain human memory or identity.

Jethamoshai refuses to leave Dhaka and migrate to India, declaring, “Once you start moving, you never stop... no one will ever have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I will die here” (*The Shadow Lines*, p. 215). His character embodies a deeper sense of patriotism, grounded in place and belonging. These “shadow lines” continue to migrate, much like the characters themselves.

While the memories in *The Shadow Lines* are framed by the violence of Partition and its aftermath, *The Glass Palace* deals with inherited memories of war and displacement. Ghosh uses family storytelling in this novel to reveal the power dynamics embedded in national histories. The narrative allows space for alternative versions of historical events, challenging official records. The novel interweaves multiple stories, showing that memory is not just a recollection of the past but a living force. At its core is the memory of Rajkumar, an Indian orphan accidentally transported to Burma. His memories are steeped in violence and dislocation. By the age of eleven, Rajkumar has already witnessed the brutality of British colonialism in Burma. Rajkumar becomes a figure of cultural hybridity, his multilayered identities formed through memory and migration.

Through Rajkumar's perspective, the novel explores cultural dislocation and the construction of identity and nationhood. His search for new places and people begins in the unfamiliar landscape. Set against the backdrop of war and colonial violence in Burma, the novel spans three generations across Burma, India, and Mandalay. Ghosh writes, “Long straight roads radiated outwards from the walls, forming a neat geometrical grid. So intriguing was the ordered pattern of these streets that Rajkumar wandered far afield, exploring” (*The Glass Palace*, p. 5). Rajkumar's journey is symbolic—it represents the immigrant's quest to navigate and make meaning in a new land.

The creation of a new nation is always accompanied by the emergence of new identities for its inhabitants. Once living in Burma, Rajkumar later searches for a new home in Mandalay. There, he eventually encounters Lady Ma Cho, who runs a tea stall. Rajkumar's experiences and inherited memories mirror the historical and political transformations of time and space. The characters' memories serve as a preserved cultural archive that is constantly challenged by the dominant narratives of empire. Rajkumar witnesses the fall of the Burmese monarchy and

migrates across India and Mandalay. Ghosh uses the figure of the ordinary man—Rajkumar—who carries the “bag and baggage” of memory from various places. These memories are haunted by the loss of home and identity, reflecting the borderland between nationality and cultural displacement.

As Wanjarri notes in “*A Search for Cultural Identity in the Selected Novels of Amitav Ghosh*,” Ghosh's works reflect the cultural belonging of characters like Rajkumar, Dolly, Uma, and Saya Jones in postcolonial and globalized landscapes. The past always



remains alive within the immigrant. Rajkumar's memories of his youth in Mandalay continue to haunt his later life, just as Dolly's memories of the Burmese royal household continue to reshape her identity in India. In

"Tracing Multicultural Aspects in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* and Observing Reverse Nostalgia and Identity Crisis," Swati highlights how the novel builds multiculturalism through the displacement of characters and their inherited memories of nation and culture. Thus, memory in Ghosh's novel functions as an archive of resistance against the grand narratives of the nation. The boundaries depicted in *The Glass Palace*—physical, cultural, and emotional—are not fixed. The narrative deconstructs the idea of rigid borders.

Colonialism, in its essence, practiced the drawing of artificial boundaries between colonizer and colonized, which eventually translated into national borders. Ghosh critiques the instability and hollowness of these borders throughout the novel. Spanning the colonial territories of Burma, India, and Mandalay, *The Glass Palace* also reflects the racial divisions between ethnic groups. The forced exile of King Thebaw and the Burmese royal family to India is a powerful depiction of colonial power dynamics. Colonialism imposed artificial homelands and forcefully removed people

from their native lands, leaving lasting scars on memory and identity.

Racial boundaries also play a crucial role in Ghosh's narrative world. The words of Rajkumar draw the reader's attention to these racial divisions: "Why, are you thinking of trying to get in there, you fool—an Indian, you coal-black kalaa? They'll know you from a mile off and cut off your head" (*The Glass Palace*, p. 17). Ghosh's repeated use of the word 'kalaa' highlights the racial discrimination faced by colonized peoples. Rajkumar's existence in a hostile land is shaped, and at times threatened, by the color of his skin. The binary of black and white is vividly portrayed through characters such as Rajkumar and Saya Jones. Ghosh challenges the notion of racial purity, suggesting instead that no race is pure and no bloodline entirely royal. The Third World, according to his narrative, is a product of colonial entanglements—an amalgamation of the colonizer and the colonized, inherently hybrid in nature. Saya Jones embodies this hybridity: he is born of a Burmese princess and a Marathi coachman from the colonized ranks. Despite wearing Western clothes and being fluent in English, Hindustani, and Burmese, Saya openly mocks his own mixed heritage.

"They (Indian Soldiers) asked me this very question: how is it that you who look Chinese and carry a Christian name, can speak our language? When I told them how this had come about, they would laugh and say, you are a *Dhobi ka Kutta* - a washerman's dog- *Na Ghar Ka Na Ghat Ka* - you don't belong anywhere, either by the water or on land, and I'd say, yes that is exactly what I am" (*The Glass Palace*, p.22).

However, the study also explores the emotional and psychological boundaries of the characters. For instance, Dolly's emotional detachment from Rajkumar and the royal family of Burma, Alison's dilemma, Arjun's moral conflict as an Indian officer in the British army, Rajkumar's search for material success, and, finally, Rajkumar's crossing of marital boundaries—all illustrate the personal lines drawn by the characters. The idea of the 'nation' undergoes numerous transitions and transformations. The identity of the nation is fluid, shaped by the memories and narratives of its inhabitants. In his study of postcolonial nations, Homi Bhabha describes the identity of the nation as follows: "The nation's narrative strategy—we are told—is a continual movement of subjects who are part of its historical process, yet remain 'othered' through the sign of cultural difference" (Bhabha 147). The nation functions as an allegory in Ghosh's narrative strategy.

Ghosh uses personal and family history to mirror the fate of a nation. In *The Shadow Lines*, the idea of the nation is constructed through the characters' understanding of national space. Tha'ama and Jethamoshai's understanding of partition reflects the nation's identity. The narrator's perception of the nation is fragmented. In *The Glass Palace*, the fall of the Burmese monarchy symbolizes the collapse of the nation under European imperialism.

### III. POSTCOLONIALISM, HYBRIDITY, AND THE THIRD SPACE

The colonial period has been dismantled, and out of its ashes rises the edifice of postcolonialism. Modern texts are replicas of colonialism. Postcolonial literature includes texts written from the colonial mindset, imperial power dynamics, and the resistance of colonial subjects. The term 'post-colonialism,' with a hyphen, refers to the chronological phase of a new dawn. Its unhyphenated form, 'postcolonialism,' refers to "different forms of representations, reading practices, and values" (Arora, 29). Minakshi Mukherjee refers to postcolonialism as "not merely a chronological label referring to the period after the collapse of empires. It is ideologically an emancipatory concept, particularly for the students of literature outside the Western world" (Minakshi Mukherjee, 3). Thus, it can be said that postcolonialism is an approach to revisit colonial subjects and the effects of the aftermath of colonization.

Some of the prominent theorists of postcolonialism include Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Aijaz Ahmad, Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and the trio—Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin. Bhabha's reading of postcolonialism is an attempt to reconstruct the ideas of 'mimicry,' 'third space,' 'hybridity,' and 'ambivalence.' The present study examines Bhabha's concept of the 'third space' and how it forms the 'hybrid identity' of a postcolonial character, using Amitav Ghosh's *The*

*Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*. The third space, born from the intersection of cultures, histories, and memories, allows for the emergence of hybrid identity.

*The Shadow Lines* covers all the postcolonial writing concerns such as the 'search for identity' for both characters and the nation, borderlines and their impacts on different relationships, and how personal memory reflects the communal past, among others. It seems that the author expresses his own views through the mouthpiece of Tridib. Tridib, the narrator's uncle, is a colonial subject. He is caught between the two worlds of Calcutta and London, reflecting a postcolonial character torn between his native and hostile lands. His narrative, which blends personal memory with historical context, creates the third space for the narrator. His identity is not fixed; rather, it exists in between. Tridib's life is symbolic—he is never rooted in one culture. The identity that coexists in him is hybrid. Memory plays a vital role in the formation of this hybrid identity. The unnamed narrator's identity has been shaped by the memories of partition and historical narratives. The family's relationship with Dhaka (Jethamoshai's family) and their existence in India have contributed to the creation of this hybrid identity. Ghosh presents Tridib as an archaeologist, mirroring his own layered identity. Tridib's identity is influenced by different cultures, histories, and experiences. His cross-cultural engagement, trauma from the partition, and migration to a new country all influence the formation of his hybrid identity. The intersection of Bengali culture and Western culture, along with fragmented memories of the past and experiences in a new land, offers the third space for a postcolonial character.

The interplay of inherited memory and personal experience is credited with shaping the narrator's hybrid identity. The narrator encounters the fragmented memories of partition through the stories of his uncle, Tridib, and his grandmother, Thamma. The historical narrative and the collective cultural experience provide the third space for constructing identity. The identity of both the narrator and the nation is not fixed. His encounter with family stories, especially those from Uncle Tridib, suggests how inherited memories and collective history shape imagined identities. As the narrator describes, "Every word that Tridib spoke..filled my mind with a landscape of stories and memories, so that I could no longer tell where one ended and the other began" (*The Shadow Lines*, p. 34).

The three different cities, Calcutta(India), London (England), and Dhaka (Bangladesh) represent the intersection of culture and memories, defended by Bhabha as third space. This third space is the psychological and emotional space of a character.

".. among other things Tridib was an archaeologist, he was not interested in fairy lands: the one thing he wanted to teach me, he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision"(*The Shadow Lines*, p. 24).

The narrator is captivated by the memories of Tridib and his encounter with the new land. The titles of the two separate sections of the novel are also symbolic. "Going Away" symbolizes leaving behind the self, while "Coming Home" represents the idea that the self is always rooted in the past. The narrator is not given a name here, which may imply that he has no fixed identity or personality. The identity he possesses is hybrid, born from memories and imaginations. The narrator carries a hybrid map of the world within himself, understanding that mapping this world is a futile attempt. Though he is emotionally connected with the places he has heard about through Tridib's stories, he remains distant from them in a deeper, existential sense. "But if there aren't any differences, then why do they draw those lines?"

And why do they spend so much time killing people over them?" (*The Shadow Lines*, p. 215)

The national boundary and the memory of Tridib give the narrator a third space to imagine the necessity of borders. It creates the hybrid identity of the narrator, who is in between his longing for his native land and his encounter with new culture. The national boundary and the memory of Tridib provide the narrator with a third space in which to imagine the necessity of borders. This creates the hybrid identity of the narrator, who exists between his longing for his native land and his encounter with a new culture.

*The Glass Palace* is a powerful narrative of imperial power. As a postcolonial text, the novel re-examines the notion of a unified identity. The characters' identities are shaped through time and space. They are remembered by their names, such as Raj Kumar, Saya Jones, Uma, Dolly, Alison, Dinu, and Neel. Postcolonial perspectives dismantle centralized identity, suggesting that identity forms through the intersection of two cultures across time and space. As Said mentioned, "All cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid" (Said, 29). Raj Kumar,

the protagonist at the beginning of the novel, is searching for a home in an alienated world. He is neither fully Burmese nor fully Indian; his identity is hybrid. Therefore, his identity is shaped in the space between Burmese, Indian, and British worlds. His search for identity mirrors the search for identity of Babu in Siddhartha Deb's novel.

"There are times when the only choice you have is to walk away, even when every instinct tells you otherwise. If you don't, you die."(*The Glass Palace*, p.142).

They are the colonial subjects, longing for a new identity. On the other hand, Saya Jones is also a representation of hybrid identity. His blood is the amalgamation of the Colonial royal family and the Colonized Marathi family. Both Rajkumar and Dolly are the products

of colonialism. Dolly left behind her native roots, haunted by the memories of her past life. The displacement formed her hybrid identity, as she declared to Uma, the Collector's wife:

If I went to Burma now I would be a foreigner - they would call me a Kalaa like they do Indians- a trespasser, an outsider from across the sea. I'd find that very hard I think. I'd never be able to rid myself of the idea that I would have to leave again one day, just as I had to leave before. You would understand if you knew what it was like when we left. (*The Glass Palace*, p.113)

Dolly's memory of the royal family and her existence in India create the third space, where identity transcends nationalism. The introduction of Arjun's character delineates the psychological space of a soldier. He exists between his loyalty to the colonial authority and his loyalty to his nation. A soldier must live in this psychological third space. Uma, the Collector's wife, in her search for oral histories, questions both colonial rule and the rigidity of nationalism. Her collection of stories is hybrid, an amalgamation of colonial history and emotions..

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Postcolonial literature dismantles the centralized notion of identity. Ghosh's novels intricately weave personal memory and historical trauma, reshaping the meaning of home and identity in the postcolonial world. Instead of adopting grand narratives of nation and nationalism, Ghosh highlights the micro-narratives of a family, challenging the historical narratives of the nation. Through the lenses of third space and hybridity, this study depicts the fluidity and complexity of postcolonial subjectivity. The third space in Ghosh's narrative strategy is where memory and storytelling intertwine. Through the personal struggles of characters, Ghosh's works reflect the collective struggles of the nation. The colonial power redraws artificial boundaries, displacing entire communities. Ultimately, the narrator realizes the impossibility of returning home. The location of home is not fixed, and similarly, the identity of the postcolonial character is fluid.

Hybrid identity is rooted in memory, storytelling, displacement, and cultural negotiation. In conclusion, we can say that Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace* offer powerful critiques of the constructed nature of national identity. The identity here transcends from the personal to the national.

In Ghosh's narrative world, memory becomes a tool to resist historical narratives and actively participate in the postcolonial world. The study, therefore, highlights the reimagining of the identity of the postcolonial character, which goes beyond rigid national identity. While borders are rooted in a nation's identity, a postcolonial character's identity transcends these borders.

Characters live within artificial geographical borders, where identity is created in time and space.

In this direction, the study overcomes the limitations of historical narratives of colonialism and nationalism.

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