

Nostalgia as a Critique of Nationalism in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

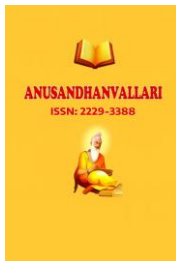
In the Indian context, postcolonial writing emerged with new themes and innovative narrative techniques and gradually asserted its presence in the English-speaking world. It foregrounded concerns such as colonial history, cultural dislocation, identity, memory, and the lasting impact of imperial power structures. Among postcolonial writers, Amitav Ghosh occupies a significant place in Indian English literature for his nuanced interrogation of memory, borders, and nationalism, often blurring the boundaries between history and fiction. His works critically examine the artificiality of political divisions and highlight the intimate ways in which personal lives are shaped by historical and national narratives. Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) engages deeply with themes of memory, borders and nationalism. Rather than presenting nationalism as a cohesive or redemptive force, the novel exposes its fragility through personal memories, familial histories, and nostalgic recollections that transcend political boundaries. Nostalgia in *The Shadow Lines* does not function as a sentimental longing for a lost past; instead, it emerges as a critical mode that reveals the emotional and ethical failures of nationalist ideology. By foregrounding memory and nostalgia, Ghosh destabilizes the idea of the nation as a fixed or natural entity and highlights the human cost of drawing political borders across shared cultural landscapes. This paper examines nostalgia in *The Shadow Lines* and analyzes how it functions as a critique of nationalism by challenging rigid territorial identities and exposing the arbitrariness of political boundaries. It explores how personal recollection undermines official histories and nationalist certainties through the narrator's inherited memories, Tridib's imaginative geography, and Tha'mma's conflicted nationalism.

Keywords: nostalgia, nationalism, memory, borders, Partition

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1989, brought significant recognition to the author both in India and abroad. The novel offers a nuanced exploration of memory, nationalism, and the arbitrary nature of political borders. Centered on two interlinked families, one English and one Bengali, the narrative unfolds against historical events such as the Partition of India, the Second World War, and the communal riots of 1963–64 in Dhaka and Calcutta. The narrative moves fluidly across time and space, reflecting the instability of historical memory and national identity.

The unnamed narrator recalls childhood memories and family stories shared with his cousin Ila and uncle Robi, revealing multiple perspectives shaped by personal experience and historical circumstance. Moving across locations such as Calcutta, Dhaka, and London, the novel challenges rigid notions of borders and fixed national identities. Through intimate family histories and fragmented recollections, Ghosh reveals how political divisions



are fragile constructs, while emotional and cultural connections remain enduring. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the invisible “shadow lines” drawn on maps cannot contain human relationships, memories or imagination.

Nostalgia, Memory and the Idea of the Nation

The past can be painful, yet it can also assume a positive form through nostalgia, which brings a mixture of pleasure and sadness derived from cherished memories. Nostalgia often involves a sentimental longing for people and places separated by time, migration, or political rupture. It fills life with meaning and facilitates the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory. In the modern era, nostalgia has moved beyond its earlier association with homesickness and acquired broader emotional and cultural significance.

Contemporary dictionaries define nostalgia as “a feeling of pleasure and also slight sadness when you think about things that happened in the past” (*Cambridge Dictionary*), or as “a sad pleasure experienced in recalling what no longer exists: a wistful or sentimental yearning for a return to or of some real or romanticized past period or some irrecoverable past condition or setting” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

Although nostalgia is often dismissed as a regressive longing for a lost past, particularly in postcolonial contexts where it may be associated with pre-national unity. Svetlana Boym’s distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia offers a more nuanced framework. Restorative nostalgia seeks to reconstruct the past as stable and authentic, frequently aligning itself with nationalist myths. Reflective nostalgia, by contrast, accepts fragmentation and uncertainty, dwelling on loss without seeking redemption or closure (Boym 49).

The Shadow Lines consistently employs reflective nostalgia. The narrator’s memories do not attempt to recover an intact pre-Partition world; instead, they return repeatedly to moments of incompleteness and emotional dissonance. Memory in the novel is recursive rather than linear, refusing to align itself with nationalist teleology. This reflective nostalgia interrogates rather than idealizes the past, revealing how historical violence continues to haunt the present. By mobilizing nostalgia in this manner, Ghosh transforms it into a mode of critique through which the nation’s claims to coherence are tested and exposed as fragile.

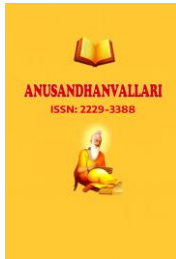
Nostalgia, Inherited Memory and the Ethics of Storytelling

In *The Shadow Lines*, nostalgia is inseparable from the act of storytelling, particularly through what may be termed ‘inherited memory’ memories transmitted across generations rather than directly experienced. The unnamed narrator’s understanding of places such as Dhaka and London is shaped less by physical travel than by stories told by others, especially Tridib. These memories, though second-hand, acquire emotional authenticity and ethical weight, demonstrating that nostalgia does not depend on personal experience alone. Instead, Ghosh suggests that memory itself is relational, produced through narrative exchange and imaginative engagement.

The narrator recollects his story to his cousin Ila and maternal uncle Jatin to make them understand the places, especially London and Dhaka. To the narrator these places emerge not from direct experience but from narratives passed down through family members especially by Tridib. When he thinks of Ila, he says:

I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one’s imagination; that her practical, bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more nor less true, only very far apart. It was not her fault that she could not understand, for as Tridib often said of her, the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all. (*Shadow Lines*, 23)

This mode of remembering highlights the constructed nature of both memory and national history. Ghosh suggests that just as memories are assembled through fragments and imagination, so too are nations imagined into being.



Storytelling in *The Shadow Lines* becomes an ethical practice because it resists closure and certainty. The narrator repeatedly revisits the same events from different perspectives, refusing to impose a single authoritative meaning on the past. This narrative structure mirrors the workings of reflective nostalgia, which, as Boym argues, “dwells on ambivalence” and acknowledges the irreversibility of loss. Through storytelling, the narrator learns that memory is not about possession or mastery but about responsibility toward the dead, the displaced and the silenced. Nostalgia here does not idealize the past; rather, it keeps alive the awareness of historical wounds that nationalism seeks to rationalize or forget. The communal violence surrounding Tridib’s death, for instance, is not absorbed into a nationalist narrative of sacrifice or martyrdom. Instead, it remains unresolved, haunting the narrator’s memory as an ethical question rather than a political explanation.

Tha’mma: Nostalgia and Nationalist Idealism

Tha’mma, the narrator’s grandmother, embodies the tension between nostalgia and nationalism. Her memories of Dhaka are saturated with longing for a lost home and a coherent past. Having grown up in a pre-Partition world, she recalls a time when Calcutta and Dhaka formed a continuous cultural space. As the narrator suggests, those who have lost their physical homes learn to survive through memory and recollection (Ghosh).

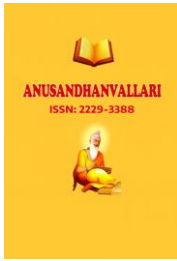
Despite her nostalgic attachment to Dhaka, Tha’mma strongly believes in nationalist ideology. She supports the necessity of borders, believing that freedom and national identity require clear demarcation. However, the novel exposes the contradictions within her thinking. When she struggles to comprehend why borders are invisible, her nostalgia clashes with her nationalist convictions. Her question, “where’s the difference then?” reveals the artificiality of national boundaries and exposes the moral contradiction between abstract political divisions and the violence enacted in their name (Ghosh 167).

Tha’mma’s nostalgia sustains and undermines nationalism. While she reveres the idea of the nation, her memories expose a world where such divisions did not exist, thereby revealing nationalism as a historically contingent construct rather than an eternal truth. Her son, the narrator’s father counters her confusion by explaining that in the modern world borders are enforced not by natural frontiers but through bureaucratic mechanisms: “The border isn’t on the frontier: it’s right inside the airport” (Ghosh 167). Ghosh thus demonstrates how nationalism operates through administrative systems rather than visible geographical markers, reinforcing the idea that borders are constructed and internalized through institutional practices.

Tridib and Reflective Nostalgia

In contrast to Tha’mma, Tridib represents a reflective and imaginative engagement with nostalgia that resists rigid nationalist thinking. He teaches the narrator to imagine places deeply, inhabiting them through stories, memories, and human relationships rather than accepting them as fixed points on a political map. Through Tridib, memory becomes a means of cultivating empathy and recognizing transnational connections. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that the narrator’s consciousness functions as a porous space that absorbs diverse experiences and reorganizes them into meaningful patterns.

The transparency of the unnamed and undescribed narrator lets different persons, events, places luminously enter his story and find new configuration there; or altering the metaphor, it is possible to see the narrator’s consciousness as porous space that absorbs other lives and other experiences until their colors leak into each other to reveal a pattern. Whichever metaphor is chosen, the narrator remains not only the large lucid reflector but also the agentive site where random shards of memory are realigned towards some measure of coherence. (*Perishable Empire*, 140)



Through Tridib's influence, nostalgia emerges as an ethical practice of remembering rather than a sentimental retreat into the past. This ethical dimension is most powerfully revealed in Tridib's death during communal violence. May's reflection "He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice... for any real sacrifice is a mystery" (Ghosh 277), frames his death as a moral act that resists nationalist justification and rational explanation.

Conclusion

In *The Shadow Lines*, nostalgia functions as a powerful critique of nationalism by exposing the emotional, ethical, and historical limitations of rigid national identities. Through characters such as the unnamed narrator, Tha'mma, and Tridib, Ghosh demonstrates that memory complicates rather than reinforces nationalist narratives. Nostalgia in the novel is not a retreat into the past but an active engagement with history that foregrounds human relationships and ethical responsibility. Ultimately, *The Shadow Lines* suggests that true belonging lies not within fixed borders but within shared memories and human connections that transcend the shadow lines drawn by nations.

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