

## Understanding Diaspora: Home and Overlapping Hyphenation in *The Shadow Lines*

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### Abstract

The idea of an imaginary homeland and the adopted country is at the heart of diasporic discourse. There is a continuous struggle on the part of the diasporas about the donor culture and the recipient culture which creates an ambivalence, separation anxiety over dislocation, as well as, an existential crisis. The apparent solution to this problem seems to lie either in shading off one's individuality as an ex-colonized and eventually becoming westernized or retaining the 'desh' in him/her while appropriating the diasporic state. However, the more they try to assimilate or acculturate themselves, the more they feel alienated from the recipient culture. Thus, they posit a "Trishanku"<sup>1</sup> position and because of their peculiar positionality, they try to transcend time and space with the wings of memory to experience the lost past which they call 'home'. This paper takes Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* into consideration and explores how different characters in this novel harbor different notions of home and how they come to terms with their hyphenated position in a transcultural space. This will be achieved through the trajectories of two of its main characters: Tha'mma and Ila. For them, the diaspora home becomes a problematic site, and there is a silent clash in their ideologies. This paper shows that it is more so because the sense of self/existence is shaped by the social relations determined by the collective history, class, race, gender and, most importantly, by culture. Thereby, the characters' concept of a home remains a prolonged paradox.

**Keywords:** diaspora, home, *The Shadow Lines*, hyphenation, Trishanku

### Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is a Kolkata-born writer who grew up in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Sri Lanka, India, and Iran and hence, has first-hand experience regarding migration. Being a diaspora himself, Ghosh can easily relate to the cultural ambiguities, otherness, and identity crisis, which are evident in most of his fiction. *The Shadow Lines* is one of his acclaimed works. The novel is set in the locale of the newly created India, East, and West Pakistan before and after the partition in 1947, and also includes Europe, particularly London. The fiction depicts the story of three generations of unnamed narrators in Calcutta and East Pakistan and their correspondence with the Price family in London. Thus, all the characters in this novel and their stories are entangled with one another which crosses the geographical and cultural terrains, and "[a]ll these stories-within-stories are united by the thread of memory as the novelist treats memory as a driving force of the narrative" (Butt, 2008, pp. 1-2). Memory is of paramount significance in this piece of work, especially for Tha'mma and Ila, as it triggers in them

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the sentiment of melancholia because diasporas have no home but in memory. This paper aims to enquire about the dilemma of a diaspora and how s/he negotiates with the varying cultural orientation s/he adopts in the process of becoming.

The word diaspora originally comes from Greek, the meaning of which is dispersed or scattered. To trace the history of diaspora, we need to go back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when the Jews were forced to leave their homeland and migrated to a different locale. Historically, then, diaspora refers to the involuntary dispersion from the original homeland, but in today's context, the term is used in a broader sense. New generation diasporas nowadays take voluntary leave from their homeland and never return. They venture to do this because of the enabling position they will have or in Akhter's (2012) term the "lure of the lucre" (p. 54). On the other hand, "the older diasporas who were forced to leave their motherland permanently, home becomes for them a sacred site or symbol, almost like an idol of memory and imagination" (Akhter, 2012, p. 58). But voluntary or forced, whatever the process is, a diaspora, always carries with him/her a sense of displacement- as paradoxical as it may be. If we consider *The Shadow Lines*, two of its central characters, Tha'mma and Ila, are representatives of the first and second generation diasporas. They also tend to vacillate in the post-migration world, making 'home' (hypothetically) with cultural/political allegiance as an endeavor to belong somewhere.

### **The Ambivalence of a Diaspora**

Tha'mma, as a refugee, has witnessed both the colonial and postcolonial periods. Her association with Dhaka, East Pakistan, is through her birth and later on, she has to migrate to Calcutta because of her Hindu origin. As a diasporan who has been separated from her birthplace by a history of bloodshed and lines on a map, Tha'mma loses her grammatical coordinates as she thinks of 'home'. In her confusion, instead of saying that she would go home to Dhaka, she says that she would "come home to Dhaka" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 152). The narrator laughs at this ungrammatical expression and makes fun of her. But for Tha'mma, this is not just a slip of tongue. She means it because earlier in the past, coming or going to/from Dhaka used to be smooth. Thus her phraseology for movement is ambiguous. The place which used to be her home becomes space now and for this reason, she cannot grasp the discrepancy between the words coming or going. Because of her hyphenated condition, she has been "caught between memory and nationality, between belonging and citizenship, the certainties of the language of differentiation and distantiation slide away from her" (Kaul, 1998, p. 280).

As a diasporic individual, Tha'mma has to undergo triple alienation; first from her native land, next from the adopted homeland, and third from the foreignness that is upon the native land while she has been away. This is the reason why when she goes back to Dhaka to rescue her uncle, the first thing she utters landing in Dhaka is: "where's Dhaka?" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 194). The Dhaka she is looking for is long gone; what remains is the residue of it in her memory. Even Tridib teases her saying "You are a foreigner now, you are as a foreigner as May- much more than May, for look at her she doesn't need a visa to come here" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 194). Her neat and orderly mind seems momentarily unable to understand "how her place of birth had come to be so messily at

odds with her nationality” (Kaul, 1998, p. 280). These words illustrate her pain. The place where she has spent her childhood, her adulthood, which is her birthplace, the essence of which is so entwined with her existence, becomes foreign now. She now cannot call this place her home. Her home resides only in her memory and the Dhaka that surrounded her family house once, that hometown now exists only in the stories she tells her grandson, and in his ability to see the house and its lane. The narrator said “People like my grandmother, who have no home but in memory, learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection” (Ghosh, 1988, p. 194).

### **Myth of Nationalism: the Trauma of Partition**

One of the chief stunts played by the British colonizers during the British Raj in India was to divide and rule and unfortunately, they were successful in instilling the idea that birthright can be nullified if your religious affiliations are different. The whole act of creating new nation-states like India and Pakistan stands on a false premise where people tend to see one another in Eric Hobsbawm’s (1996) terms as “Us” vs “Them” and Tha’mma supports this concept. However, initially, she does not feel blinded by the myth of nationalism. In Colonial India, she takes pride in the unification of people irrespective of their class, creed, and religion against a common enemy, namely, the British in the Swadeshi Movement. She rejects the ideology and goes so far as to be a part of that movement, though the then patriarchy does not allow her to do so. Nonetheless, she is willing to go through any ordeals to breathe in the free air and to detach the bondage of slavery. This sentiment lights in her the urge to become an activist, an accomplice of such a glorious deed, the battle for freedom. She will do anything for the terrorists; she can run errands, can cook for them and if needed she will willingly participate in assassinating anyone. She says to her grandchild, reminiscing her college days, “I would have killed him. It was for our freedom. I would have done anything to be free” (Ghosh, 1988, p. 39). But her militant nationalistic mindset kicks off after Tridib loses his life in the communal riots in Dhaka. She starts to see her birthplace and the people who belong to it, as threatening, as “Them” and feels morally obligated to defend her country from the so-called “Them”. Time and again she emphasizes that the sovereignty of a nation-state can only be safeguarded by legitimately fighting the enemies, in other words, by war. This is more so because “Partition’s failure to provide a proper foundation for the new nation drives Tha’mma’s continued demand that the nation’s boundaries must be drawn in blood” (Peeters, 2008, p. 32). People like her always put their faiths in “collective identity” (Melucci, 1989, p. 30) as if they had no choice but to select one since they are victims of partition. And she chooses her affiliation with the Hindus (Indians) because of their same religious affiliations. Thus, she pledges to protect her own “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006, p. 7) and advocates war against those who attempt to disrupt the peace and harmony of that community. This is justified for a diaspora, or to be more appropriate, for a refugee. She is haunted by the fact that she might lose the region that she is calling home now, or she might be forcefully ousted from it if her origin of birth (her being a refugee) is disclosed. Where will she go then? When will this endless struggle for belonging cease? To her, the answer lies in properly fighting the enemies, “to kill them before they kill us. We have to wipe them out” (Ghosh, 1988, p. 237). Thus,

when the Indo-China war breaks out, she sacrifices her beloved gold chain, the last memento from her deceased husband, as a donation in the war. When the narrator asks why she did it, she screams: "I gave it away. I gave it to the fund for the war. I had to, don't you see? For your sake; for your freedom" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 237).

### **Immigrant versus Expatriate**

Mukherjee (2012) makes a distinction between immigrants and expatriates and says, "Expatriates are those who have cultural retentiveness and they try to recreate the experience they have left behind. As per the immigrants are concerned they transform and remake themselves in the host culture" (as cited in Akhter 2012, p. 59). Tha'mma as an expatriate is highly critical of anyone who breaks the familial, moral, or cultural protocol. Tha'mma cannot comprehend why, being a native, Shaheb acts like a European. The job allows him to be amid foreigners, does that mean he will simply forget his roots? How is he related to those countries? Not only does she question Shaheb but also asks about Ila's transformation as an immigrant. Ila's short hair and her modern wardrobes are not appreciated by Tha'mma. She outright slut-shames her because she fails to understand that as a second-generation diaspora, Ila learns and relearns the cultural traits to blend in with the new world (host country) and becomes "Janus-faced" (Akhter, 2012, p. 61) engaged in a cyclical battle of confirming homogeneity. But it is difficult for Tha'mma to comprehend this situation as she is from a different era and with a different mindset. Tha'mma does not like to lose her 'self' no matter where she is. As a first-generation diaspora, she loves to retain the 'desh' in her, but Ila with her diaspora background tries to imitate the foreign culture to be one of them. As there is a generational gap between them, their opinions clash. In Akhter's (2012) words:

Although the wealth and education of the West is admired, western culture is not seen as desirable, especially the first generation diaspora believes the West to be plagued by sexual immorality, alcoholism, divorce, the lack of familial stability and so on. The first generation wants the next generation to have similar emotional attachments that they have. (p. 68)

On this ground, Tha'mma severely criticizes Ila's decision to live in London. This is rather paradoxical because Tha'mma is a matriarch who resists the patriarchy and challenges the traditional role of a woman. She never bows down to society as a caregiver, by choosing to remain a widow, refusing any monetary help from her affluent relations, and taking up a job to raise her child single-handedly. How can then she not honor Ila's decision to live in London when she is the one who has broken all the stereotypes. She misconstrues Ila and thinks that "It's not freedom she wants, she wants to be left alone to do what she pleases: that's all that any whore would want. She'll find it easily enough over there; that's what those places have to offer. But that is not what it means to be free" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 89). Though both of them want to be free, their definition of freedom differs from each other because people like Tha'mma had to fight for freedom. They had to pay a price, not money but lives; the sacrifice of the martyrs. On the contrary, Ila's liberty can be bought for the price of an air ticket. Is Tha'mma jealous of Ila's mobility the luxury to go anywhere at any time? The answer is no.

Tha'mma's insecurity arises from the fact that Ila's movement is voluntary, and she can choose to be free without losing anything. Freedom, like a dish, is served on her plate, but on the other hand, she has to sacrifice her 'home' to be free.

### **The Homing Desire**

Roy (2012) says, "traditionally the home has served as the site of origin, as a source for a nostalgic understanding of the continuities of private and public self and a place for recovering or maintaining the stability of this self" (as cited in Akhter 2012, p. 63). Tha'mma for a long time does not mourn for her lost 'home' because according to her, nostalgia is a weakness and one needs to forget the past and move on. Tha'mma, being a Hindu, so far thinks that she is at home in Calcutta as all of them share the same culture. However, her diasporic self does search for the lost home once she is retired from her job. She feels empty in her life and it appears that she starts searching her memory to bridge the void. She takes up a new habit of visiting the park where she can meet people like her, a refugee. Whenever she finds someone who is from Dhaka, she remembers the past and passionately talks about her home. To her son's question, she answers "The past is what we talk about" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 127). By the simple act of sharing or talking about the home, she gets the opportunity to live those moments again. Her homing desire takes her to Dhaka, but her homecoming was not blissful. A tragic incident happens in the form of Tridib's murder by the religious fundamentalists which puts her into a dilemma. She questions her affiliation with Dhaka as her birthplace because now it belongs to people who are different from her culturally. She starts seeing the Muslims as "Them" who are the murderers of Tridib, the enemy of the Hindu, and thus need to be terminated. Since then, going back home has never been easy for her. Reminiscence, then, is the only tool to experience home, or by talking about it, which in a way works like a therapeutic drug and a sense of satisfaction and peace comes over her.

On the contrary, the homing desire is something less experienced by Ila as a second-generation diaspora. But Ila has what Rushdie mentions in his book *Imaginary Homelands* (2010), an imaginary home, as diasporas have no true home in that sense. Peeters (2008) rightly marks that, to Ila "all of India is the unified space of a uniformed Hindu culture that she finds oppressive and constricting" (p. 33). The bitter experience in the past makes it all the more troublesome for her to have any feelings for home *per se*. She considers herself a cosmopolitan to whom the whole world is home. For Ila, home becomes unreal "just a space of imagination rather than of nostalgic recollection, not a place to return to, but a place to fantasize about, or maybe to visit sometime as a guest or a tourist" (Akhter, 2012, p. 67).

### **Double Exclusion: Overlapping Hyphenation**

Ila's struggle to fit in the box in Calcutta truly showcases any diaspora's constant battle to assert their conformity. Her mere proposal of visiting a nightclub is shunned by Robi, a true chauvinist who ultimately cannot but give his nod. In the club when Ila wants to dance, Robi prohibits her from dancing, but disregarding Robi, Ila approaches two strangers and starts dancing with them. Ila's behavior seems inappropriate to Robi and he asks her to behave as she is in India now. Ila feels flabbergasted as she realizes she does

not belong here and shouts at the narrator saying “Do you see now why I have chosen to live in London. It’s only because I want to be free. Free of you, free of your bloody culture, free of all of you” (Ghosh, 1988, p. 88). She wants to liberate herself from these biased promptings of patriarchy and her far cry echoes her Trishanku condition because, like him, Ila shuttled between two contending culture, having accepted in neither one and thus doubly excluded.

Melville (1988) suggests Ila is “the mere untraveled [wo]man” who lacks “memory and imagination” (as cited in Kaul 1998, p. 306). She fails to understand the curious nature of the narrator about a place. She takes things as they are because “The inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she lived in many places she had never traveled at all” (Ghosh, 1988, p.21). She hardly romanticizes any place or sees them with a tinge of imagination. In every place she feels like an outsider. No one makes her feel at home in those places. That is why she cannot comprehend what enchantment there is to be excited about. No matter what happens, no matter what new dimension she gives to those places, things and memories, she will always be the exotica from the orient. This is evident in the school yearbook which she shows to the narrator. She manages to explain the party and the photos but, surprisingly, in the yearbook she does not have a single or group photo. She is bullied by her classmates as she looks different from them, talks in a different accent, and has a different religion and culture. Therefore, she has some unpleasant experiences at school. Even Nick, her so-called ally, deserts and ignores her instead of saving her from bullying because he does not want to be seen with an exotic girl like Ila lest he should be the laughing stock in his friend circle. It indicates how she has been the victim of racism and how her schoolmates treat her like an ‘other’. These make her heartache and she feels to the core that she is an outsider. Though her diasporic position allows her to be in a developed country and a privileged school, she fails to be one of them.

However, in an attempt to belong somewhere temporarily, Ila plays a house game with the narrator in her grandmother’s house as a defense mechanism to feel at home, at least somewhere, though playfully. In that playhouse, there has to be a baby with pink cheeks, blue eyes, golden hair, and most importantly, a white complexion. This beauty standard, which she attributes to her doll/baby, somehow echoes what Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison’s (1970) *The Bluest Eye* wants to have. Both of them want to change people’s gaze, change the way they are treated; to be less othered. This truly reflects her inner desire to fit in that criterion to be called beautiful (look like a white girl) because from the bitter past, it is imprinted in her head that she has to look like the Whites to get the license to live amidst them without facing racism. From this unfulfilled desire, later she is seen sharing a flat with some politically active people and she finances their expenses with her well-to-do father’s money so that with that political affiliation she can form an allegiance. But the question is: can anyone forge an identity with such attachment? The truth is, no matter what, a diaspora will always have to carry the tag of a diaspora, the curse/blessing of having a double identity.

### **Misconception about History: the Eurocentric View**

The diasporic canon generates new myths and significance. The space inhabited by the diasporas is never one’s true space. They have to go through turbulent negotiation, which

is overwhelmingly contradictory regarding their ethnicity, nationality, and glorious past. Ila, a second-generation diasporan, lacks the sentiment coupled with the word home, and hence about its history. Hearing the tale of Nick's uncle Alan's living conditions in Brick Lane during the war she jumped to the conclusion that her present accommodation with a bunch of politically active people in Stockwell is similar to that of Alan. She has a misconception that being partially attached to a movement or just second-hand knowledge will suffice to be part of a historical movement or an activist of that movement. When the narrator confronts her about her comment she says:

There's a joy merely knowing that you are part of a history. That's why there is a kind of heroism even in their pointless deaths. You wouldn't understand the exhilaration of events like that. Nothing really important ever happens where you are. There are famines riots but those are local things after all; not like revolutions or anti-fascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that's really remembered. (Ghosh, 1988, p. 104)

This blunt remark exhibits her detachment and reveals her ignorance about her country's rich historical heritage. She thinks people take part in any movement and sacrifice their lives only to be remembered and want to be part of history. She surmises that there is glory in it. But she fails to understand that there is something called patriotism, which forces people to sacrifice their lives. Those people become martyrs not to be remembered or to be a part of that great movement, rather they do it solely for their country. For Ila, this is inconceivable as her diasporic position requires her to give undivided attention to the host country and culture. As a result, she turns a blind eye to her own country's history translating her 'self' and that is how a cleft happens between her Indian and London selves.

### **The Institution of Marriage: Illusion/Reality**

The diasporas lived in stories because "stories are all there are to live in, it was just a question of which one you chose" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 182). And Ila has not chosen a good one for herself. Her relationship with Nick is based on illusion from the very beginning. She is well aware of Nick's temperament. From his abandonment of Ila, to being harassed by the bullies, to the incident of his being kicked out by the company for embezzlement, and lastly his extra-marital affairs, she knows it all. Rather than approaching her husband, she shares the matter first with the narrator, which shows the communication gap and lack of marital bliss in their conjugal life. What is more interesting here is that when the narrator advises her to leave her husband she negates it saying that she loves him way too much to leave him. And when finally she confronts her husband about the infidelity and is assured about it, she does not take any steps. Instead, she says to the narrator, "he likes a bit of variety; it's his way of travelling" (Ghosh, 1988, p. 188). Can we call it masochism or does she have any other motive? It feels like she is voluntarily annulling her last attempt to claim her right to be an insider. After all, Nick is a White man and being his wife might remove her label of rootlessness, and she might become the shadow of an accident if she remains in this marriage. It shows how desperate a diasporan like Ila has to be, to prove her loyalty and to have a singular identity.

## Conclusion

Divide and rule was a special scheme deployed by the British during the British Raj in India to create disharmony between the Hindus and the Muslims and it is still prevalent in this postmodern, postcolonial world. Xenophobic people discriminate between the majority and the minorities. Despite being tied to a country by birth or descent, despite having voting rights and paying taxes, anyone having a different culture/ religion will be defined either as a Black, an Asian, or specifically a diasporic 'other' figure. This imposed reclusion makes those diasporas alienated in the assumed 'home' and at the same time, they are already isolated from their original home because of their diasporic status. This battle of belonging or non-belonging is a constant fight fought by the diasporas. For some people it is extreme, and for some, it is not so extreme. Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* portrays this type of ambivalence by mirroring two characters Tha'mma and Ila. He draws a parallelism between these two and tries to make sense of their tumultuous search for 'self', their nomadic existence as diasporas, and further illustrates how their selves are molded into their national selves. Tha'mma, as a first-generation diasporan, sought refuge in the euphoria of nationalism and valorized war so that the bordered area she is calling home cannot be invaded by enemies. Also, her being a Hindu can give her assurance that she belongs somewhere. Similarly, Ila with her voluntary decision to lead a diasporic life, time and again, goes through tests to prove that she is one of them, the Whites. She cuts ties with her birthplace because of its regressive nature, marries an English man, and decides to live in that hellish, toxic marriage, only to resolve her identity crisis. Tha'mma's loss of her physical home (Dhaka) and Ila's loss of her cultural home (Calcutta) subvert their claims that they are not dislocated beings or outsiders. In fact, they really are. And henceforth, they try to cope with their overlapping hyphenations and multiple dislocations through an imaginary homeland anchored in the nostalgic past.

## Endnote

1. A Hindu mythical king who wanted to go to heaven in his mortal state but was denied entrance because he was not dead and at the same time he was not accepted in the earth because he left it while he was alive and came back in the same body. For details see Wikipedia Contributors.(2023, January 29). Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trishanku>

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