

The Shadow Lines

A Journey Without through Within

I wouldn't call this book breath-taking in spite of the rigorous movements and the somewhat roughened texture of its plot. No, *The Shadow Lines* is 'catharsis' personified. It leaves the readers feeling utterly spent but satiated. As we begin reading we find no exposition, only to realize in the end that the entire novel has served as a back story to illustrate the conclusion. All the haphazard pieces fall right in place and the picture is complete.

The Shadow Lines was first published in 1988 which was a turbulent time owing to the assassination of the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. This novel with its description of violence and manslaughter spread over three countries blended with the atmosphere. Calcutta and Dhaka embroiled in communal riots, Swadeshi movement in the backdrop, followed by witnessing the timeless ruination by the Second World War, screams out the pathetic state of man in the midst of the attempts towards equilibrium of powers.

A nameless narrator recounts the events which took place in Calcutta, Dhaka and London over the course of almost two decades. He speaks as a direct witness and also from memory of the stories (with and without credence) that he has collected since childhood. Two characters who influence him throughout are Tridib, the second son of his father's aunt, who inspires all his imagination of faraway countries, and Ila, his beautiful, anglicized cousin, with whom he is hopelessly in love. He can identify the streets (at times lanes) and shops in London, by the sheer power of retention, which baffles his acquaintances.

His grandmother's growing up years are etched as clearly in his mind as though he were a direct spectator of the events. The grandmother, on her part, is not a stock but a Spartan figure—in the sense of austerity—who is the representative of the discords that uprooting caused. Our generation, those with a pedigree from East Bengal, can relate her with the struggle of our grandparents who had to move here with next to nothing. The episode of their voyage to Dhaka has a sinister feel from the beginning; the numerous disagreements, the breakout of the mutiny, everything in culmination prepares the reader for the climactic twist in the end.

The title *Shadow Lines*, is apt because the lines are essentially a recollection, hence casting a shadow on everyone they speak of. Ghosh's proficiency lies in his ability to talk of tragic occurrences in a dialogic exchange that is witty and humorous. It has the effect of cushioning the blow. The end is not one which gives us a romantic union or offers retribution for the sins committed. It shows the narrator leaving from London to Calcutta, undeniably more matured than when he had arrived. In my opinion, the most potent point if this book is pointing out the inherent similarity of destruction war can cause, whatever be the magnitude. Ironically this is the undercurrent that gives the novel, its desired pace and stability.