Excavating Memories and Unlayering History: The Archaeological Narrative in Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines

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In Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines, the narrator revisits his memories and oscillates between past and present, between secrets and revelations, so that the reader may feel that s/he is being taken on a dig. This paper will expose the layers in the writing by looking at it from the narrative point of view to expose how memories appear in strata, and how different voices are juxtaposed. It will also analyze other forms of textual stratification.

Images of archaeology and excavation recur throughout Amitav Ghosh’s writing. In his second novel The Shadow Lines (1988), Tridib, the narrator’s uncle and mentor, is an archaeologist. From this detail stems a particular form of narrative. The reader follows the inner journey of a narrator who tries to come to terms with his traumatic memories by exploring his familial past, through which historical events are filtered. At the core of the novel, secret childhood wounds meet the trauma of the Partition of India and Pakistan. The opening chapters of each part of the novel provide the reader with two dates: 1939 and 1962. The narrative is thus framed by the Second World War and the East Pakistan Civil War which led to the independence of Bangladesh. Social unrest and violence thus delineate the backdrop of the story.

Historical retrieval is a key parameter of post-colonial writing. Drawing a parallel between the microcosmic and the macrocosmic levels of society, such fictions claim back memories in order to write History. Re-placing the individual at the centre of a wider stage and shifting from the nation to the family, Ghosh’s writing shows similarities with Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, or Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things, for example. His narrator tries to draw together the fragments that will help him locate the whole picture of his own story within the frame of the collective memory of his community. He thus goes back to the riots that shook Calcutta in 1964, when he was still a child. After a sacred relic was stolen in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the religious tensions heightened, and while attacks against Muslims were reported in Calcutta, anti-Hindu riots broke out in East Pakistan. In this context of national instability, Ghosh describes fragmented beings who remind us of his own expatriate position, and makes the post-modern and the post-colonial intersect. As Brinda Bose puts it, “Ghosh seems to be constantly in search of that elusive epiphanic moment in which individuals may come to terms with their histories.”

1. Elsewhere in this volume, John Thieme draws illuminating parallels between Ghosh and Ondaatje, observing that these archaeological tropes occur systematically from The Hungry Tide to Anil’s Ghost, from which he quotes: “A good archaeologist can read a bucket of soil as if it were a complex historical novel.” (Ondaatje, Anil’s Ghost, London: Bloomsbury, 2000: 151.) [Editor’s Note].
2. Page references to Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines in this paper will be preceded with the abbreviation SL.
3. Of all Ghosh’s novels, The Shadow Lines is the most autobiographical. Although it is a fictional autobiography, it bears undeniable traces of the author’s own life. In his essay entitled The Greatest Sorrow, Ghosh links the year 1964 to a personal event. One night that year, his house in Dhaka “was besieged by an angry mob” (Ghosh, Incendiary Circumstances 46). In 1984, he took part in demonstrations against the violence in Punjab, and from then on was haunted by the violence he witnessed as a child and as a demonstrator. The Shadow Lines was then written in an effort of recollection, with Ghosh going “to libraries and sift[ing] through hundreds of newspapers” (Ghosh, Incendiary Circumstances 46).
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Thus the lines of the title are as much the borders which divided peoples and families after the Partition, as the traces left by time in people’s lives. The narrator examines these traces in order to make sense of a shadowy past and to have a better understanding of his present, and of his presence in the world. How does Amitav Ghosh transform a personal quest into the elucidation of a nation’s History?

The two parts of the novel, “Going Away” and “Coming Home,” give the narrative its pattern. The narrator is in between two countries, but he also oscillates between past and present, secrets and revelations. Reading this novel may consequently be compared to joining an archaeological excavation, the layers of which this paper aims to expose. First, memories appear in strata, giving a vertical quality to time. Past and present are juxtaposed so that the reader is taken into a maze in which memories emerge randomly. On the other hand, with the time strata, different voices can be heard. The novel can be read in the manner of a polyphonic web in which language is stratified into social idioms and individual voices (Bakhtin 90). Many different characters add their own voices to the narrator’s, and sometimes it is the narrator who adopts their perspective. This proliferation of viewpoints allows repressed feelings and memories to break through. The untold is in fact now told several times, shaping History as it is perceived by individuals. After analyzing the sedimentation of time and the intricacy of voices, this paper will examine what can be found beneath the text.

Digging up the truth

The plot revolves around an unnamed self-conscious narrator who sets out to investigate his familial past, trying to unearth the truth and meaning of his life. His investigations lead him to question a time before he was even born. Adopting a detective’s posture, he repeatedly asks his relatives to tell him anecdotes, and confronts his memories with them. So the narrative appears as a litany of “I remember” and “I cannot remember,” and the reader follows the narrator on his pilgrimage into the family past. All the descriptions are undertaken with an almost religious devotion and memories are recollected in minute detail. The narrator looks for the essence of things past, which prompts one to focus on the feeling of nostalgia that pervades the novel. As Th’amma, the narrator’s grandmother remarks, “The past is what we talk about.” (SL 125) Her case is revealing of the tendency of most of the characters to look back. Throughout the novel, she seems to be anchored in her revolutionary youth. She was so fascinated by the terrorists that when she was young she used to dream of the one who was arrested in her class. The passionate young woman who “would have done anything to be free” (SL 39), turns into the bemused old matriarch who wants “to donate [her blood] to the war fund” (SL 232).

Simultaneously, the fact that the narrator remains unnamed crystallizes one of the main issues raised by the narrative, that is to say identity. The anonymity of the narrator sharply contrasts with the many details he gives about his family. To a certain extent, the “shadow lines” refer to the uncertain parts of his identity that he attempts to delineate. The fact that he dwells on the presentation of the other characters conjures up the idea of a stratified identity which is illustrated by the description of his grandmother’s house:

It was a very odd house. It had evolved slowly, growing like a honeycomb, with every generation of Boses adding layers and extensions, until it was like a huge, lop-sided step-pyramid, inhabited by so many branches of the family that even the most knowledgeable amongst them had become a little confused about their relationship. (SL 119)
The narrator peels away the layers of his identity, positioning himself as an archaeologist of the self. The motif of excavation is also developed in relation to the image of the cellar, which is where most of the narrator’s childhood memories stem from. The underground is associated with the underworld and is peopled with “looming shrouded shapes” (SL 47). This dark place may be seen as a metaphor for the mind. The dust on the objects in the cellar stands for time passing, and for the blur that envelops buried feelings and memories. The image of going down to the cellar mirrors the narrator’s own exploration of his subconscious. The cellar stands for a place of transformation and symbolic death, for that is where the narrator understands that his love for Ila has no future: “I knew that a part of my life had ceased; that I no longer existed, but as a chronicle.” (SL 110)

The narrator seems haunted by this impossible love. Yet despite the weight of memories, the way he uses his imagination to re-enact the past suggests that memories serve another purpose. Even though the narrative is imbued with nostalgia, the narrator seems to have what Edouard Glissant defined as “a prophetic vision of the past”: “Le passé ne doit pas seulement être recomposé de manière objective (ou même de manière subjective) par l’historien, il doit aussi être rêvé de manière prophétique, pour les gens, les communautés et les cultures dont le passé, justement, a été occulté.” (Glissant 86) Most of Ghosh’s characters are “dust-counters” who “want to load their dirt with their own meaning” (Ghosh, The Calcutta Chromosome 17). Here, the narrator is not an historian, but he tries to write his own history. His vision of the past is transformed by feelings, as evidenced by expressions such as “I like to think…” or “I decided that…” He dreams his past to try and imbue it with meaning. Ghosh thus situates himself among those writers who are “haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim” (Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands 10).

By projecting meaning onto the present, the narrator contemplates the past, and actual pictures help him to reconstitute the story, so that the novel takes the form of a gallery of snapshots. The narration is marked by many visual details and descriptive pauses. For example, when he visits Mrs Price, the English friend of his aunt’s, the narrator stops unravelling the plot for several pages while he describes her family pictures and brings another London back to life. Such a succession of images of the past gives the narrative a rhapsodic quality. Furthermore, the diegesis is constantly interrupted by a description or a comment on a picture. Many cinematic effects punctuate the story, quickening its pace, such as when May relates Tridib’s death, or achieving a freeze-frame effect, as in the following scene, when the narrator is in a bar: “The singer dropped her microphone and the band froze into a silvery tableau under the spotlight. There was a moment of complete silence. Then, like a reel of film coming unstuck, everyone sprang to life, and a crowd of waiters surrounded us.” (SL 86)

The rhythm of the narrative is irregular and the point of view constantly shifting. While the narrator often explores his own memories, he also looks at the world and at the past through other people’s eyes. Thus, even though he has never been to Dhaka, he acquires a glimpse of the city thanks to his grandmother’s testimony: “I tried to see Dhaka as she must have seen it that night.” (SL 190) From Robi, he learns that where they stayed “was a good house to be thirteen in” (SL 191). He knows the city as well as if he had visited it because he assembles impressions. Ghosh defends a memory of the imagination, a palimps-

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4. “The past not only needs to be objectively (or even subjectively) reconstituted by historians, it also has to be dreamt as a prophecy for the people, communities and cultures whose past has, in fact, been overlooked.” (my translation)
esthetic memory in which realities are superimposed. The narrator’s mind may be described, in Thomas De Quincey’s words, as a “natural and mighty palimpsest” (De Quincey 144) on which his family’s memories are imprinted. He also acknowledges his grandmother’s influence: “She had talked to me often about that house and that lane. I could see them myself, though only in patches, for her memory had shone upon them with the interrupted brilliance of a lighthouse beam.” (SL 190) So the narrative discloses a kaleidoscope of memories with shifting angles, which echo the memories suggested by the recurring image of the mirror.

The reader perceives the story through patches which conjure up the image of a distorted chronology. The narrator throws into relief the fact that Ila, his cousin, only lives in the present: “For Ila the current was real: it was as though she lived in a present which was like an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of the past and the future steel floodgates.” (SL 30) Yet right from the beginning, the reader understands that the boundaries between the past and the present are porous. Two time-lines are interwoven. The first starts in the opening chapter, in 1939, thirteen years before the narrator’s birth, and provides a counterpoint to the second timeline, which starts at the beginning of the second part of the novel, in 1962. Even though the characters are doomed to be caught in the maelsrom of History, the novel is not grounded in objective temporality; on the contrary, it resists chronology. Past the opening section of each part, only a few more dates are given, and the other temporal clues are scattered through the text. The narrator shifts from 1939 to 1959, and then from 1940 to 1962. Yet what appears to the reader as an alternating pattern vanishes as the narrative progresses. And towards the end of the novel, dates radiate from the year 1964.

What is more, the novel presents a complex structure of embedded destinies. The reader follows the stories of two sisters, Mayadebi and Th’amma, the narrator’s grandmother. This duality is echoed by several other dichotomies, but what needs to be underlined is the interstitial space in which the narrator stands, both coming and going, both in the past and the present. What we have here is a key feature of retrospective narration, which is enhanced by Homi Bhabha’s theory of a “Third Space.” The narrator is in-between different times, and in-between different cultures, occupying a privileged position from which to unravel the stories of his family. In the background of the main plot, which stages the narrator’s life in London, the reader can see Tridib falling in love with May, and within that subplot is the story of the grandmother. The characters are enmeshed in such a web of connections that our reading is subject to delayed understanding. Memories emerge randomly in the fabric of the text, defining an aesthetic of wandering which is also epitomized by the narrator’s walks in London.

The distortion of time underscores the power of subjectivity in the choice of anecdotes. In a very Proustian way, memories are prompted by feelings and sharpened by sensations. The narrator thus vividly remembers a dress Ila was wearing:

But I do remember. I can see her in it. I can still hear the starch that Lizzie-missy had washed it in, I can see the creases left by her iron, I can feel the gauzy texture of the cloth, I can smell the faint milky smell of the baby’s talcum powder that Lizzie-missy has poured over her, I can even see the patch of white it has left on her neck and the two rivulets of sweat that have wound their way through it. (SL 43)

Places and the imprint left by people fuel the process of remembrance. From the archaeology of the self derives a form of geography of the self. The narrator uses his sen-
sations to map his memories, and so to revive the past. As Gaston Bachelard points out: “Dans ses mille alvéoles, l’espace tient du temps comprimé. L’espace sert à ça.” (Bachelard 27) The narrator is irresistibly attracted by a faraway place, travelling in his mind. Unlike Ila who does travel but is not moved by the places she visits, the narrator feels conscious of the uniqueness of a place. His wanderings in the streets of London awaken the past, causing an old London to emerge. What is more, the temporal discontinuity which reflects the fragmented memory of the narrator finds an echo in the image of fragmented countries. London is not described as a whole city. The narrator knows the place better than a local, or so it seems, but he knows the map by heart, the A-to-Z streets atlas, and more precisely its “page 43, square 2” (SL 57). With the motif of the map, Ghosh initiates a questioning about borders. Later on in the novel, the narrator traces circles on Tridib’s old atlas and ponders lines and distances. The borders erected by governments endanger the characters’ identities, as shown by the confusion of Th’amma when she has to fill in Dhaka as her place of birth: “She had not been able quite to understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality.” (SL 149) The self is as fragmented as space and memories, and because space also defines identity, the narrator has to take into account both personal and national experiences. Retracing Tridib’s steps in London, the narrator confronts his own past, and is at a loss for words.

“A struggle with silence”

Memories are repressed, and the traumatic past of the characters seems to have crystallized in their minds. Time stopped for almost all of them on 2 January 1964—the day before the trip to Dhaka—and they are trapped in their past, with the fears they used to have as children. Robi thus relates how, fifteen years after the tragedy of Tridib’s death, he still has nightmares. “I’ve never been able to rid myself of that dream, he said. Ever since it first happened. When I was a child I used to pray that it would go away. […] I would have given anything to be free of that memory.” (SL 241) Robi is a prisoner of his own mind. As for the narrator, he was forced into adulthood when his father blackmailed him into silence, having him promise not to mention Tridib’s death: “Listen: you have to promise me something. Remember you’re holding Ma Kali’s flowers in your hands, so you can’t ever go back on your word. Promise me that you’ll never talk about this anywhere […] [T]here are things grown-ups don’t talk about.” (SL 234) Haunted by his childhood self, the narrator relies on a double narration. He and Robi are children frozen in time, “children of a free state together, clinging” (SL 242).

As the narrator’s life is weighed down by a family secret, a haunting rhythm emanates from the narrative. Just like Robi who has the same nightmare over and over, and like May who ritualises her everyday life around fasting, he keeps going back to the same motifs. The text is interspersed with images of mirrors and cellars. For instance, when the narrator talks to May about Tridib, they are in a café, sitting near a mirror, and May keeps looking at it. It becomes a place for the revelation, or the reflection of the truth. This image of confronting the past while confronting yourself paves the way for the narrator’s conclusion that the borders of the Partition are a “looking-glass border” (SL 228). The narrator uses the text as an echo chamber where sentences such as “sitting with me under that table in Raijabar” or “the day before they left for Dhaka” resonate. Moreover, the same anecdotes are often told.

5. “Space contains compressed time in its thousands of alveoli. That is what space is for.” (my translation)
by different characters. These repetitions reinforce the idea that the characters linger on the past, unable to free themselves of their memories. Ghosh lays the stress on the weight of heritage, illustrating the post-colonial preoccupation with the collective construction of the self, “using history as a tool by which we can begin to make sense of—or at least come to terms with—our troubling present” (Bose 16).

The narrator always postpones the moment of revelation. Tridib’s death is not mentioned at all in the first part of the novel, and does not appear until the very end of the second part. The narrator explains that when he accidentally found out about Tridib’s murder, he was given a tranquilizer. “In a moment I shut my eyes and I forgot.” (SL 233) In a way, the glow of the tranquilizer pervades the text too. The narrative contains a mystery to be unveiled and the narrator embarks on a hermeneutic journey. The silence over Tridib’s death, which is the major event in the family story, creates a narrative gap. The same applies to Partition: the word is avoided and only appears trivially. “And then, in 1947, came Partition, and Dhaka became the capital of East Pakistan.” (SL 123) The narrative is marked by such signs of hesitation, with the narrator faltering and holding back. Scattered throughout the text are blanks, ellipses and omissions. The gaps between certain paragraphs reveal pauses, a drawing of breath as the narrator struggles to disclose the truth. The episode of the newspapers illustrates this aesthetic of the gap. The narrator looks up the newspaper files for 1964 and finds it difficult to dig up an article about the riots in Calcutta. He later realises that in the Calcutta papers, there was no hint at the trouble in East Pakistan either. Ghosh thus illustrates the fact that collective memory tends to overlook the local in History. Ila’s comment is also revealing in this regard:

Well of course there are famines and riots and disasters, she said. But those are local things, after all—not like revolutions or anti-fascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, that’s really remembered. She seemed immeasurably distant then, in her serene confidence in the centrality and eloquence of her experience, in her quiet pity for the pettiness of lives like mine, lived out in the silence of voiceless events in a backward world. (SL 102)

Ghosh tries to give a “voice to the voiceless,” to use Rushdie’s words (Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands 115). Writing is experienced by the narrator as a cathartic struggle to express his voice: “Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence. It is a struggle I am destined to lose—have already lost—for even after all these years I do not know where within me, in which corner of my world, this silence lies.” (SL 213) As the story unfolds, the narrator gets nearer a revelation but only through detours. He knows he has already lost his struggle, and yet the stories he tells are extremely revealing about what is not directly mentioned. At first, since he cannot speak about Tridib’s death, he relates it “at second hand” (SL 223), relying on the version given by the press. This official version is given details thanks to Robi’s account, and thanks to May’s final version. All these different versions enable the narrator to approach the event more closely.

Simultaneously, the narrator seems to rehearse History on the family stage. The Bose family may be seen as a microcosm of society. Its members are archetypal figures of modern Indian society. Just as the narrator goes to England to study, Ila prefers to live in England because she wants to be free, and the older members of the family such as the grandmother represent the conflicted relationship with the former Empire. Moreover, as the family stands for the nation, their house stands for the country. After a family brawl, the house is divided into two parts. The division of the house results in a microcosmic chaos, as one part
of it is turned “upside-down” (SL 123). Even their family plate is divided. The family name brings to the fore the topos of blood, and is a way for the narrator to allude to the violence that shook families, as well as the country. The family prism diffracts History through the stories of ordinary heroes. Tribid is a sacrificial figure, but the main heroic figure remains the grandmother. The woman can finally prove her bravery when she goes to Dhaka to bring back her Jethamoshai, that is to say her uncle. “There’s only one worthwhile thing left for me to do in my life now she said and that is to bring the old man home… And her eyes grew misty at the thought of rescuing her uncle from his enemies.” (SL 134)

The story is filled with testimonies of the matriarch, and yet if her voice prevails, other characters are also heard. For instance, May tells the narrator that she can still hear Tribid’s words: “All I remember, she said, is him saying—you're my love, my own, true love, my love-across-the-sea; what do I have to do to keep you with me? But it’s just a whisper.” (SL 172) As the narrative unfolds, these whispers are amplified, and secrets are voiced at last. The narrator is not just haunted by Tribid; he also lives in the shadow of the “spectral presence” of Nick Price. Ghosts and spectral presences proliferate throughout the novel. According to Bishnupriya Ghosh, “some of these ghosts are undoubtedly embodiments of forgotten voices returning ferociously to assert their claim on the living present” (Ghosh B. 156). The narrator is surrounded by ghosts who murmur stories from the past: “And what of the story? I see it in the mouths of the ghosts that surround me in the cellar: of Snipe telling it to Tribid, of Tribid telling it to Ila and me, in that underground room in Rajjabar…” (SL 182)

The fact that the ghosts murmur in the cellar denotes a subterranean transmission of memories. The narrator conveys the words of others because he is haunted by the past. His case points out the role of the subconscious in remembering, for the ghosts are figures that stand for family secrets more than actual spirits. As Nicolas Abraham puts it, “ce ne sont pas les trépassés qui viennent hanter, mais les lacunes laissées en nous par les secrets des autres” (Abraham 427).6 Thus, to some extent, Ghosh’s writing may be qualified as “a literature of haunting,” to use Bishnupriya Ghosh’s terminology.

Beneath the text

Intertextuality is a crucial form of haunting in The Shadow Lines. Amitav Ghosh explains that when he was writing The Hungry Tide, he felt haunted by Tagore’s “Hungry Stones”—and indeed, Tagore’s Ghost Stories do seem to permeate Ghosh’s writing. The proliferation of ghostly figures creates an atmosphere reminiscent of “The Living and the Dead,” in which Kadambi, a widow, thinks that she is dead. The title of the novel under study here, The Shadow Lines, can be said to be haunted in the way it echoes Joseph Conrad’s The Shadow Line. In an article entitled “Crossing The Shadow Lines,” Silvia Albertazzi draws a parallel between Conrad’s novella and Ghosh’s novel. She discusses the meaning of the title, which “refers both to the moment of interior darkness and confusion which precede maturity.” Both texts share the backdrop of a war and center on young narrators who adopt an introspective stance. The Conradian narrator says: “I became aware of what I had left already behind me—my youth […] I felt I was becoming self-conscious.” (Conrad 55) To a certain extent, Ghosh’s narrator’s “glimpse […] of a final redemptive mystery” (SL 246) echoes this statement. Yet, even though both of them reach an epiphany, there

6. “People are not haunted by the dead, but by the lacunae left in us by the secrets of others.” (my translation)
is a difference of tone between them: Conrad’s narrator confesses his story, while Ghosh’s conducts an inquiry.

This intertextuality with the Western tradition goes beyond Conrad. Tridib compares himself with Tristan and considers May as his love-across-the-sea. Their love story is haunted by a legendary couple, Tristan and Iseult. At the same time, this perfect symbol of courtly love is distorted when Tridib writes an almost pornographic letter to May. On the Indian side, the link between *Midnight’s Children* and *The Shadow Lines* has already been mentioned, but beneath Ghosh’s novel the reader may also find that traces of Rushdie’s *Shame* are even more visible. In *Shame*, the narrator warns the reader: “The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space.” (Rushdie, *Shame* 29) Both novels deal with the repressed memory of Partition, and both narrators emphasize the power of the imagination to repress. Q. is thus defined as a “palimpsest-country” (Rushdie, *Shame* 88), which is an idea conveyed by Ghosh’s title too. The “lines” it refers to are drawn on a map, but they are not visible. When Th’amma plans to go to Dhaka, she wants to see the border, and is puzzled. “What was it all for then—Partition and all the killing and everything—if there isn’t something in between?” (SL 149), she asks. As in Rushdie’s novel, the narrator’s country has been written over again. The sedimentation of the country is further epitomized by the image of the blueprint of the city of Dhanmundi: “[I]n 1964 Dhanmundi was barely a blueprint for the fashionable suburb it was later to become.” (SL 191)

Besides intertextuality and its layers of texts, a form of linguistic stratification also appears beneath the words. Sometimes Bengali emerges, which is the mother tongue both of the writer and of most characters in the novel. Other languages, like Urdu or Hindi, may also be occasionally found in the text. Ghosh’s writing thus throws into relief the linguistic diversity of the Indian sub-continent. Most of the time, the vernacular words are “cushioned” or “contextualized,” to use Chantal Zabus’s terminology, and when they remain untranslated, they generally refer to cultural specificities. Nevertheless, the use of italics for some words and not others may puzzle the reader. For example, in the same paragraph, “pandals” is in italics but not “Puja” (SL 33). These words create semantic gaps that need to be filled. The text becomes a place for a vertical reverie on words. Besides, as Zabus underlines, “the main drawback to cushioning is that it may defer understanding or overstimulate the reader’s mind” (Zabus 161). On the other hand, italics signal something alien for the reader, but most of the time are related to the emotions of the narrator. The reader is enticed to rediscover the pleasure of language, following the example of the narrator who treasures words such as “sashay” (SL 174), or “Dhanmundi”: “That name, Dhanmundi, became one of the secret sounds of my childhood, like the drumming of the monkey-man’s dug-dugi, and the tinkling of the bells of the Magnolia ice-cream cart in the silliness of hot afternoons.” (SL 190, emphasis mine) Language here is associated with food, with the motif of ice-cream, and the alliterations in /t/ and /d/ amplify the idea of pleasure. Words are given a texture, and language is linked to a form of sensuality for it exalts taste. The pleasure of language is also linked to childhood, as in “veranda”: “Veranda? she said in amazement, rolling the word slowly around her mouth as though she had forgotten its taste.” (SL 69) Little Ila rediscovers the sounds of her mother tongue, for here the veranda epitomizes the Indian house. Dreaming on words and inventing places, the reader follows the narrator, who is given “worlds to travel in” and “eyes to see them with” (SL 20).
Linguistic stratification takes on other meanings, which are linked to the way the characters relate to one another. For example Mayadebi, Th’amma’s sister, uses an “invented language” to address her Sinhalese employee, Lizzie, even though the latter “[speaks] very good English and even [knows] a little Hindi” (SL 26). Asking her to kill the reptile they found in their garden, she asks: “No possible […], it-thing killing-killing?” (SL 26) With this deconstructed syntax which relies on repetition, she seems to mimic the way colonizers spoke. This branch of the family is portrayed as Europeanised: she is married to an Indian diplomat who is known as “the Saheb,” and is herself nicknamed “Queen Victoria.” When Mayadebi finally adopts the very same reptile she wanted dead, because it “respond[ed] to one of her own private dialects,” the Western ideal is debunked and criticism of the Empire steals its way into the text. The whole novel bears the mark of this subtext, but never indulges in simplistic dichotomies, for Ghosh always multiplies the points of view.

As mentioned earlier, the narrative is sometimes interrupted by meta-poetic pauses during which the narrator sees himself writing the story of his family and of his childhood. This introspective touch can be found right from the start, when he says “it startles me now to discover how readily the name comes off my pen as ‘Mayadebi’ for I have never spoken of her thus” (SL 3). Yet the most powerful moment when the reader may grasp the concretion of writing is to be found in the second part of the novel, in the digression on the meaning of silence which is solemnised by the blank separating it from the preceding paragraph. Even though the narrator wonders about the capacity of words to fill in the gap between facts and naming, writing is the only way to fight silence.

In The Shadow Lines, the reader follows an unreliable narrator who weaves his memories with threads of imagination. By the end of the novel, most of the shadow lines have been illuminated. The narrator reaches an epiphany when May reveals all the details of Tridib’s death; he concludes: “I was glad too, and grateful, for the glimpse she had given me of a final redemptive mystery.” (SL 246) By then he accepts the fact that he cannot understand everything. Ghosh artfully reconciles us with what we cannot fully grasp. Like the narrator who wants to know the colour of the knowledge of being young during the war, and realizes that it is impossible, the reader only understands History partially. Thus Ghosh proposes the necessity of investigating the world in order to find meaning; because stories, and History, can be looked at in many different ways, like “a land of looking-glass events” (SL 219).

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