



Original Article

NEGOTIATING STATELESSNESS AND FRAGMENTED IDENTITY: A STUDY OF TRAUMA IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE SHADOW LINES

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's novels examine how history, memory, displacement and identity coexist in postcolonial societies. In *The Shadow Lines* (1988), he examines how political boundaries and communal violence shape people's lives. This paper argues that the novel's characters navigate statelessness, fragmentation, and trauma. They are citizens by law, but they feel psychologically and culturally stateless because of partition, migration, and new national borders. Such events shake their sense of self and community; they feel emotionally distant, lose memories, and are always searching for a sense of belonging. This study uses trauma theory and postcolonial ideas to examine that events such as the Partition of India and the 1964 communal riots affect the main characters: the unnamed narrator, Tridib, Tha'mma, Ila, and May Price. Ghosh challenges conventional thinking and notions of nationhood in this study by showing that borders cannot separate people's stories, histories, and relationships. As a result of trauma and its impact on identity, it crosses borders and is, therefore, not easily resolved, but it can have a long-term effect on our identity. The article reveals that trauma is a common historical experience that shapes postcolonial society. *The Shadow Lines* provides a humanistic perspective that goes beyond strict nationalism and values empathy, shared history and understanding across cultures.

Keywords: Statelessness, Fragmented Identity, Trauma, Postcolonialism, Memory, Partition

INTRODUCTION

Statelessness, fragmentation, and trauma are central themes in postcolonial literature. They embody the experiences of people who have suffered colonialism, migration, displacement, and conflict on a personal level. The 1947 Partition of India and the breakup of families and cultures of India at home and abroad shaped these sentiments in South Asian literature. Amitav Ghosh, a well-known Indian English novelist, takes on these issues in *The Shadow Lines* (1988). Throughout the story, memories and perspectives are recounted; the novel demonstrates that political borders can separate countries, but they cannot erase shared histories, emotions, and human relations. The word Negotiation is derived from the Latin *negotiarī*, meaning "to conduct business" or "to manage affairs," and, in literature and cultural studies, describes how people constantly adjust, resist, and reconstruct their identities as social and political circumstances change. The idea of negotiation was important in Cultural Studies in the 1970s and 1980s. In Stuart Hall's work, identity is not fixed but is determined by history, culture, and politics. In his seminal text "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), Hall observed that identity is always "a matter of becoming as well as of being" Hall (1990) and used this insight to question the notion that identity never changes and to show that identity is determined through negotiation with history and memory. In

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Received: 08 May 2026; Accepted: 17 June 2026; Published 29 July 2026

DOI: [10.29121/Shodhgyan.v4.i2.2026.142](https://doi.org/10.29121/Shodhgyan.v4.i2.2026.142)

Page Number: 29-33

Journal Title: ShodhGyan-NU: Journal of Literature and Culture Studies

Journal Abbreviation: ShodhGyan.NU J. Lit. Cul. Stu.

Online ISSN: 2584-1300, Print ISSN: 3108-2742

Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

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Amitav Ghosh's novels, for example, characters build their identities through crossing borders, delving into histories, and recalling memories rather than having fixed national or cultural identities, as they do in *The Shadow Lines*.

On the other hand, statelessness became a significant issue in international law after the Second World War. In Article 1 of the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, a stateless person is defined by law as "A person who is not considered as a national by any State in the operation of its law" [United Nations \(1954\)](#). Statelessness became a global issue when millions of people lost their citizenship because of war, colonialism, changing borders, and forced migration. Hannah Arendt, a political philosopher, studied statelessness in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Stateless people lose what she called "the right to have rights." (Arendt 296). Arendt said citizenship is the basis for all other human rights. And without legal membership in a political community, people are at risk of being excluded and murdered. Later scholars, such as Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer*, built on this idea. They demonstrated that stateless people live a "bare life" [Agamben \(1998\)](#) without any legal or political protection. In Amitav Ghosh's novels, statelessness is portrayed as not just a legal problem but also a mental and emotional one, the emotional and psychological experience of colonialism, Partition, migration, and globalisation.

Similarly, in *The Shadow Lines*, the notion of fragmented identity emerged in postmodernism, postcolonial studies, and psychoanalytic theory in the latter half of the twentieth century. Stuart Hall argues that identity is always changing, not fixed. In "The Question of Cultural Identity" (1992), he contends that today's identities are fragmented by globalisation, migration, and historical change. Homi K. Bhabha introduces hybridity, the third space, and cultural negotiation in *The Location of Culture*. He believes that colonial encounters produce identities that are not just between national groups. The idea comes from psychoanalysis, particularly Jacques Lacan. He saw identity as divisible and shaped by language and social ties. In *The Shadow Lines*, fragmented identity arises from characters' memories, histories, and national ties across varying places and cultures.

Closely associated with them, the word "trauma" is from the Greek word "wound." Doctors used the word first to describe physical injuries, and later to mean psychological harm. Our own understanding of psychological trauma arose from the work of Sigmund Freud in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Freud believed trauma happens because it hasn't been processed. Cathy Caruth describes "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" [Caruth \(1996\)](#). She shifted the way people think about trauma with her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). She describes trauma as an overwhelming experience that people cannot quite appreciate when it's happening, and that comes back in memory, dreams, and repeated experiences. Dominick LaCapra defines trauma as not only personal but as a common experience that can affect entire communities over time. Such ideas help us understand how Ghosh writes about memory, violence, and identity in *The Shadow Lines*. The novel takes place in and after India's partition in 1947. India and Pakistan became separate nations, so people moved, and there was much violence. Families who were once united by language, culture, and traditions were suddenly separated by new borders. Even though many survivors were legal citizens, they were emotionally uprooted and uncertain as to who they really were. The 1964 communal riots, at the heart of *The Shadow Lines*, demonstrate that political conflict can deepen trauma and social division. Ghosh illustrates that these events are precisely what make people remember long after the violence ends. Postcolonial literature often sees borders as arbitrary lines that cut communities apart but do not erase the history that binds people together. Benedict Anderson calls the nation an "imagined community" [Anderson \(2006\)](#) in which national identity is constructed by society rather than fixed. According to Homi K. Bhabha, cultural identity is constantly changing in places where differences and mixing occur. Ghosh expands on these ideas by questioning the very idea of nationalism and shows that human connections are not anchored in any political border. His stories are about memory, language, migration, and personal connection, not so much borders as people and their experiences. In this way, Amitav Ghosh is one of the top figures in Indian English literature, and his work also draws on history, anthropology, and storytelling. Not a timeline, Ghosh uses personal stories to demonstrate how political decisions affect people. His books frequently show that history is inextricable and, as such, are not as simple as nationalist accounts that ignore the people of history.

The Shadow Lines, Ghosh's seminal novel from 1988, is still one of his most important works and is set in Calcutta, Dhaka, and London. That story is told in memories rather than a timeline. The unnamed narrator links together the lives of family and friends, especially Tridib, who has an open view of the world and is not bound by national borders. Tha'mma is a member of an older generation with nationalist beliefs, but her story shows how difficult these ideas are after partition. Ila is uncomfortable in society even though she's accepted, and May Price has a moral responsibility that transcends national identity. Ghosh makes the point that identity is not static but mutable, constantly changing through memories, migration, and trauma. The book also shows that trauma is more than physical violence. Dislocation, separation, loss, and shattered memories ripple across generations, as does the emotional toll of these events on those who didn't experience them firsthand. The unnamed narrator learns about Partition and communal violence through family stories, and trauma becomes a shared legacy rather than merely a personal one. Memory is both a burden and a tool for preserving shared histories that resist erasure by politics. This study is important because it examines statelessness as a mental and cultural problem rather than just a legal one. While there have been many studies of nationalism, memory, and Partition in *The Shadow Lines*, few have examined how statelessness, fragmented identity, and trauma intersect to shape the characters' lives. This paper argues that Ghosh's ideas of trauma theory and postcolonial theory challenge the notion of borders. That identity is always a series of changing shapes, conditioned by history, memory, and relations. In this way, *The Shadow Lines* offers a powerful look at the lasting effects of political violence and the resilience of people seeking a sense of belonging in a divided world.

RESEARCH GAP

However, most research on Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* has focused on nationalism, partition, memory, migration, diaspora and postcolonial identity. The novel's structure, history, and imagined nation have also been studied. Trauma studies have examined the psychological aspects of partition and communal violence in South Asian literature. Still, there has been little work connecting statelessness, fragmented identity and trauma in a single framework. These ideas are usually discussed separately, and the ways psychological statelessness can deepen identity fragmentation, both rooted in traumatic history, are often missed. Also, the main characters are seldom examined together to understand how each reconciles belonging and identity across borders. This study aims to fill the gap between trauma theory and postcolonial perspectives. It indicates that *The Shadow Lines* doesn't view statelessness solely as a political or legal problem, but also as an emotional and psychological one, shaped by memory, displacement, and historical violence. Therefore, the study adopts Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) as a case study to draw on trauma studies and postcolonial criticism. The study focuses on the main characters: Tridib, Tha'mma, the unnamed narrator, Ila, and May Price, and how they cope with statelessness, fragmentation of identity, and trauma. As the topic of discussion is memory, Partition, displacement, migration, and communal warfare, the psychological implications of political borders are also examined. The paper draws on broader postcolonial theories and does not directly compare *The Shadow Lines* with Ghosh's other novels or with other postcolonial writers. The research is rather limited, focusing on how *The Shadow Lines* reimagines identity through history, memory, and relationships rather than on a set of borders for a nation.

ANALYSIS

Amitav Ghosh explores in *The Shadow Lines* the impact of the Partition of India on people through statelessness, fragmented identity, and trauma in his characters' lives. Rather than merely viewing partition as a political event, Ghosh examines its psychological, emotional, and cultural impact on people whose lives are forever changed by new national borders. The book is against the conventional concept of nationhood, and borders are far stronger in people's minds than on maps. Ghosh shows that the violence of partition goes beyond physical displacement. It breaks down whole identities, undermines personal histories, and also leaves emotional scars for generations. The characters in the novel respond to these historical events differently. Jethamoshai refuses to leave his ancestral home, questioning what it feels like to be a citizen and what emotional statelessness does. It is most evident in Jethamoshai, who doesn't leave Dhaka even after it has become part of East Pakistan. To him, belonging is in memories and lived experiences, not political boundaries. By refusing to move, he questions the legitimacy of the nation-state's borders and shows that new maps can never change a person's identity. His tragic death during the communal riots illustrates the terrible effects of nationalism and partition. On the other hand, Tha'mma believes in nationalism, but her faith is shattered when she sees that borders are invisible and cannot stop violence or protect relationships: "It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there, they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. I was born here, and I'll die here" Ghosh (2011). This shows that Tha'mma's confusion about the invisible border is how her belief in nationalism crumbles. Ghosh shows that Partition leaves people feeling emotionally stateless, even if they still have citizenship. Jethamoshai's reluctance to remain in his ancestral home and Tha'mma's loss of faith in nationalism show that statelessness is not just the loss of nationality but also a sense of belonging, home, and identity: "... if there are no trenches or anything, how are people to know?... Where's the difference then?... What was it all for then—Partition and all the killing and everything—if there isn't something in between?" Ghosh (2011).

The idea of fragmented identity is evident in Ila, Tridib, and the unnamed narrator, each of whom grapples with it in different ways. Ila moves from country to country because her father is a diplomat. Although she seems worldly, she never feels completely at home. Ila's life as someone who moves between countries shows how identity can blur in a world of migration. The narrator explains, "...although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all" Ghosh (2011). This suggests that moving often does not always create a sense of belonging. The narrator also says, "Those schools were all that mattered to Ila; the places themselves went past her in an illusory whirl of movement" Ghosh (2011). These lines show that Ila's identity is fragmented, shaped by brief experiences at international schools rather than by a lasting home. In contrast, Tridib teaches the narrator that identity can come from imagination rather than simply from living in a place. He says one should learn "to use my imagination with precision" (Ghosh 40). Tridib uses his imagination to cross mental borders and find new ways to think about belonging in memory and being together with people. Through Tridib, Ghosh shows that memory and imagination can cross political borders. The narrator creates his own mixed identity from family stories, maps, memories, and history, not only from his own experiences. In this way, fragmented identity seems to naturally result from migration, colonial history, and the splitting of nations. The unnamed narrator then builds the past from stories, family memories, and experiences passed down, and trauma affects not only the people who lived through the violence but also later generations who are also affected by the trauma.

By linking the lives of his characters, Ghosh turns their personal stories into a wider critique of nationalism and political violence. The real barriers between people are not on maps, he says, but in our minds and our beliefs. So *The Shadow Lines* is a thoughtful examination of how history shapes both personal and shared memories. It is a way of looking at how the novel connects statelessness to the fragmentation of identity through its main characters. These are not separate issues but interrelated experiences

generated by partition and supported by memory, displacement, and the search for belonging to a nation. Along with statelessness and fragmented identity, the novel portrays trauma as a deep psychological wound caused by partition, communal violence, displacement and memory. The most painful moment for the narrator is Tridib's death in the Dhaka riots, which alters her views on history and relationships. The narrator doesn't witness the event firsthand but can only piece it together from others' memories, underscoring how stories and memories shape trauma. Tha'mma is also traumatised when her attachment to nationalism is shattered by the violence that kills Tridib. May Price is deeply haunted by survivor's guilt when she thinks her actions led to Tridib's death. In this way, trauma is not just about the victim but everyone connected to the event. Tridib's ideas strongly influence how the narrator thinks about memory: "One could never know anything except through desire" Ghosh (2011). He also remembers Tridib's vision of a world "...where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror" Ghosh (2011). In these lines, it is suggested that to understand trauma, one has to go beyond political and psychological boundaries. The novel looks at trauma not only as a single event in history but also as an ongoing emotional legacy passed down through memory, silence, guilt, stories, and life from generation to generation. Thus, in this novel, Amitav Ghosh explores that statelessness, fragmented identity, and trauma are connected as outcomes of partition and nationalism. Jethamoshai's refusal to leave Dhaka highlights emotional statelessness. Ila's unsettled and cosmopolitan life points to a fragmented identity. Tridib's death shows the trauma that imagined borders can cause, and the narrator's memories reveal how trauma is passed down through generations. By linking these characters, Ghosh suggests that political borders may divide land, but they cannot separate memory, imagination, or human relationships. *The Shadow Lines* challenges nationalism by showing that identity is shaped more by shared memories and connections than by national borders.

CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* explores the lasting psychological and emotional effects of partition by examining how statelessness, fragmented identity, and trauma are interconnected. Ghosh shows that these issues overlap and shape the lives of people whose identities are influenced by political violence, migration, memory, and displacement. The novel questions traditional ideas of nationality, suggesting that belonging is not just about legal citizenship or borders. Instead, it comes from memory, lived experience, personal relationships, and shared histories. This study shows that Ghosh presents statelessness as an emotional and psychological state, not just a legal one. Jethamoshai's refusal to leave his home and Tha'mma's growing doubts about strict nationalism highlight how political borders cannot fully define identity or guarantee security. Similarly, the experiences of Ila, Tridib, and the unnamed narrator show that identity is always changing, shaped by culture, memory, and history. Their fragmented identities reflect the ongoing effects of colonialism, migration, and the search for belonging in a divided world. The analysis also shows that trauma in *The Shadow Lines* goes beyond physical violence. The Partition of India and the 1964 riots still affect later generations through memories, silence, guilt, and emotional loss. Tridib's death, May Price's survivor's guilt, Tha'mma's loss of faith in her beliefs, and the narrator's efforts to piece together the past all show that trauma is both personal and shared. Ghosh makes it clear that the emotional effects of historical violence continue to shape how people think and feel, even long after the events themselves. Thus, by combining trauma theory and postcolonial ideas, this study has shown how closely statelessness, fragmented identity, and trauma are linked in *The Shadow Lines*. It suggests that Ghosh challenges nationalist stories by showing that borders are artificial and by highlighting the strength of memory and empathy. The novel supports a humanistic view in which shared histories and emotional bonds are more important than political divisions. In a world still grappling with conflict, migration, and debates over citizenship, *The Shadow Lines* remains highly relevant. Its message is that true belonging comes from compassion, memory, and the recognition of our shared humanity, making Ghosh's novel an important work in postcolonial literature and trauma studies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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