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Living Through Others: Secondhand Experience and the Epistemology of Inherited Memory in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

This paper extends existing critiques of empiricist notions of authentic experience by reading Amitav Ghosh's 1988 novel *The Shadow Lines* as a literary case study in the epistemology of diaspora. This study draws on phenomenology, postmemory theory, and narrative identity studies to guide its close textual analysis. It shows inherited memory, secondhand experience, and vicarious knowledge to be legitimate and richly authentic modes of knowledge in postcolonial diasporic contexts. The book's unnamed narrator embodies what this study calls a "diasporic epistemology," one that prioritizes desire and imagination as sources of knowledge. He is familiar with places he has never visited and carries traumas he has never witnessed firsthand. This study argues that displacement itself functions as an epistemological condition in the text. Apparent limitations such as distance, mediation, and belatedness are transformed into sophisticated tools for accessing truths that immediate presence often obscures. By foregrounding the philosophical dimensions this study locates within *The Shadow Lines* and offering new perspectives on how displaced people construct knowledge and identity via mediated, inherited, and creative engagement with the past, this study contributes to the scholarship on the book.

Keywords: *Epistemology, Postmemory, Secondhand experience, Phenomenology, Partition.*

Introduction: The Epistemological Crisis of Diaspora

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrative stages the idea of a "diasporic consciousness", as seen through its narrator, who experiences London in a way that is completely different from purchasing a one-way air ticket and arriving in London. He has never seen London and yet he knows it. He remembers Partition and feels a similar sense of loss that he never experienced. He carries the trauma that he experiences over the death of his cousin, Tridib, with such an intensity that he feels it as strongly, if not stronger, than those people who were there at the time. The narrator's knowledge comes from second-hand accounts of those experiences and through his own imagination. The novel tells us that this will not be considered less legitimate, or less real, as part of his identity, than if he had lived it and experienced it first-hand.

The Shadow Lines builds on this critique of naïve empiricism by showing, in concrete diasporic terms, how secondhand experience can generate a rich and authentic form of knowledge. One

reason is that when later generations live far from their ancestral homeland, direct experience of that lost world becomes impossible to recover. The only access left to it is through the remembrances passed down by those who came before. The two major ways in which this occurs in the novel are through memory and through desire. Memory is, in some sense, the experience of others; desire is an expression of longing. The narrator's inherited grief over Partition, absorbed from Tha'mma's recollections of pre-Partition Dhaka, illustrates memory's role in this process, while his longing to know Tridib's London before ever setting foot there illustrates the workings of desire. In these kinds of diasporic situations, memory and desire become the primary vehicles through which knowledge and identity are formed.

Academics have primarily focused on the issues surrounding memory, nostalgia, the nation-state, and border construction in *The Shadow Lines*. Tabish Khair's analysis suggests that the book interrogates "the very foundations of nationalist discourse" (2003, 87). Robert Dixon expands on this idea by describing the text's "complex negotiation with Western epistemologies and geographical imaginaries" (1996, 15). Ranjana Sengupta examines how the text addresses the political dimensions of the nation-state by saying that Ghosh presents "a radical critique of the arbitrary nature of postcolonial borders" (1998, 76).

More recent scholarship has highlighted new dimensions of Ghosh's text and how it has extended the dimensions of his narrative project. Suvir Kaul shows how the text breaks down "the rigidity of national boundaries by showing how they are made and how they can change" (1994, 132). Kaul's reading positions *The Shadow Lines* as a sustained meditation on the violence that comes from drawing lines between countries. Meenakshi Mukherjee, meanwhile, examined questions of identity in the novel, focusing on how it represents the "fractured consciousness of diasporic subjects negotiating multiple cultural affiliations" (2000, 178). Finally, Anshuman Mondal, in his critical study, explores how Ghosh "makes visible the psychological wounds of Partition that official histories often ignore" (2007, 54).

Despite this substantial body of criticism on memory, nationalism, and borders, a significant gap remains in the scholarship on *The Shadow Lines*. The novel's sustained engagement with epistemological questions about the nature of knowing and the criteria for true experience has not received enough critical attention. By analyzing *The Shadow Lines* through an epistemological lens, this study fills this gap. The study treats the book as fictional ground for exploring the unique circumstances that lead to knowledge creation in diasporic settings.

Ultimately, this research contends that *The Shadow Lines* does more than solely represent the diasporic experience. Rather, a close reading of the novel reveals a comprehensive diasporic epistemology that has theoretical implications that extend far beyond the specific historical circumstances of Partition and its aftermath.

Theoretical Framework

Marianne Hirsch's Postmemory and Transgenerational Transmission

Marianne Hirsch's idea of “postmemory” is key to how this study reads the epistemological dimensions of *The Shadow Lines*. Hirsch describes it as “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (2008, 103). Hirsch established this idea largely to analyze Holocaust recollection among second-generation survivors. Its relevance, however, extends to other contexts of severe historical disruption, including the trauma of Partition depicted in the novel.

Hirsch asserts that postmemory is “distinguished from memory by generational distance” yet is “powerful enough to constitute memories in their own right” (2008, 103). The experiences of the previous generation are “transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (2012, 5). This transmission transpires not via biological inheritance but through “imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (2012, 5). Postmemory challenges the conventional distinction between firsthand and secondhand information. It shows that deeply transmitted stories can carry real psychological and sensory weight of their own, shaping those who inherit them as powerfully as lived experience shapes those who lived it.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator represents postmemory. He “remembers” the 1947 Partition despite being born after it, takes his grandmother Tha'mma's memories of pre-Partition Dhaka as his own, and recalls the 1964 Dhaka riots that killed Tridib with painful intensity despite learning about them years later through fragmented reports. According to Hirsch: “to grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors” (2012, 5). This accurately reflects the narrator's situation: his current experiences are infused with inherited pasts, and his identity is built on memories that are not “his” in any traditional sense but are yet essential to his being.

Phenomenology: Consciousness, Intentionality, and Experience

Phenomenology, in particular of the type Husserl and Merleau-Ponty made famous, offers important theoretical resources for understanding how consciousness acts upon and brings into being the world. Husserl's argument that consciousness is always “intentional”—always directed toward or about something—opens up the idea that all experience is a matter of active constitution, rather than passive reception. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states that “‘phenomenology’ is used to mean the careful study of phenomena as they appear to us in consciousness” and “it studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view” and “..concentrates on meaning and envisages “phenomenological analysis (as) a direct description and analysis of lived experience” (Smith 2013).

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) extends Husserl by focusing on embodied consciousness. Perception, he contends, is not mere feeling but rather “a kind of

radical experience” which constitutes our “being-in-the world” (1962, 236). Key to Merleau-Ponty's view is that “the fundamental teaching of the reduction [is] impossibility of the complete reduction” (1962, lxxvii), for consciousness is always already lived within a world that cannot be entirely suspended, or transcended.

Phenomenology sheds light on how the narrator's imaginative awareness creates histories, locations, and events as phenomenologically real in *The Shadow Lines*. Through Tridib's stories, he imaginatively engages with London in a way that is distinct from direct observation and instead reflects phenomenological presence. According to Merleau-Ponty, imagination can produce “operative intentionality”—the pre-reflective construction of one's relationship to the outside world (1962, 245).

Narrative Identity and Dialogic Consciousness

The construction of the narrator's identity and knowledge in Ghosh's work is further illuminated by Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of dialogism and Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity. Ricoeur contends that narrative shapes personal identity, suggesting that “narrative identity” develops as people create and narrate tales about their own life in order to comprehend who they are (1991, 73). Critically, these tales integrate historical events, cultural narratives, and the experiences of others rather than being solipsistic endeavors. Ricoeur argues that identity is hence inherently intersubjective.

This realization is furthered by Bakhtin's dialogism, which contends that the words and viewpoints of others naturally inhabit consciousness. Human awareness is “populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others” because people think, speak, and see through internalized voices that come from outside of themselves, as Bakhtin shows in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981, 294). In the context of *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator's mind is revealed to be essentially dialogic, composed of May's omnipresent remorse, Tha'mma's disjointed memories, Ila's cosmopolitan dismissiveness, and Tridib's imaginative vision. The narrator's experiences are never independent; instead, they are always mediated by this internalized chorus of polyphonic voices.

When taken as a whole, these theoretical frameworks provide credence to the idea that *The Shadow Lines* articulates a unique epistemology where knowledge functions as mediated rather than immediate. Instead of being created by direct empirical observation, such knowledge is created through narrative and imagination. It arises via dialogic exchanges rather than solitary perception and operates intersubjectively as opposed to independently. Affective engagement is given precedence over simply cognitive processes in this epistemological framework. Lastly, it does not limit cognition to the just present moment, but rather embraces temporal complexity.

Tridib's Epistemology: Imagination as Knowledge

Tridib, the narrator's cousin and intellectual mentor, makes the novel's most clear statements on knowledge. His worldview is based on the novel idea that imagination fueled by desire is a better way to perceive reality. In an important part, he tells the narrator that

“...one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places” (Ghosh 1988, 29).

This notion warrants meticulous examination due to its epistemic ramifications. Tridib differentiates “real desire” from mere “greed or lust,” framing it as ontological longing rather than acquisitive wanting (Ghosh 1988, 29). This desire is “pure, painful, and primitive,” which means it works on a pre-cognitive, physiological level. This is what phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty termed the level of “operative intentionality” (1962, 429). Tridib asserts that this desire “carried one beyond the limits of one’s mind to other times and other places,” thereby surpassing the empiricist limitations of physical presence and temporal immediacy (Ghosh 1988, 29).

According to Tridib, achieving “a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror”—a collapse of subject-object duality—is the ultimate goal of this yearning imagination (Ghosh 1988, 29). This expression foreshadows poststructuralist criticisms of stable subjectivity and reflects phenomenology’s concern in pre-reflective awareness. According to Tridib’s epistemological theory, imaginative desire achieves a form of experience fusion that is not achievable through dispassionate empirical observation by overcoming the divide between knower and knowing.

Several core tenets of conventional empiricism are called into question by Tridib’s epistemology. First, Tridib argues that imaginative access to “other times and other places” constitutes a distinct and valid form of epistemic access, one not dependent on what is visible to the senses (Ghosh 1988, 29). Second, Tridib’s vision blurs the distinction between knowing subject and known object, which is maintained by classical epistemology. Third, Tridib raises desire as the very condition of knowledge, while orthodox epistemology values dispassionate reason over desire. Fourth, Tridib argues that knowledge is produced by intense interaction, which he refers to as “a torment of the flesh” (Ghosh 1988, 29). The scientific method values separation.

The narrator’s encounters in the book serve to validate Tridib’s epistemology. The narrator’s fantastical portrayal of London, based on detailed descriptions from Tridib, is considerably durable and phenomenologically “real,” carrying an emotional and imaginative weight of its own. Upon reaching London, the narrator is unable to achieve his idealized vision and is disappointed because the actual city is not at all like his imaginings. The book contends that the imagined London, created through “desire,” possesses a phenomenological depth entirely its own (Ghosh 1988, 29).

The “upside down telescope” metaphor represents the highest point of this inversion of empiricist values. Ila mocks the narrator for imagining and engaging with the world at a distance and for viewing the world through what she perceives to be the “wrong end” of a telescope (Ghosh 1988, 21). Nevertheless, the book validates the narrator's approach. Despite being very well travelled and knowledgeable about a number of nations, Ila’s perspective is thoroughly superficial and dislocated. Whereas the narrator, through his “upside-down telescope”, has found a way to utilize his imagination and distant distance to gain a more full and nuanced understanding of the world.

Inherited Memory and the Problem of Authenticity

The Narrator's Postmemory of Partition

The narrator claims to have lived through the 1947 Partition of India, even though he was born after the event. Marianne Hirsch describes these recollections as “postmemories,” which are not literal memories but rather memories “transmitted transgenerationally through family narratives, affective atmospheres, and inherited trauma” (2008, 103). The narrator takes in the Bengali community’s grief at the dissolution of Bengali unity, his grandma Tha’mma’s yearning for Dhaka before Partition, and his father’s hazy recollections of the family home. The narrator’s identity is greatly influenced by this inheritance. He feels remorse for a home he never lived in, longs for a united Bengal he never knew, and endures the agony of relocation from an experience he never had. A person’s “own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events” (Hirsch 2012, 5), which is a profound observation of the impact of such inherited narratives. However, this is not shown as a lack in the book; rather, it is the postcolonial subject’s ontological state. When people are in diaspora, their direct experience is broken down by geographical and temporal ruptures, and postmemory takes over as the main way of thinking about the past.

Tha'mma's Failed Authenticity

Tha’mma character provides a powerful counterexample to traditional notions of authenticity. The memories of Dhaka that should provide her with an authentic relationship to the city are her memories from growing up and living there before the time of Partition. When she returns to Dhaka to visit Jethamoshai (her uncle), she is not able to relate to her memories of the city and is not able to connect to the present Dhaka. Tha’mma experiences a memory block in that the Dhaka, post-Partition, is a totally different city from the Dhaka that she remembered prior to Partition. She experiences memory blocks on the area she remembers, the memory of the area that now looks totally different and the house that was her past home that now is in a state of disrepair.

Conversely, there is also the fact that she does not learn anything new about Dhaka from the experience of visiting Dhaka that would provide her with any new insight, knowledge or relationship to Dhaka that she could not gain or learn from other sources of epistemic value; thus her visit to Dhaka, however emotionally significant, does not by itself yield new understanding of the city.

More concerningly, her genuine experience results in inflexible nationalism instead of sympathetic comprehension. She develops an obsession with boundaries and national identity as a result of her experience with Partition. “But how are people to know if there aren't any trenches or anything?” she famously wonders (Ghosh 1988, 151). Her firsthand encounter with community violence results in hardened communalism rather than healing. Because “he is family,” she wants Jethamoshai to “return” to India, but she also maintains that since he is Muslim, he cannot really be family. She is caught in contradiction by her real experience.

Through secondhand knowledge and creative engagement, the narrator comes to comprehend the arbitrary nature of borders: fictional, being nowhere in the actual environment, yet real, carrying fatal implications. His imaginative, mediated understanding demonstrates how such engagement can produce a nuanced, authentic grasp of political reality.

The Dhaka House: Imagined versus Physical Reality

The relationship between the narrator and the Dhaka house his ancestors owned, demonstrates the conceptual foundations of the use of imagination in the book. While the narrator hasn't physically been to the house, he has created a distinct mental image from other family members, including everything from the rooms and layout to any scents that might be associated with that particular house. All of these details have been formed through the eyes of the family and therefore he can think of them as he imagines them.

When the narrator actually visits the Dhaka house in 1964, it is a letdown to him, as the physical structure does not live up to the vividness of what he imagined. The point of the novel is not that the narrator failed to comprehend reality; the point of the novel is that both the imagined house and the actual house exist and have legitimacy, with the imagined house potentially being the more real house due to the strong emotional connections to it through the memory of the group of people who have shared in that experience.

A significant epistemological query is thus brought up: Which dwelling has greater genuine reality? The actual building that is in place? Or the creatively rebuilt home that exists in memory and bears the burden of ancestry? This study finds that the latter is suggested throughout the text. The imagined house has a phenomenological actuality that the actual ruin does not because it is filled with meaning, desire, and historical significance.

The Epistemology of Trauma: Knowing Tridib's Death

Framed Knowledge and Narrative Reconstruction

Years after Tridib's passing, the narrator learns of it through disjointed and frequently conflicting stories. The novel's overarching epistemology is modeled by this epistemological situation—knowing a tragic event only through mediated, fragmentary tales. From his mother's first, sterile version of events; May's remorseful, partial confession; Robi's traumatic, hesitant testimony; newspaper accounts, which are also mediated representations; and his own creative reconstruction, the narrator must piece together the reality.

None of these sources offer the whole, unbiased truth. The teller's pain, guilt, or protective tendencies influence each. However, by combining several viewpoints and admitting its own fabrication, the narrator creates a story from these pieces that might be more accurate than any one witness report. A clearly diasporic epistemology is modeled by this. Knowledge is always rebuilt from fragments in diaspora, where displacement breaks direct access to places and events. This is an alternative, possibly better way of knowing rather than an epistemic shortcoming. The narrator's synthesis narrative achieves a form of truth that is impossible for any one witness since it recognizes numerous points of view and its own mediation.

Vicarious Trauma and May's Guilt

The trauma of Tridib's death is felt as strongly by May Price, an English woman who had no national or family ties to the India-Pakistan conflict. Her life is shaped for decades by her sadness and guilt. She is an example of what trauma theorists refer to as "vicarious trauma," which is trauma that witnesses or those who hear about tragic events from others suffer (Caruth 1996, 8).

May's case is important because it shows that trauma, and consequently memory and knowledge, need not be limited by national or biological boundaries. Since she is not related, Indian, or personally accountable, she does not have the traditional "right" to Tridib's death. She has phenomenologically true trauma, though. By implying that affective ties and creative engagement—rather than family or nationality—determine who can claim connection to painful past, the book confirms this vicarious experience as legitimate.

May's trajectory further illustrates how witnessing an event does not by itself constitute knowledge of it. Even though she saw Tridib die, she was unable to process it at the time. Her insight is only attained after years of reflection and narrative reconstruction, through what could be called a secondhand engagement with her own memory.

The Reader's Epistemological Position

This book creates an opportunity for readers to engage with the production of "knowledge" in the same way that the characters within their experience would do so through their own imagination. While readers are granted an indirect view into the action of the characters within the book, they will become active participants in the imaginative creation of a cohesive experience based upon the available recordings of the past, and through the use of imagination and creativity. The novel's structure gives readers the opportunity to construct the narrative themselves, drawing on what they have learned and how they approach its events and material through their own experience and beliefs. In this way, readers are pushed to take an active role in shaping what they come to believe is true. They cannot simply absorb information as passive consumers; rather, they create the reality of the narrative's events through their own imagination.

Ila's Counter-Example: Experience Without Imaginative Engagement

In contrast to Tridib and the narrator, who represent the novel's epistemological ideal as creating a positive understanding through imaginative desire and through the secondhand knowledge gained from other people's experience, Ila stands in contrast to this model, her characterisation embodying an individual whose extensive travel yields comparatively little usable understanding of the places she has lived.

Having resided in Calcutta, London and Colombo, Ila is the epitome of a real cosmopolitan, having experienced firsthand several cultures in all three global cities while moving freely across national boundaries. By the logic of an empiricist, Ila should possess an extensive, sophisticated set of knowledge gained directly through her direct experiences. However, Ila has a very superficial understanding of the places she has lived. She may live in multiple places, but she is

unable to call any of those places home. Her understanding of cosmopolitanism is predicated upon her geographical location and not upon her knowledge or emotional connection to the cities in which she resides. Thus, Ila has the experience of living in various locations but lacks the knowledge or emotional connection to be a “cosmopolitan.”

As the narrator expresses his frustration: “I could not convince her that a place can't just exist; rather, it must be created by our imagination” (Ghosh 1988, 21). This is an important line. According to Ila, locations are merely objective realities that can only be experienced in person. The narrator knows something she does not: that locations must be “invented in one's imagination”—that understanding a place is more than simply being there; it takes creative work. If you haven't done the creative job of constitution, you can live somewhere for years without truly understanding it.

Ila's failure highlights a crucial distinction between knowledge and experience throughout the book. She is capable of seeing, hearing, and moving through places. She does not, however, possess “operative intentionality,” which Merleau-Ponty would describe as the prereflective structure of a meaningful life-world (1962, 129). She takes in stimuli but does not interpret them.

What characterizes her failures while the narrator succeeds? Tridib's theory of desire provides a framework for this contrast between the two characters. While Ila experiences life devoid of desire—according to Tridib's definition of desire—she is driven primarily by escape and denial (from India, from family, from all obligations). Therefore, her motivations arise out of a need to flee solutions rather than create opportunities for them. Accordingly, the way Ila's intention functions is in reaction to (rather than as a construction of) reality.

In contrast, the narrator's intentionality is based on positive desires for connection, understanding, and acceptance. Unlike Ila, whose imagining of reality is limited to what is currently available, the narrator imagines possibilities based upon what exists outside of himself. The difference in desire between the two characters causes the narrator to develop a much deeper immersion in his secondhand knowledge of events than Ila would ever achieve through her disconnected experiences with her family and their respective realities.

Geographies of Secondhand Knowledge

The narrator's connection to London serves as an illustration of the potential for vicarious transmission to provide insight into locations. Though he has never been to London when Tridib proceeds to meticulously describe it to him, including the Price family house on Lymington Road, streets, and buildings, his (Tridib's) descriptions are so vivid that the narrator can navigate London in his imagination with a level of precision that surpasses that of many inhabitants. This is not merely the memorization of information. London is imaginatively inhabited by the narrator. He cultivates what phenomenologists refer to as a “sense of place,” which is an affective, visceral relationship with space (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 243). Upon his physical arrival in London, he finds that his imaginative map lets him navigate its streets with striking ease and precision. His secondhand, imaginatively constructed knowledge proves richly detailed and practically effective in its own right.

This demonstrates the novel's epistemological claim: that imaginatively constructed knowledge can be phenomenologically real and practically useful in its own right. The narrator's London is not a pale copy of the supposedly real London but a constituted reality with its own phenomenological density.

Real and Imaginary Borders

The question asked by Tha'mma "If there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know?" (Ghosh 1988, 151)—crystallizes the novel's questioning of borders' epistemic significance. In addition to being actual and having lethal material repercussions, as demonstrated by Tridib's death, borders are also fictional, existing nowhere in physical geography, and epistemologically complex, needing knowledge of both their imaginative formation and their material implications.

With his secondhand knowledge and creative involvement, the narrator comes to understand this intricacy. He recognizes borders as "shadow lines," real and imagined, present and absent at the same time. This comprehension necessitates the kind of epistemological complexity that results from the essential awareness of mediation and construction that comes from secondhand knowledge.

Conclusion: Toward a Diasporic Epistemology

The novel shows that secondhand experience, inherited memory, and vicarious knowledge work as valid epistemic modes in their own right, capable of producing knowledge that is profound, phenomenologically rich, and genuinely authentic. The narrator's secondhand understanding of London, Dhaka, and Partition proves genuinely formative — it shapes his identity and his sense of the past just as powerfully as anything lived.

Secondly, in situations when geographical relocation, temporal disruption, and generational separation fracture direct experience, imagination serves as the principal epistemic instrument. Tridib's theory of desire-driven imagination, which transcends "the limits of one's mind to other times and other places" (Ghosh 1988, 29), presents an alternative to the empiricist emphasis on presence and observation.

The novel dismisses biological, geographical, or temporal proximity as factors influencing epistemic authority. Authenticity originates from profound engagement—what Tridib refers to as "genuine desire"—rather than mere physical presence (Ghosh 1988, 29). The narrator's mental connection with Dhaka carries a genuineness of its own, rooted in deliberate emotional investment.

Furthermore, utilizing Hirsch's terminology, the novel illustrates that postmemory, characterized as "memories inherited from previous generations," can possess a phenomenological potency and identity-forming capacity comparable to personal memory (2012, 5). The narrator's postmemory of Partition deeply influences his consciousness, just as Tha'mma's actual experience impacts hers.

Moreover, knowledge within the diaspora is inherently formulated through narrative synthesis and dialogic awareness. According to Bakhtin, consciousness is “populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others” (1981, 294). The narrator's comprehension of Tridib's demise, assembled from several fragmented narratives, exemplifies how diasporic individuals must perpetually recreate reality from mediated sources.

This reading of *The Shadow Lines* offers epistemological arguments that extend beyond the novel itself, speaking to the broader condition of postmemory. If postmemory carries the same evidentiary and emotional weight as memory, then later generations of diasporic people have as much claim as those who came before them to their own histories, traumas, and identities — and need not feel guilty for not having been physically present.

This study also challenges the notion that authenticity belongs only to those connected to the diaspora through biological lineage or geographical proximity. Instead, it argues that authenticity is a matter of engagement with a diasporic experience, not simply an accident of birth. Displacement, in this light, need not be understood only as loss. For many diasporic individuals, it can be a distinct and clarifying way of encountering their own history.

The diasporic individual's essential understanding of mediation, construction, and multiple viewpoints reflects a distinct epistemic sophistication, grounded in an active awareness of how knowledge is made rather than simply assumed. In the modern mediated reality, characterized by the predominance of digital media in knowledge dissemination, an unprecedented number of displaced populations due to global migration, the emergence of new forms of displacement and inherited trauma from climate change, and the facilitation of vicarious participation in remote events through social media, the novel's endorsement of secondhand knowledge, imaginative involvement, and vicarious experience directly addresses contemporary circumstances.

As Ghosh's narrator implies, humans may now perceive the world through inverted telescopes, familiarizing themselves with locations they have never visited, encountering events they have never observed, and harboring memories that do not belong to them in any straightforward manner. This study argues that living primarily through inherited memory and secondhand experience need not be perceived as an epistemic deficiency. Rather, it is a rich, intricate, and wholly legitimate way of knowing and being in the world.

In the end, this study argues that secondhand experience is not confined to those living in fractured, mediated modern states — it is fast becoming the norm. Diasporic individuals routinely lean on imagination, longing, and inherited memory to build their own sense of the world. Though Ghosh wrote a novel, not a philosophical treatise, its meditations on knowledge, memory, and how we come to understand reality speak to anyone piecing together fragments of a history they did not live through firsthand.

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