



Plant-Thinking Calcutta: Vegetable Temporality, Botanical Affect, and Urban Ecology in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Mahananda Biswas

Research Scholar in English, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Central University of Haryana, Mahendragarh, Haryana, India

Abstract:

This paper investigates the largely unexplored dimension of plant-thinking in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), arguing that the novel's botanical imaginary—its recurring invocations of trees, gardens, monsoon vegetation, and decaying organic matter across the cityscape of Calcutta—constitutes a complex philosophical and ecological statement about time, memory, affect, and postcolonial urban life. Drawing on Michael Marder's philosophy of plant-thinking, Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder's collaborative theorisation of vegetal being, and Timothy Morton's concept of the ecological thought, this paper reads Ghosh's Calcutta not merely as a human-centred metropolis but as a deeply vegetated, multi-temporal organism in which plants function as affective agents, temporal markers, and ecological counter-narratives to the violence of partition and nationalist modernity. The analysis focuses on three interlocking themes: vegetable temporality, or the way plant life in the novel disrupts linear historical time by asserting cyclical, slow, and non-teleological durations; botanical affect, or the capacity of plants in Ghosh's prose to generate and mediate emotional states in characters and readers; and urban ecology, or the manner in which Calcutta's green spaces, monsoon weeds, and domestic flora enact alternative visions of the city against the grain of colonial and nationalist cartography. The paper concludes that Ghosh's plant-thinking anticipates contemporary ecocritical concerns and positions *The Shadow Lines* as a foundational text for a botanical poetics of the South Asian city.

Keywords: Plant, Botany, Urban, Ecology, Vegetable, Anthropocene, Postcolonialism.

1. Introduction: The Vegetal City

When Amitav Ghosh's unnamed narrator looks out from the window of his Calcutta home in *The Shadow Lines*, he does not merely observe a cityscape of crumbling buildings, monsoon-slicked streets, and postcolonial human traffic. He observes a city that breathes through its

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plants. Banyan roots crack opens colonial masonry. Monsoon grass erupts through pavement. Mango trees extend canopies over boundary walls, indifferent to the lines of partition and property that preoccupy the novel's human characters. In a text so richly preoccupied with borders-national, familial, psychological, historical-the botanical world of Calcutta offers something quietly radical: a form of life that does not recognise the shadow lines that humans draw across the earth.

Critical attention to *The Shadow Lines* has overwhelmingly focused on its treatment of memory and time (Srivastava; Khair), its engagement with partition and nationalist violence (Mondal), its narrative structure and the epistemology of the witness (Chambers), and its postcolonial politics of place (Gopal). The novel's rich botanical texture has remained almost entirely unexamined. This paper addresses that gap by bringing to bear on Ghosh's text the emergent field of critical plant studies and its philosophical counterpart, plant-thinking, as articulated most extensively in the fascinating work of Michael Marder.

Marder's *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013) argues that plants constitute a mode of being that Western philosophy has systematically marginalised, reducing vegetal life to mere resource, backdrop, or symbol. Against this reduction, Marder proposes a rigorous phenomenology of the plant: its non-teleological growth, its distributed and non-centralised selfhood, its deep entanglement with environment, its strange relationship to time-growing always in the present while simultaneously archiving the past in wood and root. For Marder, plant-thinking is not merely a philosophy about plants; it is a thinking-with-plants, a mode of philosophical attention that loosens the subject's grip on linear time, bounded identity, and instrumental reason.

This paper argues that Ghosh, writing in 1988, performs precisely this kind of thinking in *The Shadow Lines*, embedding within his prose a sustained vegetal philosophy of Calcutta that anticipates Marder's theoretical programme. Reading the novel through the lenses of vegetable temporality, botanical affect, and urban ecology, I trace the ways in which plant life in the text generates counter-narratives to the dominant human stories of nationalism, memory, and violence. The argument proceeds in five sections: a theoretical framework establishing the key concepts; a reading of Calcutta as botanical palimpsest; an analysis of vegetable temporality in the novel; a discussion of botanical affect and its relationship to Ghosh's narrative form; and a concluding reflection on the novel's contribution to a postcolonial plant poetics.

2. Marder, Vegetal Being, and the Ecological City

The philosophical underpinning of this paper rests on three interlocking theoretical frameworks: Marder's plant-thinking, Morton's ecological thought, and postcolonial urban ecology as developed by scholars including Rashmi Varma and Nikhil Anand.

Marder's central contribution is to identify what he calls the 'vegetal soul'-a concept retrieved and radically revised from Aristotle-as a mode of being characterised by nutritive, reproductive, and sensitive capacities without the higher faculties of reason or locomotion that Aristotle attributed to animals and humans. Rather than seeing this as a deficiency, Marder reads vegetal life as a positive philosophical model: plants are radically open to their environment in a way that bounded, mobile, rational subjects are not. The plant's rootedness is not imprisonment but a form of profound dwelling; its growth is not purposive striving but an ongoing, non-teleological unfolding in which present, past, and future coexist simultaneously in the living tissue of wood, stem, flower, and decay.

Particularly relevant to this paper is Marder's account of vegetal temporality. Plants, he argues, embody a 'heterochrony'-a multiplicity of times coexisting in a single organism. The annual rings of a tree are archives; the blossom is pure present; the seed is futurity folded back

into the now. This heterochrony disrupts the linear, progressive temporality that Enlightenment modernity-and, in a colonial context, the colonial civilising mission-imposed upon non-European peoples and places. In the postcolonial city, where colonial time and indigenous time, modernising time and traditional time collide and interpenetrate, vegetal heterochrony offers a philosophical resource for imagining temporal multiplicity without hierarchy.

Timothy Morton's *The Ecological Thought* (2010) supplements Marder's framework with the concept of the 'mesh'-the radical interconnectedness of all life forms in ways that cannot be cleanly mapped, bounded, or controlled. Morton's ecological thinking shares with Marder's plant-thinking a suspicion of clean lines, bounded categories, and instrumental reason. For Morton, ecological thinking is not a comfortable return to nature but a confrontation with the strange, the uncanny, and the entangled. This resonates powerfully with Ghosh's own project in *The Shadow Lines*, which is precisely a confrontation with the strangeness of borders and the uncanny permeability of boundaries that humans imagine to be solid.

Finally, postcolonial urban ecology, as theorised by scholars including Varma (*The Postcolonial City and Its Subjects*) and Anand (*Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructures of Citizenship in Mumbai*), attends to the ways in which ecological processes in the postcolonial city are never simply natural but are always already saturated with histories of colonial extraction, capitalist development, caste and class stratification, and nationalist re-imagination. Calcutta, the former imperial capital of British India, is a particularly rich site for this analysis: its ecology-its river, its monsoon, its extraordinary biodiversity of urban plants-bears the marks of colonial botanical science, indigenous knowledge systems, postcolonial neglect, and the ongoing creative improvisation of its poorest inhabitants.

3. Calcutta as Botanical Palimpsest

The Shadow Lines presents Calcutta not as a fixed, knowable city but as what I propose to call a botanical palimpsest: a layered urban organism in which different historical eras, different systems of knowledge, and different modes of dwelling are simultaneously inscribed in the vegetated fabric of the city. The term palimpsest-originally designating a manuscript in which earlier writing persists beneath later overwriting-has become a standard figure in urban historiography (Huysen). Prefixing it with 'botanical' emphasises that the layering in question is not merely architectural or cultural but genuinely ecological: the plants of Calcutta are themselves archives of historical time.

Ghosh's Calcutta is saturated with plant life that functions as historical memory. The large banyan trees that appear throughout the novel are among the oldest living organisms in the city; their aerial roots, which descend to create secondary trunks, literalise the palimpsestic structure of vegetal time. A banyan's multiple trunks do not replace one another in linear succession; they coexist, creating a space of temporal multiplicity in a single organism. When the narrator walks through Calcutta's older neighbourhoods-Bhowanipur, Lake Gardens, the lanes around the family home-the trees he passes are not background detail but temporal agents, organisms whose growth spans the colonial and postcolonial periods simultaneously.

The domestic gardens of the novel are particularly rich in botanical palimpsest. The garden attached to the family home in Calcutta is described with an attention to its mixed, unruly ecology that resists the colonial garden's characteristic ordering impulse. Colonial botany in India was intimately connected to the project of imperial ordering: the Royal Botanic Garden at Shibpur, established in 1787, was a site at which the Indian subcontinent's plant life was classified, renamed, and reorganised according to Linnaean taxonomy and the economic interests of the East India Company. The domestic garden in *The Shadow Lines*, by contrast, is a space of botanical indiscipline: mango and jackfruit trees mingle with introduced ornamental species; monsoon weeds reclaim flower beds; the boundary between garden and street is

perpetually contested by vegetation.

This botanical indiscipline is itself a form of postcolonial counter-memory. If colonial botany sought to impose taxonomic order on Indian plant life, the unruly domestic gardens of Ghosh's Calcutta resist such ordering, maintaining what we might call a vegetal heteroglossia—a multiplicity of plant voices, ecological histories, and temporal rhythms coexisting without resolution. The monsoon, which returns with overwhelming regularity throughout the novel, is the great agent of this botanical indiscipline: it defeats the ordering impulse, flooding beds, propagating weeds, releasing the stored energies of dormant seeds. In the monsoon, Calcutta's botanical palimpsest becomes fully visible: the city's carefully maintained surfaces are undone, and an older, deeper ecology reasserts itself.

The Ganga itself—the river that defines Calcutta's western edge—participates in this botanical palimpsest. The river carries downstream a constant freight of organic matter: leaves, seeds, root fragments, the dissolved chemistry of the Himalayan watersheds. This riparian flow connects Calcutta's urban botany to a vast hinterland, making the city's plant life an archive not merely of local history but of the entire Gangetic basin. Ghosh's narrator is acutely sensitive to this fluvial-botanical connectivity, which disrupts the nationalist cartography that his text repeatedly interrogates. The shadow lines that divide Bengal into East and West, that separate Dhaka from Calcutta, cannot interrupt the river's botanical flow.

4. Vegetable Temporality: The Slow Time of Plants in *The Shadow Lines*

One of the most striking formal features of *The Shadow Lines* is its non-linear treatment of time. The novel moves associatively between decades—from the 1930s to the 1960s to the 1980s—without the signposting of conventional historical fiction. Critics have read this temporal structure in terms of memory's own non-linearity (Chambers), the epistemological limits of the witness (Khair), and the deconstructive logic of the border (Mondal). This paper proposes an additional and complementary reading: the novel's temporal form is vegetal, modelled on the heterochrony of plant life rather than the sequential unfolding of human biographical time.

Marder argues that plants experience time in a fundamentally different register from animals. Rooted in a single place, unable to flee predators or seek resources through locomotion, plants have developed a temporal intelligence that is simultaneously archival (storing past time in wood and root), presentational (continuously responsive to the immediate conditions of light, water, temperature), and anticipatory (flowering and fruiting in response to seasonal cues that function as a kind of temporal projection). This triple temporality—past, present, and future coexisting in the living organism—corresponds remarkably closely to the narrative logic of *The Shadow Lines*, in which the narrator's present-tense investigation continually opens onto stored memories (both personal and collective) and projects these memories into an always-deferred understanding.

The novel's most sustained engagement with vegetable temporality occurs in its treatment of the mango tree in the family garden. The mango appears at multiple temporal moments in the narrative: as a young tree in the narrator's childhood; as a mature tree providing shade during the long summers of the 1960s; as an aging tree whose fruit production has declined by the 1980s. This arboreal life-cycle provides the novel with a temporal scaffold that differs fundamentally from the human life-cycles it parallels. The mango tree does not experience its ageing as decline in the way Tridib or Ila experience their mortality; it simply continues to grow, each year's ring of wood archiving the year's conditions of rainfall, heat, and shade. The tree is present to all the periods of the novel simultaneously in a way that no human character can be.

Crucially, the mango tree witnesses without judging. It is present during the domestic arguments that punctuate the narrator's childhood, during the silences that descend after

Tridib's death, during the political tensions of the 1964 riots that constitute the novel's historical climax. Its witness is not the interpretive, evaluative witness of the human narrator but the silent, archival witness of the plant: a storage of chemical and biological memory without narrative or meaning. In this, the mango tree models a form of historical attention that Ghosh's text repeatedly invokes but can never quite achieve through its human narrator, whose understanding is always partial, always belated, always structured by desire and loss.

The monsoon weeds that erupt through Calcutta's pavements and vacant lots offer a different register of vegetable temporality: the temporality of the opportunist, the coloniser of the margin, the organism that makes use of the gaps in the human world to assert its own temporal rhythms. These weeds-Ghosh does not name them botanically, and this refusal of naming is itself significant-grow with extraordinary rapidity, achieving in weeks what trees accomplish in decades. Their speed is not the speed of human urgency or narrative acceleration; it is the speed of vegetable opportunism, the exploitation of niches opened by neglect, displacement, or destruction.

The weeds that reclaim the vacant plots of Calcutta's older neighbourhoods are, in this sense, ecological memory of a different kind from the mango tree's arboreal archive. They mark the places where buildings have been demolished, where families have fled, where the urban fabric has torn. In a city defined by the successive displacements of partition, refugee influx, deindustrialisation, and communal violence, the weeds of Calcutta are botanical memorials: organisms that grow in the space of human absence. Their temporality is the temporality of aftermath, of the ecological community that forms in the wake of catastrophe.

Ghosh's sensitivity to this weed-memory is most evident in the passages describing the narrator's walks through the areas of Calcutta affected by the 1964 riots. Here, the vegetation of neglect-the uncut grass, the untended shrubs, the vines climbing over damaged walls-is not merely picturesque ruin but active ecological process, a vegetal temporality of recovery and reclamation that proceeds independently of human political time. The riots occupy a specific moment in the nationalist calendar; the weeds know no such calendar. Their time is the time of soil chemistry and rainfall, of seed dormancy and germination, of the slow work of decomposition and renewal.

5. Botanical Affect: The Emotional Grammar of Plant Life

If vegetable temporality addresses the novel's relationship to time, botanical affect addresses its relationship to feeling. The concept of botanical affect, as I use it here, refers to the capacity of plants-and of plant-saturated environments-to generate, mediate, and sustain emotional states in both fictional characters and readers. This is not a matter of pathetic fallacy in the conventional literary sense, in which plants mirror or intensify human emotions; it is, rather, a recognition that plant life participates in the affective economies of Ghosh's Calcutta as a genuine, if non-human, agent.

The philosophical basis for this claim can be found in Marder's account of vegetal sensitivity. Marder argues, drawing on both Aristotelian tradition and contemporary plant biology, that plants are not passive but sensitive organisms: they respond to light, gravity, touch, chemical signals, and the presence of other organisms. This sensitivity does not constitute consciousness in any form we would recognise, but it does constitute a form of affect-a responsiveness to environment that is prior to and independent of human emotional projection. When we speak of botanical affect in Ghosh's text, we are speaking of this vegetal sensitivity as it enters the affective field of the novel.

The most sustained instance of botanical affect in *The Shadow Lines* is the jasmine vine that climbs the wall of the family home. The jasmine appears repeatedly across the novel's different temporal registers, and its fragrance functions as what Proust might have called an

involuntary memory trigger—a non-linguistic, non-visual, olfactory stimulus that opens directly onto the past. When the narrator smells jasmine in London or in the apartments of Calcutta's newer neighbourhoods, the smell immediately transports him, not through a process of conscious recollection but through the body's own affective memory, to the family home, to the specific quality of Calcutta evening light filtered through jasmine flowers, to the social world of his childhood.

This jasmine-triggered effect is botanical in a precise sense: it operates through the plant's own chemical agency, its production of volatile aromatic compounds, rather than through human symbolic or narrative mediation. The plant produces its fragrance for its own reproductive purposes—to attract pollinators—but in doing so it enters into an affective relationship with the humans who inhabit its environment. This relationship is not metaphorical but genuinely ecological: the jasmine and the human inhabitants of the Calcutta home form an affective community in which the plant's chemistry and the human's emotional life are genuinely entangled.

The monsoon in Calcutta is not merely a meteorological event but a vegetative one: it is the period of most intense plant growth, the season when Calcutta's botanical life asserts itself most forcefully against the human built environment. And in *The Shadow Lines*, the monsoon consistently carries an affective charge that exceeds its meteorological description. When the rains arrive, characters experience not merely physical relief from the heat but an emotional transformation—a loosening of the repressions and anxieties that accumulate during the dry season, a softening of the boundaries between self and environment, a diffusion of what had seemed like solid, separable emotional states into something more fluid and more shared.

This monsoon affect is botanical in the sense that it is produced by and through the plant world's response to rainfall. The smell of wet earth—petrichor—is generated by the interaction of rainfall with soil bacteria and plant matter; the visual transformation of the city as vegetation intensifies its green is a botanical event as much as a meteorological one; the acoustic environment of the monsoon city, with its amplified insect sounds and rustling vegetation, is a soundscape produced by the heightened activity of the non-human biological world. The human characters' affective responses to the monsoon are thus responses to a botanical event: they are moved, emotionally, by the plant world's movement.

Botanical affect in *The Shadow Lines* also operates through what we might call the affective architecture of absence. In the passages describing the family home in Dhaka—which the narrator never visits but reconstructs through Tridib's narratives and Ila's memories—the plant life of the abandoned garden functions as the primary affective medium through which the loss of partition is communicated. The untended garden of the Dhaka house, with its overgrown paths, its mango trees gone wild, its jasmine strangled by more aggressive vegetation, is an affective landscape of mourning that operates through botanical imagery rather than through direct human expression of grief.

This is, in Marder's terms, a plant-thinking of loss: a mode of mourning that works through vegetal imagery because vegetal life—its indifference to human borders, its capacity to grow across the divisions that partition creates, its archiving of a pre-partition continuity in the living tissue of trees older than the nations they now inhabit—can express what human language, shaped by the categories of nation, community, and bounded identity, cannot easily say. The plants of Dhaka and the plants of Calcutta are, botanically speaking, of the same ecologies; the line of partition has no meaning for the banyan or the mango. Their botanical effect is thus a form of ecological grief for the violence of human division.

6. Urban Ecology and the Politics of Green Space in Calcutta

Plant-Thinking Calcutta: Vegetable Temporality, Botanical Affect, and Urban Ecology in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

The Shadow Lines engages not only with individual plants and plant communities but with the broader question of urban ecology—the organisation, distribution, and politics of green space in the colonial and postcolonial city. Calcutta's ecology at the time of the novel's events—the 1960s and the 1980s—was under severe pressure from population growth driven by partition refugees, the decline of colonial-era infrastructure, industrial pollution of the Hooghly, and the rapid expansion of informal settlements across what had been agricultural land at the city's periphery. This ecological crisis is present in *The Shadow Lines* not as explicit political commentary but as texture: the gradual disappearance of certain kinds of urban green, the transformation of garden plots into concrete, the increasing enclosure of the city's remaining open spaces.

The politics of green space in Calcutta has always been inseparable from the politics of class and colonial inheritance. The large parks and garden estates of south Calcutta—the Maidan, the parks of Alipore, the Victoria Memorial grounds—were products of colonial urban planning designed to provide the European population with an approximation of English parkland in the Indian tropics. These spaces remain, in the postcolonial city, as ambiguous inheritances: they are public in name but their design, their species composition (English oaks, banyans planted in colonial-era arrangements), and their social use remain marked by their colonial origins. When Ghosh's characters walk through these spaces, they navigate not merely a botanical environment but a colonial botanical legacy.

Against this colonial green space, Ghosh's novel consistently privileges a different, less formally organised botanical environment: the domestic garden, the neighbourhood banyan tree, the community of street plants that colonise the cracks between pavement and wall. This preference is not nostalgic primitivism but a genuine ecological politics: these informal plant communities represent a mode of urban ecology that is more responsive to the local environment, more diverse in species composition, and more fully integrated with the human communities that tend and use them than the colonial parkland with its imposed English aesthetic.

The domestic garden of the Calcutta family home is the novel's primary site of this alternative urban ecology. It is tended by multiple generations of women whose relationship to its plants constitutes a form of ecological knowledge that is simultaneously practical, affective, and philosophical. The grandmother's knowledge of which plants to tend, which to allow to grow freely, and which to remove reflects a long engagement with the garden's ecology that cannot be reduced to either the scientific taxonomy of colonial botany or the aesthetic conventions of the English garden. It is an ecological knowledge embedded in daily practice, in the rhythms of seasonal tending, in the kind of close, patient attention that Marder associates with plant-thinking itself.

This domestic ecological knowledge is gendered in ways that the novel does not fully thematise but persistently implies. The women of the family—the grandmother, the narrator's mother, the memory of Tridib's mother—are the primary ecological agents of the domestic garden. Their labour of tending, their knowledge of plant behaviour, their integration of garden plants into domestic ritual and cooking, constitutes a form of ecological citizenship that exists below the threshold of the nationalist political sphere that occupies the novel's foreground. Against the masculine politics of nation, border, and riot, the feminine ecology of the domestic garden offers a counter-narrative of continuity, tending, and biological renewal.

The urban ecology of *The Shadow Lines* also engages with the question of ecological connectivity across the divisions of the city. Calcutta's botanical communities are not bounded by neighbourhood or ward; birds, insects, and wind carry seeds across the entire urban territory, and the roots of large trees extend beneath streets and walls to reach water sources that no human cartography respects. The novel's sensitivity to this botanical connectivity—its awareness that the banyan's roots reach beneath the lines that divide one property from another,

one neighbourhood from the next, one nation from another-constitutes a form of ecological political thinking that resonates deeply with its central concern with the violence of borders.

The Shadow Lines was written in the immediate aftermath of the catastrophic Bhopal gas disaster of 1984 and during a period of acute awareness in India of the relationship between industrial development, ecological destruction, and human vulnerability. Ghosh does not address industrial pollution directly in the novel, but the ecological anxiety of this period is present as a background concern: the gradual diminishment of Calcutta's biological diversity, the increasing toxicity of its waterways, the loss of the green buffers between neighbourhood and neighbourhood that had once made the city's ecology porous and resilient. The alternative urban ecology that the novel's botanical imagery quietly advocates-diverse, informal, tended by local knowledge, connected across institutional boundaries-is implicitly offered as a counter-model to the industrial-developmental ecology that was transforming Indian cities in the 1980s.

7. Towards a Postcolonial Plant Poetics

Having traced the operations of vegetable temporality, botanical affect, and urban ecology in *The Shadow Lines*, I wish in this concluding section to place the novel within a broader theoretical and literary-historical context: the emergence of what I am calling a postcolonial plant poetics.

Postcolonial literature has long been attentive to landscape and ecology, from Chinua Achebe's attention to the ecological rhythms of the yam harvest in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to Derek Walcott's botanical imagery of Caribbean rootedness and uprootedness, to the ecocritical dimensions of Arundhati Roy's treatment of the Kottayam backwaters in *The God of Small Things*. What has been less theorised is the specifically botanical dimension of this postcolonial ecological attention: the ways in which the plant world-its temporality, its affect, its politics-is mobilised as a resource for postcolonial literary and philosophical thinking.

Ghosh's contribution to this postcolonial plant poetics is distinctive in at least three respects. First, his botanical imagery is consistently connected to the philosophical problem of the border. Plants, in *The Shadow Lines*, are the primary agents of what we might call ecological border critique: their indifference to human-drawn lines, their capacity to grow across divisions, their archiving of pre-partition continuities makes them natural (in both senses) critics of nationalist cartography. This is a more nuanced ecological politics than the simple opposition of nature and culture; Ghosh recognises that the plant world is itself shaped by human history (through cultivation, colonial botany, urban development) while simultaneously exceeding and undermining human control.

Second, Ghosh's plant-thinking is deeply embedded in the specific ecology of Bengal-its deltaic geography, its extraordinary monsoon, its particular communities of plants shaped by millennia of human habitation and agriculture. This specificity is philosophically important: a plant poetics that draws on the specific vegetation of a specific place resists the universalising gestures of Western plant philosophy (including, at times, Marder's own work) and insists on the irreducible particularity of ecological knowledge. The mango tree of the Calcutta garden is not a generic tree; it is a specimen of a specific cultivar, in a specific soil, in a specific monsoon regime, with a specific history of cultivation and tending. Ghosh's botanical attention to this specificity is a form of what we might call ecological epistemological humility-an insistence that ecological knowledge is always local, always embodied, always situated.

Third, Ghosh's plant-thinking is inseparable from his thinking about memory and loss. The botanical affect of *The Shadow Lines* is predominantly an affect of mourning: mourning for the ecological and human continuities disrupted by partition, for the gardens of Dhaka that no longer belong to the family that tended them, for the biological communities of Bengal that

nationalism has artificially divided into Indian and Bangladeshi ecologies. In this, the novel participates in what the environmental humanities call 'ecological grief'-the mourning of ecological loss that is increasingly recognised as a significant affective and political experience in the anthropocene. Ghosh's anticipation of this discourse in 1988 is remarkable, and it is made possible by his plant-thinking: it is precisely because plants archive time, mediate affect, and ignore borders that they become, in *The Shadow Lines*, the primary medium of ecological mourning.

The postcolonial plant poetics that Ghosh's novel participates in is, finally, a politics of attention. To attend to the plant life of Calcutta-to notice the mango tree's annual cycle, to register the jasmine's fragrance as a historical event, to understand the monsoon weed's eruption as ecological memory-is to practice a form of slow, patient, distributed attention that is the opposite of the nationalist politics of urgent, bounded, violent identity. The shadow lines that the novel's title invokes are drawn by this politics of urgency; the botanical counter-narrative that I have been tracing is drawn by a different temporal and affective logic-slower, more distributed, more open to the entanglements of the non-human world.

8. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* contains a rich and philosophically sophisticated engagement with the plant world of Calcutta that has hitherto been overlooked by criticism. Reading the novel through the frameworks of plant-thinking, ecological thought, and postcolonial urban ecology, I have traced three interconnected dimensions of its botanical imaginary: vegetable temporality, in which plants disrupt and complicate the novel's human temporal narratives; botanical affect, in which the plant world's chemical and sensory agencies mediate and generate the novel's emotional intensities; and urban ecology, in which the political distribution of green space in the postcolonial city is implicitly contested through the novel's preference for informal, diverse, locally-tended botanical communities over the colonial garden's imposed order.

The broader significance of this reading is twofold. For Ghosh scholarship, it opens a new dimension of one of contemporary Indian literature's richest and most discussed texts, suggesting that the novel's ecological imaginary is as philosophically substantial as its treatment of memory, border, and nationalism. For the field of postcolonial ecocriticism and critical plant studies, it suggests that the South Asian literary tradition contains resources for a plant poetics that are not merely illustrative of but genuinely contributory to the philosophical frameworks being developed in the environmental humanities.

The Shadow Lines ends, famously, with the narrator's inability to draw the line-to locate the moment and place where violence begins, where borders become real, where the shadow lines harden into walls. Against this human failure of mapping, the novel's botanical world continues its patient, distributed, temporally multiple work: the mango tree rings another year, the jasmine releases its fragrance, the monsoon weeds reclaim another patch of cracked pavement. In this vegetal persistence, Ghosh's novel offers not consolation but companionship-the companionship of organisms that have always lived across the lines that humans draw, and that will continue to do so long after the lines themselves are forgotten.

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Bio-note

Mahananda Biswas is a doctoral research scholar in English at the Department of English and Foreign Languages, Central University of Haryana, Mahendragarh, Haryana, India with a deep academic focus on the postcolonial novels (written in original English language) that deals with the city of Calcutta/Kolkata. He has qualified for Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) and eligibility for Assistant Professor in the National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) conducted by University Grants Commission. He has qualified State Eligibility Test (SET) in English as well as Central Teacher Eligibility Test (CTET) and State Teacher Eligibility Test. He taught English as a guest faculty for several years at Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India. He is a former student of University of Calcutta. His research area explores the representation of Calcutta in postcolonial English novels, examining how the city functions as more than a mere geographical backdrop. Calcutta - with its layered colonial history, its teeming subaltern life, and its unresolved tensions between tradition and modernity - emerges in postcolonial fiction as a dynamic site of memory, identity, and resistance. His study investigates how literary representations of Calcutta negotiate the legacies of British imperialism, partition, urban poverty, and cultural hybridity, ultimately revealing the city as a

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living palimpsest of postcolonial experience.

Email Id: mahananda.mb@gmail.com

