

Negotiating Cultural Memory and Postcolonial Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of The Day*

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Abstract

This paper makes a comparison between Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* to explore how cultural memory and inherited history influence individual identity in the wake of empire. Both narratives are retrospective and first-person; both are journeys, and both characters have to deal with a past they have not caused. Through a comparative postcolonial approach, the study seeks to combine close textual analysis with the latest scholarship in the fields of memory, diaspora, border, and belonging. It explores the reconstruction of the past, the conflict between personal memory and official history, the displacement and politics of belonging, the silence and emotional sublimation, and each protagonist's negotiation of an identity that is informed by colonial legacies. The focal point of the study is the presentation of two novelistic models of the function of memory. Ghosh's narrator mines his family's memory and others' for his cousin Tridib's story, and this shared memory becomes the grounds for transcending political boundaries. Ishiguro's memory is a private and protective story: Stevens's memory shields him from the truth of his own story, and his institutional code of dignity is indistinguishable from his complicity. Taken together, the novels make the point that cultural memory is not a record of the past but a continual negotiation, and that a postcolonial identity depends on the kind of memory one exercises: generously or defensively. The study makes a significant contribution to comparative postcolonial criticism by offering a reading of the South Asian and British fiction as a relationship of settlements with a shared imperial past.

Keywords: Cultural memory; postcolonial identity; comparative postcolonial criticism; borders and belonging; displacement; silence and emotional restraint; colonial legacies; Amitav Ghosh; *The Shadow Lines*; Kazuo Ishiguro; *The Remains of the Day*.

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) were published within a year of each other, yet they are usually read at opposite ends of the postcolonial map. One is a novel of South Asian memory, built around Partition, communal violence, and the imagined geographies linking Calcutta, Dhaka, and London. The other is a novel of English decline, filtered through the recollections of a butler driving across the countryside he has never allowed himself to see. This paper reads them side by side, on the argument that they are engaged in the same difficult task: negotiating a self out of a past that was inherited rather than chosen.

The two novels share a structural premise that makes the comparison productive. Both are retrospective first-person narratives organised around a journey, and in both the journey releases memory rather than simply passing time. Ghosh's narrator reconstructs the life and death of his cousin Tridib from family stories, letters, and the testimony of an English woman who was present in Dhaka when Tridib was killed in communal violence (Riso, 2025; Sikder & Talukder, 2025). Ishiguro's butler, Stevens, drives from Darlington Hall to the West Country in 1956, revisiting his service to Lord Darlington and the professional code that kept him from acting on what he knew about his employer's politics (Akshay & Somveer, 2025; Milković, 2021). In both texts, the past functions as something the protagonist must re-enter and re-possess, and identity emerges from how that re-entry is performed.

The critical problem this paper addresses is the relationship between memory and identity in the aftermath of empire. Recent scholarship has established that memory, both personal and collective, is central to postcolonial identity formation, since it allows writers to reconstruct suppressed histories and bridge past and present (Gardner & Joshi, 2021; Khatoon, 2026). Studies of Ghosh have shown how the novel destabilises geopolitical borders by revealing their imaginative and psychological construction (Ghosh, 2025), while studies of Ishiguro have traced how his narrator questions the "national greatness" of empire through a voice that is itself a product of that empire (Alamri, 2022). What has not been adequately examined is the exact point of convergence between these two lines of inquiry. Reading the novels together makes visible a contrast that neither text reveals alone: Ghosh treats memory as a shared, imaginative resource that can reach across political lines, whereas Ishiguro treats memory as a private, self-protective narrative that finally fails its narrator.

The comparative focus is therefore not thematic resemblance but functional difference. The paper examines cultural memory, personal memory against official history, displacement and belonging, silence and emotional restraint, and the ways protagonists negotiate identities shaped by histories they did not create. The central argument is that the two novels represent complementary postcolonial positions, the formerly colonised subject and the servant of a declining empire, and that both positions require the same fundamental labour: remembering in a way that makes the self coherent rather than merely comfortable.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Recent Scholarship on *The Shadow Lines*

Criticism of *The Shadow Lines* in the last five years has clustered around the novel's treatment of borders, memory, and national identity. A recurring claim is that Ghosh exposes the artificiality of political boundaries by revealing their psychological construction. One study argues that the novel destabilises cartographic certainties through fragmented memories, transnational movements, and intergenerational narratives, and that it reinterprets borders as constructs sustained more by memory and imagination than by material permanence (Ghosh, 2025). Related work reads the novel through the framework of transnational identity, showing how its three generations across Calcutta, Dhaka, and London blur the lines between nations and families (Hoda et al., 2024).

Memory is widely recognised as the novel's central technique. Critics have described its non-linear narrative as a form of "memory montage" through which the narrator traverses forty years and re-imagines spatial and temporal boundaries (Nandini, 2023). Others have examined how memory objects, such as photographs and relics of the past, anchor the characters' shifting spatial identities. The role of memory in rethinking official history has also been emphasised: personal storytelling opens a space for questioning the violence and exclusions of nationalist discourse, and memory becomes a site of resistance that enables hybrid identities (Sarkar, 2025).

The novel's treatment of Partition and communal violence has drawn sustained attention. The Dhaka and Calcutta riots of 1963 and 1964, which erupt after the theft of the holy relic from the Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar, are read as traumatic episodes whose belated recognition structures the narrative (Riso, 2025). Diasporic readings trace the trauma of displacement through characters such as Tridib, the narrator, Thamma, Ila, and May, and describe a pervasive "search for home" in lives fractured by migration and war (Sikder & Talukder, 2025). The figure of the grandmother has been especially important to this line of criticism (Nayana & Manjula, 2022). Studies of Thamma show her adopted nationalism as a direct consequence of the geopolitical divide, and read her failed attempt to cross the line as evidence that the novel's boundaries are lived, painful realities rather than shadowy abstractions (Nuruzzaman & Islam, 2022). In a complementary reading, Thamma's ardent nationalism is the position the novel questions, and her identity is examined as that of a woman who faced tragedy yet refused to be silenced (Nayana & Manjula, 2022).

2.2 Recent Scholarship on *The Remains of the Day*

Recent criticism of *The Remains of the Day* has centred on memory, dignity, Englishness, and the politics of empire. A central claim is that Stevens's memory is not a record but a defence. Studies argue that his unreliable narrative uses memory as a tool for self-deception and a trigger for delayed self-awareness, and that the novel attacks the cultural exaltation of loyalty and restraint that estranges individuals from their own desires (Akshay & Somveer, 2025). Memory has been described as a "powerful medium" that determines identity, with Stevens's journey forcing him to confront the futility of a life spent in service (Bansal & Arora, 2025).

The theme of ethical silence has recently received detailed treatment. One study argues that Ishiguro's narrators engage the past cautiously, selectively, and with emotional discipline, and that "ethical silence" operates as a strategy of self-preservation achieved through restraint, omission, and understatement (Bhadoriya, 2026). Stevens's measured recollections, in this reading, mask political and emotional complicity (Bhadoriya, 2026). This connects to work on the novel's class politics, which reads Stevens as a subject constructed by ideological apparatuses, whose professionalism is less a virtue than a performance that dissolves the self. Psychoanalytic approaches similarly find that Stevens has little sense of himself, his identity rendered invisible by excessive identification with his master, and track the breakdown of this narcissistic defence (Thomas, 2025).

The question of Englishness remains central to the novel's recent reception. Critics have examined the novel's representation of the gentleman as a quintessentially English phenomenon, and noted that Stevens's knowledge of England is limited to photographs in encyclopedias and the *National Geographic Magazine*, so that his claim about the "greatness" of the English landscape rests on hearsay rather than experience (Akshay, 2022). Cosmopolitan readings argue that Stevens's motor tour is a personal response to the altered conditions of the

1950s, when American cultural influence pressured a faltering Englishness, and that his mobility is paradoxical, affirming anti-cosmopolitan narratives while depending on cosmopolitan forms of travel (Duan & Tian, 2024). Postcolonial readings locate the novel within Ishiguro's wider interrogation of empire, arguing that it demythologises both Eastern and Western empires through voices narrating their personal histories and traumas (Alamri, 2022). Studies of Stevens's dignity and professionalism show the identity crisis that follows when he realises the flaws of his employer and the outdated ideals he upheld (Zi-jie, 2024).

2.3 Theoretical Frames: Memory, Diaspora, and Postcoloniality

A third body of recent scholarship provides the theoretical vocabulary for comparative postcolonial reading. Work on memory and postcolonial identity in Indian literature argues that memory serves as a bridge between past and present, enabling writers to interrogate colonial histories and reclaim suppressed histories (Khatoon, 2026). Studies of diaspora emphasise the role of postcolonial memory in shaping identities lived away from ancestral homelands, through nostalgia, cultural preservation, and the negotiation of identity in foreign societies (Gardner & Joshi, 2021). Related work on borders and belonging shows how migration disrupts cultural identity and produces fractured subjectivities shaped by nostalgia, racism, and colonial legacies (Gaur et al., 2025). Recent reviews of diasporic identity in contemporary fiction caution that identity should not be treated as fixed or unitary, and that it is mediated by class, language, and unequal access to mobility (Farhan, 2026).

2.4 The Gap

Despite the volume of recent work on each novel, almost none of it reads the two together. Scholarship on *The Shadow Lines* tends to situate it within South Asian literary and national contexts, examining its reception across India, the UK, the US, and Australia, while scholarship on *The Remains of the Day* tends to situate it within debates about Englishness and the British class system (Milković, 2021). The two novels are treated as belonging to separate traditions, with the consequence that their common engagement with memory, empire, and belonging goes unexamined. Recent comparatist work in postcolonial studies has argued for forms of comparison that hold distinct histories and political locations in tension rather than collapsing them (Kipfer, 2021). This paper takes up that invitation by reading the two novels as complementary negotiations of a shared imperial inheritance.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative literary approach that combines close textual analysis with close contextual reading (Ibrahim et al., 2025). The method is modelled on recent comparative postcolonial studies that analyse selected novels through thematic analysis of narrative structures, character, and cultural representation (Panda, 2024). The theoretical framework draws on postcolonial theory and memory studies, especially recent work that treats memory as an active negotiation rather than a neutral record of experience (Bhadoriya, 2026; Khatoon, 2026).

The corpus consists of two primary texts: Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, the narrative structure of each novel is mapped, with attention to the organisation of memory: who remembers, when, and against what resistance. Second, the novels are examined thematically across five categories derived from the recent critical literature: the reconstruction of the past, the relation between personal memory and official history, colonial and postcolonial identity, displacement and belonging, and silence and emotional restraint. Third, the two novels are compared at the level of function, asking what each representation of memory does for its protagonist rather than how the two texts resemble each other. Fourth, the comparative findings are interpreted against the recent scholarship reviewed above, in order to locate the study's contribution.

The comparative method follows the principle that reading two texts together should disclose structures that neither reveals alone (Ibrahim et al., 2025). Treating *The Remains of the Day* as an English novel and *The Shadow Lines* as an Indian novel would reproduce the very separation this study questions; instead, both texts are treated as full participants in a shared postcolonial problematic, one approached from the site of the formerly colonized, the other from the site of the empire's internal servant. Close reading is privileged over plot summary, and claims are grounded in identifiable characters, episodes, and narrative situations from the two novels. The study does not generalise about postcolonial literature as a whole, and it does not claim that the two novels are equivalent in politics or historical situation. It claims only that their difference is itself meaningful, and that comparison makes that meaning visible.

4. Results

The results of the comparative analysis are grouped into five observations.

The first discovery relates to the social nature of memory. The *Shadow Lines*' protagonist is a man whose firsthand knowledge of his most important emotional event, the killing of Tridib in Dhaka during the violence of the mid-1960s, is almost nonexistent. He was a child in Calcutta, and his knowledge comes in bits and pieces: from Tridib's own stories, which he has heard years before, then the unenthusiastic remarks of his family, and finally, decades later, from witnessing the event himself in Dhaka that night. His memory is learned memory, something that has been passed on by other people. The conviction that the world, before it is experienced, must be first lived by imagination is what has taught Tridib, and what the structure of the novel does at the end. Stevens's memory is reversed. It is individual, businesslike and self-explanatory. He keeps coming back to the same scenes: the 1923 conference, the firing of the two maids, his father's death, Miss Kenton's departure, and in each visit alters the focus somewhat beyond his control. His memory is defensive because he doesn't want to know, and the drama of the novel is the growing distance between claims and demonstrations.

The second discovery relates to the relation of personal memory and official history. In *The Shadow Lines*, official history is in the form of grand national stories: Partition, the Second World War, the Indian and Pakistani nation-building exercise, and the novel ways in which the two have failed to accommodate the lives of ordinary citizens. One of these tales is carried by the narrator's grandmother. After Partition, she left Dhaka with a hatred of Pakistan so strong that she refused to meet with any relatives who remained in Pakistan and when she makes it back to Dhaka with an old family member, it all spirals out of control and ends in a riot in which Tridib is killed. The novel's main point about the narrator's response to her past is that the border she espouses most passionately is a line drawn on a map by men who do not live beside it and whose buried elders are not her brothers and sisters. There is no official history for Tridib's death; only the collective memory of some persons, and even then, only an approximation of that. Ishiguro reverses this situation. In this case, the documented fact is correct - Lord Darlington had sympathies for the Nazis - and it is Stevens' private memory which is the one that is distorted. His most horrific scenes are described with his own excuse, serving his father at his bedside upstairs as he dies, standing outside Miss Kenton's door as she cries, hearing her weep but telling her that it was not his place to judge. Emotional restraint is a national and professional code, inherited from one's father, the code of the gentleman's servant, indistinguishable at the end from moral failure. While Ghosh does so to connect, Ishiguro does so to protect.

The third discovery has to do with displacement and belonging. Ghosh's narrator is most at home in a place he never visited, as his identity is tied to the death of Tridib, who was killed by a border. His cousin Ila is the opposite of this temptation, a life lived with a chosen homelessness, moving through the world's cities, saying she is free from all attachments, and yet the novel reveals the freedom as a lonely life lived on the edges of the world lines she attests to not noticing. But Stevens has never been displaced, and it's exactly his issue. Darlington Hall is transferred to its new American owners, and Stevens' travels bring him face-to-face with an England of which he never knew. His depth of feeling is actually a blindness. In both novels, geography does not provide belonging; it is created, or denied, by remembering.

The fourth discovery relates to silence and its price. The protagonists are characterised by what they will not say. There's a code of dignity that says no complaint, no confession to go by, and the novel tracks the novel's psychological and moral cost with increasing accuracy. There are other silences in Ghosh's novel: the novel's family that won't talk about Tridib, the grandmother who refuses to acknowledge relatives on the other side of the border, the blank spaces in the testimony that must be completed imaginatively by the narrator. These silences are different, however. The absence of words in *The Shadow Lines* is to be navigated, an opening bridged by memory and imagination. In *The Remains of the Day*, silence is a condition towards which one strives, a condition in which the narrator has schooled himself. The comparison implies that silence is not inherently harmful nor is it inherently redemptive, but rather becomes so through its interaction with the community of others.

The fifth finding is that of the nature of the identity that each protagonist negotiates. Ghosh's narrator ultimately embraces a relational and open identity. He takes Tridib's death, May's sadness, and his grandmother's past into himself, and he realises that this is also the line that binds him to the people he loves, the line between Calcutta and Dhaka. His identity is composed of other people's memories, and the novel is all about its strength, not loss. Stevens is followed by a contradiction. That his employer had been used by the Nazis and that he was not a judge does not excuse him, but it leaves him sitting with a stranger on a pier at Weymouth and determined to try some banter when he gets home. It's a simple, hesitant movement, but it's the first time Stevens has thought of a self without service. There is no redemption for either novel, but both leave us with a gentle hint: the past can be appealed to; it can be approached with denial (Stevens) or with generosity (the narrator of *The Shadow Lines*, who learns it at the end of the novel). The quality of a life is in its memory, in how it treats the past, in how it deals with it.

5. Discussion

The comparative reading confirms and sharpens the recent scholarship on both novels, and it does so by making each text illuminate the other. The finding that Ghosh's narrator inherits his past through testimony rather than experience supports the claim that the novel treats memory as an imaginative resource capable of destabilising cartographic certainties (Ghosh, 2025). But the comparison adds something that single-text readings cannot supply: the reason this matters is visible only against Ishiguro's alternative, in which memory is an instrument of self-protection. Recent work on the novel's non-linear memory narrative and its re-imagining of spatial and temporal boundaries gains a sharper edge when set beside the reading of Stevens's journey as a defensive revisiting of fixed episodes (Akshay & Somveer, 2025). Both narrators travel through time and space; the difference is what they are travelling toward. The narrator of *The Shadow Lines* moves outward, toward other people's versions of the past, while Stevens moves inward, toward the preservation of his own.

The analysis of Thamma, the grandmother, is worth pausing on because it touches the heart of the comparison. Recent criticism reads her adopted nationalism as a direct consequence of the geopolitical divide, and her failed crossing as evidence that the novel's lines are lived realities rather than abstractions (Nuruzzaman & Islam, 2022). This study's comparison refines that reading: Thamma's tragedy is not that she believes in a border that does not exist, but that her way of believing, which is also her way of remembering, closes her off from the familial and communal memory that could have reconnected her to Dhaka. She is the figure in the novel whose memory functions most like Stevens's, as defence rather than connection, and her narrative consequence, the death of Tridib, is the price of that defence. The recent emphasis on memory as a site of resistance to nationalist discourse (Sarkar, 2025) is thus qualified: memory resists nationalism only when it remains collective and receptive. The novel shows that, in its Thamma-like form, memory can also serve the very divisions it might have dissolved.

Recent work on trauma in the novel describes the Dhaka and Calcutta riots of the mid-1960s as episodes whose belated recognition structures the narrative (Riso, 2025). The comparative frame suggests why the recognition is belated: the narrator can only complete his knowledge of Tridib's death when May supplies the missing testimony, decades later, in London. Traumatic memory in *The Shadow Lines* is completed by other people. In *The Remains of the Day*, the opposite is true. Stevens's trauma, the death of his father during the 1923 conference, is processed entirely alone, and the novel shows the cost of that solitude. This difference maps onto the recent work on ethical silence in Ishiguro, which argues that Stevens's measured recollections mask political and emotional complicity (Bhadoriya, 2026). What the comparison reveals is that the same silence, restraint, and omission carry opposite valences in the two texts: in Ghosh, the gaps in the story are what invite the listener in; in Ishiguro, they are what keep the listener out.

The discussion must also register a difference that the findings could be misread as flattening. The two novels come from different historical and political positions, and the comparison does not equate the trauma of the colonised with the self-inflicted blindness of the imperial servant. Recent scholarship on the novel's reception has rightly insisted that national context shapes how Ghosh's work is evaluated, and comparable arguments apply to Ishiguro's place in the English canon. What the comparison claims is narrower and stronger: that the imperial past imposes on both protagonists the same structural task, the negotiation of a self in relation to a history that was not of their making, and that the two novels model two ways of performing that task. The formerly colonised subject inherits a past that has been misrepresented by official history and must imagine his way back into it (Khatoon, 2026). The servant of the declining empire inherits a past that his own code of dignity has misrepresented to him, and must unlearn his way out of it. Both tasks are tasks of memory, and both novels therefore speak to recent work on diaspora and belonging that emphasizes the work of memory in sustaining identity across displacement (Immigration and Emigration in Ishiguro, n.d.; Kumar & K, 2021), as well as to cautionary work that insists identity is mediated by class, language, and the unequal politics of mobility (Kumar & K, 2021; Uzbekistan & Botirovich, 2025). Stevens's class position is precisely what makes his memory defensive; the narrator's position as a middle-class Indian intellectual is what makes his memory receptive. The novels, read together, suggest that the politics of memory depend on the social location of the rememberer.

The broader significance of the study lies in its demonstration that South Asian and British fiction of the late twentieth century, usually read in separate traditions, are engaged in related settlements with a shared imperial history. Recent comparatist scholarship has called for forms of comparison that hold distinct histories in tension rather than collapsing them into sameness (Chapman, 2021). This paper has attempted such a comparison. The result is not that the two novels are the same story told in different accents, but that each novel makes the other's method visible: Ghosh's generosity of memory clarifies, by contrast, the defensiveness of Stevens's; Ishiguro's anatomy of self-deception clarifies, by contrast, the openness of Ghosh's narrator. Between them, the two novels map the range of what memory can do in the aftermath of empire.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the effect of cultural memory and inherited history on postcolonial identity, and the comparison of the two novels provides a more precise answer than either one would have been able to offer separately. Both characters are saddled with history that isn't theirs: The narrator of *The Shadow Lines* inherits a cousin he never met, and a border that took his life; Stevens inherits a master he revered, and a code of service that died. Memory is present in both novels as the medium through which this inheritance is conveyed, and identity is not a set property but a constant negotiation with the dead, with family stories, with official history. This comparison also shows the different levels of importance given to memory by the two novelists. Ghosh sees it as a communal and imaginative capability, a faculty that is brought together with others, and able to cross political boundaries. As the narrator absorbs the stories of Tridib and May and even his grandmother's, his sense of who he is increases as well, culminating in the end of the novel in which he is convinced that this borrowed memory is the one thing he truly owns. Memory is Ishiguro's version of witness testimony in the narrator's own behalf. Throughout the novel, Stevens's memories preserve him, and paying tribute to those memories is seen only in the last moments of the novel when the code of dignity is exposed as a form of complicity.

The difference lies in the different historical roles of both writers. Ghosh's narrative comes from a world that was once colonized, and in which it becomes a necessary exercise to "imagine one's way into a history partly made elsewhere," where belonging has to be cultivated contrary to the nationalistic partition and its impact. Ishiguro's perspective is that of the imperial servant, whose entire identity was based on an aristocratic and imperial system that is now in disrepute, and whose job is to learn to unlearn a professional self. The novels are thus read from two ends of the same imperial past, and when they are read together it becomes clear that the pressure of the past onto individual identity is similar when politics are different. In both, national history and inherited code is not enough; in both, the protagonists need to be remembered into being by other people or by no one at all.

The wider impact of the study is that this is a shared predicament of reading after an empire that one did not wish for, as South Asian and British fiction of this period are engaged in parallel settlements, which are not normally read side by side. In their distinct ways, the two novels propose that cultural memory is not a history or an account of what has happened, but a constant process of what has survived being said.

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