The Shadow Lines

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AMITAV GHOSH

Amitav Ghosh's family is Bengali Hindu, and his father was an officer in the pre-independence Indian Army. Growing up, Ghosh attended an all-boys school and then earned degrees in India and the UK at Delhi University, the Delhi School of Economics, St. Stephen's College, and Oxford. He worked briefly at a New Delhi newspaper called the *Indian Express* before beginning to write novels. His 1986 debut novel, *The Circle of Reason*, won a top literary award in France, and *The Shadow Lines* also won several awards in India. As of 2018, Ghosh has written eight novels and six nonfiction works, including several essay collections. His writing has also appeared in a number of publications in India and around the world. He lives with his wife, the author Deborah Baker, in New York, and the couple has two children. Ghosh has taught literature at several colleges and universities, including Queens College and Harvard. In 2015, he was named a Ford Foundation Art of Change Fellow, which is an award that recognizes artists and cultural leaders based in the US who demonstrate a commitment to social justice.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though the Partition of British India is mostly a background event in *The Shadow Lines*, it is partially responsible for the conflicts that the narrator and his family experience over the course of the novel. Many European powers developed colonies and established trading relationships with India from its "discovery" in the fifteenth century onward. Great Britain gained control over most of the Indian subcontinent in the early nineteenth century, which led to it being known as British India or the British Raj. Indian people, however, began pushing for independence, especially in the early twentieth century. Great Britain promised India freedom in exchange for fighting for them in the two world wars, and Great Britain only followed through after the second. This resulted in Partition, during which British India split into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), West Pakistan (now Pakistan), and India. The Partition happened in August of 1947, and though the British, Indian, and Pakistani governments took religion into account, the new borders created minorities of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs where there hadn't been before. This caused extreme violence, especially in the region of Punjab, which was split between West Pakistan and India. This religious animosity continued (and still does to this day), and it's partly what led to the riots that the narrator and Tridib experience in 1963-1964 in Calcutta and Dhaka, which became the capital of East Pakistan. The riots began when an important religious relic—a lock of hair that is believed to be the Prophet Muhammad's—mysteriously disappeared from the Kashmir region of India. Though the relic had been respected by all three religions (Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam), adherents of each religion soon turned on each other in various cities in India and Pakistan, which resulted in extreme violence.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like much of Amitav Ghosh's work, *The Shadow Lines* is a work of historical fiction that deals with the geographical area around the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean—an area that Ghosh has expressed special interest in. Most notably, his *Ibis* trilogy (*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*) explores the colonial history of the area. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* takes place in much the same time period as *The Shadow Lines* (1960s-1990s) and is told in a similarly fragmented and nonlinear style. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* is a historical novel that focuses on the human costs of the Partition of India in 1947. In addition, in *The Shadow Lines*, Queen Victoria's cook makes a direct reference to *The Ramayana*, a classic epic poem from the ancient Kosala Kingdom in India.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Shadow Lines*
- **When Written:** 1986-1988
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** 1988
- **Literary Period:** Postcolonial Indian Literature
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Calcutta, India/British India; Dhaka, British India/East Pakistan; London, England
- **Climax:** The riots of 1964
- **Antagonist:** Partition, religious animosity, and violence are the most common antagonists in the novel, though individuals who act as antagonists include Tha'mma, Ila, and Nick Price.
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Persistence of Colonialism. When Ghosh's 2000 novel, *The Glass Palace*, won the Best Eurasian Novel award of the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, he famously withdrew the novel from consideration, citing objections to the term "Commonwealth" and his belief that the award's English-

language requirement is unfair.

PLOT SUMMARY

While in London in the early 1980s, the unnamed narrator recounts a series of stories and memories to his cousin Ila and his uncle Robi. The stories and memories belong to the narrator; his uncle Tridib; and his grandmother, Tha'mma. The memories begin in the early twentieth century when Tridib's grandfather, Mr. Justice Chandrashekhar Datta-Chaudhuri, befriends Lionel Tresawsen at séances in London.

Tha'mma was born in 1902 in Dhaka, British India. As a young girl, Tha'mma's father and her uncle, Jethamoshai, begin feuding, so they split their huge communal house in half with a wall. The two sides of the family stop speaking to each other, and Tha'mma tells her younger sister, Mayadebi, that Jethamoshai's family lives in "**the upside-down house**," where they do everything upside down and backwards. After Tha'mma and Mayadebi marry (Mayadebi marries the Shaheb, Justice Datta-Chaudhuri's son), they lose contact with Jethamoshai. Tha'mma follows her husband as he works on the railroad until he dies in 1936. At this point, her son, the narrator's father, is still a child. Tha'mma becomes a teacher and refuses to accept help of any sort from her family. Though Tha'mma had been very interested in the terrorist movements against British rule in her youth, when the Partition happens in 1947, it means little to her. However, she never returns to Dhaka since it becomes the capital of the Muslim country East Pakistan.

The Shaheb is a wealthy diplomat, and in 1939, he ends up needing a special medical operation that can't be performed in India. Mrs. Price, Lionel Tresawson's daughter, invites the Shaheb and his family to live with her in London so that he can receive medical attention there. Tridib, who is nine years old, accompanies his father, while his older brother, Jatin, stays in school in India. Tridib loves London and is fascinated by Alan Tresawsen, Mrs. Price's brother, and his friends Dan, Mike, and Francesca. In the time leading up to World War II and the early days of the Blitz, Tridib spends his days exploring bombsites and listening to Snipe, Mrs. Price's husband, tell stories. In 1940, a bomb hits Alan's house on Brick Lane, killing him and Dan. Later that year, Tridib's family returns to India.

Over the next decade, Mayadebi and the Shaheb have a third son, Robi. The narrator's father marries the narrator's mother, who soon gives birth to a son, the narrator. Jatin marries a woman affectionately known as Queen Victoria, and the couple has a daughter named Ila, who is the narrator's age. Mrs. Price, whose daughter May was an infant when Tridib was in London, has a son named Nick. Ila's parents are wealthy, and she spends her childhood traveling around the world for her father's work. The narrator, on the other hand, never gets far outside of Calcutta. Instead, he spends his time listening to Tridib tell stories about London and other faraway lands. Tridib teaches the narrator to use his imagination and explains that the world in one's imagination can be just as real as the outside world. Ila doesn't understand this—she sees too much of the world to understand how one's imagination can be anywhere as good.

For a time, Ila's family lives with the Prices in London. When she's eight, her family visits Calcutta for a festival. The narrator convinces Tha'mma to allow his family to accompany Ila's to their family home in Raibajar. When they meet Ila's family in Gole Park, the narrator's mother is shocked that the narrator, who spent weeks asking after Ila, is too shy to talk to her. The narrator feels as though his mother betrayed him by making it clear that he needs Ila more than Ila will ever need him. Regardless, the family piles into the Shaheb's two cars and drive for hours. When they reach the massive house, Ila leads the narrator into a half-underground storage room, which stores a massive table that Tridib's grandfather shipped back from London. Ila decides that they're going to play a game called Houses, which she plays with Nick in London. She informs the narrator of who Nick is, and the narrator understands that Nick is his competition for Ila's affection. Ila draws a map in the dust of Mrs. Price's house and adds a room for Magda, her doll, who is the baby for the purposes of the game. When everything is set, Ila tells the narrator what "happened" to Magda at school that day: the ugly school bully chased the beautiful blonde Magda home, yelling slurs at her—but Nick Price saved her from being beaten up. When Ila starts to cry, the narrator is angry and doesn't understand why she's crying. Finally, Tridib walks in with the children and listens to the narrator tell Ila's story. He encourages the narrator to not call Ila dumb for crying like the story is real, and he insists that everyone lives in stories.

In 1959, Tridib and May, who is nineteen at the time, begin writing to each other. They exchange photos after a year. In 1963, Tridib sends May a very long letter recalling an experience he had as a boy in London, when he watched two strangers have sex in a bombed cinema. He tells May that he wants to meet her like those strangers did—as strangers in a ruin. May is flustered, but she makes plans to visit Tridib in India. Around the same time, Tha'mma, who is retired and has time on her hands for the first time in her life, receives word that her uncle Jethamoshai, who is in his nineties, still lives in the family home in Dhaka. She believes that it's her duty to bring Jethamoshai home to India. Not long after this comes to light, the Shaheb receives a job posting in Dhaka, and he, Mayadebi, and Robi move there. Finally, Mayadebi invites Tha'mma to visit, and they make plans to try to save their uncle from the growing unrest in the Muslim-majority city. May makes plans to travel to Calcutta and then to Dhaka with Tha'mma. Tridib decides to accompany them to Dhaka.

The narrator joins Tridib and his father to pick May up from the train station. Over the next few days, the narrator accompanies

Tridib and May as they drive around and see the sights. He shows her the table in Raibajar, and she tells him that Ila was a victim of bullying, but Nick never saved her. When they visit the Victoria Memorial, May becomes suddenly emotional. Tridib tells her that it's *their* ruin, which puzzles the narrator. He understands that there's a relationship between May and Tridib that he won't understand. Not long after that, on January 4, 1964, Tridib, May, and Tha'mma leave for Dhaka.

A few days later, the narrator experiences a harrowing bus ride home from school as the driver tries to protect the dozen boys from the angry mobs in the streets. Meanwhile, in Dhaka, the Shaheb warns Mayadebi and Tha'mma that trouble is brewing there, but Tha'mma insists on seeing Jethamoshai anyway. Thirteen-year-old Robi is excited to see "trouble" and goes with them to the old house in Dhaka. There, a Muslim mechanic named Saifuddin greets them and explains that a rickshaw driver named Khalil cares for Jethamoshai. When Khalil arrives, he leads his guests into the house. Jethamoshai doesn't recognize his nieces, but he tells Tridib that he's waiting for his family to return so that he can take them to court and gain full ownership of the house. The driver races to the door and says that there's trouble, and they have to leave. Khalil agrees to drive Jethamoshai in his rickshaw to Mayadebi's house. When they're in the car, they turn a corner and come face to face with a mob. It surrounds the car and breaks the windshield. When the mob descends on the rickshaw, Tha'mma tells the driver to go, but May gets out to try to save Jethamoshai. Tridib follows her, but Tridib, Jethamoshai, and Khalil are all brutally murdered by the mob. The narrator's parents tell him later that Tridib died in an accident. The following year, Tha'mma gives her beloved gold chain away to fund the war with Pakistan and appears crazy to the narrator. His mother explains that Tha'mma hasn't been the same since "they" killed Tridib.

In college, the narrator continues to both love Ila and find her frustrating, as she never understands why he is so insistent on remembering Tridib's stories or their own childhood antics. Once, during a summer holiday, she convinces the narrator and Robi to go with her to a nightclub. Robi doesn't want to go, but at the club, he forbids Ila from dancing with another man. She screams at them that she lives in London so she can be free of this kind of oppression. The narrator tells this story to Tha'mma on her deathbed, and it makes her extremely angry: she doesn't think Ila's kind of freedom is real. In her anger, Tha'mma writes a letter to the dean of the narrator's school the day before she dies, telling the dean that the narrator visits prostitutes and should therefore be expelled.

After seeing a lecture in Delhi, the narrator realizes that although he never connected the events as a child, the riot he experienced in Calcutta and the riot that killed Tridib in Dhaka was part of the same political uproar. As he studies Tridib's atlas, the narrator discovers that borders are meaningless and actually helped create the climate that brought on the riots in the first place. The narrator goes on to pursue an advanced degree in London. At one point, Ila takes Robi and the narrator to visit Mrs. Price and introduces them to Nick. The narrator shows off the power of Tridib's stories by leading his friends around London and through Mrs. Price's house based off of the mental maps Tridib created for him. Ila, Robi, and the narrator have dinner at an Indian restaurant afterwards, and Robi admits that he has a recurring nightmare about the riot in Dhaka in which he can never keep Tridib from getting out of the car. The narrator also reconnects with May, who plays oboe in an orchestra. They spend Christmas with Mrs. Price, and May suggests that Nick is lying about leaving his job in Kuwait: she believes he embezzled money. There's a blizzard that night, so Ila and the narrator stay at Mrs. Price's house in the cellar. Ila undresses in front of the narrator, not realizing his feelings for her, but she spends the night with Nick.

Back in London a few years later, Ila marries Nick. At their party, the narrator gets very drunk and May offers to take him home and put him to bed. The narrator assaults May but feels horrible about it in the morning. She takes him with her while she collects money for her "worthy causes," and on a break, she talks about her relationship with Tridib. As the narrator prepares to return home a few months later, Ila confides in him that Nick is cheating on her, though she refuses to leave him. The night before the narrator leaves, he has dinner with May. At dinner, May tells the narrator about the riots and asks if he thinks that she killed Tridib. May tells him that she used to think she did, but she knows now that Tridib sacrificed himself and knew he was going to die. She asks the narrator to stay the night and he accepts, glad to finally understand the mystery of Tridib's death.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The narrator was born in Calcutta, India in 1953, where he lives with his parents and his grandmother, Tha'mma. He spends his entire childhood in Calcutta and spends a lot of it with his favorite uncle, Tridib. Tridib tells him stories, pointing out faraway cities in his atlas and telling him often about living in London as a child. The narrator idolizes Tridib's way of living and looking at the world, which is a problem when the narrator is around his cousin Ila. Though the narrator loves Ila romantically, he struggles regularly to try to make her see the importance of Tridib's stories. He and Tridib decide that because Ila traveled so much as a child, she didn't need to rely on stories like the narrator did, since he never left Calcutta. Though the narrator is often self-centered and unaware of the scope of the world, he is also very tuned into the inner workings of his family. He understands, for example, that Tha'mma has a deep sense of pride, and he uses his knowledge to his advantage. After Ila tells the narrator about

an English boy named Nick Price, the narrator understands that Nick is his rival for Ila's affection. Eventually, Ila and Nick get married, which is heartbreaking for the narrator. He feels trapped by his unwavering love for Ila, as he knows she'll never love him back. Over the next several years in London, the narrator reconnects with Ila; Nick's sister, May; and Robi in London. He has a brief sexual encounter with May, who used to be romantically linked to Tridib. May enlightens the narrator as to the real cause of Tridib's death in Dhaka, and the narrator realizes that the terrifying riot he experienced in Calcutta in 1964 was just like the one that killed Tridib in Dhaka.

Tridib – Tridib is the narrator's uncle. He's about twenty years older and is a very skilled storyteller. He often tells the narrator stories about the year he lived in London with the Prices. Tridib's sense of place in his stories is so exact, the narrator can find his way around London as an adult years later going off of what Tridib told him. Tridib has an atlas that he uses to show the narrator where in the world the places he talks about in his stories are. As an adult, Tridib is the only one in his family to not take after his wealthy father and get a high-powered, international job. Instead, he remains in his grandmother's home in Calcutta and pursues a PhD in archaeology. When Tridib is 27, he begins a correspondence with May, Mrs. Price's daughter. She was an infant when he lived in London. They write for several years and at one point, Tridib writes a long, detailed letter about a time he witnessed strangers having sex and invites May to come to India. When May accepts and arrives in Calcutta, she's relieved to discover that Tridib isn't scary—he's shy and young-looking, and though he very clearly loves May, he's unsure of what to say or how to show it. Tridib accompanies May and Tha'mma to Dhaka and to Tha'mma's ancestral home, where he dies in a riot. He is brutally murdered attempting to save May, Jethamoshai, and Khalil from an angry mob. His death haunts May, the narrator, Tha'mma, and Robi for decades.

Ila – Ila is the narrator's cousin. They're the same age, and their families joke that they could be twins, but they're very different. Ila's family is very wealthy and she lives in a number of foreign cities throughout her childhood, which makes her much less interested in their uncle Tridib's stories. She can recall where every ladies' restroom is in the airports, something the narrator believes was a way for her to find some sort of consistency in an otherwise whirlwind childhood. During her childhood, she lives in London at Mrs. Price's house for a while and attends school with Mrs. Price's son, Nick. When she visits Calcutta and plays with the narrator, she indirectly tells the narrator about being bullied and beaten for being Indian, and the narrator doesn't piece together what actually happened until years later. Because Ila grows up in a lot of western cities, she thinks about freedom differently than the narrator and Robi do. She loves to talk about having promiscuous sex and wears clothing the narrator finds exotic (mostly jeans and t-shirts). Though the narrator loves her romantically throughout his childhood and into adulthood, Ila either doesn't realize or doesn't care. Ila dabbles in Trotskyism in London, and tells the narrator that nothing that happens in India is important on a global scale. She marries Nick Price and soon discovers that this was a mistake: he has several other girlfriends and refuses to give them up. Though she confides in the narrator and seeks comfort from him, she later insists that she made it up and Nick would never hurt her.

Tha'mma – Tha'mma is the narrator's grandmother. As a young woman in British India, she desperately wanted to be a part of the terrorist groups that fought for India's independence from Britain. When Partition happened in 1947, however, Tha'mma was too busy raising the narrator's father as a single parent to think much of it. When her husband died, Tha'mma became fiercely independent and refused help from everyone, including her younger sister, Mayadebi. Eventually, Tha'mma told herself that her relatives actually refused to help her, so she actively distanced herself from much of her family. Throughout the novel, she's cautious about family relationships, given that as a child, she saw her father and uncle feud and finally build a wall through their house to resolve it. She's also a stickler about using one's time wisely, also as a result of having to support herself and put her son through school alone. Because of this, she dislikes Tridib, who she believes to be a gossip. After she retires, Tha'mma withdraws and cedes control of the household to the narrator's mother. In a sudden shift in character, Tha'mma decides in her early sixties that it's her duty to bring her elderly uncle Jethamoshai home to India, given the rising tensions between India and Pakistan. The prospect of returning to Dhaka is a difficult one for her: she doesn't understand what Partition was for if the border itself isn't even visible, and she struggles to cope with the sudden realization that her birth in Dhaka means that she was born in East Pakistan. After Jethamoshai and Tridib die in the riot, Tha'mma sells her favorite gold chain to fund the war effort with Pakistan. She becomes nasty to the narrator when she deteriorates while he's in college, and calls Ila a whore.

May Price – May is Mrs. Price's daughter. She's an infant when Tridib and his family are in London in 1939, and she's at least ten years older than her younger brother, Nick. May is an oboist and plays in an orchestra professionally throughout her adult life, though later in life, she also works for "worthy causes" that provide housing and disaster relief in third-world countries. When she's 19, she and Tridib begin a correspondence that lasts for four years and culminates in a visit to India. At this point, May isn't sure if she loves Tridib or not, and she remains unsure even throughout the visit. While she's in India, she and Tridib see the tourist sights and spend time together, often accompanied by the narrator, who is eleven at the time. Near the end of her visit, she accompanies Tridib and Tha'mma to Dhaka and visits Tha'mma's ancestral

home. When a riot breaks out May gets out of the car, believing that as an Englishwoman, the mob won't hurt her. Though she's correct, Tridib dies when he gets out of the car to protect her and his great-uncle Jethamoshai. May lives the rest of her life wondering if she killed Tridib, though she eventually comes to belief that Tridib sacrificed himself for her. Presumably because of what she saw in India and because of her guilt, she sleeps on the floor and fasts one day per week. When she reconnects with the narrator in the 1980s, she shares with him her youthful uncertainties about whether or not she loved Tridib and her fears that she killed him. Though he assaults her, she later invites him to have sex after sharing her version of what happened during the riot.

Mayadebi – Mayadebi is Tha'mma's younger sister. The narrator describes the two women as being like reflections in a looking glass. Mayadebi is lucky enough to marry the Shaheb, a wealthy diplomat. As such, she travels often throughout her life, including to London in 1939 with the nine-year-old Tridib, her middle son. She has an older son, Jatin, and a much younger son, Robi, who is only a few years older than the narrator. Mayadebi is a beautiful and shy woman, and she worries often about Tridib's safety while they're in London. Though she offers to help Tha'mma when Tha'mma's husband dies, Tha'mma refuses her help. Tha'mma often refers to Mayadebi as somewhat foolish, given that Mayadebi was afraid of scary stories and fully believed her older sister's tale that their uncle Jethamoshai's side of the house was entirely **upside-down**. However, Mayadebi agrees to take Tha'mma to visit their ancestral home when Tha'mma visits her in Dhaka. For much of the visit and during the riot, Mayadebi is silent. After Tridib dies, she gives the narrator his atlas.

Nick Price – As children, Ila introduces the narrator to Nick Price through stories she tells about playing with him in London when her family lives with his. He's several years older, blonde, and has long hair. The narrator recognizes that Nick is his opponent for Ila's affection and therefore feels as though he grows up in Nick's ever more mature shadow, even though he doesn't meet Nick until they're all adults. Though Ila idolized Nick as a child and the two likely did play together, he also refused to stand up for Ila when she was a victim of racial violence. In adulthood, Nick floats somewhat aimlessly through life, coasting on opportunities afforded to him through his privilege. His sister, May, implies that Nick was fired from his last job for embezzlement. Not long after Nick and Ila marry, Ila discovers that Nick has several other girlfriends and no intention of giving any of them up. Though she decides she could never leave him, she does punish him by embarrassing him at dinner parties.

Jethamoshai – Jethamoshai is the uncle of Mayadebi and Tha'mma. When the girls were little, he was an eccentric man and was difficult to take seriously—though he was sometimes frightening because of his skeletally thin frame and piercing eyes. Years before the start of the novel, Jethamoshai and the girls' father began feuding, and as lawyers, eventually came to an agreement to build a wall through their shared house. After the wall was built, the two factions of the family stopped speaking to each other and lost contact. During the following fifty years, Jethamoshai held onto his pride and hatred of his brother's family. He even ran several of his family members out of the house and allowed Muslims to move in. One of those Muslim families, Khalil's family, cares for Jethamoshai in his old age when Mayadebi and Tha'mma return to take Jethamoshai "home" to India. Because he's still spiteful and is now a senile old man in his nineties, Jethamoshai is only persuaded to leave the house when he's told that he's finally going to court to challenge his family for ownership to the house. He's brutally murdered by a mob within minutes of leaving the house.

Robi – Robi is the narrator's uncle, though he's only a few years older than the narrator. When his parents, Mayadebi and the Shaheb, moved to Dhaka in 1963, Robi went with them. He therefore got to accompany his mother, aunt, Tridib, and May to fetch Jethamoshai from his mother's childhood home when he was thirteen. He witnessed the riot that killed Tridib, which left him with PTSD and a recurring nightmare that haunts him into adulthood. As a student and an adult, Robi is very particular about behaving properly: the narrator suggests that Robi has an absurdly strong moral compass, which makes him willing to follow even the most ridiculous of rules. He's also a celebrated ringleader at Indian colleges, though he doesn't participate in any of the student protests due to his respect for rules. Ila finds his uptight nature tiring and offensive, particularly when he attempts to put her in her place as an Indian woman.

The Shaheb – The Shaheb is Mayadebi's wealthy husband. He's elegant, dignified, and the most important relative in the narrator's family, which earns him the admiration of everyone in the family but Tha'mma. Tha'mma resents him because she believes he's an alcoholic (though it's never made entirely clear if the Shaheb ever actually stinks of alcohol) and weak—she instinctively knows that Mayadebi does most of the heavy lifting. Tha'mma also takes offense to his extensive and varied wardrobe: as a diplomat, the Shaheb needs different styles of dress for different locales. He's a kind man who makes a point to engage women in conversation about things that matter to them, something that endears him especially to the narrator's mother. He moves his family to London in 1939 so that he can have an operation in England.

Queen Victoria – Queen Victoria is Ila's mother and the wife of Jatin, an economist. She acquired her nickname because she often sits proudly like Queen Victoria. She keeps a number of servants and has a habit of creating silly languages to speak to them to make them feel inferior and confused, and the narrator notes that she had a "special affinity" for any being, human or animal, who responded to one of her special languages. This is

the reason why she allows a huge monitor lizard to live in her garden: it flicks its tail when she speaks to it, which she interprets as a response to her language.

Mother – The narrator's mother is a skilled and competent housewife who is exceptionally proud of her competence. She's briefly shaken when her mother-in-law, Tha'mma, retires and is in the house full-time, but Mother soon regains her hold over the household. Despite this, she and Tha'mma are often at odds: Tha'mma gave Mother most of her jewelry when her husband died, and it irks Tha'mma to no end that Mother's no-nonsense sensibilities don't leave much room for frivolity like jewelry. She regularly refuses to deal with Tha'mma when Tha'mma is in one of her moods, sending her son instead.

Mrs. Price – Mrs. Price is May and Nick's mother. She and her husband, Snipe, live in West Hampstead, London. She and Snipe take in Tridib and his parents when Tridib is a child, on the eve of World War II. Decades later, when the narrator meets her, Mrs. Price is elderly and tires quickly, but still loves having Indian guests. She and her husband are extremely generous, as over the years they provide lodging for several of the narrator's family members, including Ila's family.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Alan Tresawsen – Alan was Mrs. Price's brother and an intellectual living in London in time leading up to World War II. Alan lived in a communal house with Dan, Mike, and Francesca, and Mrs. Price believes that Alan rescued and smuggled Francesca out of Germany. He dies during the war.

Snipe – Snipe was Mrs. Price's husband, and he died two years before the narrator first travels to London. He was a hypochondriac and when Tridib lived with the Price family, he often sent Tridib to the pharmacy to fetch him various remedies. He was, according to Tridib, an excellent storyteller.

Father – The narrator's father is the only child of Tha'mma. He's a businessman in the rubber trade who becomes reasonably successful later in his career, and he greatly admires the Shaheb's elegance and dignity.

Jatin – Jatin is Ila's father. He's an economist and moves his family frequently for his job.

Lizzie – Lizzie is a middle-aged nurse whom Queen Victoria hires to care for Ila. Though Lizzie speaks fluent English and even some Hindi, Queen Victoria insists on speaking to her in a made-up language that Lizzie can barely understand.

Dan – In the years leading up to World War II, Dan lived in a communal house on Brick Lane with Alan Tresawsen, Francesca, and Mike. He wrote for a Trotskyist newspaper and fascinated the young Tridib to no end.

Francesca – Francesca is a young German woman whom Alan Tresawsen possibly smuggled out of Germany. She was extremely beautiful. The Price family lost track of her after the house on Brick Lane was bombed, as she was put in an internment camp for enemies and never heard from again.

Mike – Mike is a pudgy Irishman who lived with Dan, Francesca, and Alan Tresawsen in the years before the Second World War. He didn't like the Shaheb, and implied that he believed that all Indian people want to kill Englishmen.

Kerry – Kerry is an American art student and a housemate of the narrator when he lives and studies in London.

Malik – One of the narrator's friends at college in New Delhi. He's a Marxist, and though he doubts the narrator's recollections of the 1964 riots, he helps the narrator look through old newspapers.

Montu – Montu is the narrator's best friend when they both live near Gole Park in Calcutta. They often try to one-up each other. Though it doesn't come up for a majority of the novel, Montu is Muslim, which makes him a target during the riots of 1964.

Lionel Tresawsen – Lionel Tresawsen was Mrs. Price's father and a close friend of Justice Chandrashekhar Datta-Chaudhuri. Tresawsen was a businessman and traveled extensively.

Mr. Justice Chandrashekhar Datta-Chaudhuri – The original patriarch of the narrator's family by marriage, who began and nurtured the relationship with Lionel Tresawsen. He's the Shaheb's father.

Saifuddin – Saifuddin is a motorcycle mechanic who moves into Jethamoshai's house to work and live after Partition. Khalil insists that Saifuddin wants Jethamoshai out of the house in Dhaka so that he can claim it for himself.

Khalil – Khalil is a Muslim man who moves into Jethamoshai's house with his family after Partition. His family cares for Jethamoshai and he works as a rickshaw driver. Saifuddin doesn't think much of Khalil; he tells Mayadebi and Tha'mma that Khalil is simple.

Mrinmoyee – One of Tha'mma's friend's maidservants who helps reconnect Tha'mma with her family in Dhaka.

Tublu – One of the narrator's classmates in Calcutta.

THEMES

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YOUTH VS. MATURITY

The Shadow Lines follows the unnamed narrator, the youngest member of the Indian Datta-Chaudhuri family, as he pieces together his family history. This

history spans several decades and follows many different family members—including his grandmother's youth in Dhaka in the 1910s and 1920s, his uncle Tridib's experiences of World War II in England as a child, the Partition of India in 1947, and finally, the riots in Calcutta and Dhaka in 1964, which unfold when the narrator is eleven. As the narrator recounts these events in a nonlinear fashion, he seeks to make sense of his family and his history by reevaluating initially youthful and simplistic understandings of people and events. The novel suggests that in doing so, the narrator is finally able to reach maturity and a greater sense of his place in his family and in the world.

The novel pays close attention to the different ways that characters approach things based on their age, particularly in regards to the narrator. To this end, the narrator often tells stories multiple times, sometimes from different perspectives, to explore these differences. This is most evident first in the narrator's interpretation of the story Ila tells him while they're playing a game called Houses. She tells him a story about how their "daughter," her doll Magda, was attacked by a racist classmate on her way home from school. Ila and the narrator are eight years old at the time that Ila tells this story, and in his youthful ignorance, the narrator doesn't realize that this isn't a made-up narrative—this event actually happened to Ila. As a child herself, Ila attempts to make the event easier to bear by using the doll as a stand-in for herself and altering the story so that it ends happily. Because the narrator doesn't realize that Ila's story is part of her lived experience, he becomes angry when cries while telling the story—as far as he's concerned, the story shouldn't matter, since it is just make-believe. However, Ila's version of the story does develop Nick Price, the savior figure, as the person with whom the narrator must compete for Ila's affection. Three years later, when the narrator recalls Ila's story and tells it to May, Nick's older sister, she explains what actually happened: Ila herself was the victim, and Nick didn't save her. In fact, he ran away, as he didn't want to be seen with an Indian girl. When the narrator learns what actually happened, it helps him to move towards maturity by developing a greater sense of understanding of those people around him. Especially since the narrator idolizes both Nick and Ila as a child (and Ila into adulthood), this shows him that he must be willing to allow his perspectives and understandings to mature and develop in order to grow up.

This idea that understanding one's family history allows a person to reach a point of emotional maturity reaches a conclusion when the narrator, now an adult in his late twenties or early thirties, reconnects with May in London and learns about May's brief romantic relationship with Tridib almost twenty years prior, as well as the truth of Tridib's death. These were events that the narrator witnessed or heard about as a child, but he never fully understood—Tridib died before he could help the narrator make sense of the riots or Tridib's seemingly mysterious relationship with May. When the narrator accompanies Tridib and May on their tourist activities in Calcutta, he is frustrated to realize that there are things between them that he doesn't understand, such as when Tridib mentions "ruins" belonging to them. It's cathartic for the narrator to finally be able to piece together some of those mysteries, such as when May explains that the "ruins" referred to a letter he wrote in which he confessed his love for her. She also tells the narrator that contrary to what his parents told him, Tridib didn't die in an accident. Rather, he died a grotesque and violent death attempting to protect May and his great uncle Jethamoshai from a riot. Following these revelations, the narrator and May have sex. In doing so, they connect in a very adult way over events they barely understood in their youth, which left them lost and uncertain of what even happened. By finally giving words to what happened and looking at each other as equal adults, rather than continuing to relate to each other like they did when May was in her early twenties and the narrator was a child, both of them achieve a sense of relief at finally uncovering a mystery that kept them chained to that place in time.

Overall, Ghosh presents youth and childhood as a period of both blissful innocence and shocking, anxiety-inducing uncertainty. By framing the novel around the narrator's quest to understand his childhood more fully—and his childhood desire for a more adult understanding of the people and events he experiences—the novel suggests that while youth and adulthood are two distinct states of being, each state continuously informs the other. Further, because it's not necessarily the happy moments that the narrator dwells on, either in the past or the preset, the novel ends with the assertion that growing up, becoming mature, and making sense of one's childhood necessarily hinges on losing one's childish sense of innocence and self-importance, and in doing so, coming to grips with the violent, awful, and nonsensical world.

MEMORY, STORYTELLING, AND REALITY

The narrator of *The Shadow Lines* is endlessly fascinated by the relationship between memories as they exist in people's minds and memories that are transformed into stories and passed on through the spoken word. As a child, he lives for the stories his uncle Tridib tells him of living in England, as well as other stories about the Price family, which is the family that Tridib and his parents stayed with. As the narrator grows up and experiences others challenging these stories that Tridib told him, he becomes even more convinced of what Tridib always insisted: while stark reality has its place, one can live an even richer life when a person allows stories and memories, both one's own and those of others, to inform and influence their reality.

The narrator grows up idolizing Tridib, mostly because Tridib is an exceptional storyteller. He can craft worlds and situations

with great detail—and the narrator takes the stories to heart to such an intense degree—that as an adult, the narrator is able to find his way around parts of London he's never been to, based purely on his uncle's stories and the mental maps Tridib created for him. This illustrates how, for the narrator, Tridib's memories and stories are extremely real—something that the narrator's cousin, Ila, doesn't understand. Though Ila also enjoys the stories when she's a child, they don't hold the same importance for her as an adult. The narrator suggests that this is because Ila, who grew up wealthy and privileged, never had to use her imagination to travel or see things. Essentially, the novel suggests that because Ila's lived experience is so rich, she has no reason to make memories that contain the same degree of richness. She, unlike the narrator, can always buy a ticket to a faraway land or find another interesting lover. However, because of this disregard for memories and stories alike, the narrator interprets Ila's life as actually *less* rich, as she doesn't rely on the "clamoring voices" to mediate her experiences with the world, as the narrator does.

Despite the fact that the narrator relies so heavily on Tridib's stories and memories, the instances when the narrator either cannot gain understanding outside of his own memories or simply doesn't have Tridib's memories to color his experience are telling. This suggests that Ila's method of moving through the world has its place, given that she doesn't struggle with the issues the narrator does of whose stories take precedence: his own, or someone else's. This is most apparent in the case of Tridib's death, something that Tridib himself cannot tell the narrator about and the truth of which the narrator's family keeps from him. They originally tell him that Tridib died in an accident in Dhaka, and at eleven years old, the narrator doesn't find this particularly interesting—accidents, he insists, aren't that compelling for a child, unlike other means of death. However, as the narrator grows older, he begins to wonder about the truth of his parents' story. He finally consults both the newspaper from the day Tridib died and May, who witnessed firsthand what happened. The narrator discovers that though he also experienced the riots that gripped Calcutta and Dhaka (and killed Tridib) and was understandably terrified by what happened, the power of his own memories of the event, coupled with his youth, meant that he never connected his experience of the riots in Calcutta with Tridib and May's experience in Dhaka. When the narrator learns from May that Tridib was murdered by a mob while attempting to save her, his great-uncle Jethamoshai, and his great uncle's caregiver, Khalil, the narrator is finally able to make sense of Tridib's story, his own story, and the story of the riots as a whole.

With this understanding, which completes the narrator's understanding of his uncle's entire life, the narrator finally realizes the impact and the importance of telling stories and holding onto other people's memories. May's memories allow the narrator to, for the first time, grasp the reality and the scope of what happened. This echoes the way that Tridib's stories about World War II made that war feel real for the narrator. With this, the novel ends by asserting that though reality as Ila experiences it has its place, memories and stories offer unique insight into an event that simple experience doesn't allow.

FREEDOM AND IDENTITY

The Shadow Lines centers on the relationship between freedom and how people try to achieve that freedom. In this way, the novel seeks to parse out the meanings of different kinds of freedom and how one's perception of freedom influences their identity. Further, the novel also suggests that the idea of freedom is enough to drive someone mad, even if freedom is ultimately unreachable.

The novel explores the idea of freedom primarily through the opposing definitions held by Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother, and Ila, his cousin. Tha'mma, who was born in 1902, grew up during the British occupation of India. As a young woman, Tha'mma believed that there was nothing more important than securing freedom from British rule, even telling her wide-eyed grandson that she wanted to join the terrorists and assassinate British government officials to meet those ends. Despite being so intent on this freedom as a young woman, when Partition (the process that granted the colony of British India freedom from colonial rule by creating the separate countries of India, West Pakistan, and East Pakistan, which later became Bangladesh) finally took place in 1947, Tha'mma was far too busy working and raising a family as a widow to even celebrate, let alone consider the gravity of what happened. It's not until much later that 62-year-old Tha'mma, as she prepares to return to Dhaka for the first time since she was a young woman, realizes the implications of the colony's divisions. While she identifies proudly as an Indian and Hindu woman, the fact that she was born in Dhaka means that, in light of current borders, she was born in East Pakistan—a Muslim-majority country. This realization shakes her sense of identity to its very core, especially in light of her growing nationalism in her old age. This nationalism, which reaches its height after Tridib dies on this trip to Dhaka, leads Tha'mma to sell her beloved gold chain to fund the Indian fight against Muslims. When the narrator confronts her about it, she screams at him that she did it to ensure his freedom from "them" (presumably, the Muslim East Pakistanis). This suggests that Tha'mma's desire for freedom and an easy identity very literally drives her mad, and this nationalism only increases in the following years until her death.

As far as Tha'mma is concerned, Ila's desire for and definition of freedom is a direct attack on her own beliefs about freedom. This is primarily because Ila seeks her freedom by escaping to England, where she can live as a modern western woman: she can sleep with or flirt with men if she feels like it, she can travel

around the world, and most importantly, she's no longer under the control of her male relatives in India. However, the novel questions if the "freedom" Ila finds by living in England is even real when it describes the man she marries, Nick Price. Though Ila's marriage to Nick is supposed to free her from obligations to her family and give her a platform of support, Nick admits mere months into their marriage that he has several other girlfriends and no interest in giving them up. When Ila refuses to leave her marriage because she loves Nick too much, she chooses to exist in a place where her freedom is compromised. The narrator interprets this as an indication that in some ways, Tha'mma was right: Ila *can't* be free. This is reinforced in a point that comes later in the novel but earlier chronologically, when the narrator tells his dying grandmother that Ila lives in England so that she can be free. Tha'mma calls Ila a whore and insists that Ila is in no way free—as per Tha'mma's understanding, freedom can't be purchased in the form of a plane ticket, especially since her own first and only plane ride to Dhaka resulted not only in an identity crisis, but the loss of family.

As the narrator speaks to others about the meaning of freedom, from his uncle Robi to May, he comes to understand though everyone desperately loves the idea freedom and wants it for themselves, actually achieving true freedom is nearly impossible. Robi believes he'll never be free of the traumatic memories of Tridib's death, which he witnessed firsthand; Ila chooses to never free herself from her unhappy marriage that was supposed to free her; and the narrator asserts that the Indian subcontinent will never truly be free from the spite and animosity caused by British rule, long after Partition. With this, the novel suggests that freedom is an impossible idea, and no one can ever be truly free, no matter how hard one might fight for it or attempt to escape oppression.

SOCIAL STANDING AND PRIDE

For all of the characters in *The Shadow Lines*, social standing is a major motivating factor in their lives. By exploring how people's desire for wealth and social standing gets out of control as a result of excessive pride, the novel suggests that these things should be treated with caution and not be taken too seriously. The narrator notes that though his education and his family's standing have had innumerable positive effects on his life, he also shows how the same things tear apart different factions of his family and prove to be, in some cases, lethal.

Over the course of the novel, the characters make it abundantly clear that even more important to them than climbing the social ladder is highlighting the differences, real or imagined, between themselves and those who exist on the social ladder below them. Ila's mother, who goes by the nickname Queen Victoria, is one of the most overt offenders. Although the woman she hires to nanny Ila, Lizzie, speaks fluent English and is semi-conversational in Hindi, Queen Victoria insists on speaking to Lizzie in her own made-up language designed to make Lizzie seem stupid and uneducated. In reality, Lizzie is just poor and from a different part of the country. Tha'mma also relies heavily on her sense of pride. When her husband died prematurely, leaving Tha'mma with a young son and no job, Tha'mma was too prideful to ask her wealthy family members for help. Instead, by a stroke of luck, she got a job as a teacher that she then held for the next thirty years, and impressed upon her son, the narrator's father, the importance of education. In her old age, she construes her relatives as greedy and unhelpful for not coming to her aid, though they didn't help her exactly because she refused their help. However, by juxtaposing Tha'mma's sense of pride in her self-made wealth and her sister's family's inherited wealth with an open distaste for poor people and an implied fear of living like poor people, the novel suggests that the characters' desire for wealth and standing is somewhat understandable. It's in their best interests to make sure their children attend the best schools and achieve the highest marks, as that will ensure that they don't end up poor.

Chronologically speaking, pride is the first thing that begins to destroy the narrator's family. When Tha'mma and Mayadebi are young girls, they live in a large house in Dhaka with a number of extended family members. When their father begins fighting with their uncle Jethamoshai, the two men decide that the only way to deal with the conflict is to divide the house in two with a wall and never speak to each other again. For Tha'mma, who is old enough to remember a time when the house was not divided, she sees that her father and uncle's excessive pride is what causes them to feel that their only option was to divide the house in a completely nonsensical way and cut off the other half of the family. Further, the prideful natures of both parts of the family don't end after the division: the patriarchs forbid their children from playing with each other, and thus, the two halves of the family fall out of contact. Most chilling is what Tha'mma discovers when she returns to the house in her sixties. Jethamoshai still lives there, an ancient man in his nineties, and is still very clearly upset about the conflict with his brother: he rants and raves about wanting to take his brother's family to court to legally claim the other half of the house, and indeed, ran out several family members who at various points tried to return to the house. By this point, Jethamoshai is completely unable to care for himself, and he certainly would not be taken seriously in a court of law. In this way, the novel offers a dark cautionary tale of the consequences of pride, as Jethamoshai's pride leads to his own death, the death of his caretaker, Khalil, and Tridib.

Tha'mma believes wholeheartedly that it's important to make good use of one's social standing—a belief that stems from her own bootstraps story of success. As far as she's concerned, Tridib blatantly ignores this, which makes him untrustworthy

and stupid in her eyes. Instead of becoming a professor, Tridib spends his time on the streets, talking—a sin to trump all others, according to Tha'mma. Again, however, Tha'mma turns this all on its head when, on the day before she dies, she writes a letter to the dean of the narrator's school, informing him that the narrator has been visiting brothels and therefore should be expelled—essentially, attempting to deprive her grandson of the social standing he would achieve through education. The narrator understands that his grandmother did this because she resents that the narrator is deeply in love with Ila, who attempts to reject her own high social standing by becoming involved with Trotskyism in London, a political movement that seeks to upend the class system altogether. Though Tha'mma is unsuccessful in ruining her grandson's chances at a better life through education, this instance illustrates again the dangers of excessive pride and obsession with social standing. Tha'mma ensures that her grandson will think poorly of her after her death, destroying her family in yet another way. The novel illustrates the innumerable ways that pride and fear can tear apart a family, ending with the assertion that though the reasoning behind people's pride can, in some cases, be understandable, the means absolutely do not justify the ends.

BORDERS, VIOLENCE, AND POLITICAL UNREST

The events of *The Shadow Lines* center primarily around riots that took place in Calcutta, India, and Dhaka, East Pakistan, in late 1963 and early 1964. Though the narrator doesn't discover the truth until the very end of the novel, it's this riot in Dhaka that kills Tridib, a realization that suddenly forces the narrator to reevaluate his experience of the conflict from his hometown in Calcutta and consider the ways in which the riots were an even bigger defining moment in his life than he realized at the time. As the narrator, in his late twenties or thirties, finally pieces together what happened, he begins to consider the role that British colonialism and the border between India and East Pakistan played in the conflict, and how the political unrest of the period truly impacted his understanding of his family and the world.

When the British finally granted their colony of British India independence in 1947, they divided the colony along religious lines, creating the Hindu-majority country of India and the Muslim-majority countries of East Pakistan and West Pakistan. As the narrator, who grew up in the Indian city of Calcutta, describes, these borders meant that he was relatively unaware of anything happening outside his home in India—cities that were a thousand miles away but still in India were in the forefront of his consciousness and understanding, while cities that were a day's drive away, but in another country, simply didn't exist in his mind.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE UPSIDE-DOWN HOUSE

The story of the upside-down house comes to represent the polarizing power of borders and the stories people tell about them. After Tha'mma's father and Jethamoshai divide their house in half with a wall, Tha'mma tells Mayadebi, who was too young to remember when the house wasn't divided, that their aunt, uncle, and cousins do everything backwards. She insists they drink tea out of buckets, and eat dinner at breakfast time. Over time, Tha'mma almost comes to believe this fantastical story she tells, if only because she never goes to the other side after the division. Tha'mma crafts the story that the people on the other side are very different from her, when in reality, they're no different—and in fact, are family.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin edition of *The Shadow Lines* published in 2007.

1. Going Away Quotes

❝ I tried to tell her, but neither then nor later, though we talked about it often, did I ever succeed in explaining to her that I could not forget because Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with; she, who had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in Tridib's room had meant to me [...]

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Tridib, Ila

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator and Ila are sixteen, the narrator tries to tell her about what Tridib's stories meant to him and the effect those stories had on his life. Ila is wealthy and has the opportunity to travel often, so she doesn't have to rely on stories of faraway lands to "travel" in her imagination like the narrator does. Further, Tridib later became a stickler for using one's imagination precisely to delve into the ordinary

and the mundane, a skill that the narrator carries into adulthood. Tridib teaches the narrator how to view the world by considering everything: his memories of a place, event, or person; the stories someone else told him about that place; and finally, what he sees with his own eyes. In this way, the narrator learns to see the world in a more nuanced, layered way than Ila does.

> I felt a constriction in my throat, for suddenly it seemed to me that perhaps she was not so alien, after all, to my own small, puritanical world, in which children were sent to school to learn how to cling to their gentility by proving themselves in the examination hall.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Tha'mma, Ila

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Ila has just shown the narrator her yearbooks from school. After seeing some pictures in which Ila looks sad and alone, the narrator realizes that Ila is probably not as popular at school as she claims to be. For the narrator, this suggests that Ila's high social standing, which is a result of her wealthy family, isn't something that's guaranteed for her—it's something that she'll have to work to maintain. This possibility is verified later, when Ila gets a job as an adult and supports her husband, Nick Price. Nick, unlike Ila, can coast using his family's wealth. This difference suggests that Indian families like the narrator's and Ila's must work harder to reach success, while it comes more easily and naturally for English people, like Nick's family.

> For Ila the current was real: it was as though she lived in a present which was like an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of the past and the future by steel floodgates.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ila

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator describes the way that Ila talks about people and events as though nothing matters but the present moment; she doesn't consider the role that the past or the future plays in what she experiences in life. This shows why Ila thinks so little of Tridib's stories and, by extension, the narrator, who lives for Tridib's stories. She doesn't see that the past or the future, especially someone else's past in the form of stories and memories, has any value to her lived experience in the present. This is also a result of her social standing—she can always buy a plane ticket to a faraway land and therefore, she doesn't necessarily have to remember the place in detail in order to experience it again. She, unlike the narrator, has the purchasing power to make her present look like she wants it, without needing to rely on the past or memory for help.

> I could guess at a little of what it had cost her then to refuse her rich sister's help and of the wealth of pride it had earned her, and I knew intuitively that all that had kept her from agreeing at once was her fear of accepting anything from anyone that she could not return in exact measure.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mayadebi, Mother, Tha'mma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

After the young narrator convinces Tha'mma to let his family join Ila's for a drive, he shares with the reader why Tha'mma refused in the first place. This begins to develop Tha'mma as a deeply prideful person; she believes that she's fully self-made and that she created her success out of nothing. Unfortunately, her pride also keeps her from forming or maintaining strong connections with her family members, and at the end of her life, it even destroys her relationship with her grandson.

As a child, the narrator is aware of Tha'mma's deep sense of pride and knows how to use it to his advantage. This shows that even though the narrator is often a naïve child, he's also relatively observant and understands how to put what he knows about family members to good use.

> I would have been frightened, she said. But I would have prayed for strength, and God willing, yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free.

Related Characters: Tha'mma (speaker), Tridib, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator learns that Tha'mma wanted to be a part of the pre-Partition terrorist movements, he learns that Tha'mma places a premium on freedom. The fact that she ties freedom to violence explains the peculiar ways she deals with other people over the course of the novel. For Tha'mma, freedom is something that must be secured through violent means and then held tightly. She doesn't understand that Ila, for example, feels free when she doesn't live in India. This is unthinkable for Tha'mma because Ila didn't do any of the hard work that a person must go through to obtain freedom and therefore, insists that Ila isn't truly free. Tha'mma's intense emotions in this passage also make it clear that freedom is extremely important to her, and it make her other bids for "freedom" make more sense in the context of her character.

> She had given me away, she had made public, then and for ever, the inequality of our needs; she had given Ila the knowledge of her power and she had left me defenceless, naked in the face of that unthinkable, adult truth: that need is not transitive, that one may need without oneself being needed.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mother, Ila

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

When the eight-year-old narrator discovers that his cousin Ila didn't miss him while she was away, it forces him to reevaluate how he thinks of their relationship and the power dynamic at play in it. This is a moment when the narrator is forced to grow up: as he notes, it's an adult understanding to realize that needing someone doesn't mean that they'll return the feeling. However, rather than taking this information and actually using it to become more mature and free from Ila's neglect, the narrator instead spends the rest of the novel—into his mid-thirties—waiting and hoping for Ila to love him back, even when it's clear that she never will. In this way, the narrator recognizes that he's telling himself stories that he wishes were true, even when his lived experiences clearly show that his stories will never actually come to pass.

> I said: I'm not meeting you for the first time; I've grown up with you.

He was taken aback.

That must have taken some doing, he said drily, since I grew up right here, in boring suburban old West Hampstead.

I've known the streets around here for a long time too, I said.

Related Characters: Nick Price, The Narrator (speaker), Tridib, Robi, Ila

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator meets Nick Price for the first time (when they're both adults), the narrator is unable to ignore the feeling that he "knows" Nick, even if they've never met, because of all the stories the narrator has heard about him. For the narrator, he moves through the world seeing that his memories and other people's stories constantly inform how he feels about something, which is why he feels this way about Nick. However, the version of Nick that the narrator grew up with is very much a figment of his imagination. The narrator had only Ila's brief description and one story from his father to formulate his idea of Nick, which means that the Nick in the narrator's mind differs greatly from the Nick in real life. This becomes more apparent as Nick shows that he's not necessarily a figure to look up to; he's privileged and floats through life, taking advantage of people and his family's wealth whenever he can. In contrast, the narrator is generally a hard worker who doesn't have the luxury of a wealthy family to support him. Because of this, the narrator eventually has to conclude that he doesn't actually know Nick.

> They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood [...] War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don't you see?

Related Characters: Tha'mma (speaker), Ila, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

On Tha'mma's deathbed, she insists to the narrator that England is a nation in a way that India isn't, if only because England has been at war to develop its nationhood for centuries. Tha'mma sees that the development of a nation is primarily built on blood and violence. She doesn't believe there's a peaceful way to create a nation, which explains her deep-seated nationalism in the decade leading up to her death. Then, she also believes that being loyal to a country means that a person will identify as being a part of that country before they identify as being part of a religion or an ethnic group. This suggests that Tha'mma thinks that nationalism and religious identity are in opposition to each other, something that she's actively shown isn't the case, given her desire to bring Jethamoshai "home" to the correct country, per religious breakdown.

> But I knew I had made a mistake the moment I said it; I should have known that she would have nothing but contempt for a freedom that could be bought for the price of an air ticket. For she too had once wanted to be free; she had dreamt of killing for her freedom.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ila, Tha'mma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator tells the dying Tha'mma that Ila lives in England so that she can be free, he understands that Tha'mma and Ila have very different ideas of what constitutes freedom. For Ila, living in England allows her to escape a patriarchal society that deprives her of the ability to do what she wants when she wants. In England, she can have sex with who she likes and wear what she wants—things that she can't necessarily do in India. Essentially, Ila defines freedom as having the agency to choose how she conducts her life. Tha'mma, on the other hand, defines freedom as not being under the thumb of a different government. Freedom is something that she feels the need to kill for. It's not something that she can achieve by leaving the country—rather, she feels as though she must make the oppressing culture (the British) leave with force and violence. Because of this, Tha'mma cannot understand Ila or the narrator's love for Ila.

> […] I thought of how much they all wanted to be free; how they went mad wanting their freedom; I began to wonder whether it was I that was mad because I was happy to be bound: whether I was alone in knowing that I could not live without the clamour of voices within me.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ila, Tha'mma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

After a horrifying conversation with his dying grandmother, the narrator wonders if he's crazy since he enjoys not being free. The fact that the narrator asks this question suggests that he conceptualizes freedom in an entirely different way from both Tha'mma and Ila. The narrator sees freedom as the freedom from the memories and stories that he holds inside him, which manifest as the voices that guide his thoughts and perceptions. He understands that getting rid of these voices would free him to make his own decisions and assessments, but doing so would also deprive him of richness and nuance in his life. By rejecting freedom and choosing to stick with the way he sees the world, the narrator is in some ways the freest of all: he recognizes he has the power to choose and change how he sees the world, which is something that both Tha'mma and Ila struggle to do.

> I began to marvel at the easy arrogance with which she believed that her experience could encompass other moments simply because it had come later; that times and places are the same because they happen to look alike, like airport lounges.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mike, Francesca, Dan, Alan Tresawsen, Nick Price, Ila

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

At several points throughout the novel, the narrator suggests that Ila doesn't take context into account when she makes moral judgments. Instead, she insists that everything should be the same no matter where in the world it is, and people should behave the same regardless of locale and local custom. In this case, this means that Ila believes that the act of living communally is an experience that looks and feels exactly the same for everyone who does it. The narrator understands that this isn't true—living communally while World War II looms large over London is, in his understanding, very different than living in a Trotskyist house in the 1980s, as Ila is doing at this point.

❝ Well of course there are famines and riots and disasters, she said. But those are local things, after all—not like revolutions or anti-fascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that's really remembered.

Related Characters: Ila (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator insists to Ila that living in London on the eve of World War II was probably not as idyllic as she seems to think it was, she insists the narrator doesn't understand and claims that nothing of much importance happens in India. For the narrator, this is absurd. The novel itself centers around discovering what happened during the violent riots of 1963 and 1964, an event that dramatically changed the narrator's life and resulted in a refugee crisis in Calcutta. Whether or not Ila realizes it, it also affected her as well, given that Tridib was her uncle too, and he died there.

However, Ila's point must be considered alongside the fact that she very happily lives in England, which is a world power. England then gets to set examples for the world and decide what events around the world are worthy of media coverage and discussion—and apparently, things that happen in India aren't important. This then comes to show how deeply Ila identifies with being English and how little she thinks of India.

❝ I lay on my back, staring up at the ceiling, and as the hours passed I saw Ila again and again as she was when she stepped out of that car at Gole Park, eighteen years ago; on that morning when she wrenched me into adulthood by demonstrating for the first time, and for ever the inequality of our needs.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ila

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator inadvertently shows Ila that he has romantic feelings for her, she escapes to sleep with Nick, and the narrator is left alone. As he did on that day in Gole Park, the narrator doesn't fully process this realization that Ila will never love him, nor does he choose to change how he behaves around her. Instead, he continues to tell himself stories that make it seem as though maybe, possibly, Ila will one day love him. This shows that the narrator understands that he can use stories to make himself feel better, even if they don't actually shape his reality in meaningful, productive ways. Instead, clinging to these stories keeps the narrator trapped, pointing back to his realization that stories and memories keep him from being free.

2. Coming Home Quotes

❝ But you know, the strange thing was that as we grew older even I almost came to believe in our story.

Related Characters: Tha'mma (speaker), The Narrator, Jethamoshai, Mayadebi

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tha'mma explains to the narrator that she used to tell Mayadebi that their uncle Jethamoshai's side of the house was upside-down, and she admits that after so many years, she began to believe her own fantasy. This illustrates the power of stories, as even though the idea that Jethamoshai's home is upside-down, backwards, and wholly different from Tha'mma's is absurd, telling the stories enough times is enough to make it feel almost real. In turn,

this shows how the narrator is not the only one to rely heavily on stories to understand the world.

The story itself also illustrates how it's very easy to dehumanize someone on the other side of a line and turn them into an "other," even when they were once a beloved family member. When expanded to the full scope of the novel, this explains how individuals in both India and East Pakistan were able to think poorly of their neighbors after Partition—the line made it easy to turn them into creatures entirely different from themselves, not human beings they once lived with happily.

> The price she had paid for that pride was that it had come to be transformed in her imagination into a barrage of slights and snubs; an imaginary barrier that she believed her gloating relatives had erected to compound her humiliation.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Mayadebi, Tha'mma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

When Tha'mma's husband died, she pridefully refused financial help from all of her family members, including her wealthy sister. However, as Tha'mma got older, she told herself that it was actually her family members who refused to help her, not the other way around. This again illustrates the power of stories, and in this case, this story has major implications for Tha'mma's life. She refuses to help distant relatives, since they "didn't help" her, and it makes her even more intent on protecting and preserving what she built and not sharing it with others. This later leads to her taking her anger out on the narrator when he won't give up his love for Ila. For Tha'mma, it's not a big deal to sever ties with family members, especially when she sees that they actively humiliate her.

> But he did know that was how he wanted to meet her, May—as a stranger, in a ruin. He wanted them to meet as the completest of strangers—strangers-across-the-seas—all the more strangers because they knew each other already. He wanted them to meet far from their friends and relatives—in a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers.

Related Characters: Tridib (speaker), The Narrator, May Price

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator recounts the entirety of Tridib's very sexual letter to May, inviting her to come visit in India so they can "meet as strangers." When Tridib suggests that he and May could be free in India, he believes this because his family and May's family don't have history there like they do in England. In England, the two would be at the mercy of the social structure and expectations of England, while in India, there are few people who have actually met May.

Though Tridib never actually tells the story, his mention of them as "strangers-across-the-seas" is a reference to a story that Snipe, May's father, told him as a child and that Tridib later told to the narrator. The story about a hero who isn't from a specific country. By tying this story into this letter, Tridib uses it to provide more meaning to what he's saying, as May's father likely told her this story too, meaning that she'll understand the reference.

> But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same [...] What was it all for then—Partition and all the killing and everything—if there isn't something in between?

Related Characters: Tha'mma (speaker), The Narrator, Mother, Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

In the months before Tha'mma's journey to Dhaka, she's distraught to realize that there's no visible border separating India and East Pakistan. Tha'mma links bloodshed directly with borders and wants desperately to see something tangible that makes it seem as though the extreme violence was worth it. Similarly, she links the possibility of a physical border to freedom, as it would clearly define where Tha'mma exists as a free Hindu woman (in India) and where she doesn't (in East Pakistan). When she insists that there's no difference from side to side, she's

also not wrong. The narrator mentions several times that each side of the border was more alike than people wanted to admit during this period, as the border itself made it so those similarities were very apparent.

> They were all around me, we were together at last, not ghosts at all: the ghostliness was merely the absence of time and distance—for that is all that a ghost is, a presence displaced in time.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Snipe, Tridib, Ila

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

As adults, the narrator and Ila go into Mrs. Price's cellar so that Ila can confide in the narrator about Nick's infidelity, and the narrator feels as though he's surrounded by the many stories he's heard about this cellar. This shows how the narrator so deeply relies on these stories to inform his experiences of the present. From the narrator's perspective, Tridib and Snipe aren't truly dead; they're just ghosts that appear when something triggers his memory and brings up stories about them. Living in this way allows the narrator to lead a rich life guided by the voices of all these people. Ultimately, this means he has much more information to help him make sense of his world than other people do.

> Everyone lives in a story, he says, my grandmother, my father, his father, Lenin, Einstein, and lots of other names I hadn't heard of; they all lived in stories, because stories are all there are to live in, it was just a question of which one you choose [...]

Related Characters: The Shaheb (speaker), Ila, Tha'mma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

When Tridib finds young Ila and the narrator crying in Raijabar and listens to the narrator angrily berate Ila for acting as though her story was real, he gently encourages the narrator to understand that stories guide everyone.

Tridib's assertion that even Ila lives in a story is somewhat unprecedented, given that he and the narrator suggest many times that Ila lives entirely separated from stories, memories, or any conception of the future. This acknowledgement that Ila is just like them and is just as beholden to stories goes on to inform how the narrator thinks about Ila for the remainder of the novel. Particularly after Ila discovers Nick's infidelity, she uses stories and lies to try to convince the narrator that there's actually nothing wrong with her marriage. In doing so, she does choose to live in a story of her own making—though that one is absolutely not true, while the racial violence she recounts here is verified by several characters and was therefore an actual event.

> I could think of nothing to say; nothing that would console her for the discovery that the squalor of the genteel little lives she had so much despised was a part too of the free world she had tried to build for herself.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Nick Price, Ila

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

When Ila confides in the narrator that Nick is cheating on her with several women and has no interest in giving them up, the narrator doesn't know how to tell her that infidelity is something universal. Ila's disillusionment suggests that she clung tightly to her idea of freedom and truly believed that if she created a world in which she felt free, she'd also escape problems like marital infidelity. This shows that even well into adulthood and maturity, Ila still moves through the world with a sense of childish innocence that doesn't serve her in her life. With this new information, Ila will have to reevaluate where she stands in her marriage and in the world, and possibly accept that her social standing doesn't make her immune to tragedies like this.

> Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere.

Related Characters: Jethamoshai (speaker), Mayadebi, Tha'mma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

As Tha'mma and Mayadebi attempt to convince their uncle Jethamoshai to come back to India with them, he states that he doesn't even believe in the country, especially since "they" can redraw the lines again whenever they like. Jethamoshai truly gets at the heart of the issue with this comment, as redrawing the lines is a distinct possibility given the haphazard way that some parts of India and Pakistan were divided in 1947. Even in his old age, he understands that it's far easier to believe that one lives in a home and conceptualize his world as being small and intimate, rather than including loyalty to a nation. By simply rejecting the notion of borders and nationhood, Jethamoshai is able to define his identity for himself—though it also allows him the tools to dehumanize everyone, not just those who live on the other side of the line.

> I was a child, and like all the children around me, I grew up believing in the truth of the precepts that were available to me: I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that there is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Tridib

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator explains how he had to forgive himself for taking fifteen years for connecting his childhood experience of riots in Calcutta to Tridib's tragic death at the hands of a mob in Dhaka. He attributes this late discovery to the simple fact that he was a child with a simplistic understanding of the world. Most importantly, the narrator grew up believing that those who live across a border are fundamentally different from himself—something that allows people to dehumanize those who live elsewhere or live differently. His mention of space refers to the fact that the event that triggered the riots in East Pakistan (in Dhaka and Khulna) happened in Srinagar, 1200 miles away from Khulna—distance clearly doesn't mean that those two locations are free from influence from the other. However, in the narrator's understanding of the world at this young point, that distance should mean something, and the riot should never have happened given his understanding of the world.

> His atlas showed me, for example, that [...] Chiang Mai in Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi is [...] Yet I had never heard of those places until I drew my circle, and I cannot remember a time when I was so young that I had not heard of Delhi or Srinagar.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Tridib

Related Themes:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator draws circles in Tridib's atlas and learns that some cities in foreign countries are closer to him than many Indian cities, the narrator comes to a greater understanding about borders. The narrator understands that the border makes it so that he, as an Indian boy, grew up knowing everything that happened within his own country, while downplaying or silencing everything that happens outside it. This explains several events in the novel, including Ila's assertion that nothing important happens in India. Because she lives in England and embraces English culture, she believes that the border and the distance between India and England means she doesn't have to think about what's going on in India. Similarly, this explains for the narrator why his father allowed Tha'mma, Tridib, and May to go to Dhaka in the first place. The local Calcutta paper he read didn't necessarily care about what was going on outside of its borders, so it didn't report that riots were brewing in Dhaka. With this understanding, the narrator concludes that borders are linked intrinsically to violence and dehumanization, by virtue of the fact that someone is allowed to believe they no longer have to care about what happens outside of their nation's borders.

They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Tha'mma, Tridib

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 228

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator draws circles in Tridib's atlas, he wonders at the fact that people think that borders actually separate people. Just as Tha'mma learned on her trip to Dhaka, there are usually not actual lines in the sand to delineate the boundary between two countries. Instead, the borders exist more in people's minds, but this doesn't necessarily diminish their power. In contrast, the narrator realizes that the border lines can actually make it easier to see the similarities from one side of the border to the other. This is what happened between Dhaka and Calcutta; the narrator refers to them later as sharing a "looking-glass border," or a border that makes their similarities abundantly clear exactly because they're supposed to be so different.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

1. GOING AWAY

Thirteen years before the narrator's birth, in 1939, Mayadebi, the Shaheb, and eight-year-old Tridib move to England. The narrator, who is now eight years old himself, tries to imagine Tridib as an eight-year-old but struggles to—Trudib is now 29 years old and looks ancient to the narrator. The narrator decides that Tridib surely looked like him, though his grandmother, Tha'mma, insists Tridib didn't.

When the narrator decides that he and Tridib look alike, it's an early indicator of the degree to which the narrator idolizes Tridib and wants to be as much like him as possible. It doesn't matter that (according to Tha'mma) this is impossible; it's more important for the narrator to identify with Tridib than believe the truth.

Tha'mma doesn't like Tridib; she insists that a person must use their time wisely, and that Tridib doesn't do that. This is, of course, why the narrator loves to listen to Tridib: he doesn't seem to do much, but he also doesn't seem to waste time. Tridib often drops in to see the narrator's family without warning. Despite Tha'mma's dislike of him, it tickles her when he visits because his family is rich.

The strange relationship between Tha'mma and Tridib points out that Tha'mma is very keen to associate with the rich and powerful, regardless of whether or not she actually likes them. This suggests early on that social standing is very important to Tha'mma and the narrator's family as a whole.

Tha'mma knows that Tridib visits primarily to "nurse his stomach." He comes when he finds himself needing a restroom immediately, a condition known to the family as "Tridib's Gastric." Tha'mma always forces him to go through pleasantries before allowing him to slip away to the bathroom. The narrator notes that he grew up believing that Tridib had a special organ called a Gastric, though he was too shy to ask about it. Tha'mma never let Tridib stay long, as she believes him capable of having a negative influence on the narrator and his father.

The mention of Tridib's Gastric shows that the narrator was an innocent, gullible child—and therefore, his perception of the world as a child isn't to be trusted. Essentially, the anecdote about Tridib's Gastric sets out a starting point from which the narrator can mature and grow up over the course of the novel.

The narrator runs into Tridib in the street fairly regularly when he's a child. Tridib is the only one in his family who spent most of his life in Calcutta, as the rest of his family is wealthy and travels often. Tha'mma is offended by this: she sees it as proof of Tridib's frivolity that he never married or got a real job. Instead, he lives with his grandmother in the old family house in Calcutta. Though Tha'mma often tells the narrator that she pities Tridib, the narrator understands that she fears him because she believes he spends all his time on street corners, gossiping. Tridib, is, however, pursuing a PhD in archaeology.

Tha'mma clearly believes that it's horrible to not make the most of one's social standing. The narrator recognizes that there's a difference in how Tha'mma talks about Tridib and how she actually feels about him. It's unclear how true this is (remember the narrator as a child isn't reliable), but it does set up the precedent that the narrator believes himself to be an expert on Tridib and Tha'mma.

The narrator knows that Tridib only goes to the park rarely, and he hears about Tridib from his best friend and neighbor, Montu, as well as from local shopkeepers. The narrator wonders if that kind of community even exists today in that neighborhood—then, Gole Park was outside the city, and there were only a few refugees.

The mention of there only being a few refugees indicates that at this point in the neighbor's childhood, the tensions between India and East Pakistan aren't running high—later, during the riots in 1964, Calcutta is flooded with refugees from East Pakistan.

If he hears Tridib is nearby, the narrator skips his evening cricket game and finds him. He never questions why Tridib is in the area, though he should have, as Tridib didn't live there and had a detached air about him. The narrator wonders if the people put up with Tridib because he is worldly and sometimes gives incredible advice—though he's also known for giving outright incorrect advice sometimes.

By describing Tridib as an unknowable, strange character, the narrator suggests that Tridib defies normal and accepted methods of categorization or description. Essentially, Tridib is in control of his own identity, and he doesn't share it with many.

Tridib is so self-mocking, nobody on the street quite knows what to believe about him. Nobody really believes he's the son of a rich and powerful diplomat, so the story that he has a wife and several children prevails. The narrator, as a young boy with a reputation for being gullible, can't set anyone straight.

This passage draws out the relationship between observed reality and stories. People in the community accept the (incorrect) story about Tridib's family life because it aligns with the people's observed reality and perception of Tridib.

When the narrator is nine, Tridib disappears for weeks. When the narrator stops at Tridib's house one day, Tridib tells him a secret: he's discovered treasure from an ancient dynasty, and he instructs the narrator to not tell a soul. Weeks later, the narrator finds Tridib in Gole Park, telling people that he's been away in England visiting relatives through marriage. He says he stayed with a woman named Mrs. Price, who has a daughter named May. When asked, Tridib explains that May isn't sexy in the conventional way but is warm and kind.

To an adult reader, it's more readily understood that Tridib has feelings for May—something that goes right over the narrator's head, mostly because of his youth. These two opposing stories also call into question which one is true, though it's clear that Tridib hasn't actually been in London. This sets up the idea that stories can be important and informative, even if they might not be entirely truthful.

The narrator bursts forward and yells at Tridib that he got it wrong, since he just saw him a few weeks ago in Calcutta. The listeners burst out laughing, but Tridib pinches the narrator's cheek and says good-naturedly that anyone who believes everything they're told deserves to be lied to. When he leaves, the listeners are on edge, as they believe they've been made a part of a joke. The narrator, furious with himself, yells at the listeners that Tridib *had* been to London when he was a boy, as his father needed an operation that couldn't be performed in India. He explains that the Price family is real, and they invited Tridib's parents to come. The listeners laugh, and the narrator runs away angry.

The fact that the narrator bursts in like this suggests that he believes in the importance of the truth, especially when he then goes on to attempt to set the listeners straight about the Price family. Tridib's reaction to the narrator's outburst suggests he takes more pleasure in the telling than having people believe his stories are real, which is an early way for the novel to build up Tridib's love of storytelling and his skill at it.

The narrator tells the reader that he met May Price for the first time two years later, and then for the second time seventeen years later in London. In London, it takes the narrator a month to find May. She plays the oboe in an orchestra, and the narrator manages to get a seat at one of her concerts. She looks much the same as the narrator remembers, but her long black hair is now streaked with gray. The narrator remembers watching her, entranced, as she practiced her music when she visited Calcutta.

By meeting May at several different points throughout his life, the narrator must naturally try to piece together his childhood conception of May with the adult reality before him, something that will test the narrator's ability to mature and reevaluate his childish conceptions. The fact that May looks so similar will complicate this process.

After the concert, the narrator catches May's attention, and they meet in the foyer. The two are embarrassed, and May explains she remembers the narrator as a boy very well, and he doesn't look much different now. She invites him back to her apartment for a simple dinner. On the tube, she explains that she also works for relief agencies, providing housing for people in Central America.

When May says that the narrator looks much the same—even though he's a full-grown adult at this point—it suggests that there will be some struggle as these two attempt to reestablish their relationship to each other, now that May is solidly in middle age and the narrator is no longer a child.

At her apartment, the narrator looks over May's bookshelf while May cooks. He comes across a photo of her that he says looks like it was taken when she visited his family in Calcutta. She primly says that it was taken several years before, and explains that she sent it to Tridib. She tells the narrator that she and Tridib began writing to each other in 1959, when she was 19 and Tridib was 27. The narrator tells the reader that he likes to imagine that Tridib received May's photograph the day he told the fantastical story in Gole Park.

Again, when the narrator discovers the truth of when the photo was taken, he must reevaluate what he thought was true about May and his past recollections of her. Further, when May admits that she and Tridib wrote to one another (and presumably, shared some sort of romance), the narrator is forced to amend his memory and look back on what he remembers to integrate this new information.

The narrator insists that Tha'mma was wrong about Tridib: he is openly dismissive of the gossips, and the narrator recognizes that he's happiest surrounded by books. Once, the narrator and his cousin, Ila, discuss this when they're sixteen and Ila and her family visit. When Ila gets out of the car, Tha'mma is in awe of her beauty, but the narrator is disappointed to see his cousin dressed in a sari like everyone else. Ila and the narrator decide to walk down to the lake.

The narrator's disappointment at seeing Ila in a sari suggests that he loves or admires Ila in part because she seems foreign and exotic. Further, the fact that both Ila and the narrator remember Tridib suggests that they might have differing recollections, which will again require both of them to reevaluate what they remember and what might be true.

They sit awkwardly for a minute and finally, the narrator asks Ila if she remembers how, as children, Ila, the narrator, and Robi used to go find Tridib and listen to him talk about all sorts of things. Ila insists she remembers and laughs, but the narrator can tell she doesn't truly remember. The narrator asks if she remembers all the strategies they used to get Tridib to pull out photographs and talk about his year in London. Ila again says she remembers faintly and seems puzzled by the narrator's insistence on dredging up old memories.

This exchange sets up the narrator and Ila as fundamentally different in how they think about the past and memory. These memories were clearly not important enough to Ila to truly remember them, which begs the question of what she does truly remember and value. The narrator, on the other hand, clearly lived for these experiences with Tridib, which illustrates his closeness with Tridib.

The narrator asks Ila how she could possibly forget, and she responds by asking him how he even remembers. The narrator tells the reader this isn't even a question—Ila will never understand what Tridib's stories meant to the narrator. Since Ila traveled so much as a child, she was as familiar with the world as the narrator, who never traveled, was with his local park. Ila never understood that Tridib allowed the narrator to travel in his imagination by telling him stories and pointing out locations in his atlas.

The relationship between the narrator and Tridib, despite their age difference, is was built on the understanding that stories and memories are extremely important—it's the only way the narrator learns about the world around him. In contrast, Ila has the freedom to experience these places firsthand, so her own memories and experiences are more important to her than Tridib's stories.

The narrator rambles about wanting to see Cairo but soon realizes Ila isn't listening. Suddenly, Ila snaps her fingers and says that the ladies' room is on the far side of the departure lounge in Cairo. The narrator thinks that to Ila, the world is made up of departure lounges, all with the ladies' rooms hidden somewhere different. He understands that those restrooms were the only fixed points in her childhood.

By recognizing that airport bathrooms were the only constant things in Ila's childhood, the novel begins to suggest that Ila's childhood, though privileged, wasn't as idyllic as it seemed. Relying on public restrooms for consistency implies that Ila's childhood was tumultuous.

A decade later, when the narrator is in London, he and Ila often go out. The narrator is always thrilled to get to take the underground transit somewhere, and Ila teases him mercilessly for it. To her, the underground is a means of travel; to the narrator, it's otherworldly. He never manages to persuade her that places must be invented in a person's imagination; they don't just exist. When the narrator was a boy, Tridib told him that Ila had never truly traveled, since her imagination and her inventions of places simply traveled with her: she long ago stopped seeing places with fresh eyes.

The stories that people tell the narrator intimately inform how he looks at places when he finally gets to see them himself, once again underscoring the importance the narrator places on memory and stories. This suggests that the narrator is very entrenched in a kind of mental community made up of all the people who shaped the way he views the world, while Ila exists in a mental world where she's very alone.

Ila visits Calcutta most summers while she and the narrator are children. She always brings her yearbook from her latest international school, and she and the narrator pore over the pages as Ila points out her friends. The narrator notes that though Ila can always describe the events captured in the photos with great detail, she's always absent from the photos.

When the narrator can pick out these inconsistencies in Ila's narration using the photos, it suggests again that her childhood wasn't actually idyllic. Since Ila spent time in London, she likely experienced racial violence or bullying and might not have been friends with any of the people she points out in the yearbook to the narrator.

When they're 14, Ila points out a picture of a boy who looks much older and says that he's her boyfriend. A few pages later, the narrator sees a photo of the boy with his arms around blonde girls. Ila is in the background of the photo, unsmiling, with books in her arms. A week later, the narrator discovers that Ila ripped the photo out, and the narrator feels as though Ila might not be so different from him: they might both be going to school to "cling to their gentility."

Even as this passage makes Ila's inconsistencies very clear, it also shows Ila using stories to attempt to guide the narrator's idea of what Ila's life is like. This suggests that Ila feels as though she has something to prove, and that even at a young age, she feels compelled to act and speak a certain way to maintain her status as the wealthy, worldly cousin.

Years later, when Robi, the narrator, and Ila are drinking in a London pub, the narrator reminds Ila about the yearbooks. Ila laughs and says that school is all that matters to all children—except for the narrator, who she insists was strange in his love of faraway lands. She adds that at least her stories taught the narrator that the places in the atlas were real, not "fairylands" like Tridib told him about. The narrator says this assertion was misguided; Tridib, as an archaeologist, instructed the narrator to use his imagination precisely and with purpose.

It's worth noting here that Ila's experiences allowed her to actually visit faraway lands, adding more credence to the idea that new places were uninteresting to her because of the frequency of her travels. With the assertion that Tridib had definite ideas about how to use one's imagination, it shows that Tridib believed fully in creating one's reality through stories with intricate detail.

The narrator recalls a time when he was ten and Ila; her mother, Queen Victoria; and Tridib came to visit. In the flashback, Queen Victoria tells the narrator about their house in Columbo, which backs up to a poultry farm and has a sloped roof. Queen Victoria is afraid of the proximity to the poultry; she's heard that poultry attracts snakes. She says that one morning, her cook burst in screaming about a crocodile in the yard. Victoria was shocked to see he was right—there was indeed a huge lizard. She instructed the cook to cut the lizard's head off before Ila saw it.

This flashback within a flashback emphasizes the wealth that Ila's family enjoys: they have servants, a big house, and have enjoyed all of this in the faraway country of Sri Lanka. Telling this story to the narrator is as much an attempt to entertain and awe (with the lizard) as it is to impress upon him how wealthy Ila's family is.

The cook, gripped with fear, refused, so Queen Victoria summoned Lizzie, Ila's new nurse. In the strange, almost-unintelligible dialect that Victoria developed to speak to Lizzie, she asked Lizzie what the creature in the garden was. Lizzie laughed and said it's a gentle thala-goya, and she was distraught when Queen Victoria suggested killing it. Lizzie said it keeps snakes away and ran downstairs to offer the creature vegetables. Not about to be outdone, Victoria offered the thala-goya vegetables herself and spoke to it in a version of her Lizzie dialect. The animal flicked its tail, seemingly in response to the special language, which made Victoria like it. She allowed it the run of the garden and only had Lizzie tie it up during parties.

Even though Lizzie speaks English (and it's implied that Queen Victoria is absolutely fluent in English), Queen Victoria speaks to the nurse in a strange, made-up dialect. It's a very overt way for Victoria to show everyone, Lizzie included, that Queen Victoria thinks Lizzie is stupid and uneducated. Similarly, when Victoria won't let Lizzie outdo her, it shows that Ila's family is somewhat anxious about looking *wealthy and properly performing the image of wealth.*

One morning, after a party, Ila went outside to read by the pond. The thala-goya was still tied up. As Ila became engrossed in her book, she noticed something out of the corner of her eye. With a scream, Ila turned around slowly to come face to face with a giant snake, poised to strike. When the snake struck, Ila managed to tip her chair over so it didn't hit her. Before the snake could strike again, it turned and shot away, pursued by the thala-goya. The lizard had bitten through its rope to chase the snake.

Though Victoria doesn't acknowledge it in her story, the fact that the thala-goya saved Ila means that, in some ways, Lizzie is far more knowledgeable and worldly than the wealthy people who employ her. This suggests in a more overarching way that wealth isn't a guarantee of knowledge.

When Queen Victoria is finished telling her story, she waits for the narrator's response. The narrator doesn't want to disappoint Tridib, so he asks what species the snake was. Tridib looks disappointed. Later, as the narrator says goodbye, Tridib suggests that snakes aren't that interesting and asks if the narrator noticed that Ila's house had a sloping roof. Tridib asks the narrator to imagine it: it would mean there's no place to fly kites or hide. As Tridib gets in the car he punches the narrator in the chest, confusing the narrator even further. As the narrator puzzles over the exchange later, he imagines sloping roofs and realizes that they are indeed more interesting than snakes, simply because of how ordinary they are.

Tridib's reaction to the story emphasizes that he is very interested in the setting of his stories and other people's stories. This in turn explains why, as an adult, the narrator is so taken with ordinary things like the tube system in London. The narrator, deeply impacted by Tridib's way of seeing the world, realizes that it's those small details that differentiate these places from his life in Calcutta, and therefore, that's what makes those places interesting.

Despite understanding Tridib's meaning, the narrator also understands that Tridib's imagination is far more detailed and precise than his own. According to Tridib, people can only know things through true desire, which enables someone to see other worlds as though there's no division between person and world. The narrator thinks about this as he listens to Ila in the pub, and he reasons that Ila lives so fully in the present that it's unthinkable to her that people can experience worlds in their imaginations with as much clarity as she experiences the real world.

Tridib's wisdom here suggests that he, in some ways, doesn't think much of borders—he wants to experience the world as though there's no border between his memory, his stories, and what he sees in front of him. For Ila, on the other hand, those borders between reality and memory are of the utmost importance, given that she never thought much of stories and imagined places in the first place.

Right after the narrator arrives in London, Ila takes him out to show him around. The narrator notices a building, fetches Ila, and pulls her to stand in front of it. She doesn't understand why the building is so interesting. The narrator goes in and asks the receptionist if this is where the Left Book Club used to be, but she doesn't know. Back outside, Ila is indignant, but the narrator tells her that Tridib used to tell them about how Alan Tresawsen, Mrs. Price's brother, worked there before the war. The narrator sees the building like he imagines Tridib saw it. Ila, however, leads the narrator away, and the narrator is again baffled by how different they are.

Again, when the narrator recognizes places in the present (1980s) that Tridib told him about forty years before, it shows just how much the narrator relies on Tridib's stories to inform how he interacts with places and people in the present. The narrator effectively sees the world as though the divisions between different time periods and different people don't actually exist—for him, all of those different times are layered to create one rich image.

In the pub, the narrator tries to explain to Ila and Robi the "archaeological" Tridib, but Ila is contemptuous. The narrator insists that if they don't use their own imaginations, they'll live forever in other people's inventions. Ila insists she's already free of others' inventions, and the narrator says that *he* isn't when he's in London. To explain, he tells Ila how she once "invented" London for him when they were eight. Ila's father had gotten a job teaching in London, and the family soon realized that the rooms the university provided weren't big enough. Mrs. Price offered to let them stay with her.

Notice that for the narrator, not being "free" of others' inventions isn't a bad thing—in fact, he relies on others' inventions to inform his own. Because Ila never had anyone "invent" London for her, she gets to move through the city without others' thoughts impeding her own observations. However, Ila's insistence that she's free is questionable because much of the novel suggests that people cannot actually be free of anything.

Ila and her family are living with Mrs. Price when they visit Calcutta for a holiday. Queen Victoria invites the narrator's mother to bring her family to visit the old family house in Raibajar. The narrator's mother is excited, as she never gets to take holidays. When she approaches Tha'mma to ask permission, Tha'mma sharply insists that Victoria only wants them so the narrator can entertain Ila, and they're not beggars who will take anything offered. The narrator approaches his grandmother and reminds her that his father took Ila and her family to the zoo last year, knowing that Tha'mma's greatest fear is not being able to return kindnesses tit for tat. Tha'mma relents.

Tha'mma is in charge of the household, which is an indicator of her standing within her family. Even though the narrator is a young child, he is observant of his family members and knows how to use his knowledge to his advantage. He recognizes that Tha'mma's actions are ruled by pride, which the novel as a whole suggests makes her exceptionally vulnerable to manipulation.

Two days later, the narrator, his mother and father, and Tha'mma wait at Gole Park to meet Ila's family. The narrator, overcome with excitement at getting to see Ila, jumps and points when he sees their Studebaker. Tha'mma drily notes that the Shaheb, her "Europeanised" brother-in-law, is sitting in the backseat smoking. She wonders what uniform he's wearing, and the narrator explains his grandmother's theory that the Shaheb's wardrobe consists only of impeccable outfits, each one appropriate for a different locale where he works as a diplomat. When Mayadebi gets out of the car, the narrator notes that she and Tha'mma look like the same person reflected in a mirror.

The narrator's excitement makes it clear to the reader that as a child at least, the narrator idolizes Ila. As a well-traveled child, Ila can likely tell him stories just like Tridib does that help him learn about the world. Tha'mma's distaste for the Shaheb suggests that there's probably something else amiss with him, given how Tha'mma so fully admires those who are of a higher social standing than she is.

Robi interrupts the narrator's story to say that the two didn't look alike at all, and in fact, *he* looked more like Tha'mma than anyone else in the family. The narrator explains to the reader that this isn't incorrect and meant that Robi was Tha'mma's favorite. Once, when Robi was twelve, Mayadebi sent Tha'mma an anxious letter implying that Robi got in trouble at school. Tha'mma summoned Tridib to explain the incident fully, and he said that Robi had beaten up a notorious bully. This sent Mayadebi into a panic: she feared that Robi was going to become a bully himself. Tha'mma insisted that Mayadebi should be proud of Robi and says that Mayadebi was always a bit of a fool.

Robi's actions as a child will be important to keep in mind later, as Robi turns into an adult who is very concerned with justice, morality, and following the rules. The differences that begin to emerge here between Tha'mma and Mayadebi suggest that Tha'mma has always been the leader of the two; despite Mayadebi's financial success and power, her older sister is the one who has more power and influence.

Tha'mma told Tridib and the narrator about a quiet boy she'd gone to college with in the 1920s. One morning, a group of policemen arrived in what was, at that time, a perfectly normal raid on universities. Tridib took a moment to explain to the baffled narrator that back then, there was a terrorist movement in Bengal, and secret societies attempted to assassinate British officials. Tha'mma fiddled with her gold chain and said that an officer had picked out this quiet boy. The boy hadn't seemed afraid at all. Tha'mma tells the narrator and Tridib that she thinks that Robi would've been like that boy, had he been alive then.

Tha'mma's sense of pride in this unnamed boy suggests that she grew up harboring anti-British, pro-India sentiments. This event would've taken place before Indian independence, which means that Tha'mma would've been at the mercy of the British officials in charge of running the colony. This begins to show the child narrator that his grandmother is more than she seems—she has a history that deeply informs how she thinks about the present.

Tridib asked what happened to the boy, and Tha'mma said she learned later that the boy had been preparing to assassinate an English magistrate and was sent to prison. Afterwards, whenever Tha'mma and Mayadebi passed the place where the boy had lived, Tha'mma told Mayadebi the boy's story, which frightened Mayadebi. Tha'mma admitted to Tridib that she used to dream of the boy and was fascinated by the terrorist movements, and she wanted to join but didn't know how. The narrator was shocked to hear that Tha'mma would've killed an Englishman, and Tha'mma had looked the narrator in the eye and said that she would've done anything to be free.

Though it is a much quieter through-line than Tridib's storytelling, Tha'mma is also a prolific storyteller. This offers another figure for the narrator to learn from, whose stories will also go on to influence how the narrator views the world and the people in it. When Tha'mma mentions being free, it suggests that she had (and possibly still has) a very strong sense of what it means to be free and of the importance of achieving freedom.

The narrator returns to his story. He and Robi, who was a few years older, sized each other up as Tha'mma greeted the Shaheb by sniffing his face. Later, the narrator's father scolded Tha'mma for this, but she insisted he stank of alcohol at 9 A.M. The narrator's mother hadn't smelled anything, but the Shaheb had also won her heart that day: he kindly asked her questions about how easily accessible different food items in the market were. She was touched by his interest. Years later, the narrator's father discovered that the Shaheb asks this question of all women he meets in his duties as a diplomat.

The Shaheb shows that he knows how to make his very high social standing less intimidating for those lower on the social ladder than him, which suggests that Tha'mma dislikes him for reasons yet unknown.

After the narrator's mother and the Shaheb finished talking, the narrator was worried because Ila hadn't yet arrived. He ran to Jatin, who said Ila wasn't coming but winked at the narrator's father. The narrator believed it, and when Mayadebi noticed how sad he looked, she explained to him that Ila, Queen Victoria, Tridib, and Lizzie are in another car. Finally, the other car pulls up. The narrator hides in Tha'mma's sari. Queen Victoria roars at Lizzie to fetch Ila, who's asleep in the backseat. Ila finally emerges, dressed in a white English dress and rubbing her eyes. She and the narrator eye each other.

The fact that the narrator believes Jatin (when it's very clearly a joke) provides more credence to the narrator's assertion that he was an extremely gullible child. This means that he was likely more susceptible to other people's stories than he might've been otherwise, which offers another reason why the narrator loved and respected Tridib so much.

Ila interrupts, saying she couldn't have been wearing that dress. Robi rolls his eyes and remarks that Ila had trunks of dresses. The narrator remembers the dress in vivid detail, down to the smell of the starch. His mother had loudly complained that the narrator had been asking about Ila for days and now won't even approach her. Queen Victoria thought this was sweet, and Ila turned away. The narrator realized that Ila didn't miss him, and he was angry with his mother for letting Ila know that she had power over the narrator. To escape, the narrator jumped into the car with Ila. She pushed him into the front seat.

When the narrator realizes that Ila doesn't care about him in the same way, it sets up the idea that Ila isn't just wealthier and worldlier than the narrator; her power exists in other ways as well. Though this seems like a reason for the narrator to give up his idolization of Ila, the fact that he continues to love her through the rest of the novel suggests that this is another way in which the narrator isn't free—his love for Ila traps him.

The narrator fell asleep and finally woke up when they arrived at the house, which sat way up on a hill. The servants fussed over Ila for a while until she grabbed the narrator and dragged him inside to hide. She led him through a maze of hallways until she reached her target, a half-underground storage room. The narrator was scared; the room was dark and filled with murky shapes. Ila wouldn't let him return to the adults, even when they heard Queen Victoria and Lizzie yelling for them.

Ila, like Tha'mma, is the ringleader and is assured of her own power within her family and social circle. The narrator's reaction is very indicative of his youth, as well as his love of stories. This reality, which he hasn't encountered yet in stories, is absolutely terrifying.

Ila suggested they play a game and led the narrator to a massive sheet-covered object. When they pulled the sheet off, a table huger than anything the narrator had ever seen emerged. Three years later, when he took May to see it, he learned that it didn't just seem huge because he'd been so small; even May was in awe of its size. The narrator had told May that Tridib's grandfather bought it in London in the 1890s and shipped it to Calcutta in pieces, but it was so big, he didn't know what to do with it.

The table that doesn't change in relation to the narrator's age or maturity level—it remains just as massive and imposing as it was in his childhood, highlighting the veracity of this particular childhood memory.

May wondered what it cost to ship it and anxiously said that one could've put roofs on all the huts they saw on the drive there for the cost of the table. The narrator hadn't known what to say to that, and May wondered why Tridib's grandfather brought back a "worthless bit of England." The narrator had found it impossible to think of the table as just another object, since he'd seen it take shape so miraculously three years before.

Remember that later in life, May becomes involved in humanitarian charities. The presence of such a massive piece of furniture that isn't even being used represents a waste of resources in her eyes. The narrator's disappointment in May's reaction shows that May is somewhat blind to the wonders of storytelling.

The narrator returns to the story of his visit with Ila. Ila asked the narrator to get under the table with her to play a game she played with Nick. She explained that Nick is Mrs. Price's son, and they walk to and from school together every day. The narrator was confused and didn't want to play and instead asked about Nick. Ila explained that Nick was tall, with long yellow hair. The narrator tells the reader that Ila's admiration turned Nick into a "spectral presence" in his life: he knew that no matter what he did, Nick was always doing it better. He was always older and more mature, and all that the narrator knew about Nick was from a story the narrator's father had told him years ago.

This is the point at which the narrator recognizes that Nick Price is his rival for Ila's affection. However, it's important to remember that Ila is a child here, and her story may or may not be entirely truthful. It's already been established that she uses her power to impress the narrator, which means that she could be exaggerating some of Nick's qualities in order to make him sound better and more impressive than he actually is—or to make the pair seem closer than they are in real life.

The narrator's father visited Mrs. Price when Nick was thirteen. He was impressed by Nick's composure and asked Nick what he wanted to be when he grew up. Nick said he wanted to be like his grandfather, Lionel Tresawsen. Tridib later told the narrator about Lionel Tresawsen: Tridib said that he'd been a jack of all trades traveling around the world and had finally ended up in Calcutta. He married there, but he soon returned with his wife and two children to London. He'd been an avid inventor and was interested in séances. He met Tridib's grandfather, Mr. Justice Chandrashekhar Datta-Chauduri, at a séance. The narrator is in awe of Nick and Lionel Tresawsen, and he feels as though Tresawsen is much like him since he also loved to travel.

The description of Nick's composure further draws out the difference in maturity level between Nick and the narrator, which in turn makes Nick an even more revered figure in the narrator's imagination. This relationship with Nick means that the narrator once again uses stories that others tell him to influence the way that he thinks about someone. When the narrator feels close to Lionel Tresawsen because of their shared love of "travel," it shows that the narrator believes fully that his traveling in Tridib's stories is little different from physically moving from country to country.

When the narrator took May to see the table and asked her about Nick, she said his hair wasn't truly yellow, and he wanted to be a chartered accountant and live abroad. May didn't know what a chartered accountant was, and the narrator asked if Nick wanted to travel like Lionel Tresawsen. May explained that travel means different things to different people and wondered if the narrator would like Nick. The narrator cried that he already *did* like Nick, but May cautioned that Nick wasn't like them and said nothing else on the subject.

May's assertion that Nick isn't like them begins to cast a shadow on Nick's character and suggests that he might not be as wonderful Ila told the narrator he was. The difference in the way May and Ila describe Nick's hair suggests that to Ila, Nick probably seems extra exotic given that her hair is likely extremely dark.

Seventeen years later, the narrator finally meets Nick. The narrator, Ila, and Robi visit Mrs. Price, and as soon as the narrator sees Ila, he knows she has a secret. She hurries them to the tube station, where she finally says that Nick is going to meet them. It will be the first time she's seen him in ten years. Robi asks if Nick is no longer in Kuwait, and Ila explains he came home unexpectedly. When the three exit the train, the narrator knows Nick the moment he sees him standing on the platform. He's surprised to see that Nick is no taller than he is. When Ila approaches Nick, she ignores his hand and instead kisses him on the mouth. He blushes and laughs.

When Ila seems unconcerned that Nick is no longer working in Kuwait for unknown reasons, it suggests that she's willing to not ask important questions like this—and those questions will be very important to everyone else. This suggests that Ila works hard to free herself from others' stories and instead, continues to live in her own sense of reality that she carefully creates for herself, either by using or ignoring what other people say.

Nick offers his hand to the narrator, and the narrator coyly says that this isn't the first time they've met—the narrator grew up with Nick. Nick is perplexed, and the narrator explains he's known the London streets for a long time as well. When they exit the tube station, the narrator points to the different roads in the surrounding areas, and mentions which ones were hit by bombs in World War Two. Nick is incredulous, and he walks ahead with Ila.

The fact that the narrator can navigate around London when he's never been to this part of town is a testament to Tridib's exceptional sense of place in his stories: he bestowed upon his nephew a detailed mental map that works in real life just as well as it does in the context of a story.

Robi informs the narrator that the Germans didn't develop bombs powerful enough to destroy entire streets until after 1940. The narrator insists that Tridib told him that the street was destroyed. They argue for a moment, and then they decide to go look at the once-destroyed street. When they arrive they discover the road is quiet, residential and lined with trees. As the narrator looks up and down the road, he thinks that he didn't expect to see exactly what Tridib saw 40 years ago, but the stories that Tridib told about this street seem almost realer than the sight in front of him.

Again, the narrator looks at the street as though it's made up of layers of events, time, and stories. Tridib's stories inform how the narrator thinks about the street, even if the street now looks very different. This shows again how intensely the narrator holds onto these stories and in some cases, actively rejects trying to come to his own conclusions about places—he believes that those stories should take precedence.

When the narrator and Robi return to Ila and Nick, Nick is rambling on about Kuwait and not feeling pressure to get another job. Nick notices the narrator, and asks him to lead them to 44 Lymington Road, since he seems to know the streets. The narrator agrees and leads them there in mere minutes. The cherry tree outside is taller than the narrator expected, and old Mrs. Price comes out of the house to greet her guests. Nick mentions how the narrator knew how to get to the house, and the narrator, embarrassed, explains he's just heard a lot about it.

The mention that the cherry tree is taller suggests that the narrator likely didn't account for the fact that it's been decades since Tridib last saw the tree—it's certainly grown since then. This indicates that in some cases, the narrator isn't very adept at bringing Tridib's stories into the present and acknowledging that places do change over time, even if the stories about them remain true and important.

Mrs. Price offers the narrator a drink, but he's too engrossed in looking around the room that Tridib had once shown him pictures of. The pictures were taken mostly by the Shaheb in 1939, and they were taken on an evening that Mrs. Price invited her brother Alan and his three roommates to come for tea. The narrator remembers how, when Tridib had shown the photographs to May, she'd remarked that the camera looked at people differently back then.

Here, the storytelling structure (stepping out of the narrative to describe these photographs) reinforces how the narrator sees the world: it doesn't exist in a linear, neat way for him. Instead, the world is made up of these fragmented memories, layered on top of each other, that provide a greater sense of nuance when considered all together.

In one photo, Snipe stands with a pit he dug that was supposed to be the start of a bomb shelter. Dan stands to the right—he'd been a fascinating figure for the young Tridib. He worked at a leftist newspaper, and Tridib's questions about the paper were embarrassing and, according to Mrs. Price, "difficult." Mike lies stretched out in front of Snipe and Dan. He hadn't liked the Shaheb. Alan Tresawsen had rescued the Shaheb from an uncomfortably racist encounter with Mike, and he stands in the middle of the photograph.

The mention of racism playing out in 1939 suggests that none of the times the narrator discusses are times free of racism—it plagues Tridib's family throughout his life and even at this point, when Mrs. Price is showing her Indian guests such kindness, others feel very differently about their role in the world.

One of Alan's arms is mostly metal, and Mrs. Price never believed his story that he injured it in a motorcycle accident. She'd received a letter from France, signed by a possibly German and Jewish woman, Francesca, informing her of Alan's injury. When Alan finally returned to England, he was evidently unwell and unwilling to tell his sister how he became injured. In the photo, Francesca stands between Dan and Alan, dressed in black and looking unbelievably elegant. Mrs. Price and Mayadebi stand on the edge. Mrs. Price never liked Francesca, and struggled to figure out which of the three men she was officially partnered with, as it was never clear.

Mrs. Price's discomfort with her brother's living situation suggests that she relies on clear and neat delineations to make sense of the world—both on this micro scale of individual relationships, as well as on a global scale. This adds to the novel's exploration of what borders mean and what they do. It suggests here that the lack of clarity is only a problem for Mrs. Price, an outside observer, which indicates that "insiders" don't always need borders to shape their identities.

In another photo, taken in the drawing room, Francesca, Dan, and Mike sit in an armchair, laughing. Alan stands behind the chair in between Mayadebi and Mrs. Price, who's holding the infant May. Alan looks down with a smile at Mayadebi. As the Shaheb took the photo, the two had been talking about how surprisingly friendly England was becoming in the lead-up to the war. Alan had remarked that Germany was evolving in much the same way, and mentioned that going from one country to the other was like stepping through a looking glass.

By using the motif of the looking glass, the novel begins to show instances in which two seemingly opposite entities (first Tha'mma and Mayadebi, now England and Germany) are actually not all that different from each other—and despite their issues with one another, they're much the same at heart. This is another suggestion that clear delineations don't do much, given that things look similar on both sides.

Tridib carried one more image with him that wasn't captured in a photograph: he watched the four friends walk off into the twilight together towards their house on Brick Lane. He understood that he knew nothing of the house where they lived, and he wondered what kind of small arguments played out in that house. The Nazi-Soviet pact would be signed a week later, and Tridib wondered if the petty arguments or the threat of the war was more real to them. He believes that the four of them knew that the world as they knew it wouldn't survive the war.

The push and pull here between everyday life and the looming war suggests that it's a matter of perspective as to which seems more important. It's also worth noting that the war (since it's implied the friends don't survive) destroys this small group with no clear delineations, showing that drawing borders is more powerful than existing without.

Back in Mrs. Price's living room, Nick jokes with the narrator and asks if he can find his way around the house, too. The narrator thinks for a moment and then describes how to get to the kitchen and the cellar. Ila laughs in disbelief, and the narrator tells the reader that Ila was the one who showed him the house in the first place, under the giant table in Raijabar. After she and the narrator crawled under the table, she drew lines in the dust for the road, front door, hallway, and other rooms. She explained that she and Nick play Houses down in the cellar, since Houses must be played somewhere dark and secret.

Here, the narrator shows that he also uses Ila's stories in order to add layers of meaning to his lived reality—and further, that her maps were equally as effective as Tridib's, given how the narrator can use them here. Again though, the fact that Ila doesn't remember playing this game with the narrator suggests that she doesn't need to remember things like this in order to make sense of the world.

As Ila drew the lines, the narrator suddenly became angry. The lines didn't make sense, even though Ila insisted they could pretend it was a house if they wanted to. Finally, the narrator insisted that they needed to have a veranda for it to be a real house. He pushed Ila and drew a veranda, and Ila looked ready to cry. She explained that where the narrator drew the veranda was supposed to be Magda's room. Magda is her doll, but she insists that Magda is a baby for the purposes of the game, since houses need babies.

When the narrator insists on needing a veranda, it's indicative of the fact that the narrator hasn't actually traveled—per what he explains, Indian homes overwhelmingly have verandas, while they're not as common elsewhere. This suggests that Ila's method of seeing the world firsthand lets her acknowledge these other realities.

Ila told the narrator that first, they have to get out of bed and change clothes for the day. She pulled her dress off and stood in just her underwear. The narrator reached out to touch her skin, even when she seemed not to want him to, and became fascinated by a tiny black bump above one of her nipples. He rolled it around in his fingers and tried to taste it, but Ila slapped him away and told him to "go to work" until she told him to come back. The narrator agreed and when he was allowed to return to the house, Ila was "outside."

Though the narrator's fascination with Ila's body is likely due to his romantic love for her, it's telling that he doesn't listen to her the first time when she asks him to stop—it suggests that the narrator doesn't always acknowledge other people's autonomy. This mirrors other instances of disrespected borders in the novel, which often lead to violence.

Ila began to tell the narrator what happened to Magda at school: the children stared at Magda because she was the most beautiful blonde child they'd ever seen, and everyone wanted to be friends with her. One girl, Denise, hated Magda. Denise was big and ugly, and she felt threatened by Magda's power over the other children. Today, Denise had made a mistake at the chalkboard, and Magda had been called on to correct it. The teacher suggested that Denise take language lessons from Magda. Denise had quietly called Magda a "wog."

It's worth noting the inconsistencies in Ila's story, as it suggests that it's not a figment of her imagination: "wog" is a slur used against Indian people, and it makes little sense in this situation for Denise to use it in reference to a blonde girl. This suggests that this "story" might have actually happened to Ila. She begins to process what happened by telling it here, and makes it easier to deal with by using her doll as a stand-in for herself.

After school, Magda decided to take a different route home to escape Denise. However, she soon heard Denise yelling slurs at her, and Magda ran to escape. Suddenly, Magda felt someone push her, and she crashed into the pavement. Denise punched Magda. Magda closed her eyes in defeat, but heard the voice of Nick Price pulling Denise off of her. Nick had led Magda home, and the narrator says that he always saw Nick as a savior because of this story. Ila, however, burst into tears when she finished her story.

Given the inconsistencies in the story, it's questionable whether or not Nick actually helped Ila—especially given that she's clearly very upset about what happened. This suggests that as worldly and sophisticated as Ila is, she is not free from being identified as Indian, and nor is she exempt from racist attacks.

Three years later, after the narrator told May the story, she gently explained that Nick hadn't helped Ila at all, and in fact, he didn't even want to be seen with her. A policeman had brought Ila home, and Ila refused to tell anyone what happened. The narrator imagines Ila walking home alone in a London drizzle, when in Calcutta she never has to even walk anywhere, let alone walk by herself. May implored the narrator to not think too badly of Nick, as he was just a child.

The fact that Ila altered the story to paint Nick in a better light suggests that she idolizes him, much as the narrator idolizes Ila. In both cases, the one doing the idolizing forgives their idol for their poor behavior. This is indicative at this point of both the narrator and Ila's youth.

Years later, when he's home on summer break from college in Delhi, the narrator tells Tha'mma this story. Tha'mma is very ill at this point, though nobody knows that she's going to die from this illness. Tha'mma declares that getting beaten up was Ila's fault, as she had no right to be in England in the first place. Tha'mma won't drop the subject and between racking coughs, she insists that Ila *still* has no right to be there (Ila is at college in London). Tha'mma insists that the English drew their borders with blood through years and years of wars, and that's what makes a country. She tells the narrator that he has to do the same for India.

Tha'mma believes in the power of war to establish borders that actually mean something—and notably, she sees the violence as necessary to put those borders in place. When she dismisses Ila's time in England, it shows that she believes that those borders shouldn't allow anyone in and out—it seems that she wants different countries to have little or nothing to do with each other. Remember that Tha'mma lived through British rule, which makes this view more understandable.

The narrator's heart fills with a mixture of love and pity for Tha'mma. Later, when he told Ila about what Tha'mma said, she said something about her being a "warmongering fascist," and the narrator repeated something that Tridib had said: Tha'mma just wanted a middle-class life that allowed her to believe in the power of nationhood.

Tridib's wisdom implies that there's freedom in having enough financial power to support oneself and by extension, believe in the power of one's government—something that Tridib implies the lower classes don't have, and the upper classes don't care about (since they can travel more freely).

The next morning, when the narrator returns to Tha'mma's side, Tha'mma insists that Ila is in England because she's greedy. The narrator reminds Tha'mma that Ila is far wealthier in India than she'll ever be in England, but Tha'mma persists and calls Ila a "greedy little slut." She asks the narrator to explain why he's defending Ila, and in his anger, the narrator tells Tha'mma why Ila lives in England.

The fact that Tha'mma is so intent on talking this way implies that there's more to it than the belief that Ila is greedy and doesn't belong in England. Ila's "greed," however, could be seen as an affront to Tha'mma's pride. Tha'mma is self-made, and may see Ila as fettering away her privilege like Tridib did.

The summer before, Ila arranged an impromptu trip to Calcutta at a time when both the narrator and Robi had been home. Upon the narrator's return home, his mother fed him lunch and Tha'mma drily told her to not worry about dinner—the narrator, she declared, won't be home for it, since Ila is in town. As Tha'mma predicted, the narrator went to see Ila that afternoon. Ila insisted she visited because she wanted to take advantage of her school holiday. The narrator watched her sprawled in an armchair, dressed exotically in jeans and a tee shirt, her stomach exposed where her shirt rode up. The narrator rolled onto his stomach to hide his erection and hopefully preserve their friendship.

When Ila demonstrates that she can arrange a trip to India so quickly, it's an indicator of her family's wealth and standing, something that Ila isn't even aware is special or different. To that effect, the narrator's preoccupation with Ila's "exotic" clothes suggests that he's as much in love with her worldliness as he is with any other aspect of her or her personality. When the narrator tries so hard to preserve his friendship with Ila but seems unable to squash his romantic feelings, it indicates that she still very much controls him.

A few days later, Robi, the narrator, and Ila spent a hot afternoon in Ila's room. Once the sun set, she insisted they go out to the nightclub at the Grand Hotel. Robi was scandalized by the idea of drinking in public, which Ila scorned—the narrator explains that her morals were absolute, and she didn't take context into her judgments. For Robi, drinking at school on occasion was acceptable, but drinking in public was not.

The insistence that Ila doesn't consider context is an indicator that she doesn't necessarily see borders as doing much, given that she presumably behaves the same no matter where in the world she is, societal norms aside. This suggests that even as an adult, Ila is still somewhat childlike—thinking in absolutes like this is often construed as childish and naïve.

Robi became a leader in college because he viewed the world simply and followed the rules to the letter. Once, he flat out refused to attend student union meetings in regards to a student strike over something petty, and his standing among the student body meant that the entire strike was called off. Later, when the narrator asked Robi about the event, Robi wouldn't say much. Eventually, the narrator understood that Robi had an intuitive sense of right and wrong that kept him following the rules, and this made others admire and fear him.

While Robi's morals make him a leader, it's worth noting that Ila never truly becomes a leader (later, the narrator observes that she's a mere observer among her Trotskyist roommates). This suggests that having a moral compass and a sense of context are far more successful (and mature) ways to lead than being so set in one's ways, as Ila is.

Ila finally managed to convince Robi to go. She led Robi and the narrator to the hotel, and the receptionist showed them to the nightclub. The room was dark and cavernous, and Ila bullied Robi into entering. A waiter led them to their table with a flashlight, and Ila giggled at the band. Robi angrily ordered them beers and asked Ila if her Trotskyite friends know that she spends her holidays like this, and Ila insisted they don't care since they're not joyless like Robi. This made Robi even angrier.

Robi's insistence on not going suggests that this is something entirely outside the norm of acceptability in upper-middle class Indian culture—something that Ila, with her scorn for context, simply doesn't understand. This suggests at this point that Robi believes in borders and difference.

The female performer stepped out and began flirting with a nearby table of middle-aged businessmen. Robi growled that he'd punch the performer if she came close, but fortunately, the woman stepped to the middle of the dance floor and invited the room to find a stranger to dance with. Ila excitedly tried to get either the narrator or Robi to dance with her, but the narrator was too shy and Robi was too angry. He insisted that he wasn't going to let Ila dance at all, which perplexed and then angered Ila. She huffed out of her chair and approached one of the businessmen.

Here, Ila's actions are very western—in India, she would normally be required to defer to someone like Robi. However, that kind of social structure is little more than a story to Ila, given that she grew up with so much power and influence. Her reality, in which she has the power to do what she wants, is far more compelling than Robi's reality of rules and norms is.

When the businessman agreed to dance, Robi got up, snatched Ila by her blouse, and pushed the businessman back. He paid a waiter and the wait staff ushered the narrator, Ila, and Robi out of the club. They walked a short way and then Ila angrily turned on Robi. Very calmly, Robi explained to her that "girls don't behave like that here." He said that she can do what she wants in England, but not in India. She pushed the narrator away and hailed a taxi. As she got in, she shouted that she lives in England so she can be free of oppressive Indian culture. The narrator ran with the taxi for a minute and shouted back that Ila can never be free of *him*, as they're both inside each other.

When the narrator makes this exchange personal and makes it about his relationship with Ila, it suggests that he sees himself as representing India in a way—a reading that makes Ila's lack of regard for the narrator make more sense, given how little she thinks of India. The narrator does recognize, however, that he lives with Ila's stories and memories inside of him, and he implies that Ila must do the same. Given how much Ila lives in the present and how little she thinks of stories, this likely isn't true for her.

After the narrator tells Tha'mma this, he knows he made a mistake: she doesn't think much of freedom that can be purchased with a plane ticket. Tha'mma spits that Ila can live like a whore in England, but that's not real freedom. The narrator goes to his room and remembers Ila's angry face. He thinks that everyone but him wants to be free, and he wonders if he's the only one who relies entirely on the voices inside of him.

For Tha'mma, freedom comes after war and bloodshed draw a line in the sand (as happened during Partition), and it's not something that one can achieve with a plane ticket. This again shows the major differences between Tha'mma and Ila: Tha'mma relies on borders, while Ila ignores them.

The narrator goes to Tha'mma the next morning. She now has a nurse and refuses to speak to her grandson. When Tha'mma attempts to throw a bedpan at the nurse, the nurse asks the narrator to leave. As he retreats, he hears Tha'mma ask why he always defends "that whore" Ila. Tha'mma's condition worsens over the next few days, and she continues to ask the narrator about Ila and call her a whore whenever he visits. By the end of the narrator's holidays, she finally begins to improve, and he decides to return to Delhi to sit his examinations. When he says goodbye to Tha'mma, she pulls his head to her chest to bless him and again asks why he let Ila trap him, and says that she knows he sees prostitutes in Delhi.

Interestingly, Tha'mma seems very aware that the narrator is in love with Ila and is therefore under her spell. This casts her assertion that he must draw bloody borders for India in a different light, as it suggests that she'd like to see him draw boundaries between himself and Ila as well. Tha'mma's mention of prostitutes suggests that she believes she also has a great deal of power over the narrator, as it reads very much like a threat in this situation.

The narrator's parents write often for the next two months, and then the letters stop for a week right before his examinations. Finally, he receives a letter saying that Tha'mma died and has already been cremated. The narrator wanders around Delhi in grief, but he thinks it's fitting that he learned about her death in this way. He reasons that she was too passionate to exist in his world, where exams are apparently more important than death.

The strange relationship between Tha'mma's youthful desire to climb the social ladder and the narrator's life at a much higher rung suggests that social standing isn't all it's cracked up to be. Tha'mma, ultimately, couldn't exist in the narrator's world, as it's a mental world, not the bloody world she came of age in.

Several days later, the dean summons the narrator and informs him that Tha'mma wrote to say that the narrator has been seeing prostitutes, and the school is going to expel him for bad behavior. The narrator asks to see the letter and is shocked to see that Tha'mma wrote it the day before she died. He manages to explain to the dean that Tha'mma was very ill and denies he's ever seen prostitutes. As he leaves the office, he wonders how Tha'mma ever found out that he had actually gone several times with friends to visit prostitutes, and he wonders how she also knew that he was in love with Ila.

Tha'mma's attempt to punish the narrator by denying him his successes is an underhanded attempt to punish him for loving Ila, given that Ila represents everything that Tha'mma despises and doesn't understand about the modern world. This shows that Tha'mma's nationalistic pride is even more powerful than her love for her family and her desire to see them be successful, especially in her old age.

When the narrator lives in London for the first time, he finally has to face the truth of his affections for Ila. A tune from a Hindi movie gets stuck in his head, and he hums it as he wanders around the city, inevitably finding himself in Ila's neighborhood. At this point, he decides to drop in and visit her. He counts the yards, feet, and miles as he walks to drown out the tune. He muses that love is the thing that people try the hardest to quantify by buying expensive diamonds, cars, or islands for women. Despite this, the narrator's love for Ila, quantified by the miles he walks to see her, means nothing to her.

Here, the narrator uses the quest to "quantify" love through spending money on a lover as a way to try to tell himself a story that makes sense about his strange and inappropriate love for his cousin. He hopes that by applying this kind of a story to it, the story will provide some other layer of meaning that will make it okay. Ila, however, still has the upper hand, as evidenced by his assertion that his quantified love doesn't move her in the least.

Ila lives with young liberal activists who argue quietly and seriously about small things. The narrator soon realizes that though they all seem to like Ila, they see her as a guest or as decoration in their house. He often finds Nick at Ila's house, and Nick strangely fits in with Ila's housemates. He sometimes proofs pamphlets for them. When he attends demonstrations, he often deals with police because he looks so upstanding in a suit.

It's worth noting that both Ila and Nick would likely experience some major negative changes if the Trotskyists' dreams come true: the Trotskyists seek to destroy the class system, and in doing so, the wealthy Price and Datta-Chaudhuri families would absolutely pay the price for that.

One evening, Ila makes a face at the narrator's shabby clothes and insists on taking him to Brick Lane to buy new clothes, where the shops are run by Indians and Bangladeshis. The narrator quickly composes his face and agrees to meet Ila at lunchtime two days later. At the appointed meeting time, the narrator is late. He arrives at the pub and wishes that he could hide and watch Ila and Nick, who are sitting together at a table, as to maybe understand their relationship.

Brick Lane is where Alan Tresawsen lived in a communal house. The fact that the neighborhood is now an Indian one illustrates how drastically places can change over time, though it still doesn't diminish the power of Tridib's stories about the place from forty years ago. The narrator will surely still see the lane as Tridib saw it.

Ila has no interest in hearing the narrator's explanation for his lateness, and explains that Nick wants to come along since he's interested in the import-export business. Nick chats about his plans for a few minutes until Ila decides it's time to head to Brick Lane. When they arrive, the narrator is shocked: he expected to see redbrick houses lining a narrow street, but instead, the street looks like Bangladesh was dropped in the middle of London. Familiar-looking Bangladeshi shops exist in Victorian London houses.

The existence of this Bangladeshi neighborhood in the middle of London indicates that borders aren't always effective, given that the narrator observes that an entire country appears to just exist within an entirely different one. This suggests that borders aren't even always clear-cut or well defined, as evidenced by the implication that this street is fairly separate from the rest of the surrounding neighborhoods.

Nick points at a mosque and explains it was a synagogue when the area was Jewish before the war. The narrator adds that that's when Nick's uncle, Alan Tresawsen, lived on the street, and offers to show Nick and Ila where Alan lived. He leads them to a quiet part of Brick Lane and finally, points at a crumbling building with a sign that reads "Taj Travel Agency." Nick doesn't believe his uncle would've lived someplace like this, since he was wealthy enough to live wherever he wanted. The narrator bites his tongue and doesn't suggest that Alan *did* live here because he wanted to.

Nick's amazement that his uncle lived in a neighborhood like this creates the sense that more than anyone else, Nick is caught up in appearing upper class—and further, expects that his ancestors to be similarly committed to keeping up with that appearance. This story challenges his preconceptions about his uncle, which again shows the power stories have to alter the reality that a person experiences in the present.

The narrator imagines which bedroom belonged to Dan, who was upstairs because he couldn't sleep on the fateful night in 1940. Everyone else was asleep downstairs in case bombs dropped. Dan heard the bombs falling, but London didn't yet know how to tell if the bombs were close—and they were. A bomb dropped on the sidewalk outside, shattering the window and killing Dan. The stairs collapsed on the others. Alan threw himself over Francesca, saving her and sacrificing himself, and Mike survived. Francesca was sent to an internment camp on the Isle of Wight, and Mike joined the navy and died in 1943. Tridib went with Mrs. Price and Mayadebi to collect Alan's things a few days after he died, and he found a photo of the four friends, laughing in the park.

In killing all four of these friends, the violence of World War II made it abundantly clear that their kind of communal living, without clear delineations between sex or nationality (Francesca was a German Jew), has no place in the hostile world that the war tried to create. The photograph stands as a testament to their friendship and the fact that they could exist in happy solidarity, if only for a finite amount of time.

When the narrator finishes telling Ila and Nick this, Ila comments that they must've been happy in the house, since she lives in exactly the same way in her house. The narrator marvels that Ila believes that her experience is exactly the same as other, earlier experiences, just because they look somewhat alike. He snaps at her and insists that it wasn't idyllic then, with the Nazi-Soviet pact, and they probably fought about it. Ila laughs that fighting is half the fun of living in a house like that, and insists that the narrator wouldn't understand it. She says that the narrator spent his entire life in middle-class Delhi and Calcutta, while she lived and lives in London in the middle of political movements. Ila insists that Alan knew he was a part of important events, and that nothing important ever happened in Calcutta or Delhi.

At this point sometime in the 1980s, England was struggling with major conservative movements. While these were important in shaping England, the narrator definitely has a point that the climate and experience in London in the 1980s versus during World War II is entirely different. Again, Ila doesn't believe in context, which allows her to feel this way. Her disbelief in context is also what allows her to say that nothing important happens in India—as the reader will learn later, the narrator himself experienced a number of extremely important events throughout his childhood in India.

The narrator is flabbergasted. Ila notes that Calcutta experienced riots and famine but not on a scale that affects the whole world or is remembered. The narrator shouts that unlike her, he understands that politics are serious, but she retorts that he knows nothing about England. He gives up but thinks that he knows people who survived the "Great Terror" in the 1960s and 1970s, which Ila doesn't understand. He reasons that Ila might know more than he gives her credit for, since she does take on violent racists in London.

What Ila really points to here is the fact that when western powers are in charge, they're the ones who control which stories get told—which means, by extension, that Ila's not wrong that plenty of people in Europe aren't as aware of what's going on in India as they are of what's happening in their backyards. This does not, however, mean that things that happen in India are less important or traumatic—they're just not talked about as widely.

The entire argument bores Nick, so he leads Ila and the narrator into the travel agency. The agent isn't at all friendly, insists they speak English, and begins shouting when the narrator asks if there was ever a staircase in the building. Nick, Ila, and the narrator leave. Nick comments on the success of the business, and thinks out loud about getting into the "futures market." Annoyed, the narrator suggests Nick get a job first, and Nick explains he can't in England since the salary is too low. When the narrator asks why he gave up his job in Kuwait, Nick insists that it wasn't professional enough. The narrator is skeptical. Ila angrily leads Nick away. She runs back to the narrator and tells him to call before he visits her again.

Nick takes advantage of the fact that his family is wealthy, which in turn affords him the privilege of being able to dabble, dream, and not have to hold down a real job. Ila's anger when the narrator takes offense to this shows that she still idolizes Nick like she did as a child, even if he isn't perfect in the flesh. When the agent insists on speaking English, it suggests that even though he lives in a Bengali neighborhood, it's still very important to him to appear to be English and fit in.

The narrator doesn't see Ila for two weeks. Mrs. Price invites both Ila and the narrator for Christmas Eve dinner with her, May, and Nick. Ila is late, and when she arrives, she asks the narrator why he hasn't visited her. When they all sit down, Ila announces she got a job with the Save the Children Fund, and they toast to her and to their grandfathers Lionel Tresawsen and Mr. Justice Chandrashekhar Datta-Chaudhuri. After the toast, Nick slurs about how wonderful his grandfather's life was, traveling the world, and laments that all he got was a horrible job in Kuwait.

Nick's sense of entitlement is glaring here—he seems to believe that he deserves a life just as exciting as his grandfather's, when Tridib told the narrator that Lionel Tresawsen absolutely worked hard for everything he had. This places Nick and Ila on similar footing in their respective families, given that Ila also scorns her family's wealth by getting involved with the Trotskyists.

May lightly suggests that Lionel Tresawsen would've made more of Kuwait. When Nick insists that Kuwait is a horrible place, May coolly says that Nick needs to stop lying and admit that his boss didn't like him and, possibly rightfully, accused him of embezzling money. Nick stands up, calls May a bitch, and goes to his room. Mrs. Price is asleep in her chair. A half hour later, Ila fetches Nick, they wake up Mrs. Price, and May carves the turkey. Dinner is mostly silent and awkward, and the narrator decides to leave as soon as he finishes his after-dinner brandy. May catches him in the hall and suggests that the blizzard is too bad for anyone to leave. She pleads with her eyes for the narrator to stay so she can stay too, and he agrees.

Nick's behavior is extremely childish here, which provides more evidence for the possibility that neither he nor Ila have matured significantly. May's silent pleading with the narrator to stay suggests that there's more to their relationship than what meets the eye, given that they shared a strong relationship with Tridib. When the narrator agrees to stay, it implies that he cares for May—though it's also worth noting that he's also excited to spend the night in the same space as Ila.

Mrs. Price heads for bed as May and Nick settle Ila and the narrator on camp beds in the cellar. The narrator's heart bursts with hope. When May and Nick leave, Ila laughs that she and the narrator are back where they began, playing Houses. The narrator stares as Ila undresses, wrapping herself in a towel. He thinks she looks more beautiful than any woman he's ever seen, and he creeps up behind her and puts a hand on her shoulder.

The narrator still very much feels as though Ila's acceptance or dismissal of him is an intrinsic part of his identity—if she accepts him as a lover, it'll mean that all the stories he's been telling himself about her finally match up with reality, even if such a situation would mean that they're flouting boundaries.

Ila laughs, turns around, and stops in her tracks when she sees the look on the narrator's face. She runs into his arms and hugs him. He realizes he's crying, and Ila apologizes for undressing in front of him. She insists she wouldn't have had she known the narrator's feelings. Ila kisses the narrator on the chin and runs upstairs to talk with Nick. The narrator lays in the dark and ruminates on that day that Ila stepped out of the car in Gole Park, when it was made clear to everyone that their need for each other would never be equal. She doesn't come back to the cellar, and the narrator feels as though Ila took his life hostage again.

When Ila doesn't return, it's clear that she spent the night with Nick instead—something that she surely knew wouldn't go over well with the narrator, and suggests that she has little reason to care for or think about his emotions in this situation. When the narrator feels exactly the same way now as he did as an eight-year-old, it illustrates how childhood and adulthood are constantly informing each other.

2. COMING HOME

Tha'mma retires in 1962, when the narrator is ten years old. She'd taught at a girls' school since 1936 and had been the headmistress for the last six years. The school stages a farewell ceremony on Tha'mma's last day, which the narrator and his parents attend. The students give Tha'mma a lamp that looks like the Taj Mahal as a gift, and Tha'mma and the girls cry as she accepts it. The narrator is shocked and jealous to realize that these girls love his grandmother too.

Here, the novel jumps two decades into the past. Tha'mma's professional trajectory at the girls' school shows that she worked very hard to get where she is and make a better life for herself and her family, which in turn makes her even more prideful that she was able to do that at all.

The school prepares a special meal for them after the ceremony, tying in Tha'mma's initiative to teach the girls to cook foods from around the country. As the girls bring different dishes in, Tha'mma comments on each girl and her food. However, Tha'mma calls the overweight girl who made Punjabi food "plump and juicy," and the poor girl runs out of the room in tears.

Tha'mma's food initiative recalls her statement to the narrator that a bloody war will dissolve local differences—this tries to make India seem and feel more cohesive, even though it remains differentiated by regional and ethnic groups.

At first, Tha'mma is happy in retirement. However, after only a few days, the narrator overhears his mother complaining that Tha'mma is nagging about her housekeeping, which is something she'd never done before. One afternoon, the narrator and Montu notice on their way home from school that there's a man in a turban in Tha'mma's room, an unprecedented event. The narrator runs home and bursts into Tha'mma's room. She's sitting with her head wrapped in a wet sari, and the narrator backs away, speechless. His mother explains that Tha'mma is beginning a course of treatment because she believes she's going bald, and she bursts out laughing.

Tha'mma's first few months in retirement are very much a coming of age experience for her: she has to figure out how to exist in this new phase of life, just as a child learns how to become an adult. When the narrator's mother laughs at Tha'mma's treatment, it suggests that there are personality differences between them that the narrator hasn't yet mentioned. This again shows that the narrator isn't entirely reliable, and the reader isn't getting the full picture.

Tha'mma's interest in treatments like this is short-lived, and she soon takes to visiting her school. Finally, the new headmistress phones the narrator's father to ask him to not allow Tha'mma to come to the school anymore. She begins spending time alone, and the narrator understands that she has time to waste for the first time in her life. After a few weeks, she begins spending time with the rest of the family, but the narrator notices that she doesn't seem to care much about their lives anymore. He combats this by asking for help with his homework, and he often acts out or makes silly mistakes to keep her attention.

This freedom of time directly challenges Tha'mma's understanding of her own identity, as the narrator noted that she spent most of her life railing against free time and frivolity. Especially when she's banned from visiting the school, Tha'mma must truly find out how define herself as something other than as a teacher or as a headmistress.

A few months later, the narrator's father is suddenly promoted. Tha'mma, uncharacteristically, doesn't seem to care much. Soon after, the family moves to a big house opposite the lake. The house is a wonderland for the narrator, and though he does his best to show Tha'mma around the house, she spends most of her time alone in her big room. The narrator's mother becomes the true leader of the household.

The switch in power from Tha'mma to the narrator's mother suggests that Tha'mma's identity change in her old age may be a growing down of sorts, given that she's now giving up her power and status. This would also lead to a renewal of youthful beliefs.

One night, the narrator throws his schoolbooks and asks Tha'mma why she looks so distracted. She explains that the house is very different from the house that she and Mayadebi grew up in. Over the next few months, Tha'mma tells the narrator about her childhood home in Dhaka. It was a strange house with many additions, and so many relatives lived there it became impossible to keep track of them all. When Tha'mma was little, her part of the family ate with her uncle Jethamoshai's family. Her grandfather was terrifying, and after his death, Jethamoshai attempted to take his place as the patriarch.

The fact that Tha'mma is beginning to mentally go back in time to her childhood provides more evidence that she's going to regress in age and maturity in some ways. It's important to note that Tha'mma is an excellent storyteller, and the narrator uses Tha'mma's stories just like he uses Tridib's to inform his understanding and perception of reality.

Jethamoshai was known for losing his temper, though the children felt relatively safe given that he was never strong enough to truly hurt them and often bought them sweets in the aftermath. Tha'mma's mother, however, didn't understand this, and it began a feud between her family and Jethamoshai's. As the feud escalated, Tha'mma was tasked with carrying notes on legal stationary between her father and Jethamoshai, who were both lawyers.

It's worth noting that the small-scale events of this one house very much mirror the larger-scale events of Partition: violence and suspicion escalated, even though there had once been harmony between the different groups in British India. The only way to "fix" the problem was to create a border.

Eventually, Jethamoshai and Tha'mma's father decided to divide the house in half with a wall. The wall went through the house in strange places, including through lavatories and doorways. After the division, a strange silence gripped the house. Later in life, Tha'mma became nervous when people mentioned being like brothers, as in her understanding, brothers were dangerous. Despite the feud, Tha'mma's mother and aunt supported each other in silent ways. Her aunt helped arrange Mayadebi's marriage to the Shaheb, though the women never spoke of it.

Again, this wall through the house mirrors the lines drawn during Partition, which were also drawn in seemingly strange places given the ethnic and religious makeup of the regions that were divided. Notice that the lack of speech between the two sides is very much what kept the feud going: this suggests that stories and speech are possibly a way to combat anger and violence and potentially, to bridge the gap.

Tha'mma married four years before Mayadebi, and spent her early-married years traveling through railway colonies for her husband's work. She had the narrator's father in 1925 and took him yearly to visit family in Dhaka. Eventually, only Tha'mma's parents, aunt, and Jethamoshai lived in the house, but their bitterness persisted. In 1931, Tha'mma's parents died, and she went back after that only to make sure her inherited part of the house was still there. When her husband died four years later, Tha'mma got a job as a teacher and moved to Calcutta. She had no reason to go back to Dhaka, and good reasons *not* to go when Dhaka became the capital of East Pakistan in 1947.

Tha'mma is telling this story to the narrator, and the way that she glosses over Partition is telling: it suggests that even though she desperately wanted freedom from British rule as a young woman, by the time it happened, she was busy with life, and it simply didn't mean much for her anymore. This implies that Tha'mma will at some point have to come to terms with Partition, especially since her place of birth is, after 1947, part of East Pakistan.

Tha'mma smiles at the narrator and admits that there's one regret she has about Dhaka: she never got to see the **upside-down house**. She explains that she told Mayadebi that on Jethamoshai's side of the house, everything was upside down and backwards. She remarks that strangely, she almost began to believe the story. She and Mayadebi laughed about it even into adulthood, especially since it seemed like it might've been a better place than their own side.

The upside-down house mirrors the way that the narrator thinks about faraway lands: he's never been there and thus, Tridib can tell him anything and he'll believe it. Because Tha'mma never had actual experiences in Jethamoshai's side of the house, it remained a fantastical story.

When winter sets in, Tha'mma begins going with the narrator to the park when he plays cricket. She walks around and chats with her friends while he plays, and soon begins staying out late. At dinner, she often tells the narrator's father that she and her friends chat about the past. Most of her friends came across the border during or before Partition, so she talks about Dhaka often.

Tha'mma's friends evidently experienced Partition firsthand; this implies that some of them probably took the trains from East Pakistan to India in the aftermath. Again, this illustrates that because Tha'mma didn't experience this herself, it doesn't feel truly real for her—while Dhaka does.

One evening, the narrator's father comes home extremely tired. His mother insists upon complete silence in the household, makes a cup of tea, and sits with her husband. Suddenly, Tha'mma bursts into the house and exclaims that she ran into a friend in the park who was once a neighbor in Dhaka, and this friend claims that one of Jethamoshai's sons is in Calcutta. The narrator's parents aren't sure what to do with this information, and Tha'mma says with an annoyed expression that she and her cousin might be able to patch up the animosity of their parents. She asks that the car be ready on Sunday.

The desire to fix what happened in the past shows Tha'mma returning to her childhood memories and, essentially, bringing them back up to challenge how real they actually are. Given what she told herself about the upside-down house, it's yet to be seen what she believes now about her family that she hasn't seen in decades.

The narrator's mother is flabbergasted: though *she* places a great deal of importance on maintaining family connections, Tha'mma has always been wary of relatives and even pushed them all away after her husband died. Later, the narrator's mother insists that something else must be up, given this onrush of unprecedented familial loyalty.

Tha'mma turned herself into an island in her adult life, maintaining strict boundaries with family members. Her new desire to dissolve those boundaries suggests that there will be violence ahead, given how the novel ties boundaries to violence.

On Sunday, Tha'mma's friend's maidservant, Mrinmoyee, arrives to lead Tha'mma and the narrator's father to Tha'mma's cousin, but she shares that the cousin is dead. Tha'mma is shocked, but she decides to go anyway and meet his wife. The narrator, his parents, Tha'mma, and Mrinmoyee get in the car and drive out past the edge of town, where there are shanties and concrete houses. Tha'mma remarks that the shanties are refugees' fault. When the narrator's father notes that they were refugees once, Tha'mma snaps that they came before Partition and therefore aren't refugees.

Tha'mma evidently takes great pride in not being a refugee and sees herself as superior for escaping that life. The fact that she looks down on Indian refugees from Pakistan suggests that her desire for freedom and the border is complicated, given that she seems to not believe that people should be able to live in the country that aligns most closely with their religious identity (India and Pakistan were divided along religious lines).

Mrinmoyee points out a concrete house. The narrator's father decides to stay with the car and tries to make the narrator stay, but he slips out and follows Tha'mma. When Mrinmoyee gets to the correct room in the concrete house, Tha'mma explains to the bewildered woman inside who she is. The woman asks for a moment to change her sari and powder her face, and then she shows her guests into her flat. It's dark and dirty.

The realization that a family member lives like this is likely shocking for Tha'mma, who has spent decades of her life associating only with Mayadebi and her wealthy family and lifestyle. This woman's lot in life shows that Tha'mma was deeply ignorant about her own family.

While the narrator's family settles themselves, he slips outside and looks off the railing to the back of the house. Back there, there are tiny shanties and dirty pools of sludge. The people blend in with the landscape. When the relative notices the narrator, she calls him back inside. The narrator explains that though he looked away, that kind of landscape was always present in his house as a threat: it was the alternative that awaited him if he didn't do well on exams.

Again, even more important than climbing the social ladder is stressing the fact that a person is higher up on the social ladder than someone else—and trying not to slip down the ladder. This shows that social standing is an anxiety-inducing thing for the narrator and his family, as it's implied that the threat of living like these people is somewhat real.

Inside, the relative serves tea and tells Tha'mma that her husband went back to Dhaka several times to try to bring Jethamoshai back to India. She explains that the house in Dhaka is now inhabited by Muslim refugees, and Jethamoshai doesn't care: he's senile now, and a Muslim family cares for him. She reveals a postcard that Jethamoshai sent her a month ago, and Tha'mma sighs wistfully. She decides it's time to leave.

Tha'mma's lack of acknowledgement that her childhood home has changed dramatically suggests that she's living and thinking in the past, and stressing to herself the idyllic images of her home that she carries from her childhood. By setting up this dissonance, Tha'mma prepares to have to somehow meld her memories with the truth.

As the narrator's family leaves, the relative stops the narrator's mother. When she catches up with the rest of the family, she explains that the woman wonders if the narrator's father could get her son a job. Tha'mma scoffs and changes the subject: she worries about Jethamoshai, and believes her last quest in life will be to bring him home to India, which the narrator deems her "invented country."

Tha'mma's relationship to Dhaka complicates her idea of home and of her home country. She believes that her Indian uncle should live in India, which ignores the fact that he's likely made a home in East Pakistan and probably thinks of it as home, even if it doesn't match his Indian identity.

The narrator tells the reader that at about this time, May must've received her fourth letter from Tridib. This letter was different: it was thicker than the others, and she was intrigued. She raced upstairs to read it and when she finished, she was sweating. She locked herself in the bathroom to catch her breath. Tridib had written that he likes to write with May's photograph in front of him and when he does, he sees her neighborhood clearly in his mind's eye. He remembers a September evening when he went to look at a bombed house. He was almost hit by a car and ran until he was in a strange neighborhood.

The way that Tridib frames this letter illustrates how he lives in his memories of the time—the thought of May, who lives where he used to, is enough to take him back. The effect that this letter has on May suggests that Tridib was effective in making the letter, which is a memory, real for her as well—and in doing so, augmenting her reality and making it richer through stories and memories.

Tridib looked around and noticed he was next to a large building. He noticed a hole in the wall and decided to go through. Once inside, he realized he was in a cinema that had been bombed: there's a hole in the wall where the screen was. Tridib decided to go up to the gallery. Carefully, he made his way into the dark foyer and up the stairs until he reached the gallery, which was untouched by the bomb. He went to the railing, lied down, and realized he could see out the hole he came in through.

It's worth considering the borders at play in Tridib's story: the cinema no longer has impermeable walls and borders, which means that it's now, per the logic of the novel, a place that's somewhat lost in time. However, it also means that it's a vulnerable and possibly dangerous place, given that borders are meant to protect.

Tridib watched a woman walk by outside and stop. Her dog defecated on the sidewalk, and she lighted a cigarette while she waited. A man in uniform appeared and asked the woman to borrow her lighter. He said something to the woman that made her look angry and surprised, but her face softened. She picked up the dog and the man led her through the hole in the wall. The man led the woman up the aisle, tied the dog to a seat, and began to kiss the woman. Tridib watched in fascination as the woman undressed.

This is, presumably, a defining moment in Tridib's own coming of age—at the very least, since he's telling the story to May, it's something that has stuck with him and informed his experiences as an adult. By now relaying the story to May, the novel shows again how childhood and adulthood continue to inform each other and shape how they play out.

As the man lowered the woman to the floor, the dog began barking. Tridib was afraid the lovers would be discovered, but the woman slapped the dog and it stopped. The woman finished undressing, and Tridib wanted to touch her breasts. As the woman reached for the man, Tridib felt like she was reaching for him, and he writhed on the floor of the gallery. When he looked down next, the two were having sex that seemed dangerously loud. The dog barked again, but nobody outside seemed to notice. When the man groaned and the woman screamed, Tridib slipped out of the theater unnoticed.

The fact that this is a sexual experience for Tridib as much as it is for the lovers shows that this is a turning point in Tridib's maturity—it introduces him to the idea that casual sex like this exists and is, in his understanding, romantic and desirable. Notably, this instance of casual sex relies on these two people letting down their personal boundaries in a similarly boundless space—again, suggesting there's value in not *having borders.*

May splashed water on her face. Tridib had written that he didn't know whether the memory was real or not, but he wanted to meet May in a ruin like that couple, and invited her to come to India. She decides she's angry at the "pornographic" nature of the letter and hides it in her dresser. When it's time to leave for her rehearsal, Mrs. Price asks about the letter. May says casually that Tridib invited her to India, and Mrs. Price encourages her to go. After rehearsal, May considers going to India.

When May can't quite figure out how she feels about the letter but errs on the side of finding it intriguing, it shows again that Tridib was successful in using storytelling and memory to alter how May thinks about her lived reality. Her uncertainty, however, also points to her own youth and the fact that she's unsure whether Tridib is a skilled storyteller or an actual romantic partner.

The narrator's father loves to give people good news. In March of 1963, he tells Tha'mma at dinner that the Shaheb just got a promotion. Tha'mma scoffs that he's a drunk and doesn't deserve it, but the narrator explains that Tha'mma really just thought the Shaheb was weak and that Mayadebi did most of the hard work for him. The narrator's father, annoyed, finally offers the real news: the Shaheb was posted to Dhaka. Tha'mma promptly locks herself in her room.

The narrator's aside suggests that the Shaheb might not be an alcoholic at all; instead, it might be a convenient story for Tha'mma to tell herself so that she doesn't have to accept that her brother-in-law isn't as wonderful as she expected. This illustrates again how stories can deeply change how a person experiences reality.

A week later, a letter arrives for Tha'mma from Mayadebi. The narrator carries it to Tha'mma's room, and she shoos him away before she reads it. At dinner later, Tha'mma flatly says that Mayadebi invited her to visit in Dhaka. Both the narrator's parents are supportive, but Tha'mma is uncertain: she believes Dhaka won't feel like home anymore. She's offended when the narrator's father reminds her that it'd be a lovely holiday, as she's never taken a holiday and never will. She insists she'll go to bring back Jethamoshai. However, Tha'mma remains uncertain about actually going.

Tha'mma's uncertainty stems from the sudden realization that Dhaka in the present is certainly not like the Dhaka she remembers. A trip, then, will mean that she'll have to somehow reconcile her memories and her reality to come to a new, arguably better understanding of the city of her birth. However, in doing so, there's also the possibility that Tha'mma's memories will no longer seem as right or powerful.

After three months, Mayadebi calls. The narrator and his parents anxiously hover, and at the end of the call, Tha'mma gives Mayadebi her word to visit in January, after her family has time to settle in. Weeks later, the narrator's father gives Tha'mma plane tickets to Dhaka on January 4, 1964. Tha'mma seems excited for the first time in months. The narrator is worried about Tha'mma not knowing how to properly travel by airplane, so he takes it upon himself to educate his grandmother.

It's worth noting that the narrator has never been on an airplane either at this point, which makes it clear that he's both youthful and relying heavily on what he presumably learned from Tridib about airplanes. Again, this shows how the narrator inhabits Tridib's stories so intensely, he can even "teach" his grandmother how to properly fly in an airplane.

One evening, Tha'mma asks if she'll be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. The narrator's father laughs at her, but Tha'mma is puzzled that there is apparently nothing—no soldiers, no trenches, no barren land—to separate the two countries. Tha'mma thinks for a moment and asks how people even know where the border is if there's no difference from side to side. She asks what Partition was for if there's no visible border. Annoyed, the narrator's father explains that now, the real border is in the airports in the form of disembarkation cards. He explains that on the card, she'll have to record her date and place of birth. Tha'mma looks alarmed. The narrator doesn't understand until years later that it occurred to Tha'mma at that moment that she was born in Dhaka, which is no longer in India.

Tha'mma grew up with a dividing wall built nonsensically through the middle of her house. In her lived experience, borders and walls are real, tangible, visible things, so she's confused that the border between India and East Pakistan isn't the same way. In this moment, Tha'mma also comes to the realization that the Partition of India affects her sense of identity more than she previously realized. She identifies as an Indian and Hindu woman, but in this moment, she realizes that because of the borders, she wasn't technically born in India—she's from the Muslim-majority country of East Pakistan.

The narrator's father teases Tha'mma about how she used to travel in and out of Burma easily, and she retorts that she could "come home to Dhaka" whenever she wanted. The narrator is delighted; he sees that his grandmother doesn't know the difference between coming and going. This mix-up becomes part of family lore. The narrator explains that the confusion wasn't Tha'mma's fault, as language itself assumes a set point from which to come or go, and Tha'mma's journey to Dhaka was one to try to find that fixed point.

The narrator sees that Tha'mma cannot, at this point, "come" to Dhaka—she can only ever go to Dhaka, as her current home is in Calcutta. However, this slip of language alludes to the power of stories and the way in which people describe themselves and their homes: Tha'mma has the power to dictate where home is by changing whether she's coming or going home to a place.

In November, Mayadebi writes to say that May is going to visit Delhi, Agra, and Calcutta before traveling with Tha'mma to Dhaka, and asks if she can stay with the narrator's family while she's in Calcutta. The narrator's father agrees instantly. Tridib visits a week later and announces that he'll be going to Dhaka as well. He invites the narrator to pick up May at the train station with him.

When Tridib invites the narrator along to the train station, it indicates that the two have a strong and loving relationship with each other—though over the course of May's visit, the narrator will question this. Again, this illustrates how language and stories impact how a person sees their reality.

May and the narrator discuss her visit to Calcutta for the first time the day after Ila's wedding. Ila and Nick married simply in London, and Mrs. Price invited a few people to dinner to celebrate. Now, Nick and Ila are set to leave for Calcutta to have a "proper" Hindu wedding. Ila's father buys the newlyweds a flat in London, and they plan to go to Africa for their honeymoon.

Ila's marriage is an undeniable signal to everyone that Ila is now an adult—and further, that it's silly for the narrator to continue to pine for her. Ila and Nick's plans and the gifts they receive are indicative of their social standing and make it clear that Ila has no intention of returning to India.

The narrator doesn't remember much about the evening at Mrs. Price's house. He almost loses his gift, a tiny saltcellar, at a pub when he stops on the way. Ila is amused to receive it but turns to her other guests quickly. May gives the narrator a glass of wine and leads him to the drawing room. Hours later, the narrator wakes with a start, still in the drawing room. He's distraught; he'd planned to tell Ila something important, but now he can't remember what it is. May convinces him to come sleep at her flat so she doesn't spend all of the next morning trying to figure out where he drunkenly ended up.

Alcohol makes the narrator go through the world the way Ila does: without his memories to inform his actions and perceptions. The fact that the narrator is divorced from his beloved memories and stories at this moment suggests that this is going to be a difficult evening. He is, essentially, missing a part of his identity.

May calls a cab, and the narrator sticks his head out the window. He feels as though his genitals are pushing him to find a way to mourn Ila's marriage. May looks concerned, and the narrator takes her hand in his. She draws her hand away. He leans over and kisses her ear. May pushes him, and the narrator notices that the driver fingering brass knuckles on his dashboard. When they reach May's house, the narrator doesn't realize that she's worried or afraid of him. She asks him to be quiet going up the stairs as to not wake her landlady, but May shrieks when the narrator touches her hair.

This moment points back to when the narrator touched Ila without permission when they were children. The fact that he's doing the same here to May suggests that even if he is in some ways considered lesser because he's Indian and only middle class, the fact that he's male does afford him power, which he abuses.

In her flat, May points to her bed and tells the narrator firmly to go to sleep. The narrator, feeling cunning, asks where she'll sleep. May pulls the covers down on the bed, and the narrator notices that it looks unused. May explains that she sleeps on the floor and pulls out a thin mattress and several blankets. The narrator is aghast, but May explains that most people sleep on the floor, and she wants to live like the majority. The narrator asks if he can sleep on the floor with her, and she laughs. She insists that the narrator is drunk and will feel stupid about this in the morning. She points out that she's old enough to be his aunt.

At this point, May's desire to divorce herself from her upper class upbringing is somewhat curious and suggests that there's likely more to it than simply being ashamed of her younger entitled brother. It's interesting that she chooses to sleep on the floor like everyone else, as it's a private rejection of her upper-class status, not a public one.

May again tells the narrator to go to bed. He becomes angry that May is laughing at him and pulls her face towards him. He kisses her roughly, and while he has her pinned to him, squirms one hand under her shirt and bra. May screams and jerks away, ripping her dress. She races to the bathroom, and the narrator slinks into bed and falls asleep immediately.

The narrator violently invading May's body and space deprives her of her autonomy and freedom, even in the "free" country of England. This shows that freedom can be compromised regardless of culture or place.

The narrator wakes up to the sound of May in the kitchen. He remembers suddenly how May looked afraid the night before, and he remembers everything he did. He opens his eyes to see her standing over him, and he struggles to apologize for his actions. She slaps him on the back of the head and sends him to wash up. When the narrator comes out of the bathroom, there's a plate of food on the table for him. May insists he eat without her.

As May predicted, the narrator feels horrible about his actions—her story became his reality, and now he must live with the memory of his bad behavior. The simple fact that May allows him to stay is a testament to the strange relationship they share as a result of having both loved Tridib; it's that memory that keeps them together.

When it becomes apparent the May isn't going to eat, the narrator presses her for the reason. She finally admits that she fasts every Saturday. The narrator is incredulous, but May simply moves on and tells him that she has to be out on the streets soon, collecting money for famine relief in Africa. She invites the narrator to join her and laughs when he insists the crowds won't be a problem for him. He's wrong: the crowds on Oxford Street nearly sweep him away, and May laughs at him.

Again, May's desire to fast and do the hard work of collecting money on the streets are in direct opposition to the wealth she grew up with. She likely has the financial power to simply give to these charities directly, so the choice to actually do this hard work and be generous with her time suggests that there's more at play here than a pure desire to do good.

May shows him how to hang signs and hands him a box for passersby to put money in. Nobody puts money in the narrator's box. He watches May, who is uncharacteristically bold as she demands money from people. He adopts her technique and half fills his box in a few hours. When the narrator sits down near May, she refuses to take a break and explains that she likes doing this hard work because it feels useful. From his low vantage point, the narrator comments that this perspective is how they looked at each other the first time they met.

The narrator continues to use his childhood memories of May to inform how he thinks about her in the present. For the narrator, past memories and the present moment are connected and part of each other, even though they take place years apart in time.

The narrator, his father, and Tridib met May at the station. The narrator was worried that Tridib wouldn't recognize May. He believed that he'd recognize her himself because he reasoned that she must look like a buttercup. Even though May looked nothing like a buttercup, the narrator was the first to see her, a half hour after her train arrived. She waved tentatively and then ran to them. She ruffled the narrator's hair, and he watched her look at Tridib. It seemed to take her a moment to realize who Tridib was, and Tridib looked shy. Then, she kissed him on both cheeks. The station erupted and teased her, and the narrator's father snapped at people to move along and stop staring.

At eleven, the narrator is still very naïve and is unaware of May and Tridib's relationship and how they exchanged photographs of each other several years before this visit. When May kisses Tridib (something that seems uncouth in India, given the station's response), it shows that in some ways, she does move through the world like Ila does and doesn't take context into account. This is, especially during this visit, a very youthful perspective.

On the way home, Tridib told a story about seeing the infant May in a gas mask, a sight that had terrified him. May doesn't remember this story when the narrator reminds her of it, and she suggests they go so the narrator can have a coffee. She leads him to a deli, and when he joins May at the table, she's laughing at the story of her in the gas mask.

When May can enjoy the story despite not remembering hearing it the first time, it shows that just like the narrator, she's beginning to add to her understanding by joining the narrator's recollections to her own.

May explains that she hadn't even heard him tell the story, but she laughed with relief. She'd been frightened since she arrived in India, and didn't even go to Agra out of fear. Instead, she locked herself in her hotel room in Delhi and felt helpless and afraid. She wondered if Tridib would look as intense and somewhat frightening as he did in the photo he'd sent her, which is why she sent the narrator's father a telegram asking him to accompany Tridib to the station. When she saw him, she was relieved: he looked awkward and young, with huge glasses.

The difference between the way that Tridib's photograph looks and the way he looks in person casts some doubt on Tridib and the narrator's assessment of the photos the Shaheb took in 1939. This opens up the possibility that Tridib's interpretations of the photos may not have been as idyllic as he thought, or alternatively, that even if the photos look idyllic, the evening the photos capture was not.

The narrator's family put May in their guest room, and the narrator spent a lot of time just watching her. He was obsessed with figuring out what she smelled like, and he picked and sniffed at her clothes. He admits that later, he was ashamed and embarrassed he'd behaved that way. May had been too kind to call him out.

Remember the narrator is a child who believes May to be extremely exotic. Further, he's also relying on the stories Tridib told him about England, where May is from, which adds to his sense of awe and wonder about her—she's Tridib's stories brought to life.

One evening, the narrator took May out for a walk. While they were out, May caught sight of the "cotton man," who fluffs mattresses with a single-stringed instrument. May was entranced and asked if his tool was a harp. The narrator didn't know what a harp was, but agreed anyway and dutifully asked the man to "play" his instrument for May. Later, when they got home, the cotton man had been there and told the narrator's parents about the incident. May wasn't angry; she just ruffled the narrator's hair. Later, when the narrator told Ila this story, she snarled something condescending about May's wide-eyed innocence. The narrator explained that he didn't mean it like that: May's innocence was a type of innocence he'd never seen before in a woman.

Ila appears somewhat hypocritical, as she views the world through an arguably even more naïve lens than May does. Notice too that May is taken in by the difference in context she sees around her, even if she's not sure what any of it means. Further, when the narrator seems to prioritize May's brand of innocence over Ila's, it suggests that his love for Ila is even more misguided, given how little she understands about how the narrator views the world.

During the first few days of May's visit, she often invited the narrator along when she went out with Tridib. One morning, they went to see the Victoria Memorial. The narrator chatted about ice cream and asked May to close her eyes. He told her to open them when they were right in front of the memorial, and she yelled in surprise. Tridib and the narrator laughed, but May averted her eyes. When Tridib led them out of the car to look at the memorial, May asked to leave. Back in the car, Tridib took May's face in his hands and asked what was wrong. She insisted that she shouldn't be in India. Tridib laughed and said that this building was "their ruin," which made May laugh.

Though the narrator seems entirely unaware of why May invites him along (an indicator of his innocence and youthful single-minded nature), it's possible that she's not entirely comfortable with Tridib and therefore, wants someone to witness their relationship unfold. In doing so, May allowed the narrator to create memories that align with her own, but have an entirely different perspective and tenor given that he has no idea what's going on.

Tridib gave the narrator money to buy whatever treat he wanted and sent him away. The narrator realized then that he was jealous, as Tridib and May had a relationship he'd never understand. He knew that the memorial had a meaning he wasn't aware of, and he'd puzzle over what it meant until May explained Tridib's letter to him in the deli.

Now that the narrator is finally understanding the relationship between Tridib and May, and reconsidering how he viewed it when he was a child, he's able to join his memories with this new knowledge and come to a richer understanding of Tridib's life.

When the narrator's father suggested that Tridib take May to a harbor, the narrator insisted on going, too. About an hour outside of Calcutta, Tridib swerved around an indistinct lump in the road. May shrieked that it was a dog and was still alive, but Tridib was puzzled when May asked him to stop the car. Finally, she threatened to open the door if he didn't stop, and he circled back to the dog. The dog's back was obviously broken. May approached it with a penknife despite Tridib's warnings that the dog was probably rabid, and the dog snapped at her.

Again, what to do about a dying dog in the road is a matter of cultural context—it's unfathomable to both Tridib and the narrator to stop and do anything about it, given the very real dangers of doing so. This moment also explains why May later becomes involved with charity organizations.

Finally, Tridib agreed to help. He snuck up behind the dog and held its head. May sawed at the dog's neck until she punctured its jugular, then dropped the knife and scrambled down to the rice paddy by the road to wash the blood off her arms. When she got back in the car, Tridib made her promise that if he ever needed it, she'd do the same for him. May laughed uneasily.

Tridib's request seems strange to May in this moment, but for the reader, it foreshadows the violence to come.

May decides she needs a coffee too, and after she purchases it, she returns to the narrator and her story. Back in Calcutta, Tridib dropped the narrator off at his house and took May to his. It was the first time the two of them had been alone together, and Tridib wanted to say something about love. May wouldn't let him, and just put her hands on his shoulders. The narrator interrupts the story and asks May if she loved Tridib. She insists she didn't know back then, because she was too young. She's spent the last seventeen years wondering if what happened was her fault and trying to cope with that guilt. She says she remembers him saying that she was his love across the seas.

The fact that May recognizes that she was very young at this point allows the reader to read her actions during her visit to India as being young and possibly misguided. The fact that she still ruminates on what happened shows how her youth continues to influence how she thinks about and moves through the world as an adult, especially since she apparently fixates on her unwillingness to fully return Tridib's love.

Awkwardly, May collects her things and insists she needs to leave. The narrator walks with her to the underground station. Before she enters, she admits that she's never told anyone these things about Tridib before, and the narrator says that it makes sense to tell him: he knew Tridib best. Before May leaves, the narrator apologizes for his bad behavior again. She gruffly said she didn't really mind and was actually amazed that someone saw her that way.

When May admits that she's surprised the narrator saw her in a romantic light (as problematic as the narrator's "romance" was), it suggests that she believes herself unlovable and consequently closes herself off to the possibilities of romance.

Several days before the narrator returns to Delhi, he wakes to a knock on his door from Kerry, an American housemate. She teases the narrator about looking so cold (he can't afford heat in his bedroom) and explains that he has a lady waiting for him on the phone. It's Ila, who has been married for three months now. When the narrator picks up, Ila breathlessly asks the narrator if he's packed yet and if he needs any help with anything. He's stung that she only wants to see him now, when he only has days left in the same city, but he marvels at how much she can care about others on occasion. He tells her that the only thing he needs help with is arranging a final visit with Mrs. Price.

The fact that Ila only takes an interest in the narrator now adds more proof to the narrator's assertion that Ila doesn't just ignore the past—she also ignores the future until it's right upon her. Again, this suggests that Ila lives entirely in the present, and she doesn't allow her memories of the past or thoughts about the future to inform her life in any way.

The narrator and Ila decide to meet at Trafalgar Square and then go to Mrs. Price's together. The narrator sits in the square and watches as Ila, dressed fashionably, attracts stares. She puts on sunglasses before she spots the narrator. He greets her with a laugh and tries to take her sunglasses off. She tries to stop him, but he notices that her eyes are red and swollen. She snaps that nothing is wrong and leads him to Mrs. Price's house.

Something is very clearly wrong with Ila, and her attempts to hide it suggest that whatever is wrong is embarrassing and possibly threatens her sense of self or social standing—things that she very much takes for granted.

Mrs. Price seems frailer than usual and seems like she doesn't really want visitors. After they have tea, Ila and the narrator decide to let Mrs. Price be alone, and they look around the house one more time. The narrator leads Ila down to the cellar, and she remarks that it's like being back in Raibajar under the table. As the narrator looks around, the random objects in the room seem to float away and be replaced by ghosts of nine-year-old Tridib, Snipe, and eight-year-old Ila. When Ila buries her face in the narrator's shoulder and begins to cry, the narrator feels as though it's the child Ila holding him and crying, right after she told him the story about Nick Price and Magda. Back then, the narrator didn't understand then why she was crying.

The narrator didn't understand that the bullying story Ila told him in their childhood actually happened to her. It took growing up and hearing May's side of the story for the narrator to truly understand the weight of what happened to Ila in her youth. As before, the narrator sees his memories and Tridib's memories as layered one on top of the other, all informing each other in various ways. He can use all these stories he's currently immersed in to better understand what Ila is going through in the present.

The narrator flashes back to the day that young Ila cried after telling her story about Madga. Tridib appeared, and the narrator invited him into their imaginary house in London. He showed Tridib in, and Ila began to cry again and wouldn't tell Tridib why. Finally, the narrator relayed Ila's story to Tridib and insisted that Ila's being a fool and treating the story like she lives in it. Tridib said that everyone lives in a story, and "led" them down to the shelter to hear a story. He explained that it was his ninth birthday, the 25th of September, and Snipe promised to tell him a story. Tridib felt as though he was owed one, given that it had been a bad day: for no apparent reason, Mayadebi wouldn't let him outside.

When Tridib so carefully respects the boundaries of the imaginary house and plays along, it shows that he absolutely respects the boundaries of the children's stories and understands that for them, the story of their game was very real. It's unclear if Tridib recognizes that Ila's story actually happened, but his advice to the narrator suggests that it's important to treat others' stories as though they are real.

Tridib slipped out of the house and went down to look at some of the bomb holes in the park. Mayadebi found him and angrily led him home. Back at the house, Mrs. Price kindly explained that Mayadebi heard that the Germans supposedly dropped explosives disguised as toffee tins. Tridib stayed inside all day, but Mrs. Price cooked him a wonderful birthday dinner and he received several other gifts from his parents and an atlas from Snipe.

It's never made entirely clear whether the atlas that Snipe gave Tridib for his birthday is the same atlas Tridib uses to point cities out to the narrator. If it is, the borders and countries shown in this atlas would be very different than the ones in place later in the novel. Again, memories, this time in the form of old borders, continue to inform the present.

When the alert sounded, everyone went down to the shelter. Finally, Tridib asked Snipe to tell the story. The narrator says that he could see the story in the cellar with Ila: Snipe telling it to Tridib, Tridib relaying it to the narrator and Ila, the narrator telling May, May introducing him to Nick. Later that day, Tridib had asked the narrator what he showed May in the storage room, and the narrator asked what the story was. Tridib told the narrator the story, one about a hero who fell in love with a woman across the seas. It was the last story he ever told the narrator.

The fact that the narrator doesn't fully relay Tridib's story to the reader is more support for his assertion that Tridib didn't just tell him about fairylands. The story sounds fantastical, and it preserves the sense that Tridib's stories of memories are far more important to the narrator than these fantasy stories—especially since the narrator does, at points, forget the story.

Back in the present, Ila continues to cry on the narrator's shoulder. Finally, she says that it's Nick, and the narrator asks if he forgot to buy her roses. Ila is incensed. The narrator asks if she found Nick in bed with someone else. Ila looks startled and admits that she did. She'd called home one afternoon and a woman answered the phone. The narrator laughs that Ila's sins are catching up with her, and she admits that she only told stories about being promiscuous in college to shock the narrator. She explains that she confronted Nick about it, and he admitted he was seeing two other women and had no intention of giving them up. The narrator doesn't know how to comfort her now that she knows that the petty jealousies she'd tried to escape by moving to London exist in her world too.

Finally, Ila admits that she relies on stories as much as the narrator does to influence her reality—though she does so by telling untrue stories to change how the narrator thought of her. With this, Ila begins to seem even younger and more naïve, especially given how distraught she is to discover that she can't escape common problems like infidelity. Infidelity exists the world over, and being "free" in London doesn't free her from unfortunate truths like that.

The narrator tells Ila she has to leave Nick, but she insists she loves him too much. Later when Nick arrives at Mrs. Price's house, however, Ila announces with a laugh that Nick wants Ila's father to buy him a partnership, which will take hard work. Nick's face falls. The narrator wants to hug him, as he sees that Nick will always be dependent on Ila. He remembers May telling him that Nick is different from them.

The narrator illustrates that Nick is not free, as he'll always have to depend on his wife to get him through life, simply because he refuses to do the work himself and must therefore play by her rules and rebel where possible.

Two days before Tha'mma leaves for Dhaka, she receives a letter from Mayadebi. It explains that she hasn't been to the house yet, but she met a man who lives in the house, Saifuddin. Saifuddin is thrilled that Jethamoshai's relatives are coming, as he believes Jethamoshai will die soon. Mayadebi suggests that Tha'mma bring a gift for his wife.

When nobody visits Tha'mma and Mayadebi's childhood home, it builds up the tension for the characters as to what they're going to find. Tha'mma relies deeply on her memories of the house, and it's unlikely she'll find the house exactly as she remembers it.

That night, Tha'mma asks the narrator to sleep with her. He agrees, and as they lay in bed, he goes over plane safety measures and then asks for a story. She tells him about the sweet shop down the street from her house in Dhaka and gets up to sit by the window instead of going to bed herself. The next day, Tha'mma giggles as they say goodbye. When the plane is in the air, the narrator's father sighs in relief. He explains that he's glad they're gone, as there might be trouble in Calcutta.

When the narrator's father mentions the possibility of trouble, it makes it clear that the adults surrounding the narrator have information he doesn't—he'll experience what's to come as a child, with very limited information and a naïve understanding of the world around him.

Years later, Robi tells the narrator that the first thing Tha'mma said to Mayadebi was, "where's Dhaka?" Her Dhaka, the narrator says, disappeared long ago, and all she had were her memories of what Dhaka used to be. May is impressed by the open roads, but Tha'mma continues to insist that she's not in Dhaka. To be fair, Mayadebi and the Shaheb live in Dhanmundi, which later becomes a major political center when Bangladesh becomes independent in the early 1970s, but in 1964, it's nothing more than a suburb. When Tha'mma insists that she's not in Dhaka, Tridib points out that she's a foreigner now.

For Tha'mma, the difference between her memory of Dhaka and what she sees now is disturbing and makes her feel disconnected from her past. Tridib's comment about Tha'mma being a foreigner point to the way that the Partition of India altered Tha'mma's identity as an Indian and Hindu woman—now, even her hometown feels different.

The house is big, and thirteen-year-old Robi loves it. It has a big flat roof, tall walls, and a beautiful garden in front. At dinner that first night, Tha'mma and Mayadebi discuss when to go fetch Jethamoshai. The Shaheb insists they need to wait a few days, as he's heard that there's trouble brewing in the old part of the city. Tha'mma agrees to wait no more than a week.

Remember that the narrator's father mentioned trouble brewing in Calcutta as well and was glad that May was gone. The fact that the Shaheb says the same thing suggests that neither man is aware of what's going on in the other city.

One morning while Tha'mma, Tridib, and May are in Dhaka, the narrator discovers that there's trouble in Calcutta. His mother doesn't listen to the radio that morning before she sends him to wait for the school bus with his water bottle. He admits that he was proud that his mother listened to the news, but he wasn't fully able to grasp that listening was a means of survival for her. The bus takes a long time, and the two boys who usually board with the narrator don't show up. He's not surprised, as there's a cricket match in Madras that day and he assumes his friends are at home listening to the commentary.

The narrator's youthful understanding of the world he lives in means that he thinks of his mother's interest in the news as being indicative of her worldliness and engagement with politics—not a simple way to make sure her family stays safe from the riots that gripped India at this point in time. The narrator's youth is obvious too when he reasons that everything is quiet because of the cricket match.

When the bus finally arrives, it looks different. There aren't enough students on it. When the narrator climbs in, there are only a few boys in the back. They stare at the narrator's water bottle, and one boy, Tublu, whispers that one little boy's mother sent him with a bottle of soda, since "they" poisoned Calcutta's water supply. Suddenly, the narrator knows why the streets are empty. When Tublu suggests they can confirm everything when Montu, a Muslim, gets on the bus, the narrator hopes Montu stays home. Montu does, and the boys all pour their water bottles out.

The use of "they" and the suggestion that Montu, a Muslim, can explain what's going on tells the reader that whatever is happening is rooted in religious animosity. The fact that the narrator and Montu are friends is a testament to the fact that those religious divides don't have to mean anything, but in the hands of adults, that division is apparently very important.

The school day seems almost normal until the narrator begins to hear voices outside the walls of the school. These voices don't sound like the usual demonstration crowds; the sound is jagged and frightening. He says it's the sound of fear. The teacher shuts the windows and at midday, leaves the room. The students rush to the windows, open them, and listen. There's a plume of smoke outside. When the teacher returns, she explains that classes are canceled, and everyone is going home to have a holiday.

The teacher is clearly trying to maintain a sense of calm and order in her classroom by insisting that nothing is wrong—the students are well aware that something is afoot, even if they're not sure what. The narrator's assessment of what's happening shows that political unrest often doesn't make much sense at the time; it's just terrifying.

Students line up in the playground. When the gates open, they notice armed policemen outside. Tublu insists they're guarding the students. When they all board buses, the boys sit next to the windows. As they drive, the streets look unfamiliar: they're empty except for policemen. The narrator is glad that Tha'mma and May aren't in Calcutta. The students see a rickshaw blocking a street and think it looks particularly sinister, though they can't tell if it's supposed to keep Muslims or Hindus out.

The out-of-place rickshaw symbolizes for the boys that their world is currently upside down: it tells a story about what's happening that's far more telling and compelling than the teacher's insistence that this is a holiday. The fact that the boys can pick up on this and interpret this shows that they do have the capacity to think critically and in a more adult way about the conflict.

Suddenly, the bus turns and comes face to face with a mob. Part of the mob breaks off and begins to approach the bus, and the driver turns the bus around as fast as he can. He turns onto a street none of the boys recognize, and pushes Tublu into a seat when he points this out. Tublu begins to cry, and the other boys surround him. The narrator notes that Tublu cried for all of them, as they were all "stupefied with fear." He tells the reader that their fear was a particular kind of fear that comes from knowing that one's world can become hostile in a second, without warning.

When a mob shows that it is willing to approach and possibly attack a school bus filled with innocent children, it's a sinister reminder that these riots are nonsensical, unpredictable, and incredibly violent. This only feeds the boys' fear, as everything they know about their world is suddenly turned on its head.

When Robi wakes up on Thursday morning, the sounds outside his window are normal. He wants to see the trouble if there's going to be any, and he doesn't much care if they stay home or go out to watch. The Shaheb agrees to let them go to the old house if they take a security guard. Tha'mma changes her sari three times and is very nervous, but finally, they head out. Robi scans the streets for anything amiss, but he sees nothing. Tha'mma continues to state that she's not in Dhaka.

Robi is wealthy, privileged, and only thirteen—trouble is interesting for him, as he's presumably never been at risk of having to actually think about what "trouble" could mean for him. His privilege allows him to see the trouble as something that happens to other, less fortunate people.

Suddenly, the car turns a corner, and Tha'mma cries out happily that she recognizes where they are. They reach a narrow lane, and Tha'mma points at all the sights she used to see daily. The driver stops at another lane and points, saying that that's where the house is. Tha'mma is distraught that her beloved sweet shop isn't on the corner anymore. A group of men and children gather around the car, and the driver and the security guard uneasily take up posts at the front and back of the car. The driver whispers something in Mayadebi's ear, and she relays his message to Tha'mma and Tridib: they must come back quickly in case of trouble.

The narrowness of the streets begins to create a sense of claustrophobia for the reader; the anxiety and the possibility of danger is palpable even as Tha'mma is so excited to finally see her memories made real in front of her eyes. The juxtaposition of this possibly emotional and heartfelt moment for Tha'mma with the possibility of violence suggests that sometimes, returning to one's old memories is fraught—things change, and not always for the better.

Tha'mma, Mayadebi, Tridib, May, and Robi approach the house. Children take May's hands as they walk. When they reach the gate, Tha'mma and Mayadebi are shocked to see that the yard is strewn with motorcycles, parts, and oil. The mechanic, Saifuddin, leads Tha'mma to a bench to sit down, and Tha'mma reminds herself of her duty to Jethamoshai. Saifuddin explains that the old man isn't doing well, and insists that his guests have tea before they see Jethamoshai, as they must wait for Khalil. Khalil is Jethamoshai's foolish caretaker, who is very poor but insists on caring for a Hindu man.

Despite Saifuddin's deference and respect for Tha'mma, the way he talks about Khalil suggests the possibility that he's selfish and probably doesn't like Jethamoshai. The messy state of the house's courtyard foreshadows the mess Tha'mma will find within, and begins to make it clear to her that the house is not what she remembers. For one, the house's initial divisions seem to have disappeared, given that the Muslim Khalil is caring for the Hindu Jethamoshai.

Tha'mma is in awe that Jethamoshai lets Muslims care for him when he used to not allow Muslims to get within ten feet of him. Tridib asks how Khalil came to live in the house, and Saifuddin explains that after Partition, Jethamoshai actively found Muslims to live in the house because he feared his brother's family returning. He even sent one of his own sons away once. Tha'mma asks if Jethamoshai will agree to return with them, and Saifuddin says he doesn't know: his own father wouldn't leave India to come to Pakistan.

Even if the divisions that Tha'mma remembers are gone, the "unity" of the house exists now to continue to develop divisions between Jethamoshai and his family. This suggests that even though Jethamoshai has possibly reevaluated his old prejudice against Muslims, he's now willing to use people he once found abhorrent in order to spite his family. In short, the divisions aren't gone; they're just different.

Khalil arrives. He greets Saifuddin with deference and smiles widely at Jethamoshai's relatives, and May recognizes that Khalil isn't simple at all. He insists that Jethamoshai won't leave, but agrees to try. He leads Tha'mma and Mayadebi across the courtyard and into a grimy room in the house. Mayadebi and Tha'mma laugh: nothing is **upside-down**. Khalil sends his wife to make tea, and the guests finally notice Jethamoshai on a bed. He's so old that he's almost childlike, and Robi shrinks back in fear.

The reality of the house continues to not match up with what Tha'mma remembers. The realization that Jethamoshai's side of the house is as normal as any other illustrates the consequences of relying too much on a story: it seems to have only contributed to Tha'mma's fear of returning.

Tha'mma approaches Jethamoshai, but he yells at her to stop, sit down, and tell him about her case. Khalil bellows that these are relatives, but Jethamoshai doesn't acknowledge that Khalil said anything. Jethamoshai looks at May and says that he recognizes her: she's Mary Pickford. He begins to sing an English song, and May sings with him. Suddenly, Jethamoshai whispers worriedly that Khalil needs to buy toilet paper for May. Tha'mma is distraught.

In his old age, Jethamoshai lives entirely in his memories, especially given that he doesn't seem to even be aware of when in time he is. By treating May with this kind of deference, it suggests he believes it's still a period in time when the British were people to revere in India.

Jethamoshai asks Tha'mma to describe her case, and Tridib loudly explains that they're relatives. Jethamoshai's face lights up maliciously at the mention of relatives. He says that his brother had two evil daughters, and he's just waiting for them to come back so he can drag them through court and legally claim the house. Tridib is disturbed by the look in Jethamoshai's eyes. Tha'mma gently explains that they've come to save Jethamoshai from the coming trouble, but Jethamoshai insists he's not leaving: he doesn't believe in India, and who's to say what'll happen if "they" decide to draw another line.

Jethamoshai hasn't even seen Tha'mma and Mayadebi since they were children. His insistence that they're evil suggests that he's spent his time telling himself stories about his family that support his hatred of them. In this way, the novel shows the consequences of pride like Jethamoshai exhibits: he's consumed by his rage, and cannot allow himself to experience anything more positive.

Tha'mma gives up, but Saifuddin insists they need to find another way to convince Jethamoshai. Khalil tells Tha'mma to not listen to Saifuddin, as he just wants to claim the house once Jethamoshai is gone. Saifuddin refutes this and insists that Khalil is simple, and Jethamoshai is in danger. Khalil's wife speaks up and agrees with Saifuddin. Suddenly, the driver runs to the door and tells his charges to come quickly; trouble is coming. Tha'mma tells Khalil that they'll take Jethamoshai for a few days until the trouble passes, and bring him back if he wants to return.

Khalil seems to genuinely care for Jethamoshai, illustrating once again that religious divisions don't have to keep people apart. This mirrors the friendship between the narrator and Montu; the fact that Montu is Muslim didn't even come up until the narrator suddenly realized Montu was in danger because of his faith.

Khalil miserably agrees, but says that Jethamoshai will only leave the house in Khalil's rickshaw if Khalil tells him he's going to court. Khalil manages to convince Jethamoshai to get out of bed, and Tridib helps lift the old man into the rickshaw. Outside, Mayadebi and Tha'mma take one last look at the house and then walk towards the car. The driver is frantic, but Robi doesn't see anyone in the empty streets. They drive a short distance and suddenly, Robi sees dozens of men around a fire in the road. He can tell they've been waiting for the car.

By telling this part of the story from Robi's perspective, the narrator is able to cultivate the sense that the violence that met them was expected, just not by a naïve and youthful child. It also suggests that Tha'mma's entire project of returning to the house was foolish and childish.

The narrator addresses the reader and says that all of what he writes about 1964 is "the product of a struggle with silence." He can't identify where the silence even comes from, but there are simply no words that appropriately describe what happened. It took fifteen years to even realize that his terrifying bus ride and what happened in Dhaka were related, and he only figured it out by accident. He understands that he was only a child who believed in nations, borders, and distance.

The narrator suggests that there are memories and experiences that take a long time to properly deal with through stories. All the narrator had for fifteen years was his terrifying memory and the knowledge that something happened in Dhaka, but no helpful information to help him make sense of the event.

In 1979, the narrator attends a lecture in New Delhi on the war between India and China in 1962. Afterwards, he goes out with friends, and they discuss their memories of that time. The narrator's father had been thrilled that India was at war with China, but as the war took a turn for the worse, they became confused and scared. One of the narrator's friends, Malik, declares that the war was the most important thing that happened to India when they were children. The narrator insists that the riots of 1964 were more important, but Malik and the others don't even remember that there *were* riots in 1964.

The narrator's father believed in the superiority of his home country on the international battlefield, illustrating one of the narrator's main points in the next passages: until given reason to believe otherwise, people don't understand that the borders that divide countries in the first place are responsible for violence.

The narrator can't even describe the riots or the terror he felt, and Malik insists that the riot must've been local and inconsequential. To prove Malik wrong, the narrator leads him to the library to read newspapers from 1964. Malik briefly peruses a bookshelf, but the books discuss the war with China in 1962 and the war with Pakistan in 1965, with nothing in the middle. Suddenly, the narrator remembers that it happened during the cricket season, and Malik agrees to look through the January and February papers. They find that the January 10 paper mentions a riot in East Pakistan, and Malik leaves.

By insisting that the riots simply aren't something he can speak about, the narrator is then forced to turn to other people's stories—the newspapers—to figure out how to describe his experience. In this way, he finally is able to use stories to add meaning to his experience and his memory, and further, to connect his memory with other people's memories (namely, Robi's).

The narrator keeps looking. In the January 11 paper, he finds a headline about the Calcutta riots, and smaller headlines about a sacred relic having been reinstalled in Srinagar. The narrator explains what he learned: the relic, a lock of hair from the prophet Muhammad, arrived in 1699 in Srinagar in Kashmir. Everyone—Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs—respected the relic and each other. In December of 1963, the relic disappeared, and people of all faiths demonstrated. The government labeled the ensuing riots as anti-national, but the riots remained relatively peaceful and focused on bringing people together.

These riots are proof that religious differences don't have to equate to violence, as these people demonstrated against the government in support of the relic. When the government labels the riots as negative and anti-nationalistic, it shows how the government tries to use its own stories to cover up the reality of the situation: that in the grand scheme of the area, the ties between people are stronger than those people's ties to their government.

The Prime Minister instructed his agencies to find the relic, but in Pakistan, cities were rioting as well. Newspapers there insisted that the theft of the relic was part of a conspiracy and an attack on Muslims. The relic was recovered on January 4, and Srinagar celebrated. Khulna (a small town in Pakistan), however, experienced violent riots. The narrator realizes suddenly that Tha'mma, May, and Tridib left for Dhaka the day before these riots broke out.

When the narrator begins to connect his experience in Calcutta to this much larger event involving the relic in Srinagar, it shows that Ila was wrong when she insisted nothing of importance happens in India. Further, notice how the riots are stoked in part by the assertion that there are religious tensions; this shows that this story can be used to shape reality.

The narrator cannot return to the library for days. He lies in bed, wondering why his father allowed Tha'mma, May, and Tridib to even go to Dhaka—it seems his father sent them on purpose. However, when the narrator finally returns to the old newspapers, he realizes that the local Calcutta papers don't mention any rumblings in East Pakistan. Like the narrator, those in charge of the paper believed in the power of distance. He reasons that his father and all the journalists must've known something, and wonders why they never said anything. He wonders why the journalists wrote pages about the riots while they happened, and nothing before or after. He reasons that it's simply too much of a risk to make riots mean something by writing about them, and not speaking about them keeps them meaningless.

The narrator suggests here that not speaking about something makes that event meaningless. This ties language to meaning and provides evidence for the narrator's assertion that Tridib's stories give him a richer experience in life—what happens here shows that a lack of stories deprives life of richness. The fact that the papers don't mention things happening in another country shows how much stock those people placed in the border, as it suggests a belief that strife on the other side wouldn't affect the home front.

The Pakistani army put down the disturbances in Khulna with military force, but it was too late. The riots spread, and Hindu refugees began to board trains provided by Pakistan to flee to India. The rumors circulated as the refugees flooded into Calcutta, and the riots naturally began in Calcutta on January 10. Soldiers patrolled the streets, and the papers reported that small instances of violence occurred in both Calcutta and Dhaka for a week until "normalcy" was reached. Nobody knows how many were killed.

As the conflict progresses, stories have a negative effect: the rumors only stoke the fear of the "other," which in turn leads to violence. The fact that refugees tried to cross the border suggests that they believed in the power of the border to protect them from their rival religion.

The governments of India and Pakistan were both outraged and apparently did what they could to stop the riots. They both accused each other of inciting violence in the other country, but once the riots ended, no more was said. The narrator notes that riots are a reminder that people are bound to each other in a different way than they are to their governments, and the ties between people are often stronger than those to governments. Governments exist, he proposes, to take over from the ties between people.

Essentially, the narrator proposes that the role of the government is to make citizens loyal to the nation, rather than to people that they have intimate and friendly relationships with but that the government labels as "other." By making this connection, the narrator also suggests that dividing people up like this is responsible for violence all over the world.

Several months after he makes these discoveries, the narrator drags out Tridib's old atlas and a compass. He discovers that Srinagar and Khulna are 1200 miles apart, while Khulna and Calcutta are only 100 miles apart. He draws a circle with a radius of 1200 miles, with Khulna at the center, and he is in awe of how huge it is. It includes parts of Thailand, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, China, and most of India. The narrator feels as though Tridib is watching him learn about distance. He realizes that even though places in China are closer to Calcutta than Srinagar, he never heard about the tragedies in China and instead heard only about Srinagar.

As the narrator makes these discoveries, he learns that the border isn't just an idea; it does actually divide people, given that the narrator knows nothing of these locales that are closer to him than other Indian cities. This shows that the governments as the narrator conceptualizes them were successful in their endeavors to make people more loyal to what's happening inside their country's borders than anything outside.

The narrator draws another circle in Europe with Milan at the center, and he reasons that the only thing that could possibly happen on the edge of the circle that could incite riots in Milan is a war. He notes that his circle includes only states and citizens—no people. He's struck that people place so much importance on lines and borders, when it was only after those borders were drawn that Calcutta and Dhaka became so important and connected to each other. This irony, he believes, killed Tridib.

The narrator sees borders as dehumanizing, and thus comes to the conclusion that borders and the nationalism they rely on aren't worth the conflicts they cause. In the case of Calcutta and Dhaka, their twin experiences of the riots (which were brought about by their different religious leanings) is what brought them closer together and simultaneously drove them apart.

The narrator says that Tha'mma's only frivolity was a love of jewelry. She sold a lot of her collection after her husband died and stopped wearing jewelry publicly, and gave most of it to the narrator's mother after she joined the family. There was one piece—a gold chain with a ruby pendant—that Tha'mma continued to wear after her husband's death as a way to honor him. She tried to hide it, even though the narrator's father insisted he didn't care that she wore jewelry as a widow.

Tha'mma's almost inappropriate love of jewelry humanizes her for the reader, and the fact that she clings so tightly to the gold chain as a way to honor her husband suggests that the way she spoke and thought about family isn't always what she actually believes. She does want to maintain a family connection, but the chain is a safer way to do that than actually having relationships with people.

One afternoon in 1965, the narrator comes home to find his mother lying down. She explains that Tha'mma went out in the morning, came home, and is sitting upstairs listening to the news and refusing to eat. The narrator runs upstairs and knows immediately that something is wrong: Tha'mma's gold chain is gone. He yells and asks where her chain is. When she turns around, her expression frightens the narrator. She screams that she gave the chain away to fund the war, so that they can kill "them."

"Them" presumably refers to the Muslims in East Pakistan. The fact that Tha'mma sold her chain to fund a religious war suggests that she's becoming even more nationalistic in her old age, and further, that she's given up on her positive memory of Dhaka as her Indian hometown. Now, it's nothing more than an evil place, given that she wants to help destroy it.

Tha'mma pounds on the radio and the glass front shatters, gouging her hand. She stares at it and then says that she must donate her blood to the war. The narrator screams and doesn't stop until the doctor arrives to give him a sedative. He asks his mother what's wrong with Tha'mma. She explains carefully that Tha'mma is very interested in the war with Pakistan, especially after "they killed" Tridib over there. The narrator reminds his mother that Tridib died in an accident, but he can't ask questions once the sedative takes effect.

When the narrator's mother slips, it suggests that she told him this lie in order to protect him and preserve his youth and innocence. The narrator suggests that in reality, this lie kept him from understanding what happened (and reaching a place of maturity) for far too long. This is another example of stories actually inhibiting someone's understanding of an event.

Things happened quickly after Tridib's death: May left, Tridib was cremated, and the narrator spent time with an uncle. His parents took him to a temple a week later, and his father told him there that Tridib died in a car accident in Dhaka. The narrator was uninterested but perplexed when his father made him promise to not talk to anyone, especially Tha'mma, about what happened. The narrator agreed, but only because he knew his friends wouldn't care that Tridib died in an uninteresting accident.

Though the narrator doesn't offer any concrete reason for why his father didn't want him to tell anyone about Tridib's death, it's possible that Tridib's status as a member of a wealthy family would have made the riots "real" in a way that they're not when nameless, faceless poor people are the ones involved.

Robi talks about Tridib's death for the first time in London, the day that Ila takes him and the narrator to meet Mrs. Price. Ila takes them to her favorite "Indian" restaurant, which is barely Indian. The food is Indian with an English twist. After they eat, the restaurateur, a friend of Ila's, brings coffee and sits with them. Ila tells the restaurateur that Robi lived in Dhaka, where he's from. The restaurateur is thrilled to talk about Dhaka, and peppers Robi with questions about visiting the old part of the city. He takes no notice of Robi's thin smile that turns into a grimace.

The restaurateur very clearly takes pride in being from Dhaka, just as Tha'mma once did. This suggests that he hasn't had to come to grips with the violence of the city, which forever changed Robi's life and soured his memories of the city. The fact that Ila brings all of this up suggests that she doesn't know anything about what happened in Dhaka; her parents likely lied to her to preserve her innocence as well.

Robi angrily describes his one foray into the old part of Dhaka, where his mother was born and his uncle died in a riot. The restaurateur is embarrassed as Robi grabs his coat and storms out. Ila and the narrator chase after him and he finally stops at the steps of a church. He lights a cigarette and describes a recurring dream of the riot. In the dream, he's in the car and a string of men stand in front of the car. The street is otherwise empty. The driver and security guard look anxious. The men approach the car and the guard pushes Robi down so he can't see anything.

It's important to keep in mind that this dream is a combination of memory and exaggerated story—but in this case, it's evidence of very real trauma and doesn't provide any insight or depth to Robi's memory of the riot. It haunts him, indicating that political violence like this has devastating, long-term consequences for those it impacts.

Robi stares at the guard's revolver and feels a thump on the hood of the car. He looks up and comes face to face with one of the men. The man swings something and breaks the windshield, cutting the driver's face. The driver is bleeding, the guard gets out of the car, and Robi hears him fire a shot. In the silence that follows, everyone in the car hears Khalil's rickshaw behind them. The men run towards it and climb the mountainous rickshaw. The guard jumps back into the car, thrilled that they can escape.

By telling the reader what happened to Tridib first through this dream, Robi's story makes it clear to the reader that what happened was important to the entirety of the narrator's family and was extremely violent and haunting.

The car won't start, and as Robi looks back, May has gotten out and approaches the rickshaw. She yells that everyone in the car are cowards. Robi knows that Tridib gets out of the car, but no matter how hard he reaches for him, he can't make him stay in the car. Robi says that this is where he wakes up, trying not to scream. He explains he's never been able to get rid of the dream but he used to think that if he could, he'd be free.

Robi reaching for Tridib suggests that in some ways, he feels responsible for his uncle's death—something that's understandable, but very much a thought process indicative of Robi's youth and lack of understanding of Tridib's relationship to May.

Robi lights another cigarette and says that when he was running a district, he used to look at photos of dead bodies and wonder what he'd do if riots came to his area. He knew he'd have to authorize his officers to kill entire villages, but knew that he'd get death threats for it. He wondered why they don't just draw thousands of tiny borders, but reasons that it wouldn't change anything as you can't divide collective memory. He says that if freedom were truly possible, Tridib's death would've freed him, but the dream continues to haunt him. At this, Ila hugs Robi and the narrator.

As far as Robi understands it, borders do nothing but create even more violence. Further, his comment about collective memory reinforces the idea that the ties between people are stronger than individuals' ties to their government. The recurring nightmare means that Robi will never be free from the political violence of 1964, as there's no way for him to achieve closure of any sort.

On the narrator's last day in London, he's supposed to have dinner with May. He spends his day running back and forth across town for various reasons, and phones Ila at lunchtime. The narrator reminds her he's leaving the next day and wonders why she sounds awkward. She explains that she and Nick have decided to take a short holiday, and tells the narrator to forget everything she said about Nick cheating on her. She admits she made it up and everything is fine, but her voice is high. The narrator offers to come over, but Ila shouts that she's fine and hangs up.

Now that life doesn't look the way she expected it would, Ila finally turns to stories as a tool, unsuccessful as they might be in convincing the narrator of anything. She writes Nick's infidelity off as a story in order to make her less than ideal present more palatable. This echoes the way that Ila once told the narrator a story about her doll being bullied, when in reality, Ila was the one being bullied by racist kids at school.

That evening, as the narrator tries to shove a small vase into his suitcase, he remembers that it's actually a gift for May. He realizes he's late for dinner and phones to let her know he's on his way. At dinner, May brings up what the narrator had been unable to ask: why he never asked her how Tridib died. The narrator admits he never had the courage or the words. He can tell that May has been preparing for this conversation. She explains that they'd been in the car when it was stopped by a mob. The mob broke the windshield, which injured the driver. The security guard fired a shot, and the mob withdrew—and descended on the rickshaw behind them.

The lead-up to the conversation positions it as a way for both May and the narrator to achieve a sense of closure by finally merging their differing understandings of what happened. Again, this mirrors the way that the narrator uses his own memories and Tridib's stories to provide greater meaning and richness to his experiences. May's story will finally help him understand an experience that shaped his life in mysterious ways that he didn't understand as a child.

Tha'mma had yelled at the driver to drive away, but May screamed at her and got out. She says she believed she was a heroine, though she was the only one who didn't know how it was going to play out. Tridib ran after her and pushed her down and then continued to the rickshaw. He tried to pull Jethamoshai out of the mob, but the mob dragged Tridib in. After a moment, the mob scattered. Tridib, Khalil, and Jethamoshai lay on the ground, dead and mutilated. Tridib's throat was slit.

When May got out of the car and says she believed she was a heroine, it shows her acting without considering context—though she wasn't likely to suffer harm, her actions would absolutely hurt others. This is likely the first time May understood that her social standing could hurt others at all, and it may explain why she sleeps on the floor and works for charities in the present.

May and the narrator clear away plates, and the narrator insists he needs to go home. When May responds, he notices that her voice is strange. When he touches her arm, he sees that she's crying. She begs him to stay, saying that she's afraid to be alone. When she calms, she asks the narrator if he thinks that she killed Tridib. The narrator doesn't answer. May continues: she says she used to think she did, but she knows now that Tridib knew he was going to die and gave himself up as a sacrifice. She asks the narrator to stay the night, and he agrees, and the two sleep together. He's glad and grateful to finally understand the mystery of Tridib's death.

The narrator's silence suggests that he does believe May killed Tridib, but by keeping it to himself, he allows May to maintain the story she created to make the event less painful. When the narrator stays to have sex, he and May finally connect with each other as equal adults who both loved Tridib. Now that the narrator knows the truth, he'll presumably be able to go on and better understand other aspects of his life with this new information.

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