

Deconstruction of History in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

^aAnju Bala Agrawal, ^bNimra Lodhi

^aHead, Department of English R.C.A.Girls P.G.College, Mathura, India

^bLecturer, Department of English R.C.A.Girls P.G.College, Mathura, India

Abstract

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a great call of historical events. The whole novel covers a large part of history from 1939 to the tragic end of Tridib. Newly created Bangladesh and communal riots find a clear expression in the Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Political freedom, communal strife and nationalism are important aspects of contemporary life in the sub-continent which make the scope of the novel formidable. The narrator of the novel is constantly engaged in the imaginative renewal of times, places, events and people past. The complexities of majority and minority communalism have been handled sensitively. Using the memory technique, he links two events, riot in Calcutta and mob violence in Dhaka which led to Tridib's death.

KEYWORDS : Alienation, Communal, Frenzy, Catastrophe, Partition

Amitav Ghosh is one of the distinguished and eminent Indian English novelists. When Ghosh started writing fiction, Indian English fiction was in its teenage. Recent freedom from the clutches of the British Empire made the literary world crazy to opt English as their language. Ghosh cherished all the postcolonial values in his novel *The Shadow Lines*. The mingling of cultures, painful scenes of violence, recollection of history is Ghosh's forte. He has proved himself a victor to portray a real picture of postcolonial society on the canvas of this novel.

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* has won a lot of respect from critics' corner. It is because this novel is keenly intertwined with history or historical flavour. His fiction is characterized by strong themes that may be sometimes identified as historical novels. Ghosh took deep interest in history because "the function of history is to promote a profound understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them." (Carr, E.H) Ghosh is a writer of 1970s or 80s and his novels had blown in the free air of India. The year of 1947 was a crucial year for India or Indians. It was a transitional period from slavery to freedom. That was the time when India had already seen a great number of historical events and many were about to come. As far as the postcolonial era is concerned, it is hovered by the history of the nation. This is the reason that the postcolonial literature has a very powerful impact of historical incidents faced by the particular nation. Postcolonial literature addresses the problems and consequences of the decolonization of a country and of a nation, especially the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated colonial peoples. It

also covers a major portion of historical events. Frantz Fanon has described the way how colonizers usurp the history of the colonized. He states:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today. (Fanon, F.:194)

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* has also witnessed of a number of mesmerizing events of Indian history. The theme of migration, exile, partition, violence, riots have been sitting on Ghosh's tips. In fact, *The Shadow Lines* is a "text of the postcolonial genre that seeks to reconstruct history." (Singh, Seema:60) The novel silently tells the painful history of Bengal (both East and West). Ghosh uses the character of Tha'mma as the central figure of history. The tragedy of Bengal finds expression through the partition of Tha'mma's ancestral house in Dhaka. She tells her grandson that how a happy family of her had divided into two bitter strangers. In spite of the same culture, lifestyle both the families had become different and what made this difference- a single wall between the houses.

In *The Shadow Lines* the development and growth of Tha'mma's character encapsulates the futility and meaninglessness of political freedom which was otherwise supposed to usher in an era of peace and prosperity for all. During her early days, she had her sympathies with all the current freedom fighters who were struggling for their actual freedom or for their recognizable identity. She also wanted to take the initiative and wanted to join them or at least she wanted to share the company of those classmates who did their best to serve the so-called 'terrorists'. She had an intense desire to serve them from the bottom of her heart by providing them secret news, cooking food for them or washing their clothes. This portion of history where people engaged to earn their freedom and identity is introduced by Ghosh as a pious cause. In response to a question by the narrator, "Do you really mean Tha'mma, that you would have killed him?" (Ghosh Amitav:39) We are told thus:

She put her hands on my shoulders and holding me in front of her, looked directly at me, her eyes steady, forthright, unwavering: I would have been frightened . . . But I would prayed for strength, and God willing, yes, I would have killed him(the English Magistrate). It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free. (39)

Her formative years have taught her the need, necessity and desirability of political freedom which is a sort of pre-requisite for economic, social cultural and intellectual freedom and development. Ghosh has presented Tha'mma to show a perfect historical scenario of India. The narrator of Ghosh's novel is a young boy who grew up in Calcutta and Delhi in post-partition India. Ghosh pours out the trauma, the tension of the partition or separation not only through one but three

generations. The agonies of displacement, the sense of alienation in the adopted land, difficulty to borrow another culture to face the discrimination in one's own land in the name of being 'outsider' and the constant dream of a return to one's land-are those historical facts of partitions which are raised in *The Shadow Lines*.

Fifty years have passed by since India became 'free'. The Bengali Diaspora has been dispersed to distant lands. Some have gained successes in new associations and developments. Yet the sense of loss of one's identity, the connection with one's 'baari' remains. 'Baari' is where one's ancestors have lived for generations. 'Baasha', on the other hand, is a temporary residence no matter how long one has stayed there." (Chakravati, Dipesh)

For the East Bengalis, 15 August, 1947 is the Partition Day, not India's Independence Day, a day that deliberately bifurcated the Bengali community, a day which brought a bitter relationship between East and West Bengalis. If the purpose of Partition was to gain freedom, then that freedom is a 'mirage'. Observing the front pages of newspapers which give details of terrorist activities, Amitav Ghosh is driven to ask: "Why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every place a new name?"(247)

The novel begins in 1939 with Tridib as a boy. The narrator hero gets a feedback from Tridib's memories and later from Tridib's girlfriends. In 1939, Tridib is about eight years of age and is narrator's father's cousin. Tridib is taken to England and his experiences of war-torn England are recorded with precision. There is no chronological sequence of events in the narrative. The novel shows the unnamed narrator growing into a mature individual. He recalls his meetings with his mentor Tridib who taught him to use his imagination in a right manner. The narrator also recalls his memories and experiences with Tridib, Grandmother, Ila, Nick and May Price. The narrator's grandmother used to live in Dhaka in her parental house before partition but in 1947, they had to shift to Calcutta. When all of them visit Dhaka in 1964, communal riots over the news of the theft of holy hair of Prophet Mohammad spread in which Tridib was killed by the mob. Later in 1980's the narrator searches for details of riots through archives and libraries. Tridib's death has been seen as a sacrifice, for he ran out of the car to save May Price and in the process, he got killed. The novel belongs to the bildungsroman form of novel that records the growth of the narrator's mind, with the "mind understood as a private refuge from a world with whose historical and political realities it either cannot or does not wish to cope."(Kaul, A.N.:309)

Ghosh has vividly drawn the picture of partition, a history changing fact of Indian sub-continent. Thamma, the narrator's grandmother, belongs to the crucial time of 1947. This period was a confusing state which hovered over the minds of people. They went through the tension and trauma of partition. People were afraid, confused and looked for their actual identity which was confined to the physical borders or the shadow lines. Before the arrival of the ghost of partition, the people for whom, they were ready to lay down their own life are

now their enemies. This transition is very well portrayed in the novel. When Tha'mma is all set to go to Dhaka to rescue her Jethamoshai, she inquires if she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the airplane. To quote:

But surely there aren't any trenches or any perhaps, or soldiers, or gun pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land . . . 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; it'll be just like it used to be before . . . what was it all for then - Partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between?(151)

Subconsciously she has rejected the historical act of Partition. History perhaps could explain the events leading up to this event, perhaps even explain why it happened when it did. It has rightly been said: “The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple factual past since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always ready after the break. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.”(HallStuart:113) It is her memory of her ancestral home (which actually reaches out far beyond any historical fact) which inspires her to go to Dhaka on that tragic mission. Earlier on, when told that Jethamoshai was still alive in Dhaka and that the whole house had been occupied by Muslim refugees from India, she exclaims: “You mean our house has been occupied by refugees?”(135)

It is a fact that partition never comes alone. It also brings the free package of violence. Study of world history suggests that violence is the part and parcel of partition. In 1947, the partition of India brought a communal frenzy between Hindus and Muslims. Just because of the ghost of partition, both were looking at each other with suspicious eye. With the arrival of the giant ghost of partition, innocent people were swept off their feet by a wave of violence that swiftly became a tide. Hundreds of people were killed, raped and butchered on both sides of the border and for those who survived, the catastrophe, the experience was so traumatic that the memories of those grief stricken days haunted them for years to come. For millions of people, the independence of the country brought terrible but avoidable suffering and humiliation, a loss of human dignity and a frustrating sense of being uprooted.

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* throws light on the darker side of partition. Tha'mma has a lot of grudges that she couldn't see her home town after partition. She lives her life with the memories of her house and family members. “And then, in 1947 came partition, and Dhaka became the capital of East Pakistan. There was no question of going back after that. She had never had any news of Jethamoshai and her aunt again.”(13)

The pang of partition comes to the readers not only through the borders of nations but through the division of Tha'mma's ancestral house also. The

trauma of both the sides is very well poured out where people live their lives under the shadow of fear and suspension. College going teenagers are devoted themselves in support of so-called terrorists. Tha'mma wanted to share the glory of this struggle. The atmosphere of schools and colleges were turned into a shadow of fear where the raids of police were as common as the lectures. "... we were quite used to police raids in those days. There were raids all the time in the colleges and the University. We'd grown up with it."(37)

Ghosh presents how violence cracks the mirror of life in the fictional world of *The Shadow Lines*. The whole narrative of *The Shadow Lines* is in two parts: "Going Away" and "Coming Home". Both the words stand in relation to 'home'. But What is home? Home ought to be the place where one was born and brought up. Sealed by an emotional bond where one can claim one's right without a thought and without any hesitation. If there is confusion about the very roots of one's origin, the individual's identity would be in question. In the growth of a human being, it would be ideal to feel that all places are one's place and people one's people and he/she is a citizen of the world; most people are circumscribed by the contexts of their life. They either 'go away' or come home'. Ghosh's characters go as far as Delhi or London on work or travel, and come home to Calcutta or Dhaka only to learn that peace is as elusive as ever. One disturbing feature of life in Calcutta/Dhaka and such cities is the increasing tension between the Hindu and Muslim communities and the eruption of violence which takes its toll of innocent lives and destruction of public as well as private property. As long as one learns about death and destruction in newspapers and other media, one remains as cold as one has no nerve of heart. But when a near and dear one is caught in the carnage, one realizes the terror of it. This exactly is what happens to the characters of Amitav Ghosh.

Tha'mma is not the only figure to represent the trauma of violence. From her childhood to her mature age, she sees different shades of violence-in the form of the division of her ancestral house during her college days and the difficult phase of Tridib's tragic death. The novel presents a picture of Second World War Mayadebi, the grandmother's sister and her husband with their eight year old son, Tridib had stayed with Mrs. Price, a family friend in London in 1939 for a whole year when the war had started. Tridib had told the narrator about their life at 44, Lymington road and other places. People in London had started living with the terror of German air raids and the Prices suffered when Mrs. Price's brother, Alan, and his three friends were killed in an attack. They were young intellectuals whose life had been snuffed out all of a sudden. Though they were in the photograph that Tridib had shown, "nobody can ever know what it was like to be young and intelligent in the summer of 1939 in London or Berlin."¹⁴

The novel gives a vivid picture of the facts of communal riot of 1964 which spread not only in India but also in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). The main trouble started when the sacred relic known as the Mu-i-Mubarak-believed to be a hair of the Prophet Mohammad himself-disappeared from its place on 27th December 1963 in the Hazratbal mosque near Srinagar, two hundred and sixty

three years after it had been installed. “As the news spread, life came to a standstill in the valley of Kashmir. Despite the bitter cold (the weather columns of the Delhi papers note that the water mains were frozen in Srinagar that day), thousands of people including hundreds of wailing women took out black-flag demonstrations from Srinagar to the Hazratbal Mosque. Schools, colleges and shops pulled down their shutters all over the valley and buses and cars vanished from the streets.”(225) This historical scenario finds a clear expression in the concluding pages of the novel where not only one community but Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus alike took part. The newspapers of that time were decorated with the bold headlines of curfew: “Twenty nine killed in riots” and “*Curfew in Calcutta, Police open Fire, 10 dead, 15 wounded*”.(224) The writer has quoted the situation of Kashmir valley in the following lines:

Over the next few days life in the valley seemed to close in upon itself in a spontaneous show of collective grief. There were innumerable black flag demonstrations, every shop and building flew a black flag, and every person on the streets wore a black armband.(225)

It was a great surprise that there was not a single incident of Hindu-Muslim animosity in the valley. Probably it was the gifted leadership of Maulana Masoodi who “drew the various communities of Kashmir together in a collective display of mourning”.(226) While India was so deeply agitated, Pakistan fanned communal passion and spoke of genocide. “Karachi observed 31 December as a “Black Day” and soon other cities followed suit. Fortunately the Mu-i-Mubarak was ‘recovered’ on 4 January 1964 by the officials of the Central Bureau of Intelligence and Kashmir heaved a sigh of relief. And a thankful slogan ‘Central Intelligence Zindabad’ rang out on the streets of Kashmir. The narrator is concerned with the impact of this historical event on life in Calcutta and Dhaka. Novy Kapadia rightly points out:

Amitav Ghosh’s greatest triumph is that the depiction of communal strife in Calcutta and erstwhile East Pakistan, and its continuation in contemporary India, is very controlled and taut. There are no moralizing or irrelevant digression. Lucidity and compactness is achieved primarily by his unusual narrative device. (Kapadia:208)

In Khulna, the riots started and caught the fire very quickly. The whole atmosphere was tensed and under the clutches of fear:

Over the next few days the riots spread outwards from Khulna into the neighbouring towns and districts and towards Dhaka. Soon Hindu refugees began to pour over the border into India, in trains and on foot. The Pakistani government provided these trains with armed guards and appears to have done what it could to protect them. At some places on the border the trains were stopped by mobs.

Some of which were heard to chant the slogans 'Kashmir Day Zindabad' (perhaps at that very moment the crowds in Kashmir were shouting 'Central Intelligence Zindabad') But there do not appear to have been any serious attacks on the trains. The towns and cities of East Pakistan were now in the grip of a 'frenzy of looting, killing and burning.(228)

Soon the fire of this riot spread in nearby towns. Rumours added fuel to this fire. It provoked the crazy mob and they began to gather at the stations. "A Few Calcutta dailies printed pictures of weeping, stranded Hindu refugees, along with a few lurid accounts of the events in the East."(229) Passion of revenge made the mob blind and now they demanded only blood. "Mobs went rampaging through the city, killing Muslims, and burning and looting their shops and houses. The police opened fire on mobs in several places and a dusk to dawn curfew was imposed on parts of the city."(229) No one knew that how many innocent lives were swallowed by this game of blood. "There are no reliable estimates of how many people were killed in the riots of 1964. The number could stretch from several hundred to several thousand; at any rate not very many less than were killed in the war of 1962".(229) The narrator remembers how on a certain morning in early January 1964 the school bus, which would normally be overcrowded, came with only a dozen boys. No sooner he got in, than the other boys told him that 'they' had poisoned the water in the Tala Tank, which catered to the entire city of Calcutta. Everyone knew who 'they were. At school, the classes were cancelled half way through. On their way home, the boys saw that the streets were empty. Only the patrolling policemen were seen in the streets. To quote:

All the shops were shut, even the paan-stalls at the corners. None of us had ever seen those shut before. Then the bus turned off into another, narrower street which we didn't know. The pavements were not quite as empty now; we could see knots of men hanging around at corners. They would look at our bus speculatively as we passed by. They were quiet, watchful; they seemed to be waiting for something.(229)

At a particular point, an unruly mob had thrown stones on their bus and chased it from its normal route. The boys were frightened and began to sob. This fear gripped the thousand million people of Indian subcontinent and set them apart from the rest of the world. It was at the time, the narrator suffered the worst of fear in Calcutta as his grandmother had gone to visit her sister Mayadebi, who was in Dhaka. Her husband had his posting in East Pakistan. The narrator's grandmother was very excited as she was going to her birthplace. She was deeply reflecting about the borderline and questions her son again and again. She was worried because "she has not been able to understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality."(152) when she flew to Dhaka

on 3rd January, 1964, with Tridib and May Price, her first question was: “Where’s Dhaka ? I can’t see Dhaka”(193) for the dream image of her native city had vanished long ago. One important reason for the grandmother to go to Dhaka was her desire to see her old house and bring her uncle, Jethamoshai, to India. In a book review, Girish Karnad, has made some remark on this episode:

The grandmother’s visit to the ancestral home . . . is surely one of the most remarkable scenes in Indian fiction. Past and future meet cross religious, political and cultural barriers in a confusion of emotions, ideal, intentions and acts, leading to a shattering climax.(Karnad:5)

After reaching Dhaka, she went to see her old house in a Mercedes car with Mayadebi., May Price, Robi and a security guard. After leaving the car at a particular point, they crossed the by-lanes of Dhaka and reached the old house on foot. They were shocked to see an automobile workshop in place of their garden. Their house was crumbling and a large number of families were living there. Their uncle Jethamoshai, now called Ukibabu was decrepit and bedridden and looked after by Khalil, a cycle rickshaw driver and his family. When they reached there, the old man did not recognize them. Khalil knew that his family members wanted to carry him to India. He was ready to help them but her problem was that the old man could understand only what Khalil said to him. When Khalil was convincing him to go out, the driver informed them that they must leave immediately as “there’s going to be trouble outside”.(216) Mayadebi, grandmother and others depart, arranging that Khali should bring their uncle in his cycle rickshaw behind them. The narrator has given a picture of 1964 riots. when the grandmother went to her old house, the market was open and there was crowd but when she returned after some time, the city had come in the grip of riots and the all the shops were closed. Let’s see a picture of market:

It was full of people when we went through it-a bazaar, all the shops open and people going in and out, rickshaws, thela-garis, vendors, donkeys. And there were people in the houses above the shops too, looking down at us, from the windows and balconies. But all the shops are shut now, barricaded, and so are the windows in the houses. There’s no one on the balconies. The street’s deserted, but for those men.(244)

When all of them were returning in their Mercedes from their ancestral home and their uncle in cycle rickshaw, a mob surrounded the car and broke the windscreen. The driver suffered a cut across his face. The car lurched and came to a halt with its front wheel in a gutter. Then the security guard jumped out and fired a shot from his revolver and the crowd withdrew from the car. At the same time, the eerie silence was broken by a creak and the attention of the crowd turned to the rickshaw of Khalil. The angry mob surrounded the rickshaw. May Price and Tridib left the car to save the old man. The mob didn’t touch May as she was an English memsahib. The mischief took less than a moment. The crowd began to

melt away leaving the dead bodies of Khalil, the old man and Tridib. “They’d cut Khalil’s stomach open. The old man’s head had been hacked off. And they’d cut Tridib’s throat, from ear to ear.(251)

Thus in his fictional endeavour and post-colonial consciousness Ghosh has reconstructed the Indian nation with a discursive outlook on the past over the validity of boundaries and borders in her existential reality at present. to quote:

Ghosh seeks an understanding of the past to have a bearing upon the present. The past is remembered not as a dead, remote period, but as a flowing on into the present, post-colonial situations of multi- ethnic pluralist societies, of boundaries and mutation of nations imposed by colonial rulers and complex cultural diversities of a persistent political struggle for democratic and egalitarian system.(Gupta, Santosh:243)

REFERENCES

- A Reading of *The Shadow Lines*’ a paper by A. N. Kaul, published in the Oxford edition of *The Shadow Lines*, edition 2000.
- Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Carr, E.H., *What is History?*, London. New York: Macmillan: St. Martin’s Press, 1961.
- Dipesh Chakravati, “Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu Bengali memories in the aftermath of the Partion”,*Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No.32, Aug.10, 1996.
- Fanon, F. *The Wretched of the Earth*, 3rd ed. Trans. Constance Farrington, penguin Harmondsworth, 1990.
- Girish Karnad, “Worlds within Worlds: Book Review of *The Shadow Lines*”, *Indian Express Magazine*, December18, 1988.
- Gupta, Santosh: “Looking into History: Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace*.” *Indian Writing in English*, Ed. Rajul Bhargava, New Delhi: Rawat Publication, 2002.
- Novy Kapadia,”Imagination and Politics in Amitavghosh’s the *Shadow Lines*”, *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*,ed.Viney Kirpal , New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1990.
- Singh, Seema, “Dialogics of Novelisation in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*” *Pragati English Journal* 10-1, 2009.
- Stuart Hall, *Post Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. By Padmini Mongia, Arnold, 1996.