

## Amitabh Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*: a Partition Novel

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### Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh 'the most contemporary Indian voice in literature' is the author of *The Circle of Reason*, *In An Antique Land*, *The Shadow Lines* and *Countdown*. His *The Shadow Lines*, a Sahitya Academy Award Winner novel (1989) is significant for both its most contemporary theme and brilliant and powerful use of language. The novel, according to A.K. Ramanujan 'weaves together personal lives and public events.'<sup>1</sup> At a personal level it is a story of three generations: the first generation is Jethamoshai, the grandmother, Mayadebi and Shaheb, the second generation is the mother, the father, Jatinkau, Queen Victoria and an 'eccentric' Tridib, the third generation is Ila, Nick, May, and the boy—the narrator of the story.

**Keywords:** Cotemporary, terrorism, war, violence, partition

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At the public level the novel deals with the most current sensitive issues such as the partition, riots, and war. On the dust jacket of the novel is written:

Its focus is the meaning of political freedom in the modern world and the force of nationalism, the Shadow Line we draw between people and nations, which is both and absurd illusion and a source of terrifying violence, one of the great themes of our time.<sup>2</sup>

Divided into two parts called, 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home' the novel beautifully shifts from past to present and from present to past. Ghosh manages in a masterly way time of two kinds of time past i.e. memory and time present i.e. reality.

Amidst all the above, in this paper, I intend to focus on the communal strife which has a distorting effect on people and leads to feelings of suspicion, distrust and susceptibility to rumors and the partition of India and its consequent trauma.

War, terrorism, roots—contemporary man thrives on violence and lives amidst it and becomes its victim. In *The Shadow Lines* Amitav Ghosh shows us a glimpse of this world where violence and crude barbarity prevails. The time span of the novel extends from 1939 to 1974 with 1964 being a very important year for the characters. The novel converges on the traumatic life of a family in Calcutta and Dhaka in 1964 when a member of the family, Tridib was killed in a communal riot.

Communal strife and public turmoil are interwoven with private upheaval. Almost all the characters in the novel are caught in the vortex of murderous rampages through various violent times as the narrator suffers in the riots of 1964 in Calcutta, Robi, Mayadebi, Tridib, May and Grandma are trapped in the mob violence of Dhaka and Tridib and Mayadebi witness London during the days of the Second World War in 1939. Even though the places are different being Calcutta, Dhaka and London, human beings suffer equally at the hands of violence.

Chronologically, the story begins with a passage of time in colonial Indian when the narrator was not born.' In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and son, Tridib.' (1) The year 1939 is historically significant for the outbreak of the Second World War and upheaval caused by that epochal event. Referring to this Second World War writer indirectly describes the cruelties of war. Mayadebi 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 Tresawsen, and his three friends were killed in an attack. Tridib witnessed the coupling of casual strangers in a theatre and striking, that place was 'bombed out'.

In the second section of the novel, 'Coming Home' Ghosh returns to the Indian subcontinent, to Calcutta and Dhaka. Deeply touched by its violence, Ghosh vividly describes the riots of 1964. However, the details are relevant for any other riots as well because every time, riots harm society equally and the difference transpires only in the death toll phrasing on newspaper headlines. Using an unusual, narrative technique the writer reveals the gory details of the 1964 riots in bits and pieces—it is revealed through the narrator's own memory of his suffering, the newspaper reports, Robi's accounts and finally May account. Using the memory techniques, the novelist links to events, riots in Calcutta and mob violence in Dhaka which led to Tridib's death. The narrator recalls the trouble in Calcutta had occurred after Tridib and the others had left for Dhaka. The violence in Calcutta started on 10 January 1964. Surprisingly, the narrator then a school-going boy, was the only

one at the bus-stop and similarly that the school bus was nearly vacant because of a rumor circulated that the whole of Calcutta's water supply was poisoned. After the early departure from the school, when the boys were returning by bus a mob hurled stones at it and chased it from its normal route. As the narrator thinks about this, he comments: 'it would not be enough to say we were afraid: we were stupefied with fear'. (204) The most poignant expression of the communal divide is shown in two actions. The narrator disowns his best friend, a young Muslim boy, named Montu: 'I lied, I haven't met Montu for months.' (200) Before reaching school 'We unscrewed the caps of our bottles and poured the water out'. (200) The fear that narrator and bus-mates experienced is not something unique, but it grips the thousand million people who inhabit the Indian subcontinent and distinguishes them from the rest of the world. The narrator, now a wise young man comment:

'It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood... it is a special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself, and one's image in the mirror. (204)

Mobs in Calcutta went rampaging through the city, killing Muslims, and burning and looting their houses. The police had to open fire on mobs and curfew was clamped on the city. The police could not bring the situation under control. Therefore, army was called from Fort William. It took about a week to bring normalcy in the city. Nobody could know how many persons died in Calcutta and Dhaka, but according to a rough estimate several thousand persons died.

The other piece of information is flashed before us when the narrator as a research student in 1980 browses through old papers. The news of Budhi Kuinderan's maiden Test Century helps him to locate the report of 1964 riots and later he is struck by the memory that it was this time that Tridib and others were in Dhaka. Grandma, Mayadeib, Robi, May and Tridib had gone to visit the ancestral house so that they could bring their senile old uncle Jethamoshai to India. When they reached there, the old lanes appeared to be normal. However, the normalcy proved to be illusory as while returning confronted not only empty limes, but also a violent mob. Then a breathtaking drama took place as the mob attacked the driver and made the security officer to step out of the car. Suddenly a rickshaw carrying Khalil and Jethamoshai popped up diverting the attention of mob towards them. At that moment, May, ignoring everyone in the car rushed out of it to save them followed by Tridib, just to find three dead bodies of Khalil, Jethamoshai and Tridib. The horror of the act was branded with fire on the memory of May Price and Robi who saw the whole thing. Later on May tells the narrator: 'When I got there, I saw three dead bodies. They were all dead. They'd cut Khalim's stomach open, the old Man's head had been hacked off. And they'd cut Tridib throat from ear to ear'.(251)

Amitav Ghosh stresses that due to social conditioning, the role of rumor in riots or mass movement is deep rooted. The young schoolboys willingly believe that a certain community has poisoned the water in Calcutta. Later as a research student, reading newspaper reports in the Teen Murti House library in Delhi about the 1964 events the narrator recalls the motivations for riots in Calcutta:

In Calcutta rumors were in the air — especially that familiar old rumor, the harbinger of every serious riot— that the trains from Pakistan were arriving packed with corpses... with refugees still pouring in, rumors began to flow like flood waters through the city and angry crowds began to gather at the stations. (229)

The novel shows how geographical boundaries at times lead to cultural differences which in turn create hatred among people. The loss of saint's relic in Kashmir triggers off riots in Pakistan. Amitav Ghosh dramatizes the violence that is at the heart of *The Shadow Lines*. Being trapped in the riots that had erupted after Indira Gandhi's assassination the writer has an immediate understanding of the insecurity and violence that riots bring along with them. It is implied that riots are contemporaneous. The 1964 Calcutta riots could be the 1984 Delhi riots or the 1987 Meerut riots. They all follow a similar pattern, suspicion, distrust, rumor activating conditioned mind, all sources of terrifying communal violence. The violence in Calcutta is not narrated but is presented as the memories and the images of the narrator. Ghosh even widens the scope of the novel as he shows the narrator remembering the riots of 1964 in 1980.

*The Shadow Lines* has as its center of focus the partition of India and the consequent trauma of the East Bengalese psyche. Ghosh brings out the brutality of drawing lines across a nation to form two nations, one having an East wing which is separated from its West wing by over a thousand miles.

Thamma, the narrator's grandmother, belongs to the generation that had to uproot itself in 1947, when she no all set to got to Dhaka to rescue he Jethamoshai, she inquires of she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the airplanes. She questions whether there is no difference and whether both sides will be the same—then why boundaries? She asks:

But if in their aren't trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there is no difference both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get of in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then-partition and all the killing and everything — if there isn't something in between? (151)

Before leaving for Dhaka, the grandmother thinks about the blackness of the lake, the emptiness and pains of life caused by boundaries. We can divide the nations by drawing boundaries, but how can we divide the memory? We are creatures of time. So we are creatures of history. As Tridib says:

Why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It is a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory? (247)

Tha'mma is planning to go to Dhaka to bring her uncle to Calcutta. She does not know whether she was 'coming' or 'going' to Dhaka—it is like homecoming to her. The narrator asked 'Tha'mma, how could you have 'come' home to Dhaka? You don't know the difference between coming and going'. ( ). Naturally, going to Dhaka was home coming to Tha'mma. The sense of belonging to a place is so strong that one can never feel oneself foreigner in one's birthplace even if one is separated from it by political maneuvering. There are thousands of people who were born in our country, but they have attachment with their place of birth which is now in another country.

How everything including the identities change by the partition. The irony of Jethamoshai's life is that what he strongly rejected once must be accepted now. What a tragedy: when the grandmother meets Jethamoshai she cries 'We've come home at last'... (212) But disturbed and disappointed by circumstances, Jethamoshai loses control of his mind. He fails to recognize his own brother's daughter and calls her only a woman, a foreigner, a stranger, without any memory of relationships, good or bad. He tells:

I understand very well, I know everything. Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you are 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. As for me, I was born here, and I will die here. (215)

It can be said that the partition of the Indian sub-continent was the single most traumatic experience in our recent history. The violence is unleashed by the hooligan actions of a few fanatics, the vengeance that the ordinary Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs wreaked each other worsened our social sense, distorted our political judgments and deranged our understanding of moral righteousness. The real sorrow of the partition portrayed in the novel is that it brought to an abrupt end long and communally shared history and cultural heritage. Our own people became strangers and strangers became our own people. This is the gift of partition. An individual helplessness, loneliness and anxiety are beautifully brought out by Ghosh in these incidents, which he calls, 'a struggle with silence'.

Boundaries or borders drawn for political or geographical reasons to differentiate one nation for another are welcome. But unfortunately, these boundaries create nothing, but a sense of loss are terrific fear of violence and the death of an innocent man like Tridib. It is a loss for ordinary people who are not aware about the reasons for the partition. Thus, novel is not aware about the reasons for the partition. Novel is not a story of the grandmother or Jethamoshai but it is a story of the eternal suffering of every man caused by throes of Partition which relentlessly divided friends, families, lovers and neighbors. Backgrounds and characters may change but problems remain the same. The *Shadow Lines* condemns national and communal prejudices in the boldest terms to tell people the world over that they should have regard for cultural ties. Thus, the writer has proved historically and geographically that it he world is a home of all the people. Only politics and politicians have divided it into small water-tight compartments in which, the humanity is being choked to death. The novel ends but does not conclude. It remains serious questions—Why was? Why riots? Why partition? Why boundaries? Why *Shadow Lines*?

### References

- [1]. First two quotations in the paper are quoted from the dust jacket of the text.
- [2]. Ghosh Amitav, *The Shadow Lines*, New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2002.