



Myriad of Historical and Political narrations in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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This paper focuses on the historical incidents through the novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) by Amitav Ghosh. It also projects upon the themes of violence, riots, nationalism, national boundaries and communal tension through the events of three generations of the characters spread over India's Calcutta, East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) Dhaka and England. The novel is published in 1988 after few years from the year 1984 when Indian Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi – was assassinated and wide spread violence breakout when Ghosh was teaching at Delhi University. The riots and general massacre of Delhi and other cities in India provides the backdrop of the novel. It also deals with history, independence of India and the partition of the country. The partition was an event whose consequences were entirely unexpected and whose meaning was never fully spelled out or understood either by the politicians who took the decision or the millions of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs who were to become its victims. The ethnic and social unrest created political chaos within the states. One such event is the riots of 1964.

Key words: partition, riots, violence, nationalism

Introduction:

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956 and grown up and educated in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran, Egypt, India, and the United Kingdom. He received his Ph.D. in social anthropology from Oxford

After graduating from St. Stephan College, university of Delhi; Amitav Ghosh worked briefly as a journalist with The Indian Express.

Ghosh works draw heavily upon the character, tradition and dichotomies of his native land, yet his protagonists and themes often extend beyond India's actual boundaries, most notably toward the Middle East and Great Britain. Through this discourse the works expose the cross-cultural ties between India and her former colonial ruler as well as with her kindred neighbours. Ghosh, who has travelled abroad extensively and received a PhD from Oxford University, has been hailed by critics as one of a new generation of cosmopolitan Indian intellectual writing in English who are forging a contemporary literary metier.

Chronologically, the story begins in colonial India when the narrator was not even born and it deals with historical events like the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the Partition of India in 1947, and 1964 riots in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

As a child, the narrator boards his school bus only to know that "there was trouble in Calcutta" as the bus was "curiously empty; there were heads outlined against the windows". His mother had missed the morning news on the radio, whose "bulletins were the liturgy of the ritual of our breakfast". After being told by his school mates about Tala tank being poisoned; the narrator doesn't need to enquire about who has done it as he mentions "we did not need to ask any questions; we knew the answers ...; it was a reality that existed only in the saying, so when we heard it said, it did not matter whether you believed it or not— it only mattered that it had been said at all...everything fell into place now— there were no more questions." After reaching school, the narrator describes being witness to a procession, which was "not elemental, not powerful, like the roar of an angry crowd— rather, a torn, ragged quality.... Of authentic sound of chaos." (222)

The sudden hostility and violence that overtook his city, the streets, and people make him experience the "commonest of modern fears" which sets "apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world— not language, not food, not music— it is special quality of loneliness that grows of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror". The real life enters fiction as the narrator's recollections, of a real life incident, overlap history. The novel's narrative is woven around

the historically real incidents with complete details of their occurrence. Everything is treated in such a manner that the reader is forced to believe the narrator as dates and numbers are intricately woven into the story. He even relates these real life events to news clippings and advertisements to render. In 1939, Tridib , the cousin of narrator's father , was eight years old , and was murdered in 1964 by a street mob in Dhaka where he had gone to bring his mother's grand uncle to India. 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 1964.

The narrator was born and Mayadebi had gone to England with her husband. The narrator therefore delves into history to sketch a character and comments on the contemporaneous events to highlight the attitude of the people. As has been said above, this character has grown in close contact with his grandmother whom he calls Tha'mma and Tridib cousin of his father. These two characters provide him with the opportunity to see for him what is right and what is wrong. His grandmother thinks that Tridib is wasting time, mixing with the loafers of the street corner addas, missing opportunities, and is a good-for-nothing fellow. Therefore she has interdicted the narrator not to mix with Tridib is a recluse, a scholar , doing Ph.D. in Archaeology, with knowledge of far-off places ,having intense power of imagination, and can activate the imagination of others . Therefore, he does not miss the opportunity of meeting Tridib whenever he gets one. Eventually, Tridib becomes his mentor. He has his grandmother who has old and out-dated ideas and attitude towards modern world. His grandmother thinks that a good man is one who works hard for his livelihood, as she has done, gets married and leads a settled and comfortable life at home without concerning himself with the social or political problems .

Therefore she condemns persons like Ila who is living frugally in England through she can have all the comforts at home . She fails to appreciate her aspirations. She thinks that one goes to the foreign countries only for money. She has asked the narrator not to have anything to do with such a girl as Ila. But the narrator knows that Ila is a brave girl and a devoted wife. As the grandmother has lived an austere life of a Bengali widow, she does not approve of fashionable, modern life of shahib, her brother-in-law.

Bengal was a state that saw the greatest bloodshed. Its capital city, Calcutta was the scene of such violence that observers later called the events of those terrible days the "Great Calcutta Killing". The

population of the two key provinces, Bengal and Punjab were divided among religious groups. The partition required the division of land communities, economic systems and the institutions of state administration and army. East Bengal's economy depended on the export of jute, lost its principal port and centre of industry, Calcutta, which went to India. The vast irrigation system in the province of Punjab was disrupted because the frontier cut across its river and the canal system.

Man creates and recreates history. Some are told; some are untold and lost in oblivion. The riots of 1964 vanished by 1979 without leaving a trace in histories and books. The Hindu-Muslim riot left a panic in the minds of everyone including school children. There were innumerable Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus at the cost of their own lives. In India, Hindus were sheltering Muslims. However, the riots changed everything. The people of both sides reacted with a sense of horror and outrage. Amitav Ghosh tries to present the social, political and economical impact of British rule in India. It is implied that the riots are contemporaneous. The 1964 Calcutta riots, the 1984 Delhi riots, the 1987 Meerut riots or the 1989 Bhagalpur killings, all follow a similar pattern; suspicion, distrust, and rumour activating conditioned minds. While history records that a war took place and a certain number of people died, under the euphemism of casualties, it does not delve into the consciousness of people whose worlds are devastated by violence on an international scale. Amitav Ghosh points to the abyss of forgotten "history" which makes any written history incomplete.

By the end of Jan 1964 the riots had faded away from the pages of the newspapers, disappeared from the collective imagination of „responsible opinion“, vanished, without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence.

In Dhaka, the grandmother was growing like a honey comb. Her home was inhabited by so many branches of the family that they had become confused about their relationships. In the grandmother's memory, there was a crowded house, everyone living and eating together, her grandparents, her parents, she and Mayadebi, her Jethamoshai – her father's elder brother – and his family.

The narrator's grandmother spent twelve years in railway colonies of Mandalay. She used to go to Dhaka almost every year. In 1935 her husband who was an engineer died of pneumonia. She was 32, no savings and had never worked. She possessed a bachelor's degree in history from Dhaka University. She

was born and brought up in Dhaka but came to Calcutta long before partition. In 1949, after the partition Dhaka became the capital of East Pakistan. She said that the dividing line exists between each country was inside the human mind not outside it. Universal life is like the time which has been divided into past, present and future by us for our convenience.

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