

Violence, History and Silence in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* to examine a narrative gap at its heart that conceals the central fact of the death of Tridib, arguably the most important character in the text. The novel concentrates on the Partition of Bengal and its impact on people from different countries and nationalities in Asia and Europe. Accommodating the story of three generations of people in three cities--Dhaka, Calcutta, and London--*The Shadow Lines* shows the interaction of characters belonging to Hindu, Muslim, and Christian faith. Important events in the text revolve around the family of Mayadebi, her sister Tha'mma and the Prices, their English friends. The narrative begins in 1939 and ends in 1964, connecting the Second World War, the Partition in 1947, and the riots of 1964 in Calcutta and Dhaka. Using Tha'mma, the grandmother of the unnamed narrator, as the connecting link between their pre-modern life before Partition in Dhaka and diasporic life in post-Partition Calcutta, *The Shadow Lines* depicts the traumatic suffering of characters from different nationalities but mainly from India and Bangladesh. The paper argues that the silence and secrecy maintained by Tha'mma and others about Tridib's death mirrors the silence of official history concerning violence in their narrative of civilization, freedom, and progress which Ghosh unravels to produce a novelistic revisionist history that not only challenges the mainstream history but also fills the gaps it leaves.

Key Words: partition, violence, riot, silence, narrative gap, official history, revisionist history

INTRODUCTION

Unlike most Partition stories and novels that focus on Punjab, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988)¹ concentrates on the Partition of Bengal and its impact on people from different countries and nationalities. Accommodating characters from two continents (Asia and Europe), the novel describes the story of three generations of the narrator's family in three cities--Dhaka, Calcutta, and London, and shows the interaction of characters belonging to different nationalities and religions--Hindu, Muslim, and Christian. *The Shadow Lines* mostly revolves around events involving the family of Mayadebi and her sister Tha'mma and their friends, the English family of the Prices. The narrative begins in 1939 and ends in 1964, connecting the Second World War, the Partition of 1947, and the riots of 1964 in Calcutta and Dhaka. Using Tha'mma, grandmother of the narrator, as the connecting link between pre-modern life before Partition in the family's home in Dhaka and their diasporic life in post-Partition Calcutta, *The Shadow Lines* depicts the traumatic suffering of characters mainly from India and Bangladesh. However, a narrative gap at the heart of the novel conceals the most important fact concerning

¹ This paper uses *The Shadow Lines* published by Houghton Mifflin in 2005.

Tridib, one of the major characters in the novel. The secrecy and silence maintained by Tha'mma and others about Tridib's tragic end mirror the silence of official history concerning the "other unnameable things" (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 223) in their narrative of freedom and progress. Ghosh unravels the secret and fills the gap, producing a novelistic revisionist history that contests the account of Partition recorded by the mainstream history.

In his book *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (2001), Gyanendra Pandey explains that the textbook history, or historian's history, or the official history focuses on issues such as independence, nationalism, science, and development, and ignores the painful accounts of suffering, loss, madness, and death of the masses--the human dimension of Partition.² Described sometimes also as elitist or nationalist history, the official history with its grand narrative of national progress is pitted against the subaltern history written from below that faithfully records the suffering of millions on the margins.³ In line with revisionist history, Ghosh's novel provides painful details ignored or excluded by the official chronicles about Partition of 1947, the riots of 1964, and their traumatic effect on the lives of ordinary citizens in India and Bangladesh, and contributes toward the making of an alternative version of historical account that challenges its elitist counterpart.

THEORIES OF ALAM, LA CAPRA, CARUTH, BUTALIA, AND PANDEY

At one level, Ghosh's representation of violence in *The Shadow Lines* seems to be consonant with the belief of Javeed Alam that Partition violence "should be left behind, should be forgotten so that people may live in peace, socially normal everyday life, politically as well as individually."⁴ According to Alam, memory is as much about forgetting as it is about remembering and that since remembering Partition entails pain and trauma, public should "put aside" its painful memories and move on. He wants people to remember and discuss "large historical forces" such as the role of the British state with its policy of systematic divide-and rule, of playing one community against the other, and forget the "irrelevant" "little events" like "violence and rape, mass murder and expulsion of whole communities."⁵ It is Alam's claim that people from both sides "at a moment of frenzy" indulged in "large scale massacre," but it was instigated neither by the state or any large organization.⁶ Therefore, the violent acts performed at the time of Partition when people temporarily lost their sense of judgement should not be discussed as a "general phenomenon" but as abnormality of history that must be forgotten.⁷ Rather than open the wounds of attack, retaliation, retribution, or revenge, Alam suggests people to direct their attention to the kind and compassionate acts (gestures of kindness) individuals performed by risking their own life during the genocidal violence of 1947.⁸ He

² Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 58-65.

³ Pandey, in *Remembering Partition*, explains that historical academy has long neglected the fragments of history on the margin, often called "little histories," that honestly tell the realistic story of the masses on the margin--including women and children (65).

⁴ Javeed Alam, "Remembering Partition," 101.

⁵ Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 59.

⁶ Alam, "Remembering Partition, 98-104.

⁷ Alam, "Remembering Partition, 98-104.

⁸ Priya Kumar, in "Testimonies of Loss and Memory: Partition and the Haunting of a Nation," observes that *The Shadow Lines* "remembers not just the millions who die in riots, but also

argues that revisiting trauma reopens the almost healed wounds and harms communities who are trying to forget their past. Alam's belief is that since recounting of traumatic events "is morally not sustainable,"⁹ both Hindus and Muslims should completely forget the communal or conflictual aspect of Partition and move on toward peaceful co-existence.

Based on Alam's standpoint, readers can assume that since the discussion of the painful experience of Partition entails the danger of inviting further vehemence, people resort to silence instead of speaking or writing about such cataclysmic violence.¹⁰ Apparently, Ghosh adopts this view in *The Shadow Lines*, by not having the characters directly discuss Partition, the associated bloodshed, and its psychological impact, as well as by not revealing facts concerning the central character's death for a long time. On the surface, it looks as if Ghosh agrees with Alam in his hesitation to represent Partition trauma; however, the case reveals puzzling complexity than that.

Ghosh's strategy, which is more in accord with the argument that trauma needs to be represented to heal the wounds of memory, aligns him with theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Dominic La Capra, Urvashi Butalia, and Gyanendra Pandey. According to La Capra, one needs to "work through" trauma to come to terms with and move beyond it. He explains the implication of the Freudian term and concept thus: "Working-through means work on posttraumatic symptoms in order to mitigate the effects of trauma by generating counterforces to compulsive repetition (or acting-out), thereby enabling a more viable articulation of affect and cognition or representation, as well as ethical and sociopolitical agency."¹¹ Impacting present and future, working-through involves an imperative to recognize the symptom and the trauma as one's own, to acknowledge that the trauma is still active and that one is implicated in its destructive effects.¹² Working-through, in La Capra's opinion, helps the victim move beyond the trauma because hiding or suppressing traumatic feelings does not end them, but only keep them in a latent state, from which they will re-emerge later in more dangerous forms.

Despite accepting the inadequacy of the theory of Caruth and La Capra to discuss--with more certainty, authenticity, and finality--the central issues of silence in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, this paper acknowledges the contribution made by them in the field of trauma studies.¹³ It

commemorates the forgotten stories of those 'ordinary' Hindus and Muslims who sheltered people from the 'other' community often at considerable risk to their own lives" (206).

⁹ Alam, "Remembering Partition," 101.

¹⁰ Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhashin in *Borders and Boundaries* (1998), Urvashi Butalia, in *The Other Side of Silence* (2000), and Gyanendra Pandey in *Remembering Partition* (2001), provide several instances in which women maintain silence concerning the inexplicable violence of the Partition of 1947.

¹¹ Dominick La Capra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*, 119.

¹² James Berger, "Trauma and Literary Theory," 570-76.

¹³ This paper neither discusses nor tries to apply to Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* the latest development in trauma theory in relation to the non-western texts--especially its emphasis on religion, spirituality, and cultural practice. It does not either make space for Caruth's concept of "imperative to live" discussed in her 2013 book *Literature in the Ashes of History* (xi). Despite accepting the inadequacy of trauma theory to examine--with more certainty, authenticity, and

recognizes Caruth's notion of "the enduring and ultimately unknowable and inexpressible nature of traumatic wounding"¹⁴ of the individual characters, and relies to some degree on La Capra's ideas, especially to understand and unravel the experience of the traumatized subjects in terms "of dispossession, of land loss, and of instances of racial discrimination."¹⁵ La Capra's "working through" may not transcend "a collective traumatic past," yet it helps imagine better "alternative futures."¹⁶ Ghosh tries to work off the trauma in the text both through psychoanalytical "talking cure" and *writing cure* or literary representation.¹⁷ However, his reliance on the trauma theories is only partial. Ghosh's general approach suggests that he admits the soundness of the claim made by those who argue for the need to decolonize trauma theory. *The Shadow Lines* moves toward that direction with its substantial dependence on traditional "oral modes of narrative."¹⁸

In *The Other Side of Silence* (2000), Urvashi Butalia provides several instances in which victims (especially women) maintain silence concerning the inexplicable violence of the Partition of 1947 as well as suggests the need to break that silence through speech and writing. She not only implies that narratives lie on the other side of silence, but also narrativizes or represents Partition violence.¹⁹ Arguing that historians have sidelined important human dimension to it--traumatic memory, divided hearts, and struggle of communities to rebuild their life and relationships--Butalia focuses on the oral stories, i.e., personal and collective memories of "smaller, often invisible people, women, children, schedule castes" to provide a more comprehensive history of Partition.²⁰ Her interviews where the survivors share their experiences work as a kind of "talking cure" to the victims of Partition. Since narration brings to light the long-suppressed violence, fictional works contribute to the breaking of silence as well as help women heal their trauma. According to Marja-Liisa Wallenius, women came out empowered after inexplicable experience of Partition trauma; their resilient response to the altered life situation and identity showed them "broken but stronger."²¹ Several writers have represented these brave but voiceless women in their fictional work—in different literary genres including the novel. These writers have both provided them voice as well as space for the oral account of their bravery. Ghosh presents himself as a novelist who has provided the marginalized women an opportunity to face or accept their trauma.

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¹⁴ Irene Visser, "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects," 255.

¹⁵ Visser, "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects," 254.

¹⁶ Priya Kumar, *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence in Indian Literature and Film*, 97.

¹⁷ Samir Dayal, "Amygdala, or Coming through Trauma," 37.

¹⁸ Visser, "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects," 259.

¹⁹ Anna Bernard in "Forms of Memory: Partition as a Literary Paradigm," also cites Jill Didur's "Unsettling Partition," and Gyanendra Pandey's "Routine Violence" to explain how "intercommunal" violence in the 1980s and 1990s "triggered collective memories of Partition violence, which in turn compelled historians to break the long official and academic silence surrounding the atrocities" (9).

²⁰ Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 9.

²¹ Marja-Liisa Wallenius, "The Concept of 'Otherness' in Partition Narratives of Finland and India," 60.

Similarly, in *Remembering Partition*, Pandey insists on the need to come to terms with individual as well as national trauma by representing it. According to him, communities deny the existence of violence in their midst and relish the lie by making a false claim that it always happens “out there,”²² in other areas of other groups, not here. Pandey argues that since violence is a common phenomenon, its occurrence in history should not be overlooked “as *aberration* and as *absence*,” or elided as something that is abnormal, or something that is absent or that does not happen here, or that it is non-narratable as done by the official historians.²³ Pandey’s insistence is that rather than sidelining violence, all involved communities must honestly own it--they should take responsibility for being an accomplice of it.²⁴ Owning and narrativizing violence functions as Pandey’s equivalent to La Capra’s concept of “working through.”

DEFERRED DEPICTION OF TRIDIB’S DEATH

In accordance with the views of La Capra and Pandey, Ghosh’s narrator attempts to retrieve the facts of history, and reveals the details of Tridib’s death toward the end of the novel. His delay partly reflects the nationalist discourse and public opinion that maintained silence about Partition violence; it also accounts for the sensitivity of the subject and the discursive and ideological complexity associated with representation itself. As Pandey writes: “The historian seeking to represent violence in history faces problems of language (how, for example, does one describe pain and suffering), of analytical stance (how can one be objective and express suffering at the same time?), and of evidence (for does not large-scale violence destroy much of its more direct evidence?).”²⁵ Historians and novelists have to be very careful in their use of language, analytical stance, and citation of evidence when representing violence.

Continuing in a similar vein of thought as Pandey, in his essay “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi,” Ghosh asserts that the representation of violence must never stoke the fire even as the writer tries to capture the intensity of a cataclysmic event. Ghosh emphasizes on the need to represent violence without romanticizing or aestheticizing it. Accordingly, the author uses a deliberate strategy to narrate Tridib’s death in a secondhand manner, “without reducing it to mere spectacle,”²⁶ to avoid sanctioning violent reactions. However, far-reaching consequences of Partition reflect in the pages of *The Shadow Lines* through the death of Tridib--arguably the most important incident in the novel. Seventeen years after the tragic division of the Subcontinent, Tridib dies in the riot of Khulna, East Pakistan, which may be considered as one of the upshots of the violence of 1947.²⁷ He becomes a victim of large-scale communal and religious violence of Partition that afflicts South Asia for a long time affecting the lives of millions in several riots including those in the streets of Calcutta or Dhaka in 1964.²⁸

²² Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 188.

²³ Pandey, “In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu Muslim Riots,” 27.

²⁴ Pandey, in “The Prose of Otherness,” argues that national trauma must be owned because “whether we like it or not, this is our history and in many respects our condition today” (206).

²⁵ Pandey, “The Prose of Otherness,” 190.

²⁶ Ghosh, “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi,” 60.

²⁷ Partition is considered an on-going phenomenon by the citizens on both sides of the border.

²⁸ Tuomas Huttunen, in “Representation of Riots in *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh,” observes that Ghosh depicts three levels of riots: riots between different religious communities within one

Ghosh observes that when the relic Mu-i-Mubarak, a hair of the Prophet Mohammad, disappears from a mosque in Kashmir, demonstrations of Hindus and Muslims occur in the state because both the religious communities put their faith in the prophet. Thousands of people from various communities come together in “a collective display of mourning” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 221). Different religious communities coalesce rather than splitting apart and killing each other in response to the provocative theft. When Mu-i-Mubarak is recovered, the entire city of Srinagar springs with joy, giving Kashmir the distinction of its unique culture of unity of faiths (220-221). Although the agitation ends without violence in Kashmir, riots erupt in Khulna, leading to the tragedy in the novel.

When Tha'mma (one of the central characters in the novel), and her younger sister Mayadebi (Tridib's mother) are returning by car from their ancestral home in Dhaka, Jethamoshai (Tha'mma's uncle) follows closely in a rickshaw pulled by Khalil (a Muslim refugee from India, and a caretaker of Jethamoshai). Near the bazaar area, a mob of rioters encircles the car occupied by the two sisters and breaks the windshield, cutting the driver's face (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 238-239). After the town's security man fires a shot from his revolver, the attention of the mob shifts to Khalil's rickshaw, which is soon surrounded. Tridib and May Price (Tridib's English beloved) jump out of the car to try to save Khalil and Jethamoshai, but in vain. Jethamoshai, Khalil and Tridib are killed in the process (245).

Tridib's death in a communal riot is ironic because, more than anybody else in the novel, he transcends borders and boundaries created by politics, geography, or nationality. He emphasizes the mind's ability and necessity to go beyond localities to explore cosmopolitan identities. A research scholar in medieval Archaeology, Tridib possesses a wealth of “abstruse information” on far ranging subjects: “He would begin to hold forth on all kinds of subjects--Mesopotamian stelaes, East European Jaaz, the habits of arboreal apes, the plays of Garcia Lorca” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 9). His life is “governed by higher-order needs such as creative thinking, understanding and love,”²⁹ and though he is rooted in a place, Tridib possesses cosmopolitan consciousness, and with wide humanitarian outlook, he influences and inspires characters such as the narrator, his younger brother Robi, May and Ila.

Cherishing a dream to tour the world like Tresawson, Tridib believes in imagination, and feels “happiest in neutral, impersonal places—coffee houses, bars, street-corner *addas*—the sort of place where people come, talk and go away without expecting to know each other any further” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 9). He believes that the essential bond of humanity consists of communicating and interacting with people no matter where they belong or what they do. As he feels no dichotomy between home and abroad, he treats strangers as his family members. For Tridib, with his cosmopolitan outlook and belief in the ancient Indian concept of *udaara charitaanaam tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam*³⁰ (for the generous hearted, the entire world is one family), the story of Tristan, “a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman across-the seas” becomes, the best European story (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 183). Despite a strong

nation-state; . . . simultaneous mirrored riots between religious communities in two states and . . . riots between different communities (one or more) and the government” (97).

²⁹ Arvind Chowdhary, Introduction, 3.

³⁰ A Sanskrit phrase from Chapter VI of *Maha Upanishad*

urge of his cosmopolitan self to defy barriers and break all kinds of walls to reach others, Tridib meets a tragic end owing to the restrictions imposed by damning national borders.

DIFFICULTY UNRAVELLING THE SILENCE SURROUNDING PARTITION VIOLENCE

Although Tridib's death is of central importance to the novel, Ghosh does not describe the heartbreaking scene until its final pages. Every witness of Tridib's tragedy--Robi, May, and Tham'ma--has trouble in disclosing the painful event. The "Indian-born and English-educated"³¹ narrator too comes across serious problems while trying to write about the riot that kills his uncle. Like Ghosh, who faces a challenge in writing about Partition violence in *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator confronts silence and absence when he attempts to unravel the mystery of Tridib's death. As he is unable to find words, he cannot discuss the traumatic impact of Partition and the riot of 1964 by resorting to speech, "the enemy of silence" (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 214). In his struggle with this silence³² to unveil the truth of riots in Khulna, the narrator encounters a barrier between what is known and what is unknown and loses himself "in the gap between words and the world" because it is impossible for him to use words without understanding the meaning of events. When he tries to represent them, he experiences difficulties in mapping "the contours of violence."³³ The irrationality and meaninglessness of the riots so confound the narrator that he falls back into the banality of silence.

According to Priya Kumar, unravelling the "gaps and silences" underlying the origin of the modern Indian nation-state in the text by retrieving the events leading to Tridib's death involves a digging up of painful repressed family history as well as the uncovering of a national silence which "cannot be acknowledged in the national memory."³⁴ The narrator finds out that the exploration of these events requires the breach of a tacit collective understanding to forget the hurtful moments in national history that question its unique, united, and civilized past.³⁵ Consequently, the narrator and others provide the context and approach the scene repeatedly but recoil from recounting the killings. They always keep a safe distance from the narration of the sad demise of Tridib.

NARRATIVE GAPS IN THE NOVEL: THE SILENCE OF THA'MMA, ROBI AND MAY

The silence of Tha'mma, Robi, and May leave the readers confounded concerning the riots and killings of 1964. The lack of discussion of Tridib's death until the conclusion of *The Shadow Lines*, creates a narrative gap as the novel sidelines the topic for a long time. Similarly, the novel either avoids the word "Partition" or mentions it in a trivial manner for the word appears in the text only casually: "And then, in 1947, came Partition, and Dhaka became the capital of East

³¹ Nadia Butt, "Inventing or Recalling the Contact Zones? Transcultural Spaces in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*," 2.

³² Kumar, in "Testimonies of Loss and Memory," rightly claims that the narrator struggles with silence both at the level of personal and national trauma (204).

³³ Kumar, "Testimonies of Loss and Memory," 204.

³⁴ Kumar, "Testimonies of Loss and Memory," 204.

³⁵ Anshuman Mondal, in *Amitav Ghosh: Contemporary World Writers* (2011), rightly comments on the realization of the narrator that "just as traumas might be repressed by individuals in order that a coherent sense of individual identity may be maintained, so too do collective identities repress those things which disturb their self-image, those events that might fragment the coherence of the larger narratives of history, nation and state" (10).

Pakistan" (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 123). Perhaps the narrator elides the subject of Partition (often synonymous with unspeakable horror, terror, and suffering) because, as he says, it is better to remain silent about certain times in history because they cannot be known: "there are moments in time that are not knowable: nobody can ever know what it was like to be young and intelligent in the summer of 1939 in London or Berlin" (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 67). According to him, people suppress the memory of the violent times, even of the prelude to horrid times because "nobody knows, nobody can ever know" about these inexplicable moments in history even in memory (67).

A believer in borders and boundaries for a long time, Tha'mma keeps silence about the calamity of Khulna. Unlike the narrator who falls into the abysmal pit of silence whenever he tries to write about the riot, she does not struggle to speak about it because she never opens her mouth on the subject (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 213). According to the narrator's mother, Tha'mma has "never been the same, you know, since they killed Tridib over there" (233). After retirement, she often "sits in an armchair beside an open window" and gazes out "across the lake" remembering her old house in Dhaka (118). The grandmother remembers and shares so many other elements of her past. She tells stories about her life in Dhaka, the house, the family strife, the wall to divide the house, the invented stories about the upside-down-house on the other side of the wall, the Partition, and her meetings with the refugees in Calcutta. However, like innumerable victims of Partition, Tha'mma hides her wound so that she can forget it, and consequently the uprising that claims the life of Tridib, remains outside family conversation. Related to the elision of the physical fact of Tridib's death, another gap in the novel concerns the circumstances and the reason for his death. The text discusses the gap through Robi and May—two important witnesses of the tragic murder.

PARTIAL REVELATION OF THE CENTRAL TRAGEDY: ROBI'S RECURRING DREAM AND MAY'S ACCOUNT

One of the most important eyewitnesses of the tragic happening, Robi almost never discloses the tragic fact about his brother Tridib. Although he frequently dreams of the event, his nightmarish dreams, despite including all that lead up to the deaths, end before Tridib is killed. In Robi's recurring dream,

It always begins with our car going around a corner.... We turn... and there they are, ahead of us, strung out across the road.... The odd thing is, that no matter how many men there are--a couple, or dozens--the street always seems empty. It was full of people when we went through it...but all the shops are shut now, barricaded, and so are the windows in the houses.... Then the men begin to move towards us--they're not running, they're gliding, like skaters in a race. They fan out and begin to close in on us. It's all silent, I can't hear a single thing, no sound at all.... And then the silence is broken.... We all turn: we in the car, they outside. And do you know what it is? It's the rickshaw—with the old man, our grand uncle, whom we'd gone to rescue, sitting at the back, all dressed up in his lawyer's coat. (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 238-240)

Robi's narration allows Ghosh to distance himself from aestheticizing representation of violence. The oneiric form of the narrative becomes stronger as it proceeds:

When I look around I see May: she's tiny, shrunken, and behind her is that rickshaw, reaching heavenwards, like a gigantic anthill, and its sides are seething with hundreds

of little men.... May is screaming at us; I can't hear a word, but I know what she's saying....
 I stretch out a hand to pull him back into the car, but my hand won't reach him [Tridib];
 I try to shout, but I have no voice left, I cannot make a single sound. (240-241)

In the passages above, Robi does not describe the death of Tridib. He only provides an elaborate context prior to the character's demise.

May later represents the actual scene of Tridib's death. She reveals the scene through her prosaic, journalistic reporting, which, however, is far removed from aesthetic, romantic, or sentimental and graphic description of violence practiced by some lesser and/or biased writers.³⁶ Recalling the scene, years after, May tells the narrator:

I began to run towards the rickshaw. I heard Tridib shouting my name. But I kept running. I heard him running after me. He caught up with me and pushed me, from behind. I stumbled and fell.... Tridib ran into the mob, and fell upon their backs. He was trying to push his way through to the old man, I think. Then the mob dragged him in. He vanished...it took less than a moment.... When I got there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. 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.

That was that; that's all there is to tell. (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 245)

The short swift-moving sentences of May present violence in a flat manner without any dramatization of the gruesome act. The technique not only restrains the narrator, but also effectively checks the reader's emotions.

The scene of Tridib's death remains permanently imprinted in the mind of May. She lives a guilt-ridden³⁷ life for many years, considering herself responsible for the death, but before the close of the novel she comes to the realization that he gave up his life as a sacrifice (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 246). However, lacking the exact nature of or reason for the sacrifice, she explains it away as a mystery leaving the readers too in a quandary, unable to decide whether it was a real sacrifice or just an accident. May gives Tridib's death a meaning but leaves enough space for the readers to question whether she imposes that meaning rather than discovering it in the event.

Similarly, Robi's mind registers his mentor's death and sometimes dreams about it. Elaborating and interpreting the Freudian theory of trauma, Caruth says: "trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive

³⁶ Among others, novelists such as Manohar Malgonkar, Raj Gill, and Bapsi Sidhwa, have not only included scenes of dreadful physical violence in their texts but also produced biased writing on Partition: in *Cracking India* (1991), Sidhwa uplifts Mohammad Ali Jinnah to the heroic heights while representing Gandhi as a villain; Gill, in *Rape*, spends much of his energy on venting his wrath upon the Muslims although his protagonist is molded on Gandhian ideals; and Malgonkar in *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), demonizes Gandhi while elevating Nathuram Godse--the murderer of Mahatma Gandhi--to the heroic heights.

³⁷ Toward the end of *The Shadow Lines*, May becomes a relief worker, mixes with the natives, empathizes with their problems, accepts their ways of life, and overcomes the sense of guilt.

phenomena.”³⁸ The recurrent nature of Robi's nightmare shows that he has been traumatized by the killing of Tridib, Khalil, and Jethamoshai. He says that he has the dream only twice a year now; however, he used to dream it once a week in his youth (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 238). A small incident or a remark in a London restaurant is enough to trigger his memory. When a waiter asks him why he remembers Jindabazar Lane in Dhaka so well, Robi's responds that his brother was killed in a riot in that lane. Although he replies with apparent calm, his hands shake “like a leaf” even after fifteen years as the memory re-surfaces owing to the “chance remark” made by the waiter “thousands of miles away, at the other end of another continent” (241). Ghosh reveals, through Robi's physical discomfiture, his struggle to accept the sad fact of Tridib's death.

Robi, a high civil service official in India, conceals his knowledge and painful memory of the killings in Khulna for years like Tha'mma, who buries her sorrows and anxiety concerning the unspeakable. He sustains silence because of a promise to his father who has advised him to understand “things grown-ups don't talk about” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 234). Only after fifteen years, he breaks his silence in the “Indian” restaurant run by Bangladeshis in London. Despite his work for the nation, Robi thinks in a cosmopolitan way about the futility of making shadow lines into borders. Almost at the end of the novel, he discusses national independence and personal freedom as illusions: “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's a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory? If freedom were possible, surely Tridib's death would have set me free” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 241). Robi suggests the impossibility of dividing memory; he also stresses on the irrationality of dividing nations for freedom—individual or collective, personal, or political. Unlike May, for whom Tridib's death signifies sacrifice, for Robi, it means the futility of drawing borders between countries or struggling for freedom.

THE NARRATOR

The narrator, Tha'mma's grandson, also believes in the meaninglessness of borders and boundaries. Following the footsteps of his uncle, Tridib, the narrator shares his cosmopolitan nature and attitude. His concept of cosmopolitanism has formed and developed from domestic spaces of families. Like his mentor Tridib, the narrator becomes an ideal rooted cosmopolitan because of “his immersion within discourses of home.”³⁹ A highly educated young man with an inquisitive and receptive mind, he is doing research “for a PhD thesis on the textile trade between India and England in the nineteenth century” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 13). When the narrator visits England on a year's research grant to collect material for his dissertation, he meets May and learns much about her and her relationship with Tridib. If the stories of Tridib's visit to England, the grandmother's visit to Bangladesh, and his own visit to England have molded his thoughts and life, it is mainly Tridib's example that has provided him an insight to understand the bond between individuals, nations, and cultures.

The anonymous narrator is capable of living in the imaginary landscapes painted by his uncle's exotic stories of places far from his native Calcutta. Listening to Tridib's stories, he would look up “at the smoggy night sky above Gole Park” and wonder “how the stars looked in London”

³⁸ Cathy Caruth, “Traumatic Awakenings,” 208.

³⁹ Shameem Black, “Cosmopolitan at Home: Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*,” 57.

(Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 51-52). Unlike Ila, who despite living in many places, has “never traveled at all,” the narrator invents and visits several places in his imagination because like Tridib, he believes that places come to life by imaginatively living in them (21).

The narrator’s magnanimous heart enables him to have loving relationship with some important characters in the novel. Though committed to cosmopolitanism, he loves and respects his grandmother, who almost her entire life has devoted herself to literal borders, bloody patriotism, and militant nationalism. Going beyond mere sympathy, the narrator identifies with characters such as Ila, and Nick Price. He likens his childhood with that of Ila who people thought could have been his twin. Although a believer of presentness in the past, he appreciates the unimaginative Ila, who lives “intensely in the present,” with no ability to comprehend “the past being concurrent with the present” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 29).

Nick is a “spectral presence” that grows beside the narrator all the time as his friend and an alter ego. He conceives of Nick as his better and “more desirable” mirror image because he looks at him imaginatively through Ila’s eyes (49). Nick’s image in the looking glass signifies the projected image of his self onto the other. It not only suggests the likeness of one to the other at the individual level but also of one nation to its other, for instance, the likeness of India and England or India and Pakistan. The narrator uses the image of “looking-glass” to convey that Dhaka and Calcutta function as mirrors to each other and reflect one another. Just as Nick and the narrator, one city functions as the mirror image of the other although they are separated by geography, nationality, and culture.

The narrator has free access to all the characters from both the Bengali families in Dhaka and Calcutta, and from this privileged position, he unfolds the history of his family that is intertwined inseparably with both national and international events. His ability to examine events through the perspectives of diverse characters allows the narrator to explore the meaning of nationalism, borders, personal identity, and political freedom. Although positioned most of his life in Calcutta, he gradually realizes that his own existence in post-Partition India is deeply influenced by historical ties to England and Bangladesh. As an informed and responsible citizen of contemporary India, he tries to unravel the tragic past of his family and nation, and soon realizes it to be a daunting task for the lack of recorded documents.

NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS AND OFFICIAL HISTORY MARGINALIZE RIOTS

Ghosh is acutely aware that nationalist discourse and official histories marginalize riots and other incidents of violence, considering them to be insignificant. As the narrator recalls his nightmarish car ride during the riot in Calcutta or Khulna fifteen years later, he is shocked to discover that almost no one remembers it. In a conversation concerning the riot, Malik, a Marxist student says to him: “Terrible or not, it’s hardly comparable to a war” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 216). Similarly, Ila, the narrator’s cousin, dismisses the importance of “famines and riots and disasters,” saying, “but those are local things, after all--not like revolutions or antifascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that’s really remembered” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 102). For both Malik and Ila, not riots but events such as powerful revolutions and wars between nations and states worth remembrance.

Noting that pages of journalism provide space only for huge event of war, Ghosh writes further: “The theatre of war, where generals meet, is the stage on which states disport themselves: they

[newspapers] have no use for memories of riots" (226). This statement shows Ghosh's agreement with Pandey who claims that in the historical master-narrative of Partition, its essence, i.e., violence, is given a very short shrift as an aberration, an accident, or a mistake, and is disregarded as history. Pandey argues: "'Real' violence, of which the riot might be said to be the quintessential form, lies outside the domain of the State, outside Progress, and History."⁴⁰ Because riots are ascribed to the disorderly communal elements in society, national newspapers do not consider them as worthy subjects of documentation or representation.

Since the newspapers, toeing the line of nationalist discourse, elide violence, attributing it to outsiders, criminals, political reactionaries, or fanatics, it does not come to the limelight of the nation, and consequently, the news of violence soon fades into oblivion.⁴¹ This point of exclusion and oblivion finds expression in *The Shadow Lines* when Ghosh writes: "By the end of January 1964, the riots had faded away from the pages of the newspaper, disappeared from the collective imagination...without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence" (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 226). Finding no historical or national significance, the collective memory of the people does not keep record of passing local incidents. Thus, the riots--so real and haunting for the narrator mostly because of his mentor's murder—receive no space in the newspapers and official records. Even Teen Murti House Library in New Delhi provides no more information than a short report of the death of twenty-nine people in the riots.

RIOTS, RUMORS, HUMANITARIAN ACTS AND COSMOPOLITAN IDENTITIES

Like Bhisham Sahni in *Tamas*, Ghosh discusses riots in *The Shadow Lines*: "'Stray incidents' of arson and looting continued, in Dhaka as well as Calcutta, despite the presence of the two armies, for a few days" (224). He also states that "a few Calcutta dailies printed pictures of weeping, stranded Hindu refugees, along with a few lurid accounts of the events in the east" (224). Ghosh also incorporates the crucial role rumors, "the harbinger of every serious riot" play to produce terrible consequences enmity, anger, retaliation, and revenge (224). Additionally, as per his idea in "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi,"⁴² Ghosh includes courageous acts of humanity and charity performed by ordinary people to help others by risking their own life: "As always, there were innumerable cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives, and equally, in India, of Hindus sheltering Muslims" (225). Because of the people's sense of help and sacrifice, the small or unremarkable acts of love and kindness rendered by many Hindus and Muslims become visible amid this violence.⁴³ The concern of Khalil's family for old Jethamoshai—living with him, cooking for him, and looking after him--provides one of the best examples of inter-community care. However, Ghosh also

⁴⁰ Pandey, "Violence and Civilization," 10.

⁴¹ Pandey, "Voices from the Edge: The Struggle to Write Subaltern Histories," 234.

⁴² Ghosh, in "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi," maintains that in the riots following Mrs. Gandhi's assassination in 1984, he experienced "not the horror and violence but the affirmation of humanity" because he "witnessed the risks that perfectly ordinary people are willing to take for one another" (61).

⁴³ Alam, in "Remembering Partition," observes that every instance of killing during the partition was balanced by somebody's attempt to help or rescue, or somebody giving shoulder to lean on (98-103).

notes that the kind and courageous people, being ordinary citizens, are “soon forgotten” without any “Martyr's Memorials or Eternal Flames” (225).⁴⁴

In the narrator's opinion, the kind people in *The Shadow Lines* are “subject to logic larger than themselves”; they consider riot as “a pathological inversion” of “individual sanity,” which “binds people to each other independently of their governments” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 225). Ghosh proposes that although Bangladesh (East Bengal) is separated from West Bengal, India by the government as a political entity, the people from these two areas bear strong affinities with each other and have so much in common that the artificial line between them cannot erase their cultural unity. Even violent demonstrations bring these people closer to each other as evidenced by the events of Kashmir in 1964.

The Shadow Lines suggests the power which brings together the otherwise unremarkable people and forges a permanent bond, envisaging transnational, cosmopolitan identities rather than narrow communal or national ones. Tresawsen (May's grandfather) and Mayadebi, Tridib, the narrator and May, and Jethamoshai and Khalil, all rise above the narrow limits of communal, religious, or national differences by demolishing the walls erected by governments, politicians, and extremists. It is ironic that the riots ignited by petty politicians and fanatics in the novel claim the lives of liberal people such as Jethamoshai, Khalil, and Tridib, who stand above the shadow lines of communalism and sectarianism. It is true cosmopolitan values remain fragile unless they are backed by a strong political agenda; still, the ideals of people such as Tridib remain and inspire others for a long time. For the world to have peace, more of such people are needed; otherwise, the ideal of cosmopolitanism will suffer at the hands of chauvinism.

Ghosh exhibits admirable balance towards all communities while writing about the troublesome event of 1947 and its very real physical, social, and psychological effect after seventeen years. Taking an impartial stance to describe the plight of innumerable Hindu families who were displaced from their ancestral homes in East Pakistan to settle in the suburbs of Calcutta, he also recounts the miserable life of Muslim refugees who were uprooted from Bihar, Bengal, and Assam and forced to find shelter in the newly created Pakistan. Saifuddin, the mechanic and Khalil, the rickshaw puller furnish two examples of people who have migrated to Dhaka, Bangladesh from Bihar, India. According to Ghosh, a common cause of suffering unites these and millions of other individuals from different religious communities in India and Pakistan or Bangladesh. Perceiving them as one people, the novelist says that they suffer not from the fear of nature, or violence but from the fear of loneliness, which is “without analogy” (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 200). In the author's words, “not language, not food, not music,” but loneliness that “grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror,”⁴⁵ sets the people on the subcontinent apart from the rest of the world (200). Ghosh postulates that nationalist discourses or official histories largely overlook or ignore such facts related with the ordinary mass. Therefore, much shocked by the strange “incongruity between

⁴⁴ Kumar, in “Testimonies of Loss and Memory: Partition and the Haunting of a Nation,” observes that *The Shadow Lines* “remembers not just the millions who die in riots, but also commemorates the forgotten stories of those ‘ordinary’ Hindus and Muslims who sheltered people from the ‘other’ community often at considerable risk to their own lives” (206).

⁴⁵ Claiming that this loneliness sprouts from the absurd fear of one's own mirror image, Ghosh empathizes with his characters from all nations and countries.

historical records and individual memory,⁴⁶ and to save the crucial part of Indian history from being repressed forever, the narrator embarks on the research of disturbing riots. However, he must flounder for some time because of the silence maintained by characters who could throw much light on the tragedy.

PERSONAL MEMORY FILLS THE OMISSIONS IN NATIONALIST DISCOURSE

By creating his own version of Partition history in *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh tries to fill up the huge omissions he finds in the grand narratives of nations. As he realizes the invented nature of nations and identities as well as of narrations: stories, histories, novels, and nationalist and historical discourses, he invests much time and effort to explore and contemplate the physical, social, political, and psychological consequences of the tragedy of 1947. Conforming to Pandey's argument that historians consider the violence of riots as "disorganized," "chaotic," "irrational," and therefore, unworthy to be a subject of history, Ghosh invests much time and energy in his research-undertaking on riots that were not reported in the national newspapers or recorded by the government.⁴⁷ Ghosh not only underscores their importance, but also writes about them in detail, producing a novel that serves the purpose of a revisionist history, supplying facts ignored by official history.

Emphasizing the implication of memory in his subaltern history project, Pandey asserts: "History would seem to have more to learn from Memory than the other way around."⁴⁸ Ghosh subscribes to this view in *The Shadow Lines* when he relies on personal memories to produce his alternate history, though these memories have links with public events, too.⁴⁹ Historical narratives written through memory do not much depend on facts, and yet they convey a deeper sense of truth and reality. These narratives can encompass a wide variety of issues that the official historians cannot document and record. In *The Shadow Lines*, perhaps Ghosh focuses on personal memories because he is aware that collective memory tends to overlook the local, as in the case of the fateful Khulna riot. Except for the narrator, no other character acknowledges its importance or even its existence; yet Ghosh's novel shows that narratives based on personal memory can carry much significance as well as yield positive results.

Ghosh critiques the national newspapers that give extensive coverage to cricket matches and political speeches, but no space to those on the margin whose lives are changed by riots. As the journalists write of the "Congress conference, of the impending split in the Communist Party, of wars and revolutions," the narrator asks, "what is it that makes all those things called 'politics' so eloquent and these other unnameable things so silent?" (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 223). He himself supplies an answer, meditating on irrational violence, that "for these other things we can only use words of description when they happen and then fall silent, for to look

⁴⁶ Sabiha Sabrin, "Partition: A Path to Freedom or a Gateway to Trauma? A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*," 46.

⁴⁷ Pandey, "Violence and Civilization," 10.

⁴⁸ Pandey, "Community and Violence," 50.

⁴⁹ Anjali Roy, in "Microstoria: Indian Nationalism's 'Little Stories' in *The Shadow Lines*," also looks at *The Shadow Lines* as a novel of memory because it "prefers memory's truth to recorded history to explore alternative means of documenting events" (43).

for words of any other kind would be to give them meaning, and that is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness" (223).

By using a special strategy, Ghosh tries simultaneously to bring to light the stories of people who survived or perished in the terrible times as well as to avoid ascription of significance to meaningless or inexplicable events. To achieve the purpose, he builds up in the novel "layer upon layer upon layer" of personal memories, producing in the end a "dense layering of history."⁵⁰ Ghosh also makes the narrator trace "events back and forth in time, from the outbreak of World War II to the late twentieth century, through years of Bengali Partition and violence observing the ways in which political events invade private lives."⁵¹

FRAGMENTS OF MEMORY AND THE MAKING OF HISTORY

Most characters in *The Shadow Lines* tell their stories as fragments⁵² of personal memory which are tangled with their history and national memory. Partial sharing of private memory by Mayadebi, Tridib, Tha'mma, the narrator, Robi, and May enables the author to create a version of South Asian Partition that revises the official histories. Since Ila lives "in a present which was like an air lock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of the past and the future by steel floodgates," and since she lacks memory and imagination, she cannot appreciate the strong connection between the past and the present (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 30). Ila's inability to connect the past with the present, or to realize the shaping force of history, makes her unworthy to provide material for the narrator to perform his task as a historian. While sharing their remembered histories, however, most adults reveal only certain information and hide the rest, especially about violence, riots, and deaths. Although Tha'mma speaks at length about her past commitments to the nation, and her old home in Dhaka, she remains completely mute on Khulna riot. The suppression of the facts about Tridib's death by the characters reflects the silence⁵³ of mainstream history concerning the other side of the history of civilization and progress, i.e., violence. To these characters, speaking out everything might mean exposing the shaky foundation of Indian nation.

Consequently, as an author, Ghosh must unveil the unrecorded facts of history; at the same time, he must face the challenge of seeing through the politics of silence and uphold a kind of respectful silence himself about the unspeakable in history. By struggling against silence to write a local history, Ghosh ably enacts the dilemma of one who writes of violence and produces a record of marginalized people who have been the victims of violence. He unearths the story of suffering millions by writing "a history from below" and giving "voice to the voiceless," in

⁵⁰ T. Vijay Kumar, "'Postcolonial' Describes You as a Negative: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh," 105.

⁵¹ Butt, "Inventing or Recalling the Contact Zones? Transcultural Spaces in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*," 2.

⁵² Shail Mayaram, in "Speech, Silence and the Making of Partition Violence in Mewat," observes that "the history of partition... is one that can only be written in fragments" (162).

⁵³ Kumar, in "Testimonies of Loss and Memory," rightly remarks that Ghosh's novel "seeks to remember and memorialize some of the gaps and silences" to keep intact the imaginary and ideal concept of a civilized and unified Indian nation (203-204).

Salman Rushdie's formulation,⁵⁴ taking an approach that might be described as a conscious postmodern making of history.

THE NARRATOR AS AN AUTHENTIC HISTORIAN OF THE MARGINALIZED

Unlike historians' history, based on official documents about large public events, Ghosh produces a history written from the perspective of the marginal people "who lived through it [the Partition],"⁵⁵ and built on their oral accounts. Though an elitist himself, the narrator gives voice to the marginalized, the voiceless, subalterns⁵⁶ of India. Similarly, most characters in *The Shadow Lines* contribute to the making of the history from below although some of the most pivotal ones belong to the privileged class both in India and England. The characters, who do not represent subalterns as such, are still subject to the large forces of history, and are connected to the interests of the masses of people. Their history does not constitute a grand narrative of the march of science, progress, or empire. Significantly too, the upper-class people including the British Princes have only a marginal presence and space in the novel. The patriarchs of the two families, Datta Chaudhuri and Lionel Tresawsen do not receive much attention; the Shaheb (Mayadebi's husband) is only mentioned once or twice by his name. Additionally, instead of emulating the form of the Western grand narratives, Ghosh focuses on Eastern genre of oral tales to tell the story of the underdogs.⁵⁷

In producing the history of the ordinary people, *The Shadow Lines* brings to the fore not only the perspectives of male victims such as Robi, but focuses on female victims, and provides space for their voices. Through the emphasis on the perspective of characters such as May, Ila, and Tha'mma, the novel stresses the importance of family instead of nation. This valuing of women not only serves the purpose of subaltern history project but also provides Ghosh an opportunity to reply to Fredric Jameson, Homi Bhabha, and others who look at Third World novels as allegories of nations.⁵⁸

Essentially, Ghosh recounts the little histories of families to make bold statements about nations and their histories. Through the detailed portrayal of Tha'mma's life, *The Shadow Lines* implies a sharp critique of the nationalist discourse of Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru, as well as the militant nationalism of Bengali freedom fighters such as Khudiram Bose and Jatin Bagha. However, the novelist never mentions a word about Mahatma Gandhi; neither has he written about the Hindu-Muslim politics of the time, or the role of British in the Partition of the subcontinent. The author attributes part of the violence to radical nationalist leaders but says

⁵⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-91*, 115.

⁵⁵ Pandey, "Prose of Otherness," 205.

⁵⁶ For the detailed understanding of the voice of subalterns, see Gayatri C. Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

⁵⁷ Roy, in "Microstoria: Indian Nationalism's 'Little Stories' in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*," says that Ghosh's novel can be profitably read as an alternate history and that his "revisionist historiographic project incorporates elements from the premodern oral discourse of storytelling in opposition to the written documentation favoured by western historiography" (41).

⁵⁸ In "An Interview with Amitav Ghosh," Ghosh says to Aldama that "many of [his] books ... have really been centered on families" and adds that "families can actually span nations. I think the reason why you see so many indian books essentially centered on the family is precisely because the nation is not, as it were, the central imaginative unit" (89).

nothing about the Hindu militants highlighted by Sahni in *Tamas*. Ghosh deliberately distances himself from some of these issues because he writes about Partition indirectly by concentrating on its effects.

Although Ghosh did not directly experience Partition, he remained “deeply affected by its tragic legacy,”⁵⁹ that continues to haunt most people in the Subcontinent even today. Readers may assume that being another generation removed from 1947, Ghosh might not be as traumatized as earlier writers such as Saadat Hasan Manto, Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal, Bhisham Sahni and Ismat Chughtai. Consequently, he does not depict as much as them the scenes of physical violence and trauma except for “the earlier memories of riots, ones witnessed in childhood.”⁶⁰ As he communicates to Frederick Luis Aldama in an interview, Ghosh writes about Partition in a “very restrained” tone⁶¹ because he wants more to respond to “some very ghastly events that were happening in India at the time.”⁶²

Therefore, the novelist describes not his personal trauma, but the one lived by “particular individuals that Ghosh remembers”⁶³ through the narrator, the “embodiment”⁶⁴ of the trauma. Instead of providing details of a single or multiple violent events, Ghosh writes “about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them,”⁶⁵ and directs his attention toward broader historical realities. Instead of describing the graphic violence and resultant trauma of Partition directly, the novelist focuses on the serious consequences of the Partition of Bengal on the dislocated people.⁶⁶ The aftermaths of Bengal violence acquire wider significance and provide insights into the problem of the victims of the Partition of Punjab as well. However, Ghosh confines his narrative to the effect of violence, the discourses or silence surrounding it, and the need to move on.

DISMANTLING THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST

During his narration, Ghosh delves deep into the exploration of the meaning of national borders and establishes parallels between war-torn Europe and violence ridden subcontinent to dismantle the distinction between the east and the west.⁶⁷ He does this through the narrator, who as a representative citizen of post-Partition India, forges a view of the modern world that interweaves memory, history, and contemporary life. The blurring of boundary between the

⁵⁹ Sandrine Soukaï, “The Hybridity of Partition Novels in English: Reshaping National Identities in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* and Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows*,” 73.

⁶⁰ Ghosh, “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi,” 61.

⁶¹ Frederick Luis Aldama, “An Interview with Amitav Ghosh,” 87.

⁶² Ghosh hints at the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi in 1984 four years before the publication of *The Shadow Lines* (1988).

⁶³ John C. Hawley, *Amitav Ghosh: An Introduction*, 71.

⁶⁴ Hawley, *Amitav Ghosh: An Introduction*, 65.

⁶⁵ Ghosh, “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi,” 61.

⁶⁶ Bengal was partitioned in 1905 by the then Viceroy Lord Curzon; in 1911, the decision was reversed due to mass outrage and Bengal was reunited. It was once again partitioned in 1947 into West Bengal (India) and East Bengal (Pakistan, which later became Bangladesh).

⁶⁷ Robert Dixon, in “‘Traveling in the West:’ The Writing of Amitav Ghosh,” puts the idea in this way: Ghosh “undermines any distinction between east and west, colony and metropolis, and points to similarities and continuities that cut across these differences” (18).

two hemispheres becomes evident when the narrator looks at the old Bartholomew's Atlas that Tridib used in the past, draws some imaginary circles connecting places and discovers that "Khulna is about as far from Srinagar as Tokyo is from Beijing, or Moscow from Venice, or Washington from Havana, or Cairo from Naples" (Ghosh, *The Shadow lines*, 226). He draws some more imaginary lines to discover that "Chiang-Mai in Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi is; that Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is" (227). Beside teaching him "the meaning of distance," the act also suggests the imaginary nature of borders and their influence on the minds of people despite their essential meaninglessness.

Ghosh conveys the idea that it is the governments that draw lines and separate people from people. The compartmentalization of the globe into nation states either creates distance between individuals or brings them closer to each other. Because of the imaginary lines of nations, people become distant even when they live in proximity as indicated by the reference to Calcutta, Delhi, and Chiang-Mai, or Chengdu and Srinagar. People in Delhi feel closer to the ones in Calcutta, and far distant from those in Chiang-Mai, even though geographically they live nearer the Thai people. The narrator ultimately realizes the cartographic lines to be mere shadow lines that can only divide geographical spaces but not human hearts and conveys the pointlessness of the idea of nations and nationalities by clearly deconstructing the distance between countries and nations.

GHOSH'S HISTORIOGRAPHY: COSMOPOLITANISM, MULTIPLE IDENTITIES, AND BROAD HUMANITY

Ghosh's historiography suggests the possibility of identities other than the ones projected by the nationalist, colonial, or postcolonial discourses. In fact, Ghosh objects to the use of "postcolonial" to describe India's contemporary situation because for him the word has negative connotations. In an interview with T. Vijay Kumar, Ghosh says, "'Postcolonial' is essentially a term that describes you as a negative. I mean, when I think of the world that I grew up to inhabit, my dominant memory of it is not that it was trying to be a successor state to a colony; it was trying to create its own reality, which today is the reality that we do inhabit."⁶⁸ This inhabited reality seems to be an effort to reconcile the reality of multiple allegiances, multiple identities, a reality having "many roots and many pasts," and cosmopolitan existence,⁶⁹ so aptly illustrated through the narrator.

The Shadow Lines, to use Mushirul Hasan's words, forces the affected and responsible communities "to affirm broad humanity," which is conspicuously absent in nationalist history.⁷⁰ The narrator asserts this need when he says that the madness of a riot is a reminder of "individual sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments" (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 225). Fundamental sanity figures in the re-forging of communities in the Dhaka house where Jethamoshai lives after 1947 contentedly surrounded by Muslims; in Hindu-Muslim relations at the mosque in Kashmir; and in the relationship of May and the narrator at the end of the novel. Rationality, and mutual love and trust inspire individual minds unlike fear, hatred and antagonism that influence impulsive collective actions.

⁶⁸ T. Vijay Kumar, "'Postcolonial' Describes You as a Negative," 105.

⁶⁹ R. Radhakrishnan, "Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora," 129.

⁷⁰ Mushirul Hasan, "Memories of A Fragmented Nation: Rewriting the Histories of India's Partition," 2667.

CONCLUSION

Largely by means of the narrator's agency, Ghosh puts forth a revisionist history of Partition that accommodates the perspective of the victims. His novel shows what Pandey calls "a whole new beginning . . . a radical reconstitution of community and history" through the new meanings of nation, community, and family forged after the Partition.⁷¹ Created out of the "little histories" neglected by academic historians, *The Shadow Lines* fills the gaps left by nationalist or other official histories.⁷² Through the incorporation of the "voices at the edge" or the victims' "fragments" of memories, Ghosh has produced a more authentic history than the textbook one, and thus "rendered voice to silenced stories of ordinary individuals. . . to commemorate their sacrifices as well as. . . a meeting ground of cultural and ethnic contact."⁷³

While in the process, Ghosh parodies the official historians by seeming to avoid, yet recording, what they tend to avoid in their texts, such as riots, or the tragic tales of refugees. He produces a more reliable version of history through the narrator's excavation of the "archaeology of silences, a slow brushing away some of the cobwebs of modern Indian memory" and by his repeated return to "the sites of personal and national trauma."⁷⁴ Indeed, *The Shadow Lines* functions as a testimony of "loss and memory," and "compel[s] us to concede the past-in-presentness of Partition as a history that is still developing, a history whose repercussions continue to be felt in our times."⁷⁵ Ghosh tries to look at the world as the characters do by presenting their stories of dislocation, fragmentation, and achieved cosmopolitanism in a respectful manner through a postmodern mode of text that at once embraces and defies the limits and borders of genres.

Denying the claim that non-European texts mostly employ the mode of magical realism, Ghosh in an interview clarifies that he wrote *The Shadow Lines* "in a realist mode to deal with real events and real characters."⁷⁶ Except for the dream narration of Robi, the text uses "gritty realism" through the amalgamation of time, space, and narrative perspectives.⁷⁷ Mixing and merging modes and styles, the novel blurs the difference between nations and nationalities, history and memory, secrets and revelations, fact and fiction, and realities and imagination. Ghosh uses the complex pattern of fiction-craft to reveal the absurdity of Partition and the uselessness of artificial boundaries that provoke violence but cannot divide people and their memories. By bringing the marginalized to the center and employing their point of view in the novel, Ghosh skillfully tells their tragic tales in the bloody background of deadly riots, and thus sheds light on the otherwise neglected issues of millions of subalterns in South Asia thereby successfully producing an affective history that serves as an alternative to textbook history.

⁷¹ Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 7.

⁷² Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 64.

⁷³ Butt, "Inventing or Recalling the Contact Zones?" 15.

⁷⁴ Suvir Kaul, "Separation Anxiety: Growing up Inter/National in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*," 126.

⁷⁵ Kumar, in "Testimonies of Loss and Memory," 203.

⁷⁶ Aldama, "An Interview with Amitav Ghosh," 87.

⁷⁷ Aldama, "An Interview with Amitav Ghosh," 85. In the same interview Ghosh says that his idea was "to collapse space in the way that Ford Madox Ford collapses time" (90).

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