

JUXTAPOSITION OF CULTURES OF VIOLENCE AND PEACE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

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Abstract

*In the present paper my focus is to delineate the cultures of violence and peace in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Violence, a recurring motif in post-colonial literature, is emblematic of disorder and chaos which jeopardizes thought processes and militate against the current situation. Its manifestation in literature and art can be read as an internalization of that anarchy. Demonic violence has long been a characteristic trait of human civilization, but violent moments also convey an urgency to communicate. Violence and peace go together in this scenario and should not be viewed as disparate elements. A political solution to violence is a long and difficult process, but there may be an aesthetic solution, however temporary its nature may be. This effort could bring about a literary tension, and generate in its wake a felt experience, something which can be universally comprehended. *The Shadow Lines*, the Padma Shree Award winning Indian English writer Amitav Ghosh's second novel, was published in 1988, four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the Prime minister, Indira Gandhi's assassination. Written when the homes of the Sikhs were still fiery, some of the most important questions the novel probes are the various faces of violence and the extent to which its fiery arms reach under the guise of fighting for freedom. Ghosh's treatment of violence in Calcutta and in Dhaka is valid even today, nearly two decades after its publication.*

Key words: *Demonic violence, emblematic, internalization, post-colonial, smoldering.*

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Examining violence in literature as opposed to peace is complex and complicated. Violence is enmeshed in the literary culture because of long standing oppressive binaries of militarism and militancy. By responding to violence, several writers have not just emphasized the syncretistic nature of the different literary cultures but also rejected straightjacketing of their expression as manifestations of their violence-prone existence alone. When violence is approached, it may be discussed as physical conflict among different characters in literature. Franzak and Noll suggest: 'Violence in literature, like violence in our world, is multifaceted. It functions at different levels, is perpetuated by different motivations, and is experienced in a variety of ways' (663). Referring to Van Soest and Bryant's model, they describe violence as best understood on three levels: individual, institutional and structural-cultural. Individual violence is often described as person-to-person conflict. It is violence that is perpetuated by one individual toward another and is 'violence that we can see' (663). Institutional and structural-cultural violence are layers of harm that are less easily noted and lurk beneath the surface as motivators for individual violence. Institutional forms of violence are ideological policies and practices that exhibit forms of social control. Structural-cultural violence is more complex to identify because it is perceived as normal and natural.

Violence has many faces in Amitav Ghosh's novel, it is as much present in the marriage of Ila to Nick doomed to failure even before the 'yes' word was spoken, as it is present on the riot torn streets of Calcutta or Dhaka. But the remarkable crux of this novel is that this violence is very subtle till almost the end. When violence is dealt with, the idea is not to describe it explicitly like a voyeur but to look at it to comprehend its total senselessness. It is an invigorating story about the borders that mark and limit our imaginations and memories which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1989. The story essentially revolves around the narrator who is trying to consistently juggle through memories and events from past and present in hopes of finding closures and answers to his life. Written in a non-linear manner, there are consistent

references to major historical events such as the Swadeshi movement, the Second World War, the Partition of India and the Communal riots of the 60s in Dhaka and Kolkata.

The Shadow Lines is basically the story of the family and friends of the nameless narrator who for all his anonymity comes across as if he is the person looking at you quietly from across the table by the time the story telling is over and silence descends. Before that stage arrives the reader is catapulted to different places and times at breath taking tempo. The past, present and future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcation. Such lines are present mainly in the shadows they cast. There is no point of reference to hold on to. Thus, the 'going away', the title of the first section of the novel, becomes 'coming home', the title of the second section. These two titles could easily have been exchanged.

The narrator is very much like the chronicler Pimen in Pushkin's drama Boris Godonow. But unlike Pushkin's Pimen this one is not a passive witness to all that happens in his presence, and absence. The very soul of the happenings, he is the comma which separates yet connects the various clauses of life lived in Calcutta, London, Dhaka and elsewhere dangling between the violence and peace.

The story starts about thirteen years before the birth of the narrator and ends on the night preceding his departure from London back to Delhi. He spends less than a year in London, researching for his doctorate work, but it is a London he knew very well even before he puts a step on its pavements. Two people have made London so very real to him - Tridib, the second son of his father's aunt, his real mentor and inspirer, and Ila his beautiful cousin who has travelled all over the world but has seen little compared to what the narrator has seen through his mental eye. London is also a very real place because of Tridib's and Ila's friends - Mrs. Price, her daughter May, and son Nick. Like London comes alive due to the stories related by Ila and Tridib, Dhaka comes alive because of all the stories of her childhood told to him by his incomparable grandmother, Tha'mma who was born there. The tragedy is that though the narrator spends almost a year in London and thus has ample opportunity to come to terms with its role in his life, it is Dhaka which he never visits that affects him most by the violent drama that takes place on its roads, taking Tridib away as one of its most unfortunate victims.

The story encompasses several historic events in India's history, including World War II, the Swadeshi movement, and the 1963-64 riots in Calcutta. The story begins in India and later transfers to London. The story moves through the young boy's memories and especially

concentrates on the memory of his cousin, Ila, however, because of the social constrictions of his society, the narrator stays with a platonic relationship. Split into two parts 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home', the novel follows the life of a young boy growing up in Calcutta, getting education in Delhi and his experiences in London. His family, the Dattachaudharis, and the Prices in London are linked by the friendship between their respective patriarchs, Justice Dattachaudhari and Lionel Tresawsen. The narrator adores Tridib, his second cousin, because of his tremendous knowledge and his perspective of the incidents and places. Tha'mma has a dreadful past and wants to reunite her family and goes to Dhaka to bring back her uncle. Tha'mma thinks that Tridib is the type of person who seems 'determined to waste his life in idle self-indulgence' (Ghosh, 67), one who refuses to use his family connections to establish a career. Unlike his grandmother, the narrator loves listening to Tridib. For the narrator, Tridib's lore is very different from the collection of facts and figures. The narrator is sexually attracted to Ila but his feelings are passive. He never expresses his feelings to her, afraid to lose the relationship that exists between them. However, one day he involuntarily shows his feelings when she, unaware of his feelings for her, undresses in front of him. She feels sorry for him and immediately abandons him to visit Nick (the Price family's son, and the man who she later marries).

The story of these characters is not told in a contextual vacuum, it instead corresponds to the growth of Calcutta as a city and India as a nation over a period of three decades or more. Significantly, private events in the author's life and other important characters take place in the shadow of events of immense political significance amidst violence and fear. The family too is not there typically as a spectacle but as a means to 'discuss' these issues that are at the heart of this work. So there is Tha'mma, the grandmother of the unnamed narrator through whom the issue of the Bengal Partition and the whole idea of Nation, Nationalism and Nationhood gets discussed.

But in analyzing the title of the work, the real truth comes in the delineation of borders and boundaries between nations, hence the term 'shadow lines'. The author shows how these lines are created, kept, broken, and even invisible. The concept of Post-colonial Criticism talks about the negativity of borders made by man. They pit one society against another. As is evidenced in the story, this was especially true in India when it was divided into three sections: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Only conflict resulted in that division. The novel not only deals

with the boundaries of space, but also of time. For example. Look at this quotation about seeing boundaries from above:

It took those people a longtime to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood....War is their religion. (Ghosh, 77-78)

The grand mother is not the war-mongering fascist but she believes in 'the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power: that was all she wanted- modern middle class life, a small thing that history has denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it.' (Ghosh, 78) She is nostalgic about the sacrifices of people in the Indian Freedom Movement and its aftermath in Partition. For her, Pakistan itself was the price paid for political freedom. After the partition, she settled in Calcutta but again in the post-colonial India, the partition of Bengal into Bangladesh and West Bengal had a tremendous impact on her psyche. A. N Kaul observes this impact of Partition, 'War or friendship between nations is a continuing political reality and, further, that in this particular case- it is not a simple tragically fractured by the forces of a bigoted politics.' (304)

Here is a perfect example of those boundaries becoming a simple illusion. Here, there is some kind of collective consciousness that can't be changed no matter what. The government has no power in this way. Such was the case of the subdivided India, the tumultuous India divided into three parts. The novel show that the lines and boundaries that human draws are just temporary and shadowy, which are meant to divide people, exclude, creates difference between people and nations. The novel celebrates the whole world as a home to everyone.

Tridib has grown up witnessing India's Partition and the creation of Pakistan. In 1939, Tridib was 8 year child when he had observed a man and a woman engaged in love-making in a bomb wrecked theatre in London. After growing up, he writes about the same episode to his lady-love May Price in 1964, wishing to share the same experience with her at the same place. The novelist refers to the rumour that the Germans had dropped toffee-tins in the city during the German air raids on London in 1940. He projects Tridib as an emblem of individual freedom.

Tridib travels through his imagination and creates his own world by its precise use. He accepts every place as his home but prefers to stay in the old family house in Ballygunge Palace with Tha'mma who would say, 'There's nothing in the world he couldn't have done with his connections- he could have lived like a lord and run the country.' (Ghosh, 6) His idea of freedom is intellectual one.

After the historical tragedy of Partition, Dhaka became the capital of East Pakistan. The 1971 War was followed by Hindu-Muslim riots in both India and East Pakistan. During the communal riots, Tridib went to the riot-hit Dhaka with his lady-love and Tha'mma to bring his granduncle Jethamoshai back to India. When the frenzied mob attacked Jethamoshai and Khalil, a Muslim rickshaw driver, May first jumped out of the car and rushed towards the victims. Tridib followed her and plunged into the mob. Khalil, Jethamoshai and Tridib were killed. Later on, May tells the narrator, 'When I go there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They 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' (Ghosh, 251) May is burdened with the guilt that she herself is responsible for Tridib's death. But at the end of the novel, she is free from the guilt and says:

I thought I'd killed him. I used to think: perhaps he wouldn't have got out of the car if I hadn't made him, if I'd understood what I was doing. I was safe you see- I could have gone right into that mob, and they wouldn't have touched me, an English memsahib, but, he must have known he was going to die. For years I was arrogant enough to think I owed him his life. But I know now I didn't kill him; I couldn't have, if I'd wanted. He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can't understand it. (Ghosh, 251-52)

One of the important facets of Tha'mma's worldview that we have to consider is her perception of historical events and her notions of Nationhood and Nationalism. As a young woman she finds herself in the greatly charged milieu of 19th century Bengal when the Extremist strand of Nationalism was in its full glory. As a college going young woman she upholds these young extremists as her true heroes and secretly desires to be a part of such extremist organizations as *Anushilan* and *Jugantar*. She idealizes these young men who indulge in clandestine extremism with the larger goal of Independence in mind. At the same time as a product of Western Education, her idea of Nation as an entity is borrowed in its entirety from

England. She tends to associate gory wars passion, sacrifice and blood baths with the creation and grandeur of nations.

‘War is their (the English) religion. That’s what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that...that’s what you have to achieve for India.’ (Ghosh, 187) She particularly likes her nephew Robi who, according to her, has besides, a fine education a fine body that is essential for the enterprise of nation building. To the fact that she is a dislocated Bengali (from the Eastern side) she does not pay much attention and like a typical middle class character is too involved in matters of livelihood to bother about these issues. Life is simple for her, she believes in the values of honesty and hard-work and has been a tremendously scrupulous teacher and mother. She believes so completely in the ideal of hard work that when she meets her poor migrant relatives she can think of no other reason but lack of hard work as the reason for their penury.

Thus, the way ‘violence’ is brought into the story with the message of peace. The narrator says, talking of the day riots tore Calcutta apart in 1964:

I opened my mouth to answer and found I had nothing to say. All I could have told them was of the sound of voices running past the walls of my school, and of a glimpse of a mob in Park Circus. I have never experienced such a sound, but God, how these sentences get under the skin, how easy it is to hear that sound, how the heart beats faster on reading these sentences! (Ghosh, 211)

There are many other reasons why *The Shadow Lines* is so special a book. It has many of the characteristics that elevate a book to the level of unforgettable literature. For all the violence that plays the central role in the novel, it is this abundant feeling of tenderness in the novel that the narrator feels for the people, for Tridib, for Ila, for the grandmother, for May, for Robi, that has remained with me. For Robi, the meaning of freedom is different. He regards freedom as mirage on account of violence in the name of freedom, which led to killings and murders in Assam, the North-East Punjab, Sri Lanka and Tripura. However, for the grandmother it is not a mirage but the fact of fighting against the Pakistanis.

Hemmadi observes that the communal riots are seen as ‘a defiance of artificially created national boundaries.’ (299) Novy Kapadia says:

By depicting the riots in Calcutta and Dhaka and by exploring connections, distinctions and possibilities, Amitav Ghosh shows that in a changing world, different strands of

nationalism and ideology will exist and even compete. The force for nationalism in quest for freedom or an ideology is often a source of violence. So the shadow lines between people and nations is often an illusion. (205)

There is a need of a syncretic civilization to avoid a communal holocaust in India. The 1964 communal riots in Calcutta and Dhaka could be the 1984 Delhi riots after Mrs. Indira Gandhi's assassination, the 1987 Meerut riots, the 1989 Bhagalpur riots or the recent Godhra riots in 2002. Amitav Ghosh says, 'The recent carnage in Gujarat is not just a fresh chapter in the subcontinent's annals of horror: it may well prove to be the prologue to horrors yet undreamt of.' (CNN-IBN interview) What he feels earnestly for is undermining violence and promoting peace all over the world. His plea is for co-existence and humanitarian global ties despite the artificially created borders and cultural and political differences.

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