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Analysing Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* Through the Lens of Cultural Trauma

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ABSTRACT

Winner of the 1989 Sahitya Akademi Award, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is about partition and also its aftermath. It is the story of the unnamed protagonist's coming to terms with the death of his much-loved uncle Tridib in a communal riot in Dhaka when he was a child, and trying to make sense of and understand the cause of his death years later when he is an adult. Trauma for Cathy Caruth is a belated experience. It often has a lingering, disruptive presence in memory. Dominick LaCapra offers his concepts of "acting out" and "working through" to decode trauma. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who come before. These experiences are transmitted so deeply and affectively that they continue to have their continuing effect into the present also. My paper makes a humble attempt to read the novel in the light of the cultural trauma that the unnamed protagonist went through because of his uncle's death.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most celebrated authors of India who has won many accolades both in India and aboard. His fictions are mostly based on historical events, and deal with themes namely, environmentalism, humanism, cosmopolitanism, colonial power and displacement. Among his popular novels is *The Shadow Lines* which won him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1989. It is about the "lines" that bring people together, and also set them apart; lines that are visible to some but non-existent for others; lines that remain in someone's memory and in another's imagination. Set against the historical backdrop of events like the Swadeshi movement, Second World War, Partition of 1947, and Communal riots of 1963-64 that affected Dhaka and Calcutta, the novel is divided into two parts: "Going Away" and "Coming Home". It dramatizes what Milan Kundera says in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (2). Ghosh's focus is exclusively on the aftermath of the partition. His is an idealistic vision of a world without borders. Both in his fiction and non-fiction, Ghosh's primary preoccupation as a writer has been to recover lost histories. His desire for a borderless universe and his inclination for recovering lost histories come together in *The Shadow Lines*.

Tridib, the focal point of *The Shadow Lines*, is an endearing person who took up many roles with equal élan. He is a loving son and brother, an affectionate nephew, a lover and the beloved uncle of the nameless protagonist. Therefore, his death affected all of them, and became an incident that was indelibly imprinted on their minds. But the person whose entire life got defined by this incident was his nephew (the protagonist of the novel) who was not even present

at the scene. Tridib, the uncle of the narrator-protagonist, is his idol, someone with whom he completely identified himself and as Rituparna Roy asserts, "... with whom he completely identified himself and with whose life he is preoccupied to the point of obsession. Indeed, the narrator's intensely imaginative inner life is for him, Tridib's lasting legacy." As he says in the novel, 'Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with..."' (Roy 116). As told by the unnamed protagonist, his entire life has been an imitation of his uncle's life. He continues to see the world through Tridib's eyes. As Rajeswari Sundar Rajan rightly claims, "he sees through Tridib's eyes, studies history like Tridib does, thinks Tridib's thoughts, and even finally loves Tridib's lover" (296).

Tridib's death is at first hidden from the narrator, and later on said to be due to an accident. The incident took place when Tridib, his brother Roby, Tha'mma and May -- Tridib's lover from Britain, arrive in Dhaka to take home Tha'mma's uncle Jethamoshai. Tridib's loss thus leaves a void in the narrator's life, made more intense due to the mystery surrounding it. The narrator's search for the truth behind Tridib's death, in fact is the core of the novel. The truth is revealed to him periodically over a period of almost two decades. Tridib dies on 4 January 1964. After fifteen years in 1979, when the narrator is in college in Delhi, a chance remark by a friend starts a debate about the riots of 1963 in Khulna, Dhaka and Calcutta. By scanning newspaper reports to find out how Tridib died, the narrator realizes that he was murdered in Dhaka. During the same period, the narrator had a disturbing experience of a communal nature in Calcutta. Communal disharmony had affected the two cities of Dhaka and Calcutta simultaneously. As Ghosh lets his protagonist put it, it was a time when "each city was the inverted image of the other" (Ghosh 1991, 233).

In 1981 (nearly 17 years after Tridib's death), when on a year's fellowship as a research student in London, the protagonist finally comes to know how Tridib died from two eye witnesses – Robi and May. For Robi, Tridib's brother, it is a trauma from which both are unable to get over. For May, the English girl Tridib had fallen in love with, it is the realisation of her own guilt that leads her on to intensive soul searching. As the narrative shows, it was May who was responsible for Tridib's death. It was merely her belated excuse to exorcize herself of the guilt that had weighed her down for 17 years. As the plot unfolds, it was May who had taunted the Datta-Chaudhuris with a charge of hypocrisy for leaving Jethamoshai at the mercy of the angry mob. When May stubbornly left the safety of the car to face the riots outside, that Tridib was forced to step out of the car.

Tridib died in a riot in Dhaka, which was caused by the theft of a sacred relic, the Mu-i-Mubarak, the hair of the Prophet Muhammed in Srinagar, India, that occurred the previous week. The day after the theft is reported, Srinagar sees vast demonstrations, in which "Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus alike took part" (225). In the whole Kashmiri valley not a single incident of violence was recorded and brought people together "as never before" (225). Finally, with no further information provided, the relic is found by the officials of the Central Bureau of Intelligence. Ghosh depicts how peaceful demonstrations in Kashmir, in which people of different religious backgrounds came together, caused ethnic violence in Dhaka, resulting in Tridib's death. Tridib died because of being a Hindu, a representative of the religious group of the supposed culprit, who committed the theft of the relic. Rituparna Roy rightfully asserts that Tridib's death in 1964 indicates a "farreaching consequence of the long-age event of 1947" (Roy 114). Hence, this incident is an aftermath of 1947 Partition, which in its premise is a division along religious lines. Indeed, the narrator brings out the contrast between Kashmir

where people are celebrating, and the violent demonstrations which take place in Kulna and Dhaka in East Pakistan and in Kolkata in India. Ghosh skilfully depicts the extensive, damaging consequences one incident can have on the subcontinent. *The Shadow Lines* skilfully weaves the traumatic effect of partition on the lives of the characters, long after the partition phase is over, emphasising Marianne Hirsch's concept of "Postmemory". It is the effect on the "generation after" who share the personal, collective and cultural trauma of their earlier generation. These experiences continue to have their effect into the present also. For instance, though the narrator-protagonist was not present at the scene of Tridib's death or the violence disruption in Dhaka, he has internalised the pain through the traumatic recollections of his family members. Thus, trauma here transcends temporal boundaries and manifests within familial and cultural memory. The narrator's emotional engagements with the events surrounding Partition and Tridib's death illustrates his 'postmemorial' engagement.

Ghosh's novel dramatizes the plight of characters that were distressed psychologically because of historical events, had haunted memories and were traumatized for years. The narrator-protagonist was traumatized for life, whose only purpose in life was to decipher the events of the past which labelled his life forever. For Cathy Caruth, in case of trauma, "the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). Traumatic events are intolerable at first. Hence, they remain latent and come to the fore only when similar events occur. Though May and Roby were present at the time of Tridib's death, they remained silent for years and lived in trauma for years. May asked the narrator during their last meeting in London, "Why haven't you ever asked me how Tridib died? I thought it would be the first thing you'd ask" (Ghosh, 2010, 274). Unable to live longer with the traumatic experience, Robi shared his trauma with Ila and the narrator, "It's a dream you know ... I often know when it's coming, and on nights like that I try not to sleep ... I've never been able to rid myself of that dream" (Ghosh, 2010, 268, 271). This concept is what LaCapra calls "walking through" trauma. LaCapra's another concept of "acting out" is also present in *The Shadow Lines*. This is found in the narrator's acting out through his obsessive retellings of Tridib's story.

Cultural trauma theory, as proposed by Jeffrey C Alexander, argues that cultural trauma occurs when a group perceives itself as having experienced a disturbing incident that leaves lasting damage to its collective identity (Alexander et al., 2004). Official historiographies emphasise on the geography, political and administrative aspects of the Partition, whereas literary narratives serve as counter-sites that give emphasis on the human, emotional, and psychological aftermath of Partition. Over the decades, South Asian literature has portrayed not only the immediate trauma of Partition, but its lingering effects on the subsequent generations. For instance, *The Parted Earth* by Anjali Enjeti is a novel that follows the lives of three generations of women, from India to Atlanta, highlighting the persisting effect of the partition across geographical and temporal boundaries.

The connection between generation and memory has been theorized since long. In his seminal essay, "The Problem of Generations", Karl Mannheim ([1927] 1952, 278-279) states that a "generation" is not only a biological entity but also a social construct. In addition, he observes that the romantic idea that generations evenly epitomize "'a spirit of age' (zeitgeist)" (284) is inadequate. *The Parted Earth* is a "a gripping, multi-generational story of families who must come to terms with their displacement" (Enjeti 2021).

Spanning a period of 70 years, the novel is about three generations, most of whom are

expatriates: grandparents are from the Partition era, parents are born a year after the Partition, and children have no direct connection with the Partition. The passage of time and the long years lived in exile do not always lessen the pain of partings and this is evident in the novel, which seem to be concerned with personal tragedy and collective trauma.

Forty years after independence, the efforts of Deepa's son, Vijay, as the Post-Partition generation, to find his father, Amir, fail miserably. Rather, his sincere efforts cause his untimely death under unknown circumstances in Delhi before he reaches Lahore. Hence, Vijay's daughter, Shanti (nicknamed Shan) Johnson, takes up her father's unfulfilled task of finding both her grandmother and then grandfather in order to unravel the mysteries of the past, located on a different continent. Vijay not only struggled with "postmemories" (Hirsch 22), but he also tried to ease his mother's traumatic existence by finding his father. These postmemories begin to trouble Vijay's daughter, Shanti too.

Having suffered from a miscarriage and then a divorce, Shanti felt subconsciously aligning with her grandmother Deepa's loss and trauma. In other words, Shanti becomes conscious that she must reconcile with a haunting legacy in order to achieve inner peace. Eventually, she manages to travel to India and find Amir's family in Lahore.

The Parted Earth, reminiscent of the postcolonial geography of India (Agra, Delhi) and Pakistan (Lahore), unfolds in the aftermath of entangled family histories, as South Asian diasporic communities deal with the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947. The members of these communities draw out not only the different dimensions of trauma, but also the intricate interplay between memory and forgetting as well as history and generational memory.

In the same vein, *The Shadow Lines* is not a conventional Partition novel because it does not portray the violence of 1947 in a straightforward manner. Rather it focuses on its aftereffects – the lingering influence of trauma which once inflicted, continues to live on in the memories and imaginations of the generations born long after the event. Alexander believes that trauma becomes cultural when a group identifies an injury that is durable and that affects collective identity. The role of media (newspapers in *The Shadow Lines*) is important in discovering the truth about the past by the narrator of the novel. The old newspapers from National Library in Delhi, help the narrator connect the mysterious death of Tridib with the simultaneous communal violence in Calcutta and Dhaka. By making the main characters experience the aftereffects of violence rather than its immediate spectacle, Ghosh line up with the postcolonial historiographic desire to recover micro-histories and suppressed voices. Along with this approach, the application of trauma theory and postmemory studies to the novel help explain how the narrator inherits and internalizes trauma through storytelling, even though he did not experience the original events.

Instead of directly depicting the trauma of Partition, Amitav Ghosh has instead abstained from direct depiction of violence and has focused on its psychological and emotional aftermath. Ghosh situates the trauma in the memory of its characters, where it vibrates through individuals, families, and communities. Ghosh communicates the memory of trauma through his narrator when he notes, "Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence … the silence of an imperfect memory" (Ghosh 1991, 218). Neither the narrator experience Partition first hand, nor does he witness the communal violence in Dhaka that killed Tridib. Yet, the trauma of those events deeply affected the formative years of his life. Tridib's death is the novel's emotional and narrative central point. Although Tridib's death is never reported directly, it intensely affects the narrator over the years. It reflects Caruth's theory

of belated trauma. The trauma of Tridib's death is inseparable from the larger context of Partition. The distinction between personal tragedy and national trauma gets blurred. It is represented in the thoughts of Jethamoshai when he says:

> I understand very well…. Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you are going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here. (215)

Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother, views Partition from another lens. Her ideological disillusionment is itself a form of trauma when she is unable to see the demarcation line from the plane. Her silence about Tridib's death is a vital example of unresolved trauma which is transmitted to the narrator and other family members. *The Shadow Lines* depicts Partition not as a settled event, but as an ongoing psychological estrangement. Through the death of Tridib, the ideological breakdown of Tha'mma, and the narrator's compulsive revisit of the past, Ghosh reveals how the trauma of Partition becomes entrenched in individual and collective memory. The novel focuses on the idea that trauma is not limited to those who directly experience it but ripples outward, touching those who are the successors across time and space.

The narrator's attempt to reveal the mystery behind Tridib's death, becomes a way of honouring the lives of those affected by historical violence. Through the process of storytelling, the narrator struggles against the erasure of memory and contributes to the process of cultural and intergenerational recovery. Through the theoretical lens of trauma theory, postmemory and cultural trauma, Ghosh has presented a story where trauma is transmitted not only through direct experience but through memory, national discourse, and cultural silence. The trauma is not resolved. Rather the narrator has worked through the process, thus making memory a bridge between past and present, between pain and understanding. Thus, *The Shadow Lines* expands the scope of trauma literature by showing how violence and loss reverberates across generations, challenging the distinction between personal memory and national history.

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