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NARRATING VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

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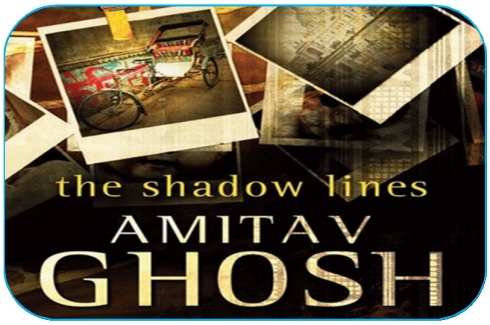
ABSTRACT:



The present research concentrates on the issue of violence in Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines, which is a landmark in the history of the Indian English novel. After Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children, The Shadow Lines has been unanimously acknowledged as a masterpiece that attracted readers' attention. Ghosh reveals that violence creates havoc in human lives. It cannot be justified at any cost, which is the core message that the novelist wants to deliver through the novel. The present endeavour is to highlight the events and incidents where violence has been condemned directly or indirectly. The study examines various forms of violence represented in the novel, including war, terrorism, communal riots, and militant nationalism. It explores how these forms of violence affect ordinary individuals and leave deep psychological scars that continue long after the actual events have ended. Through characters such as Tha'mma, Robi, May, and the unnamed narrator, Ghosh portrays the trauma, fear, guilt, and loss experienced by those who become victims or witnesses of violence. The novel also questions the ideas of nationalism, borders, and exclusive identities that often become the causes of conflict and bloodshed. The research further analyses the communal riots depicted in the novel and their connection with the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. It highlights how memory functions as a powerful tool in reconstructing suppressed histories and personal tragedies. The narrator's search for the truth behind Tridib's death reveals the lasting impact of violence on both individual and collective consciousness. At the same time, the novel upholds values such as humanism, tolerance, secularism, and internationalism. By exposing the destructive consequences of hatred and division, Ghosh advocates harmony and mutual understanding. Thus, The Shadow Lines emerges as a powerful critique of violence and an affirmation of the shared humanity that transcends political, religious, and national boundaries.

Key Words: *Violence, Landmark, Havoc, Message, Human Lives.*

INTRODUCTION:

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (Ghosh) has received wide acclaim both in India and abroad. In this novel, Ghosh examines three forms of violence that shaped the course of the twentieth century. These include the violence of war, the violence carried out by extremist groups in pursuit of their objectives, and the anonymous violence that erupted during communal riots. Violence in these disturbing forms became so widespread that it seemed to be the only common language shared by humanity. Many major events of the twentieth century unfolded within this larger framework of violence. These include the World Wars, the Nazi genocide, Hiroshima, liberation struggles, Vietnam, Palestine, civil wars, Latin American dictatorships, the Partition of India, the rise of fundamentalism,

and the invasion of Iraq. In an ironic turn of history, the beginning of the new century was marked by the attacks on the World Trade Centre twin towers in New York by Al-Qaeda terrorists. In the aftermath of these attacks, many newspapers frequently quoted lines from W.H. Auden's poems. These poems explore his recurring concerns about despair, loss of hope, and the erosion of faith in the face of humanity's self-destructive tendencies. One is also reminded of Wole Soyinka's play *A Dance of the Forests*. The play presents violence as something deeply rooted in human nature. It is shown as such a powerful instinct that it prevents the characters from recognising its destructive consequences. Creative writers have addressed the problem of violence in many powerful and varied ways. Critics have also discussed this issue extensively. Commenting on the scars left behind by violence, Jasbir Jain observes:

> Violence demands a heavy price: loss of trust and faith and freedom; a permanent inhabitation of fear, a continuity and inflaming of the feeling of hatred and revenge bringing about a temporariness in relationships as the areas of refuge go on shrinking. (25)

The last century witnessed the growth of comfort and the emergence of creative expressions that reached remarkable heights of excellence. At the same time, it also saw the rise of new forms of rivalry and violence. The growth of fundamentalism created serious challenges for the ideals of reason, democracy, freedom, and secularism. During the latter half of the twentieth century, sectarian nationalism and fundamentalism replaced traditional bigotry and political beliefs as the main basis of opposing ideologies. This shift gave rise to new forms of conflict and violence.

The unusual coexistence of creative and destructive tendencies in human beings, along with the contradictions within human nature, has attracted the attention of many writers. The following examples illustrate this concern. One comes from a creative writer and the other from a critic. K. Siva Reddy, a Sahitya Akademi Award-winning Telugu poet, captures the complex workings of the human mind in his poem "At the Same Time":

> How is it possible to respond sensitively
> And become immune to the same at the same time?
> Here it is possible-
> Enormous contradictions appear any moment…
> Climbing up and sliding down take place simultaneously
> I love someone, repulsion manifests at the very instant
> I nourish my body-tree providing water daily
> And cut it bit by bit until I uproot it completely. (4)

Jasbir Jain is the critic who resides on the question:

> The human ability to hold opposites together is amazing just as the ability to hang on to hope in the face of disaster, to erase cultural pasts in order to preserve what one begins to believe is true and important for identity formation. Is this resilience, transformation or submission to the powers of others? Is it survival or myopia? (23)

Religious and communal violence has appeared repeatedly throughout Indian history. Riots have often broken out and have destroyed innocent lives. They have also caused widespread damage and immense suffering. In one of his interviews, Amitav Ghosh points out that the communal riot is a phenomenon that is largely unique to South Asia. He states, "There are no other places that I am aware of where this type of societal violence is so pervasive" (Silva and Tickell 218). This paper examines how Ghosh carefully portrays fear in the aftermath of war, terrorism, mob violence, chaos, and massacre. It explores how individuals confront faceless violence, especially communal violence, which has become a distinctive feature of the Indian subcontinent.

India's vastness and its many contradictions indeed make questions of identity and nationalism difficult to understand. Ashis Nandy points out that anyone who tries to interpret India often ends up projecting personal assumptions and desires onto it. As a result, what emerges is often a reflection of "the interpreter rather than the interpreted" (79-80). Yet, beyond the visible differences of community, language, religion, and region, it is the collective consciousness of the people that gives shape to the idea of a nation. K.C. Baral supports this view when he states that "the affiliative relationship between a nation and its citizens is mediated at different levels under different conditions in which the nation does not simply as an impersonal representation, but variously moulds and shapes our personality" (73).

For someone raised in the Bengali cultural environment, it is natural to find the influence of Tagore on Amitav Ghosh. In one of his interviews, Ghosh acknowledges that Tagore was a significant literary and intellectual influence on him. He also mentions Satyajit Ray as someone who shaped his "way of looking at things" (Silva and Tickell 216). It is important to note that although Tagore was a modern thinker, he opposed nationalism because he viewed it as a concept borrowed from the West. He described it as "a great menace" and also as "bhougolik apadevata" or a geographical demon (Nandy 7). In his book *Nationalism*, Tagore argues that India "has never had a true feeling of nationalism" and that it would be meaningless to compete with Western culture on its own terms. Instead, he turns to India's older traditions that sustained society for centuries. In these traditions, coexistence is not based on "a conspiracy of fear" created by borders, barricades, or imagined lines. Rather, it is based on the "adjustment of races," which means accepting real differences while searching for a foundation of unity. Such a pluralistic tradition has existed in India at the social level, even if it has not always been reflected in politics. This tradition was preserved by saints such as Nanak and Bhakti poets like Kabir, Chaitanya, and Tukaram. K.C. Baral describes this stage as the "pre-integrated phase of Indian nationalism" (73).

Gandhi's entry into Indian politics played a crucial role in strengthening nationalist sentiments. The non-violent nationalism that he advocated was in harmony with India's long tradition of non-imperialist and non-interventionist values. More importantly, Gandhi viewed his nationalism as an "intense internationalism" that rejected all forms of exclusiveness. According to Ashis Nandy, Gandhi's strong criticism of nationalism and modernity and his defence of Indian traditions carried "intimations of a postmodern consciousness" (2). This critique of nationalism and this spirit of internationalism can be seen throughout Ghosh's fiction from *The Circle of Reason* to *River of Smoke*. *The Shadow Lines* offers one of the best examples of these concerns. In Ghosh's fiction, crossing boundaries appears natural to many characters and is often expressed through the imagery of flight. In *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh's third book, the narrator expresses childlike wonder at the similarities between the ancient civilisations of India and Egypt. In *The Shadow Lines*, Tha'mma, Robi, and Ila illustrate the psychological damage that nationalism can cause, especially when it assumes militant and sectarian forms. The novel also questions the authority of master narratives. During his childhood, the unnamed narrator is guided by his uncle and mentor Tridib. He learns the importance of imagination and the need to create stories for oneself. Otherwise, one remains dependent on the inventions of others. The novel is therefore not only concerned with questioning identities but also with reconstructing them. It highlights the process of creating new narratives as the narrator searches for the authentic story behind Tridib's death while confronting the many versions offered by others.

Along with nationalism, the novel engages with the issues of secularism and communal politics. Neither secularism nor religious faith supports violence. Every religion promotes values such as tolerance and compassion. Western secularism has certain limitations because it separates religion from public life. Religion may be practised in the private sphere, but the public sphere is expected to remain strictly rational. The non-Western understanding of secularism is different. It respects all religions and allows continuous dialogue among different faiths as well as between the religious and the secular. In ancient India, Ashoka represented secular values because he showed respect for other religions while remaining a practising Buddhist in public life. During the medieval period, Akbar became a symbol of religious harmony even though his secular outlook was rooted in Islam. In the twentieth century, Gandhi declared that his religion was his politics and his politics was his religion. The roots of his tolerance lay in traditional Hinduism. Every day, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity have

long encouraged peaceful coexistence among communities. India's traditional way of life offers a valuable example of such harmony. Amartya Sen expresses a similar view. He argues that India's long history of heterodoxy and acceptance of religious diversity contributed not only to the growth and survival of democracy but also to the development of a unique form of secularism. He says:

> Secularism in contemporary India, which received legislative formulation in the post-independence constitution of the Indian Republic, contains strong influences of Indian intellectual history, including the championing of intellectual pluralism. Indeed, there are two principal approaches to secularism, focusing respectively on *neutrality* between different religions, and *prohibition* of religious associations in state activities. Indian secularism has tended to emphasize neutrality in particular, rather than prohibition in general. (19-20)

In his insightful study of the role of religion in South Asia during the last century, Ashis Nandy argues that religion appeared in two distinct forms: as faith and as ideology. According to him, religion-as-ideology functions as a marker of identity at both the national and international levels. It often serves to advance "non-religious, usually political or socio-economic interests" (62). When religion is misused for political purposes or violent objectives, it can lead to terrible bloodshed and destruction. Reflecting on the dangers of a singular identity, Amartya Sen argues that it can become a source of different forms of violence. He observes:

> Indeed, many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity. The art of constructing hatred takes the form of invoking the magical power of some allegedly predominant identity that drowns other affiliations, and in a conveniently bellicose form can also overpower any human sympathy or natural kindness that we may normally have. The result can be homespun elemental violence, or globally artful violence and terrorism. (xv)

The Indian subcontinent, after Partition, became a space where borders and nationalism existed side by side. *The Shadow Lines* attempts to develop a language through which the trauma of Partition can be understood and mourned. As Suvir Kaul points out, "Partition lies at the origin of India and Pakistan" (269). Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother and one of the central characters in the novel, questions the significance of Partition when she fails to find any visible signs of division between the two countries. She is unable to understand how a border can exist without physical markers. Expressing her confusion, she asks, "But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same; what was it all for then-partition and all the killings and everything- if there isn't something in between?" (Ghosh 151).

Through the character of Tha'mma, Ghosh portrays important features of militant nationalism. Tha'mma deeply admired revolutionaries and often wished that she could have been one of them. She was fascinated by stories of nationalist heroes such as Khudiram Bose and Bagha Jatin, who fought against British rule and were pursued along the banks of the Buribalam River. In her younger days, she carried out small tasks for the revolutionaries because she wanted to contribute to their cause and gain recognition. When her grandson asks whether she could have killed an English officer, she replies that although she would have been frightened, she would have prayed to God for the courage and strength to kill the English magistrate. She justifies this by saying, "It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free" (39).

Robi, the narrator's uncle, serves as an important figure for understanding the relationship between freedom and violence. Through his experiences, Ghosh questions the value of a freedom that remains closely connected to violence. On his way to Harvard, Robi stops in London and spends some time with the narrator and Ila. During these conversations, he reflects on the idea of freedom and

argues that it is often achieved through violence and can rarely be separated from it. Drawing upon his childhood memories, Robi expresses doubts about such a notion of freedom. He states:

> You know, if you look at the pictures on the front pages of the newspaper at home now, all those pictures of dead people-in Assam, the north-east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura-people shot by terrorists and separatists and the army and the police, you'll find somewhere behind it all, that single word, every one's doing it to be free. (246)

Robi argues that if he had been serving in those troubled regions, he would have instructed the police to shoot anyone who stood in their way, including ordinary people, because such actions would be justified in the name of unity and freedom. Yet he also questions the very logic behind borders and national divisions. He remarks, "And then I think to myself 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?" (247). For Robi, freedom loses its meaning when it is achieved through violence and separation. He believes that if true freedom existed, he would have found it after the death of his brother Tridib. Instead, every mention of the place where Tridib died revives painful memories and leaves him deeply disturbed. As Suvir Kaul observes, "Memory is above all, a restless, energetic, troubling power; the price, and the limitation, of freedom; the author, and the interrogator, of the form and existence of the modern nation-state" (283).

While reconstructing the past, the narrator constantly struggles with silence. He admits, "Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence. I know nothing of this silence except that it lies outside the reach of my intelligence, beyond words that is why this silence must win, must inevitably defeat me, because it is not a presence at all; it is simply a gap, a hole, an emptiness in which there are no words" (218). As he searches his memory for answers, he finds this silence impossible to overcome. Referring to this experience, Suvir Kaul observes that "The silence that preceded and followed the revelation was a moving statement on the actualisation of internal violence. The search and the revelation together cause a harrowing experience for the narrator" (269). The narrator gradually realises the enduring power of this silence that has controlled his memory for many years. It takes him fifteen years to understand the connection between his terrifying bus journey home from school and the tragedy that befell Tridib and the others. As Suvir Kaul further notes, "The Shadow Lines is an archaeology of silences, a slow brushing away of the cobwebs of modern Indian memory, a repeated return to those absences and fissures that mark the sites of personal and national trauma" (269).

Riots are temporary events and often receive little attention once they come to an end. However, they continue to live in the memories of those who suffer their consequences. The narrator cannot recall the exact date of the riot, but remembers that a test cricket series was being played at that time and that the wicketkeeper Budhi Kunderan had scored his maiden century on debut. He begins searching through old newspapers to verify the event. To his surprise, he discovers that the riot had taken place in Khulna in East Pakistan. Later, after careful research in the library, he uncovers the causes of the violence and the connections between the disturbances in Dhaka and Calcutta that eventually led to his family's tragedy. While examining newspaper reports from that period, he comes across a headline printed in bold letters: "sacred relic reinstalled" (224). He then continues his search for information related to the incident. In December 1963, the sacred relic known as Mu-i-Mubarak disappeared from the Hazratbal Mosque. The relic was believed to be a strand of Prophet Mohammad's hair and had been preserved in Kashmir for nearly two hundred years. Its disappearance created widespread unrest, and "life came to a standstill in the valley of Kashmir" (225).

Pakistan's religious leaders declared that "the theft of the relic was an attack on the identity of Muslims" (226). The incident was described as a form of genocide and as an attempt to destroy the aspirations of Kashmiris by denying them their spiritual identity. On 4 January 1964, officials of the Central Bureau of Intelligence reportedly recovered the Mu-i-Mubarak relic. As the narrator reads the same news report for the sixth time, he suddenly remembers that his grandmother, May, and Tridib had

left for Dhaka a day before the relic was restored. At that moment, he begins to see a clear connection between the different events. His search for the past gradually brings together the scattered pieces of memory and history. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, "the narrator's desperate search in the archives to recover lost events has to be seen as an example of insisting upon one's story, a resistance to being swallowed up by narratives made up by others" (264).

The narrator recalls his school days during the riots in Calcutta. One day, while waiting for his usually crowded school bus, he is surprised to find only a few boys sitting together on a bench at the back. They all keep looking at his water bottle. Soon, a rumour spreads that 'they' have poisoned the water in Tala Tank, which supplies water to the whole city of Calcutta. No one explains who 'they' are, and no one questions the term, yet everyone seems to understand its meaning. As the narrator travels home, he notices that the streets are deserted "except for squads of patrolling policemen" (202). During such moments of unrest, even ordinary objects become frightening. In this case, it is a rickshaw standing abandoned in the middle of the road. Reflecting on this scene, the narrator says: "At that moment we could read the disarrangement of our universe in the perfectly ordinary angle of an abandoned rickshaw" (203). Soon, a mob approaches the bus and begins throwing stones at it. The narrator remembers that Tablu, one of the boys, cried on behalf of everyone because they were all terrified. As he states, "for all of us say we were afraid: We were stupefied with fear" (204). Through this episode, Ghosh shows that violence and fear are deeply connected experiences.

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

It is only much later that the narrator understands the irrational connection between that incident and the riot in Dhaka that led to Tridib's death. Communal riots operate according to their own "grotesque logic" (229). They are sustained by rumours and often reveal a complete absence of human compassion. The violence unleashed during such moments, the systematic manner in which it is carried out, and the primitive instincts that emerge in an atmosphere of hatred and frenzy reduce human life to something fragile and accidental. Before a riot begins, there is usually no sign or 'augury' of the destruction that is about to follow. Life appears to be "replete with the fullness of normalcy" (227). Then, almost suddenly, chaos erupts and follows a familiar pattern of violence. Tridib becomes a victim of that "seamless silence" (227) because he is unable to sense the hidden "stirrings of silence" that precede the outbreak of violence. The narrator's grandmother, Robi, and May witness the horrifying scene in which Tridib is brutally killed by a fanatical mob.

There is a striking symmetry in the way the two communities engage in violence. It may be the only point of similarity between groups that otherwise define themselves through mutually exclusive identities. Ghosh observes, "Ironically it is through self-destructive violence that the people of the subcontinent assert a common inheritance and affiliation; in the near symmetry of their killing of each other they deny that they might be different in the first place" (62). In Dhaka, Robi accompanies Mayadebi, Tha'mma, Tridib, and May on their visit to the narrator's granduncle. With Khalil's help, Tha'mma and Mayadebi persuade the mentally unstable old man to follow their car in a rickshaw. Although the suffering caused by riots is difficult to express in words, the terror, destruction, and loss leave deep emotional scars on those who witness them. In the novel, this trauma is reflected through the experiences of Tha'mma, May, and Robi. During the Indo-Pak war of 1971, Tha'mma attempts a form of psychological revenge by rushing to donate blood for the soldiers with a sense of desperate urgency. Her actions suggest a mind overwhelmed by grief and anger. May carries a lifelong burden of guilt because she believes that her attempt to save the old man from the mob led indirectly to Tridib's death. By urging him to help, she unintentionally caused him to leave the safety of the car and enter the violence outside. Robi also remains deeply affected by the incident. Throughout his adolescence and youth, he is haunted by recurring nightmares that keep the memory of that traumatic event alive.

The narrator's search finally reaches its conclusion when May provides the missing details of that tragic day. The wounds caused by Tridib's murder are not carried only by Tha'mma and Robi. May is also deeply traumatised by the memory of the incident. She has lived with this burden for many years and does not speak about it to anyone until the narrator visits her before leaving London. She finds comfort in sharing her memories with him because he, too, had been close to Tridib. May recounts the events beginning from the moment they left the old man's house. She steps out of the car, and Tridib follows her. He pushes her to the ground and rushes towards the mob. By the time he reaches the rickshaw, the old man has already been pulled out. When Tridib tries to reach him, the mob drags him into the crowd, and he becomes trapped within the violence. May narrates:

> He vanished. I could only see their backs. It took less than a moment. Then the men began to scatter. I picked myself up and began to run towards them. The men had melted away, into the gullies. When I got there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They'd cut Khalif"s stomach open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they'd cut Tridib's throat from ear to ear. (250-51)

May carries the burden of Tridib's death for many years and continues to hold herself responsible for what happened. However, she eventually arrives at a different understanding of the event. She says, "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, I know I mustn't try for any real sacrifice is a mystery" (251-52). Through this realisation, May begins to free herself from the guilt that has haunted her for so long. The narrator feels deeply grateful to her because her account allows him to perceive what he calls "a final redemptive mystery" (252).

The novel is not merely the story of an individual or a single family. It is an account of the trauma experienced by people who become victims of unnecessary violence even as they attempt to free themselves from the divisions that separate them. Governments have little concern for the "memories of riots" (230). Their response usually follows a familiar pattern. At first, there are "rhetorical exchanges" in which both sides accuse each other of remaining inactive during periods of "frenzy of looting, killing and burning." Once the violence ends, officials exchange congratulatory messages over their respective successes in controlling the disturbances (230). When only a limited number of people are killed, such incidents often receive little attention from the state. The tragic event in which Tridib and others lost their lives holds no significant place in official records. As a result, it disappears from public memory and sinks "into the crater of a volcano of silence" (233). Individuals, however, continue to live with the pain of such experiences. Those who witness the violence repeatedly reconstruct and relive it in their minds. In the absence of a complete historical record, one must search for the causes and details of the event, however insignificant they may appear. This is precisely what the narrator does. He pieces together forgotten incidents of violence from the depths of history and connects them with fragments preserved in memory to understand what truly happened.

The aesthetics of negation emphasises the negative and the fragmented aspects of experience while indirectly affirming and valuing the positive and the harmonious. In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh breaks the silence surrounding violence and gives expression to its devastating impact on human lives. He portrays different forms of violence and collective frenzy powerfully and movingly. Yet the novel does not become dark or cynical. The strength of Ghosh's artistic vision lies in his ability to maintain a balance between destruction and creation, loss and hope, harm and healing. Throughout the narrative, silence acquires its own eloquence. Feelings of human connectedness challenge artificial divisions. The idea of internationalism transcends the shadow lines of borders, while harmony is presented as an alternative to communal conflict. In this context, Jasbir Jain raises an important question: "As a counter argument, one can state that if violence and conflict can travel across groups, communities and countries, why is it not possible for humanistic impulses to travel across barriers of race, caste, religion and politics" (25).

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