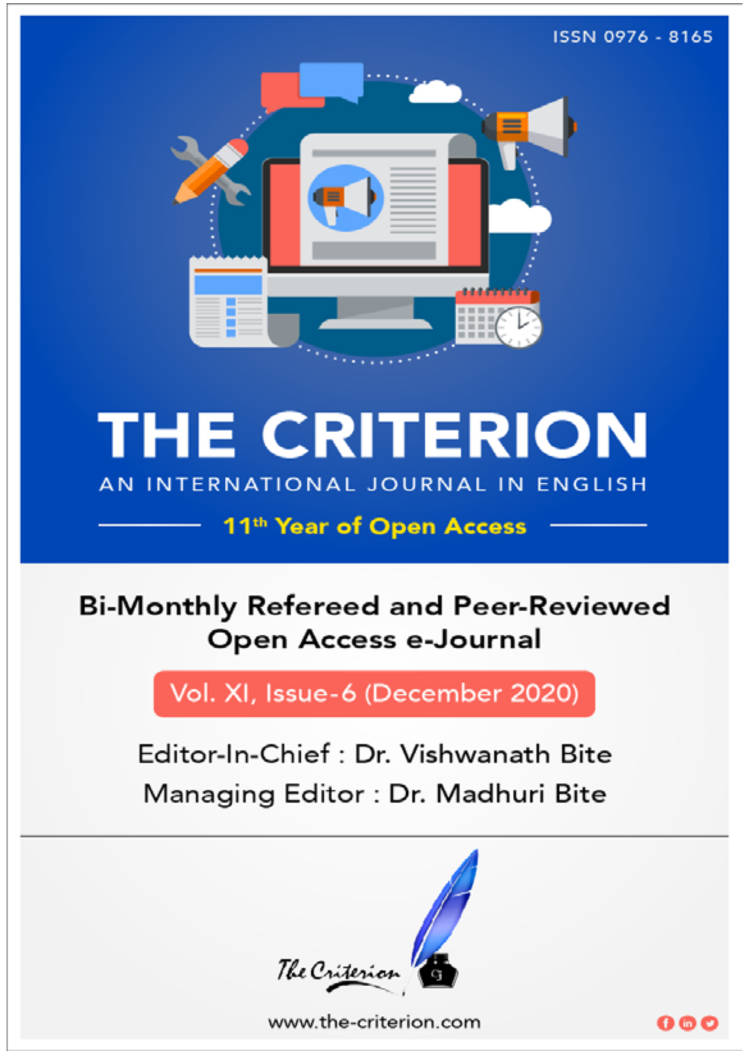

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Riots, Violence and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract:

In recent past the term 'trauma' got wide access into the academic field. After the American holocaust of 9/11 so many books have been written on the traumatic experience that shook vehemently the entire nation that a new field of studies known as literature of the 9/11 has emerged. My paper, however, does not deal with issues of the holocaust, rather it takes up issues like separation, the anxieties of separation, consequent troubles that the separation produced in the Indian subcontinent leading to religious riots and violence on both sides of the newly demarcated border, ghastly murders and the mental traumas of those who were either witnesses to such killings, or who had to lose their near and dear ones in such conflicts as they are sketched in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines*.

Keywords: trauma, holocaust, riots, psychological disorder, separation, border, nightmare, trouble, PTSD, memory, power.

In the Oxford Dictionary the term 'trauma' is defined as an 'emotional shock producing a lasting harmful effect.' It also denotes 'any distressing or unpleasant experience.' As defined by Scott Barbour, "Post-traumatic stress disorder, also commonly known as PTSD, is an anxiety disorder that some people get after witnessing or experiencing a violent, disturbing or extremely frightening event. The event is typically one that involves a real or threatened injury or death and causes feelings of extreme fear, helplessness, or horror" (9). It was so far a term which was especially associated with psychiatry and clinical studies.

Gradually, scholars especially from the domain of social sciences moved their focus from the psychiatric or biomedical approaches to the fields of historical, literary and cultural narratives of trauma. It no longer remained a matter of injured bodies and shocked mind alone, but became a subject of cultural analysis and power politics. For this paper I have taken up Amitav Ghosh's much acclaimed novel *The Shadow Lines* which is set under the backdrop of the partition of the Indian subcontinent.

The protagonist in the novel *The Shadow Lines* is the uncle of the narrator, Tridib who is brutally murdered along with two other men, one is Jethamoshai and the other is the rickshaw puller Khalil by a violent mob at the turning of Jindabahar Lane in old Dhaka. The incident takes place in Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, some years after the partition of India. The narrator's grandmother, Tha'mma and her sister Mayadebi along with Tridib, Robi and May visit their ancestral house in Dhaka with the intention of bringing their year-long 'enemy' Jethamoshai back to India. With the intermediation of Saifuddin, a motorcycle mechanic who had taken shelter in their house along with a few other Muslim refugees from India, they try their level best to convince the old man that it is not safe for him anymore to stay at that place. However, the manipulation of clever Saifuddin to despatch the old man out of the house makes it inevitable that he should be sent with his relatives. As the old man won't listen to anybody else other than the rickshaw puller Khalil who now looks after him it is decided that he be taken in the rickshaw of Khalil pretending to take him to the court while he would be actually put inside the Mercedes by which the visiting group came. It was so arranged for the driver of the car came a bit earlier and informed them that there might be trouble at any moment. As they approach the car they find the chauffeur waving frantically towards them. He and the security guard accompanying them throw the doors open and take them in hurriedly and the car starts to move. The driver is to be seen clearly in tension, biting his lips. As Robi finds the road empty contrary to his expectations to see a crowd waiting for them nearby, he cannot see any sign of 'trouble'. But as soon as they turn the first corner they spot dozens of men 'stretched all the way across the road'. They have lit a fire in the middle of the road, with a few broken chairs and bits of wood pieces and are squatting around the fire. Some are found leaning against the lamp posts and the shop-fronts. It is obvious that they are waiting for their car; trouble has come to them at last. As the car comes to a halt the men start moving towards them and begin to close in on them. However, the fire made by the security guard from his revolver makes them draw back. Just as they are about to move on they hear a cracking sound nearby, it is the rickshaw of Khalil with the old man in his

lawyer's suit following their car. The men on the road now fix their attention on it, trying to scramble its wheels. As the driver starts the car again with the men shouting behind May gets down. She could sense that the men on the rickshaw are going to be killed at any point of time and accuses them for it. She screams at the top of her voice and it is Tridib who gets down and thrusts himself amongst the violent mob in a desperate bid to save the senile man and Khalil. At the utter horror of the others he is also taken in within the circle made by the violent men. When the crowd disperses a few minutes later they discover three dead bodies lying side by side. As it is narrated by May to the narrator, "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" (251).

This ghastly killing haunts the onlookers for a long time and this trauma takes its toll on them in some way or the other. May thinks herself responsible for the killing of Tridib. It was her shrill cry that made Tridib get down from the car and rush towards the violent mob in an effort to rescue that senile old man. She goes back to London immediately afterwards, but suffers badly for a long time after the incident. For many years since then she lived the life almost of a recluse. In a conversation with the narrator long time after that May tells him:

> What do you think I've been asking myself these last seventeen years? I don't know whether any of it was real, whether I was in love with him, or merely fascinated by the sense of defeat that surrounded him. I don't know whether everything else that happened was my fault; whether I'd have behaved otherwise if I'd really loved him. What do you think I've been doing ever since, but trying to cope with that guilt? I don't know, I simply don't know – how could I know when the time was so short and there were so many questions (175)?

In fact, the questions put forward by May are not solely her questions. It is evident that she suffers a lot; she has been bearing the burden of the 'guilt' supposedly committed by her. In her case this terrible sense of guilt has not been thrust upon her by the others present there, but it is something that has been imposed upon her by herself. She is in a dilemma, with the choices that faced her at that critical moment. It is this that is telling upon her nerves, her sense of judgment – the sense of right and wrong. It is her inner self that holds her responsible for the killing, the killing of Tridib and does not keep her at rest. Hers is a struggle, a struggle to come out of the trauma, the invisible maze that surrounds her all the

time. It is through her interaction with the narrator that she finally comes out of this troubling situation. She relieves herself by confessing it to the narrator:

> I thought I'd killed him. I used to think: perhaps he wouldn't have got out of that car if I hadn't made him, if I'd understood what I was doing . . . 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 (251).

It is good that May is able to get out of her trauma at the end of the novel. She is fortunate enough to find a reliever in the narrator after a prolonged suffering.

Traumatic experiences may affect an individual alone or may induce a collective traumatic effect. The trauma of partition accompanied by the attendant violence has engendered different types of suffering for different individuals. Take for instance the traumatic behaviour of Robi. Nobody ever had any idea that a person of the stature of Robi, so strong and robust, might suffer like it is depicted in the last part of the novel *The Shadow Lines*. At the mention of the old Dhaka and the place near Jindabahar Lane, he rushes out of the Bangladeshi restaurant of Rehman Sahib in London. Ila and the narrator find it hard to catch up with him and when they ultimately catch him up by running, Robi finds a place for them on the footsteps of a derelict church where he narrates about the nightmare:

> It's a dream, you know . . . I only get it about twice a year now, but it used to be once a week, when I was younger – in college, for instance. But I learnt to control it – I often know when it's coming, and on nights like that I try not to sleep. It always begins with our car going around a corner. There's a muddy kind of field on one side, a very small one, but it's got a crooked goalpost stuck in the mud. We turn the corner and there they are, ahead of us, strung out across the road . . . (243).
>
> The door opens again, and I know in my heart that Tridib is going to get out too. I stretch out a hand to pull him back into the car, but my hand won't reach him; I try to shout, but I have no voice left, I cannot make a single sound (246).

As we see, Robi has to pass through a very different but agonising experience as an aftermath of the gruesome killing by the riotous frenzied mob. The shock prevails upon his nerves. He struggles to shut out the workings of his memory trying hard to forget such things. But no traumatic experience leaves one whenever one wishes it to be over. It comes back again and again blocking attempts of the victims to erase the unpleasant, painful, horrible,

catastrophic memory. In case of Robi the nightmarish vision was too frequent in the beginning; his desperate continuous effort keeps it somehow under control. The phobia, pain, agony, anxiety, sheer helplessness and lack of the ability to produce any sound accompany Robi's nightmare as it is with all traumatic experiences.

According to Scott Barbour there are mainly three types of symptoms of PTSD: "re-experiencing symptoms, including flashbacks and nightmares about the traumatic event; avoidance/numbing symptoms, including an avoidance of thinking or talking about the traumatic event; and hyperarousal symptoms, including insomnia, angry outbursts, and difficulty concentrating (6)." In case of Robi it is the first type of stress disorder that he experiences in the form of horrific nightmares which he somehow manages to put under control by devising some ways, particularly by not sleeping in the night when he gets some premonitions that it is coming. He also experiences the third kind of PTSD symptom, i.e. the hyperarousal symptom as mentioned by Barbour. It will be pretty clear if we go through the following excerpt:

> Robi's smile was like a grimace now. Yes, he said. I do remember. You had to go past Shador-bajar, and then turn off the road and go down a long road crowded with shops, and then you had to turn off at a corner where there was a kind of field where the boys used to play football, and then there's a hardware shop, and that's the corner of the lane where my mother was born – Jindabahar Lane, Dhaka.
>
> Allah! said Rehman-shaheb. You remember it very well I can see. But you must have been very young then. How is it that you remember?
>
> I pushed my chair back and stood up. We ought to go now. I said.
>
> But Robi didn't hear me. He was leaning towards Rehman-shaheb, gripping the table, his knuckles white.
>
> I remember it because my brother was killed there, he said. In a riot – not far from where my mother was born. Now do you see why I remember?
>
> Rehman-shaheb leapt to his feet, his face red with embarrassment.
>
> Robi stood up, pushed his way past us and went out (242-43).

Most of the trauma victims develop some level of anxiety that they carry forward for months or even for years. In most of the cases it eases with the passage of time. But in some instances this anxiety lingers even further and often interferes with their ability to function in a normal way. In case of Robi the trauma is deep seated in his subconscious mind and with the arousal of the memory of old Dhaka, especially Jindabahar Lane, the place where he witnessed the ghastly riot and the murder of three people from a very close distance and in open daylight, the agony comes back in a fusillade and vehemently disturbs his normal self. He could not hear the narrator; he gripped the table, his knuckles got white as he leant towards Rehman-shaheb. The painful roughness of his words that came in a gust – "Now do you see why I remember?" and his rushing out of the restaurant, all are indicative of his hyperarousal PTSD syndrome. It is, as if, he relives the horror of the trauma all over again. What Slone and Friedman have said about the symptomatic behaviour of the post war trauma victims may also be applicable in this case:

> . . . memories intrude on your thoughts while you're trying to think about something else. At night, you may wake up in a sweat, your heart pounding, your mind full of rage, fear, or panic because of intense nightmares about things that happened in the war zone. You are constantly on the lookout for reminders that might trigger such memories. . . . When you encounter such reminders, you may become very emotional or your body might react with a pounding heart, profuse sweating, or headache (154).

It has been informed earlier that Robi, too, suffered a lot because of the intruding memories of violence. It happened mostly during his college days. On several occasions he had to pass sleepless nights lest he should get those horrifying dreams and numbing helplessness. While Slone and Friedman refer to the troops defending their side in a 'war zone' and the horror of war they encounter every now and then, it is only a small-scale riot in one corner of old Dhaka that leads to an abrupt violence killing three innocent people which, in its turn, leaves a long trail of trauma in the mind of Robi and other witnesses as well. As put forward by Rajnish Mishra, "*The Shadow Lines* shows violence through its presence in the background and its pervading the atmosphere, also through its turning into silence, through its conversion into a recurring nightmare, and finally, through the narration of the one graphical act of violence that left a permanent scar on the lives of its witnesses . . ." (243). By depicting the scenario of partition which is solely based on religious difference that breeds hatred and distrust among people belonging to the same demographic region that

shares common cultural tradition and colonial past, Ghosh actually questions the validity of such division and critiques the two-nation theory.

In the novel *The Shadow Lines* “the shaping force of memory”, opines Suvir Kaul, “is enormously productive and enabling, but also traumatic and disabling; it liberates, and stunts, both the individual imagination and social possibilities; it confirms identities and enforces divides” (269). Memory takes a traumatic turn when the narrator reminisces that there was once ‘trouble in Calcutta’. When he was merely a schoolboy, on his way to school in a school bus, accompanied by only a few schoolmates unlike other days, he discovered to his uneasiness that he turned to be a matter of attraction the moment he stepped onto the bus. It took only a few moments to realise that it was rather his water bottle that was the point of curiosity for one younger boy brought a bottle of soda instead as his mother “heard that they had poured poison into Tala tank, that the whole of Calcutta’s water supply was poisoned” (199). Soon after, all of them unscrewed the caps of their water bottles and poured the water out. Everything seemed to be normal at school. But halfway through their first lesson of mathematics the boys heard an unusual sound outside unlike the orderly roar of a demonstration with an underlying element of fear in it. As the narrator describes:

> There is a uniquely frightening note in the sound of those voices – not elemental, not powerful, like the roar of an angry crowd – rather, a torn, ragged quality; a crescendo of discords which you know, because of the slippery formlessness of the fear it creates within you, to be the authentic sound of chaos the moment you hear it (201).

The voice was gone in some minutes, but the boys could hear the bells of a fire engine rushing past and a minute later they could see in the distance columns of grey smoke spiralling into the sky. The school was suddenly suspended for the rest of the day and the boys were sent home. They could see contingent of police personnel surrounding the school as they approached the main gate. On their way home they could sense the familiar streets turning suddenly unfamiliar in a couple of hours. The pavements usually crowded with vendors and passers-by were “eerily empty”. All of the shops were shut. In the narrower roads where the bus turned off they could see knots of men hanging around in the corners with quiet, watchful eyes, seemed to be waiting for something that invariably reminds us of the violent mob in one corner of Jindabahar Lane in old Dhaka waiting for the Indian visitors’ car to arrive. The boys could also see an abandoned rickshaw placed in the mouth of a narrow lane at such an untidy angle that it was ‘eloquent of an intent’ they could not make out. Then

near Park Circus their bus was chased by a group of men who pelted stones rattling against the bus windows. While the boys ducked their heads under the seats the driver somehow managed to manoeuvre the bus over the pavement and took it onto the road once again but swerved again into streets they could not recognize. All the way home they were unsure whether they would be able to make home. It was a feeling that made a void within, a deep-seated scar under the surface that suddenly made the familiar world not only unfamiliar but hostile. The city they lived in "had turned against" them leaving a permanent mark of trauma in the psyche of the narrator for the lifetime. As he reflects:

> That particular fear has a texture you can neither forget nor describe. It is like the fear of the victims of an earthquake, of people who have lost faith in the stillness of the earth. And yet it is not the same. It is without analogy, for it is not comparable to the fear of nature, which is the most universal of human fears, nor to the fear of the violence of the state, which is the commonest of the modern fears. It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood.

Tha'mma, too, has 'never been the same' since the killing of Tridib. The horrific incident got on her nerves; she started behaving idiosyncratically. On his way back from his maternal uncle's place his father informed him about the death of Tridib and made him promise that he would not ask any question about it to his Tha'mma because 'She's already very upset' and 'it would only get worse' if he made her talk about it (239). It becomes clearly evident that all of these characters suffer from some sort of PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder.

The narrator wondered how it could be possible that such a realistic, practical and cautious man like his father allowed his grandmother to go to meet her Jethamoshai in old Dhaka when there was 'trouble' in Bangladesh. While, after attending a lecture in the Teen Murti House Library in New Delhi on Indo-China War the narrator and some of his acquaintances attempted a trial of their memories of the time, he mentioned about a riot that erupted in Calcutta that none of them could remember. The narrator, accompanied by Malik who had been engaged in researching one thing or another there for some years browsed through the pages of the newspaper but did not find anything of significance other than a stray reference of a riot that killed twenty-nine people. But strangely, the riot happened in

Khulna, Bangladesh and not in Calcutta. Long after Malik was gone it occurred to the narrator that newspapers carry the reports a day late and flipping across the pages of the newspaper of the next day, 11 January 1964 he found a huge banner headline that spoke of a Curfew and firing in Calcutta in which 15 people were wounded and 10 were killed. In tracing the event he found out that the seed of the riot lay in the disappearance of Mu-i-Mubarak, believed to be a hair of the Prophet Mohammad, from the Hazratbal shrine near Srinagar, on 27 December 1963. On 29 December there were huge demonstrations in Srinagar in which people from all the communities like Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus took part. There were some incidents of rioting which targeted only the government properties and the police. Collective grief was clearly visible in the entire valley for the next few days and "there was not one single recorded incident of animosity between Kashmiri Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs" (225). But most surprisingly, there were demonstrations too on the other side of the border, both in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the erstwhile East Pakistan. Karachi observed 31st December as a "Black Day'. The newspapers there declared that the theft was a part of a deep-seated conspiracy against the Muslims. Prime Minister Nehru appointed the C.B.I. to find the missing relic and on 4th January, 1964 the Mi-i-Mubarak was recovered and reinstalled. There was a visible mood of festivity amongst all. There was only a rumble of warning within this festival of joy – in Khulna, East Pakistan a demonstration protesting against the theft of the sacred relic turned violent, a few shops were burnt down and a few people were killed.

This incident led the narrator to the library once again and he flipped through the pages of the Calcutta paper they subscribed at that time and opened it at the date, 4th January, 1964. But strangely enough there was neither the slightest reference to the trouble in Khulna, nor even the events in Kashmir. He opened the editions of the previous few days but they were all the same, no mention of any trouble. The narrator spared his father from blaming for the death of Tridib because of his 'ignoring the stirrings of the silence around him' (227). But the 'canny journalists' must have known something at least. He wondered why there was no hint of the coming carnage "for events of that scale cannot happen without portents. If they knew, why couldn't they speak of it?" (227). Those intelligent journalists and historians, all men of good intentions, produced innumerable words of accurate descriptions the moment the riots had started. But once they were over, they fell silent. Other events such as party congress and elections fill up the pages of newspapers and history books.

Ghosh makes a reference to the politics of power when he brings to focus the doings of the governments as soon as a riot breaks out. When the riots started in Khulna the government of East Pakistan promptly sent the army to put down the 'disturbances'. The governments on either side did whatever they could to put a stop to such events. Responsible opinions reacted sharply with a sense of horror and outrage. But the riots faded too quickly from the pages of the newspapers and histories as to leave no trace of such traumatic events anymore. It also "disappeared from the collective imagination of 'responsible opinion'" too soon. This is where the novelist takes a dig at the intentions and functionality of the governments for they follow a certain pattern. He warns that the madness of a riot, although an act of 'pathological inversion' is invariably a reminder "of that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of government . . ." (230).

Thus, if trauma is something which is related to individual suffering and terrible mental stress, it might again be a part of power game where the perpetrators as well as the governments try to erase the traumatic passed out of collective memory. Hence there are desperate efforts on the part of the power mongers to keep a control over the representation of history of a state or a nation, to willingly distort or suppress some of its versions. Attempts are often made on the part of those in power to hide the traumatic pasts in fear that it might spark off any revolt or upsurge to beset the dominant power. Such attempts bespeak the inherent fear lurking beneath which in itself signifies that trauma can also be a potential political tool in the field of power game.

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