

History or Story?: Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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This foul substance is called what?
This foul substance is called history.
And its opposite?
Is the chronicle.
Which may be illustrated?
Profusely.
Is colourful?
In the extreme... (Sealy 376)

Abstract: The writing of history has been vivisected by the surgeon's scalpel in the writing of Amitav Ghosh. It suggests the possibility of meaning concurrent to one historical event and in the wake of such discovery, it emerges that there could also be more historical documents / spaces / aporias to be recovered. This reversal of the quest in history from the interpreter and discoverer forwards many postcolonial dilemmas and existential anxieties which have been overlooked so far. That their interdependence is governed by forces which are predetermined and exploitative in nature becomes evident as the narrative unfolds. Amitav Ghosh does this by putting "retrospective intelligibility" into the narrative. The problematic of representation and reality is interrogated through recovering some fissures of the past and rendering their "incompatibility" with the present. The question arises about the limits of historiography and whether there is any such thing as complete objectivity or is it just a chimera. The paper seeks to examine all these aspects in the light of postcolonial theory. I have made an attempt to examine the difference that results when experience is articulated variously through the discourses of history, stories and anecdotes. History as a tool of reconstruction of experience used by the state

is seen to be in conflict with private reconstruction represented at two levels by stories and anecdotes.

Keywords: History, Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, riots, public and private spaces, Indian Writing in English-Historiography.

In this study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, I have tried to bring out the production and multiplicity of meaning which occurs in historical obliteration and exaggeration. History as a tool of reconstruction of experience used by the state is seen to be in conflict with private reconstruction represented by stories told by individuals. This question about the general nature of representation gets linked to some very debatable questions in contemporary India (the period in which the book is set, the latter half of the twentieth century) revolving around the issues of identity, nation, community and citizenship. The celebrated objectivity of Indian History gets displaced, if not demolished in an attempt to arrive at a comparison of these different discourses. The aforementioned constructions that are vital to the identity of Indian people have been problematised in the novel and the conflict emerges through a comparison of collective and personal narratives. The characters in the novel echo these voices and present the case alternately for history and personal stories. Some characters, therefore, become the carriers of these discourses and appear as the voices of history while others invent history in stories. This study sees the central character of Tridib, the Historian, as the voice of history and the unnamed narrator himself as the storyteller. The mind and body of Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother represents the site where conflict between these occurs and raises questions on the nature of nation, community and history, issues that are at the heart of this novel.

Simply put, history is the recording of actions of human beings done in the past, however if seen as a discipline that is specific to societies, one can see its significance as a disseminator of ideas. The definition sees the act of recording as essentially unproblematic which is what has driven Western Historiography since Enlightenment when the context and methodology of what constitutes the subject of history today first got formulated. It was only in the twentieth century that this act of recording got problematized. Collingwood in *The Idea of History* was one of the early historians to shift the emphasis vis-à-vis the act of recording from outside facts to the subjective realm of the historian's mind (Collingwood 150). He saw history as the record of past

thoughts reenacted within the historian's mind. According to him, the knowledge of an earlier era becomes possible with the historian projecting him (her) self into an earlier context. He also saw the past events with a greater sense of complexity than as being easily understood and verifiable phenomenon. In this regard he says that the historian investigating any past event makes a distinction between what can be called the inside and the outside of the event. By the outside is meant everything belonging to it that can be described in terms of bodies and their movements. In order to understand what constitutes the outside of the event he gives the example of the passage of Caesar accompanied by certain men across a river called Rubicon or spilling of his blood on the floor of the senate house at another. While by the inside of the event he means that in which it can be described in terms of thought: Caesar's defiance of the assassins. Collingwood sees the Historian, as investigating not mere events but actions and an action according to him is the unity of inside and outside together ... "for history the object to be discovered is not the mere event but thought expressed in it." With the coming in of the thought of the historian in the process of representation, the extent of the professed objectivity of history is altered. Different historians at the same time or different historians in different places read differently the significance and the thought process behind events. Certain debates in contemporary times, especially the school of postmodernism, have forwarded the idea that makes it virtually impossible to separate the event (as it happened in the past) and its representation that we get in documents and through history. Some like Hayden White have claimed through this line of reasoning the complete obliteration of the line between history and fiction (White 44). Ankersmit provides a useful metaphor in describing this state of history: like a dike covered with ice-flakes at the end of winter, the past has been covered by a thick crust of narrative interpretations; historical debate is as much about the components of this crust as about the past hidden beneath it (Callinicos 14). Callinicos says that postmodernists go as far to claim that there is crust all the way down. This paper does not take this extreme position; however it draws on another important idea that the school forwards: that of history employing the device of narration. This reading of *The Shadow Lines* tries to examine this feature of History especially in relation to the writing of Indian History and its treatment of certain events in Post-Independence India, like the Partition and Civil Strife. Also the function of ideology vis-à-vis historiography comes in which can in turn be linked to the aforementioned Collingwoodian idea of events embodying thoughts and their subsequent understanding and articulation by historians.

Postmodern historians like Hayden White have put forward the idea of history as having a literary base with a play of elements like teleology that Ricoeur describes as “retrospective intelligibility” (Sethi 180) which considers the course of history not as a diverse variety of discrete incidents but as a successive and logical sequence leading smoothly to an end that has already been arrived at. Some voices in contemporary Indian Writing in English have studied the writing and historical justification of Partition in this light. Historians have tried to read a communal angle into the event and tried to trace a genealogy of such events with a “retrospective intelligibility” that leads to a known and expected end. It is interesting to note, therefore, in this light that while they highlighted stray incidents of communal violence in the pre-partition time to give a historical justification to the inevitable phenomenon of Partition, in *The Shadow Lines*, on the other hand riots, civil strife and communal riots do not find expression in the official records. This happens because the same incidents which at one time supported the political decisions will at the present only go on to hamper its legitimacy. In both cases the community experience and its depiction suffers. The accounts of partition completely ignore the fact of the composite quality of relationships that existed between people of different religions and that there were other potent facts of their cohesion like a shared cultural ethos. *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh talks of such a definition of community in the village of Manomajra (Singh 5). Some of these books show the existence of an alternate religion with people of different faiths looking upon a common shrine (in this case a sandstone slab) as religious. Interestingly, this feature about close knit cohesive communities later gets transported to the imagined community of the state of otherwise riot-ravaged India. Through history the nation represents itself and also tells certain stories about itself. This novel asks questions about how history portrays experience and also how and why historical justifications are provide to the ideas upheld in the present while on the other hand certain experiences (for all that they do to individual lives) go utterly underrepresented as events in spite of their effect on people. Whose history does it claim to be? Does that event for its significance to the people concerned remain underrepresented in history because “it was improper to make any suggestion that nationalists may have written one thing and done something else, failed in their courage, wisdom or rationality or any of the many different ways in which human beings are known to fail?” (Kaviraj 39).

The Shadow Lines is as much about the act of telling as it is a story. There are scores of stories hidden in the novel and scores of storytellers. These storytellers not only tell different stories but

also the same stories differently. By doing this the author not only explores these various types available but also obliquely comments on the final variation that results in treating a narration in different ways. By raising questions on the nature of public and private, their co-existence and their conflict, their simultaneity and their separation, the author ultimately points at the modes of their articulation. Are the different forms we speak about suited to cater to the difference in these realms? Is there any way the deeply personal in its articulation spills over into the public realm and vice-versa? Coming to the aforementioned public and private spaces, can the dark basement of the Raibajar house and the sexual play of the narrator and Ila carried out there come out in the daylight for everybody to inspect? What are the dangers that accrue with such a possibility? Intercourse between May and Tridib does happen in a bustling public place, The Victoria Memorial in Calcutta but leads to consequences that are disastrous. Do public and private have to remain separate if sanity is to prevail? Are the various texts in conflict with each other, are there strategies working behind them or are they spontaneous and natural? Are there any ideal texts? Which ways of telling are upheld in the novel?

This brings us to the important part of questioning the role played by Tridib, who is the uncle of the unnamed storyteller. In ways more than one the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* is himself treated like a reader or a listener rather than a teller. Also he is exposed to the perils of being in the listener category quite early in the novel. In the adda scene where Tridib talks of “his English relatives,” the author realizes that despite his incessant objections to Tridib’s lies, the eager and gullible crowd willingly believes him. Tridib’s lies are more acceptable to the crowd than the young narrator’s objections to them. Here the strength of the speaker does not lie in the truth value of his utterances but in the strength of his credible image as to know—all histories and as the adda’s agony uncle. The narrator in spite of knowing and speaking the truth has obvious disadvantages of age, lack of aura and the ability to convince. Tridib in a significant aside confesses to the narrator that if you believe anything you’re told, you deserve to be told anything at all. The narrator is exposed to this truth about the power of the narrators as well as the business of who controls power in the public sphere. It is for these reasons that in this study Tridib represents the voice of history or alternatively public documentation as a form of narration. Is history then a tool of the powerful who choose to use it over the uninformed? In the

novel there are other instances of the state / historian / powerful individual / newspaper taking on the role of an unreliable agent disseminating information to the masses / reader / powerless individuals incapable of interrogating the former.

The Shadow Lines, written in 1988, was the author's response to another unprecedented event in the Post-Colonial Indian Scene: the 1984 anti-Sikh riots that swept the nation after the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. In keeping with the opinion that allegedly the state sponsored these riots, which in their magnitude, compare to the earlier communal frenzy of the 1947 partition. The novel situates the 1964 communal riots in Calcutta experienced by the narrator as a young school-going boy centrally in his psyche. It is drawing on this experience that he questions the difference of perception that the state and individual display while recording such events. In the book these riots and the riots at Dhaka become the occasion for the acid test of the veracity of these recording systems. The author does a brilliant job with the use of mundane and fleeting journalese (that the late twentieth century newspaper devourers are so used to) thereby contrasting it with the power that the narrator's personal articulation about the same event has.

This of course leads him to analyze the reasons behind this selective silence in history and also the challenge that it faces from the other two forms: stories and anecdotes. The author's imagination therefore stands beside history as a competing version of the '64 riots. But ironically the inequality of their stature is immediately recognized, with one being properly documented, supported by newspaper reportage and the other utterly alone, shrieking voicelessly, with unavailable experience as the only validation.

The challenge to history comes from the quarters of personal experience as source of knowledge. The book shows how personal experience, by its admittance and articulation can often question the recorded histories. What is significant to note is that this conflict that the author seems to be throwing up between histories, stories and anecdotes is also reflected in the rise of historical fiction in recent times. We have witnessed the burgeoning of genres like memoirs, short-stories, diaries or first-hand accounts pertaining to events such as the Partition, Post-Independence riots and other political events which have been repressed or the state-articulation of which has been met with discontent. A significant portion of the book later takes a closer look at what makes history repressive.

The novel then presents another mode of narration, which is the story mode. It is significant that the author himself comes across as more of a story teller than a historian or an anecdote teller. Stories in this book are in circuitry, without definite beginnings and endings; they are indiscrete and seem to belong to no one. In this regard it is pertinent to note that the author, in spite of his omniscience, is unnamed and his stories are mostly in the form of renderings of the versions of other characters. These stories become more intelligible when the narrator joins them into meaningful wholes after collecting all the possible versions of the incident described.

The silences that history imposes on a number of events that damage the fabric of historical ideas survive through this realm. Stories occupy another place; they are seen as the discourses of the communities. And since this book situates a partition victim in the center, it is essentially her lost articulation that it represents. The anonymity of the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* adds to this experience which goes on to emphasize the primacy of community experience over individual or monolithic historical experience. The study makes use of the story-community relationship by closely engaging with Sudipta Kaviraj's essay (Kaviraj 39). This novel becomes the story that the communities have lost. Also, a story is a more democratic form because unlike history it is not imposed and unlike anecdote its applicability is not limited to the individual alone. As has been demonstrated earlier, the fact of the narrator being anonymous points to this quality of the story that is unpossessed and not limited by state ownership. In another significant way also the novel is like a story because it is through the novel that other issues in the book like community and citizenship "get discussed" through all possible vantage points. The novel becomes a platform where all the definitions of these concepts find expression. Amitav Ghosh writes in the tradition of the story, in that he gives articulation to community experience. At one level is his community that has suffered due to partition, of which Tha'mma is prominently the representative; at another level are the present day communities that suffer civil strife. He reconstructs the experience from the viewpoint of the community which suffers. He uses the story form because a story is a community exercise and is more representative. Through the construction of the novel he revives the form, both structurally and ideally, thereby recuperating experience which otherwise would have been irretrievably lost.

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