



Centring the Margins: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's "The Shadow Lines"

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Abstract

I shall begin my paper with two quotations- one from T.S.Eliot and the other from Amitav Ghosh himself. T. S. Eliot says in "Gerontion" that history has many cunning passages, contrived corridors and issues. Taking a cue from Eliot, Ghosh observes that if history forgets, fiction can remind us of many things. Ghosh interrogates the complex nature of history and its relationship with fiction in his novels. Colonial and national history is unitary, uni-dimensional and monolithic. Its course is set according to the agenda of the establishment which includes special focus on certain events and individuals and to resort to the strategy of silencing or ignoring those events or persons who can be inconvenient.

Indian Nationalist History written by elitist historians is replete with such examples. It is Gandhi-Nehru centric and ignores the role and contribution of leaders and revolutionaries like Sardar Patel, Subhash Bose, Chandrashekhara Azad and Bhagat Singh by relegating them to the margins of history books and the common man is almost absent from the historical accounts of the Indian Freedom Movement. The truth is that Gandhi's Charkha and Nehru's Anand Bhawan find prominent mention in Indian History but there is hardly any photograph or drawing or the Cellular Jail in Andaman where freedom fighters were condemned to live the rest of their lives. There are examples galore of this nature. Amitav Ghosh gives voice to the voiceless and presence to the absent in The Shadow Lines. He delves deep into the lives of the common man and fills these gaps in the unfathomed regions of history. He tries to reconstruct history by the "events tucked behind the pages of history" (Bindu n.p.) with the help of memory, stories, experience, interpretation and analysis.

Hardly any critic has significantly noted that all the main characters in The Shadow Lines have

archaeology or history as their main subject. Tridib, narrator's cousin, is doing his Ph.D in the subject of Archaeology, which is concerned with digging out what has been buried. The narrator is working on his doctorate degree on the history of textile trade between India and England in 19th Century. Thamma, narrator's grandmother, has done her Bachelor's from Dhaka University with history as the main subject and Ila, narrator's cousin, is doing her BA in History. So, all the main characters are well conversant with the "cunning passages" and "contrived corridors" of history. Ghosh is filling the gaps in the history books of Indian Freedom Movement when he moves away from 'elitist' history to 'people's' history to recount the role and significance of the struggle of the common people. No doubt there are records of events, well preserved in public and private archives, but how these events affected ordinary people and ordinary families may never be known without the focus on the experiences and accounts of the people.

Indian historians suffer from selective amnesia when it comes to discuss, describe and document the role of revolutionaries in the

freedom struggles of India. There are fleeting, subdued and muted references to the revolutionary organizations like *Anushilan* and *Jugantar* and revolutionaries like Khudi Ram Bose and Bagha Jatin in the history of historians. But Thamma's account of these revolutionaries and organizations serves to fill this gap deliberately left in the history books. Her account of the role of these revolutionaries in the freedom struggle is validated and substantiated by her personal experience when she was a college student in Dhaka. She tells the narrator and Tridib about "the terrorist movement amongst nationalist in Bengal in the first few decades of the century about secret terrorist societies like *Anushilan and Jugatanar* " and "all their offshoots, their clandestine networks and the home - made bombs with which they tried to assassinate British officials and policemen and a little about the arrests, deportations and executions with which the British had retaliated" (The Shadow Lines 37). She tells them how one of her class-fellow who was a "shy, quite boy" living in lane next to theirs in Dhaka's "Potualtuli" was arrested by the British Officer on the charge of being a terrorist. She was shocked because she "had been expecting a huge man with burning eyes and lion's mane of a beard" (SL 39) but the terrorist turned out to be an ordinary next to door neighbour. The boy was "tried and later deported to the infamous Cellular Gaol in the Andaman Islands" (SL 38). It is the sacrifices of these common people that our history deliberately seeks to obliterate and neglect and it is these gaps that Amitav Ghosh tries to fill.

Thamma was always fascinated in her college days by the "heroism of Khudiram Bose and the sad death of Bagha Jatin, hunted down on the banks of the Buribalan river, betrayed by treacherous villagers who had been bought with English money (SL 38-39). The stories of their sacrifices and heroic acts had roused her sympathies and "she had wanted to do something for the terrorists, work for them in a small way, still a little bit of their glory for herself" (SL39). She could even have gone to Khulna with her class-fellow who had been charged of being a terrorist and "stood at his site, with a pistol in her hands waiting" to kill the English magistrate for "it was for our freedom" and she "would have done anything to be free" (SL 39). It is these

common people whose sacrifices have brought us freedom and it is these very common people who have been consistently and consciously obliterated and neglected. Amitav Ghosh attempts to fill these gaps through the memories and experiences of common people like Thamma.

Not only the sacrifices but also the sufferings and deprivations of the common people signify "an absence, a gap, a hole, an emptiness" (SL 213) in the history books. Common people of India have been victims of endless riots: Calcutta riots of 1964, Delhi riots of 1984, Meerut riots of 1987; Godhra riots of 2002 and the most recent riots in Mujaffarnagar in 2013. Besides challenging the unitary vision of official history which constructs, commemorates and consolidates the celebratory account of Partition, Ghosh's account of riots challenges the two nation theory which became the foundation of partition. Nehru's famous speech, 'Tryst with Destiny' made to the constituent assembly on the midnight of 14-15 August 1947 has become the toast of the historians but the cries of the refugees who were being butchered, raped, disrobed and dispossessed on both sides of the 'new' border find a place only in the black role of history. The Shadow Lines critiques the silencing of the violence by the nationalist historians and tells how the two nation theory was just a facade employed by the Empire for creating fractures for their divisive politics to continue. Pabby observes that "it is on record that Lord Mountbatten, the then Viceroy of India and later the first Governor-General of free India got his reforms commissioner, Mr. V. P. Menon, to drop the plan for the transfer of power and division of India in just a few hours. With this plan he himself flew to London and got Mr. Atlee, the Prime Minister of England, and his cabinet to accept it in exactly five minutes (133). But how many of us have read this fact in our history books? Not many. The result was the largest migration in the history of mankind accompanied by tales of shame and horror.

Ghosh takes up for detailed discussion the riots of 1964 which shook the entire subcontinent to bring home the point that Partition was a ploy by the Britishers to keep their divisive politics intact and that there is hardly any difference between one riot and the other. On December 27, 1963, a relic believed to be a hair of Prophet Mohammad

disappeared from the Hazratbal mosque of Srinagar. There were protests in the streets of the valley in which all the communities - Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims participated: "Over the next few days life in the Valley seemed to close in upon itself a spontaneous flow of collective grief. There were innumerable black flag demonstrations, every shop and building flew a black flag, and every person on the streets wore a black armband " (SL 225). It was the gifted leadership of Maulana Masoodi which "drew the various communities of Kashmir together in a collective display of mourning" (SL 226). But there is no mention of this great religious leader in our history books. The narrator remembers how on a certain morning in early 1964, a school bus was near empty and his best friends were absent. It was heard by him that water tanks of Calcutta had been poisoned by 'them,' an obvious reference to Muslims. There were unruly mobs on the streets of Calcutta. The riots spread to Karachi, Khulna and Dhaka. Many people were killed in Khulna and Tridib, the narrator's cousin, was killed in Dhaka by the rampaging mob. It took the narrator 15 long years to discover that there was a connection between the Dhaka and Calcutta riots. When the narrator tells his friend, Malik, about these riots, he finds that people do not even know that these riots actually occurred:

Suddenly, for no reason that I can remember I said: What about the riots

...?

Which riots? said Malik. There are so many.

Those riots. I said. I had to count the years on my fingers.

The riots of 1964. I said

What were the riots of 1964? (SL 221).

The point Ghosh is trying to emphasize is that the riots disappear from public memory and history books only to occur at regular intervals. The narrator reprimands his friend by saying that people like him remember war with China which killed less people than the riots. He goes to the Library of Teen Murthi alongwith his friends but there is hardly any history book on this subject:

Malik knew the library well; he had been researching one thing or the other for several years. He stopped at a shelf and pointed. It was a section on the war of 1962. There were whole shelves of books on the war-histories, political analysis, memoirs, tracts- weighty testimony to the eloquence of War. He pointed out another set of shelves, smiling broadly:it was the section on the 1965 war with Pakistan... but after half an hour we still hadn't found anything on my remembered riots. (SL 223)

Finding nothing in the shelves of the history books, they go to newspaper, Section-1 and take out the volume of January and February 1964. The narrator's mnemonic memory led him to correlate the Madras Crickets Match between England and India and the riots in Calcutta. It was the newspaper dated January 10, 1964 which carried the news regarding the cricket match but its lead story "had nothing to do with riots of any kind nor with Calcutta: it was about the sixty - eighth session of the Congress Party in Bhubneshwar" (SL 223). There was a brief report about a riot in Khulna in which twenty nine were killed. It was the newspaper dated January 11, 1964 which carried a headline which said: "Curfew in Calcutta, police open fire, 10 dead, 15 wounded" (SL 224). Whereas the reaction of the Indian Government was muted, the religious leaders of Pakistan declared that the theft of relic "was an attack on the identity of Muslims. The Pakistani newspapers declared that the theft was a part of a deep- laid conspiracy for uprooting the spiritual and national hopes of Kashmiris and rumbled darkly about genocide" (SL 226). The riots soon faded from public consciousness, newspaper reports and never became even a footnote in the history books: "The official histories were unable to supply an answer. There is only silence and meaning" (SL 227). The narrator is in shock because the loss of human lives does not find any mention in the history books and newspapers:

They were speaking of so much else, of the Congress conference, of the impending split in the Communist Party, or wars and revolutions: what is it that makes all those things called 'politics' so eloquent and these other unnameable things so silent? Those journalists

and historians were, after all, men of intelligence and good intention on the whole, no less than anyone else, and once the riots had started they produced thousands of words of accurate description. But once they were over and there was nothing left to describe, they never spoke of it again - while those other events, party splits and party congresses and elections poured out their eloquence in newspapers and histories for years and years after they were never, as though words could never exhaust their significance. But for these other things we can only use words of description when they happen and then fall silent, for to look for words of any other kind would be to give them meaning, and there is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness. (SL 228)

Amitav Ghosh raises serious questions at the very institution of Press which gives prominence to a cricket test match but maintains stony silence over the killings of people in riots. He suggests the possible clue to this enigmatic situation and provides a possible answer when he observes that history is possibly a colonial subject and by natural corollary so is journalism. Both are the privileged preserves of the elitist and, therefore, a cricket match is more important than the loss of the lives of the common people. Through the narrator, Ghosh attempts to give an echo to the unheard cries of agony of the common people. He traces the divergence between the history of historians and memories of riot victims. For the historians and the newspaper reports, murder, rape, abduction, riots terrorism, loss of lives are inexplicable and 'little events' marginal to the larger political process of their story. Even for Ella, the anglicised Indian, riots and famines are 'local things' not to be included in history books. She sarcastically remarks that the narrator would not understand "exhilaration of events" happening in Europe and America because "nothing really important ever happens " in a backward country like India":

Nothing really important? I said incredulously.

Well of course there are famines and riots and disasters, she said. But those are local things after all-not like revolutions or anti-fascist wars, nothing that sets a

political example to the world, including that's really remembered. She seemed immeasurably distant then, in her serene confidence in the centrality and eloquence of her experience, in her quiet pity for the pettiness of lives like mine, lived out in the silence of voiceless events in a backward world. (SL104).

CONCLUSION

The Shadow Lines emerged from the novelist's first hand experience of anti-Sikh riots in 1984 which were no different from other riots. For the political establishment, the Sikh riots were the natural corollary of the 'felling of a big tree' the tremors of which were felt all over India. For the elitist historians, the senseless killings of Sikhs does not deserve any mention in their historical accounts. This is the gap between the people's history and the elitist history which Amitav Ghosh has tried to fill through The Shadow Lines.

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