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The Silence of the Crowd: Rememory and the Violence of Forgetting in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

By

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the representation of communal violence and mob psychology within the context of South Asian literature. Amitav Ghosh's canonical novel illustrates the tension between collective aggression and individual agency, specifically regarding the recurring riots that have shaped the Indo-Pak subcontinent since Partition. The theoretical framework arises from classical crowd psychology, which views the mob as a dehumanized, irrational mass where individuals lose their sense of self, and further incorporates contemporary perspectives provided by Floyd Allport and Ralf Turner. These theories suggest that crowd behavior is often structured, coherent, and purposeful, emerging from shared norms or pre-existing individual dispositions rather than a complete loss of identity. Using a qualitative textual analysis, the paper examines how Ghosh employs "rememory", the process of recalling repressed or forgotten traumatic events to challenge nationalistic narratives. The analysis highlights the narrator's "epiphany" that the borders (shadow lines) created during Partition fail to separate the shared fates of people across India and East Pakistan. Instead, these events create "mirror images" of communal discord on both sides of the line. Tridib's death lies at the heart of this analysis. The authors argue that Ghosh's refusal to provide graphic descriptions of violence or a specific identity to the mob that killed Tridib is a deliberate act of authorial responsibility. By maintaining a silence over the senseless acts of violence, Ghosh shifts the reader's focus toward Tridib's individual courage and his legacy of pluralism. This narrative strategy acts as a form of resistance against the 'violence of forgetting' that often follows communal trauma, while emphasizing that an individual's responsibility persists even within a crowd. Through fragmented histories and individual pasts, Ghosh creates a deliberate response to the chaos of the mob. Literature serves as a vital tool for bearing witness to history while preserving stories that restore faith in human solidarity in the face of political and communal division.

Keywords: Mob Psychology, Rememory, The Shadow Lines, Communal Violence, Partition, Amitav Ghosh, the Individual vs the Crowd

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Introduction

The recurring acts of collective violence across the subcontinent have arguably become a parallel culture in the Indo-Pak region since the partition, and more recently, with the rise of religious populism since 1980s. On the surface level, this phenomenon seems to be associated with localized and sporadic instances of communal antipathy hijacked by the mob mentality of aggressive

crowds. Proceeding beyond the classical notions of crowd psychology, several disparate factors can be traced for the understanding of the politics of communalism. Representation of these instances of violence in fiction becomes a responsibility from both literary and historiographic perspectives. One of the canonical texts from South-Asian literature that deals with the complex array of communal and political dynamics of riots and mob violence in



the region is Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. With partition and world wars in the background, the narrative leads up to the memory or "re-memory" of the riots that erupted in the wake of the theft of a relic from Hazratbal Mosque in Kashmir and spread across the borders of East Pakistan and India. In the representation of these riots, *The Shadow Lines* criticizes the modern national imaginaries that sustain and build upon the partition narratives in the subcontinent and continue to fuel communal disharmony across all borders.

Thesis Statement

Ghosh builds up on two opposing models of crowds; one as the classical uncontrollable dehumanized mass, and the other as a community of conscious individuals that becomes the voice of resistance to the former. Through the narrative of *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh asserts his authorial responsibility in the representation of riots by giving dominance to the ex-post-facto implications of communal riots over their descriptions, as an act of resistance to communal disharmony and aggression.

Research Questions

- How far an individual is responsible for the collective action of the crowd? Or where does the responsibility lie in case of mob violence?
- What is the significance of Tridib's death in *The Shadow Lines*?
- Why is it important to omit the graphic descriptions of communal violence in fiction?

Theoretical Framework

The earliest scholarships available on mob psychology conceptualize mob as one large and singular entity with no individuality of its members. According to classical theories, mob mentality or crowd psychology acts like a collective paranoia, depriving the individuals of their sensibilities. After the entire group has fallen to this effect, its members see each other as a homogenized mass and completely lose their individuality. However, Floyd Allport and Ralf Turner has gone beyond the classical perspective on mob psychology. They theorize the ways in which mob affects individual existence and demonstrate how an individual reconciles with the collective without losing his individuality. This study has taken some strains of Allport and Turner's theories to analyze the nature and phenomena of riots in *The Shadow Lines*, and its long lasting consequences for the society.

Allports has offered the explanation of crowd behavior by two principles, of which one is the principle of social facilitation and stimulation. According to him, a common stimulus prepares two individuals for the same response and when they are so prepared, the sight of one making that response releases and heightens that response in the other. Similarly, Sociologist Ralf Turner has gone beyond inadequate psychological explanation of the crowd behavior and developed an emergent norm perspective. The central thesis of his perspective is that even in the most violent and dangerous crowds, there is also social interaction, in which norms

for sanctioning collective behavior, and lines of action are agreed upon and specified.

Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative work where the researchers use line by line textual analysis method for the reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Descriptive method of analysis is utilized to outline different tenants of mob psychology. Interviews and other critical essays of the writers are used as a source of information to explicate the novel and link them to the mob psychology that has surfaced in Pakistan and India. Adequate literature review surrounding mob psychology and the novel are studied and analyzed. Various instances from the novel are highlighted to support the argument of the study. Quotes from the novel are used and paraphrased to prove the validity of the argument that this study will make. Data analysis section contains analysis of texts in the light of aforementioned theoretical framework and the quantitative data gathered.

Delimitation

This study is delimited to the social-psychology theories of crowd behavior and representation of violence in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines*.

Significance

The recent years have witnessed a surge in incidents of mob violence in Pakistan and India against religious minorities and marginalized subjects. These traumatic events leave a far reaching impact on the social psyche and the prospects of peaceful co-existence of diverse communities in both countries. This study aims at recognizing the social responsibility of an individual for their actions and reactions in all circumstances, more specifically, of a writer in reporting or reconstructing these instances in their fictional or factual representations.

Literature Review

In India, communal riots started in the 1920s with the emergence of nationalism and continued even after the independence. The term "riot" is used to describe a type of social disorder where a group lashes out in a fierce public commotion against property, authority, or people. Similarly, communal riots are a form of violence that is perpetrated between different communal or ethnic groups. A 2008 publication *Riots in Literature* is a collection of essays that analyze the fictional representation of violence in canonical texts as "manifestations of popular politics, including colonial and postcolonial contexts" (Bel & Porter 6). Although a lot of research has been carried out in the fields of social psychology to study crowd behaviour/action, literature has represented it in diverse ways and strictly link it to political anxieties, attitudes, and agendas. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* illustrates different ways in which different kinds of masses and collectivities can affect individual existence in several ways and how an individual reconciles with the collective.

In the 2007 publication *Crowd Psychology*, Gustave Le Bon gives three stages in which a crowd may exist; submergence, contagion,

and suggestion. Through these stages, the individuals, because of the anonymity of the crowd, lose their sense of self and personal responsibility and become inclined to conceive the emotions and predominant ideas of the crowd unquestionably, to the point at which the emotions and ideas of the crowd are taken from the collective ideology and the members of the crowd become susceptible to any passing emotion and idea (Le Bon). Le Bon called this behaviour as uncivilized as it comes from the archaic collective unconscious. In the crowd, the "collective mind" takes over the individuals and they, therefore, being submerged in the crowd lose their self-control (Le Bon). The theory of deindividuation as proposed by Leon Festinger and Philip Zimbardo asserts that in a typical crowd, multiple factors such as group unity, anonymity, and arousal can deteriorate individual control as it distracts individual from personal identities and reduce their concerns only to social assessment. It asserts that one becomes more vulnerable to crowd instigation when his/her sense of self is weakened. A 2019 American film *Joker* explains the story of Arthur Fleck, who becomes a villain and inspires a riotous movement. Aditya Vats has pointed out that this film is a reflection of Thomas Hobbes's concept of society's inherent inclination towards destruction and chaos. Fleck gruesomely murders three wealthy bankers and a host on live TV which acts as initiation and motivation for the violent crowd to spread destruction and violence on the streets of Gotham city. The narrative of the movie is a representation of the classical theory of 'the bad leading the mad'; individuals take advantage of the crowd by using them as a tool to spread hate and destruction in the society (Radburn & Stott). These classical theories have been rejected by modern theorists based on their inadequacy to explain what happens during a riot. Contemporary theories elaborate that crowd behaviour is structured, coherent, and with purpose. Like-minded people join hands together in the form of a crowd and their riotous behaviour is often premediated for a common cause (Radburn & Stott). The contemporary understanding of crowd psychology during riots explains it as a well-structured and organized agenda of certain groups against the state or an institution. It has proper group norms according to which the members have to act. In this light, the *Joker's* actions were recognized as "anti-wealth" which influenced the crowd's behaviour in terms of violent riots, public looting, and attacking places signifying accumulation of wealth (Radburn & Stott).

In *Social Psychology*, which was published in 1924, Floyd Allports gives his convergence theory and states that "an individual in a crowd behaves just as he would behave alone, only more so" (Allports 295). According to this theory, the behaviour of the crowd is not a result of a crowd mind different from that of individuals; however, the crowd is the product of like-minded individuals. The crowd is formed from the people of similar dispositions and their actions are then intensified and reinforced by the crowd. Thus, the behaviour shown by the crowd is not irrational and individuals in the crowd express their values and beliefs. In a 2007 article, Lemonik Arthur quotes Lewis Killian and Ralph H. Turner's argument that "norms emerge from within crowd", to provide the basis for the emergent norm theory (Arthur

56). According to this theory, the crowd at the outset has little unity, however, when people start milling up, the appropriate actions suggested by the key members form the basis for the crowd's norms. Contrary to the earlier connotation of the term crowd, these theorists proposed that a crowd doesn't necessarily be destructive in its objectives and actions and could therefore be channelized for positive action as well. In a somewhat similar spirit, Ghosh's enthusiastically provides thick descriptions of the representation of everyday life and its individual experience, he represents violence in the fragmented form of dreams, memories and pictures. The crowd can be written about as Ghosh does, without compromising one's individuality; rooted in a shared experience of humanity, where the multitude ultimately reveals itself not to be the "other", which is to be joined by surrendering the self, but a mirror of the individual. In our social context, people who have the same innate tendency for destruction, anger, and violence come together under one umbrella for a single cause. As a form of resistance against control, people can become violent and carry out dangerous riots trying to affirm their power, authority, and dominance.

Analysis

Riots in *The Shadow Lines* are the point of convergence where the collective and the individual meet to perform their sense of consciousness or the lack of it. Communal riots in the subcontinent have a complex history of their own and through the representation of these riots, Ghosh problematizes the concept of nationalism and border lines drawn on the basis of communal divide in *The Shadow Lines*, or in the words of Anjali Gera, dismantles "the myth of the nation", depicting partition as division of the subcontinent into two identical yet inverted images of the whole, and both images inheriting the blueprint of communal discord from the united whole (South Asian Partition Fiction in English 120). Tuomas Huttunen argues that with such a diverse population as that of the subcontinent, the "forced" ideal of nationalism as championed by Nehru had to be an imaginative and political construction (Riots in Literature 93). The riots that spread on both sides of the border in Dhaka and Calcutta after the Hazratbal incident were consequently also inverted "mirror images" of each other (Riots in Literature 97). The plot of the *The Shadow Lines* develops by coming together of many stories and histories the narrator was told by his grandmother about life in Dhaka before Partition, by his uncle about life in London during the war, and his own memories in the Calcutta of the 1960s and London of the 1970s. A canvas is thus prepared by the individual, collective and political consciousness of an Indian Bengali family with its roots in East Pakistan and emotional ties with a British family spanning over generations. The difference between the memory, the story and the imagination is blurred, and so are the shadow lines of borders that divide people disregarding their lived experiences and manifold affiliations with spaces, cultures, ethnicities and places of origin. Ghosh draws a larger than life image of human solidarity, laying aside these nebulous lines of division.

The anonymous narrator, as a research student at Delhi University in 1979, is compelled to recall the riots he witnessed as a child in



Calcutta, after he has an argument with his fellow students over the most important thing that happened during their childhood. What perplexes him is that none of his fellows remember the riots in Calcutta that resulted in a significant number of killings and left a lasting impression on his mind. Remembering the time when the riots broke out in Calcutta, he comments;

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. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world – not language, not food, not music—it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror (148).

Later on, when he searches for the newspaper records of the 1964 Calcutta riots, he comes to realize that the riots from his childhood are a link in the series of events that started with the theft of the sacred relic in Kashmir. The realization turns into an epiphany about how the lines drawn at the time of partition are unable to separate the fates of people living across them, and rather make them inextricably bound with the moment of partition even after decades. In a 1995 article “Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi”, Ghosh revisits his memories of the communal violence that ensued in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi’s assassination in 1984 and writes how it had become difficult “to open the New Delhi papers in the morning”. His experiences of that turbulent time in Indian political history deeply influenced his authorial sensibility about what to write and how to write it. It is important to remember that he started working on *The Shadow Lines* after witnessing the horrific violence that broke out in the following months of the Indian prime minister’s assassination, bringing back to him the memories of riots from his childhood and so the article could be read as a preamble to the novel. He refuses to accept violence and aggression as instinctual to human nature and puts up a very pertinent question in the article:

When I now read descriptions of troubled parts of the world, in which violence appears primordial and inevitable, a fate to which masses of people are largely resigned, I find myself asking: Is that all there was to it? Or is it possible that the authors of these descriptions failed to find a form - or a style or a voice of a plot - that could accommodate both violence and the civilized, willed response to it?

To find such a “style” that does justice to issues that have far-reaching and grave consequences for humanity, Ghosh looks up to Proust. In an interview with the critic John C. Hawley, Ghosh said that he “decided to do with space what Proust had done with time” (South Asian Partition Fiction in English 112). By making the distinctions of time and space fluid in a Proustian manner, Ghosh is able to connect the dots between these instances of violence scattered across the subcontinent and gives a more complicated unity to the meaning of these instances than what meets the eye. It is also a conscious decision to take up the responsibility of telling those untold stories that represent the other, forgotten face of

human conscience, which restores the faith in humanity in such bleak hours of history. It is the will to resist the crowd, be it a school of thought or its aggressive followers on the streets, and change its course as he and his fellow activists did when the Sikh neighborhoods in Delhi were attacked and set to fire in 1984 by an organized mob (Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi). The contemporary theory of crowd behavior, as structured, coherent, and with a purpose, as discussed in the previous section, gains relevance here as the later commissions of inquiry uncovered an organized political funding and assistance in carrying out these attacks. Tridib’s death by the hands of such a rioting crowd however remains shrouded in mystery, as the narrator remembers how it was Tridib who once taught him “that we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly” (Ghosh 24). The narrator confesses that he finds it difficult to write about Tridib’s death because his words cannot provide any meaning to the senseless incident, and so the “silence” must win (159). The alternate that Ghosh thus provides to the rational madness of crowds is the bringing together of fragmented histories and individual pasts to contextualize these acts of violence and look beyond the narratives of nationalism and identity politics. Ghosh identifies the human responsibility in fictional representation of violence in *The Shadow Lines* by refusing to give any explicit identity to the mob that killed Tridib and complicating the causes of his death. What gains significance for the reader is Tridib’s act of courage in the face of a frenzied mob and the legacy of multiplicity and pluralism that he leaves behind in his stories.

Conclusion

The study identified a critique of the imaginary “inventions” of nationalist and communal regimes who create crowds in the pursuit of political idealism by telling the stories of singular and totalizing identities that fit into the narratives of nationalism and communalism in *The Shadow Lines*. The research has also established that to understand the role of social psychology in the recurring phenomena of riots and collective violence, it is also important to take into account the role of identity politics as a manipulative tool in providing the immediate causes for communal disharmony and mob violence in the subcontinent. Concerning the first two questions raised in the beginning of this study, the research attempted to explicate the agency and responsibility of an individual within a community, which explains the different levels at which different members of the same society engage or deal with such instances of collective violence; the mob, the bystanders and finally those who put up resistance to it, sometimes at the cost of personal sacrifice and we have illustrated this argument by citing examples of fictional representation of violence from the novel as well as factual representation of similar instances from the author’s life. Apropos to the third question regarding the aestheticization of riots in literature, we have found that Ghosh’s re-memory of these repressed accounts of resistance and courage asserts a sense of authorial responsibility in a troubled literary epoch. A writer needs to bear witness to history, but in the words of Chinua Achebe, it is equally important to achieve a balance of stories.

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