

History resonates in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Be it fiction or non-fiction, events in history feature in Ghosh's works. History is a common thread that knits a beautiful yarn in the novels of Amitav Ghosh. What is interesting about the presence of history in his novels is the fact that the historical events provide Ghosh with a space to rather read the other side of history. While history is a documented record of events that took place in a particular period and time, what is usually documented are events and stories that have had participants and even repercussions only on kings and queens and people of worth and significance. The question that evolves is if this is the only way of reading an event in history? This is where literature steps in and allows writers to write stories of ordinary people who may have been a part of an event in history and who may have suffered the pangs of history but whose stories have never found space in documented history.

Litterateurs like Amitav Ghosh makes use of history to narrate lives of ordinary people who were present in a particular historical period and event and whose lives may have been severely affected by history but whose stories have never been documented. Thus in his novels like *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh uses the discovery of malaria not only as one that is attributed to Ronald Ross but to an illiterate Mangala, the Morichchjhapi event of 1978-79 talks about Kusum's participation and sacrifice in *The Hungry Tide*, in *The Glass Palace* there is the invasion of Burma by the British and the Long March of 1967 that has affected the lives of Rajkumar and his family, Likewise, in *The Shadow Lines*, the Khulna riot is significant because Ghosh then draws in the private and personal histories of ordinary unhistorical people. The riot disturbed, shattered and disoriented the lives of ordinary people like Robi, Thamma and May Price and even the narrator. Robi, the narrator's cousin and Tridib's brother wakes up at night with images of the killing of Tridib by the mob. Thamma, the grandmother loses all vigour and love for her native land, Dhaka, the country she wants to fight for liberation. The nationalist in her that devoted her love towards Dhaka almost comes to an end with this intrusion and inference of the public event into her private world. May lived with the guilt that she may have been responsible for the death of Tridib. Thereby the narrator is appalled that his friends have not heard of the Khulna riot that broke out in 1964.

'This was a terrible riot,' I said. 'All riots are terrible,' Malik said. 'But it must have been a local thing. . . it's hardly comparable to a war.' I was determined now that I would not let my past vanish without trace: I was determined to persuade them of its importance (*Lines* 221).

The narrator is not willing to leave his familial story untold and leave the event in history that brings about "the tortured consciousness of the [Datta Chaudhary] family" (Eakambaram 97) unspoken. The relevance of this news to his family becomes miniscule if his friends are unaware of the existence of such a riot that his family is trapped in. So he tries hard to make them remember that there was a riot that broke out in 1964 and they could not have missed it. After all it was an unforgettable riot for his family. A question appears to be gnawing Ghosh's mind over the incomplete depiction of historical events by documented history. If left unrecorded is it enough for the world and future generations to know and remember that history only speaks of the riot that did take place in 1964 leaving aside those stories of little people? This would only imply that there is an absence of a humane worldview in that small piece of news about the death of fourteen people in the Dhaka riot. This news is what is missing in the documented history of the event. Why should stories of common people attached to the riot be left unrecorded? Ghosh echoes his disappointment in his essay "The Greatest Sorrow" where he writes; the Indo-Chinese war of 1962,

. . . was a war that was fought in a remote patch of terrain, far removed from major population centres, and it had few repercussions outside the immediate area. The riots of 1964 on the other hand, had affected many major cities and had caused extensive civilian casualties. Yet there was not a single book devoted to this event: a cursory glance at a library's bookshelves was enough to establish that in historical memory a small war counts for much more than a major outbreak of civil violence. . . (*Indian* 316).

What we witness here is the importance that Ghosh gives to the personal pathos and loss of the family members of Tridib rather than the event itself. What Ghosh does here is basically shifting focus from the

dominant discourse to the marginalised one by simply using history as a mere passing comment in order to elaborate on a more meaningful insight into the effect of history on people. The historical event in the text reads as “a short report at the bottom of the page, with a headline which said: Twenty-nine killed in riots” (*Lines* 223). By providing a very small space for the actual event, Ghosh is actually focusing his attention on the intensity of the impact of the riot on ordinary people.

It may not be wrong to draw in the element of postcolonialism in the text. Literally the term ‘postcolonial’ refers to the period after colonial rule and control. The focus of postcolonialism here is on people once under the rule of colonialism and on “the product of human experience, but human experience of the kind that has not typically been registered or represented at any institutional level” (Young 13). Postcolonial history reads history not from the centre but from the margin’s discarded perimeter. It presents history of the colonised people written by them in the language of the coloniser as a reply to the coloniser. Thereby Ghosh has enabled the study and understanding of history and heritage of the postcolonial nation from the point of view of the colonised people rather than the coloniser.

Postcolonial writers and many other younger writers today give the unnoticed ordinary individual a role that is definite and distinct. Vikram Seth’s travelogue, *From Heaven Lake*, is a factual account of Seth’s journey from China to India through an unusual route of hitch hiking. Seth’s focus is on the common people, who are victims of the historic Cultural Revolution. His interaction with these people depicts the dire repercussions of the Cultural Revolution on the lives of these people. Norbu, one of the poor yet hospitable Tibetans says:

Do you know what we have suffered, here, our family, because of the Chinese and their Cultural Revolution? My father spent thirteen years in prison, and I spent twelve, because of them. . . . In those days, you know, in this area, even the people on the streets would turn away when we passed, would pretend not to know us, children of counter-revolutionaries, even those we had thought of as friends (Seth 143-5).

“Postcolonial theory hinges upon the coloniser/colonised ‘other’” (Bijay Kumar Das, *Homi K. Bhabha and Postcolonial Criticism* 221). Ghosh’s narratives are about such marginalised colonised other and their experiences of imperialism and its impact on them. Monumental history has so long ignored colonised people who are now free from all colonial dominance but people who are still suffering from its impact. Ghosh’s narratives are not stories of colonialism or the imperial rule of the British. Ghosh’s point of interest in postcolonialism is to make “sure that you are looking at the world not from the centre but from the margin’s forgotten edge” (Young 16). He seeks to identify the turmoil of the colonised ‘other’ as well as regard the reaction of the colonised other after his emancipation from the iron rule of the coloniser. Ghosh’s works depict a study of the vulnerability, the suffering and the final emergence of the colonised other as one who is ready to liberate his country from the harsh and cruel treatment imposed and meted upon him by the British regime. Such a reflection reveals the colonised other as people eager to regain their identity, individuality and self-respect.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh brings forth what heavy price colonialism and nationalist ideologies have caused the common people. British colonial rule results in the Partition of the country and also its people bringing in a sense of confusion, loss, displacement and migration of citizens especially the common men who are more often the worst affected and the worst sufferers. Thamma is unhappy and confused about the Partition of the country. She sees the offensiveness of history at every end. In fact she questions the wisdom of creating such a past event. Politics that has divided nations and hearts into two has been of no significance to either of the citizens of the two countries. When she questions the Partition she is vocal about the dilemma of all the victims of Partition. Thamma says: “But surely there’s something – trenches, perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land” (*Lines* 151). To ordinary people, Partition means a visible wall or trenches that separate one country from the other. In reality the dividing wall is simply left to the imaginary boundaries that common people are made to construct in their minds. “The border isn’t on the frontier: it’s right inside the airport. You’ll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards” (*Lines* 151). Thamma is perplexed because “There weren’t any forms or anything and anyway travelling was so easy then. I could come home to Dhaka whenever I wanted” (*Lines* 152). Ghosh appears to be asking each one of his readers whether it is fair after all for Partition to have destroyed native identities of people like Thamma.

With Partition, Thamma’s home is now at odds with her nationality. Partition changes her life altogether:

. . . it had suddenly occurred to her then that she would have to fill in ‘Dhaka’ as her place of birth on that form, and that the prospect of this had worried her . . . at that moment she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality (*Lines* 152).

Amitav Ghosh beautifully illustrates this clash between the geographical public space that politics and history of nations determine and the private space that families enfold within themselves. The clash persists because the demands and requirements of the nation may be at odds with the lives of private individuals. This is exactly what Thamma goes through after the Partition of the country. This is exactly what Pabby writes:

Home ought to be the place where one was born and brought up, sealed by an emotional bond, where one can claim one's right without any hesitation. And if there was a basic confusion on this score – about the very roots of one's origin – an individual's identity would be in question (Pabby 78).

Sadly when public history intervenes and interferes into Thamma's life in the face of a communal riot in the land of her birth, Thamma knows that her nation has let her down. "Her native city of Dhaka, which she visits for the first time after Partition, is now the "other" of home, a place of danger, threat and instability" (Sharmani Patricia Gabriel 49). Her nation has turned against her. Her family members are sacrificed at the altar of communal hatred and antagonism. The nation that is so close to her heart becomes a dead bed of two important members of her family; Tridib and Jethamoshai. The little hope left to plant her identity in her country, her home in Dhaka is guillotined at the threshold of a riot and violence that is meted out to her and her family. Betrayed by the nation that had always been hers Thamma makes her choice. She places her family before that of her nation. She now thinks only of her kindred and is not ready to bear the loss of another member of her family. She even gives away her prized possession, a gold chain to the war in 1965 [India Pakistan War April 1965 – September 1965].

Thus, Amitav Ghosh's novels as revealed in *The Shadow Lines* are about people, their lives and their families. He paves way for the millions of voices that have been buried to oblivion, sacrificed to the pyre of bloodshed and violence in the annals of history. He advocates for a reading of their histories as a means to display their thoughts, contributions or even sufferings and afflictions in the advent of a historical event. His works are packed with historical truth in abundance as well as knowledge that enlightens and hence John Thieme in *Amitav Ghosh* writes about Ghosh thus:

Like Edward Said, Ghosh draws attention to the artificiality of the East-West binaries of Orientalism. Like Homi Bhabha, he demonstrates the hybrid, interstitial nature of cultures, as articulated through language. Like Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies scholars, he endeavours to recuperate the silenced voices of those occluded from the historical record (251).

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