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Research Article

Indian Partition and Life in the Aftermath: The Traumatic Memory in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

Literary depiction of contemporary socio-political escalations remains a major issue in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* as it dramatizes the plight of Chandrashekhar Datta Chaudhuri's family members in the wake of Indian partition. This paper critically examines the reasons for shattered lives and trauma in the characters of *The Shadow Lines*. This qualitative analysis of the text deploys the theoretical perspectives of memory studies. To substantiate the objective, this study explores how the historical partition and its consequent socio-political uprising killed so many people, displaced the family members from their home and country, haunted them with dreadful memories, shattered the lives and consequently traumatized them psychologically for ages. Understanding the impacts of the political spaces on the personal lives of the characters supports people to comprehend the extent of traumatic consequences in a similar context.

Keywords: Partition trauma, psychological trauma, traumatic memory, socio-political instability

Introduction

The aftermath of the historical Indian partition¹ upholds some situations which validates that the victims continue carrying their traumatic memories even in the aftermath. *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh depicts such tragic consequences of the partition on the lives of the characters. Therefore, it is seminal to examine why the characters are traumatized and how the narratives depict the impacts of such political space on the personal lives of the characters. The objective of this study is to explore the impacts of Indian partition and its consequent socio-political instability which altered the

¹ In August 1947, when independence was granted to the former imperial domain of British India, it was partitioned into two countries – India and Pakistan.

aftermath situations of the characters in such a way that shattered their lives, haunted their memories and traumatized their generations for ages.

Indian Independence Act of 1947² divided the people and territory into two: Hindustan for the Hindus and Pakistan (East and West) for the Muslims. Such division of the territory consequently ignited the socio-political instability in the regions, leading with the communal riot, mass killings and displacement of thousands of people. The consequent political uprising in the aftermath shattered the lives of thousands of people and their generations for ages.

Ghosh's novel depicts that the characters suffering from the haunting memory of their past when the historical partition caused deaths, destructions and loss of socio-political harmony between and among the people of the regions. Since historical events are found to have integral to people's lives, it is seminal to study how the socio-political conflagrations affected the people's lives. The novelist sought to demonstrate that the historical Indian partition of 1947 had a grave consequence for ages. As he dramatizes the partition impacts on the characters' lives, psychological implications of the event in the characters' lives have become seminal to analyze. Bringing the traumatic issues of the novel and the notions of historical events together, this paper explores the reasons of shattered life and trauma in the characters.

Different characters' personal story unfolds the backdrop of Indian politics, particularly ranging from the second world war, the partition movements, and the formation of Pakistan later in 1971. Though the partition of India, under the Indian Independence Act 1947 resulted in the division of British India³, the cause of political turmoil was rooted many years before 1947. In 1940, Lord Linlithgow proposed a plan to impart the dominion status to India after the second world war with the expectation of gaining support from Indian communities and parties, with a promise of Indian representation in the Viceroy's Executive Council. Later, Mahatma Gandhi⁴ led the Quit India Movement to end British rule. In 1946, elections were held in India and the Muslim League⁵ won significantly. Jinnah, the League's leader, saw this as a popular demand for a separate Muslim state. Even though the Congress⁶ Party was against the Muslim League's advocacy for a Hindu-majority India and a Muslim-majority Pakistan, The Muslim League's general strike on 16 August 1946 led to the worst communal riots in British India's history, including in Calcutta and other parts of Bengal and Bihar. The violence prompted the installation of a Congress-led interim government in September with Jawaharlal Nehru⁷ as prime minister of united India.

² The Indian Independence Act 1947 is the United Kingdom's parliamentary act that provided the base of freedom from the British India, but only with the two new independent dominions of India and Pakistan.

³ British India, also the British Raj, a direct rule of the British Crown in Indian subcontinent, particularly from 1858 to 1947.

⁴ Full name Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was an Indian freedom fighter, also known for his non-violence campaign in India while fighting a campaign for Indian independence from the British rule.

⁵ The All-India Muslim League was a political party established in Dhaka in 1906, one of the prominent leaders of the league was Muhammad Ali Jinnah during the time of Partition revolution in 1947

⁶ Locally the Congress Party or simply the Congress or The Indian National Congress is an Indian political party established in 1885.

⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru, byname Nehru, was the first prime minister of independent India, earlier he was the main leader of India's independence movement.

Although the Congress Party leaders saw the partition as necessary, they did so with reluctance and frustration. As historian Gyanendra Pandey states, “Congress leadership had decided to thwart the League by offering it an overdose of its own medicine. If you must have your partition, you’ll have it with a vengeance” (31). The Congress Party viewed the partition as a way to punish the Muslim League for advocating a division. Lord Louis Mountbatten was appointed as the last Viceroy of India in February 1947 with the task of overseeing the transition of British India to independence by June 1948. The political turmoil in the then British India led Mountbatten to conclude that partition was the only option for a quick and orderly transfer of power, as delay could result in a civil war. He announced the ‘Mountbatten Plan’⁸ and the independence date of 15 August 1947. The Indian partition is considered to be the largest mass migrations in human history, with estimates of around 15 million people crossing the border. The communal violence led to widespread deaths and atrocities. The partition of British India and the subsequent creation of India and Pakistan had far-reaching consequences that continue to impact the region and its people even today. The legacy of the partition includes ongoing religious tension and conflict, as well as the forced migration and resettlement of millions of people.

Since the partition and its relative socio-political consequences have the huge impacts in the then Indian political history, the present study hypothesizes that the partition and its consequent uprisings shattered the characters’ lives, haunted memories and traumatized the generations for years.

Theoretical Framework: Trauma Theory

This qualitative study explores the textual analysis of Ghosh’s novel within the backdrop of Indian partition and its consequent instability in the aftermath. To address this objective, the study adopts the theories of trauma developed by Cathy Caruth, Ruth Leys and Dominick LaCarpia to analyze the novel, identifying unbearable trauma in people’s psyche shattering their personal lives.

Theorists have diverse perspectives on trauma. Initially, the Greeks defined the term as denoting a mental condition caused by a severe shock, an unpleasant experience that can make a person either upset or anxious, or both. There are different reasons behind psychological distress like sexual assault, accidents, war experiences, or natural disasters. The victims of traumatic events react differently based on their personal, emotional, social, or cultural background. For Cathy Caruth, trauma is associated with “the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (*Unclaimed Experience* 11). Caruth further substantiates the idea of latency as indicated by Sigmund Freud to suggest that the victims of a traumatic event remain latent for the time being; however, they hide somewhere until something evokes them back.

Since traumatic events are unbearable in their horrible impacts, they often exist in memories imperceptible as traumatic at first. Caruth critiques over the idea of Freud's idea of latency as “it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs, or to put it somewhat differently that history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (8). Caruth foregrounds that trauma remains in the latent form and the latency can come to the fore in similar historical events related to other places at another time. Although history cannot refer back accurately if it is traumatic, it refers to the events only with inaccuracies.

⁸ Lord Mountbatten was the last Viceroy of India who proposed a plan with a proposal that the provinces be declared independent successor states.

Ruth Leys studies the idea of Freud's anxiety and repression and Caruth's notion of trauma before focusing on psychic distress in her book *Trauma: A Genealogy*. She mentions the psychological trauma related to post-traumatic disorder, first recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. She has mentioned the definition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as the condition in which “the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, s/he is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories” (2). Concerning ideas of the American Psychiatric Association, Leys clarifies that post-traumatic disorder is related to the traumatic historical event of a person. Later such event results in the form of painful memories leading to distressed psychology for those who are associated with them.

Moving further with the notions of trauma, it refers to the collective emotional destruction resulting from a traumatic experience or events in the past. Some historical events can cause violence and abuse in a group of people and remain unresolved as grief among the people. Such events may traumatize the people who are associated with it. The generations of people may suffer if the earlier generations experience the mass destruction like war or genocide, or colonialism. Any event, therefore, may traumatize people who are associated with such event.

LaCapra, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, explores the trauma concerning the process of historicism. For him, writing trauma goes simultaneously with writing history, and “the historical text is a substitute for the absent past” (10). He foregrounds the trauma of the historical event(s) with two terminologies: ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’ to indicate the historical events that can impact a person or a group of people’s experiences, limiting them to leading their life into a better future. He further foregrounds:

Acting out in which one is haunted or possessed by the past and performativity is caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes-scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop. Working through is an articulatory practice: to the extent, one works through trauma. (22)

LaCapra indicates that the condition of working out is more traumatic to a person since the past relives in the present preventing the way out to the future. In acting out, the victim doesn't realize the event of the past. It is the process of articulation when the victims consciously realize the trauma in the present in the form of hallucinations.

Different theorists and critics have stated that historical events can be traumatic to the people who are associated with them. When it comes to the impacts of such historical events, psychological trauma is entangled in such events. Hence, to explore the reasons of trauma in the characters of Ghosh’s novel, it is seminal to analyze whether the partition of India has some instances of psychological trauma in the characters or not. As the Indian partition and the consequent socio-political uprising shattered the characters’ lives, haunted them with the memories and traumatize them, this study explores the reasons of trauma as an impact of political space on the personal lives of the characters.

Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*: A Textual Analysis

What Critics Say about the Novel

Since the publication of Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* in 1985, critics have widely reviewed the text from different perspectives. The first-person narrative of the novel shows that different characters are related to the partition history of contemporary India. Analyzing Ghosh's creative work, Ian Almond explores the theme of sadness as he remarks, “[T]here are multiple pangs of sadness in Ghosh's book – the sadness of inaction, of the desire of material failure, of lack of fulfilment and, above all, the

inimitable *tristesse* in the search for identity” (92). Ian finds some of the instances of sadness and their forms in the text. Among them, identity crisis and material prosperity hold the major space; however, it did not investigate the proper reasons behind them.

Since the novel represents the characters who lost family relatives because of the partition, Priya Kumar foregrounds the different kinds of loss in the text, namely, “the loss of home, of family or more syncretic past” (201). He even incorporates the idea of how any writing or art can be a piece of evidence, which “offers a way of understanding the relationship between art and the lived reality of the events of our times as one of the conscious or unconscious witnessing” (202). The loss of nation and memory is highlighted as different characters lose different things because of the partition.

The notion of nation and nationalism are the major issues in Ghosh’s novel for Crystal Taylor. Taylor opines that the nations and the issue of nationalism have created tension between the states and have resulted in religious animosity, sometimes even wars in the states. However, Neelam Srivastava critiques the novel as a text having religious harmony and secularity of the contemporary time. She foregrounds that the text has created unity among the religions. She asserts, “Ghosh wants to tell us that the syncretic identity of South Asia cannot be reduced to these artificial lines traced by states, the ‘shadow lines’ of the novel’s title” (71). The religious confrontation ignited in the aftermath because of the political division in the country. Unlike other critics, he concludes that a shadow line lies among the religions and binds them close together.

An exploration of the female agency is the major issue for Ania Spyra in Ghosh’s novel. She comparatively examines the position of modern women in contemporary society, especially within family space or at the social level. Her paper examines the position of contemporary women while exploring how “nationalist and communitarian discourses exclude women from the cosmopolitan ideal” (2). Observing the major characters, Tham’ma and Ila, she views that their position is hidden within the male patriarchal society even though the former accepts struggle to establish her family after the death of her husband. She opines that, like Ila, women go abroad and marry English men for identity and position. For her, however, the plight of women remains the same whoever she marries from abroad and wherever she resides.

The above-mentioned reviews clarify that Ghosh’s novel has been examined from various perspectives. All of these critics have their own different interpretations of the text but none of the above-cited critics have presented the reasons behind the characters’ trauma and how their life shattered and traumatized in detail. This issue, however, demands a genuine study. Along with the exploration of the consequent socio-political uprisings of the partition which dismantled their generations even in the aftermath, this study presents how political upheavals like that of the partition of India in 1947 altered the life of the characters. The present study, therefore, explores the text and the context from the perspective of the theoretical insights derived from memory studies to analyze the reasons of shattered lives and trauma in the characters of the novel.

Indian Partition and the Traumatic Memory in the Novel

This analysis explores the impacts of the partition and its relative socio-political instability of the contemporary time which shattered lives of the characters of Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, concerning only three characters from the novel: the narrator, Tham’ma and Robi. It analyses the hunting memories of the characters to explore the causes behind their psychological distress. As the different theorists and critics mentioned, Ghosh’s novel dramatizes the plights of characters who were historically divided and psychologically distressed because of the partition and its consequent socio-political uprisings. As displayed by the text, in the consequent political instability after

the partition many people were killed, some others were forcefully separated from their loved ones and many others were dismantled them from their birth place, which compelled them to relive with the hunting memories of wonderful bygone days.

As Caruth opines on the latent state of trauma, Ghosh's novel highlights the traumatic condition of its characters. Trauma revives in the narrator while reading the newspaper about the historical incident of the Hindu-Muslim riot where Tridib was killed. When India was divided based on two religious' territories, people's life shattered due to religious confrontations, particularly in between Hindus and Muslims. As an instance, the consequences of the theft of Prophet Mohammad's relics⁹ were till the faraway land in Pakistan. The traumatic memory of the 1965 riot revived in the narrator while he was reading a newspaper in the late eighties. He mentions the vandalization when "a demonstration that was marching in protest against the theft of the relic turned violent. Some shops were burnt down and a few people were killed" (250). This was the moment when Tha'mma had been to Pakistan to evacuate her uncle to India when the mob killed Tridib, Jethamosai, and Khalil.

Considering the consequent impact of an event into another places, the narrator remembers the incident of terrifying bus ride. He traces the affinity between the incident where Tridib was killed and the demonstrations in Kashmir¹⁰. The narrator could not overcome tragic experience as a schoolboy many years after the incident. The narrator remembers a normal situation would turn into chaotic situation as "normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the stress one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood" (225). The narrator reflects on the trauma of the event in his grown-up age. He compares the fear and their uncertainties with the victims of earthquakes who feel insecure within their own spaces. It was before the partition that Dhaka and Calcutta were culturally, socially and historically bound to each other. However, the partition shattered the affinity and traumatized the generations in the aftermath. The narrator indicates that the reason behind the trauma is the breaking up of their coexistence.

Another major character, Tha'mma, suffered because of the loss of her birthplace when the city became the territory of Pakistan after the partition of India. As a consequence of the partition, many refugees came from India and occupied her home. Thousands of refugees took shelter in the houses like that of Jethamosai, her paternal uncle. Such encroachment on their property upsets her in the aftermath. Tha'mma indicates the degradation of her parental home. She says a "kind of a place where rich Calcutta people-built garden houses. And look at it now – as filthy as baby's nest. It's all because of the refugees" (145). Tha'mma is disappointed because of the overwhelming number of refugees from India. Though the reason for trauma was the loss of home, the characters' lives were shattered because of the division of the country which dismantled people from their birthplace and forced them to live like a refugee.

Similar to the condition of 'working through,' the partition not only victimized the characters but also traumatized their generations who were living with their haunted memories of the past. Robi, for example, suffered from the hunted dream of his uncle's

⁹ On 27 December 1963, a holy relic believed by many to be a strand from the beard of prophet Muhammad, went missing the Hazratbal Shrine in Jammu and Kashmir which escalated the protests across the Indian subcontinent and the relic was recovered on 4 January 1964.

¹⁰ The Himalayan region, Kashmir has been a contestable place between India and Pakistan ever since the Partition. Both the countries claim to have full ownership over the regions. Now, India owns Jammu and some territory of Kashmir and remaining territory of Kashmir lies in current Pakistan.

death in Khulna. He could not get rid of the event of the riot and the brutal killing of his innocent uncle Tridib because of the haunted dream. The narrator states the condition of Robi's dream haunt and how has been living with that memory now. Regarding the haunted dream, Robi says, "[E]ver since it first happened. When I was a child, I used to pray that it would go away: if it had, there would have been nothing else really to remind me of that day. But it wouldn't go; it stayed" (271). Robi may be indicating that it is unlikely to be free from such a traumatic past. As Robi is traumatic because of the Tridib death so are the generations who bear the pain of the loss of their loved ones. He represents the generation of all those victims who have to bear the pain of the partition psychologically. Though the partition was the incident of 1947, the generations of people traumatized because of the consequences even many years after that.

The instances of trauma can be seen as the consequences of the partition. The family members were dislocated and detached from the people and the place where they were born. The longing of Tha'mma who had been detached from her family members for a long time, especially due to the partition of the country, indicates that the trauma of the family disintegration is in the personal lives of the characters. She represents the families whose members were separated due to the partition and its consequences in the aftermath. Her trauma of family disintegration can be seen in the following lines: "There is only one worthwhile thing left for me to do in my life now, she said. And that is to bring the old man home . . . her eyes grew misty at the thought of rescuing her uncle from his enemies and bringing him back where he belonged, to her invented country" (151). The narrator foregrounds that the only objective of Tha'mma is to bring her uncle back home. This intensifies how partition altered the personal lives of the characters traumatizing them with family fragmentation. She calls the people of Pakistan as the enemies and clarifies that the one and only most important job now in her retirement is to bring her uncle back to her new home.

Overall, the analysis validates that the characters in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* were shattered and traumatized when the partition and the consequent socio-political upheavals in the aftermath killed many people, dismantled from the home and country, and haunted their memories with wonderful bygone days. As they neither can live their lives freely in the aftermath of the partition, nor can they forget their terrible past. The characters seem to be trapped in traumatic condition in the aftermath of the partition.

Conclusion

From the above discussion on Ghosh' *The Shadow Lines* in the light of partition legacy, this study concludes that the characters seem to have suffered a lot due to the socio-political instability in the aftermath. The major finding behind the cause of trauma is the death of characters and their relatives. As Tridib and Khalil were killed in the consequent uprising, it is estimated to have been killed many people in the aftermath of the partition, either side of the divided country. For instance, the way Datta Chaudhuri family members were displaced from their own home and country, it is assumed that tens of thousands of people were compelled to live like a refugee when the partition forced the Hindus and Muslims to reside in their new respective territories. Additionally, death and displacement were not only the cause of trauma for all, some people were tormented psychologically when they were haunted with the memories of past. Taken an example Robi who is living far away in the 1980s, but still suffers from the haunted memories of the past. He represents the generation who are living with the trauma of the partition legacy for ages. Overall, the lives of characters shattered when they have neither the family, nor the country, nor anything else that could impart a hope of better life in the aftermath of Indian partition. Although this study could not explore all the reasons

behind the causes of trauma in the characters like that of economic disparity, this study evidently concludes that the reasons behind the shattered lives and trauma in the characters of Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* was the devastating impacts of then political spaces--during and the aftermath of the partition--which has shattered and traumatized the generations even in the aftermath of the partition.

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