

A Looking Glass War: Representation of Communalism in *The Shadow Lines*

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Introduction

When we look back at the history of Indian society in the twentieth century, we find that the ideology of communalism has cast its long shadow. This is also exemplified in the post-colonial writings of Indian fiction in English. Unlike pre- independence fiction, which tends to be marked by a kind of sentimental idealism about Indian nationalism, the post-independence Indian fiction of the eighties takes a more realistic view of Indian reality. As a representative work of post- independence Indian fiction of the eighties, "The Shadow Lines" deals with the theme of communalism in the post colonial India. The communal riots of 1964 and the Mu-I-Mubarak episode are specifically considered in this novel. In depicting the communal riots of post independence Indian sub continent, Ghosh shows how they create social turmoil and divisions in the name of nation, religion and caste.

Communal Riots of 1964

The communal riot of 1964 is presented through the narrator's memory of his suffering. In the novel, the communal riots of 1964 start with the incident when the Grandmother, Mayadebi, Tridib, the protagonist of the novel and May and Robi go to Dhaka in order to bring the old man Jethamoshai and Khalil, the rickshaw driver to India. While they are on their way to India, the Mercedes car in which they set out is attacked by a mob while simultaneously there appears suddenly a rickshaw carrying Khalil and

Jethamoshai which divert the attention of the mob towards them. At that moment May along with Tridib tries to save Jethamoshai and Khalil. As a result, Tridib, Jethamoshai and Khalil are killed. Later on May tells the narrator, "When I got there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They had cut Khalil's stomach open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they'd cut Tridib's throat from ear to ear" (251) The death of a protagonist is the most important event in the novel. The witnessing of Tridib's death leaves a strong imprint on the minds of Robi, May and Grandma. For Robi, this nightmarish memory haunts him all the time and does not allow him to escape, "He trembles like a leaf" (244) From this memory there is no deliverance. However, later he develops a cynical view of the sacrifices after years of experience as an administrator.

Grandmother is irremediably changed after these killings as she develops a vindictive hatred towards Pakistan. She tells the narrator, "We have to kill them before they kill us. We have to wipe them out" (237) and she even wants to donate her blood. She gives away her only gold chain to the funds for the war. May is burdened with guilt that she has been responsible for Tridib's death as it is she who has stepped out of the car, thus provoking Tridib to go near the mob. After seventeen years May is not able to overcome the memory of this ghastly scene and accuses herself of his murder. But later she changes her stand and says that nobody could have touched her as she is an English Memsahib, but Tridib must

have known that he is going to die. She also understands the dynamics of the communal tension peculiar to the Indian sub-continent and concludes that Tridib's death is a sacrifice, that he has given himself up.

Tridib's death remains a mystery to the narrator as he has no word to communicate what really happened. "It lies outside the reaching of my intelligence beyond words It is simply a gap, a hole an emptiness in which there are no words." (218) The narrator's parents are reluctant to speak of Tridib's death and dismiss it as an accident. But the larger implications of the Tridib's death dawns very gradually on the narrator through the years. Initially he is told that Tridib has died in a car accident and later that he is killed. But the real aspect of the tragedy emerges fifteen years later, when the narrator digs out old newspapers to show his doubting colleagues that Hindu-Muslim riots did occur in Bengal in 1964. What those papers reveal is that these riots had first begun in Dhaka and then spread to Calcutta from there. The real cause for the riots is the loss of the holy relic from the Hazratbal Shrine in Kashmir.

Tridib's death can also be renewed as a political act which however is not redemptive. He has saved May and could have returned to the safety of the car himself. It is his plunging into the violent mob that leads to his death. Tridib's political act signifies the death of his concept of ideal freedom. As Anjali Karpe remarks, "The act itself indicates that a single individual can never hope to quell a violent mob or restrain the force of communal strife. Individual valour is insufficient to change the idea of events and a single handed interest is doomed to die out before achieving anything"¹ Tridib's death is presented in the novel simultaneously as a mystery, a needless sacrifice, and a martyrdom.

The irony is that Tridib's death is conveniently forgotten and the murderous frenzy itself disappears from the collective imagination and responsible opinion, vanishing without leaving a trace in the history and bookshelves. In addition, the events like Tridib's death prove that cities like Dhaka and Calcutta, in spite of acquiring separate nationalities, remain closely bound to each other. As the narrator says, "I in Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka, a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other" (233) As Sushila Singh points out, "Tridib's death instead of divorcing two countries brings them together in the image of a looking glass borders"²

Ghosh presents the 1964 communal riots in terms of imagination and memory. Using an unusual narrative technique, Ghosh reveals the gory details of the 1964 riots in bits and pieces as they surface in the narrator's own memory, reports called out from old newspaper, and accounts of Robi and finally of May. The narrator recalls that the day is 10th Jan 1964 and that is the same day when the first cricket test match of 1964 series with England started in Madras. While the newspapers of the time highlight the 1964 cricket series with England, it is the personal experience of the communal riots that remains alive in the narrator's mind. As a school-going boy, the narrator remembers the event when the boys are returning by bus, and a mob hurls stones at it and chases it from its normal route. The narrator notes that he is "Stupefied with fear" (204) a fear that made a lasting and powerful impact on his mind. In the novel, he tries to draw out the wider implication of his sense of fear by placing it in the context of public memory and public history:

That peculiar fear has a texture you can neither forget nor describe. It is like the fear of the victims of an earthquake, of people who have lost faith in the stillness of earth. And yet it is not the same for it is

not comparable to the fear of nature, which is the most universal of human fears, nor to the fear of violence of the state, which is the commonest of modern fears. It is a fear that comes of 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. 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.³ (204)

The fear that the narrator and his bus mates experience is not something unique, but it grips the thousand million people who inhabit the Indian subcontinent and distinguishes them from the rest of the world. It is peculiar to our cultural and political context and sets us apart from the rest of the world. Though the novel has focused on the 1964 communal riots of Indian subcontinent, it implies that the 1984 Delhi riots, the 1987 Meerut riots or in recent times the 1987 Bhagalpur killing follow a similar pattern of suspicion and distrust leading to a sudden outbreak of communal violence and an abiding trauma in the collective imagination of the people of the subcontinent.

The Mu-I-Mubarak Episode

The episode of the theft of the Mu-I-Mubarak, which is also known as "the hair of Prophet Mohammad episode", is emerged as another representation of the role of communalism in post-colonial India. Originally the hair of the Prophet was purchased by a Kashmiri merchant called Khwaja Nur-ud-din in Bijapur of Kamataka in the year 1699 and transported to the valley of Kashmir. Later the relic was installed at the picturesque Hazratbal mosque near Srinagar and every year multitudes of people, Kashmiris of every kind, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists would flock to Hazratbal Shrine on those occasions when the relic was on display. Thus, over the

centuries the shrine became a symbol of the unique and distinctive culture of Kashmir

On 27th December 1963. two hundred and sixty three years after it had been brought to Kashmir, the Mu-I-Mubarak disappeared from its place in the Hazratbal mosque. The spread of the news created wide-spread indignation in Kashmir, bringing life to a standstill. Despite the bitter cold, thousands of people including women, took out black-flag demonstrations from Srinagar to the Hazratbal mosque. Schools, colleges and shops closed down all over the valley and buses and cars disappeared from the streets

But while the situation became very tense, there was no communal disturbance. The newspaper reports read by the narrator indicate that "there was not one single recorded incident of animosity between Kashmiri Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs." (225) There were very few incidents of rioting and the authorities quickly imposed curfew. Even when the incident resulted in riots in the valley, the targets of the rioters were not people neither Hindus nor Muslims nor Sikhs but property identified with the government and the police. The purveyor of sanity was the wise leader Maulana Masoodi," who persuaded the first demonstrators to march with black flags instead of green and drew the various communities of Kashmir together in a collective display of mourning" (226) In fact it was reported that the theft of the relic had brought together the people of Kashmir as never before. This is the real history of this episode which ends with harmony. However, while the theft of the Prophet caused wide-spread indignation but did not disturb communal harmony in Kashmir, it had precisely such a consequence in the rest of the Indian subcontinent. In Pakistan there were meetings and demonstrations in towns and cities in both wings of the country, East and West. The religious authorities declared that the theft of the relic was an attack on the identity of Muslims. The

Pakistani newspapers declared that the theft was part of a deep rooted conspiracy to destroy the spiritual and political hopes and prides of Kashmiris. The Premier of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir declared that the theft was a mad act of some miscreants. In Delhi, the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru appealed for patience and to maintain peace and ordered the Home Ministry to find the missing relic. Fortunately the Mu-I-Mubarak was recovered on 4th January 1964 by the officials of the Central Bureau of Intelligence. This entire episode remained a mystery as to what had happened, and no explanations were given. But the city of Srinagar heaved a sigh of relief. People danced on the streets, there were innumerable thanksgiving meetings and Kashmiri people irrespective of their religion marched together demanding the identity of the accused.

However, a procession-march against the disappearance of the relic turned violent in Dhaka. A couple of lives were lost and the properties of Hindus put to fire. Over the next few days, the riots spread outwards from Khulna into neighboring towns and districts and towards Dhaka. In Calcutta, various rumors were spread, especially the familiar rumor that the trains from Pakistan were arriving packed with corpses. A few Calcutta dailies printed pictures of weeping, stranded Hindu refugees which had a widespread impact as Calcutta came under the cycle

of rioting. The mobs went rampaging through the city, killing Muslims, burning and looting their shops and houses.

Thus the Mu-I-Mubarak episode re-established faith and restored communal harmony in Kashmir valley, but set in motion a cycle of communal riots through out the Indian subcontinent. This incident revealed the contrast between the reaction in the valley and in the rest of the country. The contrast between Kashmir and the rest of the subcontinent has to do with the long standing prevalence of communal harmony in Kashmir and the opposite trend in the rest of the sub-continent, probably because the Kashmiryat identity was also a cementing factor.

References

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