

A STRUGGLE OF SILENCE: SEARCHING FOR HOME AND REALITY BEYOND BORDERS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE SHADOW LINES

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Abstract

In recent years, a sense of belonging has become a critical issue that provokes intense discussion among diasporic authors. Struggling for a sense of belonging, closely associated with issues of history, memory, and borders, reflects the colonized people's current dilemma. In Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, borders considered to be "shadow lines", influence the individual and community. Some individuals revere the borders and feel that they can have a sense of belonging only if they are in their original homeland, while other individuals believe that one can create a sense of home wherever they are. This paper discusses the way in which Ghosh evokes the border in relation to personal and public identity in *The Shadow Lines* and also shows how, by using the imagination with precision, it is possible to create a sense of home and identity.

Keywords: belonging, identity, border, home, imagination, Ghosh

Introduction

In contemporary postcolonial society, the issue of home has gained much interest and debate among literary theorists and diasporic writers. R. Radhakrishnan states in *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location*: "Home then becomes a mode of interpretive in-betweenness, as a form of accountability to more than one location" (1996, pp. xiii-xiv). Rather than just being a location, home then also becomes a place where the diasporic self could solve the problem of "the in-between" and finally find selfhood and a sense of belonging.

According to Sudha Rai, for diasporic authors "the country of exile 'provided a milieu they found lacking at home' with particular emphasis on its 'intellectual life'" (1992, p.1). Furthermore, "[f]or the expatriate writer, more demanding, more sensitive, the loss of home is a traumatic experience" (1992, p.8). Ghosh is an expatriate writer who faces the condition described by Rai as a loss of home. However, home, essential to locating a sense of belonging, is not easily found by these expatriate authors since they moved away from their homeland a long time ago. When these writers realize that they do not belong to the land they moved to, they decide to search for their original home, the sense of "home" that they feel can only be found in their homeland. To conceive a homeland, the colonized people need to confess the loss of it first. For instance, Salman Rushdie, in "Imaginary Homelands" states: "it reminds me that it's my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (1991, p.30). Significantly, he notes that home has been "lost"

which is the reason he seeks for “a home” in his original homeland. It is only through a confrontation with the fact that the original home is elusive, that a new home can be found; only by completing the return journey can a sense of belonging be acquired.

Keya Ganguly highlights the significance of the combination of the issues of identity and home in *States of Exception: Everyday Life and Postcolonial Identity*: “The consolidation of an identity on and through the annals of home takes on a representative as well as an exceptional function, particularly since both terms (“home” and “identity”) are shot through with specificity conjectural anxieties about belonging or not belonging” (2001, p.86). When talking about the construction of a home it is important to acknowledge that identity and home are inseparable issues. This paper discusses the way in which Ghosh evokes the border in relation to personal and public identity in *The Shadow Lines* and also shows how, by using the imagination with precision, it is possible to create a sense of home and identity.

To emphasize the difficulty and ambivalence in searching for a home in postcolonial society, Ghosh divides this novel into two parts: “Going Away” and “Coming Home” to indicate the insider/outsider dilemma that the colonized people face. As Anjali Roy comments, “the headings of the novel’s two sections, aptly sum up the post-colonial condition where, especially for the immigrant, ‘going away’ and ‘coming home’ challenge essentialist notions of belonging and identity” (2000, p.40). When the home is neither here nor there, the importance of imagination in re-assessing history, and of memory in finding one’s home, becomes essential. Ghosh’s nameless protagonist realizes that his nation’s violent past has been erased from public memory. This paper focuses on how borders, though considered shadow lines, influence the individual and the community. Some individuals revere the borders and feel as though they can have a sense of belonging only if they are in their original homeland, while other individuals believe that one can create a sense of home wherever they live.

The Shadow Lines (1988) is a novel that consists of a good combination of opposites: past and present, home and away, and imagination and reality. These opposites are constantly intertwined to give a full and vivid account of the current dilemma of creating a sense of home and belonging. In order to examine Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* in detail, it is necessary to have a brief introduction to the colonial history of India. The violence between the largely Hindu nation of India’s independence from Britain was also accompanied by its partition into two different nations: India and Pakistan, due to the violence between Hindus and Muslims. In Kavita Daiya’s *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender and Postcolonial Nationalism in India*, she raises the question of belonging in that post-colonial and post-partition society, with its violence and riots. Through personal memories of the characters in *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh tells the reader that to belong is to go beyond the constraints of geographical boundaries within the colonial and partition legacies and to imaginatively see one’s place in the world.

Rushdie, a prominent diasporic author, describes the particular context experienced by diasporic writers in “Imaginary Homelands”: “our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (1991, p.10). Ghosh is doubtlessly one of the authors who face this situation. As Hind Wassef says in “Beyond the Divide: History and National Boundaries in the Work of Amitav Ghosh”, diasporic authors, like Ghosh, face a particular predicament:

If [Ghosh] is a new-comer to the diaspora, he and most other post-colonial Third World writers have the roots of it perhaps since early education when they became versed in the language of the colonizer and speak and write about their 'homeland' in that 'foreign' language. Any attempt to reconstruct the past as they perceive it must incorporate the colonial experience as part of that broken mirror image. (1998, p.78)

Wassef believes that diasporic authors, like Ghosh, unavoidably refer to the colonial experience when trying to reconstruct the past. This is because "[to] understand and experience most of the artificiality of national borders and the cracks they have put through the past [...] they must construct the past and present as cracked and as fragmented if they are to do justice to their real conditions" (1998, p.78). In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh gives the narrator a journey through a "foreign language" to construct a past within colonial experience and the traumas caused by Partition in order to indicate the dilemma and struggle of locating a home and a sense of belonging in post-colonial society.

At this juncture, it would be illuminating to take a look at Ghosh's opinion of fiction and nonfiction. In an interview he states: "When I write nonfiction, I'm really writing about character and people, and when I'm writing fiction, I'm doing the same thing. So that shift isn't as great as it might be".¹ So, regardless of whether he is writing fiction or nonfiction, Ghosh aims to write about "real" people and events. In *The Shadow Lines*, he creates characters and events to depict what actually happened in the past. Ghosh left India as a young man for England and the United States and till today he and his family still live in England. As a diasporic author he states, "my family's history has undoubtedly played a large part in opening my eyes to these events for my family was divided not only by the Partition of India and Pakistan, but also by the Japanese conquest of Burma in 1942".² It is perhaps for this reason that Ghosh writes about the riots caused by Partition in *The Shadow lines*, as well as the wars between countries, such as the India-China war, because he believes "the history of the India diaspora in Southeast Asia", is "an epic history, a very extraordinary history".³ In *The Shadow Lines*, history is re-visited through Ghosh's innovative method which will be discussed in detail later in this paper. According to Bill Ashcroft, "The key function of the post-colonial interpolation of history is to subvert the unquestioned status of the 'scientific record' by re-inscribing the 'rhetoric' of event" (2001, p.92). In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh aptly highlights the key role of interpolating post-colonial history and by so doing, he brings the ignored past back to the stage by interrogating previously unquestioned historical records. My discussion of searching for a home and a sense of belonging will concentrate on certain characters and events in *The Shadow Lines*.

Home and reality beyond borders

As an exiled diasporic author, V.S.Naipaul states that "India is for me a difficult country. It isn't my home and cannot be my home; and yet I cannot reject it or to be indifferent to it, I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close and too far" (1979, pp.8-9). Naipaul's difficulty in finding a home in contemporary society is echoed by both the narrator's grandmother, Tha'mma, and cousin, Ila, in *The Shadow Lines*. Tha'mma is born and raised in Dhaka. After marriage, she follows her husband to Burma, and migrates to Calcutta after her husband dies, where she spends the rest of her life. Whereas Ila,

who is the only daughter of a diplomat and spends all her time traveling from country to country, never regards India as her country. For her, home and a sense of belonging can only be found away from India, more precisely, in England.

The Shadow Lines is a novel concerned with two families, one in Calcutta and the other in London, and is a novel about borders: borders among individuals, families, nations, and between imagination and reality. The title, *The Shadow Lines*, is a metaphor that illustrates the borders between home and away, and self and other. The boundaries, like shadowy lines, are blurred and intangible. However, the intangible lines influence the characters greatly. In talking about borders in *The Shadow Lines*, we also need to categorize the types of borders in this text. One is the physical border which divides the countries of India and Pakistan. It is also the border that separates Tha'mma from her old house in Dhaka. The other is the imaginary borders, one of which separates her own family. In Tha'mma's house in Dhaka, a wall is erected to separate members of the family which in turn causes distance and alienation among family members. Ghosh also shows that imaginary borders are cause for much hostility and violence among nations.

First, I will talk about the physical borders between India and Pakistan. Tha'mma, who believes in borders, knows the impact they bring to her life. She stays away from Dhaka for years, but finally returns to Dhaka as a visitor. Before the trip, she asks her family whether the borders separating Bangladesh from the rest of the subcontinent could be seen from the plane. Aware of the impact of borders, Tha'mma believes that the borders are tangible. If the borders cannot be seen, then how could the people know that they exist? There should be "trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land" because "if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? [...] Where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before" (Ghosh 2005, pp.148-149). These borders have a great impact. The first thing Tha'mma says when she arrives in Dhaka is "Where's Dhaka? I can't see Dhaka" (Ghosh 2005, p.189). She could not persuade herself that she was actually in Dhaka because "in any case her Dhaka has long since vanished into the past" (Ghosh 2005, p.189). All the sounds and smells of Dhaka which have been in Tha'mma's mind "was the city that had surrounded their old houses" and she is not able to accept that this Dhaka was once her beloved home. At this point in the novel, her sense of home and identity are still shaped by her past. As mentioned previously, home and identity are inseparable issues. If the colonized people find it difficult to find a home because their identity has been shaped by the colonization, then Tha'mma's situation can be easily understood. After being exiled from Dhaka for so many years, she feels like a foreigner in Dhaka: "where is Dhaka" (Ghosh 2005, p.191)? She is not aware that she is indeed considered a foreigner in her own country. The borders have turned her into an outsider. Tridib tells her: "But you are a foreigner here as May – much more than May, for look at her, she doesn't even need a visa to come here" (Ghosh 2005, p.191).

Tha'mma eventually acknowledges her identity as a foreigner, but still denies the landscape of Dhaka: "But whatever you may say, this isn't Dhaka" (Ghosh 2005, p.191). Her alienation from this country drives her to deny the landscape, so familiar to her, but now no longer recognizable. According to Roy, Tha'mma's "search for the pre-partition Dhaka of her childhood and youth is projected as a nostalgic return home" and her "attempt to identify herself as a native Dhakaian from the older parts of the city, who is contemptuous of the alien inhabitations of new residential localities, demonstrates

her amnesia to her new Indian identity when confronted with the more compelling claims of an older solidarity" (2000, p.39).

There is another female character in *The Shadow Lines* who crosses national borders to find a home and a sense of belonging. However, compared to Tha'mma, Ila's feelings towards India are very different. Ila regards the white men's culture as being superior. She chooses to live in London because she feels free there, a freedom she fails to find in India. As the daughter of a diplomat, Ila has the chance to live overseas and eventually marries her childhood crush, Nick Price. Once, in Calcutta, she persuades the narrator and his uncle, Robi, to go to a nightclub in Grand Hotel, where Ila invites a stranger to dance with her. Robi stops her by punching the man, because he insists that what Ila has done, such as approaching, talking to, and dancing with a male stranger, is not the proper behavior of a girl. He tells Ila: "You can do what you like in England, [...] [but] here there are certain things you cannot do. That's our culture; that's how we live" (Ghosh 2005, p.87). Ila does not share the same values as the narrator or Robi. There are people who believe that they should discard the colonizers' values and hold tightly to their own. Robi belongs to this group. Ila defends herself by saying: "Do you see now why I've chosen to live in London? Do you see? It's only because I want to be free" (Ghosh 2005, p.87). Freedom in her opinion is: "Free of [India]!" and "Free of [Indian] bloody culture" (Ghosh 2005, p.87). However, Tha'mma holds a different opinion from Ila and she says: "It's not freedom she wants, [...] She wants to be left alone to do what she pleases; that's all that any whore would want" (Ghosh 2005, pp.87-88).

In her paper "Is Cosmopolitanism Not For Women? Migration in Qurratulain Hyder's *Sita Betrayed* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*," Ania Spyra asserts that

what we know about Ila, and other women in the novel, is a fantasy constructed by the narrator himself, especially since he attaches primary value to the imagination throughout the novel. His apotheosis of invention of places and people makes him divide his world into those who, like Tridib and himself, imagine rather than act, and those who act without imagination or understanding, like Ila, Tha'mma, and in some measure also May Price. (2006, p.15)

According to Spyra, the female characters constructed through the narrator's voice are more active in searching for truth and a home. Ila's going to London, May's coming to India, and Tha'mma's trip to Dhaka all demonstrate that the female characters in the text move beyond borders to pursue what they want. "The main axis of difference is constructed along the attitudes to travel and home, or rootlessness or belonging, in which it is the narrator and Tridib who stay or return home and are rooted in their nation and history, whereas the women are migrant and in search of belonging" (Spyra 2006, p.15). For Ila, reality lies beyond borders, particularly in London. She claims only by getting away from India can she achieve freedom. But Ila does not find a home or a sense of belonging in London. The reality of London for her is alienation and displacement: "Ila walking alone in a drizzle under that cold grey sky," she walks alone "because Nick Price was ashamed to be seen by his friends, walking home with an Indian" (Ghosh 2005, p.76). For all her talk on the freedom she has in the West, Ila still feels alienated beyond the borders of India and does not feel at home in England either.

The values of the white man in post-colonial societies are sometimes considered as being better than native values. We can see that when the values of the colonizer and the colonized clash, some of the colonized will try to adhere to the colonizer's standards, as

Ila has done. But there are people who regard the values of the colonizer as trash; for Tha'mma, Ila "doesn't belong there" (Ghosh 2005, p.76). In London, Ila faces the same difficulties in finding a home and a sense of belonging. She prefers living in a world she has created for herself. For example, she once tells the narrator that a rich, popular boy was her boyfriend, but what the narrator sees is the same boy holding two blond white girls in a picture. After Ila realises that he has seen that picture, she tears it. She locates a sense of belonging for herself in British society by inventing her own stories: "I've just rearranged things a little. If we pretend it's a house, it'll be a house. We can choose to build a house wherever we like" (Ghosh 2005, p.69). In addition, she creates an alter-ego in that house: Magda, who "has nice golden hair", "blue eyes", and "goes to school everyday" (Ghosh 2005, p.70). Magda is indeed an illusion Ila creates for herself. Being Indian, Ila does not have golden hair or blue eyes. And we will discover later that she stopped going to school after an incident. All of the traits Magda possesses are that which Ila desires, including the fact that everyone in school wants to be Magda's friend. In reality, Ila herself is alienated in the English school.

Magda's story is a reflection of Ila's own experience in school. In Ila's words, Denise is an ugly, dirty, and big-sized girl, who has always been jealous of Magda. Once Denise attempts to hurt Magda, Nick Price shows up in time and saves her. Ila's story indicates her eagerness to be saved and noticed by Nick, the boy she loves. It is also an indication of her outsider status in that society and her yearning to be on the inside. Years later, the narrator discovers that "Nick didn't stop to help Ila. He ran all the way back. He used to run back home from school early those days. [...] I think Nick didn't want to be seen with Ila. Ila didn't have any friends in school, you see. Perhaps it was just that she was shy. But after she began going to school Nick used to come home earlier than he used to" (Ghosh 2005, p.74). According to Roy, "Ila's story about Nick and Magda shows that it is not 'just a story' but a most traumatic reality blurring the distinction between life and storytelling" (2000, p.41). For Ila, the boundary between real life and storytelling is blurred by a sense of alienation and displacement in London. Excluded from the white men's society, she builds an identity – Magda – to indicate her eagerness to belong. In a way, both Tha'mma and Ila fail to find a home and a sense of belonging in postcolonial and post-partition societies. The reality of the boundaries is that of loss and alienation. Both Ila and Tha'mma revere the borders, but fail to see that geographical boundaries do not necessarily foster a sense of belonging.

'Imagination with precision'

Although borders are considered to be shadows, they possess great influence over people whose lives are defined by them, such as Tha'mma and Ila. Conversely, the male characters in the novel, like the narrator and his uncle, Tridib, believe in imagination, invention, and the irrationality of boundaries. They ignore the great impact and influence of borders, choosing instead to make connections between imagination and a sense of belonging. In this section, I will discuss how Tridib grants the narrator a view of the world through "imagination with precision" (Ghosh 2005, p.24).

By this, Tridib means that the narrator must see in detail the connectivity between people and events in his imagination as this would lead to greater truths, because "Tridib was an archaeologist; he was not interested in fairylands: the one thing he wanted to teach me, he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision" (Ghosh

2005, p.24). Tridib and the nameless narrator both ignore geographical borders, and the superficial differences between countries, and instead learn to imagine the world in a broader, more connected way. By doing so, they find an alternative way of being and belonging through imagining and inventing in a post-colonial and post-Partition society. The importance of the power of imagination in locating a sense of belonging is a dominant theme in *The Shadow Lines*.

According to the narrator:

I was a child, and like all the children around me, I grew up believing the truth of the precepts that were available to me: I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality. The relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separated realities was war or friendship. (Ghosh 2005, p.219).

He says that he believed in borders when he was young. Geographical borders separate nations and make a difference. He also asserts that there are other truths and realities in countries beyond one's borders. But years later, after he realizes the existence of a historical event, i.e. the riots in Dhaka and Calcutta which were erased from public memory, he comes to understand that borders also generate ignorance and silence.

With reference to geographical borders, Tha'mma says that "It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they're a nation because they're drawn their borders with blood" (Ghosh 2005, p.76). She highlights the necessity and influence of borders. The borders draw lines between nations and separate people from each other. Borders, established by lives and blood, are not as influential to the narrator however. "It is [the fear] 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" (Ghosh 2005, p.200). For him, it is the fear and the loneliness that arises from separating nations from nations and people from people. If the war between India and Pakistan is a war between oneself and one's image in the mirror, then Dhaka and Calcutta mirror each other and the two riots that caused a huge impact in the narrator's life are linked and reflect each other. When the narrator tries to put pieces of his memories together to figure out how Tridib was killed in Dhaka, he suddenly recalls a scene on the bus ride after school. At that time, the bus was being chased by a mob who attempted to attack it. That street, which he passes every day, suddenly becomes unfamiliar to him. While he was on a bus, the narrator saw a rickshaw in the street when the driver tried to escape the mob. At the same time in Dhaka, the narrator learns from the memories of others that Tridib was killed. Here Ghosh aptly connects two riots together with the image of a rickshaw. The two riots mirror each other through this image. The narrator says: "I could not have perceived that there was something more than an incidental connection between those events of which I had a brief glimpse from the windows of that bus, in Calcutta, and those other events in Dhaka, simply because Dhaka was in another country" (Ghosh 2005, p.214). At this point, the narrator singles out the role of borders again. Because

Dhaka is a city in another country, separated by geographical boundaries, he should not have perceived any connection between those two riots.

However, it seems that even international borders could not stop him from making a connection between the two cities or countries, because as the narrator says, "fifteen years after his death, Tridib watched over me, as I tried to learn the meaning of distance" (Ghosh 2005, p.227). In learning the meaning of distance, the narrator now tries to imagine with precision like Tridib always taught him to, as was seen in the case of the sloping roof in Colombo:

the pattern they made if one wheeled in the sky above them, how sharply they rose if one looked at them from below, the mossiness of their tiles when one saw them close up, from a first-floor window, and soon I felt that I too could see how much more interesting they were than the snake and the lizard, in the very ordinariness of their difference. (Ghosh 2005, p.29)

Given that, he still feels that "the sights Tridib saw in his imagination were infinitely more detailed, more precise than anything I would ever see" (Ghosh 2005, p.29). More importantly, Tridib tells the narrator that

one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carries one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. (Ghosh 2005, p.29)

The only way to imagine a place is by ignoring the borders of difference, and striving towards a place where there is no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. It is through this method that the narrator links the riots in Dhaka and Calcutta respectively. Through his true desire to unmask Tridib's miserable death, the narrator makes a connection between two riots and two cities. Here the idea of distance is firstly represented by that which exists between oneself and one's image in the mirror. For Tridib, the border between oneself and one's image in the mirror is the only thing that separates one from their own image. Although Calcutta and Dhaka are two cities separated by international boundaries, they also simultaneously reflected each other the very moment the riots took place.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh reveals the historical truth of the riots that happened in both Dhaka and Calcutta in 1964, which were ignored or forgotten by the public as an example to allude to all the riots and violence that occurred during that specific time. With reference to the meaning of distance that Tridib grants to the narrator, it is necessary to first examine their relationship.

Remaining nameless and faceless, the narrator's own identity therefore becomes constituted in part by his role as the teller of the memory of Tridib's story. That the narrator brings together his image with Tridib's image suggests that Tridib's story is also the narrator's story, joined to and constituted by Tridib's story in the manner of absent image. (Yusin 2007, pp.180-181).

According to Jennifer Yusin, the nameless narrator is also constructing his own identity in the narrative of his memory of Tridib. Since their images mirror each other, Tridib's story also includes that of the narrator's. Although Tridib has been but an absent image in the narrator since he was eight years old, he gives the narrator a pair of eyes to see a world without borders. Tridib's imagination allows the narrator to find his way through the streets of England despite never being there before, because he "can only attempt to understand himself through his memory of Tridib, the very memories that ultimately implicate him within a history and within a story that he never actually experienced" (Yusin 2007, p.181).

More importantly, Tridib's circle on the map tells the narrator of the meaning of distance:

They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern...when they discovered that they had created not a separation, but a yet-undiscovered irony – the irony that killed Tridib: the simple fact that there had been a moment in the 4000-year-old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines – so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free – out looking-glass border. (Ghosh 2005, p.228)

It is through this that the narrator understands the irony of borders between nations. Dhaka and Calcutta are two cities near each other that once belonged to the same country. The drawing of borders has caused violence in both cities, which ultimately kills Tridib and leads to conflict between Hindus and Muslims. Moreover, the circle Tridib draws on the atlas teaches the narrator to imagine a world beyond the spaces of his life, across geographical and other physical borders. For example, even though "Chiang Mai in Thailand was much nearer to Calcutta than Delhi is; that Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is" and "Hanoi and Chungking are nearer Khulna than Srinagar, and yet did the people of Khulna care at all about the fate of the mosque in Vietnam and South China (a mere stone's throw away)" (Ghosh 2005, p.227). The two riots challenge the idea of geographical lines with fixed borders and the idea of distance. The difficulty in making a clear distinction between Calcutta and Dhaka indicates not only the blurred and fluid geographical borders but also the irony of distance which killed Tridib. By reading the circle on the atlas, the narrator follows Tridib's way of seeing life and imagining the world: by ignoring both the fixed geographical borders and the irony of distance, while at the same time discovering new ways of seeing reality and diversity, which evoke possible and alternative ways of belonging in contemporary postcolonial society.

Transforming personal memory into history

Tracing back his memories to 1964, the narrator says:

Every word I write about these events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence. It is a struggle I am destined to lose-have already lost-for even after all these years I do not know where within me, in which corner of my world, this silence lies. All I

know of it is what it is not. It is not, for example, the silence of an imperfect memory. (Ghosh 2005, p. 213)

When the narrator pursues his doctorate in London, he tries to find out the recorded events of the riots which happened both in Dhaka and Calcutta that year. However, there is no record about these riots in the newspapers. They have been erased from the minds of the public. Thus, while narrating his memories, he feels he is fighting with silence, such as Tridib's death. Ghosh evokes this ignored past of India through the memories of his characters. Roy believes that "[a]s a novel of memory, *The Shadow Lines* prefers memory's truth to recorded history to explore alternative means of documenting events" (2000, p.43). Therefore, it is a novel in which Ghosh transforms the unrecorded historical truth into personal memories, which may also be considered as a struggle with silence.

Memory plays an essential role in *The Shadow Lines*. Ghosh utilizes the narrator's memory in order to depict the historical events in Dhaka and Calcutta. For example, the narrator tries to prove to his friends that Tridib's death was caused by the riots in Dhaka. He goes to the library to search for newspapers covering that time. However, he fails to find records of the riots. In other words, the riot only lives in his personal memories. The blankness surrounding that violent event is just as the narrator says: "[n]obody knows, nobody can ever know, not even in memory, because there are moments in time that are not knowable" (Ghosh 2005, p.68).

Referring to these little known events, the narrator recalls Ila's words: "Well of course there are famines and riots and disaster, 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, nothing that's really remembered" (Ghosh 2005, p.102). To Ila, compared to the revolutions and World Wars, these national riots seem to be less important. Because they are local events, they do not gain the world's attention and that is the reason they are not remembered or recorded. Ghosh "focuses on this incident to unmask the distortions and suppressions in nationalist histories, to tell the untold stories" (Roy 2000, p.45). To bring the suppressed history back to the stage, Ghosh resorts to the narrator's voice to access these little known local events that could not be found in public records. By doing so, he "challenges the dominant discourse of both imperialism and nationalism in banishing local history to oblivion" (Roy 2000, p.45). To challenge the dominant power of historical records, Ghosh discloses the banished history by transforming it into personal memories. In *The Shadow Lines*, he tells stories through the narrator's memory to illustrate past events in order to appropriate history. In other words, he transforms the history which has been ignored into living events by the power of the narrator's memory. Ashcroft's *Post-Colonial Transformation* discusses historical narratives. He says that post-colonial narrations of history can be contradictory because when the authors aim to describe the experience of colonial history, they also tend to deny it because the history is the narrative of the imperial voice (2001, p.98). He also argues that by denying the history conceived by the white man, "what kind of story [the colonized] might replace it with are crucial to the self-representation of colonized people" (Ashcroft 2001, p.83). In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh does not fully deny the history recorded by the colonizer, or conceive another new version of the colonized. Instead he describes the experience of colonial history in a narrative of a subaltern voice which is a version of history which has been ignored by recorded history and public memory.

In talking about the part of history that has been intentionally ignored in post-colonial studies, Ashcroft also says that “the problem here is that in history, as in other discursive formations, the post-colonial exists outside representation of the past. The remedy is not ‘re-insertion’ but ‘re-vision’; not the re-insertion of the marginalized into representation but the appropriation of a method, the re-vision of the temporality of events” (2001, p.98). Ghosh’s method of representing the ignored history is not to add any other stories, but to review past events from another angle – from the view point of the insider, the person(s) who experienced these events. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh wants to represent history that has been ignored. He does this through the power of memory, whereby the rediscovery of lost history is also a means to achieve a sense of identity and belonging.

Ghosh’s narrator in *The Shadow Lines* tells stories concerned with his family. Tridib, the narrator’s uncle, plays a key role in retracing history. The section titled “Going Away” starts with the following sentence: “In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father’s aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib” (Ghosh 2005, p.3). Tridib then plays a central role in the narrator’s journey through memory. The narrator liked to listen to Tridib. For Tha’mma, “time was like a toothbrush: it went mouldy if it wasn’t used” and the wasted time “begins to stink”, whereas Tridib “never seemed to use time, but his time didn’t stink” (Ghosh 2005, p.4). Although Tridib’s time stopped for good in the riots in Dhaka which took his life, “[he] gives his legacy to the protagonist-narrator who then actively seeks to complete and reconstruct the story, or history, of his family and, by extension, a history of the nation” (Wassef 1998, p.79).

When talking about Indian diasporic authors, Rushdie argues that “[s]ometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, provide us with such angles” (1991, p.15). Ghosh shares the same diasporic background with Rushdie. By migrating from India to England and staying in London, Ghosh likewise writes about India and Indians from a distance. But the geographical distance, according to Rushdie, is useful in bringing about a new angle to access forgotten or little known events in Indian history, by bringing to the fore representations of local history that was considered as unimportant. By doing so, Ghosh unmask India’s unrecorded history within personal attitudes and sentiments.

Roy comments that

Ghosh exploits personal reminiscence to replicate the workings of memory in ‘remembered’ histories. Memory of public events in private memory, which colours and distorts them in accordance with personal biases and priorities, is used by Ghosh to call attention to the selective amnesia of the recorded history of Indian nationalism to all that ran counter to its narrative. (2000, p.43)

According to Roy, Ghosh does not only depict the forgotten public events, but also embellishes them with personal opinions. Ghosh not only discloses the covered history, the riots in the streets, but adds personal discriminations and insights to reflect the version of reality and truth that the colonized people want to represent. In this case, Tha’mma’s classmate is an example. A shy and bearded boy, who was a member of one of the secret terrorist societies that aimed to assassinate the British officers and

policemen, was arrested by the police one day in the classroom. Tha'mma, instead of being frightened, used to dream of him and conjure up his face many years later. She tells the narrator and Tridib that she wishes she could have killed the English magistrate who the shy boy was supposed to assassinate. She says that "It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free" (Ghosh 2005, p.39). Tha'mma's memories added with her preference indicate the space the colonized people need in order to imagine their victory of freedom. For her, the longing for independence from Britain and victory against China favor her version of truth and reality. Indeed we can see from this incident how Ghosh transforms the colonial and Partition legacies, like the riot, into personal memories. "The silence of national history is reproduced in the secrecy, the gaps and the disjunctures punctuating the reconstruction of the event in the narrator's mind" (Roy 2000, p.46).

Conclusion

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh creates a narrator through whom readers access post-colonial, and pre- and post-Partition India, to unmask the riots and suppression in nationalist history. The borders drawn by the Partition blur the concept of home. The aim of going across the borders to find a home and a sense of belonging ends in failure, proving the difficulty of finding a home beyond borders. Meanwhile, the legacies of colonialism and Partition establish imaginary borders among people as well. While some of the colonized prefer imperialist values to their own, they also go beyond national borders to the white man's society in order to search for a home. But the alienation beyond the borders drives them, like Ila, to imagine a place in which they could feel a sense of belonging. The method used by Ghosh to retrieve a sense of belonging validates the need for colonized and diasporic people to move between geographical borders, if not only from center to periphery, but from reality to imagination. Like the narrator says "people like my grandmother, [...] have no home but in memory" (Ghosh 2005, p.190). As quoted in the very beginning of this chapter, Tridib insists: "we had to try because the alternative wasn't blankness-it only meant that if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free from other people's inventions" (Ghosh 2005, p.31). For Tridib, telling stories of his own invention and imagination is a good way to be set free, to access the alternative side of the so-called truth. At the same time, Tridib also teaches the narrator to locate a sense of belonging by imagining with precision beyond the limits of borders. As highlighted in the previous chapters, in contemporary post-colonial society, when a home and a sense of belonging are difficult to retrieve, some diasporic authors (or their protagonists) resort to the power of the imagination. This is what the narrator and Tridib attempt to do when they desire a sense of belonging. More importantly, Ghosh uses the method of the appropriation of history to free national histories from official versions, and thereby transforming history into personal memories which creates spaces of belonging.

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Notes

- ¹ Yang Jia is a Tutor at the Foreign Language Department, Pass College of Chongqing Technology and Business University, China.
- ¹ See, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb5270/ai_n28935164/tag=content;col1 p. 6
- ² See, http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm?author_number=568 p.
- ³ See, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb5270/ai_n28935164/tag=content;col1 p.6