Haunting Narratives and The Legacy of Trauma in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

This article examines the trauma of communal violence as depicted in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988). The narrative centres on two traumatic episodes of catastrophic events that upend the lives of the anonymous narrator and his family: the Dhaka and Calcutta riots in late 1963 and early 1964 that erupted after the theft of the holy relic of Prophet Mohammed (a strand of his beard) from the Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar, in present-day Jammu and Kashmir. By situating these events within the historical spiral of violence that has scarred the Indian subcontinent since colonial imperialism, this article aims to offer a detailed analysis of the ways in which the testimony of these traumatic occurrences is articulated in the novel, and how the belated (Caruth, 1995; 1996; 1997) recognition of the invisible thread connecting the two episodes of violence can be traced to the historical, psychological and collective negotiation of overwhelming (Felman, Laub, 1992) trauma triggered by ethno-religious upheavals. Furthermore, it explores the daunting challenge of articulating such trauma without rupturing the delicate patterns of individual and communal consciousness, given the paucity of an adequate lexicon to capture its magnitude.

Keywords: Trauma studies, Communal violence, Memory and narrative, Hauntology, Rumour and silence, South-asian Literature.

1
The endless spiral:
Memory, language, and the unspeakable

Forged in the fires of communal upheaval that engulfed India following Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (2005b) constitutes a profound engagement with the nature of trauma. At the time, while he was still busy writing his debut novel, *The Circle of Reason* (2005a), Ghosh recalled the harrowing anti-Hindu pogroms he had witnessed as a child in Dhaka in 1964. This sudden resurgence of traumatic memories drove the creative process of his subsequent novel *The Shadow Lines*, in which he explored the cyclical patterns of collective conflicts and memories that burdened his personal and shared history:

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the novel has been studied from the perspective of trauma studies, as an attempt to move beyond the trauma of 1984 Delhi riot, which recalled Dhaka 1964, which in turn recalled the 1947 Partition trauma. Indeed, all these episodes are offshoots of the India-Pakistan Partition (Adami *et al.*, 2020, p. 13).

While stylistic and tonal differences exist between Ghosh's first two novels, the evocative shift of imagery from circles to shadow lines in the titles indicates a growing awareness of how trauma eludes straightforward trajectories. The endless progression of the spiral, with its continuous inward and outward motion, seems an apt metaphor for the nameless narrator's own journey through the fragmented landscapes of memory in *The Shadow Lines.* Just as the spiral returns to its point of origin while simultaneously expanding outwards, the narrator continually circles back to the traumatic events of his past, re-examining the meaning of the shards gleaned from his recollections against the expansive canvas of historical events.

Similar to this spiralling movement, the novel's non-linear narrative structure interweaves disparate temporal and perspectival threads, reflecting the meandering nature of memory and the challenges involved in constructing a coherent narrative in the aftermath of trauma (LaCapra, 2001). Ghosh attempts to formulate a «poetics» (Adami *et al.*, 2020, p. 12) capable of capturing the subtle nuances that characterise the traumatic experience, which is often imbued with disorienting and oneiric qualities. Like a recurring dream, the tenacious grip of memories of violence transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, disrupting any linear narrative of history and identity. At the same time, he confronts the fundamental aporias of language when it comes to expressing the multifarious dimensions of trauma and its entanglement with historical forces. To navigate the treacherous terrain of memory, language and meaning, one must grapple with the unspeakable. The narrator's struggle with silence and his inability to fully articulate the horrors he has experienced emphasises the inadequacy of national narratives to encapsulate the chaotic and senseless nature of violence. Indeed, while Ghosh's approach shares common ground with trauma theorists such as Urvashi Butalia (2000), Dominick LaCapra (2001), and Gyanendra Pandey (2001) in advocating for the articulation of traumatic experiences as a pathway to healing, it simultaneously engages with a more nuanced understanding of trauma's temporal and phenomenological dimensions. Specifically, the concept of working through, as articulated by LaCapra and based on Freudian psychoanalysis, posits that confronting and actively addressing traumatic memories is essential to mitigating their lasting effects. This process, as opposed to repression or avoidance, enables individuals to integrate traumatic experiences into their narratives, thereby fostering a sense of agency and facilitating recovery. In contrast yet complementary to this view, Ghosh's narrative also aligns with Cathy Caruth's (1995; 1996; 1997) conceptualisation of trauma as characterized by 'belatedness', highlighting how traumatic events, by their very nature, disrupt fundamental cognitive and linguistic frameworks, rendering them initially unassimilable. Resulting from the property of trauma to dismantle the core beliefs that

structure a person's understanding of the world around them, this belatedness signifies a delayed manifestation of the effects of trauma, with the full impact of the experience only being realised retrospectively, often through intrusive flashbacks or other forms of re-experiencing. Following this theoretical approach, latency in Ghosh's novel reveals that the experience of trauma is not confined to the temporal, but, as Felman and Laub (1992) argue, highlights its spatial and phenomenological dimensions, its capacity to transcend the immediate psychological experience and perceptual capacities of the individual as a gap or void in collective and socio-political memory and understanding. As Gautam argues, Ghosh addresses « the silence of official history » and offers a « novelistic revisionist history » (Gautam, 2021, p. 263) that challenges mainstream accounts and foregrounds the previously suppressed or overlooked dimensions of traumatic experience.

2
Whispers in the shadows and the origin of violence

The traumatic events around which the novel is centred are the Hindu-Muslim riots that broke out in East Pakistan and India during 1963 and 1964. The trigger for these communal outbreaks of violence was the alleged theft of a revered Islamic relic – the beard of the Prophet Muhammad – from the Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar, nestled in the disputed region of contemporary Jammu and Kashmir. The disappearance of this sacred relic on 27 December, 1963, sparked protests across East Pakistan, reverberating across the subcontinent, eventually reaching Calcutta. The initial act of outrage sent shockwaves through society and exposed the fault lines within communal relations. Romola Sanyal (2014) notes that the East Pakistan protests were a response to perceived sacrilege, whereas Calcutta's unrest had a more complex aetiology. It stemmed not from a targeted grievance but from a generalised fear of inter-communal violence spilling over the border. Crucially, it lacked the meticulous planning and purposive goals characteristic of earlier instances of agitation in the city, highlighting the convoluted and often unpredictable ways in which communal tensions and anxieties can metastasise and spread, even in places geographically removed from the triggering event.

The profound significance of religious relics in the lives of Kashmiris is essential to a full understanding of the factors that led to these clashes. A land of spiritual resonance, Kashmir is known as Pir-i-Wair, or the valley of saints. Temples and shrines dedicated to different faiths are scattered across the landscape, reflecting its rich and syncretic religious heritage. Pirzada Amin (2013) points out that the Hazratbal mosque is an important psychosocial sanctuary. Kashmir is located at the northernmost reaches of the Indian subcontinent and occupies a precarious geopolitical position as a contested borderland between India, China and Pakistan. In this volatile context, local belief ascribes a potent sanctity to the mosque that radiates outwards, enveloping visitors in a palpable aura of blessing (Kanth, 2018), a beacon of stability capable of healing

spiritual wounds and providing emotional respite to those seeking refuge from the chill winds of the political and ethnic strife that plagues the region. The theft of the Prophet Muhammad's hair was a sacrilegious act fanning the embers of ethnic cleansing. The storm of speculation was hardly quelled by its swift recovery, announced on Radio Kashmir at 6.15 pm on 4 January. Instead, the incident left an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust long after the initial crisis had subsided. Numerous rumours drifted through the collective consciousness, fuelling conspiracy theories that implicated both the Pakistani and Indian governments in a web of intrigue surrounding the disappearance of the artefact. This highlighted how fragile trust is and how easily it can be undermined by underlying geopolitical tensions.

The suspicions that embroiled Pakistan in the matter stemmed from the belief that, by spreading the narrative that the theft was orchestrated at the behest of the Indian government, Pakistan could stoke the flames of anti-Indian sentiment in Kashmir, and use the incident as a political leverage to bolster their ambitions in the disputed territory (Bose, 2003). Conversely, suspicions arose that the Indian government was trying to destabilise Muslims. By muddying the communal waters, the Indian authorities could weaken Muslim solidarity and make them more vulnerable to centralisation. The disappearance of the revered relic left a void of spirituality and symbolism that, like an empty throne, invited the proliferation of competing narratives, rumours and conspiracy theories that fuelled existing ethnic tensions. Similar to religious belief systems (Burns, 2008), rumours provide frameworks for interpreting trauma and injustice and serve as scaffolding upon which individuals construct meaning and value. They provide a lens through which seemingly meaningless suffering can be understood and integrated into a larger existential narrative. This coping mechanism illustrates why rumours are resilient in the face of conflicting information and disconfirming evidence. Particularly in times of disruption, they allow people to reinterpret events to make them emotionally consistent and psychologically balanced, rather than having to adapt their beliefs to new evidence. Unfortunately, when rumours become entangled with ethnic conflict, the resulting polarisation can lead to increased hostility and aggression towards out-groups. Once nurtured, rumours can become self-sustaining and no longer serve the community. Like wildfire, they can spread uncontrollably, engulfing everything in their path.

3
Beyond the visible:
Shadow narratives and the battle over geography

In *The Shadow Lines*, the spectre of violence haunts the narrative long before the central trauma of the theft of the relic and the ensuing 1963-64 riots, a time when «pro-Partition campaign[s] forced Hindus to vacate their ancestral homes in East Bengal so that those spaces could be filled up by Muslims – in return for a Hindu majority state (West Bengal) that would remain in India» (Chaudhuri, 2020, p. 32). The internal

conflicts of the Bose family in Dhaka reflect the broader social tensions and fractured political landscape of pre-partition Bengal. The decision to build a wall through their house, which turned into a battleground for unresolved grievances and deep-seated animosities, is symptomatic of the emotional and self-serving barriers that foreshadow the impending cleaving of Bengal.

Through the seedbed of Tha'mma's recollections, the narrator's grandmother, we are transported to the late 1920s, a time when the revolutionary fervour of clandestine organisations such as Anushilan and Jugantar, often branded as 'terrorist' by the British Raj, eroded the veneer of imperial authority. The colonial administration responded with draconian measures such as the *Defence of India Act* of 1915, which granted the Raj sweeping powers such as preventive detention without trial and severe curtailments of freedom of expression and movement. Although the Act was ostensibly intended to quell dissent, it was often wielded as a cudgel to suppress legitimate political endeavours. The Act's continued application in post-independence India saw several of its provisions retained and repurposed in an unbroken thread of authority, whether to counter secessionist movements, to manage conflicts with neighbouring states or to justify the Emergency of 1975. By subtly linking Bose's narrative to the 'phantom' of institutionalised violence, Ghosh frames the 1963-64 riots as a manifestation of traumatic tensions between state power, communal aspirations and democratic liberties.

Reference is made here to the ambivalent concept of the 'phantom' as theorised in the philosophical discourse of Jacques Derrida, particularly in *Specters of Marx* (1993), where it emerges as a central metaphor for addressing the persistent presence of unresolved historical injustices. Derrida introduces the concept of 'hauntology' to suggest that historical events, especially traumatic ones, do not simply fade away but continue to reverberate through time, affecting contemporary consciousness and social structures. Phantoms remind us of what is absent and serve as symbols of unresolved memories, traumas and injustices. They are an ethical imperative challenging people and societies to confront uncomfortable truths and to break through narratives that suppress or ignore the crimes of history. This is particularly relevant when tackling injustices committed by states or national entities, such as colonisation, slavery, genocide, or systematic oppression, where official histories may have obscured or justified such acts.

Trauma permeates Ghosh's novel, affecting the characters' perceptions and relationships. This is explored metaphorically by the narrator through his interaction with Nick Price, his cousin's playmate (Ila) in London. Nick, a rival for Ila's affections, becomes a haunting figure in the narrator's life, embodying the past's invisible but powerful presence. Though physically absent from Calcutta, Nick becomes a phantom rival in the narrator's mind, a constant reminder of his gnawing sense of inferiority, inadequacy and his unfulfilled desire to win Ila's heart. He also epitomises the intangible yet omnipresent psychological haunting experienced by a Calcutta Indian living under the shadow of British imperialism. This internalised resentment mirrors

the enduring imprint of colonial rule on the formation of Indian self-identity towards a nation perceived as stronger and superior.

By embodying the unspoken and unacknowledged experiences that haunt the narrator's consciousness, Nick's spectral antagonism helps to illuminate the dissonance between the superficial facets of places and people and the deeper, concealed narratives that underlie their story. Just as a ghost lingers at the edge of perception, the ability of trauma to lurk beneath the surface continues to shape beliefs and relationships long after the original event. This dominance works indirectly through covert means rather than overt repression. It is a force that exerts control while remaining elusive and unobservable, a menacing shadow that has no recognisable characteristics and no tangible source.

This interpretation summarises the feelings of those who directly witnessed the religious riots in the 1960s following the theft of the relic from the Dargah Sharif. As mentioned earlier, the unbridled anger of the masses after the incident was seen as being partially manipulated by political forces seeking to exacerbate tensions between the Islamic and Hindu communities for nationalistic ends. Just as Nick's eerie presence hovers over the narrator, these political machinations acted like puppeteers behind a veil in the collective consciousness, manipulating communal sentiments in the construction of historical narratives.

However, seventeen years later, the narrator's encounter with Nick in London marks a pivotal moment of disillusionment. The narrator's realisation that Nick is neither taller nor significantly superior to him dissolves the mirage he had constructed in his mind, setting in motion a wider process of deconstruction in which the narrator begins to question the veracity of his own memories and the narratives that have shaped his understanding of the world, which extends to his conception of London itself. The way he had pictured the city based on his uncle's (Tridib) stories, a palimpsest of wartime destruction and historical splendour, clashes shockingly with the city as it presently exists. For example, he was sure Solent Road had been bombed in World War II, a belief that proves incongruous with the calm reality that unfolds before him.

Yet, despite evidence to the contrary – the peaceful residential character of Solent Road and the historical fact that the German Luftwaffe lacked the technological capability to inflict such destruction in the early years of the war – the narrator tenaciously clings to the imagined reality. It is as if the violent past, though seemingly erased from the physical landscape, possesses a deeper authenticity than the tangible landscape confronting him and continues to exert its influence through the power of Tridib's evocative narratives etched in his memory, defined by Monaco (2016) as a series of ghostly reminiscences where « space and time overlap in the narrator's mental mapping » (Monaco, 2016, p. 109). London's placid appearance cannot conceal the echoes of historical violence that remain in its foundations. The narrator perceives a deeper truth through the haunting juxtaposition of the imagined war-torn London with reality.

Ghosh foregrounds the centrality of narratives in shaping individual identity and perceptions of the world, claiming that « a place does not merely exist, that it has to be

invented in one's imagination» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 25). The hustle and bustle of a city, he suggests, is «neither more nor less true, only very far apart» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 25) from the versions held in people's imaginations. The assumption that the reality of a place is as much a mental construct as a physical entity aligns with Benedict Anderson's highly influential concept of imagined communities, a theoretical framework in which the existence of a community or place transcends physical boundaries. Collective consciousness is defined by the shared stories that circulate in its dreamscapes. Ghosh emphasises that narratives play a critical role in constructing the identity of a community or place, whether they are disseminated by those present or by those thousands of miles away. As architects of perception, these narratives contribute to a sense of belonging and understanding that towers over the landscapes of our minds. This idea aligns with Edward Said's assertion that «just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography» (Said, 1993, p. 7). There is no escaping the fact that the struggle over competing narratives, such as those surrounding the theft of the relic, is intrinsically a conflict of identity and power. Due to its precarious geopolitical location and deep religious significance, Kashmir has become a fertile ground for ethno-religious conflict in the post-Partition era. As a result of historical grievances and inflammatory narratives, the collective psyche becomes a powder keg in which tensions can easily burst into violent conflict.

4
A vocabulary for the unspeakable: delayed recognition and the processing of trauma

The first traumatic incident of violence recounted in *The Shadow Lines* takes place against the backdrop of the narrator's seemingly ordinary childhood in Calcutta during the riots of 1964. As he prepares for school one morning, his mother sends him off with his water bottle and tells him to get on the bus as usual. But the customary rhythms begin to falter on this particular day. The bus is uncharacteristically late and the two boys who habitually accompany the narrator are conspicuously absent. The arrival of the near-empty bus reinforces this sense of foreboding. The absence of the habitual throng of students creates an atmosphere of eerie silence, a noticeable deviation from the familiar routine of daily life. One of the few students on the bus casually mentions a rumour that «"they" had poisoned their own water» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 199). The narrator and his peers, inhabiting this fraught environment, instinctively accept the rumour about poisoned water, without inquiring about the identity of 'they' and without questioning the logic of the rumour or seeking further explanation: «it was a reality that existed only in the saying» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 199).

The mere utterance of the rumour in the realm of discourse – its mere articulation, irrespective of veracity – is enough to set ablaze a chain reaction of latent fears that transform mysterious occurrences into ominous signs of impending danger. By its very existence, the rumour validates the pre-existing suspicions that permeate the social

fabric, weaving a narrative of fear and mistrust that binds the community together in a perverse form of solidarity. It acts as a prism through which the latent fears of the community are refracted and amplified, providing a seemingly coherent narrative that accounts for the anomalies and deviations from normalcy observed by the narrator, the deserted streets and the absence of other students, which now «all fitted» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 200) into this newly constructed reality.

The onset of violence shatters the shell of normality, transforming familiar spaces into deceptive arenas of fear and uncertainty. The narrator hears the indistinct and frightening voices of a distant, destructive crowd at school, marking a rupture in his sense of security. He reflects on the uncanny quality of these voices, noting that their terror lies not in their overwhelming force, as in the roar of an enraged mob, but in their «torn, ragged quality» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 201), a «crescendo of discords» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 201) that conjures a visceral sense of formless and elusive chaos disrupting the familiar soundscape of the city. The presence of armed policemen escorting the boys home further adds to this terrifying atmosphere, like shadows lengthening in the twilight of innocence. Although he moves along the well-trodden paths of his own neighbourhood, the narrator feels a deep sense of alienation, as if «the city had turned against us» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 203) and its familiar exteriors now bore the grimace of betrayal. This metamorphosis of familiar surroundings into «unfamiliar [and] eerily empty» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 202) environs illustrates the psychological upheaval wrought by the pogroms, in which people are detached from their anchoring and sense of belonging.

When the bus is suddenly attacked by an angry mob, only the driver's skill and resolve narrowly avert a likely disaster. The narrator muses that in such a milieu, all sense of direction evaporates; his disorientation, his inability to recognise familiar streets or ascertain his course homeward embodies a profound loss of centre and bearings. The familiar urban landscape becomes alien, a chaotic space bereft of refuge, where sanctuaries vanish, emotional ties are severed, and a latent threat lurks around every corner. This pervasive vulnerability underscores the unpredictable and inescapable nature of violence, ready to ensnare anyone, anywhere, at any time. The narrator's characterisation of his fear as «without analogy» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 204) emphasises its uniqueness which goes beyond the fear of natural cataclysms or authoritarian oppression: it is a terror skulking beneath the cloak of everyday life to bare the fact that normality is «utterly contingent» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 204), overlaying the known world with the power to transmute it into something new, unsettling and alienating.

Ghosh links this uncanny[1] dimension of fear to the fleeting synergy of rumours and religion, a potent catalyst for the indiscriminate brutality often displayed by mobs. These are mostly the impoverished and uneducated offspring of systemic neglect, wasting their time loitering on street corners. Indeed, poverty plays a central role in the novel's exploration of trauma and violence. It is not just an economic condition, but a reservoir of resentment, social frustration and ignorance that renders the destitute, Tha'mma's «fail-cases» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 11), vulnerable to exploitation by political

hucksters who capitalise on their grievances and unwittingly make them susceptible to the siren songs of extremist agendas.

In the novel, social marginalisation and economic decline are identified as crucial components of the perfect storm that culminated in the 1963-64 riots, beyond the confluence of crumbling borders, deep-seated religious sentiments and the spread of misinformation. This concern is evident in the scene where the narrator, ensconced within the concrete bastion of a house on the outskirts of Calcutta, is admonished by Tha'mma to avert his gaze from the impoverished shanties across the street. Tha'mma's injunction, «Don't look there! It's dirty!» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 135), reflects her concern about the precariousness of their social standing, as if the mere act of looking could breach the delicate barriers separating them from the encroaching squalor that might somehow contaminate their own lives. The narrator's acquiescence, admitting that he is «well schooled in looking away, the jungle-craft of gentility» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 135), reveals the internalisation of this metaphorical dance of aversion, the ingrained instinct to look away from the uncomfortable truths that exist beyond the carefully constructed boundaries of their middle-class existence. Nevertheless, the narrator recognises the futility of this avoidance, as the presence of the impoverished landscape remains «palpable everywhere in our house» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 135).

The narrator's startling encounter with a mob finds a tragic echo in a parallel attack on his family, in which Tridib finds a tragic death. In this fateful incident, Tha'mma tries to free her uncle, Jethamoshai, from the clutches of his past in their ancestral home in Dhaka. A violent mob descends on them like a maelstrom as they navigate the streets of Dhaka with their English friend May Price. In response to May's attempts to rescue Jethamoshai from the mob's fury, Tridib, witnessing their danger, instinctively rushes to their assistance. Both Tridib and Jethamoshai are swept up in the tide of senseless brutality that seals their fate in this heartbreaking act of courage and self-sacrifice.

Through the narrator's realisation that these two seemingly disparate events, the bus journey of his childhood in Calcutta and the fatal journey that claimed Tridib's life in Dhaka, are connected, the reader is given a glimpse into the complex labyrinth of trauma processing, where the competing forces of personal memory and social discourse can potentially hinder or delay the process of understanding past horrors. On the one side, a major factor contributing to the long delay in reconciling these haunting memories is the difficulty to accept them when they do not make sense to us. On the other, external narratives, such as those spread by media and political discourse, also appear to have a profound impact on this disconnect. This insight comes to the fore when the narrator reflects on a conversation with his friends in which they all agree that the Sino-Indian war of 1962 was a defining moment in the history of India. The narrator deviates from this consensus, but when asked to name an event of equal or greater magnitude, he points to the 1963-64 Calcutta riots, to the consternation of his friends, notably Malik, who confess to a lack of recollection. This is a surprise to the narrator, who sees those riots as an integral part

of his own and his society's collective past. When his further insistence on their significance is met with blank stares and dismissive shrugs from his friends, he urges Malik to accompany him to the library to consult newspaper archives from that year. However, without a specific date, they have difficulty finding information in the extensive volumes. Comparing this to the abundance of literature relating to the Sino-Indian War, Malik suggests that the riots may not have been as significant as claimed by the narrator. Whereas the war with China, a grand narrative of national conflict, occupies a prominent place in their historical consciousness, the riots are dismissed as a chaotic and insignificant outbreak of violence. The narrator's desperate search for evidence in the newspaper archives emphasises his fight against oblivion. The ease with which he finds information about the war stands in stark contrast to the fact that it is almost impossible to find any reference to the riots. This absence in the official records mirrors the absence in the memories of his friends and reinforces the sense that these events have disappeared from the collective consciousness. His understanding of the events and their location is further challenged when, in his search, he finds an account of the riots, only to discover that they took place in Khulna, across the border in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), and not in Calcutta. However, as he pursues his investigation alone, the narrator discovers that the riots in Calcutta were indeed related to the tensions arising in East Pakistan after the theft of the relic in Srinagar. While the first demonstrations organised in Kashmir did not initially create animosity between the various religious communities in the region, it was misinformation that led to the escalation of ethno-religious tensions in Khulna and, ultimately, Calcutta. In its rigid cartography of nations and borders, the narrator's childhood worldview had failed to comprehend the interconnectedness of events that transcended such artificial boundaries.

Despite their destructive impact, the riots were poorly documented and soon faded from public discourse, their significance eclipsed by the extensive coverage of wars and political events of the time. The narrator's observation that «for these other things we can only use words of description when they happen and then fall silent» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 227) reveals a collective reluctance to address the deeper implications of violence. This silence is neither the result of ignorance nor of state censorship, but arises spontaneously from the inability of language to capture experiences that defy explanation or categorisation and thus break open the fabric of conventional narratives. This reflects his own reluctance to confront the truth about Tridib's murder, as evidenced by his avoidance of the subject with May, a potential source of insight and comfort. The ephemeral nature of his memory, intertwined with the selectivity of historical documentation, evokes a void in the landscape of consciousness, both personal and communal, in which words falter and meanings evaporate. The narrator's inability to connect the two episodes of violence for fifteen years is not simply a memory gap, but a collapse of meaning, a struggle to articulate an unspeakable horror that defies the limits of language. Cathy Caruth's influential theory of trauma as fundamentally unrepresentable (Caruth, 1995; 1996; 1997) is

consistent with this kind of elision of language and meaning. According to Caruth, 'belatedness', a temporal disjunction that precludes immediate understanding, is a crucial aspect of trauma. Caruth suggests that the inherent latency of trauma is a consequence of its ability to overwhelm existing cognitive and linguistic frameworks, to disrupt a person's fundamental assumptions about the world, and to make it difficult for the individual to absorb and make sense of it in the immediate aftermath. This perspective draws on Jacques Lacan (1977) and Jean Laplanche's (1970; 1987) elaborations on Freud's concept of nachträglichkeit (often translated as après-coup, or after-effect), which describes how traumatic events exist in a state of delay, returning to consciousness in fragmented and often disruptive fashions. The deferred action, or afterwardness, emphasises that the significance of a trauma cannot be fixed at the time it occurred, but must be reinterpreted and re-experienced over time. The concept of nachträglichkeit clarifies how traumatic events are simultaneously remembered and selectively or intermittently forgotten. There is no simple act of repression here, but rather an indication of the disruptive effects of trauma on memory formation. This disruption resonates with Felman and Laub's (1992) observation that events of extreme magnitude can exceed the individual's capacity to register and integrate them in real time. Indeed, it is as though the person were not truly present to witness what was happening. In this sense, trauma leaves an internal absence: a gap in conscious memory and understanding that remains unresolved until it is revisited and reconfigured in retrospect. That's why the attempt to give voice to his trauma, Tridib suggests, is akin to «listen[ing] to madness» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 218). He finds himself trapped in a lexicon that cannot absorb the senselessness of the violence he witnessed, in which «there was no room [...] for this other thing» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 218). What is this 'other thing', this «absolute, impenetrable banality» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 218) that could illuminate the inexplicable and traumatic incursion of violence into seemingly discrete worlds, but remains inarticulate and, therefore, unspeakable?

Rumours, «the harbinger[s] of every serious riot» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 218), pour into this semantic vacuum like a dark tide, revealing the paradoxical relationship between state power and collective memory. The 1963-64 riots, fuelled by rampant and unconfirmed rumours (tales of trains laden with corpses arriving from Pakistan, sensationalist accounts of atrocities), highlight an implicit contradiction in the state's response to such upheavals. While the governments of India, Pakistan and East Pakistan deflected responsibility and blame onto one another, they also harboured a vested interest in downplaying the significance of these events. In their raw demonstrations of communal violence, riots and pogroms exposed the cracks in state authority and undermined its carefully crafted narrative of unity and control: «In line with revisionist history, Ghosh's novel provides painful details ignored or excluded by the official chronicles about Partition of 1947, the riots of 1964, and their traumatic effect on the lives of ordinary citizens in India and Bangladesh, and contributes toward the making of an alternative version of historical account that challenges its elitist counterpart» (Gautam, 2021, p. 263). The «grotesque logic» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 228)

of resentment drives communal violence outside the bounds of rational discourse and is impervious to state intervention. By tapping into deep-seated fears and prejudices, unrest ignited by rumours can rapidly spiral into chaos. As Ghosh eloquently states: «the madness of a riot is a pathological inversion of that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 229). An ethno-religious conflict poses a fundamental threat to the state's authority and its claim to represent the collective will of the people, which may explain the difference between the state's response to war and that to riots. Although wars are destructive in nature, they are often glorified and celebrated as expressions of national unity and patriotic sacrifice. They provide a convenient framework for understanding conflict and mobilising public support for state representations of power and legitimacy. The opposite is true of independent relationships rooted in irrational madness, because they cannot be harnessed to serve government goals. They disrupt the official narrative by exposing internal contradictions and unresolved social tensions, reminding the state that it cannot fully control the web of human relationships and emotions. The state's response to unrest is therefore characterised by an urgent desire to contain the violence and quickly erase it from public memory. While state authority is asserted and power is demonstrated on the stage of war, the unpredictable and chaotic nature of riots threatens to undermine this carefully planned performance. By relegating the unrest to the «crater of a volcano of silence» (Ghosh, 2005b, p. 230), the state seeks to maintain the illusion of order and stability, by suppressing any narratives that might challenge its legitimacy or may expose the fragility of communal cohesion.

The social and political dimensions of this silence and selective amnesia go beyond the mere manifestation of grief and loss. They also function to reinforce existing psychological and power structures by perpetuating a 'sanitised' version of history that obscures the uncomfortable truths of communal violence. Silence about the turmoil thus becomes a recognition of the fact that some experiences lie beyond the reach of conventional modes of expression, that the attempt to force them into a pre-existing framework of meaning can unleash a flood of unprocessed emotions and fragmented memories, threatening to overwhelm and disintegrate the delicate scaffolding of everyday life. It becomes a form of self-preserving complicity, a tacit agreement to look away from the darker aspects of human experience in order to maintain the illusion of stability and control, even as the unnameable things continue to haunt the margins of the community. The most profound challenge Ghosh's novel presents, then, is to chart alternative ways of meaning, to construct innovative conceptual geometries capable of bridging the abyssal chasm between words and the inexpressible, thereby imbuing significance to the ostensibly meaningless.

Notes

1. Which Freud (1919) refers to as the *unheimlich*, wherein the familiar becomes uncomfortably strange and menacing.

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