SILENCE AND VIOLENCE

...Because this is not a 9/11 poem.
This is a 9/10 poem,
It is a 9/9 poem,
A 9/8 poem,
A 9/7 poem
This is a 1492 poem.

This is a poem about what causes poems like this to be written.
And if this is a 9/11 poem, then:
This is a September 11th poem for Chile, 1971.
This is a September 12th poem for Steven Biko in South Africa, 1977.
This is a September 13th poem for the brothers at Attica Prison, New York, 1971.
This is a September 14th poem for Somalia, 1992.
This is a poem for every date that falls to the ground in ashes
This is a poem for the 110 stories that were never told
The 110 stories that history chose not to write in textbooks
This is a poem for interrupting this program.
...
Here is your silence.
Take it.
But take it all...Don’t cut in line.
Let your silence begin at the beginning of crime.

Emmanuel Ortiz, a Chicano/Puerto Rican/Irish-American activist and spoken-word poet, published this poem on September 11, 2002, to mark the first anniversary of 9/11 attacks.

This is a poem which begins with a moment of silence in commemoration of those who died in the terrorist attacks as well as those who died because of the US policy of retaliation to 9/11; it goes on to connect with the whole history of violence— from colonialism to imperialism to neo-imperialism. The poem then tries to historically locate from where that silence would begin— the silence of history. It also tries to situate the silence that emanates from violence— the type of violence that began much before 9/11. The silence that Ortiz talks about is the entire history of violence that the West and the U.S. had swept under the carpet, and he points out in this poem that when it is faced with violence, it wants to mourn in silence, creating yet another erasure in history. And, given that there had been other events in the past of equal or more importance than the 9/11 attacks, the poem critiques the way this particular incident of violence has been projected as a significant event after which the world seems to be no longer the same. The poem thus journeys from that cultural act of a moment of silence to the historical act of silencing. Ortiz also feels the urgency and the necessity to voice the “110 stories that were never told”. It is then also the writer’s responsibility to see that these stories are told. Ortiz thus is concerned with the untold stories and the many silences, and so is Ghosh— each in his own different ways.

In this chapter, I would like to deal with the way in which Amitav Ghosh depicts violence in his fictional and non-fictional works. Violence in South Asia has always been an issue which Ghosh is deeply concerned with. This is the violence which has marked his growing up and coming of age; and it is the same violence with which his volition as a writer seeks to confront and find answers. Violence in the modern world has become an integral part of life from which we cannot escape. It is an aspect of life which is
indeterminate and often incomprehensible. The violence of riots, terrorist activities, state-sponsored ethnic cleansing, forced migration, arms race, and racial hatred— these are all issues which an individual finds hard to grapple with and come to terms with. We cannot also escape the impact of violence that had occurred in the past, since our past is always implicated in the present. Modern man is trapped within the meta-narratives of the community, the nation and the phenomenon of globalisation.

In such a time as this, what perturbs the author and the reader as well, is the manner in which an author can confront the notion of violence and represent it in the text. He is faced with several difficulties. If he speaks of it eloquently through a realistic and graphic portrayal of crude violence, he would be running the risk of valorising violence. Then how do we deny violence even the infamy? Can it be done through a particular way of representation? What is the role of the media in projecting violence? Does it give violence more space, more words than is desirable? How does one defy and depict a violence which is more gross than what language can comprehend? These are the dilemmas that Ghosh must have faced while representing violence, for that is why it took him a long time to write about Partition and riots in The Shadow Lines\(^2\). The riots of Delhi in 1984 had compelled him to come out of his silence and somewhat seek answers to the grossness of the violence.

The banality of violence is often difficult to comprehend in terms of reason or language. What emerges is a silence— a silence resulting from a lack of understanding of the nature of violence. This silence doesn’t necessarily have a negative connotation— it is rather that aspect of life that allows us to confront and understand this violence. It is an intervening silence which enables us to seek answers. This silence has various shapes and

colours. It is coming to terms with that violence which is often inexpressible. There are some forms of violence which cannot be represented, understood or expressed in terms of language, mainly because the causes for such violence do not follow any conceivable logic. Silence can thus be perceived from multiple perspectives in regard to violence. Silence can then be a number of things: 1) the ability to grasp the nature of such violence; 2) a mode of realisation and understanding of the utter meaninglessness of certain types of violence; 3) the most effective mode of response in regard to such violence; 4) a way of negotiating the trauma that violence creates; and, 5) a responsible response in order not to valorise violence. The valorisation of violence often can lead to the creation of heroes or anti-heroes and especially in an image-regulated world, such proliferation of images might provide them more space than they deserve. Last but not the least, silence can also be a deliberate forgetting, so that there are aspects of one’s past and one’s history which one needs to forget in order to go on with the present.

In this chapter, I would analyse how the depiction of violence and negotiating violence form a significant thematic concern in Ghosh’s fictional and non-fictional world. I would try to explore how Ghosh deals with the various types of violence which confronts our past and our present. The question that recurs throughout his novels is how we confront this violence in terms of our rationality and in terms of our language. I will deal with the various manifestations and representations of silence that are embedded in relation to violence in Ghosh’s texts. Slavoj Žižek, in his book, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflection*\(^3\), classifies violence into two types: ‘subjective violence’ and ‘objective violence’. Subjective violence is that which is immediately palpable. It is a violence

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“which is performed by a clearly identifiable agent”\(^4\). It is the most visible kind of violence. There are two kinds of objective violence which Žižek mentions in the book—‘symbolic violence’, which is embodied in its language and its forms, and ‘systematic violence’. Symbolic violence is a type of violence related to social domination. There is another more fundamental form of violence which exists in language itself and it results in an “imposition of certain universe of meaning”\(^5\). The second kind of objective violence is what Žižek calls ‘systematic violence’—a violence that results from the catastrophic effect of economic and political systems. The major difference that Žižek points out between subjective and objective violence is that subjective violence is experienced from the background of a non-violent zero level, that is, it is perceived as a perturbation from the normal order of things. Objective violence is “invisible since it sustains the very zero level standard against which we perceive anything as subjectively violent”\(^6\). This violence is also what I will call the ‘silent violence’, as it establishes an assumed code of normalcy and dispenses and judges all other activities in terms of this so-called normalcy. It is this violence which ultimately takes the form of subjective violence. This violence is the most difficult to negotiate with. I will also use as theoretical support Alam Javeed’s (Alam Javeed is an Indian Marxist, political scientist and political activist) classification of the types of socio-political violence in regard to the State. The first type of violence is the one when the state plays a complicit role in acts of brutal, meaningless violence, and this role of the state is well established\(^7\). The second type of violence is that where the state is not the perpetrator of violence but it could have controlled the violence; and

\(^{4}\) Ibid. 1.
\(^{5}\) Ibid. 2.
\(^{6}\) Ibid. 2.
thirdly, there is this other kind of violence where people become victims of violence and sadly they start killing each other. Such violence should be left behind and forgotten.

In this paper, I would enquire into all the three types of violence as they have been depicted in Ghosh’s works, and also would discuss silence in contrast to this violence from the perspective of representation, reaction, response, as an act of understanding and inhabiting in this violence.

“*The Founding Crime on which a Nation is based*”

Slavoj Žižek refers to the founding crime on which a nation is based while discussing the creation of Israel. He says:

> Many conservative and (not only conservative) political thinkers, from Blaise Pascal to Immanuel Kant and Joseph de Maistri, elaborated the notion of the illegitimate origins of power, of the ‘founding crime on which a nation state is based, which is why one should offer ‘noble lies’ to people in the guise of heroic narrative of origin.”

This notion of the founding crime can be differently adapted to the Partition of India and the consequent violent aftermath leading to the creation of three countries— India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It was the wrangling in the corridors of power that marred the freedom struggle with blood. This founding crime was not merely the violence of the Partition that accompanied the independence; this violence is also implicated in the ideological confrontation between the idea of a European concept of nationhood and the sense of place, community and communality that existed in the sub-continent. If nationalism is a political entity, then communalism in contrast to nationalism also

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8 Žižek, 116.
9 Ibid. 116.
assumes a political entity. National identity often seems to do violence to communal identity by negating it. Dumont’s definition of Communalism is very pertinent here:

Communalism supposes the existence of a community, a group of adherents to the same religion, but it gets the edge of the meaning through the parallelism with the other term: it is something like nationalism, in which the nation, so to speak, is replaced by the community. In other words, communalism is the affirmation of the religious community as a political group.¹⁰

In a sense, the pre-existing alignments of community and communality were overwhelmed by the notion of nationhood, so that the mapping of physical space was a form of violence to the mental and imaginative charting of landscapes. There is also a desire to replace the nation with community alignments (conceived in terms of Islamic and Hindu communities) that might have pre-existed the nation. The term ‘Hindutva’, for example, signifies a complex relation between Hindu cultural identity and the nation; and the term ‘quom’ designates the religious and political community of the Muslims.

The sudden imposition of the idea of nationhood did not percolate down the masses. The division of the country in terms of religion was a follow-up of the divide-and-rule policy followed by the coloniser for a considerable period of time. The violence that followed the Partition was part of the trauma of betrayal of one’s sense of place and of one’s sense of community. The large scale violence that took place still exists in the collective psyche of the three nations—so much so that the riots that perturbed the nation, the subsequent attempts to make further divisions of the country, the attempts at reconfiguration of state boundaries, and the terrorist activities were all a part of this negotiation with the violent and traumatic past. It is this legacy of the founding crime—

the Partition— that continues abated in the form of terrorism and riots. The objective violence that followed the Partition had its roots in the symbolic violence done to them by their leaders in re-configuring existing community and communal relationships.

The Silence of the Author

Gyanendra Pandey, in his book *Remembering Partition*\(^\text{11}\), describes this founding of the two nations and the violence that ensued as a “moment of rupture”\(^\text{12}\). The partition happened with a degree of suddenness that was beyond the comprehension of the common people. It was as if they were out of their stupor to be immersed into blood:

> Astonishingly few had foreseen that the division of territories and powers would be accompanied by anything like the bloodbath that actually eventuated.\(^\text{13}\)

The strange nature of the violence was that it was not directed against the departing colonisers who had in a way plotted the violence; rather it was directed towards one’s own mirror-image— the people of the other community with whom one has shared a long heritage. The unprecedented nature of the rape, killings, looting and arson that followed was directed against each other probably because of a sense of betrayal leading to loss of one’s lived sense of place. The violence which resulted from the partition had left in its wake the death of more than three hundred and fifty million people and a huge mass migration from one country to the other. The question that arises is how literature negotiates with this type of violence, where one is at war with oneself, one’s memories and one’s own sense of place. It is difficult for a writer to confront this violence. There is

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\(^{12}\) Ibid. 1.

\(^{13}\) Ibid. 2.
always a danger of misrepresentation, such that you may not do justice to the memories, testimonies and accounts of the violence. How does a writer represent violence which is difficult to comprehend in terms of language? How does one find words for such an unspeakable trauma? How can one write about such silence—the silence of utter banality?

The Partition, according to Alam’s definition, would fall into the category of the third type of violence. It is a type of violence where people who are the victims of violence start killing each other. Such violence is difficult to define in terms of causality. It is difficult for literature to respond to the ghastly nature of Partition. Although regional writings came up on the theme of Partition, but it was only in the 1950’s that Bengali literature was able to confront the Partition of Bengal. Narayan Sanyal’s *Balmiki*[^1] was published in 1955, after which followed a spate of novels in the 1960’s and the 1970’s by writers, such as Jyotirmoyee Devi (*Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*[^2], 1967), Prafulla Roy (*Keya Patar Nouko*[^3], 1970), Sunil Ganguly (*Arjun*[^4], 1971), Atin Bandyopadhyaya (*Nilkontho Pakhir Khonje*[^5], 1971) the trilogy of Gour Kishor Ghosh (*Jal Pore Pata Nore*[^6], 1978; *Prem Nei*[^7], 1981; and *Protibeshi*[^8], 1995) and also a significant body of works by Sabitri Roy (*Swaralipi*[^9], 1952, the trilogy *Paka Dhaner Gan*[^10], 1956-58). It

took much longer for Indian literature in English to confront the violence that was Partition.

**Coming to terms with Violence**

After years of silence, which was a preparation for coming to terms with the violence of the Partition, Ghosh felt a necessity of confronting this silence after the Sikh riots happened in New Delhi in 1984. *The Shadow Lines* narrates events taking place in significant historical junctures, ranging from the events taking place in 1939-40, 1960-63 to those happening the 1978-80’s. The historical movements, that is thus incorporated in the novel, includes the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the Partition of India in 1947, and also the communal riots that broke out in East Pakistan (now, Bangladesh) and India following the 1964 Hazratbal incident in Srinagar. By stretching the narrative ambit of the novel to the period of 1939-40, Ghosh is able to incorporate events that concerned the world at large, like the Second World War. This enables him to include the family of Price: thus England in the time of war is pitted against India in the time of the riots. The narrative strategy thus complicates an easy binary classification in terms of the East and the West. Ghosh appropriates and inverts the postcolonial fictional strategy of the conflict between the East and the West. In *The Shadow Lines*, he portrays a friendship between the coloniser and the colonised elite. The narrative is also carefully constructed to complicate any easy division of the politics of the privilege by situating India and England in times of crisis—England in the backdrop of the Second World War, and India at a time when the country is trying to geographically and politically chart out its own national destiny.
The novel is based on the ruptures created by the Partition and the discord created within the affiliative bonds of the nation and the community. It involves both the role of the other (mirror-image) and the outsider, as memory and history are brought into conflict and crisis. The ‘other’, as I see it in *The Shadow Lines*, is the one with whom one shares a history, culture and a sense of place, and yet is differentiated in terms of religion or caste or status. The outsider is the one who does not have any shared culture, history or a sense of place, but is implicated in its destiny by some intervention at a particular point. The conflict in *The Shadow Lines* thus takes on a different dimension: in a carefully constructed rambling narrative strategy, time and space gets locked up in one’s memory. It is a story of three generations embroiled in historical turmoil. Jethamoshai, Tha’mma, Mayadebi and Saheb belong to the first generation; the narrator’s parents, Jatin Kaku, Queen Victoria and Tridib are of the second generation; while Ila, Nick, May and the narrator represent the third generation. The novel is thus thematically structured along historical lines. The first generation is affected by the Second World War (London during the days of the Second World War in 1939) and the Partition. The second generation lives with the legacy of the Partition and is affected by the riots. The third generation confronts the legacy of the Second World War, the Partition as well as the riots. They seek to confront the silence resulting from the failure to understand violence in terms of reason. They also seek to understand the silence that has became an inevitable aspect of the legacy of historical chaos. The modern generation, especially the narrator, tries to confront the silences of the shadow lines. The dust jacket of the novel rightly indicates the purpose of the novel:

*Its focus is the meaning of political freedom in the modern world and the force of nationalism, the shadow line we*
draw between people and nation, which is both an absurd illusion and a sense of terrifying violence, one of the great themes of our time.\textsuperscript{24}

This, however, does not mean that Ghosh is against the concept of nation at large. In our interview with Ghosh, he categorically states that he is not against the idea of the nation:

\begin{quote}
You see, I am not against the nation as an institution. I think the more I grow old, the more I realise the virtues of the nation. Let me say straightforwardly that I am not at all someone who is opposed to the idea of nationhood. I think the nation as an institution is a vital one and it was especially, I think, in writing \textit{The Glass Palace} that I came to recognise that nation is not a trivial thing...we always think of the nation as a limiting thing; but, on the contrary, if you think of the absence of the nation, what do you get instead? This is what I saw when I travelled in Burma, especially in the border areas of Burma, where the nation almost disappears and, according to our standard theories or our romantic belief, you would imagine that some sort of liberation occurs; in fact, what happens is the warlords take over— it's much worse.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

The story of \textit{The Shadow Lines} is structured around the narrator’s quest to unravel the silence behind the mystery of Tridib’s death. It is a staged silence in the sense that the narrator as well as the author try to come to terms with this silence by narrating and finding ways and means to understand this silence in terms of language. It is not a mystery or a detective whodunit story; it even fails short of asking ‘why’ Tridib had to sacrifice his life; rather the recurrent motif in this novel is “Do you remember…” . The act of remembering and coming to terms with that remembering is what entails the postmodern national subjecthood in India. As a result of the privilege given to the importance of memory as against history in the novel, the narrative’s spatio-temporal sequence is achronological. The crucial event, around which the narrative pivots, occurs

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{24} Ghosh, \textit{Shadow Lines}, “Book-Jacket”.
\textsuperscript{25} Appendix 1.
\end{footnotesize}
during the riots of the 1960s, but the narrator recalls the riots in the 1980s. By deliberately privileging memory over the chronological sequence of history, Ghosh privileges the individual over historical designs. Anjali Roy, in her article, “Microstoria: Indian Nationalism’s “Little Stories” in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*”, states:

> The novel’s entire machinery—its gentle, nostalgic tone, the use of the oral medium, the relevance on memory, the non-linear time scheme—belongs to the spoken discourse of word-of-mouth genealogy rather than elite, written historiography.26

There is no inherent conflict between history and the oral story, but history in Ghosh is shaded out of its politics of power and is appropriately adjusted to the destiny of individuals. Urvashi Butalia, in her book, *The Other Side of Silence*27, interviews more than seventy people who have survived the Partition, and emphasises particularly the role of violence against women in the collective experience of the tragedy of Partition. Unlike Ghosh’s fictional endeavour, Butalia writes the oral narratives into history. She says that she “would like to place them [the oral narratives] alongside existing histories” rather than pitting “these voices against the conventional factual histories of the time”28. Ghosh, like Butalia, places the oral histories, memories and experiences of the individual alongside historical narratives, so that the resonances of momentous historical events on ordinary individuals can be felt and understood.

The story revolves around the friendship of two families— one English and the other Bengali— trying to make meaning out of the historical events that engulf them. The

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28 Ibid. 265.
story begins in 1939, that is thirteen years before the narrator is born, when Mayadebi went to England with her husband and their son, Tridib. Tridib’s father needed to be operated on; so they went to England, in spite of the fact that they were aware that there could be a war. The family of Mrs. Price were old friends with that of Mayadebi’s, because Lionel Tresawsen, Mrs. Price’s father, and Tridib’s grandfather, a judge in the Calcutta High Court, were friends. They stayed that whole year at Mrs. Price’s house, when the War had started. Tridib had told them about the house at 44, Lymington Road, and had given them a vivid description of the city of London during the time of the War. People living in London had started living with the terror of the German air-raids. Mrs. Price’s brother, Alan Tresawsen, and his three friends were killed in an attack. The coupling of casual strangers that Tridib saw in a theatre, was also a bombed-out place. In *The Shadow Lines*, we do not find a stable world with stable values; instead, wartime London is placed side by side with the Partition, so that a stable superior gaze is lost. The metaphor of Tridib as Tristan making love across-the-seas can be extended to the relationship of the two families— one English and the other Indian— or, for that matter, two countries— India and England. In most of the Partition novels, like that of Rushdie or Khuswant Singh, we find the trope of inter-ethnic or inter-religious coupledom being used for purposes, like that of symbolising the rupture caused by Partition or the failure of nationalism. Ghosh takes it further through the relationship of Tridib— and later that of the narrator— with May. The Tridib-Tristan metaphor conveys a love that conquers all its precedents, like society, community, religion and even ethnicity. The metaphor or allegory, if we may call it so, encompasses multiple levels of meaning. Tridib’s letter to
May indicates the intricate aspects of the symbolic extension of the carefully crafted narrative structure:

He wanted to meet her, May—as a stranger, in a ruin. He wanted them to meet as the completest of strangers—strangers-across-the-seas—all the more strangers as they knew each other already. He wanted them to meet far from their friends and relationships—in a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers.29

Tridib’s desire to meet May without being burdened with history, with the past, and with family ties and relationship can also be extended to the relationship between the two nations. The gaze where the superiority-inferiority power relationship is always-already present, because of several socio-political factors, is a gaze which the narrative structure is trying to avoid and undermine. A true understanding between the two nations can only be established when they can meet as a “stranger, in a ruin”30, that is, when the founding crime of the past can be silenced. The present itself is based on a violence of the past, which dilutes any possible interactions in the present without being overburdened and without being encumbered by the past. How does one escape this memory? Tridib, like the Tristan hero, tries to break the shackles; but is he ultimately caught up in its web?

The major thematic concerns of the novel revolve around certain primary issues; like that of violence, the notions of freedom and nationalism, and the borders—these are all intricately linked together with the quest to unravel the silences associated with the representation and understanding of Tridib’s death. Tridib’s notion of time and place is central to the understanding of the novel. It is also concomitant with that of the narrator’s as well as the narrative structure of the novel. Tha’mma believes that Tridib wastes his

30 Ibid. 144.
time. Tha’mma’s notion of time is akin to that of the middle-class struggling hard to force one’s way up the social ladder. According to Tha’mma, Tridib wastes his time “loafing about”:

For her time was like a toothbrush: it went mouldy if it wasn’t used. I asked her once what happened to wasted time. She tossed her small silvery head, screwed up her long nose and said: it begins to stink.

The narrator loved Tridib because “he never seemed to use his time, but his time didn’t stink”. Tridib’s idea of place is based on imagination: however, this is not an abstract and abstruse imagination, but rather it is an imagination which can colour reality with stories, memories and an emotional attachment:

I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one’s imagination.

Tridib’s space forms a sort of continuum of the past and the present, which is totally different from Ila’s conceiving of the physical space, which is in terms of the immediate present, so that her idea of travel is in stark contrast to Tridib’s:

…the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all.

She is more concerned with the “fixed points in the shifting landscape of her childhood”. Tridib’s— and consequently the narrator’s— notion of physical space forms an important recurrent motif throughout the novel. Tridib’s idea of physical space is contrasted at one level with the other characters’ idea of a lived sense of space and, on

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31 Ibid. 4.
32 Ibid. 4.
33 Ibid. 4.
34 Ibid. 21.
35 Ibid. 21.
36 Ibid. 20.
the other hand, with the way the nation states conceive and constitute the notion of physical space. The Partition and the consequent violence are also related to the different notions of physical space. The idea of the physical space is given a fuller rendering in the use of cartography to understand riots in the later stage of the novel. Nation states always propagate the concreteness of physical borders in such a manner that people start believing in the reality of borders, as Tha’mma does in the novel. South Asian writers have often suggested that post-independence maps have often stood at odds with individual memories, inducing drastic consequences for individuals who struggle and are still struggling to reconcile their own experience with the narrative maps provided to them. The fixedness and surety of the cartographic imagination have severed maps from memories in the sub-continent. Memory and place are often aligned together in our imagination, so that violence to the physical space often leads to violence to our mental space. Edward Casey rightly points out:

> The relationship between memory and place is at once intimate and profound … [and that] … [p]lace serves to situate one’s memorial life, to give it ‘a name and a local habitation’.

The borders are created by nation-states. They didn’t really pre-exist the latter. It is not just with a concrete physical separation that we live in. We create memory and stories around our physical space, so that a mental attachment is established with the physical space that we live in. The division of any physical space would then have to consider several aspects of the society— culture, habitation, community etc. The Partition

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of India was primarily based on religious demographics, thus violating any other form of community alignment and other type of demographics that might have pre-existed the ideology of nationhood. The Partition of India led to the creation of the sovereign states of Pakistan and India on August 14, 1947, and August 15, 1947, respectively. The Partition, besides dividing other state assets, had displaced more than fourteen million people and killed more than a million others in its wake. Those people, who moved in the “corridors of power” and who believed in the reality of borders, the Nehrus and the Jinnahs, never expected that there would be such carnage— that our fight to freedom, all the years of revolutionary struggle and non-violent movements, would be smeared in blood bath. The Partition of India primarily included the division of the country in terms of the Hindu majority areas and the Muslim majority areas. It included the geographical division of the Bengal province of British India into West Bengal and East Bengal (East Pakistan, and later Bangladesh), and the partition of the Punjab into West Punjab (Pakistan) and East Punjab (India). After the Partition, the princely states of India, which had been left by the India Independence Act 1947, were allowed to choose whether to accede to India or to Pakistan. The Maharajah of Kashmir decided to accede in favour of India, when violence broke out. The state of Kashmir had a Muslim majority in the valley of Kashmir and a Hindu majority in Jammu. This decision led to the Indo-Pakistan War of 1947 and subsequently several other conflicts between the two countries on the question of Kashmir. The Kashmir issue had been a perennial thorn in the flower of freedom that pricks on till this day without any possibility of resolution. Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* also depicts the Kashmir conflict from several perspectives. We also have a reference to the loss of Prophet Muhammad’s hair and the subsequent

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conflict, as in *The Shadow Lines*. The other major community that was affected by this Partition was the Sindhis. They were expected to stay in their own places, as they had a very cordial relationship with both the Hindus and the Muslims. The Sindhis also had to migrate in large numbers. This huge amount of population transfer that took place and the displacement of such a large number of people are not to be found in any previously recorded history. Neither the politicians of the country nor the colonisers anticipated the severity and the great scale of violence that happened in the aftermath of the Partition. Those who had believed in the reality of lines failed to understand that human beings from times immemorial had lived in communities. Robi, in *The Shadow Lines*, rightly says: “How can anyone divide a memory?” This is the founding crime— not the physical division of the country, but believing in the reality of borders, believing that if you divide the borders, you can as well divide the memory, that one can start living life anew— that is from the zero-level— forgetting altogether any friendship or animosity, any lived sense of place that might have existed before that— as if one can be born wherever one likes; as if Pakistan and India were born on the 14th and the 15th of August, 1947, respectively, as if nothing existed before the nation states came into being.

The independence was declared prior to the actual Partition, so that the impossible responsibility of maintaining order fell on the new governments of India and Pakistan. The two new governments had to face the consequence of the cut-and-run policy of the British Government. Many historians trace the riots of the Partition to the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909 and consequently to the divide-and-rule policy used by the colonisers. Although these changes anticipated an eventual move to self-rule, they had actually created an irreparable damage by introducing separate electorates for different religious

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groups. This idea of dividing the states in terms of religious groups was a way of inflicting violence to the affinity of place by which several communities lived together. This breakdown of community feelings is depicted well in Khuswant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*[^41], where the bitterness of Partition ultimately catches up in the village of Mano Majra, where the Sikhs and the Muslims have lived together in peaceful harmony for years. The sense of a stable village community breaks down, as relationships become conflicting and antagonistic in nature. Jyotirmoyee Devi’s *The River Churning* also deals with the disruption in the community feeling in the wake of pre-Partition communal riots in Noakhali in 1946. It particularly deals with the added violence inflicted upon the victims of Partition, especially the women.

Morley-Montey reforms resulted in the blossoming of new communal rhetoric which ultimately led to the Partition of India. The All India Muslim League was formed in Dhaka in 1906 primarily because some Muslim leaders felt that the Muslims were not properly represented and did not possess the same rights as the Hindus in the Indian National Congress. The demand for a separate state was first raised by the writer and philosopher, Allama Iqbal of the Muslim League, who in 1930 felt that a separate nation for Muslims was essential in an otherwise Hindu-dominant sub-continent. Mohammad Ali Jinnah initially worked in favour of Hindu-Muslim unity, but later despaired about the fate of the minority communities in a united India. His demand for a separate nation was always couched under ambiguous rhetoric. The 1932 communal awards further aggravated the Hindu-Muslim division and acted as a catalyst in the resurgence of the Muslim League with Jinnah at its helm. The animosity among the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Congress ultimately led to the Partition of the country.

The actual division of the country was done according to what is known as the 3rd June Plan or Mountbatten Plan. The border between India and Pakistan was determined by a British Government Commission referred to as the Radcliffe line after the famous London lawyer, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who wrote it. It was decided that there would be two commissions— one for Bengal and one for the Punjab, both headed by Radcliffe. Radcliffe had no knowledge of India and was, therefore, preferred supposedly for impartiality. This very assumption that an outsider would be neutral is ironical in the sense that he, who is totally unaware of the culture and geography of the continent, was imparted a task of demarcation of boundaries. It is only natural that priority would be given to physical and geographical demarcation rather than the other complicated socio-political and cultural factors. The tight time-table provided to Radcliffe by all parties concerned further compounded the situation. Radcliffe arrived in India on 8th July, 1947, to meet Mountbatten and other leaders. It was in this meeting that he learnt that the whole procedure needs to be completed by the 15th of August, 1947. The time provided to Radcliffe, therefore, made it impossible for the Commission to gather survey reports and other vital information that was imperative to a well-informed decision. The whole irony behind the map-making can be found in Auden’s poem titled “Partition”. It would be relevant to quote Auden’s poem to suggest the stupidity that crowned the decision:

Unbiased at least he was when he arrived on his mission,
Having never set eyes on the land he was called to partition
Between two peoples fanatically at odds,
With their different diets and incompatible gods.
“Time,” they had briefed him in London, “is short.
It’s too late
For mutual reconciliation or rational debate:
The only solution now lies in separation.
The Viceroy thinks, as you will see from his letter, That the less you are seen in his company the better, So we’ve arranged to provide you with other accommodation. We can give you four judges, two Moslem and two Hindu, To consult with, but the final decision must rest with you.”

Shut up in a lonely mansion, with police night and day Patrolling the gardens to keep the assassins away, He got down to work, to the task of settling the fate Of millions. The maps at his disposal were out of date And the Census Returns almost certainly incorrect, But there was no time to check them, no time to inspect Contested areas. The weather was frightfully hot, And a bout of dysentery kept him constantly on the trot, But in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided, A continent for better or worse divided.

The next day he sailed for England, where he could quickly forget The case, as a good lawyer must. Return he would not, Afraid, as he told his Club, that he might get shot. 42

Pandey rightly points out:

The Partition of the subcontinent, and the establishment of the two independent states of India and Pakistan, occurred with remarkable suddenness and in a manner that belied most anticipations of the immediate future… And, astonishingly, few had foreseen that the division of territories and power would be accompanied by the bloodbath that actually eventuated. 43

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43 Pandey, 18.
What the physical Partition tried to silence in the name of nation was the other type of partition—the partition of communities, families, friends, childhood memories, childhood landscape and the partition of anything and everything that goes with the familiar knowledge of one’s own surroundings. This is the partition that is most difficult to grasp and this is the Partition with which *The Shadow Lines* grapples.

It is Tha’mma’s Jethamoshai who does not really believe in the rhetoric of the reality of these lines. Tha’mma and Mayadebi find it difficult to explain to Jethamoshai to move to India. As is always the case, when one defies the logic of popular belief and popular notions, the question of common sense and sanity crops up. Jethamoshai is like some of Manto’s characters who refuse to believe in the borderline. Khalil is able to persuade Jethamoshai only when he tells him that he would be taking him to the court. Jethamoshai does not believe in the shadow lines:

> Once you start moving you never stop. That’s why I told my sons when they took the train. I said: I don’t believe in this India-Shindia. It’s all very well you’re going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I’ll die here.

Ironically, when he is duped to move, he dies.

Tha’mma’s idea of freedom and nationhood lies in her firm belief in the reality of lines and also in the common middle-class belief of those times—that this nationhood can be achieved or earned only through blood. Tha’mma’s idea of courage and fear is revealed in the story of the shy bearded boy of her class, who was arrested for being a member of the secret revolutionary society. She was fascinated by the stories of heroism

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and the stories of the courage of Kshudiram Bose and Bagha Jatin. Her’s is a strong sense of nationalism coloured by an idea of courage that can defeat fear of any sort. Her idea of nation is revealed when she reasons out her disliking for Ila:

She doesn’t belong there. 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 the 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 have drawn their borders with blood. War is their religion… don’t you see.

It is her way probably to justify her loss of home and the violence of the Partition. The silent undercurrent that runs behind the rhetoric is the death of Tridib and her loss of childhood memories. Even when she is in Dhaka, she yearns for the familiar sight and smell. She also contributes her gold chain to the war fund. The ideology of nationhood silently forms the foundation over which her response to riots, Partition and war is moulded. She thus believes in the reality of borders.

The narrator’s quest to unravel the silence behind the mystery of Tridib’s is a journey both of coming to terms with silence and understanding the silence. The final redemptive mystery is seen not in terms of language, but rather in the realm of relationship and emotion. This “glimpse” can never be perfectly expressed in terms of language or be reduced to language.

The narrator’s journey of unravelling the silence of Tridib’s death comes from a chance accident, when the narrator was discussing with his friends over a cup of tea the Indo-China war. He found it difficult to attest his views on the riots that occured in Calcutta in 1964. The narrator’s friend, who lived in Delhi, was not informed about the

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45 Ibid. 38.  
46 Ibid. 77-78.
riots. The fact that they could locate the exact date of the riots not by remembering the
day when the riot happened, but as a day when the national cricketer, Budi Kunderan,
made his debut century, is itself a telling commentary on how one tries to forget such an
unnatural event. The riots, that happened in Khulna and consequently in Calcutta, was
actually triggered by an incident that happened in far-away Kashmir. The sacred relic,
Mu-i-Mubarak, disappeared from the Hazratbal Mosque. The demonstrations that
followed the event actually brought together people from all religions. The rioting that
took place in Kashmir was not against any people or any community, but against the
property of the government and the police. The author rightly notes that the true hero,
Maulana Masoodi, under whose leadership the demonstrations took place, vanished from
the annals of newspapers and histories. On the 4th of January, 1964, the Mu-i-Mubarak
was recovered by the Central Bureau of Intelligence. However, in Khulna, a mob
protesting the theft of the relic turned violent. It is also ironical that the violence erupted
in Khulna not only because it was geographically far away from Kashmir, but also
because of another important fact that before the Partition, Khulna was actually a Hindu-
majority district. It was after reading the newspaper that the narrator conceived of the
idea that Tridib’s death might not be an accident.

The narrator then tried to find out whether his father conspired in Tridib’s death,
for he should have known about the trouble. He then found that the Calcutta paper, which
his father must have subscribed, didn’t have the slightest reference to any trouble in East
Pakistan. The narrator then launches onto a discourse on silence:

    He was merely another victim of that seamless silence.
    And yet he knew, and they must have known too, all
    the canny journalists; everybody must have known in some
    voiceless part of themselves — for events on that scale
cannot happen without portents. If they knew, why couldn’t
they speak of it? They were speaking of so much else, of
the Congress conference, of the impending split in the
Communist Party, or wars and revolutions: what is it that
make all those things called ‘politics’ so eloquent and those
other unnameable things so silent?47

This is a silence that precedes and succeeds the riots. This is also a silence that can lead
to the riots, for, as Ghosh says, events on that scale must have given us some prior fore-
warnings. The newspapers, historical documents or other narrates, which believe in the
reality of the nation states, find it difficult to describe and define riots. Riots are violence
to the very concept of normalcy, as propagated by the nation state. They are an aberration
and, therefore, beyond the rhetoric of the nation state. The newspapers always talk about
the grand narratives—the narratives that have blossomed from the belief in the reality of
the nation states; but they are silenced when relationships are forged or broken between
individuals and communities. Such relationships are not confined within the rhetoric of
the nation state, and such events, therefore, are unnameable:

But for those other things we can only use words of
description when they happen and then fall silent, for to
look for words of any other kind would be to give them
meaning, and that is a risk we cannot take any more than
we can afford to listen to madness.48

Here, Ghosh distinguishes between language that is descriptive, and language that is
symbolic. Riots are mentioned in newspaper reports in terms of descriptive language.
Riots are not described in terms of the symbolic, for it is difficult to ascribe meaning to
riots. The state is also silent about riots because it is an outrage towards their very
existence. It is, according to them, a deviance of normality, a “pathological inversion”49,

47 Ibid. 227-228.
48 Ibid. 228.
49 Ibid. 230.
a sudden occurrence. There were probably more people killed in the riots of 1964 than in the Indo-China War, but the state remains silent over riots, because the very existence of a nation is threatened in a riot. The state usually is not complicit in such violence; so, it usually tries to curb riots a soon as possible:

... it is clear that once the riots had started both governments did everything they could to put a stop to them as quickly as possible. In this they were subject to a logic larger than themselves, for the madness of a riot is a pathological inversion, but also therefore a reminder, of that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of government, for it is in the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples.50

The riots are, therefore, forced away from the collective imagination in a deliberate act of silencing and forgetting. “They had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence.”51 The distance between Khulna and Srinagar is more than two thousand kilometres, yet an event that occurs in Kashmir can trigger riots in Khulna. The narratives of the nation which creates the reality of borders are belied by community relation and other relations that pre-existed the state. The partitioning of the borders had evidently failed to partition the memory of communities. The silence that lies within the gap between the two partitions— the partition of physical space and the partition of memory— catches up in incidents like riots and acts of terrorism. The betrayal of the borders that have belied the syncretic civilisation has resulted in the violence. This violence is bitterer because it is against one’s own mirror-image and against one’s own memory. This is thus the peculiar nature of violence in South Asia that Ghosh so often

50 Ibid. 230.
51 Ibid. 230.
talks about. The violence in South Asia creates a “...particular species of pain that comes from the knowledge that the oppressor and the oppressed were once brothers.”

Ghosh also talks about the close parallels in the patterns of violence in 1983 Colombo and in 1984 New Delhi. In all of these cases, the violence is perpetrated in the name of freedom and there is a close nexus between officials and criminals. Violence by the several insurgent groups in Burma is also carried out in the name of freedom. It is also difficult to represent because to impart meaning to riots is to valorise the violence. The narrator thus decides to describe Tridib’s death in a second-hand manner, because he feels, “I do not have the words to give it meaning”. This is the staged silence. It is the silence which one perceives and talks about; it is marked not by mere absence, but by the inability to comprehend it in terms of language. This is the silence that the narrator must address in order to find out any possibility of a redemptive mystery. Ghosh mentions how, as in the case of Tridib’s death, response to the death of a person in the family owing to such acts of violence is either silenced or is referred to in an indirect way, as the members in the family try to grapple with reality:

The riots of 1984 happened when I was finishing The Circle of Reason, but they had a very profound influence on me. I didn’t want to write about the riots in a direct way and it made me start thinking about riots and all the social violence that surrounded me; and it was exactly like the way I describe it in the book. It is the same way in which I remember the riots in Dhaka. It has never been spoken about in our family. It has never been mentioned.

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53 Ibid. 314.
54 See Appendix 2.
There are also certain events that a person or a community would like to forget in order to carry on with life. Silence, in regard to such forgetting, becomes a necessary act of recovery. Ghosh points out:

I think some things should be forgotten and must be forgotten and needs to be forgotten for the possibility of a future. For example, say these trials that the international criminal courts are instituting, the genocide trials in Cambodia— I mean, no Cambodian wants it. It was the foreigners who were the impulse behind it, because within a society we sometimes need that space to heal. If you keep digging up all the terrible things that happened in the past and get caught in that cycle of violence, you can’t move forward.\textsuperscript{55}

The narrator comes to know of Tridib’s death from several sources. When he was a child, he came to know from his father that Tridib’s death was an accident that happened in Dhaka. There was an enforced silence in his family about the death of Tridib. Nobody wanted to talk about it— not even the narrator’s mother. The narrator started his journey to unravel the silence behind Tridib’s death only after his arguments with his friends in Delhi. The narrator unravels the mystery of Tridib’s death primarily from two sources— Robi and May. Robi, Ila and the narrator went to Ila’s favourite “Indian” restaurant, which is a small Bangladeshi place called the Maharaja Clapham. There is another irony in the word “Indian” here. Partition couldn’t create a border in the cultural habits of the Bangladeshis and the Indians, specifically among the people living in West Bengal. It is the shared food habits, the shared language and the shared culture that reflect in this choice of word. This can often be found when one travels to some other continent, so that Bangladeshis, Indians and Pakistanis are often identified as one and the same. It all started when Rehman Saheb, a waiter in the restaurant, asked Robi about how

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
he remembered the Jindabahar Lane in Dhaka in spite of the fact that he was very young then. This triggered off a flood of memories— memories very difficult to cope with, the visual imprint of which is sketched on one’s mind for ever, so that it becomes a part of oneself. It is a silent yet poignant reminder of a past that will always remain a part of the self:

It’s a dream you know, he said, blowing a plume of smoke at his feet. I only get it about twice a year now, but it used to be once a week, when I was younger— in college, for instance. But I learned to control it— I often know when it’s coming, and on nights like that I try not to sleep.56

Robi’s narration moves in a hurried pace, as if one wants to let go all the horrific details of his nightmare in one go. It is described in the manner of a dream which grows big on Robi like the rickshaw in his dream. Robi wanted to stop Tridib from going out of the car, but he was helpless and could not utter a single sound. Robi’s silence is the silence of fear that is unnerving. Robi has grappled with the memory of Tridib’s death throughout the years of his growing up and adulthood. He would have done anything to be free of this memory— but there is no going away from it. Robi then emerges on a telling commentary on the mirage that is freedom. This is the freedom that creates so much violence that engulfs and subsumes so much violence— so much so that there is no freedom from this violence. This freedom is a mirage. This freedom cannot be achieved in spatial terms. It is encumbered by memory and is fixated in temporality, which makes it impossible to be free from it. One cannot be free from one’s own growing up.

The narrator finds it difficult to gather courage and find appropriate words to ask May to break the silence about Tridib’s death. Her silence has been a tryst— a coming to terms with Tridib’s death— a soul-searching, an attempt to find a meaning, so that she

can go on with her life and accommodate the past in the present. Her European sensibilities, that which had attracted Tridib in the first place, had ironically led to Tridib’s death. One can read a different meaning to Tridib’s death. It was the English who was responsible for dividing the country; yet violence was not directed towards them during the Partition or during the riots. The sense of betrayal—of betraying one’s image in the mirror—is what led to the killing, while the betrayal of the outsider was only to be expected. The Partition remains an important aspect of our living memory and, like in Robi’s dream, it grows big on us, so that it is difficult to do away with it. In riots after riots, it comes back with renewed vehemence and vengeance:

I could have gone right into that mob, and they wouldn’t have touched me, an English memsahib, but he, he must have known he was going to die.57

Tridib carried the knowledge of death before he died. It was a sacrifice. It is difficult to describe such an act in terms of words. It would be sheer arrogance to reduce them to words, to impart meaning to such an act. May’s silence is to come to terms with Tridib’s death. It is this redemptive silence that the novel looks forward to in the end.

He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can’t understand it, I know I mustn’t try, for any sacrifice is a mystery.58

### The Violence in which the State played its Part

#### The Delhi Riots of 1984

In “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi”59, Ghosh writes about the Delhi riots that took place after the assassination of Indira Gandhi on the 31st of October, 1984. In this essay, he

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57 Ibid. 251.
58 Ibid. 251-252.
talks about the responsibility of the writer in describing such events. I have begun this essay by discussing the writer’s responsibility in representing violence. Ghosh addresses the same concern in this essay. In the riots that followed the death of Indira Gandhi, the violence was specifically targeted against the Sikh community: around twenty-five hundred Sikhs died in Delhi alone. The intensity of the violence reminded him of the violence that followed the Partition:

Like many other members of my generation, I grew up believing that mass-slaughter of the kind that accompanied the Partition of India and Pakistan, in 1947, could never happen again. But that morning, in the city of Delhi, the violence had reached the same level of intensity.

The intensity of the violence reminded him of the violence that followed the Partition:

The violence that was unleashed in the streets of Delhi was “a calculated attempt to terrorise the people...” Violence, as Werbner states, is a performative and exemplary act which demands retribution. The violence that was directed to the Sikhs in 1984 was also a performative act directed to terrorise them and to hold them responsible for the death of Indira Gandhi. Thus violence blossoms with an idea of revenge demanding retribution for being the other. Moreover, the state in Delhi did not do anything to stop the violence. It was ultimately for the people, like the lady in the Bus and Hari Sen’s family and the servant of the Bawa family, that several Sikhs were saved. Ghosh himself joined the protests against this violence. Ghosh often wonders at the silent manner, that is to say the condition where there is no necessity or need of verbal communication, when

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60 Ibid. 52.
61 Ibid. 52.
62 Ibid. 51.
people come together and organise themselves to protest against the riots. This is the silence that Ghosh often talks about. In the interview, he talks about this type of silence:

To me, you know, it is a much more empirical thing. For example, if you look at 1857, the fact that all these people were rising, the fact that they had a very high degree of coordination actually made all those revolts possible. You know, the chapattis were moving and the bangles were moving—obviously they were not random events; yet nothing is said: there is no discourse, there is no programme. Just look at the strange way it occurred: I mean, it was almost as if it were a precluding discourse.\(^\text{64}\)

We have a similar type of silence when in the anti-Sikh riots protest march, some ladies come forward to save the men without a word being exchanged amongst themselves.

And then something happened that I have never completely understood. Nothing was said; there was no signal, nor was there any break in the rhythm of our chanting. But suddenly all the woman in our group— and the woman made up half of the groups numbers—stepped out and surrounded the men; their sarees and kameezes became a thin, fluttering barrier, a wall around us. They turned to face the approaching men, challenging them, daring them to attack.\(^\text{65}\)

Ghosh talks about the ‘ethical responsibility’ of a state in dealing with such issues like riots. In his essay on the Gujarat riots, he talks about the responsibility of the state:

…one of the least remarked but most important foundations of government lies in the ethical authority that is vested in it. Citizens look to their government not only to maintain order and deliver goods and services, but also to serve as a forum for the conduct of a collective ethical life: it was in this sense that Hegel called the modern state a ‘conscious ethical institution’. This unacknowledged duty is in fact one of the invisible pillars of legitimate government…\(^\text{66}\)

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\(^{64}\) See Appendix 1.


It is also the responsibility of the writer to represent violence. The representation cannot be easy, for, one should take care not to write carelessly in such incendiary circumstances, where “words cost lives, and it is only appropriate that those who deal in words should pay scrupulous attention to what they say.”\(^{67}\) The writer must not be silent about this violence, for it will not remain merely a matter of aesthetic choice, for the indifference to violence may spread to the indifference of the readers. Ghosh, in his essay, “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi”, is critical of the ‘aesthetic of indifference’\(^{68}\), and also emphasises on the urgency to represent the civilised responses to violence as well as to “remember the stories we have not written”\(^{69}\). The author engages with silence in order to find ways and means to represent violence without valorising it, or giving meaning to it. Ghosh tries to seek out moments of kindness in the whirlpool of violence and celebrates “the affirmation of humanity”\(^{70}\) that lies in the acts of ordinary people in such times of trouble.

**The Violence of the State**

**The Morichjhãpi Massacre**

As in the case of the account of Tridib’s death in *The Shadow Lines*, the Morichjhãpi Massacre in Ghosh’s another novel, *The Hungry Tide*\(^{71}\), is narrated second-hand as a strategy to suggest that it is difficult to represent violence of that scale without in any way imparting meaning to it. To narrate incidents of such violence is always a struggle with silence, but it is the author’s responsibility to stage these silences, narrate these other

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\(^{68}\) Ibid. 62.

\(^{69}\) Ibid. 62.

\(^{70}\) Ibid. 61.

stories, so that they are not lost in the greater narratives of history. Morichjhâpi is an island set in the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans of West Bengal. During the Partition, the area of the Sundarbans was geographically divided between the two countries— India and Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). Two-thirds of the Sundarbans went to Bangladesh and one-third remained with India. The Partition, as is already referred to earlier, occurred with great bloodshed and mass migration of millions of people. This migration of people carried on throughout the decade after the Partition. The educated upper-class Hindus from East Pakistan or Bangladesh were able to settle themselves in urban environment in and around Calcutta, whereas the low caste poor Hindus were moved to places outside West Bengal in rehabilitation camps in an alien environment. They were moved to inhospitable terrain like Orissa and Chattisgarh. It was primarily in the dry forest areas inhabited by the ‘Adibasis’ like the Dandakaranya that the refugees were transported. The people of Bengal were not habituated to live in such environments. They were all crammed into concentration camps. The main opposition party then in Bengal, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), had allured them with the hope of rehabilitation in Bengal in order to garner their vote bank. Taking this assurance to be genuine, the refugees had formed a committee called the Udbastu Unnayansil Samity, who sent representatives to Bengal. These people then decided to settle in the island of Morichjhâpi. The communist party then came to power and was no longer interested in this mass exodus of people and showed an antagonistic attitude from the very beginning. These people were primarily from the nearby district of Khulna in Bangladesh. They were habituated to live in such environments. More than forty thousand people settled in the island of Morichjhâpi. The government reacted violently
against the refugees, and said that they had violated the Forest Act and that they were destroying the ecosystem of the Sundarbans. The Morichjhâpi Massacre represented in *The Hungry Tide* refers to the brutal action taken by the State Government in 1979. Several hundreds were killed and several families were brutally evicted from the island.

The historical event of the brutal eviction of the refugee settlers during 1978-79 forms the prime focus of Nirmal’s journal entries. The Morichjhâpi settlement, as Nirmal observes, was a remarkable achievement primarily because of two reasons: first, because they had built up an organised society within such a short time, and secondly, because it was “an experiment, imagined not by those with learning and power, but by those without.”

Was it possible, even, that in Morichjhâpi had been planted the seeds of what might become if not a Dalit nation, then at least a safe heaven, a place of true freedom for the country’s most oppressed?

It is the poor people who are closely related to nature by their habitat. They are not just born into a particular surrounding, but they build up the memory and stories about that place. They imaginatively inhabit the physical landscape. Kusum, the protagonist of the novel, had an extremely difficult time living in Bihar. She had always longed to return to the Sundarbans, although life is extremely challenging in the tide country:

But here, in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week, and islands are made and unmade in days. In other places forests take centuries, even millennia, to regenerate; but mangroves can recolonize a denuded island in ten to fifteen years.”

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72 Ibid. 171.
73 Ibid. 191.
74 Ibid. 224.
It is extremely difficult for any inhabitation to grow in these islands, for these islands are reclaimed by the forests and the water every year; yet in the name of conservation (which, however, is not justified on the grounds that the number of tigers had depleted ever since the Government had launched its conservation schemes. The Government had subsequently attempted to introduce several commercial projects in the Sundarbans—from hotels, tourist resorts to even setting up a nuclear plant.), the ‘Namasudras’ of the region were forcefully evicted from the place. The conflict in Morichjhâpi was of a completely different nature, as both Annu Jalais and Ross Mallick point out in their articles. The conflict in the Sundarbans is not a religious conflict, but another perennial conflict—the conflict between the elite and the subaltern, between the ‘Bhadraloks’ and the ‘Namasudras’. Among the elite there were very few who had sympathies with the people in Morichjhâpi. Only some intellectuals, who were as helpless as Nirmal, shared their sympathies for the people of Morichjhâpi which thus became a dream that was forcefully contained:

Was it possible, even, that in Morichjhâpi had been planted the seeds of what might become if not a Dalit nation, then at least a safe heaven, a place of true freedom for the country’s most oppressed.

The politics of dispossessing people after the independence of the nation was, in part, to build neat boundaries. First, the boundaries were drawn, so that people are dispossessed from their familiar world; then they are transported like a pack of sheep to anywhere, so that the smooth functioning of the Government is not hindered. Hywel Dix, in his essay,

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“‘You and Your Stories’: Narrating the Histories of the Dispossessed in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*,” makes an interesting comparison between the two novels, between the Koli fishermen and the Bangladeshi refugees:

For the Koli fishermen driven to the outskirts of Bombay, and the Bangladeshi refugees who settle on Morichjhâpi, may have been historically dispossessed by an imperial order. But that struggle against dispossession continues throughout the period after freedom had supposedly been secured. In this way, both Rushdie and Ghosh deny any simple historical chronology whereby the moment of political independence could be equated with the end of a period of domination of the strong over the weak. The challenge of colonial history becomes tantamount to a continuing challenge over the politics of dispossession.  

The almost helpless elegy that Kusum utters before dying is quite intriguing:

> Every day, sitting here with hunger gnawing at our bellies … Do they know what is being done in their names?

It suggests, in another way, the power of distance and our total unconcern about the plight of individuals, as we are too occupied with grand ideologies. Any environmental policy should take in the real ground situations, it must also be able to adjust in accordance with the realities of a particular place. Traditional ecological knowledge and local ecological knowledge can often be used to frame conservational policies which are more real, more humane and more effective than purely theoretical ones. A lot of ecologist, biologists and marine scientists have recognised the need to engage with local knowledge holders, particularly because of their long ties with the ecosystem. The conversation policies cannot be uniformly applicable to all places; and in ignoring local

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ecological knowledge, which has defined man-nature relationship with regard to a particular place, is to do violence to the very notion of the primordial relationship between man and nature, where man has lived by and with nature. The Bon Bibi legend does more to protect nature in the Sundarbans than the forest guards designated for the purpose in that area.

Ghosh also writes about the violence of the state in his non-fictional essay, “At Large in Burma”. The military government in Burma, SLORC, had throttled democracy for several years and play a cunning game of political isolation, so as to keep itself out of international attention. It had dismissed the elected government and for many years had coerced the population to submission. The figure of Aung San Suu Kyi along with the non-violent remonstrations and demonstrations remains, however, a continuous threat to the military government. Ghosh also travels to the borders of Burma in order to investigate the government claims in contrast to the real separatist threats to the state of Burma from the several rebel groups. He points out the arbitrariness of the boundaries there and the complexity rendered to it by the colonial lineage, so that every group is trying to assert their own notion of freedom. Ghosh goes on to elaborate on the artificialness of all boundaries:

All boundaries are artificial: there is no such thing as a ‘natural’ nation, which has journeyed through history with its boundaries and ethnic composition intact. In a region as heterogeneous as South-east Asia, any boundary is sure to be arbitrary.\(^{81}\)

In most of his fictional and non-fictional works, Ghosh’s endeavour has been to address and represent the violence that confronts us. It is the one obvious subject that he

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\(^{81}\) Ibid. 100.
writes about, and writes about responsibly. The relation of violence to silence in this chapter has been primarily dealt with from varied perspectives. How does one negotiate and come to terms with the violence that is indelibly present in his past? The crudity of violence is such that it is always/often encumbered with silence, so that silence becomes a reaction to the trauma that is caused by violence. How does one represent violence in terms of language? For, violence often defies any association with casualty, so that it becomes difficult to express it in terms of language. The other question that crops up is the author’s responsibility to break that silence— the silence which otherwise might lead to indifference. One must unearth stories from the buried silence, one must tell one’s stories in order to be heard. It is the writer’s responsibility to take up his pen, so that one story does not subsume all the other stories of the world. Silence, then also requires a preparation, as Nirmal in The Hungry Tide suggests:

There is so much to say, so much in my head, so much that will remain unsaid: oh those wasted years, that wasted time. I think of Rilke, going for years without writing a word and the, producing in a matter of weeks, in a castle besieged by the sea, The Duino Elegies. Even silence is preparation.82

There are also instances of physical violence directed towards individual as an exercise of power that the state, society or any other form of administration have imposed on an individual, a group of individual or certain class of people. I would like to suggest that such violence is ultimately sanctioned by the power of the state. Fokir is humiliated by the forest guards as is Piya, who finds herself helpless when confronted with the forest guards. Alu’s ordeal in The Circle of Reason,83 though not resembling any direct physical violence, is an instance of how the state can go on to destroy the live of individuals.

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82 Ibid. 193.
There is great amount of sadism involved in the impinging of such violence upon helpless individuals who have to tolerate it, as they do not have the power to challenge the authority. Instances of such violence abound in *Sea of Poppies*.\(^{84}\) We find Kalua being physically humiliated by the young zemindars for losing a wrestling match. Kalua’s humiliation in the hands of the zemindars enables Ghosh to unwrap another theme that physical-sexual violation can not only be directed to female body, but also to the male body. A person like Kalua, who possesses a huge structure, has to tolerate such violence, such humiliation to his body without the means to protest. The way Subedar Bhyro Singh and the first captain treat Ah Fatt and Neel borders on sadism. The punishment carried out on Kalua on the instructions of the captain is also another instance of sadistic revenge. Kalu, unable to bear the humiliation, ultimately kills the Subedar. The torture and humiliation that Ah Fatt, Neel, Kalua and Jadu faces in the ship blur the distinction between what can be called torture and what can be called abuse. In an image-regulated world, violence is an exemplary act, a spectacle carried out to create and generate a certain type of meaning. Ironically such exemplary acts of violence in the colonial times get reflected in the modern times, as the images in Abu Ghraib would tell us. Ghosh, in his essay, “The Theater of Cruelty: Reflections on the Anniversary of Abu Ghraib”, compares the images of the violence perpetrated to prisoners from Abu Ghraib with those of the British convicts of imperial times:

Many commentators have argued that what is depicted in the pictures is not torture but abuse. They are, I think, technically right. Torture implies the use of extreme means in order to achieve certain ends. It is clear from the Abu Ghraib pictures that the perpetrators of the abuse had no specific end in mind. It is as if they were making the prisoners act out an idea of torture, not as a means but as an

end in itself. It is as if the jailors were saying to the prisoners: There is no particular purpose in doing this other than to teach you who you are and what your place is in relation to us.⁸⁵

The similarity of this type of abuse can be evidenced in the way the Subedar and the first mate treat the prisoners in Sea of Poppies. Ghosh argues in this essay that what happens in Abu Ghraib or Guantánamo Bay is a continuation of what happened in the imperial times in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The development of the prison system, the deportation of prisoners to remote island jails, the marking of the prisoners’ bodies with tattoos, stripping the prisoners—all follow the same dynamics of the colonial times—that of humiliating the subjects and fixing their place in the scheme of things. The violence is also against the deep-rooted taboos of another culture. Moreover, the violence intended on the individual is a symbolic violence to his otherness. Ghosh rightly draws our attention to the similarity in such violence:

In India too, the British conquests of the eighteenth century led to a rapid growth in the prison system. By the latter half of the century the British were transporting Indian prisoners to a chain of penal colonies on islands across the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean: Penang, Ramree Island near Burma, the Andaman Islands, Mauritius and Bencoolen off the coast of Sumatra. These were the ancestors of Guantánamo Bay.⁸⁶

The treatment meted out to Neel is not only humiliation of his body, but also an abuse directed towards his culture.

⁸⁶ Ibid.
The Violence of Language

Slavoj Žižek also talks about another type of violence, which is called the “Symbolic Violence”, which lies in language itself:

There is a more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning.87

This is the violence which distinguishes every single person from the other:

The fact that reason and race have the same root in Latin (ratio) tells us something: language not primitive egotistic interest, is the first and greatest divider; it is because of language that we and our neighbours (can) “live in different worlds” even when we live in the same street. What this means is that verbal violence is not a secondary distortion, but the ultimate resort of every specifically human violence.88

The violence of language is often the main cause underlying other forms of violence. In this context, I would like to deal with language primarily because of three reasons:

Firstly, as it is always already present in any discourse, in such a way that it imposes a given meaning even before the sentence is uttered. It is extremely difficult to be free from this discourse. Secondly, religious and cultural values impart upon certain words a symbolic and metaphorical value, which results in the ethical choice of the good and the bad. In such a situation, we believe in a particular thing as right or wrong, forgetting that this is merely a cultural or religious idea. This type of words and sentences try to dissolve and homogenise differences. It also plays upon our notion of common sense and nonsense. Thirdly, there is also in language a marker of social difference. These markers of social difference exist even in the way we address each other.

87 Žižek, 1.
88 Ibid. 66.
The symbolic violence of language is the most pernicious one, surreptitious in its mechanism, so that it imparts a sense of normalcy. It has the potential to cloth over the silent undercurrent of violence which runs through society and which suddenly erupts in some other time and in some other form. These, I shall argue, are the silences that are always already present in and give meaning to the utterances. In his fictional works, Ghosh addresses all these various types of the violences of language.

“Imposition of Certain Universe of Meaning”

In most of Ghosh’s novels, we find characters who absorb uncritically the meta-narratives and grand discourses as the unquestionable truth. This is the reason why Tha’mma believes in the reality of borders and asserts that borders and nations are built upon sacrifices and drawn with one’s own blood. Robi also subscribes to an easy morality—of deciding things and events either as right or as wrong, with a great deal of certitude, which makes him popular in the college. Arjun in *The Glass Palace* uncritically believes in the military ethics imposed upon by the imperialists. The Indian politicians believe in the logic of the nuclear bomb as a deterrent to war (*Countdown*).

The Imam and the narrator in the *Imam and the Indian* believe in the idea of superiority of nations in terms of weapons of mass destruction. Ghosh’s fictional world brings several ideas into a dialogic interaction with each other, so that the silences which are always already present in the language are brought to the forefront.

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89 Ibid. 1.
The Metaphoric Language

In *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh continuously asserts his dread for symbols. He is being continuously questioned on religion and religious/social customs— the burning of the dead, castration, worshipping of cows et al. The religious discourses operate in such a manner that it gives a certainty to the commonly held religious beliefs, that is, it endorses certain beliefs as right and wrong. People accept such beliefs uncritically. It is difficult for the common villagers, whom Ghosh confronts, to believe in another set of values. This is what creates discord as well as otherness. The construction of social and cultural symbols, and imparting to them a metaphorical value and an ethical imperative are what increases our intolerance towards the other. The notion of ‘common sense’ also crops up several times in *In an Antique Land*, where Jabir takes Ghosh to be a child because of his lack of common sense. The notion of common sense is assumed uncritically because of repetition or habit. The notion of common sense belong not only to the realm of experiences, but also to the realm of the given. Clifford Geertz, in his article, “Common Sense as a Cultural System”, analyses the notion of common sense and argues that the idea of common sense is historically and culturally constructed:

If common sense is as much an interpretation of the immediacies of experience, a gloss on them, as are myth, painting, epistemology, or whatever, then it is, like them, historically constructed and, like them, subjected to historically defined standards of judgment. It can be questioned, disputed, affirmed, developed, formalized, contemplated, even taught, and it can vary dramatically from one people to the next. It is, in short, a cultural system, though not usually a very tightly integrated one, and it rests on the same basis that any other such system rests; the conviction by those whose
possession it is of its value and validity. Here, as elsewhere, things are what you make of them.\textsuperscript{92}

The notion of common sense thus often inflicts a silent violence upon any notion of alterity that might challenge it. It is often forgotten that this notion of common sense is not an absolute, but is something that has been created within a certain cultural system. Particular ideas are seen to be relevant to certain contexts, while those same ideas are not pertinent in other situations. Ghosh dreads such symbols (and such notions of common sense), because he is aware that these are the symbols which lead to violence.

**Language of Social Difference**

Even in the way we look at each other or talk to each other, we use a register appropriate to the context. This register depends upon one’s own social position. Kanai, a middle-class elite, does not talk in the same manner with Fokir and with Piya. There is always a code-switching which signifies the difference in class, without often being conscious about it. This suggests an implicit assumption in the way and manner in which we talk to another person. There is a sort of violence which is embedded in our manner of talking. We also find Kanai hurling abusive language at Fokir. This code-switching also happens when Paulette is talking to Jadu in private. Her behaviour towards Jadu, as in treating him as her brother in public, would not be acceptable, as she is a white lady.

**The Act of Naming**

There is also sometimes a great violence done in the very act of naming. Europe had sought to know the ‘other’ in terms of its language and the act of naming. Ghosh’s

fascination for words and their etymology takes him back to delve in the subtle politics of naming through words. The act of naming often leads to the act of framing— putting the ‘other’ in terms of the known and the knowable, which emerges from one’s own epistemology. Ghosh hints at the politics in the naming of “Masr” to Egypt. The name ‘Egypt’, for example, comes from the word ‘Kopt’, which was a term for the native Christians of the country. Although this seems to be a matter-of-fact naming, this racist name bestowed on the country by the English, is actually symbolic of how Europe wants to know Egypt: they replaced ‘Masr’ which was a metaphor of civilisation. He also refers to Europe’s fascination at naming places, cars and commodities based on ‘extinct tribes’. The act of naming is a silent undercurrent that gets in the way of in the act of knowing. The act of naming is also a way of possessing the other. In his essay, “Four Corners”, Ghosh refers to the act of naming automobiles with names of disposed tribes:

…The names of disposed tribes of the Americas hold a peculiar allure for the marketing executives of auto-mobile companies. Pontiac, Cherokee— so many tribes are commemorated in forms of transport.

Most of the modern novelists writing from the sub-continent have been concerned with issues of violence. Then the first question that one needs to ask is: how then is Ghosh different from them? In his depiction of violence, Ghosh is using a type of narrative which is different from general historiography or other fictional representation of violence. Violence, in Ghosh’s works, is not idealistic, romantic or a sadist portrayal; it is actually an exploration of the roots— where violence lies silently, often embedded in the very system.

I had tried to argue in this chapter how Ghosh relates violence with the several dimensions of silence. As I have argued in the beginning of the essay, silence plays myriad roles in our understanding of violence: it assists our understanding of the meaninglessness of certain types of violence, it gives us time to perceive as well as to introspect on the nature of violence. Silence is also a response to violence. We often find that the ghastly nature of violence is incommunicable. It is an aberration in our way of life. Silence thus also lies in the incommunicability of violence; it becomes incommunicable in terms of language. There are certain things in life which cannot be represented in terms of language: the utter sense of banality that creeps up from violence, the sense of meaninglessness of life also renders us silent. Language itself is the most potent tool of violence. There are certain forms of violence which is embedded in language itself. Silence in a way frames the possibility of utterances, thus regulating the possibility of meaning. The most difficult aspect of this enterprise is to unearth the violence that is present in languages. It is what creates differences and discord in the first place. One must perceive the silences in language, so as to be able disengage the violence that is always already present in the language. The most important aspect that I have dealt with in this chapter is the author’s responsibility in depicting this violence. The “technical excitement” that writing a book like *The Shadow Lines* have provided him, as Ghosh himself suggests, is to be able to “write about violence in a non-violent way,” to disrupt “the cycle of violence”, so as to provide a voice that would be pacifist in nature. He cannot be silent, which would mean to be indifferent to violence, for it may soon percolate among the readers. He cannot shy away from violence; rather he should protest against the meaninglessness of violence. He should represent the banality and engage in a

dialogue with this banality. He should be responsible in his depiction of words, for words can be made incendiary. In his writings, he celebrates people like Aung Sun Suu Kyi, who by their resilience and fortitude, provides us with hope for the future amidst the turmoil of the present. Ghosh, in his article “September 11”, writes about the sacrifice of Frank De Martini, the architect who stayed back in the twin towers to help other people to evacuate the building. In doing so, he wilfully sacrificed his life. He recuperates those instances of humanity which emerge from sane voices in such situations of violence: he gives their silence a voice. Silence in its varied dimensions thus plays an important role in both understanding and representing violence.