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Approach to Trauma in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*

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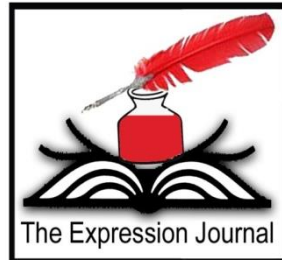
Abstract

This paper examines trauma as a structural and mnemonic force in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*. Through close textual analysis, it argues that Partition trauma reconfigures memory into fragmented, liminal narratives that challenge conventional nationalist discourse. Drawing on the psychoanalytic frameworks of Sigmund Freud and the political theories of Achille Mbembe, the study reveals how memory, violence, and identity intersect to produce hybrid cultural spaces that destabilize established borders and state historiography. The research delves into the "psychodynamics of silence" and the "retrospective glance," analyzing how trauma is not merely an event of the past but a recurring structural presence that dictates the characters' present reality. In *The Shadow Lines*, the unnamed narrator's reliance on secondary memories highlights the elusive nature of truth in a post-Partition landscape. Similarly, in *Salt and Saffron*, Shamsie deconstructs the grand reminiscences of the Dard-e-Dil family to expose the fissures within colonial and post-colonial identities. By utilizing the concept of liminality, this paper posits that these novels create a third space—a "hybridized cultural zone"—where Urdu poetry, Greek mythology, and ancestral tales coalesce to resist the "necropolitical" logic of the state. The study concludes that memory, when infected by the trauma of 1947 and its subsequent riots, evolves into a potent tool for deconstructing contemporary political apparatuses. Ultimately, the paper suggests that these narratives offer an organic structure to the chaotic aftermath of migration, proving that the shadows of history continue to redefine the cartographies of the mind and the nation.

Keywords

Partition, Trauma, Memory, Liminality, Postcoloniality, Necropolitics. Partition Trauma, Mnemonic Force, Cultural Hybridity, Historiography, Collective Memory.

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The catastrophic event of the Partition remains a defining moment in the socio-political history of the Indian subcontinent, leaving behind a legacy of fragmented identities and haunting memories. This paper seeks to examine how these narratives navigate the historical landscape of the Indian nationalist struggle and its traumatic aftermath. By adopting a qualitative research methodology grounded in close textual analysis, the study explores the intricate relationship between partition-induced trauma and the faculty of memory.

The central argument of this paper posits that liminality is an indispensable concept in understanding discursive literary memory. It further investigates how memory, when permeated by the trauma of displacement and violence, gives rise to a 'new cultural space.' This space not only reconciles the personal and the political but also poses a significant challenge to the rigid political apparatus of the state and its traditional definitions of borders and citizenship.

In Shamsie's novel, she deconstructs the grand reminiscences of the colonial hegemony and its aftermath through the picturesque portrayal of the Dard-e-Dil family. In her delinquent ways, we witness not just incidents drawn from memory, but the entire novel is narrativized from the faculty of memory, and within that there remain fragmentations which provide a greater retrospection to the already coiled depictions:

Dadi was with her cousins, Akbar and Sulaiman, when the letter arrived and, she swears she read it only once, she can still recite the letter from memory, her fingers tracing Ds in the air as she speaks: My brothers, we were born the year after the Jalianwalla massacre. Think of this when you are strolling down paths in Oxford, studying how to be Englishmen and do well in the world. I lack your gift for erasing, nay! evading history. . . . I am not an Englishman, nor are you. Nor can we ever be, regardless of our foxtrot, our straight bats, our Jolly Goods and I Says. No more the Anglicized Percy, I. I am now Taimur Hind. Dadi always ends her recitations with a final flourish of D. And always, always she says, 'We thought it was a joke. How could it not be a joke?' (Shamsie 24)

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In this narrative of diaspora, Shamsie employs cultural tools and relates them to historical events like partition to question the established notions of identity, colonialism, and mobility of people, tracking their locomotion from Karachi and Boston to London and Istanbul. Through the tale of Aliya, a Karachi returnee after completing education from USA, the events coil back to their ancestry into the lives of Sulaiman, Taimur, or Abida in order to engage our minds with the notions of postcoloniality, class, politics, and other societal parameters. It then establishes the theme of migration within a globalized, cosmopolitan society and fuses the semblance of Urdu poetry with Shakespeare or the prejudices prevalent within the English culture. This representation of culture is evident through their fashion tastes, culinary habits, gestures, and in particular the Aadaabs, which have a rich fabric of Islamic culture tailored within everyday emotions and insecurities:

Even with the lights on I knocked my legs against two table corners before reaching a suitable aadaab position. Baji didn't respond to my aadaab with the traditional 'jeeti raho' so I didn't kiss her. Whatever her feelings towards my grandparents there was no need for her to forego wishing me continued life. Manners above all. Qaida. Saleeqa. (Shamsie 36)

The opinions and observations are recollections of memory, which consider in Aliya an in-betweenness of melancholy and mourning, with recurrent figurations of the curse borne by the Dard-e-Dil family through the trope of the "not-quite-twins" at the very onset of the novel to signify those born on 14th and 15th of August, suggestive of the partition of India and Pakistan. But the reach of the novel is beyond these political considerations, to a space where ideas meet despite borders, creating a hybridized space from Urdu *shaayari* to *Bhangra* to the exploitation of Greek mythology drawn by the analogies of Leda and the Swan. Elucidating from memory, stories play an important role in the development of the characters; it is the stories which have lingered in their memories, which in turn have helped Aliya in her indistinct chatter: "At college I was famous for my storytelling abilities, but I never told anyone that my stories were mere repetition, my abilities those of a parrot" (Shamsie 18). Other cultural instruments like photographs and paintings are deployed systematically to equate memories involved in casting a retrospective glance:

The setting [of that framed photograph] was the grounds of the Dard-e-Dil palace. I recognized it instantly from the photographs and paintings that adorned the walls of Dadi's house in Karachi, recognized it well enough to know that to have snapped that particular vista the photographer must have been backed up against the marble statue of Nur-ul-Jahan, founder of the house of Dard-e-Dil. (Shamsie 40)

The familial metanarrative which Aliya reproduces through her quest for Mariam and Masood interlaces with the class consciousness and prejudice functioning within Aliya irrespective of her Western education. On the other hand, the Sahitya Akademi winning novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988), is a memory novel which encompasses a historical timeline from the freedom movement in Bengal to the Second World War, and most importantly the partition of India in 1947, to account for the violence and present the contradictory episodes of communal tensions through the riots in Bangladesh and India. The novel is set thirteen years before the narrator is born: "In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib" (Ghosh 1). This is why the narrator of the novel is dependent upon his grandmother, Robi, Ila, May, and Tridib (his uncle) as secondary sources used to fill the gap of place and time and engage in the events of past, present, and future. It is through the memory and the checkered lanes of Kolkata,

Dhaka, and London, that we locate the instances of trauma of partition. In this instance, let us revisit *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson:

I propose the following definition of a nation: it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (Anderson 6)

Within the wider concerns of cross-border humanity, ethnic nationalism, and communalism, Ghosh juxtaposes memory with history garnered from the fractures of partition and the ruptures faced by the communities across the border. The unnamed narrator in the novel intricately weaves three generations within two families. Like the Brechtian dramatic technique of alienation, the free flow of the narrative is disturbed at regular intervals by the intrusion of memory. In our attempt to decode the ideological implications of Ghosh's novel, we find the fragmented portrayal of Tridib's death, long after the actual incident through the character of Robi, who was frequented by Tridib's ghostly visitations. The retrospective details of the incident are coiled around the political crisis at Dhaka, where they went to meet their old relative who happened to be the uncle of the narrator's grandmother while their car gets stopped by the rioters. The trauma caused to the narrator as a result of the Partition of India and Pakistan and communal riots is further exemplified by the happenings of the Second World War which shook his consciousness during his formative years and he writes: "Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence" (Ghosh 240). It appears that a silent terror engulfed the mind of the narrator due to the riots:

Surely, you remember, I said. There were terrible riots in Calcutta in 1964. I see, said Malik. What happened? I opened my mouth to answer and I found I had nothing to say. All I could have told them about was the sound of the voices running past the walls of my school, and of a glimpse of a mob in Park Circus. (Ghosh 243)

Tridib seeks to identify silence with the absence of meaning and impenetrable banality. Coalescing the public and the private maps of nations, Ghosh questions the existence of borders which are otherwise a reality and thereby charts an organic structure to the narrative. This has been employed to reify the significance of the past events in order to deconstruct the contemporary political happenings and further signify the futility of international boundaries. The historical monster of partition which resides amid the scattered shadows in the various significant pockets of the novel reinforces the theme of a disgraceful grotesque functioning around gore and trauma: "When I got there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They'd cut Khalil's stomach open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they'd cut Tridib's throat, from ear to ear" (Ghosh 248). It is in view of these horrendous incidents that we undergo a psychoanalytical reading of the two texts, which will further help us in our understanding of their emotional conditions and the reasons behind their anomalous attitude. It is through the symbols of remembrance, which Freud considers as *Erinnerungssymbole*, that the hysterical symptoms in patients emerge from the traumatic events of the patient's erstwhile memories. In light of this understanding, we get a clearer understanding of the narrator's behavior at the sight of his Tha'mma's ailment:

It was then that I screamed. I screamed from the pit of my stomach, holding my head and shutting my eyes. I screamed until my mother and the servants came and carried me to my room, and even then I screamed and would not open my eyes. (Ghosh 262)

The sense of mourning which is situated at the heart of the novel, is caressed by melancholia which for Freud is occasioned "beyond the clear case of a loss by death, and

include all those situations of being sighted, neglected or disappointed, which can import opposed feelings of love and hate into the relationship or reinforce an already existing ambivalence” (Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*). However, Shamshie strategically infuses this violence, by exploiting the mythical story of the rape of Leda, where Zeus disguised as a swan rapes Leda on the very same day she had sex with her husband Tyndareus. Thereby, she contrasts and compares the birth of Zeus’ offsprings Helen and Pollux as well as Tyndareus’ offsprings Castor and Clytemnestra to the birth of the “not-quite-twins”—India and Pakistan. The disjunctive narrative of Kamila testifies the plight of ethnic concerns amid postcolonial women like Aliya or the conservative Mariam Apa. The outcast Mariam is desirous of maternal affection:

I am writing because there is a young lady, Mariam, who soon before was motherless but since last month is an orphan. Her father (late) was Sahizada Taimur Ali Khan whose name you must know and maybe even his face if you have old pictures. (Shamsie 52)

The postcolonial estrangement in *Salt and Saffron* is underlined by historiography and the separation of the families. It is through the silenced Mariam, who has refused to communicate with her family that we redeem a psychoanalytical portrayal of the characters her broken heart which is believed to occupy a greater “surface area than a heart that is intact” (Shamshe 192). In light of the Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe’s work *Necropolitics* (2011), I further argue that Shamshie’s novel may be further deconstructed in relation to the concepts of necropolitics, necropower and trauma. Mbembe’ response to the Foucauldian reading of ‘biopolitics’ postulates a model of structural injustice located within the democratic structure of society which functions through the scars and wounds of the characters, the frequent analogies to the Oedipus myth or references of Hamlet alongwith the mystifying tendency in relating the political to the personal:

When Samia told me not to mention my grandparents to Baji, it was because the general consensus—on both sides of the border, though I wasn’t aware of that until Samia explained it to me—was that ties between the Indian and Pakistani sides of the family would eventually have been renewed if it hadn’t been for Akbar and Sulaiman, each declaring that he did not want to hear his brother’s name again, each constantly reminding the rest of the family of all the harsh words, the insults, the curses that had been hurled across the Nawab’s table. (Shamsie 174)

The necropower then is functioning by the representation of the dead-world, through the long history of the Dard-e-Dil’s and the customs, social etiquette and pride still brewing among the successors. This world of the dead is made alive through the pruned copy of the family tree as maintained by Babuji. Such metanarratives help Shamshie in surfacing the prevalent class divide in Pakistan and making violent attempts in countering the rigid class boundaries through the marriage of Mariam with the family’s cook. On the contrary, the shock and trauma is rigorous in Ghosh’s novel with explicit references of the post-traumatic stress disorder prominent in the characterization of Tha’mma who has witnessed the killings of Jethamoshai and Tribid and is now seeing her birthplace bleeding. This has fragmented her from the once benevolent woman to the hysteric old lady who is keen in selling her valuables to fund the riots. This drastic aggression in Tha’mma has been considered by Suvil Kaul as an “exemplar of militant nationalism” (Kaul 278). In this regard Sigmund Freud uses the term *reminiscence* to retract the psychogenesis of hysteria and the efficacy of cathartic therapy. The hysterical symptoms as proposed by Freud and Breuer is located when the narrator asked Thamma for why was she giving her jewellery

and that she replied:

I gave it away, she screamed. I have it to the fund for the war. I had to, don't you see? For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out. She began to pound on the radio with both hands. I took a step backwards, fumbling with the doorknob, behind my back. (Ghosh 261)

The narrator's fright made him ill, primarily due to his inability in comprehending surroundings and the reactions to it. In Ghosh's novel both Tha'mma and the narrator is found to reflect traumatised behaviour, with the necropolitics functioning through the agency of Tridib, in the correspondence of a "planetary democracy" where the "demand for justice and reparation is inescapable" (*Necropolitics*). However, both Shamshie and Ghosh provokes the reader with a rebellious view against the issue of border, the presence of which will inflict unsurmountable pain among the readers. It is through the character of Tridib that Ghosh challenges the hegemony of historical construct who subscribes to the imaginative sense of space and argues that the construct of chronology is due to an unidimensional view of time which differs from the perspective of the other. With a dissociated glance of the border, the social parameters change, so does the way in viewing at it, and therefore we find characters like Aliya who clutches strongly with her Pakistani identity and in her desire of a partner who would value the same. Through the literary apparatus of memory which both Ghosh and Shamshie embraces, they have tried to allure the reader in finding the truth for themselves as we learn that it was not just for May but in order to save his family's prestige that Tridib leaped before the mob in order to protect his old granduncle. It is true that nationalist fervour amid individuals catered to the fight against colonial rule, but the violence which has been unleashed among ordinary people has distorted and deranged the societal morality. It is due to this along with other issues like expatriation and mobility across nations due to studies for Aliya and father's job at United Nations for Ila that they have been culturally hybridized. The recurrent figurations of the partition memory, the aftermath on family and friends has caused psychological trauma, to the medical condition which Freud refers to as "pathological reminiscences" which played a pivotal role in the plot construction through the surfacing of memories from the past, and its interjection with the present. Through a psychoanalytical reading of the texts, I have tried to enumerate certain traumatic happenings within the characters, delineated a socio-cultural reading behind their actions and highlighted the way they have functioned throughout the novels to defamiliarise the individual from the established notions of the society, which accentuates their past memories of traumatic happenings. This has been projected through a pluralistic model of trauma, with the unspeakability of the characters, the fragmented imaginations and narratives, and most importantly through the ruptured meanings of the text. Such a trans-temporal approach is perfectly in keeping with the avowed objectives of Partition and Memory Studies.

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