

Layers of Palimpsest on Tridib's Death Mystery in the Shadow Lines

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's attempt at retrieving the facts about Tridib's death from the fragmentary details of other characters is chiefly made with the help of the palimpsest of memory. When historiography is missing the histories of other pasts in order to protect the logical coherence of the higher narrative, Ghosh utilizes those vacuums, fissures or 'vanished' episodes in his narratives exposing the loopholes of the master narratives. Ghosh very often seems to take many of the details of History for granted; but his search is intense and profound when the lapses are found. Ghosh's palimpsest-like writing is strongly evidenced in The Shadow lines, especially while dealing with the mystery of Tridib's death.

Keywords: Palimpsest, lapses, fissures, historiography, erasure, alternative, syncretism.

When it comes to the term 'palimpsest', it generally refers to the physical erasure or the covering over of one surface with another. The third edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED 3) states that the term means "a manuscript from which the original text may be 'partially erased' while the writing surface, although altered and reused, may still retain traces of its earlier forms" (). If historiography refers to the European master narrative, then the palimpsest highlights the active layering in which the events of a master narrative that could be called "the history of Europe" are privileged and prominent, obscuring and contorting other significant events of the history of native or indigenous cultures.

Thus, Ghosh's palimpsest-like writing in response records and explores other significant events in history, sidelined or obscured from the higher narrative. Layered thus with such contradictory coatings of historical instances, he undermines the master history, exposing the illusion of its logic or integrity. For exploring the higher narrative and exposing its illusion, Ghosh generally applies the palimpsests of memory, imagination, speculative proofs and supernatural elements. Those layered and alternative 'other' pasts interwoven are playing major roles in the narratives of Ghosh's novels.

The story of *The Shadow Lines* is centred on the narrator's investigation about the sweeping historical events that took place in the 19th century and their repercussions on the individuals. Shaped by the perception of precise imagination and memory from his uncle cum mentor, Tridib, the narrator retrieves the past traces of the events in the countries of London, India and Pakistan. The novel has been written against the backdrop of the war-hit London, the riot-hit Calcutta, the civil strife in post-partition Best Bengal and the riot-hit Dhaka in the wake of the theft of the sacred relic known as the Mu-i-Mubarak, believed to be a hair of the Prophet Mohammed. In the part one, 'Going away', the narrator chiefly attempts to reproduce the past traces of the war-hit London and the agony of the individuals:

While Ghosh reconstructs the painful lives of the individuals, their unrecognised contribution to the country and their tragic ends using his own memory stratagems, especially the old photographs as an instrument for recollecting, he reproduces the past traces of the war-affected areas of the country while visiting them.

In the part two, 'Coming home', his investigation seems to be personal and one-pointed, rather than examining many individuals. Haunted by his own absence during the death of his uncle Tridib who was killed in a riot in Dhaka, he first explores the historical documents that evidence the riots of the year. This scholarly attempt, though in one way exposing the background history of the riot which killed his uncle, being futile, the narrator relies on the swirl of memories that have been assimilated from the recollection of the other people who witnessed the incident, Tridib's younger brother Robi, and May Price, an English woman whom Tridib loved. Ghosh's crucial reproduction of the war and riot-hit individuals across the two countries has been chiefly achieved by his layered palimpsest of memory and imagination over the memories of the characters.

Tridib's death mystery and his investigation start from the chapter two 'Coming home', which is personal and one-pointed. Instead of expressing the affected individuals during the big historical incidences, he focuses on the individual. His search is intense as the affected one is his uncle Tridib. Haunted by his own absence during the death of his uncle Tridib who was killed in a riot in Dhaka, he first explores the historical documents that evidence the riots of the year. This scholarly attempt, though in one way exposing the background history of the riot which killed his uncle, being futile, the narrator relies on the swirl of memories that have been assimilated from the recollection of the other people who witnessed the incident, Tridib's younger brother Robi, and May Price, an English woman whom Tridib loved. Ghosh's crucial reproduction of the riot-hit individuals across the two countries has been chiefly achieved by his layered palimpsest of memory and imagination over the memories of the characters.

Before obtaining the different versions of Tridib's death and reaching a comprehensive story

of the incident, the narrator puts in meticulous efforts to scrutinize the records of historiography regarding the 1964 riot in Calcutta. Ghosh's palimpsest in the context is dense with the details of the various riots that erupted in different places like Khulna, Calcutta and Dhaka, all of them are cited from newspapers. His intention is quite obvious that he wishes to bring to the readers' attention some striking facts related with the riots, which have been long forgotten but are important and relevant in the context as Tridib's history is getting into anonymity along with the erased history of the riots. That the history of all the victims, the number of which, the narrator claims, "could stretch from several hundred to several thousand; at any rate not very many less than were killed in the war of 1962" (247), is lost forever along with the erasure of the riot history, is distinctly highlighted by Ghosh in the episode.

He seems to point out the flaws in the character of the common people who forgot with ease the terrible riot that happened on their doorsteps and the blunders committed by the canny journalists who forgot all about the riot after producing thousands of words of accurate description and spoke no mention of it again afterwards. Thus, is the reproduction of historical details of the riots by Ghosh in the form of palimpsest with the inclusion of some conversations held during the hunting and some speculation from his part.

However, Ghosh's palimpsest in the episode is in fact initiated by the memories of the narrator and his friends, jogged by the speech on India's war with China in 1962, delivered by an Australian speaker when the narrator was doing Ph.D. Their recollection is dealing much with the war and all of them, except the narrator, don't have any mention of the terrible riot in 1964 that happened after the war. All of them suffer embarrassment and Malik, one of them, is surprised with a puzzled frown when the narrator mentions it. According to them, "it (the riot) must have been a local thing. Terrible or not, it's hardly comparable to a war" (244). As a corollary, Ghosh attempts to show the frightening magnitude of the terrible riot which he himself had witnessed. He throws light upon the historical details in sequence with the brief genesis of the sacred relic known as the Mu-i-Mubarak, believed to be a hair of the Prophet Mohammed himself.

It is an irony that the narrator has no other go but resorts to the records of historiography to find out the traces of the riots, in spite of a good number of friends contemporaneous with the riot. Another irony that comes during his hunting for the details of the riot is that the narrator himself is not sure about when the riot erupted. Before the massive volumes of the newspapers for 1964, his memory seems to be fragile, dwindling with the trivial recollections. He tries to associate the Test cricket match with England which was held sometime in the month of January or February. Cricket, the game, a sports epitome of the coloniser, hints the right guidance on his hunting.

The edition of Friday 10 January 1964, which he refers to, has a lead story about some meeting of the Congress party in Bhubaneshwar, with the marginal mention of the riot in Khulna at the bottom of the page with a headline “Twenty nine killed in riots” (246). A major discovery that is made by the narrator, which he realizes later and associates it as the primary cause for the spread of the riots in many different places, even across the borders, is that it is only in Khulna where the demonstration for the stolen relic from the Hazratbal mosque had turned violent and ended in a riot.

The next day’s edition has a huge banner headline, “Curfew in Calcutta, Police open fire, 10 dead, 15 wounded”, with a tiny box story in its right bottom with the headline “Sacred relic reinstalled” (247). The bottom story describes the tremendous upsurge of popular joy and festivity throughout Kashmir for the reinstallation of the relic. The top story reports the riot in Calcutta which is the repercussion of the riot in Khulna and the resultant curfew in the city. While Kashmir celebrates the relic’s reinstallation, Khulna and Calcutta are becoming unruly and violent for its missing. This has made the narrator to “begin on a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances: a land of looking glass borders” (247).

The genesis of the sacred relic known as the Mu-i-Mubarak, believed to be a hair of the Prophet Mohammed himself and its subsequent history is Ghosh’s palimpsest of insertion in the midst of his hunting for the riot’s story. His purpose here is to underscore the glory of the syncretic civilization in Kashmir where the relic was installed in 1699. It was purchased by a Kashmiri merchant Khwaja Nur-

ud-din in Bijapur and the arrival was greeted by a great tumult of joy in the valley. People are said to have marched in their thousands from every port of Kashmir, even from such distant and remote eyries, in order to get a glimpse of the relic. “The mosque became a great centre of pilgrimage and every year multitudes of every kind, Muslims, Hindua, Sikhs and Buddhists, would flock to Hazratbl on those occasions when the relic was displayed to the public” (248). The sight of these ecumenical pilgrims, the narrator claims, outraged the European observers whose sense of Christian sense of the necessity of quarantine between doctrines. Even in the syncretic culture, Christianity, a typical category of Europeans, is an exceptional case though the shrine became a symbol of the unique and distinctive culture of Kashmir.

The same syncretic civilization is again witnessed even in the immediate past following the disappearance of the relic until the eruption of the riot in Khulna. As the news spread, life came to a standstill in the valley of Kashmir with thousands of people, including hundreds of wailing women, taking out black-flag demonstration and schools, colleges and shops being pulled down and streets and roads deserted. The December 29, 1963 witnessed huge demonstrations in Srinagar in which Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus alike took part and a number of public meetings attended and addressed by members of all the major religious communities.

Through the layered palimpsest, which deals with historical facts with the assimilation of the memories of the individuals, the narrator has a definite purpose that he exemplifies the syncretic nature of the civilization with the attitudes of the rioters in the beginning: “The targets of the rioters were not people but property identified with the government and the police” (247) and the demonstrators replaced “black flags instead of the green and thereby drew the various communities of Kashmir together in a collective display of mourning” (248). The narrator observes that there was not one single recorded incident of animosity between Kashmir Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs during the demonstrations as if the theft had brought together the people of Kashmir as never before. The narrator points out that the newspapers “ascribe this to the leadership of

Maulana Masoodi, an authentic hero, forgotten and unsung today as any purveyor of sanity inevitably is in the hysteria of our subcontinent” (248)

Ghosh's palimpsest detailing the erased story of the riot includes both the countries' political stances on this sensitive issue. While the premier of Kashmir declared that the theft was 'a mad act of some miscreant', the Pakistani newspapers declared that the theft was part of a deep-laid conspiracy for uprooting the spiritual and national hopes of Kashmiris. When the relic was recovered by the officials of the Central Bureau of Intelligence, there was no explanation from the part of Indian Government. The stolen history itself was erased by the Indian Government which never mentioned what happened to the relic.

Both governments in the beginning during the rioting times traded a series of curiously symmetrical accusations. While Indian External Affairs ministry declared that the situation of lawlessness was an inevitable consequence of the incitement and provocative statements' made by Pakistani leaders and the Pakistani press, The Pakistani Government's view was that the communal incidents in East Pakistan was being played up by the Indian press in order to 'divert the people's attention from the serious happenings in Kashmir. Within a few days, a congratulatory note entered into the exchanges between the ministries for their respective successes in quelling the disturbances. The act of complacency from both sides, the narrator observes, almost vanishes the memory of the riots into an abyss forever, with his observance: "By the end of January 1964, the riots had faded away from the pages of the newspapers, disappeared from the collective imagination of 'responsible opinion', vanished, without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves." (254).

Ghosh's palimpsest figures out another dimension of the media and juxtaposes its condonation with the usual easily forgetting nature of the public. It shows the blunders committed by the canny journalist who forgot all about the riot after producing thousands of words of accurate description and spoke no mention of it afterwards and questions the integrity of the media which pours out its eloquence for years and years to describe the events like party splits,

elections, party congresses. But in the case of the riot, it falls silent after the occurrence of the riot. The narrator argues that "words of any other kind would be to give them meaning and that it is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness" (251) and thus concludes that "... that is why I can only describe at second hand the manner of Tridib's death" (251)

The narrator has two speculations about Tridib's death, drawn from the riot history: one is that May Price, Tridib and his grandmother must have left for Dhaka the day before the eruption of the riot in Khulna; another is the barest mention of any trouble in East Pakistan and of the events in Kashmir in the newspapers in Calcutta. His inference that his father who sent them to Dhaka should not be blamed for ignoring the stirrings of the silence as the papers had no slightest hint or augury of the coming carnage.

Ghosh's palimpsest in the end of the episode attempts to describe a flurry of killing and burning as a result of the large scale of violence meted out in the act of rioting on both sides and the resultant commotions over the borders in India and Pakistan. The description is grounded on the rumours circulated among the public. The rumours such as the trains from Pakistan arriving packed with corpses, stranded Hindu refugees, refugees still pouring in, are drawn either from hearsay or from the newspaper clippings. The description ends with a note that though "there are no reliable estimates of how many people were killed in riots of 1964, the number could stretch from several hundred to several thousand..." (252). It also incorporates the fine and humane pieces of reporting on both sides, the typical examples of the culture of accommodation such as the innumerable cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus even at the cost of their own lives and equally in India, of Hindus sheltering Muslims.

The facts about Tridib's death in the riot are drawn from the different versions of other characters, based on their memories. For detailing Tridib's death, the most sensitive part of the story, which comes in the end of the novel, the narrator is seen as not stimulating any one's memory nor applying any memory stratagems, to know the facts behind the mysterious death, as he tries very often on the characters. The versions seem to be the natural

outcomes as the characters, who witnessed the incident, need an outlet for all that pent-up sadness. Ghosh's palimpsest of memory in this context is presented by an overlay of the narrator's memory with that of the memories of the characters on the incident. No facts are sifted from the different versions. In fact, the different versions of the story are described and the job of sifting the facts seems to have been given for the readers with a statement that "for any real sacrifice is a mystery" (277)

The context in which the narrator's father's version is revealed confirms that it has mere words of consolation with no full account of the incident; it is brief and fragmentary. Besides, his father is not a first-hand witness of the incident. Thus, his version is based on hearsay. Also, he seems to have more concerns on his son, the narrator and his mother who witnessed the incident, for their safety. Ghosh's palimpsest of memory in the context is in fact the narrator's memory on his father's version: "Their car was stopped by some hooligans, my father told me. Just ordinary ruffians like you have everywhere. But the car swerved and crashed into a wall or something...that was all. No one else was hurt... it has to be kept secret, so you mustn't talk about it. Most of all, you must not ask your Tha'mma any questions about what happened..." (264)

Robi's version is descriptive as well as elaborate. It describes meticulously everything from the kind of field they (Robi, Tridib, May Price, Tridib's mother and the narrator's grandmother) came across while returning from the old house in Dhaka to their new house in Dhanmudi, to Tridib's unexpected act of running towards the riot mob. The description includes the clear picture of the gangsters whose faces Robi claims 'know ... better than I know my friends', the deserted streets, a grinding kind of noise in the car, the panicked driver, the gangsters' gliding movements, the violent assault on the car and the driver, the firing by the security guard, the stillness of the moment, the growing appearance of Khalil's rickshaw, the gangsters' attack on Khalil and the old uncle and May Price's scream and Tridib's act of running towards the mob to rescue the old uncle and Khali. The version misses what happened to Tridib after this and the missing gap is later filled by the version of May Price who is another witness of the

incident. Robi's version seems to be unbiased, unlike that of the narrator's father whose main concern is much on his son and old mother. It is not easy to sift facts from Robi's version, nor easy to find the possible fiction. However, Ghosh's palimpsest of memory is grounded on Robi's recollection of the incident. It seems to be genuine and precise as the experience of recollecting the incident itself is insurmountable as well as traumatic to Robi who claims, "I would have given anything to be free of that memory". It is becoming a haunting memory that chases him wherever he goes.

Ghosh's palimpsest of memory in the end of the novel is based on May Price's recollection of what exactly happened at the last moment. May's version makes an excellent complement to Robi's version as it constitutes the part of the incident which is found missing in Robi's version. The details in both versions are relatively the same but May's version states much about her involvement in the incident. She strongly feels that her act of running towards the mob to rescue the old uncle and Khalil in spite of the repeated warnings signalled by everybody around her, is the main cause for the death of Tridib. The unexpected turn of the incident due to the intrusion of May Price results in the deaths of all the three, the old Uncle, Khalil and Tridib. It is only May Price's version in which the states of the corpses of the deceased are detailed as such: "They were all dead. They'd cut Khalil's stomach open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they's cut Tridib's throat, from ear to ear." (276)

Thus, Ghosh's attempt at retrieving the facts about Tridib's death from the fragmentary details of other characters is chiefly made with the help of the palimpsest of memory and it seems that he is successful in the attempt which is intended not to identify which is true and which is false but to get the full picture of the incident for the readers' perusal and choice. Thus, it ends with some uncertain statements made by May Price and the narrator in its last line: "I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery" (277); "for the glimpse she had given me of a final redemptive mystery" (277).

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