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**Vultures of Violence: Ideology and Narrative Strategy Employed in
Amitav Ghosh's Work to Understand Violence**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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To

The residents of 3C/308, Bokaro Steel City in 1984
Whose house was gutted down by the anti-Sikh rioters
By the grace of the unknown forces, they survived

And to

The summer of 99, my first year of college, when I read
The Shadow Lines, that conjured up my memories of the
winter of 84.

Acknowledgements

I must thank Dr Saugata Bhaduri for his pro-active encouragement for lucid writing rather than lurid hieroglyphics, as well as for his refusal to take an essentialist stand on any issue.

Since it is about acknowledgements, I must acknowledge that Yoko Ono's stand of not ever naming the assassin of John Lennon has had a strong bearing on my mind, when juxtaposed with the reality television that telecasts every minute of violence when it can, and in turn valorizes it.

Family and friends, books and music are constant pillars of strength, is needless to mention.

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EPIGRAPH

*Hindu yeh samajhte hain sanam mein kuch hai
Muslim yeh samajhte hain haram mein kuch hai
Dono galat hain apni kajfahmi se
Hum to yehi samajhte hain ki
Tu hi Tu.*
-Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan

The hunt for love is haughty falconry.
-Gil Vicente

*Revenge is like a rolling stone, which when a
man hath forced up the hill, will return upon
him with a greater violence, and break those
bones whose sinews gave it action*
-Albert Schweitzer

*Writing saved me from the sin and
inconvenience of violence.*
-Alice Walker

Chapter 1

A PROGRAM CALLED POGROM

First there was the word

And then the sword.

Both can cut.

Related by blood.

Words about swords

Swords about words.

Call it the circle of reason

Call it the circle of treason

Many a season

Have come and gone.

But the tales of hacked entrails

And the entrails of hacked tales

Are unending

They intertwine like the mythical snakes

On medical prescriptions

To form the spine

Of the book called

The vultures of violence

Or the violence of the vultures

Across times,

Across cultures,

The vulture stoops down

With both beak and tongue

On old and young

The prey mumbles a prayer

The prey-or crumbles the prey.

Vanity of vanities,

All is vanity

Insanity of insanities,

They call it humanity

History is replete with violence and narratives of violence, with words about swords, and words that cut like swords.

The seeds of this research were sown in 2001, sitting in a classroom of a college, the same college where the writer in question, Dr Amitav Ghosh must have conjured his dreams to weave words. The day was 12/09 and we were discussing 11/09, which by now had become 9/11, fuelled by media representations. Living in the college residence, the access to television was only in the Junior Combination Room, and somehow I had missed going there the night before. It was only through the newspapers that one came to know of this sinister 'moment in history'. The image of a man free-falling like a brick from a huge burning tower was a photographer's delight, and mankind's fright.

The class was cancelled and we had a round table conference, the tutor and us, to deliberate upon the issue. A parody of sorts, but in hindsight one guesses it's important that young people gather and discuss issues. We talked about representational role of the media, of terrorism, of the increasingly Rightward' turn of the world. I was lost in that single image I had seen that morning, however.

Incidentally, we were studying *Frankenstein* (1831) those days. It was a classic Frankenstein case where the pet monster had turned against the master, which is what had happened to Mrs Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi too, one would guess. The crumbling of the twin towers is a classic example of 'being beaten at one's own game'. The incident became a metaphor that would generate

xenophobia, and launch a 'war on terror' by the US establishment in which a puny state called Afghanistan would be wiped out to hunt out one terrorist. Images of primeval violence in Afghanistan would be broadcast to justify the 'white man's burden'. Ironically, help would be taken from Pakistan, known for its terror warehouses. The vicious circle of violence began once again, and Iraq would be the next target. Images of carpet-bombing and images of the molested prisoners of Abu Gharib. Spectacle unlimited, with sources of image production also based in the First world. One is reminded also of Timothy Mc Veigh, the war veteran of 'Operation Desert Storm', who went back to his country, the United States of America, and blew up a government building to express his angst against the establishment. His execution was televised across the world. Blood for blood. The spectacle, one wonders, how was it different from beheading in the stadiums of Afghanistan, or the medieval burning at stake?

All that might be digression, but fairly pertinent to the subject of inquiry. In the same year, our third and final in college, we were to read Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1727) where in Brobdingnag, Gulliver becomes the tiny Lilliput and the huge Brobdignagians become the mighty Gulliver, and Gulliver sees sweat pores on their skins as huge ugly warts. This strong metaphor of human vanity gets even more sinister in Swift's essay "A Modest Proposal" (1720) (The complete title of the essay is "A Modest Proposal for preventing the children of poor people in Ireland, from being a burden on their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the publick.") where he suggests, in the most nonchalant manner, that to overcome the food crisis, young Irish catholic children be used as food in the Protestant establishment of United Kingdom. This scathing dig at mercantilism was followed, in our syllabus, by Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), where a whole cultural memory of the Africans is conjured. The book is so heavy, with its brooding, howling images of violence against the blacks that one needed to sit with an aspirin to finish a few pages of the book. Somehow, it was the 'most violent' year word-wise in the curriculum, with the final touches given by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his *Chronicle of a*

Death Foretold (1983) and Joseph Conrad in his masterpiece *The Heart of Darkness* (1902). In the former, the death of the protagonist Santiago Nassar, and the identity of killer is revealed at the very outset. What holds the story is the spectacle of his death, with his entrails hanging out, and how the unwilling killers kill to avenge the loss of their sister's 'honour', even though Santiago is just a suspect. They must take revenge on someone, and the judge lapses into poetry unable to comprehend the situation. In Conrad's work, the rapacity of Kurtz is unlimited, he simply wants to "exterminate the brutes".

The same novella of Conrad was used years later to prepare the script of the film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), based on the Vietnam War. All these are fictional works, trying to unravel the mysteries, trying to come to terms with a past that never perhaps can be negotiated with.

In the months that followed, the Godhra pogrom was programmed, following the burning of Hindu pilgrims in a train at Godhra. There have been allegations of state sponsored rioting, and no one has been brought to the book in four years. The carnage happened in February, and I was in a Bombay bound train from Delhi, in June that year. I had no idea that the train passes Godhra. When it stopped, I stepped down out of curiosity to see what the station looks like now. No one got down from the train, except a few students who cannot do without smoking on the stations. It was daytime when a lot of trains would cross; but half the hawkers were dozing off. The ghost of Godhra station wouldn't let business happen.

Having encountered these events, factual and fictional, with fact stranger than fiction, as generally is, one was shaken from within. I was re-reading Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) on the same journey, trying to cull out a rationale for all this madness. At a point in the book, the narrator is talking about a riot that happened in Calcutta in the 1960s. He says that he does not know what to write, because words should carry meaning. And the violence he saw did not have any meaning, so what could possibly be written about it?

Violence and banality are perhaps those twin towers that cannot be demolished, for demolition is their work.

On the same journey, trying to find answers, might not be answers, but something, I was listening to anti-war songs of John Lennon. *All we are saying is give peace a chance...* and all that. It is an irony that Lennon was pacified by one of his own fans, shot dead on a cold night of 1980. There are many conspiracy theories that abound, that the FBI had him killed, that the assassin was a product of Mind Kontrol¹ programme, that there was a chip in his ear that kept repeating instructions to him, which he thought were voices. However, to me, the most striking part of the entire narrative is that Lennon's wife Yoko Ono, drew a violence-banality connection like Ghosh, and urged the world not to propagate or take the name of the assassin, which is why I also do not name him here. Denying even infamy to the perpetrator is an interesting stand. Not talking about what is banal, robbing them of their five minutes of glory is an important method of resistance to those who want to write their name on a bullet.

My friend, a zoology student from another college, broke me from my reverie by pulling the earphone out of my ear, "Don't hear the music so loud, it might burst your pinna". I laughed, hearing the word "pinna" instead of eardrum. And reverie happened again, the incorrigible rhymester in me reminded me of Cinna of *Julius Caesar* (1599). Cinna, the poet walking down the street, the mob asking him his name, he telling them "Cinna", they confusing him for Cinna, the conspirator; and he clearing their doubt that he was a poet, and the crowd saying, "Pluck but his heart out, for his name is Cinna."

I have talked about various narratives of violence, albeit in a narrative manner. The last two accounts, the stand of Yoko Ono and the voice of the mob in Shakespeare's play resonate with the same violence-banality connection that Ghosh talks about in *Shadow Lines*, and the ghost of this issue recurrently appears in most of his writings.

One of the most compelling narratives is the annihilation of Guanahuanco, where Mexico City stands now. I heard the story for the first time in college, when a lecturer told me how the search for El Dorado had made Spanish adventurers annihilate an entire tribe. It was just in the passing, I searched a lot in libraries and on the internet, but did not find much. Recently, I was introduced to a Spanish-American girl. In the course of our conversation, I asked her if she had ever heard about a tribe being wiped off by the Spanish conquerors. She said that I'd not find books about it, but many Spanish-Americans still exult over the shameful victory of the 14th century, and the story is passed by oral tradition. Quite unlike the White Anglo Saxon People who believe in documenting everything. The vultures of violence and the cultures of silence go hand in hand.

The story goes like this. The chief of the Guanahuanco people was told by the oracle that they should travel northward and build a new city where he sees an eagle eating a snake's egg. So, they saw what was ordained and built their new city there. It was a teeming civilization that soon ran out of space. They came up with the most ingenious technology of floating trees barks over lakes and planting saplings over them, which took roots and made the barks stay in place. So, the city was half afloat. The oracle came in again, and told that God is arriving. The White Gods arrived, and the king welcomed them. The Gods soon declared a war on the sinners of Guanahuanco, and in the bloody war that followed, 81,000 Guanahuancans perished. The tribals killed their own children for the fear that they might cry and reveal the group at night. The friend told that Guanahuancans knew the 'art', if it could be called art, 'of extracting a beating heart out of a person's body'. They might have extracted a hundred hearts for the blood of their people. In the end, however, the women and children were left with no option but to commit mass suicide. 9,000 people gave up their lives on their own. Not one of the tribe was left to tell the story. The city was razed down, and

discovered only in the 1970s when construction of metro rail network was going on.

One wonders then, about the human capacity for rapacity and cruelty. It is tough either to theorise or narrativise the thirst for blood. I will try to delineate some theories on violence, propounded by psychologists, sociologists before we delve into a discussion on Ghosh's work and his stand via non-fiction and fiction.

Before we get into that, however, we must invoke the architect of Auschwitz, the Fuhrer who said in *Mein Kampf*,

The very first essential for success is a perpetually constant and regular employment of violence.

This, juxtaposed with the "violence is banal" conjecture, gives us the polar opposites of human psyche, which can never quite be captured, by stories or histories. The man who became the 'Mahatma', with his defiance of violence was deluded towards the end; he is reported to have confessed to a "sinking feeling at the mass murders which can turn a man into a brute"².

We have already encountered the pinna-deafening, Cinna-devouring mob of *Julius Caesar*. Mob, by the way, is a short form of the Latin 'mobile vulgus', which means 'common people on the move' (from 'vulgus' meaning common people, and 'mobile' for mobility). In *Julius Caesar* itself, Cicero refers to the common people as "rag, tag, hiss, hass people". Sociologists Paul Horton and Chester Hunt define crowd as a "temporary collection of people that react together to a stimulus"³. These members are bound by a rapport. When the group gets aggressive it directs its collective action against an unreasoned objective, it becomes a mob.

Trying to unravel the relation between mob and the individual, Gabriel Tarde⁴, a French sociologist forwarded his theories on "imitation" and

“innovation”. Imitation is an advanced animal behaviour whereby an individual observes another's behaviour and replicates itself. This was further developed by Gustave Le Bon who in his seminal work *The Psychology of Crowds*⁵ says that a crowd hypnotises its members through “collective suggestibility”. In a crowd, where anonymity is a defining trait, people abandon their responsibility to indulge in irrational, violent action. Tarde, however, gave a twist to the idea, underlining the importance of leaders in organizing spontaneous crowds into “corporations” like the church, the army etc. He drew a line between spontaneous and institutionalized crowds, thus. The common features, however, would be imitation and hypnosis. Tarde also talked about public opinion, and therefore he would be a precursor to Marshall McLuhan’s idea of “medium is the message”⁶.

McLuhan’s contention is that the medium influences a society not by the content it carries, but by its own characteristics. He gives the example of a light bulb, which he says does not have content of its own, yet it creates space in a night that would otherwise be enveloped in darkness. He says, “A light bulb creates an environment by its mere presence”

The work is seminal in that the idea is that with technology of the tube, the worldview would change; control and censorship would not matter much. The geometric progression of technology since McLuhan is a testimony to that. McLuhan’s aphorism became a cliché of sorts and he wrote, in 1967, *The Medium is the Message*, which is more than just his fetish for punning. In the book he draws an inventory of effects that each kind of media is likely to have in “massaging” the public’s senses. He argues that “The technique of invention was the discovery of the nineteenth [century]”, brought on by the adoption of fixed points of view and perspective by typography, while “the technique of the suspended judgment is the discovery of the twentieth century”, brought on by the bard abilities of radio, movies and television. (McLuhan. *Medium is the Message*: 69)

The influence of media in shaping public opinion in the 20th century is a very important point while discussing a world that is paradoxically increasingly becoming Right wing with the increase of technological infrastructure. Ghosh harps on this too, in several places. In an essay on Abu Ghraib⁷, Ghosh compares the British convicts of imperial times with the prisoners of Abu Ghraib, and points out how images of brutality are circulated as examples and validated as documents. In an episode in *The Imam and The Indian*⁸, the Imam and the Indian, Ghosh himself, are fighting to prove whose civilisation is better, and finally they start comparing which nation has better bombs. Bombs as a measure of modernity as McLuhan would put it, a *massage* induced by the media.

McLuhan built upon his idea further in the book *War and Peace in the Global Village* (1968) co-authored with Quentin Fiore, where he takes inspiration from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), to study war throughout history to think how wars may be fought in the future. In an interview⁹ with Playboy, in 1969, McLuhan called our era a "transitional era of profound pain and tragic identity quest." "But," he added, "the agony of our age is the labor pain of rebirth."

McLuhan claims in the book that the ten thunders of *Finnegans Wake* are representational of various stages in the history of man¹⁰ (69) Each thunder in Joyce's masterpiece is a portmanteau of 100 letters. Joyce's book is claimed to be a gigantic cryptogram that reveals a cyclic pattern for the whole history of man as revealed through Ten Thunders. There is much dispute over the meaning, but this is how McLuhan interprets it (the words in italics are his interpretations; the words in normal font are the "thunders; the bold parts are the extracts McLuhan uses to establish his point):

Thunder 1: Palaeolithic to Neolithic. Speech. Split of East/West. From herding to harnessing animals.

**bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonneronntuonnthunntrovarrhouna
wnskawntoohooordenenthurnuk**

Thunder 2: Clothing as weaponry. Enclosure of private parts. First social aggression.

**Perkothuskurunbargruauyagokgorlayorgromgremmitghundhurtthrumathunarad
idillifaititillibumullunukkunun**

Thunder 3: Specialism. Centralism via wheel, transport, cities: civil life.

**klikkakkakkaklaskaklopatzklatschabattacreppycrottygraddaghsemmihsammihnou
ithappluddyappladdykonpkot**

Thunder 4: Markets and truck gardens. Patterns of nature submitted to greed and power.

**Bladyughfulmoecklenburgwhurawhorascortastrumpapornanennykocksapastipp
atappatupperstrippuckputtanach**

Thunder 5: Printing. Distortion and translation of human patterns and postures and pastors.

**Thincrooklyexineverypasturesixdixlikencehimaraundhersthemaggerbykinkinka
nkanwithdownmindlookingated**

Thunder 6: Industrial Revolution. Extreme development of print process and individualism.

**Lukkedoerendunandrrraskewdylooshoofermoyporertooryzoosphalnabortransp
orthaokansakroidverjkapakkapuk**

Thunder 7: Tribal man again. Both all characters end of separate, private man. Return of choric.

**Bothallchoractorschumminaroundsansumuminarumdrumstrumtruminahumptad
umpwaultopoofoolooderamaunsturnup!**

Thunder 8: Movies. Pop art, pop Kulch via tribal radio. Wedding of sight and sound.

**Pappappapparassannuaragheallachnatullaghmonganmacmacmacwhackfalltherd
ebblenonthedubblanddaddydoodled**

Thunder 9: Car and Plane. Both centralizing and decentralizing at once create cities in crisis. Speed and death.

**husstenhasstencaffincoffintussemtosemendamandadmnacosaghcusaghhobixhatou
xpeswchbechoscashlcarcaract**

Thunder 10: Television. Back to tribal involvement in tribal mood-mud. Last thunder = turbulent, muddy wake, and murk of non-visual, tactile man.

**Ullhodurdenweirmudgaardgringnirurdrmolnirfenrirlukklilokkibaugimandodrr
rinsurtkrinmgernrackinarockar**

“Last thunder = turbulent, muddy wake, and murk of non-visual, tactile man” is quite an indicator of both the role of the exploding media acting as a trigger for much more explosion, as well as the turbulent times and the difficulty to narrativise or theorise it.

To get back to Le Bon and Tarde, they were the pioneers of what is called the Contagion Theory¹¹, which espouses that in a crowd, individual psychologies melt and give way to a collective consciousness, which is amplified by milling, rhythm, dominant mood, which Tarde would attribute to the leaders of the group. The individuals’ co-option to a dominant, violent idea is ascribed to repressed pathological desires by Le Bon.

These theories have been appropriated by various academics to explain conflicts in their own lands and contexts. Sudhir Kakkar tries to explain the complex Hindu Muslim dynamics through the contagion theory suggesting that dormant group identities come to the fore in tense situations. Collective memory

of violent past fires imagination further. Homogenization consumes the crowds and it is not an individual attacking the other, but a Hindu attacking a Muslim and vice versa. Kakkar states:

In times of heightened conflict between the two communities, the Hindu nationalist history that supports the version of conflict between the two assumes pre-eminence and organizes cultural memory in one particular direction.¹²

Le Bon's idea however, is quite a cliché now to explain away things just through a manifestation of repressed desires. The term "riot engineering" exists because it is not just a madding crowd ramming into the "Other", but there is a method to madness more often than not. How would one describe the participation of dalits against Muslims in Godhra riots, when they themselves have a history of being oppressed by Hindus. How would one explain the killing of Muslim Shahs in the same riot, and not the Hindu ones? A crowd on the kill would barely have the time to check the ration cards.

Manto, with his sardonic dark humour, vividly portrays in "Black Margins", one such incident. In one of the "one minute stories"¹³ titled '*Dawat-i-Amal*' (An Enterprise) Manto narrates:

Fire gutted the entire mohalla. The hoarding on the shop that escaped the flames read 'A complete range of building and construction materials sold here'¹⁴

Le Bon talked about irrational crowds, but the idea of irrational crowd was very much in currency in the 19th century. However, he considered himself the founder of the idea of "crowd psychology", and when something has a psychology attached to it, it cannot be totally random. Le Bon, then, considered the crowd as deviant from individual psychologies, in that crowds couldn't be studied by psychologists who concentrated on individual traits. He considered propaganda as a means to manage groups, in communal reinforcement of beliefs,

for example. As paradox always has it, Adolf Hitler made use of the propaganda idea of Le Bon¹⁵, he makes references to Le Bon's works in *Mein Kampf*.

Le Bon's simplistic model, as we can see, has come under a lot of criticism. Clark McPhail, for example, points that the "madding crowd" does not take any thought apart from the thoughts and intentions of its members¹⁶. Freud would criticize Le Bon's idea of collective consciousness, saying the crowds do not have a soul of their own, neither do ethnic groups have a *Volkgeist*¹⁷. The individuals consider the leader their "ideal ego".

Theodor Adorno does not believe in the spontaneity of crowds, to him the Ego of the bourgeois subject dissolves itself, giving way to the Id and a "depsychologised subject". He further propounds that the bond between the leader and the masses is a feigned one, that the group psychology is also a manufactured one. He says:

When the leaders become conscious of mass psychology and take it into their own hands, it ceases to exist in a certain sense... Just as little as people believe in the depth of their hearts that the Jews are the devil, do they completely believe in their leader. They do not really identify themselves with him but act this identification, perform their own enthusiasm, and thus participate in their leader's performance... It is probably the suspicion of this fictitiousness of their own 'group psychology' which makes fascist crowds so merciless and unapproachable. If they would stop to reason for a second, the whole performance would go to pieces, and they would be left to panic.¹⁸

Marx's talks about "issueless riot", which might not be grounded in a deep ideological conflict, but for the sake of "fun and profit"¹⁹. The blackout looting of 1977 of New York is a testimony to that. Power went off, the dark mob emerged from the inner city, and millions worth of property was looted in hours. The history of riots in India also suggests the same, time and again, where the business of other community is gutted down first, along with whatever looting

that is possible. Amitav Ghosh, in *The Shadow Lines*, mentions that newspapers always reported riots as “disturbances”, and then the situation would return to normalcy. It almost sounds like weather, where a wind would blow away a little, and then groups would be back to being individuals. Miller and Dollard forward the obvious concept of lack of punishment, or collective defence against anxiety²⁰. It would be easier to join a killer mob than to commit individual murder and go through individual marking. Godhra, again, is a recent testimony, where barely anyone has been brought to the book in four years.

Coming to what this dissertation holds; it shall aim to analyse the foreplay of violence in Amitav Ghosh’s work that leads to a broader discussion on the politically fragile times we live in. In both fiction and non-fiction, violence forms a strong motif of Ghosh, in fact the central strain that has often been overlooked. It is overlooked because it is marginal spatially, but the undercurrents never die, and that’s what makes his works so powerful. Violence has been a part of narratives for long, then why discuss Ghosh in particular? We discuss it, for violence is also given a different face from what general historiography does to it. For example, Ghosh says he’ll be silent about violence, in *The Shadow Lines*. He approaches violence not just through overt incidents, but also symbols and names that have a history of violence associated with them. The name Egypt for example, comes from ‘Kopt’, which was a term for the native Christians of the country. This racist name bestowed by the English, which is apparently matter-of-fact, replaced ‘Masr’ which was a metaphor of civilisation²¹. The idea is not to romanticize violence, but rather sensitize the reader through dialogic narratives.

Amitav Ghosh has said several times that there is something very unique and queer about violence in South Asia, it is different from what happens in Rwanda or Bosnia or any other place. This is reflected in his writings where he comes to the South Asian violence again and again, be it *Dancing in Cambodia*, *At Large in Burma* (1998) where the excesses of Polpot regime are depicted, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) where partition fury is evoked, *The Glass Palace* (2000) that recalls the woes of Burma, or any other work. Fiction and non-fiction are complimentary

as can be seen from the titles *At Large in Burma* and *The Glass Palace*, which is a novel, based on Burma. *The Imam and The Indian* (2002), collection of essays is also seminal while studying Ghosh. "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi" (1995) is on writing and politics; it focuses on "sectarian violence" in Delhi in 1984. This aspect of Ghosh's writing has been talked about, but not as a focus, for structurally, at least in fiction, there are very few pages dedicated to violence.

With this exposition at hand, the intention of this research is to see as to how Ghosh uses violence as a narrative strategy, in using it just as a small link to many personal histories, and at the end showing how that small link is the most vital. The dissertation would analyse the ideology that Ghosh is trying to further through debunking modern day violence.

Amitav Ghosh, though is a fairly new writer, yet has generated tremendous interest amongst scholars. The concern of the most of the essayists is alternate historiography, treatment of time space in works of Ghosh, nationalism in a post colonial context, etc. I have also come across the works of Dr. Claire Chambers of Leeds Metropolitan University. She is a specialist in South Asian literature, with a particular interest in Bengali writing from the early twentieth century to the present, and in Partition literature. She takes a multidisciplinary approach to South Asian texts, and is especially concerned with representations of science/technology and (neo-) colonialism. Claire is currently completing her monograph, *Knowledge and Power in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh*. My research is different from the current body of research in that no one has dealt with "violence" in his narratives, which is a constant theme in all his works, fiction and non-fiction, and to me forms a central part of his narrative and narrative strategy.

The method involved in this research project would be to refer to all of Amitav Ghosh's work, both fiction and non-fiction, and one would try to inter-relate the dynamics of violence in the genres in his work.

END NOTES

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- ¹ Mind Kontrol Ultra Program of the FBI that is alleged to have planted chips in the brain of the assassins it trained
- ² M.K. Gandhi quoted in *The Making of The Nation: India's Road to Independence*, ed. B.R.Nanda (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1998) 306.
- ³ Paul B. Horton and Chester L. Hunt. *Sociology* (Auckland: McGraw Hill, 1984) 478.
- ⁴ Gabriel Tarde. *The Laws of Imitation*. (1890, trans. 1903)
- ⁵ Gustave Le Bon. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1896)
- ⁶ Marshall McLuhan. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (1963)
- ⁷ Amitav Ghosh. "The Theater of Cruelty: Reflections on the Anniversary of Abu Ghraib". <<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20050718/ghosh/2>> as viewed on 24th October 2005.
- ⁸ Amitav Ghosh. *The Imam and the Indian* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002)
- ⁹ McLuhan quoted on <http://www.gingkopress.com/_cata/_mclu/warpeac1.htm> as viewed on 20th September, 2005
- ¹⁰ Marshall McLuhan. *War and Peace in the Global Village*. (p 69)
- ¹¹ Paul B. Horton and Chester L. Hunt. *Sociology*. (Auckland: McGraw Hill, 1984) 479-82
- ¹² Sudhir Kakkar. *The Colours of Violence*. (New Delhi: Viking-Penguin, 1995) 30
- ¹³ M. Asaduddin, introduction, *For Freedom's Sake: Selected Stories and Sketches*, ed. M. Asaduddin (Oxford: OUP, 2001) xxxii.
- ¹⁴ Saadat Hasan Manto, "Black Margins," trans. Mushirul Hasan, *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom*, ed. Mushirul Hasan, Vol. I (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1997) 96.
- ¹⁵ Serge Moscovici. *L'Age des foules: un traité historique de psychologie des masses*, Fayard, 1981 (about Gustave Le Bon's invention of crowd psychology and Gabriel Tarde)
- ¹⁶ Clark Mc Phail. *The Myth of the Madding Crowd* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991)
- ¹⁷ **Geist** is German for mind, spirit or ghost. It is a central concept in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. (1807). According to Hegel, the *Weltgeist* ("World Spirit") makes history through the mediation of various *Volkgeist* ("Folk Spirits"), of which great men, such as Napoleon, are the incarnation.
- ¹⁸ Theodor Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda" in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1991)132

¹⁹ Quoted in Paul B. Horton, and Chester L. Hunt, *Sociology* (Auckland: McGraw Hill, 1984) 483.

²⁰ R. L. Sutherland, et al. *Introductory Sociology* (Chicago: Cippincott Co., 1956) 151

²¹ Amitav Ghosh. In An Antique Land. (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1992) 33

Chapter 2

HISTORY NOTORIOUSLY IS NOT ABOUT THE PAST: GHOSH'S NON-FICTION

When writing about narratives concerning voices against violence, invoking Neruda might act as a muse. Harold Pinter in his Nobel lecture of 2005 reads out a Neruda poem called "I am Explaining a Few Things"

And one morning all that was burning,
one morning the bonfires
leapt out of the earth
devouring human beings
and from then on fire,
gunpowder from then on,
and from then on blood.
Bandits with planes and Moors,
bandits with finger-rings and duchesses,
bandits with black friars spattering blessings
came through the sky to kill children
and the blood of children ran through the streets
without fuss, like children's blood.

Jackals that the jackals would despise
stones that the dry thistle would bite on and spit out,
vipers that the vipers would abominate.

Face to face with you I have seen the blood
of Spain tower like a tide
to drown you in one wave
of pride and knives.

Treacherous

generals:

see my dead house,

look at broken Spain:

from every house burning metal flows

instead of flowers

from every socket of Spain

Spain emerges

and from every dead child a rifle with eyes

and from every crime bullets are born

which will one day find

the bull's eye of your hearts.

And you will ask: why doesn't his poetry

speak of dreams and leaves

and the great volcanoes of his native land.

Come and see the blood in the streets.

Come and see

the blood in the streets.

Come and see the blood

in the streets!¹

While talking about contemporary fiction, the name of Amitav Ghosh inadvertently crops up. It is not just fiction only, however that Ghosh excels at. His non-fiction is also widely read and celebrated. For me, Ghosh is the contemporary scholar whose works are the most engaging and thought provoking. It is not just the content that appeals, but the form too. He does not write essays in a manner that is conventionally associated with critics now, that is for example, having an overwhelming theoretical argument to validate a premise. The theoretical position and the premise are tacit. (I would not say there are not any present from the beginning), a narrative mode is generally followed, that links personal and political historiographies.

To begin with, it would be useful to know the scholar's personal and academic trajectory. Born in Calcutta in 1956, Amitav Ghosh grew up in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), Sri Lanka, Iran and India. Ghosh studied at St. Stephen's College, Delhi and furthered his education at St. Edmund Hall, Oxford and the University of Alexandria. Trained as an anthropologist at Oxford, he currently teaches the subject at Columbia University. He speaks five languages and dabbles with his favourite pastimes, anthropology and teaching. He also writes regularly for *The New Yorker* magazine.

In a sense, Ghosh's unconventional style, that includes chronicle, travel narrative and history, can be traced to his stint as a print journalist with *The Indian Express* during the Emergency. "I developed an instinct that urged me to take note of whatever is happening all around," he remarks in an interview² to *The Times of India*. After quitting *The Indian Express*, Ghosh went to Oxford to study social anthropology. In 1980, he went to Egypt to do field work in the fellaheen village of Lataifa for his PhD thesis. The work he did there resulted in *In an Antique Land* (1993), which had formed out of the personal notes he took during research work. He completed his PhD in 1982. By 1986, he finished writing his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*. *The Shadow Lines* (1988), his second novel, focuses on a narrator's family in Kolkata and Dhaka and their connection with an English family in London. With *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh showed his acumen in science fiction too. "As a child, I was greatly inspired by Satyajit Ray's science fiction," he says in the same interview. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is being filmed by Italian director Salvatores. Besides Ray, his reading of Balzac, James Boswell, Graham Swift and Michael Ondaatje also influenced Ghosh's thought process. "My schooling at Colombo's Royal College and Doon School followed by my years at St Stephen's College and Oxford, and my extensive travels have had a powerful impact on my writings," he adds. But what perhaps influenced him most is his Kolkata experience. "Bengali literature, especially Tagore, has had a profound influence on me. Even Kolkata features prominently in my works since I spend a lot of time here, shut away from the rest of the world in my cosy room at Jodhpur Park", he says in the concluding part of the interview. Ghosh's other fictional works include *The Glass Palace* (2000) and *The*

Hungry Tide (2004). *The Glass Palace* is set primarily in Burma and India and catalogues the evolving history of those regions before and during the fraught years of the Second World War and India's independence struggle. *The Hungry Tide* is Ghosh's latest novel and brings together three worlds – that of a cetologist, that of a translator located in Delhi, and that of the people in the Sunderbans, and together they unravel the hidden, suppressed histories of Sunderban.

Ghosh's non-fiction, which shall be the primary focus of this chapter, comprises of the following, in book form – *In an Antique Land* (1992), *Dancing In Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998), *Countdown* (1999) and *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces* (2002). His unpublished PhD thesis is titled "Kinship in Relation to the Economic and Social Organization of an Egyptian Village Community". *The Imam and the Indian* is a collection of the several essays he has written over a period of roughly twenty years. He has been publishing several essays on several issues in *The New Yorker* and several other journals. Some of the important essays include "The Global Reservation: Notes Toward an Ethnography of International Peacekeeping." (1994) which describes Ghosh's encounters with UN workers in Cambodia and their broader implications towards what he calls "an anthropology of the future". "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi" (1995) is an essay on writing and politics; it focuses on "sectarian violence" in Delhi in 1984. "The Fundamentalist Challenge" (1995) examines the contradiction between "religious extremism(s)" reliance on scripture and its attack on artistic production in the late twentieth century. "Petrofiction" (1992) looks at the novels of Abdelrahman Munif and their connection to oil trade. "The Human Comedy in Cairo" (1990) looks at the life and work of Naghib Mahfouz the year after the Egyptian writer won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

"And you will ask: why doesn't his poetry speak of dream and leaves..." Amitav Ghosh has seen the 1983 riots in Sri Lanka, been a protestor against the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, looked at the World Trade Centre collapse. John C Hawley, analysing why Ghosh chooses to write about turmoil, says³:

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In 1984, a momentous year for India, there was separatist violence in Punjab, a military attack on the Sikh temple of Amritsar, the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, there were riots following the assassination, and there was the gas disaster of Bhopal. It was as if George Orwell's infamous date for the apocalypse had been set with India in mind. Many people's lives were irrevocably shaken by these events, and it seems, Ghosh's was one of them. "Looking back," Ghosh writes, "I see that the experiences of that period were profoundly important to my development as a writer."⁴

Since Orwell's name has made an appearance here, it shall be useful to discuss him. To take a detour, Ghosh would perhaps, while talking about Orwell's *1984*⁵ (1949), draw connections between 1948 when Orwell was finishing his novel amid bouts of tuberculosis and world in the middle of a war, and 1984, when Ghosh was finishing his first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) amid incendiary circumstances in India. Orwell's scathing criticism is directed towards "Big Daddy" who is a Stalin like figure. The dark prophecies of a dystopia have come true, though the "big daddy" happens to be on the other side of the world and ideology of Stalin. The phrase "Orwellian" now connotes a despotic world where everything is controlled by the State. Orwell's acidic prose of this book is often attributed to his own illness; but he had been working on this book from 1943, much before the illness had set in. One of the influences was Zamyatin's *We*⁶, which would become a precursor for not just Orwell's novel, but also for Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932)⁷ and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*⁸ (1953). To augment the co-incidental strain of 1984, a computer game called *Fahrenheit451* was launched in 1984.

We is an exploration of the individual versus the social order, a celebration of the importance of imagination, and ultimately, a warning regarding the dehumanizing consequences of imagination's destruction. The narrator protagonist D-503 lives in One State where everyone is a number, and everything is regulated, even sexual intercourse, by taking permission. He is seduced by I-330 who weans him from his former lover O-

90. He later realizes that his seducer belongs to a revolutionary camp opposed to One State, and he himself in his heart of hearts wants to join her, but is torn between impulse and habit of serving One State. In *Farhenheit 451*, the protagonist Guy Montag is employed as a “fireman” (a book burner). 451F is the temperature at which paper catches fire by itself. The book reflects the major concerns for an artist of the 1950s – McCarthyism in the 1950s, the burning of books in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, the suppression of books and authors by Stalin, the world that had suffered a nuclear attack. Bradbury himself comments on the book thus, “I meant all kinds of tyrannies anywhere in the world at any time, right, left, or middle.”⁹ The title of Michael Moore’s *Farhenheit 9/11* was obviously taken from Bradbury’s work. The novel was also made into a movie in 1966 by Francois Trauffaut. *Brave New World* parodies H.G. Wells’ utopian novel *Men Like Gods* (1923). Huxley’s work attacks assembly line production as demeaning, the liberalisation of sexual morals as being an affront to love and family, the use of slogans or thought-terminating clichés, the concept of a centralised government, and the use of science to control people's thoughts and actions. The use of modern science, technology, and pharmacy to replace violence in keeping people chained in pleasurable servitude is one of the important concerns of the book. Huxley lashes out at the Left but shows a grim future for conspicuous capitalist consumption as well. In the novel, the founder of the society was Henry Ford, whose writings occupy Mustapha Mond's bookshelves. The letter T (a reference to the Ford Model T) has replaced the cross as a quasi-religious symbol. “Our lord” is replaced by “Our ford” in deference to Ford’s invention of the assembly line. While in *Brave New World*, rewards are a means to rein in people, in *1984* punishments are used to control the masses. The promiscuity of Huxley’s novel and the Puritanism of Orwell’s has the same purpose – to kill human emotions.

The detour made to all the dystopic books could be an important entry point into the post-9/11 world. *Farhenheit 451* has come back as *Farhenheit 9/11*. One important point that these novels point out to is the smugness of the people as in *The Brave New World* and totalitarianism in all the three novels. Ghosh tells Rahul Sagar in an interview with The Hindu¹⁰:

It is true that in the late 1990s America often seemed like a terribly introverted, arrogant place. There was a sense of smugness that was tacitly encouraged by politicians and the media. I was always revolted by that triumphal sense of an achieved empire - to me it was appalling. But to characterise all of America in that fashion is also inaccurate. America was also a colony once, and a strong vein of anti-imperialism does run through American life. I live in a predominantly African-American neighbourhood. I know many of my neighbours disagreed with American actions abroad. But they were no more able to change them than say, the average person in Hoshangabad is able to change the situation in Kashmir or north-eastern India.

The interview will be discussed in greater detail in the fourth chapter. It is remarkable how Huxley had foreseen what the assembly line of Ford would do in the coming years. At the same time it is also remarkable how Ghosh refuses to essentialise a society or a nation. In the same interview, Sagar asks him as to how the example of Frank de Martini serves as a counter example to the idea that the US society is becoming increasingly selfish and atomistic. Frank de Martini is a neighbour of Ghosh, who he had written about in the *New Yorker*¹¹ as to how he stayed back in the WTC towers to help the people even though he himself was in great peril. Martini lost his life in the battle. Ghosh answers thus:

To me my relationship with America is not a relationship with some grand idea or a model of society. My relationship is with my family, my friends, and my neighbours. I have always known that people are far from being atomistic within my community. My neighbour, Frank De Martini, whom I have written about, stayed behind in the WTC to help other people. This was when his wife was begging him to escape; instead he stayed behind to help others. What he did was genuinely heroic and there were many like him. Despite all that has happened there is very little warmongering in New York. In fact there have been large

demonstrations where people have carried placards that say "Our grief is not a call for war". To be in New York now is to witness the extraordinary dignity of collective grief.

In fact, the nation as a central unit of imagination has been questioned by him in most of his writings. Society and nation are always probed through relations and predicaments that individuals have. This is perhaps best exemplified in *The Shadow Lines* where formation of a new nation creates "othering" within the same family, while at the same time people inhabit cities of other nations in the mind.

We could also recall Marshall McLuhan's adage "medium is the message" as discussed in the introductory chapter, where he says the contents would not matter; media's presence itself shall change the worldviews. McLuhan's argument is debatable, but one would acknowledge the immensity of media's role in shaping public opinion. In an interview, Bhaskar Ghose¹² - one of the prime architects of Doordarshan - opines that India has two television models in front of itself, the American and the British. He says that in the UK, the BBC still holds fort because of the standards it has set in shaping public opinion. So, even the private players have to make serious documentaries, et cetera. Whereas in the US, private players have catered to sensationalism with reality shows, soaps, self-congratulatory features.

The debate on media forms can go on, but imaginations can be quite constructed by the fourth estate. The propaganda that Iraq has chemical weapons, which resulted in war on Iraq, proved to be untrue, but many people were convinced for long that that's the reality. The unleashing of "war on terror" or the broadcast of Timothy McVeigh are all means to create public opinion about the good and the evil. It would be useful to juxtapose the live telecast of the WTC fall with every moment of its uncertainty with the coverage of the 1991 Gulf War, which was a military controlled operation. The war appeared to have "no blood, no killing, no dead, no wounded" (Weimann 307). For most Americans, the Gulf War was a "remote conflict" (Weimann 313)¹³. Meltem Kiran Raw argues that while the visual media exacerbated the shock, magazines like The New Yorker initiated the process of recovery "attempting to place the events in a clearer perspective for New Yorkers. *The New York Times*, for example, besides reporting on the

events in its September 12, 2001 issue, also argued that New Yorkers had already rallied together after the attacks”.¹⁴ Robert Karl Manoff argues, “No story is the inevitable product of the event it reports; no event dictates its own narrative form. News occurs at the conjunction of events and texts, and while events create the story, the story also creates the event”¹⁵ (Manoff: 228). Ghosh pays tribute to Martini with these words in the essay: “The Twin Towers were both a livelihood and a passion for him: he would speak of them with the absorbed fascination with which poets sometimes speak of Dante's canzones”. (32) Kiran Raw says that if it was their structure that made the Towers seem invulnerable before September 11, after their fall they have paradoxically become all the more invulnerable through the symbolism associated with them. It is now impossible to view them from a purely structural or architectural perspective, for their destiny has become inextricably intertwined with that of the victims of September 11. She says, “The statement of The New Yorker is clear: like Frank de Martini, the victims of September 11 should be remembered not in terms of a violent death, but in terms of a worthwhile life. Similarly, although they are no longer standing, the Twin Towers have acquired a symbolic ‘presence’ for New Yorkers. The destiny of the victims and that of the Towers merge.” As Anthony Lane puts it, “thousands died together, and therefore something lived” (Lane: 80)¹⁶.

Ghosh’s tribute draws home the same point. Surveying the ways in which the American media has represented and shaped crises of national import over the past two centuries, Mike Maher and Lloyd Chiasson Jr. reach the conclusion, “Recent critics have shown that media portrayals consistently emphasize people rather than issues, crisis rather than continuity, the present rather than the past or the future”¹⁷ (219). The New Yorker’s attitude and Ghosh’s depart from this model in seeking reconciliation rather than conflict. Raw says that “creating an event” is a responsibility as much as a privilege. Ghosh tells John C Hawley in an interview¹⁸ that he was in the middle of writing *The Glass Palace* when he felt it was incumbent upon him to pen down *The Countdown* considering the nuclear crisis in the Indian subcontinent. (Hawley: 11) The responsibility just does not end in feeling this incumbency, but to carry out an enquiry through the people rather than the establishment, as in *The Countdown*, and unravel alternate strands of history as in *Dancing in Cambodia*, where he looks into PolPot’s history through a

resurgent dance tradition. Getting back to Harold Pinter and his scathing critique of the American establishment in his Nobel prize speech¹⁹ he demonstrates how the deaths of Iraqis will be eyewashed with a smug speech, and how “creating the event” is used by some as a privilege than a responsibility:

I know that President Bush has many extremely competent speech writers but I would like to volunteer for the job myself. I propose the following short address which he can make on television to the nation. I see him grave, hair carefully combed, serious, winning, sincere, often beguiling, sometimes employing a wry smile, curiously attractive, a man's man.

'God is good. God is great. God is good. My God is good. Bin Laden's God is bad. His is a bad God. Saddam's God was bad, except he didn't have one. He was a barbarian. We are not barbarians. We don't chop people's heads off. We believe in freedom. So does God. I am not a barbarian. I am the democratically elected leader of a freedom-loving democracy. We are a compassionate society. We give compassionate electrocution and compassionate lethal injection. We are a great nation. I am not a dictator. He is. I am not a barbarian. He is. And he is. They all are. I possess moral authority. You see this fist? This is my moral authority. And don't you forget it.'

Pinter goes on to comment on the role of a writer in incendiary circumstances:

A writer's life is a highly vulnerable, almost naked activity. We don't have to weep about that. The writer makes his choice and is stuck with it. But it is true to say that you are open to all the winds, some of them icy indeed. You are out on your own, out on a limb. You find no shelter, no protection - unless you lie - in

which case of course you have constructed your own protection and, it could be argued, become a politician.

Pinter's almost rhetorical idea might not be a theoretical formulation, but reinforces Raw's idea of responsibility that a writer has to fulfil along with the privilege s/he wields. Writing about the 1984 anti-Sikh riots could use visceral spectacle, for example, but Ghosh chooses to show the resilience of people by coming out for a peaceful demonstration in "The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi"²⁰. The mob advances towards the protestors, and the women among the protestors form a circle around their party, and the mob retreats, almost scared of their compassion and sanity.

Getting back to "creating the events" the latest media dissemination is the torture images of Abu Ghraib. Ghosh has written an essay in The Nation, titled "The Theatre of Cruelty: Reflections on the Anniversary of Abu Ghraib"²¹. In the essay, Ghosh points out that this phenomenon of stripping and shooting the prisoners has a pedigree. He says that the fact that the American military took charge of the prison first, when the museums and libraries lay unguarded, is not surprising. The convicts were a vehicle of colonial expansion in the imperial times in the 17th and the 18th centuries. He says:

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.

To be on sail, you needed to be in jail, he says. He quotes Dr Johnson, "No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail". He goes on to show how the fetish for stripping the prisoners naked and taking their pictures existed in the British regime as well, with the only difference being that the jailor was not in the frame in those pictures unlike Abu Ghraib. He says that continuity lies in the marriage of incarceration and cultural theory:

The methods employed in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay are said to have been informed by the ideas of anthropologists like Raphael Patai,

who, in his notorious 1973 work *The Arab Mind*, wrote at length about Arab conceptions of sexuality, honour and masculinity. British prison officials in India were also careful to target what they thought were deep-rooted fears and taboos. They believed, for instance, that Indians dreaded sea voyages more than death itself: This was, in their eyes, one of the great advantages of island prisons.

Marking the deported African convicts with tattoos was a sort of emasculation for them, for tattoos were worn by women in their societies. Despite these continuities, Ghosh feels that there is something new about Abu Ghraib-the pictures' intent. He says there is a difference between torture and abuse; torture has an end in mind. The prisoners in the pictures are not being tortured, for there is no end in the mind of the perpetrators. He says:

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.

Ghosh says in the essay that the war on Iraq has been described in classroom language, that it is intended to teach lessons in democracy. Ghosh feels the pictures' intent is pedagogical, to teach the Third World reality of the unspoken relationship between prisons and parliaments. He opines that the acts committed before the camera are intended to teach; and therefore they have been freely distributed, for the soldier's are convinced of their ends. Ghosh laments that this shows that the means and the ends have become the same, enacted over and over again, and that's why Richard Falk and Noam Chomsky are so important for their thrust on scrutinising the means as well as ends.

Drawing out continuities is an interest of Ghosh, and through them he shows the links to the past as well as the epistemology of absurdity. Of Abu Ghraib, the popular feeling has been that the pictures leaked out; but Ghosh's observation is that they were systematically disseminated to educate the Third World of their position and place in, as Mary Shelley would say, "the chain of existence and events"²². Ghosh narrativises violence through non-sensational prose that tries to probe and find the routes and roots,

and seeks for a voice of conciliation. He is interested, also, in finding the non-overt forms of violence that cut much deeper than the overt forms. The marking of the Africans with tattoos is much less sensational than their dying in hordes on ships, but the tattoos are symbolic of a culture being undermined and exterminated slowly. The counter-narrative of the perpetrator himself disseminating images of excesses also depicts how power induces huge quantities of sadism that seems justified to the perpetrator. The prototypes would be “the white man’s burden” or the phrenologists bent upon proving that women’s brain size is linked to hysteria. The issue is ideological violence as much as physical – the foundation of colonialism lay in that, and it is rediscovering itself in what critics would say is the neo-colonial age.

Naomi Klein in her essay on the tortures in Guantanamo Bay, which Ghosh mentions in his essay on Abu Ghraib, reflects the same sentiment of terrorising through pictures of torture. In the essay titled, “The True Purpose of Torture: Guantanamo Is There to Terrorize - Both Inmates & The Wider World”²³, she says:

The people being intimidated need to know enough to be afraid but not so much that they demand justice. This helps explain why the defence department will release certain kinds of seemingly incriminating information about Guantanamo - pictures of men in cages, for instance - at the same time that it acts to suppress photographs on a par with what escaped from Abu Ghraib. And it might also explain why the Pentagon approved a new book by a former military translator, including the passages about prisoners being sexually humiliated, but prevented him from writing about the widespread use of attack dogs. This strategic leaking of information, combined with official denials, induces a state of mind that Argentinians describe as **"knowing/not knowing"**²⁴, a vestige of their "dirty war" ... This is torture's true purpose: to terrorise - not only the people in Guantanamo's cages and Syria's isolation cells but also, and more importantly, the broader community that hears about these abuses. Torture is a machine designed to break the will to resist - the individual prisoner's will and the collective will.

Coming back to the Harold Pinter Nobel Prize speech, which I will keep coming back to, for it is the most scathing criticism of neo-imperialism, Pinter echoes the Argentinean knowing/not knowing:

Early in the invasion (the Iraq War) there was a photograph published on the front page of British newspapers of Tony Blair kissing the cheek of a little Iraqi boy. 'A grateful child,' said the caption. A few days later there was a story and photograph, on an inside page, of another four-year-old boy with no arms. His family had been blown up by a missile. He was the only survivor. 'When do I get my arms back?' he asked. The story was dropped. Well, Tony Blair wasn't holding him in his arms, nor the body of any other mutilated child, nor the body of any bloody corpse. Blood is dirty. It dirties your shirt and tie when you're making a sincere speech on television.

It would be useful to go back to Orwell's *1984* which we discussed at the beginning of the chapter. In the novel, O'Brien, Winston Smith's torturer, tells him the reason he was being treated this way, "Pain for the sake of pain. Torture for the sake of torture. Power for the sake of power. Now do you understand?" Pinter perhaps is not a cynic, for he devotes a considerable length of time discussing how people have been detained illegitimately at Guantanamo Bay for three years, and technically for life.

To stay with the rabble-rousing speech of Pinter a little longer, he harps upon how political language contorts truth for power. He resonates with Ghosh's idea that a simplistic explanation of Iraqi and Palestinians attacking the WTC is fallacious. Ghosh opines that Palestinians or Iraqis barely had anything to do with 9/11; the terrorists are from Saudi which has a US backed establishment, and that Bin Laden is more interested in power in the Saudi than an Islamic revenge.²⁵

These ideas of Ghosh will be discussed in detail in chapter 4. Pinter says, in his Nobel prize speech:

Political language, as used by politicians, does not venture into any of this territory (maintaining objectivity, and not sermonising) since the majority of politicians, on the evidence available to us, are interested not in truth but in power and in the maintenance of that power. To maintain that power it is essential that people remain in ignorance, that they live in ignorance of the truth, even the truth of their own lives. What surrounds us therefore is a vast tapestry of lies, upon which we feed.

As every single person here knows, the justification for the invasion of Iraq was that Saddam Hussein possessed a highly dangerous body of weapons of mass destruction, some of which could be fired in 45 minutes, bringing about appalling devastation. We were assured that was true. It was not true. We were told that Iraq had a relationship with Al Qaeda and shared responsibility for the atrocity in New York of September 11th 2001. We were assured that this was true. It was not true. We were told that Iraq threatened the security of the world. We were assured it was true. It was not true.

He shows the “not knowing” side after the speaking of the “knowing” side as promulgated by the US establishment:

The United States supported and in many cases engendered every right wing military dictatorship in the world after the end of the Second World War. I refer to Indonesia, Greece, Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, Haiti, Turkey, the Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador, and, of course, Chile. The horror the United States inflicted upon Chile in 1973 can never be purged and can never be forgiven...

The United States possesses 8,000 active and operational nuclear warheads. Two thousand are on hair trigger alert, ready to be launched

with 15 minutes warning. It is developing new systems of nuclear force, known as bunker busters. The British, ever cooperative, are intending to replace their own nuclear missile, Trident. Who, I wonder, are they aiming at? Osama bin Laden? You? Me? Joe Dokes? China? Paris? Who knows? What we do know is that this infantile insanity - the possession and threatened use of nuclear weapons - is at the heart of present American political philosophy. We must remind ourselves that the United States is on a permanent military footing and shows no sign of relaxing it.

It is getting beyond the scope of this paper to go into the destinies of each of these countries, but getting on to the nuclear question which is looming behind many of the narratives talked about in this chapter, Ghosh's *Countdown* (1999)²⁶ is an important work in the canon of writing against the nuclearisation of the world. The book, which first appeared as an essay in *The New Yorker* (1998) had been written after the Pokhran tests, and probes the matter through a series of interviews with Asma Jahangir, lawyer and human rights activist of Pakistan; K. Subrahmanyam, a defence and foreign policy expert; Praful Bidwai, journalist and nuclear expert; Chandan Mitra, editor of the newspaper *The Pioneer*; V.P. Malik, Chief of Army Staff in 1998; George Fernandes, India's then Defence Minister; and Kanti Bajpai, Professor of International Relations, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Besides them, Ghosh meets people in Pokhran, goes to Siachen, sees the drill at Wagah border. He concludes that people do not perceive the bomb as a deterrent that will never be used, but that people on both sides of the border perceive it as a real threat.

Tapan Basu, in his essay "Mimic Mission: *CountDown* as Critique of the Nuclear Arms Race in South Asia"²⁷, says:

If *The Shadow Lines* is a fictional narrative about the absurdity of the two nation theory which was translated into the partition of India on the eve of India's de-colonisation, the persisting fantasy of a fight to finish between the two nations, India and Pakistan (nurtured by fundamentalist elements in either nation), is put into perspective by Amitav Ghosh...Ghosh's tract

at once fits into the tradition of anti-nuclearisation writings from South Asia, exemplified by the writings by such illustrious peace protagonists as Mahatma Gandhi, Eqbal Ahmed, Rajni Kothari, Amartya Sen, Beena Sarwar, Zafarullah Khan, M V Ramana and Arundhati Roy, and extends this tradition as well. Ghosh's approach to the issue at hand is neither purely programmatic nor purely polemical. Instead, his training as a social anthropologist prompts him to travel to his field of enquiry-in search of answers to a question of the need for a bomb in the region. (Bose: 156)

At Pokhran, Ghosh is told that "some twenty children had been born with deformities in the limbs. Cows had developed tumours in their udders. Calves were born blind, and with their eyes and tongues attached to all the wrong parts of their faces. "No one had heard of such things before" (20). On the other hand, the political leaders defend the tests on both sides of the border, pointing out the security threats. Basu points out that at the Wagah check post, "Ghosh is stuck by the almost coordinated cohesiveness of the movements of the soldiers from the rival armies involved in the exercise," (Bose: 158) there is mirroring of one side on the other – the security threats that the politicians talk of, the fear that the citizens have, the way the soldiers conduct their drill. Ghosh opines that the urge to destroy each other, which started with the holocaust of the partition, is due to the sense of inadequacy on part of the ruling elite on both sides of the border. This is ratified by the argument that many hold on both the sides, that this would restore national pride. This was also engendered in the 'Gaurav Yatra' that the ruling party undertook and strew the nuclear waste infested sand across the country. Reading *Countdown* was a co-incidence of sorts, for I had written a poem that resonates with the same idea:

*...They burst a bomb in the desert
And had a dessert in Delhi,
And strew the sand
In a 'Gaurav Yatra'
Along the parallel lines...²⁸*

Ghosh thinks that the mass opinion is not with the bomb, but that the idea of national pride is linked with pride of the elite. In *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*²⁹, Fredric Jameson argues that ideology consists of “strategies of containment”. The writer, whether unconsciously or, more often, consciously, attempts at validating himself and his group in relation to what he sees as an antagonistic other, and also to promote the interests of his group, while assigning the other to an antagonistic value system. Much of the “hate” rhetoric that is generated on both sides, fit into the Jamesian paradigm. *Countdown*, however, looks at the conflict between the two nations by looking at the conflict within them. The most apt example is Siachen, where both the countries are losing endless money and men, but they fight to keep their post in the no-man’s land in sub-zero temperatures to prove to their respective countries that they will fight the enemy at all costs. That the enemy might be lying within, is a different issue.

This mimicry of the West to prove strength, claim pride, and show modernity has been grounded into the consciousness of the developing nations. The two antagonists prove their mettle to each other by example of the metals they have gathered from the West. Ghosh encountered the same predicament himself when he was doing his fieldwork in Egypt. In the “Imam and the Indian”³⁰, the Imam and Ghosh are fighting to prove whose country is more modern. The Imam thinks that the Hindu custom of burning the dead is archaic, and says that the advanced West does not burn their dead. Ghosh retorts saying the many countries in the West have electric furnaces just for this purpose. The Imam accuses Ghosh of lying, with the logic that the West cannot be so ignorant, as they “have guns, tanks and bombs” (10). Ghosh retorts that India not only has those heavy armaments but also nuclear weapons. In a very self-reflexive hindsight, as to how we have internalized the logic bestowed upon us by the West, Ghosh says, “So there we were, the Imam and I, delegates from two superseded civilizations vying to lay claim to the violence of the West.”(11)

Ghosh inquires into the symbols and names to draw out the larger ideological agenda and violence that might be connoted through these. The bomb and modernity are linked through a discourse perpetrated by the West, which has helped them sell weapons,

as well as sustain the Cold War. At other places, Ghosh uses etymology as a tool to uncover the hidden agenda. In *In An Antique Land*, Ghosh shows that the etymology for the word “Egypt” lies in the Greek Aegyptos, which in turn is related to the word “Kopt” that was used for the indigenous Christians of the country. In other European countries apart from England, Egypt had similar names, following the Greek roots. The Germans called it *Ægypten*, the Dutch used *Egypte*, Polish and Estonian used *Egipt*. Ghosh says these are old resonant words, with connotations and histories far in excess of those that usually attach to the names of countries. Ghosh invokes a 17th century English law which states: “If any transport into England and Wales, any lewd people calling themselves Egyptians, forfeit 40£”. The writer states that this reminds that words like ‘gypsy’ and ‘gitano’ were derived from Egyptian. (33). He says:

Europe’s apparently innocent ‘Egypt’ is therefore as much a metaphor as ‘Masr’, but a less benign one, almost as much a weapon as a word.

Egypt’s own metaphor for itself, on the other hand, renders the city indistinguishable from the country; a usage that brims with pleasing and unexpected symmetries.

Egypt’s own metaphor here is ‘Masr’, a derivative of a root that means to ‘settle’ or ‘to civilize’. Ghosh delineates the history of the word and juxtaposes it with the European imposition of ‘Egypt’:

The word (Masr) has a long history in Arabic; it occurs in the Qur’ân but was used even before the advent of Islam. It is the name by which the country has been known in its own language, for at least a millennium, and most of the cultures and civilizations with which it has old connections have accepted its own self-definition. The languages of India, for example, know Masr by variations of its Arabic name: ‘Mishor’ in Bengali, ‘Misar’ in Hindi and Urdu. Only Europe has always insisted on knowing the country not on its own terms, but as a dark mirror for itself. ‘Egyptian darkness,’ says the Oxford English Dictionary, quoting the Bible, ‘intense darkness (see Exodus x.22).’ Or ‘Egyptian days: the two

days in each month which are believed to be unlucky'; and 'Egyptian bondage: bondage like that of Israelites in Egypt.' (32)

This is a typical Ghosh passage that draws out links from a single word and shows how apparently harmless words can be used as weapons. It is, as it were, the writer wants to make the reader more sensitized to words, that what appears to be "normal" parlance may have devious histories behind. It is a usual trope in Ghosh's prose to use a word to unlock the histories of disparate times and spaces, to show continuities between two apparently disjoint spaces, as well as flaws in hegemonic historiography. In another essay titled, "Empire and Soul: a review of *The Baburnama*"³¹ in *The Imam and the Indian*, which one would expect to be a review of the book, which it is and yet not, the writer shows how the word "Mughal" itself is a misnomer, and that Babur would have "Mughal" as the last word to represent his dynasty. He draws links to the present times, talking about the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, saying that the demolition of the mosque is demolition of the symbol of contemporary forms of Hinduism, for very few Hindus know that the Krishna cult was not just revived but encouraged during the Mughal times. He writes:

... it is beyond dispute that Babar's descendants presided over a virtually unprecedented efflorescence in Hindu religious activity. Hinduism as we know it today - especially the Hinduism of north India - was essentially shaped under Mughal rule, often with the active participation and support of the rulers and their officials and feudatories. For instance, the *Ramcharitmanas* (begun c.1574), the version of the *Ramayana* that was to be canonised as the central text of north Indian devotional practice, was composed in Akbar's reign by the great saint-poet Tulsidas. Mughal rule also coincided with a great renaissance in Krishnaite theology. It was in this period that Rupa Goswami and other disciples of the Bengali mystic, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, rediscovered and mapped out the sacred geography of the Krishna legend.

...The region consecrated to Krishna lies between Agra and Delhi: the

two principal centres of Mughal power in the 16th century. The road connecting these two imperial cities runs right past the sacred sites of this area. It has frequently been observed that had the Mughals wished to persecute the Hindu saints and pilgrims who were then engaged in rediscovering those sites they could easily have done so. But far from suppressing the burgeoning activity in that area, Akbar and his nobles actively supported it. The Hindu generals and officials of his court built several of the most important temples in this area, with Akbar's active encouragement. Akbar was personally responsible for sustaining some of these temples: he granted land and revenue in perpetuity to no less than thirty-five of them.

Hinduism would scarcely be recognisable today if Krishnaite theology and Krishna-devotion had been actively suppressed in the 16th century: other forms would probably have taken their place, but we cannot know what those would have been. As a living practice contemporary Hinduism would not be what it is if it were not for the practices initiated under Mughal rule. The sad irony is that the Hindu fanatics who destroyed the Babari Mosque were attacking a symbol of the very accommodations that made their own beliefs possible. (104-105)

Ghosh, however, is not producing counter-rhetoric to the fundamentalists. He probes Babur's much talked about bigotry, and delves into his autobiography for more details. Babur himself used to announce his intentions of destroying Hindu temples, but Ghosh takes it as a political stratagem rather than a personal conviction:

... its writer (Babur) was, in his own distinctive way, a devout Muslim. He took great pride for example, in the title of 'Ghazi' - 'Slayer of Infidels' - which he assumed after the battle of Khanua. In his autobiography, Babar repeatedly announces his intention of destroying Hindu temples and images. These declarations were clearly intended, in part, to garner

support among local Indian Muslims. So far as actually building mosques and demolishing temples is concerned, Babar's declarations were almost certainly greatly in excess of his real intentions. However, had he indeed erected mosques on the sites of temples (and there is no clear evidence that he did) he would have done no more than Hindu rulers had themselves done, centuries earlier. Archaeological evidence indicates that many important Hindu temples are built upon earlier Buddhist sites: the great Krishna temple of Mathura for example, stands on what was probably a Buddhist monastery.³²

Yet, despite Babar's protestations of religious zeal, it is clear from the pages of his autobiography that he was no bigot. Hindus evidently frequented his court and many entered his service. The Sikhs - who were to become dedicated adversaries of the Mughal state in the 17th century - have long cherished a story, preserved in their scriptural tradition, about an encounter between Babar and the founder of their faith, Guru Nanak. In the process of sacking a town in the Punjab, Babar's soldiers are said to have imprisoned Guru Nanak and one of his disciples. Learning of a miracle performed by the Guru, Babar visited him in prison. Such was the presence of the Guru that Babar is said to have fallen at his feet, with the cry: 'On the face of this faqir one sees God himself.' (103)

"History is notoriously not about the past" might appear as a pithy saying that appears in between the essay, but forms the crux of the theoretical framework that Ghosh forms through his narrative strategies. It also shows Ghosh's belief that the boundaries of genres of writing are blurred, that narrative, theory, anthropology, etymology need not have distinct stylistic genres. Babur himself was aware that "history is notoriously not about the past". Ghosh perhaps himself does not want to say this, but the idea is implicit in his essay. Babur lost his capital Samarkand, and had to wander off to Central Asia, and Afghanistan, and later to "Hindusthan". He was imbued with the idea that he was born to rule, and so it was incumbent upon him to find a kingdom rather than being an

unemployed king. He is torn at times, and wants to give up everything, but his upbringing is too grounded for him to denounce:

But in the end, stoically, he resigns himself to the difficult business of finding a realm: “When one has pretensions to rule and a desire for conquest, one cannot sit back and just watch if events don't go right once or twice.” (95)

Ghosh re-invokes his idea of the constructiveness of history through words and texts, and is acutely aware of his language and post-colonial position when he says:

In the long view, the Mughal period was really nothing more than a lucky time-out, a magnificent hallucination whose end had been conceived even before it was born. For the truth is that while Babar was fighting his epic battles in the Indo-Gangetic plain, the future of the sub-continent was being decided in a series of much smaller engagements on the west coast, where various kings and rulers were fighting the Portuguese. For the Indian subcontinent as a whole the decisive battle of the 16th century was probably not Babar's engagement at Panipat (as I was taught in school and college) but rather the battle of Diu.

In the above essay, Ghosh weaves the past and the present, and shows how events centuries old have a bearing upon the day to day life, how history is as much about present as about the past, how representations through historiography or even names can have violent and racist ramifications. Harping on etymology again, in the essay “Four Corners” in *The Imam and the Indian*, Ghosh points out that the RVs (recreational vehicles) in America have names of annihilated tribes, which is a usual fetish to name pets and vehicles after the adversaries. He writes:

Often those RVs have striking names: Winnebago, Itasca... The names of dispossessed tribes of the Americas hold a peculiar allure for the marketing executives of automobile companies. Pontiac, Cherokee – so many tribes are commemorated in forms of transport. It is not a mere

matter of fashion that so many cars that flash past on the highways carry those names, breathing them into the air like the inscriptions on prayer wheels. This tradition of naming has a long provenance: did not Kit Carson himself, the scourge of Navajo, name his favourite horse Apache? (19)

The practice of naming pets and vehicles after the hated or the tamed enemy is an intriguing one; it is an exercise in taming, dehumanizing as well as exoticising. Recently, Volkswagen launched an online campaign urging the readers to choose a name for its new model³³. 30 per cent people voted for “Nanook”, yet another lost tribe. One of the comments during the online voting says, “Whatever happened to the Bedouin name? I like the idea of naming SUV’s after nomadic tribes. Better than naming it after mountain ranges, or mandating that they all start with the letter E, or other such lameness.” There can be nothing more exotic than the wandering Bedouin indeed – wandering Bedouin tamed in the form of a domestic wandering vehicle owned by a rich man/woman. Coming back to Ghosh’s point, he goes on to talk about Kit Carson in the same essay:

The centre of the Glittering World was Dinè Tah, which lay around Largo Canyon, about eighty miles south-east of the Four Corners monument. To the Navajo it was the sacred heartland of the country. The first time they left it *en masse* was in the 1860s after Colonel Kit Carson and the US army reduced them to starvation by scorching the earth of their Glittering World. Kit Carson felt no personal animosity towards the Navajo. He is said to have commented once, ‘I’ve seen as much of ‘em as any white man livin’, and I can’t help but pity them. They’ll soon be gone anyhow.’ He was an unlettered man, given to expressing himself plainly. Unlike him, his commanding officer, General James H. Carleton, had had the benefits of education. He was therefore able to phrase the matter more dispassionately, clothed in the mellow light of current threads in science and theology: ‘In their appointed time He wills that one race of men – as in races of lower animals – shall disappear off the face of the earth and give place to another race...The races of the Mammoths and Mastodons,

and great Sloths, came and passed away: the Red Man of America is passing away.’

The naming of the vehicles fits in with Carleton’s idea of “lower races”. Ghosh subtly brings in Darwin’s theory of evolution, and shows how it was appropriated to justify annihilation. Science, which was an apparent quest for the truth of nature, became the carrier and justifier of lies. The issue of science and violence returns in Ghosh’s work in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, where a scientific discovery is linked with many deaths; and *The Circle of Reason*, where the protagonist is always on the run, and in the middle of fires, while trying to reason out everything through 18th and 19th century European theories of science.

While discussing etymologies, the word that perhaps is the most striking one to me is ‘maudlin’. *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*³⁴ (1993) describes the word as “sickly, sentimental. Origin- ‘shedding tears of penitence,’ like Mary Magdalen”. I was aware that maudlin comes from Magdalen, but who she was never quite entered my thought until Dan Brown’s book *Da Vinci Code* (2003) made the issue a rage. This word “maudlin” has the key to the history of suppression of women for ages. It is remarkable, however, that Ghosh’s works can never really fall under the rubric of feminist enquiry. In this chapter, we have not encountered the issue of domestic violence, or patriarchy. The issues are sensitive, deal with politics, hegemony, systems of governance, the issue of language, but never patriarchy overtly.

We have already been initiated into a discussion about Amitav Ghosh’s works in a Ghosh-ian way, in that we have seen glimpses of the locations of Ghosh, his influences, and the nature of his work as we have seen from the preceding discussion. Ghosh-ian is a term I use to describe the method of metonymy where various events and arguments are linked rather than an overarching metaphor. Ghosh-ian (the sound is pretty jarring I admit), because Ghosh uses this technique of delving into personal histories and landmarks as structural markers to arrive at a bigger picture. To take an example, Ghosh tries to arrive at a bigger picture of the ramifications of the nuclear tests in the Indian

subcontinent through delving into the personal histories of George Fernandes, and Pakistani Human Rights lawyer Asma Jahangir, as we have already seen. In that way, we arrive at some kind of a picture that tells us the following: a) Ghosh is a person who has received education in the most elite institutions of India and abroad; b) he, as a child has travelled a lot- in Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Iran; c) he as an adult has again travelled a lot, this time to the other side, to England, Egypt and the US; d) he has the backgrounds of a journalist, an anthropologist, a history student, a field-researcher and a writer; e) he now lives in the US and writes for elite journals like the New Yorker; f) Calcutta is a constant in all his writings; g) there is a strain of alternate historiography in his writings that originated in his “Delhi University Days of the 1970’s” where subaltern studies in India emanated from.

Having seen this one could suspect that his historiography has a “gaze” involved in it, in that he is writing from a rather privileged position. One could argue that his travel writings, if they can be called so, would loosely resemble the imperial and the neo-imperial travelogues. The suspicion becomes stronger given the fact that the subjects of his inquiry are varied in geographical space from Burma to Cambodia to Egypt to Pakistan to Bangladesh to the Sunderbans. It is like the imperial travellers travelling to the darkest corners of the world and mapping everything for mercantilism. M. Ramachandran, a teacher from The School of Drama, University of Kozhikode, dubs such writers as “fundits”. (In personal communication). By fundits he implies that these writers think that they are *pundits*, but in reality they are funded scholars, and therefore there is always a hidden agenda, and hence they are phoney pundits or fundits. This question about the motives of cartography and historiography of Ghosh was raised in the classroom as well. “What’s happening in Ghosh’s writing? He writes for the New Yorker, he gets funds for his research in the third world. Is it some kind of an alter-globalization happening?” is one question that arose.

The similarity between the imperial travel writing and Ghosh’s writing is just limited to the fact that they are both funded and about various places. A conclusion that they both have similar tacit intentions might be quite misleading. The writing by Ghosh might well

involve a gaze, but there is an involvement from within. A couple of examples would make this argument stronger. In *The Countdown*, when Amitav Ghosh looks at perspectives from within India and Pakistan about nuclear tests and religious fundamentalism, he uses the tone of a chronicler and reports without bias. The “othering” of Pakistan is never done in the book. One could argue even then that it is a US funded project to undermine the nuclear test of India. Such an argument is however unfounded, in that the book presents the darkest of pictures that a nuclear war would entail, whenever and wherever it occurs. The book also debunks the “deterrent theory” and shows that the nuclear war is a real and imminent threat. The book then professes global disarmament and does not spare the First world in that attempt.

In *In an Antique Land*, the narrator is carrying out an anthropological research in Egypt. Anthropology entails a detached study of the “subject”, collecting data and arriving at conclusions through conventional reasoning. The subject is not imparted an alterity. The detached subjectivity of the anthropologist suggests that the anthropologist is not affected in any way by his interaction with his subjects, that he does not question his “learned anthropology”. Here is an example of an exchange between Ghosh and one of his subjects. The subject is a villager flummoxed at Ghosh’s lack of knowledge of the Arabic terms for circumcision.

‘Of course you have circumcision where you come from, just like we do?

Isn’t that so, *mush kida*?’

I had long been dreading this line of questioning, knowing exactly where it would lead.

"Some people do," I said. "And some people don't."

"You mean," he said in rising disbelief, "there are some people in your country who are not circumcised?"

In Arabic the word ‘circumcise’ derives from a root that means ‘to purify’: to say of someone that they are ‘uncircumcised’ is more or less to call them impure.

“Yes,” I answered, “yes, many people in my country are ‘impure.’” I had no alternative; I was trapped by language.

Brian Kiteley in his essay, "Trapped by Language: On Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*"³⁵, suggests that when Ghosh says he is "trapped by language", he does not mean, "as an American might, that he is trapped in English. He means that Arabic causes him to reflect helplessly on what he cannot be in any other language, to these people.... There is no way Ghosh can be anything but the baffling alien creature he is to these villagers..." Kiteley rightly suggests that Ghosh gives agency to his subjects, and that his getting trapped by language entails worldviews and cultures being trapped by language. This is a subtle but powerful critique of Western historiography and anthropology that entails a high-handed approach and interpretation to data. It is suggestive that translating from one culture to another is an act of fiction-making, that it necessarily would involve misrepresentation and misinterpretation. Ghosh provides a mirror image later in the book, where the Imam cannot understand why Indians cremate their dead. There are no words in Arabic with the connotation of purity with the act of burning. Burning is violent and profane to them. This time round, the Arab is "trapped by language." We have already seen how the Imam and the Indian go on to fight, "vying to lay claim to the violence of the West."

It shall be useful to analyse Ghosh's critique of the "Anglophone Empire" that shall tell us more about "the violence of the West". In his essay titled "The Anglophone Empire" (2003), first published in *The New Yorker*, and later in *The Imam and The Indian*, he says that in the conquest of Iraq, what Bush dubs as the "coalition of the willing" is nothing but Anglophone powers, the axis comprising America, Britain and Australia - three English-speaking countries whose allegiances are rooted not just in a shared culture and common institutions, but also in a shared history of territorial expansion. He draws parallels between 9/11 and its aftermath, and the uprising of 1857, when several British were butchered in Kanpur. Ghosh says:

Many of the leaders of the insurrections were erstwhile soldiers of the Empire who had been seized by nihilistic ideas. Their methods were so extreme that Indian moderates were torn between sympathy, revulsion and fear. Many chose to distance themselves from the uprising while

others went so far as to join hands with the British. A similar process is clearly under way in today's Middle East, where Islamist fundamentalism has inflamed some Arabs while alienating others.

The Empire's towers have been struck now on 9/11, as they were struck then. Ghosh suggests that the excesses of the British turned back on them. Frankenstein's monster is his doppelganger, and the double always comes to seek revenge on its creator. One might or might not agree with Ghosh's idea of Indian soldiers being ex-British soldiers who had learnt their lessons in nihilism in the British camp, but an engagement with colonial/neo-colonial dynamics is explicit, and the criticism is well reasoned. Ghosh goes on to show how the British retaliated by unleashing terror post the mutiny, and followed a policy of awarding the allies and punishing the states that had rebelled.

The effects of these policies were felt for generations and can, arguably, still be observed in the disparities that divide, say, the relatively affluent region of Punjab and the impoverished state of Bihar.

These are innovative theories and it is food for thought for the power-structure-holders in the 21st century, especially where attempts of legitimization are offset by counter-voices, dissuading voices. Ghosh does not essentialise the Anglophone world but looks how there is a lot of self-critique:

A substantial proportion of America's population remains unconvinced of the need to undertake a new version of a 'civilising mission.' This is what distinguishes America from the imperial nations of the past. As George Orwell (referring to 1984 with which we started the chapter) and many other observers of imperialism have pointed out, empires imprison their rulers as well as their subjects.

The above examples suggest something very different from the initial suspicions. The sub-altern strain and alternate historiography belie the theory of "first world sabotage". Ghosh is not a consumer of landscapes but someone who lives there, and tries to understand the dynamics of the culture and politics of that space. There could be an accusation that the subaltern live only in books, and those too English books, meant for

consumption in the elite marketscape, and that this is a new kind of exoticisation happening. There is merit in this argument, and something needs to be done about this emergent trend of consumption of the subaltern as a commodity. However, writing follows a rather oblique path, and even if there is a politics of consumption, the worldviews are constantly being questioned and re-written in a big way by these writers. The “other” is no longer a demon as it was earlier. This consumption pattern is a discussion of another paradigm. Here, the point is that Ghosh has dominant concerns about the sub-altern, and such an outlook is changing the ways in which we view the world.

The alter-globalisation point is well taken, and we need to see what the nature of this alter-globalisation is. The writings of Ghosh are more or less located in South Asia and the Middle East. He is looking at the struggles and predicament of these people in postcolonial times. Postcolonial because, along with this, there is a constant engagement and juxtaposition with colonisation, and the monuments and dynamics it has left behind in time, space and language. At the same time, there is a neo-colonisation happening through dominant globalisation that is attempting to standardize cultures, with the standard culture of course coming from the west, which would be exported to generate economic hegemony. Ghosh’s writings resist this by giving voice to the postcolonial people, their culture and their economies. One would suspect Ghosh’s intentions again on the ground that his protagonists are travellers who travel across the world easily and swiftly, and are the emergent global citizens, so to say. The protagonist is generally a Bengali *Bhadralok*, and it might be said that it is tough for this class to understand the predicament of the really subaltern. Ghosh writes from his class position indeed, but these protagonists are not high handed, they engage with their histories that critique privileged positions, including that of the protagonist himself. In *The Hungry Tide*, Kanai the *bhadralok* protagonist is disgusted with himself for having used casteist abuse. Also, Ghosh does not in this way become a writer of a brand called subaltern. He gives voice to the aspirations of the middle class as well in this way, and includes various people of the middle class of this country that form the machinery of economy. He includes a translator in his novel *The Hungry Tide*, he charts out the history of non-royal politician

George Fernandes in *The Countdown*, *Dancing in Cambodia* delineates the history of the middle class that was wiped out.

I have included both nation and class in my enquiry of alter-globalisation, since both are important. There is trans-mobility that is happening. At the same time there is a class mobility. There is an assertion of both national identity and ethnic and class identity across the globe. The sweeping tide of globalisation is also creating eddy currents in the form of militant identity politics. In the wake of these, I think that Ghosh just wants to be an honest story teller, who as accurately and earthily and astutely as possible wants to historicize his times, so that dialogues are possible, so that more worldviews are available than the ones we construct in a parochial hegemonic ideological discourse.

Brian Kiteley in the same essay, as mentioned earlier, says, “Books ought to create their own structure out of the material they are made of”. By breaking down barriers between genres, Ghosh is not simply attacking the boundaries, or trying to destroy the power structures inherent in genre boundaries. He is seeking a more unbiased way of telling. Ghosh’s writings are an eclectic mix of various forms as suggested earlier, that incorporates history, fiction, chronicling, travel writing, et cetera. Rikki Ducornet says in *The Word “Desire”*³⁶:

If the brain, as we believe, is shaped by thoughts and not the other way around, then our own is composed of one nacreous coil, our thoughts sweeping upward under the influence of a lucent tide, the whole protected by a layering of scales

The book by that analogy is the layering of scales and the content is comprised of the tides that decide their own form according to their energy and propensity. Let us take the example of *The Countdown*. It is a series of discussions with scholars as to what would happen in case a nuclear holocaust happens; at the same time it looks at fundamentalism; and simultaneously engages with biographies of a leader and a lawyer. *In An Antique Land* tells us about Ghosh’s fieldwork and his various experiences therein, and at the same time it tries to unravel the history of an 11th century Hindu slave, as also it tells us about the later ties between Ghosh and Egyptians. *Dancing in*

Cambodia draws out colonial history of Cambodia, while at the same time Ghosh shows us the de-mining operations and the predicament of the people ravaged by changing regimes, and at the same time uses a dance form as a metaphor of return of freedom.

This preoccupation of inquiring into the connecting threads of various events is a signature style of Ghosh, and he does tremendous and meticulous research before writing his books. If one reads this from an interview of Ghosh, it might or might not be true. The research shows itself up while reading any of Ghosh's work, whether it be fiction or non-fiction. One can see, for example the amount of work gone into writing *Dancing in Cambodia*, when one reads the chronicles of King Sisowath and his family, and later when the same is connected with the history of Pol Pot after a series of meetings with his relatives. Ghosh does a lot of fieldwork there to see what the peace-keeping troops are doing, and digs into the histories of people who have lost limbs and relatives to the Polpot regime and its aftermath. The writer also obtains paintings of Sisowath's troupe of dancers, made by Auguste Rodin. One can see similar strains in fiction.

As we have been noticing throughout this chapter, Ghosh's fiction and non-fiction inform each other, feed into each other. Seeking co-incidences and linking individual histories is one characteristic we have seen. Another important point is "mirror images" that revolve around these linkages. These mirror images function as dark reflections of one's own strongly held opinions. The ploy is very post-structuralist in the sense that it seeks to find out voids, the gaps in thinking that are considered rational, and thence dogmatised. Multiple viewpoints through mirroring is the forte of Ghosh. In *Countdown*, a non-fictional piece, Ghosh's friend Chandan Mitra tells him that the bomb is a matter of self-esteem more than anything else. Mitra says:

Two hundred years of colonialism robbed us of our self-esteem. We do not have the national pride that the British have, or the French, the Germans, or the Americans. Our achievements... negated and denied. Mahatma Gandhi's endeavour all during the freedom movement was to rebuild our sense of self-esteem...Now, fifty years on, we know that

moral force isn't enough to survive. It doesn't count for very much. When you look at India today and ask how best you can overcome those feelings of inferiority, the bomb seems to be as good an answer as any. (Ghosh 1999: 16)

Mitra feels that to get a better deal in the world, to show a violent symbol is a must. Franz Fanon suggests in *The Wretched of The Earth*³⁷ the colonized resists the colonizer within the psychological limits set by the colonizer. It is as if it were an emasculated India, in an age of neo-imperialism, searching for its virility through RDX. Ghosh meets Qazi Hussain Ahmad of Pakistan, the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami, the country's principal religious party, later in the book who echoes similar sentiments. Ahmad says -

...all the institutions in this country are more or less finished. These are all institutions of Westernized elite, of people who are corrupt. We are now paying the price of their corruption... We are not for nuclear weapons... We are ourselves in favour of disarmament. But we don't accept that five nations should have nuclear weapons and others shouldn't... (54-55)

Ghosh points out that he "was hearing a strange echo of voices from India". Persons of both places are not really concerned about a security threat but about a show of power. India must compete with the fab five and Pakistan cannot leave itself behind India, the issue being that of political prestige when it comes to these two nations. It immediately reminds one of the conversation between the Imam and Ghosh mentioned earlier in the paper. Both India and Pakistan have raised their weapons seeing each other in the mirror, as it were, but there are many more reflections involved, and sinister ones. Both Mitra and Ahmad feel it's a prestige issue. But some in the book feel that this issue might project itself onto the real plane, and annihilation shall decide prestige. Such mirroring pervades Ghosh's work. In *The Shadow Lines*, the partition of the narrator's home with a ridiculously divided commode and stories of people hanging upside down is juxtaposed with the mirror image of a nation partitioned arbitrarily. Nation, through such a mirroring is shown as an arbitrary concept, a construct that is now falling apart.

Nation is not just breaking down for the first world and the third world elite for whom mobility is easy, but also for the poorest of the nations where poverty and war are destroying the very fabric of the institution. A section in "At Large in Burma" is about Kanneni people. Tourists come to see the Kanneni's for their rural simplicity, not knowing that they have been driven away from their "rural simplicity", oppressed, cornered, and now commodified for display. This is the plight of the native inhabitants of that nation. In *The Hungry Tide*, redrawing the borders makes the people of Morichjhapi alien in their own land.

We have discussed the issue of violence throughout this chapter, though not overtly. And that, as discussed, is Ghosh's point, not to give violence an overt space, but to critique it subtly, but surely and strongly. An exception I found in this argument was *Countdown*, which is a very powerful critique of violence and armament indeed, but which goes on to show a very visual picture, at length, of what would happen to Delhi and Bombay, in case a nuclear war occurred. In all other places the critique is overwhelming by the absence of explicit violence, an absence whose presence is rather strongly felt. In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator says that every word he writes about the violence of 1964, is the product of "a struggle with silence." He says -

The enemy of silence is speech, but there can be no speech without words, and there can be no words without meanings...when we try to speak of events of which we do not know the meaning, we must lose ourselves in the silence...where there is no meaning, there is banality, and this is what this silence consists in...absolute, impenetrable banality. (Delhi: OUP: 218).

Violence is incomprehensible and meaningless in Ghosh's work, and as we know the entropy, the disorder ever increases. There is a strong theorization here about an active positioning in writing to refrain from using sensational violence, since it is banal. This is the most appealing concept for me about Ghosh's work. He is not an activist, but takes an activist stance within writing to actively resist that which takes lives. We have already

seen Imam and the Indian vying for Western violence, and the Anglophone Empire's tryst to legitimize violence in contemporary times, especially in war on Iraq, and Ghosh's critique of it, as well as other examples. Ghosh posits a theoretical stand against violence, or for the sub-altern, or engaging with the colonial past and providing one of the most scathing critiques of colonialism as in *The Glass Palace*. The content has been varied, from enquiring into the trail of a 11th century slave in 1992 (in fact 1980, that's when he wrote his diary parallel to his thesis), to enquiring into nationalism, personal relationships and violence in *The Shadow Lines* (1988), to writing science fiction that tried to give alterity to Ronald Ross's servant (1992), to writing about colonial history of Burma, to writing about Polpot, to writing about the history of the Sundarbans (2004). However, the spirit has remained the same, and there is no linear trajectory in time, like his works. However, there is a trajectory in strengthening his position by grounding the theories with research and alternate historiography. What was banality in *The Shadow Lines* is now clearly manifest as to why it is banality in his later works like *the Hungry Tide* and *Dancing in Cambodia, at Large in Burma*.

The methodology of the writer has also been talked about at various places in this paper. The genre of writing is not fixed, except in fiction which is the novel, but a novel with several innovations that entails use of mirroring, co-incidences, dissolution of empirical spatio-temporal boundaries, parodying the Western Police novel. Some of these might be considered passé. But writing is an exercise in metaphor. As long as the metaphor is fresh, organic and innovative, the reader's interest is held. In non-fiction, like in fiction, small individual histories are connected with larger ones. Besides, there is a subaltern current flowing, not just in content but in form too. Legitimization is not done in the way academic articles achieve it by a simulacrum of science.

Marques says, that all historical enquiry is necessarily constituted within a fictional framework, and this is perhaps best engendered in *The Glass Palace* where through fiction, Ghosh delves into histories of many generations that suffered under the colonial regime. Besides, the "co-incidence theory", the "banality" of violence, the

arbitrariness of lines as returning themes in Ghosh's work are an exercise in creating an ideology of resistance to received histories

END NOTES

¹ Pablo Neruda. Extract from "I'm Explaining a Few Things" translated by Nathaniel Tarn, from *Pablo Neruda: Selected Poems*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1970

² Interview with Amitav Ghosh. *Times of India*. September 14, 2002.

³ John C Hawley. *Contemporary Indian Writers in English: Amitav Ghosh*. New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2005: 2

⁴ Amitav Ghosh. "The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi" in *The Imam and the Indian*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002: 46

⁵ George Orwell. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Martin Secker and Warburg Limited, 1949

⁶ Yevgeny Zamyatin. *We*. 1927. Avon Eos, 1999

⁷ Aldous Huxley. *Brave New World*. 1932. Perennial, 2000

⁸ Ray Bradbury. *Fahrenheit 451*. Simon and Schuster, 1953

⁹ Ray Bradbury. *Conversations with Ray Bradbury*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 2004.

¹⁰ "Epistemic Upheaval". The interview appeared in two parts, the first on December 2, 2001; and the other on December 16, 2001 in *The Hindu*.

¹¹ Amitav Ghosh. No title given. (*The New Yorker*. 24 Sep. 2001: 32)

¹² In personal communication. December 2005.

¹³ Weimann, Gabriel. *Communicating Unreality: Modern Media and the Reconstruction of Reality*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000

¹⁴ Meltem Kiran Raw. "When Disaster Strikes at Home: September 11 and Its Aftermath in *The New Yorker*" in *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* 14 (2001) : 51-60

¹⁵ Robert Karl Manoff. "Writing the News (By Telling the 'Story')." Eds. Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson. *Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1987) 197-229

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- ¹⁶ Lane, Anthony. "This Is Not a Movie." *The New Yorker*. (24 Sep. 2001): 79-80
- ¹⁷ Maher, Mike, and Lloyd Chiasson Jr. "The Press and Crisis: What Have We Learned?" Ed. Lloyd Chiasson Jr. *The Press in Times of Crisis*. Westport: Greenwood, 1995: 219-223.
- ¹⁸ John C. Hawley. *Contemporary Indian Writers in English: Amitav Ghosh*. New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2005: 11
- ¹⁹ From <http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates//2005/pinter-lecture-e.html> as viewed on January 4, 2006. Harold Pinter got the Nobel for literature in 2005.
- ²⁰ Amitav Ghosh "The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi" in *The Imam and The Indian*. (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002)46-62
- ²¹ From the website of *The Nation*. < <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20050718/ghosh/2> > as viewed on 25th June, 2006.
- ²² The term "chain of existence and events" is used by the monster of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelly, in several places.
- ²³ Naomi Klein. "The True Purpose Of Torture: Guantanamo Is There To Terrorize - Both Inmates & The Wider World" *The Guardian*. (14th May, 2005)
- ²⁴ Emphasis mine.
- ²⁵ Ghosh forwards these ideas in an interview with *The Hindu*. 2nd and 16th December, 2001.
- ²⁶ Amitav Ghosh. *Countdown*. (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1999)
- ²⁷ Ed Brinda Bose. *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives*. (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003) pp155-160
- ²⁸ Amit Ranjan. "The Parallel Lines" at <<http://museindia.com/showcon.asp?id=289>> as viewed on 5th July, 2006.
- ²⁹ Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1981)
- ³⁰ Amitav Ghosh. "The Imam and the Indian" in *The Imam and the Indian*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002:1-12
- ³¹ The essay appears in *The Imam and the Indian* (pp 90-108), and on Amitav Ghosh's website, <www.amitavghosh.com> as "Love and War in Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Life of Babar"
- ³² Romila Thapar, "The Early History of Mathura", in *Mathura: The Cultural Heritage*. ed. Doris Meth Srinivasan. New Delhi: American Instt. of Indian Studies, 1989: 12-18.
- ³³ From <<http://www.autoblog.com/2006/06/29/poll-results-name-that-volkswagen/>> as on 1st July, 2006.

³⁴ Walter W. Skeat. *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*. (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1993) 275

³⁵ Brian Kiteley. "Trapped by Language: On Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*." 2000. <http://www.du.edu/~bkiteley/ghoshtalk.html> - as viewed on 24th August, 2004.

³⁶ Rikki Ducornet. *The Word "Desire"*. New York: Henry Holt, 1997.

³⁷ Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of The Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. London: Penguin, 1978.

Chapter 3

THE WAR WITH ONE'S OWN IMAGE IN THE MIRROR: GHOSH'S FICTION

If we must not act save on a certainty, we ought not to act on religion, for it is not certain. But how many things we do on an uncertainty, sea voyages, battles! ¹

-Blaise Pascal

Pascal arranges everything very tidily before God makes his appearance, but there must be a deeper, uneasier skepticism than that of a man cutting himself to bits with - indeed - wonderful knives, but still, with the calm of a butcher. Whence this calm? this confidence with which the knife is wielded? Is God a theatrical triumphal chariot that (granted the toil and despair of the stage-hands) is hauled on to the stage from afar by ropes?²

-Franz Kafka in his diaries (in 1917)

Pascal died just before his 40th birthday, and Kafka just after his 40th. Yet another trivia in a sea of trivia of coincidences. Despite these disparate quotes, it is interesting that both Pascal and Kafka are considered to be in the Existentialist tradition. It gets furthermore interesting that *Pensées* (1670) from which the first quote is taken, was published after Pascal's death, and was a collection of a myriad random notes he had made. The document was published only in parts, for the fear of the Church, and much it's much later in the 19th century that the book appeared in its complete form, just in time for Kafka to catch hold of it. Kafka's diaries where this passage appears is also a posthumous production.

This passage from Kafka's diaries has never been talked about. Might be he is referring to some other Pascal, but he might well be referring to Blaise Pascal –the child prodigy, the mathematician, the inventor of many computer prototypes, the originator of the game theory, who turned to theology towards the end and defended belief in God amid his fatal sickness. What Kafka is probably critiquing is the “Pascal Wager” where

he argues that it is always a better “bet” to believe in God, because the expected value to be gained from believing in God is always greater than the expected value resulting from non-belief.

However, there are the jealous gods that appear as *deux-ex-machina* as Kafka hints at, and they induce the calm of a butcher. The existence of God is doubted by neither Pascal nor Kafka, the matter in question is belief, and appearance. The stagehands toil and despair and send the Gods on the stage, while the players decide to believe in “their” God, for Pascal’s God is Christian, for he does not talk about Gods. Men, then, fight on the behalf of their own Gods.

No comment is being made here on either Kafka or Pascal, but their words have just been used to get this point of the theatre of cruelty. God, voyage, and battles are uncertain but undertaken, for it is profitable to believe in them. God was invoked for the voyages and battles of the entire imperial history, or rather each was invoked for each. At another place in the same book, *Pensées*, Pascal says:

The struggle alone pleases us, not the victory. We love to see animals fighting, not the victor raving over the vanquished.... It is the same in gambling, and the same in the search for truth.... We never seek things for themselves—what we seek is the very seeking of things.³

In the preceding chapter we saw Amitav Ghosh commenting on Abu Ghraib, where torture is for the sake of torture, where means is used as an end, and played all over again. Violence is a self sustaining cycle, a mirror. The quotes from of Pascal and Kafka underscore the banality of violence. One quote from Ghosh remains in my mind from the preceding chapter, “History, notoriously is not about the past”. History is to construct an imagined future, played out in the present. The collapse of time-space boundaries happen in Ghosh’s prose. Ghosh’s fiction is informed by his non-fiction, the genre boundaries blur in both. All boundaries blur, between past and the present, imagination and reality, between travel in reality and travel in mind, between nations, between one’s ideas of the “other” and vice versa.

The titles of Ghosh’s fictional work are intriguing with a looming shadow of fate, and a hint that all truth is half truth. *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*⁴, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*⁵, all have abstract adjectives attached to ‘concrete’ nouns, that

form a part of the conventional wisdom of the West—reason, line, palace, tide are all symbols of advancement in ‘natural philosophy’ of yore.

In *The Circle of Reason*, one of the characters believes that everything can be reasoned, even the falling of a plane on a building (which also shows Ghosh’s preoccupation with patterns of destiny); in *The Shadow Lines*, the grandmother of the narrator looks for real line while crossing nations, like in a map; in *The Hungry Tide*, the tide is the sustenance for the people. However, in all these novels, these theories are built by the characters who themselves get trapped in it. Everything keeps burning in *The Circle of Reason*, as if the only reason why things existed were that they should burn. In *The Shadow Lines*, the lines keep getting fuzzier and fuzzier, undermining linearity and teleology. In *The Hungry Tide*, the tide blurs boundaries between land and sea, between the hunter and the hunted. It is, as it were, the words could be transitively transposed to get the other side of the story, which mirrors the given side. So we could have the Reason of the Circle (of events, violence), The Palace Glass (to show the transparent rapacity of colonial enterprise), The Tide of Hunger (which this dispossessed intended utopia reels under), The Line Shadows (the shadows of lines are pretty thick, with lines drawn on the map whose shadows loom large on Indian subcontinent even sixty years after they were drawn).

The sinister mirror appears many times in Ghosh’s fiction, most of all in *The Shadow Lines*. These mirror images function as dark reflections of one’s own strongly held opinions. The ploy is very post-structuralist in the sense that it seeks to find out the voids, the gaps in thinking that is considered rational, and thence dogmatised. In *The Shadow Lines*, Robi is an administrative officer who tells the narrator that terrorists need to be exterminated, because they are anti-nationalists. He does not have anything personal against anyone but it is a war where the truth must triumph. When he reaches home, he sees a letter waiting for him. The writer of the letter says that he has nothing against him, but he would have to be removed, because he is coming in the way of their freedom’s interest. The terrorist becomes a freedom fighter and the officer becomes the repressor.

The Shadow Lines has many quotable quotes on musings about struggles with violence and silence; it is like the writer is trying to take make sense of the kaleidoscope of violence that has everyone trapped in its mirror maze. The narrator's memory takes him back to 1964 several years later, and several times over. He recounts the riots when he and his classmates were trying to escape the mobs in their school bus. Tublu starts crying after he realises that the bus is not heading in the direction of his home. The narrator recounts:

He cried like that all the way home, for all of us.

It would not be enough to say we were afraid: we were stupefied with fear.

That particular fear has a texture you can neither forget nor describe. It is like the fear of the victims of an earthquake, of people who have lost faith in the stillness of the earth. And yet it is not the same. It is without analogy, for it is not comparable to the fear of nature, which is the most universal of all human fears, nor to the fear of the violence of the state, which is the commonest of modern fears. It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world – not language, not food, not music – it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror. (204)

Ghosh makes three important points here. One with which we initiated the discussion, that of the mirroring of violence, that of treating one's own image as one's doppelganger. The harrowing riots during partition, or on both sides of the border in 1964 that the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* recounts, are about fighting one's own images. The "other" that is created on this side in imagination, is the replica of the "other" constructed on that side. The second point that he makes is that this kind of rioting is a South Asian peculiarity. This is an interesting statement to make, for Le Bon and others would have conjured by theories of "contagion theory" as mentioned in the

introductory chapter, from their own contexts: but Ghosh is right in pointing out that ethnic clashes elsewhere, or the riots of New York where the “ghetto” dwellers looted the city during the power cut, or the hunger riots, or the riots for political upheaval are different from the communal clashes in the subcontinent. In an interview with Neluka Silva and Alex Tickell⁶, he responds to the last line in the above quote, “the fear of the war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror” saying:

I think it’s something specific to South Asia, the way in which the kind of violence lives in our imaginations and lives in our minds is very much a South Asian thing. I’m very struck, for example, when I read articles about 1983 in Colombo, or similarly about Karachi today, by how similar these forms of violence are even though they take place in different places. I think that this particular kind of upheaval, the communal riot, is something that really is quite distinctive of South Asia. I don’t know of any other place where it is such an endemic form of social violence.

Alex responds saying he was struck by the fact that Ghosh had written this earlier, before the riots of Bosnia and Rwanda happened; and that people seem able to turn the streets into chaos in other places just as readily. Ghosh does not quite agree:

No, Bosnia is a completely different example. Bosnia was three proto-nations fighting three proto-armies. It’s not a riot in the Indian sense where, basically, the streets suddenly erupt – and then the violence completely dissolves.

Ghosh believes that it is the generation of the riot itself that is specific, and he does not blame the State for its engineering, as often it is alleged. He says in the same interview:

...one thing that is very striking is that since 1947, the governments of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have all been uniformly opposed to this form of rioting. They’ve done everything in their part to stop it. The human rights groups are always talking about how the State is sponsoring the riot – there are elements of the State which co-operate with the rioters, of course, but I think, on the whole, all these states feel

threatened by rioting. It only makes sense that the State will object to, or feel that it is in some way threatened by, this kind of social violence, over which it has no control...in Bosnia and Rwanda the whole thing is directed by elements of the State, the relationship between the State and the rioters is of a completely different kind here.

Elsewhere, Ghosh talks of these “disturbances” that were reported in the newspapers. Riots would always be disturbances that would turn normal, the same idea that is expressed in his statement “the streets suddenly erupt – and then the violence completely dissolves”. In *The Shadow Lines*, the mob violence cuts across ethno-religious boundaries as well as the cartographic national zones. Coming back to the important points that emerge from the description of 1964 riots in the book, the third point that emerges as a corollary of the second (that is the typicality of South Asia in this form of violence) is perhaps that this is a colonial legacy. The images and the imaginations conjured up amid the renowned “divide and rule” regime have stayed and even become legitimized with the rhetoric of extreme nationalism. However, the pivotal points would be the Direct Action Day and partition, the surreality of which made the sufferers believe that imagination was reality. It would be useful to invoke Marx at this point. He says:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

Radhika Subramaniam recounts from her ethnographic enquiry into the riots of 1992-93 Bombay riots in her essay, “Culture Of Suspicion: Riots And Rumor In Bombay, 1992-1993”⁷:

“There are five main reasons why the riots occurred” said Anwar crisply. He was a young Muslim journalist I met in Bombay in November 1995. I had been back in the city a few months, listening to people’s stories of the violence of 1992-1993. These were so often recounted with an

absentmindedness and bored fortitude, rather than anger or grief, that I was accustomed to this kind of brisk analysis. He counted the reasons off on his fingers: The first is economic, that is, the liberalization policy of the government. The second is the Shahbano cases and the third is the Shiv Sena.⁶ Then, of course, the most immediate one was the demolition of the Babri Masjid. He paused, and I waited silently for the fifth reason poised on his finger tip. When we were children, he continued, we played games in the buildings, often dividing ourselves into teams. We had two teams. They were “Shivaji hi aulad,” and we were “Aurangzeb ki aulad” (Children of Shivaji and Children of Aurangzeb); that’s how we divided up against each other. Them against Us. He counted off the last finger. There stood the fifth reason at the opening where uneasy pasts thrust themselves into contemporary consciousness.

The construction of Shivaji who had gone north to fight Aurangzeb as the hero against the fanatic Mughal marauders has given Shiv Sena a Hindu past to evoke in opposition to the evil other, the Muslim and the British. Subramaniam runs into the same phenomenon of violence as disturbance, as if it were a nightmare and nothing really had happened. She recounts:

This shadow city continually dogged my heels those months in 1995 in Bombay. Composed of fragments of stories and wordless glances, it darted through the daily tread. Narratives, like that of Anwar, sharpened as they blurred the sequential logic of occurrences that led up to the riots. People made easy and erratic connections between one event and another, seemingly removed in time and space. There was the dismissive shrug I frequently encountered that accepted such unprecedented violence as routine. As I sought accounts of what had happened three years previously, people shrugged. “Again?” they asked. “Nothing happened here,” they said, in areas that I knew had been badly affected. “Oh, yes, the police attacked people on the street. A young man was shot down that way. The people in the chawls threw hot water down on us,” they said,

“But it’s all fine now. Nothing has really changed. “It is all fine now. Nothing has changed. Yes, the faces of people on the crowded trains and the tones of their voices held few traces of the savage violence.

Violence was palpable, of course, in the rhetoric of the Hindutvawadis on television, in the graffiti announcing the grand gathering of the Bharatiya Janata Party on the Race Course, and in the stories of intimidation by Shiv Sainiks that followed the death of the party leader, Bal Thackeray’s wife in September 1995.

Was this a silence born of fear? Was the violence, even if unprecedented, perceived as ordinary? Was this a resignation grown out of a need to “get on with it” in a city whose crowded spaces prevent any escape from the “other?” These questions directed my attention to the everyday, to the formations of habit, and the ways in which history and myth manifest in daily perceptions. A series of fragmented stories, rumored happenings, stray perceptions, and curiously mundane observations began to emerge as an archive of conflict. This made powerfully visible an immense unconscious that destabilized social realities and unsettled stolid sociological explanations. (98)

Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* is also an “archive of conflict” where curiously mundane observations have dark underbellies. The novel’s reaction to violence is similar to the ethnographic enquiry of Subramayam – both are struggles with silence. The struggle with silence that started for the narrator with Tridib’s death keeps reappearing, and is not resolved till the end. The narrator and his friends are discussing the major world events of the 20th century, and pondering over which would be the most phenomenal for India. The friends agree that it is the 1962 war with China, whereas the narrator differs and says it is the 1964 riots of Calcutta. The narrator says:

The silent terror that surrounded my memory of those events, and my belief in their importance, seemed laughably out of proportions to those trivial recollections. (221)

After a hunt in library, they are unable to find anything about the narrator's remembered riots. The narrator is baffled, and silent yet again, "I nodded silently, unnerved by the possibility that I had lived for all those years with a memory of an imagined event." (222). After persisting a little they find the riots, but not as a headline, but as a snippet, the headline of which said, "Twenty nine killed in riots". Malik, a friend, points out that the riots report was not of Calcutta which they were looking for, but of Khulna in East Pakistan, "It's strange said Malik looking at me curiously. It's really strange that you should remember a riot that happened in Pakistan."(224)

That the narrator "remembers a riot in Pakistan" is what causes the silence, the endless mirroring of communal violence, and the inability to tell one from the other, the report which reports numbers and nothing else. We can return to McLuhan's idea of "medium is the message" here. When the medium negates the existence of an event, that is the message – that the event did not happen at all. It was a nightmare which people do not talk about in retrospect, it is as it were an eruption that is inevitable but unspeakable. It is a complicit silence. Getting back to the idea of "creating the event" that we discussed in the last chapter, riots are created as spectacles in the newspapers in India, and then forgotten about, until the next one.

The narrator realizes that Tridib with whose death is a mystery he has been struggling with, must have left for Khulna just the day before the riots in Khulna. He starts blaming his father for having let him go, for he would have had some idea about what was happening there. He turns to the Calcutta newspaper that the family subscribed to, at that time, but the paper talks about the riots in Calcutta and not in East Pakistan, as the Delhi newspaper did. He tells, "I found that there was not the slightest reference in it to any trouble in East Pakistan, and the barest mention of the events in Kashmir. It was after all, a Calcutta paper, run by people who believed in the power of distance no less than I did."(227) He now makes sense of why his father would not have known, "he was merely another victim of that seamless silence" (227). He says but despite the fact that the newspapers did not report, his father would have known, and the canny journalists must have known too – for events on that scale cannot happen without portents. He goes on to show how events are created and negated. In the scheme of South Asian creation of

events, politics and war are of utmost importance, for it helps in the interpellation of the people by the State, whereas events amid the people is their event, inconsequential and routine. The creation of events where State is of prime value is also perhaps a colonial hangover. The narrator says:

...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 makes all those things called 'politics' so eloquent and those other unnameable things so silent? Those journalists and historians were, after all, men of intelligence and good intention on the whole, no less than anyone else, and once the riots had started they produced thousands of words of accurate description. But once they were over and there was nothing left to describe they never spoke of it again – while those other events, party splits and party congress and elections poured out their eloquence in newspapers and histories for years and years after they were over, as though words could never exhaust their significance. 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. (228)

What I was trying to say about the State being the driving force in creating the events through the media, has been quite lucidly put in the above passage, with words never being able to exhaust the meaning of political events, and words never emanating when it came to the "other unnameable events." The word "silence" becomes a deafening chant in the novel, and the voids stare blankly at the reader. Talking of Tridib's death again, the narrator says:

...that is why I can only describe at second hand the manner of Tridib's death: I do not have words to give it meaning. *I do not have words*, and I do not have the strength to listen. (228)

The above passages come close to Ghosh's theory that there is something typically South Asian about this kind of violence, which is also reflected in the kind of responses Subramaniam gets in her ethnographic study. The point that I made about a colonial legacy emanates from the system of colonial administration where creation of categories and classifications was the tool used for control. Gyanendra Pandey, in his essay "In Defense of the Fragment: Writing About Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today"⁸, says:

The historical character of communalism (or nationalism) must come after the historical character of the past has been established. The past is historical not only in the obvious sense that the past makes up history. It is historical also in the sense that "history" itself— the "past" recalled — is constructed . It was colonialist writers who established the pattern of the Indian past pretty much as we know it today. (23)

Subramaniam in the same essay on culture of suspicion, resonates Frederick Jameson's idea that the colonised operate under the psychological limits set by the colonizer:

For colonialist writers, communalism was an essential and endemic part of Indian life and character. For the nationalists also, as they operated within the parameters laid by colonial knowledge production, communalism began to loom large as a threat to their political struggle for an independent nation. Communalism, they argued, was a new problem that grew out of economic and political upheavals and was exacerbated by a few elite groups. The population at large had little truck with these hostilities and manipulations. Most contemporary scholarship embraces this formulation, and accounts abound that testify to the "secularism" of people with instances constantly being cited of Hindus hiding Muslims or Muslims saving Hindus during communal riots. (100)

Sitting in a library, poring over the newspapers, the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* sees the events of 1964 unfolding before his eyes. He had witnessed the riots in Calcutta as a child, but he had no clue that there were preceding riots in East Pakistan, which Malik rightly remarks as the narrator's memory for there was barely any difference between the two. The narrator also gets to learn about the disappearance of the sacred relic *Mu-i-Mubarak* from Hazratbal shrine in Kashmir, which would be the key to all these acts of miasmatic violence. This is vintage Ghosh – unravelling histories through a personal incident, or a word, and connecting the personal to the larger scheme of things in the chain of existence and events.

The relic had disappeared on 27th December 1963 and there was rioting in Srinagar. The rioters primarily targeted the government property (225), and people demonstrated with black flags. The flags were black and not green, drawing various communities, on the insistence of Maulana Masoodi, “an authentic hero, forgotten and unsung today as any purveyor of sanity inevitably is in the hysteria of our subcontinent” (225-226). The mirrors were drawn once again, and the first reflections of the doppelganger came from Pakistan, “The Pakistani newspapers declared that the theft of was a part of a deep-laid conspiracy for uprooting the spiritual and national hopes of Kashmir, and rumbled darkly about ‘genocide’.”(228). The relic was rediscovered and reinstated on 4th January 1964 by the Central Bureau of Intelligence; there were no explanations. Ghosh's literary idiom of searching the macro through the micro gets engendered in a real event here, when with the rediscovery Srinagar erupts with joy, and “people danced on the streets, there were innumerable thanksgiving meetings, and Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs marched together in demonstrations demanding that the conspirators be revealed.” The streets echoed with the cries of ‘Central Intelligence Zindabad’. While the home to the relic was rife with joy in the Himalayas where Ganga starts, the tail of Ganga was writhing in Khulna, several thousand kilometers away. In Khulna, a demonstration that was marching in protest against the theft of relic turned violent. The riots spread outwards, the Hindus of East Pakistan started boarding trains for India, there was no violence on the trains but rumours about them would swell the

tumour of violence very soon. The narrator tells that at some places on the border, “the trains were stopped by mobs, some of which were heard to chant the slogans ‘Kashmir Day zindabad’ (perhaps at that very moment, the crowds in Kashmir were shouting ‘Central Intelligence zindabad’). But there do not appear to have been any serious attacks on the trains. The towns and cities of East Pakistan were now in the grip of a ‘frenzy’ of looting, killing and burning.”(228)

“Rumours began to flow like floodwaters”(229) in Calcutta about killing in trains, and the events followed their own “grotesque logic” and mobs started attacking the Muslims of Calcutta. All this for the disappearance of the relic that was brought to Kashmir by a merchant, Khwaja Nur-ud-din (224) from Bijapur. The Hazratbal mosque that housed the relic became a great pilgrimage place with people of all religions, much to the chagrin of the British imperialists, “whose Christian sense of the necessity of a quarantine between doctrines was outraged by the sight of these ecumenical pilgrims.” The symbol of culmination of faiths becoming a rallying point as a conspiracy against Muslims after 263 years of its inception is a sinister reminder of Ghosh’s phrase “history notoriously is not about the past”, as well as an attestation to the fact that history can be so quickly distorted to unleash a circle of violence across thousands of miles. The account of Mahmud Ghaznavi destroying a Hindu temple in Somnath centuries ago is the rallying cry for Hindu jingoists today. The symbol was used by L K Advani to start his rath-yatra to Ayodhya to replace the Babri Masjid there, for Ram is supposed to have been born there. The 1989 elections were fought with the cry of “Jahan Ram ka janm hua tha, mandir wahin banayenge” (We’ll build the temple where and only where Ram was born). It is a different matter that the historical existence of Ram, or to be safe, Ram’s existence in modern Ayodhya itself is questionable. The Archaeological Survey of India is at the job, but unlike CBI which just had to find the relic which can be found from anywhere, to prove or to disapprove the birth of Ram at that very spot is incendiary. The sword will cut both ways. The mosque was demolished in December 1992, which was followed by the grotesque riots which Subramaniam has written about. The rumour mill worked overtime to drench Bombay in a pool of blood, very much like Calcutta of 1964, and many other places at many other times.

Rumours travel faster than thought perhaps, for they are manifestations of images against the “other” as well as catalysts to carry out the most bizarre human instincts to loot and kill. Rumours are the prime movers of riots besides the riot engineers who use rumours as their prime tool. Ann Stoler in her discussion of colonial Sumatra says:

Rumour, more than first hand experience, shapes people’s fears and armed responses. But these fears in turn provide the milieu in which stories captured people’s imaginations shaping which versions spread across thousands of kilometres of estate complex through the border villages, to return transformed back to estates. If gossip is based on rules of conduct, rumours must have plausible plots (even if in an exaggerated relationship to what people believe is true about the world)⁹

In the anti-Sikh riots of Delhi, rumours that the New Delhi water supply had been poisoned, are supposed to have been broadcast by a public van.¹⁰ This rumour had done rounds during the partition as well. Vicente Rafael, in his discussion on rumours during the Japanese occupation of Manila, suggests that rumours have an excessive, irresistible force that resists any attempt to channel and mediate them with fact and information. They redraw the boundaries between the known and the unknown that have been disrupted by violence and overturn routine understandings of the plausible and the improbable.¹¹

Ghosh does not take an essentialist stand as to whether the state is complicit in rioting, as we have already seen. On the one hand, he says that states are against this form of violence, and do their best to prevent them; on the other hand he agrees that there are riot and rumour engineers within the establishment. The Gujarat riots of 2002 have strong evidences of state complicity to prove a counter point, but the larger issue is of the way state treats religion and violence. It has already been pointed out how the state gives much more importance to state violence like war over social violence. The narrator of *The Shadow Lines* tells that there are no reliable estimates of the number of people killed

in the riots of 1964. The number could stretch from several hundred to several thousand; “at any rate not very many less than were killed in the war of 1962.” (229). He talks about the courage unsung heroes showed in protecting each other:

As always, there were innumerable cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to the Hindus, often at the cost their own lives, and equally in India, of Hindus sheltering Muslims. But they were ordinary people, soon forgotten – not for them any Martyr’s Memorials or Eternal Flames...madness of a riot is a pathological inversion but also therefore a reminder, of that invisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments. (230)

The narrator goes on to theorise the relation between the state and its people, “...independent relationship (between people) is the natural enemy of the government, for it is in the logic of the states that to exist they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples. The theatre of war, where generals meet, is the stage on which states disport themselves: they have no use or memories of riots.”

Ashis Nandy sees a tendency in South Asia, after the second World War, for religion to split into religion as faith and religion as ideology¹². Religion as ideology, as “a sub-national, national, or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political, or socio-economic, interests” is what the modern state prefers to deal with if it must deal with religion. In another article¹³, Nandy suggests that riots are one of the most secular activities because they are organized now like any political rally or strike and that they need to be organized because ordinary citizens are not so easily aroused to participate in riots. Nandy uses the idea that the state is complicit in violence by using religion as ideology, very tellingly in “riots are secular”, which points to riot engineering. This is different from Ghosh who critiques the overarching state that believes in total control; but he is not quite comfortable with the idea of complicity of the state entirely. However, both point to a colonial legacy in the pattern to this violence.

Gyanendra Pandey fills in the gap in Nandy's argument, he debunks the usage of neat categories like "communalism," "secularism," and "nationalism." He also critiques elite scholarship of riots saying these undermine people's lived experiences. Variations of the "liberal-rationalist" and the constructionist approaches have greatly informed examinations of the strategies of Hindu Right groups, their reconstructions of the past, and their inventions of tradition, yet these approaches never quite explain how "this task of poisoning the minds of people could be accomplished so quickly"¹⁴

It is interesting, for me, that while I, enquiring into Ghosh's work quote from Radhika Subramaniam's essay on Bombay riots at several places in this chapter, Subramaniam quotes from *The Shadow Lines* of Ghosh in her essay. The metonymy in literature comes a full circle, while we try to comprehend the meaning and narratology of violence. The mirroring of violence is so intense, and so meaningless that all texts in the inter-textual analysis reverberate with the same silence that is unable to comprehend this violence. Subramaniam's quote is the same with which we began our enquiry, "the war with one's own image in the mirror."

Ghosh delves into the State apparatuses in *The Circle of Reason* as well, where he critiques the hangover of the colonial rationality in the systems of policing and administration. The police in the novel has the same anxieties about "law and order" as the colonial police, and this is engendered in the state's response to insurgency. This is juxtaposed with several utopian projects inspired by the biographies of the pioneers of the Enlightenment reasoning, like Luis Pasteur. This raises the question whether the advancement of reason is in complicity with the control of the police.

Adorno and Horkheimer, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*¹⁵, contend that man's will to subjugate nature, a *sine qua non* of modernity, comes to take as its object man himself, leading to the depredations of fascism. I use *sine qua non* ("without which it could not be") in a reflexive manner, for it was a legal term that is now in common parlance; the old legality makes the emphasis on the phrase stronger. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that a logic of domination inheres in Enlightenment modes of knowledge. "In thought,

men distance themselves from nature in order thus imaginatively to present it to themselves—but only in order to determine how it is to be dominated” (39). According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the path of Enlightenment comes full circle—seeking to free themselves from the realm of necessity, men impose an oppressive necessity in the realm of thought itself. It is this aspect of Enlightenment—the logic of domination inherent in its modalities—that contemporary critics of postcolonial culture have subjected to critique. In *Orientalism*¹⁶, Said criticizes the historicism of European thinkers, that is, their failure to, as Robert Young puts it, “analyze plural objects as such rather than offering forms of integrated understanding that simply comprehend them within totalizing schemas.”¹⁷

In *The Circle of Reason*, Ghosh parodies the genre of police fiction by working within its framework but critiquing it. Police fiction is a genre that expresses anxieties about order and control; at the same time the genre reinforces both the necessity and efficacy of the police through narratives of detection and pursuit. The classic detective story endorses the bourgeois state and its social arrangements and presents any challenge to these as threats to be allayed. “Police fiction” is a translation of the French “roman policier.” The term is used here to include detective and spy fiction, fiction of intrigue that celebrates the capacities of the rational sleuth to deduce the particulars of a crime or mystery. There have been other contemporary novels that parody this genre, and turn them into novels of social detection, while pointing out to the state as vicious control machinery. In Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*¹⁸, the reader learns the mystery of Sophie Moll’s death and the subsequent torture and murder of Velutha, Amu’s lover, by the police. The novel reveals the brutal policing of caste boundaries and the unscrupulous operation of party political machinery. Michael Ondaatje’s novel *Anil’s Ghost*¹⁹ traces the investigation by a forensic detective of human remains in a Sri Lanka riven by war between the government, insurgents in the south, and Tamil separatists in the north. In Rohinton Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey*²⁰, the protagonist becomes entangled during the 1971 Bangladeshi war through a friend, a guileless policeman who works for a corrupt state, with a scheme for money laundering and arms sales. These novels cast suspicion on the repressive apparatuses of the state. *The Circle of Reason*, in

showing the indictment of Alu on charges of imagined anti-national activities, similarly is a scathing attack at the policing and indicts the criminal behavior of the state's agents.

Yumna Siddiqi in her essay²¹ on the *Circle of Reason*, discusses the dual role of policing through Pasquino's critique of 18th century (the age of Enlightenment) policing:

In order to explore the dual implications of "police," it is helpful to turn to Pascale Pasquino's discussion of the "science of police" in Europe in the eighteenth century, the century of Enlightenment. Pasquino identifies two disparate meanings. The modern nation—understood as "the maintenance of order and prevention of dangers"—emerged, Pasquino convincingly argues, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From the Middle Ages until the late eighteenth century, "police" referred more broadly to the administration of a population to promote happiness and the public good. The task of police was to be achieved by the application of specialized knowledges and practices. This administration in the interest of public happiness is the ostensible mission of the modern nation.²²

The novel is set in the 20th century, roughly from the 1950s to the 1980s, with the war that created Bangladesh as a fulcrum of events. The Proustian, magical real-istic narrative delves into the vicissitudes of Alu, an orphan, who gets caught in a feud between his foster father and the village strong man, also a police informant. Consequently, the police falsely identify him as a dangerous insurgent and set a special agent on his trail. When Alu flees to a Gulf kingdom, Assistant Superintendent of Police Jyoti Das, the police detective assigned to pursue him, eventually joins him and his companions in flight. *The Circle of Reason*, in its meandering, interwoven narrative that collapses time and space more often than not, chronicles Alu's misadventures in India, Al-Ghazira, and finally Algeria. Ghosh refuses an essentialist stand like other works with the narrative invoking sympathy not just for Alu, but also for Jyoti Das who is more

interested in systems of knowledge like ornithology than policing. He quits his job by the end of the narrative.

Enmity with Bhudeb Roy, the former employer and adversary of Balram, Alu's mentor, sets Jyoti Das, the cop, in pursuit of Alu who flies from one place to the other. The hunt of a framed man relentlessly by the system reminds one of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. The 19th century novel's preface of the first edition resonates with the thematic of Ghosh's novel:

So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation, which, in the face of civilisation, artificially creates hells on earth, and complicates a destiny that is divine, with human fatality; so long as the three problems of the age--the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of woman by starvation, and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night--are not solved; so long as, in certain regions, social asphyxia shall be possible; in other words, and from a yet more extended point of view, so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless.²³

The Circle of Reason is fraught with fires and flights, and both are interlinked. Balaram's obsession with phrenology-- which is much outdated a discipline by the time he espouses it—causes him to rip off Saraswati's idol's head because he sees a lump on the head. This incenses Bhudeb Roy, his employer to no end, who poisons Balaram's pond. The ripping of an idol's head engenders a ludicrous conflict between science, the sacred, and the profane. The head is ripped off because of an apparent scientific abnormality which in turns creates suspicion through superstition. The profane act would cost Balaram very soon when Bhudeb has his house gutted down in a fire which kills Balaram, Toru-Debi, Maya and Rakhal. Alu is forced to fly because he has been declared an anti-nationalist. He goes to Calcutta, then to Kerala from where he sets sail to Mahe and then to Al Ghazira. In Al Ghazira, Mast Ram one of Alu's fellow travellers falls in love with Kulfi, who does not return his favour. Mast Ram commits suicide and sets fire to the village, burning fifty shacks to the ground. A massive building called "The Star" collapses later and has Alu crushed under it, but he escapes having been

sheltered by two sewing machines. Jeevanbhai, a dweller among the migrants, betrays Alu to Jyoti Das who burns up the place where the communist friends of Alu have gathered. Jeevanbhai himself commits suicide. The conflagration is a mirror image of the way Balaram's world was destroyed. Alu survives, and has to fly again, this time to Algeria. Jyoti Das follows them like the tail light of a vehicle, and there proposes one night stand to Kulfi, who dies out of shock.

The Circle of Reason is very different from *The Shadow Lines* in that fiction in the former plays out through magic realist modes and critiques violence and state apparatuses through parody, whereas in the latter-- even though the magic realism reappears in form of a narrative that follows patches of memory—there are precise dates, precise historical moments and the narrator and writer's voice merge quite often. While the former is a novel of intrigue through its content, the latter is a novel of intrigue in that it baffles despite and because of its precision. The absurd conflagrations of the former novel erupt as real conflagrations in the latter, which are proved to be equally absurd. The shocks, suicides, fires and flights of *The Circle of Reason* are metaphors of an oppressive state, the conflicts because of received notions of religion and morality, and of a journey within engendered in the journey without. The violence emanating out of clashes involving religion as ideology, science and rationality are implicit. The incendiary circumstances force the people to dwell in memory rather than the present:

Vomited out of their native soil years ago in another carnage, and dumped hundreds of miles away, they had no anger left. Their only passion was memory...Lalkupur could fight no war because it was damned to a hell of longing. (59)

The critique of science and its relation to violence is engendered in the comment of Mrs Verma, a scientist who has taken to mysticism. She wonders whether or not the microbes under the scientist's microscope are, in fact, "a bodily metaphor for human pain and unhappiness and perhaps joy as well." (412). She adds that if there is one thing that is to be learnt from the past, it is that every consummated death is another beginning; which

is a reminder, albeit with mystical connotations this time, of Ghosh's phrase "history notoriously is not about the past."

Ghosh returns to the people "vomited out of their native soil years ago in another carnage, and dumped hundreds of miles away" in his 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide*. The tide country is metaphor for blurred boundaries that has been a preoccupying theme for Ghosh. The metaphor here expands from boundaries of nations and religions to boundaries between speech and silence, land and sea, between man and animal, with the state apparatuses turning more ferocious than the dreaded tigers of the country. In an episode, Kusum tells Nirmal that they had just crossed the boundary between the realm of human beings protected by Bon Bibi and the realm of Dokkhin Rai and his demons. One is reminded of passages from *The Shadow Lines* that point at the constructedness of boundaries, when Nirmal writes in his journal:

I realized, with a sense of shock, that this chimerical line was, to her and Horen, as real as barbed-wire fence might be to me... To me, a townsman, the tide country's jungle was an emptiness, a place where time stood still: I saw now that this was an illusion, that exactly the opposite was true.
(223-24)

That etymology becomes a key to unlock histories as we had viewed in the last chapter, returns in this novel. Various etymologies come up; histories of making of many cities, the suppressed history of the residents of Sunderbans, intricate details of cetology that Ghosh had obtained during his field trip in Cambodia. Etymology plays an important role in the novel; word histories are linked with cultural histories and histories of generations, they are a memory preserve and Ghosh uses them in a rather evocative way. Threads are connected through these word memories- for example the narrator Kanai mentions the word "rusticate" and tells us that in England errant students were sent to rustic areas. Similar was his fate when he went to school, which made him land in the Sundarbans. Thereafter is evoked the history of his childhood, and of the childhood of the Sundarbans. A harmless word like "rusticate" which is rather exotic for a student though violent in its ramification, would have a violent elitist connotation to it was a personal revelation. Where Kanai's aunt lives is called Lusibari which is a pidgin form of

“Lucy’s house”. Lucy was the wife of Hamilton who had bought land in Sunderban to create a utopia, and had distributed land to the dispossessed on the condition that there would be no bars of religion and caste.

The weaving of the macro and the micro happens in very intricate way again, and Ghosh seems to suggest that the bigger events are always connected with the smaller, personal ones. There seems to be an intricate belief in Ghosh’s works that there are co-incidences and patterns that fit into each other, throughout our lives and History. One just needs a keen eye to unravel them. A most telling co-incidence outside these books is the publishing of *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* in the same year as Pol Pot’s death, who the book critiques. Ghosh has written twice on Burma, once in this book of fiction, and other time in *The Glass Palace*. Ghosh has family connections in Burma, by chance in a Cambodian minefield he meets with a Bangladeshi sergeant who had an ancestral district common with Ghosh, he also chances to cross paths with a guerilla fighter originally called Mahinder Singh, in the forests of eastern Burma. These chance meetings and connections are intersection points in our histories, and one needs to scrutinize them, Ghosh seems to suggest. This sense is evoked in *The Hungry Tide* as well. Piyali Roy, who has had a disturbed childhood, and is a cetologist searching for the Irrawady dolphin in the Sundarbans, crosses paths with Fokir who is illiterate, has had a bad childhood too and loves water like she does. They meet by chance when Piyali falls into the river, and without words between them they carry out successful ventures in tracking down the Irrawady dolphin. They have a shared cultural consciousness somewhere, and intersecting histories, and when they meet again it is a pattern that needs to be unravelled. In *The Glass Palace*, the intimate family histories of the characters are inextricably linked to larger events in world history. When asked if events in world history usually have such profound effects on personal histories, Ghosh answered in an interview²⁴ -

It is often war that creates a collision between history and individual lives. In circumstances of war, as in such situations as revolution, mass evacuations, forced population movements and so on, nobody has the choice of stepping away from history. The 20th century visited many such calamities on Asia and *The Glass Palace* attempts to

chronicle the impact that these events had on families and individuals. My family's history has undoubtedly played a large part in opening my eyes to these events for my family was divided not only by the Partition of India and Pakistan, but also by the Japanese conquest of Burma in 1942.

Ghosh's own family history "opened" his eyes to the larger events and as has been suggested he sees patterns in all enquiries that he carries out. As we have been noticing throughout this chapter, Ghosh's fiction and non-fiction inform each other, feed into each other. Seeking co-incidences and linking individual histories is one characteristic we have seen.

In *The Hungry Tide*, redrawing the borders makes the people of Morichhjhapi alien in their own land. Indian Bengal becomes East Pakistan becomes Bangladesh, and this poor island with no bordering land has borders writ in water. The people of this place are deemed refugees and deported to a human sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh. Some of them manage to return back. They are systematically exterminated by the police and hired goons, who are again mirror images of each other. In the rhetoric of jingoistic nationalism, no one cares about the subaltern nations within nations that are wiped out by legitimate force.

To place *The Hungry Tide* better as a part of the discussion we have been carrying on, it would be useful to have an outline of the plot, even though it is generally difficult and a reductive exercise as well for intricately woven "memory prose" if we could use that term. Unlike *The Glass Palace* where intricate family relationships are drawn to chart out Burma's history, this novel has fewer characters and they are more intimate to the reader. Kanai, a translator from Delhi, is on his way to the Sunderbans to recover the journal that his uncle had bequeathed him. He meets Piya Roy on his journey, who is a cetologist, and who does not Bengali because she was brought up in America. The only memory of Bengali is her parents arguing with each other. In her research on the Irrawady dolphin, her guide is Fokir who has saved her from the clutches of rather dodgy government guides. They do not share a language, but develop immense

liking for each other, which remains unarticulated in words. Kanai's aunt, late Nirmal's wife has struggled to build a hospital under the Badobon trust. The journal of Nirmal runs another story in the past, his leftist ideas and the story of Morichjhapi come to the fore. Morichjhapi was declared by the government as a tiger reserve and removed its inhabitants to a human sanctuary as earlier told. Some of them who return are brutally exterminated. Coming back to the times of Kanai, he sets on a search for the dolphin along with Piya, Fokir and Horen. Piya and Fokir wander off while Kanai realises a storm is brewing, and rushes back to land. Fokir and Piya are stranded, and Fokir ties themselves up to the birch of a tree, where he dies braving the storm.

Ghosh's lens, again refuses to see the tide country as either utopia or dystopia. Despite the everyday vicissitudes created by nature, people have built a syncretic society where Bon Bibi is the only God, and caste and religion conflicts do not happen at least for now. On the other hand, the oldest form of violence has already taken roots—the scourge of patriarchy—with Kusum's mother being tricked into prostitution. Years after her mother's death, Horen learns that Deepak who had tricked her mother, is out to get the daughter to replace the mother at the brothel. Animals hunt men more than the other way round, and this is a natural habitat for the tigers, but where do the wretched of the earth—the dispossessed people go? That is also one question that Ghosh raises, engendered in the spectacle of killing of a tiger in the novel, juxtaposed with a mob killing Kusum in a massacre perpetrated by the government against “squatters”. There is an episode where Piya, Kanai, Horen, and Fokir encounter a group of people killing a tiger with spears and fire, for it had killed a young calf. Piya is horrified, and wants to help the tiger out but Fokir drags her away. One is reminded of May from *The Shadow Lines* running into the Dhaka mob oblivious of the fact that she might be putting others in her party in danger by taking an idealist stand in the middle of mad killing. Later the scene is recounted in a manner reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, where Piya remarks, “it was like something from some other time – before recorded history. I feel I'll never be able to get around...the horror.”(300). Kanai responds, almost like Ghosh would, “...aren't we a part of the horror as well? You and me and people like us?”(300)

Sagarika Ghosh, in her review of the book, writes of the such paradoxes in the interaction of the characters:

Piya learns to love Fokir without language. Kanai, the translator of cultures, finds himself stripped down of all urban defences facing a tiger in the swamp. Fokir, the unlettered fisherman, falls in love with a woman and who is an embodiment of science. A massive storm brings death and terminates a potentially rich love. Nirmal falls in love with Kusum and finally breaks his armchair past. Ghosh's musings on language, on translatability, on the forgotten massacre of Morichjapi, in which dominant cultures forcibly wipe out movements from below, are deftly woven into the interactions between the characters. Yet the most dominant theme is of a great sweep away by water, the flood on land, the revolution in the mind. As the reigning deity of the tide country Bon Bibi, in Ghosh's vision a plural syncretic local cult, presides over the flood; she is a goddess of hope but also of vengeance.²⁵

Contrary to Sagarika Ghose's idea that "a massive storm brings death and terminates potentially rich love", I would argue that though storms are inevitable in the tide country, they are almost conjured up to kill both Fokir and Kusum. Piya likes Fokir, and Nirmal likes Kusum, but both are killed in this work of fiction. Why does Ghosh choose to kill both the underdogs, lower caste lovers who are the beloveds despite the lovers being bound by the institution of marriage. Ghosh critiques all institutions of establishments as we have constantly seen, but this question looms large as to why he kills these two characters as would inevitably happen in a popular film for mass acceptance. Despite the critique of constructedness of boundaries, one would wonder if Ghosh is falling in the same trap. Ghosh debunks the idea of metropolitan man as emancipated in a self reflexive manner in the novel, with Kanai trapped in the swamp but not asking Fokir for help, for he considers himself superior. He gets desperate and expresses anger with "an atavistic explosiveness" that embodies "the master's suspicion

of the menial; the pride of caste.” (326). Despite this acute sensitivity by locating the caste pride of a city man against the rural utopian who does not feel outraged at this humiliation, the plot of the novel that chooses to kill its key characters is a let down.

Nirmal’s epistolary journal to Kanai is like somebody writing to the future about a past dead in the imaginations of the people. Nirmal identifies himself with the refugees when they shout back to the rushing police, “Who are we? We are the dispossessed.” He writes:

How strange it was to hear this plaintive cry wafting across the water. It seemed at that moment, not to be the shout of defiance but rather a question being addressed to the very heavens, not just for themselves, but on the behalf of the bewildered mankind. Who, indeed are we? Where do we belong? (254)

As the cry raises its pitch, Nirmal is forced to ask the question to himself. Once again the theme of fuzziness of borders, between lands and perceptions crops up. Nirmal says:

It was as if I were hearing the deepest uncertainties of my heart being spoken to the rivers and the tides. Who was I? Where did I belong? In Kolkata or in the tide country? In India or across the border? In prose or in poetry?... Where else could you belong, except in the place you refuse to leave. I joined my feeble voice to theirs. (254)

This feeling of solidarity of Nirmal with the dispossessed is similar to the experience of Arjun in *The Glass Palace*. Urban and having had a colonial education, Arjun is smug in his world when his world changes as he sees the worlds through the eyes of the underdog, Kishen Singh. Nirmal reaches an epiphanic moment of sorts when he falls in love with Kusum, and when he starts seeing the world through its dispossessed.

We have already seen that Ghosh had familial links in Burma which started his enquiry into the past of the country. Once again Ghosh tries to search for roots through routes of personal history and comes up some revealing findings. In an interview with *The Outlook*²⁶, he tells:

...it's not been written about at all...It's strange – there were over half a million people on the Long March, over 400,000 of them Indian, and there is such a silence about it...There was no need for Indians in Burma to flee when the Japanese approached – many Indians did stay back. It makes you realise the degree to which Indians felt themselves to be the sheep of the British; the delusions that governed their lives.

The question of “borders of the mind” appears again, although this time from within the colonial setting, when the Indian soldiers of the British army in Burma start questioning the issue of their belonging-ness. Hardayal asks Arjun, “Didn't you ever think this country whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time – what is it? Where is this country? The fact that is that you and I don't have a country”.(287) This sets Arjun thinking and he realises he has more in common with the lowly “batman” in the army, his subordinate Kishan Singh than the British. The narrator tells, “For an eerie instant Arjun saw himself in Kishan Singh's place: as a batman kneeling before a dinner-jacketed officer, buffing his shoes, reaching into his trousers to tuck his shirt, checking his fly buttons, looking up from the shelter of his parted feet, asking for protection. He gritted his teeth.”(289)

The sinister mirror of violence returns again, showing the reflections to Hardayal in a moment of epiphany. Hardayal relates his queasiness to Arjun:

It's a strange thing to be sitting in a trench, holding a gun and asking yourself: Who is the weapon really aimed at? Am I being tricked into pointing it at myself?...This is what I ask myself, Arjun: In what way do I

become human again? How do I connect what I do with what I want, in my heart? (351)

Arjun, after an intense battle within himself which tells him that perhaps he had been following an illusion, he decides to join the mutineers along with Hardayal. He wonders at that moment:

Was this how a mutiny was sparked? In a moment of heedlessness, so that one became a stranger to the person one had been a moment before? Or was it the other way round? That this was when one recognised the stranger that one always had been to oneself; that all one's loyalties and beliefs had been misplaced? (380)

This rumination, I would argue is not just a moment of epiphany where Arjun realises that he had been under a long spell of an illusion of destiny, but rather a moment when he realises also that it is a destiny of illusion that he has to contend with. The destiny of illusion, through its ideological apparatuses would create a rhetoric of nationalism, coupled with a hatred for the "batman" who is his own man. And one day, in a moment, like Frankenstein's monster, Arjun would have to rebel against the step-treatment being meted out to the batman, and metonymically to him. This is not just a critique of divisive imperialism, but of war and jingoistic European nationalism. The gun is also pointed towards the wielder of the weapon himself.

Complicity in the colonising mission becomes a very important point which can take us back to the discussions of state control and how it operates by coercion and consent. The humiliation of racism, in an rather oxymoronic paradox, makes them "loyal subjects". "Loyal and subjects" have always been antagonists, and always existed together. Beni Prasad, works for the British in the novel, and is aware of the racism all the time:

...the smell of miscegenation has alarmed [the British] as nothing else could have: they are tolerant in many things, but not this. They like to

keep their races tidily separate. The prospect of dealing with half-caste bastard has set them rampaging among their desks. (149)

Uma mulls over the British hypothesis that they were setting the people free from their evil kings, and the people believed it because the British had told them so. A soldier tells her, “It took us a long time to understand that in their eyes freedom exists wherever *they* rule” (193)

The issue of migration is a prime rallying point in the novel as an almost epistemic violence. The migration of the colonial subject was never the migration of birds of the north for shelter in rough weather, but to cut stones and be humiliated for British profit and pleasure respectively. All this with consent. The exiled king of Burma wonders at the sight of Indians helping the endeavours of the chain of existence and events as desired by imperial governors, with the Indians themselves being in chains:

The King raised his glasses to his eyes and spotted several Indian faces along the waterfront. What vast, what incomprehensible power, to move people in such numbers from one place to another – emperors, kings, farmers, dockworkers, soldiers, coolies, policemen. Why? Why this furious movement – people taken from one place to another, to pull rickshaws, to sit blind in exile? (43-44)

The most intense moment in the novel, however, is when Hardayal sees Arjun turning to his side. The rhetoric of jubilation as one might expect (rhetoric is not essentially bad) is replaced with Hardayal being stirred for a moment:

This is the greatest danger, he thought, this point at which Arjun has arrived – where, in resisting the powers that form us, we allow them to gain control of all meaning; this is their moment of victory: it is in this

way that they inflict their final and more terrible defeat. For Arjun now he felt not pity but compassion.

It is a great postcolonialist moment, the theorists would argue, the realisation that the coloniser has passed on his legacy. I would argue that this is the “post of colony” moment, where the colonialist has left his post stuck into the vein-- like their flag --of those who would be remembered as the colonial subjects of yore. The post would insure that colonisation returns in its new forms, which it is.

I am always reminded of Frankenstein (without italics this time, for it has become a word for me) when I come across these mirrors of the carnival of violence. Until I read Mary Shelley’s book, I had no idea that the monster’s name is not Frankenstein. The text told me that the monster is just monster, he has no name. However, the monster is indeed Frankenstein, as is popularly believed. For the creator of the monster has bequeathed his name to him. The child in the monster knew only hunger and want of love. He enters the chain of existence and events (a phrase which I freely use now, for it pervades my consciousness) through language, which tells him that he is ugly and despicable. He learns the lessons of hatred from his own father, Frankenstein, and turns against him. But in turning against his creator, he has come full circle, he has entered the chain of existence and events, of endless rapacity and absurdity, of the war with one’s own image.

END NOTES

¹ Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), French scientist, philosopher. *Pensées* . (J.M. Dent & Sons, London , 1931) First published: 1670

² Ed. Max Brod. *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*. (New Delhi: Indialog, 2003) p 343

³ Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), French scientist, philosopher. *Pensées*, trans. J.M. Dent & Sons, London (1931 (1670)).p 135.

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- ⁴ Amitav Ghosh. *The Shadow Lines*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) First published: 1988.
- ⁵ Amitav Ghosh. *The Hungry Tide*. (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2004)
- ⁶ From Ed. Brinda Bose. *Amitav Ghosh: Critical perspectives*. (New Delhi: Pencraft, 2003) pp214-221
- ⁷ From *Transforming Anthropology*. (Volume 8, Numbers 1&2,1999)pp. 97-110
- ⁸ Gyanendra Pandey. "In Defense of the Fragment: Writing About Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today" *Representations* (37:1992) 27-52
- ⁹ Ann Laura Stoler. "In Cold Blood": Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives. *Representations* (37, 1992)136-189
- ¹⁰ From J Stanley Tambiah. *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflict and Collective Violence in South Asia*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)
- ¹¹ Vicente Rafael. *Anticipating Nationhood: Collaboration and Rumor in Japanese Occupation of Manila*. (*Diaspora* 1, 1991)67-82.
- ¹² Ashis Nandy. "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance" in ed. Veena Das. *Mirrors of Violence*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992)
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- ¹⁴ Gyanendra Pandey. *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990)
- ¹⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (New York: Continuum, 1972)
- ¹⁶ Edward Said. *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1978)
- ¹⁷ See Robert Young. *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- ¹⁸ Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (New York: Random House, 1997).
- ¹⁹ Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).
- ²⁰ Rohinton Mistry, *Such a Long Journey* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

²¹ Yumna Siddiqi. "Police and Postcolonial rationality in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*" in *Cultural Critique* 50 (Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2002) pp176-221

²² Pasquale Pasquino, "Theatrum Politicum: The Genealogy of Capital: Police and the State of Prosperity," in *The Foucault Effect*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).pp 105-18.

²³ Victor Hugo. *Les Miserables*. (Hauteville House, 1862)

²⁴ From <http://www.asiasociety.org>. As viewed on 20th October, 2003.

²⁵ Ghose Sagarika. "The Shadow Links: Review of *The Hungry Tide*" in *The Indian Express*. (27 June 2004)

²⁶ The interview appeared in *The Outlook* in July 2000.

Chapter 4

THROUGH THE LENS OF THE WRITER: INTERVIEWS

Amitav Ghosh was in Delhi giving the final touches to his first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986), when the riots broke out in November 1984 following the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The first novel was on the lines of Rushdie's writing – magic realism and fantasy with vital but loose links to larger historical and political moments. The style, however, changed with *The Shadow Lines* in which precise historical details are important, although seen through the predicament of individuals rather than society at large. The 1984 riots seem to have a profound effect on shaping Ghosh's literary consciousness. He writes in "The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi":

Looking back, I see that the experiences of that period were profoundly important to my development as a writer.¹

In this chapter, let us try to delve into the context, psyche and understanding of Ghosh through various interviews that he has given. I shall concentrate on the aspect of violence, though there are no water tight categories as such. The non-fiction has also been written in first person but a piece of written work is different from opinions given in an interview, and might help us gain more insight into both his understanding and narrative strategies.

This is how Sheela Reddy begins her reportage of her 2002 interview with Ghosh²:

Violence and riots have a way of walking into Amitav Ghosh's living room. It happened in 1984 when the events following Indira Gandhi's assassination overtook him in Delhi, and it happened again in New York when he watched from his window as the World Trade towers crashed...in its uncanny way, violence worked its way into the interview, as it has worked its way into

Ghosh's life and his writing, especially in his latest book of essays, *The Imam and the Indian*.

To Reddy's remark that Ghosh draws an interesting connection between violence and banality, Ghosh says:

It's an extension of the famous phrase about the banality of evil. When I was talking of banality and violence, I was speaking in relation to the riots in the '60s and '70s. Because in some way, the riots didn't change anything. You had this "disturbance"—in those days it was always called a disturbance. It would last for a few days, then end, and then things would carry on much as before...until the next riot. To me that was the most disquieting aspect of that kind of social violence. But since September 11, something has changed very drastically in the world.

In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator and his friends are discussing, in 1979, as to what would have been the most important incident during their childhood. Most of the group agrees to the fact that it must be the 1962 war with China, but the narrator differs just for the sake of being different. He recalls the 1964 riots of Calcutta, which had shaken him up as a child. Here's an excerpt of the conversation between the narrator and his friend Malik:

There was a riot, I said helplessly.

There are riots all the time, Malik said.

This was a terrible riot, I said.

All riots are terrible, Malik said. But it must have been a local thing. Terrible or not, it is hardly comparable to a war.³

They find several documents on war—"histories, political analyses, memoirs, tracts—weighty testimony to the eloquence of war" (222), but the narrator has still not been able to find his single most important event. He says, "I nodded silently, unnerved by the

possibility that I had lived for all those years with the memory of an imagined event.”(222)

This is the “disturbances” that Ghosh is referring to in the interview, where riots are reported as “disturbances” and where the proceeding article says “situation is tense but under control”. This narrative strategy of the media to represent “terrible” events is disquieting. It is almost legitimising the “disturbances”.

The “famous phrase” Ghosh is referring to is “banality of evil” that came into prominence following the publication of Hannah Arendt’s book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), which was based on the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem. Arendt’s contention is that the horrors of Auschwitz may not have been the product of mass sadism, but rather the work of officers who might have felt that they are doing yet another routine bureaucratic work. Edward Herman commenting on Arendt’s work contends that “Doing terrible things in an organized and systematic way rests on ‘normalization.’ This is the process whereby ugly, degrading, murderous, and unspeakable acts become routine and are accepted as “the way things are done.” There is usually a division of labor in doing and rationalizing the unthinkable, with the direct brutalizing and killing done by one set of individuals; others keeping the machinery of death (sanitation, food supply) in order... It is the function of defense intellectuals and other experts, and the mainstream media, to normalize the unthinkable for the general public. The late Herman Kahn spent a lifetime making nuclear war palatable.”⁴

This “normalization” goes against Le Bon’s theories we discussed in the introductory chapter, where a mob psychology simply takes over. Rather much of violence is clinically engineered, not just in terms of its execution, but in terms of the discourse that is created around it, which makes it appear like just “disturbance”.

Herman Kahn, military strategist and futurologist, wrote a series of four books defending the scene of nuclear war - *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*⁵ (1965), *On Thermonuclear War*⁶ (1969), *Thinking About the Unthinkable*⁷ (1962) and *Thinking*

about the *Unthinkable* in the 1980s. The conventional issues such as radiation and birth defects were not issues with Kahn really; he would designate them as any other unplesantries of life. It would be interesting to note Ghosh's ideas on nuclear expansion. In an interview with John C. Hawley⁸, Ghosh said:

...a writer is a citizen, not just of a country but of the world. When I feel strongly about an issue I think it's my duty to express my views as cogently and forcefully as possible. This is why I undertook to write *Countdown* in 1998, after the nuclear tests of that year. I was then deep into *The Glass Palace* and absolutely the last thing I wanted was to interrupt myself. But I felt this was an issue that left me no choice. (Hawley:11)

The issues, as we know, in *The Countdown*, are many and varied, from an imminent nuclear threat to the increasingly Right-ward turning politics of the world. One strong point that Ghosh makes is that people on the both sides of the border feel that the "deterrent theory" cannot work forever, that the threat is real. Quite close to Kahn's dream of MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction), one would think.

To Reddy's question as to what has changed since 9/11, Ghosh says:

Perhaps it is a symptom rather than a cause. The whole system of nation-states is coming under increasing strain. The rich countries are essentially more and more a single unit: Borders don't really apply. At the bottom of the scale, in countries like Pakistan and Burma, again borders have melted away and there's a general collapse of the state. I think we are at a point where the ideal of the nation as a way of organizing society is no longer holding.

This idea of weakening of the nation-state is recurrent in Ghosh's writing from *The Shadow Lines*, where Tridib transcends spaces in mind and Ila in reality; through

The Hungry Tide where people in their own land become refugees, the nation having changed.

In the interview with Reddy, Ghosh opines that post-9/11, the stories have fundamentally, radically changed, that a historical event that has become a huge block we have to walk around. He goes on to say that if he would make a claim for himself and his work, he would say that he has been aware of the way things have been changing for a very long time, "I've lived in the Middle East and in Burma, I've been in places where changes are occurring. My fiction has always been about communities coming unmade or remaking themselves."

There is a strong streak of things being connected, of patterns that one normally does not see, in Ghosh's work. It probably is due to the fact that he has found himself in the middle of historical turmoils more often than not. Ghosh talks about his tryst with turmoil in the interview:

One of the strange things I've found is that whenever these eruptions have occurred, somehow I have been in the middle of them. When it happened in New York, I was watching from my window. My daughter was in school across the river. Two of our neighbors and friends died. Two of my son's classmates lost their parents. For one week we had these two children living with us whose father had died. I was reminded very much of [the riots and turmoil following Indira Gandhi's assassination in] 1984. When a city is in that kind of turmoil, there are always some similarities: There's the sense of terror, of a mass of people responding in a certain way. But these are coincidental things; it's not for me to tell other writers what they should write or not write. This is my life, this is what I write about.

In an incisive interview⁹ that appeared in *The Hindu*, Ghosh discusses the world post the WTC attack with Rahul Sagar. The interview was titled "Epistemic

Upheaval” and it is about the epistemic upheaval that would change the cartography of the globe. The interview was conducted immediately after Ghosh’s lecture on “The power of language/ The language of power” at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In the lecture Ghosh linked the memories and sorrows of the 1983 riots in Sri Lanka, the November 1984 riots of Delhi and the 9/11 of USA. He concluded his speech with, “the greatest sorrow lies in recalling the times of joy in moments of wretchedness.” The interview addresses the ideological consequences of September 11, including the significant wounding of a Westphalian notion of statehood that has informed the telos of the modern world.

On India’s Pokhran tests, Ghosh says straight that it was a bad decision. In a post colonial era, Ghosh feels that some nations made good decisions, some did not. Pakistan, by being dependant on the US for so long, and later by sponsoring Taliban, has ensured Western military presence for a long time. It is a process of recolonisation, he feels.

Commenting on Susan Satong’s article in *The New Yorker* that the WTC attacks by terrorists were a direct result of specific American alliances and actions, Ghosh refuses to essentialise or take the easy way out. He says:

I believe that the American relationship with the world, political and economic, has gone catastrophically awry, especially over the last decade. But if you ask me whether there is a direct connection between this and the WTC attacks, my answer is no, I do not think there is. Although much has been written linking the one with the other, I do not think this connection can survive close examination: it is like trying to hold apples responsible for the colour of oranges.

Ghosh tells how he had donated the money garnered by his novel for Palestinian refugees when it translated to Arabic in 1987. He thinks that the US policy in

Israel is wrong, but he would not go so far as to say that Palestinians were responsible for the WTC attack. He says:

Look at the evidence: there was not a single Palestinian among The terrorists; the majority were Saudis. But the economic distress Of the Palestinians today is in part a result of the refusal of the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia to re-employ Palestinians after the Gulf War. If Palestinian suffering were the issue, then surely the terrorists would have had some history of trying to give shelter to Palestinians in their own country, or of participating in the Palestinian cause? But in fact, none of the movements with which these men were associated have ever tried to do this. Bin Laden, Al Qaeda and the Taliban have never taken much interest in Palestine: they have been much more concerned with Kashmir, Bosnia, the Philippines and so on. As Ahmed Rashid has shown, the Taliban at one point actually took assistance from Israel. If you ask me whether Palestine was the fundamental motivating fact behind the WTC attacks I would say that the evidence is to the contrary. Yasser Arafat has repeatedly said that these terrorists were trying to use Palestine as an alibi.

It is this spirit of enquiry and refusing to fall in line with the popular belief that makes Ghosh's work stand out. Ghosh goes on to theorize how Bin Laden would be more interested in getting the kingdom of Saudi than liberating Palestine. Bin Laden is of royalty, and he draws connections between him and Polpot, the leader of killer Khmer Rouge who also was a member of the royal household. Ghosh also debunks the idea of globalization being directly responsible for the WTC attacks. He says that if it was a direct effect, the Sub-Saharan are the worst hit, but they did not do anything. The militants are from Saudi, which is a beneficiary of the US. He says that if Saudi was so interested in rooting out exploitation, they would first free their slaves, and give political rights to millions of South Asians who live there without any rights whatsoever. He says

that the most powerful opponents of globalization are young people, many of them in the West. He debunks the idea that the WTC attack was an anti-globalisation attack further saying:

Many of these activists are Westerners and many are American. So if the terrorists attacked Americans because of globalisation, then in fact they were also attacking the people who were their potential allies in that struggle. America is not one place – there are many different ideas and people here. If globalisation is going to change then it will be because it loses credibility in its homeland, the West and terror attacks are not going to be of any help in this.

It appears that though Ghosh is a scathing critic of globalization per se, he would not fall for a direct cause-effect relationship. Power politics, he seems to say, always has a role in mass violence. He seems to be drawing the same violence-banality connection that we have seen so far in this dissertation. His thoughts are remarkable in that the simplistic logic of Islamic world striking back would give the US establishment to launch a “war on terror” which would simply be unleashing terror for political and strategic gains. Besides, if globalization has to be reversed, it will be by the will of the people from whose land it has started, rather than a vicious cycle of violence. Ghosh goes on to point that the motivation for these attacks has a long pedigree:

The Ikhwan al-Muslimeen was founded in 1928, when there was no Israel; Sayyid Qutb, who wrote *Signposts*, the manifesto of contemporary Muslim fundamentalism, was in America in the early 1950s, a time when the US had intervened on Egypt's behalf, to prevent a Franco-British takeover of the Suez Canal. This did not prevent Qutb from becoming violently anti- American. In fact Qutb saw the nation-state itself as his real enemy: he thought of it as a fundamentally idolatrous institution. That is why he declared jihad on the Egyptian state as a whole. There are echoes of this in

bin Laden's latest letter, where he denounces the entire system of nation-states as well as the United Nations.

The fact that the terrorists left no grievance behind themselves is also intriguing for Ghosh. This leaves their motives open to speculation, and this would help fuel violence and war. Ghosh says that he's heard that there must have been a monumental grievance for mass suicides to happen; but in India, for example, mass suicides happen even when an important person dies. "What is the grievance here, except mortality itself?" he asks. He concludes his analysis of the attacks thus:

...we must be particularly careful to resist the temptation to supply these connections. If we are not, then acts of terror will always come with inbuilt justifications – for, no matter what the policies of any country, you can be sure that there will never be a shortage of grievances in this world.

Susan Santog had written that the American public "is not being asked to bear much of the burden of reality and there seems to be a campaign to infantilise the public." To this Ghosh replies in the same interview that the late 1990s America seemed to be an arrogant and introverted place, and that the smugness was promoted by the establishment and the media. He says, "I was always revolted by that triumphal sense of an achieved empire - to me it was appalling. But to characterise all of America in that fashion is also inaccurate." He juxtaposes the American situation with the Indian and says that Indian responses to the WTC attacks were disappointing in that they were mostly, "we told you so" or "you had it coming". American policies have created widespread resentment, but the only country that comes close is India, he contends, and substantiates it with the discontent in the neighbouring Indian countries:

As an Indian, travelling in other parts of South Asia, I've often been astonished by the anger that people have towards India - in Nepal, in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, and even

further afield. It's unpalatable but true, that if there is any country that evokes a depth of feeling similar to the U.S., it is India. India is guilty of exactly the same things as the U.S., if only on a regional scale – pursuing its own narrow economic interests, fomenting terrorism and fundamentalism (Punjab, Sri Lanka) when it suits its purposes, suppressing local cultures with its exported forms of entertainment and so on. Does this mean that it would be legitimate to respond to a terror attack on an Indian city by saying: "I told you so" and "you had it coming"?

It is rather radical to exonerate US of its guilt to have created conditions for the attack, and to implicate the allegedly benign India to be the bully of South Asia. This is the alternative narrative strategy that we've been discussing, a narrative that breaks down the dominant beliefs and tries to unravel the layers instead of reacting to the immediate. Ghosh is trying to create a debate about modern violence and how the obvious might not be right. He adds:

We have to be very careful here: there is sometimes only a thin line between the languages of description and prescription.

One could, however, see Ghosh himself treading the thin line between description and prescription at times. Finding a counter-narrative to the story behind the WTC attacks might be an important step for a writer to wean away fundamentalists on both the sides, or at least in creating a discourse where sensationalism gives way to thought about the banality of violence. However, to think that globalization will end where it began, that the young activists of the West will roll the wheel back, might be falling into the trap of Westphilia, which he is trying to resist. The solution might not be violence, but the subaltern Sub Saharans or Palestinians or South Asians must have their own agency apart from violence. The Gandhian resistance was not created in London, neither was colonialism reversed in the West. To assume also that the nation-state is withering away, citing the examples of rich countries where trade is making them united or poor countries

where strife is melting away boundaries, is to ignore the huge chunk of middle class population that runs developing countries' economy like India, and that abides by all institutions of the state, where the state is armed and the citizen unarmed. To say that nation-state will wither away might be prophetic, but might be more of a prescription than a description.

To substantiate his futuristic theory Ghosh says in the interview with Rahul Sagar:

The military historian Martin van Creveld has argued that the world is living through a fundamental change in the nature of conflict -one that will transform the prevailing state system whether we like it or not. He argues that the world is moving from a pattern of war, conducted between states, to low-intensity conflict that is guided mainly by non-state players. Thus, it seems that in the end the only appropriate methods will be policing – but policing itself will look increasingly like war. Also, policing will herald a new level of surveillance. That is where the erosion of the nation-state will impinge upon all our lives whether we like it or not.

Ghosh talks about the article he had written about his neighbour, Frank de Martini, who had stayed back in the towers to help the victims, and about how New York was not hostile but resilient after the attacks, “there have been large demonstrations where people have carried placards that say “Our grief is not a call for war”. To juxtapose this with sensational reports of any one with a beard and turban being attacked by mobs, we get polar opposite pictures. That’s perhaps the idea Ghosh has in mind, to create a canvas with all kinds of pictures rather than paint saints and devils.

On the question of aestheticization of violence in the interview with Sheela Reddy, Ghosh says:

I think it's a real problem when you have an aestheticization of violence. As writers we have to resist the temptation to make violence seem heroic. When you just hold up a mirror to violence, all you see is more violence.

The resonance of refraining from valorizing violence appears in the Rahul Sagar interview as we have seen, as well as most of the prose of Ghosh. He repeatedly tells that a writer has tremendous responsibility while writing about these events.

In an interview with Frederick Luis Aldama¹⁰, Ghosh contests the idea of theorists like Fredric Jameson and Homi Bhabha who characterise "Thirs World" novels as being essentially about nation and nation building. In Ghosh's view the nation is not, as it were a central imaginative unit. In his fiction, Ghosh constantly contests this construct by telling stories of families that span nations. Nation is negotiated through family and friends. In the interview to Hawley, Ghosh reiterates this idea:

In fact, it is precisely the First World novel that is most commonly about nations and nation building. Consider for instance, the peculiar obsession with 'Englishness' that runs through much of the nineteenth and twentieth century British writing. This is even more strikingly evident in the US today, where nothing seems to be of interest unless it is American ('the American family') or has America or American in the title (witness such phenomena as American Beauty, Riding Cars in America etc). In countries like India the nation as such is still too young and too tenuous an institution to have acquired this axiomatic status. So far as the artist's role in the society is concerned, it's certainly true that in India writers are subject to pressures that seem not to exist in the US. I was in the US during the first Gulf War and I was very struck by how no major American writer seemed to have an opinion about it. This would

be inconceivable in India, where the lives of writers and artists are highly politicized. But as I see it, it is precisely because the pressures are so great that Indian artists have to be very careful in limiting their role in politics...(Hawley:10-11)

The smugness of America, promoted by the state and the media have been talked about in the Rahul Sagar interview too, and it is noteworthy how all the catastrophe movies of Hollywood show the world in peril as synonymous with the US in peril. On the one hand is the smugness of America, and on the other is the sensationalisation of politics in India where the smallest elections have the biggest stakes, those of life; where newspapers thrive on political news. Perhaps because we are still in the process of giving “power to the people” which is still a far cry. However, the fact that artists have to be careful is well reflected in the predicament of Rushdie, Tasleema Nasreen, or for that matter even MF Hussain, and even Aamir Khan who was simply rallying behind Naramada Bachao activists, and saying what had already been said in the courts.

Ghosh feels that it is not incumbent upon the writers to write about politics or times of turmoil; he writes about these stories because these are his stories, but writers should have the autonomy to choose. In the interview with Sheela Reddy, when she asks if there is no way the writers can respond to the challenge posed by 9/11, Ghosh says:

Of course it is possible. There are a few writers who are writing tender love stories, and that has its place in the world. I think it is completely authoritarian to say everyone has to write about this.

To Reddy’s question that modern literature seems to have moved away from celebrating emotional and spiritual life, Ghosh agrees that irony is prevalent but that the ray of hope is never gone:

I don’t disagree with the thrust of your question. Certainly in literature one of the things we see increasingly is a view of the world where everything is treated ironically, and I think it is a very sad thing. But I feel that a strength of Indian writing is that it is not afraid to tackle those things, and that’s why people around the

world respond to it. I could give you any number of examples—in a way, *The God of Small Things* is a very emotional book. I think Michael Ondaatje has been an incredibly intensely emotional writer. Or Agha Shahid Ali, the poet, has the most vaulting ambition, where he was looking at Sufi poetry, contemporary politics, and trying to find a form that holds it together. Similarly, over the last few years, many, many South Asian writers have given me the feeling that they want to express some sort of moralistic truth, even if they're not successful in realizing that ambition.

On the question of religion being used against modernity, Ghosh tells Reddy: ...fundamentalists often use the word pseudo-secularist to describe those who are opposed to them. But I think it is they who are pseudo-religionists. Name me a single fundamentalist who has anything to say about the spiritual content of religion. They have nothing to say; they are interested in politics. And that's why so many of these young fundamentalists are actually engineers and so on who have the most banal ideas about religion.

The above quote, though commonplace, is very important in analysing Ghosh's work. Be it the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 where arsoning had barely anything to do with religion, or the WTC attacks where Ghosh thinks it is not Islam but Arab fiefdom that struck, or the "war on terror" which was supposed to garner Christian sympathy in the US. The idea that religion is just used as an alibi to trigger violence informs much of Ghosh's work.

END NOTES

¹ Amitav Ghosh. "The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi" *The Imam and The Indian*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002: 46

² Sheela Reddy. "Amitav Ghosh: Writing Through Turmoil". *Outlook*. New Delhi, Aug. 19, 2002.

³ Amitav Ghosh. *The Shadow Lines*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995: 221

⁴ Edward S. Herman. *The Triumph of the Market*. (1974)

⁵ Herman Kahn. *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*. New York: Praeger, 1965

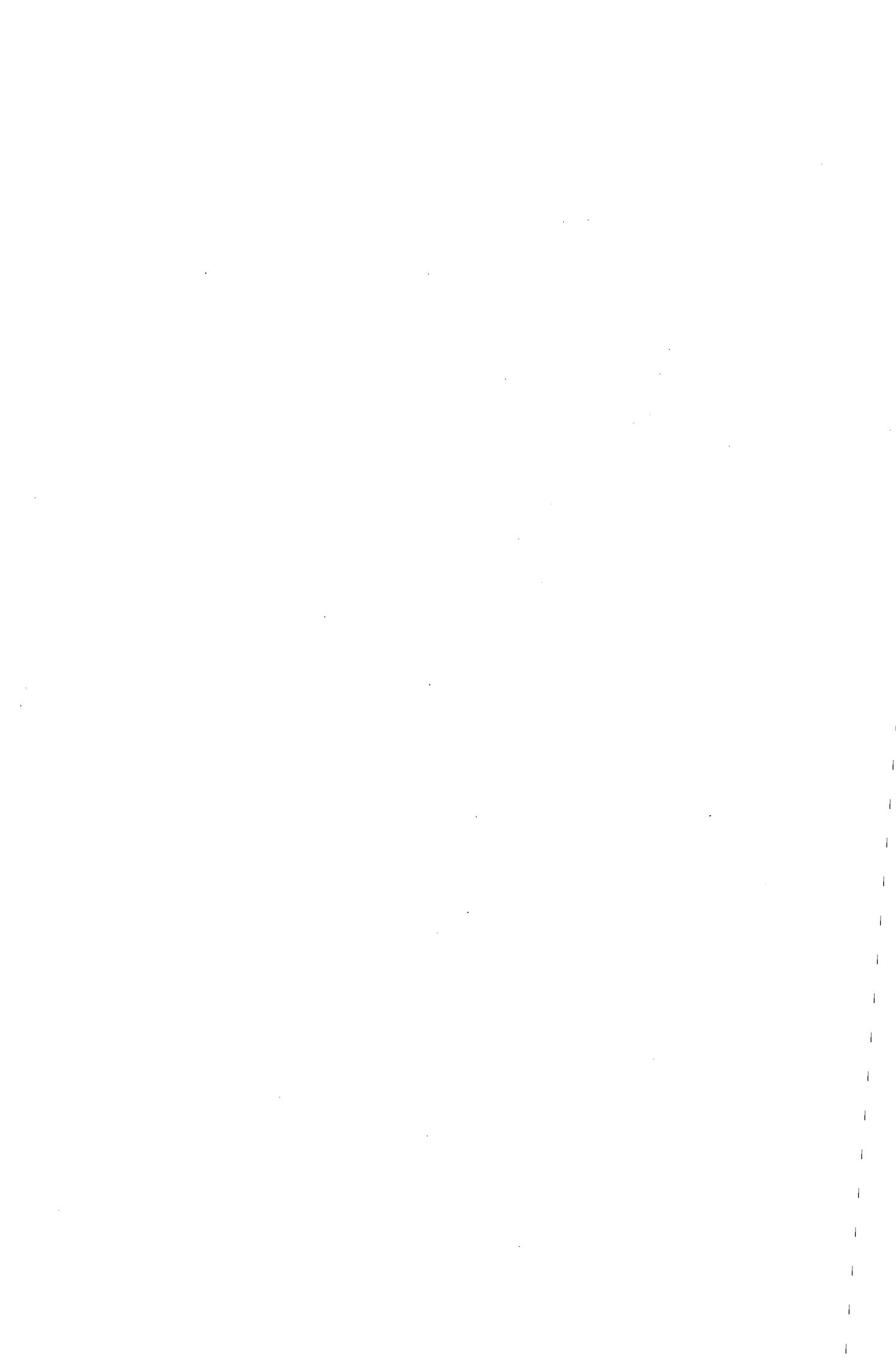
⁶ Herman Kahn. *On Thermonuclear War*, 2nd ed. New York: Free Press, 1969

⁷ Herman Kahn. *Thinking About the Unthinkable*. New York: Horizon Press, 1962

⁸ John C. Hawley. *Contemporary Indian Writers in English: Amitav Ghosh*. New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2005: 11

⁹ "Epistemic Upheaval". The interview appeared in two parts, the first on December 2, 2001; and the other on December 16, 2001 in *The Hindu*.

¹⁰ Frederick Luis Aldama. "An Interview With Amitav Ghosh". *World Literature Today: A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma*. 76.2(2002): 84-90



Chapter 5

THE CULTURES OF SILENCE: CONCLUSION

Somebody writes to the future

In the alley

In the valley

We tussle with crime

We race against time

Even as I write this rime

Somebody writes to the future.

It's not the bullet with my name on it that worries me. It's the one that says "To whom it may concern." - Anonymous Belfast resident, quoted in *London Guardian*, 1991

Even as I write this dissertation, the cycle of violence revolves at a dizzying speed. A few days back, on what they call 11/7, there were serial blasts in Mumbai railway stations leaving more than 200 dead. Whoever struck, is fighting for a "cause", and that cause kills everyone including those from their community and whoever their potential allies could be. In most cases, no one even takes responsibility. It is just as if terror and violence were a pathological need. The Delhi blasts of October 2005 just on the eve of Diwali, as the blasts in London metro, warned the common people that even they are not safe, that they will as much be a part of the war as the State. Life, however, has to carry on, and within days Sarojini Nagar market was bustling again, as is the local train network of Bombay within a week. Newspapers would write "Bindaas Bombay" or "Daring Delhi", which they inevitably did, in their standard formulaic structure. We saw Ghosh talks about the spectacle of violence that would be reported in the media, and then forgotten for "more important" issues of state politics, until the next one happens. The ghost of McLuhan and his "medium is the message" refuses to leave me, and the message of the medium is that the state is supreme, and the violence that rips the fabric of the society is either "conspiracy of the foreign powers" or "disturbances". I am not

taking an essentialist stand and incriminating the state or its will to curb violence, but aren't these faceless enemies Frankenstein's babies? People with firm belief that they want to cull out a new state, fed on the fundamentals of fundamentalism, and the only route to it is violence with the latest technology from the West. Isn't this a sordid, sinister reflection of the modern nation-state itself? I am inclined to believe that no one would want to use nuclear technology for destruction—I am sure Herman Kahn, mentioned in chapter 4 would beg to differ – but what of the Abdul Qadeer Khans of this world, who have strewn the technology like the names of British imperialists across the globe? Are these bomb attacks, no less dangerous, a warning of what is brewing? What is the option with people but to carry on with their lives in a collective silence?

There have been a spate of suicides in Delhi, from the towers of District Centre in Janakpuri, and the place has almost become a “die-streak centre”. The towers have spiral stairways that face each other, and in between lies the courtyard, where the last leap ends. In the courtyard lies, a *bhairav kali* mandir. Either the Gods seek sacrifice or they helpless with the human predicament. Neha Kakkar was allegedly raped after which she flung herself; Kartik could not take the monotony and the work stress of a BPO (Business Process Outsourcing); someone else had low marks in an exam. A lady was found dead inside a car, apparently killed for dowry six years after her marriage. The stress and violence, overt and subtle of modern life in a city is intriguing, to the point of being distressing. On one side of the suicide towers, a huge hoarding says, “Believe it or Not” with the name of some MNC under it in small fonts. The name might be anything – either a Mac or some dispossessed or annihilated tribe like Apache (like Ghosh tells in “Four Corners”¹ about the American fetish to name pets and vehicles after the annihilated other)—but for effects, we might best turn to Sub Saharan Africa, or Iraq where a general said, “We do not do body counts”.



This picture was taken by Kevin Carter, who won the South African Pulitzer prize in 1994, for this picture of a dying child in Sudan, and the “vulture of violence” waiting patiently for him to die. Carter took his own life months later, because he had not carried the child to safety. I am not vilifying Carter, and have included the picture, for it raises several questions. One, about the ethics of journalism and artistry. Two, the reason why such pictures are circulated. Three, about the smugness being propagated by the media (which is not an essential category). Four, the messages of the picture. Five, I understand that I might be falling in the same trap by printing this picture – circulation of the pornography of violence – but I was compelled to include it because while naming my dissertation “Vultures of Violence” I did not know that in the process of my research I shall actually come across a picture that should bear this caption.

To engage with the questions one by one, let’s turn to a book written by Denise Leith titled *Bearing Witness: The Lives Of War Correspondents And Photojournalists*². Leith explains that the book was prompted by two images that haunted her. One was American photographer Eddie Adams’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of South Vietnamese police chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a bound Vietcong prisoner in a Saigon street in 1968. The other, also a Pulitzer Prize-winning image, by Kevin Carter, was of a starving child in Sudan, with a vulture looming, taken during the famine of 1993. Both photographs had extraordinary impact. Adams’s became the iconic anti-war image. Carter’s mobilised international aid. But both men knew another side. Adams believed that his photograph “destroyed an honourable policeman’s life”. We had discussed in the previous chapter, how the Nazi executors thought they were simply

doing their job. Carter's story I have already related. The stories behind these photographs - not the ones the world knows - illustrate both the moral complexity and the extreme nature of the work. Eddie Adams, one of Leith's interviewees had accompanied US troops to Vietnam in over 150 operations. He admits his purpose was to get a good story, but he would contribute to disseminating the truth. He tells that he did not take the picture of a young marine, paralysed with fear, for that would circulate the image that he was a coward, though that was the truth, for "even I was paralysed with fear".

Amitav Ghosh spends a great deal of effort in his works as well as his interviews to try and ruminate over the role of a writer. In the interviews in the last chapter, we have seen him tell that he was compelled to write *Countdown* in the middle of writing *The Glass Palace* for he felt it was his responsibility. In "The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi", he tells that he would not generally join a protest, perhaps because a writer needs to be detached from politics, but was forced to join the anti-riot protests because of the banality of violence that engulfed Delhi in 1984. He tries to refrain from the pornography of violence by replacing them with silence that echoes wild, like in *The Shadow Lines*, but in *Countdown* towards the end he meanders into the spectacle of how Delhi would be turned to ashes if a nuclear bomb were to fall. Drawing continuum with history, providing alternate versions of hegemonic histories, showing the sinister mirror maze that violence is are some of the ways in which he tries to resist violence, for once again, "history is notoriously not about the past". To talk about resistance through form, the blurring of boundaries between his genres, his breaking the conventional teleology of narratives, are other modes of resistance to the colonial legacy, and epistemic violence. However, the question of switching roles between a citizen and a writer is always an uneasy one for him. The Kevin Carter question looms large over all artists, writers and journalists. What do you do when you see a dying child facing "vultures of violence". The Carter case is an extreme one, but it can well serve for an icon of the divide between reality and its representation.

To come to the second issue, the Carter picture brought aid as many such pictures do, but what makes them circulate? The compassion of the journalist in the middle of such theatres of cruelty is one answer, his hunt for “a good story” is another, and the opposite answer is the commercial value for the media of these pictures, and all three hold. However, one wonders if in the larger scheme of things, can this be connected to what Amitav Ghosh has to say about the Abu Ghraib, that the pictures are circulated by the First World itself, to “educate” the Third World about the relationship that exists between the two³? Do these pictures tell the poor Africans and rest of the world that this is the relationship that exists, and it is the “white man’s burden” to emancipate them?

African writers have resisted the temptation to theorize too much over their condition as other postcolonial nations have done, for theory perhaps will not help in the face of a vulture waiting for a child to die. However, they have developed their own idiom in English language, to the point of it being their very own, a movement that has no fixed markers but Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm Wine Drinkard*⁴ would be one of the originating texts where the legitimization of African English started. Finding a new idiom in creative writing was for sure giving the wretched of the earth their own voice, and an active resistance to the loaded codes of British English. Amitav Ghosh’s strategy of avoiding overt theoretical tools, though invoking their message through aphorisms, personal histories, anthropological inversions as in *In An Antique Land*, is a remarkable experiment.

Coming back to the idea of circulation of images in the West, a British-African if that could be a marker, Uche Nworah is disgusted with the circulation of these images, and refuses to criticize Tony Blair on this issue. The search for strength, he says, is needed within. He says in his article “Poverty in Africa and The Commission for Africa Report”⁵ that both African rulers and western collaborators have brought Africa to this state of misery, and becoming “cry babies, laughing stocks of the world”. He iterates the idea of Africans being their own enemy:

As an African living in the United Kingdom, I have lost count of the number of times, my tummy has ached, and my senses insulted by the shocking images of dying children, dilapidated infrastructures, population mass and war-torn and savaged villages in rural Africa, largely peddled in the western media, on each of these occasions, my only thoughts have been that God did not destine poverty, wars and suffering for Africans, else Africa would not have been richly blessed with abundant natural and human resources, Africans by default, willingly and unwillingly are Africa's worst enemies.

Nworah goes on to praise Tony Blair for his efforts saying that, "It is our collective failure as a people, and the failure of successive African governments to get their acts together, that has led Tony Blair and the other world leaders, to try from the West to solve the largely evident problems in Africa. On this note, praise should go to Mr Blair and his Commission for Africa team for the vision, and also for showing a willingness to back this vision with a political will."

Nworah's point is well taken that he refuses to be "laughing stock" and the suspicion of the images being circulated to "educate" the positions gets stronger. The call for internal strength is a war cry against destitution and for self respect, but the praise of Tony Blair and company might be in the Jamesonian paradigm of the colonized speaking the colonizers language, for Africa is reeling directly under the effects of globalization. On his website, Nworah has put a picture of a nude famished boy searching for food in a cow's anal cavity, and another one of a boy drinking urine as a cow is urinating. This, consciously or unconsciously is juxtaposed with a picture of the Commission leaders sitting happily, posing for a picture. The contrast is too stark, needless to say, and the pictures are too disturbing to be printed here.

To juxtapose Nworah's argument with Harold Pinter's who has been invoked regularly for good reasons in this thesis, is an inversion and yet not an inversion. Pinter blames the West directly for supporting dictators and killing people in Africa, in his

Noble Prize speech of 2005.⁶ He points out the low intensity conflict formula of America:

Direct invasion of a sovereign state has never in fact been America's favoured method. In the main, it has preferred what it has described as 'low intensity conflict'. Low intensity conflict means that thousands of people die but slower than if you dropped a bomb on them in one fell swoop. It means that you infect the heart of the country, that you establish a malignant growth and watch the gangrene bloom. When the populace has been subdued - or beaten to death - the same thing - and your own friends, the military and the great corporations, sit comfortably in power, you go before the camera and say that democracy has prevailed.

Despite the state of American state exercising such heavy control over world affairs with amazing precision, in collecting information, understanding politics and gaps in local affairs across the globe, and bombing as well, it is a paradox that the people know very little about the chain of existence and events. We have seen Amitav Ghosh telling Rahul Sagar in an interview in the preceding chapter about the growing public opinion within America against globalisation and a shift from the 1990s smugness⁷, the smugness still pervades one would guess. Morag Fraser in "Circle of Hell"⁸ quotes Peter Arnett, a Pulitzer prize winner and a veteran war correspondent, "Government decisions are made by an inside group of Congress and the American public largely doesn't give a damn. When they vote they don't vote in terms of international policies; they vote in terms of local issues." How does he explain the US myopia he diagnoses? "By looking at the news sources most Americans use: They get talkback radio, which is skewed to the right usually; they look at a bit of television and maybe some magazine shows, and that is it. They don't give a ****".

It is rather sad that the Indian media is following the example of US media with soaps and reality shows that is bent on building a very consumerist worldview. The Indian media is also an inversion, with obsession with politics, but that only reinforces

the power of the state. The results might well be positive, like in the case of reopening of the Jessica Lal case, or the very recent "Saving Prince" live telecast. A little boy had fallen in a deep pit in Kurukshetra, and all the channels broadcast his tryst with destiny live, as armymen were summoned to save the boy. The endeavour was successful to a great extent because of the sustained media coverage that put pressure on the state to send the armymen. However, when the boy was saved, there were the assembly line self-congratulations by the television channels like "Exclusive only by us, we saved the boy". All channels exclusively showed the same videos, and the videos of a nation in celebration with headlines like "Kashi mein cake" and "Mumbai mein masti" showing people bursting crackers. It is a testimony to how strong the media is, how it can decide to convert any event to a national event, and demonstrate its crude strength with repetitive videos and corny titles. That prince was saved is heartening news indeed, but the crackers that were being burst are made by young children in Sivakasi. Does the media make a national event out of that? It will not obviously sell like a rescue operation, which works as a reality thriller. This raw strength of "live and exclusive" in its inversion has the capability to incite crowds, like BBC's repeated telecast of the demolition of Babri Masjid would have done.

The messages, reach and audience of audio-visual and print media, creative writing and theory are different but they must be studied as inter-texts. The limitations without a detailed analysis is obvious, but I have tried to incorporate all three in my discussion to arrive at some kind of picture. The demolition of the mosque takes me back to Radhika Subramanian's ethnographic enquiry⁹ into the 1992 Bombay riots. She attended a workshop with Hindu slum children from a slum that had suffered very badly in the riots. Her account is disturbing and reminiscent of what we have seen her friend *Anwar* say in chapter 3, that they used to play games like "Shivaji ki aulad" versus "Aurangjeb ki Aulad":

The boys were asked for images and ideas they associated with the words "Muslim and "Islam," the associations that spilled out seemed remarkably prosaic.

They have four wives; they have many children and keep on multiplying; they wear long beards; they offer prayers on the street (raaste par namaaz padhte Hain); women never offer prayers; they only listen to their mullahs; they often leave their studies and their work and build masjids; they have fixed occupations, for instance, as butchers (kasai), and you never see them in other jobs; there is no progress or reform (parivartan) in their religion; they write from right to left — in fact, everything they do is upside down (ulta); they show no mercy (unme rehem nahin hai). (Subramaniam: 101)

The description is very similar to *The Shadow Lines* where not slum children but children of upper middle class are made to believe that everything is upside down on the other side, of home, and of the border. Subramaniam is both amused and baffled at the inversions of these received notions in reality:

In this constellation of images, the seemingly bleak recollection of ruthless butchers without mercy rests on a par with the othering response, that “they” do everything upside down, and even with the almost trivial observation that “they” wear long beards. Some of the observations, such as that about following religious leaders, link more directly to the events of 1992-1993 than others but with curious inversions. It was the call to build a temple on the site of the Babri Masjid that prompted its demolition; therefore, it was “the Hindus” who, listening to their religious leaders, left their studies and their work to go to Ayodhya for the sacred task of building the temple. To recall this only as the building of a mosque at a mythic, Hindu sacred site is to leap frog over several centuries while one taps into the rich vein of Hindutva imagery of the plundering Muslim invader. The tussle over space also manifests itself on Bombay’s streets where religious processions, jostling for public space, have had a long history from the colonial period. (Subramaniam: 101) (emphasis mine)

Despite the fact that these essentialist images of the “Other” are passed on in many families, and society at large, the essential fabric of the society is secular. Even as I write this on 27th July 2006, I get a message on cellphone from a friend saying, “*Khichdi hai saara hindustan, alag na honge hindu, musalman* –sung by Muslim women in aftermath of Benaras blast.” Both Ghosh and Subramaniam account for this solidarity between communities in face of crises. The narrator of *The Shadow Lines* tells that Muslims in East Pakistan saved many Hindus, while many Hindus saved Muslims in Calcutta in the 1964 riots (Ghosh 1988: 229-230), but that they were ordinary people soon forgotten. In “The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi” , he describes how Hindus saved Sikhs in the anti-Sikh riots.(Ghosh 2002: 46-63). The 1984 riots are personally a harrowing memory for me, for as a four year old I saw Bokaro Steel City in flames from the roof of my house in an otherwise very peaceful town. We had Sikh neighbours whose house was gutted down by a mob. The mob was made of youngsters that were easily identifiable as being from a neighbouring neighbourhood; but for that day they seemed possessed. The neighbours saved the residents, but all the property was looted. It seemed no one wanted violence and yet there was this frenzied mob from nowhere made of almost familiar faces.

The riot engineers spark that latent Otherness, would be a plausible theory. However, Gyanendra Pandey’s question reverberates, groping for answers, he asks that no explanations and theories quite explain how “this task of poisoning the minds of people can be accomplished so quickly”.¹⁰

That is where silence falls, the incomprehensibility of the banality of violence, which reverberates through *The Shadow Lines*. We have delved into many theories, none quite sufficing than silence, and that is why it is tough to find a metaphor for violence. If theory can be compared to metaphor, and narrative to metonymy; Ghosh perhaps chooses the path of metonymy for the lack of a metaphor. In metonymic narratives, at least we see a ray of hope somewhere, in Frank de Martini who died saving the victims of 9/11, or the Irrawady dolphin of *The Hungry Tide* which is a symbol of peace and

strength for all, or in the people who pro-actively come to each other's rescue in times of crises, or in the chant of the Muslim women in the wake of Benaras blasts. I also have largely followed the metonymic path, despite trying to get into metaphors out of which I had to withdraw more often than not, for when talking about violence, what falls is silence. The vultures of violence and the cultures of silence go hand in hand. Silence out of an inability to comprehend the madness, as well silence out of coercion.

Ghosh says in the preface of his latest book *The Incendiary Circumstances*¹¹, "Is it possible to write about situations of violence without allowing your work to become complicit with the subject?" Food for thought.

I could well have ended with Ghosh's question, but as a tribute to Harold Pinter, whose Nobel prize speech has had a tremendous impact on me, I quote Pinter from his speech:

When we look into a mirror we think the image that confronts us is accurate. But move a millimetre and the image changes. We are actually looking at a never-ending range of reflections. But sometimes a writer has to smash the mirror - for it is on the other side of that mirror that the truth stares at us.

Smashing the mirror is an idea that Pinter alone talks about among all the writers we have seen in this dissertation. But the question is how to smash the mirror, when the mirror overwhelms you into horrific silence?

It would not be a bad idea to end "Vultures of Violence" with a poem that has sinister echoes, that expresses grief, bafflement over the logic of nation, war, violence, religion; and above all the vanity and finality of human destiny. Again by Harold Pinter, "Death":

Where was the dead body found?

Who found the dead body?

Was the dead body dead when found?

How was the dead body found?

Who was the dead body?

Who was the father or daughter or brother

Or uncle or sister or mother or son

Of the dead and abandoned body?

Was the body dead when abandoned?

Was the body abandoned?

By whom had it been abandoned?

Was the dead body naked or dressed for a journey?

What made you declare the dead body dead?

Did you declare the dead body dead?

How well did you know the dead body?

How did you know the dead body was dead?

Did you wash the dead body

Did you close both its eyes

Did you bury the body

Did you leave it abandoned

Did you kiss the dead body

END NOTES

¹ Amitav Ghosh. "Four Corners" in *The Imam and the Indian*. (Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002) pp18-23

² Denise Leith . *Bearing Witness: The Lives Of War Correspondents And Photojournalists*. (Random House, 2005)

³ Details in chapter 2.

⁴ Amos Tutuola. *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. (Grove Press, 1953)

⁵ Uche Nworah. "Poverty in Africa and The Comission for Africa Report" in *The Nigerian Village Square*. (16th May, 2005). On <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare1.com/Articles/Nworah/2005/05/poverty-in-africa-and-commission-for.html> as viewed on 10th May, 2006.

⁶ Details in chapter 2.

⁷ Details in chapter 4.

⁸ Morag Fraser. "Circle of Hell" in *Autralian Book Review October 2004*. On <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~abr/Oct04/Morag.htm> as viewed on 2nd January, 2006.

⁹ Radhika Subramaniam. "Culture of Suspicion: Rumour and Riots in Bombay, 1992-1993" in *Transforming Anthropology*. (Voulme 8, Nos. 1 & 2, 1999) pp97-110

¹⁰ Gyanendra Pandey. "In Defence of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today" in *Representations*. (Vol 27, 1992) pp27-55

¹¹ (The book has not been discussed in the dissertation as most of the essays in this book are also in *The Imam and The Indian*. Besides, the book is not available in the Indian market)

EPITAPH

I say violence is necessary. It is as American as cherry pie.

-Hubert Geroid Brown

Answer violence with violence. If one of us falls today, five of them must fall tomorrow.

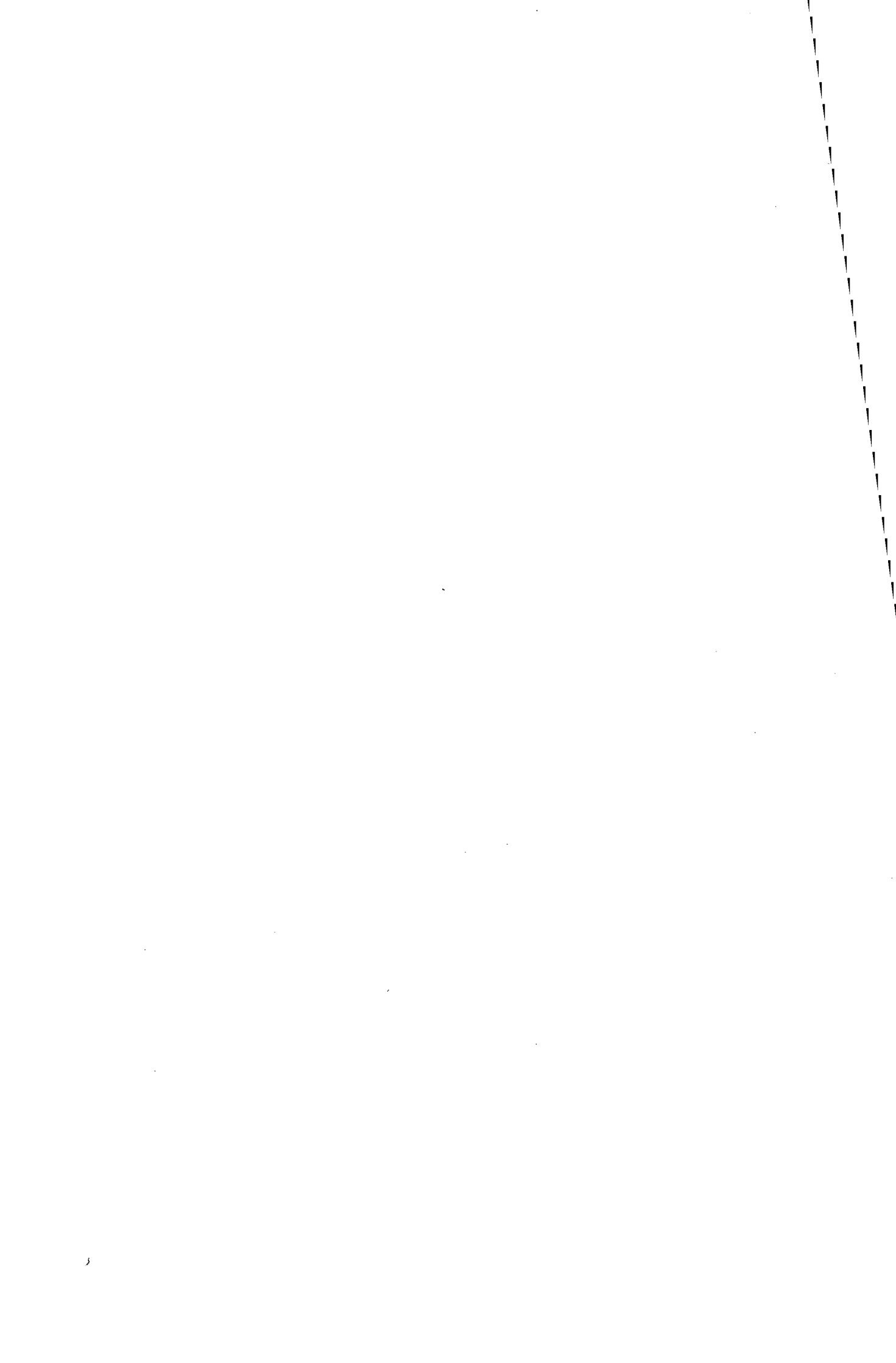
-Evita Peron

The power which establishes a state is violence; the power which maintains it is violence; the power which eventually overthrows it is violence.

-Kenneth Kaunda

It often happens that the real tragedies of life occur in such an inartistic manner that they hurt us by their crude violence, their absolute incoherence, their absurd want of meaning, their entire lack of style.

-Oscar Wilde



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