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Pangs of Postmemory in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

In most of the historical fictions by Indian writers, the narrators play the role of either historians who chronicle the events of the past in macro mode or self-narrators who have been working through the trauma of the past using the self as a temporal armature in search for identity and spatiality in the present. Among the multitude of such works, *The Shadow Lines* of Amitav Ghosh stands out for conspicuous numbers of reasons. Although the novel is most popularly termed as a "memory novel" it also prods another new arena of academic research, postmemory. Whereas trauma studies in literature deal with first-hand trauma, postmemory concerns itself with the process of how trauma is transmitted to the next generation and its effect on them. Therefore, the paper aims to go beyond the given definition of postmemory and apply it in Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* to determine how the characters of the novel are affected by both non-traumatic and traumatic memories of the preceding generations, and how that is instrumental to their understanding and rendering of the world around them. This paper will also include the way postmemory plays a significant part in the formation of their 'self'.

***Keywords*:** Memory, Postmemory, Trauma, Postgeneration, Transmission.

Introduction

Partition was a significant event for the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent in the 1940s since the event fundamentally shook the lives of millions of people overnight as they paid the price for independence with anxiety, fear, mistrust, loss and blood. It had so much harrowing effect on their collective psyche that the partition became the genesis for the following political unrest in the subcontinent. This unrest still persists, and remains far from de-escalation, even after the demise of the "first generation" who were victimized during that period and survived the catastrophe. In continuation, the succeeding generations or "generations after" have been perpetuating this legacy nationally, culturally, religiously and psychologically in various discourses of art and literature. All of these discourses intrinsically stem from the trauma of the "first generation" who have the lived experience of the event, and then they transmit it to their successors through familial and affiliative responses. Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* complies with such discourses for it simultaneously superintends national historiography and personal memoirs, and its effect on the succeeding generations whose lives and identities are shaped by the repetitive recounts of the "first generation". This aspect of the novel becomes especially relevant in a comparatively new segment of trauma studies – postmemory.

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Discussion

In an aim to facilitate memory and holocaust studies through feminist theory and reorient the study of genocide with regards to visual artefacts, Marianne Hirsch has coined the term "postmemory" to denote the "transgenerational transmission of trauma" to illustrate how the "generation after",[1] or the "hinge generation"[2] in Eva Hoffman's words, to suggest the successors of the Holocaust survivors, is moulded through recurrent narrations of traumatic experience, and how they mould national historiography through narratives of their own. The unnamed narrator of the novel, *The Shadow Lines*, in this case, functions as the hinge that connects his predecessors and his readers. It is interesting to see how his familial connection to traumatic and non-traumatic events of his predecessors, especially his grandmother and his uncle, in an affiliative response, takes the reader on a journey to both micro and macro levels of the wounded psyche of the "first generation". Additionally, it is imperative to look at his response to their experiences.

One of the instrumental aspects of Hirsch's postmemory is the relation of the progenitors with the family members since transmission of postmemory first and foremost occurs in the familial environment. Although the "postgeneration" can strongly associate with the trauma of the victims they acknowledge the fissure and discontinuity between these two experiences. Their working out the trauma comes with a deep sense of responsibility to document and share that experience so that their parents' experiences do not get lost in the void of forgetfulness. Hirsch insists that the "generation after" receives the memories through "stories, images and behaviours" invoke such deep and affective emotion in them that they start to reckon them to be part of their lived experience.[3] Such is true in the case of the narrator of *The Shadow Lines*. For example, when Ila was naming her friends from the yearbook the narrator states that they "imprinted themselves on my memory so that years later I recognized Mercedes Aguliar at once when she turned up in a photograph two continents away".[4] Although this particular instance does not qualify as a traumatic event, and Ila is not the narrator's preceding generation per se, the transmission of memory eventuates nonetheless. According to Hirsch, visual artefacts serve as a powerful tool in the transmission of memory.[5] *The Shadow Lines* is replete with such use of photographs that eventually play a significant role in the formation of the narrator's understanding of the world around him.

For example, the photo of Dan, Mike, Alan Tresawsen and Francesca found by Tridib was a "fragmentary remnant" of postmemory for the narrator. Years later when the narrator, Ila and Robi visit Brick Lane the narrator can easily identify the place from Tridib's description. Although he does not know about the recent developments in the neighbourhood, he can, with easy familiarity, connect the place with historical significance better than the rest. The same thing happens when the narrator visits Mrs. Price for the first time. He guides Ila and Nick to 44 Lymington Road from his memory of "A to Z Street Atlas of London" that his father bought him. Then when he enters the Hallroom he is pummeled with memories from Tridib's photos of that room and the day in particular when the photos were taken. From his memory of the photos, he

remembers Mrs. Price and her husband, Mrs. Price's brother Alan and his three friends. The narrator can only surmise, using his imagination, the condition under which the photos were taken but cannot in reality know them without inheriting the knowledge from someone present there. His childhood memories in Tridib's room had an astounding effect on his psyche that could have only been achieved through postmemory. For example, in contrast to the narrator, Ila has been to the places that the narrator longed to visit someday. But Ila has always been apathetic to these visits and places. They remained to her "a worldwide string of departure lounges",[6] kinds of modern non-places which have a repeated monotonous appearance to the experienced eyes, as Tridib comments about her, "…although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all".[7] Contrastively, the narrator has "…seen it first through Tridib's eyes, its past seemed concurrent with its present".[8] And, here, the risk of postmemory ensues. A lot of criticisms have been made regarding the assumption of previous generations' memory. Kathy Behrendt calls it "appropriation objection".[9] To her, the use of the term postmemory in such cases makes the term "memory" "overly liberal or literal". In her defence in a later essay, Hirsch states that postmemory is aesthetic, there is provision for imagination in postmemorial works.[10] For, there is a fundamental semiotic difference between the experience of the "first generation" and the "generation after", and the work of imagination bridges that semiotic rupture.

Tridib's description of Solent Road does not match with the narrator's subjective experience of the same. He does not even expect it to be the same, "knowing it to be lost in forty-year old past".[11] But he thinks that Tridib's description of that particular place was truer than his subjective witnessing, because, "A place does not merely exist [that] it has to be invented in one's imagination",[12] and the narrator was taught to use his "imagination with precision" by Tridib. And, the narrator can, with this knowledge, imagine the Dhaka his grandmother has depicted for him so vividly that "that house and that lane" in grandmother's neighbourhood he could see them himself. His "Diasporic postmemory…actively conjure[s] up places, situations, and bodies from which it is not only temporally discontinuous, but also spatially, culturally, and/or linguistically so".[13] Hirsch states that the transfer of memory primarily occurs in the family through "verbal and non-verbal cognitive acts of transfer".[14] The transfer of traumatic memories is often accompanied by overindulgence or silence. Recent studies in trauma studies suggest that the next generation is either bombarded with so much knowledge about the event that they fail to comprehend the present world as it is, or there is so much silence about the event that awkward family moments themselves make up a discourse of their own for them. Both are true in Ghosh's novel. In many cases in *The Shadow Lines* characters show such symptoms of traumatic transfer surfaces in different characters. The narrator is bound by the narrations of Tridib in a way that he fails to take the world "as it is" like his counterpart Ila. Nick is so enamoured of his ancestor that he loses his way and becomes someone different from his family members. The silence of the narrator's grandmother about the Bengali extremist brings about a narrative of its own in the mind of the narrator. Although they are not traumatic memories by definition, Hirsch's concept of transgenerational transfer of traumatic memory can be applied to non-

traumatic generational memory as well. When memory is transmitted to other individuals, either to family members or outside, it does not belong to that particular person anymore. And when it enters the public domain, it can be used the way the postgenerational frontman wants it to be. Crownshaw calls it "coloniz[ing] victims' memories and identities".[15] On a theoretical ground it actually may seem so, but for the "generation after" it is akin to empathy. It is the felt empathy that drives them to use the memory in their narratives. At the micro level of the novel, the narrator empathises with the "first generation" and wishes to immortalise their memory in his narrative. The macro level works on collective or cultural memory since the private memories of the traumatic past or the individual past have already entered the public domain and thus are qualified for public use to form national historiography of partition, independence and migration.

While underlining Hirsch and redefining diaspora Sandra So Hee Chi Kim takes a slightly different course from Hirsch. Kim's statement, "Postmemory is, I suggest, a characteristic aspect of diaspora…"[16] is a counterargument on a characteristic feature of Hirsch's postmemory, that is "…condition of exile…is characteristic of postmemory".[17] For Hirsch the postgeneration desires to make a connection with the "first generation" and mourn the loss they never really incurred. But both Kim and Hirsch agree that transgenerational memory transfer is always taking place. It is transpiring especially where there is a kinship structure. Recalling Behrendt's "appropriation objection" Kim suggests that although postgeneration does not actually suffer the loss, their relation with the "first generation" is significant.[18] They make up for the absence of subjectivity with the memory and imagination. Kim aligns herself this time with Hirsch's counterargument on the same issue.

Remembering does not occur in isolation. We make up the meaning of our experience in relation to preexisting social, cultural and semiotic experiences. Cathy Caruth writes in her interpretation of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* that "…history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that the history is precisely the way we were implicated in each other's trauma".[19] Kim uses Caruth's statement to justify the rationale of postmemory, "Postmemory, like the writing of history, is the *imaginative* recollection of a (nother's) prior reality".[20] Trauma manifests when we fail to explain certain events with our preexisting knowledge of the world. If there is silence in the familial environment, the silence itself is quite the signifier to make a connection with the traumatic event, for example, Tridib's death has long been silenced in the family for the sake of tackling with the traumatic event. The narrator has been asked to keep shut and denied the particulars of the event. It is especially prevalent among the victims of that event since the victims have formulated a common language of their own to communicate their victimhood among themselves, like the narrator's grandmother who proclaims to be apathetic to nostalgia but passes her afternoons with other migrated people from her lost home. These experiences, these events and this shared language are passed down to the generation next through objects, stories and silence. And they communicate these memories to the "hinge generation". Thus, postgeneration emerges firstly through familial and then through affiliative responses. The narrator is always receiving

memories from his relatives –Tridib, his grandmother, Ila, Robi, and even from May Price who is not exactly a relative by blood but whose intimate relationship to Tridib has made her a haven to the narrator after Tridib's death. It is from her that the narrator receives the full account of Tridib's death, the trauma he has been carrying for so long without knowing the details. It is with her he can openly talk about an event that affected both of them personally through a common language that victims of a traumatic event share among themselves.

Cathy Caruth has borrowed a lot from Freud. Although recent developments in trauma studies differ a great deal from Freud, Freud's contribution in its infancy cannot be ignored at all. It is her understanding from Freud that trauma fragments the psyche, causes temporal absence and hinders linguistic representation. Fragmentation is very special in Freud. Freudian psychoanalysis dictates that traumatic events split off the ego thus causing a new identity to emerge in the subject. Abreaction or talking cure was fundamental to Freud as well as in the modern PTSD therapy to have a better understanding of the traumatic events although the events are fragmentary. Recent pluralistic models of trauma theories consider a trauma an event that changes perception and identities, and during this disruption of the psyche emerges a new understanding of the self and the world around. Pluralistic models of trauma studies suggest that the traumatic events have to be made comprehensible through narration and then they have to be put for analysis with existing frames of references to form a new understanding of the event itself and its effects. This brings us to two sets of hypotheses– one is the effect of the event on the individual psyche and, another is the way its receiver communicates it to the world.

The strong bond the narrator has with his grandmother and Tridib limits his understanding of the world to a great extent. In contrast to him, Ila, who cannot form such bonds with any person and does not feel empathy and affinity towards other human beings is "free", and in reply the narrator confesses that he is not free "…at least in London". Because the London he knows is not the one he is living in. His London was constructed for him by Tridib and Ila long before his current visit. He is bound by the past descriptions of the city, innately haunted by it and looks for ghostly remnants of the historic past as he reveals, "I wanted to know England not as I saw her, but in her finest hour – every place chooses its own, and to me, it did not seem an accident that England had chosen hers in a war".[21] That is why he knows more about London than Nick and Ila, he can give both of them a guided tour of Brick Lane with personal anecdotes, and talk about the German bombardment in England. But those are not real memories, they are "…but emanations – of wartime experiences kept erupting in flashes of imagery; in abrupt but broken refrains" These "not memories" communicated in "flashes of imagery" and "broken refrains", transmitted through "the language of the body," are precisely the stuff of postmemory."[22]

Tridib's passed-down tales of other places have influenced the narrator, who had "a reputation for being wide-eyed and gullible", so much so that the desire to visit the places Ila talks about crops up in his mind. These places that Tridib pointed out to him in his "tattered old Batholomew's Altlas" become more than just places. They become

stories, a part of an objective experience that the narrator never personally undergoes. These experiences are handed down to the narrator by Tridib and Ila. The narrator becomes the agent of their memory in his familial right.

The stories that his grandmother tells him also fascinate him to a great extent. This depiction of a world that he could have been a part of is also a characteristic element of postmemory. In her explanation of the characteristic mark of the postgeneration of the Holocaust survivors, Hirsch says that "Theirs is a different desire, at once more powerful and more conflicted: the need not just to feel and to know, but also to re-member, to re-build, to re-incarnate, to replace and to repair".[23] The same desire Tridib tries to inculcate in the narrator during the narrator's visits to Tridib's room, "…one could never know anything except desire…a pure, painful and primitive desire…that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places…".[24] The narrator's grandmother herself is so much lost in the past that after retirement her afternoon activity would be talking about 'the past' she shares with her fellow partition victims. Kim suggests that it is exactly this shared identification that is the characteristic feature of diaspora. Although sometimes she would not agree that in a sense she is a refugee too in independent India, her homing instinct, her sense of *hiraeth*, would surface after she comes to know about her blood relatives in Calcutta. It is not only her sense of responsibility towards an uncle, her Jethamoshai, that drives her to the then East Pakistan but also her longing for the lost home, where she learned about partition long before the national partition. She transmits this trait to her grandson who would too live in the past for a long time until a trauma would make him compel to renounce the past lest it should resurface and hurt him. It eventually does but there is a temporal and spatial absence. And, since the knowledge of the event came from a different source, he can reflect on it objectively, in a much more different way than his grandmother, Robi or May.

The other reason the grandmother had for bringing back her Jethamoshai is to rescue "her uncle from his enemies and bringing back where he belonged, to her invented country".[25] It was not her uncle's wish at all to be rescued; he was very content to live in his ancestral home. But, the narrator's grandmother feels that she is obliged to save him from his present predicament. What she shows here is empathy. Empathy is the core characteristic trait of postgeneration. The postgeneration seeks to perpetuate the experience of the preceding generation by institutionalising their memory in their narratives that would eventually fuse itself with collective memory and national historiography. Jan Assman's distinction between two types of "collective remembrance" – "communicative memory" and "cultural memory", can explain this phenomenon. "Communicative memory" transpires between the first generation and the postgeneration, whereas "cultural memory" materialises when the communicative memory is institutionalised and archived.[26] The narrator of *The Shadow Lines* too wants to institutionalise the memory of his family members, especially of Tridib. And this desire to document Tridib's memory and his memory of Tridib comes a long time after Tridib's death, and after he has received the particulars of the circumstances relating to Tridib's death. Before that, he has been repressing the memory in an exemplary Freudian manner. This desire came in elegiac form; the narrator is mourning the memory of Tridib from a "temporal and spatial

remove" because postmemorial work "…mourns the loss that cannot be repaired".[27] Recent studies on trauma state that the second generation is affected by the unsolved anguish of their predecessors, and this effect will be visible in them through symptoms, and an urge to put the experiences of their predecessors into words. Salman Rushdie explains the second generation mourners "…will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that [they] will, in short, create fictions…".[28] Postmemorial works become "the spaces of connection between memory and postmemory",[29] the hinge that connects the first generation and the succeeding generations. The narrator in *The Shadow Lines*, thus, becomes the agent who carries on his shoulder the burden of transmitting the memories of his predecessors to others, especially to his readers. Although Behrendt argues that agency comes with subjective witnessing of events,[30] the narrator of Ghosh's novel with his empathy and trained imagination can very well transmit the events in a fragmented way peculiar to postgenerational works.

Behrendt does not nullify the role of "collective memory" in postmemory. She agrees that a lot of postmemorial works come from the public domain, like, museums, memorials, history books and fiction.[31] Her objection regarding these works is the lack of whole truth. She states that postmemory lacks "accuracy" and subjectivity. Since postmemory is intrinsically memories of others put together, they are selective, incomplete and fragmentary. Therefore, they do not qualify as memories. While memory is indeed an actual recollection of an event of the past, imagination blends memory and fiction. Postmemory, on the other hand, balances this relation by placing itself in between. It can be considered a bridge between these two divergent concepts.

> Postmemory therefore retains the object-oriented character and temporal mark of memory, but from the standpoint of another person's consciousness. The effort to recall, then, is creative; it is a practice of citation, mediation, and I would argue, imagination.[32]

Salman Rushdie too appreciates the fragmentation of memory in his essay "Imaginary Homelands". He calls this endeavour to make meaning out of these "shards of memory" an archaeological excavation.[33] "The broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover…".[34] There is merit to these passed down fragmentation of memories. While making national historiography about independence and migration is a political enterprise, since it distorts and alters "the past to fit its present needs",[35] it is necessary to take a different course, that is, to make meaning of the experience of the first generation through these personal memories. Richard Delacy argues that "while the formal historical narrative had failed to capture the human drama of partition, fictional writers had succeeded in representing the pain, trauma and loss suffered by ordinary people affected by and displaced by the cataclysmic events…".[36] That is why stories of the narrator's grandmother, her cousin, Jethamoshai's son and Minadi do not make it to the archives of national history. But our narrator, boldly and justifiably, prioritises personal accounts of the first generation over national historiography thus the novel becomes "…an archaeology of silences, a slow brushing away of some of the cobwebs of modern Indian memory, a repeated return to those absences and fissures that mark the sites of personal and national trauma".[37]

Conclusion

Postmemory is not memory, it is an objective memory that has been transmitted to the next generation through stories, photos and behaviours. Criticisms about postmemory are not entirely invalid, but that does not mean that the concept itself is implausible. As a new topic in the field of trauma studies, postmemory needs further investigation. Literature provides ample subjects to probe the issue profoundly. The novel, *The Shadow Lines*, is one of such subjects that can, to some extent, substantiate the credibility of the concept. Although the novel has been termed a "memory novel" so far, it does not verily deal as much with the narrator's memory as it does with his memory of others' memories. Sometimes his memory and others' memories merge and show powerful effects of postmemory on the "next generation" if they are received with empathy and imagination. The narrator's reliance on the memory of the others in his life and its effect on him has been fundamental in making meaning of the text. The memories of others that the narrator receives become the pre-established frames of reference through which he makes out the meaning of the world around him and transliterates his understanding in a narrative to make an affiliative relation to the existing cultural narration and national historiography.

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