Amitav Ghosh in all his novels tries to retrieve the events tucked behind the pages of history. The Shadow Lines deals with history, independence of India and the partition of the country. The partition was an event whose consequences were entirely unexpected and whose meaning was never fully spelled out or understood either by the politicians who took the decision or the millions of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs who were to become its victims.

The ethnic and social unrest created political chaos within the states. One such event is the riots of 1964.

There are no reliable estimates of how many people were 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. (TSL 229)

Bengal was a state that saw the greatest bloodshed. Its capital city, Calcutta was the scene of such violence that observers later called the events of those terrible days the “Great Calcutta Killing”. The population of the two key provinces, Bengal and Punjab were divided among religious groups. The partition required the division of land communities, economic systems and the institutions of state administration and army. East Bengal’s economy depended on the export of jute, lost its principal port and centre of industry, Calcutta, which went to India. The vast irrigation system in the province of Punjab was disrupted because the frontier cut across its river and the canal system. In the Sikh community there was split into two with its holy city of Amritsar in India and its capital of Lahore in Pakistan. Millions of Hindus remained in Pakistan and one third of the Muslims remained in India. Independence brought the worst civil strife in Indian history and left in its wake intense agony between the people of the two countries.

Man creates and recreates history. Some are told; some are untold and lost in oblivion. The riots of 1964 vanished by 1979 without leaving a trace in histories and books. The Hindu-Muslim riot left a panic in the minds of everyone including school children. There were innumerable Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus at the cost of their own lives. In India, Hindus were sheltering Muslims. However, the riots changed everything. The people of both sides reacted with a sense of horror and outrage. Amitav Ghosh tries to present the social, political and economical impact of British rule in India. It is implied that the riots are contemporaneous. The 1964 Calcutta riots, the 1984 Delhi riots, the 1987 Meerut riots or the 1989 Bhagalpur killings, all follow a similar pattern; suspicion, distrust, and rumor activating conditioned minds. While history records that a war took place and a certain number of people died, under the euphemism of casualties, it does not delve into the consciousness of people whose worlds are devastated by violence on an international scale.
Amitav Ghosh points to the abyss of forgotten “history” which makes any written history incomplete.

By the end of Jan 1964 the riots had faded away from the pages of the newspapers, disappeared from the collective imagination of ‘responsible opinion’, vanished, without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence. (TSL230)

The narrator in the novel has no name. The narrator’s grandmother, Thamma is an important character in the novel. She is a bold middle class Indian woman. She was born and brought up in British India. She felt that it was necessary to kill Englishmen who were reborn in bloodshed during wars.

All she wanted was a middle-class life in which like the middle class the world over she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power; that was all she wanted, a modern middle class life, a small thing that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it. (TSL151 - 152)

In Dhaka, the grandmother was growing like a honey comb. Her home was inhabited by so many branches of the family that they had become confused about their relationships. In the grandmother’s memory theirs was a crowded house, everyone living and eating together, her grandparents, her parents, she and Mayadebi, her Jethmoshai – her father’s elder brother – and his family.

When my father was about six, both my grandmother’s parents died, a months of each other. My grandmother returned to Dhaka only twice after that, and then only to make sure that the rooms she and Mayadebi had inherited were still in intact. On both occasions she decided to go across and talk to her uncle and aunt but the house was full of painful memories now and both times she fled back to Mandalay after spending barely a day in Dhaka. (TSL124)

The narrator’s grandmother spent twelve years in railway colonies of Mandalay. She used to go to Dhaka almost every year. In 1935 her husband who was an engineer died of pneumonia. She was 32, no savings and had never worked. She possessed a bachelor’s degree in history from Dhaka University. She was born and brought up in Dhaka but came to Calcutta long before partition. In 1949, after the partition Dhaka became the capital of East Pakistan.

Thamma’s urge to go to Dhaka and her desire to bring back her uncle Jethmoshi to India is the flaw in her. Those who live in Thamma’s invented country were Hindus and the enemies. She felt she must rescue her uncle from the Muslims, the inhabitants of East Pakistan. The extent to which she assigns objectivity to her imagined community becomes clear when she asks her son whether she will be able to see the India and East Pakistan from the plane. Her son points out that the barriers becomes clear enough once she goes to her
customs and she will be required to state her nationality, her place of birth, etc. She suddenly becomes confused about her identity: her place of birth does not correspond to her citizenship. However, the grandmother accompanied by her sister Mayadebi, her nephew Tridib, Robi and May Price leave in the Mercedes car to Dhaka. The grandmother’s uncle refused to return to India because he rightly felt that people would be drawing borders everywhere and there is no difference between India and Shindia.

I understand very well the old man uttered. I know everything. I understand I am everything. Once you start moving you never stop. That’s what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don’t believe in this India – Shindia. It’s all very well you are going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me I was born here and I will die here. (TSL 215)

Riot broke out in Dhaka and the mob began to attack them. They then moved towards the man who was looking after the grandmother’s uncle. Tridib ran into the mob, and fell upon their backs. He was trying to push his way to through the old man. The mob dragged him in. He vanished. The old man, Tridib and the man who had been looking after the old man, Khalil were killed.

The men had melted away, into the gullies. Only three bodies were left. They were all dead. They’d cut Khalil’s stomach open. The old man’s head had been hacked off. And they’d cut Tridib’s throat, from ear to ear. (TSL250-251)

The death of grandmother’s nephew changed her perception. She pondered of fighting for freedom. The agony turned into anger in the grandmother. The line that was skeptical to her now defined her nationality. In 1965, when the war between India and Pakistan broke out she understood the meaning of freedom as fighting the Pakistanis who were her countrymen twenty years ago.

After many years the narrator found the irony of freedom when he revived his memory of 1964 riots in Calcutta. Violence in Calcutta started in 10th Jan 1964, when the first cricket match of 1964 series against England at Madras commenced. The school bus was nearly empty because a rumor circulated that the whole of Calcutta’s water supply was poisoned. The young minds were conditioned to assume that Muslims had poisoned the water. The narrator is cautious to the extent of declining a young Muslim boy called Montu as his friend. In a highly charged atmosphere of suspicion and distrust, rumor becomes institutionalized. The narrator later reads the newspaper report in the Teen Murthy House library. Poisoning of water, train full of dead bodies, all incredible rumors further aggravated communal frenzy and added to violence.

The silence was so thick that it took the narrator fifteen years to discover that there was a connection between the riot in Dhaka and a curiously peculiar riot that the narrator experienced as a school boy in Calcutta. Only after laborious construction and deconstruction
of events does the narrator arrive at the truth of what actually happened and of why Tridib was killed.

The official histories were unable to supply an answer. There is only silence and absence of meaning. The narrator’s father did not prevent Tridib, May and his grandmother from going to Dhaka in that period because he didn’t know about the riots in Khulna that were to trigger off the events in Dhaka and why? Because the newspaper he read did not mention it. It was after all a Calcutta paper run by people who believed in the power of distance no less than I did. (TSL 227)

The Dhaka riot was set aflame with the repercussion of the Hazratbal incident in distant Kashmir. The Hazratbal shrine sheltering the holy Relic had become a great centre of pilgrimage, multitudes of people, Kashmiris of every religious faith, would throng to the shrine on occasions when the Relic was displayed. On 27 December, 1963, two hundred and sixty-three years after it had been brought to Kashmir, the Mu-i-Mubarak disappeared from its place in the Hazratbal mosque. Mischievous political and religious forces soon disrupted the collective display of mourning. The edifice of unity shattered resulting in large scale riding not only in the country but also in other parts of the sub-continent. The communal riots in Khulna spread to Dhaka and found its reflection in Calcutta also. It was only a trivial news to the people of other states.

Tridib was merely another victim of the endless silence. Robi’s loss of his brother Tridib in the 1964 riot haunted him. He felt that nobody understood the meaning of freedom. If they did they would have avoided killings even now. To Robi the concept of freedom is a mirage.

And then I think to myself why don’t they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It’s a mirage, the whole thing is a mirage. (TSL 247)

Tridib’s death signifies the futility of freedom. Ghosh revisits the 1964 riot to revive the events that are excluded from the history of the nation. He presents the painful struggle of the Hindus and Muslims. Amitav Ghosh illuminates the absurdities of borders and reveals the irony of freedom politically, socially, economically and psychologically. The riots vanished from the history to become shadows leaving panic in the minds of people.

WORKS CITED


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“Criticism, like rain, should be gentle enough to nourish a man's growth without destroying his roots”.

- - Frank A. Clark