



## **Violence in the City: A Look at the City-scape in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland***

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### **Abstract**

With the fragmenting of the world around us and the disintegration of narratives of culture and religion and a re-questioning of what constitutes reality, the city-space has emerged as one of the key areas of interrogation and analysis over the past few decades. If previously the urban landscape was taken to be the canvas against the backdrop of which the political, social and cultural contours of a society and state were played out, it has now become a site of power struggle, and the future of the said landscape a mirror and the future of the nation-state. The city I choose to look at is Calcutta (now Kolkata). My paper, would interrogate the changing dimensions of the city, after sectarian and political violence erupts in the city, as has been portrayed in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland*.

Violence, specially, communal violence brings into sharp focus the dichotomy and the problematics of the binary between 'good' (state sponsored or approved) and 'bad' (against the interest of the nation state) violence. Violence can bring a city together (as it happens sometimes during a coup or most recently in the case of the Catalonia Referendum), and sometimes fractures and shatters the myth of a unified social, community space. In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator is shocked to find the city that he once called his own to have suddenly become so alien. Calcutta has recovered from the gashes of those violent days. My paper would look at the way violence affects the city, its people, how it problematizes the notion of national unity and comradeship and the role memory plays in configuring and reconstructing the way we perceive the city.

### **Keywords**

urban violence, identity, nation formation, city-scape

The city, as a geographical and cultural space, has always remained a site which necessitates the most fervent of critical discussions and analyses. The effects of a war, that of an industrial and technological boom or even just the euphoric way in which a city comes alive during the yearly religious festival is something that has always been fertile ground to map the changing cultural contours of a space which seems to transcend its physical borders. This article, would interrogate the changing dimensions of the city of Calcutta, after sectarian and political violence erupts in the city, as has been portrayed in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*.

Violence, specially, communal violence puts to question the logic and the structure of a nation as a homogeneous and well defined geographical space, with identifiable enemies and more sacred borders. But these taken for granted assumptions are put to question when civil or political disturbance erupts, pitting our very own people against us. Violence in the above mentioned novels are of two kinds, but nonetheless, they leave an everlasting impression on the city-space and on the minds of its dwellers. Although riots and gang crimes have afflicted cities for hundreds of years, the interesting ubiquity of such events—even if not 'wars' in any conventional sense – suggest the hallmark of contemporary period is one of rising 'urban conflict' rather than 'peace'. By contrast, all too often it seems that cities are where state-building projects in the developing world unravel rather than consolidate. This is partly because we are moving from a world where a conflict over cities fuelled the need for taxation and state power, to one where conflict in cities undermines state-building efforts even as it necessitates them. The word "civic" is suggestive of cities on the one hand and of citizenship on the other. From sectarian violence, terrorism and "turf wars", conflicts of these sort are all linked both to the city as a distinct space and to contestation over citizenship and entitlements, often reflecting a sense of neglect by the state.

As one understands, in the desire to carve a nation and a sense of 'belonging', violence plays a very significant role but the significant and the uncomfortable question is where does this violence features in the historiography of the nation. Very crudely, it can be divided into 'good' and 'bad'. The former, when the nation as a collective goes to war against an identifiable enemy on the other side of the border. The latter however is problematic, and consists of internal riots and massacres, where the 'friend' and the 'enemy' cannot be divided into clearly identifiable categories. The former,

solidifies the attempts of the nation to carve an essentialist identity of itself and the latter, merely exposes the fissures and the cracks in the apparently neat edifice of the nation, which undermine such attempts. More often than not,

accounts of such communal and sectarian violence are glossed over, where the historiographer undertakes the erasure of public memory culminating in a collective amnesia. The heroes of the wars are decorated and the martyrs of local/communal violence forgotten. The confrontation between public history and private memory is nowhere better evinced. (Aich Bhowmik “I Want To Break Free”, 140-141)

Issues concerning the formation of the nation state and the maintenance of it as a singular monolithic entity have been embedded in history and public consciousness only to finally being problematized when the neat binary construction of the ‘Other’ and the ‘Self’ melt away, to reveal the one in the other. Various alternative realities are side stepped and brushed away as a dominant hegemonic discourse is created in order to concretize a nation state and impart to it an identity of its own. It is in this context that one must acknowledge the importance that the urban centre/cities play in the consolidation of such an identity. Fountainhead of legal/political and academic discourse, cities are also sites of power, under constant strain and caught in the tug of war between various narratives trying to inscribe itself in the official and recorded historiography. One of the ways in which it is achieved is through violence and it calls into question the concept of the nation as a physical space marked by homogeneity. In *The Shadow Lines* it is through the eyes of Tridib and the narrator that this distrust is highlighted in the novel. It is Tridib’s overriding concern not to be sucked into someone else’s construction of reality or history. The public/political narratives need to be questioned, to find one’s real place in the scheme of things. The attempt to create a watertight solitarist national identity is the handiwork of political parties with vested interests and it is up to us not to be sucked into that rhetoric of singularity. The idea of belonging needs a unifying principle, where citizens of a particular nation state and city can be interpellated within the discourse by being provided with causal reasoning to establish a dominant pattern mediating national events. It is Tridib’s warning to the narrator that rings in our ears when he remarks, “If you believe anything people tell you, you deserve to be told anything at all” (*The Shadow Lines*,12).

Amitav Ghosh, in his own admission betrays his surprise at the duality of a nation’s response to wars, which are well documented and that of violence ravaging cities and dividing the population, which seems to be brushed under the carpet of memory. He remarks, while talking of the 1984 Anti-Sikh riots,

I had not thought of this event in decades, but after 1984 it began to haunt me:  
I was astonished by how vivid my memories were and how fully I could

access them once I had given myself permission to do so. But my memories had no context: I had no way of knowing what had happened, whether it was an isolated incident, particularly to the neighbourhood we were living in, or whether it had implications beyond. I had decided to find out what happened....a small glance at a library's bookshelves was enough to establish that in historical memory a small war counts for much more than a major outbreak of civil violence. (*The Greatest Sorrow: Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness*, 315-316)

In *The Shadow Lines*, communal violence in Calcutta forces the population to look at each other with filters of communal hatred and suspicion. It is no surprise that with the outbreak of the riots in the city, the identity narrator's school friend, previously called Montu (a name which can belong to either of the two religious communities warring with each other), who is a Muslim, acquires importance. The world seems to be turned inside out, the visual metaphor of which is the untidy angle at which the rickshaws on the streets were arranged and the narrator feels the unease of having his own city and people turning against each other. This unease is not the result of a fear of an identifiable or an external enemy, but a part of us which has suddenly come apart. It is as if the past trauma and horrors of the partition are purged and sanctified with new killings and bloodshed. Amartya Sen, recounting his memories of the partition riots remarks, "A great many person's identities as Indians, as subcontinentals, as Asians or as members of the human race, seemed to give way – quite suddenly – to sectarian identification with Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh communities. The carnage that followed had much to do with elementary herd behaviour by which people were made to "discover" their newly detected belligerent identities, without subjecting the process to critical examination. The same people were suddenly different" (*Identity and Violence*, 9). This is one of the enduring legacies of the novel, where the city that was once 'home' and 'known', had suddenly become alien. The realization comes home to the narrator when many years later he travels back in time to uncover the events of the riots that had devastated the cities of Calcutta, Dhaka and Srinagar. If national identity is monolithic, then it should not have mattered to the people of Dhaka, which was politically and geographically a different nation state, if the Prophet's hair had been stolen from a mosque in Srinagar. And yet, there is something that connected the population of these three cities, something uncanny that resulted in the outbreak of riots in almost grotesque mutuality. In one of the most arresting passages of the novel, the narrator employs a 'circle of Reason', by drawing an imaginary circle on the old Bartholomew Atlas and remarks,

Within the tiny ordering of the Euclidean space, Chang Mai in Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi is; that Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is. Yet I never heard of those places until I drew my circle, and I cannot remember a time when I was so young that I had not heard of Delhi or Srinagar. It showed me that Hanoi and Chungking are nearer Khulna than Srinagar and yet, did the people of Khulna care all about the fate of the mosques in Vietnam and South China (a mere stone's throw away)? I doubted it. (*The Shadow Lines*, 232)

But we do realize in the course of the narrative that people don't forget who they are, and that the all enmeshing discursive narrative of the nation state fails to create a homogenized singular identity. It is no surprise that with the outbreak of the riot, the identity of the narrator's school friend who happens to be a Muslim acquires importance. The world seems to be turned inside out, concretized by the untidy angles at which the rickshaws on the streets were arranged and the feeling was that the narrator's own city and its population had turned against them. The same people, streets, customs appear different causing a strange sort of unease. This unease is the result of a fear not of an identifiable external enemy, but a part of us which has suddenly come apart. It is ourselves that we start fearing now and the narrator remarks, "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" (*The Shadow Lines*, 30).

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, the city of Calcutta and its people are caught in the mires of a violence period of class struggle and an armed resistance punctuated by unforeseen violence. Though the number of armed socialist insurgents around the world has declined much faster than the number of leftist academics and radical students, in fiction they continue to be portrayed in a way that inspires both envy and awe. In May 1967, Naxalbari, an almost obscure spot in the northern part of West Bengal, suddenly attracted widespread attention, both national and international, with an armed peasant uprising led by the pro-Mao Communist revolutionaries who were till then active members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The Naxalbari uprising was very soon followed by a militant movement, commonly known as the Naxalite movement and Calcutta became the germinal site for the dissemination of ideas and action. For Charu Mazumdar, "the students and youth represented a historically revolutionary section of Indian society who, because of their illustrious revolutionary tradition, would succeed in shouldering the task of Naxalite social revolution" (*The Historic Turning Point: A Liberation Anthology*, 35).

Although its primary stress remained on agrarian revolution, the Naxalites now turned its attention to acts in the urban areas as complementary to rural guerrilla warfare. The CPI(ML) “urban movement had a threefold agenda, aimed at (i) attacking “bourgeois” institutions and symbols of culture (e.g. colleges and statues of eminent personalities); (ii) annihilation of police personnel, informers and political rivals; and (iii) building up of an arsenal by large-scale snatching of arms and ammunition. As a result, the student cadres of the CPI(ML) in Calcutta launched a massive onslaught against educational institutions resulting in cancellation of examinations” (*Through the Eyes of the Police*, 3).

Lahiri gently propels readers towards a life-like portrait of Calcutta, the maddening, mystifying, glorious and ugly city which will remain the beloved towards the people who inhabit its upscale townships and dingy shanties, towards the unknown stories of hardship and triumph which breathe life into this jungle of steel, brick and mortar, towards the struggles of an ill-fated generation now forgotten in the mad dash for globalization, towards a culture which has moulded generations into what they are today.

The violence is not only against the state and the police, but also against the establishment, present and past, against a legacy of Calcutta’s past. The violence is against a city which is best understood by the metaphor of the walled Tollygunj Club. A city which houses a “displaced population” after the partition but ignores it and the walls become a literally and figuratively a concrete metaphor of the dominant and the residual economic classes in the city. Udayan calls the Tolly Club an affront and it was the proof that “India was still a semi-colonial country” (*The Lowland* 25). As the Naxalbari movement gathers pace, the city which had seen communal violence post partition and in the aftermath of the loss of the Hazrat Bal relic was now burning with the zeal and slogans of the revolutionary ideals.

It is poignant, because the city has turned against itself. It leads to a kind of alienation, where residents like Subhash, do not feel a sense of belonging and thus leave to pursue their goals elsewhere. The unchained police force was adequately encouraged to liquidate Naxalites through “encounters”. The sole motive was to kill the enemy by any means. The legal procedures were given a go by. On getting the green signal from the top, a section of the police force happily turned Calcutta and its suburbs into their hunting ground. An alleged “encounter and torture specialist” at the Calcutta Police headquarters, Ranajit (Runu) Guha Niyogi, then a sub-inspector, would later receive the president's award (police medal) for his “gallant conduct” shown in those days. In jail these young men were subjected to torture and in many cases were left maimed or even killed. Young “women Naxalites were also subjected to sexual abuse and humiliation. In a number of cases youth were shot dead by policemen in

so-called “encounters”. All this goes to show that the ideal of self-sacrifice was not confined to rhetoric alone, but was part of the everyday reality within which the Naxalite youth operated” (*Towards a New Man: Revolutionary Youth and Rural Agency in the Naxalite Movement*, 4).

It is while the city is burning that even a greater chasm develops between the two brothers. On hearing the news on the radio of the 1967 uprising in Naxalbari and the death of many unarmed peasants at the hands of police officers, the novel explains that Udayan reacts “as if it were a personal affront, a physical blow” and tells his family that “Naxalbari is an inspiration. It’s an impetus for change.” Even at this early stage of the book it is unsurprising that, as the more outgoing, adventurous and emotional of the two brothers, Udayan joins the Naxalites and forges his own path despite the expectations of his traditional parents and his brother Subhash. The firebrand Udayan is smitten with the revolutionary ideals but his brother remains strangely unaffected.

The so called cultured and urban middle class of the city is now faced with the emergence, of what Charu Mazumder termed, “the new man”. The Naxalite movement of the 1970s in West Bengal threatened to overhaul the existing political and ideological framework of Bengali 'bhadrolok' society. According to Mazumdar, “for the Naxalite movement to be successful, the revolutionary classes had to undergo a transformation of character in order to realise their revolutionary potential” (*Revolutionary Youth and Rural Agency in the Naxalite Movement*, 1). This new man was one who would be able to conquer all thoughts of self and engage in unconditional self-sacrifice. Udayan appears to be one of the many men who modelled themselves on this new ideal and thus we realize, that Calcutta was not only facing a challenge to its political, social and educational institutions, but something more, something which redefined the societal constructs of “man” and “masculinity”.

What this period of political violence does is to take the city back in time in terms of re-establishing laws which were the handiwork of the British orchestrated during the freedom struggle of in the pre-independence days. The Bengal Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act of 1936 and the West Bengal Prevention of Violent Activities Bill are both implemented with immediate effect leading to thousands of arrests without warrants and subsequent deaths in police encounters, both fake and real. The novel doesn’t deal with the intricacies with the nation formation and problematics of the politics of identity as such, what it does is talk of human relationships in the aftermath of the civil violence. When the lowland at the back of Subhash and Udayan’s house in Calcutta is flooded by the two ponds on either side of it, it is thickly populated with water hyacinth while at other times it became the nesting ground for



creatures to breed and lay eggs. This symbolic ground undergoes major changes when it is later covered over with housing developments, clearly reflecting the significant changes in the characters' lives. The city moves on after the movement is crushed violently. And like the fate of other communal and sectarian disturbances which threaten the sanctity of the nation state, the sacrifice and the memory find no footnote in the officially documented historiography.

In one of the most thought provoking passages of the text, Lahiri makes Gauri search for Udayan, her first husband on the internet. But no data, news or even a passing mention is found of him, no mention of the fateful day when he was killed in a fake police encounter. History is seen working in mysterious ways. And the conflict is between different and multiple versions of history, the official recorded history being undermined by different accounts of oral or "lived" histories. We remember Foucault commenting,

The purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation. It does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which metaphysicians promise a return; it makes visible all of those discontinuities that cross us (*Discipline and Punish*, 162).

Foucault presents individual memory that resists collective determinism. Individual memory consists in small groups that offers pluralistic version of history marked with myriads of impressions. It is this lived history that remains with Gauri and Subhash, for there is no official records of the thousands of young men and women who had been wiped off from the face of the city. The city as a social space somehow remains uncomfortable with this personal, collective memory. The role of violence is significant, what is more significant is where this violence features in the historiography of the nation. Very crudely, it can be divided into 'good' and 'bad'. The former, when the nation as a collective goes to war against an identifiable enemy on the other side of the border. The latter however is problematic, and consists of internal riots and massacres, where the 'friend' and the 'enemy' cannot be divided into clearly identifiable categories. The former, solidifies the attempts of the nation to carve an essentialist identity of itself and the latter, merely exposes the fissures and the cracks in the apparently neat edifice of the nation, which undermine such attempts. More often than not, accounts of such communal and sectarian violence are glossed over, where the historiographer undertakes the erasure of public memory culminating in a collective amnesia. The heroes of the wars are decorated and the martyrs of local/communal violence forgotten. The confrontation between public history and private memory is nowhere better evinced. Even Google, Lahiri hints, fails to recover these lost stories which have been made to adopt



the poetics of silence. The city has moved on, the Governments come and gone and yet the words of Alessandro Portelli haunt us

Memory is often discussed as an asset or a liability. Memory can function as “monument” in the form of commemoration and celebration of a proud collective identity, and a foundation on which individuals build their own identity. The function of memory, however, can be that of making us uneasy about ourselves and our history. (“On the Uses of Memory: As Monument, As Reflex, As Disturbance”, 15)

Various alternative realities are side-stepped and brushed away as a dominant hegemonic discourse is created in order to concretize a nation state and give it an identity of its own. In the process however, public/political and private narratives come at loggerheads resulting in the domination of the latter by the former. Such micro-narratives, when recovered from the cobwebs of history question the grand-narrative of a nation state. As Milan Kundera succinctly puts it, “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 4).

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