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Post-Partition Conflicts and Diasporic Loss in Amitav Ghosh and Jhumpa Lahiri's Narratives

Abstract I: Il mio articolo analizza *The Shadow Lines* di Amitav Ghosh e il racconto di Jhumpa Lahiri "When Mr. Pirzada came to dine" proponendo un'analisi di narrazioni che hanno meglio rappresentato gli antagonismi nell'India della post-Spartizione. La lunga ombra della Spartizione del 1947 ha lasciato un'eredità di spartizioni, in scala ridotta, che hanno continuato a segnare la recente storia indiana. Le dislocazioni diasporiche sono pertanto documentate in narrazioni che, focalizzandosi su ricordi di smarrimento e tensioni, hanno illuminato il potere etico e trasformativo della letteratura transnazionale.

Abstract II: My article investigates Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Jhumpa Lahiri's story "When Mr. Pirzada came to dine" so as to propose an analysis of narratives which best capture the antagonisms of post-Partition India. The long shadow of the 1947 Partition entailed further small-scale partitions which have marked recent Indian history. Diasporic dislocations are hence documented in such narratives which, revolving around memories of loss and tensions, unveil the transformative and ethic power of transnational literature.

> "What sense did the world make? Where was God, the Bloody Fool? Did He have no notion of fair and unfair? Couldn't He read a simple balance sheet? He would have been sacked long ago if He were managing a corporation, the things he allowed to happen […]"
> Rohinton Mistry, *A Fine Balance*

Scholars agree that the Partition was a moment of traumatic loss, a cataclysmic event which caused millions of people to cross the boundaries of their new homelands. "A time of great uncertainty, humiliation, anger, sadness and trauma" (Roy & Bhatia 2008: x), recalling Partition means remembering the massacre of nearly two million people, thousands of abducted women, refugees mustered on trains on both sides of the border, forced religious conversions, and scenes of crude violence.

The 'long shadow' of Partition (Butalia 2015) also entailed traumatic after-effects. In the wake of 1947, further small-scale partitions – of not less heinous kind – have marked recent Indian history. Militarized violence, tortures and abuses have widened the gaps, constructing borders among new geopolitical spaces (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), religious faiths (Hindu, Muslim and other minorities) and social classes. This is perhaps why, even years later on, memories of Partition and of its enduring consequences continue to inspire writers, journalists and scholars although they did not directly witness the violence and the troubles of the event. As the young Maneck comments in the epigraph to my article, Indian history encompasses images of chaos and upheaval while God seems to passively turn the gaze away from the disruptions in the lives of common people.

Diaspora is a necessary fall-out of such a complete mayhem: alienation, displacement and dislocation are documented in narratives revolving around memories of loss and tensions. In examining historical frictions and in recollecting and saving memories from slipping into the realm of negligence, literature enables readers to understand the emotional impact of these events. Diaspora studies, which hinge on a shift from the rigid borders of nation-states towards cross-cultural directions, look at narrative memory a site "where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed" (Brah 1996: 208).

My paper explores the narratives by Amitav Ghosh and Jhumpa Lahiri which best capture the antagonisms of post-Partition India, epitomizing the transformative power that creative writing can offer with regard to a history of anxiety and violence. Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and Lahiri's story "When Mr. Pirzada came to dine" – in her 1999 collection *Interpreter of Maladies* – exemplify through the traumatic experiences of their main characters a deep engagement with the way past violent history survives in diasporic literary imagination.

Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Shadow Lines*, was published in 1988, only four years after the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her two Sikh bodyguards. The novel is a family-saga spanning three generations from Calcutta to London, combining personal and private stories with major historical episodes. The nameless narrator is a young Indian man who temporarily moves to London to study at university. Born in post-Partition India, in 1952, he tries to make sense of what happened years before and after his birth. On the threshold of his Indian descent and Western education, the narrator (in)directly witnesses and connects a multiplicity of upheavals. Travelling from Calcutta to London and then back home (the novel is divided in two parts entitled "Going Away" and "Coming Home"), the narrator tells the stories of his relatives, particularly of his grandmother Th'amma and of his adored second cousin Tridib, who like the narrator was educated in Britain.

The narrative chronologically shuttles from the outbreak of World War II to the 1964 riots in East Pakistan and West Bengal. It therefore moves back and forth in non-linear mode, revolving around important conflicts such as the Swadeshi movement, the Second World War, the Partition of India, the 1963-64 communal riots in Dhaka and Calcutta, the Maoist Movement, the 1962 India-China War, the 1965 India-Pakistan War, and the fall of Dhaka in East Pakistan which led to creation of Bangladesh. The juxtaposition of different places and historical conflicts exemplifies a dialogic perspective. Following Avtar Brah, I argue that Ghosh's 'shadow lines' suggest the concept of 'diaspora space' as a place which "includes the entanglement, the intertwining of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" (Brah 1996: 209). Diaspora space, therefore, captures ethnic diversity and a variety of racial, linguistic and religious differences.

In dealing with a complex and unstable concept as the nation, Ghosh makes it clear that nations are elusive and shadowy entities and that barriers between nations generate animosity and violence. The Indian-American writer explores the notion of freedom since the momentous event of 1947 when subcontinental citizens liberated themselves from the manacles of the British Empire. Th'amma, then a student in Dhaka, experienced the violence of the nationalist propaganda which led to the birth of the two countries, India, and West and East Pakistan. Born in Dhaka (East Pakistan), but separated from her birthplace by bloodshed and lines on maps, Th'amma moves to Calcutta (West Bengal) where her idealism rapidly turns into disillusionment. She experiences homeliness and gradual alienation, feelings that ultimately awaken a sense of hatred against her erstwhile West Pakistani fellow citizens. During the 1965 Indo-Pakistani war the old lady decides to donate her jewelry to support the fight for freedom against West Pakistan: "I gave it *away*, she screamed. I gave it to the fund for the war. I had to, don't you see? For *your* sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them, out" (Ghosh 2005: 232). The 1965 war arouses the very same feelings of nationalist resistance against British imperialism in Th'amma who becomes "a hopelessly aggressive nationalist who never really comes to terms with the absurdity of her misplaced citizenship" (Ashcroft 2013: 24).

Diasporic dislocations and memories pervade the novel and Th'amma embodies the receptacle of a larger narrative which is buried at the interstice of private stories and historical events. The novel, hence, becomes the space where "the shadow lines" of collective and individual memories merge and collide, undermining the geopolitical boundaries within the Indian subcontinent.

With a consistent focus on violence and devastation, the novel charts ethnic and religious tensions which engender private disruptions. The narrator, for instance, conjures up Tridib's recollections of the 1940 September Blitz in London. The images of "the drone of the plans" (Ghosh 2005: 100) and "the realities of the bombs and torpedoes and the dying" (Ghosh 2005: 66) are juxtaposed to Indian conflicts, portraying a context of devastation with multiple foci. Time and space are inexorably linked in the novel and the narrator feels haunted "by the ghosts of the nine-year-old Tridib, sitting on a camp bed, just as I was, his small face intent, listening to the bombs" (Ghosh 2005: 178). Such a ghostliness is "the absence of time and distance" (Ghosh 2005: 178) that blends official historical conflicts in India and Britain with private affairs.

Tridib's death during the 1964 January riots that shattered the border between West Bengal and East Pakistan represents the core of the novel. His death, which is a personal loss to the narrator, represents the sacrificial victim of a conflict originating in the destructive forces of religious fundamentalism and in the nationalist rhetoric of the long shadow of Partition. The 1964 riots erupted in the aftermath of the incident in the Hazratbal mosque in Kashmir, when a sacred relic, a single strand of hair believed to be of Prophet Mohammad, was mysteriously stolen. The communal violence which broke out was a "massacre and ethnic cleansing of Bengali Hindus" (Butalia 2015: 176) while thousands of Hindus left East Pakistan to seek refuge in West Bengal. Yet, these skirmishes were not a major episode in official historiography and the narrator's recollection is "the product of a struggle with silence […] a silence enforced by a ruthless state" with "no barbed wire, no check-points" (Ghosh 2005: 225). The narrator will discover the truth about Tridib's sacrifice only fifteen years later while attending a PhD conference on South Asian history in London. He then investigates archives and newspapers, recollecting the images of Calcutta's empty streets and the eerie silence in a city that had turned against its own inhabitants, while "the riots had faded away from the pages of the newspapers […] they had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence" (Ghosh 2005: 226). Once more, space and time overlap in the narrator's mental mapping and he finally finds a link between his "nightmare bus ride back from school and the events that befell Tridib and others in Dhaka" (Ghosh 2005: 214).

By evoking such events, Ghosh aims at showing how futile is to draw lines. The narrator's final remark – while observing the old Bartholomew's Atlas where Tridib used to show places to him – that borders had been drawn "in the enchantment of lines" (Ghosh 2005: 228) conveys a bitter critique of national and religious barriers. By the end of the novel, the narrator is aware that some people, like his grandmother, have been enchanted by the need to draw lines. Nevertheless, the narrator positions himself in connection with Tridib's transcultural stance: as the embodiment of diasporic memory, his narrative ultimately rejects the idea of space and time as key features of division with no barriers to freedom being created. Behind Tridib's death, Ghosh articulates a healing transcultural message. By blurring the lines that divide reality and imagination, the self and the other, the first person anonymous narrator tries to encompass disparate cultures, countries and histories within the trajectories of his own coming of age.

While *The Shadow Lines* only touches upon the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, this conflict is the historical event against which Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "When Mr.

Pirzada came to dine" is set. The story is part of Lahiri's 1999 debut collection *Interpreter of Maladies* which won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize. Using the diasporic viewpoint of Lilia, a ten-year-old American child of Bengali descent, the story features the Indo-Pakistan war which led to the creation of Bangladesh, a second, and in no way less disruptive, partition in the Indian subcontinent. Lilia confronts her ethnic origin by observing Mr. Pirzada who is a regular guest in her house for a short period. A Pakistani Muslim, the man is on study leave in the US and he visits Lilia's parents, who are Hindus of Indian origin. Mr. Pirzada is anxious about his own family in Dhaka which is endangered by the terrible conflict:

> In the autumn of 1971 a man used to come to our house, bearing confections in his pocket and hopes of ascertaining the life or death of his family. His name was Mr. Pirzada, and he came from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but then a part of Pakistan. That year Pakistan was engaged in civil war. The eastern frontier, where Dacca was located, was fighting for autonomy from the ruling regime in the west. In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched, and shelled by the Pakistani army. Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped. By the end of the summer, three hundred thousand people were said to have died (Lahiri 1999: 23).

Choosing the reportage mode, Lahiri opens her tale by associating Mr. Pirzada with contrasting images. For Lilia, the Pakistani man is a source of enjoyment, since he brings her confectionaries; on the other hand, Mr. Pirzada comes to be related to the scenes of violence broadcast through TV coverage, such as "tanks rolling through dusty streets, fallen buildings […] boats with fan-shaped sails floating on wide coffee-colored rivers, a barricaded university, newspaper offices burnt to the ground" (Lahiri 1999: 31).

Lahiri's story indirectly exposes the American endorsement of an undivided Pakistan, since "the United States was siding with West Pakistan, the Soviet Union with India, and with what was soon to be Bangladesh" (Lahiri 1999: 40). According to Naeem Mohaiemen, the 1971 Liberation War was the first TV war since "the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh marked a zenith in this media influence" (Mohaiemen 2008) with British and American reporters capturing the scenes of the conflict. Mohaiemen argues that the foreign TV narration served to erase the two main interests of the Indian government: the possibility to reduce the political power of Pakistan by splitting the country's unity, and the tendency to avoid linkages between the conflict in East Pakistan and the Maoist riots of the Naxalites which had already inflamed West Bengal. The result was a TV narrative that depicted "a more palatable story of simple, gentle Bengali people, persecuted by more aggressive, militant and more Islamic Pakistan" (Mohaiemen 2008).

Yet, Lilia cannot but notice the many similarities her parents share with the guest that she still considers "Indian" in spite of her father's clarification that after 1947 Mr. Pirzada is no longer an Indian citizen. The arbitrary line drawn between Hindus and

Muslims makes no difference to Lilia. Even when her father shows her the geographical map with different colours for India and Pakistan, she reflects upon the arbitrary use of colours. Borders, like "shadow lines", illustrate the gap between political maps and sense of solidarity. For Lilia, geopolitical belonging conflicts with ethnic identity and the recollection of the 1971 events remains "a remote mystery with haphazard clues" (Lahiri 1999: 40). Because of her youth, Lilia cannot understand why a man speaking the same language as her parents has to be perceived as "other". She therefore tries to learn more at the school library, but when her American teacher finds her with a book about Indian history she discourages Lilia by saying "I see no reason to consult it" (Lahiri 1999: 31). By highlighting that Lilia learns only American history and geography at school, Lahiri indirectly denounces America turning a blind eye to a genocide that Mohaiemen views as a "frozen object" (Mohaiemen 2011: 40) which still needs to be fully disclosed and investigated.

Lahiri's diasporic viewpoint retains the trace of Indian post-independence traumas: the birth of a new nation, in the wake of the long shadow of Partition, is tied to Lilia's awareness of her transnational citizenship. The narrative of the war episodes, through TV coverage, prompts a sense of guilt in the girl because of her privileged life in the US. Every night, Lilia enacts a ritual in order to exorcize her apprehensions about Mr. Pirzada's seven daughters in Dhaka: she eats the candy the Pakistani guest gives her every evening praying for his daughters who are in danger. With this rite, Lilia tries to counterbalance the starving condition of the East Pakistani refugees she learns about on TV. Finally, when Mr. Pirzada is happily reunited with his family in Bangladesh, Lilia gives up eating confectionaries which she had been stocking up for their sake.

Jhumpa Lahiri's light touch combines traumatic snapshots of the war with the naïf thoughts of a second-generation migrant child. By using the first-person narration in the perspective of a child, which reminds of Lenny in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1988), Lahiri "blunts the sharp fears about complex historical processes that she [Lilia] cannot fully understand" (Monaco 2015: 83). On one hand, this narrative strategy reduces the political and historic burden of the event, while, on the other hand, the Indian endo-diaspora is symbolically scattered in America through TV news. Following Cohen, I suggest that Lahiri illuminates the claims that the country of origin can have on diasporic subjects because of "the acceptance of the inexplicable link with their past migration history" (Cohen 1997: ix). In this story, Lahiri gives voice to a child whose ethical concern towards the victims of massacres and rapes in Bangladesh poses questions about the implications of geopolitical divisions and nationalist discourses in the Indian subcontinent. Lilia's narrative functions also as a counter-memory which criticizes the suppression of ethnic history by American hegemonic ideology, showing the limited access she has to the Bengali side of her hyphenated identity.

Ghosh and Lahiri belong to the new Indian diaspora literature (Mishra 2007) and they take a similar stance towards the ethical burden of traumatic narratives. The diasporic experience implies a significant crossing of borders, which may be the borders of a region, a nation, a religion, or a language. The diaspora, as a consequence, produces tensional crossings and traumatic loss. Like a never-healing wound, the absence of a motherland is then transmitted to the subsequent generations, transforming mourning into melancholia. Ghosh and Lahiri's fictional accounts employ the ingenuous eyes of children in order to depict the problematic dynamics of political and religious frictions. Their works mix religious and ethnic differences in a transcultural cosmopolitanism which perceives borders as porous and fluid. Whereas Lilia copes with geopolitical questions with a strategy that arouses humor, the narrator in Ghosh's novel interrogates ethical responsibility in transcultural space.

Both writers shed light on neglected and dim memories of the past, by overlapping borders, fragments of memory and media coverage in a multidimensional perspective. Unlike Ghosh who defies spatial and temporal specificities, Lahiri's tendency is more poised and ironical, even though not less intense and critical. Their works bring to the fore the transformative power of transnational literature, unveiling its relevant ethical function. By relating memory to diaspora, Ghosh and Lahiri provide examples of an ongoing displacement. Diasporic memory is a performative process shaped both by amnesia and recollection. Such a performative platform bridges individual and collective experiences, infusing historical memory with real and imagined meanings. In the attempts of meaning-making, these narrative are communicative mediums that expand collective memory. Through their ethical position, diasporic subjectivities appropriate and rewrite their marginalized stories. The "diasporic imaginary", hence, discloses its ethical turn to preserve cultural memory, its "ethical necessity to revitalize, to self-critique" (Mishra 2007: 210). The call to ethics in the South Asian texts analyzed here, in conclusion, alerts readers to their global membership, working out ethical connectivity between citizens of the same globe.

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