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"Splashing with Both Hands": Horror and Resilience in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract: Readings of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) often interpret it as simply about an Anglophilic Indian middle class. This essay focuses on how poverty and communal violence provide the context for most bourgeois narratives from South Asia. The only image of a slum in the novel appears when the child-narrator is on a veranda he is not supposed to be on. The slum is built in one of the effluent-filled marshes on the outskirts of Calcutta. Seeing a woman use her hands to push back toxic sludge to use the water underneath is unusual but not shocking for the narrator. I argue that the disruptive image of the precarious shantytown demonstrates how a self-defeating preoccupation with looking away from the quotidian horrors of life in India forms the very basis of Indian middle-class life.

Keywords: class, ecology, horror, Amitav Ghosh

Literary portrayals of India's emerging middle class mediate radically changing perceptions of India in the context of the turbulent ideological and material transformations following independence. Critics have viewed Amitav Ghosh's depiction of the middle class as central to his ability to problematize issues of nation-building in modern India. Nivedita Bagchi posits that "Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a manifestation of the desire to validate the postcolonial experience and to attempt a reconstruction of 'public' history through a reconstruction of the 'private' or personal history" (35). While Ghosh has undoubtedly been a leading figure in assembling literary reconstructions of India's fractured society,

I argue that his examination of the postcolonial middle-class experience does much more than validate the lived post-coloniality of his cosmopolitan readers. Rather, he decenters the usual understanding of what it means to be middle-class Bengali, imagining lines of escape toward new modes of existence.

Ghosh uses social realism to explore middle-class existence—its banality as well as its potentialities—in order to interrogate the moral authority the middle class presumes for itself in creating and controlling narratives of the nation. Thinking of Ghosh as participating in a legacy of Indian writers allows for inclusion of his works within "the larger intellectual project to rethink the desirability and content of nationalism by testing the limitations and plasticity of the realist mode" (Anjaria 186). Thus, we can read *The Shadow Lines* (1988) beyond its social representation and, instead, as a provocation that explores what new roles the postcolonial middle class might play in a truly progressive society yet to come.

The settings of the novel—South Asia, England, and beyond—are presented through the perspective of the unnamed narrator, a young man who grows up in middle-class Calcutta. The narrator gives the reader access to spaces in Calcutta that belong to the sanitized experience of middle-class India: his family's homes, his uncle Tridib's house in Ballygunge and his hangout in Gole Park, and the Victoria Memorial. The very real inequalities that exist in Calcutta—the slums, the beggars, the victims of colonial and postcolonial capital—exist not only at the margins of society from the perspective of the middle class; from this perspective, they exist in "a state of near spectral invisibility" (Ghosh, "Belonging, Diaspora and Community"). The only explicit image of a slum appears in the middle of the novel, when the narrator discovers the view from a veranda in a poorer relative's apartment complex. Because his grandmother lost touch with this part of the family during Partition, this is the first time the families are attempting to make contact. Finding no place to sit, the narrator escapes to the veranda:

> Raising myself on tiptoe, I leant on the low railing that ran along it and looked down. I could not see the road; the

> corridor faced in the other direction. There weren't any more houses behind the building we were in. The ground fell away sharply from the edges of the building and levelled out into a patchwork of stagnant pools, dotted with islands of low, raised ground. Clinging to these islands were little clumps of shanties, their beaten tin roofs glistening rustily in the midday sun. The pools were black, covered with a sludge so thick that it had defeated even the ubiquitous carpet of water hyacinth. I could see women squatting at the edge of the pools, splashing with both hands to drive back the layers of sludge, scooping up the cleaner water underneath to scrub their babies and wash their clothes and cooking utensils. . . . It was true, of course, that I could not see that landscape or anything like it from my own window, but its presence was palpable everywhere in our house; I had grown up with it. (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* 131)

This image of the shantytown slum appears just once in the text, but it effectively destabilizes the progression of the familial narrative that most of the novel is concerned with and, ultimately, the very notion of stability that the middle class believes they possess.

The novel's portrayal of postcolonial existence, written from the perspective of the son of an upwardly mobile middle-class household, is built on a base of horror symbolized by the shantytown. Ghosh introduces the image of horror in a way that immediately unsettles the audience. As the narrator notes, "[T]here was no place for [him to sit]"; he does not fit into the dynamics of his poor relative's house. There is not enough furniture in the house to politely host guests, especially relations who are more financially privileged. His mother has taken the only armchair while their cleaning lady, who made the connection between the formerly estranged relations, squats on the floor. The narrator is there only because he has stolen away from his father, who is waiting outside because he refuses to leave his car in what he perceives as a dodgy neighborhood. Positioned in this uncomfortable situation of being in a home where they do not belong, both narrator and reader see the shantytown from the veranda. Used for gossiping with neighbors and haggling with

the milkman as well as for domestic chores like drying clothes, the veranda is a liminal space that is both domestic and public.

The narrator has his first important realization while looking beyond the barrier, though he can only do so by "[r]aising" himself "on tip-toe" to lean "on the low railing that ran along" the veranda-like corridor and then looking down. What is striking here is that the displaced narrator's vision is obstructed, despite his elevated location. He sees that this vantage point does not allow him to see the road by which he and his family entered the apartment building. And indeed, he does not at first see "any more houses," despite later realizing that the ground below is filled with shanties.

As the "ground f[alls] away sharply from the edges of the building," both the narrator and the reader are given a bird's-eye view of the space before them. The narrator sees a marshy land of "stagnant pools," dotted with islands that are "low" but still "raised." The contrasting adjectives describing the islands further destabilize the reader, who, along with the narrator, is not only in the liminal inside-outside space of the veranda but has also experienced the drop of the ground falling away sharply from the building. This description takes into account both the lowness of the islands from the narrator's perspective as well their raised height relative to the pools.

It is only once the narrator acquires a sense of the marshy-ness of the space that the reader's attention is drawn to the shanties, which are "clinging" to the islands with their "beaten tin roofs glistening rustily in the midday sun." The anthropomorphic description of the "clinging" shanties further enhances the contradictorily described islands, the temporary structures reiterating the contingent nature of the islands. It is as if the metal shanties need to clutch at the islands in order to remain standing. After focusing on the structures in the distance, the cinematic movement of the narrative description makes a sharp retreat, pulling the reader dramatically back and upward to redirect their attention to the sight of the shantytown. The reader finds out that the "pools were black, covered with a sludge so thick it had defeated even the . . . water hyacinth." The shanties are already described as unstable and built on barely

raised land that would flood easily; here, the contamination of the water by black factory effluents and waste further intensifies the scene.

The image of the shanties is one of destitution—rusty metal clinging to barely high-enough islands, shanties that could possibly be flooded by industrial sludge. However, this image also suggests the resilience of the shanty slum. "Even the ubiquitous water hyacinth," famous for being one of the most durable waterweeds and pests, has been destroyed by the sludge, but the shantytown survives. The narrator can "see women squatting at the edge of the pools," balancing themselves at the edge of the low, raised islands. While the water hyacinth fails to survive the sludge, these women, who have managed to stabilize themselves within such a destabilizing space, can be seen "splashing with both hands to drive back the layers of sludge, scooping up the cleaner water underneath." Thus, it is not the destitution of the scene but rather the human ability to survive in such a context that seems to be the real horror of the image—not the rusty tin or sludge but rather the splashing of the water with both hands. It is the fear not just that one could find oneself in the shantytown that is palpable in middle-class homes but also that one would not be able to survive in poverty. It is the image of the women of the shantytown splashing away sludge water to survive that further decenters the novel's middle-class narrative. The frightening resilience of the poor, which summons the fear of the members of the middle class that they would not be able to survive in similar conditions, is a spectral force that constitutes middle-class narratives and life.

At this point, the narrator's poor relative tries to shield him from what he has just seen: "Don't look there! she cried. It's dirty! Then she led me back inside" (Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* 131). The narrator's encounter with the image of the slum ends with a clear reminder of the rudeness of acknowledging its presence explicitly. Though just a child, the narrator is already "well-schooled in looking away, the jungle-craft of gentility" (131). He is preparing himself to experience the world within the restrictions, the shadow lines, imposed by his position in society as an upwardly mobile postcolonial Indian. Despite the "jungle-craft of gentility" necessitating that the dirty and poor be made invisible by

the practice of "looking away," the narrator affirms that "it was a waste of effort to lead [him] away" (131). He states that while he cannot see something akin to the scene of a shantytown from his window, "its presence is palpable everywhere in [his] house," manifesting as what "lent the note of hysteria to [his] mother's voice when she drilled [him] for [his] examinations" (131). It is an unseen yet real place which is referenced in the "*there*" where one ends up if one does not study or work hard (131; emphasis in original).

The attention the novel pays to the sludge yields to a deeper examination of the double-bind of postcolonial middle-class existence in this novel, emblematized by the need to both "look away" from and see the "dirty" things and places. What makes looking away untenable is the need to know where not to look. The disruptive image of the shantytown allows us to see how the horror of life in the shantytowns, which produces a preoccupation both with it and with ignoring it, forms the very basis of middle-class life. On a similar note, Ghosh ends the novel leaving us thinking once again of the horror of spaces seemingly outside—while forming the contours of—middle-class India.

The other specter in the novel that is both ever-present and generally not spoken about is communal violence. Although the narrator's uncle Tridib is a main character in the early part of the novel, he is not included in the narrative after the narrator grows up. May, a British family friend of Tridib and the narrator, tells the story of how Tridib died, apparently "sacrific[ing]" (246) himself by first saving her from a mob that might have killed her and then disappearing into the mob that was advancing on the cycle rickshaw his great uncle insisted on riding in. The mob was protesting the desecration of a Muslim shrine in faraway Kashmir, but this event is a stand-in for long-simmering communal tensions that have been institutionalized by Partition. We can rethink the reading of Tridib's purported "sacrifice" by situating his vanishing into the mob within the context of the hands moving beneath the sludge. Sharing her experience with the narrator at the end of the novel, May remembers how she was the only one who did not seem to understand the true danger they all had been in at the time:

> Everyone there did, except me. I was the only one who didn't. I began to run towards the rickshaw. I heard Tridib shouting my name. But I kept running. I heard him running after me. He caught up with me and pushed me, from behind. I stumbled and fell. I thought he'd stop to take me back to the car. But he ran on towards the rickshaw. . . . The mob dragged him in. He vanished. . . . [T]hey'd cut Tridib's throat, from ear to ear.
>
> That was that; that's all there is to tell. (245)

The central significance of Tridib in the narrator's experience and understanding of the world, cemented by Tridib's untimely death which is never spoken about in the family, further disrupts the hold of middle-class norms and the expectations of middle-class life on the narrator. Unlike the rest of his family, Tridib is not employed in a respectable international job, despite his intelligence and training as an archaeologist. He instead chooses to stay in Calcutta in order to take care of his grandmother, look after the Ballygunge family house, enjoy the roadside *adda* (gossip) at Gole Park, and purportedly work on archival research. It is in Tridib's room, surrounded by cigarette smoke and using Tridib's battered Bartholomew's Atlas, that the narrator begins to understand how the lines represented on the pages of the atlas control his own ability to be in the world. It is Tridib who tells the narrator that "everyone lives in a story. . . . [I]t is just a question of which one you chose" (182). Tridib offers the narrator (and reader) avenues of escape from the banality of postcolonial middle-class experience and ways to reject narratives of middle-class exceptionalism and meritocracy.

Just as May describes Tridib's death as a "sacrifice," the narrator finds possible redemption in Tridib's suicidal act. The novel vaguely alludes to Tridib's gruesome death at many points, but when the novel finally describes it, the tone is extremely matter of fact. "I suppose you know most of it already," May starts, reiterating the way Tridib's death has permeated the narrator's life, before laying out as clearly as possible her memories of the event and ending by stating "that was that; that's all there is to tell" (245). Tridib chooses not just to get out of the car to stop

May from killing herself but also to run "on towards the rickshaw" and the mob. While the narrator does not valorize Tridib's running toward his death, he does not condemn it either. In providing a glimpse of what the narrator refers to in the last line of the novel as a "final redemptive mystery" (246), without reducing it to a suicide by an elite postcolonial subject who cannot handle the contradictions of their privileged life, the narrator opens up to a project of exploring analytical and practical options of "confronting and delinking from . . . the colonial matrix of power" (Mignolo xxvii).

Tridib declares that one has the option to choose which story one inhabits. Accordingly, he not only rejects the narrative of achievement and success determined by his birth and upbringing, but decides to save May as well as "vanish" into the mob. He thus defies in more ways than one the shadow lines imposed by his class position. Hearkening back to the earlier image of hands looking for clean water under the sludge, we might now read Tridib's sacrifice as a similar moment of resilience, rather than merely suicide. We must draw on these aesthetic cues in the novel in order to read this climactic scene as challenging the variations of a middle-class teleology. Tridib goes beyond his privilege and limitations in order to do more than just *see* the sludge, represented here as the mob; he disappears into it and thus fully inhabits the horror.

Ghosh has created a literary vehicle that does not simply validate the postcolonial experience. The experiences of bodily destabilization the reader undergoes alongside the narrator in the unusually mobile narrative description of the shantytown, together with Tridib's dramatic leap into the mob, take our reading of *The Shadow Lines* far beyond into possible decolonial futures and frameworks.

The image of the slum that resides at the very center of the novel displaces middle-class and cosmopolitan concerns with identity in a transnational context. Such concerns have already been addressed in the current scholarship on the novel and Ghosh's work in general. I hope to have shown that another question emerging from this novel is that of which story one chooses to inhabit. The image of the slum very clearly situates the middle-class narrative within its material context of postcolonial India. The image decenters notions of stability and exposes

the dark underbelly of postcolonial existence by revealing the horrifying existence of suffering and ecological degradation in close proximity to lavish comfort.

The Shadow Lines' focus on middle-class Indian and diasporic Indian experience provides cathartic reading material for brown elites around the world. However, by acknowledging the horror that forms the basis of this middle-class experience, the novel destabilizes the very experience that it seems to validate. The novel explores the messy ways in which the postcolonial middle-class in India negotiates its existence through a contradictory process of locating and looking away from the poverty that enables its existence—an exploration that offers the possibility of escape.

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