



# Echoes Of Violence: Intergenerational Trauma and The Memory of Partition in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

Chandan Soni<sup>1\*</sup>, Anoop Kumar Tiwari<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, G.E. Road, Raipur, 492010, Chhattisgarh, India. Email: chandan.ptosu@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0003-1674-7766

<sup>2</sup>Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, G.E. Road, Raipur, 492010, Chhattisgarh, India. Email: aktiwari.eng@nitrr.ac.in, ORCID: 0000-0002-8241-618

\*Corresponding Author: Chandan Soni

\*Email: chandan.ptosu@gmail.com

**Citation:** Chandan Soni, et.al (2024). Echoes Of Violence: Intergenerational Trauma and the Memory of Partition in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1) 6828-6836

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.10070

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the strong presence of intergenerational trauma and the memory of Partition in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, a novel in which the aftershocks of communal violence and national division across time, space, and generations have been evaluated. Drawing upon the theories of trauma, memory studies, and postcolonial criticism, this study investigates the effects of the traumatic legacies of Partition and communal riots on the characters who were neither direct participants nor witnesses to these riots, but who inherit the psychological and emotional results of violence. The novel's narrative strategies—its use of fragmentation, memory loops, and multiple temporalities have been analyzed to demonstrate how trauma is transmitted, internalized, and re-imagined within familial and cultural contexts through a qualitative and thematic close reading of the text. The paper argues that Ghosh challenges conventional historical accounts by emphasizing personal and fragmented recollections over national memory, thus engaging in a counter-historiographical project that foregrounds private suffering and cultural silence. Ultimately, *The Shadow Lines* serves as a compelling literary work in which generational boundaries are blurred by the echoes of violence, revealing how trauma becomes part of the collective psyche and shapes identity, belonging, and historical consciousness of future generation.

**Keywords:** Partition, Intergenerational Trauma, Postmemory, Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, Communal Violence, Trauma Theory, Narrative Memory, Postcolonial Literature

## 1 Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most traumatic and defining moments in the history of South Asia, entailing a legacy of violence, disruption, and cultural upheaval. The event displaced nearly fifteen million people and led to the deaths of more than a million, breaking families, friendships, and communities for eternity across the subcontinent. While official historiographies often emphasize the geopolitical and administrative dimensions of the Partition, literary narratives have long served as crucial counter-sites that foreground the human, emotional, and psychological aftermath of this event. Over the decades, South Asian literature has struggled with not only the immediate horrors of Partition but also its lingering echoes in the lives of subsequent generations. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) stands out in this tradition as a richly textured narrative that explains how the trauma of Partition and communal violence continues to echo through time and memory, shaping identities, perceptions, and histories. *The Shadow Lines* is not a conventional Partition novel in the sense that it does not stage the violence of 1947 straightforwardly. Instead, it focuses on its after effects—the way trauma, once inflicted, continues to live on in the memories and imaginations of those born long after the event. The novel which is structured as a fragmented, non-linear narrative, captures the disorienting effects of inherited trauma through its unnamed narrator, who reconstructs his family's past and his cousin Tridib's death during a riot in Dhaka. The novel moves across the borders of time and space—between Calcutta, Dhaka, and London; between past and present; between memory and forgetting—revealing how violence and trauma disregard national and generational boundaries. Ghosh

interrogates the arbitrariness of political borders and also critiques the limits of historical knowledge and the silences within familial memory with the help of this narrative structure.

The theme of intergenerational trauma is central to *The Shadow Lines*. It possesses the idea that traumatic experiences are not confined to those who directly experience them but are also transmitted across generations through memory, silence, storytelling, and emotional inheritance. Characters in the novel are haunted not only by what happened to them but by what was never fully explained or remembered by other members of their family. This form of "postmemory," as theorized by Hirsch, describes the relationship that the "generation after" suffers to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before (Hirsch, 2008). The narrator, reconstructs his family's past through fragments and hearsay, absorbing their trauma, thereby creating his own psychic landscape. Though he was not present at his uncle Tridib's death or the violent Partition disturbances in Dhaka, he knows the pain of it through the traumatic recollections of his family members.

This paper investigates how does *The Shadow Lines* represent the trauma of Partition and communal violence as a phenomenon that transcends generational boundaries and in what ways does Ghosh's narrative structure reflect the non-linear, fragmented nature of trauma and memory. At the same time, the question, how do memory, silence, and imagination contribute to the transmission and reshaping of traumatic histories is also displayed in the novel. The thesis guiding this inquiry is that Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* dramatizes the mechanisms of intergenerational trauma through its dispersed narrative form, multi-voiced storytelling, and themes of memory and loss. The novel critiques the inadequacy of official history and highlights the emotional and psychological impacts of Partition that continue to shape familial and national identities even decades later. This paper argues that Ghosh constructs a literary portrait of history where personal memory functions as an alternative archive—one capable of preserving and transmitting experiences too painful or marginalized to be acknowledged by formal history through a close literary analysis supported by trauma theory, postmemory studies, and Partition historiography.

## 2 Literature Review

Substantial scholarly attention has been gathered by Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* since its publication in 1988, mainly for its innovative treatment of time, memory, and the politics of historical narrative. The novel holds a unique place in the context of Partition literature and trauma studies not for depicting Partition violence directly, but for exploring its psychic aftershocks and intergenerational effects. This literature review locates the present study within four intersecting fields: Partition literature, trauma and memory studies, theories of intergenerational trauma and postmemory, and scholarship on Ghosh and narrative memory.

### 2.1 Trauma and Partition Literature

The trauma of the Partition of India has been documented in both historical and literary studies. Urvashi Butalia establishes the experiences of survivors—especially women, children and marginalized groups—whose voices were silenced in dominant nationalist discourses (Butalia, 2017). She emphasizes how trauma often manifests not in historical records but in silences, gaps, and fragmented memories passed down within families. She has been the first-hand witness to the people displaced in partition of 1947. She worked as a volunteer in a Rehabilitation camp in India. She has a huge collection of testimonies, interviews, oral narratives of the victims of partition atrocities. Pandey similarly critiques the homogenizing narratives of the state, arguing that Partition is remembered not as a unified historical event, but through disjointed, affective, and regionally distinct recollections (Pandey, 2001).

Menon and Bhasin have highlighted the dimensions of gender in traumatic memory, showing how violence against women during Partition became deeply personal as well as symbolically national (Menon & Bhasin, 1998). Their work shows how trauma operates through embodied experience and cultural silence. Bandyopadhyay & Chaudhury further expand this discourse by their argument that Partition literature often becomes a collection of subaltern memory, enabling access to experiences that were omitted from official historiography (Bandyopadhyay & Chaudhury, 2022). Partition literature includes several undocumented experiences lived by the survivors which remained in oblivion. In this light, *The Shadow Lines* contributes to Partition literature by tracing their psychological inheritance across generations instead of directly documenting events of violence.

### 2.2 Studies on Amitav Ghosh and Memory

*The Shadow Lines* has been interpreted by Kaul as a literary act of counter-memory thereby challenging state-sponsored history by focusing on subjective memory (Kaul, 1994). Khair studies the narrative layering in Ghosh and argues that his oscillation between the settings of different spaces and time disrupts the fixed notions of national identity (Khair, 2016). Kumar advocates that treatment of Partition in the novel is deliberately oblique. It resists closure and foregrounds ambiguity (Kumar, 2008). She is of the opinion that for the victims of Partition the lines between nations do not exist and suggests that the "shadow lines" represent geopolitical borders as well as psychological and narrative boundaries.

### 2.3 Trauma and Intergenerational Transmission

The concept of postmemory propounded by Hirsch is indispensable for understanding how the narrator relates to events in the novel that happen to occur before his birth. Postmemory has been defined as the relationship the "generation after" has with the trauma of their predecessors, mediated through stories and cultural practices according to Hirsch. Although rooted in Holocaust studies, her theory has been applied to other historical traumas, including Partition (Hirsch, 2008). The theory of postmemory has not been applied to *The Shadow Lines* in previous studies. Alexander maintains that trauma becomes cultural when a group perceives a lasting injury that redefines collective identity (Alexander et al., 2004). Eyerman elaborates that trauma can be transmitted through cultural narratives and media (Eyerman, 2001). In *The Shadow Lines*, these concepts explain how Partition trauma permeates cultural and familial consciousness even without direct experience. The role of media (newspapers in case of *The Shadow Lines*) is distinctly important in discovering the truth of the situations in the past by the narrator of the novel. The years old newspapers are accessed by him from National Library in Delhi, which help him establish connections between the puzzled incidents of Tridib's death and the communal violence disturbances in Calcutta and Dhaka at the same time. The role of media in this context has not been evaluated in earlier studies.

### 2.4 Gaps in Existing Scholarship

Though, *The Shadow Lines* has been widely analyzed for its themes of history and memory, little focus has been given specifically to intergenerational trauma. This paper addresses this gap by focusing on how trauma is transmitted across generations through silence, storytelling, and affect. It positions Ghosh's novel not only as a critique of nationalism but also as a meditation on inherited emotional legacies of violence. This paper seeks to address this gap by analyzing how trauma is transmitted across generations—through storytelling, silence, and affect—in Ghosh's novel. By focusing on the psychological and emotional inheritance of violence, the study highlights a new dimension of *The Shadow Lines*: its portrayal of trauma as a phenomenon that transcends temporal boundaries and manifests within familial and cultural memory. Through this lens, Ghosh's work emerges not only as a critique of political history but as a meditation on how trauma becomes a haunting, intergenerational condition.

## 3 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together trauma theory, postmemory studies, and postcolonial historiography to interpret the psychological, cultural, and narrative representations of Partition-related trauma in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. These perspectives help articulate how violence and loss persist across generations and become embedded in memory, identity, and storytelling.

### 3.1 Trauma Theory

Trauma theory provides a foundational lens for analyzing how psychological rupture is expressed in literature. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is characterized by belatedness; it is not fully experienced in the moment but returns later in fragmented, often non-verbal forms. She explains the theory of trauma with reference from Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) about the story of Tancred and Clorinda, told by Tasso in his romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*. She says that the experience of repetition at the heart of a catastrophe which Freud calls as "Traumatic Neurosis" emerges when a sufferer of a traumatic event reenacts it endlessly because he simply could not leave it behind. Caruth says, "... trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (2016, p. 4). Trauma, for Caruth, is less about the factual occurrence than about its lingering, disruptive presence in memory and narrative. This notion is particularly relevant in *The Shadow Lines*, where the Partition and Tridib's death are reconstructed through scattered recollections and narrative interruptions, rather than as coherent events.

Dori Laub expands on the phenomenology of trauma, describing it as an event that can lead to a "collapse of witnessing," in which the subject is unable to narrate or comprehend the experience at the time it occurs. Laub highlights the necessity of reconstructing traumatic events retrospectively, often through testimonial narratives and acts of listening (Laub, 2013). In Ghosh's novel, the narrator's attempt to make sense of the past—especially events he did not directly witness—functions as an act of secondary witnessing shaped by others' silences and emotional cues. May Price and the narrator's cousin Roby who were only twelve-year-old at that time, were the witness of the mob violence at Dhaka, in which Tridib, Jethamoshai, their grand uncle and his caretaker Khalil were brutally killed. Roby and May Price do not discuss the trauma for so many years. The narrator does not ask about how Tridib was killed, what had actually happened that day in Dhaka. May asks the narrator on their last meeting in London, at the end of the novel, "Why haven't you ever asked me how Tridib died? I thought it would be the first thing you'd ask" (Ghosh, 2010, p. 274). Then she narrates what actually had happened. Similarly, Robi goes through the trauma of silence until, prompted by Rehman the host at the Indian restaurant in London. Rehman asks Robi how could he remember the exact place where he lived in Dhaka, after so many years. Robi replies, since his brother and grand uncle were killed at that place. Later he shares his trauma with Ila and the narrator, "It's a dream you know ... I often know when it's coming, and on nights like that I try not to sleep ... I've never been able to rid myself of that dream" (Ghosh, 2010, pp. 268, 271). Robi was haunted by

that dream until he shares it with the narrator and Ila. This relates with the concept of working through as suggested by LaCapra. Dominick LaCapra offers a distinction between “acting out” and “working through” trauma. Acting out is characterized by compulsive repetition and fixation, while working through involves the reflective processing of trauma through language and narrative (LaCapra, 2014). *The Shadow Lines* captures both processes: the narrator exhibits elements of acting out through his obsessive retellings of Tridib’s story but also begins to work through inherited trauma by piecing together a fragmented family history into a meaningful, though, an incomplete narrative.

### 3.2 Postmemory and Cultural Trauma

The concept of postmemory, introduced by Marianne Hirsch is instrumental for analyzing how trauma is transmitted across generations. Postmemory refers to the relationship that the “generation after” has with the traumatic experiences of the previous generation—experiences they did not live through but know through mediated accounts, such as stories, photographs, and silences (Hirsch, 2008). In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator’s deep emotional investment in the events surrounding Partition and Tridib’s death exemplifies postmemorial engagement. Although he was not present, these events form the emotional architecture of his life and identity. Hirsch emphasizes that postmemory is not about direct recollection but about imaginative and affective engagement with inherited trauma (Hirsch, 2008). This framework explains why the narrator’s memories are not linear or complete; they are composites of hearsay, speculation, and emotional resonance. His attempts to fill in the gaps left by his family’s silence reflect the psychological and narrative functions of postmemory. His parents do not talk about the traumatic past incidents at all.

Cultural trauma theory, as proposed by Jeffrey C. Alexander, provides a broader sociological perspective on how groups internalize and narrate collective suffering. Alexander argues that cultural trauma occurs when a group perceives itself as having undergone a devastating experience that leaves lasting damage to its collective identity (Alexander et al., 2004). Ron Eyerman further contends that such trauma is transmitted and sustained through cultural forms—literature, rituals, public memory—which reinforce the emotional continuity of past suffering (Eyerman, 2001). In Ghosh’s novel, the trauma of Partition acts as a background radiation that informs not only individual psyches but also transgenerational relationships and cultural worldviews.

### 3.3 Partition Studies and Collective Memory

Postcolonial historians and memory scholars such as Urvashi Butalia and Gyanendra Pandey have foregrounded the subjective and fragmented nature of Partition memory. Butalia documents how trauma is often preserved through oral history and familial silence, especially among women and marginalized communities (Butalia, 2017). Pandey critiques official historiographies for erasing the emotional and ethical complexities of Partition in favor of a sanitized, nation-building narrative (Pandey, 2001). These perspectives resonate with Ghosh’s literary approach in *The Shadow Lines*, where Partition is not addressed through formal history but through emotionally charged recollections, absences, and intergenerational narratives. By centering characters who experience the aftereffects of violence rather than its immediate spectacle, Ghosh aligns with the postcolonial historiographic impulse to recover micro-histories and suppressed voices. Together, these theoretical frameworks enable a nuanced reading of *The Shadow Lines* as a literary site where trauma—both personal and collective—is preserved, transmitted, and potentially consolidated through memory, narrative, and imagination. The convergence of trauma theory, postmemory, and Partition historiography underscores the novel’s engagement with inherited suffering and its commitment to bearing witness across time and generations.

## 4 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close literary analysis and supported by interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks drawn from trauma studies, postmemory theory, and postcolonial historiography. The goal is to examine how Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* narratively represents intergenerational trauma and the psychological aftershocks of Partition, particularly through its non-linear form, narrative silences, and fragmented memory.

The primary method employed is close reading, which enables detailed textual analysis of narrative techniques, thematic motifs, and character development. This method is especially suited to trauma narratives, where meaning often lies in gaps, disruptions, and stylistic ambiguity (Caruth, 2016). Attention is given to narrative temporality, the role of the unnamed narrator, and the treatment of Tridib’s death as a site of both absence and obsessive reconstruction. The analysis also considers how memory functions structurally within the novel—looping, disordered, and repetitive—reflecting the cognitive features of post-traumatic recall (Laub, 2013).

This literary approach is complemented by the application of trauma theory and postmemory studies. Hirsch’s concept of postmemory guides the interpretation of how the narrator inherits and internalizes trauma through familial and cultural storytelling, even though he did not experience the original events (Hirsch, 2008). In parallel, cultural trauma theory informs the understanding of how Partition is constructed as a shared psychological wound that transcends direct experience and is sustained through cultural memory (Alexander et al., 2004).

Postcolonial historiography, particularly the work of Butalia (1998) and Pandey (2001), provides the historical grounding for interpreting Ghosh's narrative as a counter-memory project. Their insights into gendered and vernacular remembrance offer crucial context for understanding the novel's resistance to linear and state-sanctioned historical narratives. Together, these interdisciplinary methods allow for a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of how *The Shadow Lines* engages with the transmission of trauma and the unstable boundaries between personal and national memory. The methodology thus bridges literary form with psychological depth and historical context, enabling a rich exploration of intergenerational trauma in post-Partition India.

## 5 Analysis

### 5.1 Partition as Traumatic Foundation

In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh offers a distinctive portrayal of the trauma of Partition by abstaining the direct depiction of violence and instead foregrounding its psychological and emotional aftermath. Unlike traditional Partition narratives that dramatize the moment of national division, Ghosh situates the trauma in the echo chamber of memory, where it reverberates through individuals, families, and communities. This displacement is central to understanding how trauma in the novel functions as both a historical and emotional legacy. Ghosh communicates the memory of trauma through his narrator when he notes, "Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence ... the silence of an imperfect memory" (Ghosh, 2010, p. 240).

The novel's narrator does not experience Partition firsthand, nor does he witness the communal violence that erupts in Dhaka during Tridib's death. Yet, the trauma of these events becomes a formative influence in his life. The narrator's deep emotional involvement with a past he never lived exemplifies Hirsch's concept of postmemory—where descendants of trauma survivors inherit not the events themselves but the emotional imprints of those events through narrative fragments, silences, and affective cues (Hirsch, 2008). Whereas, he had had the firsthand experience of riot situation in Calcutta when he was a school boy in 1964. While coming home after sudden call off at school, he states, "The men who were racing after us were no more than a few feet from the back of the bus now. We ducked under our seats as stones began to rattle against our windows" (Ghosh, 2010, p. 224). The terror of the little children is conspicuous, "we did not know whether we were going home or not ... our city had turned against us. Tublu began to cry ... It would not be enough to say we were afraid: we were stupefied with fear" (Ghosh, 2010, pp. 224-225).

Tridib's death is the novel's emotional and narrative focal point. Although the incident occurs offstage and is never fully described, it profoundly affects the narrator, who reconstructs it obsessively over the years. This narrative compulsion reflects Caruth's theory of belated trauma, where the event is experienced not in its original moment but in its repetitive return in memory and imagination (Caruth, 2016). The narrator's fragmented account mirrors the structure of trauma itself, which resists integration into a coherent narrative. He happens to discover the truth of Tridib's death years later when his mother says, "She's never been the same you know, since they killed Tridib over there. 'Killed' Tridib? He says to his mother. "Who killed Tridib? You told me it was an accident" (Ghosh, 2010, p. 262). Moreover, the trauma of Tridib's death is inseparable from the broader context of Partition and its lingering communal tensions. The riot in Dhaka that claims Tridib's life is presented not as an isolated eruption of violence but as part of a historical continuum rooted in the subcontinent's divided past. This continuity underscores Alexander's idea of cultural trauma—an injury to a group's collective identity that is internalized and remembered through generations (Alexander et al., 2004). In Ghosh's narrative, the line between personal tragedy and national trauma becomes blurred. It is also depicted through the thoughts of Jethamoshai when he says:

"I understand 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'll die here" (Ghosh, 2010, p. 237).

Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother, offers another lens into the legacy of Partition. A staunch nationalist, she initially believes that borders are tangible and meaningful demarcations that safeguard identity. Her journey to Dhaka, however, reveals the absurdity and futility of these "shadow lines" when the imagined certainties of nationhood dissolve into chaos. Tha'mma's ideological disillusionment is itself a form of trauma, as her beliefs in national belonging and historical purpose collapse in the face of personal loss. She is unable to find her Dhaka as she had known it and repeatedly asks, "Where's Dhaka? I can't see Dhaka ... The Dhaka she was thinking of was the city that had surrounded their old house" (Ghosh, 2010, pp. 213-214). Her eventual silence about Tridib's death becomes a site of intergenerational transmission, as her inability to articulate the trauma perpetuates its presence in the family. According to Jeffrey K. Olick, the recentness of a traumatic event is relational to the formation of memory. He asks, "Are the direct participants still alive? Are they dying out? Are they long gone? And who are the scholars of these events? Participants? Bystanders? Victims? Descendants? These differences matter" (Tota & Hagen, 2016, p. 46) In the case of *The Shadow lines* all of the questions are applicable, since the narrator's grandmother Tha'mma, Tridib, May Price and Roby were the victims. Whereas, the narrator is the descendant. The novel's structure also contributes to its depiction of trauma. Events unfold non-chronologically, memories overlap and interrupt one another, and narrative

authority is dispersed across characters and time periods. This formal fragmentation reflects Laub's idea that trauma defies linear representation and instead demands a nonlinear, layered approach (Laub, 2013). Ghosh's narrative technique, in this sense, is not merely stylistic but mimetic: it enacts the workings of trauma through its very form. To sum up, it can be said that *The Shadow Lines* depicts Partition not as a concluded historical event but as an ongoing psychic rupture. Through the death of Tridib, the ideological breakdown of Tha'mma, and the narrator's compulsive reconstruction of the past, Ghosh reveals how the trauma of Partition becomes embedded in individual and collective memory. The novel foregrounds the idea that trauma is not confined to those who directly experience it but ripples outward, affecting those who inherit its echoes across time and space. This layered representation makes *The Shadow Lines* a profound meditation on the persistence of historical wounds and the enduring quest to narrate and understand them.

### 5.2 Memory, Silence, and Unresolved Loss

One of the most poignant dimensions of *The Shadow Lines* is its intricate portrayal of memory as both a source of knowledge and a repository of unresolved trauma. Memory in the novel is unstable, incomplete, and often mediated through silence—a reflection of how trauma resists full articulation and transmission. Through the intergenerational gaps in memory and the haunting presence of what is not said, Ghosh illustrates how trauma is preserved not only through recollection but through silence, ambiguity, and emotional residue. The novel's narrator is emblematic of the postmemorial subject. He did not witness Partition or Tridib's death but is profoundly shaped by the fragmented narratives and unspoken grief passed down within his family. Hirsch argues that postmemory is not about direct transmission of experience but about a mediated, affective engagement with the past through storytelling, photographs, and behavior. In Ghosh's text, memory is often conveyed through stories that are incomplete or emotionally fraught, and the narrator is left to assemble meaning from fragments, hesitations, and contradictions (Hirsch, 2008). Tha'mma's silence about Tridib's death is a key example of unresolved trauma. Her inability to openly grieve or narrate what happened creates an emotional void in the family. As Laub contends, trauma that is not witnessed or articulated can become embedded as a persistent silence that affects others within the survivor's orbit (Laub, 2013). Tha'mma's ideological convictions collapse after her trip to Dhaka, yet she cannot fully voice her disillusionment. Her retreat into silence becomes an implicit form of communication, transmitting unresolved loss and grief to the narrator and other family members.

This narrative silence is mirrored in the novel's structure. The absence of a single, authoritative version of events, particularly regarding Tridib's death, forces the narrator to rely on fragmented recollections and speculative imagination. The multiplicity of perspectives and non-linear temporality reflect the cognitive disruptions associated with trauma. Caruth notes that traumatic memory is often nonlinear, characterized by repetition and disruption rather than closure (Caruth, 2016). In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator returns again and again to the scene of Tridib's death, attempting to make sense of it despite the elusiveness of a definitive account. The depiction of Robi's trauma and its aftermath is portrayed sensitively. He has the dreaded dream about the scene of violence which troubles him constantly, "I've never been able to rid myself of that dream...I used to think: if only that dream would go away, I would be like other people; I would be free. I would have given anything to be free of that memory." (Ghosh, 2010, p. 271). Robi's description helps the narrator to tie the loose ends of the story of Tridib's death. The narrator's process of remembering is thus inseparable from a process of re-imagining. His efforts to reconstruct the events in Dhaka blur the boundaries between memory and imagination, reality and narrative. This merging of ideas speaks to the impossibility of fully recovering traumatic histories—what is remembered is always partial, distorted, or emotionally refracted. Yet, as LaCapra asserts, the act of working through trauma requires precisely this kind of imperfect and reflective engagement with the past (LaCapra, 2014). By returning repeatedly to memories that resist clarity, the narrator initiates a process of emotional evaluation, even if it does not culminate in resolution.

In addition to family memory, Ghosh also critiques collective memory and its role in shaping national consciousness. The novel exposes how nationalist histories often exclude or obscure the emotional truths of Partition. The narrator's struggle to recover Tridib's story becomes a form of counter-memory, challenging the sanitized narratives of the state. This aligns with Butalia's assertion that the most powerful accounts of Partition often lie in personal testimonies and family silences, rather than in official records (Butalia, 2017). In conclusion, *The Shadow Lines* portrays memory as a contested, fragmentary, and emotionally charged terrain through which trauma is transmitted. The novel suggests that silence is not the absence of memory but a mode of its expression, especially when the trauma is too painful or ideologically inconvenient to articulate. Through the narrator's persistent engagement with these silences, Ghosh dramatizes the slow and painful process of working through loss that is never fully named. Memory in *The Shadow Lines* is thus both burden and bridge—a means of bearing witness to trauma that spans generations.

### 5.3 Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma

In the novel, trauma is not confined to the generation that directly experiences violence. Rather, it is transmitted across familial and generational boundaries, shaping the inner worlds of those who come after. Ghosh's novel illustrates how the trauma of Partition and communal conflict persists not through historical documentation but through storytelling, affect, and silence—mechanisms that facilitate what Hirsch terms "postmemory." The unnamed narrator becomes the primary site for exploring this inheritance, as he absorbs

and reconstructs the traumatic experiences of his elders. Hirsch explains that postmemory is not based on direct recall but on imaginative investment and emotional identification with the past. The narrator's fixation with Tridib's death—an event that occurred when he was too young to comprehend its significance—is indicative of this process. He internalizes his family's grief and silence, constructing narratives that bridge memory and imagination, in an effort to understand both the event and its emotional aftermath. His obsession with reconstructing Tridib's final moments, despite the lack of a clear, consistent account, suggests that he has inherited not just the memory but also the unresolved trauma surrounding the event.

Eyerman argues that cultural trauma is preserved and transmitted through shared narratives, rituals, and symbols. In the case of Ghosh's novel, storytelling functions as both a mode of remembering and a mechanism for transmitting trauma. The narrator's education in family history comes not through formal recounting but through fragmented anecdotes, emotional reactions, and occasional lapses into silence by the older generation. These partial transmissions reinforce the idea that trauma is often passed down in forms that are not entirely verbal or rational, but affective and bodily. The narrator's deep emotional entanglement with stories of Partition and Dhaka violence highlights how trauma transcends time. Caruth argues that trauma lies in its latency, its tendency to return unbidden in belated ways (Caruth, 2016). The narrator's attempts to make sense of Tridib's death are driven by a compulsion to process something that was never fully grasped in its original occurrence. He becomes a vessel for belated witnessing, bearing the emotional weight of a past he did not live through but nonetheless inhabits.

Tha'mma's role in transmitting trauma is particularly significant. Her nationalistic fervor, followed by her emotional collapse after the events in Dhaka, creates a paradoxical legacy for the narrator. There are instances where a strong spirit for nation is expressed by her when she gives away the gold chain gifted by her husband which she wore all her life. She says, "I gave it to the fund for the war. I had to, don't you see? For your sake; for our freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us." (Ghosh, 2010, p. 261). She was fascinated with the stories of the extremist freedom fighters, "the heroism of Khudiram Bose". She tells Tridib that "She wanted to do something for the terrorists, work for them in a small way ... She would have been content to run errands for them, to cook their food, wash their clothes, anything" (Ghosh, 2010, p. 43). On one hand, she instills in him a strong sense of identity rooted in place and history; on the other, her silence and ideological disillusionment generate confusion and emotional instability. This ambiguity is emblematic of the intergenerational nature of trauma—what is passed down is not a clear narrative, but a set of emotional cues, fears, and anxieties that shape the worldview of the next generation (LaCapra, 2014).

The idea that the past is never past, but lives on through its effects on the present, is underscored by the novel's non-linear narrative structure. Events do not unfold chronologically; instead, they recur and overlap, reflecting the psychic structure of inherited trauma. The narrator's repeated returns to the same scenes, particularly Tridib's death, signal a form of narrative "acting out" in which unresolved trauma is re-experienced compulsively (LaCapra, 2014). Yet, the act of narration itself holds potential for "working through" this trauma, as the narrator gradually contextualizes and critiques the stories he has inherited. In this way, Ghosh's novel challenges simplistic notions of historical distance. Partition, though temporally removed from the narrator's life, is psychically present. It influences his understanding of identity, place, and belonging. The trauma of the past is thus shown to be a living force—one that shapes familial dynamics and personal consciousness long after the historical moment has passed. *The Shadow Lines* reveals the subtle yet powerful mechanisms by which trauma is transmitted across generations. Through its exploration of postmemory, affective storytelling, and narrative repetition, the novel underscores how the past haunts the present—not as static history but as a dynamic, evolving emotional legacy. Ghosh offers a compelling account of how individuals come to bear the weight of inherited trauma, transforming personal and collective memory into sites of ethical engagement and narrative repair.

#### 5.4 Narrative as Testimony and Recovery

In the novel, narrative serves as more than a means of storytelling—it becomes a space of testimony, an act of witnessing, and a vehicle for potential recovery. The novel's fragmented and recursive structure mirrors the disjointed nature of traumatic memory, while its persistent engagement with the past suggests a therapeutic impulse to make meaning out of pain. By reassembling fragmented memories and silences, Ghosh's narrator attempts to transform a personal and familial history marked by rupture into a coherent, if tentative, narrative of understanding. According to Laub the act of bearing witness to trauma is not merely about recounting events; it involves a relational process where the speaker reconstructs the past in dialogue with an imagined or actual listener (Laub, 2013). In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator assumes this dual role. He is both the recipient of others' trauma and the one who gives it narrative form. His storytelling is an attempt to bear witness to what was not witnessed, to fill in the silences left by Tha'mma, by his family, and by history itself.

This process is not straightforward. The narrator often acknowledges the incompleteness and subjectivity of his accounts. Yet, it is precisely this awareness that marks a transition from "acting out" to "working through" trauma, as LaCapra describes. Instead of remaining trapped in repetitive retellings, the narrator begins to reflect on the implications of these stories, questioning the ideological frameworks of nationalism, borders, and identity that shaped them. His narrative thus functions as an ethical engagement with the past, where recovery does not mean erasure of trauma but a reconfiguration of its place in personal and collective consciousness. The formal qualities of the novel reinforce this therapeutic function. The non-linear chronology, overlapping

voices, and frequent returns to pivotal moments exemplify the structure of traumatic memory, which Caruth argues is not assimilated in chronological time but revisits the sufferer belatedly (Caruth, 2016). Ghosh's narrative method allows for a layering of perspectives, making space for uncertainty, contradiction, and emotional truth. This openness is crucial for recovery, which Hirsch suggests involves acknowledging the limits of knowledge while continuing to engage empathetically with inherited trauma (Hirsch, 2008).

The narrator's ultimate realization—that borders are imaginary, that history is subjective, and that memory is both fragile and powerful—constitutes a form of narrative healing. This epiphany does not eliminate the pain of Tridib's death or the trauma of Partition, but it enables the narrator to situate these experiences within a broader framework of understanding. As Alexander notes, cultural trauma can be transformed into a source of identity and meaning when it is publicly acknowledged and narratively articulated (Alexander et al., 2004). Ghosh's novel exemplifies this process, offering a literary testimony that challenges national mythologies while affirming the emotional realities of those marginalized by official histories. In this sense, *The Shadow Lines* contributes to a broader tradition of testimonial literature, where narrative serves not only to represent trauma but to reimagine community and selfhood in its aftermath. The narrator's attempt to recover Tridib's story becomes an act of solidarity with the past—a way of honoring the lives shaped and shattered by historical violence. Through storytelling, he resists the erasure of memory and participates in a process of cultural and intergenerational recovery. Ghosh uses narrative in *The Shadow Lines* as both testimony and therapy. The act of telling the story—however fragmented and uncertain—becomes a means of reclaiming agency, restoring relational ties, and affirming the enduring significance of memory. In doing so, the novel not only bears witness to trauma but also models the ongoing, transformative work of narrative recovery.

## 6 Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a profound literary meditation on the lasting impacts of Partition, demonstrating that trauma is not merely a historical event but a persistent force that shapes identities, memories, and familial relationships across generations. Through a careful interplay of narrative form, memory work, and emotional resonance, Ghosh reveals the subtle mechanisms by which trauma is inherited, reimagined, and eventually narrated by those born long after the actual event.

The analysis in this paper has shown how intergenerational trauma in the novel is conveyed through fragmented storytelling, silences, and the emotional entanglement of the narrator with a past he did not directly witness. Using the theoretical frameworks of trauma theory (Caruth, 2016), (LaCapra, 2014), (Laub, 2013), postmemory and cultural trauma (Hirsch, 2008) (Alexander et al., 2004) and (Eyerman, 2001), we have examined how trauma is transmitted not only through direct experience but through familial memory, national discourse, and cultural silence. The narrator's obsessive reconstruction of Tridib's death, Thamma's ideological disillusionment, and the family's ambivalence around national identity all reflect the psychological aftermath of Partition as a collective wound. Furthermore, the novel's recursive structure and polyphonic voice underscore the difficulties of articulating traumatic memory. Ghosh resists linear historical narrative, instead presenting memory as an evolving, nonlinear process shaped by both affect and imagination. In doing so, he aligns his work with postcolonial historiographic efforts to reclaim personal and marginalized histories from the constraints of official record-keeping (Butalia, 2017) (Pandey, 2001). The result is a counter-narrative that prioritizes emotional truth and ethical witnessing.

Importantly, *The Shadow Lines* also gestures toward the possibility of narrative recovery. The act of storytelling becomes a form of testimony, allowing the narrator—and by extension, the reader—to engage with the legacy of trauma in meaningful and empathetic ways. Rather than resolving the trauma, the narrative facilitates an ongoing process of working through, where memory becomes a bridge between past and present, between pain and understanding. In conclusion, Ghosh's novel expands the scope of trauma literature by illustrating how violence and loss echo across generational lines, challenging the boundaries between personal memory and national history. By tracing the emotional and narrative inheritance of Partition, *The Shadow Lines* affirms literature's capacity to bear witness to trauma and to offer spaces for remembrance, reflection, and potential healing. In doing so, it not only contributes to the archive of post-Partition fiction but also deepens our understanding of how trauma lives on—in bodies, in families, and in stories (Butalia, 2017) (Caruth, 2016).

## References

1. Alexander, J. C., Eyerman, R., Giesen, B., Smelser, N. J., & Sztompka, P. (2004). *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520936768>
2. Bandyopadhyay, S., & Chaudhury, A. B. R. (2022). *Caste and partition in Bengal: The story of Dalit refugees, 1946-1961*. Oxford University Press. <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=r2NjEAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&ots=oHjocBbS3v&sig=okvaUqTt8dMK5SZOHQcJgTyMdXo>
3. Butalia, U. (2017). *The other side of silence: Voices from the partition of India*. Penguin UK. [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=1CUMQJZLjzEC&oi=fnd&pg=PT30&dq=Butalia,+U.+\(1998\).+The+other+side+of+silence:+Voices+from+the+partition+of+India.+Duke+University+Press.&ots=yPbPXCnduV&sig=oEDGmvAo5G794vVGNE4iiEw1Efw](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=1CUMQJZLjzEC&oi=fnd&pg=PT30&dq=Butalia,+U.+(1998).+The+other+side+of+silence:+Voices+from+the+partition+of+India.+Duke+University+Press.&ots=yPbPXCnduV&sig=oEDGmvAo5G794vVGNE4iiEw1Efw)

4. Caruth, C. (2016). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. JHU press. [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=aPYoDQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Caruth,+C.+\(1996\).+Unclaimed+experience:+Trauma,+narrative,+and+history.+Johns+Hopkins+University+Press.&ots=OOxy14Y4fr&sig=xLXEb5bDeQ5ZSLENOMyBIQM37Io](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=aPYoDQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Caruth,+C.+(1996).+Unclaimed+experience:+Trauma,+narrative,+and+history.+Johns+Hopkins+University+Press.&ots=OOxy14Y4fr&sig=xLXEb5bDeQ5ZSLENOMyBIQM37Io)
5. Eyerman, R. (2001). *Cultural trauma: Slavery and the formation of African American identity*. Cambridge University Press. [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Vo1wmsvZA-oC&oi=fnd&pg=PP10&dq=Eyerman,+R.+\(2001\).+Cultural+trauma:+Slavery+and+the+formation+of+African+American+identity.+Cambridge+University+Press.&ots=gSYY\\_hq725&sig=9KtU7l3BmBjipmz3a6dM3oY2jQQ](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Vo1wmsvZA-oC&oi=fnd&pg=PP10&dq=Eyerman,+R.+(2001).+Cultural+trauma:+Slavery+and+the+formation+of+African+American+identity.+Cambridge+University+Press.&ots=gSYY_hq725&sig=9KtU7l3BmBjipmz3a6dM3oY2jQQ)
6. Ghosh, A. (2010). *The shadow lines*. Penguin Books India. [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=7c8L9ABrTRoC&oi=fnd&pg=PA3&dq=ghosh+Amitav+The+Shadow+lines&ots=owttDNucs&sig=GgscZl9MXK\\_bJwi8z-xJ\\_OSRLfI](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=7c8L9ABrTRoC&oi=fnd&pg=PA3&dq=ghosh+Amitav+The+Shadow+lines&ots=owttDNucs&sig=GgscZl9MXK_bJwi8z-xJ_OSRLfI)
7. Hirsch, M. (2008). The generation of postmemory. *Poetics Today*, 29(1), 103–128. Kaul, S. (1994). Separation Anxiety: Growing Up Inter/National in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. *Oxford Literary Review*, 16(1), 125–145. <https://doi.org/10.3366/olr.1994.005>
8. Khair, T. (2016). *Babu fictions: Alienation in contemporary Indian English novels*. Oxford University Press. <https://pure.au.dk/portal/en/publications/babu-fictions-alienation-in-contemporary-indian-english-novels>
9. Kumar, P. (2008). *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence in Indian Literature and Film*. U of Minnesota Press.
10. LaCapra, D. (2014). *Writing history, writing trauma*. JHU Press. [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=VeQRBAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=LaCapra,+D.+\(2001\).+Writing+history,+writing+trauma.+Johns+Hopkins+University+Press.&ots=kiPHBAHS9s&sig=DKxY2izpJPz3LjhRRoM3jG77UKo](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=VeQRBAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=LaCapra,+D.+(2001).+Writing+history,+writing+trauma.+Johns+Hopkins+University+Press.&ots=kiPHBAHS9s&sig=DKxY2izpJPz3LjhRRoM3jG77UKo)
11. Laub, D. (2013). Bearing witness or the vicissitudes of listening. In *Testimony* (pp. 57–74). Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203700327-2/bearing-witness-vicissitudes-listening-dori-laub>
12. Menon, R., & Bhasin, K. (1998). *Borders & boundaries: Women in India's partition*. Rutgers University Press. [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=yNN4SE7cL60C&oi=fnd&pg=PR6&dq=Menon,+R.,+%26+Bhasin,+K.+\(1998\).+Borders+and+boundaries:+Women+in+India%27s+partition.+Rutgers+University+Press.&ots=spxarod8tg&sig=9LlKt5ortJSBCI4-ZgsmzcDkgfk](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=yNN4SE7cL60C&oi=fnd&pg=PR6&dq=Menon,+R.,+%26+Bhasin,+K.+(1998).+Borders+and+boundaries:+Women+in+India%27s+partition.+Rutgers+University+Press.&ots=spxarod8tg&sig=9LlKt5ortJSBCI4-ZgsmzcDkgfk)
13. Pandey, G. (2001). *Remembering partition: Violence, nationalism, and history in India* (Vol. 7). Cambridge University Press Cambridge. <https://www.shivajicollege.ac.in/sPanel/uploads/econtent/25f9f29d6a93a4d9e9f2230380e93e35.pdf>
14. Tota, A. L., & Hagen, T. (2016). *Routledge international handbook of memory studies*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. <https://api.taylorfrancis.com/content/books/mono/download?identifierName=doi&identifierValue=10.4324/9780203762844&type=googlepdf>