

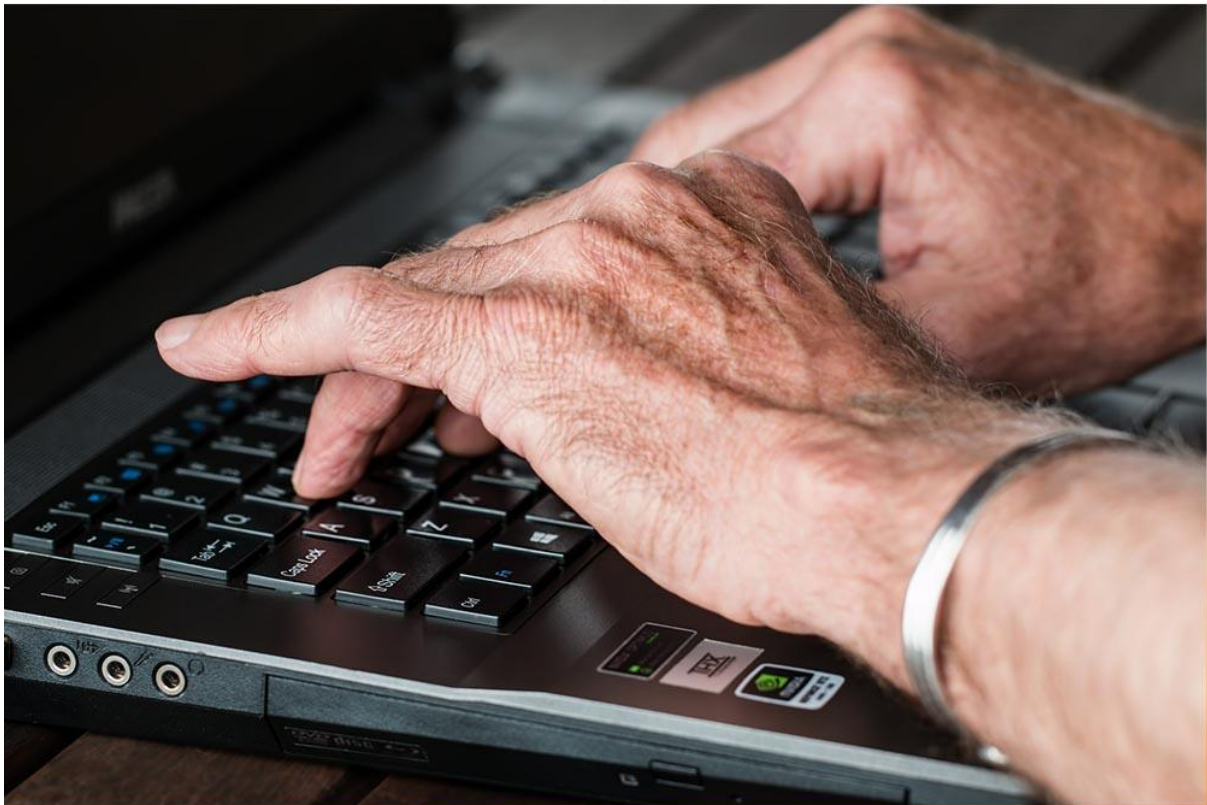
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Palimpsest of memory and the erased stories of war victims

In the shadow lines

Abstract

Ghosh's palimpsest-like writing generally records and explores significant events in history, sidelined or obscured from the higher narrative. He very often undermines the master history, exposing the illusion of its logic or integrity. For exploring the higher narrative and exposing its illusion, Ghosh applies palimpsests of memory, imagination, speculative proofs and supernatural elements. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh's crucial reproduction of the war and riot-hit individuals across the two countries has been chiefly achieved by his layered palimpsest of memory and imagination over the memories of the characters.

Keywords: Palimpsest, historiography, master narrative, erased.

The term 'palimpsest' generally refers to the physical erasure or the covering over of one surface with another. The third edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED 3) states that it means "a manuscript from which the original text may be 'partially erased' while the writing surface, although altered and reused, may still retain traces of its earlier forms" (). If historiography refers to the European master narrative, then the palimpsest highlights the active layering in which the events of a master narrative that could be called "the history of Europe" are privileged and prominent, obscuring and contorting other significant events of the history of native or indigenous cultures.

Thus, Ghosh's palimpsest-like writing in response records and explores other significant events in history, sidelined or obscured from the higher narrative. Layered thus with such contradictory coatings of historical instances, he undermines the master history, exposing the illusion of its logic or integrity. For exploring the higher narrative and exposing its illusion, Ghosh very often applies the palimpsests of memory, imagination, speculative proofs and supernatural elements. Those layered and alternative 'other' pasts interwoven are playing major roles in the narratives of Ghosh's novels.

The story of *The Shadow Lines* is centred on the narrator's investigation about the sweeping historical events that took place in the 19th century and their repercussions on the individuals. Shaped by the perception of precise imagination and memory from his uncle cum mentor, Tridib, the narrator retrieves the past traces of the events in the countries of London, India and Pakistan. The novel has been written against the backdrop of the war-hit London, the riot-hit Calcutta, the civil strife in post-partition West Bengal and the riot-hit Dhaka in the wake of the theft of the sacred relic known as the Mu-i-Mubarak, believed to be a hair of the Prophet Mohammed. In the part one, 'Going away', the narrator chiefly attempts to reproduce the past traces of the war-hit London and the agony of the individuals: While Ghosh reconstructs the painful lives of the individuals, their unrecognised contribution to the

country and their tragic ends using his own memory stratagems, especially the old photographs as an instrument for recollecting, he reproduces the past traces of the war-affected areas of the country while visiting them.

In the part two, '*Coming home*', his investigation seems to be personal and one-pointed, rather than examining many individuals. Haunted by his own absence during the death of his uncle Tridib who was killed in a riot in Dhaka, he first explores the historical documents that evidence the riots of the year. This scholarly attempt, though in one way exposing the background history of the riot which killed his uncle, being futile, the narrator relies on the swirl of memories that have been assimilated from the recollection of the other people who witnessed the incident, Tridib's younger brother Robi, and May Price, an English woman whom Tridib loved. Ghosh's crucial reproduction of the war and riot-hit individuals across the two countries has been chiefly achieved by his layered palimpsest of memory and imagination over the memories of the characters.

Tridib's death mystery and his investigation start from the chapter two '*Coming home*', which is personal and one-pointed. Instead of expressing the affected individuals during the big historical incidences, he focuses on the individual. His search is intense as the affected one is his uncle Tridib. Haunted by his own absence during the death of his uncle Tridib who was killed in a riot in Dhaka, he first explores the historical documents that evidence the riots of the year. This scholarly attempt, though in one way exposing the background history of the riot which killed his uncle, being futile, the narrator relies on the swirl of memories that have been assimilated from the recollection of the other people who witnessed the incident, Tridib's younger brother Robi, and May Price, an English woman whom Tridib loved. Ghosh's crucial reproduction of the riot-hit individuals across the two countries has been chiefly achieved by his layered palimpsest of memory and imagination over the memories of the characters.

The story of *The Shadow Lines* is centred on the narrator's investigation about the sweeping historical events that took place in the 19th century and their repercussions on the individuals. Shaped by the perception of precise imagination and memory from his uncle cum mentor, Tridib, the narrator retrieves the past traces of the events in the countries of London, India and Pakistan. The novel has been written against the backdrop of the war-hit London, the riot-hit Calcutta, the civil strife in post-partition West Bengal and the riot-hit Dhaka in the wake of the theft of the sacred relic known as the Mu-i-Mubarak, believed to be a hair of the Prophet Mohammed. In the part one, 'Going away', the narrator chiefly attempts to reproduce the past traces of the war-hit London and the agony of the individuals: While Ghosh reconstructs the painful lives of the individuals, their unrecognised contribution to the country and their tragic ends using his own memory stratagems, especially the old photographs as an instrument for recollecting, he reproduces the past traces of the war-affected areas of the country while visiting them. In the part two, 'Coming home', his investigation seems to be personal and one-pointed, rather than examining many individuals. Haunted by his own absence during the death of his uncle Tridib who was killed in a riot in Dhaka, he first explores the historical documents that evidence the riots of the year. This scholarly attempt, though in one way exposing the background history of the riot which killed his uncle, being futile, the narrator relies on the swirl of memories that have been assimilated from the recollection of the other people who witnessed the incident, Tridib's younger brother Robi, and May Price, an English woman whom Tridib loved. Ghosh's crucial reproduction of the war and riot-hit individuals across the two countries has been chiefly achieved by his layered palimpsest of memory and imagination over the memories of the characters.

There is no linear narration in the novel and thus, the story moves in a zig-zag manner, from past to present and present to past. However, the novel treats the countries such

as India, London and Pakistan alike and is mainly engaged in reproducing the past histories of the war-hit places, the affected individuals in the areas and their erased social contributions. Thus, the part one 'Going away' has full of fragmentary stories about the victims of the war-hit London through different memory stratagems like old photographs, retrospection by the individuals by speaking on the past while visiting those war-torn places ...etc. It seems that Ghosh's focus is not to present a story but to uncover the erased stories of the affected individuals through the palimpsest of memory.

Ghosh's one memory stratagem in the first part is the use of photograph. It is applied when Tridib is pestered by both the narrator and Ila, the narrator's cousin, to describe the people in the photograph. The narrator's description about them is in fact the palimpsest of Tridib's memory superimposed upon. This overlay palimpsest to retrieve the past history that could be associated with the childhood of Tridib reveals some details of the war-affected individuals and their untold sufferings as its potential repercussions. It is not clear whether the description of their sufferings has any fictional inputs from Ghosh's part but his intention for the description is to expose the histories of the common people whose experience with the war was traumatic. The photograph has no evidence of the physical damages on their bodies as potential repercussions of the war except Allan Tresawen, Mr.Price's brother, whose bad arm was hanging limply at his side as if flailing. That is the only indication directly drawn from the photo. But the remaining stories of others found in the photograph are based on the palimpsest of memory drawn from Tridib's description as a result of the prospects of his close proximity with them when he was in London. Thus, his description about each one's injury comes out of his first-hand experience with them. Snipe's fear that his dentures would be shaken out by the bombs is sensed by Tridib who was sent by him to buy a glue called Dentestive. Snipe, Mrs.Price's husband, as described as consuming Yeast-Vite tonic for his neuralgia and Bile beans for his blood. Other references such as Doan's kidney pills for his

backaches, Andrew Salt for his liver, Iglodine for his cuts and Mentholatum for his catarrh imply how the individuals experienced excruciating misery as the consequence of the war, the history of which has no room for the stories of its affected individuals.

Besides, the narrator's inference from the laughing face of one of Treaswen's friends in the photograph, which is sensibly exposing the pathetic sight of those individuals, could, in one way, be assumed that it is Ghosh's palimpsest of imagination overlaid on Tridib's memory and the narrator's speculation. There was a large pit in the foreground of the picture, the pit being dug to be the foundation of an Anderson air raid shelter. It was Snipe's second line of defence against the expected German bombs. While others kept their faces seriously, from the laughing member who was standing before the would-be shelter, Ghosh's palimpsest here not only suggests their strange states but also exposes the individual's moments of inevitable torments during war times. Tridib's words have captured and confirmed this reality more clearly:

"...they were exactly one week away from the announcement of the Nazi-Soviet pact, after which nothing in their house would ever be the same again. Which was the more real, their dirty bathtubs, and shared bedrooms or that other reality, waiting one week away?... that within two years three of the four of them would be dead... the realities of the bombs and torpedoes and the dying was easy enough to imagine...the fact that they knew what was coming... and in all probability they themselves would not survive the war..." (74,75)

When it comes to describe the tragic ends of Tresawen and his friends, Ghosh, as there is no eyewitness of their fatalities, resorts to the palimpsest of imagination and speculation, which he makes use of very often in "*The Calcutta Chromosome*" and "In an Antique land". While most of the facts in "*The Shadow Lines*" are sifted with the help of the palimpsest of memory, this is the only instance in which he turns to imagination and speculation to visualize their unfortunate ends. From the description, it seems that Ghosh is

likely to feel vicariously their excruciating deadly experiences. Thus, he captures the description in the minutest detail.

For example, the death of Dan happened when the blast shattered the panes and blew into the bed room where he was standing. Ghosh describes: “When the men from the Heavy Rescue Service carried his body out, every last inch of it was tattooed with the fine, clean perforations of the scalpel-sharp silvers of glass that had been blown through him by the blast”. (112) Dan’s insomnia, his apprehension of the unexpected bombardment in the vicinity, his friends’ complacency over the demonstration outside Savoy Hotel and his casual attempt at smoking even during the testing times are Ghosh’s palimpsest of imagination as well as speculation. The description of the death may have facts and fiction but it is not clear to make the difference between them. However, Nick’s disapproval of the narrator’s version of Tresawen and his friends’ deaths confuses anyone and may compel Ghosh to the choice of the palimpsest of imagination, which might have the inputs from Tridib’s accounts of memory on the incident. But there is no mention of those accounts in the novel.

Tresawen’s death was momentary when a beam fell upon him. However, his act of saving Mike and Francesca from the beam’s hit is speculative, inferred by Ghosh from their intimate associations. The fate of the survivors, Mike and Francesca, hints the anonymous end of the common man. While Mike’s death was found out from the casualty list in “The Times”, Francesca was sent to an internment camp for enemy aliens on the Isle of Wight and her life afterwards was never heard. Thus, Ghosh’s purpose to expose the sufferings of the individuals during the war times is sensibly accomplished with the use of the palimpsest of speculation and imagination.

Tridib’s visit to London during his childhood is very often made use of by Ghosh to express the war-affected individuals. For instance, the emergence of the palimpsest of memory takes place from Tridib’s recollected story about May Price to the narrator when she

was a baby. The instance reveals the war's effect on the normalcy of the lives of the individuals. The baby with the gas mask scared Tridib but the small story drawn from the palimpsest of memory hints how deeply the war affected on the life routines and even the preventative measure that was taken for the baby seemed like a torture as "she had turned into an insect, her face had gone all black and shiny and her mouth had grown into a long black snout, pink and quite unchanged" (182).

Another reference that comes in the form of palimpsest of memory is the narrator's retrospection of Tridib's words about toffee tins during his childhood in London. His mother was alerted by Snipe who had shown an Air Raid Precaution notice which said that tins of toffees were believed to have been dropped by the enemies for explosions. Such assault was intended to demoralise the population by getting at the children. Tridib's mother was worried about him as he was the only child left on Lymington Road and all the rest had been sent out of London. The palimpsest exposes the apprehension of the mother who slapped him for having slipped out of the house, though she had never slapped him before. From the morning of the day, she was restless and experiencing excruciating pain for Tridib being the only child left in the area. Though his birth day fell on the same day, he could neither celebrate the day nor linger over his presents as the Alert sounded while they were at the dinner table. Their lives within the four walls were not normal with May in Snipe's arm crying without a stop, the floors getting shaken very often and things getting toppled.

The use of the palimpsest of memory is also drawn from the faint recollection of the individuals while visiting the war-hit places. The individuals associated with the places, though they have no first-hand experiences with them, get stumbled upon the memories registered about them by other characters.

For instance, with what is called "precise imagination" by Tridib, the narrator's hunt for the trace of Left Book Club in the building of Victor Gollancz accommodates the

presence of palimpsest drawn from his faint recollection of the past. Though there is no evidence of the existence of the club in the past as even the elderly woman in the counter replies that she is not aware of any such club in the building, the narrator clicks on to the past, saying that "...it must have been right there, perhaps even in that office which we had entered, for the Club had been a part of Victor Gollancz's publishing house..." (34). The service of Allan Tresawson to the club with which he had associated himself for some time before the war could be his social contribution, that too was erased as there was an absence of the club's existence in the publishing house. Thus, the narrator's attempt to trace out the past which "seemed concurrent with the present" ends in bafflement but the purpose of Ghosh's palimpsest of memory layers with Tridib's imaginary inputs is quite obvious with his finger on the erasure of Allan's contribution to the society.

Another incident is when the narrator is on the way to Mrs. Price's house, along with Nick, Ila and Robi. When he points out the corner near West End Lane where Lymington Mansions were once placed in the past, he informs that the place was where the air raid shelter was and puts his finger on another corner of Lymington road where an incendiary bomb fell on. His war details were immediately refuted by Robi on the grounds that "...the Germans simply had not developed high-calibre bombs till much later in the war" (). However, the narrator's recollection of the exact mention of the date on which the bomb fell, which seems to be a moot question in this context, make stronger the use of Ghosh's palimpsest of memory on the erasure of the existence of the building.

Another minor trace is the one in which the narrator was describing the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta as "a haunted site for some other meaning" echoes the presence of an underlayer of the palimpsest past. The site once had been a favourite place for the narrator who visited the place with cheerful expectancy. It was the same place where the narrator lost

his intimate association with Tridib to May Price. The site is mystifying the narrator with some other meaning which he “could not fathom”. (188)

Throughout the novel, Ghosh’s narration very often spills out scattered minor references about the potential consequences of the war when it chances upon describing any devastated house or building or any site. For example, the crumbled masonry of the Taj Travel Agency near Brick Lane, the dilapidated house of Treaswen and his friend’s house in the Agency building, the ramshackle cinema near Brondesbury Station are mentioned randomly on the course of the narration. While describing those places, the narrator’s words are full of the palimpsests of memory and speculation to make his stories complete:

Ghosh’s purpose in this context is to reveal how the areas commonly used by the public have fallen into disuse and the damages on them have become irreparable.

Another pivotal passage, which describes Brick lane in terms of a series of migrant habitations, shows each obscuring the previous one like a palimpsest with the traces of the others showing through. The stern grey anti-racism posters in the place “issued by an iridescent spectrum of the left-wing”, are buried now under a riot of posters advertising the very newest Hindi films. Another evidence of the same kind is the chapel-like building of London Jamme Masjid, which once had been a synagogue for Jews up until the war and after. Ghosh seems to be fussy about whatever he chances upon which has some minute fissure leaking the past.

At some times, while addressing the war-torn places, Ghosh points out the ordinary places on the streets of London. The palimpsest of memory is once again presented when the narrator recalls Tridib’s entry into the damaged cricket field on Alvanley Garden. The part of the field was converted into a gun emplacement for the possible retaliations. The field now with army men, was no more a ground for cricket; later, some two days back, a bomb had

dug a huge fifteen-foot crater in the field. Now, it was not at all a field to play. The palimpsest of memory has shown the glimpse of the war's devastation on the common place.

Apart from the affected individuals and the war-hit places, the palimpsest of memory is found in some parts of the novel where some specific and striking facts in the past history of the colonised are to be addressed as they are relevant in the present context. Also, Ghosh may have felt that those facts should be highlighted as they are the erased minor stories of the individuals and their forgotten social contribution.

In the first part, the palimpsest of supernatural elements is figured out in two occasions. Though no serious implication is pointed out, it presents the agony of the individuals and exposes some aspects of the deceased people. It occurs when the narrator and Ila moves to the cellar in Mrs.Price's house in London. The cellar with the empty corners filled up with remembered forms, rouses happy childhood memories when they were in Raibajar. The ghost of the nine-year-old Tridib, whose face was intent, listening to the bombs, exposes his anxiety for the possible explosions; the ghost of Snipe is apprehensive of his dentures; the ghost of the eight-year-old Ila, having thought of her imaginary story about Magda, a little doll, is crying for the assault on the doll. Most of the details of those characters described by the narrator are drawn either from the recollected stories of Tridib or from May Price. Thus, the most painful experiences underwent by the individuals are exposed in the palimpsest of supernatural elements where the form of ghost becomes a metaphor for the past's present. This use of palimpsest has the mixture of memory and imagination as it deals with the most haunted memories of the characters to reveal their traumas. Later, Snipe's promised story for Tridib's birth day being passed from the mouths of ghosts of Snipe, Tridib and Ila is just a hallucination of the infinite momentum of the sufferings of the individuals with their liability to rid of the adverse effects of their some painful memories.

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