

## Mob Violence in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh

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### Abstract

Mob mentality had always been discordant with the peaceful law and order situation in a state and nature. To the behaviour theorists, mob mentality had remained as a riddle. But if we trace the mob violence it has been existing right from the ancient times. In Greek literature also there has been mentions of mob violence. In the novels of Amitav Ghosh mob violence plays an important role and, in some novels, it is the catalyst. But in this paper, I have tried to present the impact of mob violence on human being as well as on nature. How nature has been the victim of greedy mob who in the name of settlement and livelihood has played havoc on nature. Violent mob by jeopardizing the flora and fauna of earth has violated the sanctity and equilibrium of ecosystem. This chapter examines the representation of collective violence in some fictions by Amitav Ghosh. The fictions narrate rioting in post-partition India and Pakistan in close relationship to nationalism and communalism, and in exploring this relationship, I will first examine the way in which the problem of the simultaneous national and communal divide caused by Partition is treated in the novels. My argument here is that the novels of Amitav Ghosh are an example of the kind of narration that does not write violence into a dramatized spectacle—instead, it avoids overt dramatization and attempts to balance collective violence with representation of the individual response to it.

**Keywords:** Amitav Ghosh, Novels, Mob, Crowd, Violence, Behaviourists, Hypnotize, Colonial.

What is the difference between mob and crowd? Simply put, a crowd is a group of people with or without a common goal. (Gelles, Richard A. and Levine, Ann) A group waiting for boarding a bus, lining up or listening to a concert is a crowd. This is usually temporary and usually does not look monotonous. On the other hand, the mob has several meanings. The term mob implies many implicit judgments. In fact, the word “mob” comes from the Latin “moving vulva,” which literally means “ordinary people on the move” and should indicate the contradiction or inconsistency of the crowd. In these unfair images, we see that crowds are often associated with the lower classes, disorder, and disregard for the law.

Why do people often behave differently in a crowd than when they are alone? Several theories of crowd behaviour have been proposed, most of which began with the work of Gustave LeBon, who is also called the "grandfather of the theory of group behavior." (Berk-20) 16 To be fair, LeBon is not the first to make observations about crowd behaviour. Solon, an ancient Greek lawmaker, and poet felt that the Athenians were as clever as foxes when it came to operating their businesses, but that when they banded together, they would go insane. Aristophanes, the playwright, depicted the Athenian citizens as smart and stupid parents in the council. LeBon, on the other hand, was the first business to do a comprehensive research of crowd behaviour. He tries to explain how clever individuals become people in the mob, who appear to be limitless and harsh.

The mob, according to LeBon, develops its own psyche, and people become extremely susceptible and preoccupied with the collective group's will. Crowd behaviour, according to LeBon, is intrinsically contagious. As a result, when someone gets irritated, furious, or violent, others will become aware of their sentiments and actions almost instantly. On the one hand, he claims that individuals in a crowd may readily affect a collector's attitude and conduct. Because we have been pre-programmed. The individual's conscious personality disappears and is replaced by the collective spirit. According to Le Bon, they are violent, impulsive, emotional, morally responsible, less intelligent than humans, and blindly obey charismatic leaders who "hypnotize" and mobilize the masses. 0.17

He opines that "We see, then, that the disappearance of the conscious personality, the predominance of the unconscious, the turning by means of suggestion and contagion of feelings and ideas in an identical direction, the tendency immediately to transform the suggested ideas into acts; these we see, are the principal characteristics of the individual forming part of a crowd. He is no longer himself but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will" (Le Bon-32).18.

Mobs, as per historian Paul Gilje, are frequently highly selective in their victims and targets, contradicting the idea of mindless violence. He says:

Riotous crowds do not act merely on impulse and are not fickle. There is a reason behind the actions of the rioters, no matter how violent those actions may be. This rationality has two major components. First, the mob's tumultuous behavior is directly connected to grievances of those involved in the riot. A tumultuous crowd does not ordinarily engage in wanton destruction of persons and property. Instead, they seize upon some object or objects that represent the forces that propelled them into the riot originally. (Gilje-21)

Amitav Ghosh talks about almost three types of mob violence - riots, lynch mobs, and vigilante groups.

Riots have been defined in several different ways. The Federal Criminal Code of the US, for example, defines a riot as:

"A public disturbance involving an act or acts of violence by one or more persons part of an assemblage of three or more persons, which act or acts shall constitute a clear present danger of, or shall result in, damage or injury to the property of any other person or to the person of any other individual or a threat or threats of the commission of an act or acts of violence by one or more persons part of an assemblage of three or more persons having, individually or collectively, the ability of immediate execution of such threat or threats, where the performance of the threatened act or acts of violence would constitute a clear and present danger of, or would result in, damage or injury to the property of any other person or to the person of any other individual".<sup>1</sup>

*Lynching* is a broad phrase that has been used and abused in a variety of contexts. However, it may be generally characterised as a mob-led extra-legal execution. Of course, this isn't what Clarence Thomas meant when he termed his confirmation hearings "high take lynching."

Lynching is a form of collective violence in which a group of people commits acts of violence against each other to go around the law and punish people for actual or imaginary offences. Initially it was typically accompanied by non-lethal penalties like as whippings and tarring and feathering, but it developed through time to become a far more powerful and deadly weapon. Torture, mutilation, and hanging and burning were common methods of social control. The last of the three related types of group violence that we explore in this chapter is vigilantism. Briefly, vigilantism can be defined as an organized extra-legal movement in which the participants take the law into their own hands. (Brown-54)

Amitav Ghosh says in his nonfiction "The Imam and the Indian ":

"When I now read descriptions of troubled parts of the world, in which violence appears primordial and inevitable, a fate to which masses of people are largely resigned, I find myself asking, Is that all there was to it? Or is it possible that the authors of these descriptions failed to find a form—or a style or a voice or a plot—that could accommodate both violence and the civilized willed response to it?"<sup>1</sup>

The riots in the literature describe the manifestation of mass disorder because of popular politics, including the colonial situations. Collective action exposes difficult-to-study literary performances, political agendas, attitudes, and anxieties in a rich and deep way. Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* wants to present nationalism and its shortcomings in the subcontinent. It gives description of lives in Kolkata but is rooted in Dhaka on the Pakistani border and talks about an Indian family. The experience of division and life was expressed in the 1960s through

the boundaries or borderline consciousness and identity of the Indian nation-state of political, community and geographical symbolism. The entangled history of this family and the British acquaintance The Price family is presented as a story leaked through an anonymous narrator in the book. For most of this story, the narrator's grandmother, uncle Tridib, and his cousins Robi and Ila talk to family friends May Price.

In general, this novel depicts riots on three levels. There is a riot between different religious communities within a nation state; There is riots between religious communities in two countries and riots arise between different communities (one or more) and Government. Robbie describes his experience:

"I'd have to go out and make speeches to my policemen, saying: You have to be firm, you have to do your duty. You have to kill whole villages if necessary—we have nothing against the people, it's the terrorists we want to get, but we have to be willing to pay a price for our unity and freedom. And when I went back home, I would find an anonymous note waiting for me, saying: We're going to get you, nothing personal, we have to kill you for our freedom. It would be like reading my own speech transcribed on a mirror." (SL, 247-248)

In his article on the novel, Jon Mee sums up nicely the three-fold nature of riots in the subcontinent:

"The riots represent one of those blurrings that haunt the novel as they reveal that the imagining of the nation and the state may not be the same thing. Even in their antagonism towards each other, the rioters may be bound together in ways that the state cannot acknowledge. . . . The riots are as much a subversion of difference, the difference between India and Pakistan, as they are the product of difference, the difference between Hindu and Muslim, and even the latter asserts a relationship with the image in the mirror." (Mee -104-105)

When the narrator tries to write about the riot that killed Tridib, he finds out himself in the war against silence. For him, this silence is synonymous with missing meaning:

"The enemy of silence is speech, but there can be no speech without words, and there can be no words without meanings—so it follows . . . that when we try to speak of events of which we do not know the meaning, we must lose ourselves in the gap between words and the world. . . . Where there is no meaning, there is banality, and this is what this silence consists in. (SL, 218)"

Now if we reconsider the part in *The Shadow Lines*, where the narrator tries to find a way to write about the riots but ends up with *Fighting Silence*, we see that this silence is not only produced from the boundaries of national discourse.

“Every word I write about these events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence. It is a struggle I am destined to lose—have already lost—for even after all these years, I do not know where within me, in which corner of my world, this silence lies. All I know of it is what it is not. It is not, for example, the silence of an imperfect memory. Nor is it a silence enforced by a ruthless state—nothing like that, no barbed wire, no check-points to tell me where its boundaries lie. I know nothing of this silence except that it lies outside the reach of my intelligence, beyond words—that is why this silence must win, must inevitably defeat me, because it is not a presence at all; it is simply a gap, a hole, an emptiness in which there are no words”. (SL, 218)

Riots affects memories and sensations, but these are impossible to turn into language because this would result in meaning and knowledge, which again would not be able to convey these memories and sensations due to their partial and distorting character. It seems that any representation of a riot is necessarily banal, losing itself in the gap between the world and the words.

Amitav Ghosh expresses his concern about literature and representation of collective violence in the first published essay in *The New Yorker* 1995 (*Ghost of Mrs. Gandhi*). There he wrote about for the first time about his experience with the riots after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 explained this in his next novel (which is *The Shadow line*) and for a general description of violence he should use a representation strategy that will not detract from the experience and performances of civil unrest or violence. Robi's description of the riot that led to Tridib's death (SL, 244-6) is narrated by him in the form of a recurring dream, a nightmare that ends before Tridib is actually killed. The description is dramatized and creates the effect of a film with rapid cuts. It seems that here Ghosh the writer does allow for a dramatized, spectacle-like description of violence. Robi actually remembers the events. Below is the beginning of the dream: Sometimes it's a crowd, sometimes just a couple of men. . . . The odd thing is, that no matter how many men there are—a couple, or dozens—the street always seems empty. It was full of people when we went through it . . . but all the shops are shut now, barricaded, and so are the windows in the houses. . . . Then the men begin to move towards us—they're not running, they're gliding, like skaters in a race. They fan out and begin to close in on us. It's all silent, I can't hear a single thing, no sound at all. (SL, 243-4)

Tridib's death was explained towards the end of the novel, and it was done very differently. When the narrator meets May, one of the eyewitness to Tridib's death during the 1964 riots, he says he did it because he never asked her about the events surrounding Tridib's

death because she did because she doesn't know how to do it: "I'm telling the truth: that I don't know how to do it" asking I have no words; which I don't have the courage to break their silence without definite words. "(SL,250) When May finally reported Tridib's death from crowd, it is without dramatic details, without exaggeration or hyperbolic adjectives, openly and in the shortest possible sentences. Below is the end from the description. May got out of the car and ran there:

"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 had surrounded the rickshaw. They had pulled the old man off it. I could hear him screaming. Tridib ran into the mob and fell upon their backs. He was trying to push his way through to the old man, I think. Then the mob dragged him in. He vanished. I could see only their backs. It took less than a moment. Then the men began to scatter. I picked myself up and began to run towards them. The men had melted away, into the gullies. When I got there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They'd cut Khalil's stomach open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they'd cut Tridib's throat, from ear to ear. That was that; that's all there is to tell. We cleared away the dinner plates then, I remember". (SL, 250-1).

In *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh, there is an instance of mob violence. After the killing of Byron Singh, Kalua was mobbed by angry people on deck of the Ship in which they were voyaging:

The welter of witnessing made it hard to know what was true and what was not: one man said the silahdars had already killed Kalua, but another denied this, saying he was alive, although badly beaten. Now, as yet more men came pouring down the ladder, everyone had something new to add, something else to report, so that it was almost as if Deeti were on the main deck herself, watching the events unfold: Kalua, cut loose from the frame to which he had been tethered, was being dragged across the deck by the enraged guards. The Kaptan was on the quarterdeck, with the two malums beside him, trying to reason with the silahdars, telling them it was their right to demand justice, and they would have it too, but only through a lawful execution, properly performed, not a lynching. But this was not enough to satisfy the maddened mob on the main deck, who began to howl: Now! Now! Hang him now!" (SOP -384)

There is another instance of mob violence when Deeti was forced to commit self-immolation in the pyre of her dead husband as form of religious ritual. This novel powerfully

underscores the Girmitiyas' loss of control and initial experience of helplessness, expressed in terms of Deeti's vulnerability:

she felt as though she were about to tumble into a well: all she could see, through the veil of her ghungta [end portion of the sari], were the whites of a great many eyes, shining in the darkness as they looked up and blinked into the light. (SOP-214).

In the *Glass Palace*, after the defeat of king Thebaw, when he became powerless, mob attack happened in his glass palace and all precious items of the house were either looted or vandalised:

“Queen was screaming, shaking her fist. “Get out of here. Get out.” Her face was red, mottled with rage, her fury caused as much by her own impotence as by the presence of the mob in the palace. A day before, she could have had a commoner imprisoned for so much as looking her directly in the face. Today all the city's scum had come surging into the palace and she was powerless to act against them. But the Queen was neither cowed nor afraid, not in the least. Ma Cho fell to the floor, her hands clasped over her head in a reverential shiko”. (TGP-29)

When riot broke out in Rangoon mob attacked the outsiders especially the Indian and Chinese people and their property:

“Riots lasted several days, and the casualties numbered in the hundreds. The toll would have been higher still if it had not been for the many Burmese who had rescued Indians from the mob and sheltered them in their homes. It was discovered later that the trouble had started with a clash between Indian and Burmese workers at the docks. Many Indian- and Chinese-owned businesses were attacked, among them one of Rajkumar's timberyards. Three of his workers were killed and dozens were injured”. (TGP-212)

During the Chipko movement under the leadership of Sunderlal Bahuguna people of Gopeshwar area tried to save trees from felling by attaching their body with tree. In this way people of that area averted the violence on nature by greedy industrialist. Mass killings of nature has been perpetrated by people and it results into severe degradation of environment. Amitav Ghosh in his novels like *The Hungry Tide*, and *The Gun Island* has tried to point it out in very subtle way.

In *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Ghosh engages with the harsh reality of diasporic life in the precarious zones of the Sundarbans, the “tide country” of southern part of Bengal, in the

deltas of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra. According to Pablo Mukherjee , “... Ghosh’s novel is primarily engaged in displacing metro/cosmopolitanism with a historically differentiated refugee condition as the paradigm of postcoloniality” (188) .

While Ghosh telling *morichjhapi* massacre in a broad thematic story with his astute imagination, the text is also a critique of the postcolonial "government" (to borrow Foucault's Coin on Modern Governance Techniques), continued from its colonial predecessors, operating according to the same logic of Observation, Coercion and Control. It also talks about unjust draconian environment policy started by the colonial power and present cosmopolitan concern. At first Ghosh takes us to the "land of the tides" and a place on the outskirts of the Kolkata and away from the mass flow of India. Kanai, a forty year old man from Delhi and one of the main characters in the novel, comes by train to the Sundarbans to meet his aunt, Nilima to visit the charity project, Badabon Trust, in Lusibari, furthest from settlements islands in this region. He read about the islands between these seas and the plains of Bengal from an old sheet of paper:

"When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles.... Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. There is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in yet, to the world at large this archipelago is known as the ‘Sundarban’, which means ‘the beautiful forest.’ There are some who believe the word to be derived from the name of a common species of mangrove – the sundari tree, *Heriteria minor*. But the word’s origin is no easier to account for than is its present prevalence, for in the record books of Mughal emperors this region is named not in reference to a tree but to a tide – bhati. And to the inhabitants out of the islands this land is known as bhatir desh – the tide country – except that bhati is not just the ‘tide’ but one tide in particular, the ebb-tide, the bhata. (*The Hungry Tide* 7-8)

As we have seen, mob violence—as exemplified by lynching, vigilantes, and riots—has a long history in literature. Literature is considered as a 'mirror of society'. In our society, while lynching is not as prevalent as they once were, they nevertheless remain as potent manifestations of collective violence perpetrated outside of the boundaries of official governmental authority. Moreover, while ritualistic lynching by hanging and burning have faded, we know that hate-motivated killings remain an ever-present part of all societies. We also know that the primary purpose of lynching is not to seek some form of popular justice, but to instill a climate of terror in marginalized populations. It is a sad reality that mob violence, in its various guises, is still very much a part even of our contemporary landscape. Amitav Ghosh has tried to showcase the mob violence in some of his novels with dexterity and with subtleties.



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### Notes:

1. Taken from the Office of the Law Revision Council, which prepares and publishes the United States Code, which is a consolidation and codification by subject matter of the general and permanent laws of the United States.
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