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# Traumas of displacement in Bharati Mukherjee's the tiger's daughter (1971) and Amitav Ghosh's the shadow lines (1988)

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**Abstract**
The Partition of India in 1947 produced not only territorial rupture but also enduring psychic and cultural dislocations that reverberate across generations and geographies. This article examines the representation of displacement-induced trauma in two seminal diasporic novels: Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988). Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory, Cathy Caruth's theorization of trauma as unclaimed experience, and Homi Bhabha's notion of the unhomely, it argues that both texts articulate Partition trauma not as a discrete historical event but as a transgenerational, transnational haunting. Mukherjee's protagonist Tara Cartwright confronts the estrangement of return, while Ghosh's unnamed narrator navigates the porous borders of memory and nation. Despite stylistic and temporal differences, both novels reveal displacement as a condition that fractures identity, silences women, and renders home perpetually contingent.

**Keywords:** Partition, displacement, trauma, diaspora, post-memory, unhomeliness, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh

## 1. Introduction
The violence of 1947 displaced over 14 million people and killed between one and two million, yet its traumatic aftermath extended far beyond the subcontinent's newly drawn borders. For the South Asian diaspora, Partition became an inherited wound—experienced not directly but through fragmented family narratives, photographs, and silences. *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and *The Shadow Lines* (1988) are postcolonial novels that interrogate how individuals experience exile, return, and national division in the decades after independence and partition. While Mukherjee focuses on a diasporic woman's divided self between India and the West, Ghosh explores how partition and riots unsettle entire families across India, Bangladesh, and England, turning borders into sources of trauma. Together, the texts suggest that displacement becomes a core condition of postcolonial existence, shaping memory, relationships, and political consciousness.

Bharati Mukherjee and Amitav Ghosh, writing from North American and cosmopolitan vantage points, transform this inherited trauma into literary form. *The Tiger's Daughter* follows Tara Banerjee Cartwright, a Bengali Brahmin who returns to Calcutta after seven years in the United States, only to find herself alienated from both her homeland and her adopted country. *The Shadow Lines*, conversely, traces a nameless narrator's reconstruction of his family's history across Calcutta, Dhaka, and London, revealing how Partition's "shadow lines" persist in the imagination long after the physical borders are drawn. This article contends that both novels deploy displacement as a structural and affective principle: Mukherjee through the trope of the failed homecoming, Ghosh through the non-linearity of memory. Trauma here is not cathartically resolved but repeatedly reenacted, underscoring the impossibility of full return or stable belonging.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Displacement and Trauma
Postcolonial displacement refers to the sense of dislocation and non-belonging produced when colonial histories, migration, and partition undermine stable notions of "home" and "nation." Trauma theory emphasizes how extreme events such as communal riots, exile, and violent border-making return repeatedly in memory, disrupting linear time and coherent identity. Reading these novels through both lenses reveals how spatial movement (migration, border-crossing) translates into psychic fragmentation, cultural alienation, and generational

transmission of pain.

Marianne Hirsch's post-memory (1997) describes the relationship that later generations bear to the traumatic experiences of their predecessors—experiences "remembered" only through stories, images, and behaviors. Cathy Caruth (1996) defines trauma as an event that overwhelms the psyche, returning compulsively in nightmares, flashbacks, or somatic symptoms because it was not fully grasped in its initial occurrence. Homi Bhabha's "unhomely" (1994) captures the sensation of being psychologically displaced within the home, a condition exacerbated by colonial and postcolonial upheavals. These frameworks illuminate how Mukherjee and Ghosh portray Partition not as a closed chapter but as a living rupture. Tara's return to Calcutta enacts the unhomely; the narrator's obsessive mapping of riots across decades embodies post-memorial compulsion.

## 3. The Tiger's Daughter: The Unhomely Return

### 3.1. Tara as Displaced Subject

Tara Banerjee marries an American and lives in Poughkeepsie, yet her Bengali identity remains tethered to a pre-Partition Calcutta of privilege and certainty. Her return in 1966—nineteen years after independence—coincides with political unrest (Naxalite agitation, food riots) that renders the city unrecognizable. Mukherjee writes: "Calcutta was a city under siege, and Tara was its most bewildered captive". This siege is both external (poverty, violence) and internal (cultural disorientation).

The novel links Tara's personal anxiety to broader socio-political unrest in post-independence Calcutta, where strikes, violence, and class tensions mirror her inner turmoil. The external chaos becomes an objective correlative for her psychological disintegration: as the city appears volatile and unrecognizable, Tara experiences a "cracking" of her inner center, a loss of secure identity and moral orientation. Her displacement is thus double—spatial (between India and the West) and psychological (between past and present selves)—and this double displacement manifests as chronic fear, guilt, and confusion rather than liberating cosmopolitanism.

### 3.2. Gendered Trauma and Silenced Histories

Mukherjee's portrayal of Tara underscores that the traumas of displacement are gendered, as women bear the burden of maintaining tradition while negotiating new cultural spaces. Tara carries with her inherited expectations of Indian womanhood even as her life abroad exposes her to different values, generating an internal conflict between obedience and self-assertion. Scholars argue that she suffers "multiple dislocations": as a daughter, wife, and expatriate, she exists in in-between positions that deny her stable agency.

Tara's mother embodies the repressed trauma of Partition-era displacement. Having fled East Bengal during the 1946 Noakhali riots, she now performs upper-caste normalcy while medicating her anxiety. Her silence about the past mirrors the broader societal suppression of women's Partition experiences—abductions, rapes, and forced recoveries documented by historians like Urvashi Butalia (2000). Tara inherits this silence as a somatic burden: migraines, nausea, and a pervasive sense of fraudulence.

### 3.3. The Failed Homecoming

The novel's climax occurs during the "Battle of the Ballroom," a grotesque charity event where Calcutta's elite dance amid famine. Tara's recognition that she belongs neither to this decadence nor to America's sterility crystallizes her unhomeliness. Mukherjee refuses resolution: Tara boards a plane back to the U.S., but the text ends mid-flight, suspending her in perpetual transit. The novel also reveals how patriarchal structures intensify diasporic trauma: family scrutiny, class propriety, and the pressure to embody the "ideal" Bengali woman make Tara's return an ordeal rather than a homecoming. Her inability to articulate her experience of foreign life to relatives and to translate American freedoms into her Indian context adds to her isolation, highlighting the silencing of women's migrant experiences. The traumatic consequence is an enduring sense of estrangement from both host and home cultures, leaving Tara trapped in a liminal, uninhabitable identity-space.

## 4. The Shadow Lines: Cartographies of Loss

### 4.1. Memory as Border-Crossing

*The Shadow Lines* situates displacement within the violent history of partition and communal riots, foregrounding how political borders generate lasting psychic wounds. The novel's characters are scattered across Calcutta, Dhaka, and London, and their lives are repeatedly disrupted by events such as the 1947 partition and later riots in East Pakistan (Bangladesh), which cause physical displacement, loss of home, and fragmentation of families. Critics show that the novel emphasizes how these historical ruptures create a pervasive sense of non-belonging, madness, and fear in ordinary middle-class families.

Ghosh structures the novel as a palimpsest: the narrator pieces together stories from his grandmother Tha'mma, cousin Ila, and friend Tridib to map riots in Calcutta (1964) and Dhaka (1947, 1964). The titular "shadow lines" are borders that exist only in the mind yet kill with material force. Tridib's death in a 1964 communal riot in Dhaka—triggered by a stolen relic in Srinagar—exposes the absurdity of such lines.

### 4.2. Post-Memory and the Compulsion to Repeat

The narrator, born post-Partition, obsessively measures distances: from Calcutta to Dhaka (67.3 miles by air, yet psychically infinite). This cartographic fixation is a post-memorial symptom—attempting to master through measurement what was never directly experienced. Caruth would recognize this as trauma's "belatedness": the event returns not in 1947 but in 1964, and again in the narrator's 1980s reconstruction.

The narrative structure—shifting between times and places through memory—mirrors traumatic recollection, where past violence continually intrudes into the present. The unnamed narrator's consciousness becomes the site where disparate geographies and events intersect, demonstrating how displacement operates not only as migration but as a mental condition shaped by inherited memories of loss and death. In this way, Ghosh portrays trauma as transgenerational: the narrator and his contemporaries are haunted by events they never directly witnessed but that nonetheless define their sense of self and world.

### 4.3. Women, Nation, and Displaced Agency

One of the key concerns of *The Shadow Lines* is the arbitrariness of national borders—the "shadow lines"—which are politically real yet experientially fragile and violent. The novel insists that lines drawn on maps cannot

contain human relationships or memories, but they can provoke riots, killings, and forced migrations that traumatize entire communities. Scholars note that the text critiques conventional nationalism by showing how these borders create enemies out of neighbors and turn familiar spaces into zones of danger.

Tha'mma, a schoolteacher who crossed from Dhaka to Calcutta in 1947, embodies nationalist fervor turned traumatic. Her desire to "rescue" an uncle left in Dhaka reveals the violence of border-making: she cannot comprehend that he belongs there. Her eventual death—clutching a patriotic poem—ironizes the cost of such belonging. Ila, conversely, seeks cosmopolitan freedom in London but remains haunted by childhood sexual abuse in Calcutta, showing how private and public displacements intersect.

## 5. Comparative Perspectives on displacement

Both *The Tiger's Daughter* and *The Shadow Lines* portray displacement as a multi-layered phenomenon, combining geographic movement with psychological disorientation and cultural conflict. However, Mukherjee tends to foreground the intimate, interior life of a diasporic woman negotiating East–West cultural binaries, while Ghosh emphasizes collective histories of partition and nationalist violence that shape an entire generation. In Mukherjee, trauma arises from cultural collisions in personal migration; in Ghosh, it emerges from the violent creation and maintenance of nation-state boundaries.

Despite these differences, both texts undermine the idea of a stable "home" to which one can return or belong unproblematically. Tara's homeland feels alien after her time abroad, just as Calcutta and Dhaka feel simultaneously familiar and foreign to Ghosh's characters because of political changes and violent memories. The novels also converge in suggesting that trauma is often unspeakable: Tara's confusion and silence, like the narrator's fragmented storytelling, point to the difficulty of articulating experiences that exceed conventional language and linear narrative. Both novels reject redemptive narratives. Mukherjee's realism exposes the class blindness of return; Ghosh's postmodernism dismantles the border itself. Yet each affirms storytelling as a fragile suture for ruptured lives.

## 6. Conclusion

*The Tiger's Daughter* and *The Shadow Lines* demonstrate that Partition displacement is not a historical anomaly but a paradigmatic condition of modernity. Mukherjee's Tara and Ghosh's narrator inherit a trauma they cannot fully articulate, yet must ceaselessly reenact. Their stories—rooted in specific Bengali milieus—resonate globally, prefiguring contemporary refugee narratives from Syria to Myanmar. As Bhabha writes, the unhomely is "the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home"; these novels force that recognition upon readers, insisting that displacement's traumas are neither past nor elsewhere, but constitutive of diasporic being.

*The Tiger's Daughter* and *The Shadow Lines* together show that the traumas of displacement in postcolonial South Asian fiction extend far beyond the physical act of crossing borders. Displacement produces fractured identities, gendered vulnerabilities, and enduring psychological scars, whether it occurs through personal migration or large-scale political partitions. By foregrounding memory, liminality, and the instability of national and cultural boundaries, Mukherjee and Ghosh expose how the postcolonial condition is marked by an ongoing struggle to inhabit spaces and selves that have been irrevocably shaped by loss and dislocation.

Both novels demonstrate that displacement leads to profound trauma, characterized by fragmented identities, emotional disintegration, and the inability to reconcile nostalgia for the past with the realities of the present. While Mukherjee emphasizes the inner conflict faced by immigrant women, Ghosh foregrounds the collective suffering of families torn apart by history. These literary explorations offer valuable insights into the ongoing negotiation of selfhood within diaspora communities.

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