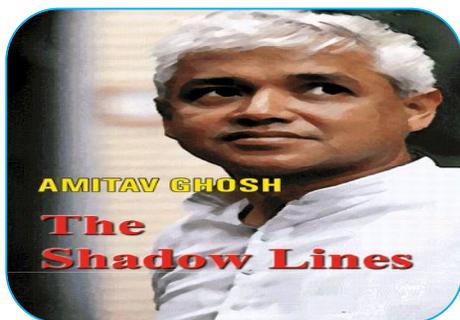




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## INVENTING AND RECALLING "IMAGINARY BORDERS" IN AMITAV GHOSH'S "THE SHADOW LINES"

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### ABSTRACT:

*This paper seeks to analyse spaces "Imaginary Borders" spaces in Amitav Ghosh's popular memory novel "The Shadow Lines". The novel opens up a space in an interconnected world in its dual role as a consignment to get in touch with as well as of conflict. It is a significant and fascinating facet in the fictional realms of Ghosh. Edges and limits between the countries cannot puzzle out problems, rather they create troubles to an extreme degree. Most of the novels of Ghosh deal with the history of the nation and the sufferings of the people before and after the partition of India. The division brings out riots, wars and sorrow among the people. The increase of boundaries in the state has not only*

*set people of the state apart, also but it has displaced the great unwashed from their country of origin. Often, this has taken the shape of a restricted identity which in turn establishes the cognitive operation of border crossing as a painful experience. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the causes of the partition. The second dwells on the effects of the variance among the masses of the two countries. The last section, as a conclusion, explores the unreal glass borders and trans-cultural identity.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Imagination, Borders, Memory, Partition, Displacement, Identity Crisis, Cultural Dyslexia, Alienation.*

### INTRODUCTION

Ghosh's novels have always dealt with the idea of constant voyage and over riding borders or with their refutation. Borders affect harmonious environment. Any physical division brings out wars, mass murders, disturbances and sorrow among the public and creates borders. The partition is a clear sign of pain, loss and suffering. Ghosh brings to the native experiences of the idea of incredible borders through the

strong reasons for the separation and disturbances prevailed during the time. It resulted riots in the country and made hard to the peaceful of the country. It not only set the people of the country apart but also dislocated the debris from their country of origin. It has gone to a restricted identity which in turn marks the cognitive operation of border crossing as a painful experience. These incidents are well depicted as per the situational demand in this novel. "The Shadow Lines" is not the only novel of Ghosh to depict border tensions but also paves a path to borderless universe. It is a recurring theme. His appeal for a borderless universe and his

affinity for recovering lost histories come seamlessly together in "The Shadow Lines".

The protagonists of Ghosh's major novels are created based on the novelist's concept of space, either imagined or remembered. *The Shadow Lines* recalls and imagines both private and public lives, in the process lending thematic unity to the novel. Ghosh undertakes a project to occupy the space between disparate people, locations, identities and landscapes in his story to

depict the dynamics of "overlapping territories, intertwined histories" (Said 3-61) in our multicultural world. The cultural space is vast and borderless with its own hybrid languages and practices which circulate outside national or religious boundaries. Tabish Khair rightly observes that "he does not inhabit a culture rooted in a single place, but a discursive space that flows across political and national boundaries, and even across generations in time" (Khair 18).

This novel is set mainly on the newly created Indian borders. It tells the story of three generations of the nameless narrator's family, who lives in cities as far apart as Dhaka, Calcutta and London, each with their own cultural baggage. Opening in Calcutta in the 1960s, the novel begins with the unnamed narrator and he introduces two branches of the same family, the Datta-Chaudhuris of Bengal and Prices of London and their relations in both the tragic and comic modes. The narrator grows from an impressionable eight year school boy in the Gole Park house in Calcutta to an assured adult. The evolution of the narrator is not just physical, but also ascertained in relation with the ideas generated on nation states, nationalism and international relations as he graduates to his maturity. He travels repeatedly between Calcutta and London in 1981 to narrate the stories of his grandmother Thamma, and his grandmother's sister Mayadebi, of his uncles Tridib and Robi, of his second cousin Ila who choose different paths due to sweeping changes in politics.

Tridib, the narrator's uncle, plays an important role and has a great influence on the narrator's life. They have a special mutual bond which begins right from the childhood of the narrator. Tridib loves May. Tridib's impact on narrator even leads him to love the same girl. Tridib's aspiration to think across cultures, time and space is interwoven with a powerful sense of locality and material. His global imagination respects differences even as he traverses them.

The novel suggests imagination and collective identities, which are the basis for the narrator of overcoming identity:

I knew that the sights Tridib saw in his imagination were infinitely more detailed, more precise than anything I would ever see. He said to me once that I could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limit's of one's mind to other times and other places, and even if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. (29)

Tridib loses his life while bringing his uncle Jetamoshai from Dhaka to Calcutta. Tridib's death as a struggle with silence signifies an absence, a hole, a gap, an emptiness. Experiencing the riot, the narrator says, "The streets had turned themselves inside out: our city had turned against us" (203). It is the madness of the riot.

The novel emerges out of Ghosh's first experience of the anti-sikh communal riots in Delhi in 1964, the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Partition, the communal riot in the history of the nation achieved nothing. Each communal riot is a reminder that partition resolved nothing. Although nationalism and they construed the development of secured Indian nationalism.

The novelist brings in a storyteller, which is very important to the construction of a novel. It is a story within a story described in a non-linear fashion. Interestingly, narration in *The Shadow Lines* is very typical and comprehensive in structure. The recollection of the narrator's memories and those of other characters are intertwined and filtered through the consciousness of the narrator. The nameless narrator, who is born in India and gains his PhD degree from England, traces events back and forth in time, from the eruption of World War II to the late twentieth century. It takes us through episodes of Bengali partition and violence, respecting and delineating the ways in which political events invade private lives.

History runs as an undercurrent in the novels of Ghosh. *The Shadow Lines* is rooted in reality and yet it appears at a slant from the present. The title *The Shadow Lines* reflects the realistic and the simplistic constituent. The chief motifs of the novel are the agonies of displacement, identity crisis, cultural dyslexia and the sensation of alienation in the adopted land and the continuous thought returning to their own land.

There are so many novels that belong to the genre of the partition novel, which deal with borders in so many ways. Some of these novels are Khushwant Singh's *A Train to Pakistan* (1956), Manohar Malgaonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), Raj Gill's *The Rape* (1974) and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Sce-Candy Man* (1988). The helpless condition of human life caused by the violent pains of partition which obstinately and ruthlessly separated friends, families, lovers and neighbors is keenly portrayed in these novels. In Indo-Anglican fiction, the division of Bengal and the distress caused by division are first highlighted by Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines*.

The Postcolonial writers are always connected with history and the traumatic past to understand and recover their concerns and they refer to the idea of the Nation. To understand the condition of Post-colonialism, one should reclaim history and retain certain memories. Postcolonial writers like Salman Rushdie, Ghosh and Vikram Seth have achieved this by taking their readers out of imagination to make believe the situation in the present world, where history and the story appear to be true. Similarly, in *Midnight's Children* (1982), Rushdie is not concerned about a unitary and monolithic notion of India, but an India of complete diversity. Thus, there is no coherent center around which the concept of India can be experienced.

Borders melt in Ghosh's fiction. In *The Shadow Lines*, they are merely means of securing political benefits. People had believed that national leaders could figure out their problems, but they had drawn imaginary lines among the religions of the people. East and West Bengals are, historically, culturally and geographically one and a division was not a solution to the traditional Hindu-Muslim animosity. For the East Bengal, 15 August 1947 is the partition day, a day that deliberately bifurcated the Bengal community. If the purpose of partition was to gain freedom, then that freedom becomes delusion.

Ghosh gives top priority to the shadows of unreal and considerable spaces, the difficulties of all characters in the novel as they struggle to tell their personal and collective histories to each other. Observing the connectedness and separation, the writer uses the fate of nations (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) to offer reflections on deeply complex political struggle in the post-partition sub-continent between two major ethnic communities of Hindus and Muslims. At the same time, these "shadows" in the form of "national boundaries" not only manipulate private and political spheres, but also demonstrate an individual's life long struggle to win over artificial borders, invading the space of home, territory, and motherland.

Space in *The Shadow Lines* is not only remembered as an imaginative construct, but it is represented as an orbit of political and cultural encounters which actually determine the connection of different characters with territory and location. Hence, space is demonstrated as a lively arrangement between people, places, cultures and societies. As James Clifford points out, "space is never ontologically given. It is discursively mapped and corporeally practiced" (James 54).

That is why the narrator highlights this point through the character of Thamma, the grandmother who 'wanted to know whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane' (148). In fact, the belief in the reality of nations and borders, psychologically there exists another reality across the borders. As the grandmother reveals they are no implications of arbitrary borders as trenches or anything, 'how are people to know? Where is the difference then? Partition and all the killing and everything- if there is not something in-between?' (148-9)

According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, cartographic imagination is atypical to Bengali imagination: Whether as a result of a relatively early exposure to colonial education or as a reaction to it, real journeys within the country and imagined travels to faraway places outside national boundaries have always fascinated the Bengali middle class (Mukherjee 137).

Tridib triggers in the narrator an yearning to imagine both common and unfamiliar places in remembrance and thoughts. In short, it is Tridib's contribution of imagination that stimulates in the narrator a longing to travel around the world. Both possess an affinity towards reading maps and to find their distinct sense of moving around the places without any kind of mental and physical border or any barrier. Tridib even suggests to the narrator to use his "imagination with precision" (Ghosh 24) in order to voyage into unknown places and spaces. He once tells the narrator that one could never know anything except through desire "that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and

other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror" (Ghosh 2:).

The narrator says about his cousin Ila, that she travels all over the globe, nevertheless, she has no concept of place because she could not invent a place for herself but relies on the inventions of others:

I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination; that her practical, bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more nor less true, only very far apart. It was not her fault that she could not understand, for as Tridib often said of her, the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all. (Ghosh 21)

The narrator realizes that Ila is trapped in a static zone, even though she has travelled to different regions of the world. The problem is that Ila perceives the present without ever seeking its affinity with the past, especially when memory is not crucial to her conception of space and place. She is unable to see the past through memory or imagination, whereas once the narrator has seen the past through Tridib's eyes, the past "seemed concurrent with its present" (Ghosh 31). The narrator points:

Ila lived so intensely in the present that she would not have believed that there really were people like Tridib, who could experience the world as concretely in their imagination as she did through her senses, more so if anything, since to them these experiences were permanently available in their memories. (Ghosh 29-30)

Although Ila wants to enjoy a sense of bonding with the narrator, she tends to look down upon him at the same time for inhabiting the middle class suburbs of Delhi and Calcutta where no events of global importance ever take place, "nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that's really remembered" (Ghosh 102). The narrator is confused because he has always viewed the world as a mosaic of interconnected places. Calcutta for him is as much a part of London as London is a part of Calcutta, especially when all places are borderless space in the process of memory like hues of the same picture. Moreover, he is surprised to know that Ila has no understanding of events outside the colonial motherland England:

I began to marvel at the easy arrogance with which she believed that her experience could encompass other moments simply because it had come later; that times and places are the same because they happen to look alike, like airport lounges. (Ghosh 101)

The narrator underlines the role of memory and imagination time and again in "inventing place," because he wants to be free of other people's fabrication of space and place. In other words, he strives to read space above all kinds of artificial borders to imagine its dimensions. As a schoolboy, the narrator conjures up a picture of London that is so vivid in his imagination that he could recognize places by their mere mention of the name when he visits London years later: Besides, he learns that even real places can be invented inside your head:

the Tridib who had pushed me to imagine the roofs of Colombo for myself, the Tridib who had said that we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly . . . because . . . if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free of other people's inventions. (Ghosh 31)

This novel works on the concept of the border in a variety of levels, such as telling stories and events, evoking the role of imaginary and real places across distant cultures and communities, watching fading photographs, reading maps and old newspapers, reminiscing about forgotten episodes of mutual bonding, and childhood games. The narrator claims that he has learned the practice of imagining space and place from his alter-ego Tridib. While recollecting him, the narrator reveals that it is Tridib who has given him "worlds to travel" and "eyes to see them with" (Shadow Lines, 20).

## CONCLUSION

*The Shadow Lines* is an evidence of loss and memory for the text compels us to grant the concept of freedom, ideological struggle, feelings of nationalism and the inevitable violence. Although *The Shadow Lines* is a quest for political freedom which makes the contemporary novel, it has been broadly discussed and addressed in literary criticism as another novel of partition. It enlightens us more with the

plight of the Bengali diaspora. On the other way, it traces out a contrast between personal memory and political history and between the space of people relations and the space of unkind chains. Ghosh's narrator shows disparate ways of reading larger political design of the fate of three nations - India, Pakistan and Bangladesh - in the light of his family records. The author shows that the 'shadow line' between people and nations is a mere illusion.

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