

**BETWEEN MEMORY AND HISTORY: THE DYNAMICS OF
SPACE AND PLACE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW
LINES* (1988)**

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1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* has remained one of the most significant works of historical fiction, memory literature, Indian diasporic literature, partition literature, and above all postcolonial novel all in one. Not only does the novel point to the importance of historical events shaping private lives, but it particularly underlines the role of displacement and relocation in shaping the imagination of ordinary individuals in the middle of a political as well as geographical change. Ghosh seems to be interested in people on the periphery of society, striving to make sense of the disintegrating world around them; hence, the novel provides insight into the lives of those who do not dazzle, but those whose lives are a vivid reflection of cultural, national, and territorial transformations. This article, therefore, seeks to highlight the significance of the novel in the field of postcolonial studies by critically examining the relationship between memory and history and space and place in the plotline.

The fragmentary narrative of *The Shadow Lines* unfolds the narrator's experiences in different cultural locations and time periods. The novel was published in 1988, four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination. In fact, the novel is set against the backdrop of major historical events such as the Swadeshi movement, the Second World War, the partition of India, the communal riots of 1963-64 in Dhaka and Calcutta, the Maoist Movement, the India-China War, the India-Pakistan War and the fall of Dhaka from East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The story, which takes place largely on the newly-created Indo-Pakistan border, spans three generations of the narrator's family, spreading over East Bengal, Calcutta and London. Opening in Calcutta in the 1960s, the novel portrays two families—one English, one Bengali—known to each other from the time of the Raj, as their lives intertwine in tragic and comic ways. The unnamed narrator as a family archivist travels between Calcutta and London in 1981 to tell the story which contains multiple stories of his grandmother Th'amma, and his grandaunt Mayadebi, of his uncles Tridib and Robi, of his cousin Ila, and of May Price, a family friend in London. All these

stories-within-stories are united by the thread of memory and imagination as the novelist treats both memory and imagination as a driving force of the narrative.

Within the flashback narrative framework, the narrator, Indian-born and English-educated, traces events back and forth in time, from the outbreak of the Second World War to the late twentieth century, through years of Bengali partition and violence, observing the ways in which political events invade private lives. Hence, the reader learns that Tridib was born in 1932 and had been to England with his parents in 1939, where his father had received medical treatment. May Price, with whose family they shared a close relationship, had begun a long correspondence with Tridib in 1959. Unfortunately, Tridib lost his life in a communal riot in Dhaka in 1964 while May was on a visit to India. Examining the ambivalence of cultural and national borders, connecting and separating individuals and families, the author addresses the fate of nations - India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh - to offer observations about a profoundly complex political conflict in the postcolonial and post-partition subcontinent between two major ethnic communities of Hindus and Muslims.

By spreading the story over diverse geographical and national landscapes in which memory and imagination reinvent historical reality, Ghosh highlights how the 'shadows' of imaginary and remembered spaces haunt all characters in the novel as they struggle with the past in an uncertain present. 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 lifelong effort to win over artificial borders, invading the space of home/land. In order to bring out the irony of dividing ancient cultures and civilisations by drawing borders and giving a new name to a piece of mutual territory, Ghosh contends the sinister smoke screens of nationalism hitherto unknown on the Indian subcontinent until the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 through the all-pervasive metaphor of 'shadow lines' in the novel.

2. Memory and History and Space and Place : Mapping the Terrain

Recently, the concept of cultural memory, first developed by German scholars Jan Assmann (2012) and Aleida Assmann (2013; 2010) and Astrid Erll (2011), is increasingly discussed with reference to its transnational and transcultural dimensions (see Butt 2015; de Cesari and Rigney 2014; Crownshaw 2013). The discourse of (cultural) memory, indeed, urges a more critical view of history. Hence, memory is often discussed as dramatically different from history. According to French philosopher Pierre

Nora:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name (...) History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past (...) Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative. (1989, 8-9)

While for Nora, “History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it” (1989, 9), for Ghosh memory is always sceptical of history – history that can be manipulated by politicians and historians. Ananya Jahanara Kabir takes one step further from the conflict between memory and history and introduces the notion of post-amnesia, which she defines as a way of ‘remembering and forgetting’ East Pakistan (2017 web), arguing that “For both Pakistan and Bangladesh, the time between 1947 and 1971 was best forgotten” (2017 web). Kabir claims post-amnesia as a more potent term to understand the twin phenomenon of partition in the history of South Asia than Marianne Hirsch’s term postmemory (2012), which indicates the transmission of traumatic memory, namely the memories of the Holocaust generation to the new generation.

Looking at the forgotten triangle of West Pakistan, East Pakistan as erased from the world atlas and replaced by a new nation-state Bangladesh is to engage with what Michael Rothberg has called ‘multidirectional memory’ (2009) – memory which recognises the interconnectedness of traumatic events on a large scale. Although Rothberg discusses multidirectional memories that connect the Holocaust and colonialism, “his model is highly useful for thinking through the relationship between 1947 and 1971, and between successive waves of memory and forgetting these engender” (Kabir 2017 Web). Kabir makes a remarkable observation in this regard, claiming: “Acknowledging the multidirectionality of cultural memory is to open the door to new ways of thinking about Partition(s) as well as seeking emotionally sustainable models for reparation and healing. East Pakistan is, in this context, an exemplary shared lost space for all three nations” (2017).

The concept of multidirectional memory takes me to Ghosh’s innovative representation of place and space in his plotline as ideas of space and place are crucial to his treatment of both memory and history in

his novel. Just as memory has been perceived in terms of a location (see Samuel 1996; see Klüger 2003), a significant number of critics have conceptualised cultural processes in geographical and metaphorical terms such as Mary Louise Pratt, Elleke Boehmer, Peter Hulme or Stephen Greenblatt; in particular, Homi Bhabha and Edward Sojatheorise these processes through the notion of Third Space. Space, as many critics have argued, does not merely provide a background for cultural configurations; rather, it is an essential part of cultural and political transformations. In Ghosh's fictional realms, however, local and global, seen and unseen space is perceived and imagined in the narrator's ritual of memory as a fundamental facet of individual, national, familial, and communal metamorphoses. Consequently, space is not merely remembered as an imaginative construct, but it is represented as a domain of political and cultural encounters, which actually shapes the connection of different characters with territory and location. Hence, space is represented as a dynamic arrangement between people, places, cultures and societies as James Clifford points out, "space is never ontologically given. It is discursively mapped and corporeally practiced" (1997, 54). According to Clifford, space is composed through movement, produced through use, and is simultaneously an agent and a result of action or practice. Therefore, it is essential to make a distinction between 'space' and 'place.'

The difference and connection between space and place have been examined by a number of cultural and postcolonial critics. According to Bill Ashcroft, for example, 'space' is the creation of colonialism, which virtually dislocated the colonised; 'place' in contrast is the pre-colonial perception of belonging in time, community and landscape – a perception that postcolonial transformation strives to retrieve, if in the "delocalised," that is, "spatialised" form of global consciousness (2000, 15). Finally, just as memory and history differ from each other, so are place and space which the following close reading of the novel aims to demonstrate.

3. Postcolonial Cartographies: Tridib's Art of Imagining Spaces as Opposed to Ila

While going down memory lane, the narrator seems to try inhabiting a space, like Tridib does, to achieve freedom and liberty in its entirety since freedom is central to every character's story in the novel. However, national uprising as a legacy of the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 pushes the characters from the old as well as new generation, as demonstrated by Tridib's killing in an act of ethnic violence, to the brink of tragedy.

Since the narrator contests artificial divisions of the subcontinent

as well as postcolonial cartographies, the novel presents space through the vivid imagination of the narrator and his most influential relative Tridib. This space is addressed not only as a space of human and cultural encounters, but of overlapping histories and territories, shifting countries and continents where different people, cultures, nations and communities seek to communicate above the 'shadow lines' of social, national and territorial barriers. Hence, the idea of space as a dynamic cultural site in the novel brings out the role of national ideologies in shaping personal memory and collective history. In fact, a profound preoccupation with spaces in the novel also points to the cartographic imagination of the Bengali community. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, cartographic imagination is peculiar 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" (2000, 137). Thus, a deep fascination with distant space and place characterises the narrator's as well as his family's imagination in both parts of the novel. Indeed, spatial practices work on a variety of levels in the novel 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 playing 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" (Ghosh 2005, 20). It is Tridib that triggers in him a longing to imagine familiar and unfamiliar places in memory and imagination. In short, it is Tridib's gift of imagination that kindles in the narrator a desire to travel around the globe. Both have a penchant to study maps to develop and discover their distinct sense of travelling to places without any kind of mental and physical border or barrier. Tridib has even suggested to the narrator to use his "imagination with precision" (Ghosh 2005, 24) in order to voyage into unknown spaces. He once said to 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 2005, 29). The narrator is sad to know that his globetrotter cousin Ila, nevertheless, has no concept of place because she cannot 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 2005, 21)

Instead of ever making efforts to understand him, Ila despises the narrator for having a dreamy view of distant places; for she could never believe in space as a human construction but looks upon it as a given reality. She dismisses the narrator's practice of imaginary space construction as a mere indulgence in fancy:

It's you who were peculiar, sitting in that poky little flat in Calcutta, dreaming about faraway places. I probably did you no end of good; at least you learnt that those cities you saw on maps were real places, not like those fairylands Tridib made up for you. (Ghosh 2005, 23-24)

The narrator realises that Ila is somewhat trapped in a static zone for having a rigid view of space and place, even though she has travelled to different regions of the world. The other 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 2005, 31). The narrator points out:

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 2005, 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 middleclass 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 2005, 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 2005, 101)

He confesses that many events of global importance might have taken place only in England, but this does not mean that the history of his country should be sniggered at. He recollects how his homeland has undergone untellable political calamities while confessing his perception of England only as a homeland of imagination, maintaining, “I knew nothing at all about England except an invention. But still I had known people of my own age who had survived the Great Terror in the Calcutta of the sixties and seventies” (Ghosh 2005, 103). Since he apprehends space as a cultural artifact (see Shields 197), he cannot, like Ila, imagine place as a closed container, independent of human subjectivity and agency.

The narrator underlines the role of memory and imagination throughout the novel 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 truedimensions himself. As a school boy, the narrator conjures up a picture of London that is so vivid in his imagination that he could recognise places by their mere mention of name when he visits London years later and learns that 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 2005, 31)

The narrator is also deeply mesmerised by an imaginary space like Tridib’s ruin which he discovers at the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta. In 1959 when Tridib was twenty-seven and May Price nineteen, they had begun a long correspondence, but they met for the first time in that ruin in Calcutta in 1964. Tridib had expressed in his last letter to May that he wanted them to “meet far away from friends and relatives—in a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers” (Ghosh 2005, 141). In fact, Tridib epitomises the narrator’s as well as every other character’s desire to overcome the shadow lines of borders and distance to inhabit a space of cultural and

human contact, shadows which tend to weaken the character's aspirations for freedom.

Despite ending as a story of unrequited love, Tridib and May's relationship is the most awe-inspiring experience in the narrator's memories because their vision of love and bonding is not constricted by either national fervour or racial hatred, hounding different ethnicities of divided India. In the course of remembering yet another particular spatial practice, the narrator points out that space at times can carry inexplicable marks of time. While recollecting Ila in London, he explains how he was suddenly haunted by the ghosts of time in the cellar of the Prices when he was playing Houses with her—a game he had actually played with her in their ancestral home in India. At that moment, he experienced time past as almost suspended in space:

Those empty corners filled up with remembered forms, with the ghosts who had been handed down to me by time: the ghosts of the nine-year-old Tridib, sitting on a camp bed, just as I was, his small face intent, listening to the bombs; the ghost of Snipe in that far corner . . . the ghost of the eight-year-old Ila, sitting with me under that vast table in Raibajar. They were all around me, were together at last, not ghosts at all: the ghostliness was merely the absence of time and distance—for that is all that a ghost is, a presence displaced in time. (Ghosh 2005, 178)

While witnessing the ghosts of time in the presence of Ila that are the ghosts of memory and imagination simultaneously, the narrator experiences a rush of multiple memories overwhelming his entire being. Real places in his recollection appear to be as much imaginary as real. This is the reason that there is a constant play on reality and imagination in the narrator's consciousness whether he is at home or abroad. For the narrator reality lies not in the obvious, but in what is evoked and understood by the shadows of memory and imagination over changing laps of space and time. It is imagination alone which can portray a lucid and an enduring picture of reality. Hence, the narrator gives more emphasis to the creative aspect of imagination in uncoiling memories even though both imagination and memory are an irresolvable mystery to him just as the murder of Tridib.

The narrator as a historian and Tridib as an archaeologist seem to complement each other in the novel as a narrative of memory. The narrator declares that even years after his death, Tridib seems to be watching over him as he tries "to learn the meaning of distance. His atlas showed me, for example, that within the tidy ordering of Euclidean space, Chiang Mai in

Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi” (Ghosh 2005, 227). Thus, time and distance like space and place appear to be a mystery that the narrator has to reckon with to relive and repossess his fast fading past.

4. The Past is Not a Foreign Country: Memory and Forgetting

Priya Kumar considers *The Shadow Lines* to be a testimony of loss and memory since the text compels the reader to concede “the past-in-presentness of partition as a history that is not done with, that refuses to be past” (1999, 201). Since the past permeates the present, the narrator is deeply preoccupied with it to understand not only his family history but the history of his country. In the opening of his essay “Separating Anxiety: Growing up Inter/National in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*” (1994), Suvirl Kaul, therefore, points out that the question if you remember is the most insistent in the novel that brings together the private and the public. Kaul declares that this question “shapes the narrator’s search for connection, for recovery of lost information, repressed experiences, for the details of trauma and joy that have receded into the archive of private and public memory (1994, 125). While remembering his grandmother’s journey to Dhaka and Tridib’s untimely death afterwards, the narrator recollects a series of political incidents in Calcutta and Dhaka simultaneously to bring out the enormity of the central tragedy in his narration. It started with the disappearance of Mu-i-Mubarak, the hair of the Prophet Mohammed, from Hazratbal Mosque in Kashmir in 1963 and its recovery in 1964. In one of the riots in Khulna, a small town in the distant east of Pakistan, a demonstration turned violent on the 4th of January 1964. This demonstration is “branded in [the narrator’s] memory” (Ghosh 2005, 222) because it is in this demonstration that Tridib lost his life. While recollecting an individual’s sacrifice and his community’s struggle with senseless political and national barriers, the narrator states:

Every word I write about those 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. (Ghosh 2005, 213)

The narrator has a twin motive in narrating from the sources of memory: first, to communicate the lurking political turmoil beneath the tender veneer of his childhood years in post-partition India; and secondly, to save his

memories from slipping into the realm of forgetting. The struggle with silence is not only a struggle with recollection, but also a struggle with the fading past in the fast-changing present. It is, therefore, justified to say that Ghosh's novel is a fine illustration of post-amnesia (Kabir 2017 web) as the narrator is anxious to hold on to the past and to document its significance. In 1979 the narrator recollects the events of 1964 involving his friend because he is determined not to let "the past vanish without trace; I was determined to persuade them of its importance" (Ghosh 2005, 271). The narrator uses memory not merely to comprehend the individual and collective cultural past that has been confounding him for fifteen long years, but also to figure out 'what' and 'how' to remember. Perhaps this is the reason that the narrative reflects a constant process of introspection; as Louis James proclaims, "if *Circle of Reason* is about knowledge, *The Shadow Lines* is about knowing" (1999, 56).

Ghosh's transnational vision of the Indian subcontinent is conspicuous in his representations of national borders as he seems to believe in cosmopolitan identity as much as being a global citizen like his narrator. The novel as a work of commemoration and reminiscence is an attempt not only to evoke the memory of the ethnic riots of 1964 and to mourn the death of innocent people, but also to pay a tribute to those who dream of the subcontinent without borders. The narrator recollects,

[b]y the end of January 1964 the riots had faded away from the pages of the newspapers, disappeared from the collective imagination of "responsible opinion," vanished without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence. (Ghosh 2005, 226)

The narrator is surprised to find out in his study of old newspapers that the riots in Khulna and Calcutta have not ever made the newspaper headlines, but became a mere bottom page story. At this stage the narrator has started the "strangest journey: a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking-glass events" (Ghosh 2005, 219). He is deeply disturbed to know that the newspapers of 1964 in India have not given enough emphasis to communal violence in Dhaka and consequent riots in Calcutta. A sudden realisation that the distance of twelve hundred miles between Srinagar (Kashmir) and Calcutta, and Dhaka being in another country, could be used as a reason to keep people in Calcutta in the dark. This piece of news leads the narrator to discover a momentous truth, that is, national frontiers create a false sense of distance and reality. In

other words, national borders generate the illusion of differences. It is this illusion of difference he seeks to address in remembering his family in relation to the English, Indian and Bengali political histories.

The narrator also meticulously recollects trouble in Dhaka and Calcutta simultaneously as political tensions in these two cities coincide with each other. When Muslims poisoned the water of Calcutta in 1964 as a protest against the communal crisis in Dhaka as rumoured by the word-of-mouth, the narrator felt at that time that “our city had turned against us” (Ghosh 2005, 199). Out of terror of riots, he could not even trust his Muslim friend Montu. He remembers fear suddenly filling the familiar space of his native city:

It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world—not language, not food, not music—it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror. (Ghosh 2005, 200)

However, the irony is that Indians are ultimately compelled to shed borders and barriers because abstract concepts of nationalism can never replace human bonding. The grandmother’s orthodox Hindu uncle Jethamoshai, for example, has never let the shadow of any Muslim ever pass him all his life, but after the partition when he has almost lost his senses, he is happily looked after by a Muslim family. Jethamoshai claims that his fate is tied to his land whether his land is transferred to his enemies or not:

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 very well, you’re 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 2005, 211)

By pondering over the sites of memory as sites of mourning, the novel depicts how nationalism invades private lives to such an extent that it breaks down families completely as some members are compelled to leave to feel secure whereas some are not ready to give in to the new political order. The narrator at the same time thinks about the lethal outcome of

cultural and national differences that do damage beyond repair as noticeable in the case of Jethamoshai who is in reality a non-political figure. But he is targeted as an enemy as he is imagined to be inhabiting a space and place, which is supposed to be no longer his own. While commenting on Ghosh's logic of drafting the poetics and politics of space in the novel, Mukherjee makes a pertinent comment:

Amitav Ghosh would like to believe in a world where there is nothing in between, where borders are illusions. Actually, three countries get interlocked in Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines*—East Pakistan before it became Bangladesh, England, and India—and people of at least three religions and nationalities impinge upon one another's lives and deaths. It is very much a text of our times when human lives spill over from one country to another, where language and loyalties cannot be contained within tidy national frontiers. (2008, 181)

Due to a long silence within and without with respect to the individual and communal crisis of 1964, it takes the narrator “*fifteen* years to discover” that there was a connection between “my nightmare bus ride back from school and the events that befell Tridib and others in Dhaka” (Ghosh 2005, 214; emphasis in original). The narrator wonders at his stupidity for finding the truth only after such a long time:

I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality (. . .) I could not have perceived that there was something more than an incidental connection between those events of which I had a brief glimpse from the windows of that bus, in Calcutta, and those other events in Dhaka, simply because Dhaka was in another country. (Ghosh 2005, 214)

Despite condemning the masses' obsession with the shadow lines of hatred and hostility out of national sentiments, the narrator also shows how ordinary people try their best to seek mutual sympathy among various ethnic groups of the subcontinent. As in the wake of partition and later on during the trouble in Dhaka in 1964, there were innumerable cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus and Hindus sheltering Muslims. “But they were ordinary people, soon forgotten—not for them any Martyr's Memorials or Eternal Flames” (Ghosh 2005, 225). However, he feels compelled to consider that some people like his grandmother believe in not only drawing lines as a part of their faith but respecting them with

blood. The narrator eventually arrives at the conclusion that “there was a special enchantment in lines” (Ghosh 2005, 228) as the pattern of the world. Therefore, ordinary people are enchanted with borders, with ‘imagined communities’ (see Anderson 1983, 15) no matter how much of ‘an invented tradition’ (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 2000, 1-14) these borders and imagined communities are. The narrator concludes:

They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland. What had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that they had created not a separation, but a yet-undiscovered irony— the irony that killed Tridib. (Ghosh 2005, 228)

Tridib’s death as a looming tragedy in the riots of 1964 is central to trigger the memory of the narrator in composing a family memoir. While underlining his profound association with Tridib as an embodiment of freedom, the narrator sheds light on space and place as subject to divisions and differences where there should be no border or barrier. The narrator hence seeks to demonstrate the irony of his relative’s sacrifice. He highlights that Tridib as a staunch believer of inventing and producing a space beyond borders gives his life away to save human lives, but the borders stay where they are. His death saves May but not his aunt’s uncle Jethamoshai for whom he has actually travelled from Calcutta to Dhaka. Because Jethamoshai is a Bengali Hindu and not a Bengali Muslim, he falls prey to fanatic Muslim Bengali nationalists despite Tridib’s attempts at rescuing him. Indeed, the narrator is left wondering why borders and not human ideals win in the end.

5. Remembering Tha’mma’s Deluding Dimensions of Space and Place

Several memory novels like Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s *The Shards of Memory* (1995) or Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) narrate the family saga that focuses on the ambivalent relationships between parents and children or aunts and nephews and nieces in the historical context. But recently there seems to be a trend of dealing with the relationship of grandparents and grandchildren in a memory narrative. If Vikram Seth chooses to write a true memoir about his great-grand uncle and great-grand aunt in his biography *Two Lives* (2005), Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* as a fictional memoir underlines the relationship between grandmother and

grandson. The character of the grandmother is central to the presentation of space and place in the novel as the narrator goes down memory lane.

The titles of two separate parts in the novel, *Going Away* and *Coming Home* point to the dilemma of space and place for the people of contemporary India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh with reference to the life story of the narrator's grandmother dearly called *Tha'mma*. When *Tha'mma* tries to explain that in the past coming and going from Dhaka had never been a problem and that no one ever stopped her, the narrator as a school boy jumps at the ungrammatical expression of his grandmother and wonders why she could not make a difference between coming and going: "*Tha'mma, Tha'mma!* I cried. How could you have 'come' home to Dhaka? You don't know the difference between coming and going!" (Ghosh 2005, 150). At this juncture, the narrator tries to share with the reader a deep-rooted confusion and chaos in the psyche of partition victims that face an era of barbed wires and checkpoints on their old territory. The narrator infers:

Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a journey which was not a coming and a going at all; a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement. (Ghosh 2005, 150)

The narrator is, at the same time, particularly concerned with the predicament of dogmatic Indian nationalists who are obsessed with drawing lines and shutting doors on each other when in history they were all one people. 'Going away' and 'Coming home' in the past was something one could achieve without risking one's life in the subcontinent; for Dhaka or Calcutta were places to enter without showing any passports or identity card. Ghosh states:

the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map, where the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines—so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the invented image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free—our looking-glass border. (Ghosh 2005, 228)

The narrative undercuts imagined differences between the newly created nation states on the subcontinent by emphasising similarities between Dhaka

and Calcutta through the recurrent leitmotif of the mirror. The reader is made to think that the “looking-glass border” (Ghosh 2005, 228) attempts to create a mirage of otherness but only sees itself reflected. Experimenting with a compass on Tridib’s old atlas, the narrator makes some startling discoveries. He notices that even though he “believed in the power of distance” (Ghosh 2005, 222) he could not help ignoring that Calcutta and Khulna, despite national barriers being created between the two cities, “face each other at a watchful equidistance across the border” (Ghosh 2005, 226). Consequently, he is convinced that border, however tangible, is a shadow of the mind; it is as fictive as it is real since human imagination can never perceive it as a fixed historical fact.

Just as Tridib and Ila have their own practices of inhabiting social and political space so has the narrator’s grandmother Tha’mma. Having a primordial view of nationalism, the grandmother equates native space with freedom and honour. According to Tha’mma who has a nationalist mindset, Ila has no right to stay in England because she is not a ‘national’ there even when the questions of national identity have undergone a radical change in an era of transnationalism. She questions furiously, “What’s she doing in that country?” (Ghosh 2005, 76) and reasons out:

She doesn’t belong there. It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed . . . War is their religion. That’s what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what *you* have to achieve for India, don’t you see? (Ghosh 2005, 76)

After her retirement in 1962 as a headmistress from a public school where she has worked for twenty-seven years, the grandmother begins to feel nostalgic about her house in Dhaka. She has reached a stage in her life where she cannot suppress old memories of her ancestral home any longer. She sadly recollects how her ancestral house was divided with a wall between two brothers, her father and her uncle Jethamoshai. The reader thus first encounters the partition of domestic space, a partition that is repeated on the national space with the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. The grandmother reminisces:

They had all longed for the house to be divided when the quarrels were at their worst, but once it had actually happened and each family had moved into their own part of it, instead of the peace they had so much looked forward to, they found that a strange,

eerie silence had descended on the house. (Ghosh 2005, 121)

Because the grandmother is convinced of the reality of borders, she asks her son before flying to Dhaka if she would be able “to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane” (Ghosh 2005, 148). When her son laughs at her question and taunts her if she thought that “the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was on the school atlas,” (Ghosh 2005, 148) she retorts: “But surely there’s something—trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land. Don’t they call it no-man’s land?” (Ghosh 2005, 148). She ends up questioning some of the fundamentals of her definition of nationalism:

But if there aren’t any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where’s the difference then? And if there’s no difference, both sides will be the same; it’ll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it for all then—the partition and the killing and everything—if there isn’t something in between? (Ghosh 2005, 148-149)

By highlighting the fact that even after the partition there might not be any difference between the two regions across the border, the novel questions the ideology of nationalism through temporal and spatial images. One of the paramount characteristics of the ideology of nationalism is that it defines itself in opposition to other countries across the border (see Renan 1990, 8-22; see Gellner 1994, 63-70; see Hutchinson 1987). Ghosh deplores the division of the subcontinent by challenging and contesting the “myth of nationalism” (e.g. see Sethi 1999) on the Indian subcontinent, which has erected walls among heterogeneous ethnicities in the false garb of freedom and liberty. When Tridib’s brother Robi recollects Tridib’s death in Dhaka in a Bangladeshi restaurant in England, fifteen years later, he expresses bitterly the cynicism towards the new nation states, which is seminal to Ghosh’s view of the present-day subcontinent:

And then I think to myself, why don’t they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It’s a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide memory? If freedom was possible, surely Tridib’s death would have set me free. (Ghosh 2005, 241)

By recollecting the events of 1964 and their role in shaping private and

public spaces, Ghosh gives a new perspective on personal and historical memory. Even the development of story “becomes a commentary on the ways in which histories get constructed” (Singh 2005, 163). This broader notion of history is, indeed, a recurring theme in Ghosh’s writing, as noted by Brinda Bose: “Ghosh’s fiction takes upon itself the responsibility of re-assessing its troubled antecedents, using history as a tool by which we can begin to make sense of—or at least come to terms with—our troubling present” (2001, 235). As the story develops, the strands of memory, history, space and place are woven into each other in a fine tapestry in a family chronicle about individuals between different cultural and national belongings. Bose adds:

In Ghosh’s fiction, the diasporic entity continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by both time and space—history and geography—and attempts to redefine the present through a nuanced understanding of the past. As the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* embarks upon a journey of discovery of roots and reasons, the more of the one he unearths leaves him with loss of the other. He is forced to conclude that knowing the causes and effects of that history which he had not fully apprehended as a child was not an end in itself. The metajourney that this novel undertakes follows the narrator—as he weaves and winds his way through a succession of once-imaginary homelands—into that third space where boundaries are blurred and cultures collide, creating at once a disabling confusion and an enabling complexity. No story—or history, for that matter—can be acceptable as the ultimate truth, since truths vary according to perspectives and locations. (2001, 239)

By introducing the idea of ‘third space,’ Bose draws our attention to the core of Ghosh’s perception of space and place above all kinds of boundaries in relation to history and memory. Ghosh’s narrator narrates various versions of nation and nationalism by tracking their effects on his family members, hence highlighting ordinary people’s confrontations with spatial hurdles. The narrator’s family history and their connections with people of ‘other’ cultures and ethnicities confirm that cultures communicate in the ‘third space’ no matter how intensely the communalists strive to undermine such connections and communications. Consequently, the narrator reconciles with Tridib’s death as a sacrifice as well as an irony.

6. Conclusion

The Shadow Lines is not solely a novel about dreamers like Tridib or displaced

individuals like Tha'mma, but more importantly about the plight of the Bengali diaspora (see e.g. Chakravarti 1996). However, the novel presents the Bengali diaspora on a wider scale by spreading the story over different countries and continents. By tracing a contrast between personal memory and political history and between the space of cultural interactions and the place of barbed wires, Ghosh's narrator offers different ways of reading larger political design of the fate of three nations—India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Finally, the narrator's movement back and forth in time and space is not merely a structural device; it is a means of reminding the reader that the partition perpetuates in the current political spheres of the divided subcontinent with Kashmir as a disputed territory. Hence, by remembering a family tragedy, the author makes the impact of past political events current and shakes the readers out of their apathy, so that they are able to think beyond the shadow lines and believe in shared spaces and places.

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