

Borderless Spaces and Cartographic Places in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to read Amitav Ghosh's text *The Shadow Lines* from the perspective of the impact of the partition of India not just on the generation which experienced it but the repercussions it had on people of different generations, religions and places. The paper explores two major outcomes of partition: first the imbalanced distribution of people of different religions which resulted in minority within the majority which creates tension resulting in riots. Second is the way in which different characters respond to the notion of distance. To Tha'amma national identities are based on two aspects related to place; first, is the cartographical divisions of places executed by people at the helm of affairs and second is the sacrifices contributed by the people belonging to that particular nation. Therefore, to her the notion of distance is based on 'us' and 'them' which is based on the line drawn in between. While to Jethamoshai place is specific and confines to the place of birth. To Ila, the narrator's cousin place becomes fixed points just like the ladies in the airports and the 'present' is all that matters. To Tridib and the narrator distance is not necessarily based on cartographical reality which makes one feel that they are far away from one other but in reality the spatial distance between them is not as vast as it is made to sound and feel. To them, an alternate reality to the existing map can be created by imagining places which in turn is a seamless, borderless space where only shadows of lines exist between people and cities are mere mirror images of each other.

Keywords: Border, Cartography, Space, Place, Distance

What interested me first about borders was their arbitrariness, their constructedness – the ways in which they are 'naturalised' by modern political mythmaking. I think this interest arose because of some kind of inborn distrust of anything that appears to be 'given' or taken -for -granted I think these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought :that is why they must be disregarded. (Amitav Ghosh in an interview with John C. Hawley)

This paper is an attempt to read Amitav Ghosh's text *The Shadow Lines* from the perspective of the impact of the partition of India not just on the generation which experienced it but the repercussions it had on people belonging to different generations, religions and places because of the policy makers who are responsible for the partition. This border that was drawn to divide a nation based on what is now referred to as the two nation theory, has brought about psychological and emotional divisions among people and hence the society at large, despite the fact that the people had a lot in common like religion and culture. In short, people were divided into "us" and "them" and hence a different notion of distance is created among the people.

A distinction that all people recognize is between “us” and “them. We are here, we are this happy breed of men. They are there, they are not fully human and they live in that place. Members within the we-group are close to each other, we see each other often and live in the same neighbourhood. Being close combines the two meanings of intimacy and geographically emotional warmth also declines:”out of sight, out of mind”. Of course, there are exceptions. Social distance may be the reverse of geographical distance. Psychologically, absence (spatial distance) can make the heart grow fonder. (Yi Fu Tuan : 54)

This is precisely what happens to the character Tha'amma, the grandmother in the novel where she assumes the lives of those living on the other side. Ghosh uses the allegory of the house and its family members as a microcosmic demonstration of what happens when a nation is divided. When Tha'amma's ancestral house is divided, the division is clearly demarcated by drawing a line. The family of Tha'amma begins to imagine and assume that people on the other side would probably be doing things in an 'upside down' manner. Having experienced the partition of the ancestral house, Tha'amma expects to see the border between India and Bangladesh during her trip to Dhaka. The border according to Tha'amma could probably be in the form of a line or trenches or soldiers pointing their guns at each other or at least a barren strip of land would exist between the two places to denote the partition. After all, all the hue and cry that was made during partition is basically to differentiation both places and hence both the groups of people.

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 all for then-partition and all the killing and everything-if there isn't something in between? (TSL: 151-152)

To her dismay, she is shell-shocked to find from her son that no actual lines would exist between the two places and in fact

The border isn't on the frontier: it's right inside the airport. You'll see. You'll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards and things.....it suddenly occurred to her then that she would have to fill in 'Dhaka' as her place of birth on that form, and that the prospect of this had worried her....(TSL : 151-152)

She finds it difficult to come to terms with the fact that her place of birth Dhaka

had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality.....There weren't any forms or anything and anyway travelling was so easy then. I could come home to Dhaka whenever I wanted. ...Tha'mma! I cried. How could you have 'come' home to Dhaka? You don't know the difference between coming and going!” (TSL : 151-152)

The place of birth of Tha'amma (Dhaka) transforms itself into the capital of another nation; a product of the process of partition which creates a different notion of distance and hence a linguistic confusion occurs in Thamma on whether her travel to Dhaka should be “coming” or “going” to.

Distance connotes degrees of accessibility and also of concern. Human beings are interested in other people and in objects of importance to

their livelihood. They want to know whether the significant others are far or near with respect to themselves and to each other.Everything and everybody spoken of are viewed as coming or going in some relation to place" (Yi Fu Tuan: 46-47)

This process of transformation of a place because of changes made in maps, reminds us of two quotations. The first is Edward Said's views on how imaginative geographies implemented by Europeans in the name of imperialism, can have a telling effect on the notion of distance on the people who experience partition.

He demonstrates that the Orient is not just 'there' but rather that the traditions of thought and imagery which give it a reality are a European invention – a product of the European imagination. He draws on the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's concept of the 'poetics of space' to explain how space becomes endowed with meaning to dramatize the distance and difference between what is close and what is far away...he argues that the European sense of self is predicted on 'the Other' (Massey : 47)

Second is the quotation by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guittari

The map is open and connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a medium. (Deleuze and Guittari : 12)

The words "susceptible to constant modification" as used by Deleuze and Guittari can be interpreted to what John Thieme refers to as "Cartographic revisionism". These concepts are reflected in the words of the character named Jethamoshai, the uncle of Tha'amma who refuses to budge from the ancestral house in Dhaka, although all his sons have left him in the lurch post partition.

Move to what....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 all 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. (TSL: 215).

The reason behind Tha'amma's mission to bring back Jethamoshai from Dhaka, is because, place and national identities according to her is based on two aspects; one, is cartographical divisions of places executed by people at the helm of affairs and second is the sacrifices contributed by the people belonging to that particular nation. This is why she dislikes and disapproves the idea of Ila, the narrator's cousin living in Britain. As Jon Mee observes that, "she sees England, no less than India as a place that belongs only to those who have this kind of visceral relationship to the land". Tha'amma feels that Ila could have lived in Calcutta with all the sophistication, comfort and people around her and strongly believes that Ila "doesn't belong there" and "has not right to be there" as it is not her home and also because

"It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and blood-shed. Everyone who lives there

has earned his right to be there with blood-with their brother's blood, father's blood and son's blood. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood. Hasn't (TSL : 78)

From the words of his refusal to move, Jethamoshai indicates that his perception of place is not related to cartography but to his place of birth unlike Tha'amma's which is strongly based on borders. The definition of the term cartography as noted by J.B. Harley in *Deconstructing the Map*

Thoroughly enmeshed with the larger battles which constitute our world, maps are not external to these struggles to alter power relations. The history of map use suggests that this may be so and that maps embody specific forms of power and authority. Since the Renaissance they have changed the way in which power is exercised. it was easy for Europeans to draw lines across the territories of Indian nations without sensing the reality of their political identity. The map allowed them to say, "This is mine; there are the boundaries". Similarly, in the innumerable wars since the sixteenth century it has been equally easy for the generals to fight battles with colored pins and dividers rather than sensing the slaughter of the battlefields. Or again, in our own society, it is still easy for bureaucrats, developers, and "planners" to operate on the bodies of unique places without measuring the social dislocations of "progress". While the map is never the reality, in such ways it helps us to create a different reality. (J.B. Harley : 167-168)

The above definition reflects both Tha'amma's ideology of boundaries based on cartography and simultaneously reflects Tridib's idea that a "different reality" can be created; implying the creation of a borderless space.

Viewed from a distance the city becomes a map that can be read, understood and interpreted as a text. While the distanced spectator "reads" the city as an image, the man on the pavement is part of creating or "writing" the city. In the same way it is not possible to get an overview of the city until you are able to get above it and see it as a pattern or a map. Doing this implies, however, that the city becomes fiction, something that is not lived. (De Certeau : 102)

The above quotes can be applied to Tridib and the Narrator in the novel as they read the entire world as an image or a borderless space and get an overview of the world by seeing it as a pattern or map while the other characters like Tha'amma create or "write" the nation states. It is Tridib whom the Narrator holds in high esteem and treats him as his role model as he has taught him to "imagine with precision". While to Tridib 'imagination' is the key to enter different places that exist in the globe, that is, he sits in one specific place which is Calcutta in this case and creates an 'imaginative space' through which he can see the streets, buildings and the map of London. This art and what he imagines in the process is shared with the Narrator and the Narrator in turn is able to identify the buildings, their history and their precise location when he is in 'reality' that is, when he personally visits London. The key to such precise imagination as Tridib says is

... 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

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 mirror (TSL: 29).

To Ila on the other hand place becomes fixed points just like the ladies in the airports and the 'present' is all that matters, "it was as though she lived in a present which was like an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of the past and the future by steel floodgates" (TSL Pg. 30) and acceptance of the world and disputes while Tridib's idea of imagining and hence inventing new places for oneself is,

... why? Why should we try, why not just take the world as it is? – I told her how he had said that we had to try because the alternative wasn't blankness- it only meant that if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free of other people's inventions. (TSL: 31)

Tridib and the narrator's view of the alternate reality or the creation of a borderless space is a reflection of Benedict Anderson's notion of an imaginative geography.

Anderson argues that nation states are imagined communities – that they are not based on territory but rather are mental constructs. In support of this claim, that nations are 'imagined' not 'real' he argues that members of even the smallest nation will never know their fellow members, yet all still have an image of a shared identity, and that this sense of comradeship or collective identity is sustained despite the level of exploitation and injustice between fellow citizens. Anderson's work carries some overtones of Said's imaginative geography, in that he too is concerned with how we imagine space and its boundaries, how we imagine whose space it is, and how we construct 'self' and 'others'. (Massey : 47)

Anjali Gera rightly observes that, "Ghosh's emphasis on the 'invented' nature of places echoes Ernest Gellner's reading of nations as , ' a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination" Unfortunately, Tridib becomes a victim of the reality created by cartography i.e., the repercussions created by partition as it invariably involves displacing people belonging to different religious backgrounds. This results in the minority within the majority which creates an imbalance and in turn leads to riots. As Robert K.Schaeffer claims,

No matter how carefully they might be drawn, boundaries between divided states left too many people on the wrong side. The same ethnic population would be part of a majority or minority depending on where the line was drawn. The result was the creation of a territorial basis for irredentist claims. In partitioned states, minority communities are frequently targets for surveillance and repression. As Cleary points out, minority populations pose a de facto threat to national security and stability: since the assumption that subtends partitionist thinking is that ethnically homogeneous states will be more stable than ethnically heterogeneous ones, the policy tends to see 'minorities' in an intrinsically negative light as a problem that has somehow or other to be resolved. Needless to say such suspicion could justify the most brutal repression" (Heugland : 143-144)

Amitav Ghosh, known for recording events that have gone unrecorded as

should be by the media and for giving voice for the voiceless records the 1964 riots in this novel. The hair of the Prophet Mohammed from Hazratbal Mosque in Kashmir is lost in 1963 and the government records that it had been recovered in 1964. The details of the recovery have never been revealed till date. Meanwhile in Khulna, a small town in the east wing of Pakistan, a demonstration turns violent and the protagonist of the novel Tridib gets killed. Despite the fact that the narrator was very much in the scene, in reality, he is unable to decipher what exactly happened and Tridib's death comes as a shock to him and he is haunted by dreams. Ironically, the death happens during May's visit to India and when Tha'amma takes the family to Dhaka to bring back Jethamoshai. During the riots, Tridib runs towards Jethamoshai to save him from the mob and in the end he sacrifices his life. Thus it is highly ironical that Tridib, the character which throughout the novel imagines and creates a borderless space, a utopia, an alternate reality, a space for all place irrespective of their borders, differences, religious and communal backgrounds is ironically killed by fanatic people who strongly believed that borders do exist between religious and communal backgrounds within a nation and hence becomes a victim to them. On the other hand, to them May is an outsider who exists outside the border of their place and hence a nonexistent entity in their fight for space in a specific place which is the nation.

In Tridib's absence, the narrator attempts at creating an 'alternate reality' using the old tattered Bartholomew atlas with Khulna at the centre and Srinagar at the circumference. To his surprise he finds that the distance between Chiang Mai in Thailand and Calcutta was way less than the distance between Delhi and Calcutta while Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar. Yet the reality is that the people of Khulna do not care about the mosques in Vietnam or South China. This makes the narrator arrive at a conclusion that,

....not so long ago, when people, sensible people, of good intention, had thought that all maps were the same, that there was a special enchantment in lines; I had to remind myself that they were not to be blamed for believing that there was something admirable in moving violence to the borders and dealing with it through science and factories, for that was the pattern of the world. 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: The simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map, when 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 inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free-our look-glass border. (TSL : 233)

The title *The Shadow Lines*, thus refers to the lines that exist between people and nations are not instruments of divisions but a shadow of the already existing reality which is the world at large. Ghosh reiterates this idea through other metaphors like looking-glass border and mirrors all meaning one and the same that is, despite the fact that people create places within spaces and call them as nations and associate religion and culture to differentiate people, society and nations on the whole, they are merely only mirages that we have created. On the other hand, the ground reality is that a people are replaceable by others and so are the cities, after all -

... each city (Dhaka and Calcutta) was the inverted image of the other, locked into any irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free – our looking-glass border. (TSL : 228)

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 possible, surely Tridib's death would have set me free. And yet, all it takes to set my hand shaking like a leaf, fifteen years later, thousands of miles away.... (TSL : 247)

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