

# Compression of Distances and Erasure of Boundaries in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow-Lines*



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## Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's award winning novel *The Shadow Lines*, despite revolving round a multiplicity of themes including cosmopolitanism, globalization and diasporic experiences, pins itself down finally to the issue of partition that remains a significant historical reality in the subcontinent. By telling a story that traverses across different spaces and times both in the subcontinent and outside, Ghosh keenly observes and minutely examines the nature of partition along with its pre-independent background and post-independent aftermaths. What Ghosh looks like concluding suggestively at the end is that the nature of reality in the subcontinent does not really change even after its partition into three separate independent nations: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Ghosh seemingly suggests towards a seamless continuity between the three countries along ethnic and cultural fronts despite the apparently visible boundary lines between them. Based on these precepts, this article intends to establish how Ghosh, in his novel *The Shadow Lines*, foregrounds the volatile nature of boundaries and impinges on their inability to hold the three separate countries as containers of separate, cloistered realities.

**Keywords:** Cosmopolitanism, Boundary, Globalization, Cartography, Nationalism

## Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* is undoubtedly a mouthpiece of the writer's beyond-boundary fascinations which seemingly generate from his own cosmopolitan experiences. As the plot of the novel unfolds through a characteristically convoluted pattern through its sequential retelling by the unnamed narrator, we can see that the plot is a tapestry of overlapping family chronicles woven through various strands of space, time, history and nation. The members of the gradually disintegrating Datta-Chaudhuri family are scattered not only along various spatial strands that include India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Europe but also along the temporal lines of the pre-independent and the post-independent times. Despite the overtly cosmopolitan nature of the story, it nevertheless centers around the theme of partition—an event that continues to remain a significant historical reality in the subcontinent. However, the text, through its exposition of various intriguing episodes at different crucial places, examines the shaky nature of partition and exposes the inability of the boundary lines to stop ethnic and cultural interactions along the borders of the separate nations. In this context, the present article seeks to establish the beyond-border-fascinations of Amitav Ghosh exemplified through the various characters and situational episodes in the novel that bespeak the trans-border imagination of the author.

The very plot of the novel seems to be woven like a complex cosmopolitan network where the characters continually keep shifting across the border of the Indian territory. Characters like the narrator himself, Ila, Tridib and many others are not permanently settled either in India or in England; rather they continually transit across borders perpetually finding themselves involved in events and episodes that bespeak the very transnational character of the novel. Even when one looks at the Datta-Chaudhuri family, one gets a clear glimpse of Amitav Ghosh's overarching cosmopolitan agenda as the family spreads beyond the borders encompassing the countries like Bangladesh, England and many others.

The cartographic details of the novel and the reference to the Bartholomew's Atlas that the narrator comes across in Tridib's room, plays a pivotal role in encapsulating Amitav Ghosh's intended theme of transgression of boundaries through the highlighting of the narrator's

trenchant fascination with the beyond-border places like Madrid, Cuzo, Cairo, Addis Ababa, Algiers and Brisbane etc. Tridib's strangely idiosyncratic imagination of places beyond the border is an expression of his subconscious desire to transcend the boundaries—a desire which he infuses into the narrator's voyeuristic childhood fantasy making him a prompt practitioner in his relentless imaginative ventures. The Bartholomew Atlas becomes some kind of a symbolic medium for both of them to transcend the boundaries and imaginatively posit themselves in places to which they could not actually travel in their childhood days. But at a symbolic level, the place is very much within their reach on the figuratively de-stratified terrain of the Bartholomew's Atlas with its easily crossable, volatile boundaries that are found to be nothing but fragile demarcations between nations. The narrator's uninhibited fascination with the "cafes in the plaza Mayor in Madrid," with the "crispness of the air in Cuzo," with the "printed arch in the mosque of Ibn Tulun," with the "stones of the Great Pyramid of Cheops" (Ghosh 22) etc. showcase his idiosyncratic transnational imagination and never-ceasing beyond-boundary fascinations that continue to remain the crux of the novel.

Ila can be witnessed as a character who is Amitav Ghosh's literary artifact to establish his intended theme of the breaching of boundaries through her stay in different places of the world during different phases of her life. This is precisely the reason why the narrator feels that the names on the Bartholomew's Atlas like Addis Ababa, Algiers and Brisbane etc. are the "only fixed points in the shifting landscapes of her childhood" (Ghosh 23) in a scenario where Ila remains a ceaseless wanderer across the de-stratified landscape of the world. But quite unlike Ila, Tridib and the narrator have the passageways of imagination to traverse across borders and boundaries—an act that could be counted as an imaginary substitute to Ila's globetrotting credentials. They are able to create a holistic landscape in their imagination that includes the unvisited places which they keep dreaming of. So, while visiting various places in London, he tells: ". . . 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 or less true, only very far apart" (Ghosh 23). Breaching of national boundaries and frontiers, whether in actuality or imagination, thus remains Ghosh's overarching theme in the novel.

The introduction of Lionel Treswasen, the father of Mrs Price further substantiates Amitav Ghosh's idiosyncratic obsession with the creation of a boundary-defying cosmopolitan cartography. A man who was born in a small Southern Cornwall village Mabe, Treswasen travels across the globe to far-away places like Fiji, Bolivia, the Guinea coast, Ceylon and Calcutta etc. The travelling and the professional itinerary of Lionel Treswasen spanning across his childhood, youth and old age and traversing across the geographical spaces "all around the world" (56) creates a cartographic lining that, in a way, seems like encompassing the whole of the world. The details in which Amitav Ghosh narrates Treswasen's travelling itinerary clearly spells out his intentions of breaching

the frontiers along various lines as A. N. Kaul fittingly demonstrates: "Crossing of frontiers—especially those of nationality, culture and language—has increased the world over, including India. Of this tendency The Shadow Lines is an extreme example" (299). Further, Treswasen's grandson Nick's desire "to travel around the world like Lionel Treswasen" and "to live in faraway places halfway around the globe, to walk through the streets of La Paz and Cairo" (Ghosh 57) intensifies Amitav Ghosh's well-defined agenda to transcend the confining limits of spatial boundaries.

The narrator's fascination with Mrs. Price's son Nick—though he has never seen him—would further let us know about his keen interest with things and people beyond the borders. He is found to posit himself besides Nick on a symbolic mirror on which he grows as his 'double' in a scenario where he describes the former as a "spectral [and] . . . ghostly presence" mysteriously growing in his vicinity with "no features" and "no form" (55). Moreover, in Nick the narrator traces a "kindred spirit" (Ghosh 57) whom he had never been able to discover amongst his friends. And more significantly, such feelings are generated in the narrator's mind when he looks up at the "smoggy night sky above Gole Park" and wanders "how the stars looked in London" (Ghosh 57). No where do we find the narrator feeling someone's presence so near him nor do we find someone with whom he identifies himself so keenly though the person is thousands of miles away in another continent. The symbolic mirror, in a characteristically suggestive way, erases spatial boundaries and brings them together on a boundary-less plane. It must also be acknowledged that the narrator's fascination with Nick is grounded in his identification with the latter's desire to travel across the globe—a desire which he, of course, had inherited from his grandfather Lionel Treswasen's unceasing, globe-trotting spirit and credentials.

As the story unfolds with the telling revelation of more events and characters, we are introduced with a few photographs (which Tridib shows to the narrator) where there is a conglomeration of characters who have their beyond-boundary activities and credentials. If we look at the character Dan, he is known to have fought in the Spanish civil war where he earns "an honourable wound" (Ghosh 69). Dan, who is the son of a Cambridge physicist, also becomes a mouthpiece of beyond-boundary ideologies like Trotskyism and Nazism. In a symbolic way, Dan shows how such ideologies percolate beyond the boundaries irrespective of the respective places of their origin. Dan is able to evoke the cosmopolitan nature of such ideologies.

In his continual endeavour in showing his beyond-boundary fascinations, Amitav Ghosh does not forget to portray the global threat of World War II percolating beyond national frontiers and boundaries. We see through Tridib's retelling of his experiences in Brick Lane and Lymington Road, how people lived under the shadow of the potential threats of bombing from the other side of the English border—from the Germans.

When Amitav Ghosh presents a cluster or congregation of people (whether in a photograph or in a residential congregation), we find that the characters either have their beyond-boundary

activities or they are bearing various national identities with widely differing professional, ideological and political affiliations. For instance, when the narrator describes the people with whom Ila shared her house, we see that one of them is “a bearded Irish computer scientist,” another one is “a girl from Leicester who had dropped out in her second year at the North London Polytechnic to work with the Fourth International” and another one is “a morose young Ghanian who was very active in the anti-Nazi league” (Ghosh 106-107). It must be keenly noted that Ghosh very craftily and purposely uses this technique in many places in the novel to espouse this dominant theme of cosmopolitanism where we are presented with some kind of a mini-cosmopolis with its innumerable socio-political and ideological variations. As various events associated with the main plot unfold, we get pictures of the global and cosmopolitan setting of the novel. Bill Ashcroft very correctly notes the fluid nature of the post-colonial condition of existence that results from the rampant interactivity of various cultures in a globalized world. Ashcroft writes: “The provisionality of inherited boundaries, the fluidity of the concept of ‘home’ which we find to be characteristic of post-colonial habitation, extends, in contemporary times, into a global system of cultural interactions (206). We find that someone is a Trotskyist and Nazist (like Dan); someone is an anti-Nazist (like the Ghanian) and someone is an “upper-class Asian Marxist” (as Ila is called by her friends). Ila was also seen as a link with the Fabians. Though these friends of Ila were not very appreciative of Ila’s blatant exhibition of cosmopolitanism, the very assortment ironically look thoroughly cosmopolitan where the characters try to spread their “influence on another continent” despite their supposed “impotence at home” (Ghosh 107). The assortment is truly a symbolic common platform or a mini-cosmos where intersecting, intercepting, and interfacing ideological cross-currents coexist in a synergetic harmony with their beyond-boundary ethos and implications. It amounts to what Elleke Boehmer would call “trans-societal flows” (Ghosh 246).

The narrator’s conversations with Ila at Brick Lane regarding the dangers of people living in that place due to persistent German bombing and Ila’s seemingly strange and bizarre response to that brings out her boundary-defying cosmopolitan spirit. First we know that she wants to cross the boundary of the Indian nation to be free from what she felt to be the oppressive cultural restraints of an orthodox Indian society. But now she wants to live in the dangers of a war-devastated England and on the face of the perpetually lurking death for she wants to be part of History: “We may not achieve much in our little house in Stockwell, but we know that in the future political people everywhere will look to us—in Nigeria, India, Malayasia, wherever” (Ghosh 115). In her excitement to achieve a timeless and global standing for herself can be more significantly understood from her wholehearted appreciation for Col Treswasen:

It must have been the same for Treswasen and his crowd. At least they knew they were a part of the most important event of their time—the war, the fascism all the things you read about today in history books. That is

why there is a kind of heroism even in their pointless deaths; that’s why they’re remembered and that’s why you have led us here. You would not understand the exhilaration of events like that— . . . (Ghosh 115).

Ila’s conversation with the narrator would indicate towards her innate urge to be posited in the grandness of the ‘global’ rather than in the narrow, confined events of the ‘local’ about which the people of the world would not know much. That is why though there are “local things” like “famines and riots and disasters” (Ghosh 115) in places like Delhi and Calcutta—things which do not presumably have their transnational and beyond-boundary effects and ramifications—Ila is more interested in events like “revolutions and anti-fascist wars” which would set “a political example to the world” (Ghosh 115). Her passionate longing for being part of a global thing makes the narrator feel that she is “immeasurably distant” compared to his life lived “in the silence of voiceless events in a backward world” In what seems like a purposefully drawn contrast between the local events and the global events and through Ila’s unrestrained longing for the ‘global’ Amitav Ghosh clearly spells out his own global and beyond-boundary imaginings.

While Tridib writes letters to May, he writes to her saying that he used to have her picture on the desk so that he, while writing the letters, would feel May’s presence right before his eyes. But every time he looked at Ila while writing, he was able to imagine Lymington Road and Hampstead right before him—a typically imaginative act of Tridib that serves the symbolic purpose of reduction of space and the compression of distances in a way that he can meet her on the wholesome terrain without boundaries and frontiers. Meenakshi Mukherjee aptly observes that “Distance in *The Shadow Lines* is . . . perceived as a challenge to be overcome through the use of imagination and desire until space gets dissolved” (256). Even through his description of the passionately amorous encounter between a man and a woman in the pitted ruins of a German-bomb-devastated Lymington Road—an encounter whose actual happening though cannot be verified thanks to Tridib’s fluctuating memory—Tridib flaunts his beyond-boundary and transnational imaginings as he wanted to meet May “as a stranger, in a ruin” (Ghosh 159). He claims that he “wanted them to meet as complete strangers” despite the fact that “they knew each other already” (Ghosh 159). The narrator goes on to describe: “He wanted them to meet far from their 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 159).

Tridib’s desire to attribute some kind of strangeness onto his relation with May despite their obvious previous acquaintances must be looked at carefully to decode his at times overt and at times covert agenda of transnational imaginings. Moreover the fact that he wants to bring these “free, really free people” on a seamless terrain of “a place without a past, without history” with the “utter freedom of strangers” (Ghosh 159) seems to be part of his subconscious desire to convert the whole world into a

seamless meeting place where strangers, cast off their regional, religious and national bearings and identities, would meet each other in a sea of non-regional, non-religious and non-national anonymity. Moreover, he wants to meet them “in a ruin” (Ghosh 159)—a place symbolically bereft of its own, clear identity.

The narrator’s experience at the cellar of Mrs. Price’s abode in Lymington Road, adds more insights to Amitav Ghosh’s border-defying idiosyncrasies. Through his imaginative recreation of the empty corners of the room, the narrator is able to weave an illusory spatio-temporal matrix where he forms an imaginary assortment of characters not only from across different nations and continents, but also from different temporal spheres. Initially, the narrator feels as if the room is filled with the ghosts of “nine-year-old Tridib,” of “eight-year-old Ila” and of course, of Snipe and the narrator himself. What is also keenly observable that there is an overlapping of geographical space between Lymington Road of London and Raibajar of Calcutta as the narrator, placed in the cellar in Lymington Road in London, imagines Ila sitting with himself “under the vast table in Raibajar” (Ghosh 200). The narrator’s imagination of the ghostliness of the characters becomes some kind of symbolic medium through which he is able to traverse the spatial and temporal confines of different times and places so as to be able to form an imagined assortment of the characters on the illusory canvass created by himself in the underground cellar of Mrs. Price’s abode in Lymington Road. But the beyond-boundary and beyond-time imagination of the narrator grows so intense and profound that the assortment of the characters is no more an illusory or imaginary experience for him: rather the characters appear before him to be very real and very present. The narrator’s feeling of himself being at the centre of the beyond-boundary and beyond-temporal assortment must be quoted here: “They were all around me, we were together at last, not ghosts at all: the ghostliness was merely the absence of time and distance—for that is that a ghost is, a presence displaced in time” (Ghosh 200). The disappearance or dissolution of time and space is truly the crux of the novel as Meenakshi Mukherjee writes: “One of the many intricate patterns that weaves the novel together is the coalescing of time and space in a seamless continuity, memory endowing remembered places with solidity, and imagination the recounted ones” (Ghosh 256-7).

The second part “Coming Home” opens up another dimension of the boundary-defying tendency of Ghosh throughout the novel. He specifically concentrates on the subcontinent intensely highlighting on the volatility of the respective boundaries between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in terms of their ability to hold three countries as containers of non-contagious, separate realities. The Shadow-Lines is, thus presented through the memory of the unnamed narrator, who recounts various events and episodes that he had heard from different characters at different times. As the story unfolds in a characteristically convoluted pattern, we are introduced to a few characters who either remember India as an undivided whole (like the narrator’s great

grandfather) or try to see India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as separate countries (like the narrator’s grandmother) with clear-cut borderlines between them. However, the very notion that the border line between two countries (India and East Pakistan or Bangladesh for instance) makes them two distinctly separate entities with two correspondingly cloistered realities contained inside them is thoroughly undermined in the novel. It becomes evident primarily through the shifting perspectives of the unnamed narrator with the sequential unfolding of a few incidents with the progress of time. Initially, the narrator believed that the other side of the border contains another reality whereas this notion is foiled when he grows into adulthood and readily realizes that the notion he had harbored inside himself during his infancy was nothing but a mirror-illusion.

The narrator grows up to be a man rid of the falsified fantasies and gross misconceptions about distances, borders and boundaries, gently divulges his faulty childhood imaginings with a visible sense of disillusionment:

I was a child, and like all the children around me, I grew up believing in the truth of the precepts that were available to me: 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. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship. There was no room in it for this other thing. And things which did not fit my vocabulary were merely pushed over the edge into the chasm of that silence. (Ghosh 241)

But one must look at the way the narrator connects his “nightmare bus ride back from school” and “the events that befell Tridib and others in Dhaka” (Ghosh 241) despite the fact that these two incidents happened in two different countries. Yet, the narrator can well trace an invisible thread of connection between them that transcend the boundaries between the divided nations and become instrumental in percolating the violence that is triggered in one particular place in one particular country to the other places in the other countries. Through the instauration of the nightmarish bus-ride incident which of course was the direct fall out of the epicenter-like ‘Mui-Mubarak’ incident, the narrator reflects on the very affective nature of the existence of the people of the subcontinent. The people of this part of the world share with each other some kind of uncanny fear that generates from the very volatile nature of the spaces that surround them and the streets they inhabit as they “can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flashflood” (Ghosh 225) because an incident of violence triggered in a place hundreds of miles away in another country can within no time percolate—transcending the boundaries—across the spaces and streets of this part of the world. That is precisely why the narrator feels: “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 225). Amitav Ghosh seems to epitomize the crux of his novel by bringing in the very symbolic mirror image towards the last part of the narrator's statement—an image which he of course has used in quite a few other occasions inside the text. The loaded complex undertones of the last part of his statement would seemingly suggest that the divided nations are nothing but the mirror-images of each other and likewise, the people of the divided countries are also the respective mirror-images of each other. That seems to be precisely the reason why the people of India (Calcutta in particular, and the same principle could also apply to the people of Bangladesh) are perpetually haunted by an uncanny fear that generates from the eternal possibility of a suddenly erupting "war between oneself and one's image in the mirror." In a typical symbolic act of his, Ghosh compresses the respective personas of the divided nations and transplants them onto every single individual's terrified persona and its reflection on the mirror. The mirror-image in fact serves the symbolic purpose of an undivided, boundary-less terrain where the individual of a particular nation sees his reflection on the mirror, or symbolically, a divided nation sees its reflection of the other one on the other side of the boundary and the confrontational nature of one's image and its mirror-reflection is the actual cause of the worry. But the real casualty in the whole scheme of things is the boundary-line along the borders which is not able to keep things separate in separate water-tight compartments. Suvir Kaul very pertinently observes: "What the narrator learns is that the separatist political logic of the nation state cannot enforce cultural difference, that some 'other thing' will always connect Calcutta to Dhaka, Bengali to Bengali, Indian to Pakistani, an image in a vast mirror" (281).

Like the narrator, his grandmother also initially nurtured a firm belief that well-defined national boundaries will be able to distinctly separate two newly born countries along with their respective communities. The grandmother's strong notions of a country with well-defined boundaries and indigenous resident communities are evident in her overt rejection of Ila belonging to the English nation. Her passionate elaboration of the formation of a country through stringently demarcated territories reveals her trademark notions of fixities and taciturnities of not only territorial but also residential boundaries. Her speech before the narrator must be quoted here:

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. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood. Hasn't Maya told you how regimental flags hang in all their cathedrals and how all their churches are lined with memorials to men who died in wars, all around the world? War is their religion. That is 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 85-6)

In her self-styled definition of a country, Grandmother tends to become excruciatingly sentimental and patriotic by believing that once a sovereign country is formed with a well-defined territorial demarcation, the communal differences between different religious and ethnic sects would be resolved automatically under the camouflaging effect of a unified nationalistic spirit. Moreover, Grandma's strong notions of a unified nationhood is more clearly expressed through the narrator's recollections of Tridib's words about grandmother that "All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power: that was all she wanted—a modern middle-class life, a small thing that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it" (Ghosh 86). But in an ironical and dramatic turn of events, the communal sentiments percolated beyond the territorial frontiers of a so-called unified nationhood after the Mui-Mubarak incident, and it contributed to the sad and untimely demise of Tridib in Khulna district of Dhaka. This can be taken to be a scathing and ironical reversal of grandmother's stern belief in a unified nationhood.

Anshuman A. Mondal has made an insightful explication of a nation in Amitav Ghosh's nation which is not confined by a particular geographical territory. He says: "A nation therefore, much more than a portion of earth surrounded by borders that contain within them a 'people' to whom the nation belongs. It is a mental construct . . . Nations are both 'real' and 'imaginary', material and immaterial. It is for this reason that Ghosh suggests that the borders that separate them are 'shadow lines'" (88). Truly, a nation cannot be determined by what Ernest Renan would call "the shape of the earth" (19).

Thamma's notion is dismantled when she, while planning to visit Dhaka, wonders if she would be able to see the demarcating lines between India and Dhaka from the flight in which she was flying. Every attempt on the part of the grandmother to assert her nationalistic identity through a supposed belongingness to a particular nation with a fixed boundary is characteristically foiled and gently ridiculed by the narrator's father, who, of course, had come to terms with the purely arbitrary and illusory nature of these boundaries. To gently ridicule her insatiable desire to see something along the border that would corroborate to her subconscious urge to see the differences, the narrator's father asks if "the border is a long, black line with a green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas?" (Ghosh 167). In reply, she expresses her innate expectations to find "trenches . . . or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land" or "no man's land" (Ghosh 167) which at least would give a certain semblance of satisfaction and certainty to her that the countries are truly separate now—a topographic disconnection, which for her, is the logical and expected and just conclusion to the

long history of conflicts, agitations and wars. But the narrator's father goes on pinpricking her separatist sentiments by laughing at her and saying: "No, you won't be able to see anything except clouds and perhaps, if you are lucky, some green fields" (Ghosh 167)—a statement which induces a certain amount of irksomeness in his mother's mind and she expresses her concerns with a traceable tone of utter disappointment:

But if there aren't trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there is no difference, both sides will be the same; it will 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? (Ghosh 167)

In response to the grandmother's utter sense of disappointment, the narrator's father tells her that she would not be able to trace a Himalaya-like border (which is found between India and China) between India and Bangladesh and the border actually starts right from the moment she steps into the airport where the process of filling up forms starts—a form in which one has to fill the details of his birth place, nationality and date of birth etc. The situation inevitably leads the grandmother to an entangling paradox. The grandmother who usually "liked things to be neat and in place" has now found herself in some kind of a mess where "her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality" (Ghosh 165). A close look at the scenario would reveal that the grandmother who always believed in neat and clear divisions between things is now ironically caught in a hotchpotch where she is not able to keep her nationality and birthplace well inside the boundary of the Indian border, so to say.

In another significant incident that serves the symbolic purpose of dismantling boundaries, the narrator's grandmother's uncle denies to recognize India as a separate country. When the narrator's grandmother tries to convince him that he is no longer safe in a country like Bangladesh and needs to go with them to India, her uncle curtly replies:

I know everything, I understand everything. Once you start moving you never stop. That is what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in India-Shindia. It's all very well, you are 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 will die here. (Ghosh 237)

The uncle of the narrator's grandmother precisely understands the capricious nature of the dividing lines that have come into existence of late due to partition. With his loads experiences spanning decades before and after partition, the uncle is able to know that it is not possible to divide this part of the world (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) into different countries culturally as the cultural root of the divided nations goes back to one larger cultural whole of

which they all were parts. Where ever one would go, his cultural roots would elongate to the other country. It is simply not possible to divide them. Jethamosai keeps on imagining the 'undivided India' even in the present times despite the post independent partition of the subcontinent. So, the nation persists in his imagination as an 'undivided whole' in his mind notwithstanding the present topographic divisions. Azade Seyhan arguably demonstrates the existence of the nation in one's imagination as: "Whether removed from the subject by one or more generations, several decades, or a few years, the memory and images of nation continue to inhabit the exilic imagination" (125).

Grandma's nationalism falls in line with what Benedict Anderson in the introduction to his book *Imagined Communities* very tacitly puts "The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie another country" (7). Her desire to hold her nationalism within the safe territorial limits of her country—which of course is predicated upon her ignorant or self-conscious denial of the complicated cultural history of this part of the world—receives a destabilizing jolt in the subtly humorous counter-argument provided by the narrator and his father. What Amitav Ghosh looks like proposing here is that 'nationalism' is something that is to be understood not so much in terms of Grandma's present, radical political ideology, rather much in terms of the larger, complicated cultural system of this part of the world that has both preceded and will go much further beyond Grandma's present radical, political ideology. Anderson's attempts to define 'nationalism' "What I am proposing is that Nationalism has to be understood, by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being" (12). And this notion stands in contradiction to Thamma's concept of nationalism, which calls for bloodshed and sacrifice.

The incident of the theft of the sacred relic of prophet Mohammad, 'Mu-i-Mubarak' establishes the virtual non-existence of the dividing lines between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as the incident was enough to stir the sentiments of not only the Indian Muslims of Kashmir, but also the Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims staying outside India in their respective separate countries. The impact was such that Karachi observed 31 December as a 'Black Day.' As a result, the incident could trigger enormous unrest and violence in Kashmir, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It was the cause of the riot in Khulna district in Dhaka—a riot which, according to the narrator, killed Tridib. Also a rumour spread in Calcutta that the water tanks have been poisoned by the Muslims resulting in a mob-uprising and curfew in the city. The event undoubtedly had its trans-national and beyond-boundary impacts and repercussions and the narrator, while investigating into the riot in Khulna and the ensuing tragic death of Tridib, rightfully calls the investigation "a voyage into the land outside space" (Ghosh 247). To quote him: "It was thus, sitting in the air-conditioned calm of an exclusive library, that I began on my strangest journey: a voyage into a land

outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking glass events" (Ghosh 247). The death of Tridib, thus, brings the narrator abruptly face to face with the central problem posed by nationalism and he has to undertake a backward journey into a vast expanse that runs beyond the geographical and spatial boundaries of the three countries of the Indian subcontinent. The episode of the stealing of the sacred relic of Prophet Mohammad, the ensuing violence because of it and the final tragic demise of Tridib, combined together, can be taken to be the symbolic dismantlement of the arbitrarily drawn boundaries between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The fascinating cartographic experiment performed by the narrator towards the last part of the text adds further insights to the general notion of the futility of boundaries between different nations in South East Asia. The narrator's gripping cartographic insight reveals that some places in India were actually far away from another whereas in contrast, there are places in other adjacent countries that are nearer to India. But Khulna in Bangladesh never concerned itself about incidents happening in nearby foreign countries whereas the incident in Srinagar affected it badly and gave rise to the riot of 1964 despite the fact that by then East Pakistan or Bangladesh was a separate country already. Despite the customary topographical divisions between India and Bangladesh along the borders, the countries never really got separated from each other culturally as an incident in one particular country could affect the people of the other country. The narrator, after explicating his maverick cartographic venture finally discover the terrible irony that this supposed act of partition or drawing dividing lines across the borders has generated. The irony is that in this act of apparent separation, the countries and the cities in particular (like Khulna and Kolkata) have rather brought themselves much closer than previously in a scenario, as the narrator would imagine, that Khulna and Kolkata become the mirror images of each other. The narrator's discovery of this irony must be explained through this quote:

They have drawn their borders . . . hoping perhaps that once they have etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland. What they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that they had created not a separation, but a yet undiscovered irony . . . the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old-history of that map, when the place 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 looking-glass border. (Ghosh 257)

In the final analysis, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow-Lines*, by creating a story that spans not only the pre-independent and the post-independent eras

but also the previously undivided and subsequently divided topography of this larger part of South-East Asia, reasserts the illusory nature of boundaries and dividing lines between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The novel demonstrates that in the midst of all the diversionist politics that has evolved of late, especially after Independence, a kind of indivisible thread of connection on various fronts—religious, cultural and ethnic—still continues to exist and haunt the collective psyche of the people of the three countries of the Indian sub-continent. Brinda Bose brilliantly summarizes the beyond-space and beyond-time journey of Ghosh's plot in the following lines:

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. . . . The meatjourney 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" (239).

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