

Inventing or Recalling the Contact Zones? Transcultural Spaces in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Memory mediates spatial transformations [...] Like those birds that lay their eggs only in other species' nests, memory produces in a place that does not belong to it. (Carteau 85-86)

Space has a history. (Burgin 40)

1. Introduction: Shadows of Imaginary and Remembered Spaces

This paper sets out to address the representation of “transcultural” (Welsch 194-231) spaces in Amitav Ghosh's memory novel *The Shadow Lines*. Space as a place of contact as well as conflict is an important dimension in the fictional realms of Ghosh.¹ In fact, space, imagined or remembered, seems to have a profound influence on the novelist and his protagonists in many of his major works.² By recalling and imagining the interplay between private and political lives, Ghosh ventures to build bridges between disparate peoples and locations and ethnicities and communities in his narrative—to exhibit the dynamics of “overlapping territories, intertwined histories” (Said 3-61) in our increasingly interconnected world.

The novel takes place largely on the newly-created Indo-Pakistan border. It 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 narrator 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

¹ Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956 and grew up in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), Sri Lanka, Iran and India. His other novels include *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *In an Antique Land* (1993), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000), and *The Hungry Tide* (2004).

² *The Circle of Reason* (1986) spreads over India, the Gulf region, Algeria; *The Shadow Lines* (1988) over India, Bangladesh and the UK; *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) over India and the US; *The Glass Palace* (2000) over Burma, India and Malaya; and *The Hungry Tide* (2004) over the Sundarbans, the islets of the Ganges delta that lie south of Calcutta and just east of the West Bengal/Bangladesh frontier.

memory as the novelist treats memory as a driving force of the narrative. The narrator, Indian-born and English-educated, traces events back and forth in time, from the outbreak of World War II to the late twentieth century, through years of Bengali partition and violence, observing the ways in which political events invade private lives.³ Hence, from his maps of memory, we learn 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 connectedness and separation, the author uses the fate of nations (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) to offer observations about a profoundly complex political conflict in the 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 to narrate their personal and collective histories to each other. 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 struggles to win over artificial borders, invading the space of home, territory, and motherland.

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 till the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 through the all-pervasive metaphor of “shadow lines” in the novel. However, the trope of “shadow lines” points not only to the ambivalence of nation and national borders, but more importantly to the grey realms of imagination and memory in narrating historical truths. Consequently, both imagination and memory remain central to the representation of imaginary and remembered spaces in the novel.

2. A Trip down Memory Lane: Representation of Space in the Vicissitudes of Time

A number of critics have conceptualised transcultural processes in geographical and metaphorical terms such as Mary Louise Pratt, Elleke Boehmer, Peter Hulme or Stephen Greenblatt; most particularly, Homi Bhabha and Edward Soja theorise these processes through the notion

³ *The Shadow Lines* 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. The fragmentary narrative unfolds the narrator’s experiences in the form of memories which move backwards and forwards. 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.

of Third Space. A focus on the spatial dimensions of these concepts thus makes us consider the role of space construction in initiating a transcultural negotiation. 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 or global, seen or unseen space is perceived and imagined in the narrator's ritual of memory as a fundamental facet of individual, national, familial, and communal metamorphoses.

In Ghosh's fiction, space is not merely remembered as an imaginative construct but is represented as a domain of political and cultural encounters, encounters which actually shape 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" (54). According to Clifford, space is composed through movement, produced through use, at the same time an agency and result of action or practice. Therefore, we need 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 that 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 (15).

A similar distinction can also be identified in diasporic Indian writing in English: "place" is often seen as the concrete manifestation of home, culture, and community before the arrival of the colonial rulers, whereas "space" is seen as the colonial construction of the land as open and raw, to be conquered by the Western coloniser. Consequently, "place" frequently functions as the grounded opposition to colonial "space." However, this kind of perception of space focuses on the perpetuation of essential cultural difference and opposition, and above all ignores a variety of cultural dynamics active in the construction of space and its role in transcultural processes in the age of worldwide global cultural transactions. The construction of space in Ghosh's novel does not simply manifest territorial struggles which preoccupy the postcolonial theorists (e.g. Kumar); rather, it serves to show the interplay between local and global influences, national and transnational reconfigurations and above all the search for community and alliances that cut across boundaries of cultural and ethnic identity. While Pratt and Ashcroft address "space" and "place" more specifically in terms of colonial and postcolonial tensions, my interpretation of "transcultural spaces" (Thomas 3) in the present context does not focus on the transactions between the coloniser and the colonised, but on geo-political strife as well as harmony among divergent ethnic groups in India in contemporary times. Mapping transcultural spaces in this analysis of the novel is a tool to speculate

on the dynamics of “space” and “place” in one of the most crucial periods of the history of the subcontinent. Ghosh and his narrator as “a chronicle” (Ghosh, *Shadow* 110) recollect this particular time to make sense of the reality of distance and space against the political crisis of 1964 in the subcontinent. However, the narrator attempts to understand space not merely as a bone of contention of territorial conflict and cultural clash, but instead, as a point of connection and conjunction, too. The transcultural dimension is important to understand the representation of space in the novel because Ghosh’s narrator compels the reader to imagine space above the narrow confines of a singular culture, nation, territory and community. I use the notion of space in relation to the transcultural theory to negotiate different representations of space in the novel such as imaginary, remembered and national. Furthermore, I argue that this notion throws light on an individual’s and his community’s strife with national ideologies as reflected in the narrator’s and Tridib’s construction of space and place. Inhabiting a world of human, geographical and political barriers, the narrator and Tridib have a vision, a vision to construct a free space (in a world without binaries) which is supposed to be above all temporal or spatial constraints. This contentious space is theorised in this paper as a transcultural space—a space of cultural and ethnic transactions where characters seek to overthrow artificial frontiers to come to terms with the reality of cultural and political transformations. Moreover, transcultural spaces also refer to cross-cultural practices of imagining or remembering space and place in the novel.

While going down memory lane, the narrator tries to inhabit a transcultural space like Tridib 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 “colonial or postcolonial” cartographies, the novel presents a transcultural space through the 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 communicate above the “shadow lines” of social, national and territorial barriers. Hence, the idea of transcultural spaces in the novel brings out the role of national ideologies in shaping personal memory and collective history. Lastly, transcultural spaces also point 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” (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.

3. Cross-Cultural Practices of Imagining Space and Place

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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 29). The narrator is sad to know that his globe-trotter cousin Ila, nevertheless, has no concept of place because she could not invent a place for herself but relies on the inventions of others:

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

Instead of ever making an effort 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, *Shadow* 23-24)

The narrator realises that Ila is trapped in a static zone even though she has travelled to different regions of the world. The problem is that Ila perceives the present without ever seeking its affinity with the past, especially when memory is not crucial to her conception of space and

place. She is unable to see the past through memory or imagination whereas once the narrator has seen the past through Tridib's eyes, the past "seemed concurrent with its present" (Ghosh, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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 land 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, *Shadow* 103). Since he apprehends space as a cultural "artifact" (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 time and again in "inventing place," because he wants to be free of other people's fabrication of space and place. In other words, he strives to read space above all kinds of artificial borders to imagine its dimensions himself. As a school boy, the narrator conjured up a picture of London that was 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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 devour 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, *Shadow* 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 transcultural 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. Furthermore, the transcultural space of memory presents a panorama of interconnected histories as Indian and English, and Indian and Bengali family stories are entangled into the larger collective history.

4. Tracking the Past in the Present: The Events of 1964 as a Struggle with Silence

The narrator portrays 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 heir 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 wing of Pakistan, a demonstration turned violent on the 4th of January 1964. This demonstration is “branded in [the narrator’s] memory” (Ghosh, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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. 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, *Shadow* 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” (56).

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 someone who has dreamed of a borderless subcontinent. 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 211)

By showing the connection between space and individual memory and collective history, the novel depicts how nationalism invades private lives and how political histories shape personal memories. The novel thus shows powerfully how nationalism invades our lives whether we fight it or not, and how it determines human relationships. In fact, the interconnectedness of space, history and memory also direct the

narrator to rediscover the dynamics of territorial distance and cultural difference. While commenting on Ghosh's logic of drafting the 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. (181)

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, *Shadow* 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 dying past. 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, *Shadow* 214). 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 228) as the pattern of the world. Therefore, ordinary people are enchanted with borders, with "imagined communities" (Anderson 15) no matter how much of "an invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 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, *Shadow* 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 transcultural space gave his life away to save human lives, but the borders stayed where they were. His death saved May but not his aunt's uncle Jethamoshai for whom he had actually travelled from Calcutta to Dhaka. Because Jethamoshai was a Bengali Hindu and not a Bengali Muslim, he fell prey to fanatic Muslim Bengali nationalists despite Tridib's attempts at rescuing him.

5. "Going Away" and "Coming Home"—Seeking

Transcultural Spaces on a Disintegrating Subcontinent

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. When the narrator's grandmother 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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” 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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 Th’amma. Having a primordial view of nationalism, the grandmother equates native space with freedom and honour. According to Th’amma 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 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, *Shadow* 151). 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, *Shadow* 151) 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, *Shadow* 151). 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, *Shadow* 151)

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 8-22; Gellner 63-70; Hutchinson). Ghosh deplores the division of the subcontinent by challenging and contesting the “myth of nationalism” (e.g. Sethi) 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, *Shadow* 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 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” (Ghosh, *Shadow* 235). As the story develops, the strands of space, memory, history and nation are woven into each other in a fine tapestry of overlapping family chronicles. 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. (239)

By introducing the idea of “third space,” Bose draws our attention to the core of Ghosh's perception of transcultural space and place in revoking 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” (See Schulze-Engler) 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: Beyond the Spatial Metaphors of Ethnic Hatred
Priya Kumar considers *The Shadow Lines* as a testimony of loss and memory since the text compels us to concede “the past-in-presentness of partition as a history that is not done with, that refuses to be past” (201). Although *The Shadow Lines* has been widely discussed and addressed in literary criticism as another novel of partition, I argue that it focuses more on the plight of the Bengali diaspora (e.g. Chakravarti) than on the legacy of the partition trauma *per se*. However, by tracing a contrast between personal memory and political history and between the space of communal interactions and the space of barbed wires, Ghosh's narrator offers different ways of reading larger political design of the fate of three nations—India, Pakistan and Bangladesh—in light of his family chronicles.

Transcultural spaces, which the narrator and Tridib wish for themselves and for their country, remain allusive as “shadows,” shrouding the mysteries of border and distance. The structure of the novel is as much evocative of space as memory as it is of imagination. The narrator's movement back and forth in time and space is not merely a structural device, it also serves as an image that the past lives in the present and that the present is shaped by the past or, as the novelist puts it, “the past is concurrent with the present” (Ghosh, *Shadow* 31). The flow of time in different cultural and national settings further demonstrates that the lines dividing space and place are as shadowy as lines dividing past and present. Therefore, the narrator is driven to map out a transcultural space like his uncle Tridib in the realm of imagination to penetrate the shadows of illusory and fictive

demarcations so that one could think beyond the spatial metaphors of ethnic hatred and thus could be able to heal wounds of the past with the exchange of interconnected histories, histories which encompass disparate people, cultures, civilisations, and countries. Thus Ghosh renders voice to silenced stories of ordinary individuals in his fictional narrative to commemorate their sacrifices as well as ideals for the subcontinent as a meeting ground of cultural and ethnic contact.

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