# «Not a coming or a going at all»
# Finding Home in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

The article considers the complexity of the concept of "home" in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988). I will examine how matters of migration and homesickness intersect a contemporary idea of a global borderless space, as well as the interrelationships and the exchangeability among topics like border, space, and home in Ghosh's work. Particular interest will be devoted to the transformation of the balances between centre and periphery after the dissolution of the British empire, with some inevitable consequences on how the different characters of the novel embody different ways of perceiving home and crossing-borders. The narrator's grandmother Tha'mma, for instance, is the fictional representation of an ancient conceptualisation of borders and geo-localisation, while the narrator himself and his uncle Tridib are emblems of an innovative perception of space.

Also, the relationships between characters consequently produce an idea of home in movement. This may lead to a significant change in the ancestral perception of home seen as a supportive milestone for human life: borders, space, and home are exploited by Ghosh in a sort of unceasing circle in which each element influences and completes the others. After all, the task that primarily concerns Ghosh is, as well, «not how to arrive, but how to move, how to identify convergent and divergent movements; and the challenge would be how to locate such events, how to give them a social and historical value» (Carter 1992, 101).

Keywords: Amitav Gosh, Time; Space, History, Borders, Home

Abstract

L'articolo analizza il complesso concetto di "casa" all'interno del romanzo di Amitav Ghosh *The Shadow Lines* (1988). In particolare, si esaminerà come il fenomeno migratorio e l'idea di "homesickness" intersechino la nozione molto contemporanea di uno spazio globale privo di confini. Inoltre, particolare enfasi verrà posta sulle diverse possibili interrelazioni e l'interscambiabilità di concetti quali confine, spazio e

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casa. Ci si focalizzerà soprattutto sulla trasformazione degli equilibri tra centro e periferia del mondo in seguito alla dissoluzione dell'impero britannico e sulle inevitabili conseguenze di tale fenomeno sui diversi personaggi del romanzo, soprattutto in relazione al loro modo di personificare e reagire all'evoluzione dell'idea stessa di "casa" e "croosing-borders". Ad esempio Tha'mma, la nonna del narratore, incarna un'antiquata concezione di confine e geo-localizzazione. Al contrario, il narratore stesso e suo zio Tridib sono emblemi di un'innovativa percezione spaziale.

Inoltre, le relazioni tra i vari personaggi producono un'idea di "home in movement". Questo può portare a un cambiamento significativo nella concezione ancestrale di "casa" tradizionalmente intesa come una pietra fondante del vivere umano. I concetti di confine, spazio e casa sono pertanto costantemente messi in relazione tra loro da Ghosh in una sorta di circolarità all'interno della quale ogni elemento influenza e completa gli altri. Dopotutto, il punto principale, secondo Ghosh non è tanto «how to arrive, but how to move, how to identify convergent and divergent movements, and the challenge would be how to locate such events, how to given them a social and historical value» (Carter 1992, 101).

Parole chiave: Amitav Gosh, tempo, spazio, Storia, confini, casa

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## 1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988, hereinafter *SL*) deals with a deep exchangeability among three basic concepts: border, space, and home. They are mainly developed through the story of Tridib and his nephew – the narrator of the whole story. The two characters are linked by a special relationship, and they are able to include each other in their own personal space without borders or barriers, so much that the narrator could remember everything about the time and place they had been together, even though he was just a child. Tridib is an inclusive and welcoming man who believes in the power of empathy as well as in a free multicultural world. Unfortunately, the world's answer to his strong sense of inclusion is his assassination in a communal riot during 1964 turmoil in Dhaka: the novel

is also about the human consequences of Indian Partition, so it is not possible to separate the historical element from the personal existences of the protagonists. This is another fundamental distinctive character of Ghosh's text: its indissoluble kinship with the history of Partition. Fiction and history constantly overlap, thus contributing to creating a dense web of elements of circularity to support the novel's story. Hence, if Tridib is related to what is imagination and fantasy, the history of Partition is exemplified by the story of Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother: while Tridib symbolises the demolition of all kinds of border and division and a contemporary perception of home in movement typical of migrant subjects, Tha'mma embodies an old-fashioned way of seeing geographical and intellectual representations of space and boundaries, linked to a strong sense of national belonging.

## 2. Border(s) and home

The concept of "border" in Amitav Ghosh's text is recurring throughout the narration, starting from the title: the "shadow lines" are both concrete and imaginary boundaries which separate India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh after Partition, but also spaces of darkness which inhabit the characters' inner world and their personal stories. Ghosh has chosen this title to suggest that borders which separate people are mere "shadows", thus stressing the arbitrariness of cartographic demarcations. When Tha'mma travels to Dhaka with her family, she naively asks «whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane» (*SL*, 167). Thus, Tha'mma is actually looking for visible indication of demarcation:

> 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 (*SL*, 167).

Through this assumption, Tha'mma reveals the potential worthlessness of the notion of border to identify home: she cannot believe that there are no external or physical marks to identify the boundaries between Calcutta and Dhaka, or India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, because she actually perceives and psychologically experiences differences and limitations due to Partition. As Ghosh writes:

> she liked things to be neat and in place – and at the moment she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality. […] in our family we don't know whether we are coming or going […]. 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 word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all (*SL*, 168-169).

Therefore, considering the "homeless" condition of the whole family, Tha'mma seems disoriented and uncomfortable in a world where concrete borders are not relevant and nationalities and birthplaces do not correspond. As Sukeshi Kamra notes, the majority of Partition survivors has deliberately chosen the «conspiracy of silence», or «non-porousness of Partition» (Kamra 2008, 106): survivors' suspicion of memorializing appears to emanate from «both a desire of forgetting and scepticism about the power of language to be able to capture the experience of Partition» (Roy 2020, 2-3). Tha'mma's tendency to use a few words or avoid the question of Partition may correspond to this phenomenon. She is also disturbed that she has to go through many procedures to cross the border between the two countries (*SL*, 167): if there is not a physical boundary, she cannot understand why people are not free of travelling from one land to another. The hostility towards borders may also refer to a tendency to deny the trauma and any kind of nostalgia and memory related to Partition, since nostalgia is just «a weakness, a waste of time» (*SL*, 230), which prevents from living the present. Therefore, through Tha'mma's denial of borders and intrinsic feelings towards Partition, Ghosh is questioning the

actual ability of those "lines" between nations to divide people. He is well aware of the central value and meaning of transnational movements for people in the Indian Subcontinent, and his final aim is knowing if such journeys across borders are worthwhile. He uses the image of the «looking-glass» to suggest that Dhaka and Calcutta are connected to each other like images in a mirror, one reflecting the other in a fantastic and reversed way.

In this context, imagination can serve a cathartic function in order to reinvent connections among places. For example, the geographically far UK or the multicultural metropolises of the world are paradoxically closer to India than East Pakistan thanks to Tridib's imagination and his ability to reinvent places for the narrator:

> Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with […] [Ila] could never understand what those hours in Tridib's room had meant to me, a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta. […] those names, which were to me a set of magical talismans because Tridib had pointed them out to me on his tattered old Bartholomew's Atlas, had for me a familiarity no less dull than the Lake had for me and my friends (*SL*, 22).

Such a spatial conception does not seem to be characterised by borders, so that long distances seem to be over in Ghosh's text. On the other hand, India and East Pakistan are geographically close but inevitably separated, in a way which is unconceivable for an old lady who experienced the trauma of Partition, like Tha'mma.

As a result, both Tha'mma and Tridib may feel a sense of "homelessness" when talking about where "home" is, but they react in opposite ways to such a condition, since they epitomise different conceptualisations of home, borders, and nation. The grandmother symbolises an attachment to what the Indian Subcontinent was before Partition and the consequent trauma. Partition traumas are generally narrated through the interconnections of different events and characters and «focus on the home […] in

order to emphasise an inability to feel at home» (Kabir 2015, 129). Tha'mma is caught, quite literally, in-between memory and belonging, in-between a fragmented reality and a strong belief in her homeland as it was before Partition. It is not by chance that she constantly repeats «Where is Dhaka?», and this particular search for home is what eventually pushes her to embark upon a rescuing mission of her uncle across the border since, as the narrator explains, «people like my grandmother, who have no home but in memory, learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection» (*SL*, 214). Moreover, Tha'mma's obsessive question about Dhaka can be a reference to a post-traumatic condition. In fact, when she visits the city of her childhood, she also tries to recollect her memories in order to find a correspondence, and a psychological relief, between her Dhaka and the reality of the capital of East Pakistan (*SL*, 227-228).

On the other hand, Tridib is used to contrast such a nationalist attachment by opposing ideas of porosity and an interrelationship between geographical and emotional conceptualisations of space which influence both his personal identity and the collective one. In this light, Tridib and the grandmother are heavily in conflict: they see borders and history in opposite ways. While Tha'mma is the typical «modern middle-class» woman resulting from Partition (*SL*, 86), Tridib does not believe in territorial nationalism. When comparing Tridib's and Tha'mma's similar state of people who cannot feel at home, it is Tridib who actually manages to overcome such a condition. This opposition can be explained by Ghosh's desire to create «space for a range of minority subjectivities whose stories interrupt the master narrative of the nation's triumphalist trajectory» (Kabir 2015, 128). That can be well exemplified by a «range of odd and unconventional families» (Kabir 2015, 128), depicted by Ghosh himself. In fact, despite some conflicts among its members, Tha'mma's family is based on love and solidarity, the very basis of community formation. This kind of familial relations forges quite fruitful personal identities, like

Tridib's one. That condition is in opposition to Regina Schwartz's comment on identity formation, according to which people usually imagine identities «as an act of distinguishing and separating from others, of boundary making and line drawing» (Schwartz 1997, 5). By contrast, Amitav Ghosh's novel aims at denouncing the absurdity of all boundaries and celebrating the multifaceted web of contacts among people that cut across nations and generations, thus becoming «a fictional critique of classical anthropology's model of discrete cultures and the associated ideology of nationalism» (Dixon 2003, 20).

The novel also deals with the problematic construction of an Indian collective identity far from nationalism and the incessant split between "self" and "other". Evidently, «what Ghosh tries to reconcile are the 'analytical' histories utilising the rational categories of modern historical thought and the 'affective' histories which account for the plural ways of being-in-the-world» (Roy 2015, 29). In this regard, history is stripped of its objective quality, as Spivak's endorsement of Foucault's suggestion points out:

> to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognised as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value (Spivak 1995, 27-28).

In Ghosh's novel, the subjective perceptions of the protagonists constantly overlap with history and the suffered establishment of borders after Partition, thus creating relentless movements of people, fantasies, and feelings which give birth to an updated idea of home. An example of such a condition is the division of Tha'mma's ancestral house in Dhaka, epitome of the Indian Partition. Both separations, in fact, could not lead to the peace they were meant for; instead, they created bitterness between the two families and the two nations. In this light, as Urbashi Barat suggests «Home is the site of nostalgia as well as of a terror of the unknown,

the borders between the spaces are "shadow" ones, achieving presence only when they are crossed» (Barat 2004, 219). Moreover,

> the ferocity with which the grandmother defends her home and its values is clearly a part of the alienation and the disorientation that are themselves the product of exile; the fluidity of borders that Tridib and the narrator experience are also born of their dislocation from home (Barat 2004, 226).

This means that the central characters of the novel belong to multiple places which forge plural identities, all the while breaking the usual standard of space and home. For Ghosh, the dilemma between "coming" and "going" home is rich of innuendoes: «How could you have "come" home to Dhaka? You don't know the difference between coming and going», asks the young narrator to his grandmother (*SL*, 168). Maybe it is possible to understand this paradox by considering the meaning of *Ashi*, the Bengali word which replaces both coming and going (Manzoor 2012, 48). Nevertheless, what it is noteworthy is Tha'mma's attachment to her personal idea of home which inhabits in the geography of the pre-Partition era. Amongst all the characters of the novel, in fact, she has perhaps the most strident form of nationalism, as well as a sort of «post-amnesia» condition which pushes her to return to a past moment «to remember what had to be forgotten» (Kabir 2015, 130). She is strongly linked to a sort of nationalist approach, since while Ghosh's characters all share a comparable longing for a "home", it is Tha'mma who believes in giving blood for it. At one point in the novel, she declares that her sister's grandchild Ila has no right to a home in Britain because her ancestors had not given their blood for it, so it could never be her nation, her *desh*, considering that citizens of a nation usually draw «their borders with blood» (*SL*, 85). The question of the "right to the city" is a well-known debate raised by Henri Lefebvre in 1990s, considering that «space demands our attention as a foundational feature of social production and struggle» (Crowley 2020, 201). As a result, space assumes a dominant role, whereas the notion of

time loses its traditional centrality. In this light, migrant people can affirm their "right to the city" as users who «make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area; it would also cover the right to the use of the centre, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos» (Lefebvre 1991, 34). Ila belongs to a second generation of migrants who ask for a national and cultural belonging in the British host country. She feels this urgency because the balances between centre and periphery have changed after the dissolution of the empire. People like Ila and the narrator have had the possibility to experience British life directly in the former mother country thanks to the different function England and its capital, London, took on after the end of the empire. During the Victorian apogee, London was seen «as a central space in constant motion, a site of restless commerce and frenetic activity. It was this movement, rather than static monuments and architecture, which was the prime public indicator of London's world centrality» (Gilbert and Driver 2000, 26). London was the true centre of the world; but, after the World War II, its aggressive imperial self-image of centrality had to surrender to a role of silent control. England, the point of origin for the measurement of both space and time for the peripheries of the world, changed its function, but not its relevance. For diasporic people the geography of empire «was not a simple pattern of centre and margins», but became «a route to another place»:

> A similar geography can be constructed for the campaigns for Indian national independence, in which London was a stop on a journey undertaken by many, Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah included. […] For others the street map of empire was more like the London A-Z, a less coherent, more complex geography of central spaces and major thoroughfares, but also of cross-cutting back-streets, lanes and alleys (Gilbert and Driver 2000, 32).

And this is evident also in Ghosh's novel: the former centre of the empire appears to the narrator as a sort of Carrollian mirror, an up-side-

down world rich of possibilities, but also a place of discomfort where Tridib's death can assume blurry outlines, as it happened in a sort of reverie (Gilbert and Driver 2000, 113).

On the other hand, Tha'mma cannot understand those new spatial balances since she belongs to a previous generation which experienced the spatial trauma of Partition. For people like Tha'mma, individuals have always decided to move from a country to another taking into consideration the «place where they belonged» (Sanyal 2011, 215). The freedom of reaching a place of belonging is all that matters for Tha'mma: she cannot accept a contemporary idea of apparent freedom in a foreign land, «that could be bought for the price of an air ticket» (*SL*, 98). However, such a traditional manifestation of space is opposed by the cosmopolitan view of characters like the narrator and his cousin Ila, or Tridib and his brother Robi. They eventually understand that the real illusion is believing in the concreteness of borders and frontiers, "lines" which, as Robi says, cannot free people from their troubles or traumas (*SL*, 272). When the narrator draws a series of circles on an atlas (*SL*, 255), for instance, he constructs a transnational space which actually denies the geographical compartmentalisation of nations.

This conceptualisation of borders and space shapes an innovative idea of home in movement fuelled by the overcoming of an ancient historiographic and historicist approach to these topics. In fact, on the one hand, historiography reduces «the lives of men and women to the play of material interests, or at other times to large impersonal movements in economy and society over which human beings have no control» (Pandey 1992, 40-41), paying little attention to people's emotions and feelings. On the other hand, also historicism presents some problems, as Chakrabarty points out. In a contemporary global context, he posits, what is important is not the place *per se*, but the links among places and spaces created by

flows of people, whereas the narrative of development of the West is losing its supremacy (Chakrabarty 2000, 8). In other words, the balances between centre and periphery have definitely changed: the peculiar way of thinking about Europe as the centre of the "modern" world is not only the heritage of a colonial and imperial past, but also the result of a passive and collaborative behaviour from the former colonies, «since third-world nationalisms, as modernizing ideologies par excellence, have been equal partners in the process» (Chakrabarty 2000: 43). Through his death in a communal riot, however, Tridib opposes both historiography and historicism: his decease is both a sacrifice and a reprisal of history. While in life he had abused of memory and imagination to reinvent historical reality, his death is a concrete act against history and the political and historical forces that worked to reinvent it and:

> 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 (*SL*, 257).

But Tridib's death is the element which destroys the linear composition of history; its «irony» (*SL*, 257) is central to help the narrator create a personal family memoir. 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 (Bose 2002, 235).

As the story develops indeed, the strands of space, memory, history, and nation are woven into each other in a fine tapestry of overlapping family chronicles which constitute a new idea of home. After Tridib's death nothing can be the same, and the whole family has to rethink its own (hi)story and the relations to Calcutta, Dhaka, and the other places

inhabited by Tridib. His brother Robi states: «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» (*SL*, 272) thus emphasising the emptiness of the old notion of border and the precarity of old ideas of home. In other words, Ghosh's ambition was «to do with space what Proust had done with time: that is, to make completely different instances of a continuum immanent in each other» (Hawley 2005, 9). The French writer had observed that «we acquire a true knowledge only of things that we are obliged to recreate by thought, things that are hidden from us in everyday life» (Proust 2006, 153). Ghosh had assimilated this assumption, so he sought to make a spatial continuum according to which different settings and concepts of borders and home could coexist with each other. However, unlike for Proust, whose memories across time may open up innovative worlds, Ghosh prefers to hold onto his own world through acts of postcolonial *flâneurism*:

> I would find myself wandering through Soho or around Trafalgar Square, and I would pretend to myself that I was walking for the mere pleasure of it, discovering the city. But soon I would find myself walking along the Embankment. I would lean on the parapet and gaze across the dark breadth of the Thames at the concrete hillocks of the South Bank; [...] I would discover that somewhere at the back of my throat I was softly humming the tune of an old Hindi film song – beqaraar karke hame yun najaiyen ... I don't know why it was that tune: I hadn't seen the film, nor ever possessed the record, but it was always that one and no other. It would appear unannounced, for no apparent reason, and though it was always the same tune there were times when it sounded quite different (*SL*, 103).

In this postmodern appropriation of the space of the former centre, Ghosh plays with the effect that London's streets have on the narrator's mental connections: his wanderings through the British city remind him of an Indian scenario, thus underlining the disappearance of the classical geographical barriers and the invention of an original postcolonial space.

From this perspective, literature can shape new spaces and perceptions of home which interact with reality, and with the postcolonial *flâneurs* standing out as symbolic and actual producers of a new idea of home because: «they are walkers […] whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban text they write without being able to read it» (De Certeau 1993, 158). Interestingly, according to Michel de Certeau, these *flâneurs* «make use of spaces that cannot be seen […] a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments, of trajectories, and alterations of space» (De Certeau 1993, 158). This kind of *flâneur* also needs the support of a number of other outsiders living in a similar condition because, to «master his narrative, the flaneur must take into account the 'tales' of fellow-flaneurs and competitors» (Williams 1997, 821). That is why Tridib and his nephew need each other in order to (re)shape their stories. But they also create a collective and public (hi)story; the death of Tridib along the streets of Dhaka is a well-orchestrated device to demonstrate the final relationship and reshaping of the concepts of space and home. While he is involved in the middle of the Calcutta riots, the narrator affirms:

> We could not recognise the streets we were careering through. We did not know whether we were going home or not. The streets had turned themselves inside out: our city had turned against us (*SL*, 224).

That condition – the same feeling of not knowing where (or what) home is – leads to a new notion of home: as a result, the protagonists can actually be seen as «cultural producers» (Beswick, Parmar and Sil 2015, 1-2) because space and home are cultural constructs. Moreover, this innovative idea of home recalls Edward Soja's concept of "Thirdspace", a «fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency» which claims for «a consciously – and consciously spatial – effort to improve the world in some significant way» (Soja 1996, 11). In *The Shadow Lines*, the effort to improve the world is seen as emerging via a spatial

intervention brought about by diverse cultural practices, which set out to embody, subvert, and reconfigure the postcolonial space and the related idea of home. This is well summarised in the last part of the novel when the narrator realises 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-thousands-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 looking-glass border (*SL*, 257).

Once again, the idea of the mirror returns to witness the empire's transformation, where «retreat and revival co-exist shrouded in a cloudy mix of ambiguity, contradictions, conflicting objects» (Ballantyne 2010, 448). This condition leads to a porosity of borders which is finally expressed, not only in a new relationship between England and India, but also in the strong and imperishable bound between Dhaka and Calcutta, Pakistan and India: this is the irony that led Tridib to his tragic ending, and these original conceptualisations of borders and space can actually give life to a different perception of home far from spatial constraints. After all, «space is a social construction relevant to the understanding of the different histories of human subjects and to the production of cultural phenomena» (Warf and Arias 2009, 1), and it plays a significant role in the creative representation of home in movement embodied by Tridib himself.

## 3. Space and home

Talking about space, the narrator affirms: «I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates; […] I believed that across the

border there existed another reality» (*SL*, 241). But with time he had begun to unlearn everything he knew and to believe in the power of imagination, especially thanks to Tridib's training. And Tridib's identity can actually be defined by both "places" he visited and the "space" he inhabited.

According to the French anthropologist Marc Augé, the notion of "place" already contains the sense of "anthropological place", since it «can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity» (Augé 1995, 77). Therefore, Tridib's identity can be reflected by the places he has visited not only because he manages to appropriate them, but also because he has the power of imagining them and leaving a part of himself in all the places he visits, in a quite empathic way. Consequently, through Tridib, Ghosh attempts to disintegrate the idea of the nation-state: the lives of the characters are not defined by geography or location as we know it. From Ila and Tridib's peregrinations around the world to the narrator's almost voyeuristic pleasure in "knowing" the alleys of London without ever setting foot there, a wide range of plot events shows how *The Shadow Lines* constantly tries to re-define both the sense of space and places visited by the characters.

What is interesting is the juxtaposition between Tha'mma's insistence on the triviality of borders in the reorganisation of space in the Subcontinent, and the fascination of the narrator and his uncle Tridib for places, imaginary and real. To understand that association, we have to think once again to the different Partition's experience lived by Tridib and his nephew on the one hand, and Tha'mma on the other. While the grandmother directly suffered it, her grandchildren cannot share the same traumatic memory. The Partition of India was a veritable shock, and it was neither clean nor clinical. Multiple partition plans, negotiations, and political manoeuvres among countries took place to gain more land, as Chatterji underlines (1999). However, «what Partition would entail for the or-

dinary person was not carefully considered» (Sanyal 2011, 215). That condition is well described by Ghosh through Tha'mma's behaviour and personality. Maybe «going back» to Dhaka is not an option for her because she belongs to an upper caste, middle class which «wanted to be part of a nation in which they would not only be part of the numerical majority, but also continue to exercise their social practices» (Sanyal 2011, 217), and India could assure it. As a result, she had never thought of concretely "going back" to Dhaka until, at least, the necessity of doing it for the recollection of her uncle Jethamoshai. Tha'amma embodies the rigid education and stubbornness of his own class. Therefore, she cannot understand her grandchildren's desire of knowing the world, not Tridib's original cosmopolitanism: the grandmother associates him with people of lower social status because he attends public spaces that are not respectable according to her education (and sense of history), since «[Tha'mma] had a deep horror of the young men who spent their time at the street-corner» (*SL*, 7). Ghosh is trying to underline the difference between private and public space by differentiating what it means to let some people in your personal zone and keep some others at a distance in the public zone. However, *The Shadow Lines* also demonstrates that the psychology of people changes with changing times. Tha'mma's visit to her uncle Jethamoshai in Dhaka is significant in this regard, since it symbolises her unconscious inability to abandon the past organisation of space in the Subcontinent. Although she has lost touch with him and his family for a long time after a series of quarrels, she wants to bring him to Calcutta, in India, because she wants him to be with his own people, as it was before Partition. She reminds herself again and again that it is «her duty to take him away from his past and thrust him into the future» (*SL*, 230). However, the only character who seems actually unable to thrust into the future is Tha'mma herself. This may be due to her attachment to the pre-Partition South Asian geography, a sort of "imagined space" which haunts in the memory. And the

notion of "space" in memory is shared by all the characters, although the younger ones manage to exploit its potentiality and learn from Tha'mma's experience in order to create a cosmopolitan sense of home in movement. Ila says to the adult narrator,

> 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 (*SL*, 26).

Thus, the "journeys" in the novel turn out to be mental journeys too in different times and spaces, to search one's own self, far from the limitations of restrictive forms of traditional temporality and spatiality. Through the "lines" that separate but also paradoxically connect since they manage to create invisible bonds between people (Shirley 2018, 104), the novelist beautifully portrays the life of an individual, a family, a society, and a nation. The shadow blurs the lines (Sharma 2013, 2) between memory and reality, personal and general (hi)stories, India and Bangladesh, India and England, Partition and migration, past and present. And Tridib concretely epitomises such a condition. He is a young man with a broader view, he has travelled a lot, and believes in a borderless world which can be reinvented and adapted by fantasy and imagination in a sort of trivial «fraud» (*SL*, 13). This same elusiveness leads to the creation of an "open" space, a «global sense of space, as woven together out of ongoing stories» (Massey 2005, 245) since, as Tridib asserts: «everyone lives in a story […] because stories are all there are to live in, it was just a question of which one you chose» (*SL*, 201). In this light, when imagination plays such a thought-provoking role, it is fundamental to consider also the role of education and culture. As Renato Rosaldo points out, «[i]n contrast with the classic view, which posits culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns, culture can arguably be conceived as a more porous array of intersections where distinct processes cross from within and

beyond its borders» (Rosaldo 1992, 20). Therefore, modern nations characterised by a borderless perspective and an elevated cultural level can be considered open cultural spaces.

As a novelist, Ghosh is interested in that debate and «prioritises space over time […] he applauds the novel's ability to eloquently communicate a sense of space and also to interweave the entire spatial continuum from local to global» (Roy 2015, 18). Reflecting on that «rhetoric of location» (Ghosh 2002, 303), Ghosh insists on the imaginary character of space. He populates his novels of both words and objects, imagination and reality, thus trying to find a fair balance between material and imaginary aspects. Ghosh calls this kind of alternative localisation «the cultural representation of space» (Ghosh 2002, 250). After all, according to Meenakshi Mukherjee, a sort of bond between imagination and space is peculiar to Bengali culture: «Whether as a result of a relatively early exposure to colonial education or as a reaction to it, real journeys within the country and imagined travels to faraway places outside national boundaries have always fascinated the Bengali middle class» (Mukherjee 2000, 137). Therefore, all considered, space can be a cultural construct also for the highly educated and middle-class Tridib: he actually thinks that space can be organised and the unknown can be experienced «concretely» (*SL*, 32) in the imagination, as if spaces in the mind «were infinitely more detailed, more precise than anything I would ever see» (*SL*, 32). In this light, it is useful to consider also the concept of relational space theorised by David Harvey in 2004 in order to understand Tridib's – and the narrator's – position. The definition of relational space is particularly relevant to the discussion, since it implies that space is composed of relations rather than structures:

> There is another sense in which space can be viewed as relative and I choose to call this relational space – space regarded in the manner of Leibniz, as being contained in objects in the sense that an object can be said to exist only insofar as it contains and represents within itself relationships to other objects (Harvey 2006, 271).

Harvey affirms that it is impossible to extricate space and time; by contrast, it is possible to conceptualise political and collective memories by linking the spatial characteristics of a given process or event to the time when they happened. In this way, the social and political facts of a precise era can be understood only in relational terms, that is by considering and examining them through time and space. This conceptual framework allows to reconsider many aspects of contemporary political consciousness, such as the concept of identity. Tridib's identity has been forged by the time and the space of his own life. He lived in an era of great turmoil and in a geographical area full of contradictions and contrasts and, according to Harvey's idea of relationality, this has influenced his identity formation. In this regard, Harvey cites Henri Lefebvre and his definitions of "space of representation" and "space of experience" as both part of the way we live in the world, and he also mentions the way space is lived through emotions and the imagination: «The strange spatio-temporality of a dream, a fantasy, a hidden longing, a lost memory or even a peculiar thrill or tingle of fear as we walk down a street can be given representation through works of art» (Harvey 2004, 279). In other words, the implementation of a spatial approach in literature considers the way through which it is possible to study the relationship between the "material" spaces we live in – such as the cities with their public and private places – and people, objects, occurrences, and events which have some linkages with spaces. The relevance of this kind of spatiality for Tridib and the narrator is suggested throughout the novel. The two constantly emphasise their bond to their Indian space and the objects of their childhood in Calcutta, as well as the spatiotemporal connection of those same Indian objects to other parts of the world, like England:

> But in my memory I see it emerging out of that storm of dust like a plateau in a desert. It was a table, the largest I had ever seen; it seemed to stretch on and on […]. Tridib once told me all about it. My grandfather bought it

> on his first visit to London, he said, some time in the 1890s. He saw it at an exhibition in the Crystal Palace and couldn't resist it. He had it shipped to Calcutta in sections, but when it arrived he didn't know what to do with it so he had it put away here (*SL*, 53).

In this passage, the narrator reconnects the existence of an antique table not only to memories of his uncle Tridib, but also to a distant area in a distant time, that is 1890s London. Through the memory of a concrete object in a private space, it has been possible to create a series of connections to both a public event in a foreign city – the Great Exhibition at The Crystal Palace – and two other events in the narrator's life, that is his child's games with Ila under the same table, and the distress of Tridib's lover May for the disparities between England and India.

On the one hand, indeed, the English girl May is shocked by the colonial symbology standing behind the table:

> May walked around it, frowning.
> I wonder how much he paid for it, she said, running her thumb along the grain of the dark, heavy wood. I wonder how much it cost to have it shipped here, she said loudly, her voice echoing in the shadows of the room. I wonder how many proper roofs that money would have bought for those huts we saw on our way here. […] Why did he bring this back, for God's sake? she cried. Why this worthless bit of England; why something so utterly useless? (*SL*, 53)

On the other hand, the table also embodies some of the happiest moments in the narrator's childhood, thus demonstrating that the same object can reveal several facets according to the different perspective through which we observe it:

> it seemed impossible to me to think of that table as an object like any other, with a price and a provenance, for I had seen it taking shape with my own eyes, within a cloud of dust, in that very room.
> All right, said Ila, let's go under it.

> Under it? Aghast, I tugged at the back of her smock and asked her what kind of game we could possibly play under it (*SL*, 54).

This constant mixture of past and present, personal and public memories, as well as of different events, objects, and settings embodies a new way of perceiving time and space: although Ghosh prioritises space over time, material and mental spaces overlap also from a temporal standpoint and have an impact on both Tridib and the narrator. This is because space is a human construction which helps the novel's protagonists to become part of each other, of their own personal stories and of their own spaces and homes, both in India and in England while, at the same time, it can also interconnect the two nations to the recent (hi)story of the Indian Subcontinent.

## 4. Conclusion

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh aims at dissolving the boundaries between fact and fiction: the "borders" of time and space, history and imagination, are mere shadows, hence they are trespassed in order to achieve the characters' shared mission, that of finding a place to call home.

Ghosh's novel delineates the intricacies of manmade nations' borders by accompanying his readers through the narrator's journey 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 (Bose 2002, 239).

Ghosh's purpose is showing that borders and national identities can be traversed, even though Tridib's dream of a world totally free of borders has to succumb to his death.

The author thus underlines that it is difficult to make a home away from home. However, the idea of home binds all his characters. It might be the birthplace, as Dhaka is for Tha'mma; whilst Tridib believes that «place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination» (*SL*, 23), and he transmits this idea to the narrator who, as a young school boy, has imagined London so vividly that he could recognise places by mere mention of their names when he visited London years later. Through the power of his imagination, the narrator travels in real and imaginary places by looking at fading photographs, reading maps and old newspapers, and thanks to «faint recollection» (*SL*, 245) of childhood memories and games. Both Tridib and the narrator are travellers in the real sense of the word: they see the world with no boundaries and want to travel across cultures. Tridib tells the narrator that one can never know anything except through real desire for everything 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» (*SL*, 32). Tridib wants to live in a place «without a past, without history, free, really free» (*SL*, 158). And this is the last sense of Ghosh's definition of border, home, and space: his work can be read as a comment on the end of the empire and on the contemporary balances between centre and periphery. Ghosh incorporates intercultural nuances, history of movements and migrations, partitions, travels, and trespassing to underline the progressive dissolution of borders. Those elements all cooperate to demonstrate how a creative way of considering borders and space has swamped the former centre of the empire thus generating an updated idea of home in movement.

Furthermore, *The Shadow Lines* is not a novel of "partition" but a claim for union. Ghosh's message is that geographical and cultural divisions do not exist if we do not create them. The distances of the Euclidean space can be over because what is important is «how to move, how to

identify convergent and divergent movements; and the challenge would be how to locate such events, how to give them a social and historical value» (Carter 1992, 101), as the narrator ultimately understands through Tridib's death. Tridib himself epitomises the desire to overcome the "shadow lines" to inhabit a space of cultural and human contact. National frontiers create a false sense of distance and reality, as well as an elusive idea of home, and they cannot be considered an element of definition of what a proper home is. In other words, national borders can generate the illusion of home and a variety of inequalities among citizens. As Mukherjee states:

> Amitav Ghosh would like to believe in a world where there is nothing in between, where borders are illusions. […] 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 (Mukherjee 2008, 181).

Ghosh seeks to explain that borders are just shadows of the mind; they are fictional and real at the same time, but «a reality that existed only in the saying, so when you heard it said, it did not matter whether you believed it or not – it only mattered that it had been said at all» (*SL*, 220).

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