Navigating Thirdspace: Between the Real and the Imagined in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the real and imagined spaces that redefine and alter the lives of individuals and communities in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) using Edward Soja's spatial theory of Thirdspace. By utilising Thirdspace not just as a critical concept but as a methodology, the study examines the alternate spatial discourse engaged in the novel that encourages a trialectical perception of space by simultaneously taking into consideration the historical, social, and spatial. Set against the backdrop of political unrest caused by the division of spaces in the aftermath of the Partition of India, *The Shadow Lines* depicts the arbitrary borders and imagined geographies that expose the fragility of identity and nationalism. The study examines the novel's recurring phrase—to imagine with precision and to invent the world in one's imagination—which is an invitation towards an alternate way of thinking about space that shatters the illusion of cartographic fixity. The social constructionist perspective provides a framework for comprehending how constructed spaces and arbitrary divisions can be deconstructed and reconstructed through memory and imagination. The study further investigates how the novel advocates for a reimagined approach to spatiality by embracing simultaneities, moving towards a Thirdspace consciousness. The findings of the study reveal how spatiality as a critical lens in

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postcolonial narratives encompasses the lived, imagined, and remembered experiences that shape the socio-political realities of the South Asian subcontinent.

Keywords
Thirdspace, alternate spatial discourse, trialectics of spatiality, illusion of cartographic fixity, real and imagined geographies, identity and nationalism

Introduction

Human beings are, and have always been, intrinsically spatial beings, with spatiality playing an active role in the social construction of self. Edward Soja foregrounds the interconnections between the social and the spatial saying, "Society is formatively spatialized from the start . . . in much the same way as space is formatively socialized. Socialization and spatialization were intricately intertwined, interdependent and often in conflict" ("Taking space personally" 21). Echoing Michel Foucault who called the emerging spatial scholarship in the twentieth century "an epoch of space" ("Of Other Spaces" 22), Soja asserts that "one of the most important intellectual renewals of the 20th century is this spatial turn" as he proposes the need for new concepts and ideas in spatial thinking ("Thirdspace" 49). Literary and cultural studies post 1960s have increasingly emphasised the importance of spatial theory in understanding narratives of the nation, memory, and identity. Advocating for a renewed focus with space and place at the centre of the analytical agenda, Edward Soja proposed a new type of spatiality which he calls "Thirdspace," in his book *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996). Thirdspace refers to a shift in geography and the social sciences from considering space as a purely material condition to understanding it as a social product. As Soja states in an interview, Thirdspace is not a theoretical concept but "a particular way of thinking about and interpreting socially produced space" (113). It essentially rests on the triangular foundations of historicity, sociality, and spatiality providing an alternate methodology that allows a reading of the text through the triadic lens—all at once rather than strain towards a singular approach. This reassertion of space into social theory, encourages one to think differently about the "spatiality of human life: place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory, [and] geography" (Soja, *Thirdspace* 1).

Postcolonial literature is unavoidably concerned with space and the related issues of fragmented geographies and displaced identities. Several influential postcolonial critics name "place and displacement" as the primary concern through which "the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into

being" (Ashcroft et al. 8). Thirdspace becomes a potent method for examining the ways in which personal/collective histories and memories are spatially encoded, negotiated, and contested within the postcolonial context. Spatiality, in this terrain, is not static or neutral but is fluid and politicised, with landscapes being imbued with layered meaning, forging simultaneities in existence. Thirdspace transcends binaries (material–mental, objective–subjective, and empirical–conceptual), embracing simultaneities, thereby opening new possibilities to explore. Soja's theory draws on the work of two spatial theorists: Michel Foucault, who introduced another way of thinking about space through his concept of heterotopias ("Of Other Spaces" 24); and the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, who opened up an alternative spatial paradigm through his conceptualisation of lived spaces, spaces of representation, and representational spaces (33). Drawing on Lefebvre's distinction between perceived space and conceived space, Soja presents the terms Firstspace and Secondspace, the former including all forms of direct spatial experiences which can be empirically measured and materially mapped, and the latter referring to cognitive processes and spatial representations which give birth to geographical imaginations (*Thirdspace* 10). Thirdspace, on the other hand, deconstructs this dualism, being characterised by a number of extraordinary simultaneities:

> Everything comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history. (*Thirdspace* 56-57)

Through its resistance to the limited knowability of space, it emerges as a site of radical possibility. Similar to Jorge Luis Borges's notion of the Aleph which is "a point in space that contains all other points" (10), Thirdspace includes both the material and mental spaces, the real and the imagined. Thirdspace as a perspective and critical method to investigate geographical imagination in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* sheds light on the real and imagined worlds, as constructed and represented in the novel, where personal memory, political history, and spatial multiplicity intersect, disrupting stable nationalities and fixed identities.

Towards a thirdspace consciousness

The Shadow Lines explores spatiality in its many dimensions—physical, mental, and political—and reveals how space is simultaneously created, perceived, lived, and conferred meaning. The novel maps physical space (London, Calcutta, and Dhaka) that is nearly indistinguishable from mental space (memory, imagination,

and storytelling) by documenting the life journeys of the Datta-Chaudhuris of Bengal who cross and re-cross both physically and imaginatively. It is a story of simultaneities—past and present, childhood and adulthood, Britain (West) and India (East), and Hindu and Muslim—set against the backdrop of the Calcutta riots and the civil war in post-Partition Bengal. In a postmodern age characterised by transnational mobility, fragmented geographies, and contested narratives of belonging, *The Shadow Lines* offers a compelling framework to study the imagined landscapes that are revisited through the memory of individuals who experienced conflict. An analysis of the novel reveals its progress from empirically mappable and real Firstspace, represented through the atlas, to the conceptual and imagined Secondspace, represented through the characters' nostalgic and imaginary travels, finally reaching Thirdspace, a deconstructive space of contradictions, heterogeneity, conflicting narratives, and juxtaposing identities. Soja's Thirdspace perspective offers a pragmatic solution to the postmodern problem where "all our lived spaces have been shifting from a period of crisis-generated restructuring to the onset of a new era of restructuring-generated crisis" (*Thirdspace* 23). *The Shadow Lines* aptly depicts this restructuring-generated crisis in post-Partition India where the arbitrary nature of borders and boundaries that define national spaces, rather than offering security, generate further fragmentation and disillusionment.

The Shadow Lines traces the unnamed narrator's evolving Thirdspace consciousness as he comes to recognise the fluidity and constructedness of space, borders, and national identities through two figures: his grandmother Tha'mma and his uncle Tridib, who enlighten him with their contrasting perceptions of space. Tha'mma views space as material, measurable, and empirically real. In contrast, Tridib perceives space as abstract, invented, imagined, and thus unknowable. As a child, the narrator conforms to traditional notions of space, believing in the physicality and reality of spaces, stating: "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 exists another reality" (241). However, Tridib influences a change in the narrator's spatial perception, offering a more imaginative and fluid conception of space, one that transcends political demarcations and invites an understanding rooted in empathy, history, and narrative. In reply to his cousin Ila's question, "why not just take the world as it is?" Tridib's answer—"we could not see without inventing what we saw… if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free of other people's inventions" (35)—reflects a key philosophical tension in the novel between imagination and reality. Tridib's reply cautions against inhabiting a world created by someone else's version of reality—their narratives, ideologies, ascribed meanings. His statement

reveals the dangers of accepting a version of the world that's already been shaped by power, history, and politics—not necessarily truth. In emphasising the need to re-invent objective reality through the lens of one's own imagination, experiences, memories, and stories, Tridib's alternate view of space aligns with Soja's Thirdspace which underscores the importance of interpretation that overrides perception. Such a view presents social space as "simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, [and] material and metaphorical" (*Thirdspace* 65).

In *The Shadow Lines*, Tridib is endowed with unique powers of imagination and he instigates in the narrator a longing to imagine familiar and unfamiliar places in memory and imagination. Tridib's philosophy "that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination" (23) liberates the narrator from the constraints of his antecedent belief in spatial binaries and fixities. Just as Tridib is considered peculiar for seeing the world differently, the narrator, in his differences from others, indicates a departure from conventional conception of spatiality, initiating his entry into a new consciousness which Soja calls Thirdspace. Through the inherited stories of other characters, the narrator enters imagined landscapes and, with Tridib's assistance, is able to inhabit spaces he has never physically visited, thus collapsing Firstspace into Thirdspace. In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator vividly reconstructs the city of Dhaka through his grandmother's stories and memories in the following way:

> The Dhaka she was thinking of was the city that had surrounded their old house. She had talked to me often about that house and that lane. I could see them myself, though only in patches, for her memory had shone upon them with the interrupted brilliance of a lighthouse beam…. I could see all that, because people like my grandmother, who have no home but in memory, learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection. For me, Kana-babu's sweet-shop at the end of the lane was as real as the one down our own road. (214)

This act of imagination with precision is vital for making sense of a complex past, demonstrating how memory and imagination can combine to construct spaces as tangible as those of lived experience. Throughout the novel, the narrator yearns to know places precisely, not as it appears in the present, but at its most historically charged moment. The narrator infers the forty-year-old past of German bombed London during World War II and Tridib's life in London through photographs. Being an image twice removed from reality, the photograph can offer only a mediated view of reality, and yet through them, imagined narratives of events as it happened in the past can be reconstructed. At the same time, the narrator acknowledges the illusion embedded in these

reconstructions: "the clarity of that image in his mind was merely the seductive clarity of ignorance; an illusion of knowledge created by a deceptive weight of remembered detail" (74). The photographic scene of Tresawsen, Tridib, Dan, Francesca, and Mike walking down the road in London, holding tightly to one another epitomises the tensions between memory and imagination. The pleasant imagination of the scene is sliced through by the tragic knowledge that three of them would not survive the war. Underscoring the limits of imaginative reconstruction, the narrator reflects, "What is the colour of that knowledge? Nobody knows, nobody ever can know, not even in memory, because there are moments in time that are not knowable" (75). This incident in the novel echoes Soja's statement regarding the nature of Thirdspace as "a limitless composition of lifeworlds… that are never completely knowable" (*Thirdspace* 70). This encapsulates the tension between the desire to imaginatively inhabit the past and the inevitable gaps and unknowability of lived history.

Tridib's personal philosophy "imagination with precision," which is a recurring motif in the novel, is not a means of escapism but a disciplined intellectual practice that enables a deeper engagement with space, history, and human experience (26). In *The Production of Space* (1974), Henri Lefebvre proposes the term "connaissance of space" in contrast to the "savoir of space," both translating to the knowledge of space (41). Lefebvre privileges the former which accommodates the lived and experiential aspects of space as opposed to the latter which focuses only on the empirical and practical aspects. Pertaining to Lefebvre's thought, Tridib teaches the narrator that one can "know" places not by physically visiting them but by imaginatively layering maps, memories, and conversations onto mental landscapes. This method of visualisation that the novel promotes is characterised by simultaneities, dismantling the binaries of objective and subjective, past and present, fact and fiction, and real and imagined, thereby representing Thirdspace thinking. Through this method, the narrator is able to travel imaginatively without the constraints of physical borders, saying, "Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with" (22). The narrator in *The Shadow Lines* imagines or recalls from memory the basement in Raibazar, Lymington road in London, Tha'mma's home in Dhaka, London during the WWII, and Calcutta during the riots. Since Thirdspace articulates new positions of in-between which opens new modes of being, the narrator is able to lead plural lives and exist in multitude of realities. The novel reveals a "constant interchange of reality and imagination in the transcultural awareness of the narrator" which makes him believe that reality is not rooted in tangible and perceivable existence, but in "what is recognized and reinforced by the shadows of memory" (Sarmila 86). For the narrator, memory and imagination

become a potent medium capable of rendering a luminous and enduring picture of reality.

Cartographic illusions and spatial simulations

The very title, *The Shadow Lines* delineates borders and boundaries as shadowy and unreal, dismantling the fixity of borders and national identities, revealing its constructed and illusory quality. Borrowing Lefebvre's terms "the illusion of transparency" and "realistic illusion," Soja in *Thirdspace* highlights how space performs a double illusion, appearing innocent and naturalising constructedness, discouraging one "to see much beyond the surface of things" (63-64). The novel critiques national boundaries and divisions as far from being natural or inevitable. Instead they are ideological mental constructs that constrain both political and personal lives. The shadows cast by the national boundaries invade the space of home, territory, and motherland, enabling an individual's lifelong struggle to win over imagined representational borders. These shadowy lines appear not only between countries, but also between imagination and reality, past and present, and memory and history, blurring the rigid divisions. *The Shadow Lines* delineates the spaces created by borders, whether real or imagined, not as a fixed line, but as a shifting zone, constantly calling into question the gaps between nationality and identity, the one and the other, memories and reality, articulating new positions of in-between. This dialectic between the real and the imagined predominates Thirdspace, which is a product of the "thirding" of the spatial imagination (60). Social space that "has long been obscured by exclusive fixations on illusive materialist and/or idealist interpretations" has been re-spatialised by Edward Soja's Thirdpace "that is radically open to the accumulation of new insights, an alternative that goes beyond the mere acceptance of the dualised interrogative" (*Thirdspace* 65). Adhering to this view, the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* realises the illusory nature of dividing lines that function like a shadow, present yet intangible, neither purely material nor entirely imagined. He thereby displays Thirdspace thinking, re-asserting postcolonial spatialities as a hybrid realm where multiple realities coexist.

The Bartholomew's atlas which preoccupies the narrator's imagination, acts as a symbolic and transgressive medium through which Gosh critiques cartographic fixities. The material representation of space in maps enables the narrator to travel unreachable spaces such as Madrid, Cuzco, Cairo, etc., bringing them imaginatively into proximity. Transcending the physicality of maps and boundaries, the mental mapping allows the narrator to visualise Tridib's description of the "cafes in the plaza Mayor in Madrid," the "crispness of the air in Cuzo," the "printed arch in the mosque of Ibn Tulun," and the "stones of the

Great Pyramid of Cheops" (22). Through the descriptions provided by Ila, Tridib, and the atlas itself, he is able to imaginatively navigate places he has never physically visited, dismantling their sense of unreachability, illustrating how spatial meaning can be reconceptualised through personal, cultural, and historical narratives rather than objective cartographic representations. Transcending the fixed, material representation of space in the atlas, the narrator in *The Shadow Lines*, relearns "the meaning of distance" by displaying a spatial consciousness that transcends "the tidy ordering of Euclidean space" (232). In this re-mapped, multidimensional geography, he says "Chiang Mai in Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi is; that Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is" (255-256). Although maps appear to correspond to real spaces, it is marked by abstraction and detachment from lived reality. In his work "Maps, Knowledge, Power" (2014), J. B Harley emphasises the constructed nature of maps, noting that, "although maps have long been central to the discourse of geography they are seldom read as 'thick' texts or as a socially constructed form of knowledge" (129). Rejecting the simple, one-dimensional and static borderlines etched upon the map that effaces complex markers, the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* reconstructs new cartographies based on emotional, historical, and imaginative connections between people and places.

Tridib's philosophy—that true knowledge arises only through transgressing "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" (32) captures the essence of the novel's spatial imagination. Tridib's death which forms the central event in the text is a tragic consequence of the imagined divisions that people still violently cling to. Inspired by Tridib's alternate conception of spatiality, the narrator comes to understand identity and belonging as something more complex than the stable or rooted reality of maps and cartographic lines. Left with only memories and inherited stories, the narrator becomes a traveller, which enables him to inhabit multiple worlds simultaneously. The narrator resembles what Maria Lugones in "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception" calls a "world-traveller," someone who can move between different "worlds" and "can inhabit more than one of these 'worlds' at the very same time" (10). Through memory, imagination and storytelling, the narrator acquires the capacity to traverse geographical, temporal, and emotional boundaries and inhabit diverse cultural and historical spaces. He is able to inhabit London during WWII, the Dhaka of Tha'mma's childhood, the Calcutta of his own upbringing, and the Dhaka riots of 1964 As Lugones observes, world-travellers possess "the capacity to remember other 'worlds' and ourselves in them" (11).

Pertaining to Lugones' statement, *The Shadow Lines* portrays Tridib and the narrator as existing "outside the mainstream" as "world-travellers" (11). Through their ability to imagine with precision, they exist simultaneously in different worlds, experiencing different realities. As true travellers, Tridib and the narrator reject the pre-disposed logic of geopolitical borders and instead embrace a worldview that dismantles fixities and the limited knowability of space. For them, the capacity to remember other worlds and inhabit them is an act of necessity. This new Thirdspace existence is inhabited only by a specific few who aim to "decipher and actively transform the worlds" they live in (Soja, *Thirdspace* 67). The use of Thirdspace in the novel exemplifies "The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 23). It thereby emerges as a productive space, constantly deconstructing fixed paradigms, reassembling hybrid identities and becoming, as Soja writes in *Thirdspac*e, the space of "possibilities, the space of radical openness, the space of social struggle" (68).

The metaphor of the mirror is a recurring trope throughout *The Shadow Lines* with its multiple references to the "looking-glass border" (257) and the "upside-down house" (138). Similar to Alice's mirror in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871) which takes her into a world of inverted logic, a space of imagined possibility, the mirror in *The Shadow Lines* represents a simulation, simultaneously reflecting reality while transcending it a realm of illusion or imagination. In *Simulations*, Jean Baudrillard outlines four phases through which representations evolve, ultimately detaching from reality (7). Applying these stages to spatiality provides a compelling framework for understanding the representation of spaces in the novel. In the first phase, the image "is a reflection of a basic reality" where practical knowledge is gained from the real empirical world (Baudrillard 7). At this stage, the child narrator succumbs to the traditional notions of space, gaining most of his knowledge from the atlas, which appears to faithfully reflect reality. He believes in the reality of nations, borders, and distance as underlying structures that create difference. In the second stage, the mirrored image "masks and perverts a basic reality" (Baudrillard 7). The narrator's mental image of London and Dhaka is shaped by the partial, second-hand narratives obtained from Tridib, Tha'mma, and others, which masks actual experience, offering only filtered, idealised versions of reality. In the third phase, Baudrillard speaks of "the absence of basic reality" where the real is substituted by signs or representations of the real (7). This marks a space where simulation feigns reality, threatening the very existence of the difference between what is true and false, the real and the imaginary, and the signifier and the

signified. In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator speaks of places he has never visited with a conviction that mimics first-hand knowledge to the surprise of characters such as Ila. These mental imaginings replace direct experience and reality itself, dissolving the boundaries, representing Thirdspace thinking. The fourth phase is a realm of "pure simulacrum," where simulation feigns reality, effacing the very difference between the real and the imagined (Baudrillard 7). The narrator's perceptions are no longer anchored in any referential truth; instead, memory, imagination, and history converge into a seamless and indistinguishable continuum. Baudrillard, views it as contributing to hyperreality where the simulated image becomes more "real" than the real. Similarly, in the novel, the narrator's London, formed through stories, photographs, maps, and historical knowledge is just as "real" to him as the lived experience of someone physically present. Much like Baudrillard's mirror in the notion of simulacra, Ghosh's narrative suggests that what is considered real—memory, nation, and history—is often constructed through layers of representation, stories, and imagination. The novel's interrogation of the illusion of spaces extends beyond glocal spaces to encompass the idea of the nation itself, whose discursive coherence depends not on natural or political reality but on imaginative constructs.

Fluidity of nationalist discourse

Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities* (1983) critiques the notions of nation, nationality, and nationalism, proposing them as constructs with multiple significations that command profound emotional legitimacy to individuals and define their selfhood. *The Shadow Lines* destabilises the arbitrary notion of nationality through the character of Tha'mma who becomes a foreigner in her own country, as the novel portrays how "her nationality becomes messily at odds with her identity" (168). Tha'mma is representative of the older generation that lived and experienced the Partition, their selves being shaped by the trauma that made the nation. Clinging to a deep sense of national identity, she perceives borders not as imagined constructs but as tangible, real, and necessary lines that must be protected to ensure order and belonging. Tha'mma is taken aback when told that she would not be able to see the borderline between India and East Pakistan from the plane. Upon hearing that "the border isn't on frontier: its right inside the Airport" (167), the shocked and disappointed grandmother raises the question, "What was it all for then—Partition and all the killing and everything—if there isn't something in between?" (167). The illusory nature of nationalist discourse is inconceivable to Tha'mma who believes in the tangibility of borders and the existence of material dividers between the one and the other. Tha'mma's Firstspace consciousness, limited to perceived spaces, is

critiqued by the narrator who questions, "Why did she really think the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like in the school atlas" (167). The borders with their fixity and solidity is precisely what Soja's Thirdspace critiques.

The Shadow Lines interrogates several mythic discourses: the myth of the nation as a coherent, natural, or eternal identity and the myth of borders as real, causing meaningful divisions. Nationalism and national identities are imagined constructs formed by inventing nations where they do not exist (Anderson 6). It masquerades under the false pretence of existential reality. This imagined community of a nation connects people with no common denominator to an abstraction called society. This imagined nation is not only marked by communion but also by the readiness to kill and willingly die for such limited imaginings. Amitav Ghosh critiques the xenophobia and hatred bred by nationalism that significantly alters the perception of belonging to a space. In the novel, the character Robi speaks with cynicism about the rhetoric of freedom which deepens the novel's illusion of nationalism:

> … you'll find somewhere behind it all that single word; everyone's doing it to be free… we have nothing against the people, it's the terrorists we want to get, but we have to be willing to pay a price for our unity and freedom. And when I went back home, I would find an anonymous note waiting for me, saying: We're going to get you, nothing personal, we have to kill you for our freedom. It would be like reading my own speech transcribed on a mirror. 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 a memory? If freedom were possible, surely Tridib's death would have set me free. (271-272)

The passage underscores Ghosh's central critique: borders cannot contain identity, nor can they offer true liberation. Robi's metaphor of one's own "speech transcribed on a mirror" captures the unsettling symmetry between the One and the Other, where both speak the same language of imagined freedom. In a world where personal histories intersect with political geographies, Thirdspace thinking in *The Shadow Lines* exposes the limitations of nationalist narratives and calls for a reimagining of freedom rooted not in exclusion, but in shared humanity.

The nationalist discourses seek to naturalise and stabilise this binary logic between "home" and "non-home" as clearly delineated spaces, with boundaries that are perceived as real and fixed through the construction and consolidation of difference. In the novel, Tha'mma's experience of spatiality and geographic identity rests on these clear-cut demarcations between "home" and "non-home."

She is teased by the narrator for her grammatical error with regards to geographical orientation as not knowing "the difference between coming and going" (152). However, the narrator later contemplates and understands that her idiom had been shaped by "the nationalist system that has ideologically fixed the meaning of identity and difference" (Gabriel 49). In "The Aleph" (1945), Louis Borges emphasises the linguistic despair and the deficiency of language in adequately capturing the complexity of lived experiences: "What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I shall now write down will be successive, because language is successive" (13). The fractured complexity of the place that Tha'mma now returns to is beyond words, lacking in language and comprehension. Her sense of home and belonging is further problematised when she visits Dhaka for the first time after Partition. She becomes a foreigner in her native city of birth which she used to calls "home." It is now the "other" of home, an unhomely space that killed Tridib, a place of danger, violence, and instability. Tha'mma is unable to understand "how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality" (168) and the loss of her "special enchantment in lines" (233) that separates nations leads to her further disillusionment. The novels central critique of nationalist discourse is depicted through the transition of Dhaka from a well-known, familiar space to a foreign territory and Tha'mma's transformation from a citizen to a foreigner. (Gabriel 49). By becoming the Hindu Other in a newly formed Muslim Nation, Tha'mma finds her previously stable sense of home and identity rendered unstable and precarious. The rhetoric of absolute borders and divisions disseminated by the official national structures impose false notions of difference, otherness, and distance between nations. In denouncing the dominant discourse of identity and belonging, *The Shadow Lines* promotes a search for alternate and more inclusive ways of perceiving geographies and boundaries.

An important consequence of the division of the world into cultural spaces marked as "us" and "them," is the underlying principle that the narrative of the self is consolidated through an absolute opposition with its "other." *The Shadow Lines* deconstructs the very notion of national identification as a space of multivocality, contradiction, and uncertainty, where identity is not pre-given, stable, or whole, but divided by othernesses within itself, always in a state of ambivalence. For Indians like Tha'mma, who have internalised the tenets of the official national discourse, Partition was necessary to demarcate the real boundary, and hence create absolute difference between Muslims and Hindus in the subcontinent. She fails to realise that the differences in terms of identity between individuals and social groups is imagined and naturalised by hegemonic

discourses as real. In *Thirdspace*, Soja describes Thirdspace as a realm which erases difference and redefines positions, embracing hybridity:

> [Hegemonic discourse] actively produces and reproduces difference as a key strategy to create and maintain modes of social and spatial division that are advantageous to its continued empowerment and authority. "We" and "they" are dichotomously spatialized and enclosed in an imposed territoriality. In this sense, hegemonic power universalizes and contains difference in real and imagined spaces and places. The politics of difference leads to the spatial practice of enclosing elements within carefully guarded spaces. (87)

This logic of spatial containment and enforced difference is dismantled when the narrator comes to understand that "Muslim Dhaka" and "Hindu Calcutta" are not ontological opposites but are mirror images of each other, separated by a "looking-glass border" (257). The narrator comes to realise that borders do not always create distinct identities: "I, in Calcutta, only had to look in the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment where each city was the inverted image of the other" (257). Hence, the knowledge that the reflection is not the other but the one and the same, a duplication of the self, leads to an overwhelming totality of perception. This recognition collapses the rigid binaries of self and other, here and there, revealing the illusory nature of national boundaries. The trialectical thinking offered by Thirdspace, destabilises and "challenges all conventional modes of thought and taken-for-granted epistemologies. It is disorderly, unruly, constantly evolving, unfixed, never presentable in permanent constructions" (Soja, *Thirdspace* 70). Subscribing to this view, *The Shadow Lines* dismantles the stable, singular meaning of space by accommodating contradiction, hybridity, and difference, allowing for plural narratives and identities to emerge. While the novel celebrates the fluidity of spatial experience and the liberatory possibilities of Thirdspace, it also acknowledges that the erosion of fixed spatial identities can be counter-productive. The novel exemplifies this through Ila's transnational experience of space which leads to placelessness, rootlessness, and alienation.

Transnational experience and rootlessness

The phenomenon of place cannot be understood without its parallel phenomenon of placelessness (Relph, "Preface"). Existential outsideness inevitably leads to a sense of not belonging, self-consciousness, and emotional detachment. In such instances, place ceases to be centres of existence but becomes a background to actions without sense, meaning, or emotional depth. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ila's view of space provides a contrast to that of other characters. She embodies the transnational experience, viewing space as

something that merely exists, stripped of personal or historical contexts. Her childhood is marked by rootlessness: "Addis Ababa, Algeris, Brisbane—running around the airport to look for the Ladies, not because she wanted to go, but because those were the only fixed points in the shifting landscapes of her childhood" (23). As a result of continuous movement, Ila's experience of place is ephemeral and transitory. The narrator observes that "the places themselves went past her in an illusory world of movement" (26). The narrator's and Tridib's perception of space is rooted in memory, stories, and imagination as opposed to Ila whose experience of places is grounded in material, observable reality. Believing in only what is seen and lived as real, Ila represents the limits of empirical reality. Although well-travelled, she is unable to fully inhabit the remembered past. When the narrator recalls a shared childhood memory, Ila is unable to remember. This bewilders the narrator who exclaims, "But how could you forget?" (21). Ila responds, "It was a long time ago—the real question is, how do you remember?" (22). Ila's inability to root herself in memory reflects a disconnection and a rejection of the imaginative work required to make place meaningful. The narrator further expresses his frustration regarding her inability to understand that places are constructed not just physically, but through imagination, memory, and narrative. As the narrator puts it:

> 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. (23)

Ila appears as an individual caught between the real and the imagined, her struggle symbolising her inability to dismantle rigid social structures and fixities and therefore a rejection of creativity and open-mindedness. By ignoring or invalidating the imaginative realm, Ila loses access to alternative perspectives and transformative insight.

In a globalised world marked by continuous mobility, immersive and emotional experience of place becomes increasingly tenuous. The depiction of Ila's alienation underscores the paradox of global mobility: the more one travels, the less rooted one becomes. Ila's transnational existence further complicates her identity, relationship with space and other people. The narrator realises that her transnational existence is detached from both history and memory. Ila lived intensely in the present, shutting herself away from the past and future, believing only in the current as real, not believing that people like the narrator and Tridib experience the world differently and concretely in their imagination (33). In her

article "Ila and the Third Space in *The Shadow Lines*" (2011), Regiane Correa de Olivera Ramos states that Ila emerges as "a kind of a hybrid subject" who constantly treads multiple worlds and negotiates varied realities (198). Ultimately, she becomes a figure suspended between belonging and estrangement. Unlike the narrator who prides himself on his imaginative capability, he realises that Ila cannot find a real place in the "tidy bourgeois world" that he had inherited" (102). She, in turn, dismisses the narrator's imagined geographies, remarking, "It's you who were peculiar, sitting in that poky little flat in Calcutta, dreaming about faraway places" (26). Ila's understanding of cities as one sees in maps are "real places, not like those fairylands Tridib" made up through imagination (26). Due to her frequent travels, she refuses to romanticise the past or indulge in nostalgia, distancing her from the narrator, who clings to memory and history. Although Ila outwardly rejects the imaginary, she paradoxically and unknowingly inhabits the Thirdspace as much as the narrator. As a child, she envisions herself as a popular girl at her school abroad, inventing numerous imaginary friends to populate her world. She also creates a fantasy home through pretend play with the narrator, asserting, "If we pretend it's a house, it'll be a house" (77). These moments in the novel demonstrate that Ila is not devoid of imagination, but rather uses it as a coping mechanism in the face of dislocation and instability. Her imagined worlds are not mere fantasies but a necessary construct that allows her to negotiate the emotional voids left by constant uprooting.

Conclusion

Place is not merely an existential reality but is lived, multi-sensory, saturated, and structured with memories and intentions. It is experienced and deeply felt by the people who live in them, and for many, such a profound attachment to place is a necessary part of survival. Affinity to place is determined largely by the intensity of imagined connections such as a sense of belonging, cultural rootedness, and affective attachments. *The Shadow Lines* is a novel about different spaces—the personal and political that intersect to alter the human perception of place and identity. By contrasting the spatial positions of multiple characters, the novel advocates a transgressive spatial vision. In articulating the fact that borders and national identities are constructs of the imagination and by emphasising the instability and permeability of geopolitical divisions, the novel embodies Thirdspace thinking as a terrain for the generation of counterspaces. By critiquing the physicality of spaces and by questioning whether the border is real or imagined, the novel presents limited imagination as the actual border that truly divides people. By interweaving the material, imagined, and lived experiences of space, the novel corresponds to Soja's trialectics of spatiality. By blurring the

boundaries between memory and history, the One and the Other, the personal and the political, past and present, and real and imagined, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow* constructs a spatial imagination that aligns with Edward Soja's Thirdspace, a transformative median that is marked by simultaneity and hybridity.

Spatiality in the novel does not adhere to a singular conception of space but inhabits Thirdspace where individual consciousness, historical memory, past experiences, and intergenerational stories converge. In a nation marked by violence, displacement, and loss, the altered geographies necessitate a new mode of spatial thinking. This alternate spatial perspective offers a potent creative framework for imagining new social realities. In the realm of Thirdspace, the real, the imagined, the historical, and the mythic coexist, providing a model for rethinking identity and belonging in the postcolonial world. In presenting the Thirdspace perspective, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* dismantles rigid geopolitical boundaries foregrounding a lived, imagined, and simultaneously real experience of space that transcends the discourse of nation-states, challenging linear, monolithic constructions of the nation. In doing so, the novel represents a space occupied by creative artists and writers which invites readers to actively transform lived spaces and inhabit a space where histories can be rewritten, borders questioned, and identities reimagined. Within these Thirdspaces, identity becomes fluid and intersectional, shaped by processes of movement, rupture, and negotiation.

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