Crossing boundaries, making home: Issues of belonging and migration in Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines

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Amitav Ghosh’s 1988 novel *The Shadow Lines* is concerned with issues of exile and migration, and a related critique of a particular construction of belonging. This notion of belonging pre-supposes the conjoining of a specific space and a single culture in a unified nation state. The individual is inserted into this unity through birth and descent – he/she belongs if she/he is born on a culture’s territory and descendant of its adherents. The text stages the negative consequences of this conception in the trajectories of two of its main characters. The narrator’s grandmother is trapped between her birth in Dhaka, now capital of the Muslim Bangladesh, and her descent from Hindu ancestors. Forced to flee from her imaginary home, she becomes an eternal refugee, longing always to return to a home that never really existed. Ila, on the other hand, rejects a Hindu culture that limits her independence, and thus also rejects any form of belonging, becoming a dislocated nomad. Against these two forms of dislocation the narrator struggles to assert a different form of belonging and motion that constructs belonging out of the painful and powerless desire to come to know the other that produces a dialogic relation to difference.

**Keywords:** belonging; cosmopolitanism; culture-space; difference; migration; nation-state

Discovering that the border between India and East Pakistan, later to become Bangladesh, is invisible from the air, Th’amma, the narrator’s grandmother in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988) asks, ‘where is the difference then? . . . What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn’t something in between?’ (151). Her consternation, as many commentators on the text have pointed out, stems from her investment in a particular ideology of what constitutes the nation, and the individual’s belonging in it. Most commentators would agree that to a greater or lesser extent the novel critiques the ways in which, in the words of Anshuman Mondal, ‘the nation . . . [coerces] a unity of culture onto its internal network of cultural differences’ (2003, 26), and reveals the dangers inherent in this coercion. Yet, there have been few
Erik Peeters attempts to understand how the demand for national unity might be produced, and those commentators who address this question seek an answer in the particular historical conditions of the subcontinent. 1 At the same time, little has been said about the kind of vision for alternative social relations the novel might offer, and how this critique might relate to questions central to current processes of globalisation. These questions will be addressed here.

The demand for the fundamental unity of the nation is based on a slippage that authorises the conjoining and mutual substitution of space with culture. As Ted Swedenburg and Smadar Lavie put it, this slippage posits ‘a permanent join between a particular culture and a stable terrain . . . and both the culture and its associated place are regarded as homogeneous in relation to other culture/places’ (1996, 1). This conjoining of space and culture does not indicate so much that culture is mapped onto space as that space and culture become constitutive of each other – the cultural practices of a number of individuals are identified as a single culture in the face of the differences between them because they are located in the same space, while the space’s boundaries are set by the spread of cultural practices perceived to be similar and marked off against cultural practices perceived to be different. 2 Neither the similarities nor the differences have a positive value of their own, they depend on the existence of the other in order to become visible.

The conjoining of space and culture then authorises the control and distribution social, political and economic power through the entity of the nation-state. As Robert Sack has argued, ‘these territories [nation-states with accurately-drawn borders] were created and used to support [Europeans’] complex hierarchical society which was based on private property and which used territory to define and organize its own membership’ (1986, 15).

Cultural unity, specifically the sharing of a single language, a single progressive history, and in the case of the South Asian subcontinent, a single religion, provides the basis for the claim to national unity. The nation, bounded by a singular, unified territory, gains political expression in and exercises political authority through the state. Once again, nation and state constitute each other – a state exists because it contains a nation, a nation exists because it possesses a state.

This conceptualisation of the unity of culture and space that legitimises the nation-state’s claim to sole political authority over the social relations of the people living within its borders, impacts the construction of the way in which an individual can claim belonging in the nation. The individual is guaranteed belonging in a specific nation for as long as he/she is inserted into the union of territory, culture and power through both descent and birth – the individual belongs to the nation because he/she is born in its territory and descended from people who adhere to its cultural practices. In the ideological demand for the overlap of an individual’s place of birth and the space of his/her culture, belonging is spatialised.

Spatialised belonging then serves to control the movement of individuals out of
and into a specific society as it is made the pre-condition for an individual’s right to the benefits of social inclusion. Individuals can be prevented from moving from their own culture-space by the double threat of losing their belonging, and thus their right to a share of their society’s resources and its protection, as well as losing a social understanding of themselves and their place in the world in which they can anchor their own understanding and through which their understanding is given authority. By the same token, any individual coming into a culture-space from outside it can be denied belonging in it. This strategic deployment of belonging as a means of social control through control over spatial movement can be read as an instance of what Robert Sack has called ‘territoriality’, which he defines as ‘a spatial strategy to affect, influence, or control resources and people, by controlling area’ (1986, 1).

As Mondal goes on to point out, Ghosh’s text reveals the idea of national and cultural unity as deeply problematic. While the partition of the South Asian subcontinent into India and East and West Pakistan in 1947, intended to draw the borders that would make a version of the unified nation state possible, never enters the narrative directly, it casts a haunting shadow over the narrator and his family, making clear that the attempt to give the fiction of the nation state a presence in the actual social, political and economic relations of the people in the South Asian subcontinent was and still is both dangerous and impossible. This article will explore how the text presents these issues by tracing the trajectory through the narrative of two of its central characters, the nameless narrator’s grandmother Th’amma and his cousin Ila. The trajectories of these two women make clear two seemingly opposed, but ultimately mirrored responses to the problems inherent in the idea of the singular nation-state and the individual’s spatialised belonging in it.

The grandmother, Tha’mma, believes fervently in the nation-state. Growing up during the Raj, the period of Britain’s occupation of the subcontinent, Tha’mma witnesses closely and endorses the struggle of South Asians for their independent nation-state. In particular, a fellow student at college is arrested during a lesson because he is ‘a member of one of the secret terrorist societies’ (38) and was about to set out on a mission to assassinate an English magistrate. She fantasises for the rest of her life about how she might have joined one of these societies and might have saved his life if she had known his secret.

Yet, it is also this longing for a nation-state, the unity of territory, culture and power, which causes the violent inter-religious clashes that accompany independence and the subcontinent’s partition. The territory occupied by the British contains not only any number of distinct language groups, but also a number of large religious groupings, foremost amongst them Hinduism and Islam, though there are a number of other significant minorities. Through a process still the subject of heated debate by academics and analysts today, within the space of barely seven years religion becomes the single most dominant marker of cultural, and thus national, unity and belonging, overshadowing and replacing all other possible markers.3

Upon independence, the new nation-states, Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India, engage
in a blood-soaked orgy of reciprocal and mirrored religious cleansing. Th’amma is herself a victim of this violence when she is prevented from returning to her childhood home in Dhaka and settles across the new national border in Calcutta. Her response to this forced migration shows up a deep contradiction. Th’amma, who is Hindu, must by her own ideological conviction believe that she is at home in Calcutta, on the territory of her own culture. Yet her place of birth, the second plank underpinning her belonging, is in Dhaka, capital of Muslim East Pakistan, and thus on foreign soil in a different country. She is not alone in facing this contradiction. Across much of the north of the subcontinent, after Partition people are left to feel the trauma of having been forced to leave their physical homes to move to the cultural home of their nation. Yet, that this move was traumatic can never be acknowledged, not even by the people involved. All that happened to them, after all, is that they were made to move to the nation-state in which they belong, where they should feel at home. They have become, impossibly, refugees in their own country.

Unacknowledged beneath Th’amma’s ideological conviction, this trauma remains. As the narrator puts it, Th’amma ‘had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality’ (152). Where the ideology of the nation state demands the overlap of place of birth with space of culture, Th’amma is left with an irresolvable gap between the two – her place of birth does not map onto the new space of her culture. In fact, her place of birth now belongs to the space of that opposite culture against which she defines her own.

Instead of unsettling the ideological categories of belonging, this experience leads Th’amma into first existential confusion and then unreasoned, atavistic hatred. The dislocation that she has suffered but cannot suffer must be someone’s fault, the fault of ‘them’, the Muslims with their mulish insistence on their own state. Th’amma would never admit that Muslims were driven to that demand for their own state by the insistence of Hindus that the new nation-state India must be Hindu.

At the same time, Partition’s failure to provide a proper foundation for the new nation drives Th’amma’s continued demand that the nation’s boundaries must be drawn in blood. As she tells the narrator:

“Everyone who lives there [in England] has earned his right to be there with blood . . . They know they are a nation because they’ve drawn their borders with blood . . . 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?” (78, original emphasis)

Thus, when war finally breaks out officially with Pakistan in 1965, the grandmother sells off her most precious possession, the very first gold chain bought for her by her long-deceased husband and her only memory of him, so intimate to her that it has taken on her smell and the colour of her skin, in order to help fund the war. When the narrator asks why she did it she screams “I had to, don’t you see? For your sake; for your
freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out”” (237).

Yet, the narrator can not judge her because he realizes that at the heart of her rage lies a simple desire –

she was not a fascist, she was only a modern middle-class woman . . . All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle classes the world over, she could thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power . . . a small thing that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it. (78, original emphasis)

Ila, the narrator’s widely-travelled cousin, shares the grandmother’s conviction of the reality of the nation-state, though to her it has different consequences. However, Ila equally does not challenge the notion of a unified, Hindu culture that dominates the territory that is India. This becomes clearest in the narrative when Ila convinces the narrator and their uncle Robi to go to a nightclub in Delhi. Ila, wishing to dance and finding both her companions unwilling, goes over to two strangers to ask them to dance. Robi assaults the stranger and drags Ila physically out of the nightclub because “‘girls don’t behave like that here’” (88). Ila storms off after shouting at the narrator, “‘Do you see now why I’ve chosen to live in London? … It’s only because I want to be free!’” (88) When the narrator asks what she wants to be free of, she shouts back, “‘Free of you! . . . Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you’” (89).

An equally simplistic substitution as in Th’amma’s case takes place here. To Ila, all of India is the unified space of a uniform Hindu culture that she finds oppressive and constricting. All of England is the space of an English culture where she can be free. Tha’mma, in a neat inversion of Ila’s wish to be free, says Ila likes London because there she is free to behave like a whore (89). Ila does not challenge the ideological conflation of culture and territory. She simply moves to another territory. Of course, once in England, she runs into the English ideological belief in the nation-state that constructs her as an unwanted and potentially dangerous and subversive outsider who can never belong because she was born elsewhere. The only place she finds there is as the tolerated exotic other of the radical activists she shares her house with and whose life-style she finances through her family’s wealth.

Despite both women’s claim that they seek only freedom, both Ila and Tha’mma become equally and permanently dislocated as a result of their belief in the imaginary idea of culture-space and spatialised belonging. Where Tha’mma submits to an idea of belonging and social being that denies that she can ever fully belong in India because her place of birth is at odds with her cultural descent, Ila can never belong anywhere because she rejects completely any notion of belonging or descent. Where Tha’mma is forever haunted by the suspicion that she is, after all, a refugee in her homeland because she has lost her place of birth, Ila rejects the notion that she might be at home anywhere, seeking only to be free, a concept utterly vague even in her own mind.

Their submission has a number of consequences for both women. As Tridib argues, ‘We
could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly’ (31). Elsewhere he points out that ‘a place does not merely exist, it has to be invented in one’s imagination’ (21).

Tha’mma in her insistence on national belonging attempts to impose a fixed knowledge of other people’s differences on them. The myriad individuals that surround her she tries to group into those who belong in the nation and thus are the same as her, or those who do not belong in the nation and thus are different, even dangerous. Yet, that knowledge that Tha’mma attempts to impose, both on herself and on others, is false since it must rely on the elision of individual differences and inflections under the national sameness. Tha’mma’s submission to this categorisation prevents her from seeing how much more she has in common with the Muslim motor-cycle mechanic from Bihar now resident in her ancestral home, than with her Hindu uncle Jethamoshai, who, despite his decrepitude, still plots to prevent Tha’mma’s branch of the family from laying claim to the ancestral house.

Ila, by contrast, in her refusal of national belonging and its particular categorisation of people into the same or different, understands sameness and difference instead in terms of an individual’s political allegiance – people are either radical activists like her, or racist and oppressive fascists like Tha’mma. This categorisation of others is just as false as Tha’mma’s. It prevents Ila from seeing the underhand racism of her childhood idol, Nick Price, whom she later marries, or to understand Tha’mma’s desperate search for belonging. She is equally incapable of seeing that her fellow activists treat her with a disparaging and demeaning tolerance rather than acceptance.6

Ila further flattens out the world into a terrain on which her pursuit of freedom plays itself out. Thus, even though she has travelled all over the world, she cannot remember the places she has been. She can only remember the location of the women’s toilets in the various departure lounges of the airports where she landed and departed (20). As the narrator puts it: ‘the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all’ (21).

Ila erases all difference by insisting that only personal freedom matters and the extent to which any one place either enables or impedes that freedom, and so loses any sense of the specificity of the places she happens to be in. Further, Ila’s mobility, as well as her ability to ignore the precariousness of her existence in London, depends to a large extent on her wealth as the daughter of international diplomats and that isolates her from others. She has a mobility that the narrator, coming from a much poorer family, does not have.

It needs to be pointed out here that the narrative makes clear that both Tha’mma’s and Ila’s conception of spatialised belonging and spatial-cultural division appeals to them because it allows for the management of their fear of difference. Tha’mma seeks safety in the unity of the nation because it will contain only individuals who are like her. Anyone who is different, and thus potentially threatening to her, is supposed to have been displaced violently beyond the national boundaries. It is this belief that also
lies at the source of her hatred of Muslims – their presence in the culture-space India destabilises the security that the drawing of its borders was supposed to guarantee. Ila, equally, seems motivated by fear of that which she cannot understand and which is other to her. The only difference to Tha’mma is that Ila manages her fear by insisting that there are no differences, that only what she can see now is real.

Between these two extremes that are really only two sides of the same coin, hovers the narrator and his father’s cousin Tridib. It is through Tridib that the narrator becomes aware that both Tha’mma’s and Ila’s view of the world are not backed up by objective reality, but are inventions that serve specific purposes.

However, Tridib does not merely point out that humans invent what they see, he adds the demand that ‘at least we could try to do it properly’ (31). As the narrator points out, ‘among other things, Tridib was an archaeologist, he was not interested in fairylands: the one thing he wanted to teach me, he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision’ (24). Tridib does not claim that an individual’s knowledge will always be imaginary. Instead he seems to suggest that any knowledge, of places as much as people, depends upon open relation and dialogue with that which is different. Such a dialogic knowledge emerges out of what Tridib describes as:

desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one’s mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror. (29)

This desire is remarkable in a number of ways. First, it refuses the imposition of a form of control over those who are different by defining them according to a set of a priori categories, whether national belonging or political allegiance or something else. Secondly, this desire is essentially powerless. It seeks its fulfilment in the response of the other without being able to demand or to coerce that fulfilment. The form of knowledge that it might give rise to is thus an equally powerless knowledge, aware of the inevitable limits of its grasp, and dependent upon the response of the other in order to come into existence. Thirdly, the search for a form of relation or exchange with people and places outside one also leads to a better understanding of oneself.

Finally, the powerless desire to understand the other through relation and exchange produces an equally powerless conception of belonging with the other that is born out of a form of relationship risked in the face of the threat that difference poses. This would be a belonging in a place that is not a product of outside factors, like birth or descent, that place the other at a safe distance outside the borders of the same, but the product of the willingness to use one’s imagination with precision in seeking to come to know the other and to seek a belonging with that other, even if that search will not and cannot ultimately, for all time, be fulfilled.

It would be a grave misreading of the text to suggest that this failure of the ideology
of the nation-state should be ascribed to the fact that it takes place on the sub-continent, thus a space and a culture in some way incapable of the rational approach of Europeans who invented the idea. Jessica Dubow, for example, has pointed to the inherent instability of the European idea of the nation-state. As she argues,

while the walls of the medieval city might be seen as an immediately visible barrier, the border of a nation is something more ghostly. It not only protects identity against the incursions of an outside but relieves the modern subject of a spectre otherwise disavowed: the fear that [in the words of Ranciere] “all people might have no place, that they are not identical to themselves”. (2004, 217)

In Europe, too, the borders between nations are shadowy, unable to monopolise the social relations between the people on either side.

Thus Tridib remembers a conversation between his mother, Mayadebi, and Mrs Price’s brother, Alan Tresawson, where they remark on the atmosphere of heightened exhilaration produced by the knowledge that England will soon be at war. As Alan, who has just returned from a visit to Germany, points out: ‘People don’t believe me . . . but it’s the same over there – in Germany – though of course in a much more grotesque way. It was odd coming back here – like stepping through a looking-glass’ (66). The English and the Germans, who understand themselves only in their opposition to each other, mirror each other much like Dhaka and Calcutta. Here, too, the boundaries of the nation-state, drawn in blood to guarantee the safety of the nation and to render the individual’s belonging in it unambiguous, lead only to further blood-shed and suffering. Both in India and in Europe, the inherent instability of the nation produces anxiety, which finds expression in repeated attempts to purge the nation of those bodies that are identified, in whatever way, as illegitimate in their presence in the nation and thus as the root-cause of instability. The nation-state is not problematic because it has been placed in the Third World. The notion of the nation-state is problematic because it is a fiction that serves specific political and economic interests.

One should guard against a certain self-congratulatory note that has entered discussions of globalisation where globalisation is celebrated unproblematically as the source of increased economic mobility and social mixture. While economic globalisation has led to the increased mobility of capital flows and goods, and has extended that increased mobility also to the rich, it has simultaneously helped to sustain and strengthen the boundaries that keep the working poor trapped in destitution. What hides behind the rhetoric of increased mobility is the fact that boundaries of belonging have simply been moved to another sphere, away from geographical borders to boundaries of citizenship. While the rich receive citizenship rights almost anywhere, the poor receive them almost nowhere, leaving them trapped either in low-waged and exploitative legal employment in their ‘home’ countries, or in equally low-waged and exploitative illegal work in the rich countries. Further, the global reach of capital makes possible the careful commodification and packaging of the other, that which is different and
thus threatening, in tourist brochures and exotic restaurants for easy consumption, its dangerous difference nullified.

Nor can the new global mobility be celebrated as an effective means of resistance against the exclusionary hierarchies of belonging as defined by the nation-state. In this context, I would suggest, Ila and her memory of departure lounge toilets serves as a model of the modern global nomad – wealthy professionals who travel the world in pursuit of their particular obsession, without ever acknowledging the specific context in which they move. The narrative makes clear the extent to which Ila’s mobility is a product of her family’s wealth and privileged status in the diplomatic service. Here, too, the way in which we imagine belonging must be opened up if global social, economic, and political justice is ever to become more than a slogan.

Notes

1 Mondal locates his analysis of the nation state within an, admittedly rather simplistic, understanding of ‘modernity’ as marked by cultural homogenization, European imperialism and totalizing modes of historical narrative, opposed to an equally simplistically conceived ‘post-modernity’ that, he argues, seeks to deconstruct these totalizing tendencies. He then goes on to argue that ‘the means by which metropolitan postmodernism attempts to overcome the “metaphysic” of modernity is, in the “postcolonial” context, simply not viable because “identity politics” – the politics of difference – in a postcolonial society has far reaching implications that do not relate to metropolitan societies, which have experienced modernity on their own terms and possess secure democratic institutions, a strong civil society, and have undergone greater secularization’ (2003, 33). Survir Kaul equally argues that the novel ‘shows us, powerfully and movingly, an (Indian) nationalism discovering its limits, limits that are often the residue of those ineffable shadow-lines, the boundaries of the subcontinent’ (1988, 284), again suggesting that the problematic of the nation-state is specific to the subcontinent.

2 Sharmani Patricia Gabriel points to this conjoining of space and culture while pointing out this conception’s usefulness to colonial conquest, when she argues that, ‘[t]he fixing of cultures through anthropological assertions of the impermeability of boundaries reinforces the idea that cultures are bounded, continuous and unchanging rather than the products of history. More significantly, it emphasizes the existence of fixed boundaries between ‘complex’ and ‘native’ races or cultures, which in the colonial era permitted (Western) anthropologists to write about ‘other’ cultures without the others reading, writing or talking back’ (2005, 41).

3 I am persuaded by Partha Chatterjee’s attempt to understand the specific trajectory of nationalism in the subcontinent. Chatterjee argues that many Indians under British occupation understood their lives as divided between an ‘outer’ sphere of public administration, law, the economy etc where British superiority had to be accepted and imitated, and an ‘inner’ realm of the family, spirituality and tradition, where Indian ideas where superior. Nationalist ideas began to circulate first in this “inner” domain and nationalism’s first struggle was to remove it from the influence of the coloniser. This provenance of nationalism might go some way towards explaining the mutual imbrication of nationalism and religion in the history of the independence struggle on the subcontinent (Chatterjee 1993). For an exploration of the gradual transformation of an Indian nationalism that saw India as culturally and ethnically plural into one that insisted more and more on India being Hindu, in the specific context of Bengal, see (Chatterji 1994).
4 A large number of studies have been published on the events of and preceding the Partition of the subcontinent. For some good summaries, see (Butalia 1998); (Kaul 2001); (Khilnani 1997); (Pandey 2001).

5 Joya Chatterji points to the impossibility of being a Partition refugee in her exploration of the different treatment meted out to Partition refugees in West Bengal from those in the Punjab. See (Chatterji 2007).

6 Spyra, in an interesting feminist critique of the novel, argues that Ila’s move to London presents an attempt to ‘avoid containment within the symbolic meanings of the body by the mastering gaze of the masculine, [her] family, or community’ (2006, 7). She goes on to claim that Ila faces this containment in the narrative constructed by her cousin, the nameless narrator, ‘who can easily be exposed in his patriarchal bias’ (7). Her assertion hinges crucially on a (mis-)reading of the role played by imagination in the narrative, since she seems to equate imagination to fantasy, a self-serving projection of the narrator’s skewed vision on the people around him (15).

7 In a similar vein, Shaheem Black has argued, in attempting to resurrect an alternative understanding of cosmopolitanism through a reading of Ghosh’s novel, that ‘[t]he wonderful paradox of imagining precisely defines the ideal version of cosmopolitanism that haunts Ghosh’s pages. Conceptualizing others requires the leap beyond positivism that imagination connotes, but to offer more than a self-serving fantasy of cultural difference, this practice of imagination demands a respect for the specificity and uniqueness of other lives’ (2006, 54). While I agree with the description of what imagining with precision might mean, I find the term ‘cosmopolitanism’ too loaded to prove useful in analysing Ghosh’s narrative. At the same time, to use one’s imagination with precision is not to assume, as A. N. Kaul claims, that ‘humanity, after all, is the same everywhere’, and thus to elide the ‘real’ differences between nations and cultures (2001, 301–302). Instead, this imagining begins with the acceptance that no amount of knowledge of overarching cultural differences will suffice in seeking to understand the particular difference of the particular individual one encounters.

8 The inverse mirroring between Britain and Germany in the lead-up to and during the war is contrasted in the narrative with the legend of Tristan and Isolde, a legend narrated in a number of different spaces and times which speaks of a Europe before it was divided into nations (186).

References


