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The Intersection of Internalized Borders and Ecological Alienation in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

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ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the concept of internalized borders and their connection to ecological alienation in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Moving beyond political geography, it argues that borders are internalized within the human mind, shaping how individuals perceive space, identity and belonging. By tracing the spatial displacement of characters across Calcutta, Dhaka and London, the paper exposes a deeper systemic pathology, namely an identity so fractured by geopolitical borders that it loses the capacity to anchor itself in a lived, physical environment. Drawing on theoretical insights from ecocriticism and postcolonial studies, the paper further suggests that this psychological fragmentation contributes to a form of ecological alienation, in which the inability to relate meaningfully to lived environments reflects a broader detachment from the natural world. In this sense, the novel highlights how imagined boundaries weaken both social and environmental relationships. The paper concludes that recognizing and questioning these internalized divisions is essential for rethinking human engagement with both place and environment, and in linking these mental constructs of separation with ecological concern, it contributes to contemporary discussions on environmental humanities and ecocriticism.*

Keywords: *Internalized borders, ecological alienation, ecocriticism, environmental humanities.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* prompts a rethinking of the meaning of borders and belonging. Rather than presenting borders as fixed geographical realities, the novel reveals them as unstable constructs shaped by memory, imagination and political history. Ultimately, it questions the very idea of borders by presenting them as unstable and often imaginary. The narrative moves across different locations, namely Calcutta, London and Dhaka, and yet these places are not experienced as fixed realities. Rather, they are filtered through personal memories

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and perceptions, which makes them feel both connected and distant at the same time. The narrator's understanding of space develops gradually, shaped by memory, storytelling and imagination rather than direct experience. This understanding emerges in the novel when the narrator reflects that the lines people drew on maps were not real.¹ This moment captures the central argument of the text, namely that borders exist not only on maps but within human consciousness. These internalized borders shape how individuals understand identity, difference and belonging.

While much of the existing scholarship on *The Shadow Lines* focuses on nationalism, diaspora and memory, relatively little attention has been paid to how these internal divisions influence human relationships with the environment. This paper argues that the psychological internalization of borders produces a deeper form of alienation, one that extends beyond the social and political realms into ecological experience. It also shapes how individuals engage with the spaces they inhabit, often leading to a quiet but persistent form of alienation. When individuals perceive space through fragmented and inherited narratives, their connection to the physical environment becomes faded.

By bringing together ecocritical and postcolonial approaches, this paper examines how internalized borders affect both identity and environmental awareness. The discussion focuses on the role of memory, narrative shifts and spatial imagination in order to show how Ghosh complicates the idea of belonging. In doing so, the paper highlights a link between human disconnection and ecological detachment that is often overlooked. The idea of borders, whether geographical, psychological or symbolic, plays a crucial role in shaping modern identity and experience.

Edward W. Said's critique in *Orientalism* further illuminates how divisions are constructed through discourse and power. Said observes that the Orient was almost a European invention,² emphasizing that boundaries between cultures are often artificially produced yet deeply ingrained. This aligns with Ghosh's portrayal of borders as ideological constructs sustained through belief, memory and narrative. From an ecological perspective, these internalized borders contribute to a sense of alienation not only from others but also from the environment. Lawrence Buell, in *The Environmental Imagination*, notes that environmental criticism seeks to reconnect human culture with the physical world.³ This reconnection becomes difficult when individuals experience a fragmentation of identity and place. In Ghosh's novel, shifting

¹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* 150 (Penguin Books 2005).

² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* 1 (Vintage Books 1979).

³ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Harvard Univ. Press 1995).

landscapes are not merely settings but conflicted spaces shaped by memory and division, reflecting a deeper ecological dislocation.

Cheryll Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism in *The Ecocriticism Reader* as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment⁴ provides a broader lens through which to read the novel. The fragmentation of identity in *The Shadow Lines* parallels a fragmentation of place, suggesting that internalized borders disrupt not only human relationships but also the individual's connection to the surrounding world. The novel thus reveals that borders, though intangible, have profound psychological and ecological consequences. This paper examines how internalized borders produce a form of ecological alienation in which the fragmentation of identity leads to a disconnection from both place and environment.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Nidhi Gupta's study of the cartography of loss in *The Shadow Lines* is important because it highlights how invisible borders shape fragmented identities through trauma and memory.⁵ However, the study remains focused on the psychological and historical dimensions and does not extend this fragmentation to ecological disconnection.

Ashok Kumar Yadav's analytical study of *The Shadow Lines* and *In an Antique Land* highlights how Ghosh recovers subaltern voices and challenges dominant historical narratives.⁶ While useful for understanding marginalized perspectives, the study does not engage with environmental or ecocritical concerns.

Sapana Pandey's examination of freedom in *The Shadow Lines* situates the novel within postcolonial discourse, highlighting issues such as nationalism, diaspora and identity formation.⁷ However, the study remains largely thematic and does not address spatial or ecological alienation.

Abhisek Banerjee's study of binaries and boundaries in the novel focuses on how the text destabilizes distinctions such as self and other, and past and present, thereby emphasizing the

⁴ Cheryll Glotfelty & Harold Fromm eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* 18 (Univ. of Georgia Press 1996).

⁵ Nidhi Gupta, *The Cartography of Loss: Mapping Memory, Trauma, and Silence in Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines*, 7 IANNA JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES 278 (2025).

⁶ Ashok Kumar Yadav, *An Analytical Study on The Shadow Lines & In an Antique Land in Current Perspective*, 9 INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INNOVATIVE RESEARCH IN COMPUTER AND TECHNOLOGY 1 (2023).

⁷ Sapana Pandey, *Freedom in Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines*, 2 IDEALISTIC JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE SPECTRUMS 1 (2023).

fluidity of identity and borders.⁸ This aligns closely with the concept of internalized borders, but the ecological implications of such fluidity remain unexplored.

Devi Prasad Gautam's study of violence, history and silence in the novel argues that the gaps and silences in the narrative reflect suppressed histories of violence and trauma.⁹ While this study effectively connects history and narrative form, it does not consider how such silences may also signal a lack of engagement with ecological space.

III. INTERNALIZED BORDERS AND THE DIVIDED SELF

At the core of Ghosh's narrative architecture lies the radical premise that cartographic lines possess no intrinsic, natural reality; rather, they are ideological phantoms sustained exclusively by human belief and collective anxiety. The novel repeatedly shows that individuals internalize these boundaries, carrying them as a means of shaping their perception of the world. Through its fragmented narrative and multiple perspectives, the novel reveals how individuals carry invisible boundaries within themselves, leading to a divided sense of self. Characters imagine places they have never seen, often forming vivid mental images that shape their understanding of the world. Tridib, for instance, encourages the narrator to imagine distant places in detail, suggesting that knowledge comes through engagement rather than distance.

Central to the novel is the idea that borders are not merely lines drawn on maps but are sustained through imagination, memory and inherited narratives. However, this imaginative process also reveals a deeper division. The narrator observes that he could not understand how one place could be so like another and yet so different.¹⁰ This confusion reflects the instability of borders and the difficulty of forming a coherent sense of identity. These imagined geographies blur the distinction between reality and perception.

The characters in the novel often exist between multiple locations and histories, unable to fully belong to any single place. This condition produces a fragmented sense of self, in which identity is shaped by overlapping influences rather than stable boundaries. The novel also explores how memory contributes to the divided self. Different characters remember the same events in different ways, leading to multiple versions of truth. This fragmentation of memory mirrors the fragmentation of identity, suggesting that the self is not a unified whole but is constantly shaped and reshaped by external influences.

⁸ Abhisek Banerjee, *Analyzing Binaries and Boundaries in Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines*, 3 SHODHKOSH: JOURNAL OF VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS 1 (2022).

⁹ Devi Prasad Gautam, *Violence, History and Silence in Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines*, 8 ADVANCES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH JOURNAL 262 (2021).

¹⁰ Ghosh, *supra* note 1, at 67.

The Shadow Lines presents borders as powerful psychological constructs that shape individual identity in complex ways. Through its exploration of memory, imagination and violence, the novel reveals how these internalized borders lead to a divided self. The characters struggle to reconcile their personal experiences with inherited notions of nation and belonging, resulting in identities that are fluid, fragmented and often conflicted. By questioning the reality of borders, the novel ultimately suggests that the divisions perceived in the world are deeply rooted within individuals, making the idea of a unified self both challenging and elusive.

IV. URBAN SPACE AND DISLOCATION

Urban spaces in *The Shadow Lines* are not simply physical settings; rather, they become a psychological and political terrain where identities are shaped, fractured and constantly reimagined. The cities in the novel are marked by tension and uncertainty. Through shifting narratives and memories, the novel explores how urban environments can produce both connection and dislocation, revealing the fragile nature of borders that are at once geographical and internal. Calcutta, in particular, is associated with memories of violence that disrupt any sense of stability. The riots described in the novel reveal how quickly familiar spaces can become sites of fear and division. Calcutta and Dhaka, once connected through shared histories, become separated by national borders that are both invisible and violently enforced. Streets, homes and marketplaces, the symbols of everyday life, turn into spaces of danger, forcing individuals to confront their own vulnerability and displacement.

Dhaka represents the most intense experience of this instability. The tragic events surrounding Tridib's death expose the illusion of safety created by national borders. As the narrative suggests, those who had drawn their borders believed that they would be safe.¹¹ This belief, however, proves to be tragically misguided, highlighting the failure of borders to provide protection.

London, often imagined as distant and secure, is also revealed to be shaped by perception rather than reality. The narrator's experience shows that no space is free from fragmentation. His imagination allows him to move freely between cities he has never physically visited. These imagined geographies challenge the conventional understanding of cities as fixed, tangible locations, suggesting that urban spaces are shaped as much by memory and narrative as by physical presence.

Dislocation in the novel operates on multiple levels. Physically, characters experience movement across cities and countries, often without a sense of rootedness. Ila, for instance, moves between different parts of the world but never feels a true sense of belonging. Her

¹¹ *Id.* at 228.

modern lifestyle highlights the paradox of modernity in urban settings, demonstrating that mobility does not necessarily lead to freedom or stability. The narrator also struggles to reconcile the different versions of reality presented through memory, imagination and historical events. The concept of shadow lines itself suggests boundaries that are intangible yet powerful, as they separate nations, communities and even individuals, creating a sense of fragmentation that cannot be easily resolved. The urban environment becomes a reflection of this fragmented consciousness, where spaces are layered with conflicting meanings and emotions.

The novel also critiques the idea of nationalism by exposing the arbitrary nature of borders. The division between India and East Pakistan is shown to be both real and unreal. While it leads to tangible consequences such as violence and displacement, it is also revealed to be a constructed boundary that exists largely in the human mind. This duality reinforces the theme of dislocation, as characters find themselves caught between competing identities and loyalties. Urban space in the novel also serves as a site of memory. Personal and collective histories are embedded within the city, shaping how individuals understand their past and present. The narrator's attempt to piece together events from different times and places reflects a broader struggle to make sense of history itself. In this way, the city becomes an archive of experiences, where memories overlap and sometimes contradict one another.

Ultimately, *The Shadow Lines* presents urban space as a complex and dynamic entity that both connects and divides. Through its portrayal of cities marked by history, memory and political conflict, the novel highlights the pervasive sense of dislocation experienced by its characters. It suggests that the boundaries individuals perceive, whether between nations or within themselves, are often as fragile as shadow lines.

V. ECOLOGICAL ALIENATION

Ecological alienation refers to the growing distance between human beings and the natural environment, a condition shaped by modern urban life, political divisions and social transformations. Although *The Shadow Lines* does not explicitly focus on environmental issues, it presents a subtle yet powerful portrayal of ecological alienation. The novel's emphasis on political conflict and memory often pushes the natural environment into the background, suggesting a diminished awareness of ecological space. Space is experienced primarily through human relationships, leaving little room for engagement with the natural world.

One of the most striking aspects of the novel is the absence of detailed descriptions of nature. Landscapes are rarely depicted as living environments; instead, they are filtered through human experiences of conflict and displacement. This suggests that when individuals are disconnected

from place, they are also less aware of their environment. The fragmentation caused by internalized borders extends beyond human relationships, shaping how space itself is perceived. One key aspect of ecological alienation in the novel is the contrast between lived spaces and remembered landscapes. The narrator often reconstructs places such as Dhaka and Calcutta through stories rather than direct experience. These places are not presented as ecological environments filled with natural elements, but as fragmented, memory-driven spaces shaped by political and emotional boundaries. As a result, nature itself becomes distant and almost invisible. The characters are more connected to imagined geographies than to the physical environment around them, which reflects a deeper separation from ecological reality.

Urbanization further contributes to this alienation. The city of Calcutta, as depicted in the novel, is crowded, chaotic and heavily shaped by human conflict. There is little emphasis on natural harmony or ecological balance. Instead, the environment appears as something overshadowed by human concerns such as identity, nationalism and violence. This suggests that modern urban life pushes nature to the margins, reducing human sensitivity toward the environment.

Another important dimension is the role of borders. The novel repeatedly questions the idea of geographical and political boundaries, especially during events such as the Partition and the communal riots. These borders are described as shadow lines, imaginary divisions that separate people and places. However, these lines also disrupt ecological continuity. Natural landscapes do not follow political borders, yet human beings impose divisions that fragment both land and ecological belonging. This creates a sense of displacement in which individuals feel disconnected not only from one another but also from the environment they inhabit.

Characters such as Tridib represent a different way of engaging with space. He encourages imagination and a deeper connection with places beyond physical boundaries. However, even this connection is largely intellectual and emotional rather than ecological. It does not fully restore the bond between humans and nature, but instead shifts focus toward cultural and historical understanding. *The Shadow Lines* thus presents ecological alienation in an indirect yet powerful way. Through its exploration of memory, borders and urban life, the novel reveals how modern existence distances individuals from the natural world. The absence of ecological awareness within the narrative is itself significant, suggesting that environmental disconnection has become normalized.

By highlighting the fragmented relationship between people, places and nature, Ghosh reflects the invisible loss of ecological belonging in contemporary life. In this sense, ecological alienation appears not as an explicit theme but as an underlying condition. The characters'

limited interaction with their surroundings reflects a broader detachment from the environment. Ultimately, the fragmentation of identity and space leads to a corresponding fragmentation of environmental awareness, and the novel invites readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world.

VI. MEMORY, IMAGINATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTION

The Shadow Lines positions memory and imagination as central to the experience of space. In the novel, the narrator does not initially encounter places such as Dhaka and London through direct physical presence; instead, these locations are constructed through stories, recollections and inherited descriptions. This reliance on imagination raises an important concern: when space is known primarily through memory, the relationship with the physical and ecological environment is disrupted. Tridib's role is relevant in this respect, as he encourages the narrator to imagine places with precision and emotional investment, suggesting that knowledge comes through engagement rather than mere observation. As the narrator recalls, Tridib insisted that one must use one's imagination with precision.¹² Although this idea allows the narrator to transcend physical limitations, it also creates a distance from the material world. The environment becomes something mentally constructed rather than sensorially experienced.

This shift becomes clear when the narrator describes how his knowledge of distant locations depends on a desire to be transported into that space.¹³ What holds significance here is that space is not encountered as it exists, but as it is imagined. The ecological reality of these places, their textures, sounds and natural rhythms, is largely absent. What remains is an abstract, almost intangible version of place shaped by narrative. The instability of such imagined geographies is acknowledged within the novel itself. The narrator admits his confusion when he observes that he could not understand how one place could be so like another and yet so different.¹⁴ This reflects more than geographical uncertainty; it points to a deeper fragmentation in the perception of space. When places are mediated through memory, their distinct ecological identities begin to blur, and they are no longer experienced as unique environments but as overlapping mental constructs.

This mediation of space through memory and imagination leads to a form of environmental distancing. The natural world, which requires direct sensory engagement, is pushed to the margins of perception. Instead of interacting with landscapes as living ecosystems, the characters encounter them as sites of memory, conflict and emotional significance, which

¹² *Id.* at 31.

¹³ *Id.* at 26.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 67.

emphasizes human experience and leaves little room for ecological awareness. The absence of nature in the narrative is not accidental. It reflects a broader condition in which human concerns dominate the perception of space. Even when the narrator vividly describes locations, the focus remains on their historical or emotional resonance rather than their ecological presence; this becomes particularly evident in the moments of reflection where the focus on imagined divisions overshadows the material continuity of the natural world. The tension between imagination and reality becomes more pronounced during moments of crisis, as the riots in Dhaka transform abstract ideas of borders into lived experiences of violence and fear. Spaces that once existed only in memory suddenly acquire an immediate, physical presence. In this context, the narrator begins to understand the limitations of his earlier, imagination-driven perception of space. The realization that borders are constructed does not diminish their impact; instead, it highlights the gap between how space is imagined and how it is experienced.

This gap has important ecological implications, because when individuals engage with space primarily through imagination, they become less attentive to its material and environmental aspects. The environment is no longer encountered as a dynamic, interconnected system but as a passive backdrop to human events. This detachment contributes to ecological alienation, as the connection between human beings and their surroundings weakens over time. Tridib's philosophy offers a partial response to this alienation, since his emphasis on imagination encourages a deeper engagement with space, but it remains limited to intellectual and emotional dimensions. It does not fully restore the sensory and ecological connection necessary for a meaningful relationship with the environment. In this sense, the novel presents imagination as both enabling and limiting, expanding the boundaries of perception while simultaneously distancing individuals from the physical world.

The ecological dimension emerges indirectly, through the absence of nature and the dominance of human-centred narratives. By focusing on memory, borders and identity, the novel exposes the ways in which modern modes of thinking contribute to a gradual disconnection from the environment. Ultimately, the interplay of memory and imagination in the novel reshapes how space is perceived and experienced. It suggests that when individuals rely too heavily on mediated forms of understanding, their connection to the physical world becomes fragmented. This fragmentation is not only psychological but also ecological, as it disrupts the sense of belonging that is essential for environmental awareness. In this way, *The Shadow Lines* offers a subtle yet profound commentary on the conditions that lead to ecological alienation in contemporary life.

VII. CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* ultimately compels a reconsideration not only of the nature of borders but also of the ways in which these borders shape human relationships with space, identity and the environment. By tracing how borders are internalized within the human mind, this paper has shown that these invisible divisions do not remain confined to political or cultural contexts but gradually reshape how individuals perceive and engage with the physical world around them. At the outset of the analysis, the discussion focused on how the novel destabilizes the idea of fixed geographical boundaries. Through its fragmented narrative and shifting perspectives, the text demonstrates that borders are not natural or permanent but are constructed through history, imagination and belief. Once internalized, these borders begin to shape perception itself, determining how individuals understand space and belonging.

Building on this idea, the paper examined how internalized borders contribute to a divided sense of self. The experiences of the characters in the novel are marked by uncertainty and fragmentation as they struggle to reconcile personal memories with inherited narratives. The observation that the narrator could not understand how one place could be so like another and yet so different¹⁵ reflects the instability of spatial perception. The discussion of urban space further highlighted how these internal divisions manifest in lived environments. Cities such as Calcutta, Dhaka and London are portrayed not as stable or unified spaces but as sites of tension, memory and dislocation.

While these aspects of the novel have been widely discussed in existing scholarship, this paper extended the analysis by exploring their ecological implications. The concept of ecological alienation emerged as a key framework for understanding how internalized borders affect not only human relationships but also connections to the environment. The novel's relative silence on nature is particularly significant in this regard, as landscapes are rarely described in terms of their ecological presence; instead, they are filtered through memory, conflict and emotional experience. This absence suggests a diminished awareness of the natural world, in which the environment becomes secondary to human concerns. The section on memory and imagination deepened this argument by demonstrating how space is often experienced indirectly in the novel. When places are known primarily through imagination, their ecological specificity begins to fade, and they are reduced to abstract representations. This mediated perception contributes to a broader condition of ecological alienation. When individuals interact with space as an idea rather than as a lived reality, their connection to the environment becomes weakened.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 67.

The natural world is no longer encountered as a dynamic and interconnected system but as a passive backdrop to human narratives. In this sense, the novel reflects a modern condition in which environmental awareness is overshadowed by political and psychological concerns.

In the context of contemporary global challenges, this insight becomes particularly relevant. Issues such as climate change, forced migration and environmental degradation are increasingly shaped by political boundaries and national interests. Yet the novel implicitly reminds readers that ecological systems are not bound by these divisions. Rivers, forests and ecosystems extend beyond borders, connecting regions in ways that challenge human attempts at separation. The persistence of internalized borders, therefore, not only affects social and cultural relationships but also hinders collective responses to environmental crises. By bringing together postcolonial and ecocritical perspectives, this paper has attempted to highlight the interconnectedness of these issues. It has shown that the fragmentation of identity, the instability of space and the alienation from the environment are not separate phenomena but part of a larger pattern shaped by internalized divisions. This approach contributes to existing scholarship by offering a more integrated understanding of the novel, one that moves beyond traditional thematic boundaries.

Ultimately, *The Shadow Lines* reveals that borders are as much psychological as they are geographical, and that their impact extends far beyond the political sphere. This internalization of borders leads to fragmented identities, dislocated experiences of space and a subtle yet profound form of ecological alienation. By drawing attention to these connections, the novel encourages a rethinking of how individuals perceive and engage with the world around them. It suggests that overcoming division requires not only political change but also a shift in perception, one that recognizes the interconnectedness of human and environmental experience. Such a perspective is essential for addressing the challenges of the present and for imagining more sustainable and inclusive ways of inhabiting the world.

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