

Geographical Borders and Political Maps in

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and

Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*

This paper will reveal the issue of geographical borders and political maps from the perspective of the postcolonial literature which plays a great role as a cultural diplomacy tool to promote political views. Frontiers and boundaries are defined as two fundamental geographical aspects. There has been quite extensive literature dealing with the subject of borders, frontiers and boundaries. My speech here is more particularly concerned with the representation of geographical borders and political maps as appeared in postcolonial literary texts. It will study the socio-political situations in Palestine and Bangladesh in a comparative analysis to the Indian-Bengali author Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani's novel *Men in the Sun* (1962). This theme of borders and maps holds a great significance in the postcolonial contexts of Ghosh and Kanafani because they both believe that their people have suffered due to the divisions created by geopolitical boundaries. They provide their readers with an insight into the history of colonization legacies. Moreover, the main characters in the two novels lose their lives on the border. Their deaths at the border are emblematic of the suffering that many people have to endure as they move between the borders of their homeland.

Further, the paper will suggest some interpretations for the titles of the two novels concerning issues of space and geographical boundaries. Central to this analysis will be the absurdity and the arbitrariness of the geographical borders and cartographic demarcations as shown in both novels. With this in mind, the paper will draw attention to the power of such boundaries and political maps and to the suffering

of the people due to these divisions and borders. Finally, the study will highlight the usage of the “house” as an allegory of partition in both novels.

Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* is a historical narrative which deals mainly with the national borders and geographical boundaries that separate people. The novel also records to violence that followed the riots of Calcutta and Dhaka in 1964. The title, “The shadow lines” has many connotations; it does not only refer to borders between countries. Ghosh chooses his title to suggest that the borders which separate people are mere “shadow”, and nothing more than artificial lines created by politicians. Building upon this, Ghosh stresses the arbitrariness of such cartographic demarcations. He illustrates this point through Thamma’a, the narrator’s grandmother. When she travels to Calcutta with her family in the plane, she naively asks “whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane” (p. 167). Thamma’a does not imagine any line in between the borders; she is actually looking for visible indication of demarcation. She says:

But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. (Ghosh, 1988: 167)

Thamma’a reveals the meaningless of the borders. When she asks her son how she can know if she is entering a new nation, it becomes difficult for her to comprehend the idea that the border is not on the frontier, but rather inside the airport. She cannot believe that there are no external marks or trenches to identify the borders between Calcutta and Dhaka. She is also disturbed that she has to go through many procedures to pass between these two countries.

Ghosh's approach toward borders and geographical demarcations is that they are arbitrary and invent divisions between people and nations. This point is clearly revealed by Thamma'a's uncle, Jethamoshai when Thamma'a persuades him to return to Calcutta to accompany his extended family, he told her: "I don't believe in this India-Shindia . . . Suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here" (p. 237). The futility of the border lines is evident in Jethamoshai's speech as he believes in the rootedness of identities and nations. He questions the ability of these lines between nations to divide people because he realizes that once a man starts to move, there would be no end to that. The narrator also realizes the futility of the constant line drawing by the politicians as it does not separate anything or anyone but only provokes acts of violence on both sides of the border. He expresses his own opinion about the uselessness of these border lines which separate countries on the geographical maps, when he says:

They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of the lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates . . . The simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map, when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines- so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other (Ghosh, 1988: 257).

The narrator argues that if the politicians draw the border lines on the political maps, this does not mean that they actually divide the nation into two nations. He finds himself locked into the "symmetry" which binds him to Dhaka even more closely than

when Dhaka and Calcutta were joined in the British India. He uses the image of “looking-glass” to suggest that Dhaka and Calcutta are connected to each other as images in a mirror; one reflects the other.

Ghosh also reveals this theme of borders’ absurdity through Tridib, the narrator’s uncle, who believes that the borders drawn by politicians do not really perform as anything more than being shadows. These borders will never be able to separate people who share the same history and culture. For him, it is the riots and the factors leading to them that separate people. One might imagine that these border lines would divide people, but ironically, they bring them closer together because their memories remain undivided.

As a part of his investigation of these “shadow lines”, Ghosh metaphorically presents the story of the partition of Thamma’a’s ancestral house in Dhaka. The story of this house’s partition started when Thamma’a was still young. The house has been divided with wooden partition wall going through doorways. The two parts of the family accepted this partition of the house to stop the continuous quarrels between them. Ironically, they could not find the peace they were searching for; instead, this partition of the house created bitterness between the two families. Ghosh uses this allegory of the house partition to represent the political partition of the nation.

Another important issue in Ghosh’s discussion is maps and cartography. The whole narrative is woven around the historical incidents of violence resulting from border divisions, maps, and cartography. Political maps have a great power in imperialism; they can be considered as a way in which colonizers exert superiority over the colonized. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said describes imperialism as “an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted and finally brought under control” (p.14). Through these maps, the colonizer

oppresses, and the colonized is submitted under control. For Said maps are “weapons of imperialism” which are used in colonial promotion. As Ghosh highlights the shadowiness of the borders and boundaries, he also emphasizes the uselessness of maps. When the narrator returns from London, fifteen years after Tridib’s death, he finds Tridib’s old Atlas. The narrator starts to draw an imaginary circle on the map and discovers that a place like Chang-Mai in Thailand is much nearer to Calcutta than Delhi is and Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is. This also explains the idea that the borders drawn between the countries and the circles the narrator draws on the map are both imaginary and mere shadow.

This theme of geographical borders is also apparent in Kanafani’s novel. While *The Shadow Lines* describes the borders that divide people who share the same cultural background, *Men in the Sun* comes to convey two kinds of border; the colonial borders that separate the Palestinians and the Israelis who have different history, culture, and language. Kanafani also mentions the political borders between Palestine and Kuwait to hint at the frontiers between various Arab states. These borders divide people who share the same culture and history and thus, mark each Arab state as an independent nation.

As a part of the Palestinian postcolonial literature, *Men in the Sun* emerges as a narrative of resistance. This narrative aims at creating ‘a nation in words’ and constructing ‘a country in books’ (Alwadhaf and Omar, 2011:109), since it has disappeared from maps”. Kanafani is considered to be the first to give voice to the voiceless and silenced people of Palestine in establishing “resistance literature”. Thus, Kanafani confirms the fact that Political maps have a great power in the case of his country. However, like Ghosh, he believes in the absurdity of the political maps. For him, even when Zionist colonialism succeeded in wiping Palestine from the global

political map, Kanafani, through his narrative, has succeeded in re-establishing the image of Palestine forever in the minds and the hearts of millions of his readers. Therefore, *Men in the Sun* becomes an effective work in the modern contemporary postcolonial Arabic literature which aims at writing about Palestinian nationalism. It also helps in carving the name of Palestine and the Palestinians into the minds of many freedom fighters and supporters of the Palestinian affair all over the world.

Men in the Sun presents a disaster that ends with three tragic deaths. It describes an incomplete journey in which three men attempt to cross the desert between Basra and Kuwait. The three men are from different generations: the old man Abu Qais and the young man Asaad and the young boy Marwan. Travelling from the refugee camps, where the three men stay, to Kuwait is a central motivation for the main characters who are smuggled in a water tanker. These three men moved to Basra to cross the frontier into Kuwait, with the help of a guide. The main aim of this journey is to search for a better life free from the bitterness of the past and bright with promises for a secure future. Therefore, crossing Shatt al-Arab to Kuwait is their ambition. In one scene, Abu Qias imagines Kuwait. He says:

On the other side of this Shatt al-Arab, just the other side, were all the things he [Abu Qais] had been deprived of. Over there was Kuwait. What only lived in his mind as a dream and a fantasy existed there (p. 25).

Clearly, Kuwait for the three men is the only salvation from their poverty and bad situations. They believe that they will find the luxuries that they are deprived of in their home land. However, Kanafani portrays the borders as a violent space and a place of death. The borders for him mean exile, that is, death and humiliation. Throughout the journey, the smuggled men notice the dead bodies of men who previously tried to cross the borders, but lost their lives in the heat of the desert. Abu AlKhaizaran, the smuggler tanker driver, tells the stories of men who were trying to

reach Kuwait, “Stories of men who became like dogs as they looked for one drop of water to moisten their cracked tongues with” (p. 55).

The three men pass through very hard times in their attempt to cross the borders. In the heat of August summer, they are forced to hide in a water tank. Kanafani chooses the tank as a place for the characters’ death to signify the effect of the imposing borders on the Palestinians. The tanker has very tight borders with a very limited space which symbolises the borders that are enforced upon them. Just as the constricted space of the tanker resembles a prison, the borders also are very tight and imprisoning the Palestinians.

Kanafani goes further in his description to the borders that separate the Arab nations, and the borders that separate the Palestinians and the Jewish. Kanafani also laments the borders added inside Palestine, which are called “Barbed wires”. These “Barbed wires” do not only separate families from each other; they also separate families from their houses. These borders imposed by the Israeli colonialists, have contributed to the emergency of refugee camps all over Palestine. In one of Assad’s failed attempts to escape to Kuwait, he runs into an English tourist in the middle of the road. Assad waves to him. During the journey, the English tourist tells him about his visit to Zeita (a Palestinian city), he says: “A couple of weeks ago I was in Zeita. . . I stood in front of the barbed wire. A little child came up to me and said in English that his house was a few feet beyond the barbed wire” (p.34). These barbed wires are enforced by the Israeli army in different Palestinian cities to separate people from each other. The barbed wires are borders through which the Palestinians can see their old houses, but cannot approach. This scene reveals the bitter fact that even the children become a victim of borders.

Palestinians seek security through housing. After the war of 1967, most Palestinians became refugees dispersed across many countries. Thus, having a house turns out to be a dream for every Palestinian. Kanafani highlights this point through Marwan's father who left his wife and his children and married a lame woman because she has a wealthy, three-room house or "a concrete roof" as he describes. Apparently, a house with a concrete roof is more attractive than the refugee camp, in which he would live in one room, and can rent two rooms and gain money. Indeed, the house has a great significance for the Palestinians; for them, the house symbolizes the nation. Not only have their lands been occupied by the Jewish army, but also their houses. Many Palestinians who live in exile suffer physically and emotionally when they have the chance to see their old houses in Palestine after many years. Ghabra (1988) mentions one story about 'Abd al-Fattah' family as an example. This family, which is composed of father, mother, and five children, moved to live in Kuwait in the 1950s. In the summer of 1972, after being allowed a brief visit to their former house in Haifa, the father experienced tremendous stress at the scene of his occupied house. That same day he had a heart attack and died (p. 79). This example shows how precious the house is for the Palestinians, and the strong link between the house and the nation. Many associate their loss of the house with their loss of the country.

In conclusion, maps and geographical borders play a significant role in enforcing imperialist power in the two novels. While borders in *The Shadow Lines* appear to be mere shadows because they divide people who share the same regional and cultural identity, borders in *Men in the Sun* are very tangible as they divide people who have different cultural background, that is, the Palestinians and the Jewish. The two authors described the borders as a place for death where at least three of each novel's main characters are harshly killed. Finally, the two novels written by Kanafani and Ghosh

echo each other. Symbolism that dominates the two works is a sign of the strong connection between the individual and his identity.

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