

SIGNIFICANT GEOGRAPHIES IN *THE SHADOW LINES**

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ABSTRACT • Approaches to world literature often think through binaries of local/global, major/minor, provincial/cosmopolitan, taking them as given positions on a single world map. To an extent, this is true of Amitav Ghosh's prize-winning essay "The testimony of my grandfather's bookcase" (1998), which reflects on his grandfather's collection of world literature books to think about the relationship between his grandfather's provincial location in Calcutta and the world. Yet in *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh takes a much more complex and interesting approach to space, the world, perception and narration. In the novel's complex narration, space, time, and self always appeared mirrored through other people, times, and spaces. Places also acquire reality and meaning only after they are first narrated and imagined, often several times, and *before* they are experienced directly. This is a stance that has deep existential but also epistemological implications that go beyond "simply" critiquing colonial and national border-making. This essay explores how (and which) spaces become "significant" in the novel, and how the novel's approach to space can be productive for thinking about world literature.

KEYWORDS • The Shadow Lines; World Literature; Literary Geographies.

1. Location

In his 1998 essay "The Testimony of my Grandfather's Bookcase" (1998), Amitav Ghosh reminisces on his grandfather's (and later uncle's) impressive library in Calcutta, a monumental collection of mostly non-English writers that strikes Ghosh as somewhat incongruent with its location and its owner. Apart from modern Bengali classics (Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra, Tagore, Bibhuti Bhushan, Bonophul and Syed Mustafa Ali),

The rest were in English. But of these only a small proportion consisted of books that had been originally written in English. The others were translations from a number of other languages, most of them European: Russian had pride of place, followed by French, Italian,

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German and Danish. The great masterpieces of the 19th century were dutifully represented: the novels of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Turgenev, of Victor Hugo, Flaubert, Stendhal, Maupassant and others. But these were the dustiest books of all, placed on shelves that were lofty but remote. (Ghosh 1998: no page number)

The prominently displayed books “were an *oddly disparate lot* – or so they seem today”, he continues. Beside modernist classics like James Joyce, or William Faulkner “that can still be seen on bookshelves everywhere”, many others like Marie Corelli, Grazia Deledda or Knut Hamsun “have long since been forgotten”:

Other names from those shelves have become, in this age of resurgent capitalism, symbols of a certain kind of embarrassment or unease – the social realists for example. But on my uncle’s shelves they stood tall and proud, Russians and Americans alike: **Maxim Gorky**, **Mikhail Sholokov**, **John Steinbeck**, **Upton Sinclair**. There were many others too, whose places next to each other seem hard to account for at first glance: **Sienkiewicz** (of *Quo Vadis*), **Maurice Maeterlinck**, **Bergson**. Recently, looking through the mildewed remnants of those shelves I came upon what must have been the last addition to that collection. It was **Ivo Andric**’s *Bridge on the Drina*, published in the sixties. (Ghosh 1998, emphases added)¹

That most of the twentieth-century foreign non-Anglophone authors are Nobel prize winners suggests to Ghosh that the globalisation of literature is an older phenomenon than we usually assume, dating from the early ’90s and not the 1990s. But it also reflects the provincial asymmetry and dependence of knowledge typical of the colonial subject, who learns about modern Italian and Swedish writers while Italian or Swedish readers remain likely ignorant about contemporary Indian writers (save of course Rabindranath Tagore).² The essay goes on to contrast the monumentality of world literature on the bookshelf with his uncle’s inconsequential life. This uncle never travelled and his broad-ranging library appears like a form of vicarious travel, a provincial’s dream of membership in the world republic of letters from a peripheral location. (In the end, he even stops reading and switches to watching popular Hindi films with equal, but now unseemly, passion.)

I begin with this essay and Ghosh’s puzzlement because they resonate with understandings of space and location – and particularly of “peripheral” location – that are common to approaches to world literature (Casanova 2004, WRAC 2015). As I have argued elsewhere (Orsini 2015), such objectivist approaches posit a single world map with

¹ Ghosh offers many interesting observations on which books did not qualify as worthy of being placed on his uncle’s bookcase (“Textbooks and schoolbooks were never allowed; nor were books of a technical or professional nature”) and on the social and symbolic importance of books in marriage negotiations and other social “performances” (part of what Leah Price calls “non-reading”). The books worthy of display included mostly novels, and “a few works of anthropology and psychology” that “had in some way filtered into the literary consciousness of the time” like *The Golden Bough*, the *Collected Works of Sigmund Freud*, Marx and Engels’ *Manifesto*, Havelock Ellis or Malinowski; www.amitavghosh.com/essays/bookcase.html [accessed on 8 July 2020].

well-defined centres and peripheries that are viewed from an apparently neutral bird's eye perspective, and imagine literary influence governed by laws that dictate that the peripheral local must be "dominated" by metropolitan trends. But is this what the eclectic display of grandfather and uncle's library shows?

Before I return to this question at the end of the essay, let me just note that such objectivist understanding of space could not be more different from that of *The Shadow Lines*, in which space is deeply conditioned by time and self, and gaze is always located. In the complex narration of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, space, time, and self are always mirrored, reflected or refracted through others "as through a looking glass":³

So, as we stood outside on the pavement, I tried to recall for [Ila] how Tridib had told us that Alan Tresawsen, Mrs Price's brother, had worked here before the war, in the Left Book Club; that it must have been here, perhaps even in that office which we had just entered, for the Club had been a part of Victor Gollancz's publishing house...

Ila looked at the window, with mild interest, shrugged, and said: Looks like any old musty old office now, doesn't it?

To me it didn't, for having seen it first through Tridib's eyes, its past seemed concurrent with its present. (SL: 36)

The protagonist learns to live through Tridib and through him establishes relationships to other people. Self-knowledge and self-discovery involve a recursive process of anamnesis in which the subject must revisit and piece together stories and fragments of memories that connect and collapse disparate places and times. This is an argument about individual consciousness. But it also a postcolonial argument about the persistent consequences of colonialism in individual and collective consciousness and national histories: in India in the shape of Anglophilia as a provincial mentality, but also as the *divide et impera* policies that led to the multiple Partitions of Bengal and underpinned communal faultlines.⁴ In England these consequences take the shape of post-imperial amnesia, guilt, and/or nostalgia. The intertwined histories of Tridib's and the Tresawsen-Price families form a kind of extended "(post)colonial family saga" illuminating and connecting different aspects of this relationship – from the interracial friendship of Lionel Tresawsen and Tridib's grandfather, both judges at the Calcutta High Court, to May Price's guilt, the protagonist's obsession with the Prices and Nick Price's amnesia.

² I discuss this asymmetry of knowledge and the ignorance about contemporary literature in early-twentieth century Europe, despite the work of Orientalists and the movement of books, in "Present Absence" (2020); for discussions of Western (and Asian) literatures in Indian periodicals around the same time, see my "World Literature, Indian Views" (2019).

³ All page references are to Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (London: BlackSwan Books, 1989). I thank Alessandro Vescovi for inviting me to the *Shadow Lines* conference and for his comments on this essay.

⁴ See Chambers (2011).

But, as we shall see, the Calcutta-London axis, though the most obvious, is not the only axis in the novel. At a more general level, this and Ghosh's subsequent novels make the case that *any* process of learning and discovery – of the world and of the self in the world – requires an investment of the imagination beyond the familiar. It involves reckoning with one's position, realising that distance and closeness are relative and subjective, remembering forgotten histories, actively looking for resonances and connections, and – particularly in his climate novels – (re)orienting one's entire life.⁵ As such, *The Shadow Lines* lays out what we may call Ghosh's poetic of space.⁶ It provides a wonderful example of what I and my colleagues have called "significant geographies". We offer this term, in the plural, as alternative to singular terms like "world" and "global" at work in world literature (Laachir, Marzagora, Orsini 2018). Unlike neo-positivist systemic approaches to world literature that posit the operation of a single world literary system, "significant geographies" foregrounds subjectivity and positionality. It underlines how "the world" is not a given but is produced by embodied and located actors, for whom the world is constituted by *particular* geographies and trajectories.⁷ Significant (as in "significant others") directs us to those geographies, trajectories and spatial imaginaries that *recur and/or matter* to actors and texts. "Recur" acknowledges the fact that this is not a free play of signifiers but that specific positions and imaginaries persist, while "and/or matter" stresses the imaginary possibilities of reinvention and reorientation that literary texts offer. In this essay, I explore how "significant geographies" animate *The Shadow Lines*, and how the novel's dynamic, located, and layered understanding of the world and the self ricochets on Ghosh's own take on his grandfather/uncle's bookshelf.

2. Learning to See

For the narrator in *The Shadow Lines*, places acquire reality and meaning only after they are narrated by others and imagined by him, often several times, *before* they are experienced directly:

Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and had given me eyes to see them; [Ila], who had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in Tridib's room had meant for me, a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta. I used to listen to her talking [...] about the cafés in the Plaza Mayor in Madrid, or the crispness of the air in Cuzco, and I could see that those names, which were to me a set of magical talismans because Tridib had pointed them out to me on his tattered old Bartholomew's Atlas, had for her a familiarity no less dull than the lake had for me and my friends. (SL: 26)

⁵ *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019).

⁶ Long recognized by scholarship on Ghosh, e.g. Chowdhary (2002).

⁷ Along similar lines, Sartori and Moyn in their preface to *Global Intellectual History*, propose that "global" be treated "as a native or actor's category—a concept that belongs to the archive and is itself the object of investigation, rather than as a meta-analytical category belonging to the investigator" (17).

Familiarity dulls the mind, while curious ignorance excites it and transforms toponyms into “magical talismans”. We could zoom in on the “tattered old Bartholomew’s Atlas” as a “colonial geography lesson” that inducted generations of imperial children into a single and standardised cartographic image of the globe (Ramaswamy).⁸ But to me, in this and other similar passages, it is Tridib’s narrative and the protagonist’s own imaginative investment that matter. In fact, whether Tridib is or is not a reliable narrator, as the passage about his dealings with the people at Gole Park shows just before this quote, is of no consequence. What matters is that he is a good, effective and inspiring narrator. He can conjure places and the histories and stories that are connected to them, making these places alive and meaningful to the listener.

Part of the narrator’s remarkable knowledge of places that he has never been to – particularly in London – is definitely cartographic.⁹ He has pored over the A to Z street atlas of London that his father brought him until he knows the Prices’ area, “page 43, square 2, by heart” (SL: 63), and he can unerringly lead Ila and Nick Price to the family house on 44 Lymington Road without ever having been there.¹⁰ But the climax of his

⁸ “In 1826, John Bartholomew set up business as a map engraver in Edinburgh and soon gained an international reputation for innovative cartography, high quality copper plate engraving and printing. The Times Publishing Co Ltd thus contracted Bartholomew to prepare a major, new, home produced, world atlas which became *The Times Survey Atlas & Gazetteer of the World* (1922). This was the beginning of the long running association between Bartholomew and the Times. A series of universally acclaimed atlases followed, including *The Times Handy Atlas* (1935), *The Times Atlas of the World, Mid-Century Edition* (1955-59), *The Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World* (1967), *The Times Atlas of the Moon* (1969) and *The Times Concise Atlas of the World* (1972)”; <http://www.timesatlas.com/Heritage/Pages/Home.aspx> [accessed 2 July 2020].

⁹ See Anjaria (2008); Mongia (2014) interestingly contrasts the use of cartography in Ghosh and Conrad.

¹⁰ “And then I began to show off.

When we came out of the tube station I stopped them and pointed down the road. Since this is West End Lane, I said, that must be Sumatra Road over there. So that corner must be where the air-shelter was... And that house there, that one, just down the road, over there, on the corner of Lymington Road, I know what it’s called: it’s called Lymington Mansions.

[...]

Nick Price inclined his head at me, in polite incredulity. [...] Now would you like to have a go at finding your way to 44 Lymington Road?

I could try, I said.

Go ahead then.

It was easy enough on the A to Z street atlas of London that my father had brought me. I knew page 43, square 2, by heart: Lymington Road ought to have been right across the road from where we were. But now that we had reached the place I knew best, I was suddenly uncertain...

But still, as far as I could tell that was where Lymington Road should have been, so I pointed to it and asked whether that was it.

Yes! said Nick. Good boy: got it the first time” (62, 63).

display comes when he can describe the inner topography of the house thanks to Tridib's stories, stopping only at the limits of Tridib's experience and telling.¹¹ In fact, the narrator knows more about the topography of Nick Price's family house than Nick himself, and he can find and describe the house in Brick Lane where Nick's uncle Alan and his doomed group of Communist friends lived before the friends were killed by a German bomb.¹² The more literal Nick can only see the current appearance of the building: "His face lengthened in fastidious disbelief as he examined its crumbling masonry and the signboard of the Taj Agency on the ground floor" (SL: 104).

To the other characters, and to Ila in particular, this ability appears pathetic and reflects the tendency of the narrator – typical of a provincial subject – to live life an *Ersatz* life, vicariously through Tridib. By contrast, the narrator observes, Ila lives "intensely in the present". Yet we can read this pervasive stance not only as a subjective characteristic (Thieme 2016), or a narrative strategy that prompts long and detailed descriptions which jump or slide, proleptically as well as analeptically, across time. We can also view it as a deeper existential and epistemological argument about the process by which spaces, events, and people become significant and (hence) real and close. As the narrator puts it to Ila:

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 or less true, only very far apart. (SL: 27, emphasis added)

Places have to be "storied" in order to become real. Yet while it "invents" places, the imagination itself is – in this novel, and one could say in Ghosh's whole *oeuvre* – nurtured by prolonged research and attentive observation. Research and a dispassionate desire to know become embodied knowledge; once distilled in one's precise imagination, this embodied knowledge produces vivid stories: "The sights Tridib saw in his imagination", the narrator recalls, "were infinitely more detailed, more precise than anything I would ever see":

¹¹ "then Nick, smiling, asked me if I could find my way around the house as I had through the streets.

I had to think a bit to orient myself. I turned to face the door and said: Correct me if I'm wrong, but if I go out of this door and turn right and keep walking straight for a few paces, that would take me to the kitchen, wouldn't it? And if I were to turn right before I reached the kitchen, wouldn't I come upon a flight of stairs that would lead me to the cellar if I were to go down there? It was my turn to laugh now, at their astonished faces.

It's incredible, Ila sighed, shaking her head. How does he do it?" (73) When he "fails" to re-cognize one side of the house, it's because Tridib had never gone there and never described it to him.

¹² "That's when your uncle lived here! I said. Your uncle Alan.

My uncle? [Nick] said in surprise. Did he live here?

Yes, I said. I'll show you where he lived. [...]

Eventually I found the street sign I had been looking for.

There, I said to Nick, pointing triumphantly at the house on the corner. That's where your uncle Alan lived at the beginning of the war" (104).

He said to me once that *one could never know anything except through desire*; a pure, real desire... 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. (35, emphases added)

In this sense, imagination is no phantasmising but rather, literally, archaeology, an excavation into historical layers and recovery of buried knowledges, as Foucault (1972) would put it:

I tried telling Ila and Robi about the archaeological Tridib, the Tridib who was much more contemptuous of fairylands than she would ever be; the Tridib who pushed me to imagine the roofs of Colombo for myself, the Tridib who said that *we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try and do it properly*. (37, emphasis added)

A few pages earlier, after Ila's mother had described their garden in Colombo and narrated her (hilarious) encounter with a giant monitor lizard and Ila's adventure with a snake and the monitor lizard, Tridib had asked the narrator: "Did you notice that Ila's house had a sloping roof?" (SL: 34). The narrator had puzzled over the question and begun to imagine the sloping roofs of Colombo for himself as precisely as possible, "and soon I felt that I too could see how much more interesting they were than the snake and the lizard" (SL: 35). Unlike the hilarious or dramatic stories of the lizard and the snake, the ordinary roofs require a dispassionate desire to know and imagine them.

This is as much a general argument about perception – that we can never perceive things "directly", without previous mediation – as about learning to see and experience things through the imagination. But it is also an argument about the correlation between "imaginative investment" and the quality and significance of things or events: once things are experienced intensely and precisely in the imagination, they become "permanently available" in one's memory (SL: 35), unlike even intense experiences in real life that are not distilled in the same way.

3. Position as Self-Discovery

Position and location clearly matter a great deal in the novel. The narrator's position as an ordinary middle-class boy in black-and-white, import-substitution era Calcutta, who lives in a "small, puritanical world" (SL: 29) and whose family "never went anywhere" (SL: 38), has a lot to do with this intense investment in the imagination. He savours the "daydream names" of the places Ila travels to – Addis Ababa, Algiers, Brisbane (SL: 26) – in her Technicolor world, or the foreign names of her classmates (SL: 28). His obsession with Ila's family's foreign postings and with recalling – though Tridib – the Tresawsen-Price family in London "in its finest hour" (SL: 57) mark him as a provincial local boy and a postcolonial subject. Looking "up the smoggy night sky above Gole Park", he wonders "how the stars looked in London" (SL: 57/Ibid.), and once in London he at first delights in riding the Underground again and again (SL: 27).

But position – in this and even more so in other Ghosh's novel – is not just a datum, a point on a map, it is a positionality, the discovery of how your context, race, class, caste,

gender, history, etc., condense into a *habitus*, a set of bodily and mental dispositions (Bourdieu 1990) that produces your particular, selective, and unselfconscious view of society and of the world. This discovery of one's own positionality is also that of the ("significant") relations that this condensed history entails. In *The Shadow Lines*, as many commentators have pointed out, positionality entails the discovery of the entwined history of Britain and India, of just how close and entangled the relationship between Britain and India remains, and how that close but unequal relationship affects personal friendships and relations in many different ways. There are also indications of Ghosh's future interest in the positionality of Indians, and particularly Bengalis, in upholding the British empire elsewhere in the world: Lionel Tresawsen's imperial career as an overseer in Malaysia, Fiji, Bolivia, the Guinea Coast, and Ceylon (SL: 56) is mirrored to a point by that of the narrator's own grandfather who worked as a civil engineer in Burma.

Position entails discovery also in the sense of Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, which in this novel takes the shape of gradually excavating the silenced history of the narrator's indomitable grandmother: her youth in Dhaka, the house and brother that were left behind, and the riot which wrecks his family and telescopes (in a spatio-temporal trick) in 1964 with the violence of Partition in 1947. So not only does the imagination need to be directed and focused, it hovers and condenses around places and events that particularly matter to an individual or a group. Here the novel pits the silence and euphemisms of families about past traumas and the forgetfulness of news against the individual's desire to know and imagine, and fiction's duty to excavate and narrate traumatic events and histories. By comparison, in *In an Antique Land* (1992) position entails the discovery of the narrator's own commonsensical prejudices (in the unforgettable clash with the Egyptian Imam, 1992: 234-236) but also the excavation of the historical connections between India and Egypt that colonial and areas studies frameworks have erased. If ethnography brings the narrator face to face with his own positionality, a painstakingly precise historical imagination – through the Geniza fragments about the Egyptian merchants Khalaf ibn Işhaq and Ben Yijû and the Indian Slave of MS H.6 – allows him (and us) to recover and imagine a more expansive and entangled history, the hallmark of Ghosh's fiction.

4. Connections, Resonances and "Looking-Glass Events"

If the argument about space and the self so far has been about positionality and "learning to see" through imaginative investment, resonance is the third element at work in the novel's narrative construction. Events and places become "significant" and impose themselves upon the imagination not directly or through a single encounter, but rather refracted through other events – "looking glass events" (SL: 225). The riot that kills Tridib in Dhaka in 1964 (still part of East Pakistan) is finally narrated towards the end of the novel, years later, through his younger brother Robi's *dream* (SL: 244), and further completed by May's story (SL: 250). It resonates powerfully with the narrator's own memory of a different riot taking place in Calcutta at the same time, though it takes him fifteen years to pierce the family silence about what they euphemistically call the 'trouble' (SL: 219) and realise that the two events were in fact not just coeval but

connected.¹³ Both were connected with the unrest following the theft of the sacred relic of Prophet Muhammad's hair from a shrine in Kashmir. The intense description of the riot in the novel itself refracts two of Ghosh's own experiences: of the anti-Sikh pogrom in Delhi in 1984, which allegedly gave him the idea for writing *The Shadow Lines*, and of the January 1964 riot in Dhaka when a number of Hindu refugees sought shelter in his garden and a mob besieged the diplomatic mansion.¹⁴ This realisation and the pivotal role of his grandmother, for whom the national border between India and East Pakistan does not exist, have prompted others, like John Thieme (2016), to offer a postcolonial reading of the novel in terms of its "clear indictment of political map-making" (SL: 30). But here I am interested in following a different line of enquiry about subjective imaginative investment in "significant geographies".

Imaginative investment in significant geographies works not just for individuals but also for groups or communities. Their ideological and affective investments acknowledge the reality of nations and borders but also transgress them. In what is for him a startling insight and provides another key scene/passage in the novel, the narrator discovers that the terrible riot in Dhaka that wrecked his family's entire life barely registered with his friends in Delhi:

Suddenly, for no reason that I can remember, I said: What about the riots [...]?
Which riots? said Malik. There are so many.
Those riots, I said. I had to count the years out on my fingers. The riots of 1964, I said.
Their faces went slowly blank, and they turned to look at each other.
What were the riots of 1964? Malik said with a puzzled frown. I could tell that he really had no idea what I was talking about.
I turned to the others and cried: Don't you remember?
They looked away in embarrassment, shaking their heads. It struck me then that they were all Delhi people; that I was the only person there who had grown up in Calcutta.
Surely you remember, I said. There were terrible riots in Calcutta in 1964.
I see, said Malik. What happened?
I opened my mouth to answer and found I had nothing to say. All I could have told them about was of the sound of voices running past the walls of my school, and of a glimpse of a mob in Park Circus. The silent terror that surrounded my memory of those events, and my belief in their importance, seemed laughably out of proportion to those trivial recollections.
There was a riot, I said helplessly.
There are riots all the time, Malik said.
This was a terrible riot, I said.

¹³ He writes: "I was a child, and ... I believed in the reality of space; 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 borders there existed another reality" (219); see also

¹⁴ "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi" (originally published in *The New Yorker*, July 1995, and now available at <https://www.amitavghosh.com/essays/ghost.html>); *In an Antique Land* (205).

All riots are terrible, Malik said. But it must have been a local thing. Terrible or not, it's hardly comparable to a war. (SL: 221-222)¹⁵

In the novel, this prompts a meditation on memory and history: History with a capital "H", the history of wars and political events, against "local" history that matters only to the individuals involved. Everybody in the group remembers the border war with China in 1962, a national event, whereas riots in which members of one religious community take it out against another are local events not "comparable to a war" even when they reverberate across national borders. The narrator remains incredulous: "But don't you remember? I said. Didn't you read about it or hear about it? After all, the war with China didn't happen on your doorstep, but you remember that. Surely you remember – you must remember?" (SL: 222). Even the old Calcutta paper that he consults in the archive ("the date now branded in my memory – 4 January 1964") reports about the local riot but "there was not the slightest reference to it to any trouble in East Pakistan, and the barest mention to events in Kashmir. It was, after all, a Calcutta paper, run by people who believed in the power of distance no less than I did" (SL: 228).

The discovery, then, is that even in the case of public events, emotional and imaginative investment are necessary for them to register and become "significant". Closeness and distance are imagined and subjective. Even groups and nations experience places as relatively close when they are significant to them, however geographically distant they may be. The shock of the missing hair of the Prophet in Srinagar reverberates immediately in Karachi and Dhaka, and its recovery prompts riots in Khulna, Dhaka and Calcutta irrespective of the "real" distance and of borders ("a land outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking-glass events", SL: 225).

This realisation prompts the narrator to undertake an experiment with a compass that pits "objective", cartographic distance against common sense and the orientation to the world honed by *habitus*. "Khulna [in East Pakistan] is not quite one hundred miles from Calcutta as the crow flies: the two cities face each other at a watchful equidistance across the border" – and yet the riot in Khulna did not register in the Calcutta newspaper. That Muslims in Khulna should react to an event in Srinagar does not strike him as strange since "the space between the points of my compass was 1200 miles, nearly 2000 kilometres. It didn't seem like much". But it is the same distance "as Tokyo is from Beijing, or Moscow from Venice, or Washington from Havana, or Cairo from Naples" (SL: 232) – cities that in his mind are not only very far but belong to completely different worlds. This point about the macro-geography of the world is true also on the micro-level of urban geography: at times a location in Calcutta – like the tenement during a family visit – feels as far from the novel's vantage points of Gole Park and Ballygunge as Calcutta is from

¹⁵ Ila makes a similar comment: "Well of course there are famines and riots and disasters, she said. But those are local things, after all – not like revolutions or anti-fascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that's really remembered" (SL: 107).

Pyong Yang. By contrast, Lymington Road is mentioned together with Stockwell and Brick Lane, which are quite far “in real life”.¹⁶

Going back to the experiment with the map and compass, the narrator then shifts from linear distance to area of purview. He draws a “circle with Khulna at the centre and Srinagar on the circumference. I discovered immediately that the map of South Asia would not be big enough. I had to turn back to a map of Asia before I found one large enough for my circle.”

It was an amazing circle.

Beginning in Srinagar and travelling anti-clockwise, it cut through the Pakistani half of Punjab, through the tip of Rajasthan and the edge of Sind, through the Rann of Kutch, and across the Arabian Sea, through the southernmost toe of the Indian Peninsula, through Kandy, in Sri Lanka, and out into the Indian Ocean until it emerged to touch upon the northernmost finger of Sumatra, then straight through the tail of Thailand into the Gulf, to come out again in Thailand, running a little north of Phnom Penh, into the hills of Laos, past Hué in Vietnam, dipping into the Gulf of Tonking, then swinging up again through the Chinese province of Yunnan, past Chungking, across the Yangtze Kiang, passing within sight of the Great Wall of China, through Inner Mongolia and Sinkiang, until with a final leap over the Karakoram Mountains it dropped again into the valley of Kashmir.

It was a remarkable circle: more than half of mankind must have fallen within it. (SL: 232)

Fifteen years after his death, Tridib “watche[s] over” him as he tries to “learn the meaning of distance” (SL: 232). Tridib’s atlas shows him that “the tidy ordering of Euclidean space” has little to do with world geography as actually experienced or learnt as part of one’s *habitus*:

Chiang Mai in Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi is; that Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is. Yet *I had never heard of those places until I drew my circle*, and *I cannot remember a time when I was so young that I had not heard of Delhi or Srinagar*. It showed me that Hanoi and Chungking are nearer Khulna than Srinagar, and yet *did the people of Khulna care at all about the fate of the mosques in Vietnam and South China (a mere stone’s throw away)?* I doubted it. But in this other direction, it took no more than a week... (SL: 232-233, emphases added)

This “perplexing” realisation leads to a further experiment, which confirms the contrast between “significant geographies” and the cartographic world of “states, and no people at all” and adds a note about scale:

In perplexity I turned back through the pages of the atlas at random, shut my eyes, and let the point of my compass fall on the page. It fell on Milan, in northern Italy. Adjusting my compass to the right scale I drew a circle which had Milan as its centre and 1200 miles as its radius.

¹⁶ I thank Alessandro Vescovi for this point.

This was another amazing circle. It passed through Helsinki in Finland, Sundsvall in Sweden, Mold in Norway, above the Shetland Islands, and then through a great empty stretch of the Atlantic Ocean until it came to Casablanca. Then it travelled into the Algerian Sahara, through Libya, into Egypt, up through the Mediterranean, where it touched on Crete and Rhodes before going into Turkey, then on through the Black Sea, into the USSR, through Crimea, the Ukraine, Byelorussia and Estonia, back to Helsinki.

Puzzling over this circle, I tried a little experiment. With my limited knowledge, I tried to imagine an event, any event, that might occur in a city near the periphery of that circle (or, indeed, much nearer) – Stockholm, Dublin, Casablanca, Alexandria, Istanbul, Kiev, any city in any direction at all – I tried to imagine an event that might happen in any of those places which would bring the people of Milan pouring out into the streets. I tried hard but I could think of none.

None, that is, other than war.

It seemed to me, then, that within this circle there were only states and citizens; there were no people at all. (SL: 233-234)

We may read this passage in several different ways. We may read it as a critique of the arbitrariness of national borders and a critique of nationalism that dictates that we should feel attachment and belonging to a particular territory and not care at all about what befalls others. Arbitrariness can also be read as a rationalist critique of nationalist, religious or any other attachment the leads to such violent reactions irrespective of closeness or distance. But we can also read this experiment as a call to “reorient” our “spatial attachments” so as to incorporate more and different places – people in Milan should care as much about Casablanca, Alexandria and Kiev as they do about Rome, Paris, or London. Or we may read it as a reflection on how things are: Chiang Mai *may be* nearer to Calcutta than Delhi is, or Chengdu nearer than Srinagar, but it does not *feel* that way, and that is, according to the narrator, a “more real” level of reality than the map. Either way, the passage shows how emotional and narrative investment is what makes places real and significant, and it does so always for particular, located subjects. It’s a very different – located, oriented, subjective, creative – understanding of the map and the atlas from the “objective” use of cartography to support global, systemic models of world literature.¹⁷

5. Other Significant Geographies

The idea of “significant geographies” in the plural as opposed to “one-world thinking” owes a lot to the late geographer Doreen Massey’s notion of space as “the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as

¹⁷ As I have argued elsewhere (Orsini 2015), this kind of “one-world thinking” employs a primarily cartographic understanding of space and of the world that, among other things, yokes geocriticism to scientific-cartographic advancements and to linear historical narratives of modernity (and postmodernity) and to scientific-cartographic advancements (Westphal 2011, Ramachandran 2018).

the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist”, “from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny” (2005: 9). Her proposition that space is always “the product of interrelations” and is “constituted through interactions” comes close to the vision of *The Shadow Lines*, in which every space – whether in Calcutta or in London – is “the product of interrelations”, and every story is pieced together by multiple narrators across several interactions.

But there is another point to be made. Although the axes of Calcutta-London (West Hampstead, Islington, Brick Lane, and Fulham) and Calcutta-Dhaka loom largest in *The Shadow Lines* and in the reader’s memory and index the two inter-related histories of colonial entanglement and of the “long partition” of Bengal, there are other geographies that briefly surface and hint at other histories and other entanglements, some of which Ghosh would take up in later novels. As already mentioned, there is Lionel Tresawsen’s imperial career as an overseer in Malaysia, Fiji, Bolivia, the Guinea Coast, and Ceylon (SL: 56), mirrored in a minor way by the narrator’s grandfather who worked as a civil engineer in Burma (SL: 137). Then there is the post-colonial diplomatic geography of (mostly) Non-Aligned postings of Tridib’s diplomat father, the Shaheb: Colombo, Algiers, Indonesia, Addis Ababa, Conakry (Guinea, 46), and Dhaka (150); and the geography of World Bank economic interventions of Ila’s economist father Jatin (Tanzania/Dar as Salaam, 157). These geographies speak to the geopolitical and economic alignments of post-independence India and its leading role in the Non-Aligned movement and decolonisation, which is also a history of economic ties and new opportunities, as signaled by the short but telling anecdote about the narrator’s father’s trip to Conakry connected to his “rather sudden professional success” (SL: 46).¹⁸ In his other novels Ghosh would go on to unearth the Bengalis’ involvement in imperial trade and imperial wars (Burma in *The Glass Palace*, China and the coolie colony Mauritius in the *Ibis Trilogy*), as well as the closer transnational history and geography of the Ganges Delta (*The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*), to great effect and acclaim. But already in this novel, I would argue, we can begin to see that the world is not one map with centres and peripheries but is crisscrossed by multiple trajectories and layers of “significant geographies.”

In the *Shadow Lines*, the wider world is neither just the postcolonial metropolis nor the bland cosmopolitanism of non-places (the international schools and airport lounges in the passage about Ila) or of the narrator’s atlas daydreams. It is unearthed, imagined, produced, evoked, and narrated by located subjects through recursive acts that make particular geographies significant as they unmask and unmake established cartographies and query the relative weight of events and memories.

¹⁸ The Shaheb, who diplomatically adjusts his conversation to the level he believes his interlocutor occupies, “had his own promotion scheme for the world, and my father had not risen very far within it. So, in the beginning, his conversations with my father were oddly disjointed” till one evening, when “a series of long and very detailed questions about the government’s export policy” made his father realise that the Shahe had placed him at “the rank of First Secretary (Commercial)” (46-47).

6. Conclusions

How can we bring to bear the novel's understanding of space as intensely and precisely imagined, subjective, located, and relational – and of the world as made of crisscrossing stories and trajectories (Massey) that matter only when they become “significant” – upon Ghosh's essay on his grandfather's bookcase?

If we morph the uncle/grandfather into Tridib of the *Shadow Lines*, the books in the bookcase appear less like single shelf of world literature and more like overlapping significant literary geographies. Interestingly, English education and its canonisation of English literature as the pinnacle of taste and a model to imitate is not prominent here – as we would imagine from a postcolonial perspective. Rather, what the bookshelf shows is that from the early twentieth century English became the *medium* to reach out to richer and “better” literatures like the Russian or the French, while it was popular English writers like Marie Corelli that were widely read and appreciated (Joshi 2002). What the bookcase also shows is the emerging notion of world literature anointed by the Nobel prize, whose winners figure prominently on the bookshelf up to Ivo Andrič, who won the Nobel prize in 1961. (By contrast, the growing interest in East Asian and literatures evidenced by the prominent Calcutta journal *Modern Review* is absent from the bookshelf, perhaps limited to the pages of the journal?) Another layer of world literature is represented by the “significant geography” of the Leftist canon that includes Maxim Gorky, Mikhail Sholokhov and Upton Sinclair. In this world of overlapping gazes and trajectories, there is no one centre to which Calcutta is only a periphery.

Economists Gibson & Graham (2002) note that one of the effects of the current globalisation discourse is that it makes local actors in “peripheral” places appear *and feel* disempowered by globalisation. Part of their work has been to make these local actors value themselves as agents of alternative economies (they call it a process of “re-cognition” and “re-subjectification”). The current discourse of world literature as a global literary system with clear centres and peripheries, winners and losers, does something similar to readers and writers in “peripheral” locations or “minor” languages. Obviously Ghosh, who writes in English, is immediately translated into many languages and has a wide/global and discerning readership, is not one of them, or is a “winner” of this literary globalisation. But it seems to me that shades of this understanding of “core” and “periphery” colour his reflections and puzzlement at his uncle/grandfather's wide-ranging bookcase of world literatures.

By contrast, *The Shadow Lines* offers a rich spatial epistemology that questions straightforward cartographic distance and instead suggests that closeness and distance are relative to one's imaginative and emotional investment. However distant or unlikely they may be, places, become significant *and* real only after you've listened to stories about them, you imagine them intensely and precisely, and you invest them with meaning. This produces a very different subjectivity for the grandfather/uncle, who, if he read so widely, appears no less worldly because he was not widely travelled. It also prompts us to re-assess his grandfather/uncle's “peripheral” position vis-à-vis world literature and to excavate a more layered and diverse reading of his library – of world literature, and of the world.

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