



HAL
open science

Reconfigurations of space in Partition novels

Sandrine Soukaï

► **To cite this version:**

Sandrine Soukaï. Reconfigurations of space in Partition novels. La clé des langues, 2019. hal-02972367

HAL Id: hal-02972367

<https://hal.science/hal-02972367>

Submitted on 20 Oct 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Reconfigurations of space in Partition novels

This article examines two Indian novels *Clear Light of Day* (1980) by Anita Desai and *The Shadow Lines* (1988) by Amitav Ghosh along with *Burnt Shadows* (2009) by Anglo-Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie, books written about the Partition of India that accompanied independence in 1947. Partition led to violence on an enormous scale; the exact number of people who were killed has never been ascertained, and estimates vary between one and two million. Partition also caused massive displacements of population, estimated between 12 and 18 million. This paper examines the way in which space – national, familial and communal – was divided and then reshaped by and through Partition. After discussing the fractures, ruptures and uprooting brought about by this trauma, I will consider the way in which diasporic writers devise fictional maps of memory of the past that foster exchanges across geographical borders.

Sommaire

1. [Introduction](#)
2. [1. From a colonial to a national \(-ist\) space: the hasty and contested mapping of the Indian subcontinent](#)
 1. [1.1 British colonial mapping of India and the Partition of the subcontinent](#)
 2. [1.2 Introduction to three iconic Partition novels](#)
3. [2. National fractures mirrored in family divisions](#)
 1. [2.1 The “perceived space” of Partition built through individual and family memories](#)
 2. [2.2 National partition reflected in family disputes](#)
 3. [2.3 The uprooting experienced by refugees and evacuees](#)
4. [3. Maps of memory commemorating Partition across geographical borders](#)
 1. [3.1 Poetic imagination creates new homes and reduces distances](#)
 2. [3.2 Maps of memory transcend communal divides](#)
 3. [3.3 International maps of memory subsume national spaces](#)
5. [Conclusion](#)
6. [Bibliographical References](#)

Introduction

The India that had been colonized by Great Britain was divided into two Dominions, which did not accede to independence exactly at the same time. **Pakistan was “born” on August 14, 1947, whereas India became independent on the following day:** at midnight on August 15, Nehru proclaimed independence, and on the 15th of August every year India celebrates its “Independence Day” (Pakistan holds its own celebrations on the 14th). The two new countries later shed their Dominion status: India became the Republic of India in 1950 and Pakistan the “Islamic republic of Pakistan” in 1956. **Partition was a traumatic event accompanied by the largest displacements of population of the 20th century** – Muslims fleeing to Pakistan while Hindus and Sikhs escaped to India – coupled with sectarian violence, killings, kidnappings and rapes. The first Anglo-Indian novel to portray the horror of Partition, *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by Khushwant Singh, depicted with realistic precision the massacres of

train passengers trying to find refuge across the new borders but Partition literature only flourished internationally after the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). In this article I propose to consider how space is shaped and reconfigured in this literature by focusing on three novels: Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009).

The analysis of Partition literature is inscribed within the field of postcolonial studies, a historiographical, socio-cultural and literary critical field that emerged in the 1980s American academia in reaction to the cultural heritage left by the western colonization. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is nowadays considered as the foundational book of postcolonial theory. Other iconic writers associated to this field include Gayatri Spivak, famous for her definition of the subaltern in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), and Homi Bhabha, best known for *The Location of Culture* (1994). **The development of postcolonial studies was marked by the "spatial turn" of literary theory and cultural geography, a departure from time and history to focus on space and geography,** initiated by Edward Soja's assertion that "today [...] it might be space more than time that hides consequences from us, the 'making of geography' that provides the most revealing tactical and theoretical world" (1989, 1).

"Space" is a main concern of postcolonial theory and Partition literature since they explore the ways in which colonial power and knowledge were enacted through territorial conquest and the creation of colonized spaces and peoples whose subjugation was maintained thanks to physical and ideological marginalization. Moreover, distinguishing between space and place is important when considering the relationship among space, power, and social relations at stake in postcolonial studies. Michel de Certeau made this distinction by defining place as "the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence [...] an instantaneous configuration of positions [that] implies an indication of stability." On the other hand, space is "composed of intersections of mobile elements," "a practiced place" (1984, 117). Inspired by de Certeau, **Soja coined the term "spatiality" to capture the dynamic nature of space.** He argued that "the organization, and meaning of space is a product of social translations, transformations, and experience" (1989, 80).

Soja's understanding of space was also influenced by Henri Lefebvre's definition of space in *The Production of Space*, originally published in French 1974. For Lefebvre, geographical space is cultural and thereby has a history of change. **Lefebvre demonstrates that space and relations across territories are given cultural meaning through historical social struggles.** He distinguishes three historical axes of space, the first of which is the '**perceived space**' or '**physical space**' of everyday social life and commonsensical perception which is often ignored in the professional and theoretical '**conceived space**' of cartographers. Nonetheless, for the theoretician, the person who is fully human also dwells in a '**lived space**' of the imagination which is kept alive and accessible by the arts and literature. This last space not only transcends but has the power to refigure the balance of popular 'perceived space' and official 'conceived space' (1991, 38-39). **This article will demonstrate that Partition literature produces 'lived space[s]' that reshape the fragmented cartography – i.e. the 'conceived space'– of the subcontinent traced in 1947 by focusing on the 'perceived space' of cultural exchanges that compose the everyday life of the inhabitants of the subcontinent across territorial and ideological divides.**

I will first recall the historical background which inspired the three novels under study, i.e. the transition from colonial India to a hastily mapped out national(ist) space that remains contested to this day. I will then show that the fractures engendered by Partition at the national level structure the novels as they are mirrored in individual and familial spaces. Finally, I will suggest that Indian and Pakistani second and third generation writers create international maps of memory to commemorate the trauma across the geographical borders traced at Partition.

1. From a colonial to a national (-ist) space: the hasty and contested mapping of the Indian subcontinent

1.1 British colonial mapping of India and the Partition of the subcontinent

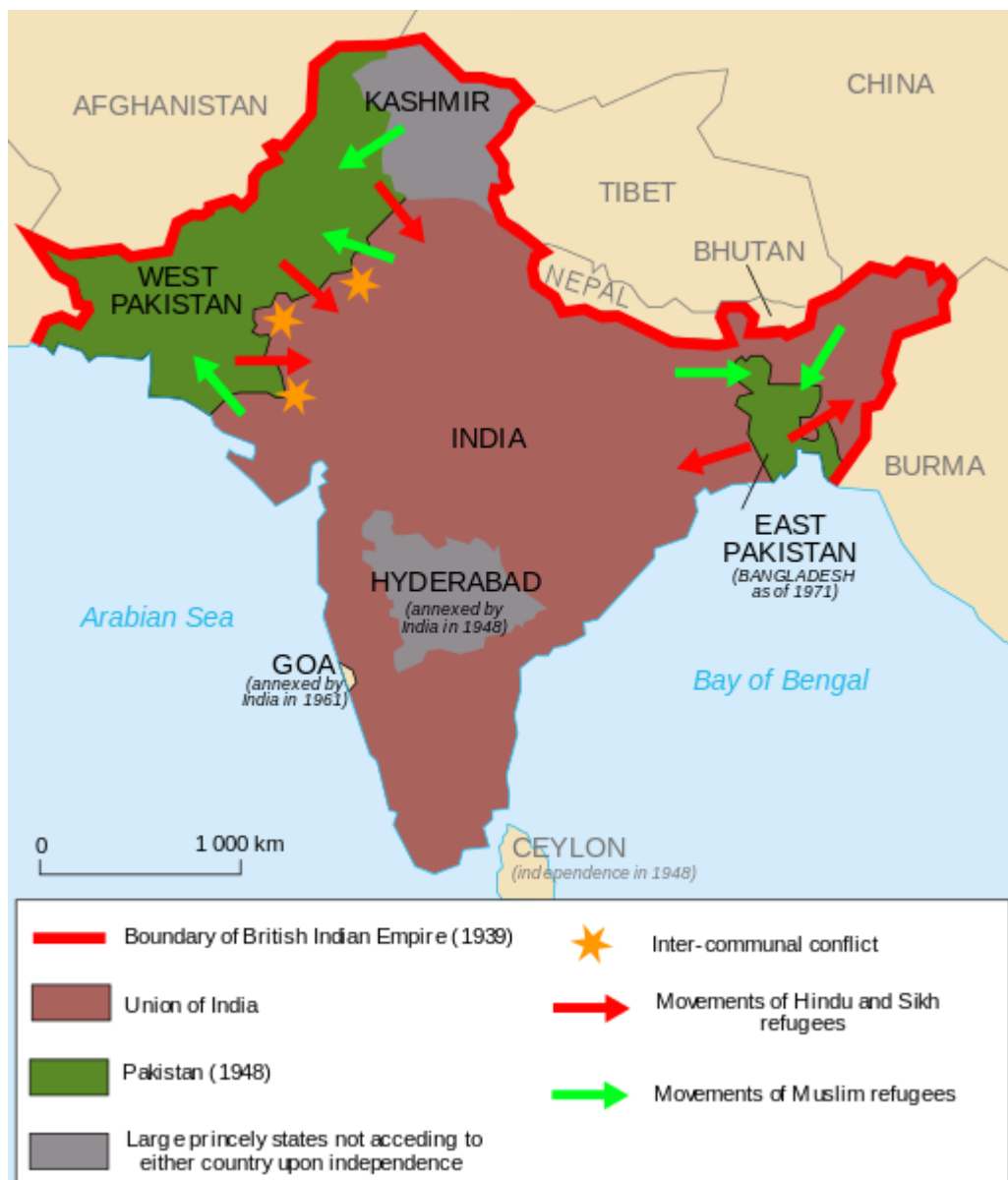
Reading Partition literature requires an understanding of the major economic, socio-cultural and political stakes that led to Independence. British imperialism first spread in India through economic exploitation with the creation of the East India Company which ruled over several Indian regions from the 1600s till 1858 when the Company's power was transferred to the British Crown. The Crown appointed British officials to rule the colony and anglicized India thanks to missionaries who spread Christianity. **In 1835, Lord Macaulay adopted a resolution that made English the official language of India and made the teaching of English and English literature compulsory** to educate an Indian elite that would be submissive to the British.

However, **the Indian intelligentsia stood up to the British notably by challenging the British historians' portrayal of India.** In fact, until the 19th century, apart from the ancestral historical Hindu epics of India – like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* – no history of India as a nation had been written by the Indians as India did not exist yet as a unified territory. The widespread histories of India written by British historians portrayed the Crown as a patriarchal figure protecting an effeminate, barbaric and powerless India. This is for instance the vision offered by James Mill. For Mill, Indians' "stature is considerably below the European standard" (1817, 311), their body is "feeble" (312), they are characterized by a "phlegmatic indolence" (313) and live in a "state of barbarity and rudeness" (314).

However, in the early 19th century, nationalism emerged amongst the local literate elite of Bengal. The well-known Bengali poet Bankimchandra Chatterjee encouraged his fellowmen to resist colonialism by writing their own history of India and he wrote the first Anglo-Indian novel, *Rajmohan's Wife*, in 1864. The genre appeared as a literary weapon to rewrite the history of India and shape Indian nationalism. As this ideology spread, the second largest religious community of British India, the Muslims, felt threatened.

The Muslims' political power had been declining since the arrival of the British who excluded them from public offices and saw them as a threat, especially after the Great Mutiny of 1857 when Sepoy soldiers had rebelled against the British army and the Muslim community had temporarily been banished from Delhi. As the **Home Rule movement for independence, which brought together local revolts, developed in the early 20th century and nationalism gained pace**, the Muslims started to fear that the creation of an independent nation would lead to the domination of the Hindu majority. Yet, it was only in 1940 that the leading Muslim party, the Muslim League, headed by Mohamed Ali Jinnah, began to ask for the creation of a Muslim nation at the Conference of Lahore. The League used the **two-nation theory** to back

up their demand. **According to this theory, communities with different cultural and religious affiliations could not coexist in the same territory.** Nonetheless, the borders of the Muslim state of Pakistan remained unspecified and were eventually drawn within five weeks by the British and Indian members of the Boundary Commissions of Bengal and Punjab, under the supervision of a British lawyer, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who barely knew India. If territorial mapping is usually used by a nation-state to enforce its control over a given space, in the case of the subcontinent this hasty mapping brought Pakistan into existence; as Claire Chambers remarks: “the map [...] precedes the territory, and geopolitical symbiosis is systematically dismantled by both colonial and indigenous cartographers” (20). **In 1947, the new maps of the subcontinent carved through the provinces of Punjab and Bengal, dividing villages, railroads, fields, etc.** Fearing additional communal riots, the British and the local Indian authorities kept these maps hidden and disclosed them only on August, 17th. When Partition took place, most Indians had no idea where the new borders stood. On the Eastern front, West Bengal went to India while East Bengal went to Pakistan; on the Western front, West Punjab went to Pakistan while East Punjab remained in India. Pakistan was made of two wings separated by India.



[The partition of India \(1947\)](#). Source: Wikimedia, [Creative Commons](#).

Chambers observes that if frontiers existed in the sub-continent before colonization, “they were often shifting, multiple, or unfixed” (24). But, with colonial expansion, Western Europe redefined mapping and borders. **From the 18th century onwards, borders came to be perceived as rigid limitations imposed on a given territory to ensure colonial knowledge and control. As such it was also believed that borders could “divide and separate identities” (*ibidem*).** The borders traced at Partition allowed the two emerging states to legitimate their nationalist power as they “made the state[s] appear to be natural unit[s]”, “homogeneous” spaces by occluding “correspondences or shared histories” (*ibidem*).

The Indian government that came to power when India became a Republic in 1952 shaped a nationalist historiography that marginalized the violence that accompanied independence so as to maintain the unity of the nation. The collective amnesia that was thus encouraged would only be broken in the 1980s with the influence of subaltern historians, memory studies and Indian feminist scholars who moved away from the grand national narratives of Independence to focus on the private memories and testimonies that gave voice to silenced victims of the tragedy such as women and children. **Politically committed Indian writers who had witnessed Partition as children or belonged to a second generation that carried with them stories of this tragedy handed over by their elders also started to write about the dark side of independence; they portrayed Partition as a traumatic experience with a lasting impact on the Indian population.** The novels we examine here were penned by such writers.

1.2 Introduction to three iconic Partition novels

Clear Light of Day was written by the renowned Indian novelist **Anita Desai**, born in Delhi in 1937. It is the most autobiographical of Desai’s works, inspired by her experience of Partition as a child. The novel revolves around a middle-class Hindu family, the Das, who live in a secluded area of Old Delhi when Partition breaks out. The timeline oscillates between the narrative present – which corresponds to two decades after Partition – and the past – which alternately portrays the childhood of the Das siblings and the summer of 1947 when they were already young adults. In the novel, disjointed family memories build a subjective, selective and fragmented narrative of Partition.

Amitav Ghosh, a Bengali writer born in Calcutta in 1956, wrote many novels about India and the region of Bengal in particular. *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is a memorial semi-autobiographical narrative partly based on his childhood memories of communal riots which occurred in 1964 in Calcutta and Dhaka (a Pakistani city until the 1971 War of Independence when it became the capital of Bangladesh). The story follows an anonymous narrator haunted by memories of his eccentric uncle and mentor, Tridib, who was murdered by a mob of Muslim rioters in Dhaka. In the 1980s, in an effort to confront his painful past and make sense of it, the narrator remembers and writes his family’s history. The narrative starts in the first quarter of the 20th century and is interspersed with voices belonging to several family members, most notably the voice of the narrator’s grandmother. The nationalist fight leading to independence is romanticized through her eyes, but it appears retrospectively, filtered through the memorial reconstruction of the adult narrator, as a violent movement characterized by terrorism and sectarian violence. The grandmother promotes a seemingly unifying vision of nationalism which would include all communities – Hindus and Muslims, Bengalis and Punjabis – but her vision relies on the exclusion of all the opponents to the

hegemonic nationalist discourse. This exclusive conception of nationalism foreshadows the geographical split of 1947 and the novel goes on to portray the instability and haziness of the post-Partition cartography of the Indian subcontinent by using the recurring image of the “shadow lines”.

The Pakistani-British writer **Kamila Shamsie** belongs to a third generation of writers born long after Partition. She was born in Karachi in 1973, but her novel *Burnt Shadows* covers several decades of world tragedies starting with the 1945 bombing of Nagasaki and ending with the 2001 New York terrorist attacks. The novel originally places the history of India on a world map of traumatic histories by following the trajectory of a Japanese female protagonist, a survivor of the bombing, or *hibakusha* in Japanese, Hiroko Tanaka. Like the two previous novels, *Burnt Shadows* relies on the technique of the flashback since the incipit is set in a prison cell of Guantanamo then the plot rewinds back to the 1945 Nagasaki tragedy before unfolding linearly.

The three novels do not dwell on the historical and political circumstances that led to the Independence of India. However, the Partition that accompanied it is retraced through individual and family memories whose elliptical and chaotic structures reflect the opacity of the geographical borders inherited after independence. Partition also brought about a series of socio-cultural divisions as new borders emerged between the Muslims and the Hindus both across national borders and within each state. This is illustrated in the novels through communal clashes but also through forced migrations. Indeed, **the novels explore the plight of families and individuals who became refugees uprooted from their homelands or who were turned into exiles at home, unable to find a sense of belonging after the territorial schism.**

2. National fractures mirrored in family divisions

2.1 The “perceived space” of Partition built through individual and family memories

The three novels analyzed here rely on individual or family memories to build a narrative of Partition. As such, the cartography of the subcontinent they shape is similar to the “perceived space” defined by Lefebvre insofar as it is primarily presented through the everyday experiences of those who suffered the consequences of Partition. In *Clear Light of Day*, the broken syntax used as Bim remembers the events of the summer 1947 mimes the fractures created by Partition:

‘Isn’t it strange how life won’t flow, like a river, but moves in jumps, as if it were held by back locks that are open now and then to let it jump forwards in a kind of flood? There are these long still stretches – nothing happens – each day is exactly like the other – plodding, uneventful – and then suddenly there is a crash – mighty deeds take place – momentous events – even if one doesn’t know it at the time – and then life subsides again in the backwaters till the next push, the next flood? That summer was certainly one of them – the summer of ’47 – (1980, 64)

Paradoxically, the dashes both break the syntax, inscribing the many ruptures that Partition occasioned in daily life, and connect oxymoronic terms so that “uneventful” moments are brought together with “mighty deeds” and “momentous events.” This syntactical proximity

illustrates the way national narrative and familial experiences of Partition are intertwined in the novel.

2.2 National partition reflected in family disputes

In *Clear Light of Day*, some years after Partition, the elder son of the Das family, Raja, moves out of the Das' ancestral house in Delhi to settle in Hyderabad, after marrying the daughter of the Alis, their former Muslim neighbours who had left Delhi hastily in 1947 due to Partition riots. This leads to a family division as Bim, the elder sister, is left to alone to take care of the decrepit house and of their younger autistic brother. **The familial dispute is objectified in the novel through the domestic imagery of the house which symbolically connects the family rupture and the national partition.** Madhusudan Prasad argues that the static image of the house reflects Bim's anger and bitterness for being forsaken as it appears as "a threatening presence" throughout the novel (1984, 369). The abandoned house however also evokes the houses that Muslim families left because of Partition, especially the Alis' former house which is metaphorically compared to a corpse once emptied out: "[...] The house was so strangely unlit and deserted as it had never been for as long as they had known it – like a body whose life and warmth they were accustomed to and took for granted, now grown cold and stiff and faded" (Desai, 1980, 111). The family split thus appears both as a consequence and a reflection of the national fracture.

In the same way, in *The Shadow Lines*, Partition is first evoked indirectly in the novel through a depiction of the division of the ancestral family house owned by the narrator's paternal great-grandfather in Dhaka. A family dispute between the narrator's grandfather and the latter's brother leads to the separation of the home. The brotherly row takes place before Partition but the hasty and inconsistent partition, narrated many decades after independence, seems to foreshadow the national event:

[T]hey decided to divide the house with a wooden partition wall: there was no other alternative. But the building of the wall proved to be far from easy because the two brothers, insisting on their rights with a lawyer-like precision, demanded that the division be exact down to the minutest detail. When the wall was eventually built, they found that it had ploughed right through a couple of doorways so that no one could get through them anymore; it had also gone through a lavatory, bisecting an old commode. The brothers even partitioned their father's old nameplate. It was divided down the middle by a thin white line, and their names were inscribed on the two halves – of necessity in letters so tiny that nobody could read them. (1988, 121)

The minute description of the partitioned areas underlines the absurdity of a division that destroys commonly shared places and objects. Later the narrative reveals that the parting of the family branches is consummated by the creation of two separate states as some family members reside in Calcutta, in India, while others stay in Dhaka, in Pakistan. Besides, though they moved to India long before Partition, the narrator's parents and his grandmother feel haunted by Partition in the 1960s because of the presence of refugee camps in the periphery of Calcutta. As a schoolchild, the narrator himself dreads being assimilated to these refugees who live in dire straits while his middle-class Bengali family enjoys a comfortable but precarious life.

2.3 The uprooting experienced by refugees and evacuees

Unsurprisingly, the three novels focus on the experience of individuals displaced by Partition. *Clear Light of Day* portrays briefly, but poignantly, the harsh living conditions of refugees who are seen through the eyes of Bim, when she returns home on a night bus, as an anonymous mass pouring into India:

The bus lumbered on past the city walls and the massed jungle of rag-and-tin huts that had grown beneath them, housing the millions of refugees who were struggling in across the new border. Here there was no light except for the dull glow of small cooking fires, blotted out by smoke and dust and twilight. They swarmed and crawled with a kind of crippled, subterranean life that made Bim feel that the city would never recover from this horror, that it would be changed irremediably, that it was already changed, no longer the city she had been born in. (1980, 131)

The scene stands out as both nightmarish and vivid through the contrast of light and darkness. The pain and hardships faced by the refugees become alive and palpable through the verbs “struggling in” and “crawled” and the adjective “crippled.”

Similarly, *Burnt Shadows* focuses on the forced migration experienced by its protagonists, the Indian Muslim Sajjad and his Japanese wife, Hiroko. Sajjad and Hiroko are forced to settle down in Karachi in 1948 after being denied the right to return to Delhi, left in the summer of 1947. The second section of the novel ends on Sajjad’s discovery that the new migration legislation prohibits Muslims any return to India: “They said I chose to leave [...]. They said I’m one of the Muslims who chose to leave India. It can’t be unchosen. They said, Hiroko, they said I can’t go back to Dilli. I can’t go back home” (2009, 125). The repetition of the anonymous phrase “they said” transforms the representatives of the Indian Consulate into nameless, dehumanized and insensitive executants of the state migration policies. The arbitrariness of such policies is heightened through the paradoxical reference to a “choice” made by the migrants while they were forced to flee to escape death. The migration legislation adopted by both Pakistan and India in the aftermath of Partition contributed to further alienate those who migrated by treating their houses as “evacuee” property and using them to accommodate the arriving refugees.

For instance, in *The Shadow Lines* the narrator’s grandmother feels alienated because before travelling from Calcutta to her birthplace, Dhaka, for the first time since Partition, in 1964, she learns that her family ancestral home in Dhaka is now occupied by Muslim refugees from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The presence of refugees is perceived as a violent evasion that destabilizes her sense of belonging and her identity: “Our house? she said. You mean our house has been occupied by refugees?” (1988, 132). The repetition of the question underlines the incredulity and the shock the grandmother experiences. In the same way, in *Burnt Shadows*, the family home left behind by Sajjad as he settled down in Karachi is seized by the government even if one of his brothers still lives in India. As family houses are places where old private bonds are wrought, **expropriation represents the intimate ruptures that Partition brings about in daily life** and age-old practices. **The focus on state expropriation shifts the narrative from the “conceived space” elaborated by cartographers that migration policies were meant to consolidate to the “perceived space” of ordinary people** (Lefebvre, 1991, 38-39) **to emphasize the powerlessness of individuals faced with state legislation.** This is illustrated by the words of one of the narrator’s relatives about the Dhaka

family house in *The Shadow Lines*: “my husband realized he wouldn’t be able to reclaim that house – no Pakistani court was going to evict those refugees” (1988, 134).

The novels are structured by the forced migrations of refugees and the expropriation of those who are considered as “evacuees” by the government because they now live on the other side of the border. Spatial disorientation also leads to identity instability as citizens are forced to quit their birthplace and to endorse a new nationality. Yet, as Claire Chambers argues, if “maps divide by their construction of borders” (2011, 24), “space is not simply a given, but is socially constructed and imagined” (2011, 45). In fact, the novels articulate through memory and poetic imagination transcultural maps that offer an alternative cartography of the South Asian region where geopolitical boundaries can be contested and crossed.

3. Maps of memory commemorating Partition across geographical borders

Maps of memory can be defined as narratives weaving individual memories to replace “officially sanctioned histories, supposedly verified by maps” (Mallot, 2012, 190). The three novels examined here offer such maps as they rely on subjective memories rather than official historiography to reconstruct a narrative of the past; in so doing they undermine the apparent impermeability of the borders drawn in 1947 and later again in 1971.

3.1 Poetic imagination creates new homes and reduces distances

In *The Shadow Lines*, poetic imagination shapes maps of memory that transcend borders as the adult narrator follows the advice of his late mentor, his uncle Tridib. The latter claimed that one could travel to distant places through imagination and live in these places more fully and sensitively than people who physically inhabited them:

And still, I knew that the sights Tridib saw in his imagination were infinitely more detailed, more precise than anything I would ever see. He said to me once that one could never know anything except through desire, real desire [...] a longing for everything that was not in oneself [...] 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. (1988, 29)

Trusting in his imaginative power, the adult narrator sets off on a quest to understand what happened during the riots of 1964 and finally uncovers a disturbing reality: despite the geographical separation created by the borders of 1947, India and Pakistan remained locked in such an ancient socio-cultural proximity that the violent riots which had occurred in Dhaka in 1964 had been mirrored by communal strife in Calcutta. **The image of the mirror illustrates the inability to dissociate between “oneself” and “one’s image in the mirror,” but also oneself and the Other, i.e. the member of the other community.** Thus the border between self and Other and the borders of the subcontinent are shown to be equally tenuous and contestable. The recurring mirror image redefines the notion of space as it “is an artifice that aids the narrator to acquire a moratoria prerogative of being in other people’s *shoes*, at many places and times simultaneously” and it “imaginatively [erases] the ‘shadow lines’ between two people’s experiences in disparate geographical contexts and at discrete historical junctures” (Sen, 2002, 131). As such the image also reconnects the communities divided at

Partition and shows that despite all governmental efforts to separate and categorize these populations some bonds are undeniably maintained in memory.

In *Burnt Shadows*, memory maps also help to transcend distances as they rely on the imaginative power of literature to recreate the home lost by an individual uprooted by Partition. Old Delhi is summoned through a fusion of sounds and images that transport the Indian Muslim protagonist Sajjad back to the home he can no longer return to:

She [Hiroko] said his name [...] – but he couldn't hear her above the fluttering of pigeons and the call of the muezzin of Jama Masjid and the cacophony of his brothers' arguments and the hubbub of merchants and buyers in Chandni Chowk and the rustling of palm leaves in the monsoons and the laughter of his nephews and nieces and the shouts of kite-fliers and the burble of fountains in courtyards and the husky voice of the never-seen neighbour singing ghazals before sunrise and his heartbeat, his frantic heartbeat... (2009, 126)

The rich sonotope conjures up a detailed and realistic urban map where geographical landmarks such as the bazar and the mosque can be identified. Sensations seem to saturate the text and the cacophony of sounds is heightened by the syntax itself as the sentences become longer through the use of polysyndeton. Unvoiceable affects thus flow through the text and syntax to rebuild the home that was left behind. Affective memory is also mobilized in the concluding pages of *Clear Light of Day* to recreate, this time, the Urdu culture shared by Hindus and Muslims during poetic soirées whose persistence reflects the cross-cultural ties maintained after Partition.

3.2 Maps of memory transcend communal divides

Clear Light of Day focuses on the Das family split after Partition and their eventual reconciliation at the end of the novel. By so doing, the novel suggests that long-standing bonds can overcome disputes such as communal skirmishes. The narrative centers on Bim's recollection of family memories which ultimately lead her to forgive her brother's desertion. Additionally, her memories bring together Hindu and Muslim communities by rekindling Urdu. **If Partition led to a marginalization of Muslims and their culture in India, especially Urdu language and literature, the narrative is interspersed with references to famous classic Urdu poets and it portrays Urdu as a shared cultural heritage.** The novel concludes on a poetic soirée, a *mushaira*, organized by Hindus, where Urdu poems and songs are passed on from an older generation to a younger one. For Ananya Kabir, Urdu songs and poetry have here a "reconciliatory power" (2005, 29) especially since the "lyric impulse [...]" offers better options for mobilizing nations increasingly fractured along religious and ethnic lines" than narratives and storytelling (2005, 37).

If poetic imagination shapes affective maps of memory that transcend physical and imaginary distances as well as communal differences, it also produces a new cartography of the Indian subcontinent by placing Partition on a world map of traumas in the two most recent novels analyzed here.

3.3 International maps of memory subsume national spaces

Far from being an event of the past, Partition is a trauma that is revived and reshaped continuously through individual and collective memorialization. As such, the experience of Partition and the "lived spaces" associated to it, i.e. spaces that are transformed by and

through social interactions (Lefebvre, 1991, 38-39), **cannot be understood without taking into account the new flows of people, capital as well as virtual and material communication engendered by globalization.** These uncontrollable and increasingly dense flows challenge the official cartography of the subcontinent. Both Ghosh and Shamsie suggest this as they portray Partition as one of many world traumas that have affected the world since the mid-20th century. *The Shadow Lines* recalls Partition in parallel with the bombing of London during the Second World War and with the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pakistani conflicts. The novel *Burnt Shadows* is particularly ambitious in its mapping of historical tragedies since it encompasses the Nagasaki bombing, Partition, conflicts in Afghanistan and the New York terrorist attacks. The global structure of the novel itself demonstrates that “lived space” cuts across bounded locales. Indeed, the book is divided in four sections – each set in a different country marked by a traumatic event –, that are connected by the individual memories of the Japanese female protagonist as she travels to various continents, confronts new traumas and meets new cultures through border-crossings that are chosen or imposed. This structure produces “hybrid and potentially subversive spaces,” “liminal border zone[s] where identities grounded in difference are shaped” (Vitolo, 2013, 2). Indeed, these spaces enable the protagonist to shape her identity against the nationalistic discourses that are imposed on her by coercive nation-states as she contests certain social conventions related to race and religion, and adopts a critical view on national belonging.

By placing Partition on international maps, the novelists Shamsie and Ghosh demonstrate that the representation of nations as bounded national(ist) spaces to be safeguarded from neighbouring countries at all costs has become obsolete. As such, the perpetual communal and interstate conflicts that agitate the Indian subcontinent as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh try to preserve and consolidate their territorial boundaries seem irrelevant in the globalized world we inhabit. Populations’ sense of belonging and identification are now to be thought of on an international scale since personal and collective identities stem from multicultural contacts and exchanges.

Conclusion

Space is central to Partition literature which recalls the tragic territorial division of the subcontinent along religious lines. **The cartography that was traced in 1947 by British cartographers little aware of the socio-cultural reality of the terrain is still contested today, especially in the region of Kashmir.** It is nowadays easier for an Indian to travel the world than to go to neighbouring Pakistan. However, **second and third generations of writers, notably from the diasporas** living in the United Kingdom and the United States, **have actively taken part in building cross-cultural maps of memory to envision a future where India, Pakistan and Bangladesh would work together** in commemorating the past and building peaceful social, cultural and political relationships for the generations to come. The novels of these writers are a first step towards appeasing conflicts in such a sensitive area of the postcolonial world as South Asia; they are a reminder that literature is always inherently political as it shapes a new vision of the world and can create connections that go beyond atavistic nationalism.

Bibliographical References

BHABHA, Homi K. 2009 (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

CHAMBERS, Claire. 2011. “[A]cross the border, there existed another reality’ (Ghosh, 1995, 219): Nations, Borders and Geography in *The Shadow Lines*,” in Sandip Anin (ed.), *Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines: A Critical Anthology*, pp.19-53.

DE CERTEAU, Michel. 1984 (1980). *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Steven Rendall (trans.). Los Angeles: University of California Press.

DESAI, Anita. 2013 (1980). *Clear Light of Day*. Uttar Pradesh: Random House India.

GHOSH, Amitav. 2005 (1988). *The Shadow Lines*. New York: Mariner.

KABIR, Ananya Jahanara. 2005. “Beyond Narrative: Song and Story in South Asia,” *Moving Worlds*, volume 5, n° 2, pp 22-42.

KING, Bruce. (May 2011). “Kamila Shamsie’s Novels of History, Exile and Desire,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, volume 47, n° 2, pp. 147-158.

LEFEBVRE, Henri. 1991 (1974). *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith (trans.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

MALLOT, Edward J. 2012. *Memory, Nationalism, and Narrative in Contemporary South Asia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

MILL, James. 1817. *The History of British India. 3 volumes*. London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy.

PRASAD, Madhusudan. Summer 1984. “Imagery in the Novels of Anita Desai: A Critical Study,” *World Literature Today*, volume 58, n° 3, pp. 363-369.

RUSHDIE, Salman. 1995 (1981). *Midnight’s Children*. London: Vintage.

SAID, Edward W. 1979 (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.

SEN, Nivedita. 2002. “‘Going Away’ and ‘Coming Home’: *The Shadow Lines* and the Travel Motif in Children’s Fiction,” in Arvind Chowdhary (ed.), *Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines: Critical Essays*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, pp.128-144.

SHAMSIE, Kamila. 2009. *Burnt Shadows*. London: Bloomsbury.

SINGH, Khushwant. 1988 (1956). *Train to Pakistan*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher.

SOJA, Edward W. (1989). *Postmodern geographies: The reassertion of space in critical social theory*. London: Verso.

SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 271-313.

VITOLLO, Daniela. May 2016. "The Performance of Identity in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*," *Transnational Literature*, volume 8, n° 2, <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>.

Pour citer cette ressource :

Sandrine Soukaï, "Reconfigurations of space in Partition novels", *La Clé des Langues* [en ligne], Lyon, ENS de LYON/DGESCO (ISSN 2107-7029), septembre 2019. URL: <http://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/litterature/litterature-postcoloniale/reconfigurations-of-space-in-partition-novels>