

**PHYSICAL, CULTURAL, AND EMOTIONAL BORDERS IN CONTEMPORARY
MIGRANT LITERATURE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE
SHADOW LINES* AND MOHSIN HAMID'S *EXIT WEST***

Ms. Bhagwat Kushawarta Shivnath

Department of English, SBES College of Arts and Commerce, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar,
affiliated to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar,
Maharashtra, India 431001

ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper around the idea of borders—physical, cultural, and emotional—as represented in contemporary migrant literature, with a specific focus on Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. Drawing on border studies, migration theory, and postcolonial criticism, it argues that these novels destabilize conventional understandings of borders as fixed lines on a map and instead conceptualize them as fluid, imagined, and deeply embedded in personal and collective memory. The paper outlines how physical borders (nation-states, passports, migration regimes), cultural borders (language, customs, religion), and emotional borders (belonging, estrangement, trauma) intersect to shape migrant subjectivities and narrative forms.

KEYWORDS: Migration Literature, Border Studies, Post colonialism, Diaspora, Cultural Identity, Emotional Borders, Physical Border

1. INTRODUCTION

Border studies has undergone a major conceptual shift from viewing borders as static territorial lines to understanding them as social institutions, processes, and symbols. Scholars now emphasize that borders are produced through everyday practices, discourses of security and sovereignty, and the lived experiences of those who cross or inhabit them. Migration literature provides a privileged site for examining these dynamics because it narrativizes dislocation, identity transformation, and the negotiation of multiple belongings. [2][5][7][8]

In South Asian and transnational fiction, works such as Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) have been widely studied for their complex engagement with partition memory, nationalism, and the contemporary refugee crisis. Both novels foreground characters whose lives are marked by movement across cities and continents, but they also reveal that the most consequential borders are often psychological and affective rather than purely geographical. This report situates these two texts within broader theoretical debates and proposes a framework of physical, cultural, and emotional borders for comparative analysis. [9][10][3][6][11]

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

Despite extensive scholarship on postcolonial borders and migrant narratives, there remains a need for integrative frameworks that can account simultaneously for territorial, cultural, and emotional dimensions of bordering. Existing studies often prioritize either geopolitical borders—focusing on

states, immigration policies, and securitization—or cultural identity and hybridity, without fully theorizing how these layers intersect within literary representation. [2][5][7]

The present study addresses this gap by asking how *The Shadow Lines* and *Exit West* depict physical, cultural, and emotional borders, and how these representations challenge dominant discourses of nationalism and refugeehood. The key objectives are: [9][10][4]

- To outline a conceptual model of physical, cultural, and emotional borders rooted in contemporary border studies and migration theory. [5][2]
- To analyze how *The Shadow Lines* reimagines borders through memory, narration, and the critique of militant nationalism. [3][6][9]
- To examine how *Exit West* uses magical-realist portals and multi-nodal storytelling to rethink the global refugee crisis and the politics of mobility. [10][4][12]
- To compare the two novels in terms of their treatment of belonging, displacement, and the possibility of transnational or cosmopolitan identities. [1][3]

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: PHYSICAL, CULTURAL, AND EMOTIONAL BORDERS

A. Physical Borders

Contemporary border scholarship argues that physical borders are not merely lines demarcating sovereign territories, but complex regimes of control involving infrastructure, bureaucratic practices, and technologies of surveillance. Borders are increasingly externalized, internalized, and virtualized through visa regimes, biometric identification, and security screening, so that migrants encounter borders far from the territorial edge of the state. In literary narratives, such physical borders appear as checkpoints, detention centers, or documentary requirements that determine who may move and under what conditions. [2][5][7][8]

B. Cultural Borders

Cultural borders refer to symbolic boundaries that differentiate groups in terms of language, religion, customs, and ways of life. They are closely related to Benedict Anderson's notion of nations as "imagined communities" unified by shared narratives yet fragmented by internal differences. Migration literature frequently stages clashes between tradition and modernity or between diasporic and host-community cultures, showing how migrants negotiate cultural codes, stereotypes, and expectations. [5][7]

C. Emotional Borders

Emotional borders are the affective boundaries that structure feelings of belonging, estrangement, fear, and attachment. Psychological research on migration and self-identity demonstrates that displacement can produce identity conflicts, loneliness, and fractured senses of self as individuals traverse multiple social worlds. Literary texts dramatize these inner borders through narrative voice, memory, and interpersonal relationships, revealing how trauma, nostalgia, and desire shape migrant subjectivities. [1][6]

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration literature has developed as a distinct field engaging with themes of exile, diaspora, and transnationalism. Theoretical perspectives range from postcolonial studies and globalization theory to feminist and queer approaches that highlight intersectional dimensions of mobility. A major insight is that migration destabilizes fixed identities by situating individuals in "in-between" spaces where cultural and political categories are contested. [7]

Within border studies, projects such as EUBORDERSCAPES and related scholarship stress that borders are dynamic and multi-scalar, operating from the local to the global. Borders may persist even after their physical dismantling, as in the case of phantom limbs, where memories of former borders continue to shape social relations and political imaginaries. This has important implications for post-partition South Asia, where colonial cartography and partition violence have left enduring scars on collective memory. [9][2][3][5][8]

Critical work on *The Shadow Lines* emphasizes Ghosh's critique of nationalism and his depiction of borders as "shadowy" psychological constructs rather than fixed realities. Scholars note that the novel's fragmented, non-linear narrative structure mirrors the instability of borders and the interweaving of personal and historical memory. Studies of *Exit West* highlight Hamid's use of magical realism and speculative elements to reframe the global refugee crisis, focusing on the interplay between the personal and the political in the lives of migrants Nadia and Saeed. [10][3][4][6][12][9]

While these bodies of scholarship provide rich analyses, there are relatively few sustained comparative readings of Ghosh and Hamid that foreground a multi-dimensional border framework integrating physical, cultural, and emotional aspects. The present study contributes to this emerging conversation by systematically applying such a framework. [3][10]

5. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close reading, comparative textual analysis, and contextualization within border and migration theory. The analysis focuses on selected episodes, characters, and narrative strategies in *The Shadow Lines* and *Exit West* that exemplify physical, cultural, and emotional borders. [3][4][7]

First, relevant theoretical literature on border studies, nationalism, and migration is synthesized to refine the conceptual framework. Second, critical essays and peer-reviewed articles on each novel are reviewed to identify key debates and interpretive trends, including discussions of transnational identity in *The Shadow Lines* and magical-realist approaches to the refugee crisis in *Exit West*. Third, close readings of the novels are conducted to trace how borders are represented at the levels of plot, character, setting, temporality, and narrative voice. [9][10][2][4][5][7][3]

The methodology is interpretive rather than empirical, but it is informed by interdisciplinary insights from psychology, sociology, and human geography on migration and identity. Quotations from the novels are used illustratively (to be supplied from the primary texts), while secondary sources provide theoretical and critical support. [1][2]

6. ANALYSIS: BORDERS IN *THE SHADOW LINES*

A. Physical Borders and Partition Memory

The Shadow Lines is set across Calcutta, Dhaka, and London, charting several decades from the colonial period through partition and post-partition communal violence. The novel foregrounds the arbitrariness of political borders by showing how the same cultural and linguistic community of Bengal is divided by lines drawn on maps. Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother, embodies a passionate nationalist belief in fixed borders and clear distinctions between "us" and "them," yet she is confused about whether she needs a passport to travel from Calcutta to her birthplace in Dhaka, exposing the absurdity of newly created national divisions. [9][13]

Ghosh's representation of partition riots and the 1964 communal violence reveals how physical borders fail to contain conflict; people in Calcutta are killed for events occurring hundreds of miles away in Dhaka, underscoring the translocal nature of communal passions. Critics argue that the novel thus "problematizes the fixity of geopolitical borders" and shows them to be historically contingent and imaginatively sustained. [14][9]

B. Cultural Borders and Imagined Communities

Cultural borders in *The Shadow Lines* manifest in differences of class, race, and national background, particularly in the interactions between the Indian narrator's family and the British Price family. The friendship between Tridib and May Price crosses colonial and national boundaries, suggesting the possibility of cosmopolitan solidarities even as unequal power relations persist. Scholars link this to Anderson's idea of nations as imagined communities, noting that the characters inhabit overlapping narrative worlds that complicate simple East–West dichotomies. [3][6]

The novel also stages generational and ideological borders within the Indian context—between Tha'mma's militant nationalism and Tridib's internationalist outlook. Tridib teaches the narrator to imagine places "with precision" through stories rather than maps, encouraging a relational and ethical understanding of space that transcends cartographic borders. This cultural pedagogy of imagination destabilizes rigid national identities and opens up alternative modes of belonging. [13][9]

C. Emotional Borders: Trauma, Memory, and Belonging

At the emotional level, *The Shadow Lines* explores how trauma and memory create invisible borders within individuals and families. Tridib's death in the Dhaka riots becomes a traumatic event that shapes the narrator's sense of self and his understanding of history, even though he did not directly witness it. The narrative's non-linear structure, which circles back repeatedly to the riots through different perspectives, mirrors the fragmented nature of traumatic memory and the difficulty of achieving closure. [3][6]

Psychological research on migration and self-identity supports the view that such experiences of violence and displacement can fracture identity and lead to long-term emotional consequences. In the novel, the narrator's obsession with reconstructing events he never saw illustrates how collective memories of partition and communal conflict continue to draw emotional borders

between communities and within individuals long after physical borders have been established. [1][6][3]

7. ANALYSIS: BORDERS IN *EXIT WEST*

A. Physical Borders and Magical Portals

Exit West follows Nadia and Saeed as they flee an unnamed city engulfed in civil war, passing through mysterious doors that transport them instantaneously to locations such as Mykonos, London, and Marin County. These portals have been widely interpreted as a magical-realist device that compresses the arduous journeys of refugees while foregrounding the political reality of closed borders and restricted mobility. The doors bypass conventional border controls, yet the characters still confront militarized checkpoints, camps, and hostile host communities in their new locations, indicating that borders are reconstituted wherever they go. [10][4][11]

Critics note that this narrative strategy challenges Western assumptions about refugee narratives by decentering the journey and focusing instead on the nodes or dwelling places where migrants temporarily settle. The novel thereby enacts a shift from linear migration trajectories to a multi-nodal, networked understanding of movement in a globalized world. [4][10]

B. Cultural Borders and Host–Migrant Relations

Cultural borders in *Exit West* surface in the frictions between migrants and host populations, as well as among migrants from different backgrounds. On the Greek island and later in London, Nadia and Saeed encounter both solidarity and xenophobic hostility, highlighting how discourses of security and cultural purity shape responses to refugees. Hamid's vignettes of other door-crossers around the world—such as dark-skinned migrants entering wealthy neighborhoods—underscore global inequalities and racialized border regimes. [10][4][12]

Within the protagonists' relationship, cultural and religious differences also create internal borders: Nadia embraces secularism and autonomy, while Saeed retains a strong attachment to family and religious practices. Their diverging responses to the new cultural environments they inhabit eventually lead to emotional distance, suggesting that cultural adaptation and value change are key dimensions of migrant experience. [11][12][10]

C. Emotional Borders: Intimacy, Loss, and Transformation

Emotionally, *Exit West* traces the evolving relationship between Nadia and Saeed as they move from intense intimacy in their besieged home city to gradual estrangement in the diaspora. Migration becomes a catalyst for personal transformation: Nadia increasingly feels at home in global, heterogeneous spaces, while Saeed longs for a more rooted, community-oriented life. Their eventual separation is depicted not as failure but as an acknowledgment of divergent emotional trajectories shaped by migration. [10][11][12]

Scholars argue that the novel thus foregrounds emotional borders—the invisible thresholds at which love, solidarity, and shared memory can no longer sustain a relationship across changing contexts. At the same time, the text suggests that new forms of connection and belonging can emerge in migrant communities and translocal networks, complicating narratives of pure loss. [4][12][10]

8. DISCUSSION

When examined through the tripartite framework of physical, cultural, and emotional borders, *The Shadow Lines* and *Exit West* reveal both convergences and divergences in their treatment of migration and belonging. [10][3][4] In terms of physical borders, Ghosh's novel is rooted in the historical specificity of partition and post-partition South Asia, while Hamid's text engages a contemporary, global refugee crisis mediated by spectacular media images and securitized borders. Both, however, expose the arbitrariness and violence of territorial divisions: in *The Shadow Lines*, borders transform neighbors into enemies and turn everyday spaces into sites of communal violence; in *Exit West*, borders regulate mobility and distribute precarity unevenly across populations. [9][3][4][6][11][10]

Culturally, both novels critique narrow nationalisms and propose alternative imaginaries of community. Ghosh foregrounds transnational friendships and intergenerational dialogues that unsettle rigid East–West binaries, while Hamid sketches emergent global communities formed by migrants sharing urban spaces and makeshift camps. Yet they also acknowledge internal borders within communities—of class, gender, religion—that complicate simple oppositions between insiders and outsiders. [3][4][7][12][9][10] On the emotional plane, both texts show that the deepest borders reside in memory, desire, and affect rather than in geography alone. *The Shadow Lines* dwells on the long afterlife of partition trauma and the ways in which personal and collective memories reconfigure relationships across time and space. *Exit West* focuses more on the intimate consequences of migration for romantic love and family bonds, illustrating how mobility can both enable and fracture emotional attachments. [11][6][11][12][10][3] Taken together, the novels support border-studies arguments that contemporary borders are multi-dimensional and that their most significant effects often manifest in the everyday and emotional lives of migrants. They invite readers to rethink borders not simply as obstacles to mobility but as sites of encounter, negotiation, and potential transformation. [2][5][7]

A. Implications for Border and Migration Studies

The comparative analysis of *The Shadow Lines* and *Exit West* has several implications for broader theoretical debates. First, it demonstrates the value of integrating physical, cultural, and emotional dimensions of borders in literary and cultural analysis. Such an approach moves beyond a focus on states and policies to capture the lived, affective experiences of migrants and those who inhabit borderlands. [1][2][5][7]

Second, the novels illustrate how literary narrative can complement social-scientific research by providing nuanced, situated accounts of migration that foreground subjectivity, temporality, and imagination. The narrative experimentation in both texts—Ghosh's non-linear, memory-driven structure and Hamid's multi-nodal, portal-based plotting—enacts on the level of form the very instability and mobility they thematize. [10][3][4][7]

Third, these works contribute to ongoing debates about cosmopolitanism and transnationalism by depicting forms of belonging that exceed national frameworks while remaining attentive to power inequalities and historical traumas. Rather than advocating a simple erasure of borders, they

suggest the need for more just and empathetic forms of bordering that recognize shared humanity without ignoring structural violence. [⁹][²][³][⁵][12]

9. CONCLUSION

This report has proposed and elaborated a research topic titled "Physical, Cultural, and Emotional Borders in Contemporary Migrant Literature: A Comparative Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*." It has outlined a conceptual framework that distinguishes but interrelates physical, cultural, and emotional borders, drawing on contemporary border studies and migration theory. Through close reading and engagement with existing criticism, it has shown how both novels challenge fixed notions of borders and nationalism by foregrounding memory, imagination, and affect as key sites of bordering. The analysis suggests that literary representations of migration can deepen understanding of how borders operate in everyday life, revealing their contingent, contested, and often violent character. For further research, this framework could be extended to other migrant texts from different regions and traditions, as well as to interdisciplinary studies that combine literary analysis with empirical research on migrant experiences. By emphasizing the interdependence of physical, cultural, and emotional borders, the proposed study contributes to a more holistic understanding of migration in the contemporary world and underscores the role of literature in imagining more humane and inclusive border regimes.

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