

UNDERSTANDING AND LIVING DIASPORA IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *RUNNING IN THE FAMILY* AND AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES*

Carol Leon¹

Abstract

Contemporary times are placed under the rubric of postcoloniality and postmodernity and on many fronts it feels as if the world we are entering is anxious and dark. The uncertainties and newness we now confront prompt radical questions about ourselves: Where do we belong? How can we find a sense of self within this diversity and confusion? This article looks at two books, namely Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Though written in the 1980s, these texts still talk about our current realities and are profound studies of the condition of diaspora and how it affects individuals and communities. Both texts also seem to suggest alternative ways of belonging to the places and spaces of the world which are becoming increasingly complex with its overlaps of histories and cultures.

Keywords: Diaspora, Borders, Michael Ondaatje, Amitav Ghosh

Introduction

Though much has been said and written about diaspora, it is a subject which still continues to shape modern society. In much contemporary cultural and literary theory, diaspora is the "exemplary condition of late modernity" (Mishra 1995, p. 147). Sustained interest in the diasporic condition is generated by an awareness that "our contemporary world has seen migrations of people on a scale as never before in human history" (Katrak 1991, p. 649). This also means the coming together of diverse ethnic and cultural communities in a dramatic way. This mobility, as Katrak notes, is rooted within colonial and postcolonial histories as well as "continuing imperialist dominations" (p. 649). It could be said that the diasporic experience provides the new postcolonial subjects. However, because diasporas are complex sites or communities, they are not unproblematic, particularly in negotiating home, identity and belonging.

There are many good literary books which discuss what it is like living in the borders and having to straddle different cultures. *Running in the Family* and *The Shadow Lines* are two such books. What is particularly riveting about these texts is the ways in which they both deal with the notion of borders. Overlapping spaces,

contact zones, living in the bordelands— these themes form the core of Ondaatje and Ghosh's writings. Being diasporic writers, the experience of diaspora naturally and fully shapes the ideas in their narratives. Among their many acclaimed books, *Running in the Family* (1982) and *The Shadow Lines* (1988) are particularly important for the study of diaspora because of the way these narratives textualise the struggles and experience of living cultural diversity. Added to that, both books seem to suggest that we must seek for alternative ways of belonging to the places and spaces of the world which have become increasingly volatile, marked by flux and, often, violence.

Diasporic Borderlands

Diasporic spaces are often likened to border zones or borderlines, indicating overlaps of histories and narratives. Indeed the enunciation of cultural borders and crossings is still deeply inscribed in the itineraries of much contemporary reasoning. Borders figure prominently in postmodern and postcolonial discourse. While postmodern rhetoric includes multiple identities and the evaporation of borders, in most postcolonial discourse, borders are usually imaged as being complicit with the operations of imperial ideologies. Both these notions of borders appear in *Running in the Family* and *The Shadow Lines*. In *Post-Colonial Transformation*, Bill Ashcroft discusses the way in which boundaries and borders have caused many of the struggles and conflicts over the constitution and experience of place in post-colonial societies (p. 163). Indeed he goes on to say: "We have only to think of the prominence of frontiers, boundaries of race and ethnicity of nation, of gender and class, the binaries of centre and margin, to see how deeply the trope of the boundary embeds itself in Western thinking" (p. 164). Borders remain a major cause of global conflict—lines that continue to divide and appropriate. Together with airports and train stations, border crossing points are still crucial markers of regulatory attempts to control movement. A good example is the invisible but potent divide of Zero Line between India and Pakistan. Then there are the numerous border wars and ethnic groups fighting for autonomy in their regions. However, removed from the centre, the border also unsettles hierarchical structures and certainties. In cultural studies, notions of exile, diaspora and travel now intersect with what is called "border theory" which espouses the borderland as a site for cultural creativity. Here the "border" is treated as a radical space that flouts hegemonic forces. Border zones are nebulous because they separate even as they connect places and spaces and it is this ambiguity that makes the "border" a powerful metaphor to illuminate contemporary phenomena. The border, both in its literal and figurative sense, looms large in this study.

Borders are a recurrent motif in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*. The text which recounts Ondaatje's return to Sri Lanka after a twenty-five years hiatus is riven with the tensions of finding identity, belonging and a sense of place in the originary homeland. Ondaatje says: "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner" (p. 79).² Indeed the narrative captures the dilemma of the diasporic individual who seems to oscillate between feelings of belonging and not belonging. In his well-known essay "Imaginary Homelands," Salman Rushdie also evokes this particular situation of the diasporic person: "Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools" (p. 15). Ondaatje writes that "we own the country we grow up in, or we are aliens and invaders..."The leap

from one imagination to the other can hardly be made.” (p. 81). But Ondaatje needs to locate himself within the space of Sri Lanka. “I was running to Asia and everything would change” (p. 22).

In the first few pages of *Running in the Family*, there is a map of Ceylon showing some of the places Ondaatje will visit as he traverses parts of the island. The traveller's preparations for the trip include studying cartographic diagrams: “During quiet afternoons I spread maps onto the floor and searched out possible routes to Ceylon” (p. 22). But Ondaatje finds that the island of Ceylon which has been subjected to “the theories of sextant” (p. 63) for centuries, exerts its own reality which seems to challenge Western cartography. In the chapter Entitled “Tabula Asiae,” Ondaatje enumerates the different historical names given to Sri Lanka over the centuries and the various shapes accorded to the island which became like “a mirror,” reflecting each European power (p. 64). The maps then are mere “translations” (p. 82), “rumours of topography” (p. 64). And so Ondaatje's own narrative, though it begins with a well-marked map, becomes more fluid and open-ended. The underlining idea is that Ondaatje's homeland is a space locatable on a map yet the fluidity of this space cannot be confined and subdued. Ondaatje creates contingent maps of his island. Instead of evoking empirical elements of the landscape, Ondaatje recalls stories about his father and other family members. The fragmentary quality of the narrative reflects the fragmented yet distinct geographical landscape that constitutes home for Ondaatje.

Later impressions of Ceylon in the text differ from the one in the first chapter. In that chapter, Ceylon is juxtaposed with Canada, the differences between the two locations glaringly obvious. But the narrative soon moves away from a dichotomy of places. There is a striking example of this in the chapter “Monsoon Notebook (ii).” Back in Canada, Ondaatje plays a tape he left on one night in Ceylon to record nocturnal sounds: “Now, and here, Canadian February, I write this in the kitchen and play that section of cassette to hear not just peacocks but all the noises of the night behind them—in audible then because they were always there like breath. In this silent room (with its own unheard hum of fridge, fluorescent light) there are these frogs loud as river, gruntings, the whistle of other birds brash and sleepy” (p. 136). Two separate places are suddenly superimposed on one another. Canada, clearly defined as the point of departure in the first chapter, loses its position here as a point of reference. What emerges is an interplay of places and spaces, moving away from rigid boundaries.

Diaspora Space

In defying static lines of cartography for maps of the island which allow for diversity, Ondaatje creates what is a “diaspora space”. I borrow this term from Avtar Brah who uses it to define the site where diaspora, border and dis/location intersect to form “a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes” (p. 181). Though separation marks the diasporic experience, “diaspora space” offers new beginnings where “individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure” (Brah 1996, p. 193). The retrieval of personal identity for Ondaatje also entails a reconstruction of the community to which he belongs. Because *Running in the Family* is written from a diasporic background, it depicts the disruptions, fractures and omissions that characterise diasporic history. Ondaatje is the scion of an elite

Burgher family. For the other natives they came to represent “the residual vestiges of colonial domination” (Kanaganayakam 1992, p. 34). Nonetheless, in *Running in the Family* Ondaatje writes that there was “a large social gap” between the Burghers and the English who were never part of the Ceylonese community” (p. 41) —implying that Burghers, unlike Europeans, were natives of the island. Much of the tenuousness of this community lies in its cultural syncretism. In the narrative, Ondaatje presents himself not as an isolated being, but as embedded in a community. By taking into account today’s conditions which do not easily permit belonging, “diaspora space” engenders possibilities for reinvention and establishing a sense of belonging.

One striking feature of the text is its combination of genres: travelogue, autobiography, biography, poetry, photography, eyewitness accounts and journal entries. This entails a crossing of generic boundaries which offers not only new ways of mapping a place, but also the discursive space of the text. It also posits alternative ways of belonging and living in these spaces. A prominent feature of the narrative is its multiplicity of textual voices. The writer’s voice and his memories coalesce with those of family members, friends, acquaintances and other natives of the island. Ondaatje creates what Brah calls a “diaspora space” in which polyphonic voices tell diverse histories. These voices rely on gossip, myth, memory and exaggeration to evoke their stories. In the chapter “Lunch Conversation,” for instance, unnamed voices try to piece together the past story of a wedding lunch. Someone drowns during the lunch and these voices try to get the facts straight. Much confusion and correction ensues:

Wait a minute, wait a minute! When did all this happen, I’m trying to get it straight...
 Your mother was nine, Hilden was there, and your grandmother Lalla and David Grenier and his wife Dickie.
 How old was Hilden?
 Oh, in his early twenties.
 But Hilden was having dinner with my mother and you....
 Wait a minute, wait a minute, when is this happening?
 Your mother is nine years old, Hilden says. And out in the sea near Negombo David Grenier is drowning. I didn’t want her to go out.
 You were in love with a nine year old? (pp. 105-7)

Myth is added to the stories when a voice recounts how Lalla, Ondaatje’s maternal grandmother, who almost drowned too, relaxed and allowed the water to take her out to sea. She “eventually came back in a semi-circle. Claimed she passed ships” (p. 106). Echoes of this story reverberate in a later section of the book when Ondaatje gives his version of Lalla’s death. In this “last perfect journey” Lalla is carried away by the flood waters through the town of Nuwara Eliya and as she is swept to her death, she passes places which are dear to her. This story is beautifully moving but as Jewinski reports, Lalla had actually died “unromantically” of alcohol poisoning (Jewinski 1994, p. 118). *Running in the Family* seems to demonstrate that history is never merely a neutral recital of facts. Indeed Ondaatje is following a path that has kept some of the memories of his family intact for he asserts that “if anything,” his parents’ generation was kept alive through “this recording by exaggeration” (p. 169). Of course, the task of representation is made more difficult by the hybrid background

of the family members. *Running in the Family* problematises representations of memory. The manner in which the author weaves together memories in his text attests to their malleability. Not only are the contents of the stories sometimes questionable, they are presented in the form of a dialogue in which different voices intervene and try to correct or build on varied memories. Multiple centres of consciousness create a "diaspora space" in which identities are fluid.

Running in the Family identifies the techniques demanded by the representations of self and communal identities. One of these techniques is destabilising the process of representation. For instance, the relationship between his parents intrigues Ondaatje but in the chapter "Honeymoon," instead of talking about his parents, he lists the different happenings that occurred that year in Ceylon, running them together with events taking place in other parts of the world. Ondaatje expresses despair at the possibility of grasping at the "intimate and truthful": "But nothing is said of the closeness between two people: how they grew in the shade of each other's presence" (p. 54). He is only able to evoke the time of his parents' honeymoon by putting together newspaper reports. In so doing, Ondaatje moves one step further by resisting representation of identity altogether. There is also the sense that the personal story is never private, always interacting with the public historical narrative.

In his attempt to evoke his island home in *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje configures a map with fluid boundaries. By doing so, he can recuperate a sense of place and belonging in his homeland. In a similar vein, in trying to retrieve self and communal identities, Ondaatje employs contemporary strategies of representation which undermine conventional notions of teleological history. Imagination and myth become modes of representation able to construct a sense of self. Ondaatje and his family are portrayed as dwellers living in "diaspora space," a site which foregrounds fragmented identities and the inevitable overlay of cultures. Just like the colonialists who resorted to imaginative backing to create and maintain empire, Ondaatje shows that contemporary writers also have recourse to language and the imagination to reclaim or create identity.

The Shadow Lines of Borders

The Shadow Lines is also preoccupied with transnational cultural processes and the elusiveness of boundaries. Indeed the text evokes a wider cross-border humanity. There are certain similarities in the ways Ondaatje and Ghosh evoke diaspora space and globalised cultures in their texts. For one thing, both narratives counter the notion of history as a linear sequence of events. *Running in the Family* demonstrates the importance of varying perspectives in recounting history and that the past cannot be discounted. *The Shadow Lines* offers a huge sweep of major historical events of the past century: the freedom movement in Bengal and the Second World War, the Partition of India in 1947 and communal violence as a result of political decisions. But Ghosh brings together the past and the present, combining and melting them together to erase lines of demarcation. Hence the text seems to assert that there is no place for essentialist nationalism and viewing societies as exclusive, discrete cultures. Ghosh says in an interview: "But Proust's influence is evident also in the ways in which time and space are collapsed in the narrative of *The Shadow Lines*. I remember that at the time my ambition was to do with space what Proust had done

with time: that is, to make completely different instances of a continuum immanent in each other” (quoted in Prasad 2008, p. 9). Places and times are so intertwined in *The Shadow Lines*, inhabiting each other often in ways unknown and unacknowledged.

The Shadow Lines was published in 1988, four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s assassination. Violence and political unrest are inevitably part of the backdrop of the novel. Though they are not overtly dealt with, suggestions at the utter futility of ethnic and religious hostilities resound in the novel. The unnamed narrator in *The Shadow Lines*, recalls the people and events that shaped his childhood in Calcutta in the 1960s and later in London, when people and lasting influence of events come together in seamless and dramatic ways. It is the manner in which Ghosh deals with borders which is of interest to this study. It is generally agreed that *The Shadow Lines* refers to the invisible lines which segregate cultures and people, lines so arbitrarily and randomly decided on and which, at the same time, heavily impose over minds and hearts, sometimes to levels of extreme violence.

The narrator in the story is nameless, perhaps in line with the transcultural theme of the novel. And so though the narrator is situated within a certain context, i.e. he is a member of an immigrant family uprooted by Partition and residing in Calcutta, he is not weighed down by too many particularities of description. The novel’s centre is the friendship between two families, one Bengali and one British. This relationship takes root in colonial India and later continues against postcolonial backdrops. In this novel which is on a deep level a journey of self-discovery, there is a parallel journey of nations seeking for identity. The narrator comes to realise his own existence in India is profoundly shaped by historical ties in England and Bangladesh. In the midst of a whole group of people, there are three who have a great impact on how the narrator feels and thinks. The three characters offer the narrator ways in which he could see and experience the world. There is his fiercely nationalistic grandmother Tha’mma. Then there is his cousin, Ila, the beautiful cosmopolitan woman and finally his intellectual uncle, Tridib who travels the world through his imagination. From these worldviews what finally emerges is the myth of the boundary or border line.

Tha’mma is a wonderfully portrayed character in *The Shadow Lines*. She could be everyone’s grandmother, at once caring and controlling. In her youth, she would have given life and limb for the fight for freedom in Dhaka. She subscribes to the idea of essentialist nationalism and is stunned when she visits Dhaka after many years and finds no rigid lines to signal the Partition. “But surely there’s something – trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns...or even just barren strips of land” (p. 148).³ When her son laughs at her, she insists, “But if there aren’t any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where’s the difference then?” (p. 148). Later she tells her grandson: “[The English] know they’re a nation because they’re drawn their borders with blood” (p. 76). When she is condemned by Ila as being a fascist, the narrator defends his grandmother: “All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power...a small thing, that history had denied her in its fulness and for which she could never forgive it” (p. 77).

In Ila we have a woman who has traversed the globe with her diplomat family. Exposed to different cultures from a young age, Ila still, unwittingly, erects borders

between people. For her the Western culture supercedes her own as she believes it allows her freedom. She clings on to Nick Price in an unhappy marriage. Just like her grand-aunt, she categorises people and places. But while Tha'mma associates borders with the fight for liberty and national identity, Ila's maps of difference are flimsy. When the narrator talks to her about Cairo, all she can say is "Oh yes, Cairo, the Ladies is way on the other side of the departure lounge" (p. 20). The narrator persuades her that places should capture the mind's eye but Ila's kind of cosmopolitanism is not enlivened with possibilities of newness, of creative difference; it is only coloured by a tired familiarity. At the end of the narrative, Ila too is unable to cross the shadow lines. The lack of concreteness or materiality in her imagination means that she cannot appreciate differences in cultures and contexts.

It is Tridib who has the greatest impact on the narrator. Belonging to an upper-class family, Tridib does not share their bourgeoisie aspirations. He imagines worlds beyond the spaces of his life and offers the narrator a worldview which crosses spatial and temporal boundaries. Some of Ghosh's dissenters have harped on this point, stating that this is a romantic view of living in diversity, i.e. ignoring the realities of borders and difference. But Tridib is killed because of ethnic and religious divisions. And the lessons he imparts to the narrator, and us the reader, are too important to be dismissed as they offer an alternative way of being and living in sites where there is diversity and, consequently, the potential for violent discord. Indeed Tridib does not overlook the significance of the material. It is Tridib who teaches the narrator about maps and gets him deeply interested in the atlas, "Tridib watched over me as I tried to learn the meaning of distance" (p. 227). But he insists that it is also vital to invent in one's imagination. "Tridib was an archaeologist; he was not interested in fairylands; the one thing he wanted to teach me he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision" (p. 24). What this turns out to be, is to take cognisance of detail and, in turn, differences. In this case, the assertion of difference is to pay heed to the various influences that shape cultures. Basically, to see the connectedness between events, spaces and people. For Tridib the cartographies of cultures are dynamic and spaces cannot be confined. His inventions then are not fantastical but necessary and must be done "properly", more so because all conceptions of cultures, nations and identities are invented and "if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free of other people's invention" (p. 31).

As in *Running in the Family*, the mode of telling and recounting the story in *The Shadow Lines* ties in with the central thematic preoccupations of the text. Memory forms the narrative trigger in this novel. It is the mnemonic fund of the narrator as well as his imagination which links all the various episodes, both personal and public, in the text. The narrator is constantly creating maps of the mind, looking for relatedness in cultures and places. In the midst of partition and divisions, memory and the imagination cannot be divided. *The Shadow Lines* overlaps time frames and spaces "at breath taking tempo," crossing borders, showing connections, forcing us to map our ideas in different ways. In the narrative, "time, space and identity intermingle in a continuous present" (Ashcroft 2001, p. 190). Through this kind of experimentation of form, the text offers imaginings of identity other than the usual nationalist self-definitions.

In *Post-Colonial Transformation*, Ashcroft evokes the motif of the veranda in his discussion on horizontality and the ways colonized and colonizer have always been

in dialogue. Imported from colonial India, the veranda is an attachment to a building. This architectural feature represents a kind of “surplus”, a location which dissolves the boundary between house and the outside surroundings. Ashcroft says: “Verandas become the potent metaphor of that continual tension between boundary and horizon which characterizes post-colonial discourse” (194). He goes on to talk about the “interactive possibilities of boundaries” offered by the veranda, adding that it “can be seen as the defining metonym of transculturation” (p. 195). In *The Shadow Lines* there is an episode when as a child, the narrator plays house with Ila. He is perturbed that the house she invents has no veranda:

It can't be a real house, I said at last, because it doesn't have a veranda. Veranda? she said in amazement,...What shall we do with a veranda?...Of course we must have a veranda, I said. Otherwise how will we know what's going on outside?...a nice house had to have a veranda; why, even our small flat had a veranda. To me the necessity of verandas was no more accountable than the need for doors and walls (p. 69).

The conversation above has interesting links with Ashcroft's reflections of the veranda metaphor. For the narrator who is inspired by Tridib's way of seeing life and the world, there must always be interaction with what is outside the known realm and it is only then that one widens the horizons of experience and discovers new ways of seeing reality and diversity. At the end of the novel, the narrator tries to put together the multi-hued threads of the past. He says: “...I was struck with wonder that there had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people, of good intention, had thought that all maps were the same, that there was a special enchantment in lines; I had to remind myself that they were not to be blamed...for that was the pattern of the world” (p. 228).

Conclusion

The question is: What is the pattern of our modern day world? In sites where there is much diversity, are lines of demarcation still revered? Texts like *The Shadow Lines* and *Running in the Family* try to transgress the margins and boundaries of conventions and centres. In doing so they recognise the fluidity of boundaries both textual and geographical. *The Shadow Lines* and *Running in the Family* propose a process of identification that discards simple geographical or cultural spatial binaries. These narratives afford ways in which to read cultures and places in our present historical moment while also evoking possible and diverse ways of belonging to and living in contemporary cultures.

References

- Ashcroft, Bill 2001, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, London: Routledge.
 Bhabha, Homi K 1994, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge.
 Brah, Avtar 1996, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, London: Routledge.
 Ghosh, Amitav 2005, *The Shadow Lines*, New York: Mariner Books.
 Jewinski, Ed 1994, *Michael Ondaatje: Express Yourself Beautifully*, Toronto: ECW P.
 Kanaganayakam, Chelva 1992, “A Trick with a Glass: Michael Ondaatje's South Asian Connection,” *Canadian Literature*, pp. 33-42.

- Katrak, Ketu H 1991, "Colonialism, Imperialism, and Imagined Homes," in Emory Elliott, *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, New York: Columbia UP, pp. 649-78.
- Mishra, Vijay 1995, "New Lamps for Old: Diasporas Migrancy Borders," *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* II.1, pp. 147-64.
- Ondaatje, Michael 1993, *Running in the Family*, New York: Vintage.
- Prasad, Murari 2008, "Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*: Re-Reading its Craft and Concerns," *Asiatic*, vol. 2.1/1, pp. 69-82.
- Rushdie, Salman 1992, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, New York: Granta.
- Sugunasiri, Suwanda H. J 1992, "'Sri Lankan' Canadian Poets: The Bourgeoisie that Fled the Revolution," *Canadian Literature* 132, pp. 60-79.

Notes

- ¹ Dr Carol Leon is an Associate Professor in The Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University Malaya in Kuala Lumpur.
- ² All quotations from *Running in the Family* taken from New York: Vintage, 1993 edition.
- ³ All quotations from *The Shadow Lines* taken from New York: Mariner Books, 2005 edition.

