

“STEP ACROSS THIS LINE”: EDGES AND BORDERS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN LITERATURE

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“Step Across This Line”:
Edges and Borders in Contemporary Indian Literature

This essay analyses the ways in which contemporary Indian literature in English addresses the poetics of the border in the aftermath of colonialism and in the context of the new configurations of a global world, viewed both as a zone of transnational migrations but also as a place where communal divides are violently reasserted. On the one hand, Indian novels acknowledge the rigid lines and frames which define the individual, society and the nation, providing a sense of stability but also of fixity and enclosure. On the other hand, they suggest lines of flight which challenge binary divisions and arbitrary partitions, and favour instead the blurring and transgression of frontiers. Through this tension between the evocation and eradication of boundaries, Indian contemporary literature re-imagines the border as a contingent, transitory and fluid place, a space of becoming rather than a stable limit.

Cet article analyse les modes selon lesquels la littérature indienne contemporaine aborde la poétique de la frontière dans le contexte postcolonial et dans celui des nouvelles configurations d'un ordre mondial conçu comme une zone de migrations transnationales où les tensions communautaires s'affirment toutefois violemment. D'une part, les romans indiens prennent acte des lignes dures et des cadres qui définissent l'individu, la société et la nation, et offrent un sentiment de stabilité mais aussi de fixité et d'enfermement. D'autre part, ils suggèrent des lignes de fuite qui remettent en question les divisions binaires et les partitions arbitraires, et favorisent au contraire le brouillage et la transgression des limites. Par le biais de cette tension entre le rappel et la suppression des lignes de démarcation, la littérature indienne contemporaine reconfigure la frontière en tant qu'espace contingent, éphémère et fluide, un devenir-lieu plutôt qu'une limite stable.

“To write is to trace lines of flight” according to Gilles Deleuze (1977, 32). This oxymoronic formula is particularly apt as it combines the image of a geometric layout which draws frames, plans, limits, and the notion of escape, departure and rupture. It brings face to face the strict line and its euphoric transgression, the fixed horizontal plane and the opening onto unknown horizons. Thus, the line expresses both the limit and its subversion. Creating lines of flight consists in acknowledging the borders of a

geographical, ideological, religious, literary, political or ethical area while also violating them, a process which is reminiscent of the oscillation of “use and abuse,” “install and subvert,” characteristic of postmodernist aesthetics according to Linda Hutcheon (3), but also of the simultaneous inscription and challenging of established discourses in postcolonial literature. Salman Rushdie’s provocative injunction which gives its title to the collection of essays *Step Across this Line* (2002) draws attention to the close bond between the line and its transgression, and shows that the discreet or triumphant pleasure of illicit crossing cannot be experienced unless the border has previously been clearly drawn. The concept of line is therefore a particularly fertile prism through which to examine contemporary Indian literature in English, on the one hand reflecting a formalised organisation of society and the nation based on divisions, grids and binary oppositions in terms of class, caste, gender, territory or religion, and on the other hand celebrating crossings, hybridisation, difference, blurring and transgression. The notion of frontiers, limits, edges and boundaries is also relevant to a postcolonial discourse which constantly interrogates definitions of territories and identities, and proposes to reconsider notions of the centre and the margin—as Robert Eaglestone suggests, “de-finition” has to do with “the question of limits” (2). According to Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), we live “on the borderlines of the ‘present’, for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix ‘post’: *postmodernism*, *postcolonialism*, *postfeminism*” (1). Theoreticians have repeatedly shown that the prefix ‘post’ does not merely indicate sequentiality or polarity, but is much more polysemic: ‘post’ or, as Bhabha calls it, the ‘beyond’ is “neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past” (1-2). It suggests an in-between space, an interstitial vision, a contrapuntal stance. Drawing from postcolonial theory as well as from the illuminating concept of lines developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), I propose to analyse the tension in contemporary Indian literature between rigid and shifting frames, between the evocation and eradication of boundaries. I would also like to determine to what extent the notion of the ‘post’ or the ‘beyond’ maps out a poetics of displacement or “overrun” as “*dé-bordement*” to quote Jacques Derrida (68), which constantly shifts limits or borders, be they geographical, religious, ethical or generic.

Contemporary Indian literature in English both acknowledges clear-cut limits in a number of territories (social, geographical, political, religious, ideological, literary, generic...), and repeatedly attempts to disturb those frames by suggesting ruptures, by blurring, breaking or crossing lines, while simultaneously inscribing others. This might be due in part to the specificity of Indian history and society, marked by a constraining set of rigid lines and arbitrary frontiers imposed both by India’s traditions and by colonial rule. Colonial discourse in particular has constructed fixed frames and grids in which to place and separate individuals according to their race, nationality, culture, class or gender, models of unified and stereotypical representation

of otherness and difference, of “cultural mummification” (Fanon 44), which postcolonial writers challenge. Many Indian novelists, among whom Salman Rushdie, but also Mukul Kesavan in *Looking Through Glass* (1995) and Shauna Singh Baldwin in *What the Body Remembers* (1999), have more specifically pondered the painful legacy of the traumatic partition in 1947 which divided the subcontinent along arbitrary geographical lines, separating Hindu and Muslim communities and leaving the Sikhs stranded. In *The Bride* (1983), Bapsi Sidhwa vividly sums up the way demarcation lines were recklessly drawn and the land was ripped apart: “The earth is not easy to carve up. India required a deft and sensitive surgeon, but the British, steeped in domestic preoccupation, hastily and carelessly butchered it. . . . The earth sealed its clumsy new boundaries in blood as town by town, farm by farm, the border was defined” (14-15).

The questioning of the notion of the boundary is still valid in the context of the new configurations of a globalized world viewed as a zone of transnational migrations, exiles and displacements, a place of cultural and political diasporas. In these “border and frontier conditions” (Bhabha 17), lines are shifting, walls are brought down, polarities are challenged and the distinction between the centre and the periphery is no longer valid. Border theory (which draws a lot from Mexican-US border theory) has become a widespread field of study which envisages the border not only as a specific and actual site but also as a metaphor, a function, a conceptual tool (Castillo 184), and even for some critics as “the governing trope of the postmodern” (Welchman 175). But the contemporary world is also one in which communal divides are violently reasserted, sometimes under the concrete form of stockades, barbed wire fences, walls and separations. Homi Bhabha gives the example of Bombay as a city where lines are both passed over or blurred, and consolidated, a city “that seems, on the surface, to work busily against, and across, . . . ethnic and religious boundaries,” but also a multi-layered, multi-storied city, which is “caught in communal fears and the fires of fundamentalism” (xxiv). In *No God in Sight* (2005), Altaf Tyrewala draws a polyphonic and multi-faceted portrait of contemporary life in Mumbai, pointing to the ghettoization of religious communities. In *Family Matters* (2002), Rohinton Mistry grimly addresses issues of nationalism and sectarianism, and derides the absurdity of fundamentalist attitudes by having the protagonist’s son provocatively insist on measuring the exact distance of fifteen feet that should separate the impure from the prayer space according to the Parsi religion of which his father has become a staunch follower: “I think we should take a measurement and draw a line on the floor, so we all know how far to go” (464). He ironically remarks that his bigoted father, who has also passed the menstruation laws which decree that his own wife must not enter the drawing-room when she has her period, has “gone over the edge” (493). The two antithetical dimensions of the line—rigid and shifting, constraining and challenging, necessary and dispensable—thus seem inseparable as a means of defining contemporary Indian productions.

This double movement may be read in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of lines and territories in *A Thousand Plateaus*: "In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and des-tratification" (4). They imagine a cartography of the strata which compose a human being, and argue that three types of intertwining lines coexist. They call "lines of segmentarity" the traits according to which a rhizome is "stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed" (10): these are rigid or molar lines (216) which draw territories with clearly delineated contours. They establish a fixed and reassuring frame, and ensure a stable sense of identity, stability and control. Then come supple or molecular lines which do not fundamentally challenge rigid lines and often pertain to imagination, but which cause fissures, "microcracks" (219), "indistinct fringes, encroachments, overlappings, migrations" (251). These thrusts and cracks, often hardly noticeable and secret, can make the rigid line deviate from its linear direction without totally destabilising it. Finally, Deleuze and Guattari call "lines of deterritorialization" (10) the lines of flight which they consider as genuine ruptures even though they are still part of the rhizome and which, in their turn, form new stratifications and proliferations. The line of flight is a flashing line of experimentation, emancipation, mutation, liberation.

These three types of lines are not strictly separated since they draw from each other and can move from one status to another: "the three lines do not only coexist, but transform themselves into one another, cross over into one another" (245). A line of flight can become a rigid line as, by escaping prescribed boundaries, it leaves new traces, ploughs new furrows, from which, one day, it may decide to move away. The rupture, passing over or flight are therefore not synonymous with anarchy and confusion, for new lines are drawn and replace the previous ones as Deleuze suggests: "To leave, to escape, is to trace a line.... To fly is to trace a line, lines, a whole cartography" (1977, 27). Lines of flight have therefore much to do with notions of departure, escape, desertion, journey and passage, but this movement is neither a renunciation nor an abandon. It should on the contrary be considered as an active procedure: one creates one's own line of flight. To fly, as Deleuze remarks, "is to produce the real, to create life, to find a weapon" (1977, 36); to fly is also to put to flight, "to put a system to flight as one bursts a tube" (1977, 27). Deleuze and Guattari's cartography will contribute to shedding light on the way in which contemporary Indian literature both acknowledges and challenges limits and boundaries. The following examples will reveal how dividing and discriminating procedures still endure, but also how border identities and more fluid conceptions of the nation emerge.

The God of Small Things (1997) by Arundhati Roy, a novel freed from traditional structural straitjackets, blurs generic lines, deconstructs chronology, mixes literary and cultural traditions, collocates the written and the oral, the poetic and the trivial, but also presents an Indian society in which

classification and the exclusion which derives from it, hold centre stage. The author accumulates vivid metaphors of rigid dividing lines which create watertight territories. Thus, the frontier between East and West is symbolised at the airport by “the tall iron railing that separated the Meeters from the Met, and the Greeters from the Gret” (142), where the preposition “from” mimics the insuperable gap between the two worlds, the line that cannot be crossed. Later on, a line of Indian workers watch from the other side of the driveway the arrival of the adored English girl (172), the boundaries of class and nationality thus adding up to suggest an exclusionary system. The narrator also reminds the reader of the rules which define relations with untouchables, as for example the fact that a Paravan is not allowed to cross the threshold of a household of higher caste (77, 278), or the fact that untouchables converted to Christianity remain separate from the Christians of other castes (74). The Indian society depicted by Arundhati Roy thus resembles a grid where people belonging to distinct categories do not meet but are separated by a concrete or imaginary line.

In this context of rigid stratification, it is certainly no coincidence that the main characters’ grandfather, Pappachi, should be an entomologist, fascinated by taxonomy: he catches insects, selects them, records their specificities, names and classifies them, an activity which is emblematic of the categorisation of Indians themselves according to their caste, gender and social class. When Pappachi discovers a new type of moth, he hopes he will become famous by giving it his name, but, to his great disappointment, the scientists classify the moth in an already existing category. Twelve years later, thanks to a new type of classification, the moth is acknowledged and said to be part of a new category (49): this highlights the arbitrary dimension of taxonomy which gives legitimacy to imaginary and artificial divisions. This operation of discrimination is also suggested in the novel through the metaphor of Mammachi’s banana jam which poses a problem because it does not correspond to any determined category: “it was neither jam nor jelly. Too thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency” (30). It takes a while for hybrids, marginals and unclassified species to find a place in a system marked by the hierarchy of castes and gender, the categorisation of religions and social classes, and the strict respect of divisions—“Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits” (3)—and rigid laws, “the laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, jelly jelly” (31). In this enumeration, the hypnotic binary repetition of family and food categories confirms the constraining and unmovable frame, and prevents any form of variation, of in-between, mixing, flight or freedom to shift from one category to another. Rigid lines thus strictly stratify and territorialize Indian society in an attempt to control and stabilize the world in a reassuring *status quo*.

In *Babyji* (2005) by Abha Dawesar, a contemporary Indian *Sentimental Education* tinged with female homosexuality, the narrator Anamika (nicknamed Babyji) explains: “We are a nation of taxonomists.... There are

categories for everything—educated or not, foreign or not, Brahmin or banya or what, English-speaking or not, meat-eating or not, if vegetarian then whether an eggitarian or strict, if strict then too strict to eat Western desserts with egg or not” (4). This segmentarity of rigid lines based on dualist oppositions might be partly both the product of Indian history and caste politics, and the legacy of colonial discourse which develops along binary divisions and has set up “inescapable jails of colour, race and clan” to quote the Moor (136) in Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995). No matter how the young narrator loathes and tries to escape her country’s tendency to categorise and divide, it has unwittingly become part of her own nature: “It was natural for me to classify people at first sight without even being aware of it” (4). However, when sixteen-year-old Anamika meets an enticing divorced woman whom she calls India, a fissure appears and the frame cracks because India, a metaphor for the country itself, is too mysterious to submit to the rules of categorisation: “I couldn’t place her... Love happens on the edges. It happens when one can’t place someone; so does hate. India was an enigma. And correspondingly rife with possibility, rich in her meanings and bountiful” (4). India escapes and attracts Babyji because she stands at the margin of common frames, beyond the boundaries of gender, sexuality, morality and social codes defined by her own milieu, refusing to be called gay: “Being gay is a western construct. Indian sexuality is a spectrum, not binary” (149). Babyji, a Brahmin, upsets gender, class and caste boundaries by falling in love not only with India but also with a girl in her class and with a servant woman. She decides against two love affairs because “[t]here was something very linear about it”, choosing instead to have three, subverting linearity and welcoming chaos: “I wanted chaos because then I could create my own patterns with it” (53). Babyji thus exceeds any family model imposed by society and this excess, rupture or line of flight is a source of excitement and panic. As Homi Bhabha suggests, “[t]he margin of hybridity, where cultural differences ‘contingently’ and conflictually touch, becomes the moment of panic which reveals the borderline experience” (296). It is precisely this borderline event, this flight away from regulated lines and from rigid dualism which enables the main protagonist to move beyond the known world and invent new trajectories.

Several Indian writers thus only find some form of achievement in the disruption and challenge of rigid lines, in the exploration of the edge, the border, the limit, in the redefinition of the boundary. In *Step Across this Line*, Rushdie the migrant writer notes: “In our deepest natures, we are frontier-crossing beings” (408), and argues that one of the main characteristics of the frontier is to generate disputes: “Give me a line drawn across the world and I’ll give you an argument” (423). He evokes the Urdu poet Ahmed Faiz and remembers his transgressive impulses: “draw a line in the sand and Faiz would feel intellectually obliged to step across it” (433). This attitude is a genuine intellectual involvement as Rushdie argues that one “must refuse the other’s definition of the boundary” (409): “It’s as

important . . . to cross metaphorical lines as well as actual ones: not to be contained or defined by anybody else's idea of where a line should be drawn" (434). The simplicity of the formula—"You take a step, you cross a line" (198), to quote Graham Swift's *The Light of Day* (2007)—should not however divest the gesture of its seriousness and gravity. In *The God of Small Things* as well as in her political and polemical essays, Arundhati Roy celebrates transgression and shows that it is usually dangerous and irreversible, but also liberating. She claims that the step aside or across, for all its perils and dreadful consequences, sets one free from constraint as it enables one to challenge interdictions, symbolised in the novel by the crossing of the Meenachal river: "They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory" (31). In a public debate in 2002, A. Roy remarked that *The God of Small Things* dealt precisely with the tension between the persistence and the abolition of dividing lines between different groups which is so relevant to Indian society: "I think much of *The God of Small Things* is about these layers and layers and layers of East meets West, and the upper-caste meets the lower-caste, and the Hindus meet the Christians, and the colonised meet the further colonised. It is all about these fences and divisions and people who walk over and people who choose not to" (155-56).

Several contemporary Indian writers share this tendency towards the violation of limits (be they related to ideology, politics, religion, gender, or national identity), Salman Rushdie being *primus inter pares*. Rushdie's work in general is based on the celebration of crossings, hybridity, mixings, decompartmentalization, impurity, grafting and what he calls "cross-pollination" (1991, 20). For him, the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization is poetic as well as political and ideological. In terms of aesthetics, he favours a form of syncretism, eclecticism and pluralism, which some theoreticians have viewed as emblematic of postmodernism but is also characteristic of the novel form itself which, from its origins, has been fundamentally dialogic and polyphonic. In his aptly entitled essay « Cross the Border—Close the Gap » (1970), Leslie Fiedler defined as one of the features of postmodernism the erosion of the distinction between elite and popular culture, an aspect Fredric Jameson also identified (and deplored) as part of a series of effacements of "key boundaries and separations" (128). The lines drawn by Rushdie in his novels are never straight but curving, looping, taking detours, escaping the frame, a meandering movement which is reflected in the narrative modes and structures themselves as the author restlessly crosses territories and intertwines artistic domains, styles and voices. Rushdie described *The Satanic Verses* (1988) as an ode to impurity and intertwining:

The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears

the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*.... *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves. (1991, 394)

Stability and fixity are deemed aesthetically and ideologically deadly and dangerous, and Rushdie opts instead for flexibility, fluidity and entropy. In Aurora's hybrid paintings in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the dividing lines between worlds become blurred: "worlds collide, flow in and out of one another, and washoffy check spelling away" (226). In *The Ground Beneath her Feet* (1999), Ormus Cama feels the ontological frontiers "softening": "The barriers between the world of dreams and the waking world, between the spheres of the actual and the imagined, are breaking down" (388). Cama's "earthquake songs" encourage and celebrate "[t]he breakdown of boundaries, what Erwin Panofsky called decompartmentalization" (386): "The songs are about the collapse of all walls, boundaries, restraints" (390). In Rushdie's work, the looping and curving lines thus coexist with the broken line, the transgressive step. Most of his characters advocate breaching the ramparts that bolster systems of containment and invent alternative realities: "You have to break the rules, deny the frame story, smash the frame" (350), Ormus Cama argues.

Other Indian writers, more focused on local issues, challenge frontiers by drawing attention to their artificiality and absurdity, but also their permeability. Their work constantly revisits India's recent history, marked by the trauma of partition, the rise of communalism and redefinitions of the nation. Partition narratives record tragic journeys across the border and challenge the forceful imposition of a political, religious and geographical schism on communities which had had a long history of social and cultural exchanges. Saadat Hasan Manto's famous story "Toba Tek Singh" (1955), about the transfer to India of the Hindu and Sikh inmates of a lunatic asylum, suggests the absurdity of such a fissure through the final image of Singh who refuses to pass over the border and dies on a no-man's land: "There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh" (287-88). Many contemporary novels likewise question the politics of partition. In *Kartography* (2002), a novel set in tormented Karachi, Kamila Shamsie explores the notions of territory, identity, ethnicity, concrete and metaphorical boundaries, and interrogates man's indomitable compulsion to build new fences: "How many walls can one nation erect and sustain. . . . Is it possible to circumnavigate one wall without crashing into another?" (51).

Kiran Desai sets her novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), in Kalimpong in the northeastern Himalayas, a foggy territory disputed by several communities, a place "where India blurred into Bhutan and Sikkim," forming a "messy map," a region in which the dissolving mist makes "ridiculous the drawing of borders" (9). Some of her characters deplore the multiplication of new states after partition, blaming the incompetent colonizer—"Very

unskilled at drawing borders, those bloody Brits” (129)—and pointing to the porosity of frontiers: “It’s an issue of a porous border is what. You can’t tell one from the other, Indian Nepali from Nepali Nepali” (129). The novel reveals the contingency and constructedness of notions of identity and nationality, which are nevertheless appealed to in order to legitimate terrible acts of violence and rebellion. Benedict Anderson famously defined the nation as “an imagined political community” (6); in Indian fiction, the lines separating countries are indeed often presented as mere cartographic conventions, “imagined projections of territorial power” to quote historian Mushirul Hasan (15).

In Amitav Ghosh’s novels, geographical borders tend to fade away, replaced by a sense of fluidity and interconnectedness. In *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the historical partition is metaphorically prefigured by the absurd division with a “wooden partition wall” of the family house in Dhaka (in what used to be East Bengal before becoming East Pakistan and then Bangladesh): “When the wall was eventually built, they found that it had ploughed right through a couple of door-ways so that no one could get through them any more” (123). As a girl, the narrator’s grandmother invents stories about what takes place on the other side of the wall (imagining that everything is upside-down over there), thus legitimising the partition and positioning a supposed intrinsic difference between two worlds, two branches of the same family, which, until recently, had been one. When, in her old age, the narrator’s grandmother flies from Calcutta to Dhaka, she expects to see the dividing line between the two countries from the plane and is disappointed to learn that frontiers are invisible and that there is not even the simulation of a border: “What was it all for then—partition and all the killing and everything—if there isn’t something in between?” (151). The historical split that forced her into exile loses its legitimacy and makes it impossible to believe further in “the reality of nations and borders” (219) which are exposed as artificial constructions: “They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of prehistoric Gondwanaland” (233). The narrator, for his part, prefers to focus on connections rather than separations, and he chooses to explore the meandering world of his imagination, free from the boundaries of time and space. This lack of rigid frames is reflected in the narrative line itself which frequently diverts and digresses, disrupting linearity and forbidding any sense of homogeneity, confirming that Ghosh is both an artist of the floating world and an architect of the broken line. This specificity of his writing is confirmed in his original travelogue, *In an Antique Land* (1992), a hybrid book mainly set in Egypt which challenges any attempt at classification and genre taxonomy, and intertwines two epochs and two narrative lines. There, Amitav Ghosh is “caught straddling a border” (340), opposing the dialogic syncretism of the medieval past when national, ethnic and religious borders were porous, to modern sociocultural and national parti-

tions which rigidify structures and identities. In its ethical stance and its polygeneric form, the text enacts the tension between the acknowledgement of contemporary partitioning and its oblique dismantling.

What emerges from these examples is that the process of deterritorialization and destratification at work in contemporary Indian novels necessarily exceeds the strict limits of the text, as it mirrors the political and ideological shifts and fissures that take place in the postmodern world. In “Living On: Border-Lines,” Jacques Derrida asks: “What are the borderlines of a text?” (69). He argues that the boundaries or partitions of what used to be called a text, which drew a neat line of demarcation between the inside and the outside, have collapsed. The text has overrun “all the limits assigned to it so far” so that it is “no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces” (68). A complex web of dividing and multiplying strokes and lines of flight is deployed beyond the edge of the text in order to dialogically communicate not only with other works of art and disciplines, but also with context(s). Rushdie has repeatedly claimed that the networks of literature and politics overlap, and that a writer’s engagement with political reality can help protest against the *status quo* and indicate possible lines of rupture and departure. The writer’s intellectual and creative border crossings, to quote Trinh T. Minh-ha in *Framer Framed* (1991), thus entail pushing one’s work “as far as one can go: to the borderlines, where one never stops walking on the edges, incurring constantly the risk of falling off one side or the other side of the limit while undoing, redoing, modifying this limit” (218).

The examples quoted above seem emblematic of a tendency in contemporary Indian literature to highlight the constraints of rigid lines in society and history, and inscribe the motif of enclosure and finitude within the frame of the text, and at the same time find aesthetic and political ways of describing lines of flight, opting for the tangent, exploring unchartered territories. In a 2000 essay entitled “In Defence of the Novel, Yet Again,” Salman Rushdie draws the contours of a new novel, freed from the limitations of national frontiers: “a new novel is emerging, a post-colonial novel, a de-centred, transnational, inter-lingual, cross-cultural novel” (2002, 57). Lines and boundaries have become particularly wobbly and fuzzy in the context of twentieth-century displacements, migrations and relocations which interrogate the very notion of the frontiers as well as definitions of the nation and the diaspora, an issue which is often debated in relation to Indian studies, as Alexis Tadié has demonstrated (80-87). For Rushdie, “the migrant, the man without frontiers, is the archetypal figure of our age” (2002, 415), a wanderer who is more interested in itinerant cultural routes than in secure roots of identity and belonging, to borrow Paul Gilroy’s terms (19) in *The Black Atlantic* (1993). He argues that he himself lives “in the comma” that separates East and West in the title of his collection of short stories (in Reder 163), and he believes that the migrant, who is rooted in ideas rather than places, enjoys a privileged position and per-

spective from which to view the world: “The migrant suspects reality. . . . To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier” (1991, 125).

Homi Bhabha, who develops the concept of transnational “dissemiNation” (239), argues that migrant writers live “border lives” on the margins of different nations, at the edge of several worlds, across homelands, in a space of liminality, and he defines borders as thresholds, in-between sites of transition between past and present, inside and outside, home and world, East and West, which deny any received binary patterning. As John McLeod points out, for Bhabha, “the border is the place where conventional patterns of thought are disturbed and can be disrupted by the possibility of crossing” (217). The aesthetics of the border therefore challenges the exclusionary binary and essentialist logic on which conventional nationalistic, colonial and patriarchal discourses depend, and encourages instead fluidity, peregrination, unpredictability, contingency, overrun. Rigid lines that define individuals, communities and nations are acknowledged but also erased or broken; lines of flight develop and form new patterns which, in their turn, will be contested. Thus, frontiers, visible and invisible, palpable and elusive, are constantly shifting, moving further away towards an unattainable “beyond,” constantly demanding to be redefined, re-inscribed, reclaimed, as well as undone and crossed anew. In postcolonial and post-modernist literature, the border is no longer a stable limit or a linear division, but neither has it completely dissolved: to quote John C. Welchman, “[i]ts breaks are not fetishized as a final cut: they are instead, or they may be, re-sutured, re-circulated or re-bonded” (178). The border is re-imagined as contingent, transitory and fluid, or, to take up a Deleuzian concept, as a space of becoming. Bhabha begins his book by quoting Heidegger who emphasizes the liberating and incommensurable dimension of the frontier: “a boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, a boundary is that from which *something begins its presencing*” (in Bhabha 1). Contemporary Indian literature precisely develops in that in-between, liminal, interstitial, intersecting, intervening and hybrid space, the privileged locus for both physical and imaginative border crossings.

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