

The Border As A Theme In English Literature

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"A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A border is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary."

Gloria Anzaldua in *Borderlands*

Borders are complex multileveled and layered social phenomena related to the fundamental organization of society and human psychology. The border is defined as a natural or imaginary division of land, sea or mountain or any natural form to demarcate one from the other. Mankind has seen many wars. One of the most sought after the bounty of these wars was the borders. Therefore right from the classical age when the nation-states existed, there has been a tussle to create, increase or decrease the borders.

The borders can be divided into two parts: the visible and the invisible. This is suggested by Michèle Lamont's and Virág Molnár's concepts of social and symbolic boundaries respectively. The visible or social is the physical or geographical boundaries. The invisible or the symbolic, on the other hand, are the non-physical boundaries and borders depicted in literature as themes, attitudes of characters, and atmosphere (as setting).

Borders and boundaries highlight definitions by drawing lines, strong and remarkable lines between entities, objects, peoples, concepts, states, etc. They show contrasting qualities, although sometimes they also indicate complementary qualities. Borders are complex human creation which is open to question. The border is either fixed or evolving construction. They not only limit the movement of things, money and people but also limit the exercise of intellect, imagination and political will. Therefore borders are no longer boundary lines to reflect the physical features. Borders have become socio-territorial constructs reflecting the discourse and practise of national identity.

The current world order harbours 200 states with more than 300 land borders. The corpus has been increasing with the rise of new states and major upheavals like the wars. There are some borders which are closely and strictly guarded like the two Koreas. Others are open like the Schengen Zone boundaries. There are

certain borders which have global significance and their meaning keeps on changing like US-Mexico border etc.

The Borders have varying degrees of legitimacy: recognized by the international community and the rules of international law, delimited and demarcated on the ground as a result of agreements between neighbouring countries, including based on a referendum or international arbitration; not completely legitimate (for example, agreed with a neighbouring country only in certain sections, or delimited in an agreement, but not yet demarcated); illegitimate, not recognized by all countries or a majority of countries; for example, between unrecognized or partially recognized states and the state to which the territory previously belonged.

The borders function as a barrier, contact and filter. The barrier function is used to separate the economic, cultural, political, legal and other spaces of neighbouring countries. The contact function, on the other hand, serves as a liaison between neighbouring countries for the control and partial pass of flows of individuals, goods, capital, energy, and, in some degree, information (North Korea, for example). However, the border is also a membrane designed, with the help of the visa regime, customs duties, quotas and other tools, to filter flows. On the border, those flows that are undesirable for the state are stopped or restricted, for example, the entry of unskilled workers or goods, whose domestic production is uncompetitive on the world market. Under the influence of many factors, but chiefly state policy, on every part of the border dynamic relationships emerge between contact, barrier and filter functions.

Border regimes are a very flexible tool in the hands of the state. Strengthening of the contact functions of borders in the context of globalization has led to an increase in the economic importance and political subjectivity of border areas as an interface between the spaces of neighbouring countries.

Border theory and literature have become a key idea to engage in issues of nation, culture, gender and sexuality. Right from the earlier times, border and its issues have been studied from a geographical perspective. Border studies remained a study within the political geography which continued till the end of the nineteenth century. The focus was concerning predominant geopolitical models and visions from studying borders as delimiters of territorial control to the dynamic role of the border as bridges rather than barriers. It has now evolved as an interdisciplinary field of study developed by political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, linguists, economists etc. Borders have become more important than just barriers. With the recent events in history especially the terrorist attacks of 9/11, there has been increased political fervour over the issue of migration and borders. There has been an increase in the volume and

intensity of international interaction. The use of such concepts like internationalization, trans-nationalization, regionalization and globalization have shown how the traditional concept of picket fence borders is no longer a requirement. Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star understand borders as interfaces facilitating knowledge production and suggest that there are conceptual boundaries capable of exploring how interrelated sets of categories — i.e., systems of classification — come to be delineated and how borders become means of communication as opposed to division and thus essential to the circulation of knowledge and information across social worlds.

Both social and symbolic projections of boundaries have functional ways of highlighting "otherness" or differences. At the physical level, this shows in landscapes, locales, persons, and groups of persons, while at the non-physical level "otherness" is manifested in actions, attitudes, and manners of people, i.e., protagonist characters in literature.

Literature has a job to present the world before the readers in a way where the imagination of the writer plays a very important role. Border literature is a field where literature has been producing substantial literature right from classical times. In the works of classical greats like Homer, Euripides and Sophocles, the setting of the great war of Troy has produced enough material about life on the borders. Homer wrote about the experience of life on the Border between Troy and Greece forces in his epic work *Iliad*. Similarly, the other great Greek writers too took up the issue of life on the borders in the times of trouble in their works.

This trend continued in the renaissance period when writers like Shakespeare and Ben Jonson took up the issue of Border in their works. Shakespeare takes up the issue of invisible borders through his writings. In several of his works, there are images of living on the border between illusion and reality. The famous quote from Hamlet where Hamlet's indecisiveness borders on "to be or not to be that is the question" shows that living on the border be it physically or mentally is a dangerous precedent. Though out literature, living on the Borders has been a recurring issue with writers right from Milton in *Paradise Lost* where Satan talks of his experience of life in hell.

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, the issue of Border has gained more prominence. Writers have continued to show interest in the issue through their personal experience and the experience of others. Writers like WaThiong'oNgũgĩ who wrote *The River Between* draws upon oral tradition (myth) to demonstrate the pre-existence of physical structures or social boundaries. From his visions, it is obvious that natural phenomena existed before they would eventually become instruments which transcend physical structures and initiate significations of a deep divide between groups at both

physical and emotional levels: "The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kameno, the other was Makuyu. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life. Behind Kameno and Makuyu were many more valleys and ridges, lying without any discernible plan. They were like many sleeping lions which never woke. They just slept the deep sleep of their creator"

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* shares the experience of USA Mexico border by saying " Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element."

There are other writers like Bruce Chadwin who writes beautiful, a melancholic tale about the lives of twin brothers in a farmhouse where "one of the windows looked out over the green fields of England: the other looked back into Wales" and of which it was said that the border ran right up the staircase. Robert Graves in his novel *Good-Bye To All That* commanded a detachment of Welshmen from Chatwin's borders. In one passage here, a certain Captain Furber makes a bet with another officer – that the frontline trenches would not shift more than a mile over the next two years. Everyone laughed at Captain Furber. He won the bet. [*Stamboul Train* by Graham Greene](#) outlines the fates of a group of passengers aboard the Orient Express. Borders aplenty are swiftly crossed, but this is an uneasy journey, full of tension and suspicion, and anti-Semitism. The writer questions the notion of borders, through his character DrCzinner, teacher and revolutionary, "How old fashioned you are with your frontiers and your patriotism!".

The border crossing itself is an experience as portrayed by [*The Crossing* by Cormac McCarthy](#). In the scenes in which young Billy Parham heads south on horseback, with a bound and wounded wolf in tow, McCarthy tells us they "crossed sometime near noon the international boundary line into Mexico, the State of Sonora, undifferentiated in its terrain from the country they quit, and yet wholly alien and wholly strange".

[*The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood](#)'s seminal feminist dystopian novel gives us both literal and metaphorical borders. There's the Canadian border over which Offred and Luke tried to escape before her indoctrination as a handmaid. There's also "the Wall" (once Harvard) upon which traitors of various kinds are hung. But what the novel is really about is gender boundaries, where roles are assigned and rigidly enforced.

Therefore the literature of the Borders continues to fascinate both the writers and the readers alike. It is the present times when issues of migrants have taken

a new turn in the twenty-first century that the story of Borders has to be rewritten, rethought and revised.

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