

**Kapka Kassabova, *Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe*,
Minnesota: Graywolf: 2017, 379 p., ISBN: 978-1-55597-786-3**

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With the critical turn in Border Studies, varying/differing perspectives on the border have gained salience.¹ Everydayness of the border has been emphasized with narratives from borderlanders and its vernacularization through the impact of border on the quotidian. Vernacularization reflects upon the language of the border and its effect on the various meanings that the border acquires for the inhabitants close to the border.² In Kapka Kassabova's book with the title, *Border*, the border attains plurality with the intricate entanglement of experiences at the tri-border of Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. Kassabova's early life was spent in this border region with a peculiar geography of the three intersecting mountain ranges of the Strandja, which extends over the border between Bulgaria and Turkey, the Rhodope extends over the border between Bulgaria and Greece and the Balkan Range blankets southern Bulgaria. Kassabova's stories are located in this mountainous terrain.

The author's personal linkages lead her to be involved with the locals. She argues, "Once near a border, it is impossible not to be involved, not to want to exorcise or transgress something. Just by being there, the border is an invitation."³ She engages the reader through stories of transgression and involvement. Her genre can be identified as a travelogue as she crisscrosses the three borders, i.e. between Bulgaria and Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey and Turkey and Greece. The narratives/stories have a personal tone to them as she interacts with the borderlanders. She ventures deep into the lives of the people she comes across to understand the impact of the border.

The book revolves around "Europe's southernmost Iron Curtain, a forested Berlin Wall darkened by the armies of three countries. It was deadly, and it remains prickly with dread to this day."⁴ In the present circumstance, the Greek-Bulgarian border is softened by shared membership of the European Union whereas the Turkish-Greek and the Turkish Bulgarian border are being hardened in response to the steady influx of the refugees from the Middle-East.⁵ Occasionally ancient history of the region is invoked with references to the Greek and Roman Empire and to the Ottoman Empire. The common cultural strands of the region are explained through the mythology. Hence, the book presents

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¹ Chris Rumford, "Towards a Multiperspectival Study of Borders," *Geopolitics* 17: 4 (2012): 887–902; Corey Johnson, Reece Jones, Anssi Paasi, Louise Amoore, Alison Mountz, Mark Salter, and Chris Rumford, "Interventions on Rethinking 'the Border' in Border Studies," *Political Geography* 30: 2 (2011): 61–69; Reece Jones and Corey Johnson, eds., *Placing the Border in Everyday Life* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

² Anthony Cooper, Chris Perkins and Chris Rumford, "The Vernacularization of Borders" in *Placing the Border in Everyday Life*.

³ Kapka Kassabova, *Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2017), xv.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xvi–xvii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xvii.

an exposition of the lives of the borderlanders with geo-history. However, the most prominent stories/narratives revolve around the Iron Curtain, its related geopolitics and the innumerable attempts to cross it and the failures and the casualties.

The chapters are uniquely titled with either a person's traits or a characteristic of a particular village or location. Every chapter is preceded by a prelude to the central theme of the chapter, for example, *sozialistischen persönlichkeit* is preceded by the chapter 'Riding the Iron Curtain' and *ursus arctos* by "Goddess of the Forest." Every story has a central character, typically impacted by the border.

The stories range from people who have been border guards to men who have been people smugglers, to people who have lost their close relatives while crossing the border and refugees. There are people who have been displaced due to their religious affiliations, uprooting them from their traditional livelihoods. For some of them the border is a constant hindrance and for some it is a line to be crossed. For others life depends on crossing the border illegally through ancient routes. The stories are seeped in mythology, Cold War and local bonhomie that has existed between the Turks, Greeks and the Bulgarians under the shadow of various political dispositions.

Instructive is the story of a Turkish couple, of Bulgarian Muslims, who were ousted from Bulgaria at the end of the Cold War. The dilemma for Ahmed, from the couple, is, "Even if in Bulgaria, they call me a Turk, and in Turkey they call me a Bulgarian. What am I, tell me."⁶ The border impacts the identity of person where he is rooted more to culture rather than the geopolitical state. The region under discussion in the book is also a gateway to Europe for the affected people of the most volatile and conflict-ridden region in the world i.e. West Asia.

Recently the volume of migrants from West Asia to Europe has increased due to conflicts in Iraq and Syria and has led to major policy decisions in European nations as well from the European Union. Ziko, a Greek and a former human-trafficker, who transported refugees, to Bulgaria via the ancient and treacherous routes in the *Strandja* for a fee, makes for a peculiar character. The author relives the fear she felt while crossing the border with Ziko and argues that one can perhaps imagine the dread felt by the migrants/ refugees, when they are forced from their homelands due to persecution or to escape conflict and arrive in alien lands.

Emel, a Turkish bureaucrat, who visits the Bulgarian town of Svilengrad from Edirne, a historical Turkish city regularly, experiences the border differently. Her journeys to Svilengrad are personal and are meant for leisure. In a statement, reflective of the privileged attitude towards the geopolitical phenomena of border she says, "The only good thing about a border is that you can cross it."⁷ For her, crossing the border may be mundane and routine, but there is a sense that borders only cause separation and are divisive, in her statement.

The book has implications for border research, since it brings out the impact of border on multiple actors and thereby complementing the academic idea of *Ubiquity of borders* (Balibar)

⁶ Ibid., 139

⁷ Ibid., 127

Language of Borders (Paasi) and *Multiperspectivalism* (Rumford).⁸ In terms of the presence of the border and its multiple meanings Balibar's *polysemic* understanding of borders is relevant as various actors cognize the border with their own lens. The book may contribute to the narrative form to understand borders and the narration foregrounds the involvement of the author. Her approach can be construed as participatory method. The book highlights the issues faced at the borders in general.

⁸ Etienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London: Verso, 2002); Anssi Paasi, *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness: The Changing Geographies of the Finnish-Russian Border* (Chichester: John Wiley, 1996); Rumford, "Multiperspectival Study."