



# Amitav Ghosh – A Historian Or A Novelist

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## Abstract

My paper proposes that Amitav Ghosh employs history as in a collage or in a mosaic. He interweaves it into his aesthetic fabric. The incidents in his novels may be historical but the context is universal. History loses its circumstantiality and becomes a timeless presence of social significance. His texts straddle the border between history and fiction. History is the central and definitive element of his texts.

Amitav Ghosh bears numerous mantles of responsibility in the world of the book: anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist, travel writer, teacher and slips in and out of these veiled categories with admirable aplomb. Each of his texts challenges the Eurocentrism of History and each of his major works direct their narrative energy toward the unofficial episodes in the records. In *The Circle of Reason* Ghosh explores the history of science and pseudoscience and their deployment in the colonial milieu; *The Shadow Lines* unearths the forgotten history of communal riots; *The Calcutta Chromosome* deconstructs history of modern science and rewrites an alternative history of the colonised subalterns; *The Glass Palace* unearths the history of the Indian National Army and the forgotten long march of the Indian refugees from Burma; *The Hungry Tide* recalls a marginalised episode in the coercive history of postcolonial India – Morichjhapi resettlement and the Ibis trilogy *Sea Of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* reestablishes cultural legacy and identity of diaspora. In *Gun Island* history, culture, and nature are put on the same level.

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## FULL PAPER

It is true that every novelist seems to agree with Balzac that the official historians do not give us any information about manners that is worth speaking of and it is for the novelist to highlight these social/historical/moral manners and the emphasis of the novelists fall on the selection and pacing of the historical facts. Joseph Conrad has rightly observed that the artist's task is to "make you hear, make you feel and to make you see"(13), unlike the historian who is always looking for 'the intensity of the expression' in order to weave an intricate web of human relationship. The methods of the novelist and the historian are entirely different and James made a subtle distinction between the methods of the novelist and the historian in the following way:

Historians and Story-tellers work each in a very different fashion. With the latter it is subject, the cause, the impulse, the basis of fact that is given; over it spreads the unobstructed sky, with to hinder the flight of fancy. With the former, it is

the effect, the ultimate steps of movement that are given; those steps by which individuals or parties rise above the heads of multitude, come into evidence, and make themselves matters of history. (Mordell 279)

History is the prism through which the novelist explores the nuances of the contemporary world. Although history provides the framework and guides the creative artist, it does not limit his perspective. He portrays history imaginatively as a state of affair affecting human beings. His ultimate concern is human life conceived in history and his interpretation gives it a contemporary relevance.

Amitav Ghosh is unarguably one of the most prominent writers in the post Rushdie era in the academic world. He bears numerous mantles of responsibility in the world of the book: anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist, travel writer, teacher and slips in and out of these veiled categories with admirable aplomb. His texts straddle the border between history and fiction. History is the central and definitive

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elements of his texts. Each of his texts challenges the Eurocentrism of History and each of his major works direct their narrative energy toward the unofficial episodes in the records. His novels have revisited versions of history in ways that draw attention to issues associated with the representation of experience. His novels are not confined to India alone but his narratives traverse different locations of the world and, in doing so, present varieties of cultural practices in genre-splitting fictional framework. It would be pertinent to point out that Ghosh graduated with a BA in history, followed by an MA in sociology and a doctoral research in social anthropology.

Amitav Ghosh broadly aligns himself with the Subaltern Studies, Ranjit Guha and Co, since one of its primary aims is to uncover fragments of information about oppressed groups neglected by History. In fact Ghosh is more stylistically innovative than most of the Subaltern Studies historians, inserting his semi-fictionalized alter ego into the narrative, interbraiding storylines from past and present, and allowing speculation and imaginative reconstruction to enter his creative works. In place of the arguably epistemologically oppressive discourses of history and anthropology, Ghosh offers a deliberately partial, contradictory, and inconclusive narrative. In his attempt to write a 'history from below', Ghosh attempts to reconstruct history. He searches the archives for 'those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world' to combat the emphasis of medieval history of the elites.

Another notable aspect of Ghosh's creative output is that he is particularly interested in presenting a collage of the past and contemporary world of the Indian Ocean and the Indian subcontinent. His fascination with local, oral and fragmented history of the tidal region and seas is portrayed in his novels except *The Shadow Lines* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*. The seafaring characters that Ghosh portrays in his oeuvre trace their ancestries to a wide variety of littoral regions, from the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and the Persian Gulf in *The Circle of Reason*, the Strait of Malacca in *The Glass Palace*, the Sunderbans Delta in *The Hungry Tide* and the Ibis Trilogy – *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* traces the journey of *Ibis* from India to Mauritius towards the China Seas. *The Gun Island* is historicification of the myth and mythification of history. The aquatic settings

provide fluid boundaries since it is impossible to inscribe on water the 'shadow lines' which Ghosh fervently contests and challenges. He also pays special attention to the cultural, economic, and social connections between the inhabitants of far-flung lands and islands of the Indian Ocean. Moreover, he proposes that travel, migration and cultural interaction are not recent gifts of globalisation but are endeavours that societies have undertaken for economic, religious, ideological or personal compulsions. While Ghosh's works broaden the readers' knowledge of cultural interconnection at various moments of history, they also remind that national boundaries are a relatively recent construct. Similarly, Ghosh uses historical fragments – poetry, anecdotes, newspaper clippings, etc to narrate his stories.

*The Circle of Reason* (1986), Amitav Ghosh's debut novel won much critical acclaim, notably by the distinguished novelist and critic Anthony Burgess. An episodic, picaresque novel in three parts – Part one, *Satwa* (Reason), spans several decades and beginning from Balaram's birth carry on to Alu's escape to Al- Ghazira; Part two, *Rajas* (Passion), unfolds over a few weeks and depicts Alu's wandering over India and the Middle East; part three, *Tamas* (Death), like a sherzo, races through a day and shows Alu's escape to El-Qued at the northeastern tip of the Algerian Sahara. The novel explores the history of science and pseudoscience and their deployment in the colonial milieu. The novel also shows how the 'subaltern' forms illegal migrants.

*The Shadow Lines* (1988) published four years after the sectarian violence that shook New Delhi in the aftermath of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination, was penned while the homes of the Sikhs were still smoldering. Ghosh's treatment of violence in Calcutta and in Dhaka raise pertinent questions on various faces of violence and the guise of fighting for freedom, about the very real yet non-existing lines which divide nations, people, and families. *The Shadow Lines* unearths the forgotten history of communal riots. It is the story of the family and friends of the nameless narrator. The past, present and future combine and melt together erasing any kind of line of demarcation. Such lines are present mainly in the shadows they cast and there is no point of reference to hold on to. 'Going Away' – the title of the first section, becomes 'Coming Home'-- the title of the second



section of the novel. The narrator embarks on a historical quest to unearth the riot which does not find mention in historical records. The India – Pakistan Partition still initiates a trauma in the national imagination.

*The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery* (1996) won the Arthur C. Clarke Award. With its astounding range of characters, advanced computer science, religious cults and wonderful portraits of Victorian and contemporary India and is certainly a compressed masterpiece of Amitav Ghosh. *The Calcutta Chromosome* has a resonance of theme of Amitav Ghosh's debut novel *The Circle of Reason-- Science, Reason and colonial Power / Knowledge*. *The Calcutta Chromosome* deconstructs history of modern science and rewrites an alternative history of the colonised subalterns. The novel interweaves a network of traces – from the history of malaria research, theological movements generally deemed to be heretical in the West, and slightly futuristic computer technology *inter alia--* to provide the possibility of an alternative subaltern history which exists in parallel with colonial history as a more potent epistemological system, albeit one which has traditionally operated through silence. The novel intertwines historical research and field work into fiction. The main narrative of the novel involves a re-examination of history by-- Antar, L. Murugam and Urmila Roy. Interestingly, Amitav Ghosh weaves different patterns highlighting the subversive tendencies prevalent in Indian Society to reflect a close connection between the past and contemporary India in a new historicist fashion. Ghosh attempts to deconstruct the dichotomy between official western science (represented by scientist Ross) and alternative eastern science (embodied by Mangala). He presents a radical history of scientific research; or rather he explores the question of knowledge and history. In narrating Murugan's account of history of malaria, Ghosh tries to show that reality is more complex and diverse than what we normally are used to seeing.

*The Glass Palace* (2000) is a discourse of postcolonial subjects within the fictional world of the novel. Ghosh attempts to remap the history of three South Asian countries -- Myanmar (Burma), India and Malaysia i.e. the core sites of the empire through the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. *The Glass Palace* unearths the history of the Indian

National Army and the forgotten long march of the Indian refugees from Burma. Anshuman A Modal suggests that Amitav Ghosh “draws on his own personal experiences and those of his family to dramatize the difficulties of pinning down a coherent sense of identity for colonised peoples who have, in their differing and multitudinous ways, responded to the violent interventions of colonialism in their physical environment, their social being, their cultural formations and their *mentalite*. Addressing the psychological and affective effects of colonial ‘defeat’ as much as its political or economic dimensions, this constitutes a more humanist attempt to recuperate some measure of subjectivity and agency as a viable basis for a future decolonization of the mind and body.” (30) The narrative of *The Glass Palace* takes place between 1885--1942. The novel opens in 1885 when Britain colonized Burma, annexed it to its Indian empire and sent King Thebaw into exile. The novel concludes in 1942 when Quit India movement was at its peak. Thus, the novel traverses the end of British colonialism in Asia and awakening of postcolonialism in India. His argument in the novel carries an implication that colonialism is now a matter of the past and we should distance from colonial representation of our historical past. Constructed around characters in Burma, Malaysia and India, *The Glass Palace* is a telling comment on the history of colonial India through its post independent nationhood.

*The Hungry Tide* (2004) – part fact, part fiction – is set in the Sunderbans, the vast, intermittently submerged archipelago, largely covered by mangrove forests, that forms the delta of the Ganges as it debouches into the Bay of Bengal. Amitav Ghosh paints a number of histories on the vast canvas of this novel. *The Hungry Tide* recalls a marginalised episode in the coercive history of postcolonial India – Morichjhapi resettlement. The novel includes present history of visitors- Kanai Dutt, Piyali Roy; ‘outsider-insiders’ – Nirmal, Nilima and the fisherfolk – Fokir, his wife Moyna, their son Tutul, fisherman Horen Naskor, Kanai's childhood playmate Kusum and a host of refugees. The personal histories are intertwined with many other histories – one, Piyali Roy's research on dolphin, its identification and aquatic history; two, the visionary ambition of Sir Daniel Hamilton who bought ten thousand acres of land in Sunderbans to build an ideal



community; three British folly of establishing the port town of Canning; four shipping inspector Henry Piddington's travails and ravages of irresistible ferocious cyclones ; five the folk lore of Bon Bibi fusing Hindu- Muslim faith. Amitav Ghosh makes his readers aware of the sedimentation of human history, the layers of past knowledge, experience, memory, human sense of place in a land regularly obliterated, albeit partly, by the flood tide or by the huge tidal waves dredged up by cyclones. His sense of Bengali social history is unerring and profound. As the last significant expression of the trauma of Bengal's Partition, the eviction of refugee settlers from the island of Morichjhapi in the Sunderbans by the left Front government of West Bengal in 1979, occupies a central significant place in the narrative of the novel.

The Ibis Trilogy -- *Sea Of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015) reestablishes cultural legacy and identity of diaspora. At the heart of this vibrant saga, *Sea of Poppies* is a vast ship, the *Ibis*. Its destiny is a tumultuous voyage across the Indian Ocean; its purpose, to fight China's vicious nineteenth-century Opium Wars. As for the crew, they are a motley array of sailors and stowaways, coolies and convicts. In a time of colonial upheaval, fate has thrown together a diverse cast of Indians and Westerners, from a bankrupt *raja* to a widowed tribeswoman, from a mulatto American freedman to a free spirited French orphan. As their old family ties are washed away, they, like their historical counterparts, come to view themselves as *jahaj-bhais*, or ship-brothers. An unlikely dynasty is born, which will span continents, races, and generations. The vast sweep of this historical adventure spans the lush poppy fields of the Ganges, the rolling high seas, the exotic backstreets of Canton. But it is the panorama of characters, whose diaspora encapsulates the vexed colonial history of the East itself, which is the highpoint of *Sea of Poppies*.

In September 1838 a storm blows up on the Indian Ocean and the *Ibis*, a ship carrying a consignment of convicts and indentured laborers from Calcutta to Mauritius, is caught up in the whirlwind. When the seas settle, five men have disappeared - two lascars, two convicts and one of the passengers. Did the same storm upend the fortunes of those aboard the *Anahita*, an opium carrier heading towards Canton? And what fate befell those aboard the *Redruth*, a

sturdy two-masted brig heading East out of Cornwall? Was it the storm that altered their course or was the destinies of these passengers at the mercy of even more powerful forces? On the grand scale of an historical epic, *River of Smoke* follows its storm-tossed characters to the crowded harbors of China. There, despite efforts of the emperor to stop them, ships from Europe and India exchange their cargoes of opium for boxes tea, silk, porcelain and silver. Among them are Bahram Modi, a wealthy Parsi opium merchant out of Bombay, his estranged half-Chinese son Ah Fatt, the orphaned Paulette and a motley collection of others whose pursuit of romance, riches and a legendary rare flower have thrown together. All struggle to cope with their losses - and for some, unimaginable freedoms -in the alleys and crowded waterways of 19th century Canton. As transporting and mesmerizing as an opiate induced dream, *River of Smoke* is a masterpiece of twenty-first century literature.

While *Sea of Poppies* moves along the Ganges and to Calcutta, where the poppies are grown and the opium processed, *River of Smoke* follows the story through to Canton in China, where the opium is sold. The third novel of the trilogy is eagerly awaited. The judgements of history are generously deferred. In historical novels the past can sometimes feel tamed; hindsight, hovering just off the page, tells us that we know what it all added up to and what came of it (the First Opium War, during which British gunboats enforced a treaty opening Chinese ports to international trade, comes shortly after the ending of this novel). But Ghosh's novels somehow succeed in taking his readers back inside the chaos of when "then" were "now". His grasp of the detail of the period is exhaustive - he is so thoroughly submerged in it - that readers can't possibly remember all the things he shows them, or hold on to all the life-stories of all the characters he introduces. Both novels are cabinets of curiosities, crowded with items that hold a story of their own.

*Flood of Fire* is what Henry James might have called a loose, baggy monster says the newspaper headline. The novel brims with wonderful historical details, clearly the result of prodigious research. The trilogy's final volume picks up the story in 1839, a few months before the outbreak of the First Opium War. *Flood of Fire* is a world of sepoys, sahibs and rajahs, traveling with them from Assam to Calcutta to Canton, all the while



learning about their pasts and dreading or hoping for their futures. Ghosh's novel is also concerned with how the nascent free trade of the region has brought about a major conflict, which is resolved through military force. With all the verve of the first two novels in the trilogy, *Flood of Fire* completes Ghosh's unprecedented re-envisioning of the nineteenth-century war on drugs. With remarkable historic vision and a vibrant cast of characters, Ghosh brings the Opium Wars to bear on the contemporary moment with the storytelling that has charmed readers around the world. But neither of the previous two novels nor this one reads as a dry history lesson.

The most striking element of *Gun Island* is how history, culture, and nature are put on the same level. In *Gun Island*, Ghosh portrays the displacement and migration of humans and how difficult life is for those who need to leave their countries and families behind: in particular, this crucial topic and its various implications are displayed by the story of Tipu and Rafi. Touching upon the topics of xenophobia, immigration, climate change, and deterioration of ecosystems, Ghosh creates a story that locates its protagonists within networks that foster reciprocal awareness and enable cooperative actions. The scenario is discomfiting, and isolated individuals are completely powerless in it, but the strength to act comes from connecting with one another; the characters of the novel are moved to action as the crisis intensifies, joining groups and founding new ones which allow them to overcome their initial passivity (Cole 15).

*Gun Island* explores many of Ghosh's other recurring motifs: Irrawaddy dolphins; the Sunderbans; and climate change. The basic theme is refugees and illegal migration, displacement and renewal. "Migration and displacement have always interested me, perhaps because my father's family was displaced by a flood way back in the 19th century," Ghosh says. "Over the last couple of years, I spent a lot of time in Italy, visiting refugee camps, and interviewing recent migrants, especially those who have made the crossing from Libya to Sicily, across the Mediterranean. These interviews were revelatory... When we hear about refugee boats on the Mediterranean, we usually assume that the people on those boats are mainly Middle Easterners and Africans. But in fact large

numbers of people from the Indian sub-continent, mainly Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, also travel that way." Two of the novel's characters, Tipu and Rafi, come in this manner from the Sunderbans to Italy. The sections in which Ghosh lays bare their traumatic journey are the most visceral and harrowing of the book. They haunt the reader as the novel hurtles towards its tumultuous conclusion. Ghosh has emerged in rude writing health from the 19th century world of opium trade. Taut and gripping, *Gun Island* is a parable for our times.

To conclude, Amitav Ghosh's fiction may be seen as the flip side of a subaltern historiography. They represent his secular and humanist orientation. Henry James is of the view that the supreme virtue of a novel is "the air of reality (solidity of specification)". He also points out that "the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life" and he also insisted on the fact that "as the picture is reality, so the novel is history." In fact for artists like Amitav Ghosh, the problem of considering novel as history acquires a new dimension because the novel cannot be and should not be considered history. Even James did not subscribe to the idea because that would place a novelist in the company of those who subscribe to the idea of bland realism. Amitav Ghosh does not subscribe completely to the mimetic view of reality. It goes without saying that he has been profoundly influenced by the aesthetics of realism and the use of history and historical methods. But what is important is that he has made a consistent massive attempt to make a humane order out of disorder of experience and to give form to the multifarious impressions and ideas of conscious life. Novel is not history, nor is a novelist a historian. The novelist penetrates into the hidden motives working behind his character's action in order to bring out the true nature of human experience in terms of art. Ghosh employs history as in a collage or in a mosaic. He interweaves it into his aesthetic fabric. The incidents in his novels may be historical but the context is universal. History loses its circumstantiality and becomes a timeless presence of social significance.

Fiction is harrowingly diverse in its coverage of history yet Amitav Ghosh manages to cover each successive event with historical clarity and surreal manipulation simultaneously. Because history can be seen to be a malleable artifact, it proves to be a most useful tool to employ when



writing fiction. And because history is often chaotic, fiction can be seen as perhaps the only way to approach it. By fictionalizing it, to an extent, a writer admits to his/her own limitations in constructing the past via the present context. While re-writing history in a creative manner is appealing, readers seem to revel in the deliberate manipulation of historical characters and events. Whether tweaking the tales of history or bringing them into a fresh, new light, Amitav Ghosh has the ability to weave history in his favour.

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