

The Shadow Lines and the Ghosh oeuvre

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The Shadow Lines (TSL) is the perhaps the most acclaimed novel of Amitav Ghosh, which happens to be only his second novel. Since then Ghosh has gone on to write several other novels, including the recent *Ibis Trilogy*. This paper attempts to identify and analyze the influence of *TSL* in the making of the oeuvre of Amitav Ghosh. In doing so, it will examine and analyze how the major themes of *TSL* continue to influence his later novels and how the later novels can lead the reader to newer interpretations of *TSL*, that, in a sort of way, paved the way to the fame that Ghosh enjoys.

TSL, like its author, is interdisciplinary. It encompasses several themes, such as post colonialism, border-crossing, historicism, emigration, exile and cultural displacement. The later novels of Amitav Ghosh continue to explore and elaborate the same themes and this, I believe, is done with the intention to suggest that the issues of culture and national boundaries are illusory, as the title of the novel suggests.

Ghosh and Colonial History

It is interesting to observe how a historian and a novelist treat the subject of history. A novelist's relationship to the past becomes substantially different from the historian's because the former approaches history through the characters he creates. This goes without saying that in most respects the novelist's understanding of the subject is far less comprehensive, far less accurate than that of the historian. However, the novelist who has created his character proceeds

with an intuition, to demonstrate the logic of how a certain character would apprehend the events of history. Viewing it this way, we find that there are also some respects in which seeing the past through the prism of a character's experience allows for a kind of wholeness which is unavailable to the historian.

Ghosh adopts a complex inversion of the subaltern method that involves two processes: one, the selection of small, neglected events from the national story in a concession to subaltern practice –the little narrative against the grand; and two, the neglect by the narrative of some aspect of these stories. He does this by choosing his historical area carefully, keeping some part of it silent and invisible and then meditating on silence as it is revealed as a fictional and historical necessity. In *TSL* Tridib's death is a silent moment in the narrator's memory that has to be retrieved and understood so that Tridib's dominating presence in his life may also be exorcised. In *The Hungry Tide (HT)* the marginal highly personalised genre of the diary through which the Morichjhapi incident is recounted is retrieved from its silent existence even as the incident is similarly retrieved. These retrievals are a necessary aspect of both the method of subaltern history and of its critique that the Ghosh text offers. That is precisely what an attempt to overcome the impact of the monolithic version of history would be like.

Ghosh's declaration that he is not writing the "19th c dynastic European novel form" but a "contemporary memoir," "a project in chronicling a family history" (*Ghosh and Aldama*, "An Interview" 85) has been echoed by critics who have re-presented it as a fictional practice tacitly set against subaltern theoretical assumptions. This is apparent in critics developing interpretations based on the novels' interest in the lives of "ordinary people," a "more genuinely human experience" and an "alternative history" (Wassef 76). It also appears in a more sophisticated

version of subaltern practice that identifies a discursive basis in the vernacular, identified as the “other” archive that is “grafted” on to the European novel form and haunts it. Bishnupriya Ghosh demonstrates this in *The Calcutta Chromosome (CC)* where two Indian language texts by Rabindranath Tagore and Phanishwarnath Renu are embedded in a combination of “ghosting” and “grafting” (197).

In the process, what the Ghosh text offers by way of opportunity to examine the subaltern practice itself -- and one glimpses a little of this in the exchange with Dipesh Chakrabarty— is missed. There is a tacit critique at Ghosh’s end of the exchange and in Ghosh’s work in general, of the limitations of the subaltern method and if one arrives at this critique through the choice and deployment of historical material in his novels, it becomes clear that Ghosh is not simply ‘using’ the subaltern method but in taking up the other side of even the subaltern narratives —an alternative to alternative histories— pointing to the possibilities of reparation.

The arbitrary dividing lines called ‘Border’: Migration and Transculturalism

TSL is concerned with issues of exile and migration, and a related critique of a particular construction of belonging. This notion of belonging presupposes the conjoining of a specific space and a single culture in a unified nation state. The individual is inserted into this unity through birth and descent s/he is born on a culture’s territory and descendant of its adherents. The text stages the negative consequences of this conception in the trajectories of two of its main characters. The narrator’s grandmother is trapped between her birth in Dhaka, now capital of the Muslim Bangladesh, and her descent from Hindu ancestors. Forced to flee from her imaginary home, she becomes an eternal refugee, always longing to return to a home that never really existed. Ila, on the other hand, rejects a Hindu culture that limits her independence, and thus also

rejects any form of belonging, becoming a dislocated nomad. Against these two forms of dislocation, the narrator struggles to assert a different form of belonging and motion that constructs belonging out of the painful and powerless desire to come to know the other that produces a dialogic relation to difference.

In her book *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Avtar Brah finds ‘borders’ as “arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic” (Brah, 1996: 198). When spatially considered, the existence of the border seems more real, but the idea of border also acts temporally in separating one historical period from the other (as the event of political independence could be seen as a border between the colonial and the post-colonial periods in the history of a nation-state). In her book *Borderlands*, Gloria Anzaldua finds a border thus: “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge.” (Anzaldua, 1987: 3) Seen from a postcolonial perspective, the concept of the border is important both geographically and historically as the history of colonization shapes the borders of many new nation-states. The political identities of these new nations are mostly conditioned by the reality of the geographical borders of the erstwhile colonial territories and not by the socio-cultural realities. These arbitrarily created borderlines have “little or nothing to do with ‘ethnic’ fault lines, linguistic demarcations, religious affiliations, geographical landmarks or other such ‘natural’ lines of cleavage between territories” (Krishna, 2003: 304). But as relics of colonial rule, these borders are appropriate sites for a re-negotiation of ‘national’ identities. In an article entitled ‘Beyond the Nation: Post-Colonial Hope’ (2009) Bill Ashcroft finds ‘border’ as something severely disrupted by an interplay between memory and place: “The concept of the border is disrupted in many ways in

postcolonial literatures, but most powerfully in the relationship between memory and place: memory rather than nostalgia and place rather than nation” (Ashcroft, 2009: 17). The concept of border is essential as ideological, which generates and reinforces a sense of difference and its impact on individual identity, with particular reference to Amitav Ghosh’s *TSL*(1988).

The nation is an “unprecedented” institution, contends Sudipta Kaviraj, which attempts to replace pre-modern communities, marked by “fuzzy” boundaries and intense emotional ties with an “enumerated” and modern national community. The latter is territorially specific, has clear boundaries and must “enumerate” what belongs to it. Hence, “the endless counting of citizens, territories, resources, majorities, minorities, institutions, activities, import, export, incomes, projects, births, deaths, diseases” (1992: 30-31). Benedict Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (1983: 15). It is imagined by its people and ideologues, imaginings fraught with inc. One of these is that nation-states, although historically “new” entities, “always loom out of an immemorial past” (1983: 19) as the same entity of a united people sharing the same heritage. Modern India needs to be judged from this perspective. The Indian nation is “not an object of discovery but of invention” (Kaviraj 1992: 1).

Ghosh’s writings focus on migration during the pre-national space that was continuous and permitted boundary crossings as well as on colonial and post-colonial spaces. While critiquing the concept of borders, he engages with the frequency of boundary-crossings within and outside India, focusing on Bengal in particular, which challenges essentialist definitions of nations and societies. Although Ghosh’s fiction and non-fiction throws light on both pre-colonial and colonial movements and displacements in general, he focuses in particular on the dislocation

caused by the formation of nations through the marking of what he has called “the shadow lines” across nations (Ghosh, *TSL*).

Through uncovering these on-going histories of migration and transnational flows that began several centuries ago as well as through the construction of borders, Ghosh interrogates the idea of the nation and borders. In *TSL* (1988), Ghosh captures this difference between boundaries and borders in the character of the grandmother or Tha'mma's consternation when she is informed about there being no physical markers between India and Bangladesh: “But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then?” (*The Shadow Lines* 151) . In contrast to modern national borders that are policed and implicated in issues of legality and illegality, pre-national boundaries were essentially permeable and permitted frequent crossings, as Tha'mma points out in the novel:

And if there's no difference both sides will be the same, it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then – Partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between? (151)

As one who gave her consent to the idea of the nation through her allegiance to the nationalist cause, Tha'mma does not realise that she is herself complicit in the closure of those boundaries that could be crossed effortlessly before the formation of borders and nation states.

As novelist, Ghosh prioritizes space over time as the structuring principle in narrative. In “The March of the Novel through History”, he applauds the novel's ability to eloquently

communicate a sense of place and also to interweave the entire spatial continuum from local to global:

The novel as a form has been vigorously international from the start; [...] And yet, the paradox of the novel as a form is that it is founded upon a myth of parochiality, in the exact sense of a parish — a place named and charted, a definite location. [...] Location is thus intrinsic to a novel [...]. (*The Imam and the Indian*, 294)

Reflecting on “the rhetoric of location” (*The Imam and the Indian*, 303), Ghosh stresses that he is not thinking merely of place or the physical aspects of the setting. Asserting that the links between India and her diaspora are “lived within the imagination” (*The Imam and the Indian*, 247), he examines the modes in which “the spaces of India travel with the migrant” to create what Rushdie calls the imaginary homeland:

That is the trouble with an infinitely reproducible space: since it does not refer to actual spaces it cannot be left behind. [...] Eventually the place and the realities that accompany it vanish from memory and [...] [t]he place, India, becomes in fact an empty space, mapped purely by words. (*The Imam and the Indian*, 248-249)

These “words”, which signify memories and inherited values, are the “metaphors of space” that constitute “the symbolic spatial structure of India” for the migrant (*The Imam and the Indian*, 248). Ghosh calls this kind of alternative mapping, in terms of sites of lived experience and memory and not of material location, “the cultural representation of space” (*The Imam and*

the Indian, 250). In Ghosh's fictional realms, local or global, seen or unseen space is perceived and imagined in the narrator's memory as a fundamental facet of individual, national, familial, and communal metamorphoses. Space is not merely remembered as an imaginative construct but is represented as a domain of political and cultural encounters, encounters which actually shape the connection of different characters with territory and location. Hence, space is represented as a dynamic arrangement between people, places, cultures and societies. James Clifford argues that "space is never ontologically given. It is discursively mapped and corporeally practiced" (1997: 54). According to Clifford, space is composed through movement, produced through use, at the same time an agency and result of action or practice. The construction of space in Ghosh's *TSL* does not simply manifest territorial struggles but serves to show the interplay between local and global influences, national and transnational reconfigurations and above all the search for community and alliances that cut across boundaries of cultural and ethnic identity.

Journey, especially sea journey, has a vital role to play in many of Ghosh's works. His passion for describing journeys comes involuntarily, and his special taste for describing sea journeys can be witnessed even in his early writings. In *The Circle of Reason (CR)*, narrating Alu's journey through Calcutta to Goa, Ghosh writes, "it was still dark, though the eastern sky behind them had turned scarlet. The sea, tinged with violet, was lapping gently at *Mariamamma's* sides" (183). Likewise, the following lines from Ghosh's *TSL* illustrate his urge to look beyond boundaries, "And then I think to myself why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It's a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage" (272). Admitting the influence his transnational journeys and Evans-Prichard's works had on him Ghosh calls both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka his home. Referring to

Egypt he states that he was interested in historical connections in general and connections between India and Egypt in particular. Writing is the point of integration for Ghosh the Anthropologist and Ghosh the novelist. It is very interesting to note that Ghosh, despite having been established as a renowned novelist, acknowledges the limitation of novel as a form. He feels that the “novel with its conventions of naturalistic dialogue, is most at home within monolingual speech communities” (*The Imam and the Indian* 78). This is significant in the light of the fact that Ghosh, in *Sea of Poppies (SP)*, brings together characters speaking different languages on board the *Ibis*. Ghosh’s imagination has got its own structure and is well defined. He says his research is driven by his characters. He reveals his interest in anything past, as past is both ‘unique’ and ‘unrepeatable’. Ghosh reveals that the ship episodes in his novels are a ‘sweetened version’ of reality.

Ghosh’s novels often imagine the world from the perspective of displaced peoples and focus on peoples’ histories often relegated to the margins of Eurocentric narratives of history. In *The Glass Palace (GP)* (2000), Ghosh focuses on the “forgotten” histories of WWII such as the “Forgotten Long March,” the harrowing march of Indian settlers from Burma to India in the wake of a Japanese advance. *In An Antique Land (AL)* (1992) explores African-Asian connections preceding British colonialism and “other” non-European worlds and connections. *TSL* (1988) interrogates both the legacies of Partition in the subcontinent as well as the silence surrounding riots in nationalist histories since riots call attention to the failures of the postcolonial nation-state. The massacre at Morichjhāpi of Bangladeshi refugees by the Indian state in 1979 finds voice in *HT* (2004), where Ghosh focuses on the islands of the Sunderbans to unsettle the notion of progress by showing the costs of developmentalism through the predicament of refugees and

indigenous peoples. And, in *CC*, Ghosh questions the colonial narrative of discovery and progress by disputing the colonial “truth” of Ronald Ross’ discovery of the cure for malaria. Thus, Ghosh has variously exposed the limits of (imperial) archives and questioned the myth of progress in his corpus. In *SP*, Ghosh revisits themes and preoccupations of his earlier work and presents a historical novel of panoramic scope and great depth, populated with characters from different continents with complex histories and conflicting interests.

In *SP*, the readers were shown the desperate cast of indentured slaves, stowaways, and seamen at sea on the *Ibis*, heading for Port Louis. In the turmoil of a storm into which the passengers of the ship were hurled, a band of captives managed to free themselves by fleeing to escape to Singapore. The second volume of the trilogy picks up with Deeti, the widow saved from the fires of self-immolation at the beginning of *SP*, now the respected elder of an extended clan in Mauritius - La Fami Colver. Her memories form the novel's outer structure into which Ghosh goads his most fascinating characters for three of the other *Ibis* shipmates: Neel the bankrupt Raja; Ah Fatt, his opium addicted cellmate; and Paulette Lambert, the aspiring botanist. Given the cumbersome number of characters with whom Ghosh was juggling at the end of *SP*, his bizarre ploy here is to add two key principals: Ah Fatt's father, Seth BahramModi, a rags-to-riches opium merchant hailing from Bombay, and Robin Chinnery, a dazzling painter and childhood companion to Paulette.

SP, the first volume of Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy, an impressive and detailed account of the events leading up to the first opium war of 1839-42, throws light on opium production in India, enforced labour and its impact on the people of Bihar and the Bay of Bengal. The *Ibis*, a former slaving schooner repurposed as a transporter of opium, tracks Deeti, the chief character in

the novel, up the Ganges, who travels on the black-water, with high hopes of starting a new lease of life, ignorant of the hardships that lie ahead. Through *RS*, Ghosh takes his readers to the opium's destination, Canton, and highlights the growing tension between the Chinese authorities and the opium traders. In his third instalment *Flood of Fire (FF)*, Amitav Ghosh recreates "that tension – essentially between a state resisting an unfettered trade that has kick started widespread addiction in its population and a conjunction of personal and corporate interests messianically committed to the cause of free trade – culminates in full-blown conflict" (Lalami). Ghosh's ambition is also to show how it redrew the map of the region, prompting, "the transformation of the backwater port of Hong Kong into a globally influential centre of enterprise" (Lalami). Making the narrative "simultaneously wrong-footing and delightful, riveting and diverting" (Lalami).

The later novels of Amitav Ghosh cast a new insight into the readings of *TSL*. The later novels have highlighted and explored similar themes that were introduced by Ghosh in *TSL*. Essential to an understanding of the postcolonial migration in the *TSL* is the *Ibis Trilogy*. The three novels that comprise the trilogy explore the various implications of the migration, both forced and voluntary. The *TSL* traces the impact of partition and the forced migration thereon. Another aspect of *TSL* is the dilution of the physical borders and boundaries in the increasingly reduced global space. The cosmopolitan nature of the border in a world of shadow border lines is demonstrated in the global citizenship of Ila and her family, which is strictly in contrast to the ideals of rigid nationalism of Thamma. The global nature of this global citizenship that is a characteristic of Ila and her family is due to their frequent migration across various borderlines that separate the nations. While in *TSL*, Ghosh depicts that such migration does not provide any

citizenship, he goes on to explore another aspect in the *Ibis*. In the *Ibis*, the migration is forced upon the laborers and indentures who escape from the *Ibis*, which was supposed to carry them to Mauritius as indentured labour. Ghosh goes on to explore the fact that though they have been cut off from their ‘homeland’, they create their own ‘homeland’ in the place of their settlement where they continue to maintain their cultural heritage (*Flood of Fire*).

As he states in many of his interviews, Ghosh is investigating the silence around Britain’s role in the “drug trade” of the nineteenth century. Ghosh, who refers to opium as “among the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria’s crown” in his novel (*Sea* 83–4), is in agreement with economist Carl Trocki’s contention that, “Without the drug, there probably would have been no British Empire” since “the economic foundation of the imperial economy lay on opium” (Trocki xiii). Trocki states that by the middle of the nineteenth century, opium was a major source of government revenue in British India and a major export. In Ghosh’s novel, the British merchants’ heavy surveillance of the opium factory leaves no doubts about the immense value of the commodity: “The fortifications here were formidable, and the guards particularly sharp-eyed—and well they might be, for the contents of those few sheds, or so it was said, were worth several million pounds sterling and could buy a good part of the City of London” (*Sea* 84).

This inversion of the roles of the colonizer and the colonized is one of the major themes in *TSL*. By giving voice to such minor characters as Tridib, who do not figure as an important figure in the relations of the imperial project, Ghosh not only disrupts the monolithic version of history, which lays an overwhelming emphasis on the dates and the stories of the kings and great warriors, but also examines the roles of the common man in the making of the present by means

of their pasts. In doing so, Ghosh explores the various trauma, both the physical and the psychological, that the characters undergo.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *TSL* continues to be his most debated and highly critical novel till date. The later novels of Ghosh have gone on to develop the issues of migration, exile and nationalism that he developed in *TSL*. At a time when there is an overwhelming discussion on the various aspects of migration and exile, Ghosh's *TSL* proves to be a touchstone against which the various literatures on migration and exile can be read, for, the novel is perhaps the earliest and a well-researched narration on the themes. Notwithstanding the fact that Ghosh's novel is essentially postcolonial as it gives voice to the subaltern,

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