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# AMITAV GHOSH AS A NOVELIST AND A BIOGRAPHER-AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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**ABSTRACT**

Most of the Indian English novels of recent times written by migrant writers have chosen materials for their art from contemporary Indian socio-cultural situations. They also undertake the exploration of the relationship between the East and the West. It has become a recurring theme in contemporary Indian English fiction because of the nature of the linguistic medium the novelist uses. Fictional reworking of mythology and history has given new significance and possibilities to the Indian English novel writings. Amitav Ghosh often returns to Indian history and mythology. Midnight's Children, Shame and The Moor's Last Sigh deal with the complex working of the Muslim psyche caught up in the historical and cultural web of the Indian subcontinent. The Circle of Reason, The Calcutta Chromosome and *The Shadow Lines* (1988) express the blind follow of the English by the Indians, the encounter between the west rationality and Indian myth, and hollowness of national identity and national boundaries.

Amitav Ghosh, who won many accolades including the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Prix Medicis Etrangere of France. Although less prone to controversy, he is responsible for producing some of the most lyrical and insightful works on the effect of colonialism on the native people. His books include *The Circle of Reason, The Glass Palace, The Calcutta Chromosome*, and *The Hungry Tide*.

**Keywords:** Communication, between, intellectual, university , memories, chromosome, imagination, political, family, knowledge, portrayal.



## INTRODUCTION

Ghosh's narrative, rather than encompassing vast swathes of South and South-East Asia, here prefers, then, to focus a magnifying lens on what might be called a micro-culture within the region - namely, the Sundarbans or "tide country," the islets of the Ganges delta that lie south of Kolkata and just east of the West Bengal/Bangladesh frontier. The Economist reviewer took the view that "it is its sense of place that dominates the novel," and Ghosh himself might seem almost to vindicate such a view in his remark of 1998: "A novel … must always be set somewhere: it must have its setting, and within the evolution of the narrative this setting must, classically, play a part almost as important as those of the characters themselves." That "almost" needs to be noted, however, and indeed The Hungry Tide highlights not only place but, crucially, dynamically evolving human relationships, in a context that includes - as in his other writings - the dimensions of work (he stated in 2002 that "even the most mundane forms of labour can embody an entire metaphysic"), crosscultural barriers and communication, and the relationship between past and present. History is, indeed, a recurring theme in Ghosh's writing, as acutely noted by the critic Brinda Bose (2001), who states: "Ghosh's fiction takes upon itself the responsibility of re-assessing its troubled

antecedents, using history as a tool by which we can begin to make sense of - or at least come to terms with - our troubling present."

The story centres on two visitors to the Sundarban community, Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy (Piya), and their interaction with that community and with each other. Kanai, a Delhi businessman in his forties, is a semi-outsider, paying a rare visit to his aunt Nilima, an NGO activist who runs a hospital on one of the islands; Piya, an Indo-American scientist from Seattle in her twenties, irrupts into the Sundarban world as - despite her Bengali origins - less a diasporic Indian than an outsider pure and simple, "the American." Kanai is there to pick up and read a journal left him by his late uncle Nirmal, an idealistic, Marxist intellectual in the Bengali tradition, whose contents will oblige him to delve deep into his family history; Piya's journey to the tide country is part of her ongoing research on dolphins. Piya knows no Bengali ('"you know no Bangla?' … 'I was so little when I left India that I never had a chance to learn"'). Her ignorance of her own language heritage induces her to take Kanai on board as interpreter between her and Fokir, the illiterate fisherman and protégé of Kanai's aunt who serves as her guide. Ghosh's novel takes as its task the exploration of a vast field of human communication, testing both its possibilities and its limits as the characters seek to cross multiple barriers - the barriers of language, religion and social class, those between human beings and nature, between traditional and cosmopolitan India, between urban and rural, between India and the wider world. The tension between global and local is articulated through the characters, with, for most of the novel, globalisation embodied by the Americanised Piya with her hi-tech GPS device, local identity symbolised by Fokir, and Kanai, the Delhi-resident, part-globalised modern entrepreneur, shifting uncertainly somewhere in between.

***The Circle of Reason (1986)***

The first novel by Amitav Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason*, was published in 1986. It attracted some critical attention, including an endorsement from the influential critic and novelist Anthony Burgess. This work could be characterized as an episodic, picaresque novel in three parts (Mondal 2007, 7)[i]. The parts are linked by the protagonist, Alu, who flees the Indian authorities after being falsely accused of terrorist activity, the intelligence officer, Jyoti Das, who is trying to capture him and a book, The Life of Pasteur, by René Vallery-Radot. The general motif running through the novel is that of weaving as the method for creating connections by intertwining various discursive threads.

A saga of flight and pursuit, this novel chronicles the adventures of Alu, a young master weaver who is wrongly suspected of being a terrorist. Chased from Bengal to Bombay and on through the Persian Gulf to North Africa by a bird-watching police inspector, Alu encounters along the way a cast of characters as various and as colorful as the epithets with which the author adorns them. The reader is drawn into their lives by incidents tender and outrageousand all compellingly told. Ghosh is as natural a weaver of words as Alu is of cloth, deftly interlacing humor and wisdom to produce a narrative tapestry of surpassing beauty.

A picaresque tale, with comic and intellectual overtures, *The Circle of Reason* tells the story of the orphan Alu, adopted by his elderly uncle, a teacher in a small Indian village. Balaram Bose had been a brilliant student, but his obsession with rationalism has declined into a fanatical study of phrenology. After measuring Alu's lumpy head, he has him apprenticed as a weaver, where he soon surpasses even his master.

Unfortunately, Balaram also is involved in a local feud, which ultimately results in the bombing of his home. Alu, the only survivor and a suspect in the bombing, flees, closely followed by a young Indian policeman, Jyoti Das. Taking ship across the Arabian Sea, Alu arrives at the small, oil-rich state of al-Ghazira, where he moves into the home of Zindi, an enormously fat madam. After a near fatal accident, he has a vision worthy of his uncle--the people of the Indian quarter will wage war on germs and money. This bizarre social experiment almost succeeds, until the local government brutally ends it. Alu flees again with Zindi and other friends, still closely pursued by Das. Finally, after wandering over much of North Africa, they accidentally meet in a small Saharan village, concluding with a sad denouement which determines their future.

A mere plot summary hardly does justice to this dense novel, loaded as it is with plots, subplots, dozens of nationalities, and the complicated intellectual rationale for Alu and Balaram's theories. American readers may find this heavy going, but close reading will yield definite rewards. Ghosh has undeniable talent, particularly in that peculiar synthesis of the intellectual, the comic, and the ridiculous which is so intrinsic to life in India, but he would be well-advised to prune his cast and plot in future works. Still, this is an amusing and provoking look at the "real" India, for those with the time and interest.

***The Shadow Lines (1988)***

*Ghosh's second novel, The Shadow Lines (1988), has received more critical attention than his other, by no means unnoticed, novels. New editions of the novel designed for literary scholars and common readers alike are constantly released, especially in the Indian subcontinent. The Shadow Lines is listed in the curricula of several universities around the world. This novel has the most prominent position also in this dissertation, as it has in my other output, too. I have published three articles on The Shadow Lines, and the following introductory examination of the novel (II.2.1.) draws heavily on my earlier work (Huttunen, 2004)*[ii].

*The Shadow Lines* is a story told by a nameless narrator in recollection. It's a non linear tale told as if putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle in the memory of the narrator. This style of writing is both unique and captivating; unfolding ideas together as time and space coalesce and help the narrator understand his past better. Revolving around the theme of nationalism in an increasingly globalized world, Ghosh questions the real meaning of political freedom and the borders which virtually seem to both establish and separate. The novel traverses through almost seventy years through the memories of people, which the narrator recollects and narrates, giving their viewpoint along with his own. Though the novel is based largely in Kolkata, Dhaka and London, it seems to echo the sentiments of whole South-east Asia, with lucid overtones of Independence and the pangs of Partition.

It is a story of a middle class Indian family based in Calcutta. The boy narrator presents the views of the members of his immediate and extended family, thus, giving each a well defined character. However, Tha'mma, narrator's grandmother is the most realised character in the novel, giving a distinct idea of the idealism and the enthusiasm with which the people worked towards nation building just after independence. It is chiefly through her character that Ghosh delivers the most powerful message of the novel; the vainness of creating nation states, the absurdity of drawing lines which arbitrarily divide people when their memories remain undivided. All the characters are well rounded. In Tridib, the narrator's uncle, Ghosh draws one of the most unique characters of our times. Narrator's fascination with him is understandable as Tridib travels the world through his imagination. Ghosh subtly tries to undo the myth that boundaries restrict as there are no barriers in imagination. Though Ghosh is a little mean to narrator's cousin and childhood love, Ila, but her thus portrayal is crucial to showcase the confusions which the people who live away from their native place, harbour and the prejudices they face. Ghosh gives adequate space to the British Price family and unlike most authors, he doesn't stereotype them.

***The Calcutta Chromosome (1996)***

*The Calcutta Chromosome* is a multi-layered novel, presenting different storylines from different times. The idea, of course, is to have them merge neatly in the end: Ghosh does bring them together, but not nearly as nicely as one might hope. Too bad, but at least there's some decent entertainment along the way.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* begins in the near-future, in New York, where Antar works for the mega-organization the International Water Council. The IWC had swallowed up Antar's previous employer, an NGO called LifeWatch ("that served as a global public health consultancy and epidemiological data bank"). Now he works from home, linked up by computer, doing drudge work.

In a sense, the novel presents questions concerning religion and the epistemological nature of god/goddess as counterparts of science, its methodologies and the idea of rational knowledge. The question of discursive knowledge has been addressed as —the spirit of knowingness from an

ethical viewpoint by Cora Diamond, who writes of the feeling of mystery in our lives:

There is far more to things, to life, than what we know or understand. Such a feeling is tied to a rejection of the spirit of knowingness often found in abstract moral and social theorizing, a spirit which may recognize the existence of phenomena not yet satisfactorily explained or dealt with, but which is reductive in its idea of our relation to the world, and in what it takes understanding and knowledge to be, a spirit that is often “restless” in its supposed wisdom, eager to re-order human lives in accordance with its rational plans (Diamond 1998, 51-52, orig. emphasis).[iii]

Ghosh offers a mild dystopia here. Antar's New York is a more desolate, decrepit, and impersonal one than the present-day city, but Antar can still find convivial souls and his life isn't all too bad. Ghosh doesn't expend much energy on working out a vision of the future, and didn't put too much thought into it. Antar's computer, known as Ava, is a pretty neat thing, able to speak in any dialect and do a good number of things, but otherwise Ghosh's future sounds out of date even these few years after he wrote it. His Internet is still expensive and slow, for example. And Antar's friends discuss "some new scam for saving on subway tokens" -- when it must have been clear even in 1995 (when the book was first published) that the subway token would soon be phased out, replaced by a more flexible electronic card system.

Ghosh's quaint lack of imagination about the future is only appropriate, because the focus of the book is on the past. The past first drops into Antar's lap -- or rather: appears on his computer screen -- in the form of a piece of an ID card from another LifeWatch employee, L.Murugan. Murugan went missing in 1995 in Calcutta and, as it happens, Antar met him before then.

Murugan was obsessed with Ronald Ross, who had received the Nobel Prize in 1902 for his work on malaria. With that the three timelines are set, and the novel shifts back and forth between them: there is Antar's present, as he investigates the ID card and what might have happened. There are the events leading up to Murugan's disappearance in 1995, which include his discussions with Antar and then his adventures in Calcutta. And there are the events from the late 19th century, as the malaria-discoveries are being made (these events are largely -- and confusingly -- related by Murugan, though often based on accounts and letters from that time).

It is complicated -- and it gets more so. There are different casts of characters: few in New York, more in Calcutta, and a whole slew in 19th century India.

Ross' malaria-related discoveries are the key. It turns out the discoveries are surprising, as is how he came to make them. And Murugan thinks there is more to them too -- the Calcutta chromosome, for one. The steps of Ross' discovery were also remarkably fortuitous: they almost seem to fall into place for him, and this is where Murugan focusses his attention.

***The Glass Palace (2000)***

Primarily, *The Glass Palace*, as a novel, depicts how forces of history and politics change family life. It has a sweeping canvas that spreads two centuries, three families and three countries, in its course documenting events of the past century, in Burma, Malaya and India.

The novel offers deeply interesting human and historical insights. It is a scathing critique of the British imperial rule of India. It traces the invasion of Burma by the British in 1880, the toppling of the Burmese Monarchy, their imprisonment in Ratnagiri (India) and the capitalist exploitation of Burma. A romantic book on human survival, the movement and the agony of refugees are portrayed in a positive and spirited manner.

In addition to the sad story of a King and Queen in exile, and besides the intricate twists and turns of the family saga, what immediately arrests interest in *The Glass Palace*, is the dilemma of Indians soldiers in the British armed forces, a significant part in the later half of this novel. As India struggled for its independence, the role of Indians in the British armed forces became more controversial and questionable. The dilemmas faced by the Indian soldiers during World War II, figuring out whom they should be loyal to, what they are fighting for, and such associated historical and political issues and conflicts are dealt with a great deal of maturity, not

merely painting the situation in black and white, but bringing out the predicament of human complexities involved.

Both a political novel and a family saga, mixing within itself the stories of three families and to a lesser extent, of the Burmese Royalty, *The Glass Palace* is a refreshing book, as fresh characters and settings are introduced very frequently in the novel, giving it an appealing variety. The reader's interest is easily held with the numerous exotic locales and swift changes of the characters and situations. There is a great deal of good reading material here in fine local colors of Burma, Bengal and Ratnagiri.

*The Glass Palace* is the love story of Rajkumar, a young Indian boy in Burma and Dolly, an attendant to the Burmese Queen. Much of the early part of the novel focuses on the exile of the Burmese Royal family to Ratnagiri. Rajkumar has a poor background and rises to create an empire in Burma's Teak Forests along with his mentor Saya John.

Rajkumar marries Dolly with help from Uma, wife of the district collector of Ratnagiri. The family saga centered mainly around the families of Rajkumar, Saya John and Uma. Their next generations who criss-cross each others' paths forming a bulk of the later half.

Rajkumar and Dolly's final journey back to India and a dogged determination to survive, during the World War II is riveting stuff. World War II rolls around to bring in turmoil and towards its end the novel fleetingly depicts modern Myanmar (Burma), with Aung San Suu Kyi in a cameo. The continuing thread of the Burmese Royal family in exile and then back in Burma is quite fascinating and well-done.

This is certainly not a book for readers who do not enjoy extensive details on issues not very germane to the main plot. However, I love such meanderings in a novel *(even in MS reviews, for that matter)* and don't mind them, provided they hold one's interest. Imparts some kind of an audacious variety to the plot.

At the same time, he touches upon important twists of the novel very fleetingly and this too this would exasperate readers who would want the author to go into more depth. The end though spellbinding and jam-packed with events, is rather rapid and drastic, leaving the reader goggling.

Black has calculated that the narration of the novel documents the language choices of its characters on over seventy five occasions (2010, 172). She also observes that these allusions are in many cases compiled in a manner that assures the reader of their possibility in real life. Consequently, in a scene unfolding for instance between a Westernized Bengali and a Malayan Tamil, it is made clear that the conversation proceeds in the lingua franca of either Hindustani or English (Black 2010, 173).[iv] This highlights Ghosh's rejection of popular means for representing sociolinguistic amalgamation in novels, such as magic realism and chutneyed English, or mixed argot, used by Salman Rushdie.

*The Glass Palace* has an almost whimsical and remarkably uneven pace. In fits and starts it races, while at most times it simply plods.

***The Hungry Tide (2004)***

*The Hungry Tide*, set in Sundarbans islands, or the *tide country*, tells the story of Piya Roy, an American cetologist of Indian origin, who's come to the Sundarbans in search of the Irrawady dolphins. On the train, she meets Kanai Dutt — a Delhi based businessman, quite successful at that, who manages a firm which provides professional translation services — who happens to be visiting his Aunt in a (fictional) island of Sundarbans: the Lusibari. They meet again, when Piya takes up his invitation to visit him at his Aunt's place, after a chance encounter puts Piya on Fokir's boat. Fokir, an uneducated local fisherman, who knows the ever-changing riverbeds of Sundarbans better than most, takes Piya first to the Dolphins, after Piya shows him the sketches that are the only real mode of communication between the two: Piya knows no Bengali. Fokir knows no English. Piya sees in Fokir, what neither the city bred Kanai, nor Fokir's village bred wife, who's fighting against all odds, to become a nurse. He becomes her guide in her subsequent trip to the deep interiors of the Sundarbans, where she is to observe the behavior patterns of the Dolphins. Kanai joins them on impulse, and so does the river.

In his characteristic style, Ghosh weaves an intricately plotted story that touches upon myth,

legends, history, science/ecology, and human issues. Ghosh's USP has always been his painstaking research into the history of the locale where his story is formed. In contrast to "The Glass Palace", where the story spans across multiple locations, though, Hungry Tide is set in just one area, and consequently, it's much tighter. Glass Palace, on the other hand, was tremendous in scope, but ended up dragging, especially in its second half. The Hungry Tide, is almost a too easy read, moving at a brisk pace.

Another virtue of Ghosh is that he rarely preaches. He rarely takes sides, even. His characters do, of course, but then there is always another character, as central in the story, pitching for the other side. And so, in the spirit of postmodernism, he lays down ideas, and counter-ideas; perceptions and counter-perceptions; pitting myth against science, belief against scepticism, progress/survival against environmentalism, the rustic against the refined, and so on. There are numerous sub-themes, developed just enough to make them meaningful, and aborted just in time (OK, not all the time!) to not let them take away the focus, and all contributing to the intricate structure, which looks almost simple in the end. But if one ponders, even for a minute, its obvious what genius it takes to narrate like that!

The backdrop of Sundarbans, where survival is an everyday matter, where one is confronted by the unknown the every other step, also gives the work the depth that its characters lack, probably. It gives Ghosh an infinite freedom to maneuver. And he has used it, without really abusing it. At times it reminded me of both Calcutta Chromosomes, his very early work, where myths reaffirm themselves, and Circle of Reason, where men are driven by singular passions. Only the passions here are very earthly. But it clearly surpasses both of them, in its poise, its plotting, its focus, its flow. In the past, if Ghosh could really be blamed for anything, it's his almost missionary zeal to find connections. Although it can be argued, that that's his unique gift, too. That's precisely why Hungry Tide is one of his best books. He doesn't get carried away, in a backdrop, where it well could have been excused. I am waiting for his next book more eagerly now. Clearly, Ghosh is in a great form.

The Hungry Tide, features a triangular relationship between the Americanized cetologist Piya, the professional translator Kanai and the illiterate fisherman Fokir. The setting is the Sundarbans, a labyrinthine area of mangrove islands on the Bay of Bengal. Also referred to as the tide country, it forms the delta of the Irrawaddy river. The mixing of river water with sea water and the ecological niches this creates provide Ghosh with elaborate metaphors for inter-cultural connections, replacing the metaphors of weaving or the World Wide Web and railroads as the symbol of connections and the dissolving of binaries. Nature and animals (notably dolphins and tigers) are presented as the others of human beings, and their way of being and communicating is compared to those of humans, who are largely presented as inhibited by linguistic totalities that tie them to the self without "real" access to other humans or to nature and animals (Ghosh 2004).[v]

**Conclusion**

Indian writing in English is not a recent genre, It is as old as British, American, African, and Common wealth in English. The depiction of characters, women characters in particular, differ from country to country. However portrayal of male dominance over women is a common feature in all these writings including Indian writing in English.

Among the modern Indian writers in English amitav ghosh occupies a unique place for the diversity of presentation of plots, themes, characters, and situations in his Novels. The circle of reason, the culcutta chromosome, the glass palace and the hungry tied. His main feature as a writer despite being educated and leaved in the west, is him ability to depict indianness in his novels, the survival of multiple of culture in India.

The colonialism forced Indians to depend desperately on the British rule for social and political need. Post colonialism compelled them to look forward the British imperialists more and more for educational and intellectual needs. Thus the post colonialism has had a great deal of adverse impact on Indian writers writing their words in English

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