

TRANSNATIONAL IMAGINARIES AND CULTURAL MOBILITY IN THE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE OF AMITAV GHOSH

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Abstract

*This paper examines the concept of internationalism in the novels of Amitav Ghosh, highlighting his exploration of cross-cultural identities, historical consciousness, and diasporic imagination. Ghosh's fiction reflects a cosmopolitan vision shaped by transnational journeys, colonial histories, and the interaction between personal narratives and global political events. His novels foreground themes such as displacement, memory, nationalism, and the search for identity, portraying characters who move across geographical and cultural boundaries while retaining deep connections to South Asian heritage. Through works like *The Circle of Reason*, *In an Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, and *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh presents a multilayered perspective in which private experiences mirror larger historical processes. The paper also emphasises his non-linear narrative techniques, humanistic concerns, and critique of rigid nationalist ideologies, showing how borders function both as markers of identity and as sources of conflict. By blending anthropology, history, and fiction, Ghosh constructs narratives that challenge conventional ideas of place and belonging, revealing the paradox between rootedness and mobility. Ultimately, the study argues that Ghosh's internationalism lies in his ability to interweave local histories with global contexts, creating a literary space where cultural encounters, memory, and historical imagination redefine the meaning of modern Indian English fiction.*

Keywords

Internationalism, Diaspora, Postcolonial Identity, Cultural Hybridity, Transnationalism, Historical Memory, Globalisation

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Those of us who love novels often read them because of the eloquence with which they communicate a sense of place. Yet the truth is that it is the very loss of a lived representation possible. (Amitav Ghosh, “The March of the Novel through History: the testimony of my Grandfather’s Bookcase”)

This is perhaps also the peculiar paradox of reading – and appreciating Amitav Ghosh’s novels, that we respond to the eloquence with which they both convey a ‘sense of place’ and a sense of (almost immediate) dislocation that make such fictional representations possible. Amitav Ghosh today cheerfully – if humbly – bears numerous mantles of responsibility in the world of the book (case): anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist, travel-writer, teacher, and slips in and out of these veiled categories with admirable aplomb. The novel, according to Ghosh, has been ‘vigorously international from the start’ born amidst cross-cultural reading habits and imbibing its nutrients from an experimental cross-breeding of ideas and styles.

In the trajectory of history – as well as of historical fictions – we have always been concerned with the ‘other’. It is no doubt fitting that in the age of an extravagant embracing of globalization, we may claim to have closed the gap between battling the other and straddling it; certainly, the legacy of post-colonial angst today appears to have settled into a potentially numbing acceptance of bi- or multi-cultural euphoria. Ghosh’s imagination is as necessarily diasporic as it is post-colonial, being a product of specific histories of the subcontinent in the twentieth century. This paper opens up a new vista by establishing Amitav Ghosh, who is undeniably the most cosmopolitan contemporary Indian novelist in English.

Born in Kolkata, studied in Delhi, Oxford and Egypt, Amitav Ghosh has been publishing essays, articles, novels, travelogues and interviews since 1984. *Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In an Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Hungry Tide*, *Sea of Poppies*, are all unique novels, each of which explores places and histories, not in the usual sense of the word, but in a deeper sense of uncharted voyages and discoveries into imaginary or little-known homelands. In all his novels, the metaphor of journey is employed in some form. Perhaps Ghosh’s own roots have something to do with it.

Crossing of frontiers – especially those of nationality, culture and language has increased all over the world, including India. Though this is an old theme Ghosh gives it a new twist; several other modern Indian novelists have explored this theme, not so much in terms of whether the two can meet or not in terms of political and cultural consequence of the historical fact, that they have met, what is more, they have been looked at together for years in a colonized – colonizer relationship.

Amitav Ghosh maps the personal stories of men and women alongside the political histories of the whole of South and South-East Asia in his novels. He unfolds

the Asian Saga with a totally Asian perspective. Public events of a turbulent and momentous century are recounted through the eyes of private individuals caught in a multidimensional perspective, mirroring life, bringing out the innate nature of modern human beings who form the society. Ghosh's novels have an irresistible cultural pre-occupation vigorously manifested with humanistic yearnings. Thereby a sense, for a typical quest for one's identity which invariably has cultural moorings. The question of survival, existence and a sense of longingness to rise in this materialistic world is what Ghosh tries to communicate by making his protagonists move from one country to another with his strong Indian cultural heritage.

Indira Bhatt and Indira Nityanandam in their 'Introduction' to *Interpretations of the Shadow Lines* comment that history is always present in Ghosh's novels. They further add that "most of his novels use time in a non-linear, juxtaposing the past and the present" (p. 11).

Ghosh seems at his best when he is describing public events. The fiction he creates is only a pretext for handing down to his readers the treasure of geographical, political, historical and socio-cultural issues, he has so painfully gathered through arduous research. It becomes irrelevant to talk about Indian English, for a post-colonial perspective, when we see an author at work with such unselfconsciousness.

In *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh portrays the cultural complexities through family relationships. Ghosh portrays women as life-givers, sustainers and continuers of the race as well as women in search of an identity. His women characters get rid of their dependency needs, break the pattern of sexuality and sensuality and take their place as whole human beings freely and equally among men.

The Glass Palace is symbolic at once of the power and fragility of imperialism. Along with the overturned personal destinies of the royal family of Burma, there are the undulations in the personal destinies of humbler folk tracing the board *The Glass Palace* in front of an alley in Yangon that seems to lead to nowhere. This is the crowded, dingy room where she finds her grand-uncle, Dinu, ostensibly holding forth on the history of photography. The Palace has shrunk in size, and the glass is opaque for none can see it from the outside, its transparency lost in the secrecy of the new underground political movement that the young have in their hearts. The link between the royal Glass Palace of Mandalay and the dingy studio is established through Dolly and her son Dinu.

Ghosh seems at his best when he is describing public events. Ghosh's autobiographical voice can be heard clearly in this novel when Dinu is talking to her Burmese husband, who is also a writer.

"U Tun Pe, do you know what I find hardest in my writing?"

“What?”

“The movement I have to step off the street into a house.”

He frowned. Why? Why that?

“It is very hard,” she said, “And to you it may seem like a small thing.”

But I do believe that it is this moment that marks the difference between classical and modern writing of all things.

‘how so?’

“You see, I, in classical writing, everything happened outside – on streets, in public squares and battlefields, in palaces and gardens – in place that everyone can imagine.”

“But that is not how you write says Dinu”

“No”, she laughed. “And to this day even though I do it only in my mind, nothing is more difficult for me than this going into a house, introducing violating. Even though it’s only in my head, I feel afraid – I feel a kind of terror – and that’s when I know I must keep going, step in past the threshold into the house.”

He is at his best when talking of issues that bind the individual to the society outside. It is through the novels that he wants to protect the common citizen’s life from the triviality of politics. Which has only yielded misrule and tyranny.

The Circle of Reason is a remarkable achievement. It is the intelligence manifested in a brilliant handling of the socio-cultural aspects that impresses us. Amitav Ghosh’s first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, is a huge, ambitious novel with a crowd of characters and themes, set in a number of countries: India, Yemen, Egypt, and Algeria. Ghosh has chosen to make his literary debut with a long, rambling, picturesque novel, with umpteen characters, and diversions that are sometimes so long and winding that we feel we shall never get back to the main narrative. In the early chapters of *The Circle of Reason*, the reader feels confident enough. We appear to be in the hands of a capable, accomplished writer who is creating characters we can believe in, however eccentric their behaviour, and whose descriptions of place combine exotic colouring with a draughtsman’s precision.

The Circle of Reason has received less than its due acclaim. Ghosh is writing for a largely non-Indian audience about Indian matters. He says, for instance, that it is difficult for anybody who has not been through the sort of debates that Indian socialism indulged in during the 1960s and 1970s to understand one of his main themes; that you cannot expect rational solutions to problems while ignoring the history of the people you are practising on. Indian socialism, he says, has always been more international, less rooted in its own soil, than European socialism, which perhaps partly accounts for its evident failure to turn India into a socialist country.

In an Antique Land is an astonishing and profoundly exciting book, thrilling and quite compelling. A moral puzzlement over borders informs all of Ghosh's portrayals of entangled worlds; intricate novels, critical travel writing, and *In an Antique Land*, part travel memoir, part archival detective story, and part experiment in multi-local ethnography. Its title is drawn ironically from Shelley's "Ozymandias", although the Egyptian past unearthed by Ghosh differs sharply from the sublime antiquities of European Romanticism. *In an Antique Land*, reach back to a 12th century cosmopolitan world linking Arabs, Jews, and South Asians, a world not yet structured by five hundred years of Western economic and cultural expansion. Ghosh recovers for use now a submerged tradition of contracts between South Asia and the Middle East. And this past situation, in a sense, authorises his own late 20th-century ethnography; a series of disturbing encounters with worldly peasants in the Nile Delta. Ghosh's poignant, tragic, sometimes hilarious account connects the time of the crusader and Ibn Battuta with current labour migrations and the Gulf war.

In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh frolics with breathtaking intensity and variety to produce a novel like none other in the Indo-Anglian shelf. This novel is an amazing amalgam of existentialist theory and an Indian cultural perspective. It is through the complex plotting that he tries to highlight the thoughts typical Indian, regional Calcutta, society and culture of a person outside his homeland.

Indian culture, plot and cultural consciousness are considered the outcome of the long processes of historical accidents, cultural suppressions and geographical dislocations, according to Ghosh, which is the dominant impression he conveys in the sheer compulsion and authenticity of experience gathered enroute the long phase of history of his or her society, particularly their problematic relationship with the Western world. This is the 'Ethno Cultural' experience, which he conveys in his next novel, *The Shadow Lines*.

"War is their (the English) religion. 'That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens, people forget they were born this or that... They become a family born of the same pool of blood. That's what you have to achieve for India, don't you see?"

These lines from *The Shadow Lines* are a fervent praise of territorial nationalism. The novel starts off with the boy's perceptive and eccentric cousin Tridib, who finds himself sucked into history, his grandmother stuck in an age-old family feud; Tridib and his family in 1939; their English friends, whose daughter's love for Tridib can only end in tragedy. All the while, private upheavals are mirrored by public turmoil – (the Blitz in wartime London), (civil strife in post-Partition Dhaka, a riot in Calcutta). This novel beautifully focuses on the meaning of political

freedom in the modern world and the force of nationalism / the shadow line we draw between people and nations, which is both an absurd illusion and a source of identifying violence.

‘Do you remember?’ – In *The Shadow Lines*, this is the insistent question that brings together the personal and the public. It shapes the narrator’s search for connections for the recovery of lost information or repressed experience, or the details of great trauma or joy that have receded into the archives of public or private memory. It is in this novel that fear is understood as formative and enduring, fear for oneself. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world. Not language, not food, not music – it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror!

Nationalism, militant and brilliant thoughts of anti-imperialism, is tarnished in its need for defining oppositions within and enemies across the borders. At the origin of India and Pakistan lies the national trauma of Partition, a trauma that freezes fear into silence. *The Shadow Lines* seeks to find a language, a process of mourning, through the narrator Thamma, as she moves from her nationalist certitudes to an awareness that borders confirm identity even though they are meant to affirm difference. Various books, reviews and articles have appeared in India and abroad on different aspects of his writings; they all confirm that Amitav Ghosh’s novels at once communicate the double paradox of ‘sense and place’ and ‘sense and location’. He is a writer of strong historical imagination. He has admitted that his main interest lies in observing the ‘world around him’, listening to ‘other people’s stories’ and trying to understand them by looking at them from a distance. Realities do not go away just because you call them illusions. This is exactly what Ghosh has tried to convey through his novels.

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