

Cross-connections of Memory and History in Amitav Ghosh's Fictions

Dr.Narugopal Mukherjee, Associate Professor of English, Bankura Christian College, Bankura,
West Bengal, Email: ngm@bankurachristiancollege.in

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Abstract

The paper attempts to make an interdisciplinary study of Amitav Ghosh's fiction. Any novel of Amitav Ghosh demands a great deal of research and sincere study for a clear understanding of the thematic issues covered therein. Being well versed in History, Sociology, and Anthropology Amitav Ghosh has left a strong impact of his varied scholarship upon the readers and the researchers as well. The novels of Ghosh are again philosophical treatises on the concept of nation and nationalism. The political issues implying nationalism put forth in some of the novels also demand serious attention. Thus, Ghosh has blended the basic tenets of almost all branches of study: History (in almost all his texts), Sociology (in almost all major texts), Anthropology (mainly in the Bonbibi myth in *The Hungry Tide*), Philosophy (in *The Shadow Lines* particularly), Political Science (in his revolt against colonial domination expressed in *The Glass Palace*, *Sea of poppies*, *River of Smoke*, etc.), Geography (in *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide* particularly), Medical Sciences (especially in *The Calcutta Chromosome*), so on and so forth. Any project on Amitav Ghosh, thus, is pretty interesting almost to the students and the researchers of all disciplines of study.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary studies; Personal History; Anthropology; New historicism.

“Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks.”

(Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 38)

Taking a cue from this observation of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, in Salman Rushdie's epoch-making fiction *Midnight's Children*, Amitav Ghosh gives a new interpretation of history, history not as a dry record of events but as a lived experience. It's not the official version of history as reported or compiled for researchers; rather, it is very much a personal history, a record of the trauma and the subsequent upheavals in the psyche of the persons involved.

The proposed study will explore how memory and history intersect each other in Amitav Ghosh's novels. The demarcation lines of memory, history, and truth are blurred, and they become

overlapping. 'Historical truth' and 'Memory's truth' merge with one another. Saleem Sinai, in Rushdie's novel, very pertinently remarks:

Memory's truth because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also but in the end, it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events, and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own. (*Midnight's Children* 253)

Ghosh is following the line of those novelists who reconstruct events, often as accurately and carefully as any historian, "putting real people in imaginary situations, and imaginary situations in documentary narratives, augmenting the significance of historical events by plausible, internally consistent, but more obviously unverifiable depictions of the subjective intentions of people" (qtd. in Gupta 279). The use of historical details in novels has been a very popular trend among novelists in the last three decades or so. As Fred Weinstein observes:

Unlike earlier generations of novelists who did not like history or historians, for whom history was a nightmare from which they were trying to awake and who would have escaped from history into a world of art, not only are there novelists currently who have come to appreciate the uses of history, but a number of them want to claim history for their own. (11)

Amitav Ghosh does exactly that. He makes extensive use of details of history in his fiction, but more importantly, he relies not upon official history but upon the individual's memory of the past events, some kind of trauma, and the subsequent impact upon the individual. "Memory," as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, "is a complex phenomenon that reaches out to far beyond what normally constitutes a historian's archives, for memory is much more than what the mind can remember or what objects can help us document about the past" (qt in (Prasad 75).

Amitav Ghosh, in all his novels, delves deep into history but fictionalizes it and thus (re)creates and (re)writes history. Memory becomes so instrumental in (re)writing this history. More than the official records available, the individual's memory is thought of as more authentic and down-to-earth. In an interview, while referring to his work, *The Glass Palace*, Amitav Ghosh said, "One can examine the truths of individuals in history definitely more completely in fiction than one can in history" ("The Glass Palace" par. 1). This is the clue to the interpretation of history in his fictions. In another context, while referring to his latest novel, *River of Smoke*, he remarked:

The difference between the sort of research I would do and the sort of research a historian does is completely different. They are focused on particular things, and because I follow my characters, I try to recreate their world. So, in a way, it's sort of a slapdash thing than what historians do. But I do try and bring together the reality of the lived experience. ("The enchanting story")

This reality of lived experience is expressed in all his writings. His debut novel, *The Circle of Reason*, is replete with historical references as directly faced by Alu, an orphan. "The first section of the novel contains a number of incidental observations on Indian migrations. Balaram's birth year, 1924, for example, reminds the narrator of crucial moments in the history of Indian emigration to the West; Canada's colonial government decided not to admit 'eight thousand Indians ... after deciding that the ancient purity of Canada could not be endangered by Asiatic immigration'" ("A Study of Diaspora").

Ghosh's second novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988), echoes Rushdie in its experimentations with geography and history. The novel has at its center the haunting memory of partition and frequently moves between the memory's truth and historical truth. The title is an allusion to Joseph Conrad's novella, *The Shadow Line*. The demarcation lines between the two countries get blurred; the so-called border lines become 'shadow lines.' Not only those, but the boundaries between the historian's account and the individual's account recollected from memory also lose their distinctive features. Meenakshi Mukherjee observes:

. . . the public chronicles of nations are interrogated in this novel by highlighting, on the one hand, the reality of the fiction people create around their lives, and on the other hand, by recording the verifiable graphic details of individual memories that do not necessarily tally with the received version of history. (255)

By shunning conventional mimesis or diegesis and utilizing memory as the very motor of the story, Ghosh succeeds in engaging the thematic issues with multiple moving revelations. The first-person narrator, whose memories provide the structure of the narrative, has a mobile narratorial perspective. Unlike the use of memory in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, where the third person narrator's focus is impersonal, and the perspectives shift from one storyline to another through differing narrative voices, *The Shadow Lines* has the narrator as a participant in the story with shadowy extra-diegetic voices. Ghosh makes skillful use of free direct and free indirect speech to supply the structural frame for the memory's content (Prasad, "Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*," par. 2).

Fiction and history intersect each other in the next work, *In An Antique Land*, a delicate, vivid, and deeply moving evocation of Egypt since the twelfth century. Packed with anecdotes and exuberant detail, *In an Antique Land* provides magical and intimate insights into Egypt from the Crusades to Operation Desert Storm. It exposes the indistinguishable and intertwining ties that bind together India and Egypt, Hindus and Muslims and Jews. By combining fiction, history, travel writing, and anthropology to create a single seamless work of imagination, Ghosh characteristically makes us rethink the political boundaries that divide the world and the generic boundaries that divide narratives ("In An Antique Land" par. 1).

The strong emphasis on history and memory is given a fresh twist in his next book, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), a work of science fiction set in the near future. An authority on the Nobel Prize-winning scientist Sir Ronald Ross, who solved the malaria puzzle in Calcutta in 1898, Murugan is in search of the elusive 'Calcutta Chromosome.' The narrative becomes an exciting tale of adventure where history and memory have quite intimate connections.

The Glass Palace begins with the shattering of the kingdom of Burma and tells the story of a people, a fortune, and a family, as well as its fate. It traces the life of Rajkumar, a poor Indian boy who is lifted on the tides of political and social turmoil to build an empire in the Burmese teak forest. When British soldiers force the royal family out of the glass palace during the invasion of 1885, he falls in love with Dolly, an attendant at the palace. *The Sunday Tribune* writes:

The novel outdoes theory as well as history in terms of its subtle treatment of colonialism. In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh examines the individual and

psychological dilemmas posed by colonialism. Through this brilliant and impassioned story of love and war, Amitav Ghosh presents a ruthless appraisal of the horrors of colonialism and capitalist exploitation. *The Glass Palace* is an instance of a novel overtaking history as an authentic and reliable source of understanding the micro-level subtleties of colonial politics. (www.penguinbooksindia.com/amitavghosh)

Memory could almost be considered a character unto itself in this novel. For instance, Rajkumar's life is utterly driven and shaped by his one striking boyhood memory of Dolly in the plundered Glass Palace during the invasion of Burma. Ghosh weaves the theme of photography into the overarching ideas about history and memory that permeate his novel. It is often war that creates a collision between history and individual lives. In war, such as in situations such as revolution, mass evacuations, forced population movements, and so on, nobody has the choice of stepping away from history. The 20th century visited many such calamities in Asia, and *The Glass Palace* attempts to chronicle the impact that these events had on families and individuals. In an interview, Ghosh remarked:

For me, the value of the novel, as a form, is that it is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life - history, natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love, and sexuality. As I see it, the novel is a meta-form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writing, rendering meaningless the usual workaday distinctions between historian, journalist, anthropologist, etc.

(“An Interview with Amitav Ghosh”)

Ghosh's next work of fiction, *The Hungry Tide*, is again reminiscent of the trauma the refugees faced. Nirmal records in his diary the violence during the eviction of refugee settlers from the island of Morichjhapi in the Sunderbans by the Left Front government in 1979. Supriya Choudhury remarks in the review of the fiction:

But it is only one of the histories - part fact, part fiction - that the Sundarbans of Ghosh's novel unfolds. There are others: the life cycle of the Orcaella, the story of its identification and the aquatic history of which it is part; the story of the port town of Canning and the folly of its foundation by the British; the storms, named cyclones by the shipping inspector Henry Piddington, which ravage the region with irresistible ferocity; the visionary ambition of Sir Daniel Hamilton, who bought ten thousand acres of land in the Sundarbans and set out to build an ideal community; the tale of Bon Bibi and her worship, recounted in many folk epics, fusing Muslim and Hindu faith; and of course the present histories of Kanai, Nilima, Piya, Fokir, Fokir's wife Moyna and their son Tutul, among others.

(“Review: *The Hungry Tide*”)

The first in Amitav Ghosh's new trilogy of novels, *Sea of Poppies*, is so vibrant with historical details and reminiscences of some historical events. The ship, the *Ibis*, makes a tumultuous voyage across the Indian Ocean to the Mauritius Islands. The historical adventure spans the lush poppy fields by the Ganga and the exotic backstreets of China at the time of the Opium Wars. *Sea of Poppies* (2008), as a representative novel of the Indian subcontinent, returns to a self-reflexive question about the nation. This becomes a question with chronological, metaphysical, religious,

personal, political, aesthetic, historical, and geographical dimensions, and India emerges not just as a theme but also as a point of discourse, the voice of history (“Diasporic Consciousness”).

The proposed study will, thus, focus on the relative importance of history and memory in Amitav Ghosh’s novels. It will be studied in this connection how the very concept of memory becomes so instrumental in understanding the history of a nation and the history of mankind as a whole. It will show how Amitav Ghosh has established and consolidated the concept Rushdie introduced. The project thus seeks to explore how an individual’s interpretation(s) of fact(s) help(s) in deconstructing myths and reconstructing history.

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