

## Exploring the Orient from Within: Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*

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One of the striking features of contemporary literary theory, and indeed of cultural studies more generally, is what might be termed its socio-politicisation of the ethical. Literary texts, traditionally viewed as repositories of moral and aesthetic insight or challenge, tend now to be seen as predominantly ideological constructions, or sites of power struggles between social powers of various kinds.

— C.A.J. Coady and Seumas Miller, *Literature, Power and the Recovery of Philosophical Ethics*

The paradox of Enlightenment humanism was that, in positing a universal, human subject as the agent of history, it provided an alibi for imperial expansion as an engine of modernization, progress and civilization.

— Jeannie Im, *Modernity in Translation*.

... I'm drawn to marginal people in India, I'm drawn to marginal people around the world, I'm drawn to Burmese, Cambodians, to obscure figures, defeated figures and people who salvage some sort of life out of wreckage ... these characters appeal to me, they interest me.

— Amitav Ghosh, "Diasporic Predicaments"

Amitav Ghosh's specialty lies in his deft handling of political and philosophical issues without sacrificing the graces of art. Exhibiting a profound sense of history and space, his novels explore the human drama amidst the broad sweep of political and historical events. He has a personal stance on such controversial issues as postcoloniality, postmodernity, subjectivity, subalternity; he interweaves them in a complex pattern in his works, which themselves are generic amalgams. This generic multiplicity stems from an inherent interdisciplinarity within postmodernism which is part of its assault upon the Enlightenment. It also entails the deployment of "metafiction" wherein the text is constantly aware of its own status as a text. In Ghosh's oeuvre, a self-reflexive narrator often introduces metafictional meditations on the value and purpose of his narrative. Ghosh looks up to the novel as a "meta-form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writing, rendering meaningless the usual workaday distinctions between historian, journalist, anthropologist, etc." (*Asia Source* 2). There are no limits to the novel as a form. For the eclectic Ghosh, it is not necessarily fictional; rather "it overarches fiction, and non-fiction, and history, the present, the past" (Chambers 32). The novel's generic heterogeneity, or discursive inventiveness, enables Ghosh to retain sensitivity to various kinds of

discourses, voices and agents, while narrating into existence unforeseen connections between them. Ghosh's generic mixtures are ethically aware in that they break and re-construct pre-existing generic formations, thereby changing their political implications. The self/other relationship is also narrated ethically as a reciprocal relationship, in which neither is reduced to a passive target of scrutiny; both appear as active agents in a relationship with a voice of their own. Contemporary ethical criticism is closely linked with the discussion of otherness at the mercy of discursive power. It examines in the main questions of how to represent otherness in a text, how to respond to the other and how to bring the concept of otherness to bear on the experience of reading and writing. Ghosh's writings concentrate on interpersonal relationships, emphasizing the need for solidarity across ontological and epistemological divides, while retaining the ultimate alterity of the other.

## I

Nations and nationalism are profoundly important in the formation of colonial practice. As Partha Chatterjee explains in his influential book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, the origins of the nation in the West have much to do with the pursuit of a set of human ideals often identified as the European "Enlightenment." European nationalism is "part of the same historical process which saw the rise of industrialism and democracy" and "Nationalism represents the attempt to actualize in political terms the universal urge for liberty and progress" (2). There is, however, a conflict right at the heart of nationalism which Chatterjee terms the "liberal dilemma": nationalism may promise liberty and universal suffrage to the colonizers but undemocratic forms of government and domination to the colonized. The concept of the Western nations as representing the best of human civilization becomes a way of legitimating colonial expansionism. It degenerates into an ideology of racial hatred in the colonies. In his correspondence with Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ghosh points to a "profound ambiguity in Enlightenment thought" which actually parallels Chatterjee's "liberal dilemma." This ambiguity was often used, sometimes quite deliberately, to dupe the colonial subject. Ghosh equates nationalism or "blatant expansionism cloaked in the language of reform and political progress" with racism. "Racism," as he conceives it, "is not just an exclusivist or supremacist ideology. It is an ideology that is founded on certain ideas that relate to science, nature, biology and evolution—a specifically post-Enlightenment ideology" (6). The liberal thoughts of "J.S. Mill, or Bentham or any other 19<sup>th</sup>-century British liberal" are grounded on the idea of race. To expose how blatant racism vitiated even the operation of the rule of law in British India, he cites the infamous double standard in this regard. The putative racial superiority of the Britishers and the racial inferiority of the Indians and hence their incorrigibility justify the conquerors' perpetual rule over the conquered for

the sake of civilizing them. Tearing to shreds this sophistry, Ghosh unmasks British hypocrisy. He concludes his diatribe against British imperialism thus: “In this discourse Race is the unstated term through which the gradualism of liberalism reconciles itself to the permanence of Empire. Race is the category that accommodates the notion of incorrigibility, hence assuming the failure of all correctional efforts (and thus of tutelage)” (4).

One of the reasons why Ghosh is considered an important writer is that his narratives do not occupy a “neutral” zone. Rather, they offer a sensitive and multifaceted view on the contemporary problems of the worlds he writes about. Ghosh seems to be intent on moving his readers through his narratives beyond the aesthetic of indifference. Ghosh’s first commitment is to his art. The question that has engaged him a lot is whether this commitment excludes all other commitments. He has to admit that “a writer is also a citizen, not just of a country but of the world” (qtd Hawley 11). Whether a writer should be a responsible citizen or an insouciant aesthete is the issue that occupies him in the essay “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi.” His point of departure is Dzevad Karahasan’s essay “Literature and War,” which touches on the relation between modern literary aestheticism and the contemporary world’s indifference to violence. Karahasan holds that “[t]he decision to perceive literally everything as an aesthetic phenomenon—completely sidestepping questions about goodness and truth—is an artistic decision. That decision started in the realm of art, and went on to become characteristic of the contemporary world” (cited in *The Imam and the Indian* 60). Ghosh abhors Karahasan’s brand of aestheticism, and plumps for moral activism:

Writers don’t join crowds—Naipaul and so many others teach us that. But what do you do when the constitutional authority fails to act? You join and in joining bear all the responsibilities and obligations and guilt that joining represents. My experience of the violence was overwhelmingly and memorably of the resistance to it. (61)

By advocating resistance to violence and rejecting the “aesthetic of indifference,” Ghosh is squarely denouncing the postmodernist dogma of pan-aestheticization as enunciated by Patricia Waugh: “Postmodern theory can be seen and understood as the latest version of a long-standing attempt to address social and political issues through an aestheticised view of the world, though it may be more thoroughly aestheticising than any previous body of thought” (6). For Ghosh, it is “the affirmation of humanity” that is more important, “the risks that perfectly ordinary people are willing to take for one another” (*The Imam and the Indian* 61). Ghosh thus straddles the currents of both modernism and postmodernism. Meenakshi Mukherjee underscores Ghosh’s refusal to be categorized, but she does so with respect to Ghosh’s rebellion against the templates of genre (Hawley 4). Ghosh is too eclectic to embrace a particular *ism* and in the process stifle all his innate dynamism. Ghosh’s works occupy a critical juncture between postmodern and postcolonial perspectives, exploring the potentialities and limits of postcolonialism as also evading any strategic

alliance with postmodernism. He is rather an intellectual amphibian, partaking of all ideas and isms that are congenial and pertinent to his artistic pursuit.

One key marker of the ethical turn in criticism has been a reaction to the shift in focus in poststructuralist criticism from literature as representation—as a window onto the world—to literature as textuality, as a fundamentally opaque and intertextual medium. Poststructuralists' emphasis on the slippage of language and their privileging of textuality over representation have contributed to a disinclination to engage with literature at perhaps its most morally and ethically pertinent level—its mimetic effect. As Parker argues, “like much criticism of the period, poststructuralism seemed to be antipathetic in several significant ways to any interest in what would seem the most obvious ethical dimension of literature, that is to say, the narrative or dramatic presentation of moral questions, dilemmas, embodied in characters, imagined agents, lives, selves or subjectivities” (8). Martha Nussbaum suggests that for poststructuralist theorists “to discuss a text’s ethical or social content is somehow to neglect ‘textuality,’ the complex relationships of that text with other texts; and of the related, though more extreme, thought that texts do not refer to human life at all, but only to other texts and to themselves” (*Love’s Knowledge* 170). In response, Nussbaum argues that the vitality and appeal of literature resides largely in its continuing dialogue with life: “It speaks *about us*, about our lives and choices and emotions, about our social existence and the totality of our connections” (*Love’s Knowledge* 171). A crucial component in literature’s ability to do so is empathy. In the wake of what Parker describes as a “shift from foundationalist to pragmatist, tradition-centred ethics” (15), moral progress, Richard Rorty argues, continues to be possible, “in the direction of greater human solidarity,” at least. But, as Rorty is careful to add, “that solidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings” (192). Rather, it is the ability to minimize the importance of traditional differences in pursuing a shared goal of minimizing the possibility of cruelty, of pain, and of humiliation—in short, “the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us’” (192). This kind of empathetic engagement, Nussbaum argues in *Poetic Justice*, is a crucial ethical dimension of literary texts. She points to the way in which novels tend to “construct and speak to an implicit reader who shares with the characters certain hopes, fears, and general human concerns, and who for that reason is able to form bonds of identification and sympathy with them, but who is also situated elsewhere and needs to be informed about the concrete situation of the characters” (7). Indeed, “the very structure of the interaction between the text and its imagined reader” invites a shared concern with “how the mutable features of society and circumstance bear on the realization of shared hopes and desires” (7).

Ghosh's keen interest in the predicament of individuals pitted against historical forces enables him to explore the depths of fundamental human experiences and emotions. In delineating his characters, Ghosh jettisons conventional postcolonial discourse which promotes racial and ethnic differences. He instead displays his characters on the level of a kind of transcendent universal humanity, or experience. His characters are socio-culturally specific. He never dispenses with diversity and particularity in his writings. The stories his characters tell locate each teller in the material domain and promote particularism. But ethnic or racial differences, religious and communal separatist tendencies, although acknowledged, are of little relevance. These characters are not cocooned within their separate and local identities because the emotions and passions explored are related to humanity as such. What Ghosh endeavours to create is connections between various socio-cultural and historical discourses which smother diversity and various particularities. Ghosh thus veers away from constructionist discursive epistemology. Conversely, his celebration of the transcendent ethical universal experience connecting people is at odds with the Eurocentric mode of narrating, or constructing, the world. Accordingly Ghosh's narration is akin to what Patrick Colm Hogan has named—"particularist universalism" (xvii), which can be characterized as simultaneous universalism and cultural particularism.

A recurrent motif in Ghosh's writings is an ethnographer/historian who enters into a democratic dialogue with the past, and treats it not as object but as subject. With his profound capacity for empathy, he transcends temporal as well as culturally constructed differences. He "provincializes" the Eurocentrism of History by focusing on non-European histories as well as recovering the traces of marginal and suppressed stories. Intent on subverting the hegemonic position of a Western-originated discourse as the bourgeois historiography of a decolonized state, the ethnographer-historian considers his subaltern subjects not as "other histories" or "other knowledges." He rather imagines their discursive-epistemic spaces as forms of openness for a genuine transcultural open-ended dialogue. In meeting the other, he remains open and responsive to them, rather than define them from his own perspective. Alterity, i.e. the unknowable and unreachable nature of the other, cannot be attained, but can be imagined and hence activated. The ethnographic, historical subjects are transformed from passive objects of traditional ethnographic representation and knowledge into active agents/characters with a historical trajectory of their own. This mode of knowledge formation is a two-directional act of knowing, a moment of contact between two active participants who meet as pure consciousnesses. To "recover" the history of the subalterns, the historian "translates" discrepant "life-worlds" and experiences through secular explanatory modes. The ethnographer constructs the subjectivity of his historical subject in a two-dimensional narrative process. He imaginatively interprets and interweaves the textual traces from the scraps of manuscripts he has found in archives through his narrative process as well

as relates his search for these documents. The exhaustive Notes section at the end of the novels testifies to the empirical and philological research he has also conducted on the documents. The subaltern subject that is put together from the textual traces gains in agency in the very process of being narrated into existence. In order to overcome the limitations of historical archives, Ghosh's writings build up a complex series of intersections between material documents like personal diaries, fragments of letters, and schedules as well as individual memories to re-construct the past. By taking into account not only the hard facts but also the emotions, thoughts and actions of these seemingly ordinary individuals, Ghosh weaves an inclusive historical narrative, an imaginative micro history which lies embedded in the macro history of the imperial project. History as a palimpsest seems to be one of Ghosh's favourite metaphors. Evidently what Ghosh tries to reconcile are the "analytical" histories based on rational categories and the "affective" histories based on the plural ways of being-in-the-world. By bringing together the fictive reconstructions of the past and excavating the erased histories from hegemonic official representations, Ghosh's novels highlight imagination as a way of transcending and challenging their neutrality. By stretching the limits of history, they open up new possibilities for the emergence of different "life-worlds."

Ghosh's novels are primarily concerned with creating connections between various others, individuals or communities, without depriving any participant of their authentic voice and agency. The general motif running through his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, is that of weaving as the method for creating connections by intertwining various discursive threads. The novel dismantles the discursive totalities of Western modernity, while remaining alert to questions of voice and agency. *The Shadow Lines* concentrates on the various ways of narrating/giving meaning to the world. It brings together fictive reconstructions of the past based on memory and highlights imagination as a way of transcending hegemonic official representations. In addition to the level of individual subjectivity, there seems to be a longing for an ethical inter-subjective space transcending the boundaries of separate subjectivities. In *In an Antique Land* the eclectic Ghosh, while recovering the subaltern consciousness, fuses the poststructural textual "traces" with the "properly human, individual, existences" (IAAL, 17). *The Calcutta Chromosome* returns to the problematics of scientific, philosophical and colonial knowledge production that were first taken up in *The Circle of Reason*. Like his previous work, *In an Antique Land*, this deconstruction of colonial medical history is a generic mixture, blending techniques from science fiction, the thriller, the detective novel, ghost stories and historiography. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the World Wide Web takes on the function of weaving as the creator of connections. One of the central themes in *The Glass Palace* is the way colonial discourses mould the subaltern identity and result in severe alienation. This is why the transcending of cultural and ideological definitions or even the whole

dimension of discursively constructed knowledge, through ethically formed personal imaginary identifications is so important in his narratives. The novel also reacts to the existence of totalitarian regimes. The military regime in the modern state of Myanmar comes under scrutiny towards the end of the novel, when Jaya goes to Myanmar to search for Dinu, who has opened a photo studio there. Ghosh continues his characteristic dismantling of totalities and categories in *The Hungry Tide* using nature to emphasize the heterogeneous and constantly changing character of human societies on the one hand and the eternally unchangeable cycles of history on the other. The Sundarbans area is seen as an intermediate border zone between land and sea, where river water mixes with sea water producing peculiar life environments. The quest for connections in the narrative covers the relationship of human beings to nature and animals. Another strong theme linked with that of nature and animals is the examination of the linguistic and epistemological alienation of humans from their circumstances and from one another. The capability of language to represent emotions and the encounter with the other is increasingly in doubt in recent work by Ghosh.

## II

Amitav Ghosh's projected *Ibis* trilogy grows out of his comprehensive historical research about the mid-nineteenth century opium wars between China and the Western powers led by Britain. The European powers, cloaking their greed under the rubrics of free trade and internationalization of commerce, attempted to open the Chinese markets to the vicious opium trade. The first book of the trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*, depicts the politics of subjugation of the West and the efforts at resistance of the East in an inclusive diachronic version of history which incorporates the unheroic wretched of the earth. *Sea of Poppies* ends with the escape of the convicts from the *Ibis* which is in the grip of a fierce cyclone in the Bay of Bengal. *River of Smoke* begins in the wind-swept cliffs of Mauritius with "La Fami Colver," Deeti's clan, marching in ritual procession to her "Memory Temple." The repressed, exploited young woman from a remote Indian village establishes a matrilineal community in Mauritius after serving out her indenture along with eight of her shipmates. With the creation of an indentured community of "ship-siblings from the *Ibis*" (RS 11), culture flows between national boundaries undermining the modern narrative of a homogeneous nation. A product of this intercultural negotiation is the "strange mixture of Bhojpuri and Kreol" that becomes Deeti's "personal idiom of expression" (RS 4). Hybridity and fluidity of movement thus lead to the rise of a global imaginary characterized by heterogeneity as the nation becomes an open cultural site.

Deeti's semi-mystical experience interweaves the beginning of both *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*. In the first novel, she has an instinctive foreknowledge that her vision of a tall-masted ship on the

ocean is a “sign of destiny” (SP 3). In the sequel, she insists that it was not chance but destiny that leads her to the site of her hidden shrine in Mauritius. Deeti’s prescient drawing of the *Ibis* on a green mango leaf amazes her daughter Kabutri, and she even puzzles herself with the “sureness of her intuition” (SP 9). Her sketch is so authentic that the narrator comments in a proleptic aside that “[L]ater, even seasoned sailors would admit that her drawing was an uncannily evocative rendition of its subject” (SP 10). The unlettered Deeti transcends the “island boundaries of the individual” and enters into a “symbiotic communion with ... some higher entity, real or imaginary, of which the self is felt to be a part” (Koestler 119-120). This explains Deeti’s extra-sensory perception, “a condition which Piaget called ‘proto-plasmic’ or ‘symbiotic’ consciousness, and which may be at the origin of that ‘oceanic feeling’ which the artist and the mystic strive to recapture on a higher level of development, at a higher turn of the spiral” (Koestler 120). Significantly Deeti’s creation of her private universe takes place in the inner sanctum of her puja room. Her pursuit of art reaches its high point in Mauritius where she paints the walls of the cavern later known as “Deetiji’s ‘Memory-Temple’—*Deetiji-ka-smriti-mandir*” (RS 8). Deeti thus continues the indigenous traditions of art she learned from her grandmother in her native village Madhubani, famous for its gorgeously painted walls and decorations. Unrepressed by her patriarchal in-laws, she relentlessly pursues her art in her inner shrine, her private domain. In Mauritius too, she has carved out her “‘puja room,’” “a small hollow in the rock, hidden away at the back” (RS 7). The members of Deeti’s indentured community dispersed within the island and abroad would mobilize once a year to make elaborate preparations for their annual pilgrimage to Deeti’s Memory Temple. This Temple becomes a cultural strategy of identity formation. Robbed of a past, a history, a culture, the descendants of Deeti’s clan have developed a culture that draws its energy from displacement, heterogeneity, syncreticity. The saga of the patriarch Kalua’s deliverance from the *Ibis*, given a mythical dimension by Deeti’s paintings, is an event oft recounted by the Colver clan. This narrative is to them what “the story of the watchful geese was to ancient Rome—an instance when Fate had conspired with Nature to give them a sign that theirs was no ordinary destiny” (RS 13). This “*prophetic vision of the past*” (Ashcroft 17, italics original) which through repetition becomes a part of everyday life is a strategic attempt to trace the origins of the family’s history and to recover some pure cultural identity. It is also designed to resist the master discourse of imperial History. The mode of this resistance is the operation of “productive memory” because “memory circumvents the striated space of history and reinfuses the present with a sense of potentiality” (Ashcroft 17). Deeti’s uninterrupted pursuit of her art in a foreign space illustrates Ghosh’s non-normative concept of the South Asian diaspora which is oriented around an ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations. Furthermore, Deeti’s experience accords well with Clifford’s observations that “women in diaspora remain attached to,



and empowered by, a 'home' culture and a tradition" (*Routes* 259). For Deeti, drawing is her "principal means of remembrance: being unlettered, it was the only way she could keep track of her memories" (*RS* 10). Ashcroft's observations on "the productive and signficatory operation of memory" are pertinent to the context: "Memory is that medium in which utopia can either dissolve into nostalgia or become the mode of transformation." Moreover, memory is "the smooth space that flows through and around the striated space of history, the space of a nation state and all structures of fixed identity" (22). Deeti thus carves out her own strategies of survival in an alien land as culture becomes transnational.

The architecture of Deeti's temple resembles the architecture of the World Mountain. The inner core, the ur-temple, the ultimate darkness is the anonymous region of the subconscious, the amoral primal forces. The external world of the ego, of consciousness and history is connected by the "narrow," "tilted fissure" (*RS* 7). In her unwavering quest to create her private universe, Deeti transforms the caverns scattered with "ossified human dung, rendered odourless by age" (*RS* 12) into a realm of beauty and congeniality. Stimulated by the creative inspiration, Deeti breaks through the barriers of the insulated, separative ego, and ventures out into the boundless collective unconscious which explains her mystical trance on the *Ibis*. In a moment of self-transcendence, she develops the superhuman capacity to detach the spirit from the flesh and hence asserts that "the winds had lofted her to a height from which she could look down and observe all that was happening below—not in fear and panic, but in unruffled calm" (*RS* 16). As her imagination leads her along unsuspected ways, she bears Iris Murdoch's thesis out: "Love of beauty and desire to create inspire us to activities which increase our grasp of the real" (59). Naturally, Deeti is privileged to look beyond phenomena into the noumenon which underlies her claim that "the tufaan had chosen her to be its confidante, freezing the passage of time, and lending her the vision of its own eye" (*RS* 16). From the vantage point of her non-empirical self she surveys the world around her and transcripts that into art. The state of instinctive seizure in which she could exist and enjoy the essence of things seemed to bring about in her "a curious Time-shift" so that she appeared to herself "to stand and stare at them in some timeless region" (Priestley 287). Coming down to the empirical plane, Deeti can conjecture that her extra-sensory perception lasted for "a matter of a few seconds" (*RS* 17). Deeti's assertion and her revelation in her painting that the storm which befell the *Ibis* was "wrapped around an eye" (*RS*, 20) predates the scientist's discovery that hurricanes can be created by winds rotating round a still centre or an "eye." For Neel, the mystery was how it was possible that Deeti, "an illiterate, frightened young woman, had been granted this insight? And that too at a time when only a handful of the world's most advanced scientists knew of it" (*RS* 21)? In Ghosh's oeuvre, silence represents a mode of epistemology, an inscrutable experience that cannot be represented or mediated by either language or scientific empiricism. Silence ultimately has an ethical function, which basically

posits silence beyond, or outside, discourse. Silence in Ghosh's narration comes through as ethical rather than discursive. The voluntary silence, the—"will to unsay" (Duncan 28-30), became prominent as a subversive act, a token of resistance towards hegemonic discourses. In a literary text, the unspoken was seen as having—"the potential for decoding that which is hidden by and from the dominant discourse" (Huttunen xv). Conceived of as a textual site that has the potential to create alternative meanings, this performatively functioning silence needed a reading strategy of its own (Huttunen xv). Silence is here conceived to be a feminine counterforce to Western male-centered science and rationalism. Western scientific discourse has no access to it; it cannot, in fact, even be aware of its existence. What is questioned is the transparency of language as a means of communication and the equation of language with meaning. This anti-intellectualist stance graduates Ghosh to the recesses of mysticism. Deeti thus belongs to the elusive band of initiates in Ghosh's oeuvre—Shombhu Debnath in *The Circle of Reason*, Mangala in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Fokir in *The Hungry Tide*—who with their extra-sensory perceptions erode Enlightenment's empirical rationalism.

*Sea of Poppies* focuses on the transportation of Indian indentured labourers to Mauritius and exposes imperial machinations to wrest control of the Indian economy. *River of Smoke* traces the complex chain of events leading to the outbreak of the Opium War in 1839 between China and England. The immoral trading practices of the West in general and the British in particular bred deceit, hypocrisy, and exploitation. The rhetoric of the democratizing powers of Free Trade under the pretext of which they carried out their nefarious activities animates *River of Smoke* as it did its prequel. European colonialism was a lucrative politico-commercial enterprise inextricably tied with capitalism. Exploring the relationship between the ideology of imperialism and its functioning through the practice of colonialism, Denis Judd argues that "no one can doubt that the desire for profitable trade, plunder and enrichment was the primary force that led to the establishment of the imperial structure" (3). The extent to which Britain's illicit opium trade with China served as British colonialism's financial engine is evident from the Chamber of Commerce's influential member John Slade's observation that the Empire "reaps an annual revenue of five million pounds and involves the most vital interests of the mercantile, manufacturing, shipping and maritime interests of the United Kingdom" (RS 517). Not unsurprisingly, in the several consecutive meetings of the foreign opium merchants, English entrepreneurs passed themselves off as "crusaders in the cause of Free Trade" (RS 244). Like Captain Chillingworth in the first part, Mr. Charles King, "one of the few true Christians" (RS 219), is disillusioned with this vicious opium trade and exposes the Britishers' duplicity. Though they endlessly affirm their intention to bring Freedom and Religion to China, they resort to "the most absurd subterfuges" (RS 354) which breed corruption as hundreds of Chinese officials are bribed to safeguard the safe passage of opium. When he urges in a public resolution to refrain

from a trade that is “fraught with evils, commercial, political, social and moral” and desires to establish “true Christian amelioration” (*RS* 387), his plea is instantly rejected. The European belief that free trade and the internationalization of commerce would create wealth for all nations and produce a new peaceful world order is contested by the Chinese administration who rejects the idea that trade could elevate human society. The newly appointed Commissioner of Canton, Lin Zexu surprises foreign merchants by announcing that the opium trade is over and ordering them to surrender their stock. Consequently, a “good” and “honest” Commissioner, the “best officer in country” (*RS* 267), “an incorruptible public servant ... a scholar and an intellectual” (*RS*, 424) is disparaged as a “madman or monster,” who has ordered two executions and has shown that he has “scant regard for human life” (*RS* 463). The unfazed Lin demands the protesting British to hand over the prominent opium trader Lancelot Dent. In a calculated move, Captain Elliot, the crown official appointed to look after British interests in Canton, decides to concede to Lin’s demands. Soon, the British decide to assemble expeditionary forces on the Chinese shores to open up Chinese markets to opium trade. Defying the dictates of the Chinese Emperor, the British traders attempt to conceal their greed in nicely cloaked evangelical language: “It is the work of another, invisible, omnipotent: it is the hand of freedom, of the market, of the spirit of liberty itself, which is none other than the breath of God” (*RS* 463). The war between China and Britain that this opium trade ignites does not simply stem from cultural difference or conflicting claims over territory but from a capitalist ideology. Trade is free when it suits England, as is the concept of justice. The British merchants argue in a circular fashion that the devastation wrought by opium among the Chinese has nothing to do with them; yet when the Chinese government seeks to limit the entry of the drug they cry foul, claiming impedance of their natural right to trade.

The problem of the Chinese administration is further complicated by the complicit involvement of Indian and Chinese merchants profiteering from British imperialism. While British colonial expansionism couples with capitalist aggrandizement to seize political powers in Asia, it also opens up wonderful private opportunities for native entrepreneurs. The narrative traces the dynamics of collaboration and the complicity of Parsi Bahram Modi, one such collaborator, sympathizes with his professional struggles and personal dilemmas and his sad demise. Goaded by his struggle for one-upmanship with his in-laws, Bahram establishes one of the largest and most consistent profitable export divisions in Bombay and resists the British monopoly of opium business in India. In the beginning of the narrative, Bahram’s ship the *Anahita*, financed by his in-laws, carries not only “the most expensive cargo that Bahram had ever shipped” but also “possibly the single most valuable cargo that had ever been carried out of the Indian subcontinent” (*RS* 45). A businessman of “exceptional ability and vision,” “a kind of genius” (*RS* 224), Bahram is confident that in spite of the Chinese Emperor’s edicts prohibiting opium

trade the “Mandarins will not tolerate any change—or else where they will get cumshaw? ... Those bahn-chahts are the biggest smokers of all” (RS 230). His knowledge about the Chinese demand for opium makes him assert to Napoleon that although it is “in principle a clandestine trade,” it is “difficult to put an end to it for many officials, petty and grand, benefit from it” which makes them “find ways around the laws” (RS 174). Even the British merchants attribute the overwhelming success of the trade to the “marvellous degree of imbecility, avarice, conceit, and obstinacy” (RS 420) of the Chinese race. That this discourse smells of Western arrogance is hinted at by none other than Napoleon himself when he prophetically states that “[W]hat an irony it would be if it were the opium that stirred China from her sleep” (RS 174).

Bahram’s frequent travels from Bombay to Canton provide the narrative the opportunity to explore the in-between spaces, the Derridean interstices, through which an individual crosses the borders between ethnicity and transnationality. Travel involves a negotiation of both existential location and epistemological positioning by which subjects and objects are articulated not as fixed categories but as epistemological categories. For Parsis in the Indian diaspora, the fact of being a Parsi Zoroastrian marks his/her racial and religious identity followed by the nationalist and the wider transnational identities. Far from cancelling each other out, in Bahram’s case, they complement one another. Since too much focus on ethnicity leads to fetishization and essentialization of identity, the mobile, hybrid Parsi self operates in ever-widening circles of being and belonging: “Where it concerned matters of belief Parsis had clung faithfully to the old ways, ... but in other respects they had borrowed freely from the customs and usages of their neighbours” (RS 170). When he meets Napoleon, Bahram’s “adaptation in outward appearance” is balanced by “the preservation of an inner distinctiveness” (RS 170) which enables him to extol the teachings of the prophet Zarathustra. Bahram thus resolves the dialectic of the home and the world as enunciated by Partha Chatterjee: “The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one’s inner spiritual self, one’s true identity” (*The Nation and its Fragments* 120). Resolving the conflicting spaces of the home and the world within his self, Bahram retains the spiritual distinctiveness of his culture and can make all the “compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt ... to the requirements of a modern world” (Chatterjee 120) without losing his true identity. In the alien space of the Manchu Empire, however, Bahram discovers his alter ego: “In Canton, stripped of the multiple wrappings of home, family, community, obligation and decorum, Bahram had experienced the emergence of a new persona, one that had been previously dormant within him: he had become Barry Moddie” (RS 52). The name of an individual connotes his fixity in family, nation and ethnicity. “The Name,” observes Ashcroft, “stands for the illusion of an irreducible identity that locates *this particular* subject, *this particular* subjectivity and no other” (21). The absence of a name or the renaming of a diasporic subject is “the point of potentiality” at which

he can be recognized as “cut adrift, absent from the nation or launched into the possibility of new life” (Ashcroft 20). While Barrie Moddie is “confident, forceful, gregarious, hospitable, boisterous and enormously successful” in Canton, when he returns to Bombay his “other” self would be shrouded and “Barry would become Bahram again, a quietly devoted husband, living uncomplainingly within the constraints of a large joint family” (RS 52). Ghosh, in this context, seems to be more at home with Stuart Hall’s idea that positioning is central to any idea of identity which is “not necessarily armour-plated against other identities” not “wholly defined by exclusion” (46), and endorses the idea of “‘unities’-in-difference” (45).

Bahram’s successes as an opium merchant are balanced by his failures as the fruits of his labor prove to be elusive. He suffers a huge financial setback because the storm in the sea damages both his ship the *Anahita* and the massive cargo of opium. Arriving in Canton’s Fanquitytown or Foreign Enclave, the helpless Bahram fails to dispose of his cargo because of the stand-off between the adamant Chinese authority and the British enforcers of Free Trade. His situation becomes more complicated when an arrest warrant is issued against his name. The gifted entrepreneur with a luxurious lifestyle feels tormented with the idea that the Chinese security are scrutinizing him at every nook and corner of Canton: “Everywhere he looked, eyes seemed to be following him: although he strode along as fast as he could, the two-minute walk seemed to last an hour” (RS 494). The most decisive blow is struck when the British, in a strategic move, decide to surrender their stock of opium to the Chinese. Bahram, who professed to be “the most loyal of the Queen’s subjects” (RS 453) is shattered with a “sense of betrayal” (518) because the entire edifice of his sense of the world and his place in it proves to be an illusion. The English merchants used all means, from rhetoric to brute force, in order to convince those who opposed their line of thinking. They perpetuated their ideology in various garbs. Religion, politics, economics, and ethics were all ingredients went into the making of the pot-pourri used to convince all the races all over the world. Burnham, Jardine, Dent etc. are few of the most prominent voices that espouse the philosophy of a white exploiter. They are the forces of darkness to which Bahram sells his soul. He regrets this when he is eventually betrayed. With his debts rising high and prospects for the future receding, Bahram takes shelter in his private world of dreams about his lost Chinese lover which culminate in his hallucinatory suicide in the Pearl River: “she seemed to be looking up from under the water’s surface, smiling at him, beckoning with a finger” (RS 546). Bahram is a helpless individual at the mercy of the broad sweeps of politics and history. His self-defence to Napoleon when asked about the ethics of opium-trade reveals how Bahram negotiates with his sense of self and evaluates his position in the wake of capitalist ideology: “Opium is like the wind or the tides: it is outside my power to affect its course. A man is neither good nor evil because he sails his ship upon the wind. It is his conduct towards those around him—his friends, his family,

his servants—by which he must be judged. This is the creed I live by” (*RS* 175). By focusing on the trials and tribulations of a character caught against the whirlwinds of forces beyond his control, the narrative portrays “a broad and many-sided picture of the everyday life of the people” (Lukács 39).

The concept of the nation as a category is influenced by anthropocentric perceptions of the world and fails to regard nature as a co-participant in any national community. Ironically, however, it is precisely through such appeals to “nature” and “the natural” that humans effect its very exclusion from any primary affiliations and ethical considerations. In assuming that human ethical priorities take for granted a biotic community rather than include it within the realm of ethical value, anthropocentrism repeats the ideologies of both imperialism and racism. Val Plumwood points out that imperialism and anthropocentrism are intrinsically interwoven:

[The] anthropocentrism that underlies and justifies the colonization of non-human nature through the imposition of the colonizers’ land forms [does so] in just the same way that Eurocentrism underlies and justifies modern forms of European colonization which see indigenous cultures as ‘primitive’, less rational, and closer to children, animals and nature. (qtd Ashcroft et al 503-504)

The “human,” who from an imperializing Western perspective, meant “civilized” and thus European, stood outside the realm of an untamed nature. The result was that “ethics was confined to the human (allowing the non-human to be treated instrumentally).” Laurence Buell argues that environmental crises and conceptual crises in Western thought are intrinsically interwoven: “Western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today’s environmental problems.” We urgently require, continues Buell, “better ways of imagining nature and humanity’s relation to it” (2). As a sensitive novelist, Ghosh has been in the forefront to demystify such configurations and re-constitute a genuine community along less human-centred lines. *Sea of Poppies* explored the destruction of indigenous agricultural practices when the native peasants were forced by the colonizers to cultivate opium. This ecological imperialism was aggravated by the transportation of a pauperized pool of landless labourers to Mauritius. This led to the development of the capitalist world economy with its open plunder of the periphery for the benefit of the centre. *River of Smoke* presents another aspect of this pillage of peripheral natural resources through the British naturalist Frederick “Fitcher” Penrose’s money-making ambitions to extract rare Third World flora and fauna and sell them in the West. His imperialistic greed considers China as a country “singularly blessed in its botanical riches, being endowed not only with some of the most beautiful and medicinally useful plants in existence, but also with many that were of immense commercial value” (*RS* 101). Penrose’s ship the *Redruth*, which had revolutionized the business of transporting plants across the seas, is a mobile world of greenery. Inspired by the twin impulses of thrift and profit, the sparse and angular *Redruth* is

“an extension of Fitcher’s very being” (RS 75). The frugal Penrose’s mode of living contrasts sharply with Bahram’s affluence on the *Anahita*. Penrose displays a nurseryman’s great diligence in not wasting even a single drop of water. His utilitarian attitude towards nature is the exact counterpoint of Paulette’s sensitivity towards it. The young Frenchwoman, who joins Penrose after their fortuitous meeting in Mauritius, is dismayed at his cruelty towards marine creatures. When a breathing porpoise is hauled up from the *Redruth*’s fishing lines, instead of setting it free Penrose slaughters it and uses its fat. A practical bourgeois, he looks upon nature as an “assortment of puzzles” which after a proper solution could provide “rich sources of profit” (RS 78). Penrose thus embodies the reductionist principles of Enlightenment rationalism which attempted to master nature conceived as an enormous, soulless mechanism. Denouncing this fragmented, mechanical worldview, Plumwood equates it with the rise of capitalism “which needed to turn nature into a market commodity and resource without significant moral or social constraint” (111). Rejecting Penrose’s claims of human mastery and possession of nature, the idealistic Paulette imbibed her father Pierre Lambert’s naturalistic outlook that the love of Nature is a “kind of religion, a form of spiritual striving” (RS 78). An advocate of a holistic and organic Man-Nature relationship, Lambert believed that “in trying to comprehend the inner vitality of each species, human beings could transcend the mundane world and its artificial divisions” (RS 78). In terms of their antithetical attitude towards Nature, Penrose and the Lamberts work out a nicely framed dialectic.

“In the geography of human history,” affirms Ghosh, “no culture is an island” (188). He emphatically points to heteroglossia as a fundamental characteristic of Indian culture: “India exported with her population, not a language, as other civilizations have done, but a linguistic process—the process of adaptation to heteroglossia” (*The Imam and the Indian* 246). With Bakhtin’s conception of heteroglossia as a motivating impulse, Ghosh rejects the prescribed anthropological assumptions about cultural coherence and authenticity. It is the statesmen who draw borders, but people leave the human imprint by creating the melting pot of sub-cultures to subvert these borders. For Ghosh, this dynamic human activity is centuries old: “In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, people developed a much more sophisticated language of cultural negotiation than we know today. They were able to include different cultures in their lives, while maintaining what was distinct about themselves” (Interview with Amitav Ghosh, “Lessons” 52). Granted “a privileged point of vantage” (RS 370) and thereby serving as the narrator’s alter ego, Robin in his heavily descriptive letters to Paulette vividly represents Canton’s multicultural world. The pre-colonial world that Robin creates in his letters challenges the contemporary notions about cosmopolitanism being a postmodern phenomenon. He discovers a nuanced world when thousands of Achhas (the Cantonese word for Hindusthanis), Arabs, Persians and Africans lived together in Canton. The guardian deity of the city is goddess Kuan-yin, a

“bhikkuni” from Hindusthan. Buddhists from Hindusthan had lived in Canton for centuries, the most famous of them being a Kashmiri monk called Dharmayasa. The most famous of Buddhist missionaries, the Bodhidharma, came to Canton from South India. The syncretism of this rich medieval culture is embodied in the architecture of a mosque, one of the oldest in the world built in the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad himself. It is “a most remarkable structure, no different, in outward appearance, from a Chinese temple—all except for the minaret, which is like that of any dargah in Bengal” (RS 377). By recovering traces of this primitive world, Robin journeys forward in space but backwards in time. The new rules of dominance and autonomy which the British brought with them to Canton during the Opium trade failed to alter the older structures of cultural solidarity. The narrator’s observations on this issue corroborate Robin’s views on medieval multiculturalism and trans-racial togetherness: “The ties of trust and goodwill that bound the Hongists to the fanquis were all the stronger for having been forged across apparently unbridgeable gaps of language, loyalty and belonging” (RS 346). Despite the vicious nature of the Opium trade, by erasing boundaries between people it enforced cultural diversity. Indians from “Sindh and Goa, Bombay and Malabar, Madras and the Coringa hills, Calcutta and Sylhet” (RS 185) flocked together to create the “Achha” community of Canton. Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Parsis from India, whose paths never crossed in the subcontinent, enjoyed an inexplicable “mysterious commonality” (RS 193) which was thrust upon them. They stand united against “every variety of foreign devil” (RS 185): the British are scoffed at as the “I-says” and the French jeered at the “Merdes” (RS 185). Neel is quite correct in his observation that “Fungtai Hong was a world in itself, with its own foods and words, rituals and routines: it was as if the inmates were the first inhabitants of a new country, a yet unmade Achhasthan” (RS 192). With the erasure of the boundaries of language, class and caste among these migrants, they replaced the notion of authentic, discrete national cultures with a shared openness to the world, espousing a utopian belief in a trans-racial, human collectivity. These intertwined syncretic histories of Indians and Egyptians, Indians and Chinese, Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Muslims torn apart by political forces are a bulwark against segregationist strategies that promote the cause of religious separatism, while disregarding a shared common past.

A corollary of this rich hybrid world is the exhilarating carnivalesque mix of languages, sonorous yet at times confusing. The English language in *Sea of Poppies* is interspersed with Indian terms from Bengali or Bhojpuri, as well as scattered French. When the narrative ventures out to sea along with the *Ibis*, it enters into the intricate world of Laskari language. The Laskari language was a rich cosmopolitan language, the language of command or sailing ships drawn from the English, Malay, Hindusthani, Chinese, Malayalam and the entire Babel of languages spoken on board. An eclectic web, the Laskari language has a labyrinthine network which can be a puzzle to a newcomer as Zachary discovers:



He had to get used to “malum” instead of mate, “serang” for bo’sun, “tindal” for bosun’s mate, and “seacunny” for helmsman; he had to memorize a new shipboard vocabulary, which sounded a bit like English and yet not: the rigging became the “ringeen,” “avast!” was “bas!,” and the cry of the middle-morning watch went from “all’s well” to “alzbel.” The deck now became the “tootuk” while the masts were “dols,” a command became the a “hookum” and instead of starboard and larboard, fore and aft, he had to say “jamna” and “dawa,” “agil” and “peechil.” (SP 15-16)

The Laskari language, Ghosh observes, is more like a “technical” and “specialized jargon” (Boehmer 34). The steady linguistic flow of this “unseen net of words” is the prime reason for the efficient functioning of the ship: “To work a sailship efficiently, dozens of men must respond simultaneously to a single command” (Ghosh, “Of Fanás,” 58). This lively *mélange* of tongues brings to mind Alu’s “khichri of words” (CR, 279) with which he communicates with the immigrant community in al-Ghazira. By foregrounding the remarkable vibrancy of the Laskari language the narrative celebrates the unsung lives of this mobile community and their lingua franca. The Lascars were the first Afro-Asians to participate freely in a globalized workspace, the first extensive travelers to settle in Europe, the first to adapt to a scheduled work culture and emergent new technologies. The Lascars were thus “in every sense the forerunners of today’s migratory computer technicians, nurses, high-tech workers, and so on” (Ghosh, “Of Fanás,” 58). The *Ibis* thus becomes a floating world with its own lexicon.

Amitav Ghosh’s linguistic virtuosity takes a kaleidoscopic dimension in *River of Smoke*. The narrative opens in Mauritius and its first few pages are peppered with words from Mauritian creole and the Bhojpuri dialect of the Indian settler *girmityas*: “pus-pus,” “palki,” “bonoys,” “belsers,” “bowjis,” “salas,” “sakubays,” “bandobast,” “gardmanzes,” etc. By investing his narrative with native unfamiliar words and expressions, Ghosh imparts a sense of time and place to the multilingual universe of the Indian Ocean where one is “always surrounded by languages you don’t understand” (Ghosh, Untitled 3). In a world where drug-peddlers become heroes, women disguise themselves as men, an ex-convict Indian landlord becomes a *munshi*, identities are endlessly reshaped, and European, Indian and East Asian languages continuously interact with each other. There is a shift in focus from the indentured Indian labourers in Mauritius to the Indian mercantile community huddled in the “Achha Hong” complex in Canton. The phrase “Achha Hong” itself is a hybrid coinage. “Achha” is the Cantonese term for Indians; “Hong” is the Chinese word for trading house. The International Standard English of the third-person narrative voice is sprinkled with words and phrases from the non-English linguistic world. The “Achhas,” themselves a “motley gathering” from distinct parts of the Indian subcontinent, ‘spoke between them more than a dozen different languages” (RS 192). Bahram hears voices of the Chulia boatmen “talking, shouting and singing in Tamil, Telegu and Oriya” (RS 63), Neel experiences employees hailing from disparate communities from the

Bombay hinterlands conversing in “Gujarati, Marathi, Kachhi and Konkani” (RS, 313). Cantonese, Chinese, Portuguese, French, English, Mauritian creole languages seep into one another to create the hybrid pidgin language of the business community. Words like “chai” come from Cantonese, while the Portuguese word “falso” meaning fraudulent or false spoken by Bahram’s efficient Portuguese manager Vico becomes *phaltu* on Achha tongues (RS 192). A language with a peculiar syntax, pidgin has a peculiar sensibility of its own. While the grammar was that of the Cantonese, the words were mainly English, Portuguese and Hindusthani. The charming musical rhythm of Chi-mei’s “sing-song” pidgin is noticeable when she expresses her sympathy for Bahram: “‘Mister Barry trouble have got? Blongi sad inside’” (RS 70). The poetic and direct nature of this mode of communication is quite evident in Punhyqua’s warnings to Bahram about the new governor Lin: “‘Mr. Moddie, Lin Zexu, he savvy allo ... Allo, allo. He have got too muchi spy. He sabbi how cargo come, who bringee, where it go. Allo he savvy. If he come Governor Canton too muchi bad day for trade’” (RS 291). Expressions such as these can only be understood by deducting the sense from the context. For the British, however, pidgin is an uncomfortable domain and they depend on “linkisters” i.e. three-way interpreters between Chinese hosts, pidgin and the English community. While discussing grave issues such as the Letters of the High Commissioner Lin the musical lilt of pidgin is supplanted by official English where translators play a key role.

Exhilarated by this carnivalesque linguistic “chutneyfication,” Neel plans a book on the multi-lingual commercial world of southern China whose proposed title is “*The Celestial Chrestomathy, Comprising A Complete Guide To and Glossary Of The Language Of Commerce in Southern China*” (RS 272). Neel’s *Chrestomathy*, a lexicon of English, Cantonese and pidgin, is inspired by his “providential” meeting with his “kindred spirit” (RS 271) Liang-Kuei-Ch’uan, a printer and translator also known as Compton. As the compiler of this multilingual glossary, Neel acts as the novelist’s fictional double because *The Ibis Chrestomathy* was published on Ghosh’s website in 2008 when *Sea of Poppies* was also published. The assertion that “words ... no less than people, are endowed with lives and destinies of their own” (*The Ibis Chrestomathy*) is as much Neel’s as his creator’s. This linguistic hybridization is, no doubt, a corollary of multiculturalism. But to celebrate this multilingualism as a product of intermeshing of cultures is to overlook the strategies of resistance of South Asian colonized countries. By seizing the language of the centre i.e. English and re-positioning it in a discourse suited to the colonized space, post-colonial literature writes back by the dual processes of “abrogation” and “appropriation” as Ashcroft explains:

The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of “English” involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege. (*Empire* 37)

By dislocating British English and introducing new cultural patterns into it, a postcolonial writer localizes it for creative use thereby producing a variety of “englishes.” “To conquer English,” declares Rushdie, “may be to complete the process of making ourselves free” (*Imaginary Homelands* 17). By employing the strategies of code-switching and vernacular transcription, Ghosh abrogates the Standard English thereby strengthening his anticolonial stance.

The hybrid world of Achha Hong which Robin celebrates in his letters to Paulette is ravished by the brutal public executions of Punhyqua and Allow which predate the opium wars. These are followed by the bombardment of Canton by British and French gunships and the destruction of the thirteen foreign factories by the enraged mob which changed the place beyond recognition. Robin’s premonition of the destruction of this incredible place inspired him to paint it on his canvas in July 1839, seventeen years before the event took place. He also unearthed the secret that the plant called the Golden Camellia was nothing but a fictitious element, a moneyspinning “*HOAX*” (RS 536) invented by a gentleman named William Kerr. What startles a sensitive artist like Robin is the riddle that a city “which has absorbed so much of the world’s evil, has given, in return, so much beauty” (RS 536) in the form of multitudes of flowers. An artist who sketches from life, which he finds “a great deal more rewarding” (RS 352), comments on the nature of his art as an “epic scroll” which self-consciously draws attention to the nature of the narrative itself as a representation: “Events, people, faces, scenes would unroll as they happened: it will be something New and Revolutionary” (RS 280). What is more, his “epic tableau” (RS 215) is so wide that it is all-inclusive: “there are so many people here who simply *cannot* be left out” (RS 215, *italics original*). The narrative’s celebration of the micro-narratives of subaltern individuals and communities enables it to repudiate the imperial “forces of evil” which “celebrate their triumphal march through history” (RS 553). Robin’s paintings are the only surviving documents that testify to the existence of the rich multicultural world of 19<sup>th</sup> century Canton. Quite truly, *River of Smoke* is a diachronic version of history which re-interprets the imperial archives. It is a sustained, and in many respects agonistic, instance of an ethical approach that disavows deleterious ideologies and abominable social practices, that exposes biases in disciplinary structures and methods that are prejudicial towards the other, and works towards articulating how we can understand, respect, and live with others.

*River of Smoke* explores alternative ways of constructing the world based on connections that dismantle the rigid binaries and empiricism of Western modernity. It interrogates both the grounds and the production of historical knowledge by reading between the lines of the imperial archives and emerging as alternative discourses for expressing the subaltern past. Ghosh’s novel transforms the discourses of Western modernity, be they scientific or novelistic, by producing an ethically informed narrative that

subverts the discursive knowledge production strategies that originally produced those discourses. Radhakrishnan, who, like Ghosh, is engaged in a project of dismantling the hegemonic position of a Western-originated discourse (the discourse of postmodernism, in his case), maintains that for genuine transcultural readings to become possible, other realities will have to be "recognized not merely as *other histories* but as *other knowledges*" (58, italics original). To transcend the incommensurability in worldviews, the participants would have to imagine their own "discursive-epistemic space[s] as a form of openness to one another's persuasion" (61). Ghosh's narratives consistently explore this ethical imperative to keep the channels of communication between the self and its other open, so that one might "hear that which [one] do[es] not already understand" (Correspondence, 11). This accounts for the complexity and messiness of literature, the way in which it encourages and engages an ethical sensibility—particularly through the cultivation of empathy—rather than simply embodying eternal verities.

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