

“Any canon of World Literature should be much more open”: A conversation with Amitav Ghosh

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This conversation with Amitav Ghosh covers his intellectual positions, his stance on issues such as modernism, postmodernism and postcolonialism, and his reaction to the ravages of the pandemic. His subversion of the enlightenment concepts of “nation” and “nationalism” would seem to align him with postmodern theorists. Yet he is not at home in the postmodern anti-humanist ambience. His affinity with the modernists comes through in his abiding interest in the individual’s predicament and in his belief in literature’s life-furthering capacity. Ghosh repudiates the anthropological assumptions about cultural authenticity and coherence. This explains his advocacy of hybridity and migrancy. At the same time, however, he opposes the “agonistic” or “reconciliatory” strand in postcolonial studies and, of course, the Eurocentrism of the colonized. He subscribes to the subalternist view of history as a dialogue between the past and the present. His project as a novelist is to achieve self-integration. A syncretist in the realm of ideas, he conceives the novel as an all-inclusive form. Ghosh is too eclectic to embrace a particular *ism* and in the process stifle all his innate dynamism. His 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 that are congenial and pertinent to his artistic pursuit. 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” (cited in Hawley, 11). Not unsurprisingly, he interrogates the 19th century concept of “World Literature” and stresses the expansion of the canon to welcome narratives from the “Third World.” Whether a writer should be a responsible citizen or an insouciant aesthete is an issue of pressing concern for Ghosh. He comes across as an ethically committed thinker and writer in a post-Covid world ravaged by an invisible germ and environmental disaster. My questions were prompted by his discursive writings and not simply his fictional narratives. Amitav answered my questions very patiently and eloquently, stretching his memory to the time when he began his career as a writer. The conversation took place on 20th April, 2021 via Google Meet. What follows below is a transcript of the interview.

Amitav Ghosh is the author of the novels: *The Circle of Reason* (1986); *The Shadow Lines* (1988); *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996); *The Glass Palace* (2000); *The Hungry Tide* (2004); *The Ibis Trilogy*, comprising *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015); *Gun Island* (2019) and the fable *The Living Mountain* (2022). His first book in verse, *Jungle Nama*, was published in 2021. Ghosh's notable non-fictional works include *In an Antique Land* (1992), *Dancing in Cambodia*, *At Large in Burma* (1998), *Countdown* (1999), *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces* (2002), and *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), which received the inaugural Utah Award for the Environmental Humanities in 2018. His most recent work of non-fiction, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, was published in 2021.

Ghosh's literary works have received numerous accolades and awards. *The Circle of Reason* was awarded France's Prix Médicis in 1990. *The Shadow Lines* received two prestigious Indian prizes the same year; the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Ananda Puraskar. *The Calcutta Chromosome* won the Arthur C. Clarke award for 1997 and *The Glass Palace* won the International e-Book Award at the Frankfurt book fair in 2001. The novel also won the best book award for the Eurasian region of the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2001. Interestingly, Ghosh spurned the award on ideological grounds. In January 2005 *The Hungry Tide* was awarded the Crossword Book Prize, a major Indian award. *Sea of Poppies* (2008) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, 2008 and was awarded the Crossword Book Prize and the India Plaza Golden Quill Award. In 2018 the Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary honor, was conferred on Amitav Ghosh. He was the first English-language writer to receive the award. In 2019 *Foreign Policy* magazine named him one of the most important global thinkers of the preceding decade.

Binayak Roy: Are you a modernist in an age of postmodernism as you are an anticolonialist in an age of postcolonialism? Are you out of step with your time?

Amitav Ghosh: (Laughs) ... I was more influenced by Proustian modernism than by Joycean modernism. I wanted to do with space in *The Shadow Lines* what Proust did with time in *Remembrance of Things Past*. Proust's work, for me, represented an alternative modernism compared to the Anglo-Irish or even the American variant of modernism. As for your second question, yes, I am anticolonial.¹

BR: "Still I, for one, have swum too long in pre-postmodernist currents to accept that some part of the effort that human culture has so long invested in matters of the spirit will not, somehow, survive." ("The Fundamentalist Challenge", *The Imam and the Indian*, 285-286). The term "pre-postmodernist" is not a commonly accepted periodizing or conceptual

term. Does it mean the same as “modern”? If so, why the periphrasis? If not, what, according to you, is the difference between “modern” and “pre-postmodern”?

AG: It was an ironical term, actually. The idea was to gesture at the premodern because in a sense I was just being ironic about all these labels—premodern, postmodern.

BR: Your review of *The Baburnama*, titled “Empire and Soul,” is a significant contribution to the concept of the secular in literature along with the essays by Amartya Sen. I (along with many readers) am keenly interested in a very pregnant sentence: “Written centuries before the discovery of the Self, *The Baburnama* is, astonishingly, a narrative of self-discovery” (*The Imam and the Indian*, 97). Normally, the “S” in self is capitalized in philosophical writings to signify “the transcendental or universal Self” to mark it off from the “everyday self.” Does your capitalization of “S” in “Self” carry a special significance?

AG: It was to point to the thought that Emperor Babur was really writing about himself, his inner life, his feelings, his emotional states. He was writing about himself, about an individual, which is actually a very very rare thing. At that moment of time, even in 16th-century Europe, that kind of memoir was very rare when one talks about his individual life in that particular way—his feelings towards his stepmothers, some of whom he hated. Babur was also completely frank about what he wrote. I think it’s a very remarkable thing, you don’t really see that [...] someone writing that unreservedly, it’s quite rare even in modern times. So, in many ways I do feel that Babur was certainly in a literary sense an absolute pioneer. After *Baburnama* it’s hard to think of an autobiography in the modern sense coming out of India or Central Asia. The next autobiography that one can think about is the *Ardhakathanaka* in Sanskrit. So, it’s a long gap.

BR: Let me now turn from the individual to the community. Your writing explores the various processes of the formation of a community or a collective. This community almost invariably conflicts with the forces of global capitalism (*The Circle of Reason*, *Gun Island*), or colonial forces (*Sea of Poppies*). Sometimes the “men in the aggregate” also develop a strong sense of solidarity as in the formation of the INA and the army of plantation laborers (*The Glass Palace*) or fraternity as in the case of the lascars (*River of Smoke*). Is it a conscious attempt on your part to fill in this gap in contemporary fiction “which has become ever more radically centered on the individual psyche” (*The Great Derangement*, 106)?

AG: It wasn’t a conscious attempt when I was writing *The Circle of Reason* (1986) but it, in some way, reflects my own life experiences. It was not a deliberate attempt to look at the emergence of a community then but now I suppose if I were to write a book like that it would address these

issues of community more directly. A community does not always exhibit solidarity and puts up a sense of resistance to external forces; it is also fragmented by lots of hidden conflicts, tensions, rivalries and so on. That is also an aspect of a community; there are hierarchies and power struggles.

BR: “Recognition is famously a passage from ignorance to knowledge. [...] Nor does recognition require an exchange of words: more often than not we recognize mutely” (*The Great Derangement*, 5). Your subtle observation is packed with a lot of philosophical insight. Would you please elaborate why the processes of knowledge formation are a recurrent trope in your writings?

AG: That whole idea of recognition comes from Aristotle’s aesthetics. It’s one of the things that has not been written about. It is Aristotle who says that recognition is very much an aspect of the narrative and that is absolutely true. Recognition narratives are so much important—two brothers separated in their childhood but ultimately recognizing each other is a recurrent narrative trope. Recognition narratives are a very important part of literature in general; they exist at all times in all places. Here, I was talking about something else; it is the recognition of a non-human protagonist, that of people recognizing the river as a force in their lives. Suddenly they wake up to the knowledge that there are non-human entities that interact with their lives in very specific and dramatic ways. That, in fact, is the story of the planetary crisis of today. When you think of James Lovelock’s Gaia theory, that precisely is what it is. The theory is one in which Lovelock awakened to the realization that the earth is very much a living entity. It is agentive, it acts. In a sense that is the core of the planetary crisis we are living in because every day that we look around we realize that the earth is not a passive or inert entity as philosophy conceptualized it in the preceding centuries. We now recognize that the earth is agentive, it acts, it interacts with us and out of this recognition springs a profound crisis that we are plunged in.

BR: In *The Great Derangement* you say that the novel as a genre is limited when it comes to discussing issues like the climate crisis. You link this powerlessness to its genesis in the 18th century. Do you think that writing has the force to persuasively argue against climate change, especially after the post-Covid situation?

AG: I do feel that for a writer it is important to reflect the reality that we live in, on ethics, on the state of things in the modern world. This has never been truer than during the pandemic when we have so much time to reflect on our own circumstances. Certainly, the thing that the pandemic has made clear is that much that we believed during the pre-pandemic period was really a kind of an illusion—the idea of human mastery, the idea that human beings were firmly in charge of everything that was

happening on the planet, the idea that technology has solved everything—all these ideas are now extinct. We have to try and find some other way of relating to each other and to the earth.

BR: There has been a lot of engaging discussion about the silence surrounding the un-narrated historical events in your work. But there is another kind of silence: silence as an alternate mode of knowing in both your fiction and discursive writings. Your writings penetrate deep into the issues of mysticism, be it precognition or extra-sensory perception. Does mysticism interest you very much?

AG: It is not clear to me what mysticism is, it's a very vague word, but certainly words like precognition or premonition are much more relevant and precise. And yes, I certainly think that there are other ways of knowing. Non-standard, non-conventional modes of knowing are of great interest to me. I have always been interested in those kinds of things; how sometimes people have ideas about the future that do come true. I confess that sometimes it happens with my own work. In *Gun Island*, for example, there is a whole section that is set in Los Angeles where there is a description of a fire surrounding a museum. I wrote that many months before it eventually happened. Similarly in the same novel a spider does play a big role in the later sections in Venice. A few months ago, a friend of mine who lives in Venice told me that his son was bitten by a spider. In fact, these strange things are constantly unfolding around all of us. One of the strangest aspects about these epistemologies was revealed very recently when I received a message from a Professor at Columbia that he had actually found a temple exactly similar to the one I described in *Gun Island*: built in the Bishnupuri style with bricks. These uncanny things happen all the time.

BR: Reflecting on Nabeel's predicament in your essay "An Egyptian in Baghdad" you observe that "Nabeel had vanished into the pages of the epic exodus" (II, 45). In *An Antique Land* concludes on a slightly different note: "Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History" (IAAL, 353). Why this replacement of "epic exodus" with "History"? Do you have any particular philosophy of History?

AG: I don't think I have a philosophy of History as such. Iraq had been bombed and all these youths had been set adrift. The broad sweep of historical incidents does engulf the lives of ordinary individuals. We have seen a similar scenario during the pandemic when literally hundreds of thousands, in fact millions, of poor working-class people found themselves on the roads. So, these are recurrent patterns in human lives. I was trying to make the point that what had happened to Nabeel over there in the Gulf was that he was swallowed up by an anonymous crowd.

BR: The pandemic has reached almost every corner of the world and has erased all differences between the First and the Third Worlds in terms of human suffering. Is there a possibility of a universal or a “World Literature” emerging from these ravages?

AG: The whole idea of “World Literature” took shape in the 19th century beginning with Goethe’s whole enunciation of the idea and I think it’s undeniable that some kind of “World Literature” exists. When I was a child growing up in Kolkata, the books on my uncle’s bookshelf really influenced me. It was later that I realized that a lot of these books were written by Nobel Prize winning writers. So, in one sense, the institution of the Nobel Prize played a great role in forming this idea of “World Literature” but not in the true sense of the term. If one counts the number of non-Europeans who figure in that canon, he/she can count them on the fingers of one hand, or maybe two hands. Almost all the figures in this so-called canon of “World Literature” are Europeans, basically white men and some white women. We would have thought that in the last 10-15 years this canon should have expanded much more and I suppose, it has a bit, but it is still a very restrictive and hierarchized kind of grouping. Any canon of “World Literature” should be much more open. The question does arise that ultimately who decides all these canons? If I had to make my own canon of “World Literature,” fortunately I never had to and never will, I would certainly say that many of the Bengali *Mangal kabya* should find a place in it. They are very interesting as a literary form and very novelistic as well. The *Manashamangal kabya* are extremely interesting because of their character sketches. The most fascinating aspect of these *kabya* is their conversations, the dialogues. I really love the long description of meals, whole descriptions of how meals had to be eaten, and all the dishes. In many ways they are more realistic than some of our contemporary literature. They represent the reality of Bengal much more truthfully; the reality of cyclones, the droughts, the currents of rivers and so many other things like that, and snakes. Snakes are so much a part of the reality of Bengal. So, the *Manashamangal kabya*, for me, should be a part of any canon of “World Literature.”

BR: Very true. This conversation was really enlightening. Thank you so much for sacrificing your valuable time, Amitav. Please keep well and stay safe.

AG: Thank you. Take care.

Notes

1. Amitav Ghosh’s objection to the term “Postcolonial” is explicitly stated in earlier interviews:

“‘Postcolonial’ is essentially a term that describes you as a negative” (T. Vijay Kumar, 105).

“What is postcolonial? When I look at the works of critics, such as Homi Bhabha, I think they have somehow invented this world which is just a set of representations of representations. They’ve retreated into a world of magic mirrors and I don’t think anyone can write from that sort of position” (Silva and Tickell, 214-215).

Works Cited

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