

Imagining Plural Cosmopolitanisms in the Essays of Amitav Ghosh¹

Terri Tomskey

University of Alberta, Canada

There are times when words seem futile, and to no one more so than a writer. At these moments it seems that nothing is of value other than to act and to intervene in the course of events.

Amitav Ghosh – *Incendiary Circumstances*

“Only through stories can invisible or inarticulate or silent beings speak to us; it is they who allow the past to reach out to us”

Amitav Ghosh – *Gun Island: A Novel*

In his 2016 non-fiction work, *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh foregrounds the problem of genre, observing that he has long been troubled by the “project of partitioning” that sequesters one way of knowing from another. Drawing on the work of French philosopher Bruno Latour, Ghosh writes that “the project of partitioning is supported always by a related enterprise: one that [Latour] describes as ‘purification’” (71). Given the history of modern India, a state created by a political act of division and a society still grappling with the genocidal consequences of religious and cultural purification, the metaphor of partition is especially freighted for someone like Ghosh. Likely with that in mind, he advocates for approaches to representation that resist the purification projects of partition. To do otherwise is to limit our ability to apprehend the full consequence of the large-scale global challenges we face today. The project of partition, he notes, is a particular problem for writing in the age of the Anthropocene and for understanding a global climate crisis that exceeds and resists its representation in language or in literary fiction. Given this, it is unsurprising to see in Amitav Ghosh’s fiction and non-fictional writing a search for an alternative, anti-partitionist perspective. Many scholars have used the word *cosmopolitan* to describe this effort, which makes sense given the global perspective entailed within the word’s Greek origins. However, given the entanglement of modern cosmopolitanism with Enlightenment philosophy and the legacy of European imperialism, there is a risk that the view of the cosmopolitan – the world-citizen – becomes synonymous with an imperial vision. To appreciate the ways in which Ghosh works to avoid this pitfall in his

fiction, we should consider his longstanding simultaneous commitment to the essay form. In his many essays, Ghosh draws authority not from a disembodied view from above, but from a grounded, particular, and subjective perspective. In those essays, Ghosh promotes plural cosmopolitanisms, an approach potentially capable of grasping the geographical and chronological scale of global problems like climate change without reproducing either the imperial or the partitionist ideologies.

For readers of Ghosh's oeuvre, it is hard to separate out (or partition, as he might say) his non-fiction essays from his fiction because of the way the same topics cross over both forms: each genre elaborates and extends Ghosh's ideas in ways that either complement or supplement one another. Ghosh uses the essay form to scrutinize the world around him, leveraging the authenticity of the "I" to lend authority and urgency to his perspective, as well as to work through the articulation of his ideas. As life writing scholars have observed, the first-person life narrative expresses a claim to autobiographical truth, what Philippe Lejeune has termed "the autobiographical pact" between the writer and the reader (*On Autobiography* 14–17). In other words, the testimonial "I" creates public trust and accountability in relating the writer's "real life" experiences. Consequently Ghosh's first-person essays represent a form of activism, a shift from fiction to an engagement with political reality. In Ghosh's case, the essay represents a journalistic mode with which to document and contemplate what he calls the "incendiary circumstances" of the world ("The Ghosts of Mrs Ghandhi" 35). Moreover, the essay form offers a way to incorporate a literary appreciation (the essay form, I want to emphasize, is not a rejection of or an alternative to fiction). In valuing literature, especially literary forms like poetry, alongside personal experiences and political reflections, Ghosh's essays remind readers that all texts are mediated, while highlighting the function of narratives in communicating human relationality to the world. This is illustrated through the autobiographical components of Ghosh's essays, including his recollections of his childhood in Sri Lanka and India, his anthropological work in Egypt as a doctoral student at Oxford University, as well as his subsequent travels to the UK, Myanmar, Mauritius, Pakistan, and the Andaman Islands.

Within his essays, Ghosh illuminates connections across cultures and countries through which we can trace the emergence of a cosmopolitan consciousness, a cosmopolitanism that appears as an antidote to the longer histories of colonial violence and the xenophobia of the nationalist present. Yet, even as I wish to extol Ghosh's view of cosmopolitanism, we must pay attention to those longer histories of colonialism that Ghosh also draws out in his writings. These histories are a reminder that a certain ambivalence attends and troubles

cosmopolitanism, since many cosmopolitan communities have formed as a result of the violent displacements provoked by Empire. This seeming contradiction (for Empire has both created cosmopolitanisms and ruptured already existing cosmopolitanisms by way of chattel slavery, indenture and other forced or exilic mobilities) must be understood as the product of divergent cosmopolitanisms—imperial ones, as well as ethical others that seek to resist systems of domination. This article investigates how Ghosh’s attention to the *past* especially, to the often idealized memories of cross-cultural alliances as well as in the connections between different places, helps articulate an ethical and positive form of cosmopolitan consciousness. The attention to geography and chronology produces *plural* cosmopolitanisms in his essays, including one we could term utopian cosmopolitanism. While the essay form offers an important source for articulating Ghosh’s main ideas, it is impossible to read his essays alone without turning to similar ideas expressed in his fiction. An integral part of Ghosh’s politics is reaching across divides and crossing boundaries, whether geographical, discursive, cultural, or generic. I conclude by examining the significance of literature for Ghosh, as articulated in his essays. In those essays, Ghosh presents an understanding of literature as “thoroughly internationalized,” disseminated along global circuits and reaching readers around the world (“March of the Novel” 161). By this, he asks us to consider how literature reaches distant and diverse readers and how particular modes of storytelling open up a cosmopolitan consciousness. Literary representation itself has an expansive effect, bearing witness to the traumas of minority groups and illuminating the consequences of nationalist xenophobias.

Plural Cosmopolitanisms

The term cosmopolitanism often evokes numerous, and sometimes conflicting, discourses, from cultural hybridity and multiculturalism to transnational mobility and privilege; consequently, it is best to think of the term as a plurality, as cosmopolitanisms, rather than a singular cosmopolitanism. Historically, the term originates with the Cynics of Ancient Greece, with Diogenes of Sinope, singled out for inventing the phrase, “cosmopolitan” meaning “a citizen of the world.” This claim was one of political detachment, which marked Diogenes’ allegiance beyond the *polis* (the city state). The meanings of cosmopolitanism have shifted since Diogenes’ defiant pronouncement in the fourth century BCE. Filtered through the Stoics of Ancient Rome, like Cicero, it gained purchase during the moment of European modernity coinciding with the birth of the nation-state. During a time of national conflict, philosophers like Immanuel Kant revived cosmopolitanism as a vision to secure perpetual peace and the universal rights of man.² Alongside these loftier visions, nineteenth-century nationalists

countered by using cosmopolitanism as a negative slur, a shorthand for rootless others, especially Jews. As economic globalization progressed in the late-nineteenth and twentieth century that negative connotation was applied to describe a global capitalist elite who are perceived to have no real allegiance to the local places in which they reside. Beyond this struggle between cosmopolitanism's proponents and its nationalist opponents, however, lies another group: those who have been made cosmopolitan against their will. In his essays, Amitav Ghosh draws attention to such negative cosmopolitans in his description of the transnational crossings and displacements across the Indian Ocean when

the British were transporting Indian prisoners to a chain of penal colonies on islands across the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean: Penang, Ramree Island near Burma, the Andaman Islands, Mauritius and Bencoolen off the coast of Sumatra. These were the ancestors of Guantánamo Bay. ("The Theater" 31)

Identifying historical and global continuities between Guantánamo and British penal colonies, as well as "Abu Ghraib and British prisons in India" (31), Ghosh alerts us to what sociologist Ulrich Beck has described as "cosmopolitanization," that is, the material realities of an interconnected, globalized world that now structure most people's lives (112). For Beck, this is not merely an abstraction or theory, but rather describes the global norms created by trade and economic practices as well as military incursions, territorial acquisitions, and other imperial formations of contemporary global powers, like the United States. Ghosh's essays offer a longer view of how cosmopolitanization was firmly in place due to international trade as well as the global displacements prompted by Empire.

Though it has negative connotations in popular culture and political discourse, in the scholarly areas of political philosophy and sociology, cosmopolitanism has mostly been theorized positively. Especially in the wake of the Cold War, with the collapse of a bi-polar global hegemony and Francis Fukuyama's infamous "end of history" quip, cosmopolitanism has been promoted as a world political philosophy geared toward collective responsibility. It raises ideas of receptiveness to other cultures, and advocates for a critical detachment from and re-attachment to a wider world (see Anderson; Delanty; Derrida; Mignolo). These positions are oriented towards a positive and often humanist future as well as a politico-ethical ideal. In line with such theories, Ghosh frequently returns to cosmopolitanism as a practice that relies on an ethics of openness and hospitality towards the Other. For Ghosh, a self-styled "xenophile," cosmopolitanism offers an explicitly political stance, resisting the purifying drive of the ethno-nationalist state, like those created by the British partitioning of India. Ghosh, who has written about the traumatic impacts of the 1947 Indian Partition in his nonfiction as well as his novels, such as *The Shadow*

Lines (1988) and *The Hungry Tide* (2003), knows all too well how the rigidity of homogeneous, national identity formations do not allow room for what Gyanendra Pandey has called the “hyphenated national” citizen, such as those found in religious minorities and other marginalized groups (“Disciplining Difference” 159). As Ghosh understands it, the partitioning of the Indian subcontinent offered no “solution” but instead would go on to “create only a new set of minorities and new oppressions” (“The Greatest Sorrow” 74). In the wake of ethnic partitions, conducted under the auspices of ethno-nationalism, cosmopolitanism, with its tolerance of multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities, becomes a strained concept. Those minorities that are not immediately displaced and forced out are ultimately viewed with suspicion. If cosmopolitanism implies hospitality to others, such a notion under the ideology of the nation-state becomes untenable, since it places into jeopardy the post-partition project of state-building with its exclusivist ethnic or religious loyalties.

Utopian Cosmopolitanisms

To understand the importance of cosmopolitanism in Ghosh’s essays, it is necessary to look into his earlier writing, and in particular, his book-length auto-ethnographic travel narrative, *In an Antique Land* (1992), which describes his student experiences conducting fieldwork in Egypt. Here, Ghosh outlines a utopian cosmopolitanism that we see imagined and challenged in his later essays. *In an Antique Land* describes the harm perpetrated by nationalist ideologies as well as the possibilities for a cosmopolitan alternative, even though this alternative is assembled by Ghosh’s imagined and idealistic reconstruction of a disappeared community. Ghosh describes a journey he undertakes in Egypt to visit the tomb of Sidi Abu-Hasira, a Jewish saint who “had once been equally venerated by Jews and Muslims alike” (342). On reaching the tomb, Ghosh and his driver are detained and interrogated by uniformed guards, representatives of the state. Unable to fathom Ghosh’s interest in the tomb (for, as Ghosh’s interrogator asks, “what connection could [an Indian like Ghosh] have with the tomb of a Jewish holy man, here in Egypt?”), the guards let Ghosh go, on the condition that he leave at once without visiting the tomb. Pondering this episode, Ghosh realizes the extent to which the historical displacements of colonial legacies and nationalist discourses are inscribed:

It struck me ... [that] the remains of those small indistinguishable, intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim, had been partitioned long ago. Nothing remained in Egypt to effectively challenge [the interrogator’s] disbelief It was then that I began to realize how much success the partitioning of the past had achieved; that I was sitting at that desk now because the mowlid of Sidi

Abu-Hasira was an anomaly within the categories of knowledge represented by those divisions. (339-340)

In An Antique Land foregrounds these discrepant, yet “intertwined histories” to bring into view a medieval, non-western multi-religious world, a paradigm of cosmopolitanism. Indeed, to pair up identities like Muslim-Jewish and Hindu-Muslim in today’s world where such Manichean dyads are often understood as oppositional at best, and hostile at worst, is a gesture that asks readers to take pause and reflect on the complex and hybrid histories that have been effaced by the essentialist rhetoric of the nation-state. As Ella Shohat has suggested in her writing on the *Mizrahim*, whom she also describes as “Arab Jews” (i.e., the Jewish communities that had long lived and thrived in Islamic lands, before the creation of Israel), any reading which opens up a “*multichronotopic* notion of time and space” expose the historical, cultural, and political connections between seemingly disparate groups and suggests inroads to resisting dominant views (“Rupture and Return” 51, original emphasis). Such a reading is clearly at hand in Ghosh’s writing, which creates a way to acknowledge and account for seeming “anomal[ies] within the categories of knowledge” while also confronting the violent realities and repressions that have emerged as a result (*In An Antique Land* 340). While the Egyptian interrogator’s incomprehension remains troubling, Ghosh’s representation of this encounter refuses to accept the construction of normative difference as encoded in this man’s reaction.

Yet Ghosh’s careful reconstruction of a precolonial, non-western, multi-religious world in his text has been criticized by scholars, who have faulted *In An Antique Land* for its utopian and nostalgic thinking. Inderpal Grewal provides such an outlook, praising Ghosh for his focus on “Indian Ocean trading practices,” but arguing that it does so in the service of “an idealized, non-Eurocentric, postcolonial cosmopolitanism” (“Transactional America” 50). She critiques Ghosh’s imagining of what she calls an “anti-colonial cosmopolitanism” (38) or “postcolonial cosmopolitanism,” (46) because it can only be realized through the University of Princeton’s “repository of ... documents that made this history possible” (55). This is true, where knowledge of non-colonial cosmopolitanisms is reliant on and perhaps even subordinate to Empire, what Grewal elsewhere calls “colonial cosmopolitanism” (40). Indeed, Empires have fostered their own versions of cosmopolitanism, where cosmopolitan difference was preserved and managed in complex ways to uphold imperial rule (see Lavan *et al.* “Cosmopolitan Empire”). Grewal’s reading highlights some of those contradictions in Ghosh’s text and her insightful analysis demarcates the extent to which Ghosh privileges his male subjects as cosmopolitan, while relegating women to the background of his text. Yet, Grewal also ignores the extent to which the imaginative reconstructions and fragmentary interruptions in Ghosh’s text

constitute an important rejoinder to anthropological ethnography as the legacy of imperial discourse he is simultaneously working on during his studies. As Claire Chambers points out, *In An Antique Land* challenges “the claims to definitiveness of academic discourses” in Ghosh’s acknowledgement of epistemic violence and how it operates within anthropology (“Anthropology as Cultural Translation” 2). Chambers also notes how the text’s self-awareness foregrounds local characters’ views, reminding readers of what she describes as “the problem of representing the Other” (16). She further observes that Ghosh makes a point of representing his struggle with language, idiom, and translation, unlike “traditional ethnographies, where the issue of language is effaced and foreign concepts are explained through smooth, unproblematic translation” (5-6). In other words, Ghosh’s text serves other important purposes that cannot be easily separated from its utopianism. *In An Antique Land* reminds readers of the role inhabited by writers, whose imaginative tools can craft a cosmopolitical vision by retrieving the traces of heterogeneous communities and reimagining transcultural connections. His book enables readers to re-examine their understanding of the world, where those historical cross-cultural entanglements have disappeared. Reanimating those histories, even if only imaginatively and idealistically, signifies an important intervention that asks readers to critique the animosities of our present-day order and see alternatives to what looks like an inevitable trajectory of today’s divided communities.

Indeed, much of Ghosh’s work is preoccupied with challenging partitionist ideologies in their various manifestations: as genres, as ethno-religious exclusivism, as nation-states that espouse oppressive ideas of ethno-religious purity and identity. Twenty years after writing *In An Antique Land*, Ghosh thinks back to his time in 1980s Egypt as a twenty-four year old in his 2012 essay, “Confessions of a Xenophile”. Ghosh recalls that he had desired more experience with the world as a writer, one of the reasons that prompted him to study abroad, but instead he found himself dealing with the cultural “shock” of living in a small village with such a poor grasp of modern Arabic that any efforts at communication provoked “great outbursts of laughter” from the villagers (“Confessions” n.pag.). Yet, despite this ongoing ridicule (which he documents far more extensively and with self-deprecating humility within *In An Antique Land*), Ghosh also explains how communication was facilitated by other means, mostly through the medium of “*aflaam al-Hindeyya* – that is to say, Hindi film songs,” which “became a shared language and opened many barriers and earned me many invitations to meals” (“Confessions” n.pag.). These popular songs, like the ubiquity of Indian water pumps in Egyptian rural communities, evoke not just the economic ties between India and Egypt, but also a memory of postcolonial internationalism, political

liberation, and self-determination, an alternative to colonialism and Western-led leadership. Those shared connections Ghosh recognizes “as the spirit of decolonization” brought about by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), that spurred and consolidated ties between different places (“Confessions”, n.pag.). Indeed, Ghosh believes that without NAM, he “would not have been permitted to reside in the countryside,” in Beheira, Egypt, nor would the medium of Hindi film songs exist between the locals and himself, and that the water pumps “would have been of European or Japanese make,” rather than manufactured in India (“Confessions” n.pag.). The NAM presents a different kind of postcolonial order, one that issued calls for the economic and social rights of subjugated people. As scholar Crystal Parikh suggests, the NAM-affiliated Asian-African Conference, held in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, created a “real force of possibility” in “the Bandung Spirit,” represented by its coalition of heterogeneous nation-states and formerly colonized People of Colour (*Writing Human Rights* 53). The NAM rejected imperialism, and not only offered an alternative to the rigid polarization of the Cold War, but also imagined a Third World characterized by peaceful co-existence, alliances, cooperation and dialogue, as well as greater equity, not least since many of its members faced similar forms of economic underdevelopment and disenfranchisement as a result of colonialism.

In “Confessions of a Xenophile,” Ghosh concedes that in a post-9/11 world, with its “extraordinary rehabilitation of imperialism” symbolized by the invasion and occupation of Iraq and the rise of religious fundamentalisms, the “words Non-Aligned seem somehow empty and discredited” (n.pag.). By reanimating the NAM, Ghosh nevertheless posits an alternative future to what seems an inevitable trajectory of imperialism in the present. He writes that the NAM represents a unique moment of decolonial possibility, given its

deep historical roots and powerful cultural resonances ... it represented an attempt to restore and recommence the exchanges and conversations that had been interrupted by the long centuries of European imperial dominance. (“Confessions” n.pag.)

Ghosh’s project is concerned with retrieving the traces of the past in order to imagine the promise of an alternative politics to neo-imperialism, with the NAM as “the necessary and vital counterpart of the nationalist idiom of anti-colonial resistance” (“Confessions” n.pag.). While Ghosh laments that “Third World nationalism is often presented [in the West] as an ideology of xenophobia and parochialism,” he marvels at the cosmopolitan internationalism of the NAM that entailed a new kind of universal solidarity through its openness to others:

But the truth is that many of these movements of resistance tried very hard, within their limited means, to create an universalism of their own.

Those of us who grew up in that period will recall how powerfully we were animated by an emotion that is rarely named: this is xenophilia, the love of the other, the affinity for strangers - a feeling that lives very deep in the human heart, but whose very existence is rarely acknowledged. ("Confessions" n.pag.)

Universalism, as Ghosh understands it here, is decoupled from the Western conceptualization—as a white, Eurocentric, and hierarchical concept, often predicated on the violent exclusion of other humans (who were conceived as non-human). The “universalism of their own,” as Ghosh puts it, instead relates to the NAM’s reimagining of the human community as a diverse unity, holding up a set of ideals. This universalism is sustained by xenophilia, an idea that Ghosh borrows from Leela Gandhi’s work on affective communities. In her 2006 book on this concept, Gandhi unearths the historical and unorthodox alliances that sprung up between British metropolitan anti-imperialists and colonized Indians in order to describe an ethics of solidarity with outsiders. Taking her cue from Derridean notions of hospitality, Gandhi argues that the “politics of friendship” situates otherness and difference before all individual and filial loyalties, consequently giving rise to a “non-communitarian communitarianism” (*Affective Communities* 26). For Gandhi, this “utopian mentality [...] shows the way forward to a genuine *cosmopolitanism*” (31, emphasis added). Similarly, Ghosh views the aspirations of NAM as significant to social transformation; he holds up its diverse alliances as an ideal, that promised a better future. As he explains in his essay, he has personally benefited from the legacy of that collaboration between disparate communities – between India and Egypt; his lived experience in Egypt he describes as “critical to [his] development as a writer” and “absolutely essential to [his] literary formation” (“Confessions” n.pag.). Of course, as with *In An Antique Land*, Ghosh’s view of the NAM is a nostalgic one, since the movement ultimately failed, and its collapse was predicated on the sharpening of national and ethnic identities. Nevertheless, Ghosh’s essay on xenophilia bears witness to the potential held in those precarious historical moments. He reminds readers how past cosmopolitanisms have, in their “yearning for a certain kind of universalism,” held together diverse political solidarities, facilitated cultural exchanges, and entailed economic trade in their xenophilic quest for dialogue and connection (“Confessions” n.pag.). By invoking those cosmopolitan aspirations and utopian visions, however remote they may seem today, Ghosh holds on to the promise of co-existence and political transformation, while excavating a deeper and richer understanding of the world and its resonant possibilities.

Cosmopolitan Literature and the Politics of Loss

In many of his essays, Ghosh turns to examine the cosmopolitan character of literature itself, which provides an aesthetic to examine partitionist ideologies and the damage they inflict, from the construction of otherness to communal riots. The novel is especially prominent in this regard, given that Ghosh considers it a “vigorously international” form produced by the legacies of globalization and colonialism (“March of the Novel” 161). In his own writing, such as the *Ibis Trilogy*, those themes are explicit. Ghosh has traced the rise and disappearance of multi-communal dialogue, depicted the costs of imperial trade, the expansion of empires as well as the formation of new political solidarities. For Ghosh, fiction is an obvious site where he can delineate cosmopolitanisms as a remediating force to the “rise in violent and destructive kinds of fundamentalism” as scholars have demonstrated in their literary criticism (“Confessions of a Xenophile” n.pag.). Ghosh uses his essays as a platform to express his faith in literature and storytelling and to illuminate the possibilities that the imaginative and subversive space of literary fiction represents. In his 1995 essay “The Fundamentalist Challenge,” Ghosh speaks to the way literature and art are at the forefront of the culture wars, either “regarded as the ultimate repository of value on one side” by the secularists, or “excoriated” by religious extremists, who view literature as a threat to their supremacy (179). In this essay, Ghosh casts a comparativist look at atrocities against minorities. Reflecting on the Khmer Rouge massacres of the ethnic Vietnamese population, he finds similarities with India’s Hindu extremists and particularly their demolition of the Ayodhya mosque in 1992, with ethno-nationalist pogroms directed against the Muslim community. Ghosh sees the fascist ideology of extremists as “the same in every case,” a pattern which surfaces time and time again across different places, whether articulated in “Bosnia, Croatia, Sudan, Algeria, Sri Lanka” (186). Against that violence, he praises the work that literary fiction can do to speak to and challenge this pattern of events.

In his review of the novella, *Lojja (Shame)*, by Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin, Ghosh describes how its prose exposes “what it means to live under the threat of supremacist terror” as a minority (197). Nasrin’s “richness of detail,” Ghosh writes, “creates a circumstance that is its own context” but which also becomes “imaginatively available far beyond the boundaries of its location” (197). In other words, Ghosh recognizes how literary fiction can transport the reader across places, effectively cosmopolitanizing the reader in its engagement with the Other. This harmonizes with philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah’s insistence that cosmopolitanism is, above all else, an “idea that we can learn from people’s differences” (*Cosmopolitanism* 4). While Nasrin’s text in fact

deals specifically with the plight of a besieged Hindu minority in Muslim majority Bangladesh, Ghosh recognizes that the novel exceeds the specificity of this plot: it places him into an empathetic relation with Indian Muslims in an increasingly Hindu-nationalist India. Nasrin's imaginative reconstruction of a minority family allows the reader to supplement his own incomplete understanding of other places, as well as learn about the predicament of minorities within his own nation-state. Her text facilitates an empathetic relationship to the Other, a cosmopolitanism that allows Ghosh to see the similarities across different nation-states, as well as understand, bodily in an empathetic way – “*to feel on my own fingertips the texture of the fears*” as Ghosh puts it – what minorities are subject to within an intolerant, ethno-nationalist regime (197, emphasis added). Literary writing, Ghosh writes, provides a way “to recreate, expand, and reimagine the space for articulate, humane, and creative dissent” about minorities within an increasingly intolerant and hegemonic context (199). Nasrin's text, Ghosh suggests, creates a cosmopolitanism for the reader that is at once educational and political, enabling a self-reflective and critical look at one's own nation-state and its own intolerance of others.

In a later essay published in 2003, “The Greatest Sorrow: Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness,” Ghosh returns to the topic of the nation-state and its role in the resurgence of ethnic violence. Writing about Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, a coming-of-age novel about a queer child, Arjie, growing up Tamil in an increasingly intolerant Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lanka, Ghosh ponders his own happy childhood connections to Columbo, “a time of joy” before that “paradise” is wrenched away from him as he is forced to go to school in India at the age of eleven (87). While Ghosh's experience is not equivalent to Arjie's, who along with his family must leave their home in Sri Lanka for Canada in order to secure their safety, Ghosh in some way nevertheless connects to the sense of “banishment” expressed by Arjie when Tamil homes—and eventually Arjie's own home—are burned to the ground. But it is the news that Arjie's grandparents' home has been burned to the ground that catalyzes Arjie's pain and complex sense of loss, since this was the home in which he had enjoyed his “childhood spend-the-days” of freedom and play away from his parents and other restrictive adults. Selvadurai's evocative depiction of Arjie's grief in the novel resonates with Ghosh who sees in his own loss of childhood home in Sri Lanka a similar affect: “what it was to recall a time of joy in wretchedness” (87). Ghosh's recollection of his childhood past and the “bewildering pain of [his] banishment” recognizes that Arjie's loss is actually a “commonality” shared by many exiles who have lost their homes in much starker ways because of the “twin terrors of armed insurgency and state repression” (88).

Literature is valuable, Ghosh suggests, as a vehicle that produces a transnational solidarity, connecting the book's characters with its readers through a shared sorrow, in spite of the disparities of their individual experiences.

Literature consequently brings the reader to the affective legacies of partitionist realities: the reader shares the feelings of pain, loss, betrayal, and grief of exiled individuals, such as Tamil Arjie, who is now constructed as the outsider or unwanted Other in his Sinhalese-majority nation. As with the loss of home represented in Selvadurai's novel, so Ghosh also empathizes with the emotions produced in Michael Ondaatje's poem "Wells II." Ondaatje here depicts his elegiac sadness when "leaving/ the first home of my life" grieving his departure as an eleven year-old from his "lost almost-mother, Rosalin, his ayah" ("The Greatest Sorrow" 88). Ghosh reads Ondaatje's poem as "a lament" which is "spoken in a voice that has been orphaned ... by history itself" as the home country is rendered unrecognizable (88). As sectarian violence tears the country apart, individuals are ruptured from their motherland; the Ayah certainly symbolizes such a home not least because of the Sinhalese words the speaker connects with her. Ghosh sees the poem as a "passing of the paradise that made Rosalin possible," an implicit acclamation of the diverse multi-ethnic community of Sri Lanka. Yet, Ondaatje – a white passing man, a Burgher of Dutch and Sinhalese ancestry – raises questions of complicity that Ghosh overlooks when he ends his poem with the retrospective thought, "Who abandoned who, I wonder now" ("The Greatest Sorrow" 88).

In the same essay, Ghosh then turns to another place that has been racked by partitionist violence: Kashmir, a conflict-ridden space that has been occupied by Indian state forces and is overwhelmingly militarized. Ghosh traces the same tenor of pain that he identifies in both Ondaatje and Selvadurai's writings in Agha Shahid Ali's poem, "The Last Saffron". Ali's poem anticipates the Kashmiri poet's pain and death in his home region, which is analogously "bleeding" ("The Greatest Sorrow" 89). The poet anticipates his death will be "almost news, the blood censored," a reference to the state's heavy control and repression of the territory. The poem ends by coupling the poet's death with the assertion of Kashmir as "a paradise on earth." The twinned tropes of paradise and loss Ghosh identifies as the "single literary leitmotif" across these different works, which serves to interconnect pain between different places — Myanmar, Kashmir, Sri Lanka — that have all been afflicted by intolerance and attempted ethnic cleansing. Those connections prompt Ghosh to revisit his assumptions about the world. He observes

Till then I had taken for granted a pattern of the world that divided the globe between a large number of nation-states. Now suddenly it was as

though a bucket had been upended on the map, making the colors run. The camp and the disputed territory around it were no longer on no-man's-land; it was a reality in its own right, one that extended in an unbroken swathe through northern Burma and northeast India, to western China and Kashmir, Afghanistan, central Asia, and the Caucasus. (98)

In diagnosing what he calls the “absolute militarization of political life” across these, otherwise unconnected places, Ghosh redraws the map of the world entirely to imagine communities more expansively. He realizes that the map demarcating distinct national territories is, in many ways, meaningless, and in fact, contradicted by the similarities those territories share with other places. Rather than representing national or ethnic distinctiveness, the disparate spaces are united in an “unbroken swathe” of conflict and repression (98). In his novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) Ghosh's narrator also recognizes the similarities that unite people in different nations, in spite of the nationalist discourses that create divisions between people. Drawing a circle in an Atlas, he is amazed by the proximity of different nations he has until that point not thought about. “Chiang Mai in Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi is,” he notes

Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is. Yet I had never heard of those places until I drew my circle, and I cannot remember a time when I was so young that I had not heard of Delhi or Srinagar. It showed me that Hanoi and Chungking are nearer Khulna than Srinagar, and yet did the people of Khulna care at all about the fate of the mosques in Vietnam and South China (a mere stone's throw away)? (*The Shadow Lines* 232)

Here, as in his essay, Ghosh ponders over the arbitrariness of borders of nation-states, and the way the proximity of one state has no meaning for the people of another, who are instead emotionally and imaginatively invested into their own ethnic and religious identities, despite having even larger geographical and regional distances between communities within their own borders. For instance, consider the 2,000 plus kilometers between the Indian city of Kolkata in West Bengal and Srinagar in Kashmir. Ghosh's redrawing of the map offers readers an alternative epistemology, one that asks the reader to rethink their relationship to the world and especially in regard to the concept of the nation-state and its nationalist investments. In a similar way, the literature Ghosh turns to in his essay illuminates a different kind of relationship to the world. It re-assesses nations in light of their shared suffering (that is, of how minority groups have been treated) and, by creating “an awareness of this loss” brought about by the terror of ethnic fascism, Ghosh posits a relationality between communities that produces a cosmopolitan solidarity (99).

That potential of fiction to generate solidarity is evident in his 2016 collection of essays on the climate crisis, *The Great Derangement* to argue for its “irreplaceable potentiality” because “it makes possible the imagining of possibilities” (128). In his more

recent novel, *Gun Island* (2019), one of his characters reminds readers that stories matter: “Only through stories can invisible or inarticulate or silent beings speak to us; it is they who allow the past to reach out to us” (141). Ghosh’s forceful defence of fiction resonates with an earlier essay he had written in 1995, over twenty years earlier. Entitled “The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi,” Ghosh contemplates the ethnic violence of 1984 against the Sikhs in India, following the Prime Minister’s assassination by her Sikh bodyguards. While he speaks of the “catastrophe” of sectarian violence, Ghosh couples it with the equally disastrous effect of its representation: the excision, within many cultural discourses, of the efforts to oppose and quell such violence (46). Where violence is represented in “descriptions of troubled parts of the world,” Ghosh worries that it “appears primordial and inevitable, a fate to which masses of people are largely resigned” (62). He asks:

is it possible that the authors of these descriptions failed to find a form – or a style or a voice or a plot – that could accommodate both violence *and* the civilized will response to it?
(62, original emphasis)

Lamenting what he calls the “dominant aesthetic of our time – the aesthetic of ... indifference,” Ghosh urges readers towards the political potential offered through fiction (61). In reading accounts that describe the violent dilemmas of the world, Ghosh suggests that rather than thinking of these events as “mere spectacles,” we must “recognize the urgency of remembering the stories *we have not written*” (60; 62, emphasis added). His essays encourage readers to think beyond the aesthetic character of textual discourses to acknowledge the existing material efforts that need to occur in order to act and intervene within these volatile circumstances.

In his own writerly interventions, Ghosh himself exemplifies the cosmopolitan intellectual who seeks to reorient readers to the world, its violence, and their relationship to it. Always a secular humanist, Ghosh uses his essays as public commentaries to advocate tirelessly for greater social, political, and worldly engagement, foregrounding the issue of creative and intellectual writing and the theme of political agency. For instance, in his essay, “The Diaspora in Indian Culture” (1989), Ghosh articulates the importance of the diasporic subjectivities in relation to the Indian nation-state. His exclusive attention, however, is keenly focused on writers, “the specialists of the imagination” who “play so important a part” within this relationship, with the potential of reaching out to a vast audience of readers (76). His fictional and essay writing both advance a cosmopolitan sensibility that contests partitionist realities and unsettles the onset of historical amnesia, in order to recover some of the political and communitarian possibilities projected by cosmopolitan ideals. His essays relay that

hope in their search for connections with others. For Ghosh, literary fiction is key to tracing the predicaments and sorrow of those displaced, exiled or attacked communities to remind readers of the consequence of partition's violence. Writing, as Ghosh sees it, must strive to reflect both pain as well as hope. This has become of critical importance given the work that is still to be done in addressing political and even genocidal violence against minorities: Muslims in India, as well as Dalits and other minority groups who continue to face disenfranchisement. Ghosh recognizes that work ahead when he writes: "Only when our work begins to embody the conflicts, the pain, the laughter, and the yearning" can writing "be a true mirror of the world we live in" ("Confessions" n.pag). It is in his xenophilic acknowledgement that an ethical cosmopolitan relationality is urgent, and yet unfinished business, that Ghosh makes his demand for a critical re-attachment to the world. This insistent engagement makes Ghosh's essays not only topical, but also necessary reading in today's divisive age.

Notes

1. I am deeply grateful for Eddy Kent's intellectual help, editorial suggestions, and general support during a difficult pandemic year.
2. See Walter Dignolo's historical genealogy of modernity and cosmopolitanism, pp. 725-37.

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