The Critical Mass around Indian English Novels

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Chitra Sankaran, ed. *History, Narrative, and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2012. 239 PP. ISBN 978-1-4384-4181-8.

Prabhat K Singh, ed. *The Indian English Novel of the New Millennium*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013. 170 PP. ISBN 978-1-4438-4951-7.

Amitav Ghosh bloomed as a premier practitioner of Indian English fiction in the 1980s and has since been around in expanding circulation as a steady producer of fascinating novels. His creative flair, his depth of research into the nooks and trapdoors of human history and his novelistic fantasy are evidenced by his prodigious output. In seven novels including *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *The River of Smoke* (2011) and a hybrid, multi-generic text, *In an Antique Land* (1992), as well as a substantial body of non-fiction, Ghosh has offered stirring narratives about the subcontinent's complex and convoluted past impinging upon its postcolonial evolution. These intricately constructed novels with eclectic themes, ecumenical perspectives and variegated vignettes of human drama stand out in global fiction making Ghosh a striking phenomenon. They demonstrate how individual lives are driven by diverse forces and in the process are challenged, threatened and moulded. Ghosh's literary standing has indeed grown globally, earning him a string of awards and massive critical acclaim.

This volume of essays edited by Chitra Sankaran gets to grips with Ghosh's perspectives on the human predicament from disparate points of view. The thirteen essays preceded by a perceptive introduction and an eminently useful interview with the author substantially add to the critical conversations on these widely known works of world fiction. As Sankaran herself puts it, "this

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volume can legitimately lay claim to being the first truly international critical volume on Amitav Ghosh, if one succumbs to such essentialising categories" (Sankaran xiv). A SUNY (State University of New York) imprint, it has contributions from only Indian diasporics or non-Indian scholars. This qualification implies two things: the international reach and reception of Ghosh's novels and the breadth of scholarly interest in his works. On both counts, however, Ghosh has claimed early credit. Anshuman A. Mondal's monograph, *Amitav Ghosh* (2007), is perhaps the first full-length study of Amitav Ghosh's work outside India though it covers Ghosh's oeuvre only till 2005. Notably, professional interest in Ghosh's works has been flourishing all along. A good number of critical anthologies including *The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh* (2001) edited by Indira Bhatt and Indira Nityanandam, *Amitav Ghosh*: *Critical Perspectives* (2003) edited by Brinda Bose, and *Amitav Ghosh*: *A Critical Companion* (2003) edited by Tabish Khair have also appeared alongside collections of essays on *The Shadow Lines* – "a brilliant allegory of the deleterious effects of political partitioning and colonial power hegemonies" (Thieme 8) and Ghosh's popular text in India.

Where does Sankaran's collection of essays stand in the pecking order of proliferating Ghosh studies? In many ways this is precisely the book that attempts to answer current theoretical questions about Ghosh's fiction published till 2008 (*River of Smoke*, the second in the *Ibis* trilogy came out in 2011). Ghosh has drawn the attention of scholars steeped in new critical approaches, including those offered by Michel Foucault, Benedict Anderson, Emmanuel Levinas and Dipesh Chakrabarty. While the thirteen contributing essayists view Ghosh through the lens of the latest literary theory and culture criticism, the editor's interview with the established diasporic Indian writer clarify and consolidate the lines of arguments posited in the essays. The salient points extracted from the interview include Ghosh's use of history as background to an individual's predicament. Ghosh is of the view that postcolonial people are still manipulated by colonial and ex-colonial powers. The term "commonwealth" places contemporary writers in relation to old colonial power structures. Ghosh critiques the revival of imperialism and notes that the idea of Imperialism and colonial power structures are too dominant to be easily dismantled in an uneven world. He privileges diasporic experience in that it enriches the perspective of the writers. This is the reason why this segment of Indian writing in English has a universal or at least a "much greater dimension of experience, greater vision of the plurality of the world" (Ghosh 8). Diasporic Indians feel connected with the new, emerging and resurgent culture of India. Piya in *The Hungry Tide* testifies to Ghosh's view of this diasporic connection. A history maven and a bit of a maverick in the narrative management of his tales, Ghosh declares preference for varied emotional universe of characters – especially the figures that are occluded, obscure,

silenced, marginalised, defeated or salvaged out of wreckage (Ghosh 12-13). In broad terms, his later works are characterised by "richness of experience" whereas the earlier novels are driven by "the pleasure of ideas" (Ghosh 15).

Ghosh's candid declarations in this critical anthology are not just the icing on the cake; they are explored, analysed and amplified in erudite discussions. There are more essays on *The Hungry Tide*, *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Glass Palace* than those on *The Shadow Lines*, *In an Antique Land*, *Sea of Poppies* and *The Circle of Reason* in this collection. Lou Ratté in her essay, "Unlikely Encounters: Fiction and Scientific Discourse in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh," focuses on *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Hungry Tide* to argue that Ghosh undermines the pre-eminence given to recorded, official history. The master narratives of Western science are decentred in the novel dealing with the discovery of the malaria parasite. The credit solely attributed to the British discoverer, Ronald Ross, and the colonial science is interrogated in the novel by foregrounding the role of his laboratory assistants whose participation in the momentous discovery has been omitted. Lutchman, the faithful Indian servant who placed the clue in his master's path, represents the subaltern voice erased from the one-directional process of discovery projected by Ronald Ross. The continuing colonial bequest in postcolonial dispensation is a major preoccupation in *The Hungry Tide* as well. The novel explores the issue of unjust and inhuman environmental policy of the colonial state and the current cosmopolitan concerns in the subaltern space of the tide country. The novel is a critique of postcolonial "governmentality" (to borrow Foucault's coinage for the techniques of modern government) which is an extension of its colonial predecessor, in that it operates on the same logic of surveillance, coercion and control. Further, to dissolve the boundary between science and its "others," Mangala in *The Calcutta Chromosome* and Fakir in *The Hungry Tide* appear to be embodiment of indigenous knowledge system privileged by Ghosh vis-à-vis the subverted colonial and postcolonial givens.

In the concluding part of the interview included in this collection, Ghosh points out the significant shift in his preoccupations: "I would say that the difference between my earlier work, say *The Calcutta Chromosome* or *The Shadow Lines* and my later work is precisely this, that those works often rose out of a kind of pleasure in thought – the pleasure of ideas, the pleasure of play. But as I grow older, I think my writing is more and more coming to represent the breadth of experience of what I've lived through, you know... the fun, the laughter, the difficulties, the sadness, all those things" (15). Evidently, Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* being the transitional text between the two phases of his fictional writing has drawn attention from different angles. Chitra Sankaran, in her essay on *The Calcutta Chromosome* shows how the author transmits his ideas about marginality or "the Other" in a multi-stranded novel, straddling the generic boundaries between science fiction and fantasy. In order to analyse the

encounters between Self and Other offered variously in the novel, she uses Emmanuel Levinas' concept of "Self as multiple and fragmented," aligned with the idea of "ethical alterity," and argues that the notion of a homogenised Self stands impugned and the disempowered status of the Other overturned in the novel.

Emmanuel Levinas's theory of the ethical is also invoked by Tuomous Huttunen for explaining the inadequacy of language in embracing the "Other" in the context of *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh's texts are powered by the vision of preserving the Self and the Other as independent and self-sufficient, but nevertheless in mutual relationship with each other. At the centre of Levinas's philosophy is the critique of the ontological assumptions of Western philosophy. In Levinas's view, the "Other" is appropriated by the same, or the self, through the basic idea of the Self as the producer of (discursive/linguistic) meaning to the world – in other words, the filter of consciousness. In Levinas's view, the "Other" ultimately escapes the cognitive powers of the knowing subject. It implies that the "Other" exists outside the ontology of traditional Western philosophy, which conceives of all beings in terms of objects that can be internalised by filtered consciousness or grasped through an adequate representation. Huttunen also refers to Ludwig Wittgenstein's view on language as an incapable and unreliable tool to capture the ethical, that is, the representation of the "Other." He demonstrates the application of these theoretical concepts to the conversations between Moyna and Fokir, Kanai and Moyna and, more significantly, between Piya and Fakir, in order to underline Ghosh's consistent concern with the marginal and peripheral voices.

As the culmination of a kind of fiction impelled by "the pleasure of ideas" Ghosh's generic choice for weaving diverse plot strands and melding multiple points of view, *The Calcutta Chromosome* has passed with flying colours. Ruby S. Ramraj discerns the postcolonial issues pinned under the skin of science fiction conventions in this impressively crafted novel. However, her point regarding the absence of futuristic speculation in Ghosh's novel of the science fiction genre does not stand the test of textual evidence. She likens *The Calcutta Chromosome* to Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and notes:

> Like Twain's novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome* does not attempt to extrapolate the future as so many contemporary science fiction texts do. In an interview with Paul Kincaid, Ghosh justifies turning to the past for his science fiction locale: 'Science and science fiction are old passions of mine... it is a pity that science fiction seeks to project into the future; it's just as interesting to project into the past.'… Ghosh attempts this successfully in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. (192)

Of course, the scientific fantasy in *The Calcutta Chromosome* projects into the past in that it is layered with the malariological research of the late 19th century, but it includes at the same time the elements of cyberpunk and delineates a technologically advanced, computerised corporate culture of tomorrow as well as the onset of globalised network society. The New York sections of the novel indicate the impact of the new communication media on the migrant population. More to the point, the novel opens with Antar's computer Ava, which is equipped with a "laser-guided surveillance camera" behaving like anthropomorphised super-computer, and ends with a portrayal of virtual reality.

Interestingly enough, the stirrings of the new technology leading to a likely scramble for dominating the domain of virtual reality emanate from Bharati Mukherjee's novel *The Holder of the World* (1993) too. As Claire Gail Chambers suggests, the shared anxieties of Ghosh and Mukherjee reflect a credible likeness between "their reactions to contemporary developments in international communications" (219). Chambers further contends that the reverberations of the idea of cyberspace following the publications of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) may have a shaping coalition with Ghosh's warnings about the tentacles of colonialism. She writes:

> From his diasporic position, Ghosh explores the technologies of virtual reality and networked computer communications with a more sceptical attitude. Despite his laudatory depictions of the new technologies' potential to collapse spatial boundaries and to encourage the creation of new narrative forms and virtual imagined communities, Ghosh recognizes the latest frontier of cyberspace may represent a form of neo-colonialism. (220)

It may be argued that the projections of the past and future in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, written within the genre of science fiction, bring Ghosh's anti-colonial passion into an intertwined focus.

The indictment of colonialism – a preoccupation at the heart of Ghosh's corpus – gains remarkable heft and amplitude in *The Glass Palace*. Ghosh hit a new high in international reach and reception of his fiction with his resolute stand on the colonial implications of the term "The Commonwealth" and his decision to withdraw *The Glass Palace* from the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in an open letter. In the editor's interview with him, Ghosh maintains that the term is "just a euphemism" (Ghosh 4). The essays on this novel included in this volume discuss the diasporic components and the range of subalternity in *The Glass Palace*. Nandini Bhautoo-Dewnarain focuses on the distinctive formations of diasporic groups in diverse streams as the inevitable concomitants of colonial expansion. The complex ontology of migration rooted in the distance between the new Indian diaspora of the twentieth century and the old plantation labour

diaspora of indentured workers informs the novel's essential tenor. What drops out of her discussion is that the new diasporic formation is stratified in its nature, propelled as it is by new economic opportunities and shifts in the economic changes of late capitalism. Theorising the paradigms of the South Asian diaspora, Susan Koshy states: "The new diaspora has become an increasingly bimodal formation defined by wealthy and impoverished sectors. In the United States there has been a noticeable shift after the 1980s.... The term neo-diaspora foregrounds the internal diversity of the South Asian diaspora in the older and newer migration movements" (Koshy 7).

Concentrating on the lateral linkages between the old and new diaspora of the colonial regime, Nandini demonstrates that the human implications of the elite and subaltern diasporic anxieties coalesce and converge in Arjun's reflections on his conflict and dilemma over loyalty to the British army and alienating interpellations. For an impressively panoramic representation of the old diaspora Ghosh puts in a capacious fictional cast in order to overcome the problematic of empty frames or the forgotten history. In stark juxtaposition, the old diasporic experiences imaginatively extrapolated and the relatively recent diasporic experiences fall within a unified perspective.

This point threads through Shanthini Pillai's argument for Ghosh's positive negotiation of the terrain of subalternity. The marginal figures in *The Glass Palace* are not sentenced to silence. Their movement, mobility and assertion are tracked in tangible terms. Rajkumar, the Indian coolie, shakes off his docility and shapes his destiny. The dynamics of his aspiration feed into the novel's trajectory. His narrative turns the pejorative depictions of the coolie in the text on its head. As Pillai concludes her observation on the resignification of the coolie:

> Throughout the novel, the sign 'coolie' is freed from the moorings of subalternity and docility and is instead shown up against a backdrop of survival and self-preservation that invest it with a new dimension, that of the human predicament that Ghosh is obviously deeply concerned with and as a result we see coolies as characters within the narrative of history and not perennially passive detainees of imperial dominance and hegemony. (63)

Indeed, Ghosh redeems a figure of defeat and deprivation salvaged from the existential wreckage and imbues him with fresh strength and motivation.

A kindred issue forms the mainstay of *Sea of Poppies*, the first in Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy. Here, the indentured labourers aboard the *Ibis* negotiate and cope with an unprecedented and enormously difficult terrain of life. Wrenched from their familiar life-worlds and finally plucked from their homeland, the workers indentured to plantation, as Sudesh Mishra notes, "underwent a traumatic metamorphosis that forever changed their sense of subjectivity and affected

their outlook on the world around them" (Mishra 73). Rajesh Rai and Andrea Marion Pinkey examine the experience of the women *girmitiyas* – a tiny part of the indentured labour – as well as probe the solidarity and new identity formation of the *girmitiya* community in the form of ship-siblings aboard the *Ibis* in *Sea of Poppies*. Paul Gilroy has called the labour ship on way to plantation colonies "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (4). The journey turning into a crucible of a novel model of community entailed compromising with social and cultural behaviour in a new, life-altering situation, mooring the coolies to fresh coordinates of belonging.

Rai and Pinkey offer a typology of responses to the indenture system of labour recruitment: (i) positive and uplifting; (ii) humiliating and inhumane; (iii) empirical and ideologically neutral. The subaltern narratives in *Sea of Poppies* come under the third category and so Ghosh's depiction of the indentured labour "may be broadly classified as revisionist" (Chitra 68). A point absent from their account is the overlap between the two terms, indenture and *girmitiya*. Sudesh Mishra says: "The two terms are not equivalent: indenture denotes a system of contractual agreement introduced after the abolition of slavery, whereas girmit describes the *narak* or hell of a labour system to which the coolie had not consented" (73). Ghosh excavates the fecund subjectivities of the silent and servile workforce in order to underscore both the migrants' precarious living conditions at home and the debilitating indenture system embedded in colonialism. His capacious historical perspective offers a powerful heuristic for identifying the interplay of local contexts and the controlling power of the imperial capitalist system as the driving force and impetus for the dispersals that produced the diaspora.

While the essays on *Sea of Poppies* and *The Hungry Tide* in Sankaran's collection explore an assortment of concerns, Richa's paper titled "Ecotheology and the Notion of Multiculturalism in *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*" in Prabhat K Singh's critical anthology, *The Indian English Novel of the New Millennium*, adds a fresh dimension to the explication of these two novels. Put simply, ecotheology seeks a healthy and harmonious balance between human world and nature for the survival of an integrated global order. The term has gained currency since the publication of Lynn White's article, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," in 1967 but it is still distinctly on the academic margins. However, Richa's essay urges its adoption with a set of assumptions germane to the interpretation of Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*.

Richa argues that the myth of Bonbibi in *The Hungry Tide* has both ecumenical and ecological implications. The co-existence of varied religions as well as wild life and human habitation in a complex ecosystem is the novel's main conceptual plot as is evident in the command of the forest's ruling deity. Ghosh's vision of multiculturalism embraces human and non-human beings. The subalterns and disfranchised are suitably attuned to the laws of nature in

the tide country. As the story unfolds, cosmopolitan concerns need to be spliced with local imperatives, for which the hinge points are compassionate and collaborative initiatives of diverse individuals and entities. Similarly, the immigrants displaced and unmoored from their territorial coordinates in *Sea of Poppies* reimagine themselves as pilgrims on a religious mission, shedding off discrete social affiliations and identity marks. The microcosmic world on the *Ibis* is akin to biotic diversity impelled by the laws of nature.

The issue of dalit subalternity woven into the complex thematic strands of *Sea of Poppies* has been noted by Shanker A. Dutt in his essay, "Dalit Writings: From Empathy to Agency." The vein of Dalit consciousness in the Indian English novel is still tiny and sporadic although there is evident "dalitness" in texts, such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Shanta Rameshwar Rao's *Children of God*. In the aesthetics delineated by the influential Dalit critics, the authenticity of non-Dalit empathetic sensibility has been questioned and the experiential discrimination emphasised. They are of the view that "Dalit literature is a socio-political document of Dalit movement... [their] struggle through pen and pain against inhumanity" (ctd. in Kothari 62). There is another point of view countering this *ad hominem* approach wherein the class/caste or location of writers is confronted rather than ideological allegiance or position they maintain. Dutt argues that, like Tagore's treatment of untouchability in his dance drama, *Chandalika*, Ghosh's perspective on the hegemonic structures of oppression is revolutionary with visceral impact. He declares:

> In the making of Kalua as a heroic protector of the dalitised Deeti… resisting oppression… and in the building of a subaltern solidarity within the fragile community on board the Ibis in *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh reaffirms dalit agency and writes the oppressed back to the centre. (Dutt 49)

Singh's collection covers a good range of the quality and variety of the current Indian novels in English, particularly the works published during the last ten years, such as Chetan Bhagat's *five point someone* (2004), Vikas Swarup's *Slumdog Millionaire* (2005), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Upamanyu Chatterjee's *Weight Loss* (2006), David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* (2007), Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Keki Daruwalla's *For Pepper and Christ* (2009) and David Barun Kumar Thomas's first novel, *Rear Entrance* (2010). The editor's Introduction gives a broad overview of the new trends and experiments in the Indian English novel. Evidently, the recent generic mutations suggest the continuing inflorescence of the English language-based fiction from India on a global scale. However, the assortment of issues analysed in the collection deserves a detailed discussion and so I reserve it for the subject of a separate paper.

Finally, I would like to return to Ghosh's observation on the development and differentiation of his fiction in the editor's interview with him in Sankaran's collection. He declares that his early novels are powered by "the pleasure of ideas, the pleasure of play" whereas the later works "represent the breadth of experience..." (15). However, one finds the later works ingesting the ideas that underpinned the earlier novels and with large chunks of historical research thrown in for ballast. The skewed and self-serving accounts of science and uneven dispensation of globalisation underlined in *The Circle of Reason*, the impediments to transnational alliance in *The Shadow Lines* and the excavation of subaltern history in *In an Antique Land*, as shown by the contributing essayists in this volume, define Ghosh's postcolonial slant and are throughout central to his narrative explorations. In his vision of hope for a different world Amitav Ghosh is, as Bill Ashcroft notes, "a fitting heir of Rushdie, and of Tagore before him" (Ashcroft 23), but his syncretic gesture does not suggest "homogenization of culture in line with the Western ideology" (Prasad 59). In most of his novels, he has parlayed the literary influences and his own sense of history into big winnings.

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