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Alex Tickell

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## Amitav Ghosh in interview with Neluka Silva and Alex Tickell

### Abstract

Neluka Silva: Amitav Ghosh, you are a novelist and you also write journalistic pieces on travel. In what ways are your travel writing and fiction linked? Amitav Ghosh: It's hard to say. I don't think of my journalistic writing as 'travel writing' as such; for me, travelling is always in some way connected with my fictional work. It's a very close link, I would say.

## Amitav Ghosh in interview with Neluka Silva and Alex Tickell

*Neluka Silva: Amitav Ghosh, you are a novelist and you also write journalistic pieces on travel. In what ways are your travel writing and fiction linked?*

Amitav Ghosh: It's hard to say. I don't think of my journalistic writing as 'travel writing' as such; for me, travelling is always in some way connected with my fictional work. It's a very close link, I would say.

*NS: Could you talk a little about the personal experiences that you feel have been most important to your writing?*

AG: The most important thing, I suppose, is my childhood which was spent in various parts of the subcontinent ... I suppose the thing that's been most important is Calcutta; it's a kind of constant that runs through all my books. Calcutta has been in some way the centre of my imaginative world.

*NS: Your work has been readily incorporated into 'postcolonial' literature, alongside the textual 'interminglings' of such writers as Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri. How do you feel about being regarded as a postcolonial writer? Is the term restrictive?*

AG: I must say, I have no truck with this term at all. It's a term one's begun to hear in the last five or six years, and I don't know a single Indian writer of my acquaintance who doesn't detest it. It completely misrepresents the focus of the work that I do. In some really important ways, colonialism is not what interests me. What is postcolonial? When I look at the work 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.

*Alex Tickell: So, in a way, this kind of theorizing is self-generating?*

AG: Yes, I think that it's just that. Mind you, commentators such as Bhabha have probably done something very interesting and important, which is that they've somehow 'made' writers. When I began writing, it was very difficult if one were an Indian writing in English. One always felt, and still feels, incredibly marginalized – under attack really; and people like Bhabha somehow took that position and made it an acceptable one. So there is something to be said ... but the content of what they are saying, in terms of my work, is neither here nor there.

*NS: Do you characterize your work in any particular way?*

AG: No, it's not for me to characterize my work. I mean, how does one do that? It's not something that's occurred to me, frankly.

*AT: One of the defining aspects of the South Asian novel before 1947 seems to be a need to speak for certain indigenous groups on a national or cultural level. Would it be fair to say that your work speaks for an alternative, 'transcultural' South Asia which falls outside these groupings?*

AG: No, I'm not interested in speaking for anyone or creating a kind of political vision which will supplant other political visions. I mean, there are things in politics that I don't like. Obviously I hate these fundamentalists, I hate extreme nationalism ... and I suppose that emerges from my work ... but I don't see myself as political. I would go even further and say that I don't think it's particularly interesting to write about politics.

*AT: You gesture towards writers such as Conrad and Shelley in the titles of your works, and obviously there's the literary background of Calcutta as well. Who would you say your main literary influences are?*

AG: Tagore is an obvious literary influence; but I would also say that Satyajit Ray, more than anyone else, has in some important respect formed my way of looking at things.

*AT: Are there any specific films which really stand out?*

AG: Well, it's also his books which we used to read as kids. So many interests of mine come from Ray, like my interest in science-fiction, my interest in history, all of that is a part of our common culture, I suppose. His films had a profound effect on me. I think they formed my way of looking at things. You asked me what films – *Pather Panchali*, but also others, such as *The Philosopher's Stone*. There are aspects of his work which are not as realistic as *Pather Panchali* – his children's films, they are really wonderful.

*AT: I'd like to ask you about your interest in history. In the majority of your writings you seem to engage not so much with history as with the alternative cultural connections and narratives excluded by the writing of history in the West. Do you see the transcultural world of, say, medieval Indo-Arabic trade in an Antique Land, as a phenomenon which challenges notions of 'purity' or political enclosure?*

AG: Yes, I mean it's not just history in the West, it's also the way history is thought of in India. But, yes, that's exactly the way that I saw medieval history, especially the history of Egypt. But within Judaism, within Islam, there have developed so many exclusionist ideologies.

*AT: So that's what you're addressing as well?*

AG: Absolutely ... you know, I feel very proud of *In an Antique Land* because to write, in the same book about Jews, Muslims and Hindus, and to find a point of entry which wouldn't automatically antagonize anyone is not an easy thing. The book is very popular in Egypt as well as Israel.

NS: *The sense of history in your work is also intensely personal, such as the narrator's family history in The Shadow Lines, and the use of family connections and personal letters in In an Antique Land. Is this 'domestic vision' a deliberate subversion of the 'grand historical narrative', or is it simply the space in which we can make our own connections most readily?*

AG: I would say it's the latter. I do think if you are Indian or Asian, and this is not necessarily to essentialize, that you think in terms of families. Narratives, when they come into my head, come as families, and that's why *The Calcutta Chromosome* was very important to me because it wasn't about families; it was about people who were completely disconnected, and I think that aspect of it is sometimes unsettling.

AT: *Your article, 'The Slave of MS. H.6', which was incorporated into In an Antique Land, was published in Subaltern Studies in 1992. How do you see yourself in terms of the Subaltern Studies project?*

AG: The *Subaltern Studies* people are old friends of mine. They are people I went to school and college with, and in that sense, I suppose, there's been a shared point of view for a long time, one which goes beyond the *Subaltern Studies* project. I felt very happy they printed that piece. I was very proud to be included. I think, in a sense, they and I came out of a similar moment in the intellectual life of India and that's really been the connection. The interesting thing is that, in India, historians aren't really historians and writers aren't really writers, there's a kind of fuzziness about these things. Take Partha Chatterjee – who's one of the main figures in *Subaltern Studies* – he's a wonderful dramatist, and a very good actor.

AT: *This brings me on to my next question. Do you think that the way in which you incorporate formerly quite 'empiricist' disciplines, such as anthropology, into your work is an expression of this 'fuzziness of borders'?*

AG: Absolutely, that's very well put; and I certainly see no disconnection between my writing and other kinds of work. I don't think of writing as something which is opposed to other forms of knowledge, other ways of knowing.

AT: *Or that other ways of knowing are not necessarily 'creative' as well?*

AG: Exactly.

NS: *Your early work is permeated with images of rioting and mob violence, the possibility of which you describe as, I quote, 'the fear of the*

*war between oneself and one's image in the mirror'. Do you still see this type of violence as typically South Asian?*

AG: I think it's something specific to South Asia, the way in which that kind of violence lives in our imaginations and lives in our minds is very much a South Asian thing. I'm very struck, for example, when I read articles about 1983 in Colombo, or similarly about Karachi today, by how similar these forms of violence are, even though they take place in different places. I think that this particular kind of upheaval, the communal riot, is something that really is quite distinctive of South Asia. I don't know of any other place where it is such an endemic form of social violence.

*AT: I was struck by the fact that you made that comment before Bosnia, and before Rwanda. Wouldn't you say that – very sadly – people seem able to turn the streets into this kind of chaos in other places just as readily?*

AG: No, Bosnia is a completely different example. Bosnia was three proto-nations fighting each other with proto-armies. It's not a riot in the Indian sense where, basically, the streets suddenly erupt – and then the violence completely dissolves.

*AT: So it's the generation of the riot itself that is specific?*

AG: Exactly; one thing that's very striking is that, since 1947, the governments of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have all been uniformly opposed to this form of rioting. They've done everything in their power to stop it. The human rights groups are always talking about how the State's sponsoring the riot – there are elements of the State which co-operate with the rioters, of course, but I think, on the whole, all these states feel very threatened by rioting. It only makes sense that the State will object to, or feel that it is in some way threatened by, this kind of social violence, over which it has no control.

*NS: In fact this is quite interesting because, in The Shadow Lines, mob-violence cuts across national boundaries, and the national papers suppress the information – it's almost as though the riot didn't happen. Although we talk of national boundaries, mob-violence transcends the ethno-religious boundaries that the State is trying to maintain – as if it is some kind of common bond.*

AG: That's exactly the thing. That's exactly right. You know, in Bosnia and Rwanda the whole thing is directed by elements of the State, the relationship between the State and the rioters is of a completely different kind over there. I don't see it as similar at all in that sense.

*AT: In In an Antique Land, you make a connection between the appropriation of the Geniza documents by European orientalists and the later national demarcation of Palestine. Do you always see history as*

*complicit in the nationalist or communalist project?*

AG: I think it is, actually. I wouldn't have believed this before I wrote *In an Antique Land*, but once you see the ways in which history has become really a kind of battleground in the Middle East – well, not even a battleground; no-one even disputes the boundaries. Egypt is not interested in the Geniza documents and Western Jews see the fact of Egyptian Jewry as an aberration, an anomaly. Jewish history is profoundly tragic because it's a history that has been completely invented within the German academy in the nineteenth century. It comes out of German scholasticism, and out of a pressure to systematize history; it's essentially a Christianizing impulse. More than two-thirds of the Geniza consists of magical documents and amulets, and none of that is ever dealt with. I think it's just regarded as non-Jewish. Similarly, all the Sufi stuff is traced back to a kind of proto-Jewish mysticism. I mean, the very fact of that interchange with Islam is completely disregarded. Increasingly, there are scholars working on this stuff. But Israel conceives of itself in such a Europeanizing way – basically that model of German scholasticism has become what Judaism is today. You can just see today the erasure of what existed in the Middle Ages – of what that period represented.

AT: *I suppose an analogous sort of thing would be the creation of Pakistan, and the massive conflict over history which came about because of the 'Two-nation' theory, and the negotiations over what shape the subcontinent would take after Independence.*

AG: Exactly, but Indian knowledge, as such, was formed in a different way by the European academy. Today it would be hard for anybody in the subcontinent to talk about 'Two thousand years of Pakistan', or 'Two thousand years of the Two-nations' – nobody would take them that seriously. If you look at journalistic discourse about the Middle East, it's always 'Four thousand years of enmity', and where does that 'four thousand' come from? Even Judaism doesn't go back four thousand years, far less Islam and Christianity.

NS: *Although the historical narrative in your work depends on the written archive, there is a great sensitivity towards the nuances and complexities of spoken language, for instance, in The Circle of Reason. There you describe Aloo's speech as 'all stirred together, Hindi swallowing Bengali, tongues unravelled and woven together'. Would you like to say more about this interweaving?*

AG: I am bilingual, but I also have several other languages – so language is something that is very much in my mind. Just the texture of our speech is so intermixed that it's something you can't help noticing and being interested in.

AT: *My last questions concern your latest work, The Calcutta Chromosome, and develop on some of the things we've already talked*

*about. The erosion of boundaries between genres seems to be a predominant feature of contemporary fiction, and, in The Calcutta Chromosome, the unfolding process of Ross's research becomes a kind of sub-narrative within the text. Could you say a little about your adaptation of research method into fictional form?*

AG: I did some research for the book. Basically it meant reading Ross's laboratory notes and his diaries and that kind of thing, which really wasn't much. With this one I really felt I was writing fiction, I didn't care what happened. At the same time, it was very interesting to read Ross, as most of the connections (he made) came from his servants, his household.

*AT: In your novel the malaria parasite, as it mutates and passes from person to person, could be seen as a symbol of storytelling itself, perhaps most of all the digressive, ever-changing oral narratives of the South Asian tradition. Are you consciously drawing upon these forms in your writing?*

AG: Yes and no. There was a time when I used to think to myself, 'How can I tell the story in an oral form?' But to tell you the truth, more and more the sort of voice that I find really useful comes to me from prewar and postwar Bengali writing. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, in the long section where Phulboni the writer goes into the countryside, and has that odd experience – there I was writing quite self-consciously in the Bengali mode of the 1930s and 1940s. I told myself, 'Wouldn't it be fun to deploy that apparatus.' It was really fun to do, and I was just hearing it in my head, in Bengali. To come back to the question of the oral thing, we always think of Indian narratives as oral, but I don't know what that means for me or any other Indian writer, because people of our background very rarely hear stories told in the way that, say, religious stories are told. Most of the time we encounter them through written texts of some kind. What is really interesting is that the voice Bengali fiction adopts is a very intimate form of address. It's a really wonderful thing that you find in, say, the work of Thackeray; a very intimate form of address in which you draw your reader in. The texture of that prose has a kind of warmth which is very different from what you get in English. Whenever I get stuck with anything I find myself listening for that voice, saying to myself, 'If I were saying this in Bengali, how would I say it?' On one level you could say that it's almost a transposition of the spoken voice in fiction.

*AT: That's really interesting because, in contemporary European fiction, the relationship between writer and reader seems to involve an intrinsic degree of trickery, of double-bluffing, whereas ... would it be right to say that what you're trying to do is produce a sense of rhetorical 'communion' between writer and reader?*



AG: Exactly that. I must say one of the reasons why I find it hard to read so much contemporary fiction is that the relationship between writer and public has become, especially in postmodern writing, very, very distanced. Postmodern writers seek to create this kind of hard-edged text, which is incredibly self-referential, which focuses on itself, and the whole effort creates a very glittering crystalline edge which keeps the reader out. I have done that myself, I suppose, but now I find myself listening for that other form of address, that intimacy which writing creates. That form of communion which one used to discover in novels.

*NS and AT: Thank you.*