

Amitav Ghosh in Conversation

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I met Amitav Ghosh on September 23, 2007 in Pordenone where he attended the Pordenonelegge festival. On the previous day Ghosh was publicly interviewed by Irene Bignardi in the town's main theatre, called Teatro Nuovo. Forty minutes before the actual start of the meeting there was an impressive queue in front of the theatre and there must have been some five or six hundred people standing in the line, which was quite a lot I thought, especially in a comparatively small town such as Pordenone.

The following day morning papers reported how a number of monks had succeeded to get to Aung San Su Kyi's house, while she stepped out of it to talk to the demonstrators. The police had helped the people to remove the barricades around the house. Repression had not yet begun, so our conversation naturally started with a reference to the day's Italian newspapers and to the previous day's meeting. I began by asking him about his impressions of the festival.

I was struck and also moved when I saw the enormous queue in front of the theatre yesterday.

Yes, it was amazing, wasn't it? ...

And I thought of Professor Samuel from The Circle of Reason: what would he say?

Oh yes, my goodness [laughs]. It was astonishing. But I think it has something to do with Pordenone. I've noticed here that all their events are very well attended. They were telling me that their events are always very well attended.

I thought this may have something to do with what Mrs. Verma says in The Circle of Reason, that you can love a book, but a book does not love you back. Maybe that's a reason why people go to meet writers, they expect some interaction.

It's true. You know, one thing I certainly notice is that when we as writers interact with the public, at a certain point they stop talking about your books and they want you to tell them about life. They want you to tell them about how to live. And it's a strange thing because of course as a writer you can't tell them how to live. You don't know.

People are interested in the way you arrange your life anyway. You yourself tell that during an interview with Aung San Su Kyi, eventually felt the need to stop talking about politics to concentrate on herself: "as I listened to those answers, I knew what I really wanted to ask: I wanted to know what it was like to be under house arrest for six years; what it meant to be separated by one's spouse and one's children, to be offered the option of leaving and turning it down ("At Large in Burma," Incendiary Circumstances, 166).

It's true, yes. What Aung San Su Kyi has gone through is so unbelievable, it's such an extraordinary thing, it is a sort of miracle that she still has kept everything together in this amazing way. She is truly one of the great saints of modern times. So maybe it is like that.

Today's paper compares Aung San Su Kyi to Gandhi: do you think they are right?

I think it is a very apt comparison. Aung San Su Kyi has Gandhi's stamina, she has Gandhi's views, she shares his philosophy, she has all of that. One difference is that Gandhi was a very shrewd politician, and I don't think Aung San Su Kyi is a shrewd politician. That's a big difference.

In Europe your own name is often associated with Gandhi's. Is it the same in India?

No, because in India so many people are influenced by Gandhi in the same way that I am. And this is not the first thing people would think about in relation to me.

What about Nehru?

Me being associated with Nehru? No, not at all.

Gandhi was very skeptical about the value of creative writing. He said novels invent things rather than pursuing Truths; to what extent can you

share this view? Is Truth in Gandhi's sense something that can be achieved, or at least explored through fiction?

Great philosophical minds always are very skeptical of creative writing, for example Plato. But you have to remember that one of Gandhi's most important influences was Tolstoy.

But possibly not Tolstoy's novels.

No, possibly not, but certainly he felt Tolstoy as a moral presence in a very important way. You can see the sense in which he would not be always sympathetic to fiction, but Gandhi was a great reader and Gandhi was also a wonderful writer.

In an interview with Claire Chambers you say you are dissatisfied with epistemological means of anthropology, because they tend to make general statements rather than observing the predicament of the individual. Yet you chose anthropology and you still have seminars in anthropology and you write anthropological articles.

No, no, I haven't taught anthropology for almost fifteen years. And even then I never taught anthropology; I was teaching a writing course in a department of anthropology. People always seem to think that I teach anthropology but I don't and haven't in a very long time. When I was living in Delhi, I was teaching at Delhi university and by default I often taught anthropology, but after that I never really taught it again. The courses I used to teach (at Columbia and so on) were housed in a department of anthropology, but they were basically writing courses. I published two articles in anthropology and that was in 1983: it's almost twenty-five years ago now. I haven't written about anthropology since then.

I liked anthropology, I thought anthropology was a very interesting subject and I learned an enormous amount from it. But it wasn't what I wanted to do. Anthropology, at least the anthropology of that time, was full of generalizations, and my mind doesn't work like that. I can't think about very abstract generalizations. I like to think about people, that's what interests me, people, characters. The plight in which individuals can find themselves. In some sense that was not what anthropology was about.

In The Shadow Lines Tridib develops a theory of imaginative knowledge: he says that if you cannot imagine what you know, you will never be free, because someone else will imagine it for you. I was fascinated by this idea of imaginative knowledge. How did you come to it? Did you develop it by reflecting upon your role as a writer?

Yes it was really that. For example let's say Indian history, say the history of Partition, or the history of the riots in *The Shadow Lines*. What Tridib is trying to say is that in India for a long time there was just a silence about this kind of violence. People wouldn't speak of it. But what actually happens when you allow something like that to relapse into silence is not that it goes unsaid—it is filled with another kind of noise, a communal noise. Anybody who thinks they have to make sense of this has to address this in an honest way, in good faith, because if they don't people will address it in bad faith. So what Tridib is trying to say is that it is necessary for us to try and tell these stories, because if we don't it's not that there will be a silence, but they will be just be filled with the wrong kind of telling. If you don't tell a child a story it is not that his mind will be empty

It seems that knowledge is terribly important for both Tridib and the protagonist of The Shadow Lines, but the novel ends with a sort of celebration of "the final redemptive mystery." It is almost as if it eventually denied the importance of knowing. Has this anything to do with the Vedantic notion of Maya's veil?

Yes, I think it probably does, in some sort of complicated way. Knowledge is something which all my books are about in one way or the other—what can be known, what can't be known. And I suppose that it's partly because I had this formal training in anthropology that I keep thinking of it. Procedures of knowledge are interesting to me, because there is a point at which knowledge stops—there are certain sorts of mysteries which not only do actually exist in one's life, but they should exist, one should respect those mysteries; there are certain ways in which one really does have to pull back from this relentless search for exhaustiveness.

Is this what The Calcutta Chromosome is about? It sounds like a novel is a sort of laboratory, a scientific model which shows how people come to know things ...

Yes, that's certainly one aspect of it. *The Calcutta Chromosome* comes out of that moment when we suddenly began to see the real impact of the internet on all of our lives. Our lives are now so completely known in the sense that there is always someone watching and every aspect of it is being continuously categorized, continuously catalogued. In a way it seems new, but it is also very much a part of what has been the process of Enlightenment, a process resulting from the Seventeenth century sort of scientism. But most of all in the colonial context. The colonialist was always seeking to know, to know exactly what forces were in control, and we see now that this process has become universalized. So when I look back to movements of resistance to colonialism one thing which always strikes me as so interesting is that they are always silent; they never declare their programme, they never declare their agenda. If you look at 1857, at the Indian Mutiny, it is very hard at any point to find a sort of programme where they say this is what we want. Or if you look at, say, al-Qaeda on 9/11: to this day we don't know what those people wanted. So it often actually happens that if you think of the progress of modernity it is the progress of continuous cataloguing, of a continuous search for exhaustive knowledge. One of the ways people have historically resisted that is through silence.

In The Calcutta Chromosome you explore the border between official science and non-science. Murugan says that Mangala discovered the malaria vector faster than European scientists because she was not hindered by a structured knowledge. Could it be a sort of metaphor for fiction? The one character who knows most in the novel is Ava, and yet, being a machine, it is the poorest spiritually speaking. Can there be wisdom in ignorance?

There can certainly be a wisdom without structured knowledge. I think people can achieve deep insights through other forms of knowing, through forms of knowing that we wouldn't even recognize. And I think in fact the novel is one of those forms of knowing. But I don't

think I would call it ignorance exactly, I would say that's a different way of knowing, of exploring possibilities, of exploring Truth.

The somewhat farcical character of Balaram in The Circle of Reason is a caricature of the Derozians?

When I finished *The Circle of Reason* I had so many ideas, so many thoughts. But now it's almost twenty-five years and no, I do not even remember. There has been so much water in between. But this much I can tell you, the Balaram figure was like many people I have known in India: it is a very common thing in India to have these Quixotic figures who take one idea and carry it to its logical extreme. And they were certainly very common in India of my childhood. I had uncles like that, who had some weird, nutty ideas about what you could eat or what you couldn't eat. All sorts of strange ideas find very fertile soil in India, like chewing your food thirty-two times or things like that. In this sense I think that in the India of my childhood there was still a lot of faddishness, like in Europe in the Nineteenth Century. So that's maybe what I was thinking of, mainly.

It occurred to me that the rationalists of the novel may be the forefathers of Ava.

That's an interesting idea. Now that you mention it, actually it is true that there was someone, but it wasn't Derozio in fact. It was actually the positivists. You know, one of the first positivist societies outside Europe was actually in Calcutta. There was a man called, I think, Jogendra Chandra Ghosh who was the founder of this positivist society. I read a book about him and became fascinated because he had all these mad ideas. In fact he was a correspondent of August Comte, and not only that: he would take people to dance in the crematorium and all sort of fascinating things. It was a big movement in Calcutta in the late Nineteenth Century.

The Circle of Reason and The Shadow Lines are based on your own experiences; you took most of that material from casual experiences you made in your life. Apparently there is not much research work behind them, whereas things change with The Calcutta Chromosome and even more with The

Glass Palace and *The Hungry Tide*. *In these cases you have studied a lot for what you were writing. What came first: did you go to Burma because you meant to write a novel on Burmese history or vice versa?*

What you are saying is basically true, but actually I did a lot of research for *The Circle of Reason* also. For me research is the fun part, it's really the enjoyable part of writing a novel. Writing is lonely and you spend most of your time alone—I like that, I have come to like it—but by nature I am quite gregarious. I like to meet people, I like to see what's going on in the world. My books are long and difficult books and it takes me years and years to write them and I am literally shut up in my studio for years. When I am really working sometimes six months go by and I hardly see a person. So for me it's a great pleasure to be able to step outside of my writing space and to be able to see the world. Because, as a writer, I am a sort of figurative writer. You know that some painters are abstract painters, and some are figurative, and their interaction with the world is a necessary part of what they do. I would say I am in the figurative tradition: my interaction with the world is very necessary for me—that's what renews me, that's what supplies my material, supplies my imagination. I think that's actually increasingly unusual in modern writing, where more and more writing is very private, more and more privatized. So in that sense I am perhaps more a Nineteenth-Century kind of person than a Twentieth-Century person. But even for *The Circle of Reason*, one of the most enjoyable parts of the writing was that I went to live with some weavers for a long time. It was near Calcutta ... I went to this small village, I lived with the weavers, and all that stuff came straight into my work.

So in some way my way of working hasn't changed that much, but I think it *has* changed a bit. Again there was actually a lot of research for *The Shadow Lines* ...; now that you mention it I remember walking all over London, going to the War Museum, pulling out lots of memoirs, and that was a lot of research.

And what about The Hungry Tide? Did you visit the place in order to write the novel or did you conceive the novel because you had been there? The whole story of Morichjhāpi, for instance: did you know it before you set to writing the novel?

I had heard of Morichjhāpi vaguely, but that's not where the story began for me. It began with my uncle—you know, almost all my books are about my uncles, fortunately I have many uncles, both my father and my mother had nine siblings each, so it means lots and lots of uncles and cousins to draw upon. And I had this uncle who was actually Sir James Hamilton's estate manager. He would talk a lot about the Sundarbans, through him my family visited the Sundarbans. So I went back to just look at the Sundarbans again and that was when the idea came to me. It was also, in part, a sort of moral imperative to me I must say. Because *The Hungry Tide* was a response to two things. In one aspect, it was a response to 9/11. This may seem strange, but the attacks happened so close to me¹, and I had been living with so much of this terrorism and violence for such a long time. Through the years, one thing I had seen more and more, was that nihilistic ideas had become more and more deeply rooted in people. You can see them everywhere, you can even see it in some environmental activists: the idea that somehow to kill yourself for something is a good thing. In some strange way I felt a responsibility for it, because people like me, we have developed a very strident critique of the world as it exists today—and that critique is a very necessary part of the life that we live. But what we sometimes forget is to think about what is valuable about the world, what is beautiful, what is necessary, what is important about living. In the end I think that is the only way we can really combat this nihilism—which has now become so widespread as to become a part of the modern consciousness. The first modern religious suicide, which I remember seeing in the papers as a child, was that of a monk in Saigon—and it has become a part of modern consciousness, this idea that there is something so devalued about the world, so rotten about the world that it is actually not worth living in it. And yet, especially if you have children, you cannot see the world that way. After 9/11 Rilke was an enormous inspiration for me—that's what Rilke is about, about loving the world, about seeing it and loving for what it is. So for me, *The Hungry Tide* came out of these two imperatives: one was just to find a way of saying what is so mysterious and magnificent and wonderful about this world, in all its horror. What is it that makes life

worth living? This is what I would want to tell my own children: that there's much that is wrong with the world, and yet you have only this one life, as Rilke so beautifully says, and you must live it completely, and inhabit this world and see it in all its beauty. That was one aspect of it, the other was that I do think that writers of my generation have a duty to address issues of the environment. When we look at writers of the Thirties and Forties, we ask "where did you stand on fascism?" In the future they will look at us and say "where did you stand on the environment?" I think this is absolutely the fundamental question of our time.

About Rilke. When people ask you what you read, usually you only mention other novelists, apart perhaps from Tagore.

You are right, I never do mention poets. It's probably because, in part I read poetry very erratically, I don't read poetry systematically in the way people who read a lot of poetry do, so I think that's one reason, but in fact I love reading poetry, it is very important to me.

*Let's go back to influences. You say that reading Rilke was a source of inspiration during the writing of *The Hungry Tide*, was Chen Chao's *photography*² also a source of inspiration when you worked at *The Glass Palace*?*

No, not Chen Chao, but, you know, photography is a very old interest of mine. It's not that I take good pictures, because I don't, I do not have much of a visual imagination. But when I was in Delhi in the Seventies and Eighties there was a huge interest in photography and cinematography, and many of my friends were photographers. To this day I have very close friends who are photographers—their work influences me and I think I influence their work too. In *The Glass Palace* what actually happened is a strange thing. One of the greatest Indian photographers of contemporary times was a very dear friend of mine. His name was Raghbir Singh,³ and I used to talk a lot with him—he was an intellectual and a very good reader—he read a lot and talked a lot and he had many interesting ideas and I used to spend a lot of time with him, he was a very close friend. I was two years into writing *The Glass Palace* when he died very suddenly. It was after his death that the Dinu character took shape—and for me Dinu is the moral centre of the book.

And he is very much like Raghbir, I thought of Raghbir in writing about Dinu, and it was my way of saying goodbye to Raghbir.

Talking of the Sundarbans, you say that the landscape is a sort of world apart. "A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself" (p. 7) positively hostile to the presence of man. It seems to me that the Sundarbans are a character rather than a place.

Yes absolutely, I think they are very much. That's certainly what I wanted the forest to become. I wanted it to have its own agency, its own will. Because that's how I experienced it. But I think, again, there is a sense in which, out of an Indian tradition, it happens that you anthropomorphosize, which is something antiscientific. But for me it's natural, it's normal, I anthropomorphosize things: objects of the natural world become people, become themes to me. So yes, it's absolutely right.

While I was reading The Hungry Tide I often thought of Lord Jim, but then you quote "the horror, the horror" (p. 300), which made me think of Heart of Darkness: did you mean to acknowledge any influence of Conrad on your writing?

People often ask me about Conrad. I suppose it's because Naipaul talks about Conrad so much. I've always felt that I must read Conrad carefully, and I have read Conrad carefully. But you know, the more I read him, the more I dislike his work—I just detest it. There are nice things in Conrad certainly—*The Shadow Line* is a beautiful story, and *Typhoon* is a beautiful story, but they are very uncharacteristic of Conrad. *Lord Jim* is completely loathsome. Because Conrad is genuinely racist. He's racist in a way in which very few writers of the nineteenth century are racist. To me when he talks about the Chinaman, he isn't a human presence. And what is *Lord Jim* about? *Lord Jim* is essentially a celebration of whiteness. One man has betrayed whiteness by being a coward, so he has to redeem his whiteness, discover a true English whiteness. In fact incidents like the central event in *Lord Jim*—white officers bailing out of their ship, abandoning their passengers—happened many times, and no-one thought about it twice; it happened on slaves ships, on coolie ships ... So the idea that this man was pushing himself to do good in the

world because he had once made a mistake—to me it is just ridiculous. The fact that Conrad made this into an elegiac defense of the imperial project is incomprehensible to me. Believe me, I've tried to read Conrad with an open mind, but the more I do, the more I see these aspects of his work. All of us who come to English literature from my part of the world have to recognize that there is a certain level of racism in it. You have to live with it if you want to read these books, it's normal; there is also a certain level of anti-Semitism, you just accept that—that was the moment and the time. But with Conrad the racism was not incidental—with Conrad the racism is the subject, it is the moral core of the work. So what can I say ...?

Perhaps I should explain why I thought of Lord Jim reading The Hungry Tide, the similarity is not in the theme, but rather in the way the knowledge of the main character is offered to the reader through many different voices and standpoints, none of which is quite exhaustive. The Sundarbans as a character is presented through a variety of viewpoints (Nirmal's, Priya's, Kanai's, legendary) but in the end the reader is left alone to form his own mind on the subject.

That's interesting. I think there are many interesting narrative devices in Conrad. My good friend Homi Bhabha is a great admirer of *Lord Jim* and he's always talking about it. But if there is some aspect of *Lord Jim* in my book it is certainly not intentional. That's all I can say.

What about your next novel, The Sea of Poppies? Will it be another thoroughly researched novel? Are you doing specific researches for this novel?

I have done a lot of research for it, there is a lot of research that is going into it. For me, research is just background, just the icing on the cake: basically a novel has to be about the people. And with this again I think it is the people who will be at its centre.

When I was reading The Hungry Tide I was struck by the double level at which you offer knowledge. I felt happy that I was learning so many things about a far off place. On the one level I was learning so much about a place I had never heard of before and on the other level you were sort of telling how a landscape is ultimately indescribable, its knowledge unattainable.

What I liked most about writing *The Hungry Tide* was just spending time in the Sundarbans. With those people it was so beautiful to hear the language around me all the time and to hear the songs. It was such a wonderful thing to experience the simplicity of that life, because people like me, in Bengal, we all come from a peasant background. And I certainly feel a very deep sense of connection with that sort of life. And it was incredibly fulfilling, just living in those houses, to be on the boat at night: it was pure magic, pure magic. I just can't explain how magical it was. If I was to write ten books like *The Hungry Tide*, it would never do justice to the absolute magic of being there at night with the tide changing, under the moon, and to hear the tiger nearby. And you know, the quality of one's interaction with the fishermen—there is something so lovely in it, something so beautiful about the texture. I suppose you can experience that if you go to some rural part of Italy. It is something you cannot experience as a tourist. It is because I am Bengali, because I am of a certain age that they can interact like that with me. With that sort of simplicity and openness and a kind of trust.

Notes

- 1 On 9/11/2001 Ghosh, who lived in Brooklyn, lost a friend in the collapse of the towers and some school friends of his children lost their parents in the attack. See his own "September 11" in *Incendiary Circumstances*. Ghosh felt short of being a victim of communal riots at least on two occasions, in Dhaka in 1964 and in Delhi in 1984. The two episodes are narrated at length in *In an Antique Land* and in "The Ghost of Mrs Gandhi", reprinted in *Incendiary Circumstances*.
- 2 Chen Chao is an American photographer of Burmese origin, who published a collection of pictures mostly taken in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border under the title *Burma: Something Went Wrong*, with an afterword by Amitav Ghosh.
- 3 Ghosh acknowledges his debt to Raghbir Singh at the end of *The Glass Palace*. For a discussion about the shared poetics of Ghosh and Singh see Freedman.

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