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Beyond National Literatures: Empire and Amitav Ghosh

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The Indian-born novelist Amitav Ghosh can be regarded as an Asian American writer in that he fits the definition of an ‘Asian-origin writer... living permanently in the United States’.¹ But his work belongs to a more global, ‘hemispheric’ theorization of Asian American literature since he is also fully transnational in personal and artistic terms.² Ghosh produces ambitious fictions, looking beyond the United States and spanning countries and continents. His work challenges nationalism, ‘national literatures,’ and imperialism, or more specifically, ‘the anglophone empire ...America, Britain, and Australia ...the most potent political force of the past two centuries’.³

Ghosh treats the US with caution across his writing and he has stated that ‘I don’t think of myself as an American writer *at all*. I think of myself completely as an Indian writer’.⁴ Like other US-based writers, he has also made explicitly anti-American pronouncements.⁵ His inclusion in this volume adds to our understanding of contemporary Asian American literature since he profoundly interrogates the importance of this imperialistic superpower, while laying little claim to the US as his own country of domicile. His status also calls to mind the persistent questions surrounding the ‘term “Asian American” ...itself in constant instability ...open to continued critical negotiation’.⁶ English is Ghosh’s medium of expression; he has two American children; and for many years, he has been based in New York. Thus, he remains physically and emotionally connected to America and, outside India, his popular and academic audience is primarily the Anglo-American world.⁷ Ghosh has also drawn increasingly upon particular US literary genres by combining elements of the slave narrative and the racial

passing novel in *Sea of Poppies* (2008), a novel which ‘represents [Ghosh’s] ...first sustained engagement with the United States as an imperial nation ...conceived under the shadow of war in Iraq and Afghanistan’.⁸ America appears sporadically in such early essays as ‘Tibetan Dinner’ (1988) and ‘Four Corners’ (1989) and at the end of the traveller’s tale *In An Antique Land* (1992). But the US is represented more prominently, through New York City, in Ghosh’s novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), and such later non-fiction as ‘September 11’ (2001) and ‘The Greatest Sorrow: Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness’ (2001). New York also appears in the essays ‘Satyajit Ray’ (2002) and “‘The Ghat of the Only World’: Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn’ (2003).

More generally, however, Ghosh has never seemed fully at home on US soil. The broader *national* contours of Asian America – political, social, cultural, and historical – are not especially apparent in his work, with South Asian America emerging only briefly through the essay on Agha Shahid Ali; Murugan, the US-educated Indian researcher, in *The Calcutta Chromosome*; and Piya Roy, the Bengali American protagonist of Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004). It is revealing that both Piya and Murugan remain outside the United States throughout each narrative. In *The Glass Palace* (2000), Ghosh briefly refers to Indians fighting British colonialism in early-20th-century America and to the imperialism of US slavery through a nod to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s classic novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Further, characters in *The Glass Palace* all visit or settle in the United States, but the novel never really accompanies them there.⁹ In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, New York takes on a futuristic, dystopian character when glimpsed fleetingly by Antar, an Egyptian eager to return to his country of origin. More recently, in *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh alludes briefly to nineteenth-century Baltimore, while name-

checking Frederick Douglass, yet moves firmly ‘beyond the black Atlantic’.¹⁰ Ghosh has also spoken of his debt to Herman Melville with the novel *Moby Dick* (1851), referenced in *The Hungry Tide*;¹¹ and *Sea of Poppies* gestures towards Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), through the naming of Chillingworth, Captain of the *Ibis*.

In this chapter, I will focus on Ghosh’s relationship to the United States and its role in the anglophone empire. That relationship is complex and difficult: unsurprisingly since he is a postcolonial writer who came of age in post-Independence India. Between Ghosh’s second novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and *Sea of Poppies*, the US is his major Western counterpoint and embodiment, suggesting both that he has an American readership – and a South Asian American one at that¹² – partly in mind and that the United States’ geopolitical centrality cannot be ignored. Yet he simultaneously decentres the US, an absent presence in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *Sea of Poppies*, rejected either by fictional characters or by the course of the narrative itself.¹³ Thus, the material reality of the US as a distinct nation remains putative and unrealised. But as a global presence, it hovers, politically and ideologically, at the edges of Ghosh’s writing, since he is implicated in the anglophone empire through his mode of expression and because the US has long been his physical base. Herein lies the particular tension driving Ghosh’s treatment of the United States: how to negotiate, intellectually and morally, his own unease towards this world power, which has so clearly had an impact upon his life and work?

Ghosh scholarship has addressed issues of nationalism, postcolonial identity, ecocriticism, testimony, subalternity, and historiography. But the idea of Ghosh as an Asian American author with a particular relationship to the United States and its national

mythologies, has barely been considered.¹⁴ In this discussion, I will therefore explore this neglected aspect of Ghosh's *œuvre* by looking at the idea of America in his writing and by situating his work within what I am terming 'the Bengali American grain'.¹⁵ This is because Ghosh writes a particular form of Indian regionalism, ethnicity, and history into American literature; challenges US exceptionalism by proposing the uniqueness of South Asian experience from a specifically Bengali vantage point; and, arguing from a position of 'postcolonial cosmopolitanism', offers his own vision of a transnational, 'provincialised' America.¹⁶ Reading his work alongside that of other Bengali American writers¹⁷ and arguing that it is more ambitious thematically and more anti-imperialistic, I will probe Ghosh's problematic relationship with the United States, asking how his hemispheric writing continues to extend and even alter the terrain often associated with Asian American literature.

In the Bengali American grain?

Ghosh decisively and continuously interpolates Asia into US literature and consciousness. India is absolutely central to his output but his interpretation of it is heavily localized. Returning time and again to Bengali characters and a West Bengali setting, thus demonstrating a real commitment to the region, Ghosh can be positioned alongside such writers as Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri. Yet he seldom features in discussions of Bengali American literature, which usually focus on women writers,¹⁸ and he is rarely regarded as straightforwardly diasporic, because of the strongly Indian nature of much of his literary material, his decision to divide his time between India and the United States, and his own public self-fashioning.¹⁹ Rather, critics

have generally addressed the Bengali, but not the Bengali *American*, tradition to which Ghosh belongs.²⁰

He himself has argued that a sense of ethnic belonging is key to his artistic formation through the creative legacy of the leading Bengali writer, Rabindranath Tagore,²¹ and the world-renowned filmmaker, Satyajit Ray. In his essay on the Calcutta-based director, Ghosh writes:

I am more than ever aware of the part that Ray played in shaping the imaginary universe of my childhood and youth ...he was a rivet in an unbroken chain of aesthetic and intellectual effort that stretches back to the mid-nineteenth century – a chain in which I too am, I hope, a small link ...Ray's work ...moors me – often despite myself – to the imaginative landscape of Bengal ...the essential terrain of my own work.²²

Ghosh's paean to Ray suggests a firm Bengaliness, reflected too in the inspiration provided by 'the Bengali storytelling voice ...a very intimate voice which invites you into the story ...whenever I get stuck in my work, I ...try to listen to that voice'.²³ Like Mukherjee and Lahiri, he seeks to educate the wider world about Bengali culture, history, and topography. To that end, he places Kolkata (or Calcutta in its earlier designation) and the Sundarbans within the landscape of American fiction through such novels as *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *Sea of Poppies*.

Mukherjee writes that 'to be a native-born Calcuttan was (and is) to be a Londoner, a Parisian, a New Yorker, at the zenith'.²⁴ Ghosh feels less need to convince the outside world of Kolkata's significance, yet he is more concerned than Mukherjee with the region's past, especially as it has been overlooked by ethnic outsiders, including those within India itself. Thus, in *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh highlights the Bengali dimensions of Partition in a *Bildungsroman*, where the unnamed child narrator's lack of

awareness arguably stands in for the presumption of the reader's own. *The Shadow Lines* is about the vital importance of excavating and recording key moments in 20th-century Bengali history and it also memorialises the Hindu-Muslim riots in Calcutta in January 1964, which left over 100 people dead.²⁵ Local history re-appears in *The Hungry Tide* through recollections of 'the policy of "armed struggle" adopted in Calcutta in 1948' and 'the terrible famine that ...devastated Bengal in 1942' (77, 79).²⁶

Moving beyond the strictly Bengali, Ghosh suggests the uniqueness of South Asian experience in *The Shadow Lines* through the narrator's recollections of that life-changing day from his Calcutta childhood in January 1964:

That particular fear ...is without analogy ...It ...comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one ...can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world ...the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror.²⁷

A 'thousand million people' forces us to re-think the more common usage, 'billion', in a moment of realization which implicitly interrogates America. Predicated on the idea of its exceptionalism in relation to other nations, the specialness of the United States is arguably challenged here by the particularity of South Asian lives, or the 'fear ...that sets apart the ...people [of] ...the subcontinent from the rest of the world' (204). This claim of South Asian exceptionalism – repeated elsewhere when Ghosh argues that 'nations ...matter ...most of all ...in the subcontinent, more than in any other place in the world'²⁸ – can be understood 'as a powerful ingredient of a national consciousness – particularly in times of transition'.²⁹ In other words, every nation or geopolitical region may see itself as unique to some degree. But Ghosh's statement in *The Shadow Lines* also serves as a

defensive strike against perceived Western prejudices about Indian lives. Thus, Ila, a Bengali expatriate based in the West, expresses contempt for India through her sense that its

famines ...riots and disasters ...are local things ...nothing that's really remembered. She seemed immeasurably distant ...in her quiet pity for the pettiness of lives like mine, lived out in the silence of voiceless events in a backward world (104).

In response to such attitudes, Ghosh deliberately renders civil violence in the novel as anything but silent or 'voiceless'.

Ila's Western-inflected dismissal also invites comparison with earlier Bengali American writing, specifically Mukherjee's short story 'The Lady from Lucknow' (1985), where Nafeesa Hafeez also experiences a moment of double consciousness when she sees herself through the eyes of an older white woman: 'I was a shadow without depth or colour ...who would float back to a city of teeming millions when the affair with James had ended'.³⁰ In a firm rejection of the 'shadow' designation, Mukherjee renders the adulterous Nafeesa as a flesh-and-blood, sexually adventurous woman, while the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* similarly counters Ila's version of the insignificant 'shadow' people populating a 'backward' India with his sense of knowing 'people of my own age, who had survived the Great Terror in the Calcutta of the 'sixties and 'seventies...'' (105).

Referring here to the Naxalite movement – Maoist revolutionaries active between 1967 and 1973, who provide the backdrop to Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* (2013) – Ghosh shifts the emphasis from the anglophone 'West' to the polyglot 'East', and specifically to West Bengal, as

centre of the world. He also pays tribute to the courage of those who ‘survived the Great Terror’ (105). Such historiographical debates are written into Lahiri’s short story, ‘When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine’ (1999), which may be read intertextually against *The Shadow Lines*.³¹ Here historical events affecting ethnic Bengalis – namely, the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 – are interpreted through the eyes of a child, Lilia, in an American setting.³²

The focus of *The Hungry Tide* is broadly, and unusually in Ghosh’s recent fiction, contemporary. Yet it relies, like *The Shadow Lines*, on specific historical moments in West Bengal, most importantly the Morichjhāpi incident in the Sundarbans or ‘tide country’ (as Ghosh calls it in the novel) when refugees, settled illegally on the island of Morichjhāpi, were brutally raped and massacred by the state authorities in 1979. The geographical setting of the tide country is itself perilous and little known, and Ghosh places it unforgettably on the global literary map. He has since framed this location in terms, once again, of South Asian exceptionalism, claiming recently that the population of the Sundarbans face ‘the most difficult material circumstances of anyone anywhere’.³³ When Nirmal writes to his nephew Kanai that Morichjhāpi is ‘a place ...you will probably never have heard of’ (67), this is not simply a matter of local events or of a personal correspondence. That ‘you’ could address many of Ghosh’s readers and indeed, forging his own form of historical revisionism, Ghosh uses West Bengal to stand for India as he extrapolates wider points about the place of dispossessed people and forces Morichjhāpi, in Nirmal’s phrase, ‘*upon the memory of the world*’ (69, emphasis in original) in this transnational Asian American novel.

This regionalised focus relates to a further degree of exceptionalism within Ghosh’s writing: a contemporary reconceptualisation of the special historical status of

Bengalis in India and particularly of educated, middle-class Bengalis – that is, members of the *bhadrasamaj* – as an elite within colonial India. As Makarand Paranjape has argued, ‘this amorphous and diverse “middle class” was not only constituted by colonialism but also went on to resist it to help forge the nation that became India’.³⁴ Ghosh was born into such a class and acts as a kind of modern-day *bhadralok* (or middle-class male) interlocutor for subaltern Bengalis in *The Hungry Tide*, as do such characters as Kanai and Nirmal. By implication, exceptionalism takes an ethnic, as well as a national, form in such works as *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide*.

Writing Asian America

The Hungry Tide also marks Ghosh’s main imaginative attempt to write about Asian America from a more US-centric perspective, through the figure of Piya, a marine biologist in the Sundarbans. She has forgotten the Bengali she once knew while growing up in the United States and this loss of language is arguably deliberate since she associates Bengali with the unhappy marriage of her parents: immigrants locked into the ‘accumulated resentments of their life’ (93-94) in a small apartment in Seattle before her mother’s early death from cervical cancer. Piya’s inability to speak Bengali may also signal an implied critique of US parochialism and the global hegemony of the ‘anglophone empire’ whose subjects display ‘monoglot attitudes’, because of the pre-eminence of English.³⁵

Ghosh’s choice of Seattle in the novel is significant and surely deliberate in terms of Asian American history. After all, the Pacific Northwest was an important site of settlement for Japanese Americans, as we see in John Okada’s novel *No-No Boy* (1957),

and for some of the first South Asian North Americans across the US-Canada border in British Columbia. The importance of an Asian American West Coast is intimated through the references to California where Piya has studied marine biology at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego. And returning to Seattle, Ghosh links Puget Sound to eastern India through the image of Piya's dying mother 'resting her eyes on the sound' because it reminds her of her 'girlhood staring at a view of a river – the Brahmaputra' (95). Similarly, Piya connects 'the first known specimen of *Orcaella brevirostris*', first discovered in Kolkata, with 'the majestic killer whales of Puget Sound' (95). Thus, in a hemispheric Asian American gesture typical of Ghosh, the United States – in its own regional variant – can only be understood in dialectical relation to India and indeed to specific areas within it.³⁶

The aroma of Indian spices in cooking also belongs to Piya's experiences as a young Bengali girl growing up in the US 'when she discovered, from pointed jokes and chance playground comments, that the odours followed her everywhere, like unseen pets' (97). Ghosh's account of a Bengali American childhood recalls what S. Mitra Kalita has called "'IFS" ...Indian Food Smell' and the impact of this 'gastronomic anxiety' on young South Asian Americans.³⁷ Through the animism of Ghosh's image of 'odours' as 'pets', he breathes fresh life into this familiar terrain. But once again, American life as a domestic phenomenon is handled at a remove. By contrast to the rich psychological depth of Lahiri's treatment of Bengali American lives – in her hands, the Roys' bitterness and disillusionment with immigrant life would have been the complex subject of an entire short story, or even a novel – Ghosh sums up South Asian American life as it is experienced within the US in just a few pages.

Unlike the Sundarbans in this novel, which deserves epic treatment in order to do justice to a particular way of life, Bengali American experience is not considered the proper stuff of storytelling here. And in nodding to such recognised tropes as disappointed immigrant hopes, loneliness, early parental death³⁸ and ethnic shame – but without investigating them properly – Ghosh’s depiction of Asian America in a national sense risks cliché and superficiality. Piya represents a South Asian American essentially alone in the world, suggesting both a kind of exceptional status and that the domestic aspects of Asian America are not within Ghosh’s comfort zone. As Inderpal Grewal has argued, his ‘postcolonial cosmopolitanism lead[s] Ghosh to write against the West ...from the cosmopolitan subjectivity of the writer of literature, instead of probing the complexity of living within it’.³⁹

Piya’s American identity – and the relative lack of importance of Asian, and specifically Bengali, America to Ghosh’s fictional project – might also be linked to his early essay, ‘Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel’ (1992). Here he notes that literature in Bengali is full of

innumerable short stories and novels about expatriates in New Jersey, California, and various parts of Europe. Yet the hundreds of thousands of Bengali-speaking people who live and work in the oil kingdoms scarcely ever merit literary attention.⁴⁰

While Ghosh’s assertion is about the need to give voice to a vast, floating, overlooked population of Bengali migrant workers, explored in his first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986), he is also signalling his own lack of excitement, even impatience, towards what he sees as the over-represented lives of Bengali Americans.

Ghosh is alluding here to the place of such ‘expatriates’ in Bengali-language literature in the early 1990s, yet his claim might be extended to more recent fiction in English and in particular to the dominant status in South Asian American letters enjoyed by such successful ethnic Bengalis as Mukherjee, Divakaruni, and Lahiri. Their work, which has won prizes and often achieved popular appeal, suggests that Bengali exceptionalism continues to play out within areas of the South Asian diaspora. But Ghosh’s writing rejects the thematic emphasis on America generally found within this *œuvre*, marking him as a ‘postcolonial’ rather than an ‘ethnic’ South Asian American writer in Rajini Srikanth’s distinction.⁴¹ For him, the Bengali diaspora cannot be understood in US terms alone. The fiction of Mukherjee, Divakaruni, and Lahiri does not merely concentrate on the United States, however: it, too, is transnational, encompassing South Asia, Canada, Central America, Western Europe, and South-East Asia.

At the same time, Ghosh’s work has a consistently greater spatial and temporal sweep than that of his Bengali American peers. He has produced novels set in a broader range of eras and countries, narratives which are conceived on a more epic scale, speak of wider interests, and marshal a more impressive cast of characters in, for example, a multigenerational saga such as *The Glass Palace* or his maritime *Ibis* novels than anything by Mukherjee, Divakaruni, or Lahiri. In his critical distance from the anglophone empire and the sheer historical ambition that he demonstrates in such epic narratives as *The Glass Palace*, *Sea of Poppies*, and *River of Smoke* (2011), he also offers a more penetrating investigation of imperialism than his Bengali American counterparts. This might be explained generationally since Ghosh was born not long after Indian independence. But Mukherjee came of age in the post-Independence period and her work

also critiques the arrogance of British colonialism. The difference between them arises from Ghosh's deeper historicisation of the British Empire and his continued interest in other forms of imperialism.

Ghosh's position on world events is always politically marked, whether he is exploring earlier eras of globalisation and transnationalism – medieval commerce in the Indian Ocean, the opium trade in the Age of Sail, and the growth of the Indian diaspora globally – or regarding such phenomena in contemporary terms through US neo-imperialism, the place of the United Nations in Cambodia, South Asia's nuclear capability, economic migration within the Middle East, or the far-reaching effects of climate change and the importance of conservation. As distinct from the writing of his fellow Bengali Americans, Ghosh's sustained literary commitment to reporting on and critiquing the state of the world – a project often centripetally linked to India – is a resolutely political act. It is, moreover, key to our understanding of him as a hemispheric writer moving Asian American literature in ever more transnational and geographically novel directions.⁴²

Why, then, does Ghosh opt for a second-generation Bengali American protagonist in *The Hungry Tide*? Reinscribing the ethnic exceptionalism I discussed earlier, Ghosh arguably continues a thought-experiment begun with his assumption of an American English voice through Murugan in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. That Piya represents a fictional experiment for Ghosh is hardly surprising. His children may hold US passports, but the experience of an American childhood is no more the writer's own than Fokir's life as a fisherman in the Sundarbans in the same novel or, more challengingly, the dizzyingly detailed historical worlds of *The Glass Palace*, *Sea of Poppies* and *River of*

Smoke. And Ghosh's exploration of Piya's Bengali American identity becomes most incisive when he moves the focus away from the US terrain of the 'innumerable short stories and novels' he appears to dismiss in 'Petrofiction'⁴³ and deploys a more transnational Asian American perspective.

Piya is, like second-generation characters visiting India in such stories as Lahiri's 'Interpreter of Maladies' (1999) and Divakaruni's 'The Lives of Strangers' (2001), something of a wandering soul in her ancestral homeland: unlike 'her Kolkata cousins, who wielded the insignia of their upper-middle-class upbringing like laser-guided weaponry ... she had no ...idea of what her own place was in the great scheme of things' (34-35). Such existential questions notwithstanding, Piya is different from other non-resident Indians (NRIs) engaging in forms of 'ethnic return' and seeking to connect with their heritage, visitors who are often punished for their naïveté and lack of local knowledge.⁴⁴ Piya is no ignorant 'roots' tourist, bidding to understand her familial traditions, even if her NRI perspective sometimes threatens to cloud her vision of local people.⁴⁵ Rather, she brings hard-won scientific expertise to the region and educates Kanai and the reader about cetacean life, while painstakingly accumulating her own tide country knowledge. And unlike other foreigners visiting the area, Piya comes back to settle there.⁴⁶

She recalls the eponymous protagonist of Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000): a Sri Lankan American forensic anthropologist whose ethnic return is conducted for specific professional reasons. Both Ghosh and Ondaatje seem to suggest that young diasporic South Asians may 'return' if they can bring a specialist skill to the table. Work becomes crucial in uniting Bengalis in India with their diaspora and 'proposing ...an

ethics ...which aspires to reconcile global and local concerns'.⁴⁷ But Piya's investment in the Sundarbans is also ultimately problematic, as several critics have noted. Robbie Goh, for instance, argues convincingly that 'Piya's plans to start a research project named for Fokir ...does [sic] not change the fact that Fokir dies in service of her research'.⁴⁸

Goh also refers to Piya as 'an Overseas Indian' and 'a fully fledged expatriate', but these terms overwrite Piya's American status – after all, she is described by Moyna, a local nurse, simply as 'the American' (257, 259) – and the relationship between the US and India set up by the novel.⁴⁹ Thus, in Piya's early life, she brought India to America and now she brings the United States to a remote corner of India, rather like the US mailbags used in Sundarban fishing boats. When she is working in the field, Kanai regards her 'silhouette ...[as] not unlike that of a cowboy, with her holster of equipment around her hips and her wide-brimmed hat' (266): a classically American image of rugged individualism. At the same time, America is decentred because Piya has to travel to India to find meaningful work and because, as we saw earlier, the US can only be interpreted in relation to India. Through Piya, Ghosh pits India and America against each other ideologically and ethically, as when Kanai discusses human mortality rates in the Sundarbans. Thus, the United States – and Asian Americans themselves – must be regarded in transnational, hemispheric terms.

The two nations are also implicitly in conversation when Kanai views Moyna in the light of Indian social mobility. This actually takes the form of Piya imagining Kanai's thought that "“everyone who has any drive, any energy, wants to get on in the world”" (220). Refracted through Piya, this sounds rather like the classic mythology of the American Dream, as though Ghosh may, once again, be drawing upon US discourses.

Social mobility is, of course, an Indian concept, which Ghosh addresses in 'The Town by the Sea' (2005) and in his contention that 'India ...lets you be exactly who you want to be', a somewhat utopian view based, perhaps, on his own class and gender privilege.⁵⁰ In *The Hungry Tide*, Kanai's perspective is made problematic by being conceptualised at several removes, as one character (Piya) imagines another character (Kanai) thinking about a third character (Moyna). Thus, social mobility is no more a safe orthodoxy here than it is a readily achievable goal. Indeed, Piya believes that it reassures Kanai to think in such an egalitarian way precisely because he needs to believe that India is a meritocracy. But in a novel of multiple translations and ventriloquisms, which dramatizes the whole problem of giving voice to the powerless, Ghosh complicates the point. He does this by using a US character to question an idea recalling a famously American myth of success through an Indian character's imagined thoughts.

Deterritorialising Asian American literature

In terms of 'the Bengali American grain', Ghosh's writing sits both within and outside this tradition. For one thing, his work is much less invested in the US and the realities of Indian American experience in the United States than the writing of Mukherjee, Lahiri or Divakaruni. Time and again, Ghosh's work employs a richer spatial and historical scope, despite the bold intentions of Mukherjee's fine historical novel *The Holder of the World* (1993), the colonial sections of her later novel *The Tree Bride* (2004) and Lahiri's use of history in 'When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine', 'Sexy' (1999), and *The Lowland*. Ghosh's *œuvre* also questions the systems and workings of imperialism, past and present, more searchingly than anything by his Bengali American peers.

Ghosh's treatment of West Bengal is different, too. It is more historicised and ecocritical, more focused on the rural than the urban, and more comfortable with contemporary Bengali realities than the writing of, for example, Mukherjee or Lahiri. In the essay 'The March of the Novel through History: The Testimony of My Grandfather's Bookcase' (1998), Ghosh argues that 'location is ...intrinsic to a novel' before contending that 'those of us who love novels often read them because of the eloquence with which they communicate a "sense of place". Yet ...it is the very loss of a lived sense of place that makes their fictional representation possible'.⁵¹ Through Ghosh's imaginative recreation of place – particularly Calcutta/Kolkata and the Sundarbans – richly conceived fictions such as *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *Sea of Poppies* are made possible. In this sense, Ghosh's writing can be read according to Kandice Chuh's formulation of 'Asian Americanist hemispheric studies ...[wherein] the significance of spatial location, the negotiation of linguistic differences, and the impact of variegated histories ...are explored'.⁵²

Just as Mukherjee's bid to reinvent American literature has been ambitious, so Ghosh's stylistic and generic techniques have been bold and experimental, especially in his early work. These methods have recently given way to more conventionally linear storytelling, yet his fiction and essays remain thematically more daring than the work of other Bengali American writers. In his non-fiction especially, he offers the reader news, often bringing remote or little-known places and periods to life. Despite his stake in Bengaliness, Ghosh strives to move beyond regional and sectarian belonging through the theme of Indian identity *tout court*, both within and outside the motherland. Unlike Lahiri and Divakaruni, whose accounts of ethnic return imply that "Indianness" ...can become

almost void of meaning’ in the sense that there is little common ground between Indians and an American-born diasporic generation,⁵³ Ghosh suggests the necessity of believing in a unified Indianness. He does so even though his own impassioned, repeated emphasis on Bengaliness calls such an idea into question by reiterating the special ethno-cultural status of West Bengal within India; and even though his belief in a shared Indianness is a contradiction in terms since, in his own words, ‘being Indian ...gives you this wonderful chameleon-like quality ...any statement you make about India ...the opposite is also true’.⁵⁴

The need to believe in a wider Indianness is driven both by the horrors of religiously motivated civil violence in India and by a more utopian desire to get past ethnic, caste, and societal divisions. Thus, ““The Ghat of the Only World”” goes beyond a personal promise to memorialise Agha Shahid Ali and celebrates a collective, culturally Indian identity, as Ghosh recalls the two writers discovering

a huge roster of common friends, in India, America, and elsewhere ...a shared love of rogan josh, Roshanara Begum and Kishore Kumar; a mutual indifference to cricket and an equal attachment to old Bombay films.⁵⁵

We learn that for Ali, such interests or ‘good things’ take on a more powerful resonance in America because ‘here we have been able to make a space where we can all come together because of the good things’.⁵⁶ Ghosh’s belief in a collective Indianness is reflected in *The Hungry Tide*, where the tide country itself seems to offer freedom from caste, the promise of social mobility and Indian belonging for NRIs, and in *Sea of Poppies*, where the indentured collective on board the *Ibis* allows a common Indianness to prevail over old caste designations. As Anjali Gera Roy has put it, ‘through merging the stories of different kinds of travellers ...in *Sea of Poppies* [and *The Glass Palace*]

...Ghosh demonstrates the dissolution of boundaries of language, class and caste among those who are forced to travel'.⁵⁷ His ethnic Indians endlessly grapple with the mystery of national and transnational identity. However contradictory and mystifying this self-image is, Ghosh feels compelled to continue examining it throughout his writing.

Even as his main interests lie beyond the US, Ghosh's experiences of living and working in America for some twenty years, and now leading a more peripatetic existence between New York and India, have liberated him and enabled him creatively to challenge 'national literatures' through his transnational literary works. In this chapter, I have considered Ghosh's complex, critical treatment of the United States and the 'anglophone empire' through a Bengali American lens, as he repeatedly depicts Americans outside the US and relegates the nation to the margins of his hemispheric narratives, yet bids to make Bengali historical events involving civil and state violence into new forms of American public memory, and cites iconic American figures and texts (Frederick Douglass, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Moby Dick*). In doing so, Ghosh's writing radically troubles what are still national canons of literature even in, and arguably because of, our globalized world. His writing 'deterritorialises English ...from a point of view that is essentially that of an outsider'.⁵⁸ It thus continues, like that of other leading Asian American writers such as Karen Tei Yamashita and Chang-rae Lee, to expand the definitional, discursive, temporal, and geopolitical limits of Asian American literature. That it does so makes continued critical engagement with Ghosh's work all the more necessary.

Endnotes

¹ Susan Koshy, "The rise of the Asian American novel," in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Casuto et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1047.

² Kandice Chuh, "Of Hemispheres and Other Spheres: Navigating Karen Tei Yamashita's Literary World," *American Literary History* 18.3 (2006): 618-620.

³ Amitav Ghosh, *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 28.

⁴ Quoted in Claire Chambers, "'The absolute essentialness of conversations': A discussion with Amitav Ghosh," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 41.1 (2005): 36 (emphasis in original).

⁵ Chambers, "Discussion," 36; and see Lila Azam Zanganeh, "Lila Azam Zanganeh interviews Amitav Ghosh," *Excavation*, May 15, 2011, accessed June 27, 2014, www.guernicamag.com/interviews/ghosh_5_15_11/.

⁶ Stephen Hong Sohn, Paul Lai and Donald Goellnicht, "Introduction: Theorising Asian American Fiction," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 56.1 (2010): 2; and compare David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 12, 337.

⁷ Compare Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 48; and Anshuman A. Mondal *Amitav Ghosh* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 163.

⁸ Elleke Boehmer and Anshuman A. Mondal, "Networks and Traces: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh," *Wasafiri* 27.2 (2012): 34.

⁹ Compare Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 93.

¹⁰ Jacob Crane, "Beyond the Cape: Amitav Ghosh, Frederick Douglass and the Limits of the Black Atlantic," *Postcolonial Text* 6.4 (2011): 3, accessed June 27, 2014, postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/download/1301/1261.

¹¹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 304. Further references in parenthesis in the text. See also Zanganeh, "Amitav Ghosh"; and John Thieme, "Amitav Ghosh: *The Hungry Tide*," *Literary Encyclopedia*, December 27, 2007, accessed June 27, 2014, www.litencyc.com.

¹² Thus Ghosh told an interviewer in 2007 that he thinks of his readership 'as ... India and the diaspora' before sharing an anecdote about ethnic Indian readers of his work in the United States; see Zanganeh, "Amitav Ghosh".

¹³ Compare Crane, "Beyond the Cape", 5, where he notes that 'the Atlantic world exists in the novel only *as memory*' (emphasis in original).

¹⁴ The rare exceptions here are Srikanth, *World Next Door*, 9-10, 37-40, 90-94; Grewal, *Transnational America*, 38-41, 45-58; and Sohn, Lai and Goellnicht, "Introduction," 15.

¹⁵ Adapting the title of William Carlos Williams' classic study, *In the American Grain* (1925), I am using 'grain' to mean the fibre and texture of wood.

¹⁶ Grewal, *Transnational America*, 38. The notion of a 'provincialised' America is borrowed from Kavita Daiya, following Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincialising Europe* (2000); see Kavita Daiya, "Provincialising America: Engaging Postcolonial Critique and Asian American Studies in a Transnational Mode," *South Asian Review* 26.2 (2005): 26.

¹⁷ Compare Grewal, *Transnational America*, 35-42.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Somdatta Mandal, "The City of the Mind or Return to the Roots? Representations of Calcutta in the Fiction of Diasporic Bengali Women Writers," in *Indias Abroad: The Empire Writes Back*, ed. Rajendra Chetty et al (Johannesburg: STE,

2004), 127-142; and Sanjukta Dasgupta, "Locating 'Home' in a Liminal Space: Longing and Belonging in the Fiction of 'Bengali' American Women Writers" in *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature*, ed. Malashri Lal et al (Delhi: Dorling Kindersley, 2007), 75-95.

¹⁹ Ghosh has claimed that 'I'm not really a diasporic in the sense that I grew up in India. I'm returning to India ...I've been away for a while'; quoted in Zanganeh, "Amitav Ghosh"; Makarand Paranjape, "Beyond the subaltern syndrome: Amitav Ghosh and the crisis of the *bhadrasamaj*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47.3 (2012): 366, regards Ghosh as distinctly diasporic, however.

²⁰ See Bishnupriya Ghosh, *When Borne Across: Literary Cosmopolitics in the Contemporary Indian Novel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 152-156, 173, 179-183; Mondal, *Amitav Ghosh*, 3-5, 30-37; and Paranjape, "Beyond the subaltern syndrome," 358-363, 366-367, 371.

²¹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal), xii.

²² Amitav Ghosh, "Satyajit Ray," in *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*, ed. Tabish Khair (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 5-6, 8.

²³ Quoted in Zanganeh, "Amitav Ghosh".

²⁴ Bharati Mukherjee, *Desirable Daughters* (New York: Hyperion, 2002), 22.

²⁵ See Ghosh, *The Imam*, 316, where he notes the silence surrounding the 'civil violence' in Calcutta in 1964 when he did research for *The Shadow Lines*.

²⁶ See also Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 477.

²⁷ Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2004), 204. Further references in parenthesis in the text.

²⁸ Cited in T. Vijay Kumar, "'Postcolonial' describes you as a negative': An Interview with Amitav Ghosh," *Interventions* 9.1 (2007): 101.

²⁹ Srikanth, *World Next Door*, 36.

³⁰ Bharati Mukherjee, *Darkness* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin, 1985), 33; and compare Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 340.

³¹ Compare Floyd Cheung and Lavina Dhingra, "The Inheritance of Postcolonial Loss, Asian American Melancholia, and Strategies of Compensation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*" in *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, ed. Lavina Dhingra et al (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012), 36-37.

³² See Daiya, "Provincialising America," 267-270.

³³ Amitav Ghosh, "How 'history' becomes 'fiction'" (panel discussion hosted by Global, Colonial and Postcolonial Network, University of Leicester, UK, November 12, 2013).

³⁴ Paranjape, "Beyond the subaltern syndrome," 358.

³⁵ Christopher Rollason, "'In our translated world': Transcultural Communication in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*," *The Atlantic Literary Review* 6.1-2 (2005), accessed June 27, 2014, yatrarollason.info/files/GhoshHungryTide.pdf; and compare Srikanth, *World Next Door*, 32-33.

³⁶ Compare Srikanth, *World Next Door*, 3-5, 9-10, 31.

³⁷ S. Mitra Kalita, *Suburban Sahibs: Three Immigrant Families and Their Passage from India to America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 2; Ruth Maxey, *South Asian Atlantic Literature, 1970-2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 183-184, 206n.

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- ³⁸ Compare Ruth Maxey, “Mother-Weights and Lost Fathers: Parents in South Asian American Literature,” *Wasafiri* 27.1 (2012): 25-31.
- ³⁹ Grewal, *Transnational America*, 48.
- ⁴⁰ Ghosh, *The Imam*, 78.
- ⁴¹ Srikanth, *World Next Door*, 44.
- ⁴² Compare Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 392-393.
- ⁴³ Ghosh, *The Imam*, 78.
- ⁴⁴ Maxey, *South Asian Atlantic*, 99.
- ⁴⁵ Rollason, ““In our translated world””.
- ⁴⁶ The likely success of her relocation to India, however, is left open to question; other novels about Indian Americans settling in the ancestral nation – for instance, Ameena Meer’s *Bombay Talkie* (1994) and Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008) – suggest that such a move is doomed to failure; on the latter novel, see Robbie B.H. Goh, “The Overseas Indian and the political economy of the body in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47.3 (2012): 345.
- ⁴⁷ Thieme, “Amitav Ghosh”.
- ⁴⁸ Goh, “Overseas Indian,” 354.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 350, 351.
- ⁵⁰ Quoted in Zanganeh, “Amitav Ghosh”.
- ⁵¹ Ghosh, *The Imam*, 294, 303.
- ⁵² Chuh, “Of Hemispheres,” 635.
- ⁵³ Maxey, *South Asian Atlantic*, 97.
- ⁵⁴ Quoted in Zanganeh, “Amitav Ghosh”.
- ⁵⁵ Ghosh, *The Imam*, 342.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 346.
- ⁵⁷ Anjali Gera Roy, “Ordinary People on the Move: Subaltern Cosmopolitanisms in Amitav Ghosh’s Writings,” *Asiatic* 6.1 (2012): 42.
- ⁵⁸ Paranjape, “Beyond the subaltern syndrome,” 370.