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The Representation of Colonialism in Amitav Ghosh's Novels

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh was born in July 1956 in Calcutta to a diplomat father and a homemaker mother. Although his family originated from eastern Bengal and relocated to Calcutta before the Partition in 1947, the theme of displacement has been a recurring element in his literary works. His protagonists often reflect the experiences of refugees, shaped by historical upheavals. During his early years, Amitav Ghosh traveled extensively with his parents due to his father's diplomatic assignments in Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), Sri Lanka, and Iran. These experiences likely nurtured his interest in travel and its influence on storytelling, allowing him to explore themes of displacement and transience in his fiction. He has acknowledged that travel plays a significant role in shaping his narratives. Scholars have also observed that movement, whether physical or psychological, is central to his storytelling. He challenges conventional ideas of history as being defined by settled communities and stable cultures, instead portraying migration and mobility as intrinsic to human experience.

Keywords: amitav ghosh, partition, migration, history, colonialism, trade, slavery and identity

Amitav Ghosh's doctoral studies at Oxford, he found a footnote in Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders, a translated document collection. This minor reference concerned an Indian slave of a Jewish merchant on the western coast of India during a twelfth-century time frame. This finding motivated Ghosh to do fieldwork in Egypt. The story is told on two linked levels: one based on his experience doing doctoral research in 1980 on life in small villages of Lower Egypt and one based on his search for the history of the "Slave of MS. H.6," which he searches for in archival records maintained by the Jewish community in Cairo's Geniza (repository) of their synagogue. In one aspect of his work, he examines the past as an anthropologist, and in the second as a historian. He reconstructs the contours of life for the slave, the Jewish master, and their multi-linguistic and culturally diverse worlds.

The people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time. But the slave of Khalaf s letter was not of that company: in his instance it was a mere accident that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved. It is nothing less than a miracle that anything is known about him at all (IAL 13).

The theme of displacement has been a recurring element in his literary works. His protagonists often reflect the experiences of refugees, shaped by historical upheavals. He challenges conventional ideas of history as being defined by settled communities and stable cultures, instead portraying migration and

mobility as intrinsic to human experience. Amitav Ghosh takes issue with partition references to significant moments in history, an important context for interpreting the idea of partition. Amitav Ghosh's novel, The Shadow Lines, follows two families living in three distinct places Dhaka, Calcutta, and London that correspond to Bangladesh, India, and England, respectively. Through the narrator's perspective, the novel examines cultural, religious, and national differences that become significant to the two generations of families, while the impact of these communities' and their related riots is another major concern for the narrative. Amitav Ghosh's PhD research in Egypt gives a context for immediate experiences that are formative in their dual functions for the project.

The first narrative, which makes up most of the narrative, takes us through Ghosh's conversations with friends in Egypt and critical engagement with modernity, religion, and nationalism in the Middle East. The second narrative, though separate, connects with overlapping themes and geographical ties to the first. Amitav Ghosh's friend Nabeel and Isma'il leave their homes for fortune in Nashawy, and the narrative shifts seamlessly into a historical reconstruction of Ben Yiju and his servant Bomma in the same place. Before Ghosh visits Mangalore, he takes time to tell the city's story leading up to the time of Ben Yiju. The historical narrative weaves in and out of the two, creating a sophisticated interplay where the past informs one's observations of the present, and vice versa. The medieval narrative shifts, particularly, are a refuge for Ghosh, where his hopes and expectations as an anthropologist in the modern Middle East collide with reality. For Ghosh, he wants to leave Lataifa and travel to Cairo but soon realizes he will need to depend on his friend Shaikh Musa for assistance.

Colonialism means the attachment of colonies to the global capitalist system in a subordinate and dependent role. Unequal economic exchange and dependence are characteristic of colonial capitalism, as is an exploitative international division of labor. To illustrate, colonial powers (metropoles) produced high-value, advanced technology goods, while colonies existed on the lowest margin of production with the lowest productivity and, by the standards of those colonial powers, archaic methods of production meaning that colonialism was where Britain's overseas colonies existed as a world of primary extractive economic activity. The protagonist's grandmother, Tha'mma, and Tha'mma's family, Mayadebi and her husband, bring up three sons in England: Jatin, Robi, and Tridib.

Tha'mma's affection for Ila, who is in London, is a love she cannot voice, even to Ila, even to anyone. Tha'mma's retirement, in 1962 after twenty-seven years as a teacher and headmistress, is significant and an important part of her memories about her homeland in Dhaka, historical legacy, and life in Calcutta. Tha'mma's narrative of her story also recalls when she and Mayadebi, with Jethamoshoi, return from the family home and rioting erupts nearby the bazaar. The mob attacks their vehicle, and their driver is slashed across his face with a knife. A policeman fires his gun to disperse the rioting crowd. They murder Khalil, Jethamoshoi, and Tridib in the ensuing violence. This catastrophic incident has a significant impact on Tha'mma. It compels her to reckon with the fractures caused by the partition. The bureaucratic protocols, like filling out a passport application that asks where she was born, make her painfully aware of the social and political divides created by borders. At this moment in time is an important shift for Tha'mma, where she comes to realize how partition has impacted not just her life, but the lives of countless others who were displaced and impacted by the division. Through Tha'mma's character, the narrative of the novel brings forth the shared experience of those who unwillingly became victims of divisions within history.

Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide recounts the historical happenings and trials and tribulations of migrants/refugees from Morichjhapi, as described in Nirmal's diary. Nirmal's diary provides an account of suffering and despair that differs from historical accounts, which tend to present history only from a broad perspective, often misleadingly so. We see in Nirmal's writings the extreme chasm that separates privilege from marginalization, particularly evident in Nirmal's writings about how wealth decided the fate of people during displacement. For instance, marginal caste Hindus were forcibly moved from West Bengal to the remote and inhospitable

wilderness of Dandakaranya (parts of what is today Odisha and Chhattisgarh), while upper castes and elites were favored for settlement. In addition, Nirmal's diary reveals the stark nature of migration, especially the plight of the displaced to be pushed into permanent liability camps that were confined, controlled spaces, and where, in many cases, they faced hostility from villagers.

The Calcutta Chromosome challenges the established historical narrative found in Ronald Ross's 1923 memoir. While Ross documented his scientific work on malaria, the novel hints at the crucial, yet unrecognized, role of an Indian contributor who assisted Ross in his research. By weaving this alternative perspective into the narrative, Ghosh questions the erasure of indigenous knowledge from colonial histories. Antar, an Egyptian working in the IT profession, uncovers an unusual trace in his futuristic computer: an ID card he senses is 'lost' on the web somewhere. Murugan's investigation of Ross involved a certain hidden group, which might have been described as a mystical counter-scientific cult, including Mangala and a servant to Ross known as Lutchman, Lakshman, or Laakhan. Murugan's philosophy was that knowledge modifies reality the moment something is known, and then the 'thing' of reality undergoes a change of quality. The novel provides a suggestive alternative reading of Ross's scientific study, interweaving history with speculative fiction. Ross's Memoirs (1923) was intended to demonstrate Ross would take exclusive credit for the malaria discovery, and thus, it selectively included letters exchanged between Ross and his mentor, Patrick Manson, written between 1895 and 1899. The novel closely follows formal quoting from Ross's Memoirs, which includes an interesting moment in which Ross advised Manson against stating that he had a low-ranking Indian worker perform experiments.

Murugan contests the established historical narrative by suggesting that Ross was unwittingly led to his discovery by the so-called anti-scientific cult. Ross is not the sole genius behind the discovery; Murugan portrays Ross as someone manipulated by forces he could not behold, which placed properly tiny clues into his path. The novel depicts another Nobel Prize winner who discovered that one could induce malaria to alleviate the symptoms of syphilis, found in Julius Wagner-Jauregg's work, with incomplete success. Even those who practiced it were unaware of the full explanation. Murugan points out the paradox of scientific discovery. Sometimes we learn something before we understand fully how or why it works, and all the while, this suggests that knowledge itself is transformational. The Calcutta Chromosome, by Amitav Ghosh, is situated in an investigation layered on top of an investigation. The narrative follows Antar, a computer technician from New York. Ghosh's story has many times; it alternates between Murugan's time in Calcutta and Antarctica today, where someone uses his computer to decipher all the events surrounding Murugan's disappearance. "For years he'd been dreaming of leaving New York and going back to Egypt: of getting out of this musty apartment where all he could see when he looked down the street were boarded-up windows stretching across the fronts of buildings that were almost as empty as his own" (TCC 11).

In 1995, Murugan arrives in Calcutta, retracing the path of Ross and discovering the unseen forces that may lie beneath Ross's scientific work. The narrative weaves through three important temporal spaces: the late 19th century, when Ross made his discovery; the mid-1990s, when the main action occurs; and the early 21st century, when Antar's investigation unearths past enigmas. The novel transitions across India, Egypt, and New York as Antar connects dots that occurred in August 1995. Ross pursues his research on malaria without realizing he is being subtly influenced by a hidden group of individuals. Murugan believes that a secretive native sect has been directing Ross's efforts without his knowledge. Ross, deeply entrenched in colonial ideology, remains oblivious to these unseen influences. Grigson, a linguist who visits Ross's initial laboratory in Secunderabad, senses an air of secrecy surrounding the place, yet his curiosity is thwarted when Lutchman leads him on a harrowing chase along railway tracks, nearly costing him his life. Meanwhile, Cunningham, the doctor overseeing Ross's work in Calcutta, is similarly unaware of the covert activities occurring around him. As his presence becomes an obstacle to the continuation of this hidden knowledge, he is mysteriously driven out of Calcutta through inexplicable means.

Although various changes were introduced throughout the time the colonial state governed areas, lots of things stayed the same at least in the countryside if not worse. There were some changes made, mainly with the organization of the military, the transfer of technology into the colony, and at upper levels of revenue administration, the authority established certain taxes. In rural contexts where land revenue was being extracted from villages, there were mostly no meaningful disruptions in the organization of land-based economies. As during the free trade period, colonial states like India were transformed into a marketplace of the manufactured goods produced in the colonial metropoles and sources of raw materials and food grains for the colonial metropoles, thus reinforcing the economies of the colonies as dependent on the dominant colonial powers.

Elijah Farley is the sole Western person to observe Mangala's religious practices. Mangala, an enigmatic leader in the sect, is portrayed as an almost godlike figure and attains something close to immortality by being reincarnated. As a result of Farley learning the sect's esoteric knowledge, he becomes a liability, leading to his sudden disappearance at Renupur. The Countess Pongracz, a psychic from Hungary who has resigned to becoming an archaeologist, attempts to become an avenue of documentation of supernatural events with C. C. Dunn (perhaps Cunningham under a pseudonym). She pursues the shrine of silence in Egypt but also disappears, reinforcing the theme of suppressed knowledge in the novel and understanding truths that remain just outside of reach. The Ibis Trilogy delves into the socio-economic upheavals of the 19th century, particularly the Opium Wars. The novels bring to life the struggles of marginalized individuals like Raja Neel Ratan Haldar, portraying their displacement with depth and sensitivity. Ghosh's storytelling interweaves themes of indentured labor migration, transnational trade, and mercantilism, offering a critical exploration of colonialism's lasting impact. The trilogy sheds light on British imperial expansion and the forced opium cultivation in Bengal and Bihar under the East India Company. It also portrays the large-scale consumption of opium in China, the confiscation of opium stocks by Commissioner Lin Zexu, and the subsequent British military intervention.

Through figures like Deeti, Ghosh illustrates the environmental degradation imparted by opium cultivation, highlighting its disastrous results for both humans and the environment. By connecting historical events with fictionalized narratives, Ghosh reveals concealed histories and provides a platform for individuals on the margins. The following chapters of the trilogy continue to interrogate the experience of displaced narratives, migration relationships, and how the opium trade continues to shape economies worldwide. The literature produced in India had its origins in oral traditions that later appeared in written formats. In the twentieth century, Indian writers began to gain recognition in both regional languages and in English, a language left over from British colonialism, and Indian English emerged as a distinct form of English. Writing serves as a platform for writers to meditate on and critique life while regularly drawing on historical events and their lives and experiences. "Reid,' said Mr. Burnham patiently, "that British rule in India could not be sustained without opium; that is all there is to it, and let us not pretend otherwise. You are no doubt aware that in some years, the company's annual gains from opium are almost equal to the entire revenue of your own country, the United States." (SOP 100).

Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines is a narrative rooted in the lives of three families across Dhaka, Calcutta, and London, which explores the dynamics of social, religious, and national orientation in relation to the past and its impact on generations. Seemingly the backdrop is the story of the communal riots in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Calcutta, providing an understanding of the agony of migrants and the individuals left behind in the wake of partition. The Shadow Lines depicts the lives of its characters and their tribulations to reflect the notion of displacement, as it takes account of history over an extended length of time. In an Antique Land contrasts the 12th century to modernity. The exposition is about Abraham Ben Yiju through the 12th-century letters he wrote to Khalaf ibn Ishaq in Egypt or to anyone else he wrote, who was the Jewish merchant who lived in Mangalore, India, or someone in 1132 AD.

Conclusion

The novel follows Ghosh's research into historical documents related to Ben Yiju while also depicting his experiences living in rural Egypt, particularly in Nashawy and Lataifa. Much of the surviving records of Ben Yiju's life come from the Geniza archive, discovered in the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Coptic Cairo. By shifting between different times and locations ranging from medieval Cairo and Fustat to the Malabar Coast in India, Ghosh creates a compelling narrative that highlights the interaction between two civilizations. At the heart of In an Antique Land is the relationship between Ben Yiju and his Indian slave, Bomma. Presenting historical facts in a narrative form is challenging; Amitav Ghosh skillfully blends history with storytelling, crafting a vivid reconstruction of the 12th century from fragmented records. His ability to arrange historical details in a coherent and engaging sequence showcases his narrative expertise. Through meticulous research and masterful storytelling, Ghosh brings to life the complexities of cross-cultural connections and historical migrations. Amitav Ghosh further highlights the complexities of cultural interaction. In Arabic, the word for "circumcise" shares a root with the term for "purify," leading to an interaction where Ghosh finds himself unable to counter a cultural assumption about purity. He resigns to saying, "Yes, many people in my country are 'impure'" (62), feeling constrained by language. Similarly, his investigation into the history of Bomma's name introduces him to an obscure religious tradition in Tulunad, where a group known as the Bhutas venerated spirit deities of the same name. These discoveries provide insight into historical and cultural exchanges between regions. Colonial societies were composed of multiple modes of production, from feudalism and petty commodity production to agrarian capitalism, industrial capitalism, and finance capitalism. The colonial state played a role that historians have described as the agent or site of accumulation for the colonial and international capitalist systems and played a foundational role in maintaining this economic and social order. The colonial state was the apparatus through which the metropolitan capitalist class established control over the colonies, exploiting the country and attaching wealth back to the colony. Amitav Ghosh's visit to the tomb of Abu- illustrates the tensions between history and contemporary society. Accompanied by a driver named Mohsin, who expresses a personal interest in visiting the site, Ghosh arrives in Damanhour, only to face a rigid interrogation by a guard. The official demands details about Ghosh's identity, affiliations, and religious background, leaving him unsettled when he cannot provide satisfactory answers. Ghosh thoughtfully engages in a discussion regarding medieval slavery in Egypt and India, suggesting that servitude in those regions lacked the modern-day meaning attached to slavery, which began to receive condemnation within European societies in the seventeenth century. Individuals in these systems were more commonly viewed in the light of apprentices, military companions, or even as executing a form of a sacred tradition with some notion of spiritual connection to the core of godly being. Making a direct parallel between medieval slavery and what we would call apprenticeship is, however, problematic because the material realities of servitude in different cultures were quite different. Through the weaving of these various narratives, Ghosh creates an incredibly intriguing engagement with history and identity, particularly in relation to the challenges of the cross-cultural imagination.

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