Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (2004)

Timeline

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He studied in Delhi, Oxford and Alexandria. He is the author of many important books beside *The Hungry Tide*, among them *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In An Antique Land*, *Dancing in Cambodia*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, and the volumes that make up *The Ibis Trilogy*: *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*. In 2016 he published *The Great Derangement*, a non-fiction work with the subtitle ‘Climate Change and the Unthinkable’.

*The Circle of Reason* was awarded France’s Prix Médicis in 1990, and *The Shadow Lines* won two prestigious Indian prizes the same year, the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Ananda Puraskar. *The Calcutta Chromosome* won the Arthur C. Clarke award for 1997 and *The Glass Palace* won the International e-Book Award at the Frankfurt book fair in 2001. In January 2005 *The Hungry Tide* was awarded the Crossword Book Prize, a major Indian award. His novel, *Sea of Poppies* (2008) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, 2008 and was awarded the Crossword Book Prize and the India Plaza Golden Quill Award. He and Margaret Atwood were joint winners of the Dan David Award for 2010. In 2011 he was awarded the International Grand Prix of the Blue Metropolis Festival in Montreal.

Ghosh’s work has been translated into more than twenty languages and he has served on the Jury of the Locarno Film Festival (Switzerland) and the Venice Film Festival (2001). His essays have been published in important and influential journals throughout the world. A volume of essays, *The Imam and the Indian*, was published in 2002. He has taught in many universities in India and the USA, including Delhi University, Columbia, Queens College and Harvard. In January 2007 he was awarded the Padma Shri, one of India’s highest honours. In 2010 alone, he was awarded honorary doctorates by Queens College, New York, and the Sorbonne.

Subalternity, Difference, Otherness, Incommensurability

The term ‘elite’ [is] used… to signify *dominant* groups, foreign as well as indigenous. The *dominant foreig*n groups include… all the non-Indian, that is, mainly British officials of the colonial state and foreign industrialists, merchants, financiers, planters, landlords and missionaries.

The *dominant indigenous* groups include… classes and interests operating at two levels. At the *all-India level* they include… the biggest feudal magnates, the most important representatives of the industrial and mercantile bourgeoisie and native recruits to the uppermost levels of the bureaucracy.

At the *regional and local levels*, they represent… such classes and other elements are either members of the dominant all-India groups… or if belonging to social strata hierarchically inferior to those of the dominant all-India groups *still act… in the interests of the latter and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being…*

The terms ‘people’ and ‘subaltern classes’ [are] used as [synonyms]… The… groups… included in this category represent the *demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the ‘elite’*. Some of these classes and groups such as the lesser rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle peasants who ‘naturally’ ranked among the ‘people’ and the ‘subaltern’, could under certain circumstances act for the ‘elite’… and therefore be classified as such in some local or regional situation’ (Ranajit Guha ‘On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India’).

‘[The progressive hope is that] [t]hrough the restoration of subjectivity and the focus on experience… a textual space [will be]… opened up in which subaltern groups may speak for themselves and present their hidden past in their own distinctive voices… [W]e must ask ourselves whether we are in danger [not only of turning] the silence of the subaltern into speech, but [of making] their words address our own concerns, and [of rendering] their figures in our own self-image. For my contention here is not only that the recuperation of the subject-agent imposes real limitations on our ability to comprehend the workings of power upon its object, but that its unguarded pursuit produces a diminution in the only constant feature of the subaltern’s ‘nature’ which we can identify with any certainty, which is its alienness from our own (Rosalind O’Hanlon, ‘Recovering the Subject’).

‘She understood now that for Kanai there was a certain reassurance in meeting a woman like Moyna, in such a place as Lusibari: it was as if her very existence were a validation of the choices he had made in his own life. It was important for him to believe that his values were, at bottom, egalitarian, liberal, meritocratic. It reassured him to be able to think, ‘What I want for myself is no different from what everybody wants, no matter how rich or poor; everyone who has any drive, any energy, wants to get on in the world – Moyna is the proof.’ Piya understood too that this was a looking-glass in which a man like Fokir could never be anything other than a figure glimpsed through a rear-view mirror, a rapidly diminishing presence, a ghost from the perpetual past that was Lusibari. But she guessed also that despite its newness and energy, the country Kanai inhabited was full of these ghosts, these unseen presences whose murmurings could never quite be silenced no matter how loud you spoke’ (The Hungry Tide, pp. 219-20).

Cosmopolitanism/Internationalism

‘Historically, cosmopolitanism has combined two distinct significations. On the one hand, it designates an enthusiasm for customary differences, but as ethical or aesthetic material for a unified polychromatic culture – a new singularity born of a blending and merging of multiple local constituents. Typically, in this conception, a subjunctive ‘ought’ contains a normative ‘is’: the suggestion that the period in question is – for the first time in history – already substantially cosmopolitan. On the other hand, cosmopolitanism projects a theory of world government and corresponding citizenship. Here the structure of underlying unity conveyed by the cultural meaning of the term is carried over to the political…The cosmopolitan ideal envisages less a federation or coalition of states than an all-encompassing representative structure in which delegates can deliberate on a global scale. By contrast, internationalism seeks to establish global relations of respect and cooperation, based on acceptance of differences in polity as well as culture. It does not aim to erase such differences juridically, before material conditions exist for doing so equitably. *Inter*nationalism does not quarrel with the principle of *national* sovereignty, for there is no other way under modern conditions to secure respect for weaker societies or peoples. If cosmopolitanism springs from a comfortable culture of middle-class travellers, intellectuals and businessmen, internationalism – although based no less on the realities of global interpenetration and homogenization, mass migration and mass culture, under the dominance of capital – is an ideology of the domestically restricted, the recently relocated, the provisionally exiled and temporarily weak. It is addressed to those who have an interest in transnational forms of solidarity, but whose capacities for doing so have not yet arrived’ (Timothy Brennan, ‘Cosmopolitanism and Internationalism’).

‘Kanai represents a different type of cosmopolitan. Like Sir Daniel he has access to modes of production and can thus initiate a form of intervention that bypasses the national or regional hegemon: in publishing Nirmal’s notebook, he can bring the story of Morichjhapi to an international audience. Unlike Sir Daniel, Kanai is not constrained by the conventions of familial frameworks and patriarchal inheritance. Kanai’s freedom is emphasized by the nature of his relationship with Piya, which in other circumstances could simply have reproduced the bourgeois family unit. The novel closes with a vision of this new cosmopolitan activity. Kanai is publishing Nirmal’s notebook…At the same time Piya is collaborating with Nilima; a union between the global and the local that promises to empower the subaltern inhabitants of the tide country through Piya’s academic and international contacts’ (Terri Tomsky, ‘Amitav Ghosh’s Anxious Witnessing’).

‘By the thousand. Everyone who was willing to work was welcome, S’Daniel said, but on one condition. They could not bring all their petty little divisions and differences. Here there would be no Brahmins or Untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas.’ (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 51)

‘Her family’s opposition served only to strengthen her resolve and in 1949 the young couple were married in a civil ceremony. The wedding was presided over by one of Nirmal’s comrades and was solemnized by readings of Blake, Mayakovsky and Jibanananda Das… It so happened that the year before Nirmal had participated in a conference convened by the Socialist International, in Calcutta. (In telling this story Nirmal would pause here, to note parenthetically that this conference was one of the pivotal events of the postwar world: within a decade or two, Western intelligence agencies and their clients were to trace every major Asian uprising – the Vietnamese insurrection, the Malayan insurgency, the Red Flag rebellion in Burma and much else – to the policy of “armed struggle” adopted in Calcutta in 1948. (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 77)

‘It was surprising enough that their jobs had not proved to be utterly incompatible - especially considering that one of the tasks required the input of geostationary satellites while the other depended on bits of shark-bone and broken tiles [….] she saw something in his expression that told her that he too was amazed by the seamless intertwining of their pleasures and their purposes’. (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 141).

Piya understood too that this was a looking-glass in which a man like Fokir could never be anything other than a figure glimpsed through a rear-view mirror, a rapidly diminishing presence, a ghost from a perpetual past that was Lusibari. (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 220)

Border Crossings

‘The curious thing, of course, is that I'm not from one of the real diasporic communities of India – the Bangladeshis, for example, the Gujaratis or Sindhis – but perhaps especially because of that, the topic of travel and movement caught my interest. I wanted to write about it because it was a challenge, because the whole terrain of the novel has historically been so much one of exploring a place, creating a sense of place, a sense of rootedness – as in Turgenev, for instance, or George Eliot. It was a challenge to try and see how you could take the form outwards, explore these different sorts of connections. When I first wrote my books there was a clear hostility from within a certain English readership about writing concerned with “just” travelling around the world. Now it’s completely changed, I feel…’ (Ghosh, qtd. In Boehmer and Mondal, ‘Networks and Traces’)

‘Considering Ghosh's novel in comparison with works of his contemporaries Vikram Seth and Salman Rushdie, Partha Chatterjee concludes that Ghosh seems more uncomfortable with his “role of Western educated literary observer” and notes that instead of just mining his visits to India for content, Ghosh makes an effort “to capture the flavour of the Bengali language including the dialects of the Sunderbans.” Chatterjee also suggests, however, that Ghosh's distance from India interferes with his ability to write a truly great novel, one that blends his impressive research with lived experience. Chatterjee implies that Ghosh's use of English might distance him from India, but his Western education and part-time residence in the USA also impose other types of distance. However, this position also affords Ghosh a view of India from both inside and outside that enables him to adapt the form of the novel to comment on its alliance with a Western model of overseeing vision. Rather than simply inhabiting the viewing position of detached observer, Ghosh uses his position between cultures to circulate a multifaceted picture of the Sunderbans to middle-class Indian and global English speaking readers, allowing him to provide an alternative conception of human–nature relationships to audiences who are currently the targets of development and conservation discourse’ (Laura A. White, ‘Novel Vision’).

‘There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea…The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily – some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there was none before’ (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 7)

‘*All the time our boat was at that spot, the creatures kept breaking the water around us. What held them there? What made them linger? I could not imagine. Then there came a moment when one of them broke the surface with its head and looked write at me. Now I saw why Kusum found it so easy to believe that these animals were something other than what they were. For where she had seen a sign of Bon Bibi, I saw instead, the gaze of the Poet. It was as if he were saying to me:*

*some mute animal*

*raising its calm eyes and seeing through us,*

*and through us. This is destiny*’ (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 235)

‘For Kanai the greatest surprise came right at the start of the show. This was because the story of the tiger-goddess did not begin either in the heavens or on the banks of the Ganges [….] Instead, the opening scene was set in a city in Arabia and the backdrop was painted with mosques and minarets’. (*The Hungry Tide*, pp. 102-3)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2ElB_aikCw>

(Bonbibi jatra performance)

‘How could it be otherwise? For this I have seen confirmed many times, that the mudbanks of the tide country are shaped not only by rivers of silt, but also by rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else? Flowing into each other they create a proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow. And so it dawned on me: the tide country’s faith is something like one of its great mohonas, a meeting not just of many rivers, but a roundabout people can use to pass in many directions – from country to country and even between faiths and religions’ (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 247).

Translating the World

‘The very looseness of the “translational” relation implied between “original” and “translation” or “copy”, then, means that it might equally well be defined alternatively as a form of “intertextuality”. Perhaps we could call it a form of “bound intertextuality”, in that it posits a stricter link between two (or more) texts than is necessarily the case in an intertextual relation, where the mere mention of an element from another text may suffice to qualify the relation as such. At the same time, the relation here suggested is always less strict than that which we usually associate with a “real” translation. It seems to me that so-called postcolonial writers in particular have very aptly seized upon the possibilities offered by this specific use of translation/

intertextuality… [P]ostcolonial authors have been quick to seize upon the “transgressive” potential of “translating” especially the “classics” of European, and particularly English or British, colonial literature into “rewritings” more germane to their own postcolonial point of view, re-translating as it were the West's earlier, and biased, “translations” of colonial relationships into literary canonicity’ (Theo D’Haen, ‘Antique Lands, New Worlds’).

‘Minutes later, she was back in position, with her binoculars fixed to her eyes, watching the water with a closeness of attention that reminded Kanai of a textual scholar poring over a yet undeciphered manuscript: it was as though she were puzzling over a codex that had been authored by the earth itself. He had almost forgotten what it meant to look at something so ardently – an immaterial thing, not a commodity nor a convenience nor an object of erotic interest. He remembered that he too had once concentrated his mind in this way; he too had peered into the unknown as if through an eyeglass – but the vistas he had been looking at lay deep within the interior of other languages. Those horizons had filled him with the desire to learn of the ways in which other realities were conjugated. And he remembered too the obstacles, the frustration, the sense that he would never be able to bend his mouth around those words, produce those sounds, put sentences together in the required way, a way that seemed to call for a recasting of the usual order of things. It was pure desire that had quickened his mind then and he could feel the thrill of it even now – except now that desire was incarnated in the woman who was standing before him, in the bow, a language made flesh’. (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 269).

‘In Kanai’s professional life there had been a few instances in which the act of interpretation had given him the momentary sensation of being transported out of his body and into another. In each instance it was as if the instrument of language had metamorphosed – instead of being a barrier, a curtain that divided, it had become a transparent film, a prism, that allowed him to look through another set of eyes, to filter the world through a mind other than his own. These experiences had always come about unpredictably, without warning or apparent cause, and no thread of similarity linked these occasions, except that in each of them he had been working as an interpreter. But he was not working now, and yet it was exactly this feeling that came upon him as he looked at Fokir: it was as though his own vision were being refracted through those opaque, unreadable eyes, and he were seeing not himself, Kanai Dutt, but a great host of people – a double for the outside world, someone standing in for the men who had destroyed Fokir’s village, burnt his home and killed his mother; he had become a token for a vision of human beings in which a man such as Fokir counted for nothing, a man whose value was less than that of an animal. In seeing himself in this way, it seemed perfectly comprehensible to Kanai why Fokir should want him to be dead – but he understood also that this was not how it would be. Fokir had brought him here not because he wanted him to die, but because he wanted him to be judged. (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 327)

‘You asked me what Fokir was singing and I said I couldn’t translate it: it was too difficult. And this was no more than the truth, for in those words there was a history that is not just his own but also of this place’. (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 354)

Forest Refuge

’Many islanders explained to me that they and tigers had lived in a sort of idyllic relationship prior to the events of Morichjhanpi. After Morichjhanpi, they said, tigers had started preying on humans. This sudden development of their man-eating trait was believed to have been caused by two factors. One was the defiling of the Sunderban forest due to government violence, the second was because of the stress which had been put thereafter on the superiority of tigers in relation to the inhabitants of the Sunderbans (Annu Jalais, ‘Dwelling on Morichjhapi’).

‘It is in postcolonial India, with its colonial past and continued claims of social justice from the displaced, the Dalits, the minorities, and women that refugees are “created”. Morichjhapi’s spectral refugee is emblematic of the inadequacy of the postcolonial state to provide a safe “home”… Ghosh’s critique of the politics of possession/dispossession is worked out effectively through a postcolonial uncanny…The uncanny, as theorized by Freud (1919) is abut the human “sense” of house and home. It is a perception of a space where the perceiver finds herself simultaneously “at home” and “not at home”…The sight of a particular place or event invokes uncanny dread because the perceiver hesitates to classify, define and identify the ambiguity in the place or event (Pramod K. Nayar, ‘The Postcolonial Uncanny’).

’It was not just that he had thought to create a space for her; it was as if he had chosen to include her in some simple, practised family ritual, found a way to let her know that despite the inescapable muteness of their exchanges, she was a person to him… But where had this recognition come from? He had probably never met anyone like her before, any more than she had ever met anyone like him (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 71).

‘We’re tide country people… rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood. Our fathers had once answered Hamilton’s call: they had wrested the estate from the sway of the tides… For months we prepared, we sold everything we owned. But the police fell on us the moment we moved… but we still would not go back; we began to walk’ (*The Hungry Tide*, pp. 164-5).

‘But now it’s there is front of you, in front of your eyes – this hospital. And if you ask me what I will do to protect it, let me tell you, I will fight for it like a mother fights to protect her children… stay away from Marichjhapi. I know the government will not allow the settlers to stay and I know also that they will be vengeful towards everyone who gets mixed up in this business (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 214).

’Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names?...and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 261-2)

‘Then she saw a knot of flame arcing over the crowd and falling on the thatch; almost all at once, branches of flame sprouted from the roof of the pen. There was another roar and this was matched a moment later by the voices of the crowd, screaming, in a kind of maddened bloodlust, *Maar*! *Maar*!’(*The Hungry Tide*, p. 295).

‘If not for the tide country, the plains would have been drowned long before: it was the mangroves that kept the hinterland alive. Kolkata’s long, winding sea-lane was thus its natural defence against the turbulent energies of the Bay; the new port, on the other hand, was dangerously exposed…even a minor storm would suffice to wash it away; all it would take was a wave stirred up by a cyclone (*The Hungry Tide*, p. 286).

‘Without blinking, the tiger watched them for several minutes; during this time it made no movement other than to twitch its tail…But something had changed and it took Piya a few minutes to register the difference. The wind was now coming from the opposite direction. Where she had had the tree trunk to shelter her before, now there was only Fokir’s body…it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one (*The Hungry Tide*, pp. 389-90).