

WORKING THE GAP: AMITAV GHOSH AND THE POSTCOLONIAL LABOUR OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

*Amitav Ghosh's fiction, from *The Circle of Reason* to *Flood of Fire*, returns again and again to a single wager: that the novel can recover what history has misplaced, discarded, or never thought worth recording. This paper reads that wager against the theoretical ground prepared by Hayden White, Ranajit Guha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, for whom history is itself a mode of narrative construction rather than a transparent window onto the past. Ghosh belongs, by temperament and by timing, to the generation that came of age alongside Subaltern Studies, and his novels share its founding suspicion: that the archive speaks chiefly in the voice of the victor. Reading *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, and the completed Ibis trilogy together, the paper traces three related operations in Ghosh's method: the recovery of erased anti-colonial networks, the excavation of a counter-scientific knowledge that imperial epistemology worked to suppress, and the reconstruction of an opium economy that colonial record-keeping preferred to leave undocumented. The argument is not that Ghosh writes history in place of fiction, but that his fiction performs, deliberately, the historian's own labour of emplotment, polishing what it excavates into narrative sense.*

Keywords: postcolonial historiography; Subaltern Studies; Amitav Ghosh; historical fiction; micro-history; emplotment.

History, Hayden White once proposed, is a kind of storytelling that has forgotten it is telling a story. The historian selects. The historian orders. The historian suppresses one fact to let another carry the weight of an epoch and calls the result an account of what happened. Amitav Ghosh has spent three decades working the seam that opens between those two admissions — the admission, from the theorists of historiography, that history is narrative before it is anything else, and the older, more stubborn assumption that the novel is merely narrative's decorative cousin.

The theoretical permission for this seam came from several directions at once, and it is worth naming them before turning to the novels themselves. White's *Metahistory* and *Tropics of Discourse* argued that the historian's raw material — a congeries of unprocessed fact — becomes history only through emplotment, the same technique a novelist uses to turn events into a plot. Ranajit Guha, inaugurating *Subaltern Studies* in 1982, made a companion argument from the opposite end: that Indian historiography, whether colonialist or nationalist, was elitist in its very sources, built from files, dispatches, and memoirs that could not register the subaltern except as an object to be pacified. Dipesh Chakrabarty pushed the point further, arguing that European

categories remain the silent grammar of every history written about India, so that the postcolonial historian works, of necessity, inside a language not built for the material it must carry.

Ghosh's fiction began appearing at almost exactly this moment, and the coincidence is not incidental. *The Circle of Reason* was published in 1986, four years after the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*; *The Shadow Lines* followed in 1988. What follows traces that overlap through four case histories: the underground and mercenary lives buried inside *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*, the counter-science smuggled into *The Calcutta Chromosome*, and the opium economy excavated across *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*. The claim is cumulative rather than declarative — Ghosh rarely announces a thesis about historiography inside his own novels — so the case, and not the doctrine, has to carry the argument.

EMPLOTMENT AND ITS DISCONTENTS: HISTORY AFTER THE LINGUISTIC TURN

Traditional history, in the line running from Hegel through the early twentieth century, treated the past as a settled object waiting to be reconstructed, not made. Two thinkers cracked that confidence before the postcolonial critics arrived to finish the job. Nietzsche insisted that history could be recovered from the vantage of whoever had been excluded from it. Marx went further, treating history and literature alike as modes of production, shaped by the material conditions of their making and not by any method that could claim to stand outside ideology. By the second half of the twentieth century that scepticism had matured into Historicism and its offshoots, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, both of which extended the archive of legitimate historical evidence to include cookery books, surgical notes, and the incidental debris of daily life alongside state papers.

Hayden White gave the scepticism its sharpest formulation. In *Tropics of Discourse*, White argued that the historian, confronted with a fragmentary and often contradictory record, must impose a plot on it — must decide, in effect, which facts are protagonists and which are merely scenery. He called this process emplotment, and meant the word to carry its full theatrical charge: the historian stages the past rather than transcribing it. Linda Hutcheon, writing a decade later in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, described history and fiction as “notoriously porous genres” (Hutcheon 106), each borrowing techniques — characterisation, pacing, withheld information — that the other had long claimed as its own.

None of this dissolves the difference between history and fiction into nothing; it relocates the difference. If both genres depend on imaginative reconstruction to bridge the gaps in what survives, the question worth asking of any given text is not whether it invents, but what it does with the licence to invent — whose absence it fills, and to what end. Ghosh's fiction answers that question with unusual consistency. The gaps he chooses to fill are, almost without exception, gaps

that a triumphalist national or imperial record found convenient to leave open. His novels do not so much rewrite history as go looking for the history that was never allowed to be written in the first place, and in this his practice sits closer to Guha and Chakrabarty than to the postmodern relativism sometimes attributed, not always fairly, to writers who blur the line between archive and invention.

SUBALTERN STUDIES AND THE CASE FOR THE NOVEL

Guha's opening salvo in *Subaltern Studies I* accused both colonialist and nationalist history of an identical elitism: each told the story of India's making as the achievement of great men — viceroys and Congress leaders alike — while the peasant, the labourer, and the soldier appeared only as a mass to be led or subdued. Chakrabarty's later essay sharpened the diagnosis into a paradox. The postcolonial historian, he argued, has no choice but to think inside European categories — the nation, the citizen, the modern subject — even while demonstrating that those categories cannot fully accommodate an Indian past. Historicism becomes, on his account, indispensable and inadequate at once.

Guha's subalternist project sits inside a wider turn, sometimes gathered under the loose umbrella of History from Below and Micro-History, that shares a working premise regardless of the particular label: that societies and nations are abstractions, and the record of an abstraction cannot substitute for the record of the family, the individual, or the small community actually living through an event. Most of this apparatus was developed with a European historiography in mind, and its transplantation to a colonial and postcolonial Indian context is not automatic; the categories carry an inheritance the subalternists themselves spent considerable energy interrogating. But the underlying wager — that mass movements are made of people who do not experience themselves as masses — travels reasonably well, and Ghosh's fiction is best read as testing that wager one character at a time rather than assuming it in advance.

Where classical historiography narrates in aggregates — the peasantry, the army, the nation — Ghosh works in the singular, often anonymous life through which a larger dislocation becomes visible. Rajkumar, the orphan who rises from boat-boy to timber magnate in *The Glass Palace*, carries an entire economic history of Burma's teak and rice frontiers on his own unremarkable back. Alu, in *The Circle of Reason*, threads a similarly obscure path through Bengal, the Gulf, and North Africa. Neel Rattan Halder, stripped of his zamindari in *River of Smoke*, becomes a copyist and translator in Canton's foreign enclave, his fall from rank turned into a vantage point on a trade his own class had profited from and never fully understood. None of these figures would qualify, on the terms of conventional historiography, as makers of history. That is precisely the point subalternist history had already made about the archive; Ghosh makes it again, at novel length, about the reader.

ERASURE AND ITS RECOVERY: THE SHADOW LINES AND THE GLASS PALACE

Frantz Fanon's account of colonialism as a "systematic negation" of the colonised subject's history and culture supplies a sharp frame for what Ghosh does across *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*. Both novels return to networks and movements that official memory allowed to fade: the underground revolutionary societies of early twentieth-century Bengal in the first case, the mercenary conscience of the colonial Indian Army in the second.

The Shadow Lines recalls, through the character Tridib, the clandestine world of Anushilan and Jugantar, the secret societies that plotted against British officials in the opening decades of the century and paid for it in arrests, deportations, and executions largely absent from the national narrative that would later celebrate Gandhi and non-violence as the freedom struggle's only idiom. Ghosh does not present this as a corrective triumph — the societies are not rehabilitated as heroes — but as a reminder that the story India eventually agreed to tell about its own liberation was one story among several that had been possible, and that the others did not simply vanish; they were edited out.

The same erasure operates a register lower, in a conversation between two of the novel's women, Uma and Dolly, about the Ghadar Party and its successor, the Indian Independence League, a wartime network of thousands of overseas Indians whose existence, Dolly is startled to learn, had never reached her despite her own family's proximity to nationalist circles. Ghosh gives no dramatic reveal to this omission; Dolly's surprise is the entire point, since it shows how completely a movement of that scale could vanish from a life otherwise attentive to the freedom struggle, crowded out by a nationalist memory organised almost entirely around Gandhi.

The Glass Palace performs a related recovery at greater length, through the uncomfortable question of what an Indian soldier serving under the British flag was actually fighting for. The novel's Arjun, a young officer stationed in Burma in 1942, is forced to hear his own profession named plainly by civilians who call his regiment hired killers rather than soldiers. His friend Hardy's answer — that every soldier in every modern army is, in the end, a mercenary, paid to obey a will not his own — reframes loyalty to empire not as treachery but as a structural condition few colonial subjects were permitted to examine openly. The novel is explicit about the machinery that kept this examination from happening: recruitment confined to particular castes, soldiers cut off from wider political life, land and employment held out as inducements to loyalty (223). Ghosh's most pointed illustration of the machinery's success is historical rather than invented. When General Reginald Dyer ordered troops to fire on an unarmed crowd at Jallianwala Bagh on 13 April 1919, the regiment that accompanied him was a Gorkha unit — men drawn from precisely the recruitment logic *The Glass Palace* anatomises, deployed against the countrymen of a nation not their own to defend an empire that was, in the most literal sense, not theirs either.

It finally takes an outsider's plain words to break the loyalty Arjun has been trained into. After Burma's occupied civilians reveal to him that his own people have starved under conditions no different from those his regiment was sent to police, he arrives at a description of himself as "a toy, a manufactured thing, a weapon in someone else's hand" (376). The phrase does the work of an entire chapter of subaltern historiography in a single sentence, and Ghosh earns the right to it only because the preceding two hundred pages have shown, rather than argued, how such a self-description becomes thinkable.

COUNTER-SCIENCE AND THE OTHER TEAM: THE CALCUTTA CHROMOSOME

The Calcutta Chromosome stages its recovery of erased history inside the history of science rather than empire's military or political apparatus, and the shift in register matters. Ronald Ross's discovery of the malaria parasite's transmission through the *Anopheles* mosquito is, in the official record, a triumph of British colonial medicine, crowned with a Nobel Prize. Ghosh's novel, narrated substantially through the obsessive researcher Murugan, reopens that record and finds it stranger than the citation suggests: an account in which Ross stumbles toward answers that a group of Indian assistants and informal researchers — the "other team," in Murugan's phrase — appear to have reached before him, by a route resistant to the West's insistence that knowledge must be classifiable, replicable, and public to count as knowledge at all.

The novel is careful, and rightly so, never to specify exactly what the other team believed, since to do so would be to translate a counter-science back into the very idiom it was constructed to evade. What it offers instead is a critique of a familiar colonial figure of speech — India as a land of snake charmers and mysticism — that Ghosh reads not as harmless local colour but as a serviceable alibi. If Indian medical knowledge could be filed under superstition, then the traditions of snake-venom treatment without antivenom, and whatever the other team knew about malaria before Ross did, could be dismissed rather than investigated. Ghosh extends the same argument outside the novel's frame, pointing in interview to the physicist Jagdish Chandra Bose as a case of Indian science proceeding from a sense of unity between observer and observed, closer to Advaita than to the West's habitual separation of subject from object ("Diasporic Predicaments" 10).

The Calcutta Chromosome's counter-science is, in this sense, the closest Ghosh comes to a historiographical statement delivered in the register of fiction rather than argument. Where *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace* recover erased political history, this novel recovers an erased epistemology, and does so by refusing the reader the satisfaction of a fully reconstructed alternative. The gap stays a gap. That refusal is itself the argument: some histories cannot be recovered in full without falsifying the manner of their original suppression.

THE UNWRITTEN LEDGER: OPIUM AND THE IBIS TRILOGY

If *The Calcutta Chromosome* recovers a suppressed epistemology, the completed Ibis trilogy — *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire* — recovers a suppressed ledger: the nineteenth-century economics of opium, grown under compulsion in the Gangetic plain, processed in the government factories at Ghazipur, and shipped to a Chinese market that the same government spent considerable diplomatic and naval effort forcing open. The trilogy follows indentured labourers, sepoys, opium farmers, and Parsi merchants across the Bay of Bengal to Mauritius and on to the foreign enclave at Canton, reconstructing a traffic that colonial record-keeping preferred, for obvious reasons, not to narrate in moral terms.

Ghosh is unsparing about the mechanism of that evasion. Opium, unlike food or cloth, answers no bodily need; it is manufactured demand, sustained by advertisement and addiction rather than necessity, and the trade's defenders in the novels know this perfectly well even as they dress the traffic in the language of commerce and providence. *Sea of Poppies* puts the era's most notorious piece of that language directly into a merchant's mouth, borrowing a phrase actually coined by Sir John Bowring: "Jesus Christ is free trade, and free trade is Jesus Christ" (106). Bowring made the line famous years before he became Governor of Hong Kong, and Ghosh borrows it because inventing anything comparably damning would only have softened it.

The irony sharpens once the trilogy's geography is set against the historical record. Samuel George Bonham, Governor of the Straits Settlements through the years the trilogy's opium clippers pass through Singapore, went on to govern Hong Kong itself a few years later, so that a single colonial career presided, in succession, over the two ports around which the opium trade's Southeast Asian circuit turned. Both cities today impose severe penalties, including capital punishment, for drug trafficking, and neither, in Ghosh's telling, keeps much public memory of having been built, in real part, on the trade each now punishes so heavily.

The trilogy's labour narrative is equally attentive to what the record omits. Its indentured workers travel to Mauritius under contracts the novels present as barely distinguishable from the servitude they were meant, on paper, to replace, and the ships' manifests that survive in archives at Sydney and Port Louis record numbers without registering the coercion, the false promises, or the ordinary human confusion of people crossing an ocean they had never expected to see. Where official economic history counts tonnage and revenue, Ghosh's trilogy counts what those figures cost the people who produced them — the opium farmers of Ghazipur no less than the labourers who boarded the Ibis. The result is not a rejection of economic history so much as its supplement: the trilogy asks what a ledger looks like once its entries include the people the original ledger was never designed to see.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these four case histories point to a working method rather than a single argument. Ghosh does not claim, anywhere in his fiction, that the novel supersedes the historian's discipline; the appendix bibliographies attached to *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*, listing the shipping records, botanical studies, and linguistic sources behind their invented crossings, are themselves an acknowledgement of that discipline's authority. What his fiction claims instead is a licence the historian's own procedures make available but rarely exercise fully: the licence, drawn from White's account of emplotment, to follow a suppressed thread past the point where the surviving archive gives out, and to do so openly, as invention, rather than smuggling the same imaginative labour into a monograph's hedges and modal verbs.

This is also where the argument should concede its own edges rather than round them off. A novel that recovers Bengal's revolutionary underground, or the other team's counter-science, or the opium ledger's silences, still recovers them through Ghosh's own selections, and a critic in a more sceptical mood might reasonably ask whether fiction-as-history simply substitutes one emplotment for another — the imperial archive's silence replaced by a novelist's equally partial noise. Ghosh's fiction does not fully answer that objection, and it is not obvious that any single work of historical fiction could. What it offers instead is a demonstration, case by case, that the space Chakrabarty identified between an indispensable and an inadequate historiography need not stay empty. Someone has to work that space, however provisionally, and Ghosh has spent three decades showing what happens when a novelist takes on the historian's excavation without first asking permission.

The gems, to return to this paper's own metaphor, do not emerge from the ground pre-cut. Ghosh's fiction performs the historian's remaining task in public — the emplotment, the polishing, the decision about which fact carries the epoch — and asks its readers to notice that the decision was always being made, by someone, long before the novel arrived to make it visible.

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