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## Amitav Ghosh and the Uses of Subaltern History

Nandana Dutta

### Abstract

The interface between history and fiction has been an area of rich potential for the postcolonial novelist in South Asia and this is evident in the practice of many novelists from the region who have used historical material as backdrop but have also used fiction to comment on recent events in their countries. In this paper I examine the work of Amitav Ghosh as offering a fictional method that has evolved out of his immersion in subaltern historical practice and one that successfully bridges the gap between these two genres. I show this through his deployment of historical material in the three novels, *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Glass Palace* (2000) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004), where Ghosh is not simply 'using' the subaltern method but pointing to the possibilities of reparation. Ghosh adopts a complex inversion of the subaltern method that involves two processes: one, the selection of small, neglected events from the national story in a concession to subaltern practice –the little narrative against the grand; and two, the neglect by the narrative of some aspect of these stories. He does this by choosing his historical area carefully, keeping some part of it silent and invisible and then meditating on silence as it is revealed as a fictional and historical necessity. I suggest that Ghosh, by retrieving and giving place/voice to the historically repressed event in the fiction, achieves a swerve from simply 'righting the record' and releases the marginal as a referent in the present. Such fiction enters the realm of intervention in public discourse, or carries the potential, by introducing considerations that create public consciousness about historical injustices, successfully 'using' subaltern history.

There is so much to say, so much in my head,  
so much that will remain unsaid. ...  
Even silence is a kind of preparation.

Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*

Literature that has emerged in South Asia in recent times has crucially engaged with events from the recent past of countries in the region. This has been especially true of

fiction. Placing itself in the colonial aftermath, in the midst of troubled colonial legacies that have erupted in violence, separatist aspirations and social divisions, the fictional text has deployed its generic features to achieve interpretations and revisions of recent history and often intervened in the discursive self-presentation of the South Asian nation, its political choices and its understanding of itself.

It is possible to see these developments in novels that emerged in the post 1980s, written by authors like Allan Sealy, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor, Arundhati Roy (India), Hanif Mohammed (Pakistan), Romesh Gunesekhara (Sri Lanka), Tahmina Anam (Bangladesh), all of whom have responded creatively to their times and to the turbulent postcolonial histories of their nations, offering revisionist readings of events themselves or of the violence and terror that have been their fallout. In the process, the novel form has been used with fresh insight and a keen awareness of its representational power; and the close relationship that exists between fiction and history, and the cultures of history and historiography, have been inevitable sources for the novelist. Following the example of Salman Rushdie who offered an interpretation of the political choices of modern India in *Midnight's Children* (presenting alternatives to the ideas of the nation, to its rationale for division into constituent states, and a critique of the declaration of Emergency in India thereby radically transforming the postcolonial novel), these authors critically examined events from the recent history of their countries like independence from colonial rule, the assassination of leaders, insurgencies and the character of societies and cultures that evolved in the wake of imperialism.

Against these discursive interventions, Amitav Ghosh has been an important presence, bringing to fictional practice his grounding not only in anthropology (his parent discipline) but in subaltern history, the most well known instance of this being the piece "The Slave of MS H.6" which was originally written for one of the volumes of *Subaltern Studies*, and later incorporated into the ethnographic text, *In An Antique Land*. Ghosh's "grafting" of the subaltern historical method into the fictional has been so enthusiastically received by critics that it is impossible to find an essay or a commentary that does not replicate in critical practice what Ghosh does in the creative. Ghosh's declaration that he is not writing the "19<sup>th</sup> c dynastic European novel form" but a "contemporary memoir," "a project in chronicling a family history" (*Ghosh and Aldama*, "An Interview" 85) has been echoed by critics who have re-presented it as a fictional practice tacitly set against subaltern theoretical assumptions. This is apparent

in critics developing interpretations based on the novels' interest in the lives of "ordinary people," a "more genuinely human experience" and an "alternative history" (Wassef 76). It also appears in a more sophisticated version of subaltern practice that identifies a discursive basis in the vernacular, identified as the "other" archive that is "grafted" on to the European novel form and haunts it. Bishnupriya Ghosh demonstrates this in *The Calcutta Chromosome* where two Indian language texts by Rabindranath Tagore and Phanishwarnath Renu are embedded in a combination of "ghosting" and "grafting" (197).

In the process, what the Ghosh text offers by way of opportunity to examine the subaltern practice itself—and one glimpses a little of this in the exchange with Dipesh Chakrabarty—is missed. There is a tacit critique at Ghosh's end of the exchange and in Ghosh's work in general, of the limitations of the subaltern method and if one arrives at this critique through the choice and deployment of historical material in the three novels, *The Shadow Lines (SL)*, *The Glass Palace (GL)* and *The Hungry Tide (HT)*, it becomes clear that Ghosh is not simply 'using' the subaltern method but in taking up the other side of even the subaltern narratives—an alternative to alternative histories—pointing to the possibilities of reparation.

Ghosh does not cut a swathe through an entire national imaginary like Rushdie. Instead he adopts a complex inversion of the subaltern method that involves two processes: one, the selection of small, neglected events from the national story in a concession to subaltern practice—the little narrative against the grand; and two, the neglect by the narrative of some aspect of these stories. He does this by choosing his historical area carefully, keeping some part of it silent and invisible and then meditating on silence as it is revealed as a fictional and historical necessity. In *HT* the marginal highly personalised genre of the diary through which the Morichjhapi incident is recounted is retrieved from its silent existence even as the incident is similarly retrieved. In *SL* Tridib's death is a silent moment in the narrator's memory that has to be retrieved and understood so that Tridib's dominating presence in his life may also be exorcised. These retrievals are a necessary aspect of both the method of subaltern history and of its critique that the Ghosh text offers.

Silence indeed is what interests the subaltern method—the silence of the subaltern against the mainstream; the silence of subaltern material and person that urges articulation by a spokesperson (*HT* achieves this neatly through the diary maintained by the spokesperson for Morichjhapi); and the fictional method that draws on this

essential silence of the subaltern material as it structures itself around a repressed or silent 'point of beginning.' Ghosh has in fact transformed the subaltern method of focusing and subverting with the help of the marginal into a fictional method where the recovery of the repressed primal scenes (the death of Tridib, the massacres and the long march from Burma in the three novels) also facilitate critique of subaltern practice. Many of the essays in the *Subaltern Studies* volumes focus on an incident of resistance from the past that was erased in mainstream history. Ghosh's own essay on the slave of MS 6 is a good example of how the finding of a tiny, ostensibly insignificant fragment of history can transform an entire period and shift it out of earlier modes of interpretation –finding the busy exchanges between Egypt and India, long before the European discovery of these worlds. But as he takes this approach into the novels, he also initiates a further shift, adapting the subaltern method of retrieving the historically repressed as a model for the fiction where the repressed now becomes the point of origin for the novel. In describing subaltern practice, Ranajit Guha has pointed to four effects: it "challenge[s] the univocity of statist discourse," "puts the question of agency...back into the narrative," "makes audible other small voices," "interrupts the telling of the dominant version" (11-12). This method also discussed as analysis of "the historical moment of rebellion" (Das 312 ) and critiqued as prey to its own system (Spivak *In Other Worlds*) seems to offer itself as a readymade model for the novel.

However, I suggest that Ghosh, by retrieving and giving place/voice to the historically repressed event in the fiction, achieves a swerve from simply 'righting the record' and releases the marginal as a referent in the present. For example, the communal riots of the past are replicated in the animosities of the present: the riot in *SL* during which Tridib is killed along with Jethamoshai and the rickshawpuller offers a comment on the many instances of communal violence that has marked the story of modern India; the massacre in *HT* refers the reader to the disturbing *real* presence of the illegal migrant from Bangladesh in different parts of India, especially in the border states and the anger she provokes that may result in an incident like the Nellie massacre in Assam in 1983; the long march from Burma and Ghosh's sympathetic representation of that country and its peoples in *GP* is seen in conjunction with its present where it is caught between the military junta, the democracy movement and the opinion of the international community. Such fiction enters the realm of intervention in public discourse, or carries the potential, by introducing considerations that create public consciousness about historical injustices. By introducing new

material into the field, the novels play these off against their historical erasure but also against existing notions about these in the places of their occurrence or arrival.

The Ghosh text offers these options by challenging itself with what it means to represent the marginal and hitherto repressed and what constitutes subaltern speech. And Ghosh undertakes this critique by selecting material that has overt subaltern possibilities but also points the reader to that which this material itself silences (I say this in spite of Guha's claim about the method enabling the articulation of other small voices). I argue that this happens in Ghosh's deliberate choice of the kind of material that has multiple subaltern locations and trajectories. Such focus on the historical material deliberately selected, juxtaposes what the novels contain as subaltern history and that which they elide and which becomes visible only when the novels arrive in the darkened locations of the other side and jostle for space with texts that tell an alternative story. There is a tacit play here between the place of creation which, in the case of all three novels, is the area in and around Bengal demarcated by the subaltern studies collective, and the place where the novel also arrives that is 'other' in having its own history of the same event. I am in this instance also gesturing towards a voicing achieved by a specific location that may have been marginal in India's history as much as in subaltern history (as Assam is) –and it is a participation of this location in the novel's critique that sends new material into the field.

These locations, that I call the 'subaltern's repressed,' by presenting alternative interpretations of marginal history, invite intervention. This process works not against the reader who might accuse the text of being unaware but by sharing with or allowing the participation of the reader who has knowledge of what the text elides. The rationale for retrieval of these deliberate erasures is embedded in the text as much through erasures as through tropes of silence that the novels show as versions of subaltern speaking. This practice, though, has been read by critics as "an inadequacy of language to represent emotion and the encounter with the other" (Huttunen 335), "a humanism transcending discourse" (Dixon 17), and "a postmodern recognition of difference" (Mondol 30).

The moral shift in the fiction is tied up with concerns about subaltern voice. The narrator in *SL* overcomes the enthrallment to Tridib that keeps him silent through the novel and speaks in his own voice at the end after the redemptive relationship with Tridib's girlfriend May allows him to recover a lost selfhood. It is apparent in the Egyptian villagers of *In an Antique Land* who become subjects as they overturn the

hierarchy of ethnographer and object of study, by making the ethnographer the target of questions. It appears in *GP* when Rajkumar is finally able to enter Uma's world (one where he had always been tongue tied and uncomfortable) after coming back to India from Burma; Dolly is able to realise her long cherished dream of entering the monastery; and Dinu, awkward and young for most of the novel, becomes a seer whose voice is much sought after at the end. And it shows itself in *HT*, in Fokir shielding Piya with his body and giving his life to save her from the storm. In fact, from the moment she enters his world, Piya is protected by Fokir but that his voice was always there and only had to be recognised is shown by the novel in this last gesture that transforms him into agent and allows him to speak to those who would see him as 'object' of pity or ridicule. The silence of each of these texts is also in the entanglement of marginalities – the acknowledged subaltern, that which the subaltern suppresses, and characters and ideas that represent the silences that run through these. In *HT*, for instance, Nirmal's diary is such a text that is subdued within the central narrative but is the textual site of the massacre, and contains and enables Fokir's speech.

Ghosh uses 'an archival moment' to open up an interpretation of contemporary history but also makes this originary point the "primal scene" (Freud read by Peter Brooks as a narrative model) from which the novel proceeds and around which it is structured. It is therefore interesting to observe not only what the historical record represses and is retrieved by Ghosh, but what the Ghosh text in turn represses (one might recall that in the psychoanalytic model for narrative, the analysand's narrative is uncovered and corrected by the analyst and a new narrative containing new and other repressions is offered –the suppression of narrative components being an essential aspect of therapeutic and narrative closure). This is particularly evident in *SL* where the story of human displacement on the borders of India and what was then East Pakistan is tilted in sympathy towards the migrant from that country –families continue to have their roots, second homes and relatives in East Pakistan– and a possible alternative response from the host society appears only in the form of the communal riot at the heart of the novel. Thamma always longs for the lost land. And the novel presents the longing of the displaced –whether it is in Tridib's imaginative conjuring or whether in the restlessness of Ila– for a world other than the one she is in, despite the fact that the everyday life of Calcutta is evoked so graphically. In the process the novel appears to ignore the potential that receiving societies have for

negative response or rejection. I read these as deliberate erasures or gaps left by Ghosh in his interpretation of the impact of the historical event that is Partition.

Speaking overtly to the attractions of displacement for postcolonial discourse in all three novels, Ghosh however inaugurates an important strategy, built around silence and suppression, for the postcolonial historical novel written against a subaltern historiography, but carrying a tacit critique of the subaltern method. This is seen in the incidental gesturing at the violence engendered in receiving societies through the riot in which Tridib is killed.

It is salutary to remember that the migrant was not just fleeing riot and violence – she was often the cause of it in the new land. And the choice of material Ghosh makes here, as in the later novel *HT*, is interesting when one remembers that during the years 1979–1983, a major social movement against illegal migrants was going on in Assam – a mirror image of the land Ghosh evokes in the novel. During the Assam Movement, the most horrific episode was what came to be known as the Nellie massacre of perceived illegal migrants (paralleling the Morchjhapi massacre in *HT*). *SL*, possibly written during these years, arrived on the scene in 1987 –for Assam the crucial aftermath of the Movement, when debates about deportation and citizenship claims were common– and became an extremely popular text, entering syllabi and the homes of people equally but also evoking questions about its representation of migration. For the practice of fiction, this is a critical deployment of the subaltern historical method, raising questions about what is remembered and how, the aesthetics of memory and representation in the wake of violence, but most crucially making room through a glaring and apparently deliberate memory lapse, for a critique of subaltern historiographic positions that underpin such fiction.

While the examination of the archival moment and the specific regional representation are aspects of the revisionist history that fiction of this kind engages in, it also performs a ‘real’ interventionist role in a region where they are received and whose history these texts seriously rewrite. *SL*, reaching the markets in Assam in the wake of these public sentiments about identification and eviction of illegal migrants coming from Bangladesh, fed into the confusion over the status of migrants who had come earlier, a category of people represented in the novel by the narrator’s grandmother, Thamma. The time and the situation into which the book arrived introduced a complexity into both its reception and the evolving discourse about migration, hosts and guests circulating in the region. Now figuring regularly in



undergraduate and graduate courses in Indian English and postcolonial writing, it has become part of that discourse sometimes unexpectedly influencing the response to the migrant (Dutta).

Such a method by which a section of history is left hidden even while giving voice to the approved subaltern is an intriguing development achieved by Ghosh, enabling a critique of the denial of voice to the subaltern (Spivak "Can the Subaltern") by presenting silence itself as voice. This interpretation of subaltern speech as a pregnant silence is realised more clearly as the Ghosh oeuvre expands –through the narrator who can only speak in Tridib's voice almost to the end (*SL*), in the silences of Dolly and Rajkumar and Dinu (*GP*), and most expressively as the silence of Fokir (*HT*). In pointing to these resonant silences, the novels also mark their difference from the traditional romantic or eighteenth century European historical novel written against another tradition of historiography. And instead of diaries and memoirs recording the reigns of monarchs, it is now the personal diary embodying an individual's life and worldview that is set against the generic master narrative of the novel in *HT*. In the juxtaposition, this alternative voice sustains the subaltern presence and voice of the otherwise silent Fokir. Ghosh had in fact explored this in the travel essay "At large in Burma" in the way he described the interview he had with Suu Kyi. As he listens to her answers to his prepared questions, he hears another story in a suspended moment of silence, of how she must have felt about her children being so far away from her, by remembering his own children asleep back home in the United States (*Dancing in Cambodia and Other Essays* 70-71).

## II

Ghosh selects periods from recent history and reads the history and making of the Indian nation from within them. Using actual historical events as the spark, novels of this kind build fictions around them that critique history and its associated 'errors' or 'shames.' One might indeed be looking at a postcolonial historical novel that does not simply use history as backdrop, or take historical figures as characters but adopts the historical moment –the riots, the long march and the massacre in the three novels discussed here– as the primal scene of the narrative, its point of beginning, inserting the protagonist into the middle of that historical moment and retrieving an experience that had been subsumed within the ideology of the modern nation. In the process it is able to intervene in established stories of the nation and its making through the stories

of individuals and families, offering the dark underside of glory claims, and making visible the suppressed or hidden stories of peoples and nations. Unlike the traditional historical novel where historical characters occupy centre stage, or provide important support to fictional characters and mainstream history is 'accepted,' this postcolonial version of the historical novel in its fictional swerve catches up individuals in tacit resistance to the mainstream historical version. All of this however is not unique to Ghosh. What is unique is the deployment of his critique of both anthropology and subaltern historical practice as fictional strategy, expressed in the tropes of silence and compassion that these novels build on.

Agamben writing of the "destruction of experience" claims that "[T]he question of experience can be approached only with an acknowledgment that it is no longer accessible to us" (15). As Ghosh's novels repeatedly open the neat files of migration experience that hide the untidy history of India's eastern regions, this suppression of the experiential becomes a necessary critique of the way the migration studies industry has effectively erased the 'experience' of the migrant and the host under the conventions of human rights discourse, and political strategies and interventions. By seeking areas of individual human experience as its locus, the postcolonial novel transforms fiction's approach to experience. Taking individual empathy and identification out of collective migrant experience it revises the history of a society and a people through the newly bestowed authority and agency of an unknown event. And Ghosh himself stakes his claim on this individuated territory in his declared interest in the family and not the nation as "the central imaginative unit" (Ghosh and Aldama 89). See, for example, how in *SL* the nation and its tortured birth and existence is only available to us through the political, social and psychological experiences of the two families, the long march in *GP* is sharpened as the experience of individual men and women, and in *HT* the experience of immigration and the hard life it brings in the Sunderbans is made accessible only through the lives of people.

Ghosh's placing of his novels against subaltern historiography facilitates the evolution of the postcolonial historical novel. The sentiment at work in this kind of rereading is compassion —the quality that 'intervenes' and is generated in these novels through the insertion of the fictional character (who is fashioned to evoke empathy and compassion) into the historical. This 'use' of subaltern material and mode invites fiction's humanisation of the historical or a process of "individualizing history" (Sircar).

The Ghosh text, in its compassionate response to two marginal regions and historical experiences –the immigrant experience in the Sunderbans (*HT*) and the story of the long March from Burma (*GL*)– while performing the subaltern act, actually also points to the inability of the subaltern position to shed its conviction about its own reparative achievement. This position is so charmed by its own practice that the gaps in the historical narrative escape its attention. So the story of immigration from the early years of colonial rule affecting a much larger region than the one indicated, and the long march from Burma taking place over regions that the novel does not mention but that are a significant part of the human tragedy of that migration remain invisible in the telling. My point here which I elaborate below is that Ghosh’s revisionist gesture lies in *the selection* of these particular experiences where an absence happens to be part of this history.

The area Ghosh has written about in these novels is the eastern region of India – geographically and historically distinct and therefore often ignored in grand discourses about the nation– but a site of events like migration, communal disturbances and annual floods that are determining aspects of the life of the nation and appear as determining in the lives of individuals in the novels. The ‘real’ referent in *SL* and *HT* is the country of Bangladesh (separated only in 1971 from Pakistan) that is surrounded by India and culturally linked to it and that is also the source of waves of migration that have become one of eastern India’s most disturbing political and human problems.

Ghosh also writes about Burma in historical conjunction with these regions through a long shared border (specifically with the northeastern states) and the traffic in peoples between eastern India and its neighbor, with compassion and empathy, and with the characteristic subaltern consciousness of identifying little known or ignored regions and peoples and their resistance. While this is an expansive and often morally corrective exercise, by these very positions it tends to ignore areas and concerns that may be at odds with its sympathies. This happens particularly with his use of the Burma phase as a backdrop to his novels –first briefly touched in *SL*, appearing in some detail in the travel essay, “At Large in Burma,” and at the centre of *GP*.

In *GP*, set against the massive movement of Indian refugees from Burma to India, what I think of as a subversion of the subaltern method is evident, with Ghosh presenting, against the very well known place of Assam on the route followed by the refugees, an elision of this location in the emphasis placed by the narrative on the travails of the refugees as they journey to India, and the nostalgia for a glorious land

felt by them once they are settled in Calcutta. This is represented best by Rajkumar's dominant memory; "Ah, Burma –now Burma was a golden land" repeated in visits by him and others at the Burmese temple in north Calcutta (*GL* 494-95).

As in the case of people moving between India and East Pakistan/Bangladesh, in this too the overt expression of pro Burmese sentiment may actually be set against the historical memory of the Assamese that becomes the other story in the light of Assam's role in the refugee exodus. The significant juxtaposition is of these two impressions of the Burmese that works in the sideways gesture of the Ghosh text at a historical reality that it does not overtly acknowledge.

The Assamese memory of the rule of the Burmese known as the 'days of the Maan (or Burmese)' is of unbelievable atrocities. The most well known of these is of course the eye witness account of Maniram Dewan (1806-58) who said that the Burmese "in attacking the house of a rich man would tie him with ropes and then set fire to his body. Some they flayed alive, others they burnt in oil and others again they drove in crowds to village *Namghars* (or prayer-houses), which were then set on fire" (qtd. in Baruah 230). Another account says: "A number of men and women would be shut up in a house which would be set fire to afterwards. ... The people fled to distant parts of the country where they were plundered and killed by the Dafalas and other wild tribes. Villagers were robbed of their property and were subjected to inhuman tortures in the event of their inability to produce their money" (Dutiram Hazarika, qtd. in Baruah 231). The Burmese ruled Assam from 1819 to 1824, a period that marks the end of the 600-year old Ahom monarchy and the coming of the British following a treaty with the Burmese. Histories and eye witness accounts all agree on the cruelties of this reign. Major John Butler who was Agent to the Governor-General of the N.E. Frontier of Assam from 1841 for fourteen years, records the stories he heard of mass killing by the Burmese in 1819-20. He also mentions the decapitation of some 50 people and continues the motif of people being trapped in houses and burnt alive (Butler, qtd. in Gait 231). And in the still popular history of Assam by Sir Edward Gait, we read that, "The oppressions of the Burmese became more and more unbearable and no one could be sure of his wealth or reputation, or even of his life. Not only did they rob everyone who had anything worth taking, but they wantonly burnt down villages and even temples, violated the chastity of women, old and young alike, and put large numbers of innocent persons to death" (231).

The Burma story appears in several places in the Ghosh oeuvre and, of interest in the context of this paper, it is always presented with a degree of sympathy that is in stark contrast to the horror of the above accounts. The destruction of Burma that is a matter of anguish in the following has to be read alongside the accounts of the territories left to waste by the Burmese invasions of Assam in the nineteenth century:

The year was 1945. ...As the Allied forces advanced on Rangoon from the north my father found himself both amazed and appalled by the scale of destruction around him. The British had adopted a scorched- earth policy when they withdrew from Burma in 1942, demolishing bridges, setting fire to oil fields, and blocking the Irrawaddy's navigation channels with scuttled ships. Three years later, the retreating Japanese had reciprocated, destroying all that was left of Burma's infrastructure. "When buffaloes fight," goes a Burmese proverb, "the grass gets trampled." By the end of the war, after two bitterly fought campaigns, Burma was a devastated country (Ghosh *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large; Dancing in Cambodia and Other Essays* 59).

Just as there is an alternative story to the pains of the migrant in the receiving society that functions as fiction's subaltern critique, similarly here, paralleling Ghosh's record of a beautiful and gentle people, is the historical and folk memory of Burmese atrocities that still circulates in the present in the regions of Assam that were under Burmese rule and are represented in authoritative historical accounts (Gait; Barpujari; Baruah). Anyone studying the end of the Ahom dynasty in Assam is likely to encounter the account of Burmese rule in all its gory detail. Ghosh's representation is impossible to read without this other interpretation of the same people, country and history, and the existence of texts like O.D. Gallagher's *Retreat in the East*, George Rodge's *Red Moon Rising* and Geoffrey Tyson's *Forgotten Frontier*, that foreground Assam's place in this displacement story.

So these two large historical phase –the migrations from East Pakistan /Bangladesh and the migrations from Burma which become the occasion for Ghosh's present identification with the Burmese cause against the Myanmar military junta– inaugurate a rereading of the period and place that might have significant influence on the political discourses of the present and in the light of India's Burma and Suu Kyi connection. And silence circulates here both in the imperative of subaltern retrieval, and in the reader's retrieval of that which silently inhabits the acknowledged subaltern space.

Ghosh of course adopts a position on the Burma issue that matches the international pro-democracy discourse about that country. And he implies the

forgetting of the Burma connection in India's political dealings with the military junta and its ambivalent response to Suu Kyi's incarceration, in recalling it in both *GP* and *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*: the first a gesture of reminding the reader of a forgotten connection and a shared state of repression, the second a not so veiled comment on the political positioning of India's successive governments and on the nature of international geopolitics. That is why perhaps he so clearly eschews Jameson's advice on national allegories as appropriate subject for the third world writer and repeatedly claims that he is writing about families. In his interview with Suu Kyi, it is a family moment that produces a silent empathy.

The question that this practice seems to address is one of how such fictional representation of history influences the writing of literature and the particular generic complexity of the postcolonial novel. Ghosh's critique of subalternity addresses the aesthetic issue of the experience that a fictional text might seek and be able to retrieve (how does one represent a forgotten episode and what is the extent of forgetting). In the fictional representation of history, each genre influences the other —the fictional text enabling subaltern speaking and the subaltern text in turn pointing to itself as both empowering and erasing.

A reciprocal move is generated in the intervention made by popular and widely read fictional works like *SL* and *HT* in the reception and understanding of problems like borders and illegal migration, that are everyday realities in the region where the borders of India and Bangladesh blur, and that are also at the heart of major insurgencies in the north east of India. Writing of displacement to the mainstream, Ghosh enables the visibility of these locations that have been marginal to even subaltern history. While Ghosh is ostensibly moving in the territories demarcated by the Subaltern History Collective, the migration history his novels point to is as much that of Bengal as it is of the regions of India's north east that have a 150 year-old relationship of human displacement with Bengal starting from the time that Assam was a part of the colonial administrative unit known as the Bengal Presidency.

And Assam's repressed presence in the Burmese story, where the sympathy of the Ghosh narrative corpus with Burma sharpens Assam's perceived and real historical suffering under Burmese invasion and its handing over to the East India Company after the Yandaboo Treaty, signed with Burma in 1826, continues to be an experience that circulates poignantly in collective memory. Therefore speaking of contemporary and recent history the fictional text mediates or ventilates such events, even as it gives

the present a perspective on the past. But in both these cases of evocation of a historical period or event, the Ghosh text implicitly takes on several existing discourses about these experiences from regions other than the ones immediately evoked by the narrative.

How therefore does subaltern history account for its own method that allows it to tell one repressed story, but in privileging it, actually performs the same repressive operation on another and ends up becoming another master narrative about a historically marginal area, instead of retaining its little narrative and therefore resistant and critical status (it is worth noting here the characteristic of little narratives to aspire for and achieve master narrative status —carrying within their off centre proclamations or tacit assumptions a sentiment of legitimacy and exclusivity by virtue of the injustice of historical neglect: this is now the right interpretation or story, discovered through the subaltern vision). On the other hand, the postcolonial novel, by virtue of its circulation in the regions it writes about or refers to by absence (and it is this that makes it interventionist —how does it get received in the regions that are the overt others of the occasions and events focused on) offers two kinds of critique that I have called interventionist. The first is one with a political dimension when the view of the Burmese, for example, is placed against India's (and the world's) relationship with the current political regime —the Burma-Myanmar opposition making for an interesting site of intervention. The other kind of intervention is more subtle and has to do with how a cultural text may have a transformative effect in collective memory —and here the respective Burmese phases that the Ghosh corpus uses and a place like Assam remembers becomes the new site of interest and engagement.

What notion of history is at work in these novels? Ghosh tracks the unfamiliar and often invisible histories of families and regions that are constitutive for the region and yet have so often been marginalised in the grand story of the nation. The Burma and SE Asia story inaugurates a rereading of the period and place that might have significant influence in the political discourses of the present and in the light of India's Burma and Suu Kyi connection. The forgetting of the Burma connection in the story of modern India is evident in India's political dealings with the military junta (and this also points to the possibility of a disjunct between the individual view and that of nation determined by the necessities of current geopolitics )and the ambivalent response to Suu Kyi's incarceration. This discursive clash —and I choose to call it this because of the way the discourse of the nation that includes these geopolitical concerns

comes into conflict with Ghosh's critique of it— creates a space for the interventionist role of the postcolonial novel in South Asia that is unable to shake off the temptation to comment on and repeatedly (in novel after novel) rewrite the modern histories of nations even when as in the case of Ghosh this is done indirectly through the histories of families.

In dealing with migration, Ghosh presents a similarly crucial site for the clash of discourses. In *HT* the region he speaks of, the Sunderbans, is an area where the borders of India and Bangladesh blur and where the troubled issue of illegal immigration is played out. Dealing in detail with the issue of migration, the novel offers occasions for revising the perception of migration in the host societies of the bordering regions and actually brings about shifts in the political and cultural discourse of migration.

It is a truism about the postcolonial novel that it rewrites or reviews colonial history. My contention here, while acknowledging that Ghosh indeed brings subaltern history into the mainstream or gives visibility to hitherto neglected (neglected in English fiction it must be qualified) locations of the postcolonial world, is that the form of fiction in this exercise in fact returns via this freshly complicated interest in the subaltern to a venerable narrative practice that builds on what might be described after Freud (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) and Peter Brooks (*Reading for the Plot*) as a “return of the repressed.” This return, which is both revisionist historiography and conventional narrative practice, is simultaneously achieved through the archival moment where the subaltern witness works both to defamiliarise the historical and now also the subaltern historical (and it is from here that the special intervention a cultural artifact can make stems), and to make the practice of postcolonial fiction conservative.

This kind of fiction gives a voice to the subaltern as a result of these choices. While Spivak mourns the inability of the subaltern to speak, the special nature of speaking that this kind of sensibility girded around by this feature of Ghosh's unique subaltern, fictional practice —the play of repressions within repressions— enables is premised on the empathic space created as the subject/narrator of this fiction defines what subaltern speaking might mean. This is particularly seen in the case of Fokir in *HT* who is the looming, ghostly presence in that novel, a character who is silent but central and whose speech is articulated by interlocutors, not in the mode of “speaking for” but by offering the site for this special speech in the diary, and in recognising the condition of being that is his preferred mode of self-expression.



Ghosh is therefore engaged in a very special practice of postcolonial historical fiction writing that uses subaltern history not only to understand historical events that have been marginalised, but that also offers a strong critique of subaltern history's limitations, especially in its choice of events to deconstruct mainstream historiography. In the particular method that I have sought to demonstrate as his signature method – the selection of areas and events that are in turn repressive of other aspects of the same events– he makes a move that seems to echo the critique made by Gayatri Spivak that subaltern historiography “cannot consider itself immune from its own system” (*In Other Worlds* 207). And the special effects of ghostly presences, haunting memories and pregnant silences are necessary aspects of this fictional-critical mode.

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