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Diasporic Predicaments

An Interview with Amitav Ghosh

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CS: Your two recent novels *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* have been seen as concerned with larger historical or global movements. They are often perceived as compelling explorations of some of the central problems and dilemmas surrounding both colonialism and globalization, concerned with ways individual predicaments and larger “Histories” get entangled. Would you agree? Did you write to expose these?

AG: I wrote it because it was the only way that I could write it, I suppose. In some ways I don’t feel that these issues are distinct from the people. I mean the lives of, say, Dolly or Rajkumar and the rest of them in “the diaspora,” where they are so bound up with the events that are happening around them. History itself is . . . in a novel . . . not very interesting, except in as much as it forms the background of an individual’s predicaments. So, for example, the character of Arjun is one that was very compelling to me from the start of the book and remains compelling to this day because the peculiar circumstance he finds himself in, the way in which he’s formed, the way in which his history is enmeshed with the history of the families around him . . . all of those make him what he is, really.

CS: Actually, Arjun is a fascinating character because when he starts off, he’s not at all self-analytical; he takes things at face value. But then he progresses to a point when he is actually, for the first time, asking questions that seem inevitable to his predicament at that point in time. I think that’s a very good example of the way in which individual predicaments and history enmesh . . . entangle, because in Arjun’s story you have the predicament of

the Indian soldiers under the British Raj, in a manner of speaking. And that seems to me to be such an important question that has really never been asked seriously. What led you to ask that question in such a serious way in that novel?

AG: A number of reasons, you know. One of the reasons is that in some very important way, Arjun is like some of the people I went to school and college with, who were very bright, but also very un-self-conscious, you know . . . our brightness was often completely without self-awareness, in the sense of reflecting upon our place in the world, and I think that's something to do with a kind of colonial conditioning really. I'll just give you one example . . . this morning I went down to have breakfast. Here I am in a country [Singapore] which says everywhere that drug smugglers have the punishment of death. And this café was named after Ellenborough . . . you know Lord Ellenborough, who was an aggressive promoter of drug smuggling into China in the days of the opium trade. And you suddenly see there is a peculiar disconnect; an absolute lack of any kind of awareness or any kind of consciousness of how to make your place in the world, really. I think that is around us all the time—this kind of inability almost, to cope with our circumstances, our past. I suppose the seeds of Arjun's character were planted for me by many different people, including my father, who was in the Second World War. Usually, when he told his stories it was all about "we were soldiers," but once or twice he would let slip things that suddenly made you realize what he had had to deal with. He was in Kohima, for example, during the war and he got into a fight with a South African who called him "nigger" or something. And you suddenly realize this was something that they were constantly coping with, this racial denigration. It's something which has incredible poignancy.

I spent a lot of time talking with Colonel Dhillon who was in the INA, who was one of the first people to join the INA. And he came from a family which had, for three generations, been in the British-Indian Army. He came from one of the traditional British-Indian Army families and I was talking to him about what made him rebel. If the British had been as successful as they had always been in the past, they would not have asked themselves these questions. It was defeat on the field of battle which made them stop and ask. But I think it's a very, very, interesting dramatic predicament. And for me that was what interested me, it was the human and the dramatic. It's not that I have a position on it as such, it's the human and the dramatic aspect of it which gripped me. And you know another person who faced that predicament was Mangal Pandey. I haven't seen the film but I think it's very interesting that Amir Khan and Ketan Mehta have explored that predicament, because that is essentially the predicament of contemporary India as well. To this day we are constantly being manipulated by colonial powers and ex-

colonial powers. As people who have been colonized for three hundred years, to feel our way into any kind of responsible presence in the world is a very difficult thing, and a historical self-awareness is one of the most important aspects of it

CS: One can see the kind of unease you have with these kinds of colonial power structures that seem to be a continuing presence. It is common knowledge that in 2001 you withdrew *The Glass Palace* from the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and in your open letter to the prize's organizers you expressed unease with the term "commonwealth"—a term that you felt orients contemporary writers around old colonial power structures. Is this because you feel that these colonial power structures are old and hence need to be dismissed or do you fear and worry that they still have a lot of credibility and clout in the modern world, and hence that you need to guard against them, be vigilant so people don't slip into their old passive ways?

AG: See one thing that has been very clear to me is that since the end of the Cold War there has been a real and massive revival in imperialist ideology, and it has reached an apex with the Iraq War. Immediately after the Second World War, people realized the extent of the disaster that colonialism had brought upon the world. Because really, the First and the Second World Wars in that sense were imperial wars; they were fought over imperialism, imperial policies and so on. Fifty years after the Second World War, people have come to forget and there's a kind of whitewashing of colonialism. I'm very aware of it, living in America, where really this ideology has an almost childish grip upon people. Almost childish, Americans embrace this idea of a new empire. I've been warning about this since 1997. I wrote small articles in *The Nation* warning that this thing is coming about and really with the Iraq War you saw it coming into full fruition. I must say here, I really value Arundhati's interventions on this as well, because she has been someone who has really taken on this issue where most people are fighting shy of it. I must say that I'm really shocked by the way that so many prominent Indian intellectuals have actually just shut their mouths on this. None of them have responded to Niall Ferguson's book.¹ In private they'll tell you what they think of it. But none of them have publicly come out. It's strange! These are the intellectuals who should be tackling this stuff at a historical level in their writings. But they haven't. In that sense, I would say "I" in a small way, and Arundhati in a much bigger way, have really been among the few who've been trying to find some way of critiquing this sort of revival of imperialism. I was telling Homi, Partha Chatterji, and others, "why don't you respond?" but it's as if they're above the fray. Because it's not just this "New Empire" book, it's a whole slew of stuff coming out of Britain right now. They're trying to repaint themselves into some kind of crusader role. British intellectuals have been absolutely at the heart of this attack upon

Iraq. So yes, I am very, very, aware of this revival of imperial ideology and so on. Today we really see the fruits of this. In 2001, when I rejected this Commonwealth Prize, it wasn't still so clear, even though one could see the rudiments of it. At that time, really, what was much more on my mind, in a very basic sense, was really just this issue of self-consciousness and truthfulness.

I think writing as we do in English, we have to be very, very careful of the historical burden that English places upon us, because, within English, there is a constant tendency to whitewash the past, in language in the first instance. So, for example, the occupation of Burma is never called the occupation or the brutalization of Burma. In English sources it's always called "pacification." Just as today, in Iraq, the Americans call the occupation "peace making," pacification . . . but it's not. It's an open war of aggression. And you know, while I was writing, I had to struggle with these words . . . I had to struggle because there's such a weight the English language places upon you to accept these words—to call "pacification," what they call "pacification," rather than to call it occupation, the name that it deserves. I realize that even for someone like me, who's so aware of this history, it is still a struggle. It's against that background that you're presented with an entity like "The Commonwealth." Look at what this term means, "Commonwealth." Until the 1960s, this term was reserved for white British settlers. Then deciding to expand the term, they allowed in some of the black countries and they essentially tried to put a whitewash upon the entire past. Let that be as it may, The Commonwealth is a political grouping and political groupings serve their purpose; India has participated in it and that's fine by me—I don't care about that. But when such a grouping wants to make an intervention in the field of culture, we must be very aware of what they're doing. And when you have them using this term like "The Commonwealth," what is it? It's just a euphemism. I believe it's very important for us to not accept these euphemisms as facts of life.

During the Second World War, the Japanese called their empire in Southeast Asia—after this incredibly damaging and violent campaign in Southeast Asia—they called this entire region "The Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere," as I'm sure you're aware. Now, if someone came to me and said would you accept "The Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere Prize," would I accept? Of course I wouldn't! Why should I accept something, which is just a euphemism for some incredible violence that was done to the world that is now seeking to whitewash itself? So I felt I couldn't in conscience accept this prize. . . . You know, I feel, aesthetically, do I want my book, which is about the lives of people who were resisting empire in various ways—do I want it to be stuck with this Commonwealth Prize label on the cover? And I decided, "no, I can't live with that. I don't want it." And so I withdrew.

CS: You mention about how you're very aware of the historical baggage that comes with the English language and that is something that has been in the minds of a lot of linguists as well, who have been working on English as a world language. Of course, we all know your multilingual background and the fact that you have always talked about how you would, one day, want to perhaps write a book in Bengali. You mention this is something that is still on your agenda. If you do write in Bengali, would you translate it into English yourself?

AG: [laughs] You know, to be honest, I thought one of the ways in which I would start maybe writing in Bengali is by translating *The Hungry Tide* into Bengali. I did make a start on it and then I realized maybe it was not for me to do, because it's very hard to revisit your own work in a very intimate way because you're always tempted to rewrite. But I am working closely with a translator now who's actually translating *The Hungry Tide*, and that is, as it were, easing me back into Bengali. I am going to write an article in Bengali quite soon. I feel very grateful for the fact that I do have access to this other language and therefore access to another way of looking at the world. Because, it was while writing *The Glass Palace* that I became aware of the differences. For example, the life of Rashbehari Bose as seen from a British perspective and from a Bengali perspective; the lives of these INA² people seen from those two perspectives, it's all very different and a part of it is, of course, nationalist propaganda, but part of it is something else. In Bengali, even when people are castigating the INA, there's a recognition of the seriousness of the dilemma. Even Gandhi never rejected Subhash Bose. Unlike Nehru, who did . . . even though Nehru later took on the defense of the INA, he initially reacted against Subhash Bose. But Gandhi knew, because Gandhi, I think, understood the sort of dilemma that Subhash Bose confronted. I feel very grateful that I have this sort of double perspective upon my world and our world. As I grow older, I feel more and more that I want to be able to hold on to that perspective and preserve some aspect of it.

CS: You talked about the double perspective . . . I think that brings in the very important issue of translation . . . transculturation. There is this idea about not just linguistic translation, but cultural translation that you're talking about, and translation as a performative means of cultural communication. Do you believe in the ultimate translatability of languages and cultures? Do you think there's always some measure of incommensurability or untranslatability which gets in the way of actually communicating ideas that's intrinsic to one community or culture into another culture or into another language, which you can never supersede?

AG: I'm not a theoretician so I can't think of it theoretically. But I think all this stuff that people are always saying, "oh so much lost in translation," I think to myself, "who needs to hear that!" I mean what's the point of people

saying that? I just don't understand what the point is of saying it; we all know it. When I speak in English, how do I know that you are understanding what I am saying? Is it really possible for one human being to understand another human being? Obviously we interact with each other through a surface of words which is always deceptive. So what's the difference? There is always some sort of a patina which prevents, as it were, perfect communication. But that should be a given. It should be a starting point. I think every time you hear people say this is untranslatable or this can't be translated you should just say "can't it? Or does it just mean you're not doing your job?" If it's difficult to translate, then find a way! Language allows you infinite possibilities; you just have to try a little harder. I think incommunicability is one of those constraints which should be taken for granted and which should lead you . . . like meter in poetry, it should push you . . . push you harder.

CS: Yet it's a predicament that you've very explicitly expounded on, for instance, in your *The Imam and the Indian*, where, when you were staying in Egypt and doing some fieldwork in the village of Nashawy, you talked about how you experienced this strange incident where you were asked to talk about cremation and you mention about how you couldn't find an Arabic equivalent for the word cremation and you said "burn," and of course, that brought in a whole different set of connotations for the Imam. I thought this episode was very interesting since it shows the kind of predicament, which, as you rightly point out, can happen within a language, not necessarily across languages or cultural barriers.

AG: People often point to that particular instance and say to me here you're pointing to the incommunicability of languages but that was not my intention at all. What I was pointing to was the inadequacy of my knowledge of Arabic! Because, if I had known Arabic better, even today, I would be able to find a locution around it. I would find a better locution or I would find some other locution. It was because *then* I didn't know Arabic very well. So that's what I was pointing to. I was pointing to my own imperfect knowledge of Arabic.

CS: I found the ending of the essay rather moving—your ideas about how both of you—the Imam and you, when you were actually disputing about the differences in culture and ideological perspectives, you said it was very sad that in a way you were actually negotiating from a position that was ultimately relative to the West . . . that both your civilizations were being judged on the basis of how far or how close they were to Western notions of civilization, which basically evolved around armament, war, and ammunition. I felt that was a very central irony that is very remarkable and obvious there. Again, it goes back to this whole idea of imperialism and colonial power structures that refuse to be dismantled. That's an idea that seems to really preoccupy you. It comes through in so many different ways and in different novels. Even in your first science fiction / fantasy effort, *The Calcutta*

Chromosomes, there's this incredible effort to subvert the power structure. It's very amusing and deeply ironic that an Indian sweeper woman ultimately seems to have the British scientist, the male scientist under her scrutiny. She seems to be the one who's judging them and finding them wanting. I thought it was a brilliant stroke and very ironic. How did you hit upon this idea? Of course you mention that the idea originated from reading Ronald Ross's memoirs, but can you tell us a bit more about it?

AG: Well I'll answer the first part of your question first. See, one of the things I was pointing to in *The Imam and the Indian* is that, in fact, despite the enormous differences between say someone like me and someone like the Imam, there was a strange commonality in what we were saying. That's exactly what I would say even to the issue of this question of untranslatability and so on. You know I'm sure there are places in the world where languages exist completely in isolation, in some parts of Africa, maybe parts of New Guinea, perhaps. But no Bengali can claim that he is dealing with a language that is uncontaminated by English because the fundamental grammatical structure of Bengali has been profoundly altered by English. There was no prose in Bengali until Bengali came into contact with English. The syntactical structure of Bengali is influenced by English. The earliest Bengali magazines and writings were bilingual. They were printed bilingually so you had texts running in Bengali and in English. So the whole invention of Bengali, modern Bengali at least, comes out of this encounter. So for me, as a Bengali, to say that there is something in Bengali that is so completely different from English as to be absolutely opaque . . . I think would be a cop-out. It's just not the case! Obviously there are elusive aspects and there are aspects that are deeply occluded and so on. But there's something just too simple about saying that I'm so Bengali that I can't find any word to translate into. Most Bengali writers—in fact most writers in Indian languages—have actually taught English. All of them have read many books in English. As you know, Bankim Chandra wrote his first novel in English; Mahasweta Devi was a teacher of English; Sunil Ganguly's great inspiration came from Allen Ginsberg. So I think there's something faintly ridiculous about pretending there's this enormous difference between Indian forms of expression and English forms of expression. In fact, there's a deep mutual interconnection. We have to admit it and we have to accept it as a source of strength and richness as opposed to something else. So that's again something I would say very strongly about the interconnection between languages. The reason why the central character in *The Hungry Tide* is a translator is precisely because I wanted to write very honestly about this situation. I mean Kanai is not a person who's easily resolvable into Westernized or Indian . . . and whose, as it were, sense of language, or sense of self, expands considerably.

I feel very, very, fortunate in having this interconnection. I often tell my children, who, unfortunately, despite my efforts, have not learned any

Bengali—I tell them “your sense of self is so diminished by the fact that you don’t have access to anything outside your linguistic universe.” I feel writers like me, writers like say, bilingual Arabs and so on . . . in today’s world, we are the “universal” people because we have access to wider modes of experience, modes of thought and modes of culture. Westerners are contained within a sense of being which is very particular. It is only people like us who have had access to that universality. I think that’s the peculiar importance of what we are doing. I think that’s why people read us, because they recognize this. They recognize that what we offer to the reader is a much greater dimension of experience; a much greater dimension of history; a much greater vision of the plurality of the world. People often ask me why Indian fiction has found so many readers around the world. That’s my answer. I think this is the reason—because our world is richer in the end.

CS: The kind of richness that comes out of hybridization, as you say. In a sense that kind of hybridization, as you pointed out in a very subtle way in *The Calcutta Chromosome* is the hybridization that occurs in every field of enquiry. It’s not just in language but also in science, for instance, because as you mentioned elsewhere, the kind of hybrid science that has led people, in very subtle ways, say, Indian scientists to manipulate Western science or change it in important ways, seems to have had an impact on you. Would you agree?

AG: Unfortunately the kind of scientific education we get in India is very much focused upon the analytical sciences like physics and so on. These never held any interest for me. But the taxonomic sciences, these completely fascinate me—botany, geology . . . I’m absolutely fascinated by geology, for example. Human beings since the beginning of time have looked at their surroundings and wanted to make sense of it. I think this is a very deep and instinctual human urge.

If you look at the history of botany, for example, one of the first botanical texts was actually in Dutch—*The Botany of Malabar* as I recall—was actually, not so much written as deeply informed by a man called Itty Achuthan. When this text was published in Holland in the seventeenth century, Itty Achuthan even wrote the afterword to it and said, “as far as I know the contents of this volume are alright.” Since the beginning of the taxonomic sciences, specialists have always relied upon native informants for categorizing the knowledge of the world. I think there’s no shame to our admitting that the systematic work of categorization has been done mainly in Europe. But it has always drawn upon the variety of the world’s knowledge. I think this is something that we should celebrate. My character in *The Hungry Tide*, Piya, does exactly this. Her interaction with the world around her is deeply informed by Fokir’s understanding of his circumstances. Also, within their circumstances was discovered this extraordinary sense of commonality, a sense of a shared enterprise and a shared endeavor.

CS: Piya seems a unique character in that she's a diasporic who comes back to her motherland, in a way not through any of the usual or common channels or avenues like language or culture, but, in fact, she comes back because of her love for the environment, for the freshwater dolphins. I thought that was a very unusual take on the whole diasporic question. You do talk about the imaginative link that exists between India and the diaspora. And here, it's a very unusual loop that pulls Piya back into her Bengali background.

AG: What I wanted to explore with Piya is something that I feel is not written about enough. We all have this vision of the diaspora being very sentimental about India and we all know that that is not the case. The diaspora have always had deeply ambiguous feelings toward India, a part of which is founded on a deep sense of rejection, almost hostility. I'm not really an Indian diasporic but I'm certainly a Bengali diasporic, and I do know that my own feelings about Bengal are conflicted in that way. I love some aspects of it, at the same time I hate some aspects of it, and I think that's normal within any sense of cultural heritage. Piya is a person who actually feels no sense of connection toward India and feels a sort of hostility toward Indian culture, but who does discover this other way of connecting with India. That too is increasingly common. When you look at young Indians who are in the diaspora, their connection to India doesn't come from feeling connected with the old culture. It comes from feeling connected with the new culture . . . with films or with music, something like that, you know. And I think it's a good thing.

CS: You think the future lies that way?

AG: Absolutely, absolutely. I see this very much in the lives of my own children. It's such a strange thing, I mean none of them has any particular interest in India or anything. I don't force it upon them either because I think that that has a wrong effect. The incredible energy that India is generating today is intersecting with their lives in strange ways. For example, when they go to see their friends, their friends will say, "Okay, let's go to an Indian restaurant and you choose." At home I have to struggle to get them to eat Indian food, but suddenly they go to a Indian restaurant and they're busy ordering and are very knowledgeable you know. . . . [laughs] It's because our culinary culture has become so powerful. Or for that matter, now, when they go out, their friends will say, "tell us about Bollywood" and suddenly they feel . . . you know . . .

CS: Obligated to expound on it?

AG: That's right. It's because of the energy of contemporary India really. And contemporary Indian culture is also made by the diaspora. So I think that's what's actually become the link between people abroad and in India.

CS: I was very interested in a phrase that you used while talking about diaspora. You said that you see yourself not as an Indian diasporic but as a Bengali diasporic. What in your mind is the difference between the two?

AG: I think it's possible to be a Bengali diasporic within India. In Delhi, I could be a Bengali diasporic. I would feel a diasporic there much more intimately than I would feel a part of the Indian diaspora, because I'm not actually a part of the Indian diaspora. I think of myself as an Indian expatriate who will quite soon, I hope, be able to live in India again.

CS: To go back to that idea of hybridized science which comes up in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. . . . That's one book that generated a lot of interest worldwide, because for one thing, it's a departure from your usual narrative style, though, I don't think you have one—and that's one of the great benefits of reading your narratives, that you don't stick to any one narrative style. But definitely, even while acknowledging the fact that you have very diverse narrative styles, I think that definitely *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a departure. There are a lot of things about *The Calcutta Chromosome* that are very unusual. The character Murugan for one is a very inquisitive, irreverent kind of character and in some ways like Farnaby in Aldous Huxley's *Island*. Did you have any kind of intertextuality in mind?

AG: No, none whatever.

CS: He's the same kind of irreverent and inquisitive character . . .

AG: I've never read Huxley's *Island*.

CS: Okay, I was just wondering about that. And, if you look at the whole idea of the spiritual/religious ending of *The Calcutta Chromosome*, it seems to veer away from the pursuit of scientific truth which Murugan perhaps seeks but in the ending of the novel, were you attempting to identify a link between scientific discoveries and spirituality, which much science fiction writing seems to contradict? Were you actually trying to show that those kinds of compartmentalizing of the mind are limiting?

AG: Yes. . . . In the Western tradition there is this conflict between science and religion—between Christianity and science and so on. But I think if you look at the lives of Indian scientists, it's not the same thing at all. For example, with Jagadish Bose, his vision of what he was doing came very much from a sense of Advaita, of a sense of unity between human beings and their surroundings. Similarly the Buddhist idea of a sort of continuous chain of interlinkages between human beings, is a very beautiful idea; I completely believe in it . . . it just makes sense to me. Ideas like that do inspire a lot of scientific thinking, most notably in the case of the mathematician Ramanujan whose mother was a numerologist. So, yes, I suppose in that sense *The Calcutta Chromosome* reflects my thinking. But you said something about the style of *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Usually, I'm a great rewriter. But when I wrote *The Calcutta Chromosome*, I decided I won't rewrite at all . . . I'll rewrite as little as possible. As a writer, the temptation is always to polish your sentences or to make them better. But sometimes something is also lost in that process and I wanted to preserve the very

uneven spontaneity of the sentences that come out. I said to myself, “I won’t rewrite, I won’t even it out.”

CS: It has a very interesting structure, this alternating the past with the present and the flashbacks, the little excerpts from the lives of the British scientists Farley, Ross, which make for a very gripping narrative.

AG: Thank you.

CS: I was wondering about this idea of aesthetics—is it something that you struggle with? Do you have any preconceived aesthetic formulations that you try to work out? Do you feel conscious of using any kind of Eastern or Western aesthetic formulations? Do you see them as distinct or do you feel that it’s something that you just let happen, as it were, when you’re writing?

AG: I wouldn’t put it in terms of Western or Eastern aesthetics. But I think certainly, after I finished writing *In an Antique Land*, one thing that became very important for me was that I wanted to be sure that my writing reflected the varied emotional universe of its characters. That’s something I find very important. I feel that especially as you grow older and your hold over your craft grows greater and greater, there’s always a tendency to rely more and more upon craft and more and more upon aesthetics. I think that’s a very dangerous and destructive thing that can happen to writers.

CS: That’s interesting because when you talk about extremes of emotion, it seems to me, that’s not something many of your characters give in to. In fact, one of the things that strikes me, particularly about your women characters, is that they are very resolute . . . resilient. For instance, in *The Glass Palace* you have Uma and you have Dolly, and in *The Calcutta Chromosome* you have Urmila and Sonali. These are women who in their very distinctive ways are very strong and resilient—survivors who do not let life’s hardships keep them down. What interested me is that I wouldn’t say that your male characters are as resilient.

AG: I don’t think that’s true really. Ila is a character who is incredibly fragile in *The Shadow Lines*. Similarly, (oh dear I’m forgetting the names of my own characters now [general laughter]) in *The Glass Palace* you have the suicide.

CS: The daughter-in-law of Rajkumar . . .³

AG: My memory is repressing her name right now [laughs] . . . I wanted to be able to deal with exactly that—this fragility, the sense of loss that a woman can have upon losing a child, for example.

CS: But having said that, if you look at Rajkumar, in some sense he almost has the dimensions of an epic tragic hero. You take him up from nothing and have him build an Empire and then he finally loses it. But somehow Dolly comes out as the woman who is more resilient. At the end, she is the one who seems to be able to overcome that loss and still be able to

move away to a more philosophical plane and she ends up as a nun in the Buddhist monastery. Whereas Rajkumar, you feel, is a man who is ultimately subdued by life. And you feel the same about Nirmal in *The Hungry Tide* . . . ultimately you see them as defeated men. Also, there seems to be a gender patterning evident. You have, for instance the ultimate survivor, Mangala Bibi, who, compared to all these women is the least empowered. But, finally, she is really empowered, reaches almost a deified status. Is there a conscious (perhaps unconscious) gender patterning evident to you at all?

AG: Well [laughs] I think it's for readers rather than for me as a writer to think about that. Certainly if there's a gender patterning, that doesn't reflect my theorems of the world. I think men and women are fragile, are strong, sometimes break down, sometimes don't . . .

CS: In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, I was intrigued by your fascination with the idea of silence. You have the poet Phulboni enacting an evocative eulogy to silence and you also point out this idea of significance of the silent or the unspoken—that which cannot be perceived through intelligence that you say is intrinsic to Sufism. Do you feel that perhaps genres like science fiction and fantasy would give you a greater avenue to explore these ideas or could you even do it with conventional realist fiction?

AG: I think silence is something which plays a very important part especially within Indian lives. For example *The Shadow Lines* is also about the silences that surround riots and so on. I'm glad to say *that* silence no longer exists. I mean now when you have a riot there's a huge media discourse about it, which is exactly as it should be. But if you look back on Indian history, 1857 is surrounded in silence . . . there are so many sorts of events which are just constantly, as it were, wrapped in silence. This whole mass march out of Burma is wrapped in silence. So yes, it does interest me very much, especially as a writer, you know you're in the business of producing words and there's a kind of paradox when you're addressing something which is explicitly silent, I think. So I do find that's something very intriguing.

CS: When you talk about silence in this sense it's the kind that has led to a lot of very important historical events not being narrativized. That's something you touched upon in your keynote address yesterday as well.⁴ The silence that surrounds the long forgotten march and the sense of shame that kept the people silent. Do you see your novels as attempts to redress the balance by exploring these silences through your featured characters?

AG: Yes, I think somehow it is. I don't quite know how to explain it. Most writers are drawn to aspects of the world that are public, that are well known—pop culture for example, things that are happening around us. . . . For some reason, I've always been drawn to exactly the opposite. That which is obscure, that which is hidden, that which is occluded, that which is mar-

ginal. I don't know why—it just interests me. I'm just not interested in writing about pop culture and Bombay. It's not that I dislike it, I think there's a lot to be written and other people are writing those books. But I'm drawn to rural India, to marginal India, I'm drawn to marginal people in India, I'm drawn to marginal people around the world, I'm drawn to Burmese, Cambodians, to obscure figures, defeated figures and people who salvage some sort of life out of wreckage . . . these characters appeal to me, they interest me.

CS: There's a lot of critical interest in that aspect of your work, in fact. What do you feel about this whole question regarding the ethics of literature? Do you have an opinion on the ethical role that literature or the novel form has to play in the contemporary world?

AG: I hear a lot of writers say that writing is all political. I think they're really misusing the word "political." I think what they really mean to say is that writing is fundamentally ethical. And it's something that writers feel discomfort with because they don't want to think of themselves as being moralizers or this and that. But in fact that is really what it is. I mean a writer reflects continuously on ethics, on morality, the state of things in the world. Some do it by, as it were, reflecting on the immoral [laughs]. Some do it by reflecting upon conscious ethics or conscious morality. But I think it's really impossible for people to pretend that writing does not address issues of ethics . . . it does. It just constantly addresses the issue of "who are you," "what is right conduct, what is wrong conduct." I don't mean to say that writing is necessarily prescriptive . . . I don't think that is what it is at all—that would be much more like philosophy or something and I would not be drawn to that because I don't think I'm in a position to be telling people what they should be doing, as a rule. But I'm very drawn to ethical predicaments—the difficulty of ethical, moral predicaments . . . Arjun's predicament, which in some sense, at the end, is a profoundly ethical predicament. At the center of my book, again, if you talk about a male character who survives and triumphs it's Dinu and he is absolutely the ethical center of the book. He's very much the ethical center of *The Glass Palace*.

CS: It's interesting how ultimately it is the human predicaments that illustrate these ethical/moral issues and I think that's what seems to be at the center of your novel writing. In a sense it is through human predicaments that you come back to address these larger ethical issues. And I think that is particularly true in relation to scientific issues and individual predicaments. In both *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Hungry Tide*, you have this connect between individuals and larger issues of science. Do you feel that in some way *The Calcutta Chromosome* led to *The Hungry Tide* even though you have *The Glass Palace* in between?

AG: Yes; let's even go further back—in *The Circle of Reason* science plays a very large part. Yes, that's been a continuous thread in my work. Just one

thing more I want to say about this whole issue of writing about marginalization and so on is that I'm not interested in victimhood even though I'm drawn to people who are on the margins of things. I'm interested in people who shape their own lives in some sense or who give up shaping their lives, or who find themselves defeated.

CS: In one essay, "The Fundamental Challenge," you talk about religion and scientific progressivism. You describe them as two strands of modernism, in fact. This paradoxical link between science and religion is something that seems to really preoccupy you. Would you care to comment on this? As in, do you see the situation as somehow getting resolved especially given this modern predicament that we have, where this whole issue of religion somehow seems to be placed in a discourse that is shown to be antagonistic to the discourse of scientific progressivism and a lot of politicians play around with it?

AG: [laughs]. You know, unfortunately, often when people ask . . . I mean if you'd asked me this just when I'd written *The Calcutta Chromosome* I'm sure I'd have talked about it for like two hours but by now I've forgotten what I meant then! [Laughs] And certainly at this particular point in time when I look around the world and see all this religious revivalism, I must say that it fills me with this instinctive horror. I really hate this kind of fundamentalism, whether it be Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, whatever, it just revolts me. I just feel for it an absolute disgust because I think most of all it betrays any kind of spiritual content in human beings. And I do think that our inner lives, our spiritual selves are very, very important and it's very, very important to preserve that space in which spiritual life is possible. And what I hate most about this kind of fundamentalism is that it is just a pure kind of politics which is seeking to, as it were, colonize every free space within us and that's why I feel we must resist this fundamentalism just as strongly as we resist the sorts of secular attempts to colonize all our integral spaces.

CS: One final question to you before we wrap up. Can you share with us any single moment in your life or a set of circumstances which profoundly influenced you as a writer?

AG: [Laughs] There are so many but I think one of the most important things for me as a writer has been—and it's not a single moment, it is, as it were, an evolving moment; of being in a long marriage, seeing my children grow up. Many writers today, you can see that their best work is done by the time they are thirty or thirty-five or something. Writing comes out of their youth. Increasingly now, I feel fatherhood, husbandhood, brotherhood—being a brother to my sister, being a son to my mother, being a friend to my friends, it has given me so much more to write about. It has given me such a sense of richness which I didn't have when I was younger. So I feel very

grateful for that and I think that in some strange way I feel very grateful that I'm a writer of fiction as opposed to a scientist or mathematician or whatever, because one of the wonderful things about writing fiction is that in fact your work can begin to reflect more and more the richness of your own experience. So I would say that the difference between my earlier work, say *The Calcutta Chromosome* or *The Shadow Lines* and my later work is precisely this, that those works often rose out of a kind of pleasure in thought—the pleasure of ideas, the pleasure of play. But as I grow older, I think my writing is more and more coming to represent the breadth of experience of what I've lived through, you know . . . the fun, the laughter, the difficulties, the sadness, all those things.

CS: Thank you.

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NOTES

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1. Niall Ferguson is an award-winning historian specializing in financial and economic history. He is best known for his revisionist views on imperialism and colonialism. In 2006 Penguin Press published his most recent book *The War of the World*.
2. Indian National Army was an armed force formed by Indian Nationalists in 1942 in Southeast Asia during the Second World War with the aid of the Japanese and with the aim of overthrowing the British Raj.
3. We were discussing Manju, the wife of Neel, in *The Glass Palace*.
4. Amitav Ghosh was the keynote speaker at the Asia Trends Conference. "Permission to Remember": Race, Class and Trauma in the Construction of Memory"; organized by Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 20 September 2005. He has not published this essay due to copyright issues that he says he has been unable to resolve.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ferguson, Niall. 2006. *The War of the World*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.