THE LAST OF EARTH

and

THE POETICS OF POSTCOLONIAL HISTORICAL FICTION: AN ANALYSIS OF AMITAV GHOSH'S WORKS

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ABSTRACT

My thesis combines a novel, *The Last of Earth*, and a critical essay, 'The Poetics of Postcolonial Historical Fiction: An Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's works'.

Set against the backdrop of the Great Game, *The Last of Earth* examines white privilege and colonialism through the lenses of exploration and surveying. As Tibet was closed to all foreigners except Indians in the mid-nineteenth century, the British-run Trigonometrical Survey trained Indians in rudimentary techniques of cartography to conduct clandestine surveys of Tibet with a view to gaining knowledge of the terrain and dispelling any Russian incursions into the region. The Indian explorers employed their own bodies as surveying instruments and risked their lives for very little money and recognition.

The Last of Earth narrates the story of one such expedition from the perspective of a disgruntled Indian explorer named Balram, tasked with guiding a disguised British surveyor through Tibet on an expedition to map the course of the Horse River. Also travelling through Tibet at the same time is Katherine, whose goal is to be the first European woman to reach Lhasa. Through these two perspectives, the novel investigates notions of borders and belonging and the dialectic between science and myth.

The critical study analyses the works of Amitav Ghosh, particularly *In an Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, and *The Hungry Tide*, to identify the techniques that Ghosh utilises to construct voices missing from the archives. The essay discusses the influence of the Subaltern Studies' historians on Ghosh's fiction, and examines the manner in which he incorporates and extends their research methodologies to recreate the subaltern consciousness. Ghosh's willingness to employ fictional devices

such as coincidence in particular and the uncanny in general, which are on occasion considered ‘flawed’ or ‘illogical’, and antithetical to realism, is investigated, and the role of these aesthetic choices in emphasising invisible networks between people and geographies disrupted by colonialism is also addressed.

Note

The Last of Earth combines two narrative voices, those of Katherine and Balram. They are self-contained, although they do illuminate each other. Due to word limit constraints on the novel submission as imposed by University regulations, I have included only Balram’s perspective in this thesis. Katherine’s narrative intersects with Balram’s in only one scene, but the character named Chetak recurs in both narratives.

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THE POETICS OF POSTCOLONIAL HISTORICAL FICTION: AN ANALYSIS OF AMITAV GHOSH'S WORKS

Introduction

In a BBC Reith Lecture given in 2017, Hilary Mantel noted that the historical novelist is often questioned about the legitimacy of their work. 'No other sort of writer has to explain their trade so often,' she said. 'The reader asks, is this story true?'[1] If this was a challenging question for Mantel to answer, it is even more so for the writer of postcolonial historical fiction, who has to reconstruct histories from fragments and footnotes located in archives curated by colonial powers.

The importance of truth in historical fiction—as paradoxical as it may sound—is underscored by the disputes about history in many postcolonial societies. Stepping into this 'contested domain' is an 'especially risky' enterprise, cautions Hamish Dalley.[2] He writes that 'in societies founded on colonial occupation, the extermination of indigenous populations, anti-imperial violence, or bloody intra-national conflict, fictionalised narratives of the past can never avoid being politically fraught.'[3] In India, for instance, history is being constantly rewritten; historical discourse, even when it declares itself to be fictional, can offend and lead to violence. Writers and their books are banned if their views are perceived to be 'objectionable' by either the State or a section of the population.[4]

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[1] Hilary Mantel, "Why I Became a Historical Novelist," The Reith Lectures, BBC Radio 4, June 13, 2017.
[2] Hamish Dalley, *The Postcolonial Historical Novel: Realism, Allegory and the Representation of Contested Pasts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 3.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Rupam Jain and Tom Lasseter, "By Rewriting History, Hindu Nationalists Aim to Assert their Dominance Over India," March 6, 2018, last accessed February 2023, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-modi-culture-specialreport-idUSKCN1GI170.

Against this backdrop, what are the techniques available to a writer of postcolonial historical fiction to bring the past to life? How do we animate the ghosts in the ruins, the voices behind the illegible names we find on scraps of paper? While studying for a master's degree in creative writing, I took a module in historical fiction in which I was told that all writers navigate the same uncertainties and questions. If the materiality of certain lives—those of women, children, the poor, the LGBTQ+—were invisible in historical records, where could we locate their emotions except in our own minds, guided by research and intellectual rigour? In that semester, I learnt that the historical novelist should have the skills of a historian, but remain mindful of the narrative conventions that have shaped historical discourse. These lessons, while useful, didn't fully address my questions on the dialogue between fiction and history in a postcolonial nation.

Apart from Dalley's study of the postcolonial historical novel, not much research has been conducted into the genre as a collective. While works of individual authors have been parsed to delineate their thematic concerns, less attention has been paid to the stylistic and narrative devices employed by the writer of postcolonial historical fiction to reconstruct contested histories. My attempt in this thesis is to address these gaps in research by examining the methodology and literary techniques employed by Amitav Ghosh.

Ghosh's works, such as *In an Antique Land*,[5] *The Calcutta Chromosome*,[6] *The Glass Palace*,[7] and *The Hungry Tide,*[8] bring to light facets of Indian history erased by

[5] Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (1992; repr., London: Granta Books, 2012).
[6] Amitav Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995; repr., London: John Murray, 2011).
[7] Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (2000; repr., London: HarperCollins, 2001).
[8] Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (2004; repr., London: HarperCollins, 2005).

colonial record-keeping, the subsequent nostalgia about colonialism in the West, and the nationalistic discourse in India that seeks to distort the past for majoritarian reasons. His books occupy a liminal space that lies at the intersection of history and fiction, and yet win the praise of both readers and historians.[9] An analysis of its poetics, therefore, offers insights into those aspects of craft and research essential to the creation of historical fiction set in colonised nations.

Apart from the commonality of the setting—Ghosh's novels typically traverse India and its neighbouring Asian nations—I'm drawn to his work because of the techniques he employs to excavate and narrate the past. His approach towards research, no doubt influenced by his training as an anthropologist, includes consulting archives, conducting interviews, and visiting the settings of his novels. While he may share this methodology with other historical novelists, in this thesis I focus on those aspects of Ghosh's texts that accord his historical fiction its unique character. Despite his extensive research that has unearthed new information about the past, Ghosh acknowledges in his fiction that no historical account can be authoritative, and I outline the reasons why such an exercise of caution is vital to the recovery of the subaltern voice.

In the first chapter of the thesis, I examine the similarities between Ghosh and the historians belonging to the branch of postcolonialism described as Subaltern Studies. My interest is in identifying the techniques Ghosh borrows from the Subaltern Studies group of historians, and the subsequent process of translation he undertakes to apply these techniques to fiction. I argue that by employing the methodologies of historians

[9] Ghosh's *Flood of Fire*, published by John Murray in 2015, carries a blurb by historian Chris Clark, who describes it as a 'a masterpiece . . . *Flood of Fire* is not just a work of literary imagination but also an exercise in deep and original historical reflection.'

belonging to the Subaltern Studies group in his books such as *In an Antique Land* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh extends the boundaries of postcolonial historical fiction. I examine Ghosh's engagement with archival traces in these two books, and the relation between his fiction and these traces. Ghosh overtly points to the biases in historiography resulting from the imperialistic curation of archives, and incorporates absences and revisions in his fiction, thereby allowing the reader to discover new ways of engaging with the past.

The second chapter of the thesis explores the literary devices unavailable to, or unexploited by, historians that Ghosh adopts to further the historical discourse. These devices, such as coincidence, are considered antithetical to literary realism, but I argue for a different reading inflected by cultural and historical specificities, and the understanding that the empiricist, Enlightenment model of historiography failed to ascribe agency to the colonised. I note that the constitution of 'realism' and 'truth' in history and historical fiction has always been a contentious subject. As Ann Curthoys and John Docker write in the Introduction to *Is History Fiction?*:

> No one—including us—would do history, would pursue historical research, unless she and he thought they could arrive, however provisionally, at some kind of truth about the past. We think, however, that the temptation to declare that the historian can objectively establish the truth about the past is to be resisted. There always has to be a question mark hovering over any claim to have attained an objective, let alone scientific, status for one's findings.[10]

The third chapter of my thesis considers the 'question marks' that Ghosh intersperses in his writing to challenge the notion that historical discourse can convincingly arrive at a single truth. I suggest that in Ghosh's novels such as *The Hungry*

[10] Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction?* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006), 5.

Tide and *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the silence of certain protagonists is a deliberate choice on the part of the author to reflect the ultimate unknowability of the past. I also examine the articulation of silence within the framework of Gayatri Spivak's position that the recuperation of the subaltern voice by the elite is a project beset with challenges.[11]

In my analysis of the research methodologies and literary devices that Ghosh employs to reconstruct histories lost to Eurocentric historiography, I have been guided by Dipesh Chakrabarty's text *Provincializing Europe*, and the fundamental premise of his book that European thought is 'both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical in India.'[12] Countering Eurocentric historiography does entail a recognition of its influence that continues to this day, and my attempt in the thesis has been to identify the devices through which Ghosh challenges the limitations of Eurocentric historical discourse. In this process, I have been alert not only to the problems inherent in comparing history and fiction, but also to the existing theories on the fictionality of history, such as Hayden White's argument that 'stories, like factual statements, are linguistic entities and belong to the order of discourse'[13] and Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, or fiction situated within the historical discourse that has not 'surrendered its autonomy as fiction'.[14]

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[11] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
[12] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6.
[13] Hayden White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 37.
[14] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989), 124.

My study of Ghosh's methodology has shaped the direction of the research I have undertaken for my creative project, and its narrative form. The primary sources available to me to are mostly written by Europeans. Identifying the manner in which Ghosh employs the techniques of Subaltern Studies historians has offered me insights on how best to read the archival sources for my own creative project. His literary technique has also guided the stylistic choices I have made in the creation of subaltern voices in my novel.

Finally, my thesis focuses on a close reading of three of Ghosh's books: *In an Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, and *The Hungry Tide*. This is because these works most directly share the following thematic concerns with my novel: the construction of the subaltern consciousness from archives; the deployment of science by imperialists as a tool for furthering their ambitions, and the interplay between modern science and traditional forms of knowledge; and the positioning of the uncanny as a legitimate, realistic mode for expressing both subaltern agency and the role of invisible yet powerful forces such as colonialism, capitalism, and religion in determining the course of history.

1

Ghosh and the Subaltern Studies Model of Recreating History

In *Remaking History*, a text that examines the relationship between fiction and history as mediated through elements of popular culture such as historical novels and films, Jerome de Groot claims that the very term historical fiction is 'paradoxical' and 'contradictory'.[15] He writes:

> History gives identity, agency, future, temporal order, nationhood; historical fiction might replace this with something, but its undermining of totalizing models of knowledge leaves people very much alone. Without 'History', all a society has are 'traces', made into various collages to mimic an order it cannot believe in.[16]

De Groot's delineation of the roles of history and historical fiction is based on Anglophone texts and films, and this may well be the reason why it fails to take into account the contested, fragmentary nature of history in postcolonial societies. Confronted with missing or biased historical records, many Indian historians have had to rely solely on *traces* to recreate missing historical narratives. In fact, the entire canon of Subaltern Studies, established in the Eighties to counter the colonialist and elitist bias prevalent in the historiography of India, is built around gaps, traces and ellipses. This reliance on fragments, as Edward W. Said posits, does not make Subaltern Studies any less 'integrative'.[17] 'Its claim is that by being subaltern it can see the whole experience

[15] Jerome De Groot, *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions* (London: Routledge, 2016), Introduction, Kindle.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Edward W. Said, "Foreword" to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds., Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), viii.

of Indian resistance to colonialism more fairly than the partial histories provided by a handful of dominant native leaders or colonial historians,' writes Said.[18] This view is strikingly close to Ghosh's observations about historical fiction. When asked if his *Ibis* trilogy[19] can be read as history, Ghosh states:

> Approaching history through characters makes the novelist's relationship to the past substantially different from the historian's. In most respects the novelist's understanding of the subject is far less complete…. But there are also some respects in which seeing the past through the prism of a character's experience allows for a kind of wholeness that is unavailable to the historian.[20]

The similarity in the outlooks of Ghosh and Said is unlikely to be a coincidence. To create a missing narrative such as the subaltern one, Said notes that Indian historians have applied Michel Foucault's idea of 'relentless erudition', 'a deeply engaged search for new documents, a brilliantly resourceful re-deployment and re-interpretation of old documents, so much so that what emerges … is a new knowledge, more precarious perhaps than its familiar competitors, but strikingly rigorous, intellectually demanding, forceful and novel.'[21]

Ghosh's methodology for historical research, as indicated in his books, interviews, essays, and correspondences with readers published on his website amitavghosh.com, closely resembles the 'search' undertaken by Said's historians. My goal in this chapter is to identify the similarities in the processes of Ghosh and the

[18] Ibid.
[19] The trilogy, on the first Opium war and the events that led up to it, comprises of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015).
[20] "An Interview with Amitav Ghosh," *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History,* accessed February 2023, http://historyofthepresent.org/2.1/interview.html.
[21] Said, 'Foreword' to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, viii.

Subaltern Studies historians, many of whom are his friends.[22] Through a close reading of Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* and *The Calcutta Chromosome,* two works that move between genres and defy neat categorisation, I attempt to track his affinities to the Subaltern Studies project. I have chosen these two books because the subject of recovering lost histories is the central thematic concern in both.

'The Tale and its Tenuous Telling': Reading the Archives

In April 2012, and subsequently in December 2017, reports surfaced that the British government had destroyed or lost thousands of archival documents, many of which detailed colonial crimes. Noting that the documents in the National Archives had proved key to exposing human rights abuses by the British State, *The Guardian* stated that 'this sort of accident is happening too often for comfort'.[23] While the fate of the files that went missing is not known, what is clear is that thousands of colonial documents were indeed destroyed as part of the UK's Operation Legacy programme. Shohei Sato describes the Operation as 'a policy of systematically purging documents [that] began in Ceylon and was codified in the Gold Coast. The general idea was to remove documents that were deemed inconvenient either for Britain or for its collaborators,' he writes.[24]

[22] In an interview with John C. Hawley published in *Amitav Ghosh: An Introduction* (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2005), Ghosh says, 'I am sure at some level I have been deeply influenced by the ideas of the 'subaltern studies' group. The founder of *Subaltern Studies*, Ranajit Guha, is a close friend and so are many other members of the group.'
[23] Siobhan Fenton, "Why Do Archival Files on Britain's Colonial Past Keep Going Missing?", *The Guardian*, December 27, 2017, last accessed from theguardian.com in February 2023.
[24] Shohei Sato, "Operation Legacy: Britain's Destruction and Concealment of Colonial Records Worldwide," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 45 (2017): 712.

Such discussions on the curation of archives and the truths they contain are a relatively recent phenomenon. Michelle T. King states that in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, '… historians distinguished themselves from their predecessors by basing their histories on documentary evidence gleaned from archival research … to present objective analyses of historical events.'[25] This methodology was thought to be more professional, and was meant to lead to a more 'scientific' view of history.[26] King writes, 'Whereas earlier amateur historians had achieved their status on the quality of their writing, this new breed of professionals emphasised the quality of their research, and adapted the stylistic apparatus of the footnote to serve as a locus for evidentiary documentation.'[27]

Today, however, it would be a mistake for the historian or the historical novelist inspecting colonial archives to consider them to be 'simple or simply repositories of "fact" and "truth",' as Anupama Arora puts it. They 'are imbricated within power, involving processes of construction, selection, and interpretation. Thus, archives silence as much as reveal the past, privileging some narratives over others.'[28] This privileging also occurs as a consequence of the transfer of documents from one country to another, typically from the colonised nation to the metropole.

The loss and migration of an archive, and the resultant search for the figure of an enslaved man from the twelfth century whose fleeting presence is recorded in a few documents, is the main narrative thread that runs through Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*,

[25] Michelle T. King, "Working with/in the Archives," in *Research Methods for History*, eds. Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 16.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Anupama Arora, "The Sea is History: Opium, Colonisation and Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 42 (2011): 24.

a text that Claire Chambers says 'straddles the generic borderlines between fact, fiction, autobiography, history, anthropology, and travel book.'[29] Based on the research Ghosh undertook in Egypt as part of his doctorate in anthropology at the University of Oxford, the book began its life as an essay titled 'The Slave of MS H.6', first published in the seventh volume of *Subaltern Studies* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), edited by historians Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, yet another indication of Ghosh's close connection to the field. Though *In an Antique Land* is about Ghosh's search for a slave, it also brings to light the medieval Indian Ocean trade between Asia and Africa that flourished before colonialism altered its dynamics and caused it to rupture, a subject Ghosh returns to in the *Ibis* trilogy.

He first comes across a reference to the slave in a letter sent in 1148 AD by Khalaf ibn Ishaq, a merchant living in Aden, to his friend Abraham Ben Yiju in Mangalore. At the end of the letter, the Aden merchant sends the slave 'plentiful greetings'. Ghosh writes:

> That is all: no more than a name and a greeting. But the reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual, existences are the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests—the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time. But the slave of Khalaf's letter was not of that company: in this instance it was a mere accident that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happened to have been preserved.[30]

Interspersed with the narrative of Ghosh's own field trip to Egypt, *In an Antique Land* pieces together this 'barely discernible' life across centuries and continents

[29] Claire Chambers, "Anthropology as Cultural Translation: Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*," *Postcolonial Text* 2 (2006), 1.
[30] Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, 16-17.

through the letters written to and by Ben Yiju, the master of the slave of MS H.6.[31] These letters survived because of a custom followed at the Synagogue of Ben Ezra in Fustat, Old Cairo. Its congregation, which included Ben Yiju, 'deposited their writings in a special chamber in the synagogue so they could be disposed of with special rites later'.[32] Either because of oversight or because of respect for the past, the letters at Ben Ezra synagogue were not removed until the synagogue was destroyed in 1890.[33]

The chamber that held the letters was called Geniza, 'a word that is thought to have come into Hebrew from a Persian root, ganj, meaning 'storehouse'—a common element in place-names in India and Iran…'[34] Apart from the etymological unpicking that Ghosh offers readers, the fact that he considers the Geniza an archive is made amply evident when he writes that it 'preserved' the memory of Ben Yiju and his slave for seven hundred years.[35]

Many historians will agree with Ghosh's categorisation of the Geniza as an archive. Antoinette Burton, for instance, describes the archives as traces of the past collected intentionally or haphazardly as 'evidence', not limited to official spaces or state repositories, and 'housed in a variety of unofficial sites since time immemorial'.[36] She writes:

> From the Rosetta stone to medieval tapestry to Victorian house museums to African body tattoos, scholars have been "reading" historical evidence off any number of different archival incarnations for centuries, though the extent to

[31] The letter written by Khalaf ibn Ishaq to Ben Yiju bears the catalogue number MS H.6 at the National and University Library in Jerusalem (*In an Antique Land*, 13).
[32] Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, 56.
[33] Ibid., 57.
[34] Ibid., 57.
[35] Ibid., 60.
[36] Antoinette Burton, "Introduction" to *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 3.

> which a still quite positivist contemporary historical profession … recognises all such traces as legitimate archival sources is a matter of some debate.[37]

Before Ghosh can worry about the legitimacy of his archival source, he has to first locate the 'evidence'. The destruction of the synagogue and the subsequent dispersal of the documents contained therein makes this a difficult proposition. *In an Antique Land* goes to some length to describe the role imperialism played in the migration of the archive. Ghosh does this by first noting the decline of Cairo in the eighteenth century; its power was enfeebled, and the city reduced to a mere province of the Ottoman Empire. European naval powers took control of the Indian Ocean trade, which had once been a shared enterprise.[38] But, just as Egypt's influence was falling, a curious case of 'Egyptomania' was simultaneously rising in Europe.[39] Ghosh writes:

> … sphinxes and pyramids began to appear in houses and gardens throughout the continent; several operas were written around themes from ancient Egypt; a succession of Popes became interested in the placing of Rome's obelisks, and none other than Sir Issac Newton took it upon himself to prove that Osiris, Bacchus, Sesotris and Sisac were but different names for the same deity.[40]

If Ghosh chooses to dwell on this European fascination with Egypt, it is because, as he goes on to explain, the country had become 'the scholarly counterpart of those great landmasses that were then being claimed and explored by European settlers: unknown to herself, she was already well on her way to becoming a victim of the Enlightenment's conceptions of knowledge and discovery.'[41] This may well be the reason why many of the documents in the Geniza ended up in the private collection of

[37] Ibid.
[38] Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, 80-81.
[39] Ibid., 81.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., 82.

Abraham Firkowitch, today housed in the State Public Library in St. Petersburg. In *stealing* these manuscripts, Ghosh writes, Firkowitch was 'merely practising on his co-religionists the methods that Western scholarship used, as a normal part of its functioning, throughout the colonized world.'[42] Today, the Geniza documents are also found in libraries in Paris, Frankfurt, London, Vienna, Budapest, Oxford, and New York. The largest collection is at the University of Cambridge library.

By detailing the appropriation of the documents, Ghosh appears to be employing what Burton says is one method for challenging the claims to objectivity associated with archives. Stories about the archive's 'provenance, its history, its effect on its users, and above all, its power to shape all the narratives which are to be "found" there' can all point to the biases in its construction, she writes.[43] This suggestion is in keeping with the ideas of Foucault and Jacques Derrida, both of whom have significantly influenced Subaltern Studies.

Chakraborty notes that subaltern historiography 'necessarily entailed … an interrogation of the relationship between power and knowledge (hence of the archive itself and of history as a form of knowledge).'[44] Pointing out that the founding editor of *Subaltern Studies* volumes, Guha, consistently questioned the construction and production of archives, Chakraborty writes that this interrogation reveals Guha's 'discernible sympathy with early Foucault'.[45]

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[42] Ibid., 84.
[43] Antoinette Burton, *Archive Stories*, 6.
[44] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1 (2000): 15.
[45] Ibid.

In particular, Foucault's statement that archives reveal the rules of a practice that enable statements 'to survive and to undergo regular modification'[46] is useful while reading colonial records, given their exclusionary nature and close links to power (as suggested by their curation and destruction). Foucault notes, '… the archive is first the law of what can be said'; it is not that which 'safeguards the event of the statement' but that which 'defines at the outset the system of its enunciability'.[47] Foucault further describes the archive as 'the general system of the formation and transformation of statements'. By extrapolating Foucault's definition of archives to colonial record-keeping, it is possible to see the latter as 'a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated.'[48] Subaltern Studies historians are interested in identifying the ways in which colonial discourse has been manipulated to shape the past in a certain way. This subject is at the core of Ghosh's works as well, as can be seen in the pages of *In an Antique Land*. His search for the slave mimics Foucault's use of the term *archaeology*, which as Foucault's defines it:

> … does not imply the search for a beginning; it does not relate analysis to geological excavation. It designates the general theme of a description that questions the already-said at the level of its existence; of the enunciative function that operates within it; of the discursive formation, and the general archive system to which it belongs.[49]

This *archaeology* is evident time and again in *In an Antique Land* as the narrative thread follows Ghosh's attempts to scale the obstacles he faces when it comes to

[46] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (1969., repr., New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 130.
[47] Ibid., 129.
[48] Ibid., 130.
[49] Ibid., 131.

unlocking the archives. He decides that his best chance of locating the slave is by finding references to the slave's master, Ben Yiju, whom Ghosh first encountered in a collection entitled *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, translated and edited by Professor S.D. Goitein at Princeton University. But Ghosh's visit to Princeton proves disappointing. The professor has passed away and Ghosh is denied access to his papers in which Ben Yiju would have appeared as work is underway for an edition of the late professor's book on the trade across the Indian Ocean. Ghosh then looks for Ben Yiju's own papers, but they are written in an unusual, hybrid language of Judaeo-Arabic that Ghosh has to teach himself over the next two years.

The fact that Ghosh does not shy away from representing the difficulties he has in accessing the archives, that too at great length, is unusual. Durba Ghosh states that while the archive stories of historians often reflect the process by which 'historical knowledge is gathered, narrated, and represented,' it is a 'largely inadmissible secret that our work is often shaped by archival conditions beyond our control…'[50] Amitav Ghosh has no interest in hiding his archive stories, possibly because making the issues of access explicit is one way to 'remain mindful of the very powerful political and nationalist investments that continue to grid historical narratives.'[51]

By allowing the reader to witness the fragmentary nature of his search for documentary evidence, Ghosh is, to use Nicholas B. Dirks' phrase, 'historicizing the archive'. Illustrated in Ghosh's text is Dirks' statement that the archive is

[50] Durba Ghosh, "National Narratives and the Politics of Miscegenation: Britain and India," in *Archive Stories*, ed. Antoinette Burton, 27.
[51] Ibid., 28.

'simultaneously the outcome of historical process and also the very condition for the production of historical knowledge.'[52]

As his search continues, Ghosh discovers that there are considerable gaps in Ben Yiju's correspondences. For instance, while the documents suggest that Ben Yiju moved to Aden from Egypt in the 1120s or earlier, Ghosh writes, 'The exact dates and duration of his stay may never be known, however, because not a single scrap of material dating from that period of his life has survived.'[53]

A further study of the documents helps Ghosh realise that Ben Yiju moved to India before 1132 AD and lived there for nineteen or twenty years without once returning to Aden or Egypt, instead sending his slave to Aden to conduct his business while he himself remained in Mangalore. A cryptic letter in the possession of the Taylor-Schechter collection at Cambridge university suggests that something about Ben Yiju's departure was unusual. The letter in question, Ghosh writes, is seven inches long and more than five inches wide, 'but it is still only a fragment—a scrap which Ben Yiju tore from a longer sheet so he could scribble on its back. The little that remains of the original letter is badly damaged and much of the text is difficult to decipher.'[54] This difficulty in tracing a linear, complete history, which is a recurring trope in the book, serves as a reminder of Foucault's words: 'The archive cannot be described in its totality … It emerges in fragments, regions, and levels…'[55]

[52] Nicholas B. Dirks, "Annals of the Archive: Ethnographic Notes on the Sources of History," in *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and its Futures*, eds. Brian Keith Axel (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 48.
[53] Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, 154.
[54] Ibid., 160.
[55] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 130.

Even as he makes the reader aware of the gaps in the records, Ghosh occasionally relies on similar accounts from that time to extrapolate those stories to Ben Yiju, but emphasises the speculative nature of his statements. For instance, writing about Ben Yiju's journey from Egypt towards Aden and then India, Ghosh indicates that it '*would have begun* with a four-hundred-mile voyage down the Nile.'[56] That trip, he writes, *could have* taken as long as eighteen days.[57] Many of his sentences are similarly sprinkled with words such as *probably*, *hardly likely*, *it must have been*, *may well have*, *it could well be that*, or *there is good reason to believe*…

When, in the course of his research, Ghosh comes across 'unusual and intriguing fragments' that point to Ben Yiju's liaison with a slave named Ashu, whom he manumitted, and his subsequent fatherhood, Ghosh sums up the events thus: 'There is no particular reason to connect Ashu's manumission with Ben Yiju's fatherhood yet it is difficult not to.'[58] Ghosh surmises that Ben Yiju married Ashu, a woman born outside of his faith, and that could only 'have been because of another overriding and important consideration. If I hesitate to call it love it is only because the documents offer no certain proof.'[59]

Ghosh thus creates a destabilising effect by weaving together speculation and scraps of documentary evidence. In pointing to the uncertainty around his conclusions, he is following the methodology of Subaltern Studies historians and, among them, Gyanendra Pandey in particular, who suggests, 'If the provisionality of our units of analysis needs stressing, so does the provisionality of our interpretations and of our

[56] Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, 174 (emphasis added).
[57] Ibid (emphasis added).
[58] Ibid., 229.
[59] Ibid., 230.

theoretical conceits.'[60] Through the repetition of the word *fragments* in *In an Antique Land,* Ghosh foregrounds the non-totalising nature of his narrative and its instability.

Pandey has, in fact, called for the eschewing of standard historiographical procedures that require 'the taking of a prescribed center (of a state formation, a nation state) as one's vantage point and the "official" archive as one's primary source for the construction of an adequate general "history".' He suggests focusing on fragments instead, because they allude to other histories while marking 'those contested spaces through which particular unities are sought to be constituted and others broken up.'[61]

For Pandey and other Subaltern Studies historians, the 'fragmentary' point of view is important because it resists 'the drive for a shallow homogenization' of history.[62] While there is a yearning for a totalising narrative, it doesn't acknowledge 'the provisional and changeable characters of subjects under analysis,' states Pandey.[63] A fragment does not represent a part of a whole; rather, it questions the very concept of a whole, or of a totalising historical discourse, which, as Chakrabarty points out in *Provincializing Europe*, is often Eurocentric in nature. Chakrabarty writes that in India, 'the British conquered and represented the diversity of Indian pasts through a homogenizing narrative of transition from a medieval period to modernity.'[64] The Subaltern Studies historians, therefore, view fragments as a challenge to such metanarratives. For them, and indeed for Ghosh, fragments are traces of alternative histories concealed by Eurocentric or nationalistic forces.

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[60] Gyanendra Pandey, "In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today," *Representations* 37 (1992): 50.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid, 28.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* 32.

It is possible to spot, in Ghosh's attempt to trace the slave's life through Ben Yiju's correspondences, echoes of the methodology Pandey employs to construct the lives of the lower-class weaving community of Mubarakpur in the late nineteenth century. Pandey writes that an elite perception of the happenings of that time is revealed in an Urdu manuscript written by Sheikh Mohammad Ali Hasan, a member of a local zamindari family. Official records offer a different perception of the same events, but are also elite. 'Yet,' Pandey writes, 'we are allowed glimpses of how the ordinary labouring people of the qasba [of Mubarakpur] spoke and acted—both in the official record relating to a succession of violent outbreaks in the nineteenth century and in Ali Hasan's detailed narration of these and other events.'[65] Similarly, Guha, writing about peasant insurgencies in India against colonial rulers, insists that 'it should be possible … to read the presence of a rebel consciousness as a necessary and pervasive element' of colonial documentation.[66]

The slave of MS H.6, however, is barely present in the documents that Ghosh studies. Even his name becomes evident to Ghosh only after he travels to Mangalore and meets a professor in Tulu folklore and philology (Mangalore is home to Tulu-speaking people). With the professor's help, Ghosh realises that the slave's name could be Bomma, derived from the Tulu deity Berme, but there is little else that he can find.

Ghosh is able to secure direct knowledge about only one incident in Bomma's life, through a reference in a letter that Ben Yiju received from a friend in Aden. In the letter, the friend writes of a piratical raid on Aden, repelled by the city's troops, as also

[65] Gyanendra Pandey, '"Encounters and Calamities": The History of a North Indian *Qasba* in the Nineteenth Century' in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, 91.
[66] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983., repr., New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 15.

Bomma's drunkenness. 'He took 4 months money from me, eight dinars. Often he would come here, very drunk, and would not listen to a word I said,' the letter says.[67] Ghosh extends that image to write: 'We cannot be sure of course, but it is not impossible that the Adenese soldiers were cheered into battle by a drunken Bomma, standing on the shore and waving a flask.'[68] By highlighting the use of his imagination in creating this memorable image, Ghosh signals to the reader that fictionality is an important part of any attempt to recover a subaltern voice.

Through this technique, Padmini Mongia notes, Ghosh makes it clear that 'the story he creates is plausible but by no means more so than the many others suggested in *In an Antique Land*. The book is thus both subaltern history and also a reminder that history and fiction are inseparable.'[69] Readers, therefore, can't be passive consumers, Mongia asserts; instead, they have to 'reflect on the conjectural nature of stories and find her pleasure in the interaction between the tale and its tenuous telling.'[70]

'The World's Oldest Thriller': Locating the Bias in Colonial Discourse

Ghosh makes a similar demand of the reader in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, a novel that chips away at the claim that the British State was scientifically and technically superior to the countries it colonised. Just as in *In an Antique Land*, here too Ghosh attempts to locate missing histories, but through a fictional character named Murugan ('but feel free to call me Morgan'[71]), who is, much like Ghosh in *In an Antique Land*, an archivist.

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[67] Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, 259.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Padmini Mongia, "Medieval Travel in Postcolonial Times: Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*," in *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*, ed. Tabish Khair (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2003), Kindle.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 81.

Murugan works in New York, in the near future, for an international agency that collects data from across the world and stores it digitally. Convinced that an indigenous cult with advanced scientific knowledge nudged Ronald Ross towards his Nobel Prize-winning discovery of the female anopheles mosquito as the malarial vector in the late nineteenth century, Murugan travels to Calcutta almost a full century later to look for answers.

Ghosh's non-linear narrative moves at a dazzling pace, switching points of view and mixing fact and fiction, such that the reader, in John Thieme's words, has 'to play the role of hermeneutic detective, to piece together [the] … numerous clues to arrive, if not at a solution, at least at a possible version of meaning.'[72] The involvement of the reader suggests that no one is exempt from 'playing an active role in the *historiographical* process', according to Thieme. Readers, he says, are empowering themselves as makers of meaning 'through the *silent* agency of reading'.[73] Thus, by encouraging the reader to fill in the gaps, Ghosh gestures towards the importance of close textual reading in detecting hidden subaltern narratives in colonial discourse, also an important aspect of the Subaltern Studies methodology.

This focus on *detection* has Guha, who scrutinises colonial documents using Roland Barthes' analytical terms, stating that 'the historical discourse is the world's oldest thriller.'[74] Ghosh has taken the idea further by writing a historical novel that is also a sci-fi thriller. Incorporated into *The Calcutta Chromosome* are, in Barthesian terms, indices that 'involve an activity of deciphering', which require that the reader

[72] John Thieme, "The Discover Discovered: Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*," in *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion,* Kindle.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, 55.

'learn to know a character or an atmosphere.'[75] Both in the manner in which Ghosh structures the narrative and in the language that he uses to tell the story, it is possible to perceive the influence of the research methodology that Guha details in his seminal essay, 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency'.

To take one example, while criticising the inability of colonial and elite historiography to accept that peasant insurgency in India was a 'conscious' undertaking, Guha points out that this omission is 'dyed into most narratives by metaphors assimilating peasant revolt to natural phenomena: they break out like thunder storms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics.' Even when historiography is asked to produce an explanation in human terms, it does so, Guha writes, 'by assuming an identity of nature and culture, a hall-mark, presumably, of a very low state of civilization…'[76]

Ghosh reclaims these metaphors and connections to nature suggested by colonial historiography to subvert the idea that the subaltern is an entity without will or reason. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a novel about malaria, which had at one time assumed *epidemic* proportions in India. The aim of the indigenous, cult-like group that wants Ross to discover the method of transmission of the malarial parasite is to achieve immortality through 'interpersonal transference' (connected to the idea of rebirth and reincarnation in Hinduism). As Anshuman Mondal states, the 'use of reincarnation in *The Calcutta Chromosome* challenges the colonial devaluation of Hindu "superstition".'[77]

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[75] Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 96.
[76] Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, 46.
[77] Anshuman Mondal, *Amitav Ghosh* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 61.

At the same time, Ghosh is careful not to situate the novel on the 'weather-beaten axis of Science vs Magic/Mysticism, with the former often standing for the west and the latter for "All the Rest",' writes Tabish Khair.[78] Certainly, Eurocentric discourse appropriated science, and ignored key discoveries in other cultures, but Khair implies that Ghosh's method of challenging this is by *not* suggesting a magic-science dualism; instead, he collapses the distinction between man and machine by hinting at the use of scientific instruments even by those belonging to the cult. By calling the cult's activities 'counter-science',[79] Ghosh accords it the legitimacy that colonial historiography denied the subaltern.

His decision to narrate a neglected aspect of Indian history by deploying elements of science fiction can in itself be read as a political choice, particularly in the light of John Rieder's view that 'colonialism is a significant historical context for early science fiction'.[80] Pointing out that 'no informed reader can doubt that allusions to colonial history and situations are ubiquitous features of early science fiction motifs and plots,' Rieder notes that the genre emerged during the period of imperialist expansion in the late nineteenth century. 'Science fiction,' he writes, 'comes into visibility first in those countries most heavily involved in imperialist projects—France and England—and then gains popularity in the United States, Germany, and Russia as those countries also enter into more and more serious imperial competition.'[81]

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[78] Tabish Khair, *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 304.
[79] Explaining the cult's activities to Antar, another one of the main protagonists of *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Murugan says, 'Now, let's say there was something like science and counter-science...' 103.
[80] John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 2.
[81] Ibid.

The Calcutta Chromosome adapts but also distorts the framework of science fiction; by integrating medicine and mysticism, Ghosh ensures that his counter-science is 'not the opposite of Western science', states James H. Thrall.[82] Instead, 'it is a form of rational inquiry of an entirely different order, Eastern rather than Western in orientation, with goals commensurately more vast, and independent from limited perspectives that can only accomplish what is perceived as possible.'[83]

Ghosh also challenges the so-called objectivity of western science by weaving in extracts from Ross' *Memoirs* into the novel, and by having Murugan question—in his comical, invective-ridden American slang—the validity of the pompous statements Ross makes in his memoir. In doing this, Ghosh appears to be borrowing Guha's technique of analysing colonial documents that include reminiscences of bureaucrats and officers. Such colonial discourse often pretends to offer unbiased views and stakes a claim to being part of the historical record. Ross himself writes in *Memoirs*:

> …I trust, then, that this book at least will give a frank and accurate picture of one investigation, of the difficulties which attended it … In writing it, I have seldom trusted to memory alone, but have verified most of the details from the mass of documents—generally scribbled in the heat of action—which I possess. The book contains some criticisms which are required in the interests of human life … but I have usually left the facts themselves to do the talking.[84]

Through *Memoirs*, Ross is constructing and curating an archive about his own life and work, erasing certain figures and manipulating details to present a narrative in which he emerges as the hero. As Murugan notes, '… the great thing about a guy like

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[82] James H. Thrall, "Postcolonial Science Fiction?: Science, Religion and the Transformation of Genre in Amitav Ghosh's 'The Calcutta Chromosome'," *Literature and Theology* 23 (2009): 298.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ronald Ross, *Memoirs: With a Full Account of the Great Malaria Problem and its Solution* (London: John Murray, 1923), VI.

Ronald Ross is that he writes everything down. You've got to remember: this guy's decided he's going to rewrite the history books. He wants everyone to know the story like he's going to tell it…'[85]

Memoirs insists that Ross' account is true, but Subaltern Studies historians like Guha reveal the problematic nature of such 'factual' claims by critiquing the discourse in Barthesian terms. Guha suggests the breaking down of each colonial document into segments, or 'strings of words of varying lengths' that perform indicative and interpretative functions. Consider, as an example, the documents on insurgency written by British officers or the elite. *Indicative* segments in these documents state or report the actual and anticipated actions of rebels while *interpretative* segments comment on them in 'order to understand their significance'.[86] Guha illustrates this with a letter written by a British government official before the Barasat uprising of 1831:

> Authentic information having reached Government that a body of *Fanatic Insurgents* are now committing *the most daring and wanton atrocities on the Inhabitants* of the Country in the neighbourhood of Tippy in the Magistracy of Baraset and have set at defiance and repulsed the utmost force that the local Civil Authority could assemble for their apprehension, I am directed by the Hon'ble Vice President in Council to request you…[87]

This letter is supposed to be fact, but a closer look reveals the 'comment' that has burrowed its way in through *indices* that don the role of adjectives or epithets. In the text quoted here, Guha has italicised the indices that turn the despatch into something 'more than a mere register of happenings', and inscribe into it a meaning, 'an interpretation so that the protagonists emerge from it not as peasants but as '*Insurgents'*,

[85] Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 51.
[86] Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," 53.
[87] Ibid., 48.

not as Musalman but as '*fanatic'*; their action not as resistance to the tyranny of the rural elite but as '*the most daring and wanton atrocities on the inhabitants…*'[88]

These indices, 'designed primarily to indicate the immorality, illegality, undesirability, barbarity etc., of insurgent practice,' are so firmly structured and complete that it is possible to reverse their values to understand peasant consciousness, according to Guha.[89] The pressure of insurgency, he writes, forces elite discourse to reduce the semantic range of many words and expressions, and instead assign specialised meanings to them which, for instance, equate the peasant with the rebel. 'Thanks to such a process of narrowing down it is possible for the historian to use this impoverished and almost technical language as a clue to the antonymies which speak for a rival consciousness,' Guha argues.[90]

Ghosh adopts a variation of this subversive strategy in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, and it is most noticeable in the manner in which Murugan breaks down Ross' *Memoirs*. Murugan's comments on Ross' text perform an *interpretative* role that is not entirely dissimilar to what indices do in colonial discourse. In particular, during the course of a conversation with Antar, Murugan picks apart events that Ross attributes to good fortune. When Ross finds a malarial patient named Abdul Kadir, whose blood has sixty parasites that prove crucial for his research, he writes that Kadir is a 'wonder case'. Zeroing in on this phrase, Murugan comments drily, 'You'd think a bug like the malaria parasite wouldn't look for any teacher's pets, but maybe it doesn't work that way.'[91]

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[88] Ibid., 57.
[89] Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, 16.
[90] Ibid., 17.
[91] Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 71.

Murugan's claim is that the indigenous, secretive cult employed Kadir, and later a man named Lutchman, to direct Ross towards his discovery. Both Kadir and Lutchman do figure in Ross' *Memoirs*, making Murugan's comments even more instructive. 'He [Ross] clearly knew that Abdul Kadir was a special case,' Murugan says. 'But he never stopped to ask himself how come this guy just walked through the door when he needed him most. He thought it was just luck.'[92]

Ross' *Memoirs* has several references to 'natives' (occasionally granted the epithet 'intelligent'[93]) showing him different species of mosquitoes. In fact, his path-breaking discovery, as Murugan determines, occurs after a hospital attendant points out to him a mosquito sitting on the wall that has its tail sticking outwards. Only the day before, Ross had written to his wife, 'I have failed in finding parasites in mosquitoes fed on malaria patients, but perhaps am not using the proper kind of mosquito.'[94] But the new mosquito species the hospital attendant shows Ross turns out to be the exact one he had been looking for, that is, the female anopheles that transmits the malarial parasite.

Ross writes that it was the 'Angel of Fate' who brought him the mosquito on the hospital wall.[95] Naturally, Murugan has something to say about this phrase: 'Angel of Fate my ass! With Ronnie it always has to be some Fat Cat way up in the sky: what's under his nose he can't see.'[96]

The Calcutta Chromosome thus shines a light on the omissions and revisions in Ross' *Memoirs*, and its refusal to acknowledge indigenous knowledge. In perhaps what

[92] Ibid., 71-72.
[93] Ross writes in *Memoirs* (43) that Europeans who visit India for the first time are always much struck by the character of the people. 'As hard-working as any, faithful, docile, and intelligent…'
[94] Ross, *Memoirs*, 221.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 77.

is the most galling example of this erasure, all Ross has to say about the hospital assistant who pointed out what turned out to be the anopheles mosquito to him is that, 'I regret I have forgotten his name.'[97] This sentence, for good effect, is enclosed inside parenthesis, making the assistant's marginalisation even more complete. As Murugan says, visualising Ross—Ronnie to him—in a hospital in India conducting his experiments:

> … one guy, in uniform, hunched over the microscope and a swarm of orderlies buzzing around him. … 'Do this,' he says and they do it. 'Do that,' he says and they scramble. That's what he's grown up with, that's what he's used to. Mostly he doesn't even know their names, hardly even their faces: he doesn't think he needs to. As for who they are, where they're from and all that stuff, forget it, he's not interested.[98]

Here Ghosh is emphasising what Khair describes as the hallmark of Eurocentric discourse, the 'appropriation of what is called science itself'.[99] Khair's 'Notes' offer an instance of such appropriation: the zero did not exist in ancient Greek and early European mathematical sciences before it was brought in from India via the Arabs. European discourse, however, not only ignores Chinese and Indian contributions, 'it even accounts for the Arab phase as one of mere transfer, of handing on the torch of science from the ancient Greeks [Europe] to Enlightenment Europe—an account that deliberately obscures the fact that the Arabs added a number of original contributions and did not take over elements from Greek philosophy and science uncritically.'[100]

The Calcutta Chromosome not only questions such Eurocentric narratives but also highlights colonial attempts to control the Indian body. Ross writes in his *Memoirs*

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[97] Ross, *Memoirs*, 221.
[98] Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 67.
[99] Khair, *Babu Fictions*, 304.
[100] Ibid., 304-305.

that he tested his hypotheses, including his belief that malaria was spread through water, on Indians. The Indian body was for him a site of experimentation, but as historian Gyan Prakash suggests, the colonisation of the native body in fact operated under the guise of 'the care of the native body.'[101] For Ross, finding the malarial parasite was the first step towards achieving the eradication of the disease, whose very existence, he muses, may have prevented 'the settlement and civilisation of the vast tropical areas that would otherwise be most suitable for the human race.'[102]

The close links between medicine and colonisation, suggested in Ross' statement, is no accident. As Prakash explains, the relationship between medicine and colonial power led to the late nineteenth-century effort to control and contain the alien environment of India, where an 'unhealthy climate combined with the fevered irrationality of the people to unleash virulent outbreaks of sickness and death…'[103] Indigenous medicine was considered unscientific and inaccurate, and the role of colonial medicine was to 'disenchant' superstitious natives and rationalise their society.[104] This was also part of the colonial state's attempt to turn India into a productive colony. By introducing and overseeing the establishment of railways, irrigation works, mines and telegraphs, Prakash writes that the colonial state made technology not only an instrument but also 'the substance of state power'.[105]

However, the intention to dominate natives with technology, in order to liberate them from their superstitions was, Prakash notes, 'a profoundly contradictory

[101] Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 127.
[102] Ross, *Memoirs*, 115.
[103] Prakash, *Another Reason*, 128.
[104] Ibid., 4-5.
[105] Ibid, 160.

enterprise'.[106] He suggests that by dwelling in such doubleness, the imperialists in effect dislocated the polarities such as 'scientific/unscientific' and universal/particular' through which colonialism functioned.[107]

The Calcutta Chromosome can be read as a novel that reveals this doubleness. Claire Chambers suggests that Ghosh's 'nuanced' novel 'makes us realize that the kind of stories in which the tropical medicine of men such as Ross is "embedded" are stories of exploitation and unequal power relations.'[108] The cult in the novel can be said to embody Indian resistance to imperialistic attempts to control the native. Its pursuit of interpersonal transference or immortality may appear irrational, but this search is being aided—even if unknowingly—by the British State's 'rational' scientific apparatus. Or, to put it in Murugan's words: 'Here's Ronnie, right? He thinks he's doing experiments on the malaria parasite. And all the time it's him who *is* the experiment on the malaria parasite.'[109]

Like Murugan, the characters in *The Calcutta Chromosome* are, through their actions and beliefs, constantly challenging colonial discourse, often to assert their own agency. Gyan Prakash says that this is what Subaltern Studies does: locate the 'blind-spots, silences and anxieties' in the archives to 'uncover the subaltern's myths, cults, ideologies…'[110] However, the aim of Subaltern Studies, Prakash concludes, is not to 'unmask dominant discourses but to explore their fault-lines in order to provide different accounts, to describe histories revealed in the cracks of the colonial archaeology of

[106] Ibid., 5.
[107] Ibid., 20.
[108] Claire Chambers, "Postcolonial Science Fiction: Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 38 (2003): 69.
[109] Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 78.
[110] Gyan Prakash, "Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography," in *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 9.

knowledge.'[111] By narrating the fractured stories of the slave of MS H.6 and Ronald Ross' 'helpers', this exploration of fault-lines appears to be Ghosh's aim, too. While Ghosh borrows the techniques of Subaltern Studies historians in this exploration, he is also able to harness, in his fiction, literary devices unavailable to historians. The next chapter discusses the fictional techniques Ghosh employs to highlight both subaltern agency and the erasures in historical discourse.

[111] Ibid.

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Beyond the Historian's Handbook

In her review of Ghosh's novel *Gun Island*,[112] the critic Alex Clark hints at the difficulty writers of literary fiction face in 'depicting apocalyptic fractures of history and geography within the confines of a story expected to take its metre from the scale and scope of human lives…'[113] According to Clark, Ghosh rises to this challenge in a 'straightforward' fashion. She writes:

> … if realism is not a capacious enough vessel to accommodate the truth, then dispense with it. *Gun Island* brims with implausibility; outlandish coincidences and chance meetings blend with ancient myth and folklore, tales of heroism and the supernatural set in a contemporary world disrupted by the constant migrations of humans and animals.[114]

Coincidence, in Clark's opinion, isn't a realist device. Rukmini Bhaya Nair, in her reflections on Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, makes a similar point about the recurring coincidences that unite the novel's vast cast of characters across time and space: '…coincidence… [is] an unexpected regular in *The Glass Palace*. Coincidence, the irresistible old trickster of fiction, shamelessly asking for a willing suspension of disbelief from the reader—and getting it!'[115]

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[112] Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island* (London: John Murray, 2019).
[113] Alex Clark, "Gun Island by Amitav Ghosh Review – Climate and Culture in Crisis," *The Guardian*, June 5, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/05/gun-island-amitav-ghosh-review.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Rukmini Bhaya Nair, "The Road from Mandalay: Reflections on Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*," in *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*, Kindle.

In these critical readings, coincidence is viewed as being antithetical to realism. Aesthetically too it's considered illogical and flawed, the last recourse of writers with questionable talent and skill forced to employ what Marie-Laure Ryan calls a 'cheap plot trick'[116] to weave the unwieldy strands of a story together. Ryan states in her essay that 'our tolerance towards extraordinary coincidence has grown lower through the ages, as the demand for realism has grown higher.'[117] But my argument in this chapter is that far from being anachronistic to realism, coincidence in particular, and the uncanny in general, can be understood as literary techniques that allow Ghosh to draw out otherwise invisible connections between people and geographies disrupted by colonialism.

While seemingly incompatible with the realist mode in which Ghosh's meticulously researched historical fiction operates, these narrative devices, which are unavailable to, or underutilised by, historians, allow Ghosh to portray subaltern agency and milieu, and thus extend the historical discourse. These devices are to be found in all of Ghosh's novels, but for the purposes of this chapter, I have chosen to focus primarily on *The Hungry Tide*. To indicate how they represent subaltern voices, and the complexities of networks colonisers found inscrutable, I will also refer to *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Glass Palace*.

Improbable Probabilities

As an MA student in 1978, Ghosh found himself coming face-to-face with a rare tornado on a Delhi street. Despite his many attempts to include the incident in his fiction

[116] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design," *Narrative* 17, No.1 (2009): 56.
[117] Ibid., 58.

afterwards, he failed at every turn.[118] His reluctance stemmed from the improbability of the event. 'Surely only a writer whose imaginative resources were utterly depleted would fall back on a situation of such extreme improbability?' he asks.[119] This appears to be a peculiar question for Ghosh to raise, given that his fiction is threaded with coincidences. But his intention here is not only to provoke but also to analyse why improbability, once the cornerstone of narrative, came to be seen as a contrivance. Ghosh notes that 'detailed descriptions of everyday life', or 'fillers' as Franco Moretti anointed them, have led to fictional worlds that lack surprises and miracles.[120] This 'gradualist' regime of thought became pervasive in the arts and sciences, one reason why, in Ghosh's opinion, literary fiction is particularly ill-equipped to address climate change.

The Great Derangement is concerned with the fictional portrayal of apocalyptic changes in the environment, but Ghosh's interpretation of improbabilities in this work is a useful lens through which we can understand his definition of realism and, by extension, his creative choices in his novels. For instance, he writes that modern novels do acknowledge the importance of exceptional moments, without which 'writers would be faced with the Borgesian task of reproducing the world in its entirety'.[121] Nevertheless:

> … the modern novel, unlike geology, has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable: the concealment of its scaffolding of events continues to be essential to its functioning. … Here, then, is the irony of the

[118] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* (2016; repr., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 16.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid., 19.
[121] Ibid., 23.

> "realist" novel: the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real.[122]

Narrative conventions that reject improbabilities can be traced back to Aristotle, who writes in Part IX of *Poetics* that 'it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen – what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity.'[123] He adds that 'the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities. … Everything irrational should, if possible, be excluded…'[124] It's important to note, however, that Aristotle doesn't ask the poet to ignore probability altogether. Rather, he states that the effect of surprise in a tragedy is heightened if the reader can trace its cause and effect—even if the connection between the two is so nebulous as to be linked to fate or justice. Such a causal connection ensures the event doesn't appear to be because of 'mere chance'.[125]

This then is Ghosh's challenge. To achieve verisimilitude, the novelist doesn't want to risk centring what might be perceived as improbable. But as Ghosh acknowledges, an event 'only slightly improbable in real life', such as a tornado in Delhi, may appear 'wildly unlikely' if recreated in a novel.[126] His solution, as we see in his fiction despite his hesitations, isn't to exclude improbabilities altogether, but to organise them such that they contribute to the realist nature of his project by revealing histories erased by colonialism and Eurocentrism. Though coincidence is typically characterised as a concurrence of events without causal connection, it's possible to read

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[122] Ibid.
[123] Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. S.H. Butcher (1895; repr., London: Macmillan & Co., 1902), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1974/1974-h/1974-h.htm.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 24.

Aristotelean causality into the network of coincidences that underpin the narrative in Ghosh's novels.

As a historical novelist, Ghosh's methodology is to make visible his techniques to excavate subaltern history. I suggest that he employs coincidence for the same reason, and also to reveal the 'scaffolding' around which his narrative is built.

Realism and Empiricist Historiography

If realism, as Ghosh suggests, is constructed through concealment, a related question that needs to be addressed first is whether the realist mode, as it is commonly understood, is in itself a representational technique which, alongside empiricist historiography, obscured subaltern pasts and experiences.

Examining the rise of academic history, Roger Spalding and Christopher Parker note that Leopold von Ranke insisted on 'thorough research', a critical examination of documents, and use of scientific terminology so that history would be 'objective'.[127] Auguste Comte too believed that 'the only true knowledge was scientific knowledge, and that scientific knowledge could be defined as that which could be induced from observation and, where possible, experiment.'[128] In my examination of archival bias in the previous chapter I noted how historians were expected to conduct 'objective' research by relying solely on archival documentation.

Alan Munslow notes that a direct link exists between Enlightenment and modernism, and the establishment of empiricism as the sole avenue for knowledge. He

[127] Roger Spalding and Christopher Parker, *Historiography: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 8-9.
[128] Ibid, 9.

explains that a 'determinist and reductive empiricist priority of content over form was clearly expressed throughout Enlightenment,'[129] resulting in history being viewed as facts arranged in the order in which the events occurred. Munslow points out that the Scottish historian Alex Ferguson wanted a distance to be maintained between the observer and the observed so that the discourse of history would be *objective*, but like his friend David Hume, also realised that knowledge had to be organised conceptually to be presented as history, thereby creating a contradiction of the 'objective yet engaged historian'. Munslow writes:

> This discrepancy, that historians write history but can be objective…, is unavoidable in modernist thought because one of the key features of Enlightenment-inspired modernism is the eighteenth-century bourgeois liberal humanism that places the rational, purposive and undivided thinking self at the centre of all things … The 'I' was also taken to be, as convenience dictated, 'reality' or the 'evidence'.[130]

Such a conception of narrative discourse, Hayden White suggests, 'permits us to account for its universality as a cultural fact and for the interest that dominant social groups have not only in controlling what will pass for authoritative myths of a given cultural formation...'[131] Or, to summarise it in Chakrabarty's words, 'The European colonizer of the nineteenth century both preached this Enlightenment humanism at the colonized and at the same time denied it in practice.'[132]

In a similar vein, Gyan Prakash identifies the hierarchies of subjects and knowledges instituted under colonialism: 'the coloniser and the colonised, the

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[129] Alun Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1.
[130] Ibid., 2.
[131] Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (repr., 1987., Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), X.
[132] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* 4.

Occidental and the Oriental, the civilized and the primitive, the scientific and the superstitious, the developed and the underdeveloped.'[133] By reducing 'complex differences and interactions to the binary (self/other) logic of colonial power,'[134] the coloniser erased subaltern sources of knowledge and agency from 'the fields of knowledge that grew in an incestuous relationship with colonialism.'[135] Consequently, as Prakash points out, while there are historical accounts of Western dominion, there's little recognition of the history of subaltern agency and knowledge in the colonial past.[136]

Gayatri Spivak echoes this line of thought in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. By describing as 'epistemic violence' the project of constituting the colonial subject as the Other, Spivak points to the failures of representational realism. She writes: 'It has helped positivist empiricism—the justifying foundation of advanced capitalist neocolonialism—to define its own arena as "concrete experience", "what actually happens". Indeed the concrete experience that is the guarantor of the political appeal of prisoners, soldiers and schoolchildren is disclosed through the concrete experience of the intellectual, the one who diagnoses the episteme.'[137]

From these examples, it is evident that European historiography, based on an empiricist approach, failed to accommodate the subaltern experience. Nationalism too contributed to this failure. Originating from the understanding that history was a process, nationalism created a 'need to communicate a sense of national history,' writes

[133] Gyan Prakash, 'Introduction,' in *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid., 10.
[136] Ibid., 6.
[137] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, 69.

Jerome de Groot.[138] In Georg Lukacs' opinion, '… the appeal to national independence and national character is necessarily connected with a re-awakening of national history, with memories of the past, of past greatness, of moments of national dishonour, whether this results in a progressive or reactionary ideology.'[139] But for colonised nations, nationalism, and the simultaneous construction of a national history, in many ways resulted in the silencing of multiplicities and diversities.

For instance, as Prakash explains, while anticolonial nationalism achieved its authority by transgressing colonial polarities and boundaries, it also 'disavowed the ambivalence of the nation's process of emergence. It normalized and contained the space of difference that it invoked in performing the nation's unity.'[140] One example of this containment is the narrative of subaltern insurgencies in India, which was erased from the nationalist discourse.[141] Prakash's opinion, therefore, is that to re-enact the history of colonised nations, a 'transformative' intervention in the historical record is necessary. Such an intervention, however, may not be considered realist as it would go against the empiricist approach that inflected the writing of history and fiction.

Barbara Foley takes issue with the 'confident empiricism' of the historical novel, which she says simplifies the epistemological relationship between fact and generalisation. She writes:

> The historical novel's "facts" appear to anchor the text's analogous configuration in historical actuality by proposing that particular corroborative data bear an unmediated reference to the public historical record. … however, these data function to validate a posteriori the text's particular ideological construction of its referent. Documentation in the historical novel is intrinsically

[138] Jerome De Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 26.
[139] Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (1937, repr., London: Merlin Press, 1989) , 25.
[140] Prakash, *After Colonialism*, 9.
[141] Ibid., 10.

> tautological; rather than confirming the text's assertions about social reality, it corroborates a reality assumed to be self-evident. This documentary practice was bound to recoil upon it self. In the course of the century, the historical novel's empiricist claims enter into a state of crisis, ultimately issuing in the profound epistemological skepticism characterizing modernist documentary fiction.[142]

Not just historical fiction, but fiction classified as realist is also limited by similar constraints. Often embedded in their narratives are erasures revealed only on close reading and analysis. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said introduces his technique of contrapuntal reading to highlight the threads of imperialism hidden in 19th-century British and French fiction described as realist. As he writes, '…. most cultural historians, and certainly all literary scholars, have failed to remark the geographical notation, the theoretical mapping and charting of territory that underlies Western fiction, historical writing, and philosophical discourse of the time.'[143]

On Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, widely held up as a social realist text, Said remarks that the eponymous estate's beauty hinges on the wealth derived from Thomas Bertram's slave plantation in Antigua, but Austen 'sublimates the agonies of Caribbean existence to a mere half dozen passing references to Antigua'.[144] While the 'metropolis gets its authority' from the 'devaluation as well as the exploitation of the outlying colonial possession', and the 'right to colonial possessions helps directly to establish social order and moral priorities at home',[145] subaltern life itself goes unacknowledged in the text. In 19th century European fiction, empire is only a 'marginally visible' presence,[146] while colonial territories are presented as 'realms of possibility …

[142] Barbara Foley, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 146.
[143] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993; repr., New York: Vintage, 1994), 58.
[144] Ibid., 59.
[145] Ibid., 62.
[146] Ibid., 63.

associated with the realist novel'.[147] The imperial vision, Said writes, was not only supported by the culture that produced it, but also disguised by the same culture.[148]

In the construction of what is described as realist historiography and fiction, several registers—such as the imperialist framework, the non-secular, the spiritual, the supernatural—were thus excised under the guise of an empiricist approach. To counter such erasures, Spivak suggests developing Pierre Macherey's formula of 'measuring silences'. 'Although the notion "what it refuses to say" might be careless for a literary work, something like a collective ideological *refusal* can be diagnosed for the codifying legal practice of imperialism. This would open the field for a political-economic and multidisciplinary ideological reinscription of the terrain. … The archival, historiographic, disciplinary-critical and, inevitably, interventionist work involved here is indeed a task of 'measuring silences',' she writes.[149]

Said too recommends a different empiricist approach in the reading of realist fiction and history: '… to deal with as much of the evidence as possible, fully and actually, to read what is there or not there, above all, to see complementarity and interdependence instead of isolated, venerated, or formalized experience that excludes and forbids the hybridizing intrusions of human history.'[150]

This is the achievement of Ghosh's fiction, which clearly delineates the absences and presences in historical narratives, and draws the reader's attention to the erasures and silences in the recording and rendition of subaltern history. His narrative techniques such as his emphasis on fragments and traces (as noted in the previous chapter), and his

[147] Ibid., 64.
[148] Ibid., 65.
[149] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 82.
[150] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 96.

utilisation of coincidence and the uncanny, highlight the limitations of the empiricist approach in history and fiction, and ask readers to re-examine narrow definitions of realism. In this regard, it's worth keeping in mind Ulka Anjaria's definition of realism in the twentieth-century Indian novel. She writes:

> … realism in the colony is highly metatextual, founded on variegated textual fields and constituted not by ideological certainties but by contradictions, conflicts, and profound ambivalence as to the nature of the "real" world being represented, and the novel's ability to represent it. "Realism" is both deployed and kept at arm's length; it is both used and thematized, and in this way it is both the mode of representation and, in particularly illuminating moments, the question at stake in representation itself.[151]

Even if realism in the colony is 'never quite realism in the metropoles', Anjaria quotes Partha Chatterjee to state that difference is not a sign of 'philosophical immaturity and cultural backwardness'.[152] Instead, realism, in her opinion, represents 'both the world and the limits of its own referentiality'.[153] I suggest that a similar expansion of the aesthetic criteria that's typically presumed to constitute realism is necessary while reading Ghosh.

Accidental Encounters

On the very first page of *The Hungry Tide,* two of the novel's main characters, Kanai and Piya, meet at a railway station, and find themselves on the same train—seldom used by tourists—to the Sundarbans. The two are outsiders; Piya is a cetologist who grew up in Seattle, and Kanai, despite sharing his mother tongue with the locals, is metropolitan

[151] Ulka Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel: Colonial Difference and Literary Form* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid.

and middle-class. This chance encounter, which ends with Kanai inviting Piya to visit him at his aunt's house on an island named Lusibari, sets the narrative in motion.

In the chapters that follow, characters similarly meet each other by coincidence, and often go so far as to comment on the fortuitous nature of their meeting. In fact, Kanai's trip to the Sundarbans has its roots in an 'accidental encounter'[154] with his uncle Nirmal in Calcutta in the 1970s. After running into him near his university, Kanai buys Nirmal a translation of Francois Bernier's *Travels in the Mughal Empire*. The book reappears midway through the novel, when the perspective shifts to Nirmal's, as featured in his journal that Kanai is translating at his aunt's request.

In one passage, Nirmal writes about a journey he undertakes from Lusibari. Having missed his ferry connections, he despairs until a fisherman named Horen, whom he hasn't met for a while, comes to his rescue. As it happens, Horen has travelled to Lusibari to speak to Nirmal about enrolling his son at the school where Nirmal is headmaster, and he is amazed to find Nirmal at the embankment. This chance encounter serves both parties well: Nirmal offers a school seat to Horen's son, and Horen agrees to take Nirmal to his destination.

About that journey, Nirmal writes:

> Sitting in the boat, the familiar scenery began to take on a different aspect: it was as if I were seeing it in a new way. Under the shade of my umbrella, I opened one of the books I had brought with me – my copy of Bernier's *Travels*' – and, as if by magic, the pages fell open to his account of his travels in the tide country.[155]

[154] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 18.
[155] Ibid., 145.

These sentences indicate the techniques Ghosh employs to present coincidence in the novel. First, he draws the reader's attention to its improbability: an encounter is 'accidental', and a book opens to a particular page 'as if by magic'. One could argue that these descriptions anticipate, and perhaps serve to deflect, criticism that the author is overplaying his hand. But one could also counter that the characters' recognition of the providential nature of events hints at connections they are only beginning to decipher themselves. The spatial disorientation that prefigures a coincidence such as Nirmal's serendipitous meeting with Horen and the subsequent journey—'I was seeing it [the familiar landscape] in a new way,' as Nirmal writes—lends further credence to the notion of characters discovering, along with the reader, that which wasn't apparent before.

The Hungry Tide is divided into two sections titled 'The Ebb' and 'The Flood', and Ghosh harnesses the tidal movements, and the changeable quality of the Sundarbans, to mirror the characters' surprise at the unexpected encounters, and evoke the uncanny. As Nirmal tells Kanai, 'One of the many ways … in which the tide country resembles a desert is that it can trick the eye with mirages.'[156] The discovery of an envelope addressed to Kanai, enclosing Nirmal's journal whose translation eventually necessitates Kanai's trip to the Sundarbans from Calcutta, occurs because Nirmal's study, locked up for years following his death, has to be torn down to make space for a new floor. Spaces in *The Hungry Tide* are thus constantly being reconfigured, either by

[156] Ibid., 49.

nature (tides reshape islands[157]) or by humans (as in the case of Nirmal's study, or in the attempts to make the hostile islands fit for habitation[158]).

The spatial and temporal disjunction that characters experience on account of coincidental encounters serves as a fruitful device to underscore one of the main themes of *The Hungry Tide*: the displacement of people that began with the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, when Bengal was split into India (West Bengal) and East Pakistan (which later became Bangladesh). Hindu refugees entering India were first resettled in West Bengal, then forcibly moved further away from Bengal to what was 'more like a concentration camp or prison'.[159] These refugees escaped the camp in 1978 to travel to an island in the Sundarbans named Morichjhapi, drawn to its natural environment because it shared the features of their ancestral land. Their hope was that the authorities threatening them with eviction would, in time, come to understand their reasons.

The island's tumultuous story features in the novel through Nirmal's journal, and a woman named Kusum whom he and Horen meet in Morichjhapi. As a girl, Kusum had been in Lusibari under the care of an organisation run by Nirmal's wife Nilima. Later Kusum travels in search of her mother, believed to be working as a sex worker. In passages that highlight the role of the uncanny and chance, Nirmal transcribes in his journal Kusum's story as she narrated it to him. On her arrival at the railway station of the town where her mother is said to live, the unfamiliar surroundings overwhelm Kusum. 'But I was fortunate,' she says, 'although I didn't know, a blessed power[160] was

[157] Ibid., 7.
[158] Ibid., 8.
[159] Ibid., 118.
[160] The subsequent section on the uncanny examines the invocation of the divine and the supernatural in Ghosh's fiction.

watching: she showed me where to go.'[161] This 'blessed power' leads Kusum to Rajen, also from the Sundarbans. The coincidental nature of their meeting is emphasised when Kusum says that Rajen, after becoming injured in Calcutta, started selling food on trains: 'Chance had brought him to Dhanbad…'[162]

Kusum marries Rajen, has a child, but finds herself without support when Rajen dies in an accident. But she believes the deity Bon Bibi, whom the people of Sundarbans worship, watches over her: '… for one night I heard the tell of a great march to the east. They passed us next day – like ghosts, covered in dust…'[163] The marchers turn out to be refugees from Bangladesh, escaping the camp in which they had been resettled. Kusum and her son Fokir join them to return to the tide country.

These coincidental encounters are too frequent to be seen as the overreaching attempts of a writer manipulating the plot and characters with little regard for realism, or reader immersion. A more productive reading is to group these coincidences under the wider umbrella of what Hilary Dannenberg calls the 'kinship plot'.[164] Stating that the coincidence plot is centred on kinship and its discovery, Dannenberg writes:

> … the narrative power of this plot and its successful recurrent use across fiction despite its obviousness as a literary device are due to the deep cognitive power that representations of biological kinship activate within the mind of the reader. Due to the basic and quite literally "familiar" (i.e., familial) level of cognitive response it can elicit in the mind of the reader, the kinship plot makes the narrative world a "real" one for the reader. Above all, the pivotal position within the coincidence plot of the recognition scene (in which estranged family members discover their true identity) can be attributed to the deep cognitive imprint and consequent emotional power that kinship recognition has in real life.[165]

[161] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 163.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Ibid., 164.
[164] Hilary P. Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 31.
[165] Ibid., 31-32.

While Nirmal and Kanai are uncle and nephew, many characters in *The Hungry Tide* aren't biologically related to each other. But they do share a kinship based on geography and community. The Radcliffe Line that divided British India into West and East Pakistan was drawn in haste in 1947, when India and Pakistan became independent, with the resulting disputes continuing to this day. Foregrounding this history reveals that Ghosh's coincidental encounters have two functions: one, they highlight the ties of family, friends and community severed by Partition; and two, by prefiguring these through the spatial disorientation experienced by characters, Ghosh emphasises both their traumatic experience of dispossession, and their nostalgia for the home they have lost.

In *The Glass Palace*, for instance, Ghosh has, in Nair's words, 'three generations and several families strewn across half the world and must meet the obligation to establish connections between them.'[166] She notes that coincidental encounters allow Ghosh to link families by marriage, and to manoeuvre the movement of the characters such that one member each of the families' second generation meet in one place, 'in perfect consonance with Aristotle's traditional injunction that the unities of time and place be observed in any authoritative drama.'[167]

Nair interprets Ghosh's employment of coincidence as part of a 'literary compulsion', on a par with 'exuberant wordplay or fantasy', an attempt to 'counterbalance and redeem those brute facts of history that Ghosh is clearly committed

[166] Nair, "The Road from Mandalay," Kindle.
[167] Ibid.

to depicting in relentless detail.'[168] She also analyses the coincidences by citing Carl Jung on synchronicity.

In Jung's definition of coincidence, causality doesn't feature as a determining factor. As he writes:

> Chance, we say, must obviously be susceptible of some causal explanation and is only called 'chance' or 'coincidence' because its causality has not yet been discovered. Since we have an inveterate conviction of the absolute validity of causal law, we regard this explanation of chance as being quite adequate. But if the causal principle is only relatively valid, then it follows that even though in the vast majority of cases an apparently chance series can be causally explained, there must still remain a number of cases which do not show any causal connection.[169]

Jung believes coincidences are, however, connected meaningfully, and he chooses to distinguish them from 'meaningless chance groupings'.[170] For him, 'synchronicity in the special sense of a coincidence' is 'two or more causally unrelated events that have the same or a similar meaning.'[171]

By extending this definition, Nair argues that coincidence in *The Glass Palace* 'represents a 'break' in the logic of narration, just as post-coloniality marks a disjunction from the earlier trajectory of colonialism.'[172] According to her, coincidence stands in for fate in Ghosh's fiction, and allows him to tie up loose ends in the story. '*Stylistically*, he is always measured, correct, objective—in the manner of the historian—but

[168] Ibid.
[169] Carl Jung, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 16.
[170] Ibid., 33.
[171] Ibid., 34.
[172] Nair, "The Road from Mandalay," Kindle.

managerially he isn't altogether able to resist the temptation to play God—in the mode of the novelist,' she writes.[173]

Nair states that Ghosh's skill as a historical novelist enables the reader to 'forget history' and 'allow the internal dynamics of the text to dominate events'.[174] This echoes Dannenberg's hypothesis that readers tend to overlook coincidences involving the meeting of family members because 'kinship plots activate the reader's sense of lineage', and lead the reader to 'process the text as a realistic one representing the types of connections (human relationships) familiar from her own life.'[175]

Applying Dannenberg's conclusions to Ghosh's fiction, it's possible to attribute reader immersion to the primacy of the kinship plot in his novels. However, these arguments, based on Jung's acausal principle of coincidence, ultimately place coincidence at odds with realism. I suggest that, on the contrary, the coincidences in Ghosh's fiction encourage the reader to visualise forgotten or erased relationships and stories, and thus serve as constructive tools for representing realism.

Unlike many Western readers, the South Asian reader has no choice but to be aware of the coloniser's reshaping of the Indian subcontinent. As Mondal writes, 'The arbitrariness of borders, and the gap between maps and reality, could have been personally vouched for by millions of people during the Partition of 1947 as they found themselves on the wrong side of the border hastily drawn up by Cyril Radcliffe and his Boundary Commission, which partitioned an entire subcontinent without leaving its offices in Delhi by using (out-of-date and inaccurate) maps.'[176]

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[173] Ibid.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, 25-26.
[176] Mondal, *Amitav Ghosh*, 88.

Pointing out that the reality of the nation is articulated through language, Mondal states that the relationship of the nation to the space it inhabits is also, in some ways, arbitrary: 'The 'map' upon which the nation is inscribed is, like a text, merely a representation of the world, a metaphor of space and not space itself. Therefore the physical space of the nation, and the location of its borders—as represented by the map—may not necessarily coincide with the 'imagined community' that is brought into being through the language of nationhood.'[177] By creating borders and nations, colonialism erased the evidence of the existence of ancient networks, a theme that Ghosh returns to in all his works. In *In An Antique Land*, when Ghosh is prevented from entering a tomb of a medieval saint because he is not Jewish, Israeli, Egyptian or Muslim, he notes, '… there was nothing I could point to … that might have given credence to my story – the remains of those small, indistinguishable, intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim, had been partitioned long ago.'[178]

Far from signifying the artificiality of the fictional world, the coincidences scattered across Ghosh's narratives thus point to the connections between characters across time and space that existed before borders recategorised friends and family as the *other*. This is particularly true of novels such as *The Glass Palace*, in which coincidental encounters occur across geographies. In *The Hungry Tide*, these encounters primarily take place in the same geographical region, but are made all the more poignant by the fact that the dispossessed characters in the novel were rendered stateless by Partition.

[177] Ibid.
[178] Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, 339

While a few of his contemporaries have opted for magic realism to underscore these stories, Ghosh's literary techniques appear to have more in common with the narrative mode employed in Hindi films made soon after India's independence. In her analysis of the film *Waqt* (1965), Rebecca M. Brown notes that the 'lost-and-found' trope was once popular in Hindi films.[179] Typically these films followed families torn apart by calamities, and concluded with a reunion. In *Waqt*, for instance, family members are separated by an earthquake, but, as Rachel Dwyer writes, 'It requires little imagination to read the family's displacement from the Punjab to Delhi and its final reunion in Mumbai as a metaphor for Partition.'[180] In a correspondence with Chakrabarty, Ghosh himself states that his novels are centred on families, which is a 'way of displacing the "nation" … writing about families is one way of not writing about the nation (or other restrictively imagined collectivities).'[181]

Even more pertinent is the fact that like the displaced family members finding each other at the conclusion of *Waqt*, and the characters discovering community and friendship through unexpected encounters in Ghosh's novels, long-lost kin do locate each other in the Indian subcontinent in real life.[182] While critics may condemn the coincidental encounter as improbable, when viewed in the context of the fractured histories of South Asian countries, it reveals itself to be a worthy device for representing the experiences of the fifteen million people thought to be displaced by Partition, as also

[179] Rebecca M. Brown, "Partition and the Uses of History in *Waqt*/Time," *Screen* 48, 2 (2007): 161.
[180] Rachel Dwyer, *Yash Chopra: Fifty Years in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Lotus Collection, 2002), 18.
[181] Amitav Ghosh and Dipesh Chakrabarty, "A Correspondence on *Provincializing Europe*," *Radical History Review*, 83 (2002): 147.
[182] "Two Brothers, Separated During Partition, Meet after 74 years at Kartarpur," *NDTV.com*, accessed February 2023, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/separated-during-partition-brothers-hug-burst-into-tears-on-meeting-after-74-years-at-kartarpur-corridor-2704859.

the tens of thousands of Indians forced to leave Burma (as it was then known) in 1942, an exodus at the heart of *The Glass Palace*.

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh writes that 'the contemporary novel has become ever more radically centred on the individual psyche while the collective … has receded, both in the cultural and the fictional imagination.'[183] By heightening the interconnectedness of characters and not just individual experiences, the coincidental encounter allows Ghosh to centre the collective in his fiction. As a technique to depict the assertion of subaltern agency, and its resistance to the geographical barriers created by colonialism, the coincidental encounter therefore also serves a function more powerful than mimetic description.

Coincidence, Plot, and Agency

'Good plots,' writes Marie-Laure Ryan, 'are propelled by the inner disposition of characters and by their logical reasoning, while bad ones are steered by *ad hoc* external circumstances which bear the stamp of the author's fabrication.'[184] Though Ryan states that readers will have variable opinions on whether a 'plot trick' such as coincidence should be labelled 'cheap' or 'brilliant', her essay asks if plot is an adequate way to represent reality. Pointing to Hayden White's distrust of emplotment in narrative history, she states, 'Plot … is a form imposed top-down on reality, rather than growing out of it.'[185]

[183] Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 78.
[184] Ryan, "Cheap Plot Tricks," 57.
[185] Ibid., 69.

Ryan's comments allude to the authorial temptation to create a hierarchal structure in the construction of a story, with plot dictating the movement of characters. The fear is that the imposition of a rigid structure, as necessitated by a tightly constructed plot, will entail the undermining of character motivation and, by extension, the realist nature of the text.

Examining Ghosh's fiction through this lens, we can see that while his novels are lauded for their realist presentation of history, reviewers also marvel at the narrative urgency and absorption created by his plots. The page for *Sea of Poppies* on the Waterstones website (last accessed in January 2023), for instance, features praise from *The Guardian*, which calls it a 'ripping post-colonial yarn', and from *The New York Times*, which applauds its 'plot of Dickensian intricacy'. Academics too concur. Of *The Glass Palace*, Nair writes in her essay that it is 'not just a thoroughly researched novel' but also 'a carefully plotted one'.[186] Khair contends that *The Calcutta Chromosome* is notable for 'the presence of that rare commodity in Babu Indian English fiction, a plot. One can claim that novels by, say, Rushdie, Desani, Raja Rao, Vikram Chandra, even "literary realists" like Anita Desai and Vikram Seth, lack intricate plots. They have a flowing narrative, a loose character-based or congeries-of-events structuring, a beginning and an end: but the kind of plot that a novel of suspense (at its best) epitomises is often missing.'[187]

The plots of Ghosh's novels, particularly *The Calcutta Chromosome*, are predicated on suspense. For Nair, it is his fidelity to plot that encourages Ghosh to

[186] Nair, "The Road from Mandalay," Kindle.
[187] Tabish Khair, "Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*: The Question of Subaltern Agency," in *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*, ed. Khair, Kindle.

employ coincidences and create unity in the structure of his novels. But for Khair, coincidences in *The Calcutta Chromosome* not only facilitate an intricate plot, but also express subaltern agency. He defines this agency, which remains incomprehensible to the coloniser, as 'the capacity of a subject (constituted within certain discourses) to act with a degree of freedom from the control of another subject (constituted within other discourses)'.[188]

Khair notes that the coloniser saw the colonised as 'irrational', but '*The Calcutta Chromosome* suggests that different noetic modes, not comprehensible within narrow and Eurocentric versions of rationality, may operate in colonised … societies.'[189] Owing to this lack of comprehensibility, the coloniser can't read patterns into the coincidences in the novel as the subaltern can. These coincidences include Antar unexpectedly seeing Murugan's ID on his computer, thereby learning about Murugan's disappearance, Murugan's discovery of the Robinson Guest House 'entirely by accident'[190] and, as stated in the previous chapter, the appearance of a malarial patient named Abdul Kadir whose blood samples advance Ronald Ross' research.

The characters in the novel often comment on the coincidences and the patterns they create. Murugan, for instance, tells Antar that Ross never thought to question why a patient crucial to his research 'walked through the door when he needed him most. He thought it was just luck.'[191] In response, Antar asks: 'Are you suggesting that Abdul Kadir's arrival at the hospital on May 17 wasn't just coincidence?'[192] Later on in the novel, Urmila realises that the important person visiting them to offer her brother a

[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 79.
[191] Ibid., 72.
[192] Ibid.

sports contract, necessitating an early-morning expedition to buy fish so that she can prepare a special meal for the visitor, is her friend Sonali's boyfriend Romen Haldar. 'It's just a coincidence,' she says when she hears Haldar's name from her mother.[193]

On the morning of Haldar's planned visit, a young man appears at Urmila's door with the fish she needs, wrapped in a Xerox-copy of *The Colonial Services Gazette* from 1898. Discovering he has sold her putrid fish, Urmila runs after the young man to confront him and ends up meeting Murugan. The scraps of the *Gazette* she has with her mention Ross, and turn out to be the missing link Murugan had been hoping to find. When Murugan says that someone wanted them to discover these connections, Urmila says, '… I met you by accident.'[194] But as Murugan explains to her, 'Someone's trying to get us to make some connections; they're trying to tell us something; something they don't want to put together themselves, so that when we get to the end we'll have a whole new story.'[195] As Mondal notes, '…these are not coincidences but part of an elaborate pattern – a plot, one that encompasses every aspect of the narrative…'[196]

Khair states that by turning 'coincidences (the epitome of the *incomprehensible*) into a pattern, they are made eminently *comprehensible*—provided one knows what one is looking for, provided one learns to speak the language of the subalterns.'[197] But this language is outside the purview of the coloniser, just like the critic who arbitrarily dismisses the use of coincidence as a 'plot trick'.

In a tongue-in-cheek fashion, Ghosh addresses the subject of incomprehensibility through the lens of Murugan's research on malaria. Murugan writes

[193] Ibid., 134.
[194] Ibid., 214.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Mondal, *Amitav Ghosh*, 62.
[197] Khair, "Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*," Kindle.

a paper on the subject, which in its original form receives terrible reviews. He revises it, and 'the new piece bore the unfortunate title "An Alternative Interpretation of Late Nineteenth-Century Malaria Research: Is There a Secret History?" It met with an even more hostile reception than the earlier version, and it only served to brand Murugan as a crank and an eccentric.'[198] Despite the satirical tone of the sentence, the words 'secret history' do indicate that Ross refused to understand and appreciate the subaltern contribution to his research, which brings to mind Spivak's argument that the Western intellectual failed to 'hear' the colonised in their discussions about who should speak for those considered to be oppressed.[199]

Woven together, the coincidences in *The Calcutta Chromosome* serve to create an immersive plot, and illuminate secret histories missing from colonial archives. As Khair writes, 'subaltern agencies and experience … have been largely plotted out of extant histories.'[200] Ghosh's well-plotted novel, therefore, 'marks the restoration of history to the subaltern: for history can be seen as the plotting of human experience and agency.'[201]

The Uncanny as a Realist Mode of Representation

A coincidence is often characterised as 'uncanny', a term also used to describe encounters with spirits, the divine, demons and ghosts. For Freud, the uncanny is 'that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very

[198] Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 35.
[199] Spivak's argument is discussed further in the next chapter.
[200] Khair, "Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*," Kindle.
[201] Ibid.

familiar.'[202] It is also that which has been concealed, hidden, or to use Freudian terminology, 'repressed'.[203]

Before examining the quality of the uncanny in Ghosh's novels, it is pertinent to discuss the context in which the uncanny is interpreted as concurrent with or in opposition to realism in fiction. While an uncanny experience can be seen as part of real life, if we consider that realism is in itself constituted through certain beliefs and perceptions, the very definition of realism is rendered as unstable as that of uncanny itself. For instance, we can extend the doubleness Freud associates with the word 'uncanny'—that which is familiar but also unfamiliar—to argue that certain beliefs were once part of everyday life, but have since been repressed to make it possible for us to inhabit a particular social existence, be it modern, rational, or empirical. The question then arises as to whether the uncanny is an effect that emerges on account of modernity and realist modes of perception and representation that followed Enlightenment.

Tzvetan Todorov, in his study of this conundrum, suggests that it's the reader and the character who decide if a particular event can be classed as uncanny or not. If, on reading a story, the reader 'decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described', the work belongs to the genre of uncanny.[204] For Todorov, the fantastic relies on a reader's hesitation about the nature of an uncanny event. 'This hesitation,' he states, 'may be resolved so that the event is

[202] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," trans. Alix Strachey, *Imago*, *Bd. V.,* (1919); reprinted in *Sammlung*, Fünfte Folge, 1-2.
[203] A study of coincidence is excluded from this section as it has already been examined. I have instead chosen to focus on the spiritual, supernatural, and other aspects of the uncanny.
[204] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 41.

acknowledged as reality, or so that the event is identified as the fruit of imagination or the result of an illusion; in other words, we may decide that the event *is* or *is not*.'[205]

From Todorov's emphasis on hesitation, it's possible to infer that the decisions people take on the realist or unrealistic nature of an event are often shaped by the world in which they live, and their belief systems that vary over time and region. As Charles Taylor notes in *A Secular Age*, our predecessors acknowledged 'the enchanted world, the world of spirits, demons, moral forces'.[206] They believed objects held meaning independent of us, and had a causal power that matched their incorporated meaning. In the disenchanted world, however, objects have no such meaning, or it's our minds that project meaning onto them.[207] Taylor also states that if, at one time, the self was seen as porous and vulnerable to demons and cosmic forces, now we are able to define an inner self free of this fear, and disengage our minds from those beliefs that we today consider superstitions.

'Perhaps the clearest sign of the transformation in our world is that today many people look back to the world of the porous self with nostalgia. As though the creation of a thick emotional boundary between us and the cosmos were now lived as a loss,' Taylor writes. 'The aim is to recover some measure of this lost feeling. So people go to movies about the uncanny in order to experience a frisson. Our peasant ancestors would have thought us insane. You can't get a frisson from what is really in fact terrifying you.'[208]

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[205] Ibid., 156.
[206] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 29.
[207] Ibid., 35
[208] Ibid., 38.

A Secular Age lists the reasons why Western Christian society moved away from the enchanted to the disenchanted world, including Reformation and political theories that remade societies. Nicholas Royle expands on this subject in *The Uncanny*, where he notes that uncanniness manifested itself in the nineteenth century across a range of political and social issues, particularly in Britain. He quotes Mladen Dolar, who states:

> There is a specific dimension of the uncanny that emerges with modernity … [I]n premodern societies the dimension of the uncanny was largely covered (and veiled) by the area of the sacred and untouchable. It was assigned to a religiously and socially sanctioned place … With the triumph of the Enlightenment, this privileged and excluded place (the exclusion that founded society) was no more. That is to say that the uncanny became unplaceable; it became uncanny in the strict sense.[209]

As a condition that emerged with modernity, it's possible to argue that the uncanny in fiction can offer not only a representation of that which has been repressed but also those narratives erased by structures of modernity, keeping in mind that modernity and advancement of 'uncivilised' societies were often offered as reasons to justify colonialism. To look at the uncanny exclusively as an emotive feeling, Samuel Weber notes, is to 'ignore the fact that the uncanny has a particular structure, which, however intimately bound up with subjective feelings … is nonetheless determined by a series of "objective" factors that in turn stand in a certain relation to literary discourse.'[210] Royle states that as the uncanny is not merely an 'aesthetic' or a 'psychological' matter, 'its critical elaboration involves analysing, questioning and even transforming what is called "everyday life".' This applies, he writes, to issues of

[209] Mladan Dolar, '"I Shall be With You on Your Wedding-Night": Lacan and the Uncanny', cited in Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 22.
[210] Samuel Weber, "The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment," *MLN* 88, No.6 (1973): 1103.

sexuality, class, race, age, imperialism and colonialism, 'so many issues of potentially uncanny 'otherness' already evident in the nineteenth century'.[211]

The uncanny in Ghosh's fiction resurrects the past by underscoring the link between characters and their histories, often unavailable to the characters themselves because of the empirical, totalising nature of Eurocentric historiography, which, for instance, fails to consider the role of gods and spirits in shaping history. Chakraborty elaborates on this subject with an example of peasants in eastern India who claimed they were inspired to rebel at the exhortation of God:

> For a historian, this statement would never do as an explanation, and one would feel obliged to translate the peasants' claim into some kind of understandable (that is, secular) causes animating the rebellion. I assume that such translation is both inevitable and unavoidable (for we do not write for the peasants). The question is: How do we conduct these translations in such a manner as to make visible all the problems of translating diverse and enchanted worlds into the universal and disenchanted language of sociology?[212]

Chakrabarty's answer to his own question is that translation 'must possess something of the "uncanny" about it. An ambiguity must mark the translation…'[213] The conspicuous presence of the uncanny in Ghosh's novels, particularly *The Hungry Tide* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*, can be read as Ghosh's attempt to ascribe agency to the supernatural in his construction of history, and thus reinstate forgotten or erased historical discourses.

While the historian, as Chakrabarty states, can't invoke the supernatural to explain an event, the novelist faces no such constraints. But the novelist who allows

[211] Royle, *The Uncanny*, 23.
[212] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 89.
[213] Ibid.

ghosts and gods to influence his characters' decisions and actions may find that his work may not be accorded a place in the realist canon. As Peter Brooks writes, '… realism becomes so much the expected mode of the novel that even today we tend to think of it as the norm from which other modes—magic realism, science fiction, fantasy, metafictions—are variants or deviants.'[214]

Ghosh's fiction, being populated with ghosts, spirits, gods, folktales and myths, occupies an unstable position in relation to the realist mode, but I suggest that this instability has a mimetic function. It is Ghosh's response to Chakrabarty's question: are there experiences of the past that can't be captured by methods employed by historians?[215] By giving equal weightage to myth and geology, by refusing to differentiate between modern science and traditional knowledge, and by acknowledging the uncanny in the daily lives of his characters, Ghosh makes visible the process of translating 'diverse and enchanted worlds' in a manner that historians can't. For him, realism encompasses and goes beyond a secular frame of reference.

To accommodate the uncanny in his novels, Ghosh either relies on senses other than the visual or disrupts the primacy of sight. This is in many ways at odds with the construction of realism. Brookes notes that realist literature is 'attached to the visual, to looking at things, registering their presence in the world through sight. Certainly realism more than any other mode of literature makes sight paramount—makes it the dominant sense in our understanding of and relation to the world.'[216]

[214] Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 5.
[215] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 107.
[216] Brooks, *Realist Vision*, 3.

In *The Hungry Tide*, however, characters are never certain of what they are seeing. The landscape shapeshifts with the ebb and flow of the tide; overnight, mangroves begin to gestate, spreading so fast that, in the right conditions, a new island is formed every few years.[217] The changeable nature of the landscape, described as a 'mirage' as we have seen earlier, is a theme that recurs throughout the novel. An instructive example is the scene in which Piya travels on a boat with Fokir. As she reaches closer to the forest, she realises 'the greenery worked to confound the eye'. She reflects:

> It was not just that it was a barrier, like a screen or a wall: it seemed to trick the human gaze, in the manner of a cleverly drawn optical illusion. There was such a profusion of shapes, forms, hues and textures, that even things that were in plain view seemed to disappear, vanishing into the tangle of lines like the hidden objects in children's puzzles.[218]

Throughout the novel, Ghosh creates a delicate interplay between the real and the unreal, and the seen and the unseen. Writing in his journal, Nirmal notes that as 'a townsman,' he had at first assumed 'the tide country's jungle was an emptiness.'[219] But he later changes his mind: 'I saw now that it was an illusion, that exactly the opposite was true. What was happening here, I realized, was that the wheel of time was spinning too fast to be seen.'[220]

The emphasis on the illusory nature of the surroundings isn't meant to detract from the novel's realist impulse; rather it's intended to enhance it. This is evident in *The Great Derangement*, where Ghosh offers a non-fictional account of the Sundarbans that

[217] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 7.
[218] Ibid., 150.
[219] Ibid., 224.
[220] Ibid.

has much in common with the fictional narrative in *The Hungry Tide*. Of the tigers in the Sundarbans, he writes:

> …tigers are everywhere and nowhere. Often when you go ashore, you will find fresh tiger prints in the mud, but of the animal itself you will see nothing: glimpses of tigers are exceedingly uncommon… Yet you cannot doubt, since the prints are so fresh, that a tiger is somewhere nearby; and you know that it is probably watching you. In this jungle, concealment is so easy for an animal that it could be just a few feet away.[221]

Every household in the Sunderbans has a story about the tiger. Ghosh recalls: 'In these stories a great deal hinges on the eyes; seeing is one of their central themes; *not* seeing is another.'[222] By representing the uncanny, Ghosh's fiction acknowledges the uncertainty experienced by the inhabitants of the islands and, thereby, meets Ian Watt's criteria for formal realism: the presentation of 'a full and authentic report of human experience'.[223] But Watt doesn't consider the uncanny as realist, as is evident in his criticism of the use of coincidence in Fielding's *Tom Jones*: '… although such apposite juxtapositions of persons and events do not violate verisimilitude as obviously as the supernatural interventions that are common in Homer or Virgil, it is surely evident that they nevertheless tend to compromise the narrative's general air of literal authenticity by suggesting the manipulated sequences of literature rather than the ordinary processes of life.'[224]

Interestingly, Watt's dismissal of the supernatural as unrealistic is echoed by Nirmal in *The Hungry Tide*. When Kanai first encounters the tale of Bon Bibi as a child,

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[221] Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 28.
[222] Ibid., 29.
[223] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957; repr., Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964), 32.
[224] Ibid., 253.

he asks Nirmal for an explanation, but Nirmal dismisses it as 'false consciousness'.[225] Nirmal is rational and disapproves of religion and myths about goddesses. He's the proxy for the reader who believes the fantastic and the spectral lie in opposition to realism. While relating Bernier's accounts of the tide country to Horen, Nirmal mentions a 'most extraordinary night'[226] the priest and his entourage spent on a creek when the mangroves around them appeared to burst into flames because of glow worms. The sailors with Bernier decided it was the handiwork of devils. Soon after, a storm rages for two hours. Horen asserts that these events were indeed the work of a demon named Dokkhin Rai; as the priest was lost, he must have crossed the line Bon Bibi drew on the water separating the realm of humans from that of Dokkhin Rai and the demons.

'I grew impatient,' Nirmal writes, 'and said, "Horen! A storm is an atmospheric disturbance: it has neither intention nor motive."'[227] But Nirmal has a dramatic realisation on another journey, when he sees Horen and Kusum genuflect on the open water at the point where Bon Bibi drew the line. He writes:

> I realized, with a sense of shock, that this chimerical line was, to her and to Horen, as real as a barbed-wire fence might be to me.
>
> And now, everything began to look new, unexpected, full of surprises. I had a book in my hand to while away the time, and it occurred to me that in a way a landscape too is not unlike a book – a compilation of pages that overlap without any two ever being the same. People open their book according to their taste and training, their memories and desires: for a geologist the compilation opens at one page, for a boatman at another….[228]

The 'sense of shock' that Nirmal experiences is analogous to the habitual experience of the uncanny as a shock, or a jolt to the senses. In Nirmal's case, the shock

[225] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 101.
[226] Ibid., 146.
[227] Ibid., 147.
[228] Ibid., 224.

makes way to an understanding that recall Foucault's words on the 'frontiers of a book'. As Foucault says, a book is 'caught up in a system of reference to other books, other texts, other sentences … it cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it; its unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity, it loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse.'[229]

Ghosh's reference to borders here also tallies with Royle's statement that uncanniness 'is often to be associated with an experience of the threshold, liminality, margins, borders, frontiers'.[230] As Nirmal questions the frontiers, and the unity, of the book he holds, he realises that myth and sciences can carry equal weightage, a change of heart that allows Ghosh to directly addresses why the inclusion of supernatural needn't be at odds with realism. This suggestion is further reinforced through Piya's scientific discoveries, which not only rely on modern technology such as the GPS to track marine animals, but also the knowledge of fishermen like Fokir who is illiterate but, as Piya affirms, 'can see right into the river's heart'.[231]

This dissolution of barriers can be read as an 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges'; Foucault's definition of the term 'subjugated knowledges' includes 'a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated'.[232] Criticisms perform their work, Foucault writes, through the 're-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified knowledges (such as that of the psychiatric patient, of the ill person, of the

[229] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 23.
[230] Royle, *The Uncanny*, Preface, vii.
[231] Ibid., 267.
[232] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon., trans., Colin Gordon et al (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 81-82.

nurse, of the doctor-parallel and marginal as they are to the knowledge of medicine—that of the delinquent etc.), and which involve what I would call a popular knowledge ... a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it…'[233]

The 'insurrection' of other knowledges can also be seen in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, in which Ghosh similarly avoids constructing a polarity between science and magic.[234] These two modes, Khair writes, share a common 'tradition', as both are 'based on the assumption that there is more to the world than meets the naked eye—that this 'more' cannot be explained by 'common sense', but that it can be registered, controlled, cultivated, even understood through a systematic process of human action.'[235] The ghosts in Ghosh's fiction, and its Gothic intertext, perform a similar function.

Postcolonial Ghosts

In *The Hungry Tide* characters often reference ghosts in their dialogue and interior. 'We were like two ghosts living in the same house,' Nilima says of her life with Nirmal.[236] As Fokir cooks on the boat, the smells remind Piya of her mother in the kitchen, and the odours of cooking unfamiliar to North Americans that clung to her and caused her to be taunted in the school playground. 'But here [in the Sunderbans],' she thinks, 'the ghosts of these creatures seemed to be quieted by their surroundings. The spell of Fokir's

[233] Ibid, 82.
[234] Also discussed in the previous chapter.
[235] Khair, "Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*," Kindle.
[236] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 120.

fingers was broken only when a breeze carried the acrid odour of burning chillies directly into her face. And then suddenly the phantoms came alive again…'[237] Kusum, as noted in a previous section, compares the refugees she meets to ghosts.

The ghosts that populate the novel create a specific effect, moving the uncanny, as Pramod K. Nayar puts it, 'beyond the realm of the merely psychic into cultural and geographical contexts, where dispossession-repossession, locational perceptions and epistemology inform the uncanny.'[238] Nayar quotes Nicholas Rand who states in his editor's note to *The Shell and the Kernel* that '… the phantom has the potential to illuminate the genesis of social institutions.'[239] By extrapolation, these institutions that the ghosts in Ghosh's fiction illuminate include structures such as colonialism, which dismantled indigenous knowledge and ways of life. In effect, these ghosts are created by the condition of postcoloniality, or, as Bishnupriya Ghosh puts it, they record 'the trauma of modernity in the postcolonial liberal state'.[240]

Often, Ghosh employs ghost stories alongside tropes from the Gothic, thrillers and science fiction. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the description of Calcutta as a city with secrets, the experiments conducted on Indians by Ross that include the drawing of blood and its subsequent analysis, and the recurring ghost stories, point to its Gothic influences. This Gothic intertext in the novel challenges the typical construction of Otherness in Gothic English literature, a genre Khair says may have been 'best situated

[237] Ibid., 97.
[238] Pramod K. Nayar, "The Postcolonial Uncanny: The Politics of Dispossession in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*," *College Literature* 37 (2010): 90.
[239] Ibid., 102.
[240] Bishnupriya Ghosh, "On Grafting the Vernacular: The Consequences of Postcolonial Spectrology," *boundary 2*, 31:2 (2004): 215.

to access … the hauntings and dreams, the nightmares and anxieties of empire…'[241] He notes that more than other mainstream branches of literature, the Gothic's 'concern with excess and transgression, its ambivalence, the tense dialectic of 'us' and 'them', 'self' and 'Other', has allowed greater space for narratives of Others, with the Other defined in European thought as 'a Self waiting to be assimilated… or … cast as the purely negative image of the European Self… Either as lack or as an absolute incomprehensibility-read-negatively, this reduced Other is posited as inferior or secondary to the European Self – and utterly knowable in its very negativised unknowability.'[242]

In his fiction Ghosh reverses the image of the Other in the European Gothic text. The subaltern perspective, which the reader is able to discern through the characters' viewpoints, presents the trespasser, the imperialist, or the visitor who lacks a grasp of a region or a people's history and culture, as the Other.

The ghost stories in *The Calcutta Chromosome* that feature Laakhan/Lutchman serve as sites where the subaltern is able to exact his revenge against the European Other or those in positions of power. The ghosts are also reminders of erasure and, as Bishnupriya Ghosh writes, 'demand redress from rational historiography'.[243] They don't subvert reality; rather, they remind the reader of the problematic nature of empirical historiography. If the ghosts represent a lack, it's of the absences in the historical discourse.

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[241] Tabish Khair, *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 9-10.
[242] Ibid., 4.
[243] Bishnupriya Ghosh, "Grafting the Vernacular," 217.

Quoting Wendy Brown in "Futures", published in 2000 in *Politics Out of History*, Bishnupriya Ghosh states that spectres present new possibilities in undoing the opposition between life and death, presence and absence, with spectrology itself serving as post-progressive history, relocating historical meaning to an "other space and idiom".[244] The uncanny in Ghosh's writing, therefore, is not merely a figure of the incommensurable. Rather, the ghosts remind the reader of the questions of political justice that Jacques Derrida asks in *Specters of Marx*. The recurrence of the ghost stories in *The Calcutta Chromosome* too echoes Derrida's statement that 'the spirit comes by *coming back* [revenant], it figures *both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again.'[245]

In Ghosh's fiction, ghosts also erase the differences between the past and present to reveal historical truths. This idea is articulated in a scene set in a cellar in *The Shadow Lines*. Looking around the space where other characters have spent considerable time, the narrator thinks: 'Those empty corners filled up with remembered forms, with the ghosts who had been handed down to me by time… They were all around me, we were together at last, not ghosts at all: the ghostliness was merely the absence of time and distance—for that is all that a ghost is, a presence displaced in time.'[246]

Unseen Forces

The uncanny in Ghosh's fiction references more than the supernatural and the divine, which often shape history and human lives; it also helps to emphasise those forces that

[244] Ibid., 206.
[245] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 10.
[246] Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (1988; repr., London: John Murray, 2011), 222.

we don't see but still exert a considerable influence on our lives, such as climate change; structural inequality on account of race, gender and sexuality; and market forces.

In *The Great Derangement*, for instance, Ghosh points to how the uncanny introduces 'an irreducible element of mystery' also present in the tiger stories of the Sundarbans,[247] a mode that accommodates the unseen power of nature. Referring to the writings of Freud and Heidegger, Ghosh notes:

> …it is indeed with uncanny accuracy that my experience of the tornado is evoked in the following passage: 'In dread, as we say, "one feels something uncanny". What is this "something" and this "one"? We are unable to say what gives "one" that uncanny feeling. "One" just feels it generally.'[248]

Here he doesn't posit the uncanny as being anachronistic to realism. If our gaze is turning again, he states, it's because 'uncanny and improbable events' are at our doorstep. Climate change has created in us the recognition that 'humans were never alone, that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be more distinctively our own: the capacities of will, thought, and consciousness.'[249] These unseen forces, he states, have shaped our discussions 'without our being aware of it.'[250]

A scene in *The Glass Palace*, where Uma and Matthew converse about the human ingenuity and endeavour required to maintain a rubber plantation, brings this *unseen force* to sharp focus. Pointing to a tree that refuses to produce latex, Matthew refers to a popular saying that 'every rubber tree in Malaya was paid for with an Indian

[247] Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 30.
[248] Ibid.
[249] Ibid., 30-31.
[250] Ibid., 31.

life.'[251] This saying has its origins in the understanding amongst Indian rubber plantation workers that 'there are trees that won't do what the others do' and, in refusing to heed to the ministrations of the workers, the trees are 'fighting back'.[252]

Similarly, the uncanny points to the effects of colonialism as well as globalisation and capitalism. The appearance of ghosts and spectres in Ghosh's fictional narratives recalls Karl Marx's employment of the gothic in *Das Kapital*, as interpreted by Francis Wheen, who says the book 'can be read as a vast Gothic novel whose heroes are enslaved and consumed by the monster they created.'[253] Wheen explains:

> The *terra incognita* which he [Marx] set out to explore was the new world of industrial capitalism … and from the outset Marx warned readers that they were entering a fantasy land where nothing is as it seems. Look at his choice of verbs in the very first sentence of *Das Kapital*: 'The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails *appears* as an "immense collection of commodities"; the individual commodity *appears* as its elementary form.' (My emphasis.) Though less dramatic than the famous opening sentence of the *Communist Manifesto* ('A spectre is haunting Europe …'), it makes a similar point: we are entering a world of spectres and apparitions. The pages of *Das Kapital* are peppered with phrases such as 'phantom-like objectivity', 'unsubstantial ghost', 'pure illusion' and 'false semblance'. Only by penetrating the veils of illusion can he reveal the exploitation by which capitalism lives.

Such a style of writing is deliberate, Wheen concludes. Metaphors force us to look at something anew through a process of defamiliarisation. Wheen quotes the critic Ludovico Silva who draws on the etymological meaning of 'metaphor' to show that:

> … capitalism itself is a metaphor, an alienating process which displaces life from subject to object, from use-value to exchange-value, from the human to the monstrous. In this reading, the literary style Marx adopted in *Das Kapital* is not a colourful veneer applied to an otherwise forbidding slab of economic exposition … it is the only appropriate language in which to express 'the

[251] Ghosh, *The Glass Palace*, 233.
[252] Ibid.
[253] Francis Wheen, *Marx's Das Kapital: A Biography* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), 75.

> delusive nature of things', an ontological enterprise which cannot be confined within the borders and conventions of an existing genre such as political economy, anthropological science or history.[254]

The uncanny in Ghosh's fiction too can be said to be an appropriate language through which Ghosh expresses the hidden forces that guide the course of countries and people. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, for example, Murugan's theory about Ross, which leads his colleagues to consider him erratic, is that 'some person or persons had systematically interfered with Ronald Ross' experiments to push malaria research in certain directions while leading it away from others.'[255] This cult-like group remains unseen, but their actions direct the narrative and characters.

Through the evocation of unseen presences, Ghosh is able to gesture towards the role of the divine, the supernatural and other forces such as capitalism and colonialism in a manner that historians can't. In Chakrabarty's example mentioned earlier in this chapter, a subaltern attributes the rationale of a rebellion to a god, and the historian can't reproduce this fact without taking agency away from the subaltern for their own action.[256] Therefore, as Chakrabarty explains, 'Historians will grant the supernatural a place in somebody's belief system or ritual practices, but to ascribe to it any real agency in historical events will go against the rules of evidence that gives historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past.'[257]

The novelist, however, can accommodate multiplicities and assign agency to both the supernatural and the subaltern without one invalidating the other. Chakrabarty articulates a similar sentiment when he writes: 'The past is pure narration, no matter

[254] Ibid., 80-81.
[255] Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 36.
[256] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 103.
[257] Ibid., 104.

who has agency in it. Fiction and films … are the best modern media for handling this mode.'[258]

Ghosh himself states that the novel is 'the grandest form of all expression'.[259] History or anthropology, he says, can't convey emotion or affect, and 'it cannot give you what individual characters feel as they experience history. So this is why I write novels, because I think novels can synthesize geology, history, personal relationships, emotion, everything.'[260]

[258] Ibid., 88.
[259] T. Vijay Kumar, "Postcolonial Describes You as a Negative," *Interventions* 9 (2007): 103.
[260] Ibid.

3

Should the Subaltern Speak? The Role of Silence in Ghosh's Fiction

The historian and the historical novelist writing about the colonised must inevitably confront a key question raised by Spivak: 'can the subaltern speak?'[261] As noted in the previous chapter, Spivak's argument in her essay isn't that the subaltern can't speak for themselves, but that in reconstructing their voice, the intellectual is often unable to *hear* the subaltern or present an authentic account of the subaltern experience. In her essay, Spivak illustrates her argument with the story of a teenage girl named Bhubaneswari Bhaduri who killed herself. The suicide wasn't motivated by the cause first suspected—pregnancy outside of marriage—as Bhubaneswari was menstruating at the time. Later, it was discovered that Bhubaneswari had been entrusted with a political assassination and, being unable to execute the task, chose to end her own life. Revisiting the subject of the essay several years later, Spivak writes:

> I know of Bhubaneswari's life and death through family connections. Before investigating them more thoroughly, I asked a Bengali woman, a philosopher and Sanskritist whose early intellectual production is almost identical to mine, to start the process. Two responses: (a) Why, when her two sisters … led such full and wonderful lives, are you interested in the hapless Bhubaneswari? (b) I asked her nieces. It appears that it was a case of illicit love.
>
> I was so unnerved by this failure of communication that, in the first version of this text, I wrote, in the accents of passionate lament: the subaltern cannot speak! It was an inadvisable remark.[262]

[261] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 69.
[262] Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 308.

Despite the self-designation of her famous phrase as 'inadvisable', Spivak states that the liberal intellectual must acknowledge their complicity in the silencing of the subaltern voice. 'Our work cannot succeed if we always have a scapegoat,' she writes.[263] Spivak also emphasises that once 'a line of communication is established between a member of subaltern groups and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been inserted into the long road to hegemony. Unless we want to be romantic purists or primitivists about "preserving subalternity"—a contradiction in terms—this is absolutely to be desired.'[264]

A productive exercise is to unpack Spivak's statements in the context of Ghosh's fiction, which inserts the subaltern into the historical discourse by reconfiguring fragments and Eurocentric archives, and by placing myth, superstition, and the uncanny on a par with empiricist research and scientific and technological advances. Ghosh's methodology too merits the question: does it accurately reproduce the past? Can a historical novelist, or for that matter a historian, truly recover the voice of the subaltern, or are misreadings possible, as Spivak experienced while attempting to excavate Bhubaneswari's reasons for committing suicide?

My argument in this chapter is that the silences in Ghosh's fiction represent questions that can't be answered through research and fictional technique. If, as Spivak suggests, there are certain limitations to the reconstruction of subaltern agency and voice, I will show that Ghosh employs silences to both signify and challenge these limitations.

[263] Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 309.
[264] Ibid., 310.

A Mode of Expression

The articulation of silence in Ghosh's writing is particularly surprising because a well-charted plot is a prominent characteristic of his novels; multiple characters, perspectives, geographies, and timelines are typically brought together by the close of the narrative. As stated in a previous chapter, such a controlled narrative in Ghosh's fiction indicates not the authorial hand but the agency of the subaltern. Or, to put it in Said's words, '…stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. … nations themselves *are* narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging is very important to culture and imperialism…'[265]

At the heart of Ghosh's project is the unearthing of the colonised's silenced narratives, a task he undertakes with the rigour and discipline of a historian. The historical research he conducts, and his methodology, can be gleaned from his interviews, and through paratexts such as the Author's Note and Acknowledgements that often list the names of the people he interviewed, the archives he visited, and the books he consulted. So meticulous is his research that historians have called for his novels to be used as a pedagogical tool.[266]

Against this backdrop, it seems paradoxical to suggest that the history in Ghosh's fiction is incomplete or that the narrative he presents is at best partial—an assumption easily made if a writer creates space for silences. Asked about his fascination with the

[265] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xii-xiii.
[266] Jan Goldstein, "Discovering Global History through Historical Fiction," *Perspectives on History*, last accessed February 2023, https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2014/discovering-global-history-through-historical-fiction

idea of silence in novels such as *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh himself equates silence with the silencing of the subaltern in colonial archives, and in Indian society which encouraged its members to conceal from the public eye events and incidents considered shameful and embarrassing. He says:

> … silence is something which plays a very important part especially within Indian lives. … 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…[267]

Ghosh states in the interview that unlike those writers drawn to certain public aspects of the world such as pop culture, or life in cities, his interest lies in 'that which is obscure, that which is hidden, that which is occluded, that which is marginal'; the characters he finds appealing are 'obscure', 'defeated', 'people who salvage some sort of life out of wreckage.'[268] His fiction reinscribes agency to these figures by characterising their perspective. But even as he writes against silences, he also articulates silence in his novels, a literary device that on the surface appears perplexing, but less so if we consider it in the light of the writer Phulboni's assertion in *The Calcutta Chromosome*:

> Mistaken are those who imagine that silence is without life; that it is inanimate, without either spirit or voice. It is not: indeed the Word is to this silence what the shadow is to the foreshadowed, what the veil is to the eyes, what the mind is to truth, what language is to life.[269]

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[267] Chitra Sankaran, "Diasporic Predicaments: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh" in *History, Narrative, and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction*, ed. Chitra Sankaran (New York: Suny Press, 2012), 12.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 27.

Phulboni's words are, at first glance, challenging to follow, but a close reading of these sentences highlights the importance of silence. For characters in Ghosh's novels defined by their allegiance to silence, such as Fokir in *The Hungry Tide* and Laakhan/Lutchman in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, silence is neither inanimate nor spiritless; it operates as a vehicle of expression and constitutes a voice in itself.

The Shape of Silence in *The Hungry Tide*

In many ways, *The Hungry Tide* is a novel about our attempts to translate the world, and the failures of translation. Ghosh makes this evident through the linguistic proficiencies and deficiencies of his protagonists: Kanai is a translator while Piya doesn't know the native language and is unable to communicate with the residents of the Sundarbans. Ghosh offers readers chapters from Kanai and Piya's perspectives but denies the reader access to Fokir's interior. Despite Fokir's silence in the novel, he's a commanding presence on the page, and a fully formed character, through his actions as perceived by others.

Take, for instance, the scene wherein he creates a makeshift enclosure on his small boat to afford Piya some privacy, leading her to state:

> It was not just that he had thought to create a space for her; it was as if he had chosen to include her in some simple, practised family ritual, found a way to let her know that despite the inescapable muteness of their exchanges, she was a person to him and not, as it were, a representative of a species, a faceless, tongueless foreigner.[270]

[270] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 71.

Silence in this context isn't a lack, or an absence of knowledge or understanding. This idea gains further momentum in the novel's later scenes, such as the one where Piya follows dolphins, and Fokir successfully fishes (the pool where the dolphins congregate is also a habitat for crabs). Tracking dolphins with the aid of Fokir's fishing nets that acted as guiderails, Piya notes:

> It was surprising enough that their jobs had not proved to be utterly incompatible – especially considering that one of the tasks required the input of geostationary satellites while the other depended on bits of shark-bone and broken tile [these two objects are tied to Fokir's unusual fishing lines]. But that it had proved possible for two such different people to pursue their own ends simultaneously – people who could not exchange a word with each other and had no idea of what was going on in one another's heads – was far more than surprising: it seemed almost miraculous.[271]

Though she leads a peripatetic life, Piya grew up in North America, allowing us to trace her surprise to what George Steiner calls the 'essentially verbal character of Western civilisation', which makes it difficult for the Westerner to transpose their imaginings outside it.[272] Steiner cautions against the assumption that the verbal matrix is the only conceivable one for articulation and conduct of the mind. He writes, 'There are modes of intellectual and sensuous reality founded not on language, but on other communicative energies such as the icon or the musical note. And there are actions of the spirit rooted in silence.'[273] On the boat with Fokir, we see Piya slowly coming to grips with what Steiner describes as the 'shape and vitality' of silence.

Interestingly, just like the shifting landscape of the Sundarbans in which the novel is set, the shape of silence too mutates according to the situation in which the

[271] Ibid., 141.
[272] George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (1970; repr., New York: Atheneum, 1986), 12.
[273] Ibid.

novel's characters find themselves. If silence reflects kindness on one occasion, it denotes hostility in another. When Fokir refuses to engage in a conversation with Kanai, Piya notes:

> She hadn't understood what had passed between the two men, but there was no mistaking the condescension in Kanai's voice as he was speaking to Fokir: it was the kind of tone in which someone might address a dim-witted waiter, at once jocular and hectoring. It didn't surprise her that Fokir had responded with what was his instinctive mode of defence: silence.[274]

Kanai may take Fokir's silence for alienation or incomprehension, but it's neither. Here it's useful to remember Foucault's words that 'the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know.'[275]

While silence is equated with powerlessness, feminist scholarship has drawn from Foucault's identification of the power of silence—for instance, the power of the silent listener over the confessor in religious confession—to state, as DoVeanna Fulton Minor does, that silence has the 'potential to convey significance within a particular set of circumstances'.[276] Susan Gal concurs that while silence is taken to mean passivity and powerlessness, it can also be a 'strategic defense against the powerful', and that 'for the English Quakers of the 17th century, the refusal to speak when others expected them to marked an ideological commitment.'[277]

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[274] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 210.
[275] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 62.
[276] DoVeanna Fulton Minor, *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery* (New York: SUNY, 2006), 66.
[277] Susan Gal, "Between Speech and Silence: The Problematics of Research on Language and Gender," *IPrA Papers in Pragmatics* 3 (1989): 1, https://doi.org/10.1075/iprapip.3.1.01gal.

Gal also states that 'silence, like any linguistic form, gains different meanings and has different material effects within specific institutional and cultural contexts.'[278] These different constructions of silence are evident in *The Hungry Tide*. Nirmal, for instance, reminds himself of Rilke who went for years without writing, but then wrote *The Duino Elegies* in a matter of weeks. 'Even silence is preparation,' Nirmal writes in his journal.[279]

Silence isn't the same as acquiescence either. As Piya discovers, Fokir's view about villagers killing tigers differs from her own perspective that privileges the natural world. While the brutal killing of the animal upsets her, Fokir conveys to her through Kanai that '… when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it's because it wants to die.'[280] Piya can't bring Fokir around to her viewpoint because he has been shaped by the environment around him. Her words alone are insufficient to change his beliefs, and the inadequacy of language is a subject that Ghosh examines in some detail.

Throughout the novel, alongside the portrayal of silence as a legitimate mode of communication, Ghosh also hints through the characters that speech alone is incapable of conveying the truth in its entirety. Here is Piya, for instance, ruminating on the distance between herself and Fokir:

> What was he thinking about as he stared at the moonlit river? The forest, the crabs? Whatever it was, she would never know: not just because they had no language in common but because that was how it was with human beings, who came equipped, as a species, with the means of shutting each other out. The two of them, Fokir and herself, they could have been boulders or trees for all they knew of each other: and wasn't it better in a way, more honest, that they could not speak? For if you compared it to the ways in which dolphins' echoes

[278] Ibid.
[279] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 193.
[280] Ibid., 295.

> mirrored the world, speech was only a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being.[281]

Other characters in the novel too express similar views about silence, and the inability of words to facilitate communication. Speaking to Kanai about her husband Fokir, Moyna says, '… words are just air … When the wind blows on the water, you see ripples and waves, but the real river lies beneath, unseen and unheard.'[282]

Moyna's and Piya's words recall that of Steiner's, who states that in Buddhism and Taoism 'the highest, purest reach of the contemplative act is that which has learned to leave language behind it … It is only by breaking through the walls of language that visionary observance can enter the world of total and immediate understanding.'[283]

While asking the reader to value silence on its own terms, through his multiple constructions of silence and verbal discourse that includes testimony,[284] Ghosh appears to agree with Foucault's conclusion that:

> … there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.[285]

No fictional narrative can, therefore, successfully recover the subaltern voice without an emphasis on silence. Quoting Foucault, Wendy Brown writes that silence

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[281] Ibid., 159.
[282] Ibid., 258.
[283] Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 12.
[284] Historical discourse is constituted in *The Hungry Tide* through oral storytelling, the stories that the characters tell each other about the history of the island and their own lives, and also through Nirmal's journal.
[285] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 27.

has a paradoxical quality as a 'shelter *for* power', and a 'shelter *from* power'.[286] It has not only an aesthetic but also a political value in that it can function as a 'means for preserving certain practices and dimensions of existence from regulatory power, from normative violence…'[287] As Brown explains, if freedom is a practice, then the possibility of practising freedom inside a discourse 'occurs in the empty spaces of that discourse as well as resistance to the discourse'.[288] The deliberate silences of characters in Ghosh's novels, similarly, can indicate the resistance of the characters to certain expected modes of discourse.

For Gareth Griffiths, the silences and miscommunications in *The Hungry Tide* constitute the refusal of experience to be contained by a single representation. '[H]ere it [experience] seems often to resist representation entirely, dramatizing that not everything can be "translated" between different cultures, let alone different species,' he writes.[289]

The gap created by the failure of translation is, however, a productive space. As Pablo Mukherjee asserts, we must pay particular attention to Ghosh's refusal to erase silences because:

> Much of what Kusum, Fokir, Horen say may be incomprehensible to the elites, much of it mistranslated, misunderstood. But they are seldom dismissed, and it is in the novel's refusal to force transparency on to them, in its deference to silences and gaps, that differences are humanised, contacts made, a different idea of the universal glimpsed.[290]

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[286] Wendy Brown, "In the Folds of Our Own Discourse: The Pleasures and Freedoms of Silence," *The University of Chicago Law School Roundtable* 3 (1996), https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/roundtable/vol3/iss1/8.
[287] Ibid., 186.
[288] Ibid., 185.
[289] Gareth Griffiths, "Silenced Worlds: Language and Experience in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*," *Kunapipi*, 34 (2012), https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol34/iss2/12.
[290] Pablo Mukherjee, "Surfing the Second Wave: Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*," *New Formations* 59 (2006): 151.

Mukherjee believes that through the encounters with the subaltern, notwithstanding the mistranslations and silences that may ensue, the elite can catch 'glimpses of a universality that accommodates, rather than obliterates, differences'.[291] On similar lines, Griffiths states that the characters in *The Hungry Tide* learn to acknowledge not only the 'silenced' human beings they encounter but also the 'silenced' entities of the Tide Country, a category that includes human and non-human actors such as the plants and animals of the Sundarbans.[292] For Ghosh, and for his characters, silence constitutes a dynamic ground to explore the tension between language and the failure of language to articulate the world. Or, as Griffiths notes, '… [T]he novel simultaneously affirms the failure of language … to encompass experience whilst by its very existence … [the novel] asserts the need … to struggle against this limitation.'[293]

The Known and the Unknown in *The Calcutta Chromosome*

Like *The Hungry Tide*, *The Calcutta Chromosome* too draws attention to silences. Paradoxically, while the novel reveals the nature of silencing prevalent in the archives—in particular, the erasure of Ronald Ross' helpers from the historical discourse, as noted in a previous chapter—it also presents the deliberate silence of the subaltern as a sign of empowerment, best evidenced in the railway station story that appears in various guises within the novel featuring the silent figure of Laakhan/Lutchman.

[291] Ibid., 152.
[292] Griffiths, "Silenced Worlds."
[293] Ibid.

In one version, Phulboni recalls spending a night at the signal-room of Renupur railway station despite the station master's advice to the contrary. Uncanny events culminate in him waking up to find himself on a railway line as a train bears upon him. Barely managing to save his own life, Phulboni later learns that Renupur has had no station master for a long time. This tale is overlaid against an identical accident from the past, when the sole occupant of the station was Laakhan, the lab attendant who plays a significant role in edging Ross towards his discovery of the mosquito as the malarial vector. An upper-caste man attempts to kill Laakhan but instead meets with the fate he had intended for the attendant. Thieme notes that this story, the third iteration of a ghost story set in Renupur within the novel, 'is the most interesting, though it is narrated in a more summary fashion, since it provides the most obvious case of a subaltern figure exercising power, even if this figure remains voiceless…'[294]

The reader learns that Laakhan is part of the counter-science cult that conducts research in secret in Ross' laboratory, and Ross himself is a participant in this research though he remains unaware of his role in furthering the cult's objectives. As the reader is not granted access to the perspectives of the cult's members, including Laakhan, it's only possible to guess at the motives behind their silence, and the reason why the cult doesn't want to share the knowledge around interpersonal transference.

Murugan's explanation for the importance the cult attaches to silence is that 'to know something is to change it'.[295] It would, therefore, follow that one way to effect a change would be to make something known – as he puts it, 'Or creating a mutation, if

[294] Thieme, "The Discoverer Discovered," in *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*, Kindle.
[295] Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 215.

you like.'[296] The cult is understandably careful about who it reveals its secrets to, and when, because the secret can be changed through mere whispers.

We can also read their silence as a representation of the obfuscation inherent in Western discourse which, according to John Thieme, 'silences alterity by denying its very capacity for utterance.'[297] By narrating the story from two viewpoints—one of which is silent—Ghosh employs a literary technique that in Alessandro Vescovi's opinion challenges the relentless Western search for knowledge, as evident in the supercomputer Ava and the classification and archiving of all branches of knowledge in the colonialist versions of traditional science.[298] On the manner in which *The Calcutta Chromosome* critiques Western epistemology, Vescovi states:

> … firstly, it problematises the notion of narrative truth by staging the consequences of actions and facts which remain unknown and unknowable and dividing authorship among different entities. Secondly, it challenges narrative agency by creating a number of unreliable narrators… Ghosh posits a multifaceted fictional truth that is ultimately unattainable and describes the efforts of different characters who try to pursue it.[299]

Indeed, within the novel, Ghosh's characters often reflect on what they don't yet know, and the nature of the narrative that they are struggling to put together. But this is not featured as a negative, but a necessary journey they have to undertake if they want to attain wisdom. As Murugan tells Antar, '[K]nowledge couldn't begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge.'[300]

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[296] Ibid.
[297] Thieme, "The Discoverer Discovered," Kindle.
[298] Alessandro Vescovi, "Emplotting the Postcolonial: Epistemology and Narratology in Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*," *Ariel* 48 (2017): 37.
[299] Ibid., 45.
[300] Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 104.

Such an acknowledgement, Claire Chambers notes, is a radical alternative to the vociferous assertions of Western science.[301] In her reading, the silence of the cult challenges the claims of universal applicability made by Western knowledge, and indicates, as Vescovi puts it, 'the limits of knowledge'.[302]

These limitations extend to both the narrative space and the real world as is apt in a novel about the unknowability of things. The reader, along with the characters, must play detective, assembling information from multiple timelines and geographies to speculate upon the cult's history and intentions, a mode far removed from the rigid systems of archiving and classification of knowledge followed in Western science. Thieme believes that by erasing the borders between the discoverers and the discovered, Ghosh demonstrates the unsatisfactory nature of the distinctions between storytellers and listeners. 'The final insistence that all the investigators within the text are implicated in the material they are investigating leaves the novel's readers having to consider the possibility that they too are caught in the conspiracy of history,' Thieme writes.[303]

Chambers concurs that the novel examines the idea that narratives, even apparently factual ones such as histories, aren't transparent.[304] By creating a space for silence, Ghosh acknowledges that 'we should not "speak for" the subaltern, but rather recognize, with Spivak, the unrepresentable aspects of the Other's experiences.'[305] In so

[301] Claire Chambers, "Network of Stories: Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*," *Ariel* 40 (2009): 43.
[302] Vescovi, "Emplotting," 46.
[303] Thieme, "The Discoverer Discovered," Kindle.
[304] Chambers, "Network of Stories," 54.
[305] Ibid., 57.

doing, as Drucilla Cornell writes, '[T]he noting of the failure of representation itself becomes a form of listening.'[306]

[306] Drucilla Cornell, "The Ethical Affirmation of Human Rights: Gayatri Spivak's Intervention" in *Can the Subaltern Speak?:Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 101.

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that research and historical knowledge, on their own, make for a fragile scaffolding around which to construct a postcolonial historical novel. Through a close reading of Ghosh's works, I argue that an intelligent historical novel also has to acknowledge the limitations in the recreation of the subaltern voice even as it sets out to challenge these limitations. As Ghosh himself has stated in several interviews, he writes about those marginalised in historical records, people and events often neglected by contemporary historians. To bring these characters and settings to life, Ghosh conducts his own research, details of which can be located in paratexts such as the Author's Note and Ghosh's blog (available at www.amitavghosh.com).

The authorial decision to fill the gaps in knowledge through personal research instead of relying on existing historical knowledge is striking in itself, and one that has elevated his fiction in the eyes of reviewers and readers. In my analysis of Ghosh's works, I was surprised therefore to find that the writing doesn't claim to be authoritative about history, knowledge, or the subaltern voice and agency. Rather than create a dissonance in the narrative, this stance paradoxically affirms the historical knowledge contained in the text in a manner reminiscent of Catherine Gallagher's notion that 'modes of reference often vary widely within works', and readers can 'engage in a dialectically differential reading within a work'.[307] This thesis demonstrates that Ghosh's fiction revises Eurocentric archives and historiography without simultaneously claiming to be authoritative, or the one true account of the past.

[307] Catherine Gallagher, "What Would Napoleon Do? Historical, Fictional, and Counterfactual Characters," *New Literary History*, 42 (2011): 318.

As detailed in the first chapter of the thesis, Ghosh borrows the methodologies of the Subaltern Studies historians to conduct his research, challenge curated colonial archives, and build a history from fragments. Dipesh Chakrabarty's suggestion for historians is that they should make the workings of historical research visible to the reader, and I suggest that Ghosh has been following this rule well before Chakrabarty published *Provincializing Europe*. Such a technique invites the reader to participate in the process of creating meaning and constructing a narrative.

The next chapter examines the fictive devices that Ghosh employs to further the historical discourse. Chakrabarty notes that the historian is unable to assign agency to the supernatural, and account for the role the spiritual and divine have played in shaping the course of history. By tracing the significance of the uncanny in Ghosh's fiction, I propose that it shouldn't be misconstrued as fantastic or magic-realist but instead be categorised as realism. I make this argument by tracing the empiricist approach towards history, which paradoxically claimed the historian had to be objective and rational while constituting historical discourse, but also relied on the historian's notion of 'the self', or the 'I', inspired by Enlightenment ideology that granted universality to the 'I'. The resulting discourse was not only subjective despite its claims to the contrary, but it also neglected to acknowledge that the 'I' excluded the colonised and their viewpoints on the constitution of realism. Munslow suggests that history should be reconfigured as a discourse through which meaning is created rather than discovered, thereby emphasising the 'cultural processes of knowledge creation and organisation'.[308] Ghosh employs the

[308] Munslow, *Companion to Historical Studies*, 9.

uncanny to amplify these cultural processes, and to question the objectivity of the 'I' that labelled the supernatural, for instance, as unrealistic and unhistorical.

The coincidental encounters that populate Ghosh's fiction point to subaltern networks disrupted by colonialism and the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, while the existence of a strong, well-charted plot in each one of Ghosh's novels indicate the agency of the subaltern that defies suppression under the forces of colonialism and capitalism. By according the uncanny a prominent place in a well-researched text, Ghosh reminds the reader of the 'unseen' forces that have shaped history: the supernatural, the spiritual, colonialism, and capitalism. The motif of the ghost that recurs in Ghosh's fiction in particular is a device that evokes Derrida's 'specters' in their quest for justice. I ask for a reading of the uncanny that acknowledges its modernist positionality based on the argument that the interpretation of the uncanny has changed over time.

The third chapter examines the techniques Ghosh employs to reinscribe subaltern voices in the light of Spivak's comment that the elite can't successfully recover these voices. By centring silent characters, and silences, in his fiction, I show that Ghosh highlights the impossibility of the enterprise of recovering voices while also presenting silence as a positive attribute. Recalling Foucault's statement that power can often lie with the one remaining silent in certain situations such as religious confession, Ghosh indicates that the silence of the subaltern shouldn't be read as capitulation or obedience.

Much of the current analysis on Ghosh's fiction focuses on its role in revising histories and correcting erasures—a role Ghosh undertakes with admirable results—but less attention has been paid to the fictional devices he employs to challenge the notion

that Western knowledge and historiography can be applied universally. By studying Ghosh's works, I have been able to identify these devices, which in turn have reshaped my own research and writing. Whereas I would have previously dismissed coincidence or the uncanny in general as a mode antithetical to realism, and indicative of a manipulative authorial hand, Ghosh's writing has led me to identify the cultural and historical reasons for employing these devices in the postcolonial context. I once equated the question marks and ellipses illustrative of the gaps in historical knowledge, and the silence that signalled those aspects of subaltern consciousness that couldn't be retrieved, with a failure on the part of the postcolonial historical novelist; I believed that a recreation of the past necessitated a full accounting that would win the approval of historians. But Ghosh's work has helped me to understand the ways in which the postcolonial historical novel can simultaneously acknowledge and challenge these limitations.

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