
Rediscovering the Human Image by Crossing Borders: Amitav Ghosh's Writerly Travels/Travails

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Introduction: Amitav Ghosh and the Imbrications of the Human Image in a Changing World

In contributing to our conference theme about “The Human Image in a Changing World”, my paper will range over the works of the Indian-born, New York based, but truly international and peripatetic writer Amitav Ghosh. It will claim that he is one the leading contemporary chroniclers of what our conference write-up calls “the imbrications of the human image “at this time. I intend to begin it though with an attempt to understand what the phrase implies. I will then discuss briefly Ghosh's writerly location and stance. In the body of my paper, I will focus on five of his works. I will begin with his 2001 collection of essays, *The Imam and the Indian*. I will then go to an earlier work, his debut novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986). I will look next at his 2nd and perhaps his most thought-provoking work of fiction, *The Shadow Lines* (1988). I will consider afterwards *River of Smoke*, the second book of his Ibis trilogy, which he published in 2011. I intend to glance too at some of his other non-fictional as well as fictional works because of my intent to present him as someone deeply committed throughout his works to our conference's theme.

Let me begin, however, by trying to explain what the phrase “imbrications of the human image in a changing world” means to me. Firstly, as a student of English literature, it reminds me instantly of William Blake's poem, “The Divine Image” in *The Songs of Innocence* that sees “Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love” as the most compelling attributes of the creator embodied in humans. In the companion poem, “The Human Abstract”, published in the volume Blake composed afterwards, *Songs of Experience*, Blake depicts the antithesis of these virtues as intolerance, suspicion of others, pride and deceit. These qualities, he avers, mar the human image anywhere. Blake implies that the human image takes divine form in the coming together of all human beings, and not in their divisions and conflicts, but that repressive governments and the emissaries of capital collude to complicate the process.

As for “imbrications”, the word always seemed to me to be like many other theory words to be endlessly suggestive as well as exasperating. To pin it down for my paper I decided to Google it. I

think I got what I wanted in a blog exchange where in response to the blogger's contention that the word only implies something like "overlap" or "connected with", someone responded anonymously by saying, "it has more to do with separate things coming together seamlessly, whether by accident or design, to make a whole" and is "similar to interwove or embedded." It will be my contention that in his fiction as well as in his prose writings Ghosh wants to depict the way we are all connected, either fortuitously, or because we would like to do so willingly, despite our differences as people. It is in our coming together that we can face the problems that keep cropping up for us humans, age after age.

As for the human image in a changing world, who can deny in this second decade of the twenty-first century that capitalism and mechanical civilization have combined to create a world where we are much more intertwined than ever before, although our coming together can be quite problematic and tension-ridden? As we face the possibilities of more and more outbreaks of violence, environmental degradation and dehumanization than ever before, we need to find a way out of our current predicaments creatively, urgently and together if we are going to make the best use of our increasing contact with and physical proximity to each other.

Ghosh is like many leading thinkers and artists of our time in finding creative ways of making us rethink not only of the plight people find themselves in again and again, but also of the possibilities ahead of them when they get together. In the face of conflicts displacing people and endangering lives, and threats to the environment caused by global warming, he continues to gesture at ways of underscoring the interdependence of human beings through his works. He is thus in line with those who have been stressing that we are all ineluctably entangled in the future of the planet, and who have been finding more and more creative ways of first understanding, and then driving home this fact to as many people as possible.

As I will try to show, from the beginning of his professional life as a writer, Amitav Ghosh has focused on the imbrications of the human image in a changing world. Focusing on different periods of history and the coming together as well as the dispersal of people in different parts of the world in the last two centuries, he has been portraying intricate situations that develop out of such phenomena. Ghosh traces imaginatively complexities in relationships created by ever-new forms of circulations as well as disjunctions in our lives induced by capital flows, the desire of profits, and the complications colonial/neocolonial movements create in human relationships. Certainly, this is why Ghosh has been writing novels about the human cost of sudden acts of violence, as in *The Shadow Lines*, or the price we pay for environmental degradation, as in the non-fictional work, *The Great Derangement*, and composing other essays and novels throughout his writing career about human predicaments in a fast-changing world.

The Imam and the Indian and the Intricate Network of Differences Humans Thrive In

Ghosh declares in the "Acknowledgements" pages of his collection of essays, *The Imam*

and the Indian, that “In the circuitry of the imagination, connections are of greater importance than disjunctions” (vii). This is the conclusion Ghosh arrived at from his readings of history, his anthropological research, novelistic predilections and travels in the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia and Oceania, as well as his extended periods of stay in South Asia, Britain and the United States. They exposed him to the plight of expatriate workers and periodic outbreaks of sectarian violence. They also made him reflect on partitions and shadow lines dissecting populations and contemplate ways of countering such phenomenon. His first major collection of essays, *the Imam and the Indian* is testimony to his preoccupation with such issues.

In “The Ghost of Mrs. Gandhi”, Ghosh records how he came to realize that he could not be like V. S. Naipaul, a writer who wrote about diasporic situations, and someone who Ghosh otherwise admires. To him, Naipaul is someone who can report astutely on people caught up in violence or mired in postcolonial predicaments. However, Ghosh realizes that Naipaul is the kind of person who would ultimately prefer to stay aloof from human beings caught up in such unsettling moments. This realization comes to Ghosh after the rioting that erupted in New Delhi subsequent to Indira Gandhi’s assassination. Unlike the ironic and detached Naipaul, at the sight of a “forlorn little group” marching against the riots and for peace in the Indian capital, Ghosh “without a second thought”, joins their procession (56). Such compassion and desire for peace and love constantly propel his art. The feelings triggered in him by the marchers, in fact, lead him to write *The Shadow Lines*. Ghosh tells his readers in the essay that the route he preferred to take was not controlled by “literary aestheticism”, or the kind of rapt attentiveness to ‘the horror of violence’ that seems to be Naipaul’s forte; what the “forlorn little group” had revealed to him was the importance of “the affirmation of humanity’ through his writing (61).

In the next essay of *The Imam and the Indian*, titled “Petrofiction: the Oil Encounter and the Novel”, Ghosh laments the lack of literature about parts of the world where disparate groups of people had been coming together in the 1970s because of employment possibilities created by the worldwide surge in demand for petroleum products. He notes that the fluid situation created thereby in the city-states of the Gulf, “where virtually everyone is a ‘foreigner’, was well worth paying attention to for any chronicler of human predicaments. After all, “admixture of peoples and cultures” were taking place “on a scale never before envisaged; vicious systems of helotry” were now being “juxtaposed with unparalleled wealth”, while deserts” were being “transformed by technology, and military devastation on an apocalyptic scale” (78). Ghosh notes that the oil boom has created a ‘space that is no place at all, a world that is intrinsically displaced, heterogeneous and international” (79). The novelist, he implies, would and should find material to depict the interwoven nature of humanity in such settings.

A couple of essays of *The Imam and the Indian* look back in history to note humans crisscrossing travel and trade routes in medieval times. One such essay, “The Slave of MS.H.6”, is inspired by Ghosh’s archival forays into documents that are related to “the chronicle of travel and dispersal in modern times” (179). It is clear though that Ghosh is interested in reconstructing narratives of

travel to and from the subcontinent mainly because he wants to show people in it “enmeshed with its neighbors in an intricate network of differences” (190). The point is reinforced in “The Diaspora in Indian Culture”, an essay where Ghosh once again observes that “the culture” of the subcontinent “seems to be constructed around the proliferation of differences” (250), the paradox here being that “to be different in a world of differences is irrevocably to belong” (250). It all depends; however, Ghosh avers in yet another essay, on how we work out our relationships. As he puts it in the essay, “The Global Reservation: Notes towards an Ethnography of International Peacekeeping”, “Diversity...properly managed, can easily be transformed into its mirror image, homogeneity” (259). What can only infect the human image fatally, Ghosh avers, is a state governed by an ideology like that of the Khmer Rouge. He encountered its consequences in Cambodia and thought then that it “embodies the ultimate pathology of nationalist thought, where the national and racial Other becomes so pervasive, so omnipresent, that he is no longer distinguishable from the Self except in death” (260). Taken beyond a point, then, nationalism can become a bane for humanity. In contrast, it is the interwoven nature of humanity that Ghosh intended to alert his readers to through his writings and the imbrications of the human image in our time that fascinate him.

The Circle of Reason and the Queue of Hope

In his debut novel, *The Circle of Reason*, Ghosh fictionalizes the plight of ordinary people torn apart everywhere by centrifugal forces, even as they attempt to reach out to each other and overcome them. As the novel begins, a schoolteacher named Balaram, living in a village in West Bengal called Lalpukur, adopts the orphan Alu, destined to be the picaresque work’s central character. The people of Lalpukur are originally from an East Bengal district who have had to relocate because of the partition of India. They speak in “a nasal sing-song Bengali, with who knew what mixed in of Burmese and the languages of the hills to the east?” (27). In other words, the newly arrived people of Lalpukur were already hybrids by the time they crossed the border, like most people everywhere who, however, may think otherwise. Many of us, however, would like to believe that we have a “pure” aspect in us we need to hold on to, even as we eliminate any traces of the “others” in our selves or try to distinguish ourselves from the “others” surrounding us, Ghosh is clearly intent on demonstrating instead that such attitudes lead to endless problems that proliferate differences between people who are really not and cannot be so detached from each other.

Balaram is inspired by enlightenment and progressive values he has inculcated from his readings in western thought. Born in 1914, when people in the west were fighting each other with tools forged by science, and soldiers were being recruited from the colonies for distant wars, even as racist values were leading to discriminatory policies in North America, Balaram wants to hold on to his belief in Reason as the panacea for all problems. However, the narrator keeps drawing attention directly or indirectly to the unforeseen consequences on human amity that result from advances in science and technology and that have only benefited the west in the past. The narrator thus cites

brutal episodes of British imperial history when “millions of Africans and half of America were enslaved by cotton” by westerners intent on “strangling the very weavers and techniques” of the Indian subcontinent they had crossed oceans to discover” (57). However, if history records horrors of such imperial ventures and supremacist policies fuelled by the insatiable desire for markets, the narrator is keen on emphasizing that history should be seen as a repository of “hope as well as despair”. Keeping in view that Alu has been apprenticed to weaving, the narrator suggests that “having made the world one and blessed...with its diversity”, weaving and weavers “must do so again” (58). It is clear as the novel progresses that Ghosh also uses weaving as a trope for the writer’s craft, thereby indicating that as a novelist he too would like to weave people together through his work. Even as he records fictionally not only the adverse consequences of nationalism but also the ill effects of the nexus between power and capital on humanity in recent decades, Ghosh would like us to appreciate the composite nature of the human image and its dependence on qualities like mercy, pity, peace and love for the benefit of all of us.

The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 led to the exodus of millions of Hindus and Muslims across it; in 1971, events in Pakistan would lead to the country breaking up in another enforced migratory flow. As the narrator of *The Circle of Reason* observes, “borders dissolved” once more then “under the weight of millions of people in panic-stricken flight from an army of animals” (60). However, not only external forces drive people across borders or from one place to another then. Statist repressive forces in independent India, for instance, force Alu, out of Lalpukur. As a result, he is forced to fend for himself, first and briefly in the Indian state of Kerala, and then for some time in the Middle East oil boomtown of al-Ghazira.

The central and most compelling parts of *The Circle of Reason* focus on the lives of the temporary migrants who flock to places like al-Ghazira in vessels carrying humans in flight. As the narrator phrases it, they board vessels “carrying with them an immense cargo of wanderers seeking their own destruction in giving flesh to the whims of capital” (189). Alu joins here others who have migrated legally or illegally, most of them out of sheer desperation. Almost all these migrants keep hoping that the jobs available in the oil-rich state will provide them with some economic security at least for a while, though they know well that they would still be vulnerable politically as undocumented workers in al-Ghazira, or as people doing low-paid menial jobs.

In al-Ghazira, Alu joins migrants and runaways from other parts of the world as well as the Indian subcontinent—for example, Egypt and Morocco. They all become part of a shantytown here called the Ras where at least the older settlers are ready to accept the newcomers in their midst. As Hajj Fahmy, whose family had come to the Ras years ago from Egypt, declares expansively, “Let them come to the Ras if they keep out of our way. The Ras gave us shelter; let it give them shelter” (227). This suggests that to people like him compassion is something they can extend to others, since they were aware of how necessary it had been for them at one point.

Despite such people, Alu and the migrants of al-Ghazira live precariously. They are perpetually at the mercy of the greedy and uncaring expansionary maws of capitalism. Trapped in the wreckage

of the construction site he has been working in at one point, he manages to escape from it and al-Ghazira somehow with some members of the group he had met on the journey to the Gulf oil town. In the last part of the novel, we find him relocated in Algeria, where too migrants from India and other parts of the world have settled provisionally, either in flight or in transit. The ultimate destination for such migrants in an unsettled world appears to be Europe. Here, when a woman member of the group Alu has been with in his travels since he left India dies of a heart attack, an Indian doctor called Mishra present then declares that she did not deserve to be given the last rites prescribed in the Hindu religion because she was supposedly harboring adulterous thought at the moment of her death. However, Mrs. Verma, a much more sympathetic presence in this part of the novel, points out that both religion and enlightenment thought tend to stifle human impulses and accentuate the divisions between people. Berating Doctor Mishra, she says, “That’s how you and your kind have destroyed everything—science, religion, socialism—with your rules and your orthodoxies. The difference between them, she points out to Dr. Mishra, who is otherwise equal to her socially, is that while he obsesses about such rules and rituals, she worries “about being human” (409).

The Circle of Reason ends with the surviving members of Alu’s group who had fled with him to al-Ghazira now poised to leave North Africa for some part of Europe or the other that will accept them—at least for a while. Although written over thirty years ago, Ghosh’s description of the situation these band of migrants find themselves in resemble uncannily the predicaments of contemporary illegal migrants. As we see in news reports on television even now, such people are perpetually on the brink of yet another desperate move to escape their precarious present-day position by fleeing to western shores from Asia and Africa, despite the endless barriers erected in their paths. As one of them tells the plainclothes security people in an airport in accounting for their indomitable spirit, “How many people will you send away? The queue of hope stretches long past infinity” (409).

As a novelist of contemporary migrants repeatedly caught up in dehumanizing situations but trying to rise above the circumstances that keep pulling them down, Ghosh seems to believe thus that the human spirit cannot be repressed for long. The last line of the novel, states simply but unequivocally, “Hope is the beginning” (423). It is a line that could be the signpost of all discussions about the imbrications of the human image in the face of our present-day predicaments.

The Shadow Lines and a World without Borders

To me, Amitav Ghosh’s best work to date is his second novel, *The Shadow Lines*. Focusing in it on a few educated, cosmopolitan and relatively well-off Indian Bengalis this time and people they forge relationships with elsewhere, Ghosh now seems bent on showing that events such as partitions and diasporas force them too to confront situations that bring to the fore the complexities of being human in our time. This novel is ostensibly about Tridib, described in the dust jacket of

the Penguin edition of the book as “an eccentric Calcutta intellectual”; his English lover May, who is bent on liberal causes to heal humanity’s wounds; the narrator’s grandmother, who holds on to nationalistic sentiments that appear to be reinforced by the partitioning of India; and his cousin Ila, who was raised outside the subcontinent and is apparently quite liberated in her mindset from all boundaries, but is really stuck in her self. However, the novel is mostly about the anonymous narrator, who worships Tridib and tries to uncover the chain of events that led to Tridib’s death in a communal riot and the lessons he learnt from it so that he can communicate it to benefit us all. In the course of his reconstruction of the narrative of Tridib’s death, the narrator finds his central theme in the necessity of going beyond the shadow lines that divide peoples and rediscovering paths that can lead them to transcend barriers and affirm their common humanity.

Ila, the narrator discovers, is despite her international upbringing and freethinking posture, restricted in her imaginings about the complexities of relationships, and hemmed in by her inability to transcend her immediate desires. The narrator’s grandmother, outwardly so different from the ostensibly liberated and cosmopolitan Ila, is severely restricted in her imaginings as well, but by the scars nationalism has left in her psyche, for she upholds the notion of borders and looks for them intently. Like many middle-class people everywhere, the narrator observes, she “would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and power” (77). In contrast to both of them, Tridib’s imaginings transcend space and time. He is drawn to his lover May in the romance mode; he views their relationships as if he was mythical Tristan of a Europe that was once without “borders and countries... a man without a country,” who fell in love with “a woman-across-the seas” (183).

However, the Indian Bengali intellectual Tridib and the liberalized and altruistic English woman May have come together in a world mired in sectarian divisions, religious antagonism, and mind-forged manacles that erect borders in the path of human amity. Not only do partitions like those of 1947 divide families like that of the grandmother, but their aftereffects and resurgent nationalism in India and Pakistan create obstacles for anyone trying to transcend borders and hold on to a vision of the interconnectedness of peoples as do Tridib and May. Like in *The Circle of Reason*, Ghosh underscores the alienating artificial borders erected between people because of nationalism or in the name of patriotism. Parts of the grandmother’s Hindu family thus had to end up in different parts of India, “the Middle East...and God knows where” (132). Indian Muslims similarly had to crisscross the subcontinent and end up in Pakistan, the Middle East or elsewhere.

The culmination of this theme of borders and the othering of the self in the novel is Tridib’s death in a Dhaka riot. He is killed when the city was part of East Pakistan because of the violence that ensued in parts of the Indian subcontinent after the theft of a Muslim holy relic in a Kashmir mosque in 1963. That theft set off a chain reaction then that led to riots in Calcutta, Dhaka and other cities of India and Pakistan. These riots reopened Partition’s wounds and added to the trauma of the families split by partition, spiraling religious strife, and causing endless queues of refugees who have to cross borders and set up provisional settlements for themselves.

However, the narrative of Tridib's death presented by the anonymous narrator suggests that one must imagine an alternative to endless partitions and divisions and take inspiration from acts of individual heroism. This is mainly why the narrator recounts the story of Tridib, who sacrifices himself to save May, who is stranded momentarily in a riot in Dhaka. The narrator must live to tell their story, since "stories are all there are to live in" (179), not only romances like that of the mythical Tristan and his woman-across-the-seas, but the contemporary one of Tridib. After all, and stories are exemplary as well as illustrative. The narrator will pass on to us his discovery through Tridib's death that no borders can separate us from our "others" permanently; the riots in Dhaka that killed Tridib, set off by events in distant Kashmir and riots elsewhere in the subcontinent, prove that people in Calcutta and Dhaka, and indeed India and Pakistan, are "locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line" that was to set them "free". That is to say, the sub-continent's "looking-glass border" (228) ensures that India and Pakistan are locked in permanent opposition. The point, he implies, is to understand this truth and then find ways of dealing with it.

Indeed, the thrust of Amitav Ghosh's narrative in *the Shadow Lines* is that we human beings have memories of togetherness that can and should outlast borders and partitions. Robi, Ila's brother, concludes his account of the circumstances that led to Tridib's death to the narrator by reflecting bitterly on the communal hatred that led to it thus: "I think to myself, why don't they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It's a mirage....How can anyone divide a memory? (241). That we human have in our unconsciousness memories of a world where people coexisted for ages in relative harmony is something the narrator indicates at the end of the novel. In addition, the novel leaves us with the image of May trying to rescue the narrator's grandmother's aged uncle from the mob in addition to Tridib sacrificing himself to rescue them both; these images are offered to readers as "a final redemptive mystery" of the narrative (246). The culminating idea of the narrative seems to be that if there are shadow lines dividing peoples that are known as borders, there are even more lasting and primordial shadow lines that unite human beings that are worth dying for.

Sea of Smoke and the Imbrications of the Human Image in the Past, the Present and the Future

With his 2008 novel, *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh embarked on bringing out one after another the books of what is now known as the Ibis trilogy. Its sequels, *River of Smoke*, which came out in 2011, and *Flood of Fire*, which completed the series in 2015, succeeded this historical work of fiction. All three are based on the linkages as well as the deprivations and displacements of populations at a time when the imperial encounter had not only created international frictions on unprecedented scales but also brought together disparate groups of people in many parts of the world in hitherto unforeseen mixtures. The tension created by the opium trade between India and China, the trafficking of coolies in Mauritius, imperial impositions in the nineteenth century, and

the thrust for survival of people who come together for one reason or another to begin new lives elsewhere are some of the subjects of the works of the trilogy. Ghosh writes in them not only about colonial officials, traders and entrepreneurs, but also about sailors and subalterns, amateur botanists, painters, and all sorts of other people from India, China, and Britain in locations that encompass three continents. The idea seems to be, to adapt John Dryden's wondrous observation on the characters of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, and use it to characterize Ghosh's settings and themes in one exclamatory sentence, "Here is God's plenty!" But I will use the time I have left to talk briefly about the second and what seems to be the most impressive of the three novels of the trilogy, *River of Smoke*, to show how it concentrates on a historical narrative that has implications for our own world and even our futures, as we deliberate on the "imbrications of the human" at this time.

Ghosh's intent in *The Sea of Smoke* is perhaps best articulated by the attributes he tells us in the novel one of his characters possesses when looking at atmospheric disturbances such as storms. Neel, the character I have in mind, has endured a lot of hardship and fallen from social heights quite drastically. Ghosh tells us, however, that he is someone who is always "looking for new possibilities, creating fresh beginnings, rewriting destinies and throwing together people who would have never met" (20). Reading the novel, the reader realizes that this is Ghosh's intent from the beginning to the end—he wants to highlight the endless possibilities in addition to the tensions generated by the continual coming together of people, and dedicated to the idea of visualizing new beginnings for characters who have experienced the worst of times but refuse to go down in life.

The Sea of Smoke is indeed an exuberantly imagined, vibrant polyphonic work that revels in heteroglossia and the coming together of peoples. The novel begins in "a far corner of Mauritius" (3) where indentured servants and convicts have rehabilitated, but the action shifts across the Indian Ocean and moves through newly emerging townships like Singapore and Hong Kong to settle down in Canton, where the opium trade has brought together people from all over the world and created a kind of of potpourri. The novel, indeed, is a celebration of hybridity, of the coming together of tongues, cuisines, apparels, and what not. Its accomplishment in bringing together people from all over the world and making them interact with each other and showing the imbrications of the human image in archetypal situations is impressive. *Sea of Smoke*, to adapt lines from a letter supposedly written by one of its character, Robin Chinnery, supposedly the son of the real-life painter English George Chinnery who spent most of his life in India and China, pens about a garden in China, is "a place of the most *extravagant* fantasy...large enough to accommodate a hundred people" where "at every turn there was a new perspective to baffle and delight the eye" by the medley of "events, people, faces" (280).

Sea of Smoke climaxes in the First Opium War that took place in China in the mid-nineteenth century, but the events and the peoples of the novel can be easily reimagined in our times when the international market of illegal habit-inducing drugs keep bringing business persons and subalterns together in cosmopolitan locations all over the globe. The coming together of races, tongues,

cultures and sexual crossings and relationships forged across national and class impositions in the novel is not only engaging but is also of great relevance in our time. Ghosh seems to be saying through the book that we are all intertwined in our destinies, and that the human image needs to be reimagined as often now as then. The incessant coming together of peoples in generation after generation is something that he treats in work after work with sympathy and a transcendental imagination. Ghosh's historical novel, like many of his other books, is thus immensely suggestive for all of us contemplating our collective futures as human beings.

Conclusion: The Novelist and the Affirmation of Humanity”

At one point in *The Imam and the Indian*, Ghosh tells us that that what he learnt most from the religious riots that took place in New Delhi in the aftermath of the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination is that it was not enough to write about such happenings with “writerly wonder”; what the writer needs to do, he realized then, is take these occasions as inducements for the “affirmation of humanity” (61). Ghosh thus has been imaginatively visualizing for us past and present pressing issues in his works in ways that clearly have implications for our futures as human beings. In fact, in recent years, he has been focusing in his books on the future of the planet in the wake of the human assault on it in the form of global warming. I am thinking here of his 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide* which deals imaginatively with cross-cultural connections over time and space but is centered in the Sunderbans, a part of Bangladesh and West Bengal where the environment and non-humans as well as humans are increasingly imperiled by such warming. But I would like to conclude by saying that the novel now appears to be only a preliminary foray into a theme that Ghosh would develop fully in his 2016 work of non-fiction about the whole world, *The Great Derangement*. As he observes at the outset of the book, as a writer he has had to “recognize” the phenomenon as one that “poses challenges” for the contemporary writer” (9), although such challenges “derive ultimately from the grid of literary conventions that came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely the period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth” (ibid).

Through his fictional and non-fictional works, then, Ghosh has been contemplating the “imbrications of the human image”, in an ever-changing international landscape. He has done so from the vantage point of the present, but ultimately must be seen as someone who also writes with an eye towards the future. In this, I believe, he is one of the most astute chroniclers and observers of human destinies in our time. Through inventive and sympathetic portrayals of the consequences of imperialism, capitalist forays across the world, and “progress” in recent centuries, he has made us contemplate all too human issues associated with border crossings, diasporas, and the coming together of disparate groups of people over the centuries in our parts of the world.

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