

The Narratives of Amitav Ghosh: The Palimpsest and the Fact-Fiction Dichotomy

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Abstract

When historiography is devoid of the histories of other pasts or rendered subservient to protect the logical coherence of the higher narrative, Amitav Ghosh utilizes those vacuums, fissures or 'vanished' episodes in his narratives exposing the loopholes of the master narratives. Quite often, Ghosh seems to take many of the details of History for granted; but his search is intense and profound when the fissures or loopholes are found. His continuous striving for evidence leads him to adopt 'fictional' supplements or advance 'speculative proofs'. The paper deals with the layered and alternative 'other' pasts interwoven the palimpsests of memory, imagination, speculative proofs and supernatural elements and how they are playing major roles in the narratives of Ghosh's novels.

Keywords: *Palimpsest, history, imagination, speculative proofs, supernatural elements*

The outcome of colonization has been the erasure of the native/indigenous cultures, identities and traditions. A study of such erasures have, naturally and inevitably, led to the questioning and flouting of the validity of history as an objectively rendered account of the factual past. Thus, Chakrabarty (2000) observes that "Writing History involves inscribing onto the past some local variant of European modernity". All other histories are variations channeled through the categories of the master narrative, the logic of which is oriented towards European modernity. Any divergence from the European norm has been "measured and placed on a sliding scale of difference" designated invariably "in terms of 'distance', 'deviation' and 'lack'."

When historiography is devoid of the histories of other pasts or rendered subservient to protect the logical coherence of the higher narrative, Amitav Ghosh utilizes those vacuums, fissures or 'vanished' episodes in his narratives exposing the loopholes of the master narratives. Quite often, Ghosh seems to take many of the details of History for granted; but his search is intense and profound when the fissures or loopholes are found. His continuous striving for evidence leads him to adopt 'fictional' supplements or advance 'speculative proofs'.

Historical details are amassed apparently without scrutiny. A great number of the footnotes given in his works imply an acceptance of the past history without suspicion. On the other hand, Ghosh's palimpsest-like writing records and explores other significant events in history, sidelined or obscured from the higher narrative. Layered thus with such contradictory coatings of historical instances, he undermines the master history, exposing the illusion of its logic or integrity.

According to Ghosh, history itself is a palimpsest which obscures the past with a 'dense layer of accretions'. In *In an Antique Land*, the archive in itself becomes the palimpsest while Ghosh makes the following observation, during his search for the name of the slave there: "For more than eight centuries papers continued to accumulate inside the Genizia". Ghosh's irony is unmistakable when he points out the rubbish dump that now stands on one of the most important sites in Cairo's history beneath which lie large quantities of Chinese pottery and other riches. The anthropologist in Ghosh is undoubtedly outraged by such a sight; for, that is an evidence of the European/Western master narrative's privileging written documents and the negation and/or rejection of other forms of history objects of anthropological excavations or preserved art works in a museum. It was in Cairo's archive that Ghosh found some of the earliest and most valuable fragments of Indian textiles to unearth the past that concealed the 'history of accommodation'. Speculative propositions are perfectly welcome and legitimate in the absence of any written document with regard to the 'minor histories' of the natives or colonized. Thus *In an Antique Land* (2009), Ghosh's arrival at the name for the slave and the reason for his conclusion that Ben Yiju's married his slave Ashuwas was because he loved her are explained by the narrator as follows: ". . . there is no particular reason to connect Ashu's manumission with Ben's fatherhood yet it is difficult not to" (Gosh 2009).

Similarly, in *The Shadow Lines*, a pivotal passage describes the history of London's East End in terms of a series of migrant habitations, each obscuring the previous one like a palimpsest with the traces of the others showing through. The 'chapel-like' building that had once been a synagogue is now a mosque, the 'stern grey anti-racism posters... buried now under a riot of posters advertising the very newest Hindi films. The palimpsest implicitly figures in the form of memories when the author was striving to collect the fragmentary accounts given by other characters about the death of Tridib and the riot, which cannot be spoken of in the language of historicity. His search for the cause of Tridib's death is profoundly subjective and sentimental as he had himself witnessed the anti-Sikh communal riots following the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Other minor traces, for instance, May Price describing the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta as 'a haunted site for some other meaning', echoes the presence of an underlayer of the palimpsest-past.

Once again, the Antar's building in New York in *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a site of numerous historical intersections, 'with one wave of migrants moving out and another moving in'. More significantly, the central conceit of the novel also gestures the palimpsest. The plasmodium held responsible for these interpersonal transference, the technique aimed at by the servants of the colonial doctor Ronaldo Ross, is an overlay of a palimpsest. For, Laakhan and

Mangala are very much behind the façade of scientific progression of Roman Haldar and Mrs. Aratounian. Much like the concealment of characters themselves under various guises, the malaria bug keeps altering its coat-proteins. The traces of fissures and cracks of the Past which Ghosh finds investigated are the re-presented palimpsests of Murgan's alternative interpretation. Murgan's retrospection of the history of malaria research and its alternative trajectory make for a palimpsest of imagination, superimposed through fissures found in Ross's diary.

The palimpsest of imagination is invoked directly in *The Hungry Tide* where Ghosh attempts to reinscribe the 'forgotten' marginalized episode through the reappearance of the missed diary of Kanai's uncle. The Morichijhapi incident was recalled for attention through the fortuitous recovery of the personal document that 'leaves some trace of the incident on the personal memory of the world'. The presence of the palimpsest is also felt when *The Glass Palace* focuses on the history of the Indian National Army in Malaya and the forgotten long march of Indian refugees from Burma in 1941, which was thwarted by violence and displaced by war.

Exploring the affective histories that evidence and reinforce a plurality of existence in the world, Ghosh uses even a palimpsest of supernatural elements, the idea of which he seems to have hit upon during his collaboration with the historian Chakrabarty in the 'Subaltern projects'. Chakrabarty (200) suggests, "Fantastical or magic-realist modes offer the best prospects in the subaltern writing". Many haunted memories in Ghosh's works are a case in point in this connection. The slightly fantastic nature of *The Circle of Reason* accommodates the supernatural especially in the second section. The ghost becomes a metaphor or a signifier for the past's present. Through the dialectic of past (absence) and presence Ghosh underscores the ghostly presence of the archive.

While *The Glass Palace* introduces a supernatural episode in which a phantom elephant kills a planter, Kanai in *The Hungry Tide* encounters a ghost in the form of a tiger on the island of Ganrjontola, which later becomes an illusion as he has exaggerated the words of Fakir (the subaltern figure) about the footprints of Tiger. It also symbolizes that the modernity is entangled in the other pasts. The nine-year old ghost of Tridib in *The Shadow Lines* exposes some aspects of the deceased Tridib and the truth of his death.

Engaging himself with the interrogation of episodes and aspects of 'objective historiography', Ghosh's (2008) works disclose the subjective element inherent in historiography. His experimentation with the facts in an artistic manner involves 'the impossible double-task of writing historically about the pasts that could not have been articulated through historical discourse in the first place'. The layered and alternative 'other' pasts interwoven the palimpsests of memory, imagination, speculative proofs and supernatural elements are playing major roles in the narratives of Ghosh's novels.

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