

Rewriting the empire: Postcolonial resistance in the novels of Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh rewrite the inherited narrative structures of empire in their major novels, arguing that both writers use fiction as a deliberate site of postcolonial resistance rather than mere historical reflection. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the study reads Roy's *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* alongside Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, *The Hungry Tide*, and the Ibis trilogy to trace a shared preoccupation with reclaiming subaltern voice, contesting colonial cartography, and disrupting linear, imperial time. The paper argues that Roy resists empire chiefly through the intimate register of caste, gender, and the fractured family, while Ghosh works at the level of geography, trade, and diaspora, mapping the entangled histories of the Indian Ocean world. Read together, their fiction constitutes a sustained project of narrative decolonization: one that does not simply invert colonizer and colonized but reconstructs the very idioms — language, map, archive, and memory — through which imperial power once represented itself as natural and inevitable. The paper concludes that Roy and Ghosh together model two complementary strategies of postcolonial resistance, the intimate and the cartographic, which jointly demonstrate literature's capacity to rewrite empire from within.

Keywords: Postcolonial resistance, empire, subaltern voice, hybridity, diaspora, narrative decolonization

Introduction

The novel in postcolonial India occupies a peculiar and productive tension: it is written in the language of the coloniser yet turned, again and again, against the assumptions that language once carried. Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh, though divergent in style, temperament, and thematic emphasis, both belong to a generation of Indian writers in English who inherited this tension and transformed it into a method. Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) work through intimate, often domestic spaces — the family, the body, the small community — to expose how the logics of empire persist in caste hierarchy, gendered violence, and the machinery of the modern nation-state. Ghosh's fiction, by contrast, ranges outward: *The Shadow Lines* (1988) unsettles the cartographic certainties of Partition, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) sets ecological and indigenous knowledge against colonial and developmentalist surveys of land, and the Ibis trilogy — *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015) — reconstructs the nineteenth-century opium trade to expose the economic architecture of British imperialism in Asia.

This paper argues that despite these differences of scale and setting, Roy and Ghosh are engaged in a common project: rewriting the empire. Both novelists treat the colonial past not as a closed historical chapter but as a living structure that continues to organise space, memory, and social relation in the postcolonial present. Both refuse the neutrality of the imperial archive, instead reconstructing it through fictional forms — fragmented chronology, multiple narrators, vernacular interruption — that mimic and then subvert the totalising gestures of colonial historiography. The paper proceeds in three stages: first, it outlines the theoretical vocabulary of postcolonial resistance that frames the analysis; second, it examines Roy's and Ghosh's major novels in turn; and third, it offers a comparative reading of

the two oeuvres to argue that their combined strategies — the intimate and the cartographic — together constitute a fuller model of literary decolonization than either could achieve alone.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Resistance

Postcolonial theory provides the conceptual scaffolding for this study. Edward Said's account of Orientalism established that colonial power operated as much through representation as through military or economic domination, producing the colonised subject as an object of knowledge to be studied, classified, and governed. Said's later work on culture and imperialism extended this insight to argue that the novel, as a form, was historically complicit in naturalising empire, but that the same form could be reclaimed and turned toward what he called a contrapuntal reading — one that holds coloniser and colonised narratives in tension rather than resolving them into a single, imperial perspective.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity complicates any simple binary of coloniser and colonised, proposing instead a 'third space' in which colonial authority is destabilised through mimicry, ambivalence, and the productive slippage of cultural translation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's writing on the subaltern, meanwhile, poses the more troubling question of whether the most marginalised subjects of empire — particularly women of the lowest castes and classes — can be heard at all within inherited structures of representation, or whether the act of speaking for them risks a new form of appropriation. Taken together, these frameworks suggest that postcolonial resistance in fiction is rarely a simple reversal of power; it is instead a set of formal and narrative strategies for exposing, inhabiting, and unsettling the structures that empire left behind. This paper reads Roy's attention to caste and gendered subalternity through Spivak, and Ghosh's cartographic and diasporic imagination through Said's contrapuntal method and

Bhabha's hybridity, while noting that both novelists resist being reduced to any single theoretical lens.

Arundhati Roy: The Intimate Register of Resistance

1. *The God of Small Things*

The God of Small Things dismantles the imperial inheritance of caste and class through the story of the twins Rahel and Estha and their family in Kerala. Roy's prose famously refuses linear chronology, moving instead in loops and returns that mirror the way trauma resists straightforward narration. This formal choice is itself a form of resistance: by declining the tidy, forward-moving time of the realist colonial novel, Roy insists that history in postcolonial India is not a settled sequence of events but an unresolved wound that continues to shape the present. The novel's central transgression — the relationship between Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman, and Velutha, a Paravan (untouchable) carpenter — stages caste as a structure at least as violent and totalising as colonial race hierarchy, and one that colonial rule in India often reinforced rather than dismantled.

Velutha's fate demonstrates Spivak's warning about subaltern speech: he is, throughout the novel, spoken about far more than he is allowed to speak, and his death at the hands of the police functions as the narrative's starkest indictment of a postcolonial state that has inherited and repurposed colonial mechanisms of control. Roy's achievement is to make this critique legible not through polemic but through the sensory, fragmentary attention of children's memory, which registers political violence as inseparable from the textures of family, food, and the natural world of the Meenachal river. In this sense, Roy's resistance operates at the level of the household and the body rather than the map or the archive, insisting that empire's afterlife is lived most intensely in private, domestic space.

2. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Two decades later, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* widens Roy's canvas considerably, moving between Delhi's graveyards, Kashmir's contested valleys, and the lives of hijra communities, without abandoning her commitment to the marginalised body as the site where political history becomes legible. Anjum, a transgender woman who makes her home in a graveyard, and Tilo, whose life intersects with the Kashmir conflict, together allow Roy to connect the intimate violence of gender and sexual non-conformity to the larger, ongoing violence of the postcolonial nation-state in Kashmir. Where *The God of Small Things* reads empire through caste, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reads it through the unfinished business of Partition and the militarised governance of a disputed territory — showing that the cartographic violence Ghosh treats explicitly is never wholly absent from Roy's intimate frame either. The novel's fragmented, multi-voiced structure, assembled almost like a graveyard itself from many buried stories, again enacts formally what it argues thematically: that postcolonial history cannot be told as a single, continuous narrative without erasing the very people it claims to represent.

Amitav Ghosh: The Cartographic Register of Resistance

1. *The Shadow Lines*

If Roy's resistance is intimate, Ghosh's is cartographic. The *Shadow Lines* interrogates the arbitrary lines drawn across the subcontinent at Partition, following a narrator whose

family history spans Dhaka, Calcutta, and London. The novel's central insight — voiced through the character Tridib — is that the border is a kind of collective fiction, a 'shadow line' that produces division through the very act of being drawn, even as it fails to correspond to the lived, entangled histories of the people it separates. Ghosh uses the device of memory and the interweaving of two family histories across three cities to show that colonial and postcolonial map-making are continuous projects, both invested in producing legible, governable space out of what was once fluid, overlapping habitation.

This cartographic resistance aligns closely with Said's contrapuntal reading: Ghosh does not simply tell the story of the coloniser or the colonised but holds multiple, competing geographies in view at once, showing how the same historical event — Partition, or a riot in Dhaka and Calcutta occurring almost simultaneously — looks entirely different depending on which side of the shadow line one stands. The novel's refusal to grant its narrator, or its reader, a single authoritative vantage point is itself an act of resistance against the imperial cartographer's claim to survey the world from above.

2. *The Hungry Tide*

The Hungry Tide relocates this cartographic concern to the Sundarbans, where the American-trained cetologist Piya and the local fisherman Fokir together navigate a landscape that colonial and postcolonial development schemes have repeatedly tried to survey, settle, and control. The novel recovers the history of Morichjhapi, where refugee settlers were violently evicted in 1979 in the name of conservation and land management — a policy inheritance of colonial forest and wildlife administration repurposed by the postcolonial state. Ghosh sets local, tidal, oral knowledge of the Sundarbans against the abstracting instruments of the surveyor and the conservationist, suggesting that empire's afterlife persists most durably in the technologies — the map, the census, the protected area — through which land and its inhabitants continue to be managed from a distance.

3. *The Ibis Trilogy*

The Ibis trilogy extends this cartographic imagination across the widest canvas of Ghosh's fiction, tracing the nineteenth-century opium trade from the poppy fields of Bihar to the trading houses of Canton and the battles of the First Opium War. By assembling a vast, multilingual cast of migrants, sailors, and traders aboard the ship *Ibis*, Ghosh reconstructs the economic infrastructure of British imperialism — indenture, opium monopoly, and unequal treaty — as a single interconnected system spanning the Indian Ocean world. The trilogy's linguistic texture, thick with Bhojpuri, Cantonese pidgin, Lascari ship-talk, and colonial bureaucratic English, formally enacts the very hybridity Bhabha theorises: no single language, including the coloniser's English, is left standing as a neutral medium of narration. Ghosh's cartographic resistance here becomes historiographic as well, using the density of fictional detail to recover a history of global capital and coerced labour that official colonial archives largely suppressed or minimised.

Comparative Analysis: Two Strategies, One Project

Read side by side, Roy and Ghosh model two complementary strategies of postcolonial resistance. Roy works inward, using the fractured family and the marginalised body — the untouchable, the transgender

woman, the abused child — to show that empire's structures of hierarchy and violence persist most intimately in the spaces the nation-state claims as private. Ghosh works outward, using the map, the border, the trade route, and the archive to show that those same structures persist in the seemingly impersonal machinery of geography, economy, and law. Both, however, converge on a shared formal conviction: that linear, authoritative narration is itself an inheritance of the colonial archive, and that postcolonial fiction must therefore fragment, multiply, or otherwise unsettle its own narrative authority in order to resist reproducing the very structures it critiques.

This convergence is visible, for instance, in the way both novelists treat silence and untold history as a formal problem rather than a simple absence. Roy's Velutha and Ghosh's indentured migrants in the Ibis trilogy alike exist at the edge of what official records could or would preserve, and both novelists respond not by claiming to fully recover these voices — a claim Spivak would rightly treat with suspicion — but by dramatising the difficulty of recovery itself, allowing the reader to feel the limits of the archive as part of the novel's meaning. In this sense, both writers practise what might be called a resistant historiography: fiction that does not merely fill gaps in the colonial record but makes visible the political work that such gaps perform.

The two novelists also differ instructively in their relationship to hope and closure. Roy's endings — Ammu and Velutha's brief, doomed love; Anjum's makeshift community in the graveyard — locate resistance in fragile, temporary spaces of solidarity that exist alongside, rather than in triumphant opposition to, the structures of power that surround them. Ghosh's trilogies, by contrast, often move toward wider historical vindication, tracing how individual acts of resistance aboard the Ibis or in the Sundarbans connect to larger currents of anti-colonial and diasporic history. Together, these two modes suggest that postcolonial resistance in the Indian English novel is neither purely intimate nor purely structural, but requires attention to both scales at once — the small things, in Roy's phrase, and the vast, shadow-lined geographies that Ghosh maps.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh, read together, demonstrate that rewriting the empire is not a single gesture but a sustained and varied literary project. Roy's fiction insists that the caste hierarchies, gendered violence, and militarised governance inherited from empire are lived most intensely in intimate, domestic space, and that resisting them requires attention to the small, fractured lives that official history overlooks. Ghosh's fiction insists that the same inheritance persists in border, trade, and archive, and that resisting it requires a cartographic imagination capable of holding multiple, competing geographies in view at once. Neither writer offers a simple reversal of coloniser and colonised; both instead use the resources of the novel — fragmented time, multiple narrators, linguistic hybridity — to expose the constructedness of the very categories empire left behind. Their combined body of work suggests that the postcolonial Indian novel in English continues to serve as one of the most searching instruments available for examining how empire persists, and how it might yet be undone, in the present.

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