



Western Versus Eastern in the select novels of Amitav Ghosh

R Karthick¹, P Bagavathy Rajan²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, Government Arts College, Affiliated to Bharathiar University, Udumalpet, Tamil Nadu, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Arts College, Affiliated to Bharathiar University, Udumalpet, Tamil Nadu, India

Corresponding Author: R Karthick

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66856/english.2026.12.4.12126>

Abstract

This paper explores the dynamic interaction between Eastern and Western cultural values as reflected in the selected novels of Amitav Ghosh. It examines how he reinterprets history, myth, and identity to portray the continuing influence of colonial encounters on the Indian psyche. The study situates Amitav Ghosh within the broader framework of Indian English fiction, where the use of English becomes not merely a linguistic choice but a tool for negotiating cultural hybridity and intellectual discourse. By weaving together elements of history, folklore, and contemporary social realities, Amitav Ghosh creates narratives that question the rigid boundaries separating nations, peoples, and ideologies. His novels such as *The Circle of Reason*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, and *The Hungry Tide* vividly illustrate the tensions and connections between modernity and tradition, reason and faith, and the colonizer and the colonized. Through these novels, Amitav Ghosh exposes how global movements, migration, trade, and empire reshape personal and collective identities. The paper also highlights his nuanced depiction of postcolonial consciousness, where the East and the West are not opposites but interdependent forces shaping human understanding. Ultimately, the study emphasizes Amitav Ghosh's contribution to redefining Indian writing in English as a space of cultural dialogue and historical reinterpretation.

Keywords: Communication, history, intellectual, myth, social

Introduction

A significant portion of South and Southeast Asia is left out of Amitav Ghosh's story. He chooses instead to concentrate on what might be called a micro-culture in the area: the Sundarbans, sometimes called Tide Country, which are the island groupings of the Ganges delta south of Kolkata, just east of the boundary between Bangladesh and West Bengal. However, that "almost" must be noted, because *The Hungry Tide* does, in fact, depict not just location but also, and perhaps most importantly, the evolution of human interactions throughout time. As noted by critic Brinda Bose in 2001, Amitav Ghosh's work often deals with history: "Amitav Ghosh's fiction takes it upon itself to re-evaluate its troubled antecedents, using history as a tool to help us make sense of, or at least come to terms with, our troubled present." The researcher may use history as a tool to help us understand, or at least accept, our difficult present. The narrative centers on the interactions between two tourists, Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy (Piya), and the local population as well as between them. A semi-outsider in his forties, Kanai is a Delhi businessman who sometimes visits his aunt Nilima, an NGO worker who manages a hospital on one of the islands. In her twenties, Piya, an Indo-American scientist from Seattle, enters the Sundarban realm as an American, despite being Bengali. The reason Kanai comes there is to study a notebook that his late uncle Nirmal, a Bengali idealist thinker, left him. He is forced to discover more about his family history through the notebook. As the protagonists attempt to overcome several obstacles, Amitav Ghosh's novels investigate the wide realm of human communication, examining both its potential and its boundaries. Language, religion, and socioeconomic status

are some of these barriers, as are those that separate people from nature, traditional and contemporary India, the country and the city, and India and the rest of the globe. The characters illustrate the conflict between the local and the global. For most of the novel, Fokir symbolizes local identity, Americanized Piya, with her sophisticated GPS gadget, represents globalization, and Kanai, a contemporary Delhi-based entrepreneur who is somewhat globalized, vacillates in between.

The Circle of Reason (1986)

Amitav Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, was published in 1986. Critics gave it significant attention, and renowned critic and author Anthony Burgess gave it a favorable review. One may refer to this work as a three-part picaresque novel consisting of short pieces. The plot is tied together by the main character, Alu, who flees from the Indian government after being falsely accused of terrorism; the intelligence officer, Jyoti Das, who attempts to apprehend him; and René Vallery-Radot's *The Life of Pasteur*. The novel's central thesis is that weaving is a means of connecting disparate lines of reasoning. The protagonist of this tale is Alu, a young master weaver who must flee and evade capture after being mistakenly believed to be a terrorist. A police investigator who enjoys observing birds pursues Alu from Bengal to Bombay and then across the Persian Gulf to North Africa. He encounters a cast of individuals along the road who are as diverse and vibrant as the names the author gives them. Both humorous and serious tales are compellingly narrated, drawing the reader into their lives. Amitav Ghosh is as naturally gifted with words as Alu is with weaving fabric. He expertly combines

knowledge and humor to create an engaging tale. Alu, an orphan, is adopted by his elder uncle, a teacher in a small Indian hamlet, in *The Circle of Reason*. There are humorous and serious aspects to the narrative. Formerly a stellar student, Balaram Bose is now more preoccupied with phrenology than rationality, which he formerly studied with fervor. He employs Alu as an apprentice weaver after measuring his chubby head, and Alu promptly outperforms his master. Additionally, Balaram is part of a local dispute that ultimately results in the bombing of his home. As the only survivor of the blast, Alu is under suspicion. A young Indian police officer called Jyoti Das follows him as he flees. Alu travels to the tiny, oil-rich state of al-Ghazira by ship across the Arabian Sea. He then moves in with Zindi, an extremely obese woman. He has a goal that would make his uncle happy after almost dying in an accident: the Indian quarter's residents would battle against money and disease. Before the local government harshly ends this odd social experiment, it is on the verge of success. Das follows closely after as Alu flees once again with Zindi and a few other companions. They eventually cross paths by coincidence in a tiny Saharan town after traveling through most of North Africa. A tragic turn of events determines their destiny at the conclusion of the novel.

Plots, subplots, dozens of nationalities, and a convoluted explanation of the validity of Alu and Balaram's views abound in this complex work, which is too complex for a straightforward narrative synopsis. This may be difficult for American readers to understand, but they will learn a lot if they listen carefully. There is no denying Amitav Ghosh's skill, particularly in that peculiar fusion of the humorous, the ludicrous, and the intelligent that permeates Indian culture. In his subsequent novels, he would benefit by reducing the number of characters and narrative threads. Nevertheless, this is a humorous and thought-provoking glimpse into the real India for readers who have the time and interest.

***The Shadow Lines* (1988)**

The Shadow Lines, Amitav Ghosh's second publication, released in 1988, has garnered more critical notice than his earlier and lesser-known novels. New editions of the novel are consistently released, particularly on the Indian subcontinent, catering to both literary scholars and general readers. Numerous colleges include *The Shadow Lines* in their reading lists. The novel has paramount significance in all my writings, including my dissertation. *The Shadow Lines* is narrated by an unnamed protagonist. It is not conveyed in a linear manner. The narrative unfolds as if the narrator is assembling a jigsaw puzzle in his imagination. This is a distinctive and engaging method of writing, whereby concepts converge as time and place intertwine, aiding the narrator in comprehending his history more profoundly. Ghosh's work examines nationalism in an increasingly globalized society. He interrogates the true essence of political freedom and the manner in which boundaries both establish and divide. The narrative spans over seventy years, recounted through the recollections of several individuals, while the narrator conveys their perspectives alongside his own. Although the narrative mostly unfolds in Kolkata, Dhaka, and London, it resonates with the sentiments of the whole of South-East Asia, distinctly reflecting the themes of Independence and the anguish of Partition. It pertains to a middle-class Indian

family residing in Calcutta. The protagonist, a small child, narrates the tale from the perspective of each member of his immediate and extended family. This imparts a multifaceted personality to each individual. However, Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother, is the most fully realized character in the novel. She presents a vivid depiction of the populace's optimism and fervor as they endeavored to construct the nation immediately after its freedom. Amitav Ghosh's most compelling message is conveyed through her persona. She illustrates the futility of establishing nation-states and the absurdity of delineating boundaries among individuals whose memories remain consistent. All the characters possess several advantageous qualities. Tridib, the narrator's uncle, is among the most compelling characters created by Ghosh. Tridib's capacity for mental travel makes the narrator's fascination with him comprehensible. Ghosh subtly attempts to refute the notion that constraints are constraining, asserting that the mind has no boundaries. Despite Amitav Ghosh's rather unkind demeanor towards the narrator's cousin and childhood affection, Ila, her depiction is significant as it illustrates the disorientation and biases experienced by those residing distant from their own land. Amitav Ghosh gives much time and care to the British Price family, and unlike many writers, he refrains from categorizing them simplistically.

***The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995)**

The Calcutta Chromosome is a novel comprising many narratives situated in various temporal and geographical contexts. The objective, undoubtedly, is to ensure that they align seamlessly at the conclusion. Amitav Ghosh unites them, but not as well as one might anticipate. Although it is unfortunate, there are still some positive aspects to observe along the route. The narrative starts in the imminent future in New York, where Antar is employed by the International Water Council, a substantial organization. Antar was once employed by an NGO named Life Watch, which was acquired by the IWC. The novel's inquiries into religion and our understanding of deities parallel the principles of science, its methodologies, and the concept of rational knowledge. Cora Diamond, who explores the sensation of mystery in human existence, has addressed the issue of discursive knowledge as the essence of understanding. There exists far more to existence and life than our current knowledge or comprehension allows. This sentiment is linked to a rejection of the essence of knowingness often present in abstract moral and social theorizing. This attitude may acknowledge the presence of phenomena that remain inadequately elucidated or addressed, but it has a constrained perspective on our relationship with the universe and the essence of comprehension and knowledge. This work by Amitav Ghosh presents a subtle dystopia. Antar's New York is more desolate, dilapidated, and impersonal than the current metropolis; however, he still encounters kind individuals, and his existence remains somewhat satisfactory. He exerts less effort in formulating a future strategy and has not contemplated it extensively. Antar's computer, named Ava, has the capability to communicate in any language and perform several tasks, making it an impressive device; nevertheless, the remainder of Amitav Ghosh's envisioned future becomes antiquated within a few years of publication. The novel mostly focuses on the past; hence, it is logical that it lacks several insights into the future. Antar's first insight into the past materializes

as a fragment of L. Murugan's identification card, which appears on his lap or, more precisely, on his computer screen. Murugan disappeared in Calcutta in 1995; nevertheless, Antar had already seen him. Ronald Ross, who won the Nobel Prize in 1902 for his work on malaria, was Murugan's obsession. The novel then jumps back and forth between three different times. In the present, Antar is looking into the ID card and what might have happened. There are the things that happened before Murugan went missing in 1995, like his talks with Antar and his adventures in Calcutta. There are also events from the late 1800s, when malaria was first discovered. Murugan's fascination was Ronald Ross, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1902 for his research on malaria. The novel then alternates between the three distinct eras. Antar is currently investigating the ID card and potential outcomes. The events that took place prior to Murugan's disappearance in 1995 include his conversations with Antar and his travels in Calcutta. Events from the late nineteenth century, when malaria was first identified, are also included. The narrative is difficult and becomes increasingly complex. It features a variety of social groupings. There are a few in New York, more in Calcutta, and more in India in the nineteenth century. The secret lies in Ross's malaria findings. Both the items he discovered and the manner in which he discovered them are unexpected. Additionally, Murugan believes that they are more than just *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Ross was also quite fortunate to locate what he was searching for. For him, they almost fall into place, and this is where Murugan concentrates.

***The Glass Palace* (2000)**

The Glass Palace is mostly about how politics and history impact a family's existence. Three families, three nations, and two centuries are all covered in this epic tale. It describes the events of the last century in India, Malaya, and Burma. There is much fascinating information about individuals and history in this novel. The manner in which the British Empire governed India is severely criticized. It recounts the events of the 1880 British invasion of Burma, the overthrow of the Burmese monarchy, their incarceration at Ratnagiri, India, and the capitalists' exploitation of the country. The suffering and travel of refugees are shown in a pleasant and cheerful manner in this romance novel about survival. *The Glass Palace* is compelling for many reasons beyond the tragic tale of a king and queen in exile and the convoluted twists of the family narrative. Also fascinating is the predicament faced by Indian troops in the British army, which is a major theme in the novel's second half. Indians' positions in the British military became more contentious and ambiguous as India struggled for independence. Indian troops in World War II had to choose their allegiance, the reason for their battle, and the cause of their struggle. In addition to presenting the situation in black and white, these and other historical and political concerns and conflicts are treated with great maturity by highlighting the human complexity involved. *The Glass Palace* is a family tale as well as a political novel. Three families' tales are interwoven with those of the Burmese royalty to a lesser degree. Because it often presents different people and situations, this novel offers a lot of intriguing variation and is refreshing. It is simple to maintain the reader's interest because of the many unusual locations and the rapid changes in individuals and circumstances. Many excellent novels published in Bengali, Burmese, and Ratnagiri indigenous languages may

be found here. Dolly, a servant of the Burmese queen, and Rajkumar, a young Indian boy residing in Burma, fall in love in *The Glass Palace*. The transfer of the Burmese royal family to Ratnagiri takes up a large portion of the novel's opening section. Despite coming from a low-income background, Rajkumar and his tutor Saya John put forth a lot of effort to establish an empire in the teak forests of Burma. Rajkumar is assisted in marrying Dolly by Uma, the wife of the Ratnagiri district collector. Rajkumar, Saya John, Uma, and their families are the main focus of the family narrative. The majority of the second half is made up of their subsequent generations, whose paths intersect. The tale of Rajkumar and Dolly's last journey back to India during World War II and their unwavering will to live is fascinating. There is a lot of hardship when World War II breaks out. Aung San Suu Kyi appears in a short description of contemporary Myanmar (Burma) toward the conclusion of the conflict. An intriguing and well-written plot revolves around the Burmese royal family's exile and subsequent return to Burma. Those who dislike a lot of information about unrelated topics are not likely to like this novel. However, as long as it maintains the reader's interest, this kind of meandering in novels can add a bold twist to the narrative. However, he simply skims the surface of significant story twists, which may irritate readers who want the author to elaborate. The reader is left in disbelief by the sudden and swift conclusion, despite the fact that it is captivating and action-packed. Additionally, she observes that these references are often combined in a manner that makes it obvious that they may occur in real life. Therefore, it is obvious that they are speaking either Hindustani or English, which is the common language, if a scenario is set between, for example, a Westernized Bengali and a Malayan Tamil (Black 2010, 173). This indicates that Salman Rushdie's use of magic realism and justification in English, or mixed argot, are examples of popular methods to depict a variety of cultures and languages in novels that Amitav Ghosh dislikes. *The Glass Palace* moves at an odd, almost surreal pace. It goes slowly most of the time, but sometimes it races.

***The Hungry Tide* (2004)**

The Sundarbans islands, also referred to as "tide country," are the setting for *The Hungry Tide*. It narrates the tale of Piya Roy, an Indian American who traveled to the Sundarbans in search of Irrawaddy dolphins. She meets Kanai Dutt, a wealthy Delhi businessman who owns a firm that offers expert translation services, on the train. Kanai Dutt's aunt resides on the artificial island of Lusibari in the Sundarbans. They cross paths again when Piya accepts Fokir's offer to join him at his aunt's place after they first meet by happenstance on his boat. After Piya shows him the drawings that serve as their only means of communication, Fokir, a local fisherman with little education who is more familiar with the Sundarbans' constantly shifting riverbeds than others, introduces Piya to the dolphins first: Piya does not speak Bengali, and Fokir has no knowledge of English. Neither Fokir's wife, who grew up in the countryside and is trying valiantly to become a nurse, nor Kanai, who grew up in the city, sees anything in Fokir that Piya does. When she next travels to the deep interior of the Sundarbans to observe the behavior of the dolphins, he brings her along. On a whim, Kanai joins them, and the river follows suit. Amitav Ghosh delivers a narrative with a complex storyline

that incorporates mythology, folklore, history, science, ecology, and human concerns in his typical manner. Because he takes the effort to learn about the history of the location where his writings are set, Amitav Ghosh has always been unique. The plot of *The Hungry Tide* is significantly tighter since it takes place in one location, while *The Glass Palace* has many locations. *The Glass Palace*, on the other hand, had a lot of potential but ultimately moved slowly, particularly in the second half. *The Hungry Tide* reads almost too easily and moves swiftly. The fact that Amitav Ghosh does not preach a lot is another plus. He seldom chooses a side. His characters do, but there is usually a significant character who makes the opposing argument. Thus, in the spirit of postmodernism, he establishes concepts, counterarguments, and perceptions, contrasting the rustic with the polished, myth with science, belief with skepticism, progress and survival with environmentalism, and so on. The primary topic is not detracted from by a number of sub-themes that are explored just enough to make sense and end at the right moment. Each of these sub-themes adds to the intricate framework, which ultimately seems to be rather straightforward. But it is obvious that it takes a genius to create a narrative like that if one gives it even a moment's thought. Its characters likely lack the depth that the Sundarbans' context, where existence is a daily struggle and the unknown lurks around every corner, provides. It allows Amitav Ghosh to move about indefinitely. He has also made use of it, although in a positive manner. It is reminiscent of both his later novel *The Circle of Reason*, in which men are motivated by a single love, and his early novel *The Calcutta Chromosome*, in which myths recur. The emotions are the only earthy objects present. However, its composure, storyline, concentration, and flow clearly make it superior to both of them. Amitav Ghosh's almost obsessive quest for connections would be the one thing that might be held against him in the past. However, one might also argue that it is one of his unique abilities. *The Hungry Tide* is one of his greatest novels as a result. Even when it would have been simple to become excited, he does not. The uneducated fisherman Fokir, the professional translator Kanai, and the Americanized cetologist Piya share a three-way connection in *The Hungry Tide*. The narrative is set in the Sundarbans, a maze-like region of mangrove islands in the Bay of Bengal. The Irrawaddy River empties into the sea there. The tide country is another name for it. Amitav Ghosh utilizes the natural niches formed by the meeting of river and seawater as a metaphor for cross-cultural relationships.

Conclusion

Indian literature in English is not a new phenomenon. It has existed alongside British, American, African, and Commonwealth literature in English. Characters, particularly women, are shown variably throughout various countries. All of these texts, including Indian literature in English, demonstrate that males possess more authority than women. Amitav Ghosh is among the few contemporary Indian authors who compose in English. His works include a diverse array of stories, topics, characters, and scenarios. *The Circle of Reason*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, and *The Hungry Tide* reflect his wide narrative range. Despite his education and residence in the West, his principal strength as a writer lies in his ability to depict the Indian experience and the many cultures that persist in

India. Due to colonialism, Indians were compelled to rely on British control for their social and political necessities. Postcolonialism compelled them to further rely on British imperialists for their intellectual and educational requirements. Postcolonialism has adversely affected Indian authors who compose in English.

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