

**The Relationship Between Knowledge and Power in the Work
of Amitav Ghosh**

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Abstract

To date no single critic has yet published a monograph charting the development of Amitav Ghosh's fiction. Yet Ghosh is one of the most distinctive and influential writers to come out of India since Rushdie and, with five novels already published at the age of forty-seven, his fiction is continuing to develop in ambition and scope. This thesis is an attempt to fill the critical gap by providing a sustained account of Ghosh's writing. I contend that at the heart of his corpus is the argument that knowledge is produced by structures of dominance, particularly the military, economic, and epistemic strategies of colonialism.

In the Introduction I set out my methodological parameters, tracing the debate about knowledge and power through Foucault's conceptualization of power as a pervasive set of social relations; Said's recognition that contemporary thought has been crucially shaped by colonialism; and arriving at Bhabha's insight that colonial models of power and knowledge are ambivalent, split, and self-contradictory. Threaded through this discussion I provide tangible examples, from colonial texts and art, which cast new light on the theories. The Introduction then turns to Ghosh's writing, particularly focusing on the way in which his interrogation of borderlines — between nations, discursive fields, and genres — sends out a challenge to the compartmentalization of much Western thought.

I discuss Ghosh's novels in chronological order, suggesting that in each of them he examines the imbrication of at least one specific form of knowledge in colonial power structures. In Chapter One, I discuss representations of science in *The Circle of Reason*. I argue that science has often been regarded as a legitimate and legitimizing form of knowledge that is disinterested, culturally neutral, benevolent in intention, and allowing access to objective 'truth'. Recent theorists, however, have indicated that science is culturally located, with its own biases and interests. Western science and technology helped both to establish and consolidate power in an active way in colonized countries, and also provided a moral justification for imperial nations to continue their exploitation of Asia and Africa. Yet, through the character of Balam, Ghosh demonstrates that science was reshaped in the Indian context. Chapter Two focuses on Ghosh's treatment of space in *The Shadow Lines*. Dramatized here is the notion that space is not simply a given, but is socially constructed and imagined. The novel suggests that the Western obsession with defining nations and firm boundaries on maps has reified a view of space as a territory to be owned, measured, and divided. Chapter Three argues that in *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh turns his attention to prevailing perceptions of time. As well as exploring Ghosh's rewriting of conventional history, this chapter also considers the whole problem of representing the historical or ethnic Other. Ghosh rejects any single historical or anthropological account's claim to provide an authentic and complete version of the Other. He suggests that to provide a non-coercive description of alterity, the text should be multi-faceted, imaginative, and open-ended. In Chapter Four, I return to Ghosh's discussion of scientific and technological discourse. *The Calcutta Chromosome*, I suggest, is another attempt at problematizing the boundaries between science and pseudoscience, and challenging the 'claim to know' (CC, 103) of Western scientists such as Ross. My argument concludes with a summary of the thesis's main concerns and a brief adumbration of the ways in which Ghosh's most recent novel, *The Glass Palace*, fits into Ghosh's argument about knowledge and power.

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Abbreviations

The only abbreviations in this thesis are to primary works by Amitav Ghosh and refer to the following editions, which are given in the order in which they were written:

- CR* *The Circle of Reason* ([1986] London: Granta, 1994).
- SL* *The Shadow Lines* ([1989] Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- IAAL* *In an Antique Land* (London: Granta, 1992).
- CC* *The Calcutta Chromosome* (Basingstoke: Picador, 1996).
- DCLB* *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1998).
- Cd* *Countdown* (Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1999).
- GP* *The Glass Palace* (London: HarperCollins, 2000).
- II* *The Imam and the Indian* (Delhi: Ravi Dayal/Permanent Black, 2001).

Introduction

In 1784, Warren Hastings, then Governor-General of the Bengal Presidency and patron of the Asiatic Society, argued that an acquisition of knowledge about India was essential in ruling the country:

Every accumulation of knowledge and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise dominion founded on the right of conquest is useful to the state... [I]t attracts and conciliates distant affections; it lessens the weight of the chain by which the natives are held in subjection; and it imprints on the hearts of our countrymen the sense of obligation and benevolence (quoted in Cohn, 1985: 315).

Hastings was not alone in identifying knowledge as a source of power, and during their 'dominion' over India, numerous scholars set out to interpret the country and build up a storehouse of data about its languages, peoples, geography, history, and so forth, in order to legitimize British rule. The colonizers saw themselves as the custodians of the subject races' history, culture, and knowledge. They believed that only they had sufficient moral and intellectual virtues to explain Indians to themselves, and heritage preservation became a central component in the rhetoric of the 'civilizing mission'.

Simultaneous with their systematic collection of information about the country, British administrators attempted to stage European knowledge in India as a superior and universally applicable episteme. The West's economic and political ascendancy in the eighteenth and nineteenth century meant that ideas travelled with goods along the trade routes, in a similar process of imperial appropriation and imposition. This is by no means to discount the achievements of Western thought. On the contrary, non-Western peoples would have had no truck with their colonizers' ideas, had they not been highly insightful, useful, and ambitious in scope. Furthermore, and as I shall make plain throughout this thesis, Western knowledge is extremely heterogeneous: for every current, there is a counter-current, for every science a pseudoscience, for every empire-builder such as Hastings there is a dissenter such as Annie Besant. The British attempt to 'civilize' India of course also met with Indian resistance, and each culture was constantly fertilized with new ideas from the other. This was never an equal exchange, however, and the colonizers' insistence on the paramountcy of their worldview has wreaked lasting damage on India's infrastructure, institutions, and

individual psyches. As Hastings makes clear in his reference to the ‘weight of the chain by which the natives are held in subjection’, the issue of ‘knowledge’ in the colonial context was entangled in a complex web of power relations.

In this thesis I focus upon Amitav Ghosh’s preoccupation with the cultural creation of ‘knowledge’ in India. My line of enquiry is primarily influenced by Michel Foucault’s theorization of the relationship between knowledge and power. Power, according to Foucault, manifests itself not just in obvious displays of authority, such as military occupations and public executions, but more importantly in perpetual underlying processes, such as surveillance, discipline, and education. He describes power as being complex, elusive, and chaotic:

Power must be [*sic*] analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power (1980: 98).

Here Foucault recognizes that power does not simply reside with one individual or a small cartel, but rather penetrates all areas of life. It is not a possession, but a set of social relations. Power is fluid and dynamic, able swiftly to move between individuals, groups, and institutions. Foucault suggests three possible models to express this interchange: circulation (which suggests that power engages in an endless orbital movement), the chain (in which power is perceived as having a more linear, yet interlinked, trajectory), and the network. The model of the network is perhaps the most important, in that it imagines gaps existing between nodes of power, and this model is something to which I will return at several moments in this thesis.

Power also involves complicity on the part of the relatively powerless as well as the powerful, as everyone is ‘simultaneously undergoing and exercising [...] power’. Drawing on Gramsci’s idea of hegemony, Foucault argues elsewhere that people believe a social system to be natural or in their interests, so they consent to it. He emphasizes the productive as well as repressive effects of power, writing that power is not only a negative force, but that it also ‘traverses and produces things, [...] induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse’ (1980: 119). It is most effective when it is invisible, and people do not even realize that power is being exerted on

them. Thus modern-day American neo-imperialism may prove more difficult to resist than British colonialism, as American policy-makers avoid straightforward occupation of foreign countries, ruling the world instead via an elaborate matrix of large businesses, international law-enforcement agencies, and cultural and artistic suasion. In turn, the British Empire was more durable than the other European modes of colonialism it replaced, as it courted the respect and approval of its middle-class indigenous subjects. Finally, Foucault argues that although power is omnipresent, it cannot control everything, nor can it fully 'achieve[...] what it sets out, or claims, to do' (Danaher *et al*, 2000: 77).

According to Foucault, knowledge is not, as is commonly assumed, a disembodied entity contiguous to the world. He challenges the idea that our bodies of knowledge are inexorably increasing and gaining in strength as part of 'progress'. On the contrary, he argues that knowledge is socially produced and historically located. What people think they know is defined by their contexts. Foucault identifies an 'order of things' (1970), an intricate network of statements, discourses, academic disciplines, and institutions, which invests some things with the aura of truth, and allows other ideas to be dismissed as impossible. This is not to say that Foucault does not believe in truth; rather he argues that forms of knowledge cannot claim to be universal, only specific. The Indian folk-tale of the seven blind men and the elephant illustrates this idea very neatly. The men give correct descriptions of the elephant according to the segment they are touching (tail, ear, trunk, body, etc.), but each view is dependent on its context, indicating the multifariousness of truth.

Foucault suggests that knowledge 'doesn't follow [...] smooth, continuist schemas of development' (1980: 112), but that our ideas about truth change, often abruptly, over time. Accepted academic discourses define themselves by contrast with an Other, a discursive field that is represented as being badly argued, erroneous, and everything that the orthodox discipline is not. Once again, this Other may change over time, and discourses that were once seen as being beyond the pale may later be admitted into mainstream knowledge (one example is the increasing legitimacy of such practices as acupuncture and aromatherapy within medicine). As this discussion about exclusion and alterity suggests, knowledge is born out of power struggles, and is inextricable from power relations. Foucault writes that '[t]he exercise of power

perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power' (quoted in Gordon, 1994: xvi). Power structures are validated and sanctioned by knowledge. Rather than empowering us, knowledge makes us its subjects, because we understand ourselves in relation to different discourses, which are themselves linked with power. In his work, Foucault focuses on discourses from the human sciences: psychiatry, psychology, criminology, sociology, and some parts of medicine (Gordon, 1994: xvi). In the thesis I examine branches of knowledge to which Foucault devoted less attention: history, geography, anthropology, and certain aspects of science and technology.

As Robert Young has shown, Foucault was well aware that dominant modes of knowledge and power had been forcibly shaped by colonialism. Young cites Foucault's argument that the West's claim to universal validity for its culture, science, political philosophy, and rationality was 'a mirage associated with economic domination and political hegemony' (1990: 9). Yet Foucault focused most of his attention on internal, rather than external, colonialism, examining the policing of criminals, the insane, the sexually deviant, and the sick in the *West*. In order to understand more clearly the crucial role of colonialism in moulding the connections between knowledge and power, my research is directed by the postcolonial theories of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha.

Said was the first person to harness French theory, particularly the work of Foucault, for discussion about colonialism and the legacies of Empire. In *Orientalism* (1978), he developed Foucault's theorization of the intertwining of knowledge and power to argue that Western knowledge and culture were complicit in, and inextricable from, imperialism. Simultaneously, Said identified a significant lacuna within French theory: until his intervention, very little attention had been devoted to the effects of colonialism upon knowledge and power. In *Orientalism* Said reminds us that scholarship and art are not isolated from the world of practical affairs, but are deeply dependent on the political and economic processes of colonialism. He suggests that even creative works, such as novels, are enmeshed in a much larger body of writing — Foucault's 'discourse' — that actively produces the object of its knowledge. According to Said, '[t]he Orient was almost a European invention' (1995: 1). This 'Orient' bears little or no resemblance to the realities of the East, but is rather

a product of the West's statements, ideas, and discourses about its Other. Said poses two questions in *Orientalism* that are particularly relevant to the concerns of this study. Firstly, he asks whether it is ever possible to gain knowledge of other cultures and peoples that is impartial and non-coercive (1995: 24). His second question relates to the compartmentalization of knowledge:

Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly? (Said, 1995: 45).

I shall shortly demonstrate how these two concerns are central to Ghosh's literary project.

Said departs from Foucault's model of power as an impersonal flow that permeates institutions, leaders, and the oppressed alike. He sees colonial power instead as deliberate acts of collective will. He also believes that individual subjects can to some extent resist power, a possibility that Foucault rejects because of his insistence on subjectivity as a product of discourse. Said celebrates the humanist idea of the individual artist or critic as an agent of resistance (Moore-Gilbert, 1997: 37; 42). He has been criticized for this by such commentators as Young (1990: 137), who rightly points out that if, as Said insists, Orientalism is a totalizing system, then the idea of the critic finding a place outside this system to enunciate her opposition is logically unsound. Yet I find Said's position an important, if contradictory, stance, in that it provides an alternative to Foucault's unremitting pessimism, projecting the possibility of change. We can perhaps view his portrayal of the artist as a site of opposition to (neo-)colonialism to be an example of Spivak's idea of 'a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism' (1987: 205). A similar optimism about the artist's dissenting voice is found in Ghosh's writing. This thesis demonstrates that throughout his work, art as a humanist counterpoint to knowledge is lauded.

In contrast to Said and Foucault, who have both been criticized for their totalizing approach to the workings of power, Bhabha is interested in the gaps, slippages, and disturbances that exist within power and knowledge. He argues that the discourse of colonialism is agonistic, split, and contradictory, so that it never fully manages to assert a fixed and stereotypical knowledge of the colonial Other as it sets out to do. Even in the most confident colonial text, Bhabha suggests that there are

moments of ambivalence, moments when it is possible to divine that the argument is antilogous. One example that Bhabha gives of an inconsistency within colonial discourse is that the very basis of colonialism is to deny most of the world's people liberty, and yet one of its main justifications is the professed claim of bringing liberty, equality, and social advance to colonized countries. Bhabha thus identifies a worrying paradox of colonialism: in order to justify and maintain Empire, the colonizer brings Western education to the Indian middle classes, but in doing so, he gives Indians the language to challenge the colonizers' forcible 'liberation' of non-Western peoples. Bhabha writes, 'in "normalizing" the colonial state or subject, the dream of post-Enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms' (1994: 86).

Bhabha argues further that not only the colonial subject's resistance, but also his compliance with colonial strictures, endangers the fragile stability of imperialist knowledge and power. Through his theory of mimicry (which I discuss in Chapter One), Bhabha contends that even the most slavish attempts of the colonial subject to imitate his master result in an inadvertent threat to the colonial order. The more the colonial subject begins to resemble the colonizer, the more the differences between the two are reduced. The lessening of the distance between the two groups reveals another aspect of colonial doublethink. Colonial discourse is predicated on the assumptions that the colonized subject is alien, dangerous, and essentially different from the colonizer, while at the same time s/he is seen as educable, capable of being remade in the colonizer's image (McLeod, 2000: 52 - 55). Colonial texts anxiously seek to hide or disavow these mutually exclusive suppositions, but mimicry exposes their internal conflict.

Bhabha also demonstrates that knowledge is changed when it is transplanted to another country or context. Geographical dislocation undercuts the voice of authority, and its original message is destabilized and transformed. When missionaries brought the Bible to India, for instance, they found that it was 'repeated, translated, misread, displaced' (Bhabha, 1994: 102). Indians brought their own knowledge systems to bear on the new ideas introduced by the missionaries, and as a consequence Christianity was hybridized. Bhabha gives the example of Evangelists distributing the Bible to a receptive group of 'natives' in Meerut. These natives accept the Bible as the word of

God, but they are unwilling to countenance the Evangelicals' role as mediators in this process. Furthermore, they refuse to take the sacrament, as it is at odds with their vegetarianism. As Bhabha puts it 'the unitary and universalist assumption of authority' is challenged by 'the cultural difference of its historical moment of enunciation' (1994: 116). The Indians unwittingly effect a mutation in Christian doctrine by interpreting it according to Hindu tradition. As a result, both ways of thinking are altered, and 'new forms of knowledge, [...] new sites of power' emerge (1994: 120). The colonizers' forms of knowledge are not supinely received, but are put to uses for which they were never intended. This is highlighted by another example Bhabha gives of Indians clamouring for Bibles, not out of desire for the Word, but because they can be used for waste paper or sold (1994: 122). The image of Indians tearing up Bibles and putting them to practical use evokes the ruptures and dismemberment that Western knowledge undergoes in the 'wild and wordless wastes of colonial India, Africa, the Caribbean' (1994: 102).

Finally, the borders that Said describes as existing between colonizer and colonized, self and Other, between 'binary oppositions' and different academic disciplines, are refigured in Bhabha's theory. Bhabha argues that borders presuppose a no-man's land, an in-between space that simultaneously divides and connects two areas. This space, he suggests, is productive and enabling. It challenges conventional modes of thought by intermingling opposing views:

The borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress (1994: 2).

Bhabha's decision to interrogate colonial discourse by an examination of its borders is relevant to my discussion of Ghosh's writing. Like Bhabha, I suggest, Ghosh seeks to complicate our 'definitions of tradition and modernity' and 'challenge normative expectations of development and progress'. Particularly in the chapter on *The Shadow Lines*, I use Bhabha's and others' theorizations of the border in order to highlight the ways in which Ghosh unsettles the frontiers between disciplines, genres, and nations.

I will discuss Ghosh's questioning of borderlines presently. Before doing so, I would like to examine a painting that dramatizes many of the issues about knowledge and power identified by the three theorists I have discussed. This painting, Thomas Hickey's *John Mowbray* (Plate 1), was produced in about 1790 and depicts a smartly-dressed colonial administrator sitting at a desk overflowing with papers and books. In the foreground stands his money agent or *banian*, dressed in a white *dhoti* with a shawl over his head, holding a set of keys and a 'long list of business transactions' (Archer, 1979: 216). Behind him stands an Indian servant in a turban, who proffers a letter or message to Mowbray. A map hangs on the wall behind Mowbray, and below it is an iron box or safe.

This is a scanty description of the picture, but on closer examination it sheds interesting light on the preceding discussion about knowledge and power. In accordance with Foucault's theorizations, power in this painting is hidden rather than manifest. On the surface of it, the figures work together in an orderly and amicable fashion, but despite the lack of overt images of power, there is no doubt that the British man has authority over the two Indians. Mowbray is portrayed in a relaxed, confident posture: he sits back in his chair with one leg crossed over the other, and his face is in three-quarters perspective as he looks directly at the *banian*. In contrast, both Indians have their eyes downcast and their heads slightly bent, indicating submission and deference. The men's clothes also denote the inequality of their relations. Mowbray is immaculately yet simply attired in a black velvet suit, white cravat, and embroidered waistcoat, and his stockings and sturdy buckled shoes make no concessions to the hot climate. The plentiful folds and gatherings of the *banian*'s clothes, and the messenger's garish pink- and orange-patterned uniform suggest mystery and unknowable Otherness.

The intertwining of colonial knowledge with power is symbolized by the map on the wall and the papers and books that fill every available space. The map ostensibly represents the colonizers' occupation of much of the earth's surface, and their ability to chart that space accurately and scientifically. The iron box below this map may be for money storage, and this indicates the material benefits that the colonizers have accrued from their military and epistemic conquest of non-Western countries. From a

Plate 1



Plate 1. Thomas Hickey, *John Mowbray* (c1790), in C.A. Bayly. 1988. *The New Cambridge History of India, II.1: Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, unnumbered frontispiece.

Saidean perspective, the unruly piles of books and papers provide a way for the painter to emphasize the superiority of colonial discourse. In this interpretation, the overflowing documents indicate that there is simply not enough space in the room to contain the wealth of Western knowledge. Yet if we analyse the picture in the light of Bhabha's theories, the open drawers spilling out reams of paper suggest chaos and disarray within the discourses of colonialism. The frenzied turbulence of the books contrasts with the calm assurance of Mowbray's countenance, hinting that colonial discourse is not as authoritative as it seems.

Mildred Archer's historical account of the portrait further suggests that its circumstances are haunted by disorder and uncertainty. The picture's subject, John Mowbray, was not an administrator for the East India Company, but a partner in the private company of Graham, Mowbray, Graham, and Skirrow. About a year after the portrait was painted, the firm went bankrupt. Robert Graham and Mowbray moved to Chinsurah and drank themselves to death, while Skirrow went mad (1979: 216; 454, footnote 21). The map on the wall is not a depiction of the far-flung corners of Empire, but merely shows Bihar and Tibet, the company's meagre areas of commerce. Archer's description of the precariousness of Mowbray's financial affairs and mental health, and the paucity of his sphere of influence, encourages us to reinterpret the painting. Behind the face that Mowbray wishes to present to the artist and the world lurks fear, confusion, and failure. The existence of numerous private British firms in India, many of them disreputable, and all entirely motivated by profit, disrupts and calls into question the East India Company's claims to be operating in India's interests. Mowbray's and his partners' reckless financial dealings, hard drinking, and questionable sanity must also have been anathema to the Company's policies and an embarrassment to the British government. No wonder, then, that in 1813 and 1833 the British government took more active control in reducing corruption and financial mismanagement both within and outside the Company.¹

¹ According to Philip Lawson, although small companies and individuals increasingly benefited from enterprises in India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the East India Company's debts by this time were so high that the Company made no profits on its operations in India (1993: 139; 147). In 1813, therefore, the Company was stripped of its monopoly on all but the China tea trade (1993: 127), and in 1833 its entire monopoly over trade in India was terminated when its charter was not renewed. From this date on the Company played little more than a nominal role in India's affairs, until rule over India was

The artist's biography also contains a few surprises. Thomas Hickey, a struggling Irish painter, arrived in India in 1784 hoping to make his fortune. Unusually amongst the portrait painters of the Raj, he was enchanted by India and chose to live out his days there (Archer, 1979: 205). Although his paintings are not stylistically innovative, many of them are notable for representing Indian and British characters interacting with mutual respect (Archer, 1979: 211 - 22). Hickey's sympathetic portrayals of Indian *bibis* (unofficial wives of British administrators), *ayahs*, and Persian teachers or *munshis*, illustrate that his worldview has been altered by his lengthy residence in India. It can be seen, therefore, that a painting that initially appears to be an unambiguous statement about the superiority of Western forms of knowledge and governance, is in fact fraught with contradictions.

Picking up from the reading of complex power relations in the above pictorial text, it is my contention that throughout Amitav Ghosh's writing there is a debate about knowledge and how it relates to power, particularly colonial power. Several of the ideas given in the theoretical framework outlined above are reiterated and reshaped in Ghosh's fiction. For example, Foucault's notion that knowledge is context-dependent and develops through abrupt epistemic shifts is confirmed by Ghosh's representations of the history of science, in which reputedly deviant practices are sometimes admitted into the fold of mainstream science, while generally accepted procedures are later jettisoned. Furthermore, Foucault's argument that everyone is complicit in the workings of power, and that even the most downtrodden groups frequently consent in their own oppression, is borne out by the fact that Ghosh does not portray power simplistically as flowing from the West to the East. Rather, he shows how even the richest and most powerful countries have their share of dispossessed individuals. In all his novels, Ghosh looks at a migrant underclass within a dominant culture, portraying undocumented workers in al-Ghazira (*The Circle of Reason*), Brick Lane Bengalis (*The Shadow Lines*), Egyptian workers in Iraq (*In an Antique Land*), economic migrants in New York (*The Calcutta Chromosome*), and Indian coolies in Burma (*The Glass Palace*). The fact that these people are prepared to put up with social injustice and economic uncertainty in exchange for the vague advantages of living in the 'developed world' confirms the notion that 'people [...]

officially transferred to the British government after the Great Rebellion of 1857 – 58 (Lawson, 1993: 144 – 63).

invest in their own unhappiness' (Eagleton, 1991: xiii). Ghosh takes this idea further in his portrayals of the Indian sepoy, a figure that helped the British Empire to consolidate its international structures of dominance. In *The Circle of Reason*, he contemptuously describes these sepoys as 'uniformed hirelings' (CR, 260), but in *The Glass Palace* their reasons for fighting for the British are explored in more depth, particularly through the complex characterization of Arjun, who is figured as a product of Western education.

Said's question as to whether it is possible to acquire a non-manipulative knowledge of other cultures is a constant preoccupation of Ghosh's. This is particularly apparent in *In an Antique Land*, in which he portrays the inhabitants of a modern-day Egyptian village alongside Jewish Arab traders from the twelfth century, interbraiding the techniques of the anthropologist, historian, and novelist. The tendency of Western discursive formations to 'divide human reality [...] into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races' (Said, 1995: 45) is challenged through the subject matter, settings, and generic form of Ghosh's writing.

Ghosh is an Indian Bengali by origin, whose family moved from East Bengal to Calcutta on Partition, and who has lived a peripatetic life in Europe, South Asia, and the US. He has published five novels; works as a journalist, academic, and travel writer; and his non-fiction has appeared in three collections, *Dancing in Cambodia*, *At Large in Burma* (1998), *Countdown* (1999), and *The Imam and the Indian* (2002). Yet his writing overflows generic categories and confounds any attempt at classification. In each text he experiments with a different genre. His first novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986), is an ambitious, fantastical narrative that owes a debt to Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. In *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Ghosh moves away from this kind of literary 'chutnification' towards a more realistic and personal narrative. Yet he still occasionally draws attention to the novel's artifice, particularly through layers of stories and dreams that allow his narrative to elude the constraints of realism. In an interview I conducted with Ghosh (Chambers, 2003), he argues that *In an Antique Land* (1992) should not be considered as a novel at all, as it is based on anthropological fieldwork he undertook in Egypt, and on his historical essay, 'The Slave of MS. H.6'. Nonetheless, by utilizing such novelistic techniques as imaginative plot construction, evocative imagery, and empathetic characterization in

an ostensibly historical and anthropological text Ghosh implies that the novel has as valid a claim to knowledge as more academic genres. *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) sees Ghosh experimenting with the genres of science fiction and cyberpunk to spin a fantastical story around the actual history of the British scientist, Ronald Ross, who discovered that malaria is transmitted by the bite of a mosquito. Finally, in *The Glass Palace* (2000), Ghosh creates a family saga that spans several generations and continents to describe little-known histories of Burma and India, and to draw attention to the horrific ‘Forgotten Long March’ that took place at the end of the Second World War. This novel was published during the writing of this thesis, and I have not been able to devote a chapter to it. However, in the Conclusion, I suggest ways in which the novel reiterates Ghosh’s arguments about the interpenetration of knowledge and power.

Not only do Ghosh’s works transgress generic boundaries, but they effortlessly cross national frontiers. His novels’ settings include India, the Middle East, Britain, America, Burma, and Malaysia, and he frequently emphasizes that travel is not a recent byproduct of globalization, but something that societies have always undertaken for economic, religious, political, or personal reasons. As Massey and Jess point out, ‘there has since the beginning of human existence always been movement, migration and settlement in new areas; for as long as is known and in most parts of the world, individual places have been open to, and partly constituted by, their contacts with “outside”. Interconnection is not new, and diasporas are certainly not only a feature of the recent past’ (1995: 2). Ghosh is instrumental in broadening our knowledge of cultural interconnection at various moments in history, and in reminding us that national borders are a relatively recent construct.

Furthermore, Ghosh’s novels often challenge the conceptual boundaries that have been erected to separate academic disciplines or schools of thought from each other. For example, in *The Circle of Reason* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh interpolates the mainstream science of such figures as Louis Pasteur and Ronald Ross with pseudoscientific and religious practices. In doing so, he suggests that the boundaries between science and pseudoscience are porous, that the notion of the scientist as a lone genius is misleading, and that third-world countries such as India have hybridized and reworked science coming from the West. In *In an Antique Land*

he focuses on social crossings, celebrating travellers and migrants who cross international borders as a matter of course, and interstitial religions that borrow cultural practices from across the frontier, such as Sufism and *bhakti*. *The Shadow Lines* problematizes physical borders between nations, arguing that these obfuscate the emotional and cultural ties between officially separate nations such as India and Bangladesh.

Ania Loomba asserts that '[p]ostcolonial studies have been preoccupied with ideas of hybridity, creolisation, *mestizaje*, in-betweenness, diasporas and liminality, with the morality and cross-overs of ideas and identities generated by colonialism' (1998: 173). In the light of this statement and Bhabha's celebration of the 'in-between' spaces of borderlands, Ghosh's interrogation of the 'shadow lines' that have been set up to demarcate separate nations, concepts, or genres may be seen as an important contribution to the postcolonial debate. Although Ghosh dislikes being categorized as 'postcolonial',² in his writing he consistently focuses on the ways in which the partitioned South Asian subject has been affected by, and yet can to some extent resist, colonialism's legacy. Highly respected both in India and the West, Ghosh's work increasingly stimulates debate and discussion. In 2001, he caused controversy by withdrawing *The Glass Palace* from the competition for the Commonwealth Writers Prize. In an open letter to the Prize's organizers,³ he expresses his unease with the term 'Commonwealth', a designation that he suggests orientates contemporary writers around the old power structures of colonialism. He also criticizes the Prize for excluding Commonwealth writers who choose to write in languages other than English. Although his withdrawal from the Commonwealth Writers Prize is not the concern of this thesis, and although it may be viewed cynically as a publicity exercise, the action is worthy of mention because it is another example of Ghosh grappling publicly with issues surrounding power and knowledge.

² In an interview, Ghosh states: 'I have no truck with this term at all. [...] It completely misrepresents the focus of the work that I do. In some really important ways, colonialism is not what interests me. What is postcolonial? When I look at the work of critics, such as Homi Bhabha, I think they have somehow invented this world which is just a set of representations of representations. They've retreated into a world of magic mirrors and I don't think anyone can write from that sort of position' (Silva and Tickell, 1997: 171).

³ This letter (Ghosh, 2001b) can be read on www.amitavghosh.com/cwprize.html#letter

In brief, then, the greater part of my thesis focuses on Ghosh's challenge to normative modes of knowledge. Given Foucault's idea that knowledge is specific to the time and place in which it was produced, my approach in this thesis is highly contextual. I analyse the impact that certain paradigms of knowledge — scientific, geographical, historical, and anthropological — have had, and continue to have, on colonized countries. India is of course the main focus, but I also consider Ghosh's interrogation of knowledge and power in other countries, most notably Egypt. I also argue that Ghosh provides alternatives to Western ideas about time, space, and science by frequently introducing other worldviews into his narratives. Philosophies that tend to be perceived as 'deviant', which emerge from the West as well as the East, are highlighted in the texts. Gnosticism, Vachanakara Hinduism, pseudoscience, Sufism, Gandhism, Theosophy, and notions of spirituality and rationalism that arose from the Bengali Renaissance: all are introduced in order to show that mainstream Western knowledge has always been challenged by counter-knowledges.

Chapter One: Historicizing Scientific Reason in *The Circle of Reason*.

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, is an intriguing debut, which introduces and explores themes that are developed in his later work. The novel is ostensibly a *bildungsroman* recounting the journey of Alu, a Bengali orphan, from the obscure village of Lalpukur to Calcutta, Kerala, the Middle East, and Algeria. It also incorporates elements of the picaresque novel, the fantastic mode, the novel of ideas, the thriller or detective novel (with Assistant Superintendent of Police, Jyoti Das, trailing the alleged extremist, Alu, through several continents), and the Hindu epic. The text thereby offsets linear narrative techniques against a multi-voiced, cyclical structure. Set in the twentieth century, its frequent use of flashbacks, memories, and oral stories enables time as constructed to loop between Calcutta in the 1950s and North Africa in the late 1970s, to name but two of the novel's many locations.

The novel has evident flaws, the most serious of which is that it does not hang together as a whole. It is structured into three sections, each of which has a different setting, characters, and concerns. Alu and his pursuer Jyoti Das are the only characters who are constants throughout the novel. Despite the use of such recurring motifs as sewing machines, birds, and *The Life of Pasteur*, the novel's sections remain discrete entities that for the most part fail to dovetail. Because of this, I have structured this chapter into two halves, examining what for me are the novel's most interesting features: its portrayal of science and multifarious use of genre. The chapter opens with a critique of *The Circle of Reason*'s first section, 'Satwa: Reason', in which, I suggest, Ghosh creates what is almost a self-contained novel of ideas. In this part of the chapter I focus upon Ghosh's interrogation of the cultural creation of 'knowledge' in India, specifically upon his representations of the discourse of science. Through the characters of Balaram, his friend Gopal, and enemy Bhudeb Roy, Ghosh generates a debate about how various scientific discourses emanating from the West have been accepted, challenged, or remoulded by Indian recipients. Balaram's view of scientists as altruistic seekers after truth is humorously deflated, and Ghosh suggests that even

the most 'objective' science is caught up in the belief systems and power structures of its era and geographical location.

In the second part, I discuss Ghosh's grappling with form, looking at the novel's amorphous attempt to represent the globalized societies of the Persian Gulf. Ghosh tries out several different genres in writing about immigrant society in the fictional state of al-Ghazira. Arguably, however, he has not yet managed to find his voice and remains reliant on the narrative techniques popularized by Salman Rushdie. There are many ways in which Ghosh echoes Rushdie's works, particularly *Midnight's Children*. In the second half of the chapter I examine Ghosh's use in this novel of magical elements, although I suggest that his novel draws more on the fantastic mode than on Rushdiean magic realism. Furthermore, *The Circle of Reason* contains a wealth of symbolism, which seems to be a gesture towards Rushdie's witty use of metaphor, but which is frustratingly empty and unsustainable at times. For example, Alu's physical defects such as his potato head, oozing boils, and atrophied thumbs have obvious resonances with the injuries that befall Saleem, the narrator of *Midnight's Children*. Whereas Rushdie employs mutilation as a metaphor for catastrophes suffered by India's body politic, Ghosh's usage of this device is bafflingly lacking in resonance. His subsequent abandonment of this Rushdiean symbolism suggests awareness on his part that it has proved unsuccessful.

Similarly, *The Circle of Reason's* depiction of minor characters suffers by comparison with those who populate the pages of *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie renders many of his subordinate characters in startling and unforgettable ways. Examples include Saleem's Uncle Hanif, the proponent of social realism, whose futile attempts to sell his film 'The Ordinary Life of a Pickle Factory' to Bollywood enrages his starlet wife; William Methwold, the bewigged English administrator with a penchant for the cocktail hour; and Picture Singh, the political magician, who trains snakes to enact communist allegories. By turns idiosyncratic, poignant, and hilarious, Rushdie's characters are one of the main reasons for the novel's enduring popularity. In contrast, Ghosh fails to sustain the colour and vigour with which he portrays characters in the early part of the novel. Particularly in the section of the novel set in al-Ghazira, the reader may easily become confused or frustrated by the proliferation of sketchily-drawn characters such as Abu Fahl, Hajj Fahmy, and Forid Mian.

Ghosh's decision to abandon this literary 'chutnification' in subsequent novels, I argue, signals the moment at which he begins to articulate his ideas more effectively. *The Circle of Reason's* canvas is too cluttered with characters and issues, yet most of the themes that continue to fascinate Ghosh are evident in this first novel. His attempt to disrupt linear time and transgress spatial boundaries, and his intermingling of science and fantasy, are two aims that are arguably more successfully achieved in *The Shadow Lines* and *The Calcutta Chromosome* respectively. Similarly, *The Circle of Reason's* portrayal of a Middle Eastern community prefigures *In an Antique Land*, but in the later work the narrative scope is not quite so ambitious, and it is consequently handled better.

In this chapter I suggest two major ways in which *The Circle of Reason* foreshadows the later novels. First, in this novel Ghosh interrogates the practice of science by drawing attention to the disruptive potential of pseudoscience. In doing so, he anticipates *The Calcutta Chromosome's* portrayal of Ronald Ross's mainstream science as being inextricable from the magical pseudoscience of a counter-science group. He also unsettles the dichotomous idea that India represents 'tradition' as compared to the West's 'modernity'. Despite the fact that science is often taken to be the West's most 'modern' discourse, it has a pseudoscientific underbelly, containing elements derived from superstition, unverifiable imaginings, and 'tradition'. I examine two Indian thinkers, Rammohun Roy and M.K. Gandhi, who inform the novel's debate about science and who are often made to represent 'tradition' and 'modernity' respectively. My research indicates that this simplistic depiction of Roy and Gandhi as modernizer and traditionalist does not take into account the contradictions and syncretic worldviews to be found in the life and works of both men. Ghosh continues to critique the distinction between modernity and tradition in later writing, and always endeavours to reveal interchange between ostensibly opposed discourses.

Second, *The Circle of Reason* evinces an important distinguishing characteristic of Ghosh's fiction to date: his heterogeneous use of genre, language, and allusion. Despite the limitations already outlined, this lively first novel demonstrates Ghosh's eclectic interaction with ideas from both East and West, and his ability to create a composite generic framework in which to discuss these ideas. Wide-ranging

intertextual references are used in a more focused way in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, while the novel's hybrid use of genre foreshadows the multiple narratives of *In an Antique Land*.

Ghosh also uses an image of the weaver's loom to suggest that writers will have to adapt their use of language, interbraiding different linguistic threads, in order to represent the polyglot societies of India and the Gulf states. In the novel's portrayal of the specialized idiom of the loom, language is depicted as being altered by its encounter with new technologies. When Shombhu Debnath teaches Alu weaving, he will not let the boy touch the loom until he has taught him the terms for all its different parts in several dialects: '[s]o many names, so many words, words beaten together in the churning which created the world: Tangail words, stewed with Noakhali words, salted with Naboganj words, boiled up with English' (CR, 73). This image of a kedgerie of different dialects is appropriate to a novel such as *The Circle of Reason*, which is peppered with words from so many languages. Multilingualism is particularly striking in the examination of the cotton trade, which appears on pages 56 - 57, and in which Ghosh traces the etymology and semantic history of the word 'cotton', from its ancient Sanskrit roots to its Latin, Arabic, and modern European mutations.

Despite such forays across linguistic boundaries, *The Circle of Reason* is of course a novel written primarily in English. In tackling the problematic issues that pervade the use of the English language in India, Ghosh does not merely season his novel with spicy terms borrowed from Indian or Arabic dialects. This, after all, is a device common to many Indian writers, but what marks Ghosh out is the extent of his reflection on language use. The best example of this, perhaps, comes in a description of how the history of the loom has created a new language:

So many words, so many things. On a loom a beam's name changes after every inch. Why? Every nail has a name, every twist of rope, every little eyelet, every twig of bamboo on the heddle. A loom is a dictionaryglossarythesaurus. Why? Words serve no purpose; nothing mechanical. No, it is because the weaver, in making cloth, makes words, too, and trespassing on the territory of the poets gives names to things the eye can't see. That is why the loom has given language more words, more metaphor, more idiom than all the world's armies of pen-wielders (CR, 74).

In this passage the weaver's occupation is explicitly compared to that of a poet and, more generally, a 'pen-wielder', while his loom is described as a 'dictionaryglossarythesaurus'. This composite term demonstrates Ghosh's point that, like the weaver, a writer must devise fresh ways of describing things, reassembling language so that it is capable of portraying even the finest detail, 'every twist of rope, every little eyelet, every twig of bamboo on the heddle'. However, it is asserted in this passage that the stream of words, metaphors, and idioms which the loom has poured into language is greater than anything which 'the world's army of pen-wielders' has yet managed to produce. Ghosh pokes fun at his own profession, suggesting that it is the writer who frequently has a more automated and utilitarian attitude towards language than the weaver sitting at his mechanized loom. Rather than treating language as merely a mechanism to create a story, Ghosh implies that the writer should spin together multifarious strands of language and subject matter, pouring out new words, as the loom has done.

Weaving is therefore used as a metaphor for fiction. Just as there are different types of looms in different countries: 'dummy-shuttle looms and rapier looms and water-jet looms and circular looms' (CR, 74), so fiction too manifests itself in different forms across the world. Yet, Ghosh suggests, the different weaving techniques all have in common the same technique of 'locking yarns together by crossing them' (CR, 74). The usage here of the word 'yarns', with its extra meaning of 'stories', indicates that the statement can also be read as a literary manifesto. Ghosh seeks to 'lock together' disparate stories in a complex weave that alludes to oral and literary texts from both East and West. While I spend some time untangling Ghosh's multifarious use of genre in the second half of this chapter, I will now focus upon the debate about reason and science in the early part of *The Circle of Reason*.

SCIENTIFIC REASON IN *THE CIRCLE OF REASON*

Throughout *The Circle of Reason*, Western and Hindu philosophies and texts are intermingled. This is perhaps best exemplified in the novel's very title, the paradoxical 'circle' of reason. Following Richard H. Popkin and Avrum Stroll, I

broadly define reason as a set of inductive processes that supposedly allow access to ‘knowledge in the strongest sense, knowledge that can under no circumstances possibly be false’ (1993: 239). ‘Reason’ is of course a contested term, which has been interpreted in vastly different ways by philosophers as diverse as Plato and Chomsky. It is also important to be aware that there is a plurality of concepts of ‘reason’. In India, for example, discourses of reason and logic long predated British expansion into the subcontinent and were not exclusive to the Hindu tradition.¹ However, the Enlightenment’s bold assertion that its own brand of reason had unique and universal applicability, and the impact this had on colonized countries such as India, has led to the emphasis in this chapter on interrogating *Western* interpretations of reason. That said, I want to avoid becoming embroiled in the debate about the complex and often contradictory nature of Western perceptions of reason from the Enlightenment onwards. My focus, therefore, will be on Western discourses surrounding science and technology, which, in the context of colonialism, were increasingly seen as touchstones of rationality and progress. Colonial discourse tended to hinge upon one particular version of reason, scientific reason, which manifested itself in material advances.

Reason has tended to be viewed by Western philosophers as a linear association of thoughts, progressing through logic and deduction, but rarely as something that has a cyclical motion. The title for Ghosh’s first novel, then, is extremely suggestive, indicating that reasoned argument does not necessarily have to take the form of a continuum. The notion of circularity, of course, also foregrounds the Hindu view of time as cyclical, with constant patterns of renewal and rebirth. In Hinduism, the image of a circle suggests both an endless process of regeneration and degeneration through time. And yet, at the same time, its similarity to the notion of the ‘zero’ has resonances of annihilation and death, seen as the ultimate goal in the Hindu concept of *moksha*, or release from the cycle of existence (*samsara*).

¹ In addition to the well-known Hindu tradition of reason advocated by such figures as Gandhi and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, there was also long-standing Islamic discussion on the subject. The philosophies of the Mutazalis of the eighth century and the Muwahhidin of the twelfth, for example, long predated the thinking of Rammohun Roy. Several commentators now claim that Roy — who as we will see was conventionally regarded as the ‘Father of Modern India’ and as a reformer primarily influenced by Enlightenment notions of reason and humanism — may also have been influenced by these Perso-Arabic rationalist theologians (see Ray, 1975: 10; Sarkar, 1975: 52).

The 'circle' of reason is represented in the novel when Balaram, applying his notion of reason to obsessive proportions, surrounds himself with a protective circle of drums of carbolic acid, which he sees as being the epitome of reason. His circle is contrasted with the obsession of his arch-enemy, Bhudeb Roy, with linearity in the form of straight lines. Roy's passion for linearity culminates in his creation of a straight road through the village and the formulation of his slogan 'Straight to Progress' (CR, 120). This may be read as a parody of the usual stereotype of Western thought as linear and Indian as cyclical, and it is significant that both Bhudeb Roy's and Balaram's arguments degenerate into violence. Just as the notion of a circle has simultaneous connotations of protection and entrapment, perfection and emptiness, so reason in the novel is also seen to have both beneficial and destructive qualities. This is illustrated when carbolic acid (once again being used as a symbol for scientific reason) rids the village of disease during the influx of migrants from war-torn East Bengal, and yet the same carbolic acid is used as a weapon in Balaram's battle against his former employer. The novel thus embraces neither the linear nor the cyclical models of reason in their entirety, but rather suggests the strengths and limitations of both ways of thinking.

The notion of reason as an essential aspect of Hinduism is even suggested in *The Circle of Reason's* tripartite structure. The novel's three sections are named after Hindu concepts (*Satwa*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*), translated by Ghosh as 'reason', 'passion', and 'death' respectively. Hindus believe that human personality is made up of different combinations of three *gunas* or strands, which are interdependent and non-conscious (Lipner, 1994: 242). According to Lipner, the *gunas*, if they could be translated precisely, are 'goodness', 'passion', and 'ignorance':

sattva [this spelling in original] [...] produce[s] experiences and dispositions which we characterise as serenity, peace, compassion, benevolence, kindness, forgiveness, awareness, intelligence, insight, clarity of mind, etc. Likewise, *rajas* produces passionate mental and moral activity (a mercurial temperament, volubility, wrath, lust, etc.) [...], while the modifications of *tamas* give rise to such things as sloth, stupidity, mental confusion, cowardice, and so on (1994: 243).

It is unclear why Ghosh has chosen to simplify the meanings of two of the *gunas*, designating the highest *guna*, *satwa*, as 'reason' and the basest, *tamas*, as 'death'. Yet the important point to emerge from Ghosh's use of the *gunas* is that these three strands

are inseparable and could not exist without each other. This seems to imply that however rational a culture considers itself, there will always be a dark side to that reason, its *tamas*, which manifests itself through violence, intolerance, and even imperialism.

In discussing the novel's depiction of the dark and light aspects of scientific reason, I situate Ghosh within a debate about the 'modernization' of India, which began in the early nineteenth century and continues to this day. The debate has focused upon the following issues: should educated Indians reject as inhumane traditions such as child marriage and caste notions about pollution, and embrace the Western enthusiasm for science, secularism, and industrialization? Or are Western rationalism, secularism, and scientific and technological innovations simply not applicable in the Indian context, in that they signify India's bondage to its colonizers, and the creation an emasculated population of Macaulay's 'mimic men'? The terms of this dialogue in late twentieth-century India may have altered dramatically, but the perceived dichotomy between 'tradition' and 'modernity' is an ongoing concern for many Indian scholars.

In order to illustrate the ways in which Ghosh continues and updates the discussion, I examine two Indian thinkers, whose ideas are alluded to in *The Circle of Reason*, but who are usually interpreted as belonging to opposing sides of the debate. Rammohun Roy (1774 - 1833) is remembered as India's earliest and most vocal advocate of Western rationalism and science, whereas M.K. Gandhi (1869 - 1948) is famous for his allegedly implacable opposition to science. Despite the ideological chasm that is assumed to divide them, both men were important reformers of Hinduism; they highlighted the individual's responsibility for changing his society; and both sought in their lives and works to synthesize the best of Western and Eastern thought. In addition to these shared features, each man's attitude towards Western science was more complex than is usually supposed. Roy is sometimes regarded as an obsequious cheerleader for the colonizers' culture, while Gandhi is often depicted as a reactionary who wanted to arrest India's scientific and technological development, turning the clock back to an idealized pre-industrial age. I want to suggest that while there is a grain of truth in these caricatures, the tradition/modernity dichotomy does not hold.

Rammohun Roy is known as the 'Father of Modern India', a phrase that indicates the importance of his educational, religious, and social reforms. He was a vocal proponent of reason, and campaigned against Hindu practices he considered to be irrational and immoral. He despised Hinduism's popular, idolatrous forms of worship, and sought to replace these with a rational monotheism, derived from, but not exclusive to, the Unitarianism movement. The religious group that he founded, the Brahmo Samaj, waged a relentless but finally ineffective struggle against the 'excesses' of Hinduism. At the same time, the group sought to prove the Hindu tradition's intellectual respectability by attempting to recover Vedantic thought shorn of its 'superstitious' accretions. As such, the Brahmos are the most likely butt of Ghosh's satire in his portrayal of the Rationalists' Society, a group of college students who revere science and reason almost as gods. In archaic language, which reinforces the intended parody of the Brahmo Samaj, the Rationalists' manifesto sets out their aim to 'make known to the masses of Hindoostan how they were daily deceived and cheated by the self-styled purveyors of religion' (CR, 47). Like the Brahmos, Ghosh's Rationalists scour the sacred texts of Hinduism for evidence of proto-scientific thought, but the novel indicates that the futility of such an endeavour lies in its isolation from the concerns of ordinary people. Indeed, as Sumit Sarkar has observed with regards to the Brahmo Samaj, its most serious weakness was that its aims were seen as being elitist and abstracted (1975: 53).

Roy's social reforms met with a greater and longer lasting degree of success than his purely religious interventions. He worked towards the eradication of practices he considered to be abuses of the Hindu tradition, such as *sati*, child marriage, caste, *purdah*, and female illiteracy. As these examples suggest, Roy was particularly interested in the low status of women that he argued was perpetuated by orthodox Hinduism. As a humanist, he believed in the possibility of progress towards a final, perfect society, but he argued that this could only be achieved in India after the amelioration of women's degraded position. He believed that this improvement would be achieved through education. If the working classes were educated, they would realize that misogynist practices represented a gross distortion of 'authentic' Hinduism, and if women were educated, they would be able to articulate outrage at their oppression.

It is for his views on education that Roy is best remembered. He famously petitioned the British colonizers to ‘promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy and other useful sciences...which the nations of Europe have carried to a degree of perfection that has raised them above the inhabitants of other parts of the world’ (quoted in Adas, 1989: 278). It is easy to see why this has been read as an extreme example of Indian ‘cultural cringe’; the petition is couched in language that has not won Roy many supporters within postcolonial studies. Yet, more significant than Roy’s blatant attempt to curry favour with the colonizers is his insistence that the foundations of an Indian education should rest on ‘Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy and other useful sciences’. At the time at which he wrote this (1823), the suggestion that a colonial education should have such a scientific bias was a radical one. Indeed, it ran counter to the colonizers’ wishes, and the curriculum that they instead introduced into India had the literary bent recommended by Macaulay (Sarkar, 1975: 48 - 49). Although Roy’s language shows that he has been heavily influenced by the colonizers’ ‘civilizing mission’ rhetoric, Partha Chatterjee has demonstrated that demands such as his for education in English sciences should not be regarded as wholesale endorsement of Western values. Rather, Chatterjee argues that middle-class Indians believed culture was divided into two spheres: the material and the spiritual or, following Tagore, the home and the world. It was only in the material, worldly sphere that members of the *bhadralok*, such as Roy, wanted to learn from the West. In the spiritual sphere, most Indians viewed their own mythologized traditions and history as superior to, and unaffected by, those of the British colonizers (Chatterjee, 1989: 237 - 40). As such, Roy’s petition may be decoded as representing an attempt to graft pragmatic Western scientific and technical knowledge onto indigenous metaphysical ideas about literature, art, and religion, while reassessing both in the process.

As Chatterjee’s distinction between the material and spiritual spheres suggests, Rammohun Roy throughout his life spoke at least two cultural languages, and constantly had to translate and negotiate between them. Although he was an outspoken critic of Hindu ‘irrationalities’, he consistently conformed to Hindu dietary strictures, obeyed caste rules, and wore his Brahmin’s sacred thread. In his campaign against *sati*, he devoted much energy to finding ancient texts that glorified ascetic

widowhood, thus inhibiting possible debate about widow remarriage. Furthermore, whereas most historians have tended to view Roy as a product of the encounter between Hindu and Western thought, research has shown that his theism and opposition to idolatry came as much, if not more, from his interest in the Islamic tradition (Sarkar, 1975: 52 - 53). The inconsistencies in Roy's life and works suggest that it is wrong to view him as an unequivocal apologist for Western science. A more productive conclusion to draw from a study of this complex figure is that Western science was hybridized in its encounter with the Indian educated classes. 'In the colonial context', Prakash remarks, 'the universal claims of science always had to be represented, imposed, and translated into other terms' (1999: 5 - 6). In India, Western science had to negotiate with the claims of Hindu scientific knowledge, Persian and Arabic branches of mathematics and other sciences, and Vedic philosophy, in order to achieve hegemony.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, in contrast, is often interpreted as being a radical opponent of Western science and technology, and his promotion of cottage industries is seen as an indigenous alternative to industrialization. It is my contention, however, that neither Gandhi himself, nor the allusions to his thinking in *The Circle of Reason*, represents such unambiguous opposition to Western science and technology. There are many references in the novel to suggest that Gandhi's attitudes towards science are being foregrounded and questioned. Both Balaram's withdrawal from Calcutta to work as a schoolteacher in Lalpukur village and his fascination with weaving show the influence of Gandhian thought.² Furthermore, Gandhi's theories of education inform Balaram's creation of a practical school of reason that is productive and self-supporting (see Gandhi, 1959: 151). Other Gandhian allusions include the anti-commercialist crusade that Alu organizes in al-Ghazira, which involves the picketing of uncooperative businesses, recalling the Mahatma's endorsement of the non-violent boycotting of British products.

² Gandhi's argument that India should be organized through a system of self-sufficient villages, and his rejection of expensive imported cloth from Manchester in favour of the spinning of *khadi*, are well known.

Finally, Toru-debi's love affair with her Singer sewing machine may be read as another obscure reference to Gandhi, in that the Mahatma identified this as one of the few worthwhile machines invented:

The supreme consideration is man. The machine should not tend to make atrophied the limbs of man. For instance, I would make intelligent exceptions. Take the case of the Singer Sewing Machine. It is one of the few useful things ever invented, and there is a romance about the device itself. Singer saw his wife labouring over the tedious process of sewing and seaming with her own hands, and simply out of his love for her he devised the sewing machine in order to save her from unnecessary labour (1959: 126).

Gandhi's emphasis here on 'romance', conjugal love, and the traditionally feminine occupations of 'sewing and seaming' suggests that he is advocating an alternative use of technology, one that is family-orientated and detached from the capitalist ethos. As with his endorsement of cottage industry through the symbol of the *charkha*, Gandhi uses the Singer sewing machine to celebrate the local and the domestic. The sewing machine is also seen as a benevolent piece of technology in *The Circle of Reason*, as it saves Alu's life on two occasions. Firstly, Alu is saved from immolation in the explosion that kills his family in Lalpukur because his aunt Toru-debi has sent him to throw her broken sewing machine in the pond. Secondly, two Singers protect Alu when the gaudy new shopping mall, the Star, falls on him. The contrast between the menace of the falling Star, and the sheltering qualities of technology in the shape of sewing machines, suggests that not all machines are criticized in Gandhian philosophy, just those that promote unrestrained consumerism.

One of Gandhi's most famous works, *Hind Swaraj* (1909), identifies three evils imported from the West that prevent India from achieving independence (*swaraj*): railways, doctors, and lawyers. For the purposes of this chapter, his indictment of Western medicine has the most relevance and it is worth quoting from his argument at some length:

Hospitals are institutions for propagating sin. Men take less care of their bodies and immorality increases. [...] doctors induce us to indulge, and the result is that we have become deprived of self-control and have become effeminate. In these circumstances, we are unfit to serve the country. To study European medicine is to deepen our slavery (1938: 59).

It would be a mistake to take this passionate opinion too much at face value. It is important to contextualize *Hind Swaraj*³ and realize that it is a piece of political polemic. The book's central point is that India must not recreate the British system wholesale when it achieves independence: 'if India copies England it is my firm conviction that she will be ruined' (1938: 34). Gandhi understood that medicine is not as beneficial and value-neutral as it is usually depicted, but rather provides a means of justifying colonialism and perpetuating it by keeping British administrators healthy. By championing an alternative model of medicine that incorporated indigenous medical systems, sexual abstinence, teetotalism, and strict dietary practices, Gandhi sent out a challenge to the colonial attempt to appropriate and control the Indian medicalized body.

Despite his strident objections to the practice of medicine in *Hind Swaraj*, elsewhere, and in a less politically charged context, Gandhi writes more approvingly of doctors: 'a surgeon does not commit *himsa* [violence] but practises the purest *ahimsa* [non-violence, or 'truth force'] when he wields his knife' (1959: 42). Furthermore, as Bhikhu Parekh has emphasized, Gandhi often used medical images in order to represent India as a 'weak' or 'diseased' body politic, in need of strong remedies to bring it back to health (1989: 9). Thus, I would argue that in *Hind Swaraj*, as in other utopian or politically-motivated texts, Gandhi does not truly believe that his vision of a return to a mythical, primitivist India unsullied by trains, litigation, or surgery, will ever be realized. Indeed he probably does not even wish for this to happen; rather he imagines that by sketching an idealistic picture of a postcolonial India, he will direct attention and action towards the exploitation brought about by British rule.

I would suggest that Gandhi was more amenable to the implementation of science and industry than is generally assumed. He does not abjure the entirety of Western science and technology, as might be assumed from a reading of *Hind Swaraj* in isolation. Indeed, the subtitle of his autobiography, *The Story of my Experiments with Truth* (1927), implies both that truth is non-absolute (I will return to this point

³ *Hind Swaraj* was written during a few short weeks in 1909 while Gandhi was travelling between England and Johannesburg (Wolpert, 2001: 76). At this time Gandhi had become the leader of the Indian community in South Africa and was beginning to formulate his ideas for leading the anti-colonial struggle within India itself.

shortly) and explicitly links his work with scientific practice. In the introduction to his autobiography, he demonstrates his admiration for science's claims to objectivity:

Far be it from me to claim any degree of perfection for these experiments. I claim for them nothing more than does a scientist who, though he conducts his experiments with the utmost accuracy, forethought and minuteness, never claims any finality about his conclusions, but keeps an open mind regarding them (Gandhi, 1957: xxvii).

This passage suggests that Gandhi does not object to science except insofar as it is used as a tool of oppression. Gandhi often refers to his philosophy of *ahimsa* as a science (1959: 88; 96; 97) and he makes his position on the issue clear when he writes:

I am not opposed to the progress of science as such. On the contrary, the scientific spirit of the West commands my admiration and if that admiration is qualified, it is because the scientist of the West takes no note of God's lower creation (1959: 98).

The complexities and contradictions of Gandhi's thought provide a salient warning against the seductive, but misleading, temptation to characterize Western thought as rational, linear, and teleological, and Hindu thought as spiritual and cyclical.

In contrast to pervasive images of Gandhi as a mystical ascetic, the 'Mahatma' was in fact an ardent proponent of reason. Despite being a devout Hindu, he emphasized throughout his life that the traditions of religion must be subjected to rational analysis:

My belief in the Hindu scriptures does not require me to accept every word and every verse as divinely inspired... I decline to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense (1959: 61).

Depictions of Gandhi as an otherworldly spiritualist are undercut by his notorious insistence on punctuality (Collins and Lapierre, 1975: 37). In addition, he sent his friend and disciple C.F. Andrews to Fiji to conduct empirical research into the condition of indentured labourers there, which suggests a firm belief in scientific principles. His legal background may have encouraged Gandhi's belief that an impartial collection of facts in conjunction with applied reason would allow a truthful conclusion to be reached (Datta, 1953: 11). However, Gandhi also warns against the limits of reason when it is untempered with faith or spirituality, arguing that '[r]ationalists are admirable beings, rationalism is a hideous monster when it claims

for itself omnipotence. [...] I plead not for the suppression of reason, but for a due recognition of that in us which sanctifies reason' (1959: 172). This thought was not unique to Gandhi; indeed many Western schools of thought — including, most obviously, the Romantics: but even some philosophers of the Enlightenment, such as Rousseau and Joseph Priestley — had also called for the unification of reason with spirituality. However, the Hindu ideas that Gandhi brought to bear in his critique of Western reason — the doctrines of *ahimsa* (non-violence), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and vegetarianism, for example — challenged Enlightenment reason by illustrating that the supposed 'truth' of Western reason is perceived differently from an Indian standpoint.

Furthermore, his concept of truth itself was notably different from the absolutist notion common in Western culture. In general, Western thought, shaped by the binaries of orthodox Christianity, has tended to have a fairly rigid conception of truth. This can be seen when Sir Henry Maine, writing on the need for scientific education in India in the early twentieth century, argues that the 'Indian intellect stood in need [...] of stricter criteria of truth. It required a treatment to harden and brace it, and scientific teaching was exactly the tonic which its infirmities called for' (quoted in Baber, 1998: 184). In contrast with this European view of scientific truth as non-negotiable, one of Gandhi's greatest philosophical legacies is the notion that a dissenter (religious or otherwise) holds his worldview not out of malice or bad faith, but out of a conviction as genuine and heartfelt as that of the man of religion (Lipner, 1994: 187 – 88). Gandhi is often quoted as contending that 'Truth is God', an argument that allows all religions — and even non-religious philosophies — to be regarded as striving for the same goal. He writes:

[e]ven the atheists who have pretended to disbelieve in God have believed in Truth. The trick they have performed is that of giving God another, not a new, name. His names are legion. Truth is the crown of them all (Gandhi, 1959: 65 – 66).

Gandhi was not original in conceiving of truth as a flexible concept; indeed he simply articulates anew an important principle of Hinduism. Hindus believe that absolute truth is something that the human mind cannot grasp. Telling the truth, therefore, is regarded as a necessarily partial activity that is specific to its context (Lipner, 1994: 185). In *The Circle of Reason* Ghosh follows Gandhi in suggesting that it is not

reason and science themselves that are responsible for intolerance and imperialism, but the notion that reason and science allow access to a culturally-transcendent truth.

I would now like to examine *The Circle of Reason* in the light of this debate. The first part of the novel, '*Satwa*', intersperses scenes of life in a Bengali village with episodes that take place in Calcutta prior to the Second World War. Certain historical events, such as the Indian nationalist struggle of the 1930s, the Bangladesh war of 1971, and the international tide of migration to the Middle East of the 1970s onwards, are foregrounded. The early part of the novel is, however, more concerned with the period of British colonization of India. Through the character of Balaram, Ghosh explores the continuing impact of the Raj's educational policies on postcolonial India. Ghosh's concern is not with the Raj *qua* the Raj, but with the complex cultural imbrication, as a result of the Raj, of various elements — precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial — in the creation of a certain kind of knowledge/discourse.

The novel pivots upon a debate concerning the relationship between science, technology and nationalism in India. As my discussion of Gandhi and Roy has suggested, Ghosh engages in an intertextual dialogue concerning 'tradition' versus 'modernity' that has preoccupied Indian nationalists from Tagore to Nehru, and colonial thinkers such as William Jones and Macaulay. Within this broad framework Ghosh, like many other Indian writers, does not fully accept the conventional science/tradition division, or set it on an East/West axis. Just as my reading complicates the orthodox interpretation of Roy as a modernizing, Westernized rationalist and Gandhi as indigenizing spiritualist, so too Ghosh problematizes the Science-is-West and Tradition-is-East dichotomy. He breaks down such myths by interrogating the status and worth of different branches of science in India. In particular, Ghosh is concerned with the staging in India of what might be conveniently termed science and pseudoscience.

I analyse this debate by tracing the history of such 'pseudosciences' as phrenology and nineteenth-century criminology, as well as more generally accepted scientific practices, such as Pasteurian microbiology and tropical medicine. Ghosh's allusions to a vast range of scientific projects encourage the reader to think about how Western science drastically alters, and yet is itself hybridized by its encounter with,

Indian society. In this novel, Ghosh makes the important point that science, technology and medicine were not conveyed to India by the British in a one-way process of transfer, but were in fact involved in a complex series of cross-cultural exchanges, translations, and mutations.

Balaram's fascination with science generates much of the novel's debate as to whether the materialistic scientific reason of the West is tethered to its cultural origin, or whether it possesses a universal validity. Balaram takes the latter position, arguing that '[s]cience doesn't belong to countries. Reason doesn't belong to any nation. They belong to history — to the world' (CR, 54). Given this somewhat naïve viewpoint, he is frequently presented in an ironic way. However, ambivalence in the novel's treatment of this character suggests that his belief that '[s]cience doesn't belong to countries', is not wholly being condemned. Balaram is a product of Western education and, despite his fervent Indian nationalism, he has internalized the notion that Western science transcends national boundaries in its search for truth. Yet he does have some justification for his contention that '[r]eason doesn't belong to any nation', because the notion that reason is a unique attribute of man is something that most cultural outlooks have in common, although definitions of reason vary greatly. Furthermore, his universalizing approach also problematizes Western science, in that he unwittingly exposes its racist subtexts. This is another way in which Ghosh complicates the science/tradition dichotomy and goes beyond a simplistic East-West axis.

Throughout the novel, the scientific reason that Balaram celebrates is contested by other voices. His friend Gopal, for example, historicizes the practice of reason and views it as a source of power, contending that '[e]ven Reason discovers itself through events and people' (CR, 38). The culturally relativist stance that Gopal takes, suggesting that scientific reason is a product of history and society, finds endorsement in the arguments of modern sociologists and historians of science. Since the influential work of Michel Foucault, many scholars have sought to situate reason in a

particular time and place.⁴ The following quotation diametrically opposes Balaram's claim that scientific reason is value-free and disinterested. Foucault writes:

What reason perceives as *its* necessity, or rather, what different forms of rationality offer as their necessary being, can perfectly well be shown to have a history [...] Which is not to say, however, that these forms of rationality were irrational. It means that they reside on a base of human practice and human history; and that since these things have been made, they can be unmade (1988: 37).

In addition, a central concern of Foucault's is that discourses, including the discourse of a putatively 'universal' form of reason, are not accessible to all. He argues that only certain members of privileged groups, such as the Western male bourgeoisie, are given the right to use these discourses: 'the property of discourse — in the sense of the right to speak, ability to understand, licit and immediate access to the corpus of already formulated statements, and the capacity to invest this discourse in decisions, institutions, or practices — is in fact confined [...] to a particular group of individuals' (1972: 68).

In the colonial context, British administrators consistently strove to demonstrate that the discourse of reason was — in the Foucauldian sense — their exclusive property. In his pioneering study, *Machines as the Measure of Men* (1989), Michael Adas argues that Western man from the industrial age onward considered science and technology to be the most reliable indicators of their purportedly superior reasoning abilities. Enlightenment optimism as to the possibility of progress through man harnessing reason, coupled with the tangible material achievements that arose from the Industrial Revolution, led to Western-style technology and science being perceived as dominant signifiers of 'civilization'. This belief justified the colonialist argument that non-Western countries were illogical, infantile, and in need of guidance from that alleged archetype of advanced reason, the West. The power of science as a discourse was tremendously important for European expansion, providing justification for imperial nations to continue their exploitation of Asia and Africa. Of course, Western science and technology also actively helped to establish and consolidate power in colonized countries. As Daniel Headrick (1981) has shown, scientific and

⁴ In the following texts, academics have mobilized Foucault's ideas to explore the relationship between science and empire: Arnold, 1993 and 2000; Baber, 1998; Kumar, 1997; MacLeod and Lewis, 1988; Nandy, 1995 and 1988; and Prakash, 1996.

technological advances may be interpreted as ‘tools of empire’. They were deployed in a practical way, in the shape of advances in weaponry, medicine, transportation, and communications, to achieve global hegemony.

Forms of scientific knowledge, which were deemed to be irreconcilable with the rhetoric of Western superiority, were labeled deviant or ‘pseudoscientific’. Ghosh’s well-researched allusions in *The Circle of Reason*, suggest that the labels of ‘science’ and ‘pseudoscience’ disguise the fact that these disciplines are not as incompatible as they are made out to be. Western science is often interpreted as a discipline founded upon logic, empiricism, and rationalism, even if these goals are not always met (in fact, such objectivity is rarely, if ever, achieved, owing to the limitations of scientific methodology). It is worth noting, however, that the borders between mainstream science and pseudoscience are more porous than is usually supposed. For example, one of the leading figures who helped inspire Enlightenment faith in reason, empiricism, and ‘pure science’, Isaac Newton, famously regarded such esoteric practices as alchemy and astrology as sciences. Before making generalizations about Western science, it is necessary to be aware that it was only after the Industrial Revolution that the distinction between science and pseudoscience assumed the rigidity that we know today. This point is perhaps most graphically illustrated in colonial India, where the British administrators’ desire to promote science as a visual spectacle to the illiterate masses of India caused mesmerism to gain temporary acceptance within mainstream science, even as late as the mid-nineteenth century.⁵

Conversely, many scientific principles, which have come to be regarded as orthodox, were considered for some time to be aberrant beliefs before they acquired the semblance of legitimacy. The theory of scientific evolution only became generally accepted with the forceful arguments and evidence of Charles Darwin. Prior to the publication of *The Origin of Species*, the spurious arguments of inexperienced proponents of evolution meant that the theory was dismissed by mainstream scientists as being distinctly deviant.⁶ Thus the concept of what constitutes science is, to borrow a

⁵ The British Indian government funded research into the visually impressive ‘science’ of mesmerism, despite its precarious position ‘perched [...] between cold scientific inquiry and “superstition in its widest sense and...most absurd forms”’ (Prakash, 1999: 33). Amazingly, subsidies were even granted for the creation of a Mesmeric Hospital in Calcutta in 1846.

⁶ For further discussion of this issue, see Dolby, 1979: 22 – 23.

metaphor from Darwin, an evolving process, and practices which are considered in one period to be pseudoscience, may later be accorded full scientific status or *vice versa*. This argument is not to be taken as an endorsement of the position that knowledge entirely constructs that which exists. On the contrary, like a text that circumscribes the interpretations of a translator, the natural world constrains the production of scientific theories. However, social pressures, such as the impetus of colonialism, also shape scientific knowledge.

The notion that science is a product of history and society is affirmed in the novel's examination of two contrasting groups of scientific practitioners that Balaram admires. Firstly, the novel's portrayal of the mainstream science of Louis Pasteur and others suggests that a perception of science as consisting of a series of groundbreaking discoveries made by great men, is misleading. Secondly, Ghosh interrogates the equally false assumptions that surround the so-called 'pseudoscientists', whose theories are judged by history to have failed. The novel invites us to consider many pseudoscientific practices, such as phrenology, Lombroso's criminology, and the plant physiology of Jagadish Chandra Bose. It focuses in particular on phrenology, a pseudoscience pioneered by Franz Joseph Gall, J.G. Spurzheim, and George Combe in early nineteenth-century Europe, which claimed to judge the individual's personality by feeling bumps on the head. This speculative type of science may seem far removed from the supposedly objective empiricism of Pasteur's microbiology. Yet Ghosh characteristically encourages us to challenge such artificial boundaries, or — as he will phrase it in his next novel — 'shadow lines', that represent the world as essentially binary. Just as Pasteur's reputation has been exaggeratedly sanctified, equally those scientists who are deemed to have failed are treated with a condescension that occludes the similarities between science and pseudoscience. Bruno Latour has written:

the history of the sciences is seldom just to the defeated, or even, for that matter, to the victors. It accords too much attention to the latter and not enough to the former. A juster approach would be to treat both victors and defeated *symmetrically* (1988: 31).

Interestingly, this 'juster approach' is exactly what Balaram inadvertently adopts; he makes no distinction between the arch-representative of mainstream science, Pasteur,

and those 'scientists' who are now widely considered to be discredited, such as the phrenologist George Combe.

Balaram's attitude towards science evinces a hybridizing tendency and, in this respect, he unwittingly challenges Western scientific discourse. He receives many very different scientific notions originating from the West with the same almost indiscriminate rapture, and his admiration for discredited sciences such as phrenology and criminology indicates the heterogeneous and socially-determined tendencies of Western scientific discourses. In the light of Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry, Balaram's enthusiasm for both mainstream Western science and racist pseudosciences exposes elisions and instabilities in the discourses of science. This illustrates Bhabha's point that 'mimicry is at once resemblance and menace' (1994: 86), in that Balaram's choice of scientific gurus reflects both the achievements and the shameful hidden history of Western science.

Contrary to the boundaries that are often perceived as separating science and pseudoscience, the two had an influence on each other, and social and political issues helped to determine the extent of their success or failure. Just as I shall demonstrate that the success of Pasteur was in part precipitated by political factors, so too the initial success, but consequent failure, of such scientists as Bose and Combe, was largely due to contemporary social factors. We shall see that both these men's ideas were temporarily accepted, but ultimately failed to gain the support of the Western academy. As will be demonstrated, mainstream science and popular science are in many ways mirror images of each other, and are necessarily concomitant. Similarly, it is wrong to assume that Western medicine was hegemonic and all-powerful in India, and that it was unaffected by its meeting with the 'pseudoscientific' medical traditions of India. David Arnold argues, for instance, that both indigenous and Western systems of medicine were altered by the colonial encounter, and that both were 'constantly engaged in a dialogue' (1993: 14). He shows that for Western medicine to gain acceptance in India, many concessions had to be made to local medical practices.

Hospitals segregated on the basis of caste were created (1993: 250), and links were reluctantly established with indigenous medical practitioners.⁷

In the discussions about science that occur in the novel, Louis Pasteur is taken to be the type of the objective, disinterested scientist. Vallery-Radot's book, *The Life of Pasteur* (1906), is an important motif in *The Circle of Reason*,⁸ and both Balaram and his nephew Alu interpret it as presenting Pasteur as the epitome of reason. For example, here is a passage from early in the novel, in which Balaram first introduces Alu to the biography of the great scientist:

he [Balaram] reached for the copy of Vallery-Radot's *Life of Pasteur* which always lay beside his chair, and began to read him the chapter about that turning-point in the history of the world — 6 July 1885 — when Louis Pasteur took his courage in his hands and at the risk of his reputation and his whole professional life (for he had never lacked for enemies) filled a Pravoz syringe and inoculated poor, hopeless ten-year-old Joseph Meister, only that day savaged by a rabid dog, with his still untested vaccine.

When he stopped and put the book down he saw tears in Alu's eyes (*CR*, 28).

Balaram and Alu are not alone in this inspirational view of Pasteur as an embattled yet courageous scientist. Pasteur is widely regarded as an irreproachable pioneer of modern medicine. He discovered the microbe, formulated germ theory, was the second person (after Edward Jenner) to carry out successful vaccination against a human disease, as well as lending his name to the process of pasteurizing, or briefly heating such substances as wine and milk, in order to kill the pathogens therein. It is difficult to argue against the benefits of his discoveries, as Bruno Latour acknowledges in a book which seeks to demystify Pasteur's reputation. He writes:

no one — except extreme cynics — can doubt the value of Pasteur's discoveries to medicine. All of the other technological conquests have their embittered critics and malcontents — not to mention those suffering from radiation — but to prevent children from dying from terrible diseases has never been seen as anything other than an advantage (1988: 8).

⁷ Western medicine either attempted to coopt, or was forced to collaborate with, indigenous medical workers, such as the *dai* (midwife), *tikadar* (indigenous practitioner of variolation against smallpox), the *vaidya*, and *hakim* (Hindu and Muslim medical specialists, respectively), in order to gain local people's trust, even though these practitioners were suspiciously regarded by British doctors (Arnold, 1993: 146 – 47, 257 – 60, 294).

⁸ For more discussion on the recurrent mention of this book, see Prasad, 1990: 104 – 105.

Yet for this reason, a study of Pasteur's science encourages an understanding of how scientists are mythologized.

Balaram idealizes scientific 'genius', seeing his favourite scientists (Pasteur, Bose, Combe, Lombroso, Raman, *et al*) as men who work alone in the hope of making discoveries that will benefit mankind. He holds Pasteur in the highest esteem, making the following impassioned comments to the Rationalists' Society:

Do you remember why he left his promising studies in crystallography? It was because the brewers of France came to him and said: What makes our beer rot? It was that question, asked by simple people, which led to the discovery of what he called the 'infinitesimally small' — the Germ, in other words. [...] Who did the silk farmers of Europe go to when disease struck their silkworms [...]? Who but Pasteur? They went to him and they said: Save us. And when he saw their wretchedness not all the powers on the earth could have kept him from answering.

That is why the world still has silk (*CR*, 49).

Balaram's attempt here to present Pasteur as an altruistic man of the people is undermined by his unfortunate decision to describe Pasteur assisting the producers of two luxurious commodities, silk and beer. In the context in which Balaram is speaking — that of a pre-independence India whose economy has been disabled in part by the destruction of the indigenous cotton industry⁹ — allusions to the silk and beer industries of nineteenth-century France only serve to expose the fact that Pasteur was working both in his own interests and those of his social milieu; certainly not for the good of what is vaguely known as 'mankind'.

Balaram's talismanic book, Vallery-Radot's *Life of Pasteur*, typifies the 'lone genius' approach to scientists. It portrays Pasteur as the philanthropic champion of a universally applicable science and describes him as possessing 'scientific ardour and [a] [...] generous eagerness to lighten the burden of others' (1906: 120). However, more recent studies, while recognizing Pasteur's achievements, also draw attention to his showmanship and more worldly motives: '[h]e was enormously talented, with

⁹ The British ravaged India's weaving and handicrafts industries through an exploitative system of tariffs which prevented the exportation of Indian textiles. Simultaneously, Britain exercised its colonial sovereignty by expropriating India's cotton plants for use in the production of Lancashire textiles, which were then exported back to India at inflated prices (Chatterji, 1992; Baber, 1998: 112 – 20). Ghosh's narrator angrily describes the British tactics as 'a garotte to make every continent safe for the cloth of Lancashire, strangling the very weavers and techniques they had crossed oceans to discover' (*CR*, 57).

great powers of scientific intuition; he was also ambitious, arrogant, combative and nationalistic' (Millar *et al*, 1996: 254). Interestingly, one of his most far-reaching discoveries came about by accident when in 1880 his assistant made the mistake of leaving a sample of chicken cholera bacilli exposed to the hot sun. Pasteur injected this weakened bacilli into some healthy chickens, which experienced only fleeting and negligible symptoms of cholera. He then injected a fresh dose of bacillus into the chickens already treated and into a control group fresh from the market. He found that while the former were unaffected by the disease, the chickens which had not had the first injection contracted cholera and died (Daintith *et al*, 1999: 416). The fact that this important scientific discovery came about largely by chance and with the help of an unnamed 'assistant' unsettles the notion Pasteur as a lone genius. Indeed, had Balaram known of the random circumstances that led to this discovery of Pasteur's, he would probably have been perturbed, as he dislikes the idea of great scientists making discoveries by chance. He comments disapprovingly on Robert Koch's creation of mercury-based disinfectants: 'weren't they invalid in a way, since Koch had come upon them almost by accident [...]?' (CR, 61). It is also significant that Pasteur's notebooks were made public for the first time in 1971, further serving to debunk his reputation. The notebooks revealed that some of his clinical trials were 'very inadequate' and that some of his claims, such as that he tested rabies vaccines on fifty dogs before attempting the injection of a human subject, were grossly overstated (Millar *et al*, 1996: 255).

Latour's reappraisal of Pasteur's impact on Western science suggests that science, far from being a series of discoveries made by outstanding men, is in fact a dialogic interaction between scientists, laboratory workers, technical instruments, and objects of study, such as microbes. Latour controversially argues that Pasteur's obsession with the 'infinitely small' germ invites us to recognize new agents in the discourse of science:

'Ignoring the danger of the microbe awaiting us, we have hitherto arranged our way of life without taking any account of this unknown enemy' (Leduc: 1892, p. 234). Everything is in that sentence. There are not only 'social' relations, relations between man and man. Society is not made up just of men, for everywhere microbes intervene and act (1988: 35).

The confines of this chapter do not allow for a full exploration of Latour's complex argument, but it is worth observing that his identification of microbes as invisible players suggests that Pasteur's brand of mainstream science may have more in common with the so-called 'pseudoscience' of Indians such as J.C. Bose than is generally recognized. Bose, as will be discussed, sought to collapse the boundaries that divided the organic from the inorganic. His desire to insert into scientific discourse agents such as plants, which have conventionally been overlooked as having no feelings, therefore has certain resonances with Pasteur's exposure of the workings of the 'infinitely small'.

In order to problematize notions of the scientist as an individual expert, Latour demonstrates that Pasteur's ideas did not come out of an intellectual void. On the contrary, rather than making entirely new discoveries, Latour argues that Pasteur 'translated' already existing ideas surrounding the microbe. Research also indicates that his reputation owes far more to the unsung work of his wife and obscure laboratory assistants than has previously been recognized (see Geison, 1995). The mythical figure of 'Pasteur' was almost invented by the hygienists and those who became known as 'Pasteurians', as both groups needed such a figure to justify their research and to fund laboratories. What emerges from Latour's analysis of Pasteur's work is a depiction of emerging power:

The lesson in sociology that Pasteurians and hygienists give to their time [...] is that if we wish to obtain economic and social relations in the strict sense, we must first extirpate the microbe. But in order to extirpate the microbe, we must place the representatives of the hygienists or Pasteurians everywhere (1988: 39).

Latour does not look at the colonial situation in any detail, but, from the point of view of India, it is evident that just as the hygienists needed the microbe in order to reinforce their status as its 'extirpators' within France, so Pasteur's research was also necessary to allow Western forces to justify occupation of their empires.

Although Pasteur had no first-hand connection with India or any other European colony, his identification of the germ was central to the foundation of tropical medicine, a branch of healthcare that, in the nineteenth century, was orientated towards maintaining the health of soldiers and administrators in the colonies. The research of Pasteur and his collaborators marked a watershed; from the 1890s

onwards, his germ theory allowed the new ‘tropical medicine’ to become more assured and interventionist in India (Arnold, 1993: 13). A leading scholar of the history of science and empire argues that from the late 1870s onwards ‘tropical medicine — its ideology European, its instrument the microscope, its epistemology the germ theory of disease — served the interests of dominant economic groups and obscured the relationship of disease to social structure’ (MacLeod, 1988: 7). Pasteur himself implicitly acknowledged the relationship between medicine and power, writing that ‘[a]way from their laboratories, physicists and chemists are but disarmed soldiers on a battlefield’ (quoted in Vallery-Radot, 1906: 152). The military image of the battlefield implies both that the laboratory is the arena of power for the modern scientist (a central premise of Latour’s argument) and also that there are violent undertones to the seemingly neutral practice of science.

Many of Pasteur’s contemporaries quickly realized that advances in medicine (particularly Pasteurian bacteriology) would provide a valuable pretext for the West’s argument that their occupation of non-Western countries was founded upon a ‘civilizing mission’. Rudyard Kipling indicates this viewpoint in the following lines:

Take up the White Man’s burden —
 The savage wars of peace —
 Fill full the mouth of Famine
 And bid the sickness cease (1941: 136).

What imperialists failed to recognize, however, was that far from ‘bid[ding] the sickness [to] cease’, their expansionist activities had a devastating impact both in introducing new diseases such as syphilis to hitherto unaffected areas, and in increasing existing diseases such as malaria by causing environmental disturbances. Roy Porter summarizes the imperial self-deception when he writes:

Bringing war, the flight of peoples, clearings, settlements, encampments, roads and railways and other ecological disruptions, and the reduction of native populations to wage-labour or to marginal lands, colonization spread disease. [...] Colonial powers, however, would see disease in one light only: an evil, an enemy, a challenge, it had to be conquered in the name of progress (1997: 465).

This portrayal of the imperialists’ simplistic interpretation of disease as ‘an evil, an enemy, a challenge’ that must be overcome has resonance for the reader of *The Circle of Reason*. In the novel, Balaram attempts to eradicate disease from his village by the

application of scientific reason. However, his laudable Pasteurian aim of disinfecting the village with carbolic acid¹⁰ becomes subsumed in his irrational hatred for his employer. Carbolic acid becomes a weapon of self-interest in the violent power struggle between the two men, just as tropical medicine — despite its importance as a propaganda tool in the rhetoric of the ‘civilizing mission’ — was in practice designed with the health of colonial administrators and soldiers in mind.

Medicine may be interpreted — in David Arnold’s phrase (1993) — as part of the ‘colonization of the body’. The body becomes a site for control and controversy in the colonial context. How to deal with the native body in sickness, sexual activity, work, or death became important questions for the imperial administration, as it ran up against unfamiliar cultural practices. Even in the post-Independence setting of *The Circle of Reason*, Western and ‘traditional’ Indian bodily rites come into conflict. This is most obviously exemplified by the dilemma that arises over how to dispose of Kulfi’s dead body at the end of the novel. Dr Mishra represents the Western ‘rational’ approach to death, arguing that the authorities should deal with the body, as he regards it simply as ‘a bit of dead tissue’ (CR, 404). Mrs Verma, on the other hand, recognizes the emotional and cultural significance of rituals surrounding death, and she resists Mishra’s quasi-colonial attempt to reduce the dead woman’s body to mere biology. It is also important to recognize, with Arnold (1993: 8), that medicine is only one example of the colonization of the body: ‘[i]ts equivalents are to be found across a whole range of interlocking colonial discourses, sites, and practices: from penology to anthropology, from the army to the plantation and the factory’. Confines of space do not allow for detailed discussion, but it is salutary to bear in mind that these other manifestations of colonial appropriation of the native body are also present in the novel. Jyoti Das’s mission to arrest Alu on the grounds of his alleged ‘extremism’ represents the draconian penal system instituted by colonial rule. The power of the factory over the body of its workers is illustrated in a Dickensian passage,¹¹ in which

¹⁰ Carbolic acid is another medical development associated with Pasteur, as its effectiveness as an antiseptic was the discovery of his follower, Joseph Lister.

¹¹ In this passage, Ghosh employs an intriguing metaphor of the circus in describing the factory, so that the factory floor becomes a ‘stage’ and a ‘great tent’, while machinery is symbolized by demons performing a dance akin to the performers in a circus (although this dancing demon also seems to allude to the *Nataraj*, or dancing Siva figure). Alu is transfixed by the performance, and is finally described ‘on his feet, cheering and throwing peanuts, until he has to be led outside, still noisily celebrating the tiny victories of the men

‘the men minuscule, compressed, struggling under the weight of the giants’ are starkly contrasted with ‘the machines new, awesome in their potency and their size’ (CR, 156). However, the novel’s interrogation of Western medicine provides the most sustained critique of the colonization of the body.

One of the most significant moments in *The Circle of Reason* occurs when Balaram becomes alienated from the mainstream science of figures such as Irène Joliot-Curie and turns instead to such practices as phrenology, physiognomy, and nineteenth-century criminology, which are nowadays considered to be unscientific and fallacious. Balaram is repelled by Curie’s canonical science when she inadvertently humiliates him in public (CR, 16). He also becomes aware of the violence unleashed by the practical application of some (Western) scientific discoveries when he is reminded of the atomic bomb during Joliot-Curie’s lecture on the ‘importance of nuclear physics, and the new chapter in the prosperity of mankind it had opened’ (CR, 18). Despite her emphasis on the humanitarian aspects of nuclear energy, all Balaram can think about is the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.¹² Ironically, what irks him most about this memory is the rejection of the headline he wrote to cover the atomic bomb story by the newspaper he was working for at the time. This is significant because it indicates that his interest in pseudoscience is precipitated by an irrational fit of personal petulance. In anger, Balaram embraces phrenology, finding the science attractive due to its practical ‘self-help’ qualities. The idea underlying phrenology, that personality can be detected through the relative size of the mental organs in the brain, is easy for an untrained mind to grasp, and phrenologists often boasted that anyone could be taught their system in a day (Shapin, 1979: 146). The fact that no special knowledge is needed in becoming a phrenologist appeals to Balaram, who feels estranged from the detached, impersonal discourse of ‘high’ science. Indeed, he

who live with demons’ (CR, 156). This circus imagery probably alludes to Dickens’s use, in his novel *Hard Times* (1854) of Sleary’s circus as a symbol that challenges the values of industrialism and utilitarianism, represented in the novel by Gradgrind’s insistence on ‘Facts’.

¹² A further irony in her choice of subject matter is available to any reader who is acquainted with Irène Joliot-Curie’s life-story. As she claims in the speech recounted in *The Circle of Reason*, she worked on radioactivity largely for ‘the prosperity of man’, her discoveries proving of great benefit for medicine and industry. However, like her mother Marie before her, Irène Joliot-Curie died because she had been inadequately protected from radiation. This graphically illustrates the dangers of nuclear physics that she keep under wraps in the enthusiastic speech portrayed in the novel.

comes to be seen an expert on the subject simply by purchasing a copy of *Practical Phrenology* and having a set of head-measuring calipers made. The discourse of phrenology, unlike most psychiatric and medical discourses, may become anybody's property, in the Foucauldian sense mentioned earlier. These democratic features gave phrenology its popularity and, although it is regarded as an obsolete science today, its influence may be gauged by the surprising fact that Combe's *The Constitution of Man* generated more 'intellectual and emotional heat' in its day than did Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (Cooter, 1984: 10).

It is important to identify the conservative political ramifications of phrenology and I shall attempt to do so shortly. But it is also necessary to recognize that in many ways this 'pseudoscience' had radical implications. Phrenology's hierarchization of different functions of the brain promoted the notion that power should be shared by a meritocracy and challenged the prevalent belief that the existing class-based power structure was divinely ordained. Cooter (1984: 43 – 47) demonstrates that many of the pioneers of phrenology, such as Combe, Gall, Spurzheim, and their supporters, were from less privileged social backgrounds than members of the established medical profession. In *The Circle of Reason*, one of the consequences of Balaram's adoption of phrenology is that he is seen to be undermining the village's caste system. After examining their cranial structures, he decides to make his middle-class nephew Alu a weaver, and elevates the weaver Shombhu Debnath to the status of teacher. While Balaram accepts the notion that certain organs of the brain are more valuable than others, he subverts the orthodox view that the 'highest' qualities are the most cerebral, arguing instead that '[t]he Mechanical was the highest of all organs — the organ that made a mere two-legged creature Man, the seat of Reason' (CR, 55). He thus invests weaving and mechanical labour in general with a dignity and value that are conventionally overlooked, while accepting what seems today to be a conservative hierarchization of the brain.

Phrenology possessed medical and scientific respectability in the first third of the nineteenth century and is sometimes regarded as an early precursor of psychology, but its reputation then suffered a decline and it began to be seen as a 'pseudoscience' in the second half of the century. It is therefore a revealing example of what Michel

Foucault has termed 'subjugated knowledge'. Foucault describes these 'subjugated knowledges' as:

a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity (1980: 82).

In line with Foucault's argument, phrenology has been excluded from the mainstream scientific academy and now tends to be perceived as a popular science not based on empiricism. This interpretation of phrenology poses important questions about the nature of scientific doctrine itself and what may be included in its purview. Roger Cooter argues that phrenology's liminal position between 'the intellectual boundaries that have come to be erected between science and pseudoscience, nature and culture, science and society' necessitates a reappraisal of these boundaries (1984: 8). In other words, the most illuminating aspect of analysing phrenology's history is not to highlight the science's evident flaws, but to investigate the ways in which certain theories about the world, such as Louis Pasteur's discovery of the germ, come to be seen as representing 'truth', whereas others come to be discredited and assigned the Foucauldian status of 'subjugated knowledge'.

The discredited sciences of phrenology and craniometry in fact underwent mutation and continued to assert an influence on other academic disciplines for many years. In anthropology, for instance, scholars such as Franz Boas and Melville Herskovits used head-measuring calipers in order to validate the importance of environment on cranial capacity and to challenge social determinism.¹³ Thus the

¹³ Boas 'worked within the essentialist framework developed by [Paul] Broca, the father of modern physical anthropology, who wrote in 1873 that a table he had constructed "shows that West Africans have a cranial capacity about 100 c.c. less than the European races. To this figure we may add the following: Caffirs, Nubians, Tasmanians, Hottentots, Australians. These examples are sufficient to prove that if the volume of the cranium does not play a decisive role in the ranking of races it nevertheless has a very real importance"' (Williams, 1996: 11).

However, Boas used the framework of physical anthropology to challenge this fixed racial hierarchy. He used physical anthropology, particularly cranial measurements, to show that racial characteristics were not static but affected by diet and environment. His research, in books such as *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) and *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants* (1912), paved the way for a more direct challenge to static concepts of race in Melville Herskovits's study of 1928, in which he uses anthropometric measurements of African Americans to stage an argument about racial mixing that counters the accuracy of the charged term 'race' (1985: 81).

boundaries between pseudoscientific practices and apparently legitimate academic disciplines are not as rigid as might be expected. Breakthroughs in pseudoscience may feed into mainstream science, and *vice versa*.

It is perhaps disappointing that Ghosh does not expand his discussion of phrenology in *The Circle of Reason* explicitly to question the authority of science as a whole. In his later novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, he looks more generally at what constitutes science, which is discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis. If phrenology's biologically deterministic and racist implications are not specifically explored in the text, they are soon unearthed when one reads phrenological documents. An example of phrenology's racist propensities is evident in the following statement by Balaram's hero, George Combe, who was a major architect of the pseudoscience:

the aboriginal races, with few exceptions, have perished or constantly receded, before the Anglo-Saxon race, and have in no instance either mingled with them as equals, or adopted their manners and civilization (quoted in Gould, 1984: 51).

Curiously, Balaram, who is portrayed as a well-read science enthusiast and patriotic Indian, is unaware of the racist arguments that Victorians induced from criminology and phrenology. In the nineteenth century, to give another example, there was a craze for phrenology in India, and no less a personage than Rammohun Roy sent a selection of twelve 'Hindoo crania' for examination by the Phrenological Society of Edinburgh. The Society's findings, however, merely confirmed prevalent colonial assumptions, revealing the Hindus' 'love of money [...] [and] secretiveness' (Bates, 1995: 232; footnote).¹⁴ In the novel, Bhudeb Roy is similarly judged by Balaram to have pronounced acquisitive and secretive cranial protuberances, but, like the historical example, his findings are in line with the animosity he bears Roy.

The founder of criminal anthropology, Cesare Lombroso (1835 – 1909), is another of Balaram's scientific gurus¹⁵ and yet he too is implicated in the imperial project. In his conception of criminology, the white body is seen as the norm and

¹⁴ Rammohun Roy himself had his skull analysed after death, and it was demonstrated to be larger than average size. This seems fortuitous, given his important work in promoting phrenology in India (Bates, 1995: 232; footnote).

¹⁵ See *CR*, 11, 22 for examples of Balaram's enthusiasm for Lombroso's concept of a criminal physiognomy.

anything else a deviation. He contends that certain criminal individuals are evolutionary throwbacks, whose apish anatomical features indicate their primitivism. This argument has racist implications, because criminals are portrayed as sharing features with so-called 'savages', children, and women, which mark them out as being lower on the evolutionary scale than the upper-class white male. In *The White Man and the Coloured Man* (1871), Lombroso writes:

Only we White people [...] have reached the most perfect symmetry of bodily form... Only we [have bestowed]... the human right to life, respect for old age, women, and the weak... Only we have created true nationalism... [and] freedom of thought (quoted in Pick, 1989: 126).

In another study that translates as *The Female Delinquent. The Prostitute and the Normal Woman* (1893), he sets out to equate the physiognomy and physiology of the prostitute with those of the Hottentot. Lombroso assumed that Hottentots — perceived as displaying archetypally 'black' characteristics — stood on the lowest rung of an evolutionary ladder, and he believed that prostitutes shared genital abnormalities with Hottentots which marked them out as atavistic. Sander Gilman has demonstrated that Lombroso's views made manifest a polygenetic outlook on the world (1986: 245 & 8). Polygeneticism posited the notion that unbridled female sexuality was the mark of an inferior lifeform, and became a widely held viewpoint in the nineteenth century. The nineteenth-century fascination with the female Hottentot's genitals and buttocks, seen as stigmata that allegedly marked her out as deficient, culminated in the abhorrent treatment of Sarah Bartmann, known as the 'Hottentot Venus', who was put on display during her life and dissected after death in order to satisfy racist voyeurism.

Finally, one of the most sinister aspects of Lombroso's criminology was that it advocated pre-emptive punishment for those marked by criminal 'stigmata' (Gould, 1984: 136 – 38). The novel hints at the oppressive nature of this argument in Balaram's seemingly innocuous musing, '[w]asn't that why Lombroso was so celebrated — for demonstrating the hereditary nature of character? Wasn't that why the American laws of 1915 prescribing sterilization for confirmed criminals were

enacted?’ (CR, 11).¹⁶ This kind of prejudicial treatment of people based on biological make-up is ironically handled in *The Circle of Reason* when Balaram is consulted in his capacity as amateur phrenologist and criminologist to give a verdict on the future of Bhudeb Roy’s baby son. Balaram refers to the child as ‘[t]he exhibit’ (CR, 24), exposing the inhumanity encouraged by too great a reliance on ‘scientific evidence’. He gives a dire prognosis that the baby is a born criminal, declaring: ‘he reproduces almost exactly the structure of the Typical Homicidal. With careful nurture you may perhaps be able to hold him down to mere felony, but no further, I fear, no further. Pray, Bhudeb-babu, [...] pray that you may not be his first victim’ (CR, 24). The baby’s premature death a month later indicates what the specious logic of biological determinism fails to take into account. Social circumstances, even such an unpredictable event as an attack of pneumonia, have greater impact on a child than genetics.

Phrenology and criminology cast mainstream science into doubt with their handling of ‘race’. Scientists, often overly swayed by figures and experiments, fail to notice that their choice of data and methodology may skew results. Thus they sometimes inadvertently lend a mantle of scientific respectability to justification of the existing social order. This is dramatized in the novel when Balaram is questioned by Gopal for making his ‘scientific’ findings fit with his observation of people’s behaviour, rather than first collecting data on subjects’ mental organs and then formulating a theory out of the evidence. For example, Balaram notices Bhudeb Roy’s ‘organ of secretiveness’ only *after* it has been discovered that he is spying on local people and reporting to the police (CR, 20 – 21). In an indictment of scientific methodology as a whole, Gopal thinks to himself, ‘the trouble with people like Balaram was that theories came first and truth afterwards’ (CR, 13). In this context, the following statement by Stephen Jay Gould is illuminating:

Science is rooted in creative interpretation. Numbers suggest, constrain, and refute; they do not, by themselves, specify the content of scientific theories. Theories are built upon the interpretation of numbers, and interpreters are often trapped by their own rhetoric. They believe in their own objectivity, and fail to

¹⁶ Anthropometry and Lombroso’s theories of criminality continued to be used by the Indian police until finger-printing was introduced in 1897. Even after that, finger-printing complemented but did not replace anthropometry, and it is sobering to consider that head-measuring was still being used by departments of law in parts of India until the late 1930s (Bates, 1995: 248).

discern the prejudice that leads them to one interpretation among many consistent with their numbers (1984: 74).

Gould goes on to demonstrate that the nineteenth-century scientists of craniometry and phrenology made certain fundamental assumptions which biased their research towards results that were reconcilable with their political beliefs. Aside from the question of race, lying behind these sciences of the mind are certain suppositions, such as the idea that there are different functions of the brain which can be identified, compartmentalized, and ranked in importance. Science as a whole, even apparently 'objective', apolitical practices such as mathematics or microbiology, can only ask questions from within certain frameworks; their quest for 'truth' is never unlimited. However grounded in statistical data they may be, all sciences are, in some degree, provisional; dependent on their society and time.

Another scientific endeavour that obsesses Balaram, and provides the reader with further insight into the boundaries that have been erected to divide scientific from non-scientific thought, is Jagadish Chandra Bose's investigations into the sensitivity of plants. Balaram sees himself as being closely linked with Bose. Both came from the Bikrampur district in East Bengal (*CR*, 41), and Balaram follows his hero to Presidency College, the first university in India to institute Western models of education, and Bengal's most prestigious seat of learning.¹⁷ When Balaram has to choose an alternative birthday because astrologers claim his real date of birth is inauspicious, he aligns himself with his scientific mentor. He limits his choice to

any one of several dozen days in May and June [1914] when Jagadish Chandra Bose, in a laboratory in south London, demonstrated to stunned audiences of scientists and poets and politicians, all half-deafened by the ringing of sabres in Europe, that even a vegetable so unfeeling as a carrot can suffer agonies of fear and pain (*CR*, 39).

The reference to 'the ringing of sabres in Europe' clearly alludes to the First World War, suggesting one reason why Bose's science initially proved so popular with the 'scientists and poets and politicians' in London. Many European intellectuals felt that

¹⁷ Presidency College was initially named Hindu College. It was set up in response to demands made by members of the Calcutta elite, most notably Rammohun Roy, for a university to teach Indian students Western disciplines such as science.

the First World War had exposed the dangers latent in scientific discourse.¹⁸ Such figures as Einstein, Aldous Huxley, and Bernard Shaw embraced Bose's science, viewing it as a compassionate alternative to the inhumane science of the West. Yet in the passage considerable irony is directed at Bose's demonstration of the sensitivity of a carrot at a time when millions of people were being slaughtered.

Bose presented his findings at a volatile moment in history, not just because of the global conflict, but because this was a time when many Indians were beginning to reject colonial domination. Preceding the quoted passage is a list of many other dates Balaram could have chosen for his birthday, which include Bengali acts of terrorism against the British and the passing of racist immigration laws in America and Canada. In this context, his decision to choose for his birthdate the day when Bose had impressed Western audiences with a new, Indian model of science, constitutes a recognition that imperialism can be challenged as much by the formulation of new epistemologies as by violence. Indeed, Ashis Nandy's study *Alternative Sciences* illustrates that to many, Bose's appeal lay in his being a 'symbol of Indian science and a pioneer who had Indianized modern science to make it compatible with the culture of an ancient society' (1995: xii).

Bose may also have proved an attractive figure to Balaram because he questioned conventional divisions within science. He contravened the demarcations between scientific disciplines, making a name for himself in botany, physics, and physiology, and forging important new advances in wireless telegraphy. He also interrogated the conceptual boundaries that divide animals from plants and animate from inanimate. This may be read as a radical rejection of a basic premise of colonialist scientific discourse, which increasingly sought to elevate humans 'to a position clearly distinct from and above the rest of nature' (Adas, 1989: 210). Bose's research enchants the nationalist in Balaram because of its bold attempt to apply

¹⁸ Adas argues that the First World War was a radical turning point which made Western philosophers reassess their basic precepts:

The mechanized slaughter on the Western Front corrupted or undermined the credibility of most of the ideals and assumptions on which the Europeans had based their sense of superiority to all other peoples and from which they had fashioned that ideological testament to their unprecedented hubris, the civilizing mission. Years of suicidal devastation forced European intellectuals to question the very foundations upon which their thought and value systems had been built: the conviction that they were the most rational of all beings, in control of themselves, of other peoples, and of all creation (1989: 372).

rational, scientific principles in articulating the Hindu belief in the sacredness of all life forms. Bose admits that his interest in plant sensitivity is determined by a distinctly Hindu concern to find interconnectedness within nature:

India through her habit of mind is peculiarly fitted to realize the idea of unity, and to see in the phenomenal world an orderly universe. It was this trend of thought that led me unconsciously to the dividing frontiers of the different sciences and shaped the course of my work in its constant alternations between the theoretical and the practical, from the investigation of the organic world to that of organized life and its multifarious activities of growth, of movement, and even of sensation (quoted in Nandy, 1995: 60).

Here Bose speaks as ‘a poet among biologists’ (Arnold, 2000: 168), acknowledging that his research took as its starting point a belief in unitarian Hindu philosophy.

Bose’s attempt to create a uniquely Indian science proved ephemeral and unsuccessful. We have seen that his experiments initially met with high acclaim in the West, due to European intellectuals’ desire to find a science that opposed the mechanized slaughter of the First World War. Yet once those political concerns diminished, his research was swiftly relegated to the status of ‘pseudoscience’. The capricious reception of his work in the West raises the question as to whether it would have been productive, even if it had been possible, to create a science rooted in the Hindu philosophies of the non-dualism of things and the sacredness of life. Perhaps attempts to prove the validity of Indian philosophy from within the framework of Western scientific practices could never have achieved anything significant. The futility of such an endeavour is satirized in the novel when the Rationalists’ Society tries to reconfigure the whole history of science from an Indian perspective. Balaram points out the absurdity of their mission when he asks, ‘[w]hat good will it do anyone if the masses start saying *Hail, Cosmic Boson* instead of *He Bhagoban*? Will it cure them of disease? Will it fill their stomachs? Will it get the British out of here?’ (CR, 48). The pointed question suggests that it is more important to challenge the authority of science as a whole, than to try to rewrite it from a Hindu perspective. Bose did not recognize the need to challenge the epistemologically monopolist nature of Western scientific discourse and his research thus depended on approval from the Western academy. Ashis Nandy contests that Bose’s failure lay in an unwillingness to accept the notion of a plurality of sciences (1995: viii). Like Balaram, Bose had faith in the notion that ‘[s]cience doesn’t belong to countries. Reason doesn’t belong to any

nation. They belong to history — to the world' (*CR*, 54). However, the reality for Bose was that scientific discourse confined him within the culturally specific frame of Western science, and it was his stubborn insistence on trying to prove his philosophical viewpoint from within this discourse that led to his intellectual defeat.

Despite the importance of social factors in determining Bose's foreign reputation, it would be naïve to suggest that these were the only forces in play, because other Indian scientists have evidently managed to sustain international applause for longer than Jagadish Chandra. For example, the physicist C.V. Raman, another scientist whom Balaram greatly admires (*CR*, 41 - 43), was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1930 for his discovery of a spectral effect. The conferring of this prize on Raman (the first time it had gone to an Asian), and the fact that the 'Raman effect' continues to be studied in physics departments all over the globe, proves that Indians are perfectly capable of making important discoveries in the realm of 'pure science', as long as they do not stray from the scientific paradigms established in the West.¹⁹

Another scientist mentioned in the novel is Meghnad Saha, an astrophysicist who, like Raman, worked in the mainstream of science and 'whose formulation of the likeness between a star and an atom had laid the foundation of a whole branch of astrophysics' (*CR*, 41). With Raman and Bose, he was another member of the 'extraordinary group of scientists [...] reared by Presidency College' (Prakash, 1999: 191 - 92). However, his way of being an Indian scientist could hardly be more different from Bose's. He was a great exponent of heavy industry and fiercely disapproved of Gandhi's endorsement of cottage industry, writing: 'I believe and have proved that this insistence on primitive technology shows a very retrograde and antiscientific mentality, and persons who are wedded to this mentality would bring disaster to the country when they are in power' (quoted in Baber, 1998: 233). He worked on a number of occasions with another renowned Indian technophile, Jawaharlal Nehru,²⁰ in order to plead the case for industrialization to the Congress Party (Prakash, 1999: 194 - 97). Saha acknowledged that industrialism had brought

¹⁹ Indeed, Raman deemed Jagadish Chandra Bose's investigations into responses of the 'living' and 'non-living' to be 'mumbo-jumbo' (Dutta and Robinson, 1995: 129).

²⁰ Nehru himself was quoted as arguing that 'the future belongs to science and to those who make friends with science and seek its help for the advance of humanity' (in Baber, 1998: 232).

inequality and exploitation to many sections of Indian society, but argued that without the application of science and technology India would stagnate. In later life he became involved in India's nuclear programme (Daintith *et al*, 1999: 471), and all of this indicates his implacable opposition to Bose's search for a uniquely Hindu science. By making references to scientists such as Raman and Saha, Ghosh encourages the reader to realize that just as the West has mainstream and popular brands of science, so too in India there were scientists who conformed to the dominant Western tradition and those who challenged it.

REPRESENTING THE 'OIL ENCOUNTER' IN FICTION

In this section, I analyse Ghosh's handling of generic form in the later sections of the novel, '*Rajas*' and '*Tamas*'. '*Rajas*' is set in al-Ghazira, a country which, despite its fictionality, shares many of its features with existing states in the Persian Gulf. Like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, al-Ghazira is reliant on Western technical knowledge for its economic survival, and channels much of its wealth into short-term conspicuous consumption. I argue that just as in the colonial era science was an integral component of the 'civilizing mission', so too applied science and technology now play a crucial part in neo-colonial subjugation. I also suggest that in these two sections of the novel, Ghosh experiments with the genres of the picaresque, social realism, the fantastic, and the detective novel in his attempt to represent the Middle East in fiction.

In Ghosh's 1992 essay 'Petrofiction', which I take to be a central statement of his literary goals in writing about oil and the late twentieth-century phenomenon of globalization, he writes:

As one of the few people who have tried to write about the floating world of oil, I can bear witness to its slipperiness, to the ways in which it tends to trip fiction into incoherence. In the end, perhaps, it is the craft of writing itself — or rather writing as we know it today — that is responsible for the muteness of the Oil Encounter. The experiences that oil has generated run counter to many of the historical imperatives that have shaped writing over the last couple of centuries and given it its distinctive forms (1992b: 30).

The first sentence of this quotation hints at dissatisfaction with his portrayal of the oil economy in *The Circle of Reason*, and indeed there is a certain amount of ‘incoherence’ in the later sections of the novel. As we shall see, *In an Antique Land*, which came out the same year as ‘Petrofiction’, is a fuller and more successful account of the ‘floating world of oil’. In the second part of the passage cited above, Ghosh contends that in order to address the unique situation of the contemporary oil economy, literature will have to be drastically altered in its form. He goes on to argue that the Gulf states, with their mixed populations of American oil-men, Arab residents, and Asian migrant workers, constitute ‘a world that is intrinsically displaced, heterogeneous, and international’ (1992b: 30). The novel, which he suggests has traditionally been a genre that is monolingual and with a fixed sense of place, is ill-equipped to deal with the microcosmic world of oil. The crucial issue Ghosh is raising in this essay is the question of how a writer can create a new kind of novel, the structure and form of which will reflect a globalized world.

In the essay Ghosh also suggests that the consequences of the discovery of oil in the Gulf are as far-reaching as the development of the spice trade centuries ago. This comparison initially seems incongruous, and his statement ‘oil is clearly the only commodity that can serve as an analogy for pepper’ (1992b: 29) wittily juxtaposes and challenges our notions of beauty and ugliness, particularly in the implied aromatic contrast between the two products. Yet despite this superficial polarity, the oil and spice trades have in common their economic importance, the inequality of the benefits they bring, and the international power struggle over their control. The comparison is exploited with sophistication in *In an Antique Land*, in which medieval spice traders are depicted alongside present-day oil migrants. Yet, whereas the spice trade inspired great literature (he mentions such writers Duarte Barbosa and Gaspa Correia [1992b: 29]), Ghosh can think of few contemporary writers who have found the ‘Oil Encounter’ worthy of attention. A handful of Arabic-language writers have addressed this difficult subject, and Ghosh devotes a sizeable section of the essay to a review of the attempts of Abdelrahman Munif to meet the literary challenges posed by oil.

However, Ghosh criticizes the American literary scene for failing to acknowledge the pivotal role of oil in their country’s current global dominance. Given that a central trope in American literature is the creation of a settlement out of

wilderness, and that many American workers view themselves as effecting just such a transformation in the Middle East, it is surprising that no American writer has tackled the Oil Encounter. Ghosh argues that the 'Great American Oil Novel' has yet to be written (1992b: 30), but that its creation would reveal much about Americans' self-perception and their position in the world. Ghosh rejects the American novel's alleged insularity, asserting that, in contrast with the country's increasingly wide-ranging foreign policy, 'its fictional gaze has turned inward, becoming ever more introspective, ever more concentrated upon its own self-definition' (1992b: 30). Most American novelists, he suggests, seem unable to resist the urge to portray a geographically bounded place, to describe characters as located in a village, a town, or a city. Yet it is not just the U.S. that Ghosh criticizes for its inattention to the Oil Encounter. He makes the point that for Indians, like Americans, the oil economy is something that 'no one [...] who has any thought either for his conscience or his self-preservation can afford to ignore' (1992b: 30). As we shall see, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and many other Asian countries send vast numbers of migrant workers over to the Gulf. Despite this fact, Ghosh observes that Bengali, a language that has a well-developed travelogue genre, fails almost entirely to interrogate the experiences of India's many Gulf expatriates. Ghosh tries to fill this lacuna in *The Circle of Reason* and I shall examine the extent of his success in this section of the chapter.

The first section of *The Circle of Reason* is, like the American novels Ghosh criticizes, located within a delimited and familiar place, and Balaram's experiences in Calcutta and the small Bengali border town of Lalpukur are juxtaposed. However, the discussion about rural and metropolitan India is unexpectedly curtailed when most of the main characters, including Balaram, are murdered. The novel changes course as Alu goes into exile first in Kerala and then in the imaginary Middle Eastern oil state of al-Ghazira. From the moment that Alu goes on the run, Ghosh introduces a new formal framework of the picaresque. This genre is peculiarly appropriate for the presentation of the Oil Encounter and globalization.

Harry Sieber, in an authoritative monograph on the picaresque, quotes Fonger de Haan's succinct definition of the genre as 'the autobiography of a *picaro*, a rogue, and in that form a satire upon the conditions and persons of the time that gives it birth' (1977: 1). Although *The Circle of Reason* is not written in the first person, and

although its perspective oscillates between Alu and other important characters, the novel nonetheless borrows certain picaresque features. Sieber lists the following typical characteristics of the picaresque: ‘poverty, delinquency, “upward mobility” (self-improvement of the *pícaro*), travel as an escape from despair, social satire of a system unresponsive to the needs and desires of a growing active community of “have-nots”’ (1977: 9). All of these elements are apparent in Ghosh’s narrative, with the exception of ‘upward mobility’. Alu differs from the typical picaresque anti-hero in that he is downwardly mobile, his status deteriorating from that of a relatively privileged schoolmaster’s nephew to an exiled criminal. This caveat aside, other features encourage the reader to view the novel, like its picaresque forebears, as a critique of societies that neglect their ‘have-nots’. Poverty and petty delinquency are certainly widespread in *The Circle of Reason*. The novel focuses on the misery and displacement caused by the Bangladesh war, and on the lack of job security or legal rights faced by migrant workers in the Gulf states. Although we are never encouraged to view Alu as a rogue, he is technically a felon, illegal immigrant, and rabble-rouser. For most of the novel he is trying to evade the policeman, Jyoti Das, who suspects him of belonging to an ‘extremist’ movement responsible for the destruction of his village.

Alu evinces other traits of the picaresque anti-hero outlined in Sieber’s book, such as the fact that he is an orphan and outsider, adopted by his uncle, but never quite ‘belonging’ anywhere. Travel is an important feature of the picaresque, which becomes more evident as the novel progresses. Alu and his companions’ restless movement accelerates as Jyoti Das gains ground on them, and Zindi’s repeated exhortation to ‘Go west!’ becomes increasingly desperate (*CR*, 363 – 67). Two other common set-pieces of the genre are identified by Sieber as the *pícaro*’s encounter with a ‘thieves’ society’ (1977: 26), and his acting as an imposter to gain acceptance with a powerful benefactor. Such episodes are loosely incorporated in *The Circle of Reason*. For instance, Zindi’s house in al-Ghazira — while hardly a ‘thieves’ society’ — is nonetheless depicted as sheltering a fairly desperate group of migrants, who go to great lengths to survive the hostile environment of the oil economy. Furthermore, in the novel’s final section Alu, Kulfi, and Zindi masquerade as a respectable family, in order to gain the support of a benefactor, Mrs Verma. With regard to form, Sieber argues that the picaresque tends towards a digressive, open-ended structure (1977: 10). This is a noticeable feature of *The Circle of Reason*, as is humour, also listed as an

important feature. It thus seems likely that, while it does not conform to every picaresque convention, the novel is certainly alluding to this centuries-old genre.

The question remains as to why Ghosh integrates elements of the picaresque within his novel. Sieber's work is again illuminating; he shows that different emphases were placed on the genre in its various European contexts, and the picaresque was 'made to conform to the peculiar satiric, social, and historical contexts of each country' (1977: 59). This suggests the utility of the form to Ghosh's project. The picaresque form has frequently been adapted to new locations, and Ghosh may be interpreted as reconfiguring the *pícaro* to suit the modern world of globalization and international migration. In this context, it is worth considering Sieber's claim that the convention of the *pícaro*'s journey has always lent itself to the myth of migration, and to visions of a New World utopia in which the upwardly mobile *pícaro* can find riches and respectability. He writes:

In the seventeenth century the New World symbolized an escape from the hierarchical society of Spain. Seville was populated with *indianos*, Spaniards who had returned home after making their fortunes in America. [...] In the eighteenth century the English colonies fulfilled the same function. *Moll Flanders* reveals how even a transported criminal can 'earn' his freedom from poverty through careful investment. In the nineteenth century popular myth defined the United States as a Promised Land with unparalleled opportunities for getting ahead (1977: 65).

In *The Circle of Reason* Ghosh shows that, for residents of third-world countries in the late twentieth century, the utopian myth of a New World of wealth and opportunity has been transposed onto the oil-rich states of the Middle East. The novel illustrates that, while there is some truth in Indian rumours of great material success to be had in the Gulf (see *CR*, 158 – 59), the reality for migrants tends to be very different.

In a harrowing passage, migrant workers who have been shipped to al-Ghazira are described as follows:

those ghosts behind the fence were not men, they were tools — helpless, picked for their poverty. In those days when al-Ghazira was still a real country they were brought here to slip between its men and their work, like the first whiffs of an opium dream; they were brought as weapons, to divide the Ghaziris from themselves and the world of sanity; to turn them into buffoons for the world to laugh at (*CR*, 261).

This description of the workers as 'ghosts', 'tools', 'weapons', and 'buffoons' contrasts with the hope represented by the 'New World' in European picaresque narratives. In the English and Spanish narratives discussed by Sieber, the *pícaro*, no matter how poor and dissolute, is still a member of a colonizing nation, and if he gets the chance to migrate to a colony, he will be in a position of authority. The faceless migrants Ghosh describes, on the other hand, come from previously colonized countries and therefore have no such privileged relationship with their 'New World'. In fact, although Ghosh does not make it explicit in the passage quoted above, their experience of migration is evidently tainted by neo-colonialism. Ghosh's use of the passive tense ('were brought') only hints at the multinational corporations that are responsible for their exploitation. In the light of this discussion of migration Ghosh may be seen to be rewriting and updating the picaresque genre from a postcolonial standpoint. Just as the *pícaro*'s dubious lineage and criminal activities define him as an outsider, so today's third-world migrants in the Gulf states are marginalized and excluded from the political process. Ghosh makes the picaresque's original aims relevant for contemporary society, giving a voice to obscure economic refugees and satirizing the society that oppresses them.

I now want to examine in more detail the Middle Eastern society that Ghosh satirizes. In addition to the picaresque and the fantastic, there are also elements of social realism in Ghosh's portrayal of al-Ghazira, as the experiences of his immigrant characters accord with research into labour conditions in the Gulf. Since the discovery there of rich oil reserves in the early twentieth century, the Gulf has become a region characterized by dislocation and population flows. The whole of the Middle East has been affected by the post-Second World War oil boom. Even the economies of the so-called oil-poor countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen, are heavily reliant on remittances sent by migrant workers in the oil-rich countries to their families back home. Attracted by the easy availability of work and high wages on offer, large numbers of Arab migrants flock to the Gulf states each year. From the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, workers from poor Asian countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and the Philippines were also encouraged to come over, as they were seen as being 'cheaper and more pliable' than indigenous or other Arab labourers (Findlay, 1994: 107). Yet expectations of the good life were frequently dashed by the exploitation, poor conditions and xenophobic abuse that are common features of migrant existence.

While the oil-rich countries are eager to benefit from the inexpensive and often highly skilled labour of these workers, little effort is made to integrate them into the society. Immigrants tend to be spatially segregated from the indigenous populations and assigned barren land, such as former desert sites, in which to live or work (Findlay, 1994: 115). Since the mid-1980s' slowdown in international oil consumption, workers from both Asia and the oil-poor countries have been forced to accept lower wages and, in some cases, job cuts. The decrease in demand has not stemmed the inflow of labourers, but immigrants are increasingly forced to work illegally, with the maltreatment and insecurity that this entails.

Oil-endowed states such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, have benefited from the mineral in obvious and frequently ostentatious ways. Despite their vast wealth, however, these countries' economies are more vulnerable than might be supposed. Their small and/or unskilled populations mean that they are dependent on foreign workers to man the industrial infrastructure. In the case of Kuwait, this has led to the country becoming the world's first 'rentier state'. Its indigenous population is outnumbered by foreigners, who comprise an astonishing 75% of the work force (Farah *et al*, 1983: 42), and its economy depends for its survival on overseas investment (Findlay, 1994: 97 – 98). The last example suggests that the oil-rich states are financially precarious another way, due to their reliance on foreign investment opportunities, technology, and markets. As Y.A. Sayigh (1983) has shown, inhabitants of the newly wealthy states are more than usually enthralled by electrical and consumer goods. These are imported from the West and Japan in such quantities that the countries plough most their wealth back into the world economy, rather than achieving regional or pan-Arab sustainability. Furthermore, many of the oil-rich countries have tried to jump-start their industrial capabilities by importing modern machines and technological know-how. In the long term this has meant that behind the façade of wealth in the oil-rich countries is a worrying lack of indigenous skills, entrepreneurialism, and industrial infrastructure.

Many of these issues are dramatized in *The Circle of Reason*, with the oil economy appearing as an asymmetrical and frequently oppressive system. The first glimpses we are given of this system are from onboard the boat *Mariam*, which transports Alu and a small group of (mostly illegal) immigrants to al-Ghazira. En

route we are shown the lengths to which these Indians will go to avail themselves of the alleged employment opportunities, consumer goods, freedom and rights of this promised land. *Mariamamma's* engine is defective and the immigrants spend several days stranded on the ocean, wondering if they will ever reach the Gulf. Yet the narrative suggests that they are fortunate in travelling onboard an expensive and comparatively safe boat. Some boats are so overcrowded with people desperate to emigrate that they capsize or sink, while others are apprehended by the harbour police (*CR*, 169). A disturbing description is given of Karthamma, a heavily pregnant Keralan woman who is convinced that if she can get to al-Ghazira her child will have 'houses and cars and multi-storeyed buildings [...]. Sign a few forms and the child will be a Ghaziri' (*CR*, 177). When her labour starts, she resists it with all the strength of her will, between screams demanding the papers that she believes will convey citizenship and rights on her baby.

Yet Karthamma's confidence in the inexhaustible prosperity and opportunities of al-Ghazira is shown to be unfounded. On arrival, she and the other newcomers find accommodation with the larger-than-life Egyptian madam, Zindi at-Tiffaha. Zindi's house provides refuge for a group of migrants from Egypt, the Indian subcontinent, and North Africa, on the condition that they find work and contribute towards the house's upkeep. As Zindi points out, work in al-Ghazira is far scarcer than the Gulf's reputation suggests: '[t]here are hundreds, thousands of chhokren [boys] [...] begging; begging for jobs' (*CR*, 180). Many of those in the house who manage to find work suffer terrible misfortune. Kulfi works as a cook in a rich Ghazira house, which is an easy and lucrative job, until she is sacked because of a misunderstanding due to her poor understanding of Arabic. Professor Samuel does an accounting job in a Western-style supermarket, for which he is paid under the odds because he doesn't possess a work permit. He loses his position when he inadvertently startles a Ghaziri woman who, perhaps influenced by racist stereotypes of Indians, assumes that he means to molest her. Abusa the Frown is reported to the police for working illegally and is never heard from again. Worst of all, we hear of several other immigrants being killed on construction sites by faulty equipment or materials. The 'litany of calamities' (*CR*, 201) portrayed in the novel may be seen, in the light of Peter N. Woodward's research into migrant labour in Saudi Arabia (1988), to be an accurate reflection of migrant experience. Woodward demonstrates that undocumented workers in the oil-rich states

submit to unhealthy or even dangerous working conditions, long working hours, few employment rights, and hostility from the local population.

Indigenous suspicion and fear of the immigrant community means that the latter tends to be sequestered in separate living areas. In *The Circle of Reason*, the places where locals and foreigners live, work, eat, and shop are clearly demarcated. Most immigrants live on a narrow inlet known as 'Ras al-Maqtu', the Severed Head' (CR, 196). The suggestion of violence in the name is borne out, as we have seen, by the suffering that many of its inhabitants experience in their workplaces. In addition, connotations of severance reflect the Ras's isolation from more affluent districts in al-Ghazira. The Ras is essentially a shanty-town, characterized by 'roofs of corrugated iron and halved oil-drums, with [...] crazily angled wooden platforms and tracery of pumpkin vines' (CR, 196). It is populated by people 'from all the corners of the world' (CR, 226): we see Baluchis and Bangladeshis, Egyptians and Moroccans living here, using their wits to survive. The heterogeneous and multicultural atmosphere of the Gulf, precipitated by a global capitalism, is evoked by this description of a bazaar near the Ras:

On one side of the road, jostling for space, were tiled Iranian chelo-kebab shops, Malayali dosa stalls, long, narrow Lebanese restaurants, fruit-juice stalls run by Egyptians from the Sa'id, Yemeni cafés with aprons of brass-studded tables spread out on the pavement, vendors frying ta'ameyya on push-carts — as though half the world's haunts had been painted in miniature along the side of a single street (CR, 344).

The bustling microcosm described in this passage contrasts sharply with the sterile 'concrete-and-glass cliff of hotels and offices' that lines the Ghaziri district on the other side of the inlet.

As this example suggests, the Ras is socially as well as spatially segregated from the bourgeois Ghaziri areas. It is seen as a threatening ghetto: taxi- and bus-drivers refuse to go there at night (CR, 306) and an Indian waiter is insulted at the suggestion that he would live in what he darkly refers to as 'that place' (CR, 322). Despite the Ras's dangerous reputation, many of its occupants see it as a sheltering domicile (CR, 226) and the community that lives there is shown to be lively and supportive. Immigrants spend much time there drinking coffee and smoking *narjilas*, exchanging gossip and stories of local interest. At times of trouble the residents forget their

frequent squabbles, and band together to defend their community against outsiders. For commerce, the Ras is serviced by its Souq, a dark, labyrinthine marketplace that, in its raucous, jostling intimacy, is so different from more modern shopping areas in al-Ghazira that it appears to be ‘almost another country’ (CR, 194).

The lifestyles of most Ghaziris differ dramatically from the perilous existence of the migrants. Ghaziris live in modern, sanitary districts, wear fashionable Western clothes (CR, 209), and often have decadent hobbies such as helicopter- or aeroplane-flying (CR, 346). They do their grocery shopping in sterile, brightly-lit supermarkets. These supermarkets, such as the one in which Professor Samuel works, are full of imported products: ‘freshly frozen Australian lamb and Danish mutton, French cauliflowers and Egyptian cabbages’ (CR, 208). This illustrates al-Ghazira’s confluence with, and reliance on, the forces of globalization. For consumer goods Ghaziris go to the Star, a new shopping mall that reveals a great deal about the concomitant hubris and vulnerability of the oil-exporting states.

The Star is al-Ghazira’s tallest and most opulent building, so-called because of its ‘five pointed arms’ (CR, 263). The abrupt disintegration of the mall signals the Ghaziris’ precarious economic dependence on foreign consumer and technological goods. The Star collapses before it has even been opened, creating a mountain of rubble, strewn with televisions, radios, washbasins, and refrigerators. Alu, who has been working on a construction site there, is trapped beneath its wreckage for days. His narrow escape from being flattened by the weight of imported technological goods makes literal the crushing effect that consumerism has had on the Gulf states’ economies. As Y.A. Sayigh points out, the oil-rich nations have some of the highest levels of import per capita in the world, and 93% of the goods imported come from outside the Arab world. This, he argues, represents a serious ‘leakage’ of Arab wealth into the world economy (1983: 36 – 37). If one scrutinizes the ‘*Rajas*’ section it becomes evident that the money generated by oil is only a short-term solution. Al-Ghazira’s reliance on foreign technologies and skills means that many construction projects are too expensive to be completed and that the Ghaziris have become a minority in their own country. This is evident in a description of ‘the entrails of unfinished buildings festooned across the skyline, and the flow of people with their

inexplicable nationalities' (*CR*, 321). The Star may thus be usefully interpreted a symbol of the subjugation of the Gulf states to the forces of global capital.

In addition, the Star was created against a historical background of exploitation and neo-colonialism. In the chapter 'From an Egg-Seller's Mind', Hajj Fahmy tells the story of the mall's conception. He goes back in time to describe al-Ghazira in the days before the multinational companies arrived on their quest to find oil. At that time al-Ghazira was far from rich, but the country was ruled by its own leader, the Malik, and still had a certain amount of autonomy. After oil is discovered there, the British send a resident to al-Ghazira to persuade the Malik to sign a treaty giving them exclusive digging rights. The Malik angrily rejects their advances, drawing on 'histories of the great Baghdadi and Cairene dynasties' (*CR*, 249) to formulate an inchoate plan of Arab resistance. Rather than bombing the Ghaziris into submission, the so-called 'Oilmen' (whose nationality is indeterminate) choose more indirect methods of persuasion. They spread rumours about the Malik's madness, undermining public confidence in him, and cultivate his half-brother, the Amin, as an alternative leader. They bring in acquiescent Asian labourers to show the Ghaziris that strikes and union agitation cut no ice with them. In a masterly piece of propaganda, they also introduce 'specially grown date palms; unique palms which could thrive on any soil' into al-Ghazira. These palms are allowed to bloom in a patch of barren ground in order to impress on its inhabitants 'the things the world could do for the forgotten land of al-Ghazira' (*CR*, 257). However, the novel shows that this humanitarian rhetoric is merely intended as a smokescreen to hide the Oilmen's real intentions to appropriate the land for oil development. Once again, a seemingly benign application of scientific and technological knowledge in practice merely serves to mask colonial ambitions.²¹

²¹ This strand of plot draws on historical events. The Enlightenment scholars William Jones, Joseph Banks, and Robert Kyd were involved in the creation of a botanical garden for Calcutta (Cannon, 1990: 332). Although such botanical gardens were depicted by the colonial administrators as part of their humanitarian endeavour, and although plants such as sago and date palms were supposed to be transplanted to India to combat famine, the rhetoric masks the commercial designs behind their creation. The proposed famine-relief sago palms were ultimately never introduced to the botanical gardens, which were used instead for the cultivation of commercially important plants, such as tea, cinchona, and spices (Baber, 1998: 168 – 70).

The date palms become a battleground on which the struggle for control of al-Ghazira is played out. Despite the rebels' initial success in burning down the palms, the Oilmen prevail, and the Ghaziris find themselves in a state of submerged colonialism: 'the whole country was [an] Oiltown now' (CR, 263). Strikes, trade unions, and demonstrations are banned, and protestors are harshly put down by 'the newest and best guns and helicopters and computers money can buy' (CR, 261). The Oilmen's strong-arm tactics are not employed with any degree of emotion:

This was no feud: no tyrants died; there was no fratricide, no regicide, no love, no hate. It was just practice for the princes of the future and their computers — an exercise in good husbandry (CR, 262).

Here, the Oilmen's activities are described in pointedly neutral language as 'practice', which suggests both that violence is standard procedure to the Oilmen, and also that they could wreak much greater damage if they put their minds to it. The repeated reference to computers indicates that new technologies are used as 'tools of empire' to disempower nations that do not have access to relevant equipment or expertise. Finally, the ironic use of the word 'husbandry' foreshadows a similarly double-edged usage of the term in *In an Antique Land*, which I discuss on pp. 145 – 46 of this thesis. The Oilmen decide to build the Star on the plot of land where the date palms once stood, 'in celebration of the starry future' (CR, 263). In the light of Hajj Fahmy's narration, these words seem ominous, suggesting a future in which the Ghaziris will be entirely ruled by multinational companies and giant producers. Fahmy provides a list of all the people who would have been dispossessed or financially ruined had the Star opened and concludes, in language that is reminiscent of Shakespeare: '[n]o one wanted the Star. That was why the Star fell: a house which nobody wants cannot stand' (CR, 264). The falling Star therefore partly symbolizes the potential collapse of neo-colonialism.

Colonialism is rarely mentioned by name in the novel, and it is remarkable how rarely the British, who rule over the India of Balaram's youth, or the Americans and multinationals, who have behind-the-scenes control in the novel's 1970s oil economy setting, are explicitly referred to in *The Circle of Reason*. And yet colonialism and neo-colonialism are central concerns of the novel, featuring as an absence that is usually represented by technologically advanced gadgets and consumer goods. One of the few instances in the novel where the word 'colonize' is used comes in a

description of Balaram's wife, Toru-debi, whose heart is said to be 'securely colonized' by her Singer sewing machines (*CR*, 6). In the light of this usage, we may feel that most of the main characters in the '*Satwa*' section of the novel are 'colonized' by different technological applications. Balaram's bondage to carbolic acid has already been noted, and Alu is linked to the weaver's loom, whereas for the older boy, Rakhal, bombs and other makeshift weapons are an obsession. However, the most evident connection between technology, consumerism, and (neo-)colonialism is demonstrated in the later parts of the novel.

Here, consumerism is portrayed as being a more durable and sinister way of controlling nations than outright imperial aggression. Both Ghaziris and migrants are preoccupied with acquiring material possessions from foreign countries. Japanese products such as cassette recorders (*CR*, 335), watches (*CR*, 158), and video games (*CR*, 287 – 89), are particularly sought after, for their high technological capabilities. There is a poignant depiction of an elderly war-victim, whose tongue has been cut out, and whose one possession is a Japanese umbrella. This 'Japanese Miracle' is the indirect cause of his death, as he falls in the sea after it and is eaten by sharks (*CR*, 373). The desire for imported products destroys local businesses. Hajj Fahmy recognizes this when he argues that if the Star had opened the Souq's shops would have soon folded (*CR*, 264). Western consumerism also erodes indigenous traditions, which is demonstrated when Rakesh tries to sell Ayurvedic laxatives, only to realize that:

The trouble really lay in the product. It was soon clear that people no longer wanted Ayurvedic laxatives. There was no market for black viscous liquids in old rum bottles; they wanted sparkling, bubbling salts which dissolved in water, or milky syrups in bottles with bright labels. They wanted advertisements and slogans which promised more than mere movement — promotions and success at work, marital triumphs, and refrigerators in their dowries. Regularity, balance and inner peace no longer sold (*CR*, 182).

Here the bubble and sparkle in the marketing of Western medical products makes the peculiarly Indian philosophy behind Ayurveda seem hopelessly old-fashioned.

Perhaps the most damning indictment of the nexus between capitalism, technology, and (neo-)colonialism is given in a portrayal of *Mariamamma's* arrival at al-Ghazira. The lure that the Middle East exerts on the migrants onboard is embodied in

their first glimpse of the lights strewn along the peninsular at night. The narrator comments on the implications of al-Ghazira's illuminations:

through a century and a half the same lights have shone in one part of the globe or another, wherever money and its attendant arms have chosen to descend on peoples unprepared for its onslaughts, and for all of those hundred and fifty years *Mariam*'s avatars have left that coast for those lights carrying with them an immense cargo of wanderers seeking their own destruction in giving flesh to the whims of capital (*CR*, 189).

Although no explanation is forthcoming for the arbitrary choice of one hundred and fifty years as the timescale on which this 'destruction' has taken place, it seems likely that this coincides with the period of overt British colonialism. Here money and technology are explicitly equated with the devastation of cultures unused to such motivations. Yet colonized peoples are also presented as being to some extent complicit in this devastation, because through their desire for material wealth they bring about their own downfall.

The Circle of Reason does not entirely reject capitalism; rather, the focus of its satire is the inhumanity of huge multinational corporations. Small businesses that are run in the Indian or Middle Eastern bazaar tradition tend not to be condemned by the novel. For example, Zindi is desperate to take over Forid Mian's small tailoring shop in the Souq, as she sees the Souq as 'hope' (*CR*, 291) and the shop as a 'promise' (*CR*, 220) of self-sufficiency and good times to come. Zindi is an ambitious, even ruthless businesswoman, but she is presented sympathetically as a pragmatic yet compassionate survivalist. Nury the Damanhuri is another archetypal capitalist, as he manages to create a demand for eggs where there was none before. In 'From an Egg-Seller's Mind', the story-teller, Hajj Fahmy, tells how the people of al-Ghazira used to eat eggs as and when their own hens supplied them, but that Nury persuaded people to buy from him when their hens failed to lay. He achieved this business success by building up contact with the community's women, as they were responsible for household economy and taking care of the chickens. He was able to get close to the women because rumours of his impotence, which he probably started himself, meant that the men trusted him with their wives. The narrator concludes, 'Nury built a trade on a story [...]. [He] was an artist. For him every egg was an epic, a thousand-page song of love, death and betrayal' (*CR*, 247). This identification of Nury with oral

story-telling and the imagination allows his brand of capitalism to escape narratorial condemnation, infused as it is with communal interaction and human emotions.

The novel's censure is reserved for what has been described as the 'desiring-machine' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984): the way in which the West holds 'developing' countries in sway by fostering a dependency on technological advances. During his four days trapped under the Star's rubble Alu has a Gandhian vision of an anti-materialist society. He makes a link between money and Pasteur's notion of the 'infinitely small' germ, arguing that both 'travel[...] from man to man carrying contagion and filth, sucking people out and destroying them even in the safety of their own homes' (CR, 281). As a result, he decides to start a campaign to banish money from their community. His laudable intentions, however, are distorted by his friends to such an extent that soon '[h]e could no longer understand what he'd started' (CR, 315). In the Middle East, most migrants are 'target workers', whose aim in living there is to save a specific amount of money before returning home (Serageldin *et al*, 1983: 55). Thus Alu's followers interpret his anti-materialism as a cunning way of collectively saving money. His anti-materialist movement degenerates into unmitigated greed and commercialism, with pieces of paper standing in for money, and Alu's friends becoming more obsessed by material possessions than they were previously. This is most evident in the highly ironic scene in which Alu's followers — equipped with chits that stand for money and with dusters tied around their arms to ward off monetary contagion — go on a shopping spree to buy calculators, televisions, American jeans, and Korean shirts (CR, 341). In this section of the novel it becomes evident that the applied side of science, technology, has far more appeal to the inhabitants of third-world countries than the more intangible benefits of 'pure' science that have been examined so far in this chapter.

If, as I have suggested, the narrative techniques in this novel seem at times to be a pale imitation of those that Rushdie deploys in *Midnight's Children*, it would nevertheless be mistaken to overlook the stylistic innovations that Ghosh introduces. Ghosh creates a composite generic frame for *The Circle of Reason* in which literary genres overlap. For example, Ghosh plays the picaresque journey form off against the genre of the detective story. According to William Spanos, the detective novel genre revolves around 'the rational solution generated by the scientific analysis of man-in-

the-world'. He argues this solution is reached through investigation into a 'pre-ordained or teleological determined structure' (1992: 80). As such, the detective resembles the scientist, in that both see themselves as sifting through 'facts' in order to reveal the truths that lie behind the evidence. However, in the same decades in which theorists such as Foucault were critiquing science's claims to knowledge, postmodernist writers invented what Spanos terms the 'anti-detective novel'. This subversive take on the detective genre ruptures preconceptions, such as notions of the subject's logical progression through time and the beginning-middle-end narrative convention.

Spanos cites Sartre's assertion that the anti-detective novel is:

a parody on the novel of 'quest' into which the author has introduced a sort of impassioned amateur detective [...] [who] doesn't find anything... and gives up the investigation as a result of a metamorphosis; just as though Agatha Christie's detective, on the verge of unmasking the villain, had himself suddenly turned criminal (Spanos, 1992: 80).

This might almost have been written about the strand in *The Circle of Reason* in which the 'impassioned [...] detective' Jyoti Das embarks on his futile quest to catch Alu. Das's journey to find Alu frames the novel, and although the reader may at times forget it, the novel is structured by accounts of events recounted by his various sources. The frequent biases and omissions of these narratives prompt the reader to question whether an empirical collection of evidence can ever lead to the 'true story'. Instances when the reader becomes aware that the evidence Das is collecting is fallible include Bhudeb Roy's narrative distortions (for example, personal rancour makes him neglect to tell Das about Balaram's humanitarian efforts to save the village from disease [CR, 84]), and the fact that other informants, such as Gopal, 'had always had the [...] tendency to dramatize' (CR, 101). While trying to write his report, Das increasingly feels caught between the conflicting accounts of newspaper reports and eye-witness accounts, and is described as having 'lost himself in [a] labyrinth of cause and effect' (CR, 83). Das's feeling of disorientation is caused by the realization that no text can definitively claim to narrate the 'truth'. As Hayden White argues, 'historical accounts cast in the form of a narrative may be as various as the *modes of emplotment* which literary critics have identified as constituting the different principles for structuring narratives in general' (1986: 487). If we take White's notion

a stage further, this notion of history as a story can be extended to any act of research, including, as we have seen, science. All research may be seen as an act of desire, and even the reputedly dispassionate detective or scientist has aspirations which will shape his investigations.

The novel's detective story strand is undercut by fantastical elements of the novel. Outlandish tales such as the colourful story that tells of Nury the Damanhouri, Jabal the Mountainous Eunuch and the battle of the date palms (see 'Chapter Twelve: From an Egg-Seller's Mind', *CR*, 236 - 65) disrupt and call into question the realist aspects of the novel, as represented by Jyoti Das's doomed attempt to write a 'true' report recounting Alu's activities. In a book such as *The Circle of Reason*, which seeks to unsettle the claims of science for absolute truth, the use of the fantastic mode is entirely appropriate. Fantasy mocks the claim of realist texts to narrate an authentic version of the world, just as the intrusion of pseudoscience destabilizes Balaram's rhapsodies on scientific reason. Rosemary Jackson emphasizes that one of the most striking qualities of the fantastic is the way in which it problematizes certainties:

It was a genre which did not claim to be definitive or knowing. Lacking finality, it interrogated authoritative truths and replaced them with something less certain. As Bakhtin puts it, 'The fantastic serves here not in the positive *embodiment* of the truth, but in the search after the truth, its provocation and, most importantly, its *testing*' (1981: 15).

This description fits well with Ghosh's preoccupation with the concept of 'knowledge' and its implications in India. In the fantastic, as in Ghosh's text, knowledge is portrayed as being partial, incomplete, and provisional.

Ghosh at times appears to be using the magic realist techniques for which Rushdie is celebrated. The novel's magic realist elements include the contrasting descriptions of Frowning Abusa, who has such green fingers that he can make 'grass push through the sand' (*CR*, 206), and of Mast Ram, who is so strange and bitter that he makes everything die (*CR*, 207). Alu has an almost preternatural ability for weaving, and there is a depiction of an old crone, Saneyya, whose ugliness blinds her bridegroom on her wedding night (*CR*, 255 - 56). Such exaggerated and implausible incidents may usefully be categorized as magic realist, but I suggest that for the most part *The Circle of Reason* actually belongs to the older and more ambivalent literary

mode²² of the fantastic. Rather than simply using the 'tried and tested' formula of magic realism, which has proved so successful for many third-world writers (see Brennan, 1989; Slemon, 1988), Ghosh moulds the fantastic mode to his postcolonial subject matter.

It seems likely that the boundaries between magic realism, the absurd, surrealism, and the fantastic are elastic, and that many texts do not fit neatly into one category. However, it is worth considering the distinction that Amaryll Chanady draws between magic realist and fantastic texts. She sees their difference as stemming from the way in which characters interpret strange and illogical events. Whereas fantastic texts are characterized by the uncertainty and doubt that surrounds such events, characters in magic realist novels, on the other hand, tend to accept the most bizarre and unbelievable occurrences with ease. Consequently, magic realism takes the reader into an alternative world, while fantastic literature, as I will illustrate, is more equivocal, introducing a world that is 'almost the same but not quite' as our own. Chanady summarizes this position in the statement, '[w]hereas there is always the suggestion of a rational explanation in the fantastic, a magico-realist text prevents the reader from even considering a rational solution' (1985: 106).

Bearing Chanady's definitions in mind in returning to a comparison of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *The Circle of Reason*, it is possible to read these two texts as examples of magic realism and the fantastic respectively. *Midnight's Children* invites us to believe in such extraordinary things as the thousand and one children with telepathic powers; the brief occupation of the narrator, Saleem, as a human sniffer-dog; and the terrifying Widow whose magical powers are employed to sterilize the children of midnight. At no point does Saleem or any other character express doubt or incredulity as to what is happening to them. In fact, the narrator at times specifically declares that supernatural events are to be taken literally, as when he announces:

²² For discussion as to whether the fantastic may be viewed as a 'mode', a 'genre' or an 'impulse', see Cornwell, 1990: 15 - 18. Following both Jackson and Cornwell, I will use the term 'mode' throughout: "'mode" in Frederic [sic] Jameson's sense, implying "structural features underlying various works in different periods of time"' (Cornwell, 1990: 15).

Please believe that I am falling apart.

I am not speaking metaphorically; nor is this the opening gambit of some melodramatic, riddling, grubby appeal for pity. I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug [...] I ask you only to accept (as I have accepted) that I shall eventually crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust (1982: 37).

At other moments he dismisses as irrelevant any possible disbelief on the part of the reader, for example, when he declares: '[t]o anyone whose personal cast of mind is too inflexible to accept these facts, I have this to say: That's how it was; there can be no retreat from the truth. I shall just have to shoulder the burden of the doubter's disbelief' (1981: 196 - 97). The phrase 'believe, don't believe' is repeated several times in the text, in a defiant assertion of the veracity of the events described. *Midnight's Children* appears, then, to be an archetypal example of magic realism, in that 'the supernatural is not presented as problematic' (Chanady, 1985: 23).

Characters in *The Circle of Reason* tend to have a more ambivalent relationship with the extraordinary events that unfold in the novel, suggesting that it is an example of the fantastic rather than of magic realism. Following Todorov, Rosemary Jackson asserts that 'the purely fantastic text establishes absolute hesitation in protagonist and reader: they can neither come to terms with the unfamiliar events described, nor dismiss them as supernatural phenomena' (1981: 27). This is certainly true of *The Circle of Reason*, in which even the most marvellous event (Alu's survival after the huge edifice of the Star collapses on him) is treated with the 'absolute hesitation' described by Jackson as being an integral element of the fantastic. Several critics also argue that the fantastic mode enables a writer to occupy a liminal position between mimetic and supernatural ways of portraying the world (Todorov, 1973; Jackson, 1981: 34 - 35). Jackson suggests that the improbable events of fantastic narratives destabilize worldviews that rely on exclusive faith in supernatural phenomena or in logic and reason (1981: 27). This too is evident in the aftermath of the discovery of Alu, 'miraculously' unhurt under the rubble of the Star. The certainties of rationalism and religion, or of the mimetic and the marvellous, are unsettled by a failure adequately to account for his survival. Various explanations are offered for the event by the novel's baffled characters, with those who like to think of themselves as being modern and rational explaining the phenomenon by saying that two sewing machines propped up the rubble and saved Alu from harm. As we have seen, this may be read

as a burlesque of Gandhi's identification of the Singer sewing machine as benevolent technology. The more traditional Mawali women, on the other hand, offer an alternative argument that the spirit of a sheikh who was buried on the site protected Alu (CR, 235). This supernatural explanation is underlined by the episode's ironic gesture towards the legend of Krishna holding up the world. However, the narratorial stance towards the incident is indeterminate, thus disrupting the totalizing arguments on both sides.

In a similar, although minor incident, when Balaram is trying to persuade Shombhu Debnath to teach Alu weaving, the five rupee notes he is offering momentarily stick to the weaver's palm. Once more, two different explanations are given for this phenomenon; one scientific, one religious: 'Static electricity, said Balaram. Sri Krishna's leela, said Shombhu. Divine play, but not for a mortal man to question' (CR, 70). Neither explanation is fully acceptable, but the implication is that both reason and religious faith allow people to interpret baffling occurrences, without necessarily providing the entire solution.

CONCLUSION

R.G.A. Dolby, writing on the limitations of mainstream science, has argued that '[t]he orthodox [scientific] position is not necessarily vastly superior to all others'. He suggests that mainstream science may even be inferior to pseudoscientific practices 'especially if its methodological preoccupations have led it systematically to ignore especially important but problematic sources of evidence, such as myths, legends, anecdotes, craft traditions, non-expert testimony of unreproducible events, and so on' (1979: 29). I conclude by suggesting that *The Circle of Reason* similarly problematizes the practice of modern science by introducing into its narrative deviant sciences such as phrenology and criminology, and calling scientific methodology into question. Ghosh also introduces into his novel the 'myths, legends, anecdotes', mentioned by Dolby, to indicate that these allow alternative ways of looking at the universe.

If pure and applied science, far from offering privileged access to ‘truth’, actually only provide narratives to explain our situation, then this suggests that fiction itself may provide equally relevant ways of interpreting the world. The novel’s use of weaving as a metaphor for fiction; the digressive, cyclical structure that is a striking feature of the novel; as well as the celebration of the energetic story-telling of many of the novel’s characters (most notably Zindi): all convey Ghosh’s commitment to the view that fiction is equally as valid a way of explaining events as those more prestigious authorities, reason and science.

When Zindi tells stories ‘it was only in her telling that [they] took shape; changed from mere incidents to a palpable thing’ (CR, 212), and by introducing variations into her litany of stories, ‘it was like the pressure of a potter’s thumb on clay — changing the thing itself and their knowledge of it’ (CR, 213). The subjective nature of ‘reality’ is emphasized here by the fact that we can only articulate our experience of the world through language. Despite their apparent objectivity, discourses such as science inevitably change the thing they seek to describe at the moment they attempt to articulate it. Writing itself is often seen as an instance of translation: ‘[i]n the act of writing, the author is producing a complicated translation of the “text” of the world; we generate a second translation in our attempt to return to the “native tongue of reality”’ (Spence, quoted in Chew and Stead, 1999: 1). Even in the most apparently disinterested, scientific ‘translation’ of the natural world, the political and cultural assumptions of the translator, or scientist, slant any findings. Ghosh’s later novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, addresses this idea that ‘to know something is to change it’ (CC, 103) in more detail and arguably with more erudition.

One aspect in which *The Circle of Reason* proves illuminating is in its treatment of literary and oral narratives. Books are generally portrayed as symbols of hope in the novel, as when the *Life of Pasteur* is passed from Balaram, to Alu, Dantu, and Mrs Verma, inspiring them all in different ways. Literature is not portrayed uncritically in the novel, however, and the inequalities inherent in the written text are implied when Mrs Verma announces her disenchantment with the contents of her father’s beloved bookcase: ‘[t]hey ruled over him: for him that bookcase had all the order the world lacked’ (CR, 395). The Western origins and biases of the novelistic genre are indicated when Balaram criticizes Gopal’s love for ‘novels about drawing-rooms in a

language whose history has destroyed its knowledge of its own body' (CR, 53). In a more sinister example, literature is revealed as being complicit with power structures when the policeman, Jyoti Das — who is responsible for Alu's traumatic exile from India — trails him in order to formulate a written police report about his activities.

Orality, on the other hand, is largely celebrated in the novel, and its fluidity and openness to change is contrasted with the greater rigidity of the written word. The novel's entire structure is based on the circularity and digression of the verbal story. The opening scene of *The Circle of Reason* involves villagers 'sitting under the great banyan tree in the centre of the village' (CR, 3), listening to accounts of the events of thirteen years ago, and this familiar image of a story-teller interacting with an audience to present a digressive narrative, is one that is repeated at several points. Throughout the novel, communities make sense of events and people by telling stories about them, just as discourses of science and pseudoscience provide ways of theorizing and understanding the world. In the section of the novel set in the mythical Gulf state of al-Ghazira, oral stories provide a way of giving a voice to its disempowered multitudes of migrant workers. At the beginning of the *Rajas* section, the individual story of each character is told consecutively, providing an archive of fictional accounts of marginalized oil workers. However, this championing of an oral style is illusory and somewhat tongue-in-cheek, in that ultimately *The Circle of Reason* is of course not only a written text, but one that is conveyed in English, a language that would be inaccessible to most of the story-tellers portrayed in the novel.

I outlined earlier the way in which pseudoscience, like a distorting mirror, reveals the subjectivity and dangers of mainstream scientific discourse. Similarly, the novel's interweaving of the techniques of the conventional realist novel with outlandish fable and digressive hearsay, suggests that however convincing and 'realistic' they may appear, all narratives are simply stories that arise from particular spatial and temporal perspectives. This notion of the way in which 'truth' can only ever be represented through stories is suggested by an intriguing passage in the novel in which Hajj Fahmy is trying to assert the correctness of his account of the collapse of the Star. Initially he insists, 'I know the real story; the true story', but when this claim is countered with the challenge, 'If it's true, how's it a story?', he concedes, 'All right, then, it's a story [...] just a story' (CR, 245). I would like to conclude by suggesting

that this incident may be seen as being emblematic for the novel's preoccupation with the provisional and socially-located nature of 'truth', and the possibility that an infinite number of stories exist to narrate 'truth'. In Hajj Fahmy's assertion, the implication is that any account of the past 'is just a story', or as deconstructionists would have it, a text. Even the mainstream science of men such as Pasteur, which as we have seen has had the status of indisputable truth for so long, is exposed by Ghosh's novel as being just a convincing story.

Chapter Two: Representations of Space in *The Shadow Lines*

INTRODUCTION

Ghosh's second work, *The Shadow Lines* (1988), marks a change in his writing. In a departure from the Rushdean fantasy of *The Circle of Reason*, which largely unfolds in a linear — if digressive — direction, *The Shadow Lines* moves away from sequentiality towards a narrative that emphasizes lateral connections.¹ The plot can be summarized as the unnamed narrator's search, through both his memory and actual investigations, for the reasons behind the death of his favourite uncle, Tridib. He moves from India to England and vicariously to Dhaka, and along the way gleans information from other people as to what happened to kill Tridib in 1964. The temporal development of his narrative is frequently sidetracked into horizontal movements across space, which allow time to be disrupted and geographical location to be highlighted. Even in one of the novel's most dramatic moments, when Robi tells the story of Tridib's death, the narrative zig-zags through space, juxtaposing London with Dhaka, collapsing spatial boundaries, and veering off to discuss seemingly unrelated issues.

The account of Tridib's death begins with the following sentence: 'The first time Robi ever talked about Tridib's death was in London: at the end of that beautiful September day when Ila took us to Lymington Road to meet Mrs Price' (*SL*, 240). The reader is impatient to know what happened to Tridib, but the narrative signals from the start that it will not unfold in a straight trajectory. After whetting our curiosity the narrator contextualizes the circumstances that compelled Robi to talk about the tragedy. Ila, Robi, and the narrator go to Ila's favourite 'Indian' restaurant in London, to celebrate the narrator's imminent return to India, and there follows a detailed description of the restaurant. Nestling between Guyanese, Turkish, and other

¹ This move was to prove decisive, and Ghosh continued to use the lateral narrative model in his next two texts, *In an Antique Land* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*. *The Glass Palace*, playing as it does with the conventions of the historical novel, returns to the sequential mode of narration.

foreign eating establishments, it is managed by a Bangladeshi called Rehman, and serves an appropriately hybrid cuisine that incorporates ‘stock and cream and Worcestershire sauce’ (*SL*, 241) into the usual range of Indian spices.

After the meal, Rehman’s fond reminiscences about Dhaka’s old city trigger Robi’s memories of the riots that killed Tridib. Bursting out of the restaurant, he is pursued by Ila and the narrator to a derelict church in Clapham, where he tells them the story. Two worlds are therefore made contiguous: secular London with its boarded-up churches, and a subcontinent so fuelled by religion that people are killed ‘for wearing veils or vermilion, [...] [or] for the state of their foreskins’ (*IAAL*, 210). Even after all the digressions that have led us to this point, Robi does not then simply narrate Tridib’s story. Instead, he introduces us to yet another space, that of dreams and the subconscious, as he tells of a recurring nightmare he has about the riots. The reader thus never witnesses Tridib’s death in its original location; it is refracted here through the hyperreal and grotesque world of Robi’s dream, and juxtaposed with the very different space of multicultural London. Appropriately enough, Tridib, who in life was so concerned about imaginative geographies, has his death narrated via a series of digressive spatial vignettes. As this example suggests, stories from several different historical and geographical locations — the London of the Blitz, the narrator’s childhood in the Calcutta of the 1960s, riots in East Pakistan in 1964, the secession of Bangladesh in 1971, and the narrator’s student days in London in the late 1970s — are interlaced in a complex narrative that questions our perceptions of space and place at least as much as time. Ghosh’s preoccupation with space and place, I will argue, is suggestive of the crisis of location that many Bengalis have experienced following the Partition of India (1947) and the Pakistani civil war of 1971.

It is necessary to analyse the resonances created by these familiar terms ‘space’ and ‘place’. Space is a vast, rather abstract concept that has connotations of both freedom and danger. Sometimes the word is used as a synonym for ‘roominess’, as when we talk about having space to move about, or whether a country has enough space for its expanding population. Here space is seen as a desirable commodity that promises freedom from restriction: ‘spaciousness’ is almost always seen as a positive attribute. At other times, usage of the term gestures towards the limitless and the cosmological. Objects or aircrafts ‘hurtle through space’; we speak of being ‘lost in

space'; and astronauts and divers try to expand our knowledge of the little-known corners of outer and inner space. In this context, space inspires exploration and the desire to colonize, but it also overwhelms, mystifies, and threatens. When we are overcome by the unforgiving openness of space, we long for place, a bounded and familiar location in space. Place is 'a space of individuation' (Harvey, 1990: 302), representing security, nurture, and stability. It can be as small as a hiding place, or as large as one's nation or religious community. Regardless of its size, place is somewhere we can pause in our relentless movement through space and find refuge among long-known people and objects. Yet, as Salman Rushdie recognizes, place can also be constrictive, overcrowded, and oppressively unchanging:

to explain why we become attached to our birthplaces we pretend that we are trees and speak of roots. Look under your feet. You will not find gnarled growths sprouting through the soles. Roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places (1984: 86).

Rushdie reminds us that the admonition 'know your place' is used to justify social hierarchy and maintain the status quo. Place and space have both positive and negative attributes. They derive their meaning from contrast with each other, and this interdependence is carried over into the simultaneous need people have for the secure attachments of place and the freedom and excitement of space.²

At several moments in the novel, the meanings of space and place are opened up. Here are two examples in which space is transformed into place (or *vice versa*) by a change in perspective. In the first example, May is taken by Tridib and the narrator to view Calcutta's famous monument, the Victoria Memorial. The left-wing British character interprets the building as a monstrous instance of the colonial orchestration of space. She declares that she 'can't bear' the monument's design, with its imperious dome and minarets, and she finds the statue of Victoria regally overlooking the city 'obscene' (*SL*, 170). The Victoria Memorial upsets May, as she feels it represents 'an act of violence' (*SL*, 170) performed on the Indian landscape. There is some justification in her outlook, as the Memorial's architects executed an entirely British design, neglecting to consult Indian opinion, and the monument therefore 'represented

² For more on space and place, see Tuan, 1977.

always an imposed power' (Metcalf, 1989: 210).³ While May is disturbed by the evidence that the monument provides of her ancestors' arrogance, Tridib and the narrator view the Memorial as a familiar, pleasurable place. The young narrator looks forward to eating *chaat* and ice-cream there, while Tridib tells May that the location 'will do for our ruin' (*SL*, 170). This comment refers to the salacious letter he wrote her some time before, suggesting that they meet as 'strangers' in a ruin in India (*SL*, 144). What is significant about this passage is that a monument which horrifies May as oppressive *space* is reclaimed by Indians as their own *place*, to be used for modern-day pursuits, such as eating and sexual liaisons. Even the stern figure of Victoria, which towers over the car and makes its occupants feel 'like Maharajas at a durbah' (*SL*, 169), is manipulated into a source of amusement by Tridib and the narrator, as it is a family joke that Ila's mother looks like the British queen. This scene comes as a useful reminder that colonial buildings and city structures, however imposing and powerful their message, were often subverted or indigenized by Indians. As Nezer AlSayyad explains, 'there comes a point at which the formerly colonized people cease to perceive colonial history as colonial and start absorbing the colonial heritage as their own' (1992: 21).

In the second example, the young Ila shows the narrator her favourite hiding place, underneath an enormous table in her family's country house at Raibajar. In this confined domestic place, the children's imaginations roam through spaces created in daydreams and games of make-believe. The depiction of their imaginative wanderings is reminiscent of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1964), in which he focuses on the effects of shut-in places on memory and the imagination. He argues that one's memories of nooks and corners within houses are particularly sharp, because as a child one spent hours daydreaming there, so that the 'resting-place particularized the daydream' (1994: 15). In their hiding place, Ila introduces the narrator to another setting that is central to the plot. She instigates a game of Houses, and draws in the dust under the table a plan of the house on Lymington Road in West Hampstead, London, where she has been staying until recently with the Price family. Intercut with

³ Commissioned in 1901 by Lord Curzon to commemorate the death of Queen Victoria, the Memorial was designed in a European classical style and housed a collection that testified to what Curzon termed the 'wonderful history' of the British Raj (see Metcalf, 1989: 203 – 10).

descriptions of the children's game is a flash-forward account of the narrator's first view of the house when he travels to England as a student in the 1980s.

The house is only an ordinary Victorian red brick terrace on a tree-lined street, but it exerts a fascination on the narrator long before he even sets eyes on it. Through Ila's and Tridib's stories and photographs, the narrator feels as though he knows the house and its inhabitants as well as his own. By the time he comes to England on a research grant in the late 1970s, he knows 'page 43, square 2F' (*SL*, 58) of his London *A to Z* so well that he is able to navigate his way around Lymington Road and the surrounding area. Despite his familiarity with the district, nothing prepares the narrator for the changes that have taken place in West Hampstead since the 1940s, which is the period he has been imagining. He goes to Solent Road, a nearby street that was heavily bombed in the war, and an old woman walking her Pekinese, children playing, and the cars with their 'Save the Whale' stickers startle him by their ordinariness. He feels that 'Tridib had shown me something truer about Solent Road a long time ago in Calcutta, something I could not have seen had I waited at that corner for years — just as one may watch a tree for months and yet know nothing at all about it if one happens to miss that one week when it bursts into bloom' (*SL*, 57). This metaphor succinctly indicates one of the themes of the novel: empirical evidence (watching the tree) is of limited use without emotional involvement. Equally, the *A to Z*, with its emphasis on streets and buildings, can tell the narrator nothing about the social, economic, and political realities of urban life, and does not allow him to predict the street's prosaic modern incarnation or glimpse its past. I shall discuss Ghosh's critique of the limitations of maps in a later section. Yet because the narrator is looking through the prism of Tridib's stories about the war, he sees, to borrow the metaphor, the blooming of the tree: the most dramatic moment of the street's history, when it was devastated by a bomb during the Blitz. To return to the children crouching under the table, it can be seen that their imaginations roam to other places far separated in time, location, and social milieu. Space and place shadow into each other and, in a reverse movement to the Victoria Memorial example, confined place telescopes out into encompassing space.

Later in the novel, the grown-up Ila and the narrator go down to the cellar in Mrs Price's house and Ila remarks that it is like being under the table in Raibajar. Once

again the narrator perceives the collapsing of spatial and temporal distance. The cellar's present-day existence appears increasingly insubstantial, and household objects stored in the room flatten themselves against the walls 'like paintings' (*SL*, 181). The reader's confidence in the solidity of things and her expectation that the physical world obeys the laws of geometry and physics are challenged by these mutations of dimension and perspective. As the cellar's modern accretions dissolve, 'ghosts' from the past, such as Snipe and the nine-year-old Tridib, take shape in the narrator's imagination. This cramped space⁴ evokes for the narrator memories that are not his own: he remembers Tridib's account of air raids spent there, and simultaneously recalls Ila in Raibajar telling of playing in the cellar with Nick Price. Thus, Ila's comparison of the cellar with the children's den in Raibajar causes memories to loop in a full circle, as their game of Houses was of course an imaginative recreation of the Price home.

These two examples — of the Victoria Memorial and of the hiding place under the table at Raibajar — illustrate that space and place are not stable, discrete entities, but that they can easily become interchangeable. At the heart of Ghosh's novel, therefore, we again find a debate about knowledge. The main kind of knowledge that is interrogated in *The Shadow Lines* is our understanding of our place within space; our geographical surroundings, in other words. In the next section I will explore some poststructuralist and postmodernist theories of geography in order to further my analysis of Ghosh's exploration of space and place.

QUESTIONING 'THE REALITY OF SPACE' (*SL*, 219)

Whereas history claims to tell the truth about the past by means of detailed examination of archival documents, the discipline of geography is predicated on its

⁴ Bachelard is again instructive here, as he singles out the cellar as a site of irrationality and daydreams. Its function within the house is unclear, he argues, and 'it is first and foremost the *dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths' (Bachelard, 1994: 18).

ability to codify space. The narrator summarizes the assumptions of Western geography when he declares:

I was a child, and like all the children around me I grew up believing in the truth of the precepts that were available to me: I believed in the reality of space, I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality (*SL*, 218 – 19).

In this passage assumptions about space are put forward in a series of short, seemingly irrefutable, statements. ‘I believed in the reality of space’ and ‘I believed that distance separates’ are just two of the five assertions made here. It is no coincidence that the narrator’s beliefs about space are set out in this way. The five suppositions parallel the five postulates of Euclid, the Greek founder of geometry. Euclid’s postulates, like the statements given in the passage, are simple, rational deductions about space; for example, ‘*Given any two points, a line segment may be drawn with those points as its endpoints*’ (in Mlodinow, 2002: 35). For centuries, Euclid’s postulates were taken as axiomatic by geometers, mathematicians, and physicists, but since the nineteenth century, they have been increasingly challenged by the notion that space is curved.⁵

For all that, Euclid is still often represented as the archetypal Western mathematician and logician. Leonard Mlodinow, for instance, writes, ‘[t]he story of Euclid is a story of revolution. It is the story of the axiom, the theorem, the proof, the story of the birth of reason itself’ (2002: 3). The fact that historians of science like Mlodinow so often locate the ‘birth of reason’ in Greece rather than amongst Chinese, Arab, or Indian thinkers (who had also made many astonishing inroads into ‘the axiom, the theorem, the proof’ by this time) indicates their Eurocentric bias. However, Euclid’s rigorous insistence on logic, and his desire to eradicate ‘intuition, [...] guesswork and [...] inexactness’ (Mlodinow, 2002: 34) from his work, have undeniably had a great impact on Western thought. Euclid’s legacy is indicated in the novel when the term ‘Euclidean space’ is used as a broad denotation for the calibrated and flattened-out space of Western cartography (*SL*, 232). His influence is also suggested in the repetition of the word ‘reality’ in the quoted passage above. The references to ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ highlight the mimetic claims of Euclidean geometry

⁵ Scholars that established the curved space theorem include Carl Gauss, Georg Friedrich Bernhard Riemann, Johann Bolyai, and Nikolay Ivanovich Lobachevsky (Mlodinow, 2002).

and Western geography: both disciplines claim to represent space as it 'really' is, ignoring other perceptions and ways of knowing.

In recent years developments within both scientific and critical thinking have unsettled the notion that one can ever definitively represent space. Einstein's theory of relativity, for example, has indicated 'the subjectivity of measurements of space and time' (Mlodinow, 2002: 177). Just as Euclid's postulates have been challenged by Einstein's followers, who argue that the discovery of curved space demands an entirely new geometry, so too the precepts the narrator takes for granted, such as the notion that distance separates, are confuted during the novel's unfolding. Furthermore, the work of spatial theorists such as Michel Foucault and Edward Soja has replaced the notion of mimetic spatial representation with 'a partial, relativistic viewpoint emphasizing the contingent, mediated nature of theory building' (Dear and Flusty, 2002: 6).

Since the mid-1970s a theory has emerged that Western accounts of history are incomplete,⁶ due to an excessive concentration on the temporal perspective, at the expense of the spatial dimension. Foucault famously indicts Western thought as a whole for its inattention to space:

Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic (1980: 70).

Here Foucault identifies a dichotomy of thinking about time and space. From at least the time of Bergson (1859 – 1941), he suggests, space and geography have largely been ignored by philosophers,⁷ while time and history have been accorded great attention. In the interview 'Space, Knowledge, and Power' (1984: 252), Foucault calls

⁶ Henri Lefebvre was probably the first and most influential of these theorists to campaign for the reinsertion of space into philosophy. His theories, outlined best in *The Production of Space* (1974), alert us to the fact that space is not innocent, but is socially produced and simultaneously socially producing. He argues that the control of space is highly political: capitalism's endurance has depended on the production of a space that is all-encompassing, hierarchized, clearly delineated, and yet mystified. Lefebvre's arguments have fed into Soja's and Foucault's theories, which I discuss in more detail in the body of this thesis.

⁷ Foucault himself is accused, with some justification, of ignoring space and geography. His interviewers from the geographical journal *Hérodote* tell him: 'You accord a *de facto* privilege to the factor of time, at the cost of nebulous or nomadic spatial demarcations

for a renewed critical interest in space, asserting that '[s]pace is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power'.⁸

As a result of the interventions of philosophers such as Foucault, geography is going through a crisis of discipline. Following Foucault, Edward W. Soja, in his study *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), contends that for too long interrogations of space have been confined to the disciplinary ghetto of geography, rarely exerting an influence on other disciplines. He asserts that we must challenge the excessive historicism of previous generations of thinkers, which has occluded the importance of the spatial dimension in shaping histories. Although Soja seldom engages directly with issues surrounding postcolonial space, he implies that, through its preoccupation with time, Western thought has failed to learn from foreign countries and cultures. He argues that the ability to predict the future cannot simply rest upon an understanding of past events and trends. Instead, he contends that in order to have a three-dimensional view of the world we must also look sideways, examining other cultures' ideas and experiences (1989: 23 – 24). He writes of the need for 'a more flexible and balanced critical theory that re-entwines the making of history with the social production of space, with the construction and configuration of human geographies' (1989: 11). If time and space are 're-entwined' in critical discourse and a dialectic is set up between the two concepts, it will result in a richer understanding of the ways in which hegemony produces and/or recasts our perceptions of the world. I submit that Soja's identification of a need for narratives that enmesh history within geography is crucial

whose uncertainty is in contrast with your care in marking off sections of time, periods and ages' (Foucault, 1980: 67). This criticism must have hit home, since Foucault admits at the end of the interview: 'Now I can see that the problems you put to me about geography are crucial ones for me. Geography acted as the support, the condition of possibility for the passage between a series of factors I tried to relate' (1980: 77). After the interview Foucault produced several pieces, such as 'Space, Knowledge and Power' (1984) and 'Of Other Spaces' (1986), which criticize the Western academy's tendency to ignore space and geography, because of its fascination with time and history.

⁸ In the light of this statement it is possible to read Foucault's development of Bentham's concept of the Panopticon into the model of an ideal prison, and his critiques of the hospital, clinic, school, and asylum, as integral to a philosophy that acknowledges the importance of space in the assertion of power. Furthermore, as Jeremy Black has observed (1997: 18), Foucault's work relies on spatial metaphors for its account of the relationship between knowledge and power, as we see in his frequent references to space, networks, and boundaries.

for an understanding of Ghosh's novel. As this chapter makes clear, Ghosh seeks to re-entwine space and time in his narrative, giving each aspect equal prominence.

Soja also suggests that space has three different manifestations,⁹ and I would argue that this is borne out in the novel. First, in commonsense perspective it is a given, relatively unchanging physical reality that has a profound effect on its inhabitants. This is demonstrated to some degree in *The Shadow Lines* when the narrator's family goes to visit a poor relation. A description is given of an appalling slum adjacent to her house, which illustrates the detrimental effects environment can have on the individual:

The ground fell away sharply from the edges of the building and then levelled out into a patchwork of stagnant pools, dotted with islands of low, raised ground. Clinging to these islands were little clumps of shanties, their beaten tin roofs glistening rustily in the midday sun. The pools were black, covered with a sludge so thick that it had defeated even the ubiquitous carpets of water hyacinth. I could see women squatting at the edges of the pools, splashing with both hands to drive back the layers of sludge, scooping up the cleaner water underneath to scrub their babies and wash their clothes and cooking utensils. There was a factory beyond, surrounded by a very high wall. I could see only its long, saw-toothed steel roof and its chimneys, thrusting up smoke that was as black as the sludge below. Running along the factory wall was a dump of some kind; small hillocks of some black and gravelly substance sloped down from it towards the sludge-encrusted pools. Shading my eyes, I saw that there were a number of moving figures dotted over those slopes. They were very small at that distance, but I could tell they had sacks slung over their shoulders. They were picking bits of rubble off the slopes and dropping them into their sacks. I could only see them when they moved; when still, they disappeared completely — they were perfectly camouflaged, like chameleons, because everything on them, their clothes, their sacks, their skins, was the uniform matt black of the sludge in the pools (*SL*, 133).

In this passage the overwhelming impression is of filth — an all-enveloping black sludge that destroys even the hardiest plants, contaminates the water supply, and stains its human inhabitants a 'uniform matt black'. There is a lack of quarantining between clean and unclean activities, so that women are reduced to finding the least dirty part of the pool to wash their clothes and babies in. The women's matter-of-fact use of polluted water for cooking and cleaning indicates a stoical acceptance of their insalubrious environment. Workers are also depicted moving unemotionally through

⁹ He makes a tripartite distinction between 'space *per se*, space as a contextual given, and socially-based spatiality' (Soja, 1989: 79). He is interested in the way in which space is primordially given, yet is also an effect of social production and imaginative construction.

the grime picking up rubble, which they can presumably use to eke out a meagre living. The narrator can only discern these labourers when they move, since they are camouflaged against the black sludge ‘like chameleons’. The fact that the slum people blend so perfectly with the mire in which they live indicates that environment, whether benign or hostile, inexorably shapes the individual.

Even though the slum evidently has a massive impact on its current residents, it would be a mistake to construe it as a predestined, unchanging, or unchangeable environment. Ghosh’s narrator is at pains to emphasize that the noxious black sludge is man-made, having been produced by a factory in the middle of the slums. This building, largely hidden from view but with a menacing ‘saw-toothed roof’ and a chimney coughing up clouds of black smoke, is clearly representative of an industry that has generated the pollution. The fact that the environmental devastation is man-made suggests a second manifestation of space. Space — particularly urban space — is a socially manipulated, changeable material that is produced as much as it produces. As Soja writes, ‘[s]pace in itself may be primordially given, but the organization, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience’ (1989: 79 – 80). Both Soja and his theoretical forerunner Henri Lefebvre write compelling accounts of the ways in which urban spatial planning is intimately related to ideology and methods of social control. Yet both theorists recognize that the attempts of the powerful to monopolize the social production of space are never entirely successful. The intentions of town planners are modified or subverted by the uses locals make of their space ‘on the ground’, and city dwellers have varying degrees of agency to transform their surroundings.

We need only look at the depiction of London’s Brick Lane district in *The Shadow Lines* to see that space can be radically re-constructed by its residents. It should be noted, however, that economic migrants in London have a greater capacity to change their environment than the impoverished inhabitants of a Calcutta slum, and that the two examples are not taken to be equivalent. The narrator had imagined Brick Lane to be composed of ‘small red-brick houses jostling together, cramped, but each with its own little handkerchief-garden and flowers in its window sills’ (*SL*, 100). When he gets to the street, he finds instead that:

I had no means of recognising the place I saw; it did not belong anywhere I had ever been. I walked ahead of Ila and Nick in a trance, looking at the Bengali neon-signs above the shops that lined the lane, staring into display windows lined with the latest Bengali film magazines, reading the posters that had been slapped on those walls of aged London brick — stern grey anti-racism posters issued by an iridescent spectrum of the left-wing, buried now under a riot of posters advertising the very newest Hindi films — listening to quick exchanges in a dozen dialects of Bengali as people hurried past me, laughing and chattering, with their fingers curled into the sleeves of their anoraks, like shoppers at Gariahat on a cold winter's morning. I stopped to sniff the fragrance of *rosogollas* wafting out of a sweet-shop and waved to Ila and Nick to hurry. She laughed when she saw me gazing greedily into the shop. Exactly like that sweet-shop at the corner of Gole Park, she said, isn't it? And so it was, with exactly the same laminated counters and plastic tables; exactly the same except that it was built into a terrace of derelict eighteenth-century London houses (*SL*, 100).

In this passage the urban landscape of the imperial centre, London, is being altered almost beyond recognition by its immigrants. Brick Lane during the Second World War was a bohemian but largely white area, and this was appropriately where the left-wing radicals, Dan, Francesca, Mike, and Alan lived. Yet when the narrator reaches this area of the capital in the late 1970s, it has become a Bengali enclave. Very few shop signs are in English, the narrator hears 'a dozen dialects of Bengali' as he passes through the streets, and the latest Hindi and Bengali films are advertised. The fly-posters adorning the 'walls of aged London brick' speak volumes about how much this area of London is changing. The narrator notices a palimpsest of posters, where 'stern grey anti-racism' notices — presumably posted there by the predominantly white members of left-wing organizations — are overlaid by a colourful 'riot' of Hindi film posters. Towards the end of the passage, the narrator can almost imagine himself in Calcutta. People hurrying down the road cheerfully hiding their fingers in their jacket sleeves to keep warm reminds the narrator of 'shoppers at Gariahat on a cold winter's morning'. He is also amazed to see a shop that is almost an exact replica of one in Gole Park, but grafted onto 'a terrace of derelict eighteenth-century London houses'. The juxtaposition of *rosogollas* amongst crumbling London brick, and the intermingling of Bollywood posters with humourless Marxist tracts indicates that space is a socially pliant, malleable substance, subject to manipulation by the changing composition of its residents.

The unruly collage of posters serves as a useful metaphor for the changing face of Spitalfields, the district of London in which Brick Lane is located. Spitalfields has a history of housing immigrants and refugees, from the Huguenots in the eighteenth

century and Jewish and Irish settlers in the nineteenth century, to the post-war stream of Bengali immigrants who now make up to between sixty and eighty percent of the population. Ghosh alludes to the layers of migrant history in Nick's comment that the local mosque 'used to be a synagogue when this place was a Jewish area' (*SL*, 101). Since the onset of decolonization, Britain has of course witnessed a process of what Louise Bennett (1966) ironically termed 'colonisation in reverse', whereby migrants from the colonies have moved to the former colonial centre. Yet Jane M. Jacobs's research into immigration in the Spitalfields area (1996) suggests that this has proved a far from liberatory experience, and that overcrowding, homelessness, and racial harassment have dogged Bengali settlers since the 1970s. Gentrifying schemes to renovate the area's Georgian houses and large-scale development projects have forced many Bengalis out of their homes or businesses, even though the same developers claim to speak for Bengali interests. The far-right British National Party has made Brick Lane a target in its campaign of racial hatred, and the murder of a Bengali clothing worker in 1978 served to politicize the Bengali community (Jacobs, 1996: 91). The Left saw the tensions in Spitalfields as an opportunity to consolidate local support, and socialist organizations moved in, claiming to act on behalf of the Bengalis in the face of racism and the incursions of big business. Yet, as Jacobs shows, the Left has structured an image of the Bengali community as a symbol of multiculturalism and working-class industry that is commensurate with its vision of a tolerant Englishness. She argues that the Bengali community 'often slipped outside of the Left's constructs of it' (1996: 97). Many Bengalis are enthusiastic entrepreneurs, and their business aspirations sit uneasily with the Left's need to position them as an idyllic, pre-capitalist community. Ghosh's Brick Lane, then, is an accurate depiction of the way in which space becomes a battleground fought over by combatants with different residential ideals and competing visions of Britain. His image of 'stern grey anti-racism posters' competing for space on the eighteenth-century walls with advertisements for Bengali businesses encapsulates the continuing tensions in Spitalfields over identification within space.

The third way in which we experience space is through what Fredric Jameson terms 'cognitive mapping' (1984: 89). Each of us, Jameson argues, has our own mental map of the city we live in; we position our subjective consciousness within 'unlived, abstract conceptions of the geographic totality' (1984: 90). Elsewhere,

marshalling the work of Kevin Lynch, he acknowledges that our mental maps are often ‘garbled’ or distorted reflections of cultural biases (1988: 353). Jameson does not pursue his notion of a geography of the mind in psychological terms, preferring instead to discuss what happens to cognitive mapping in the protean postmodern city. However, his conception of cognitive mapping is insightful for my purposes because it serves as a reminder that space is as much created by the imagination as by town planners. This is illustrated by returning to the novel’s depiction of slums, as these assume even more horrific proportions in people’s thoughts than they do in reality. The narrator’s aunt hurries him away from his view of the slum, warning him not to look there because ‘[i]t’s dirty!’ (*SL*, 133). The narrator realizes that most Indians are affected by the presence of such slums on the margins of their cognitive maps:

It was true of course that I could not see that landscape or anything like it from my own window, but its presence was palpable everywhere in our house; I had grown up with it. It was that landscape that lent the note of hysteria to my mother’s voice when she drilled me for my examinations; it was to those slopes she pointed when she told me that if I didn’t study hard I would end up over *there*, that the only weapon people like us had was our brains and if we didn’t use them like claws to cling to what we’d got, that was where we’d end up, marooned in that landscape: I knew perfectly well that all it would take was a couple of failed examinations to put me where our relative was, in permanent proximity to that blackness: that landscape was the quicksand that seethed beneath the polished floors of our house; it was that sludge which gave our genteel decorum its fine edge of frenzy (*SL*, 134).

Shanty towns are used to construct cautionary tales for middle-class children, promoting a strong work ethic and encouraging the pursuit of education. In a country such as India, which does not have a welfare state, the fear of losing one’s place in society and ending up in deprived space has great potency. The fact that the narrator’s relative lives in close proximity to the slum, and that her own apartment is shabby and claustrophobic, illustrates the precariousness of social and economic status. She reacts to the slum by mentally cordoning it off and viewing it as a space that should not be visited or even observed.

Jameson’s theory of cognitive mapping also suggests that different cultures and individuals experience space in contrasting ways, according to the projections, scales, and catchment areas of their mental maps. A person from a rich country may not feel the same fear and repulsion towards slums that is experienced by an Indian, whose mental maps have been shaped by these ‘no-go’ areas. I will illustrate the fact that

people cognitively map the world in vastly different ways by examining the contrasting spatial perceptions of several characters from *The Shadow Lines*. Before doing so, I would emphasize that the manifestations of space outlined above — physical, social, and mental — are not discrete, static entities, but rather feed into each other, transforming and being transformed in their turn. The recurring example of the slum has shown that space can be at once formative, pliable, and imagined.

In *The Shadow Lines*, different characters perceive space in entirely different ways. Ila is the character who perceives space in the most Western, empiricist way. She is irritated by the narrator's fascination with imaginative geographies, which she calls 'fairylands' (SL, 24), and argues that he is mystifying space. At one point she exclaims, 'why not just take the world as it is?' (SL, 31), and this indicates her commonsense faith in the veracity of what she sees with her eyes. And yet her contempt for the narrator's stories and her professed belief in 'reality' is undercut by her imaginative desire to rewrite her own experiences in London. During the children's game of Houses, Ila tells the story of Magda, a blue-eyed, blonde-haired girl, who clearly represents the person she wants to be. Despite her Aryan colouring, Magda is bullied by racist children, who call her 'wog' and 'nig-nog', but she is rescued by Nick Price, who confounds the bullies and takes her home. Yet Ila's tears and May's later conflicting account indicate that this story is wish-fulfillment, as Nick was ashamed to be associated with an Indian and neglected to defend Ila against her tormentors. Ila is no less susceptible to stories than the narrator, although the stories she puts her faith in are tales of romantic love and of friendship with rich and powerful children in international schools. But she views herself as a practical, no-nonsense person, and orientates herself in her peripatetic childhood by constructing a myth of foreign places based on tangible markers such as the Ladies' toilets in the aseptic environment of airport transit lounges. Ila's spatial perceptions derive from Western realism, and she believes that space can be depicted unproblematically through mimesis. However, it is now generally recognized that realism is as much of a fabrication as other, more overtly fanciful modes of representation. As the narrator points out, Ila's 'practical, bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more nor less true, only very far apart' (SL, 21).

Ila's attitude towards space is also a product of the 'temporal master-narrative, [...] [the] historical but not yet comparably geographical imagination' that Soja (1989: 11) argues has dominated Western thought for the last two centuries. This is demonstrated half-way through the novel, when the narrator tells Ila the story of the deaths of Tresawsen, Mike, and Francesca during the Second World War. Ila's reaction is to compare their situation with her own; she can understand how they lived and died, she claims, because her life in a Marxist commune in London is similar. The narrator 'marvel[s] at the easy arrogance with which she believed that her own experience could encompass other moments simply because it had come later; that times and places are the same because they happen to look alike, like airport lounges' (*SL*, 103 – 104). Irritated, the narrator challenges her comparison, and Ila replies calmly that, like Tresawsen and his friends, her political group 'know[s] that in the future political people everywhere will look to us — in Nigeria, India, Malaysia, wherever'. The narrator couldn't possibly understand, she breezes on, as 'nothing really important' happens where he lives. She dismisses the 'famines and riots and disasters' of India as 'local things', arguing that *real* history, the history of 'revolutions or anti-fascist wars' (*SL*, 104) only unfolds in the West. In this scene, Ila's views may be read as a caricature of the historicist critical discourse of the West. Space to Ila is transparent, and easily overlooked in favour of time and History. To her, history takes place in the West, and activists in other places, such as Nigeria, India, and Malaysia, can only look to political leaders in centres like London in order to imitate their agency.

The narrator's grandmother is as practical and impatient with dreamers as Ila, but due to her experiences she has a much less confident attitude towards space. She was born in Dhaka but moved to Calcutta on Partition, and this gives her the anxious awareness that space is not a given, that it can change its character overnight. When she goes back to Dhaka to rescue a dying relative she imagines, no doubt spurred by her nationalist beliefs, that the border between India and East Pakistan will be visible from the aeroplane. Her discovery that it is not so puzzles and upsets her. She exclaims, 'if there's no difference both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then — partition and all the killing and everything — if there isn't something in between?' (*SL*, 151). The

grandmother's desire to see some perceptible evidence of the boundaries separating Indian Bengal and East Pakistan indicates her need for certainties in a spatially unstable world. Later, the narrator realizes that she has also been worrying about what to put under 'place of birth' on her disembarkation form. The prospect of putting 'Dhaka' on the form 'worried her in the same way that dirty schoolbooks worried her', because it is a birthplace that is 'messily at odds' with her present nationality (*SL*, 152). Tha'mma's feeling that her relationship with the space around her is precarious is enunciated in a verbal slip she makes, confusing the verbs 'to come' and 'to go'. The young narrator and Ila delight in the schoolteacher's rare mistake and it enters family legend. In time, however, the narrator realizes the predicament out of which Tha'mma's blunder arose. 'Every language', he argues, 'assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all; a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movement' (*SL*, 153). Tha'mma's attitude towards space is that of a migrant; she cannot talk about 'coming' or 'going', occupying as she does what Said has delineated as a migrant's space 'between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages' (1993: 403).

The final character whose attitude towards space I want to examine is Tridib. Of all the people portrayed in the novel, his perception of space comes closest to that of the spatial philosophers discussed earlier. He believes that space is not a reality existing 'out there' that can be represented mimetically. Rather, he contends that each individual creates a different version of space in his or her imagination. Tridib's beliefs about space are to some extent ironized in the narrative. His death is something that cannot be imagined away, and it occurs in a threatening space of riots and communal hatred. His absorption in books and the realm of the imagination, it is suggested, have left him unaware of the political upheavals in Dhaka, and it is this that makes him underestimate the danger he faces.

And yet Tridib's view of space is also shown to have value, as he interprets the world in a refreshingly original way. His unexpected reaction to a story Ila's mother tells about the house she inhabited in Sri Lanka makes a lasting impression on the narrator. Ila's mother recalls that one day a snake intruded into the pastoral calm of

her garden and prepared to strike her young daughter. Ila was rescued by the family's pet monitor lizard, which bit through its leash and chased the snake away. While the rest of the family are preoccupied with horror at the thought of Ila's narrow escape, Tridib responds to a minor detail in the story: the disclosure that houses in Sri Lanka have sloping roofs. He invites the narrator to imagine living in a house without a flat roof to play on, and soon the narrator begins to understand:

I puzzled over what Tridib had said, and in a while I began to imagine the sloping roofs of Colombo for myself: the pattern they made if one wheeled in the sky above them, how sharply they rose if one looked at them from below, the mossiness of their tiles when one saw them close up, from a first floor window, and soon I felt that I too could see how much more interesting they were than the snake and the lizard, in the very ordinariness of their difference (*SL*, 29).

Once more a house becomes a locus for the imagination. The narrator envisions the sloping roofs from different angles, in close-up, and from a panoramic vantage point. He discovers that pointed roofs would make more of an impact on life in Sri Lanka than aberrant events such as the appearance of snakes or lizards. Everyone else sees Sri Lanka as a foreign place replete with strange animals, but Tridib views it as space, focusing upon the patterns its roofs make in the sky. His vision is filtered through the seemingly prosaic domestic place of roofs, yet 'the very ordinariness of their difference' fills the narrator with wonder. Tridib, as the narrator says, 'had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with' (*SL*, 20). By teaching him to notice small details and use desire to allow himself to imagine the scene, Tridib shows the narrator that the imagination is a serious instrument for seeing the world.

This lesson is inextricable from another of Tridib's beliefs: that all knowledge is imaginary, created out of desire, and dependent on stories. The narrator reports Tridib's argument that 'we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly [...] [because] if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free of other people's inventions' (*SL*, 31). Here, knowledge is characterized as 'invention', drawn from an artificially constructed story rather than an objective, verifiable collection of facts. If we interpret the phrase 'other people's inventions' as referring, in part, to the West,¹⁰ then this suggests that structures of dominance,

¹⁰ Ila certainly interprets Tridib's comment in this way; she asks the narrator rather scornfully whether Tridib felt he had to be free of other people's inventions '[b]ecause of the Raj?' (*SL*, 32).

particularly the colonial ‘desiring-machine’,¹¹ have allowed certain ways of knowing and seeing to be seen as natural and normative. Tridib argues that to combat these pervasive ways of seeing, we should try precisely to chart our own imaginary territories (*SL*, 29). Ila’s, Tha’mma’s, and Tridib’s contrasting perceptions of space unsettle the notion that one can ever depict space in its ‘true’ form: the same landscape is interpreted by several observers in entirely different ways.

MEASURING SPACE: MAPS, ‘CARTOGRAPHIC AGGRESSION’ AND THE RADCLIFFE COMMISSION

Having examined the ways in which space manifests itself and is variously interpreted by different people, I now turn to some concrete ways in which space has been mapped in South Asia. In this section I uncover the history of India’s Partition and its repercussions, which, I argue, is always-already present beneath *The Shadow Lines*’ representations of space. Maps, as we shall see, are only capable of representing space in limited ways, but such limitations were rarely acknowledged by imperialists, who saw cartography as a form of knowledge that the West had come close to mastering. Out of the Raj’s acquisitive and inflexible fetishization of maps came the bloody scramble to fix India’s borderlines in 1947. Referring only to maps and statistics, Radcliffe created deeply flawed borderlines that divided the subcontinent and continue to cause instability and economic depression. Ghosh implicitly critiques the history of mapping in the subcontinent by offsetting the rigidity of these borderlines with the image of accommodating circles.

In *Countdown*, a book about the subcontinental nuclear arms race, Ghosh describes the ludicrous ‘cartographic aggression’ (*Cd*, 37) that has led to Indian and Pakistani forces fighting an expensive war high up in the Karakoram mountains over a piece of infertile frozen land that neither side really wants. Maps, Ghosh explains, were central in triggering this Hellenesque dispute, because the Indian government was incensed by American mountaineering maps that delineated firm borders where previously none had been thought necessary. The scene in *Countdown* is emblematic of Ghosh’s attitude towards cartography, because in it he argues that the ‘notional lines’ on maps are frequently the cause, rather than the result, of conflict (*Cd*, 37). In

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, 1984; Young, 1995: 98; 175.

his essay 'Simulacra and Simulations', Baudrillard discusses Jorge Luis Borges's famous story in which cartographers draw up a map so detailed that it is an exact, full-scale representation of the land. He adduces from Borges's story the notion that in the postmodern age the simulacrum has more potency than the real: '[t]he territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory — *precession of simulacra* — it is the map that engenders the territory' (Baudrillard, 1988: 166). In Ghosh's representations of the mapping and remapping of the Indian subcontinent, the map also precedes the territory, and geopolitical symbiosis is systematically dismantled by both colonial and indigenous cartographers.

'Cartographic aggression' has had many different manifestations in the subcontinent, but it was arguably first introduced to India by the British. Western inventions for measuring space, such as maps, and such units of measurement as miles and feet or degrees of latitude and longitude, were used by the early imperialists to assert their power and superiority over non-Western peoples. Michael Adas demonstrates that British administrators in India believed that their ability 'to overcome geographic barriers and in effect shrink space', through technological innovations such as the railways and the telegraph, 'became the most prominent manifestation of [...] [the] perception in which Europeans believed themselves to differ from and exceed all other peoples' (1989: 259). Although the ancient Hindus had developed 'numerous instruments of celestial observation, [and] invented intricate systems of measurement and enumeration' (Adas, 1989: 246), modern Indians were viewed by their British colonizers as having deficient, childish ideas of space. Macaulay sneers at the perceived shortcomings of Indian cartographies in his 'Minute on Indian Education', arguing that Indian geography is 'made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter' (1995: 429). This statement indicates the contempt prevalent among Europeans for perceptions of space that were at odds with their own territorial and acquisitive spatial worldview. As Joseph E. Schwartzberg has shown, Indians were perceived as having 'no cartography to speak of' (1992: 296). In their drive to annex new territories, imperialists ignored or belittled non-Western cartographic traditions. Indigenous place-names, agricultural demarcations, and environmental practices were replaced in the interests of 'progress'. If non-Western peoples lacked a sophisticated spatial awareness, they were also, it was argued, incapable of exploiting their land to its full potential. This provided an excuse for colonial invasion (see AlSayyad, 1992:

3), and geography was thus one of the most important branches of Western knowledge to be used as a weapon in the colonial battle.

What the British failed to acknowledge was that the development of sophisticated mapping and measuring techniques was a product of the imperial drive to exploit the world's resources. As Lloyd A. Brown points out, countries need an incentive to produce maps:

The nations that have been most interested in the establishment of colonies and a world trade have contributed more than others to the establishment of a science of cartography; those nations which have resisted exploitation and the intrusion of outsiders, regardless of their mission, have hindered the cause (1949: 11).

From about 300 to 1200AD, as Brown illustrates, cartography was actively discouraged by the Western Church, which viewed map-making as 'impious if not downright sinful', as its discoveries might contradict liturgical lore (1949: 7). In medieval times, Arab cartographers produced far more accurate maps of the world than their 'pious' European counterparts (Tibbetts, 1992), but the roles were reversed as Europe began to expand. It is now generally recognized that the West's advances in map-making went hand in hand with European expansion. Maps, as J.B. Harley argues, were 'weapons of imperialism'; they proved to be tools as crucial to the imperial project as more openly aggressive 'guns and warships' (1988: 282).

In times of war, information about enemy lands acquires immense value. From the nineteenth century onwards, there was an international race to collect topographical data, and accurate maps were seen almost as guaranteeing military victory (see Brown, 1949: 280 – 81). Maps serve to dehumanize targets in warfare, allowing soldiers to plan attacks on enemy land in an unemotive way by making landscapes appear empty of people, as *terra nullius*. Graphic images also have the power to present ideas in a memorable and easily comprehensible manner, so maps are also very useful during times of war or colonial expansion as forms of propaganda. As John Pickles demonstrates (1992: 197), makers of propaganda maps can exaggerate scale, use threatening or benign colours, and position certain geographical features at the centre of the map and confine others to the margin. All these techniques have a visual impact on the map's recipients, convincing them of the validity of the map's message. Yet while the map enabled Europe both practically and ideologically to

colonize huge swathes of land, the Europeans' possession of this land also allowed them to make ever more detailed maps, in a self-perpetuating process.

Most people see mapmaking as a science, predicated upon geometry, surveying, and topographical fact. From this perspective, maps are assessed as being more or less accurate depictions of a static landscape, and it is this evaluation that has allowed the judgement of Indian maps as inferior. However, recent theory suggests that no single cartographic strategy is sufficient to explain the manifold meanings of space. Spatial understandings from different cultures should be taken into account to produce a spectrum of mapping standards, rather than the present absolute frontier that divides 'true' Western maps from 'false' non-European cartographies. Just as the sciences are being problematized by theorists who argue that they are socially constructed discourses entangled within power relations (see Chapters One and Four), so too cartography's scientific status is beginning to be challenged.

Even the most 'scientific' maps are deeply imbued with politics. As small-scale models of space they are inevitably selective, and any map-maker is faced with decisions about what to show and what to leave out. Maps are always produced with a purpose, so that military maps, maps for walkers or road-users, weather maps, and maps of the solar system all have different scales and emphases.¹² Even such seemingly innocuous details as colour scheme, symbols, and captions convey certain values (Black, 1997: 17). Maps also contain silences; they omit things that do not fit into the orderly world of cartographic representation,¹³ and their emphasis on certain topographical features, such as roads, leads to a neglect of other aspects of the landscape, such as the vertical perspective. Yet maps tend to convey a misleading impression of certainty, obfuscating the fact that any map is just one story about the

¹² In Michael Ondaatje's recent novel *Anil's Ghost*, he describes the maps that have been drawn up to chart different aspects of the same Sri Lankan territory: maps of its population, birdlife, flora, fauna, rainfall, etc. Yet he observes that atlases contain 'No depiction of human life' (2000: 40). The final section of his novel appears to be an attempt to expand on this dehumanized kind of mapping.

¹³ For example, Zbigniew Bialas looks at maps in the 1980s and early 1990s that showed Johannesburg but entirely ignored the existence of Soweto. Bialas explains this omission in the following way: '[s]ince order is believed to be a necessary condition for making a structure functional and a state of minimum tension is a prerequisite for the survival of the underlying order, the unnecessary fact (Soweto) is thus modified back into nothingness' (1999: 26).

world. Examples of cartographic misrepresentations include the inevitable distortions that result from the flattening out of the spherical world onto a two-dimensional map, and the arbitrary but revealing decision to place North at the top of all maps (Hall, 1992: 369 - 402). It is tempting to view maps as simple depictions of the known 'fact' of the earth, but as Stephen Hall points out, '[m]aps not only shape worldviews and cultural values; they perpetuate those values in powerful visual vignettes' (1992: 378). Even now that it is well known that the standard Mercator projection of the globe places Europe at its centre and grossly underestimates the size of Africa and Asia, the mind retains an enduring image of that world and its assumptions.

As well as emphasizing their visual impact, recent scholarship suggests that maps are powerful, value-laden forms of knowledge; they are texts that may be read. Rather than seeing them as inert, mimetic charts of geographical regions, we should interpret maps as 'contributing to dialogue in a socially constructed world' (Harley, 1988: 278). If maps are texts, they are therefore subjects for deconstruction just like literature, art, and popular culture. Mobilizing the theories of Derrida, Barthes, and Lyotard, postmodern geographers have decoded maps, identifying in them a language of power, an iconography that slants their vision of the world, and an intertextuality in which new maps build on the assumptions of previous cartographies. Maps are now scrutinized for rhetoric and metaphor 'where previously scholars had found only measurement and topography' (Harley, 1992: 233).

Maps reify a certain view of space; it is seen as a tangible territory, to be measured, divided up, and ruled over. As Black argues, maps usually emphasize the construct of the nation-state:

the map of the world, or a region thereof, divides up its land space (although not generally the seas) in terms of territorial control and political authority: the map as assertion of sovereignty. States, such as France and Germany, are the building blocks of such a map. [...] [O]ther methods of organizing space at this scale, indeed of presenting political space, are ignored (1997: 12).

Even the most seemingly apolitical map, such as a weather map, uses nation-states as its 'building blocks'. This makes the state appear to be a natural unit, ignoring its relatively recent construction and the oppression that may have gone into the definition of its borders. Too much internal coherence is given to the state, which

often has very distinct areas, characterized by differences in languages, customs, and religions. Regions are subsumed to the state, which is seen as homogeneous, and correspondences or shared histories across frontiers are occluded from cartographies.

Maps divide by their construction of borders. These borders may ignore religious, cultural, and linguistic connections, as well as frequently creating immense practical problems. Frontiers did of course exist in the non-Western world prior to colonialism, but they were often shifting, multiple, or unfixed. From Western Europe, particularly from the eighteenth century onwards, there came a drive to locate borders more rigidly. And yet maps do not simply measure existing frontiers; as we have seen in the example from *Countdown*, they can also precipitate frontier conflicts. Uncertainty is anathema to cartographers so precise frontiers, which define and separate identities, are drawn up. The map both reflects the power of the nation-state and sustains the image of the state as a 'natural' geographical formation. Maps create even as they distort; the very act of depicting something on a map validates it and gives it a coherence it may not possess. Indeed, the drawing of maps of nation-states and their frontiers can *precede* the existence of the state, as I shall shortly demonstrate in the case of Pakistan, which was first formulated on paper, and then imagined into existence. Thus, even when they are made with the purest of motives, maps are inextricably bound up with the mechanics of power.

The Shadow Lines does not contain any visual maps,¹⁴ but its landscapes are precisely charted. The novel can be used to navigate one's way around parts of London and Calcutta, such is its exactitude. For example, the narrator often finds himself being propelled by the force of his desire towards Ila's house in Stockwell, and his journeys are meticulously described. Starting in Soho or near Trafalgar Square he would find himself walking along the Embankment, ending up at Lambeth Bridge, by which time he would decide '[s]ince I've come this far I may as well walk to Stockwell and visit Ila' (*SL*, 95). The spatial detail given in this passage serves several

¹⁴ Such novels as Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, and Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind of Willows*, in contrast, provide detailed maps of the imaginary lands chronicled in their narratives (Black, 1997). In *Territorial Disputes*, Graham Huggan suggests that the inclusion of maps, usually at the frontispiece, in literary texts causes these maps to function in an 'iconic' way. 'The process of matching map to text, or text to map', he argues, 'involves the reader in a comparative activity that may bring to the surface flaws or discrepancies in the process of mimetic representation' (1994: 22).

functions. The resonances of the famous London place-names help to locate the narrative richly in geographic space, and to evoke the narrator's excitement at being in the colonial centre. Indeed, later in the novel Ila mocks the narrator for his insistence on always meeting at famous London monuments and sounding like 'a script for a bad film' (*SL*, 179). In both the London and Calcutta sections of the novel, Ghosh self-consciously draws attention to landmarks and famous districts, making us interrogate the way we orientate ourselves in urban space with reference to sights that trigger the imagination. Furthermore, the narrative's topographical concreteness chimes with Tridib's assertion that the imagination should be used with precision. The novel's construction has clearly involved a great deal of spatial research. In order to describe space so fully, Ghosh must have consulted maps, read up on architecture and monuments, and surveyed existing geographical locations. Implicit in the novel is the notion that the movements of fictional characters are as necessary to map as those of historical leaders or armies. If, as I have suggested, maps are highly selective and constructed depictions of space, then fictional mappings may be equally valid ways of looking at space.

Ghosh does not confine his debate about maps and mapping to his own fiction, however. In his examination of the legacy of India's Partition, he evokes the one event in the subcontinent's history in which the destructive inflexibility of maps and their borderlines has been most graphically demonstrated. In the following analysis of Partition I will focus on its impact on two states, Bengal and Kashmir, as these are the two areas with which Ghosh is concerned in *The Shadow Lines*. The concept of India as two nation-states, one for Hindus and one for Muslims, was first articulated by the poet Iqbal as late as 1930. His idea was developed by a Cambridge student, Chaudhri Rahmat Ali. In 1933 Ali coined the name 'Pakistan', an acronym of the nation's five projected regions, which also means 'land of the pure'. Significantly, Bengal was not included in the acronym, and indeed was not envisaged as being part of Pakistan at this developmental stage. When it was pointed out to Ali (a Punjabi) that he had omitted this important Muslim-majority state, he invented the term 'Bangistan' (Kulke and Rothermund, 1998: 283), but his delayed realization foreshadows Bengal's uneasy and short-lived incorporation within the Pakistani state. The Muslim League did not adopt Ali's idea of a separate state for Muslims until 1940, and even then Jinnah kept his demands for Pakistan deliberately vague, in a strategy that many historians have

seen as a way of bargaining for regional Muslim autonomy within a federal India. Despite the subtle ambiguity of Jinnah's 1940 Lahore Resolution, it is possible to discern that at this stage he did not necessarily see Bengal as being an integral part of Pakistan. In the Resolution he delineates an inchoate plan for 'autonomous national States', which would 'allow the major nations separate homelands' (1994: 55), but he refuses to specify how many nations or states would be involved in this process.

By early 1947 Jinnah's plans for Pakistan were clearer: he was playing for the five states stipulated by Ali: Punjab, Kashmir, NWFP, Sindh, and Baluchistan, and in addition, Bengal, the state that Ali had overlooked. He was still hoping to have these states in their entirety, however, disdainfully viewing proposals for the partitioning of Bengal and Punjab as offering 'a maimed, mutilated and moth-eaten Pakistan' (quoted in Bose and Jalal, 1998: 179). Even in the final months before Partition, there are indications that Jinnah would have been prepared to relinquish his demands for Bengal as part of Pakistan, so long as it would have prevented the province's dissection. In May 1947, the estranged Congress politician, Sarat Chandra Bose, and his unlikely ally, the communalist Muslim Chief Minister of the province, H.S. Suhrawardy, drew up plans for an autonomous, undivided Bengal. Jinnah was apparently more ready to countenance their proposal than the Congress High Command, who rejected outright the idea of Bengal becoming an independent, Muslim-majority state (Sherwani, 1986: 154 – 59). Contrary to popular perception,¹⁵ the research of recent scholars indicates that it was the Congress, rather than the Muslim League, that pushed for Partition (Bose and Jalal, 1998; Chatterji, 1994; Sherwani, 1986). Congress leaders changed their attitude towards Partition in the months before independence, deciding it was better to abandon Muslim-majority provinces they could never control, while retaining a strong central government, rather than permit the balkanization of India into alliances of small independent states with no strong centre. Another reason for Congress's ready acquiescence with the Partition plan was that many of the party's members believed that Pakistan would not survive long after its secession, and that its states would soon rejoin the Indian union (Lamb, 1991: 102 – 103). On the other

¹⁵ Most accounts of the Partition have assigned sole responsibility for the country's division to Jinnah and the Muslim League. Collins and Lapierre's journalistic history of Partition, *Freedom at Midnight* (1975), and Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* (1982), are just two examples of portrayals that adhere to the view of Jinnah as a megalomaniac evil genius who engineered the Partition to gain power.

hand, Jinnah, often seen as the architect of Partition, in fact resisted the 'truncated Pakistan' he was being offered almost to the end of the negotiations. Even an hour before the deadline to decide the country's fate, he was trying to persuade Mountbatten to allow him the Punjab and Bengal in their entirety. Only after being threatened with losing Pakistan altogether did he reluctantly agree to Partition according to the stipulated terms (Ahmed, 1997: 130).

When the decision to partition India was eventually reached, the British lawyer, Cyril Radcliffe, who headed the Boundary Commission that drew up the plans for the country's division, was chosen because his complete lack of local knowledge was thought to ensure his impartiality (Collins and Lapierre, 1975: 179). He arrived for the first time in India in July 1947 to make a decision that would impact on millions of people's fates. W.H. Auden satirizes the decision to send a non-Indian outsider to carve up the country in the final lines of his poem 'Partition':

Shut up in a lonely mansion, with police night and day
 Patrolling the gardens to keep assassins away,
 He got down to work, to the task of settling the fate
 Of millions. The maps at his disposal were out of date
 And the Census Returns almost certainly incorrect,
 But there was no time to check them, no time to inspect
 Contested areas. The weather was frightfully hot,
 And a bout of dysentery kept him constantly on the trot,
 But in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided,
 A continent for better or worse divided.
 The next day he sailed for England, where he quickly forgot
 The case, as a good lawyer must. Return would he not,
 Afraid, as he told his Club, that he might get shot (quoted in Bose and Jalal,
 1998: 189).

As Auden's poem suggests, Radcliffe worked in an isolated bungalow on the outskirts of Delhi, with only 'maps, population tables, and statistics' to help him decide on the division of land he had never seen (Collins and Lapierre, 1975: 211). The limitations of maps, which I have already discussed, presented the lawyer with many obstacles. By 1947, it was already well-known that maps were not sufficient on their own to create fair and coherent borderlines. As Lucy Chester points out, contemporary experts 'stress[ed] the importance of field surveys' (2000: 43), but Mountbatten's tight deadline prevented Radcliffe from consulting or drawing up any such surveys. Many historians are alert to the irony that Radcliffe never set eyes on the land he was engaged in trisecting.

The maps that he consulted frustrated him by their inaccuracy: he found, for example, that '[t]he Punjab's vital five rivers [...] had a curious tendency to stray as much as a dozen miles from the beds assigned them by the Punjab's vaunted engineering services' (Collins and Lapierre, 1975: 212). Maps and population tables were also distorted by both sides to convince him of the validity of their respective petitions for a greater share of the land. In addition, the rival claims of maps and population tables presented him with a tricky conundrum. Should he base his decision on the dictates of population, creating awkward enclaves that would be impossible to administer, or should he aim for geographical simplicity, at the cost of increasing migration, displacement, and violence? His own brief shed little light on the dilemma. In it the Boundary Commission was instructed 'to demarcate the boundaries of the two parts of Bengal on the basis of ascertaining the contiguous areas of Muslims and non-Muslims. In doing so, it [should] also take into account other factors' (Radcliffe, 1947: 1). It is remarkable that the phrase 'other factors' was never defined, and there has been bitter acrimony ever since as to whether these factors were intended to be geographical, economic, social, or political. In the end, Radcliffe opted for a boundary line that conceded more to geographical integrity than to population density, and the mass exodus that took place was thus larger and more violent than had been expected.

Kept secret until after Independence Day,¹⁶ Radcliffe's hurriedly created borderlines severed villages from their water-supplies, and divided regions that, despite their religious differences, were united by a common language, a shared economy, and similar customs. In both the Punjab and Bengal, Radcliffe faced immense difficulties in creating boundaries that would be acceptable to all sides and would not cause too many humanitarian or practical predicaments. In Bengal he identified the main problems as arising from the fact that '[t]he province offers few, if any, satisfactory natural boundaries, and its development has been on lines that do not well accord with a division by contiguous majority areas of Muslim and non-Muslim majorities' (Radcliffe, 1947: 2). Bengal's scarcity of topographical markers such as

¹⁶ Mountbatten wanted Radcliffe's plans for the division of the subcontinent to be carried out in a clandestine manner until after August 15, so that the Partition would not mar the Independence Day celebrations. Historians have criticized Mountbatten for fuelling tensions in the region. His preoccupation with secrecy inflamed the violence, they argue, as it allowed increasingly wild rumours about the proposed Boundary Awards to circulate (Ahmed, 1997: 141; Lamb, 1991: 101 – 102).

rivers and large cities made the decision perplexing, as there were no features that would act as 'natural boundaries'.¹⁷ In addition, Radcliffe's recognition that Bengal had developed in such a way that the state would not lend itself easily to division on communalist lines proved far-sighted. Bengal depended for its prosperity on the coadjuvancy of the business centre of Calcutta and the productive agricultural heartland of East Bengal. The British lawyer thus faced a grave dilemma as to which side Calcutta should be assigned to. The dictates of commerce seemed to suggest that Calcutta should remain in the eastern part of the province, but the city had a large Hindu population and any attempt to allocate it to Pakistan would have met with stiff resistance from India. In the end, after toying with the idea of the two states sharing their capital city, Radcliffe awarded Calcutta to India. His line in Bengal was fairly straight in its north-south axis, dividing the regions of Calcutta from Khulna in the south, and proceeding north up to the Himalayan foothills (see Plate 2).

As had been predicted, industry was badly damaged by the division; for example, the busy port of Calcutta was deprived of its main product for export, jute, which was produced in what became East Pakistan. Many of Calcutta and Bangladesh's current economic problems can be traced back to the artificial separation of the two interdependent regions. Radcliffe's Awards also caused great controversy among both religious communities. According to V.P. Menon, a senior Congress figure who was involved in the Partition negotiations at a high level, the Muslims 'deplored the loss of Calcutta, Murshidabad, and part of Nadia district'. The Hindus, on the other hand, regretted the loss of Khulna and the Chittagong district; complained that their share of Bengal had 'shrunk by about 4,000 square miles' compared with the notional division that had been agreed; and were disgusted by the fact that Darjeeling was left with barely any land to link it to the rest of West Bengal (1957: 402).

¹⁷ In the Punjab, in contrast, the five rivers that give the province its name provided invaluable markers around which Radcliffe structured his borderline. Radcliffe starts his description of the boundary in the Punjab with reference to a river: 'The boundary between East and West Punjab shall commence on the north at the point where the west branch of the Ujh river enters the Punjab Province from the State of Kashmir. The boundary shall follow the line of that river down the western boundary of the Pathankot Tahsil [...]' (1947: 10). This is not to suggest, however, that Radcliffe's task was easier in the Punjab than in Bengal. Although the Punjab's geographical features could be adapted more easily than Bengal's for a frontier, Radcliffe faced unique problems in the Punjab caused by the region's shared canal systems and rail and road infrastructure.

Plate 2

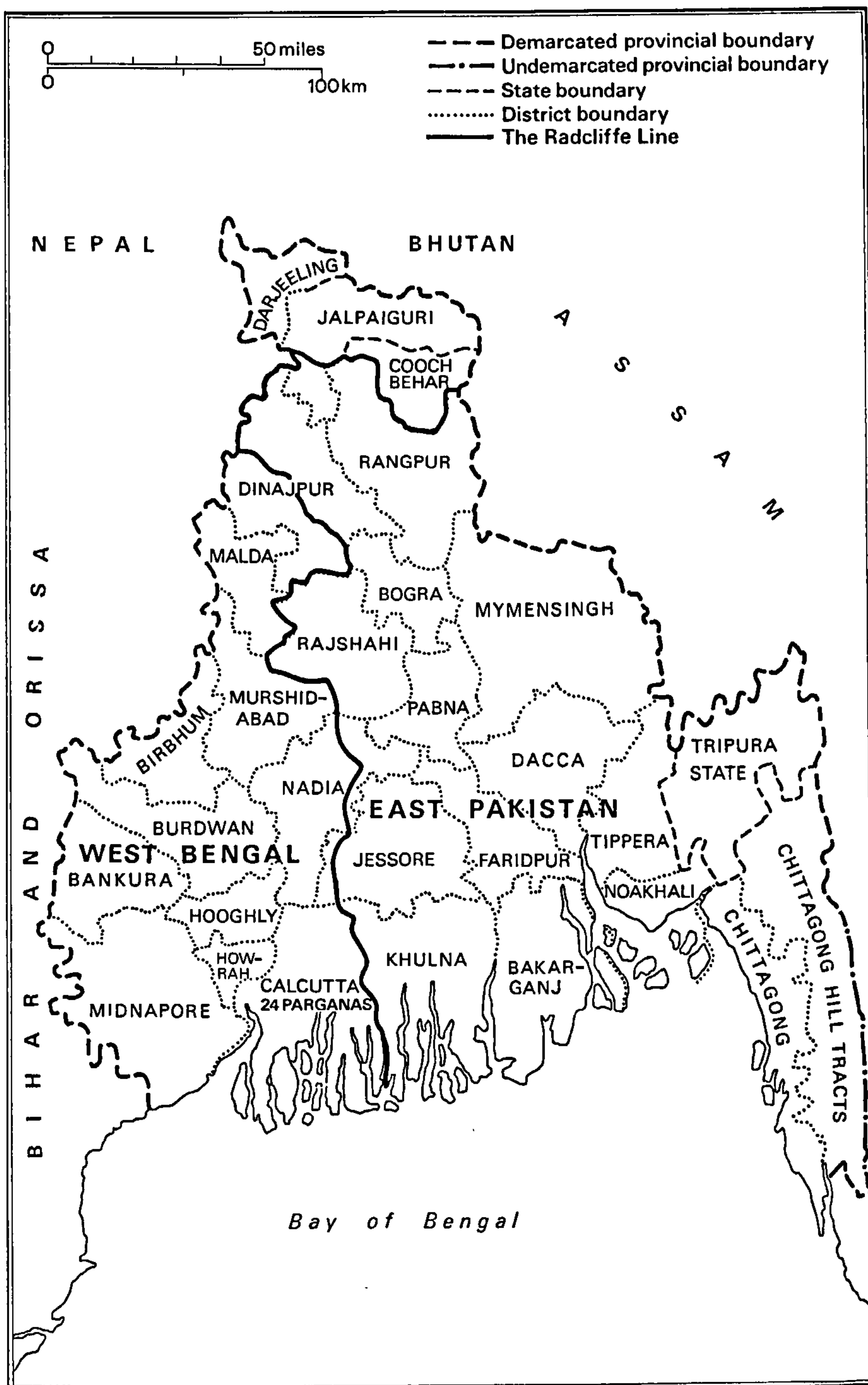


Plate 2. 'West Bengal and East Pakistan, 1947. The Radcliffe Line', in J. Chatterji. 1994. *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932 - 1947*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 258.

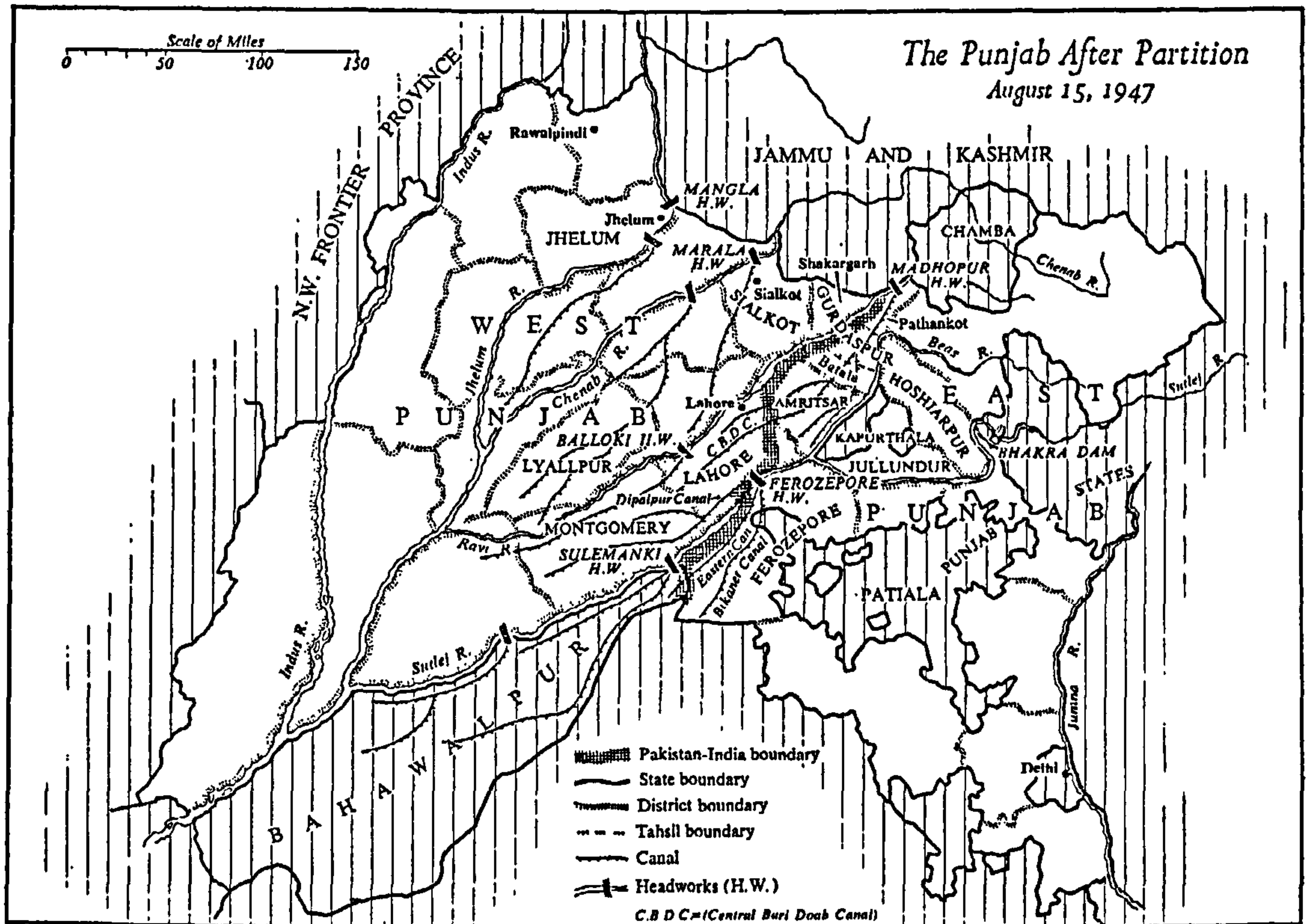


Plate 3. 'The Punjab after Partition. August 15, 1947', in C.M. Ali. 1967. *The Emergence of Pakistan*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 211.

Menon's description of the deep-felt bitterness that arose from the Awards indicates the thankless nature of Radcliffe's task. As Radcliffe recognized,¹⁸ his decision was never going to satisfy all parties.

The Boundary Commission faced another crucial and acrimonious decision about the highly coveted state of Kashmir. Pakistan seemed to have a more natural claim to Kashmir, which, though a princely state led by a Hindu Maharajah, had a clear Muslim majority population, and was geographically and culturally closer to Pakistan. Pakistani historians blame Radcliffe and Mountbatten for the loss of Kashmir. By allotting three out of the four *tehsils* of the Muslim-majority area of Gurdaspur to East Punjab, they argue that Radcliffe created a corridor from India to Kashmir, which allowed the state's appropriation (see Plate 3). There have even been quite plausible claims that Mountbatten interceded at the final hour, and forced Radcliffe to change his boundary line to give India access to Gurdaspur (Ahmed, 1997: 136 – 37; Sherwani, 1986: 173 – 79; Lamb, 1991: 111 – 17). If these allegations are correct, doubt is cast upon the supposed impartiality and legal integrity of the Boundary Awards.

Another problem which came to the surface years later was caused by the fact that Radcliffe did not extend his borderline through the uninhabitable glaciers of northern Kashmir, as he understandably did not foresee that this territory would ever be disputed. The logic in which simulacral maps assume more importance than the territories they represent has thus been taken to its extreme in the battle for Kashmir. The struggle for the high altitude no-man's land of the Siachen glacier was, as we have seen, precipitated by a dispute over the boundaries projected on highly specialized maps. In *Countdown* Ghosh demonstrates that more men are killed by the altitude and arctic conditions than by military hostilities, in this conflict over a piece of land which only has symbolic value. He describes the terrible sufferings of the soldiers in the glacier, many of whom go mad, some even ending up worshipping the helicopters that bring their supplies (*Cd*, 39). The comic-tragic situation in Kashmir is also that of the

¹⁸ In the Boundary Commission Report, he makes the wry comment 'I am conscious that there are legitimate criticisms to be made of it: as there are, I think, of any other line that might be chosen' (1947: 9).

subcontinent writ large. The attempt to concretize borders in such uncertain terrain grotesquely mirrors the Radcliffe Commission's endeavour: both are products of the British Raj's obsession with establishing firm borderlines.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh highlights the limitations of such regimented and calibrated views of space. His protagonist draws circles with a pair of compasses on a map to illustrate that national boundaries or 'shadow lines' obfuscate emotional and cultural ties between geographically distant areas. The narrator has discovered that the riot he was caught up in on his school bus in Calcutta and the riot that killed Tridib in Dhaka were part of the same wave of violence. Both riots came in response to the theft of the sacred relic of the Prophet Mohammed's hair from a mosque in Hazratbal, Kashmir. Brooding on the links that had caused people to come out on the streets in parts of India and East Pakistan thousands of miles from the home of the sacred relic, the narrator idly begins to draw circles on his old Bartholomew's Atlas. Khulna, the city in East Pakistan where some of the worst riots took place, is less than one hundred miles away from Calcutta on the other side of the border, but a full 1200 miles away from the state capital of Kashmir, Srinagar. Putting the point of the compass on Khulna, the narrator extends the circle from Srinagar, and discovers that such places as Phnom Penh in Thailand and Inner Mongolia are of an equal distance from Khulna. The narrator comments:

His atlas showed me [...] that within the tidy ordering of Euclidean space, Chiang Mai in Thailand was much nearer Calcutta than Delhi is; that Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is. Yet, I had never heard of those places until I drew my circle, and I cannot remember a time when I was so young that I had not heard of Delhi and Srinagar. It showed me that Hanoi and Chungking are nearer Khulna than Srinagar, and yet, did the people of Khulna care at all about the fate of the mosques in Vietnam and South China (a mere stone's throw away)? I doubted it. But in this other direction, it took no more than a week... (SL, 232).

This passage explodes the myth that 'distance separates' (SL, 219), which as we saw earlier is an aporia the narrator has always taken for granted. Shared history means that people whose homes are separated by thousands of miles, such as Kashmiris and Bengalis, may have a lot more in common and take greater interest in each other's affairs than communities much closer together which have few cultural links. Of course, one of the main reasons that the narrator 'cannot remember a time when I was so young that I had not heard of Delhi and Srinagar' is that these cities lie within his

own national boundaries. Yet nationality is not the only factor that causes people to feel involved in the fates of others far away. Even though Khulna became part of the new nation of East Pakistan in 1947, nearly twenty years later people still have a strong enough emotional connection to Kashmir to bring them out on the streets when the relic is stolen from the Hazratbal mosque.

This fact calls into question a major underlying assumption of maps such as the narrator's treasured Bartholomew's Atlas. I noted earlier that nations are the 'building blocks' of maps, and that the implication conveyed by most maps is that nations are discrete entities separated by fixed borders. Yet the narrator's circles expose the limitations of the 'tidy ordering of Euclidean space' represented by maps. He employs the map and the pair of compasses, the tools of geography and geometry, to send out a powerful challenge to the assumption that there is a 'special enchantment in lines' (*SL*, 233). In one sense, then, the map is ironized as 'a visual analogue for the inflexibility of colonial attitudes' (Huggan, 1991: 131). Yet it also allows the narrator to create alternative cartographies by drawing circles that undermine the foregrounding of nations as the central units on the map. The narrator remaps the world through his creation of encompassing circles of cities. Perhaps alluding to John Donne's conceit of a pair of compasses as a metaphor for love, Ghosh's circles bring unfamiliar space into the intimacy of place. Rather than rejecting maps outright as symbols of imperialist authority, Ghosh uses them as an enabling vehicle for contesting Western geographical assumptions and celebrating cross-cultural connections. Thus the map is used to challenge one of its main components, borderlines, which firmly separate nations from each other on the page while concealing the interchange and shared history that may exist across those lines. In the next section I will explore Ghosh's interrogation of borderlines and nations in more depth.

'[A]CROSS THE BORDER THERE EXISTED ANOTHER
REALITY' (*SL*, 219): NATIONS AND BORDERS IN *THE
SHADOW LINES*

Perhaps the most important challenge Ghosh makes to conventional perceptions of space and the intractability of boundaries in this novel lies in his depiction of the

nation. The nation-state is usually portrayed as a timeless entity fixed by stable boundaries that unequivocally defines those born within its borders. However, the work of theorists such as Benedict Anderson (1991 [1983]: 11 – 12) demonstrates that this view of the nation that ‘loom[s] out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide[s] into a limitless future’ is extremely distorting. Anderson employs the phrase ‘imagined community’ to argue that the nation is a concept which has only evolved over approximately the last two centuries. The idea of the nation emerged out of specific historical conditions, the two most important of which are the rise of capitalism and the development of print technologies. He identifies ‘print-capitalism’ with the eighteenth-century creations of the novel and the newspaper, seeing these as the media responsible for fixing the idea of national community in readers’ imaginations. Anderson’s important proposal that the imagination, literature, and culture were the means by which the concept of national identity was propagated helps to reveal that the nation is more than a geopolitical territory.

The firm outlines of the nation-state, as represented on maps, obscure the myriad meanings that emanate from the words ‘nation’ and ‘state’. There has been much intellectual wrangling as to what constitutes a nation. Some commentators, like Joseph Stalin, argue that the nation is defined by tangible criteria, such as the sharing of a language, religion, economy, and territory,¹⁹ while others, like Anderson, point to more elusive concepts such as shared ethnicity, history, culture, memories, or worldviews. Furthermore, certain scholars take the term ‘nation’ to mean the territorial entity of the nation-state, as is manifest in Anthony Giddens’ assertion that a nation is ‘a bordered power-container’ (in Hutchinson and Smith, 1994: 34). Other analysts warn against what they argue is a misleading and prevalent tendency to conflate the discrete terms ‘nation’ and ‘state’. Walker Connor, for example, draws a distinction between the state, which he defines as ‘the major political subdivision of the globe’ and the nation, which is more difficult to define because it rests on ‘a psychological bond that joins a people’ (in Hutchinson and Smith, 1994: 36).

¹⁹ Stalin’s definition of the nation is remarkably precise and, while it does mention such subjective factors as ‘psychological make-up’ and ‘common culture’, the emphasis is on an objectively verifiable set of criteria that define the nation:

A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture. [...] It is only when all these characteristics are present together that we have a nation (in Hutchinson and Smith, 1994: 20).

According to Connor's argument, the bordered entity of the *state* may contain several *nations*, groups of people who have a feeling of shared identity and who desire some degree of self-determination. Whichever definition of nation we adhere to, it seems fair to assume that nationalists view their nation as comforting place, contrasting with the unfamiliar space of foreign nations.

Debate and dissent over what constitutes a nation has been particularly apparent in India's history. Indian nationalists' views of their nation vary widely. The right-wing *Hindutva* stance is that India is defined by the religions and cultures indigenous to its soil — Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism — and that all other groups, such as Muslims, Parsis, and Christians, should be seen as outsiders, to be tolerated only if they accept Hindu governance. The secularist view, central to the rhetoric of the Congress party, is that India is and always has been characterized by 'unity in diversity', and that allegiance to the all-embracing multiplicity of the geopolitical state should override any narrowly 'communal' loyalties to religion, linguistic group, or region. Yet from the 1930s on, increasing numbers of Muslims rejected this state-orientated definition of India, arguing that due to their distinct religion, cultural practices, and allegiances they constituted a separate nation. In 1940, Jinnah proposed his 'two nation theory', articulating the fear felt by many Muslims that the Congress's secularist rhetoric concealed its intention to create a 'Hindu Raj'. In a speech delivered at the Muslim League annual meeting, he contended that 'Musalmans are a nation according to any definition of a nation, and they must have their homelands, their territory and their State' (1994: 57).

In the novel, Tha'mma grapples with these conflicting definitions of the nation, coming to her own conclusion that a nation can only emerge out of shared struggle and armed conflict. Commenting on the British nation, she argues that

Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood. [...] That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood (*SL*, 78).

In this interesting passage, Tha'mma extorts two meanings from the word 'blood'. The nation, she argues, is created out of blood literally spilt on the battlefield. She

suggests that only after insurrection has necessitated the shedding of blood can a nation 'become a family born of the same pool of blood', and here the word 'blood' signifies kinship. Tha'mma's belief that a common struggle should be enough to unite 'Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi' is sadly belied by her own experiences on the edge of the nationalist struggle. As a teenager in the 1920s, she longed to join one of the Bengali terrorist societies, such as Anushilan and Jugantar,²⁰ which sought to achieve Indian independence (*SL*, 37). Yet in the following passage her early nationalist ideals are portrayed as having given way to disappointment:

All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power: that was all she wanted — a modern middle-class life, a small thing that history had denied her in its fullness and for which she could never forgive it (*SL*, 78).

Tha'mma's belief in a distinct Bengali nation within the Indian federation, consisting of a people that shares a language and culture and that occupies a long-recognized spatial territory, is shattered when Bengal is 'denied her in its fullness'. In 1947, as we have seen, the state was divided on religious lines, with the active compliance of the nationalist movement she had supported.²¹ Now her ancestral home, or *desh*, is in the foreign country of East Pakistan, and her conception of her nation is 'messily at odds' with the nation-state in which she resides (*SL*, 152).

Underpinning all theories of nationalism is 'a doctrine of popular freedom and sovereignty' (Hutchinson and Smith, 1994: 4), and nationalists such as Tha'mma are ready to die for their nation's freedom. Yet just as the term 'nation' has a bewildering range of connotations, so too freedom and liberty mean different things to different

²⁰ These organizations sprang up as part of the Swadeshi movement that challenged the first British attempt to partition Bengal in 1905. After the first Partition was overturned, the terrorists continued violently to protest against British occupation of India and poor social and economic conditions. Anushilan and Jugantar were almost exclusively Hindu parties, and they drew on the literature of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Hindu historical legends, and the Gita to create a racially-inspired ideology that later channelled its hatred against Muslims instead of whites (see Ray, 1984: 174 – 85).

²¹ Joya Chatterji argues that while the Hindu community vociferously opposed the first Partition of Bengal, they actively supported moves toward a second Partition. Prompted by fears of living in a Muslim-majority state, Hindu nationalists from within both the Congress and Mahasabha began calling for the division of Bengal. Even the anti-colonial terrorist organizations, Anushilan and Jugantar (see footnote 20, above), for which Tha'mma felt such a strong affiliation, were by 1947 more concerned with persecuting Muslims than striving for a united Independence (1994: 237).

people. The notion of liberty in Western thought since the time of Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) has meant freedom from external constraints and the right of self-determination. In Hindu thought, on the other hand, liberty has typically been regarded as an inner state of freedom from the tyranny of the senses and the ego.²² Contrasting usages of the term *swaraj* encapsulate the two sides of this debate. While Gandhi used *swaraj* to mean political self-government and freedom from British rule, the word actually originated in Hindu philosophy and meant 'the state of self-rule or self-control in which a man abstains from action and escapes from the painful and evil cycle of perpetual reincarnation' (Kedourie, 1971: 75). Thus Gandhi arrogates a Hindu concept of freedom for his Western-influenced brand of nationalism.

Such discordant ideas about freedom clash when Ila provokes Tha'mma's ire. Ila is outraged when Robi forbids her to dance with strangers in a bar, and she tells the narrator that she lives in England because there she is '[f]ree of your bloody culture and free of all of you' (*SL*, 89). When the narrator relates this to his grandmother, she is disgusted because she views Ila's position as resting on a Western concept of freedom that merely consists of a lack of external restraints. 'She wants to be left alone to do what she pleases: that's all that any whore would want', contends Tha'mma, concluding that this kind of personal freedom is found 'easily enough' in the West, but arguing 'that is not what it means to be free' (*SL*, 89). Yet Tha'mma's own view of liberty is not so far different from Ila's. She wants freedom for the Bengali community rather than just for herself, but her concept of liberty is, like Ila's, based on the Hobbesian notion of freedom from external restraints (in her case, freedom from colonial rule). Perhaps the narrator comes closest to articulating the Hindu notion of freedom from the ego: he claims that unlike the others he is not interested in freedom: 'I was happy to be bound: [...] I could not live without the clamour of the voices within me' (*SL*, 89). Here, the narrator suggests that true happiness can be only be found in recognizing one's state of bondage, and that freedom is paradoxically found in the yokes that tether one to the community.

Later, in an impassioned speech, Robi exposes the way in which conflicting interpretations of 'the nation' and 'freedom' cause untold violence and hatred. He

²² Sudhir Kakar, for example, argues that personal autonomy represents a Hindu's idea of hell, while fusion and togetherness is seen as the perfect state of being (1978: 36).

recalls his work as a district officer, when he would tell policemen to stand firm against dissidents, killing them if necessary, in order to protect the region's freedom and stability. And yet, he received almost identical letters from the terrorists, in which they threatened to kill him for their freedom. He comments that it was 'like reading my own speech transcribed on a mirror' (*SL*, 247). From different standpoints, therefore, freedom is taken to mean entirely different things. To a minority group that considers itself to be a nation, terrorist acts perpetrated against a repressive state are legitimate examples of 'freedom fighting'. Yet to a majoritarian law-enforcer, terrorists have to be suppressed at any cost, in order to preserve the state's 'unity and freedom' (*SL*, 246). It is to be hoped that all these examples illustrate that behind the common perception of the world as being divided into discrete nation-states lurks a web of contradictory and often unstable concepts, definitions, and constructs.

Not only does Ghosh expose the artifice that underlies the nation-state, but he also examines the constructed nature of spatial boundaries. Nations are spatially defined by their borders, which physically demarcate them from other nations. These boundaries are, as Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson put it, 'markers of identity' which are critical to 'the creation and the maintenance of the nation and the state' (1999: 5). International borders are in one sense interactive; they are the places where nations meet and have to negotiate with their neighbours. At the same time they signal the limits of national territory, indicating separation and distinctiveness from other states. Yet borders are never just territorial divides; they also resonate with metaphorical meanings, marking 'inside' and 'outside', 'safe' and 'unsafe', 'us' and 'them' (see Anzaldúa, 1999: 25). Even in their material reality, borders may be seen as an imagined, constructed entity. I have already discussed Tha'mma's disappointment that there is no visible line on the ground marking the division of West and East Bengal. The humorous depiction of her surprise reminds us that most international borders are not physical barriers, but notional divisions that are arrived at by consensus, negotiation, and sometimes conflict. Furthermore, they are 'spatially and temporally dynamic' (Donnan and Wilson, 1999: 53), meaning that a state's boundaries may move vast distances from one generation to the next. Maps, as we have seen, seek to pinpoint firm, static boundaries, but in reality these borders are often shifting, contested, and fraught with ambiguity.

Through the title of his novel, Ghosh suggests a way of thinking about both geographical and metaphorical boundaries. The title of a Conrad novella, *The Shadow-Line* (1916), is adapted for a different context, evoking the simultaneously material and illusory nature of borders. Ghosh, with his emphasis on border-crossings, cultural interchange, and syncretism, suggests that the lines that separate nation-states often mask continuities that exist across these borders. The example he gives of the Bengal border is a particularly shadowy one, as it is a relatively recent construction that has had several different manifestations. The first attempt to partition the Bengali state was made by the British in 1905, but it proved extremely unpopular and the ruling had to be rescinded in 1912. In 1947 another Partition meant that the two provinces of Bengal suddenly belonged to two different countries, India and East Pakistan. Finally, after a brutal civil war in 1971, East Pakistan seceded from the Pakistani state to become the independent nation of Bangladesh. Despite the severance from India that was heralded by the erection of the border in 1947, millions of Muslims continue to live in India and Hindus in Bangladesh. Certain events in one country prompt riots and persecution of minority populations in its neighbouring state, and activities and attitudes continue to be closely monitored across the dividing line.²³ Despite years of separation, events in India continue to reverberate in Bangladesh, which is dramatized in the novel through the depiction of the Hazratbal crisis, to be discussed later. Yet in my discussion of Ghosh's representations of the 'shadow lines' between India and Bangladesh, I shall question whether he underplays the very real divisions that do exist between the two countries. There is some justification for Gauri Viswanathan's argument that his portrayal of the border as a chimera represents 'an inability or even refusal to concede the reality of partition' (1995: n. pag.).

In recent years theorists have become increasingly interested in the metaphorical possibilities that border imagery offers for discussion of the condition of postmodernity. Writers such as Iain Chambers, in his *Border Dialogues* (1990), use the interstitial possibilities of borderlands to represent 'the multiple voices, languages, her- and his-stories' of the postmodern world (1990: 10). In Bhabha's theory of

²³ After the Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya in 1992, for example, many Hindus were persecuted across the border in Bangladesh, as Taslima Nasrin describes in her novel *Lajja*. The novel's protagonist reads in a newspaper the following statement on the riots in Bangladesh: '[i]f a malignant situation has taken form in India, the pain caused by it will be felt [...] most certainly by her immediate neighbours' (1994: 3).

hybridity, he celebrates the enabling possibilities that the postcolonial migrant may find in 'in-between' spaces: between races, nations, and cultural practices. Throughout this thesis we see that a major concern of Ghosh's is the literal and metaphorical crossing of borders. In *The Shadow Lines*, a novel which I have shown takes as its central concern representations of space and place, Ghosh's discussion of borders is more tangible and spatial than in his other novels. Rather than conceptual boundaries or social crossings, he concentrates on the physical boundaries that divide Bengal and the effects these have had on the psychology of Bengalis. In the next section I examine his representations of Partition and its repercussions.

PARTITION, COMMUNAL VIOLENCE, RUMOURS, AND RIOTS

In *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh endorses Anderson's view of the constructed nature of the nation-state and its boundaries. One of the most memorable ways in which he does this is through a passage that may be read as an allegory of the Partition of India, although it must be remembered that interpreting the passage allegorically should not in any way 'invalidat[e] its material reality' (Mukherjee, 1995: 262). The passage takes place in a domestic space, Tha'mma's ancestral home in Dhaka. The description of the house invites the reader to recognize its symbolism:

It was a very odd house. It had evolved slowly, growing like a honeycomb, with every generation of Boses adding layers and extensions, until it was like a huge, lop-sided step-pyramid, inhabited by so many branches of the family that even the most knowledgeable amongst them had become a little confused about their relationships (*SL*, 121).

Like India, the house is a vast entity that has grown almost organically so that it now accommodates many different groups, and it has been altered and extended by each new generation of inhabitants.

The household is kept together by a stern patriarch, Tha'mma's grandfather, a lawyer. After the death of this grandfather, the house is divided when Tha'mma's family and that of her uncle, Jethamoshai, quarrel over trivialities. As both men 'sprang from notoriously litigious stock' (*SL*, 123), their disagreement takes the form

of sending each other writs, culminating in the decision to divide the house with a partition wall. The use of the term 'partition wall' of course echoes the Partition of India. Indeed, just as at the national level Partition resulted in villages being severed from their water supply, and the port of Calcutta being separated from its jute-producing hinterland of East Bengal, so too the division of the house causes great inconvenience. Tha'mma recalls that the wall 'ploughed right through a couple of door-ways so that no one could get through them any more; it had also gone through a lavatory bisecting an old commode' (*SL*, 123). The two families have no further open contact, and a great bitterness develops on each side. Yet behind the scenes the women of the house continue to take an interest in each other's affairs, and without any words being exchanged they help to arrange marriages for daughters on the other side of the wall. Both Tha'mma and Mayadebi marry and move away from Dhaka, but when they visit home they find that their ageing parents have in no way forgotten the quarrel. On both sides of the divide, the wall has come to be seen as the natural order of things: '[t]hey liked the wall now; it had become a part of them' (*SL*, 124). In a similar way, after Partition the new parameters of India and Pakistan have been naturalized by politicians and historians. The 'two nation' theory, for example, which has been expounded by many Pakistani historians and Hindu nationalists, contends that Muslims and Hindus have always been two separate peoples, unable to live together harmoniously. The enmity between the two nations is depicted as going back centuries, ignoring the fact that the two communities for the most part shared their living space peacefully until the lead-up to Partition and that, like the women in the divided house, both countries continue to take a close interest in each other's affairs.

After the deaths of her parents, Tha'mma rarely visits the Dhaka house as it contains too many 'painful memories' (*SL*, 124 – 25). In 1947 the historical event of Partition, which has been prefigured by the division of the house, takes place and prevents Tha'mma — who has settled in Calcutta — from returning easily to see Jethamoshai and his wife who after all live now in a different country. She tells the narrator that her one regret is that she 'never got to see the upside-down house' (*SL*, 125). She goes on to explain that as a child she used to tell Mayadebi that the people on the other side of the house did everything in a topsy-turvy way:

Everything's upside-down over there, I'd tell her; at their meals they start with the sweets and end with the dal, their books go backwards and end at the

beginning, they sleep under their beds and eat on the sheets, they cook with jhatas and sweep with their ladles, they write with umbrellas and go walking with pencils. [...] And when I'd finished, I'd make a ghastly face and say: If you don't go to sleep right this very minute I'll drop you over the courtyard wall, and then you'll have to become upside-down too (*SL*, 125 - 26).

This absurd children's story illustrates the way in which the construction of boundaries causes people on the other side of the line to be demonized as 'Other'. Homi Bhabha has suggested that nationalist discourses tend to depict the nation in terms of 'the *heimlich* pleasures of the hearth', while the people on the other side of the border are portrayed with '*unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other' (1990: 2). Similarly, Tha'mma comes to believe that her relatives are replete with '*unheimlich* terror' and that 'across the border there existed another reality' (*SL*, 219). Even though she is old enough to remember her relations in the days before the wall went up, and therefore to know that they do not do things backwards, the mere repetition of the falsehood means that she 'almost came to believe in our story' (*SL*, 126). The children's cautionary tale suggests that we construct our own nation as the yardstick of normality when juxtaposed in the imagination with the strangeness of other nations. Yet, as Bhabha goes on to argue, depictions of the nation are always ambivalent, or 'Janus-faced', and 'the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity' (1990: 4). Although Tha'mma dislikes her relatives and vaguely believes her own fantasies about their alien habits, her attitude towards them is equivocal. At the same time as despising and pitying the people in the 'upside-down house', she envies them and imagines that they live a better life than her own family. With subtlety and élan, Ghosh uses the image of the divided Dhaka house to evoke the complex repercussions of the Partition of India.

Ghosh draws on a long tradition of writing that uses the image of the joint family figuratively to represent the Indian nation. Gandhi was particularly fond of the family metaphor, and in the following passage he describes the nation in terms that bear a striking resemblance to Ghosh's depiction of the Dhaka house:

Two brothers quarrel; one of them repents and re-awakens the love that was lying dormant in him; the two again begin to live in peace; nobody takes note of this. But if the two brothers, through the intervention of solicitors or some other reason take up arms or go to law [...] their doings would be immediately noticed in the press, they would be the talk of their neighbours and would probably go down in history. And what is true of families and communities is true of nations.

There is no reason to believe that there is one law for families and another for nations (1959: 139).

Here Gandhi explicitly equates families and small communities with the larger social grouping of the nation. The metaphor is useful, as the image of a large family of squabbling yet closely connected people indicates the difficulties of holding together such a diverse nation as India. In another piece of writing, Gandhi uses the symbol of the joint family in discussing the possible partition of India. Although he expresses the hope that 'fratricide' will not take place, he argues that if the Muslims really want a separate country they are entitled to it: '[w]e are at present a joint family. Any member may claim a division' (1994: 70).

In literature too, Indian writers frequently stage the family home as a microcosm of the nation. R.K. Narayan's *The Financial Expert* (1952), for example, contains a description of a discordant extended family that may have provided inspiration for the quarrelsome Boses in *The Shadow Lines*. In Narayan's narrative too, two brothers fall out and get involved in litigation which culminates in them partitioning '[e]verything that could be cut in two with an axe or scissors or a knife' (1997: 232). In his celebrated poem 'Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House', A.K. Ramanujan uses the image of the house to more resonant effect in evoking the Indian nation. Like the family home in Dhaka, the 'great house' of Ramanujan's title is depicted as being sprawling and all-enveloping. From the first lines of the poem ('Sometimes I think that nothing / that ever comes into this house / goes out' [1995: 96]), the house is established as a decaying place where one could get trapped amid the clutter. An inference is thus made that the house's structure resembles the assimilatory and accommodating energies of the Indian nation. A more pointed reference to India's history — specifically an allusion to the colonial destruction of the Indian garment industry — is made in the description of the family's possessions which leave the house only to return 'like the hooped bales of cotton / shipped off to invisible Manchesters / and brought back milled and folded' (1995: 97). Through 'small-scale' descriptions of the everyday routine of an Indian household, therefore, Ramanujan calls to mind diverse aspects of the Indian nation.

When Tha'mma does finally revisit her childhood home, she finds that the house has been drastically affected by the Partition of India, which its own internal politics

so closely resembled. Her reasons for going to Dhaka are complex. She denies that she is motivated by her memories of the city, claiming that nostalgia is 'a weakness, a waste of time' (SL, 208), yet her reactions on recognizing her old haunts seem to express that emotion. In characteristically ebullient fashion, she argues that her sole incentive for returning there is to 'rescue' her uncle, but when she reaches the house she becomes lost in her memories of growing up there. It is in any case debatable that Jethamoshai requires rescuing from anything. Tha'mma never elucidates what danger the old man is in, although she hints darkly: 'I'm worried about *him*: poor old man, all by himself, abandoned in that country, surrounded by ...' (SL, 136). Although she allows the sentence to fade into silence, it is clear that the grandmother's fierce nationalism has made her construct the Muslims who now control Dhaka as a threat to all Hindus. She sentimentalizes her own role as saviour of an uncle she has not thought about in years, and 'her eyes grew misty at the thought of rescuing her uncle from his enemies and bringing him back where he belonged, to her invented country' (SL, 137). This quotation indicates the extent of Tha'mma's self-deception and shows that just as she had once made up stories about the people on the other side of the partition wall, so too she is now calumniating people with whom she once lived as neighbours and friends. The phrase 'invented country' is well chosen, as it indicates, in line with Anderson's theory, that nationalism is a discourse that relies on myths and fiction to sustain its hold on the imagination.

When Tha'mma arrives in the old city, the conditions of both the family home and her uncle confound her expectations. The house has now been subdivided even further to accommodate several families of Muslim refugees who had fled from India after Partition. In contrast to the silent bitterness of the partitioned house that Tha'mma remembers, the building now brims with life. Colourful saris and hoardings for small businesses litter the building, and the garden has been converted into a motorcycle workshop. While the house is of course not literally upside-down as she had imagined, the familiar place of her childhood has nonetheless been transformed into foreign space. A Muslim rickshaw-driver named Khalil has taken pity on Jethamoshai and provides him with food and shelter, so Tha'mma's preconceptions are challenged by the fact that the old man is being cared for by the very people she has constructed as his enemies. This is not to say that all the Muslims now occupying the house share Khalil's compassion, and it is clear that Khalil's wife and neighbours

see the aged Hindu lawyer as an inconvenience and a drain on their income. Yet Khalil's rational kindness indicates the erroneousness of Tha'mma's assumption that her uncle is not safe living amongst Muslims.

Tha'mma tries to persuade her uncle to come back to Calcutta with her, but he vehemently refuses to go. In his senility he mistakes her for a client, revealing that he encouraged the Muslim families to move into his house rather than permit any relatives of his despised brother to stake a claim to the property. His all-consuming hatred is ironized, and yet Tha'mma's distrust of Muslims is shown to be equally damaging. It is her insistence that Jethamoshai leave a place where he is being well looked after that results in the hideous deaths of Tridib, Khalil, and the old man himself. Her partial responsibility for their murders finally unhinges Tha'mma, and she becomes a victim of a rage against Muslims that is as destructive as her uncle's loathing of his family. In her old age she is described in terms that mirror the depiction of Jethamoshai: both have threads of spittle hanging from their lips and withered, crumpled bodies (*SL*, 78; 212). Just as Jethamoshai sacrifices wealth and status by remaining in poverty in his old home rather than running the risk of his relatives taking it over, so too Tha'mma sacrifices her most treasured piece of jewellery and even lacerates her hand to prove her hatred of Pakistan (*SL*, 237). Metaphorical and historical partitionings overlap in these mirrored depictions of two people whose judgements are clouded by the bitterness of their memories.

We have seen the ways in which Partition is evoked both literally and symbolically in the depiction of the Dhaka house. Yet the violence of 1947 is deliberately not described in *The Shadow Lines*. The novel nonetheless revolves around the trauma of the 'vivisection' of India and its continuing reverberations decades later. I will now discuss the phenomenon of post-Partition communalist violence, a phenomenon that has been shaped and greatly exacerbated by memories of the original Partition conflicts. I will discuss Sudhir Kakar's psychoanalytical investigation into the complex reasons for Hindu-Muslim animosity, before turning to the narrator's experience of a communalist riot in Calcutta in 1964.

Kakar's research demonstrates that rumour and cultural memory play a central part in the violence that periodically erupts in the subcontinent. He argues that certain

motifs commonly recur in rumours about religious violence in the subcontinent. These include the poisoning of water or food supplies by the other religious group, the stockpiling of weapons in sacred spaces, the desecration of temples or mosques with carcasses of cows or pigs, mutilation of the sexual organs, and the covert involvement of the Indian or Pakistani state in the violence (1995: 37 – 59).²⁴ Kakar argues that such rumours are stylized, autonomous, and self-perpetuating. The significance of hearsay stories is to be found not in the illumination they shed on actual events, but in the way they stand in for and ‘substitute’ these events (1995: 37). Rumours take on a life of their own and do not rely on empirical evidence for their propagation and rhetorical potency. They spread quickly and are generally accepted because they are underpinned by enduring communal memories and myths. Each religious community has its stock of stories detailing the atrocities it has suffered in the past. Kakar gives the example of the Hindu community remembering their persecution at the hands of the Muslim leader, Tipu Sultan (1995: 22 – 23).

Of course, the most significant event in recent years to generate stories of oppression on both sides of the religious divide is Partition. The oral repetition of stories about Partition and other religious conflict, and the many distortions that accrete as these are passed down the generations, lead to cultural memories taking a distinct turn away from the facts of history (even assuming that these have ever been known):

Cultural memory is the imaginative basis for a sense of cultural identity. For isn't imagination not [*sic*] a memory of vital moments of life freed from their actual, historical context? Cultural memory, too, is a group's history freed from rootedness in time — it is as much imagination as the actual events that go into its construction (Kakar, 1995: 22).

In the collective memory of past violence, the group to which one belongs is imagined to be entirely the wronged party and any culpability for the violence is glossed over.

²⁴ In the loosely autobiographical description found in *In Antique Land*, in which Ghosh gives details about the riots he was caught up in as a child living in Dhaka, and which provides the basis for his fictional account in *The Shadow Lines*, he argues that ‘[t]he stories of those riots are always the same’. He suggests that these rumours always contain tropes very similar to those suggested by Kakar:

of cities going up in flames because of a cow found dead in a temple or a pig in a mosque; of people killed for wearing a lungi or a dhoti, depending on where they find themselves; of women disembowelled for wearing veils or vermillion, of men dismembered for the state of their foreskins (*IAAL*, 210).

In an interview, Urvashi Butalia has made the following remark about the role of rumour in remembering Partition: 'in individual and collective memory, inside families particularly which is where this history of partition is largely contained, it's very one-sided. You hear from families about their victimhood, but you never hear about their involvement in the violence' (in Whitehead, 2000: 234). Hatred for the other group spreads, as their actions are portrayed as being inexplicable and inhuman in the face of the perceived peaceful behaviour of one's own community.

Kakar goes on to suggest (1995: 53) that another consequence of the onset of rumours is that people whose affiliation with their religious group may normally be loose and vaguely defined suddenly start identifying themselves exclusively in terms of their membership with one or other of the religious communities. Whereas in times of peace people define themselves according to a variety of categories — class, occupation, gender, age, and personality disposition, as well as religion — at moments of tension, people start acting and thinking in religious stereotypes. Individuals exaggerate their identities as Hindus or Muslims, emphasizing the stereotypical appearance and practices expected of the group. They also perceive members of the other group only in terms of their religion, so that an idiosyncratic individual with whom they have lived and worked is abruptly reduced to a 'Hindu' or 'Muslim'.

Ghosh's portrayal of post-Partition riots in Calcutta tacitly reinforces Kakar's claims. His depiction of the riots opens on a morning when the narrator is boarding his school bus as he usually does. He quickly realizes that this is no ordinary day: the bus more than half-empty, with the boys 'huddled together' (*SL*, 199) on the back seats for protection. Many of the narrator's schoolmates have been kept at home because of rumoured 'trouble' in Calcutta, and one of the boys on the bus has been forbidden by his mother to drink tap water, as it has allegedly been poisoned. The narrator recalls that neither he nor any of his friends needs to ask who poisoned the water supply. It is assumed that the Muslims are responsible, although the older narrator points out the implausibility of Muslims poisoning their own water. This incident echoes the rumours we have seen circulating in Blitz-era London earlier in the novel that the Germans were dropping tins of toffee in order to 'get[...] at the children' (*SL*, 184). Anxiety about the possible contamination of foodstuffs by the enemy is shown to be a concern that transcends national boundaries in times of crisis. This

anxiety surfaces whenever one's social group is perceived to be under threat and, like other recurring tropes, the suggestion of poisoned supplies provides 'conversational food' which helps to strengthen communal feeling and sharpen indignation towards the other side (Kakar, 1995: 44). The truth or otherwise of the rumour is inconsequent: 'it was a reality that existed only in the saying, so when you heard it said, it did not matter whether you believed it or not — it only mattered that it had been said at all' (*SL*, 200).

As is implicit in the boys' immediate comprehension of the imprecise term 'they' to denote the Muslims who had supposedly adulterated the water, at moments of crisis religious identities are crystallized into 'us' and 'them' binaries. This kind of reductionism is plainly at work when the boys start talking about their cricket-loving classmate Montu solely in terms of his 'Muslimness'. They even turn on the narrator for his friendship with Montu, and under the slightest pressure the narrator denies his friend, insisting that 'I haven't met Montu for months' (*SL*, 200). The fact that the narrator, who is of a secularist disposition and has friends of all religions, betrays the Muslim boy at the first sign of trouble, illustrates how quickly fear and peer pressure erode moral values in times of communal trouble.

The riots themselves are represented in terms of changes to the spatial organization, sights, and sounds of the city. The children first hear a disturbance through their classroom window; it is the sound of many voices, but not the organized chanting of Calcutta's frequent demonstrations. This is a formless shouting, interspersed with random moments of silence, which the narrator describes as 'the authentic sound of chaos' (*SL*, 201). The children are sent home on the bus again, and the streets are now completely unfamiliar, devoid as they are of the usual pedestrians and shop-workers. The children are particularly disturbed by the angle of a rickshaw left in an alleyway. Although the narrator acknowledges that rickshaws are left at such angles all the time, its positioning seems expressive of a mysterious threat, although whether to Hindus or Muslims he cannot tell. The narrator laments: '[a]t that moment we could read the disarrangement of our universe in the perfectly ordinary angle of an abandoned rickshaw' (*SL*, 203). The usual signifiers have been torn from their moorings and all the children's certainties are disrupted. Their fear manifests itself as a sense of betrayal by the city itself, which is seen as having 'turned against' them (*SL*,

203). Again, familiar place becomes frightening space. The boys' fear of their city is described as:

a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world (*SL*, 204).

Here Ghosh reminds us that urban space is socially constructed and can be subject to sudden and violent change. The idea that 'normalcy is utterly contingent', that people live together peacefully under an unspoken consensus that can be broken at any time is, Ghosh argues, an idea that is more prominent in the minds of inhabitants of the subcontinent than any other people in the world.

This fear of the seismic potential of space to change its character in an instant is, as Alex Tickell has shown, a recurring theme in narratives about Partition. Tickell argues that because the country's division precipitated the largest exodus of people in recorded history (with an estimated ten to seventeen million shunted across the new frontiers), the literature of Partition is punctuated by 'themes of displacement, travel, and relocation' (2001: 156). He focuses on the spatial tropes to be found in Punjabi accounts of Partition, observing correctly that Bengali responses are 'relatively limited' (2001: 158). Ghosh's view of Partition is an unusual and valuable one, because it focuses on the Bengali division and its aftermath, rather than the more commonly described carnage in the Punjab. Furthermore, unlike most Partition narratives, it is not an immediate response to events, but a second-generation account refracted through later events. Ghosh reminds us that, while the mass migration in the Punjab may have caused more immediate bloodshed, the ongoing situation in Bengal has created long-term spatial uncertainty for its residents. This has of course been compounded by East Bengal's secession from the Pakistani union.

Partition unleashed all kinds of psychological anguish. People felt let down by their leaders for allowing such a cataclysm to occur with so little demurrer. They felt betrayed by a newly created religious enemy, people with whom they had lived for so long and of whose sadistic violence they now heard such lurid accounts. Bearing in mind my earlier account of the Radcliffe Commission and mapping, perhaps the most

bewildering and traumatic aspect of their suffering was the loss of their birthplace and the cruel dismembering of their cognitive maps. Kakar argues that, while the effects of violence and displacement are constantly stressed in accounts of Partition, the psychological effects of the country's division are usually depicted as being less important fallout from the tragedy. Yet he contends that the division of the country was particularly agonizing for Hindus, because Hinduism is defined as no other religion is by its territory. India's ancient borders are sanctified by Hinduism, so part of the trauma of Partition was the loss of part of the 'sacred geography' of ancient Hindustan (1995: 49). I would suggest that this feeling of the loss of sacred geography was not unique to Hindus. The Muslims too, as Mushirul Hasan explains,

were pained to bid adieu to the symbols of their faith — the great Imambaras of Lucknow and Matiya Burj, the sacred shrines at Ajmer and Delhi, and the *dargahs* at Bansa, Rudauli, Kakori and Dewa Sharif in Awadh. They were no less agonized to snap their ties with Lucknow and Delhi, the cities of Mir Anis and Ghalib, or the *qasbahs* in Awadh which served as centres of cultural and intellectual life (1994: 30).

The Sikhs perhaps most of all were caught in the middle of the sectarian impulse, having their Punjabi homeland cleaven in two (see McLeod, 1989: 102).

On both sides of the divide, people of all religions found their cultural ties snapped and their composite identity dissipated. Not only were people's sacred geographies undermined by Partition, but also on a smaller scale their confidence in the stability of their surroundings was shattered. In Ghosh's felicitous phrasing, the fear felt after Partition was 'like the fear of the victims of an earthquake, of people who have lost faith in the stillness of the earth' (*SL*, 204). Earthquake survivors are said never again to regain their assumption that the earth is stable. Similarly, the logic of dividing the country on religious lines provokes a permanent anxiety that even the new countries may be further subdivided until they are completely atomized. The fear that new borders may be constructed, resulting in more bloodshed and enforced migration, is often expressed in literature on Partition. Ghosh articulates this fear when he has Jethamoshai say, 'I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have

you anywhere' (*SL*, 215).²⁵ As this example suggests, the victims of Partition fear space for its ability to change and turn against its inhabitants.

Notwithstanding the temporal and spatial rupture that Partition caused, *The Shadow Lines* reveals that it is no easy matter to divide a shared history and culture. The bifurcation of India and Pakistan along Radcliffe's rigid borderlines has not been as definitive as might be expected. The events of Partition gave rise to great hatred between the two countries, but Ghosh shows that it is not possible to separate people who have lived together for generations simply by erecting border checkpoints and passport controls between them. Culturally, the borders are nonsensical. Even though a religion and a national boundary divide them, Indian and Bangladeshi Bengalis share a language, cultural preferences, rituals, and regional history. In *Countdown* Ghosh depicts Indian and Pakistani Punjabi soldiers who are fighting each other over Kashmir, yet the North Indian soldiers acknowledge that they have more in common with their Pakistani enemies than they do with Bengalis and South Indians (*Cd*, 42). Similarly, in *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh argues that mirrored instances of riots in Dhaka and Calcutta in response to the theft of a Muslim relic indicate that Bengalis on each side of the border share more than the histories of their separate nations would suggest. As we shall see, this is a somewhat tendentious claim.

Ghosh identifies the tight binds between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh when he writes:

They [Indian and Pakistani politicians] had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland. What had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that they had created not a separation, but a yet-undiscovered irony — the irony that killed Tridib: the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map, when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines (*SL*, 233).

²⁵ The character Amma in Ismat Chughtai's short story 'Roots' expresses a similar fear when she argues against moving to Pakistan, saying, 'who knows if you won't be driven, pushed out of there too? Who knows if you won't be told to go and settle in some other place?' (1999: 583). The title of Kamleshwar's short story 'How Many Pakistans?' also indicates the fear, common to both Punjabi and Bengali victims of Partition, of the possible balkanization of the country (see Tickell, 2001).

The narrator's strikingly geographical image of the new nations sailing away from each other 'like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland' is a useful metaphor, as it indicates both the long shared history of the subcontinent, and the fact that many people viewed Partition as being as definitive as a geological cataclysm. Yet Ghosh questions the principle that borders signalling absolute division are prerequisites on which the nation depends. Just as the partitioning of the Boses' house in Dhaka failed to stop the relatives from being involved with each other, so too the Partition of India, in Ghosh's argument, bound Dhaka and Calcutta together even more closely than before. Four thousand years of history cannot be halted overnight by the creation of a border, and Ghosh suggests that even the undeniable hatred between the two communities is a sign of their continuing emotional involvement.

The paradoxical nature of this argument, where enmity is interpreted as proving the countries' closeness, suggests that Ghosh may to some extent be romanticizing the continuing binds between the two countries. It is worth noting that Salman Rushdie has recently utilized a similar metaphor of (West) Pakistan and India floating away from each other, but to quite different ends. Rushdie sees the drifting apart of the two nations as being an inevitable and irrevocable consequence of Partition:

As I grew older the distance between the two [countries] increased, as if the borderline created by partition had cut through the landmass of south Asia as a taut wire cuts through a cheese, literally slicing Pakistan away from the landmass of India, so that it could slowly float away across the Arabian Sea, the way the Iberian peninsula floats away from Europe in José Saramago's novel *The Stone Raft* (2002: 5).

Rushdie's violent metaphor of India and Pakistan being sliced apart contrasts sharply with Ghosh's contention that politicians wished for a split, while the two countries in reality remained stubbornly close. Of course, the extent to which Pakistan and India have floated away from each other is a matter of individual interpretation. Rushdie's and Ghosh's contrasting usage of a geographical image of severance may reflect the different circumstances of their regions of concern. Whereas West Pakistan and India have interacted with nothing but animosity since Partition, East Pakistan/Bangladesh's relationship with India has been more ambivalent, partly because large numbers of Hindus chose to stay in the east after Partition, and partly because the East Bengalis relied on India for asylum and military intervention in their 1971 struggle for self-determination.

Ghosh is not alone in emphasizing the strong links between the Hindu and Muslim communities: he follows a long line of Indian secularist historians — from Nehru, in his *The Discovery of India* (1945), to the Subaltern Studies historians — who argue that religion is less of a dividing force than economic, linguistic, political, and social differences. In doing so, these historians have rightly challenged the assumption, common to Pakistani proponents of the two nation theory and Hindu nationalists, that the Muslim and Hindu communities were continuously and irrevocably at loggerheads. And yet, as Sudhir Kakar argues, the secularists' eagerness to stress harmony and interchange between the two religious groups leads to an unwillingness to explain instances of violence between Hindus and Muslims. In the secularist view of history, Muslim and Hindu identities were diffuse and unfixed until the advent of the British 'divide and rule' policy, which forced them into inflexibly opposed positions. Secularists are keen to emphasize the syncretism of Indian popular religion, stressing that many Hindus and Muslims pay devotions at each other's holy sites, and focusing on the intermarriage of the two religions in such movements as Sufism. According to this view, communal conflict was rare prior to British colonialism. Yet, as Kakar suggests, this well-meaning interpretation is hard pressed to explain instances of precolonial violence that did occur, and can lead to an over-emphasis on economic and political factors in current outbreaks of religious violence. The secularist approach thus relies too heavily on the notion of an elite manipulating the innocent masses, and fails to explain how ordinary people can act independently as agents of violence. Kakar writes that 'the secularist has tended to downplay the dark side of Hindu-Muslim relations in India' (1995: 21).

While Ghosh in no way downplays the horrors of interreligious hatred, he finds it difficult, as a secularist with an optimistic view of the interchange between the two communities, to account for this 'dark side'. In his description of the riots in Calcutta and East Pakistan, he is keen to emphasize that not everyone was caught up in the mood of religious hatred:

It is evident from the newspapers that once the riots started 'responsible opinion' in both India and East Pakistan reacted with an identical sense of horror and outrage. The university communities of both Dhaka and Calcutta took the initiative in doing relief work and organising peace marches and newspapers on both sides of the border did some fine, humane pieces of reporting. As always, there were innumerable cases of Muslims in East Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives, and equally, in India, of Hindus

sheltering Muslims. But they were ordinary people, soon forgotten — not for them any Martyr's Memorials or Eternal Flames (*SL*, 229 – 30).

The prominence Ghosh gives here to 'responsible opinion', by which he means middle-class institutions such as universities and newspapers, suggests that he would rather not dwell on the undoubtedly *irresponsible* opinions that were also rife at this time. He focuses attention on instances of Hindus saving Muslims and *vice versa*, rather than questioning what motives caused 'ordinary people' to turn on members of another religious community.

I submit that Ghosh's account of interreligious riots is more successful when it does not try to account for the violence, but rather focuses on the traumatic, inexplicable nature of the events. Ghosh uses the device of having Robi recount the violence through a recurring dream he has about the riots, which frees him from the constraints of realism and the need to provide a causal explanation. Robi's dream is marked by an eerie silence that contrasts with the wealth of visual imagery it contains. From the outset he observes that no matter how many men are in his dream (it varies from a couple to dozens), 'the street always seems empty' (*SL*, 244). Noises inside and just around the car seem amplified to its scared occupants (the 'grinding' of the gears and the 'thump' of someone hitting the bonnet [*SL*, 244]), but the rioters themselves seem to act from within a menacing hush. They are described as gliding 'like skaters in a race', but their actions are soundless: '[i]t's all silent, I can't hear a single thing, no sound at all' (*SL*, 244). As the dream progresses, the silence becomes more pronounced, making the occasional noises that interrupt it, such as the sound of the pistol shot and the dripping of the driver's blood, seem all the more sickening. Eventually the silence becomes entangled in the dreamer's feelings of powerlessness. He knows that May screams but 'can't hear a word', and when he tries to prevent Tridib from getting out of the car 'I try to shout, but I have no voice left, I cannot make a single sound' (*SL*, 246).

The hush that permeates the riot scene reflects the silence in which Ghosh's narrator argues riots have been buried in histories of the subcontinent. Before I analyse the narrator's investigations into the riots that claimed the life of his uncle, I should pause to explain that at this point in the novel his voice becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from Ghosh's own. In his essay 'The Greatest Sorrow: Times

of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness' from *The Imam and the Indian* (2002), Ghosh recalls the circumstances in which he began to write *The Shadow Lines*. He was a witness to the appalling, state-sponsored violence against Sikhs that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. This led him to recall other moments of civil violence — such as the Great Calcutta killing of 1946 and the anti-Indian riots in Burma in the 1930s — that he had been told about by members of his family. Most of all, his memory of a riot in which his family was involved while living in Dhaka in 1964 (described in *IAAL*, 204 – 10), inspired him to investigate 'whether it was an isolated incident' (*II*, 315), or part of some pattern. The findings of his research were exactly those of the narrator in *The Shadow Lines*: he discovered that riots prompted by the Hazratbal crisis had shaken the subcontinent, irrespective of national borders. The narrator's meditation on the silence in which the 1964 riots have been engulfed thus slides into Ghosh's expressed indignation in this essay that no books exist to document such civil disorder.²⁶ In the light of this autobiographical information about Ghosh's impetus for writing this section of the novel, it is tempting to view the narrator here as an alter ego for Ghosh himself. This techniques of intermingling fact with fiction and blurring the distinctions between narrator and author are more fully developed in Ghosh's next novel, *In an Antique Land*, as I suggest on pp. 153 – 54 of this thesis. Let us now return to an interrogation of the narrator/Ghosh's discussion of his research into the riots.

Noting the vast amount of newspaper space that is devoted to the discussion of political issues, the narrator/Ghosh asks what makes journalists limit their analysis of riots to mere description. He answers this rhetorical question by arguing that to speak about events of which we do not know the meaning runs the risk of 'banality' (*SL*, 218).²⁷ Worse, he suggests that speaking about the violence could also risk giving meaning to the riots, which 'is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness' (*SL*, 228). Yet for the narrator, the fact that the riots have

²⁶ He quotes the passage from *SL*, 218, in which the narrator discusses the silence in which the history of the riots has been buried, and affirms that it was his attempt to address the 'conundrums' of this unwritten history (*II*, 316). This is the clearest evidence we have that the narrator's musings are intimately linked to Ghosh's own views.

²⁷ His use of this word may be an allusion to Hannah Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1964), in which she posits the idea that there is nothing in evil that is radical or lucid; rather, that even the most extreme evil is senseless and banal.

disappeared into a 'volcano of silence' (*SL*, 230), and have not been thought about or discussed for nearly thirty years is nothing short of a scandal. He seems to suggest that, because the stories of ordinary communities' violent confrontations do not fit into a historical discourse that focuses on the nation and its leaders, they have been ripped out of the pages of history. I am reminded of Ila's earlier dismissal of riots in India as just being 'local things' (*SL*, 104), which incenses the narrator as evidence that she believes that only those events deemed important by the West can be viewed as History.

Clearly then it is not an option for the narrator/Ghosh to avoid discussing the riots, as that would be colluding with the historical reticence that surrounds the subject. He has to forge a new way of speaking about the riots, one that does not slot them into existing discussions that focus on cause and effect, rational explanation, and the apportioning of blame. The narrator arrives at the following conclusion: 'I can only describe at second hand the manner of Tridib's death: I do not have the words to give it meaning. *I do not have the words*, and I do not have the strength to listen' (*SL*, 228). He resorts to the 'second hand' narration of the riots through Robi's dream, which, as we have seen, evokes so hauntingly the terror and futility of Tridib's death. By allowing events to unfold through a series of interconnected stories — Rehman's nostalgic description of the old city in Dhaka, which gives rise to Robi's account of his dream, followed by May's more conventionally realist account of Tridib's death — Ghosh rejects the idea that there is one correct way of narrating the story of violence in India. Like many other historians who have focused on communal riots in the subcontinent,²⁸ Ghosh suggests that it is best to allow the victims of violence to narrate their own stories, without comment or judgement. This seems an entirely appropriate way to narrate the death of Tridib, who always maintained that '[e]veryone lives in a story [...] because stories are all there are to live in, it was just a question of which one you chose...' (*SL*, 182).

²⁸ See Chakrabarty, 1996; Menon and Bhasin, 1998; Butalia, 1997, all of whom allow stories about the Partition to be told in the victims' own voices. In the words of Urvashi Butalia, speaking on the importance of orality in remembering partition, '[a] million may have died but they have no monuments. Stories are all that people have, stories that rarely breach the frontiers of family and religious community; people talking to their own blood' (1997: 22).

CONCLUSION

My discussion of *Countdown*'s depiction of the absurd conflict over the Siachen glacier has indicated that maps reify a knowledge of space that is territorial, acquisitive, and divisive. In *The Shadow Lines*, the work of Radcliffe and the Boundary Commission is implicitly critiqued, as this kind of cartography has imposed a rigid and homogenizing reading of space. The novel pushes against the borders that were laid down by the departing Raj. In his image of the compasses, Ghosh breaks down those frontiers, drawing the cities of the subcontinent into an alternative cartography based on accommodating circles. His argument, as we have seen, is both evocative and powerful and yet, in this concluding section, I wish to question his positioning of Kashmir as the central point around which the other cities of the subcontinent cohere.

The history of the violent conflict that emerged in Kashmir in the 1990s, discussed so intelligently in *Countdown* (1999), has undermined the optimistic treatment of the region in *The Shadow Lines*. In the light of recent events, Ghosh's narrator in the novel dodges the issue that most Kashmiris actively want a borderline to separate their country from what they see as the occupying Indian regime. The Hazratbal shrine near Srinagar is set up in the novel as a symbol of interreligious harmony, where people from all religious communities share in peaceful syncretic worship. The shrine's air of tolerant calm is temporarily shattered by the theft of its most important relic, a hair alleged to belong to the Prophet Mohammed,²⁹ but peace and order are soon restored after the relic's recovery. It seems that Ghosh needs to portray Hazratbal as a sanctuary for secular interaction in order to provide a positive contrast to the communal conflict that develops in other parts of the subcontinent in the wake of the relic crisis. Gauri Viswanathan goes so far as to suggest that he uses Hazratbal to 'impos[e] an order of syncretic harmony on the memories of communal carnage' (1995: n. pag.). I will not repeat Viswanathan's elegant analysis of Ghosh's occasionally troubling espousal of syncretism. Instead, I want to suggest that he elides the specificities of the shrine itself and the Kashmiri history in which it is embedded.

²⁹ The sacred hair is referred to by Ghosh as the 'Mu-i-Mubarak' (*SL*, 224), but in my research I have come across no other usages of this term. The relic is universally referred to as the 'Mo-i-Muqqadas', although spellings vary. To avoid confusion, I choose to refer to the Mo-i-Muqqadas only by English phrases such as 'the relic' or 'the sacred hair'.

The Hazratbal shrine is the most important focal point in the religious life of Kashmiri Muslims, and is interpreted by Ghosh as 'a symbol of the unique and distinctive culture of Kashmir' (*SL*, 225). He points out that the shrine's famous relic is revered by Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists alike, in a way that challenges the 'Christian sense of the necessity of a quarantine between doctrines' (*SL*, 225). Ghosh's celebration of the synthesizing quality of the devotion surrounding Hazratbal is to some extent confirmed by the research of Muhammad Ishaq Khan (1989). Khan observes that the religion that has grown up around the shrine is of a populist nature, frowned upon by orthodox Muslims. The *ulama* disapproves of the veneration of relics and of pilgrimages to shrines in general, and efforts were regularly made in the case of Hazratbal to undermine the authenticity of the relic. Yet Kashmiris would not relinquish their enthusiasm for the relic, which was seen as providing a close connection with the 'spiritually alive Prophet' (Khan, 1992: 175). Hazratbal was viewed as a second Medina, which gave locals the chance to experience pilgrimage without the expense of the *hajj*. For many uneducated Kashmiri Muslims, worship of the Prophet's hair was more central to their beliefs than the teachings of the Qu'ran, of which they had little knowledge (1992: 179). Furthermore, their devotions at the shrine took a peculiarly Hindu form, with great obeisances being made to the relic, using physical gestures common in Hinduism (1992: 178).

Thus far, then, Ghosh's account of the Hazratbal shrine largely agrees with that of Kashmiri historians. His interpretation deviates from the standard line, however, in his description of the crisis that followed the theft of the sacred hair from Hazratbal in December 1963. True to his secular leanings, Ghosh's narrator argues that the riots that spread through Kashmir following the theft were not communally based. 'But the targets of the rioters', he writes, '(and with what disbelief we read of this today) were not people — neither Hindus, nor Muslims, nor Sikhs — but property identified with the government and the police' (*SL*, 225). Here I think he is being somewhat disingenuous. First of all it is not entirely true to say that the riots were not directed towards other religious groups. Alastair Lamb explains that a Hindu temple reported the loss of two images, seemingly stolen in retaliation for the loss of the sacred hair. Doubts have been cast on the veracity of this claim, but the mere suggestion that images had been desecrated was enough to bring Hindus out onto the streets of Jammu

(1991: 205). Tensions between some members of the two communities perhaps ran higher than Ghosh would have his readers believe.

Secondly, Ghosh interprets the rioters' targeting of government property as proof of the secular character of the unrest: violence is directed towards impersonal institutions rather than individuals of a different faith, he argues. Yet in Kashmir wrath directed at the government has a specific resonance, because the Indian government was — and is — viewed by many to be attempting to destroy the Islamic culture of the valley. Kashmiri Muslims had long felt oppressed by the policies of the small Hindu ruling elite: grievances included '[t]he policy of the government that kept the Muslims out of state service, heavy taxation and the consequent destruction of existing industries, forced labour, a law severely punishing Muslims for cow-slaughter [...]' (Khan, 1992: 182). Ghosh sidesteps the issue of Kashmir's uncomfortable relationship with India's central government, as it does not fit with his vision of Hazratbal as a religious symbol venerated in harmony by all communities. No sense is given in his account of the widespread feeling in the valley that Kashmir had been unfairly held onto by India in 1947. The disappearance of the relic exacerbated anti-Indian feeling, as the theft was believed by many to have been engineered by the Indian government to undermine Muslim unity in the valley. Ghosh makes no mention of the prevalent feeling that the relic was stolen as part of an Indian government conspiracy. The emphasis he places on the slogan 'Central Intelligence zindabad' (*SL*, 226; 228), which he claims was chanted after the recovery of the Prophet's hair, almost suggests a pro-Indian stance by the Kashmiris. In fact, most historians have taken an opposite view. For example, Lamb sees the crisis as a turning point in the Kashmiris' disenchantment with India: '[b]y the end of 1963 the majority of foreign observers of the Kashmir scene had little doubt that a plebiscite treating the State of Jammu and Kashmir as a single voting unit would lead to a clear call for the transfer of the entire State from India to Pakistan' (Lamb, 1991: 210).

Ghosh describes Maulana Masoodi, the politician who led the Kashmiri demonstrations against the loss of the relic, as 'an authentic hero' (*SL*, 225) for his refusal to allow the protests to be hijacked by communalist elements. It is certain that Masoodi bravely opposed those who sought to lay blame for the theft on Hindus: Sheikh Abdullah described his actions as 'render[ing] a great service to India' (quoted

in Khan, 1992: 186; footnote). Once again, however, presenting Masoodi as an exemplar of secular tolerance is not the end of the story. The Action Committee, which Masoodi founded to provide a response to the loss of the relic, and which continued as a political force long after the crisis ended, increasingly became identified with a policy of union with Pakistan (Lamb, 1991: 257 – 58). Masoodi himself was sidelined after the relic agitation, as Kashmiris regarded him with mounting suspicion as an Indian government lackey (Gauhar, 1998: 86; 108).

Furthermore, the shrine had long been used as a 'ready-made platform' for Kashmiri politicians to rouse the feelings of the Muslim electorate (Khan, 1992: 181). Even politicians such as Sheikh Abdullah and Masoodi, who advocated secularism and regional autonomy as the answer to Kashmir's problems, were not averse to using Islamic symbolism to promote their cause. The mosque at Hazratbal was used to stir up feelings about corruption of the region's religious identity by the Indian government. As such, even though Kashmiri politicians such as Masoodi passionately believed in interreligious harmony, their focus on the mosque as a rallying symbol was necessarily exclusionary towards the local Hindu population. Ultimately, even though the Islam of the Hazratbal shrine is syncretic, it is still very much *Islam*, and it was religious rather than secularist feeling that galvanized Kashmiri anti-Indian politics in the wake of the crisis. As Lamb argues, 'despite years of Sheikh Abdullah and his associates apparently preaching secularism, the Islamic religion remained the most powerful stimulus for political activity in the Vale of Kashmir' (1991: 207).

Finally, Ghosh's use of the Hazratbal shrine as a symbol of Hindu-Muslim syncretism may be seen as an unfortunate one in the light of more recent events. In 1993 Indian forces lay siege to the Hazratbal shrine, claiming that Muslim militants were using it as a base for stockpiling weapons. In an admittedly emotional account of the crisis, G.N. Gauhar argues that although the shrine was used as a stage for speeches and proselytizing by the militants, no activist willingly inhabited the sacred site or used it to store their arms. Instead, he suggests that the Indian forces deliberately flushed militants out of their hiding places around Hazratbal, sealing off their exit points so that they had no other option than to hide in the shrine. In contrast to the claims of the Indian authorities and some sections of the media, he argues that many of the people in the shrine were civilians, including women and children, who

were trapped there while trying to help the militants to escape. He suggests that the Indian government orchestrated the siege in order to boost its fortunes in the forthcoming elections. And yet, the siege has widely been viewed as a bloody and costly mistake. It has been dubbed 'Operation Blunder',³⁰ and resulted in hundreds of deaths, including a terrible massacre of dozens of teenagers from Bijbehara district who were on a peaceful demonstration to the local mosque (see Gauhar, 1998: 152 – 58). Since the 1993 siege and the restrictions on visiting the site that were instituted in its wake, Kashmiris have become even more disillusioned about their subjection to Indian rule. Hazratbal has become a symbol for freedom fighters, as is instantly noticeable when one does even a cursory search on the internet.³¹

In conclusion, while Ghosh is right to identify the uniquely tolerant and syncretic culture of Kashmir, I would suggest that his celebration of the Hazratbal shrine as a symbol of interfaith harmony is selective and somewhat misleading. Just as Tridib's liberal imagination makes him unaware of the dangers of Dhaka's riot-torn streets, so too Ghosh's desire to read Kashmir as a locus of tolerant syncretism is exposed with the benefit of hindsight to be problematic. This does not invalidate his argument about cultural continuities that exist across national boundaries. Yet I would caution against accepting Ghosh's arguments in their entirety. It is, after all, strongly perceived cultural and religious *differences* that lead so many in Kashmir today to campaign for the creation of another border to separate their country from India.

³⁰ This term is a play on the codename 'Operation Blue Star', used to describe the Indian government's raid on the Golden Temple in Amritsar in 1984. The two events have certain parallels: in the Punjab a Sikh militant group led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was similarly accused of using a holy site to hoard weapons and train insurgents. Yet the Kashmiri operation is viewed by many as being at best as a blunder and at worst a conspiracy, because the shrine was not being used as a military base as was the temple in Amritsar (see Gauhar 1998: 126).

³¹ Even the web addresses of two of these sites give an idea of their polemical content:
www.holocaustinkashmir.50megs.com/ka01001.html
 and www.independentjklf.org/hazratbal-massacres.htm
 both provide outraged accounts of the Bijbehara massacre and the Indian troops' decision to storm the shrine. I have only found one site that attempts to give the Indian side of the story, which is entitled 'Of Shrines and Blackmail', and criticizes what is depicted as the militants' manipulation of holy places for political ends:
www.kashmir-information.com/Chrar-Hazratbal.html

Chapter Three:

Interrogating History and Anthropology in *In an Antique Land*

INTRODUCTION

Ghosh's third book, *In an Antique Land*, has tended to be approached by critics either as an example of non-hegemonic ethnography, or as a new narrativization of history. Most critics recognize that Ghosh challenges the disciplines of anthropology and history, but few have made a sustained examination of the two together.¹ My intention in this chapter is to show how Ghosh's examinations of history and anthropology are part of a 'shared enterprise' (*IAAL*, 80 – 81), that is, an interrogation of the Western academy's claim to represent other cultures truthfully. Moreover, as well as being a hybrid narrative,² it is less widely recognized that *In an Antique Land* can also be regarded as a novel. Although Ghosh is insistent in interview that this is a work of non-fiction,³ *In an Antique Land* incorporates many novelistic techniques.

¹ Nonetheless, there have been some very fine analyses of the text's individual ethnographical and historical strands. In his book on travel writing and ethnography, *Routes* (1997), James Clifford praises Ghosh for his recognition that the subjects of ethnographies are not rooted homebodies bound by tradition, as has often been supposed. Ghosh, he argues, illuminates the fact that indigenous people are often cosmopolitan travellers, engaged in many different kinds of travel, from economic migration to a virtual travel mediated by television and radio images. '[I]n Ghosh's account', writes Clifford, 'fieldwork is less a matter of localized dwelling and more a series of travel encounters' (1997: 2). Whereas Clifford focuses almost exclusively on the ethnographic sections of *In an Antique Land*, Robert Dixon, in his paper "'Travelling in the West": The Writing of Amitav Ghosh' (1996), is interested in how the text fits into the Subaltern Studies historical project. Although Dixon acknowledges Ghosh's use of the past 'to speak indirectly about the present' (1996: 21), his analysis provides more insights into the medieval world of the Geniza than the book's modern-day sections.

² The publication history of *In an Antique Land* indicates that the book is a polymorphous development and extension of several pieces of writing previously undertaken by Ghosh. The twelfth-century story of Ben Yiju and his slave is excerpted in the academic essay, 'The Slave of MS. H.6', published the same year as *In an Antique Land*, in the 1992 edition of *Subaltern Studies*. The book's detailed and scholarly footnotes — which may come as a surprise to the reader of *In an Antique Land* who has reached the end assuming it to be a work of fiction — derive from the text's origins in historical research. Two sections from the book's modern day Egyptian setting have appeared as short stories or journalistic travel pieces in *Granta* (Ghosh, 1986 and 1990). Other parts of the modern-day section originally formed part of Ghosh's anthropological PhD thesis (see Srivastava, 2001).

³ In my interview with Ghosh, he dismisses the notion that *In an Antique Land* may be viewed as a novel: 'You know Homi Bhabha? He teaches it and he told me at great length

The ethnographic and historical elements of the text, though rigorously researched, are deeply ambivalent, and it is never made clear to what extent we are expected to believe the narrative. My approach in this chapter is to situate *In an Antique Land* both within and outside intellectual challenges to the discourses of history and ethnography that have emerged since the 1970s. Interrogating Ghosh's phrase 'the husbandry of the Western academy' (*IAAL*, 82) in some detail, I suggest that he poses radical questions about Western 'knowledge'. By presenting his multidisciplinary research in a fragmentary and imaginative way, he challenges the claims to definitiveness of academic discourses. In both the ethnographic and historical storylines, Ghosh indicates that knowledge can only ever be partial, subjective, and historically contingent. Grand narratives are rejected in favour of 'rich confusions' (*IAAL*, 288).

In *In an Antique Land*, straddling as it does the generic borderlines of fact, fiction, autobiography, history, anthropology, and travel book, Ghosh maps his own anthropological fieldwork undertaken in the Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashawy onto his subsequent research into medieval Indian Ocean trade. In so doing, he explores the connections and ruptures between two worlds, the medieval and the contemporary. As the book progresses, the two seemingly disparate strands — descriptions of the Egyptian families and village communities with whom Ghosh resides in the early 1980s, and the narrative of Ghosh's attempts to trace 'the slave of MS. H.6' — increasingly dovetail, each narrative helping to shed light on the other.

The narrative opens as a conventional history book would, with the setting of a scene, in this case the Middle East of the Crusades era. Quoting mainstream history books, and providing scholarly footnotes, Ghosh depicts the area made up of today's Israel, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt as a highly cosmopolitan region, in which several European nations are jostling for power. He describes the Crusaders' defeat at the hands of the Damascenes and then hints at the vast changes in global power that have occurred since then by referring to the next time such a large and diverse group of foreigners convene in Egypt, that is, in 1942, when Britain and her colonial armies arrived to fight Rommel's forces. Ghosh concludes, 'That summer, while the fates of

just the other day why, philosophically, it's a novel. But I know that it's not a novel, I didn't make up a single word of it' (Chambers, 2003: n.pag.).

the two armies hung in the balance, Alexandria was witness to the last, most spectacular, burst of cosmopolitan gaiety for which the city was once famous' (*IAAL*, 15). This deft movement and correspondence between medieval history and more recent events is typical of Ghosh's writing in this text. His claim that the assembling of foreigners in Egypt during the Second World War signals her 'last, most spectacular, burst of cosmopolitan gaiety' is also significant. In *In an Antique Land*, he is constantly at pains to interrogate current perceptions of the postmodern world as a world 'newly-shrunken' (*IAAL*, 55), in which new technologies of communication and transportation allow money, ideas, goods, and individuals to transgress boundaries at speeds previously unknown. In the sentence quoted above, Ghosh indicates that the supposed advances of 'globalization' may actually have lessened the cosmopolitanism of individuals and countries. In the remainder of the book, he subverts our usual assumptions about the progress of history by juxtaposing medieval and modern-day Egyptian societies. He suggests that inhabitants of the twelfth-century Middle East may have been more open to difference and well-travelled than those of the present age, despite new technologies that potentially allow twentieth-century individuals greater access to other cultures. As Javed Majeed points out, in this work 'the term "medieval" is shorn of its pejorative connotations' (1996: 45).

The medieval world depicted by Ghosh is a sophisticated trading society, in which people travel remarkable distances, and in which Christian, Jew, Muslim, and Hindu interact, do business, and form relationships. Conventional histories, Ghosh argues, have obfuscated this shared heritage, compartmentalizing historical evidence in such a way that 'centuries of dialogue' (*IAAL*, 236) between religious groups are occluded. Through his discussion of Judæo-Arabic, Ghosh indicates that the 'dialogue' between Jews and Muslims was not simply metaphorical, but also literally enshrined in this hybrid, and now obsolete trading language. By contrasting the twelfth- and twentieth-century strands of the book, he suggests — not always entirely convincingly — that Jews and Muslims interacted more tolerantly in the Middle Ages than might be expected in the light of the current chilly political relations between Israel and the Arab nations. (Modern-day Israel is, however, never explicitly referred to in this text. I shall discuss the significance of this notable lacuna in the conclusion).

In the twentieth-century section the men of the Egyptian villages in which Ghosh resides are nearly as well-travelled as their forebears; Ghosh notes that 'some men had passports so thick they opened out like ink-blackened concertinas' (*IAAL*, 174). Their travel, like the medieval traders', is motivated by economic pressures and needs, as most of the men travel to find work 'outside', particularly in the Gulf states. In contrast to the medieval world, however, the villagers have a lack of knowledge about other societies and a deep suspicion of religions other than Islam. Ghosh is frequently confronted by the villagers' horror and disgust when they discover that Hindus cremate their dead, do not practise circumcision, and consider the cow to be sacred. A lot has changed, it would seem, since the medieval 'world of accommodations' (*IAAL*, 237) that Ghosh describes.

But what is the reason for this decline in the region's cultural pluralism? The answer is hinted at in the opening passage's reference to the Second World War. In the intervening eight hundred years, Ghosh argues, the medieval non-hegemonic world order has been obliterated by colonialism, 'that unquenchable, demonic thirst that has raged ever since, for almost five hundred years, over the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf' (*IAAL*, 288). In this chapter, I will examine how the 'demonic thirst' of colonialism was able to destroy the syncretic, cooperative proto-capitalism of the Middle Ages. Ghosh's main concern in this book, I submit, is to make us understand the ways in which Western forms of knowledge are as accountable for the destruction of the non-hegemonic world order as the more obvious 'tanks and guns and bombs' (*IAAL*, 236) of imperialism. I will return to this important point shortly, but first I would like to give more of a sense of the plot and concerns of *In an Antique Land*.

Ghosh is not interested in the broad sweep of History: of Crusades, wars, and empires, but chooses instead to focus on individual histories, 'those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world' (*IAAL*, 17). These traces concern an Indian slave who travelled between the Middle East and India in the twelfth century as the representative for an Arabic Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju. As Ghosh points out, '[i]t is nothing less than a miracle that anything is known about him at all', given that he is an illiterate slave, who does not have the power 'to inscribe [himself] physically upon time' (*IAAL*, 17). According to Ghosh, it is nearly as miraculous that

the letters between the highly literate Ben Yiju and his friends have been preserved, because they were not members of a privileged society, but ordinary family businessmen (*IAAL*, 56). I shall suggest later that this description of the traders as 'ordinary' is somewhat contentious. Yet Ghosh rightly observes that the merchants' documents are only available to us because they form a small part of what Ghosh describes as 'the greatest single collection of medieval documents ever discovered' (*IAAL*, 59). This is an extensive cache of papers from the 'geniza' of a Cairo synagogue that the Western world first became aware of in the late nineteenth century. The story of *In an Antique Land* engages as much with the fate of the Cairo Geniza as it does with the slave and his master. The text is a work of historiography as well as of history; it is equally about the difficulties of writing history and anthropology as it is about the surprisingly hybrid past and present of the Middle East. No attempt is made to hide the scaffolding around Ghosh's literary edifice, and it is part of his project to reveal the gaps, omissions, dead ends, and false leads integral to any research using the fragmentary documents of the past. Ghosh shows that the writing of history, both ancient and more recent, is after all writing, rather than absolute knowledge about 'reality'. Fundamentally, *In an Antique Land* is a text about the politics of 'knowledge', whether this is historical or ethnographic knowledge.

The Cairo Geniza may be interpreted as a symbol around which the novel's debate about knowledge is structured. The Hebrew word *geniza*, according to the historian S.D. Goitein, 'like Arabic *janaza* (which means "burial"), is derived from the Persian. In Persian, *ganj* denotes a storehouse or a treasure, and the closest meaning of its biblical derivative, especially in Ezra 6:1, is archive' (Goitein, 1967: 1).⁴

⁴ Ghosh alludes to Goitein's translation of the term 'Geniza' in *In an Antique Land*, writing:

The chambers in which the documents were kept were known by the term '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, particularly beloved of the British who sprinkled it liberally across their British settlements, in odd Anglicized forms like 'Ballygunge' and 'Daltongunj'. (*IAAL*, 57).

Like Goitein, Ghosh recognizes the linguistic exchange between Persian, Arabic, and Hebrew, but here he only includes one of Goitein's three translations, 'storehouse', suggesting that his concern in this text will be towards the way in which the Geniza is exploited almost as a commercial resource. Later in the book he mentions another of Goitein's suggested translations, writing that in the late nineteenth century it was rumoured that there was a 'potential treasure trove of documents waiting to be uncovered in Cairo' (*IAAL*, 84). Again, this indicates the financial motivations of Western academics in acquiring the manuscripts, rather than their professed scholarly interests.

Storehouse, treasure, and archive: these words, with their different connotations, have resonance when thinking about the debate about knowledge and academic discovery in *In an Antique Land*. The word 'storehouse', suggestive as it is of trade, warehouses, and business practices, reflects the fact that the Geniza was intimately bound up with mercantile affairs. The Geniza was a repository for a society of affluent Jews who were dispersed throughout the Mediterranean lands, and many of the documents buried there concern the financial transactions of this merchant society. 'Treasure' is a word that emphasizes both the value attached to the written word by the Jewish society portrayed in the Geniza⁵ and the high price that the Geniza documents have acquired in today's academic market, as will shortly be discussed. Finally, 'archive' is a complex term that will be explored in the section on historiography. For now, it is enough to note that an archive is a place or collection containing records, documents, or other materials of historical interest.

As Goitein emphasizes, the Geniza deviates from what we would usually understand by the word 'archive'. Designating something to be an 'archive' implies that great care has been taken to preserve and put into an orderly system its records, but this is certainly not something we find in the case of the Geniza. Goitein ruefully writes of the 'topsy-turvy' state of the Geniza (1967: 8), indicating that its disorder was created firstly by the fact that its original function as a 'sacrosanct wastebin' (Ghosh, 1992a: 164) caused documents to be scattered carelessly there with no thought for their preservation. Secondly the 'dispersion and scrambling' (Goitein, 1967: 8) of the manuscripts into various libraries in the Western world often allowed heterogeneous materials to be collated together and related documents to be separated by thousands of miles. In a recent article on the ransacking of Coptic manuscripts from Deir-el-Suriyan in Egypt by Robert Curzon and other Western bibliophiles, Stuart Jeffries (2002: 2) argues that '[t]he diaspora of Egyptian artefacts was one of the key consequences of the European plunder of Egypt set in motion with Napoleon's invasion'. The Geniza fragments, like the Coptic manuscripts, were fiercely bargained

⁵ As Goitein explains, paper was extremely expensive and so was not to be discarded lightly; it was often used and reused for a wide variety of purposes: 'drafts, short notes, accounts, or even merely for trying out a pen' (1967: 7). Another reason for the care shown by the Jewish community towards the written document is that they were prohibited from destroying any paper that contained the name of God, and so, as even the most trivial note was likely to contain a set phrase evoking God, most documents had to be stored in the Geniza.

over and ended up in a 'diaspora' dispersed in libraries and museums in Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, St Petersburg, and Philadelphia. Despite these caveats, the Cairo Geniza documents are universally recognized as the most fertile extant source of information about medieval society in the Middle East.

When we think about these words, 'storehouse', 'treasure', and 'archive' in relation to the Geniza documents' dispersal into Western collections, libraries, and museums, it sheds light on Ghosh's argument about knowledge and power. The lofty sounding 'archive', denoting an impersonal collection of documents preserved for posterity and History, slides into the more materialistic, and yet still somehow elevated word 'treasure', which is in turn undercut by the frankly acquisitive 'storehouse'. Similarly, the Taylor-Schechter collection, the largest accumulation of Geniza manuscripts stored at Cambridge University, is often perceived as an unparalleled *archive* that is a great *treasure* to scholars of the Middle East of medieval times. And yet, as Ghosh shows, scratch the surface and the financial implications of the word 'treasure' appear. For example, he describes scholarly wrangling over possession of the documents in terms of trade and capitalism: the documents, he writes, 'could command good prices on the international market' (*IAAL*, 87). In fact, the bargaining, deceit, and negotiation required to gain ownership of the Geniza documents is a good deal more fierce than that employed by actual traders of the twelfth century, such as Ben Yiju and Khalaf ibn Ishaq. It appears that the historical documents of the past are another commodity to be bought and sold in the international marketplace. Furthermore, just as the West directs the markets of the colonial and neo-colonial eras, so too is it able to control the traffic of information, knowledge, and History.

I would like to suggest that in this text, the Western academy's procurement of the Geniza documents appears as a process that evokes all the nuances implied by the three connotations of the word 'storehouse'. This is particularly well exemplified in the following passage:

By the end of the eighteenth century, Egypt 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*. In fact, the first detailed plan for the conquest of Egypt was conceived not by a soldier but by a philosopher, Karl Liebniz, as early as 1670.

More than a hundred years later, when Napoleon conceived of his invasion of Egypt, it was partly on the model of a scientific expedition.

In the decades immediately after Napoleon's invasion of 1798, Egypt attracted *the husbandry of the Western academy* in a way that no other place ever had (*IAAL*, 82; emphasis mine).

In this quotation, Ghosh makes clear his equation of the West's relentless acquisition of historical documents with colonial land appropriation. Egypt, that 'antique land' of which Shelley writes, becomes by virtue of its antiquity the 'scholarly counterpart' of countries such as India, which were plundered for materialistic reasons. Ghosh shows that the Western academe is closely implicated in the imperialist project. The examples he gives of Leibniz providing the first plan to conquer Egypt, and Napoleon following the model of a scientific expedition when he attacks the country, illustrate the intimate intertwining of the scholarly and colonial enterprises.

The phrase 'the husbandry of the Western academy' I take as a touchstone for this chapter. It is a curiously double-edged expression, as the word 'husbandry' has several meanings: 'farming; (*good, bad*) economy; careful management' (*OED*). Farming is about cultivation and nurture as well as the exploitation of resources for profit. As the parenthetical words 'good' and 'bad' indicate, the second, economic sense of 'husbandry' is also ambivalent. It could be interpreted approvingly as thriftiness, or condemned as draconian financial organization. The final nuance, 'careful management', is equally irresolute, indicating both attentive supervision and unequal power structures. Ghosh's choice of the word 'husbandry' to describe the Western academy's garnering of the Geniza documents is thus a highly successful one. Like the term 'Geniza' itself, which as we have seen has several different implications, the word 'husbandry' also presents us with a 'giddy spiral of meanings' (*IAAL*, 161), alerting us to both the positive and negative aspects of the Western academy's actions in Egypt. The three meanings, 'farming; [...] economy; careful management' remind us that the collection of Geniza documents by the West was inextricably linked with the colonial appropriation of land, economic exploitation, and social subjugation. Yet the positive connotations of nurture, thrift, and care cannot be overlooked, and Ghosh's felicitous word-choice reminds us that without the Western academy's intervention the Geniza documents might not have been preserved. Ultimately, however, the phrase 'the husbandry of the Western academy' evokes the West's violent intercession in Egypt's history. Two further connotations of the word

'husbandry' not included in the dictionary are the notion of animal husbandry — a euphemistic term for the breeding of animals, often for slaughter — and the word's inevitable association with a dominant, male spouse. Underlying Ghosh's phrase, therefore, is the suggestion of killing and domination. In some ways, as I will discuss, Ghosh's designation of 'the Western academy' does not match the subtlety of his term 'husbandry', as the former is seen as an undifferentiated mass. However, by and large, Ghosh's text provides a rich and complex account of the culpability of Western academia in the destruction of the Geniza world.

If we interpret the Geniza manuscripts as a commodity being traded in the international market, it becomes clear how much has changed since the twelfth century of which Ghosh writes. Most historians describe the world system of the twelfth century as an inchoate '*free-trade community*' (Goitein, 1967: 61), where trade laws allowed the relatively free flow of goods to and from countries, with no one country or community having a monopoly over the others. Janet Abu-Lughod has written that each country interacted with others in the medieval global economic system, in ways that could be 'cooperative, conflictual, or symbiotic'. Yet she concludes that the medieval world order was more cooperative and symbiotic than conflictual:

Each gained from the system but not to the detriment of others. When the system reached its zenith in the opening decades of the fourteenth century, no single power could be said to be hegemonic; the participation of all was required for its perpetuation (1989: 37).

This largely non-hierarchical society provides a marked contrast with the world economy from the sixteenth century to the present day, in which both goods and ideas are traded in a system that heavily favours the storehouses of the West. The proto-capitalism of Ben Yiju's day was a matter of cooperation, friendships, and tolerance and, as Ghosh shows, this system compares very favourably with the ruthless monopoly of capital under colonialism.

Apart from the literal translations of the word 'Geniza', the physical conditions of the Cairo Geniza are also instructive when thinking about 'knowledge and discovery'. The Geniza contained a wealth of extremely disparate materials, including divorce papers, children's exercise books, business inventories, and deeds of sale. These documents originated spatially from all corners of the Islamic world, which at

the time stretched from Spain and Morocco to Palestine and Syria; and temporally from 956 to at least 1538 A.D.⁶ The contents of the Geniza, prior to their dispersal to various libraries, were never static: the Geniza was less a repository than a constantly shifting process, as people frequently removed from and added to the store. Many of the Geniza documents, as I have indicated, are themselves palimpsests. Paper, a costly material then, was often used for many different purposes — legal, personal, financial.

The Geniza, then, prior to its scattering and classification in Western collections, has features that are suggestive of Ghosh's project. The idea of a heterogeneous mix of documents, simultaneously growing and eroding, and with different texts grafted onto each other palimpsestuously, is a neat symbol for the kind of knowledge that Ghosh seems to be arguing should replace 'the Enlightenment's conceptions of knowledge and discovery' (*IAAL*, 82). The idea of the Geniza as an evolving process, in which documents are both added and removed, is significant because when interpreted symbolically it suggests that knowledge can never be definitive, but is constantly being updated and revised. Furthermore, just as in the Geniza papers dealing with vastly different subjects co-exist in layers and bundles, with no one document having precedence over another, so too Ghosh intermixes different subjects — anthropology, history, historiography, politics, and even linguistics — but without allowing any form of knowledge to take precedence. *In an Antique Land* strives towards a similarly layered and fragmentary form as that embodied in the Geniza, and articles and papers on different subjects are fused together into a non-hierarchical whole. Here, Trinh Minh-ha's discussion of interdisciplinarity is relevant:

To cut across boundaries and borderlines is to live aloud the malaise of categories and labels; it is to resist simplistic attempts at classifying, to resist the comfort of belonging to a classification, and of *producing classifiable* works. Interdisciplinary is, for example, not just a question of putting several fields together, so that individuals can share their specialized knowledge and converse with one another within their expertise. It is to create in sharing a field that belongs to no one, not even to those who create it (Trinh, 1991: 107 – 108).

This comment is instructive for the reader of *In an Antique Land*, who will see that the book is an attempt to 'resist simplistic attempts at classifying'. Ghosh creates a book

⁶ Even after this date, which is fixed on by Goitein (1967: 8), people intermittently continued to deposit manuscripts in the Geniza. Ghosh is interested to find in Goitein's *A Mediterranean Society* that the last document to appear in the storehouse was a divorce settlement from Bombay dated 1875 (*IAAL*, 57).

that is neither novel, history, travel book nor autobiography but contains elements of all these forms. In so doing, he unsettles our assumptions about how each of these genres should be written and, by implication, deprivileges the notion that there is a definitive way in which knowledge can be presented. To borrow Trinh's phrasing, he aims to create 'a field that belongs to no one, not even to those who create it'. In other words, Ghosh wants to escape from forms of knowledge that seek to possess 'facts' in order to prove their own superiority. I shall examine his critique and remoulding of two forms of knowledge: history and anthropology.

HISTORY

The debate about history and historiography in *In an Antique Land* may be seen as part of a wider dialogue that has been taking place in the discipline since the mid-1970s. Such pioneering historians as Hayden White have sought to expose 'the historically conditioned character of the historical discipline' and assist 'the dissolution of history's claim to autonomy among the disciplines' (1978: 29). What theorists such as Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra seek to show is that the discourse of history cannot claim to represent the truth about the past in an objective way. History, they argue, like any other discourse, only asks questions from within a certain structure and, as such, inevitably skews its findings. White criticizes the perception that history uses a methodology that is allegedly situated in between the arts and sciences, but uniting the best properties of both. He disputes history's pretensions to scientific demonstrability by observing — in accordance with my arguments in Chapter One — that recent philosophers suggest that even science does not provide a definitive, universally valid explanation for the world:

Many historians continue to treat their 'facts' as though they were 'given' and refuse to recognize, unlike most scientists, that they are not so much found as constructed by the kinds of questions which the investigator asks of the phenomena before him (1978: 43).

He also pours scorn on the discipline's status as 'art', arguing that 'when many contemporary historians speak of the "art" of history, they seem to have in mind a conception of art that would admit little more than the nineteenth-century novel as a

paradigm' (1978: 42). Linda Hutcheon confirms this idea that historical discourse grew concurrently with the nineteenth-century novel, but that its narrative form, unlike the novel's, has never reacted to new innovations in art (1988: 105 – 106).

According to White, stylistic experimentation is largely missing from historical discourse. Although it is assumed to be transparent, historical discourse in fact shares the biases of nineteenth-century realism. There have been 'no significant attempts at surrealistic, expressionistic, or existentialist historiography in this century (except by novelists or poets themselves), for all of the vaunted "artistry" of the historians of modern times' (1978: 43). White can identify only one historian, Jacob Burckhardt (1818 – 1897), who, he argues, was unique in trying to figure forth a model of history that takes into account new artistic movements (in this case impressionism):

Like his contemporaries in art, Burckhardt cuts into the historical record at different points and suggests different perspectives on it, omitting, ignoring, or distorting as his artistic purpose requires. His intention was not to tell the *whole* truth about the Italian Renaissance but *one* truth about it, in precisely the same way that Cézanne abandoned any attempt to tell the whole truth about a landscape. He had abandoned the dream of telling the truth about the past by means of telling a story (1978: 44).

This passage is suggestive for my reading of Amitav Ghosh's representations of history in *In an Antique Land*. Like Burckhardt, Ghosh eschews the narrative conventions of history — chronological order; an impersonal, omniscient narrator; and a plain, formal style — drawn from nineteenth-century methods of emplotment. Also like Burckhardt, Ghosh inserts himself into the historical record, making sure that the reader is always aware that this is *one* truth, rather than the *whole* truth about the Middle East of the twelfth century. He achieves this in a different way from Burckhardt's attempt to provide various perspectives on the same events. Ghosh's inventive historical narrative is interspersed with personal reflections on the research process and anecdotes about the villagers with whom he resides while conducting his research. This alerts the reader to the subjective nature of Ghosh's historical quest and to the motivations, as a third-world ethnographer and historian, that inform his research. Finally, and again like Burckhardt, Ghosh borrows from the techniques of his contemporaries in art, in this case creating a postmodern historical narrative. The theorist Ihab Hassan has written, '[t]he postmodernist only disconnects, fragments are all he pretends to trust' (1986: 505). If this is true then, as I shall discuss in a later

segment, Ghosh is a consummate postmodernist, as he embraces in this text the image of fragments as a way of understanding the world.

Ghosh challenges conventional histories, in particular their presentation of events in a chronological, orderly, linear narrative. I must acknowledge first, however, that not all histories are strictly chronological. Berkhofer reminds us that many history books begin with 'a later, sometimes culminating, event or episode' (1995: 78), to grab the reader's attention, and then flashback to explain earlier occurrences that led to this event. And yet, Ghosh's challenge to linearity is more fundamental than this relatively minor adjustment to the sequential order.⁷ His inclusion of such disparate subjects as, for example, linguistic history (Judæo-Arabic), modern-day Egyptian agricultural methods, and the religious practices of the matrilineal Tuluva group, makes the reader question History's tendency to concentrate on a few events, trends, or movements. As such, his writing accords with Robert Young's statement that 'any "new history" must, necessarily, be almost unrecognizable as "history"' (1990: 156). The history of *In an Antique Land* is 'almost unrecognizable', decentring as it does the figure of the omniscient narrator, using novelistic techniques to recreate the past, and broadening the field of 'history' to encompass modern-day concerns.

One of his techniques is to end one chapter and begin the next with a similar theme, despite the centuries that separate the two major plot strands. To take one example, at the end of chapter six and the beginning of chapter seven of the 'Nashawy' section, the resemblance between Nabeel and Isma'il's departure for the Gulf and Ben Yiju's move to Aden is indicated. Chapter six ends with Shaikh Musa commenting that men like Nabeel and Isma'il leave Egypt to go 'outside' for work because '[t]he opportunity comes, and it has to be taken' [*IAAL*, 152]. The opening sentence of the next chapter reads:

⁷ Indeed, Berkhofer later indicates that the flashback technique does not really alter the linear model of time:

Flashback as a narrative technique depends upon an understanding, shared by the historian and the reader, of chronological time as a sequence or succession of events independent of their order of presentation in the text; the historian depicts a dramatic event before tracing the history or presenting the story that supposedly led to it, but the reader understands them in proper chronological sequence despite the order of presentation (1995: 110).

To the young Ben Yiju, journeying eastwards would have appeared as the simplest and most natural means of availing himself of the most rewarding possibilities his world had to offer [*IAAL*, 152 – 53].

We are therefore encouraged to make connections between the historical trader and the modern-day cousins: both are portrayed as being entrepreneurial, ambitious, and eager to take opportunities as they arise. Both also regard wealth as being more freely available outside their own country: Ben Yiju travels from Aden eastwards to India to avail himself of its legendary riches, while for Nabeel and Isma'il, money is to be found in the oil-rich states of the Gulf. The juxtaposition of the two stories makes Ben Yiju's life seem more immediate, as his motivations are similar to those of characters we have come to know.

Ghosh's playful intertwining of past and present poses a challenge to the teleology and linearity of much Western discourse. As such he is indirectly attacking Orientalist, even racist, assumptions of that discourse. Anne McClintock points out that the model of progress adopted by Western historical discourse causes non-Western societies to be portrayed in extremely damaging ways:

In colonial discourse [...], space is time, and history is shaped around two, necessary movements: the 'progress' forward of humanity from slouching deprivation to erect, enlightened reason. The other movement presents the reverse: regression backwards from (white, male) adulthood to a primordial, black 'degeneracy' [...] (1993: 292).

In an Antique Land focuses upon two nations that have been portrayed by the West's linear historical model as being quintessentially degenerate and regressive: Egypt and India. Both countries were seen as once having had an extremely sophisticated culture, but having declined to such a level that imperial forces were compelled to intervene. Said writes that Egypt 'was the vindication of Western imperialism; it was, until its annexation by England, an almost academic example of Oriental backwardness; it was to become the triumph of English knowledge and power' (1995: 35). Similarly, India was commonly perceived by nineteenth-century historians as an ossified, immobile society. James Mill scathingly observes that 'the Hindus, at the time of Alexander's invasion, were in a state of manners, society, and knowledge, exactly the same with that in which they were discovered by the nations of modern Europe' (1826: 146). At the least effective moments of *In an Antique Land*, as I shall indicate in the conclusion, Ghosh does little more than reverse the West's model of

progress from (Oriental) barbarism to (Occidental) civilization. At times, as I hope to make clear, the text seems to project an alternative model of degeneration; depicting a golden age of Middle Eastern multiculturalism and tolerance, which, when ruptured by the 'demonic thirst' of Western imperialism, declined irreparably.

And yet, in the structure and emplotment of the text, Ghosh for the most part disrupts and complicates any easy sense of narrative linearity. In order to contest Orientalist depictions of India and Egypt as societies languishing in corruption and decay, he offers us a historical narrative that is based on the decentred model of the network. The word 'network' crops up at several points in the narrative, most often in a conventional usage, referring to the international business organization of Ben Yiju and his friends (*IAAL*, 16; 155; 277). More metaphorically Ghosh writes, 'Within this tornado of grand designs and historical destinies, Khalaf ibn Ishaq's letter seems to open a trapdoor into a vast network of foxholes where real life continues uninterrupted' (*IAAL*, 15 – 16). In this evocative sentence, the word 'network' has connotations of a subterranean warren of interconnected lives. The historian is depicted, like Alice in Wonderland, falling helplessly through a 'trapdoor' into a confusing labyrinthine world, where she or he may gain insight into snatches of 'real life'. Yet the 'network of foxholes' is a domesticated, reassuringly small image in comparison with the 'tornado of grand designs and historical destinies', by which Ghosh means the events History views as important, such as the Crusades and the Second World War. This indicates that Ghosh is interested in ordinary lives that have been overlooked by the grand narrative of History. Thus the network model allows history to be plotted not as an orderly sequence of events, but as a disparate web of far-flung nodes, separated by time and space, but united by the themes and concerns that they share. Furthermore the model of the network is appropriate in narrating the stories of those whom the linear narrative of history has tended to exclude, those who are neither 'literate' nor 'consequential' (*IAAL*, 17). Whereas conventional history usually requires detailed evidence about its protagonists in order to ensure the smooth chronological run of its narrative, the interconnected and non-hierarchical nature of a network structure allows comparatively unknown characters to enter history.

Finally, when discussing the Tulunâd culture of Mangalore, Ghosh argues that 'like so many other parts of the subcontinent', the area is 'distinctive and singular,

while being at the same time closely enmeshed with its neighbours in an intricate network of differences' (*IAAL*, 244). Here, the term 'network of differences' is used to describe the paradoxical 'unity in diversity' of the area, and of India as a whole. I would argue that this idea of a 'network of differences' is implicitly present at many points in the novel, when societies and cultural practices that seem to be entirely discrete are revealed as being linked. Ghosh's comparative approach to history allows him to expose connections that are obfuscated by the broad, linear sweep of history. For example, some time after his move to Nahawy, the narrator is told the legend of the local saint, Sidi Abu-Kanaka (*IAAL*, 138 – 40). This story contains very similar tropes to that of the tale of a Lataifan saint that had earlier been recounted to him (*IAAL*, 65 – 66). This is hardly surprising, given the two villages' close proximity, but when the narrator hears a story thousands of miles away in Mangalore that also involves a saint's indestructible grave and his protection over his villagers, he is amazed. The Indian taxi-driver who tells him the legend of his local saint asks if he has ever heard a similar story, and when the narrator answers that he has, in Egypt, 'disbelief was written all over his face' (*IAAL*, 266). The taxi-driver's incredulity indicates that history's nationalist focus has obscured correspondences that transcend national boundaries. This is another strength of the network model of history: it allows a supra-national approach to events, as I will discuss later. In the next chapter, I return to this model of the network, arguing that it is foregrounded more explicitly in *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

Ghosh also lampoons the figure of the historian and subverts our expectations of the tropes and language that she or he uses. Alun Munslow describes the historian's stylistic approach as follows:

The modernist empiricist historical method handed down from the nineteenth century requires and assumes historical explanation will emerge in a naturalistic fashion from the archival raw data, its meaning offered as interpretation in the form of a story revealed explicitly, impersonally, transparently, and without resort to any of the devices used by writers of literary narratives, viz., imagery or figurative language. Style is deliberately expunged as an issue, or relegated to a minor problem of presentation (1997: 10).

In contrast, Ghosh's model of history is highly personal and does not assume transparency. *In an Antique Land* is narrated in the first person by a narrator of rather uncertain identity. The Egyptian villagers call this 'I' narrator 'Amitab', and he is

clearly to some extent meant to be associated with Amitav Ghosh.⁸ Of course, many of the events in the text are autobiographical, such as Ghosh's residency in Egypt to do anthropological research for his PhD at Oxford University. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the 'I' figure is an unequivocal representation of Ghosh himself and nowhere in the text does he explicitly equate this figure with himself. There is in fact a certain amount of distance from this narrator. The reader may occasionally feel somewhat repulsed by his immature behaviour; for example, his excessive anger with the Imam for his jibes against Hinduism, and his somewhat unfriendly and irrational refusal to attend a mosque when pressed by his hosts.

The pedantry of the later narrator, who is researching the history of Ben Yiju's slave, is also satirized. For example, when this narrator speculates on Ben Yiju's reasons for marrying an Indian slave girl, gentle fun is made of the text's uneasy conjunction of imaginative reconstruction with historical fact: 'If I hesitate to call it love it is only because the documents offer no certain proof' (*IAAL*, 230). Here, the 'I' narrator exhibits a dual personality: the meticulousness of the historian and his reliance on documentary evidence is contrasted with the novelist's need to supply characters with motivations and emotions. The 'I' narrator in this instance is less a representation of Ghosh himself than a parody of the historian, encumbered as he is by the limitations of the historical archives.

Ghosh self-consciously draws attention to his style, confounding our expectations that historical narratives should take the form of 'a story revealed explicitly, impersonally, transparently' and subverting the idea that 'facts' can have only one explanation. Another moment when the objective, disinterested manner of the historian is conflated with the more personal, metaphorical style of the novelist comes in the following passage describing the second time the Slave is mentioned in a modern history book:

The Slave's second appearance, like his first, occurs in a letter by Khalaf ibn Ishaq, written in Aden — one that happened to be included in a collection entitled *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, translated and edited by Professor S.D. Goitein, of Princeton University. Like the other letter, this one too is

⁸ In this chapter, I shall sometimes refer to the narrator as 'Ghosh' and sometimes as 'the narrator'. This is to indicate my belief that the narrator figure is simultaneously meant to represent Ghosh and not-Ghosh.

addressed to Abraham Ben Yiju, in Mangalore, but in the thirty-one years that have passed between the publication of the one and the other, the Slave has slipped backwards in time, like an awkward package on a conveyor belt. He is nine years younger — the letter in which his name now appears was written by Khalaf ibn Ishaq in 1139. [...] The Slave's role is no less brief upon his second appearance than it was in his first. But he has grown in stature now: he has earned himself a footnote (*IAAL*, 17 – 18).⁹

The beginning of this excerpt is written in the magisterial, factual style of the conventional historian. Ghosh provides a detailed reference to the work by S.D. Goitein that contains the second mention of the Slave. However, the language then moves into a more informal and suggestive register, with the simile 'like an awkward package on a conveyor belt' being used to denote the Slave's slippage backwards in time. This image humorously alludes to the confusion frequently encountered in historical research, when a piece of evidence from a later date comes to light *before* the documents which should precede it. The simile also evokes something of the personality of the Slave. The fact that he is compared to an 'awkward package' blocking a conveyor belt foreshadows Ghosh's imaginative rendering of the Slave as an uncompromisingly boisterous individual, which, as we will see shortly, he gleans from meagre archival traces. Finally, the last sentence of this passage is interesting as it accords the Slave agency in his own historical representation: 'he has earned himself a footnote'. Rather than giving the credit to Goitein for providing a gloss on the Slave, Ghosh chooses to interpret the footnote as something the Slave has earned. As such, the Slave appears not as some remote historical figure, but an active, living character who is more real and distinct to the reader than is the recent historian.

⁹ Compare this passage with its equivalent in the scholarly essay 'The Slave of MS. H.6':

The slave's role is no less brief here, but this time he has a bigger part in the production: he has earned himself a footnote. His second appearance, like his first, occurs in a letter written by Khalaf ibn Ishaq. But in the twenty-four years that have passed between the two, he has slipped backwards in time: he is ten years younger now (Ghosh, 1992a: 161).

Ghosh's language is much simpler here and, with the exception of some unobtrusive theatre imagery ('this time he has a bigger part in the production'), there are few narrative tropes. Ghosh merely notes that the Slave's second appearance in a modern historical text dates from a document that is nine years older than the first text cited. Note that the evocative metaphor 'like an awkward package on a conveyor belt' has been entirely omitted, probably because this would be regarded as too flowery for a serious historical work. (N.B. I am uncertain why the essay and *In an Antique Land* give different time spans between the two publications [twenty-four and thirty-one years respectively]. Goitein's *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* was published in 1973, thirty-one years after E. Strauss's publication of 1942, so I can only assume that the figure given in 'The Slave of MS. H.6' is a mistake).

In a later passage we once again see the Slave as a rounded, animated character, when Ghosh envisions his drunken antics from a letter written by Madmun after a piratical raid on Aden:

It appears that Bomma, determined to enjoy his trip to the full, had spent his wages on an extended drinking bout during which he had presented himself several times in Madmun's office, demanding money.

This is how Madmun put it:

And after that he [Bomma] started on other things. He said: Give me more money, [what I have] is not enough. He took 4 months money from me, eight dînârs. Often he would come here, very drunk, and would not listen to a word I said.

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 (*IAAL*, 258 - 59).

From the insubstantial traces of information about Bomma's drunkenness in the archive (notice the ellipses which indicates that some of the fragment is missing or illegible), Ghosh produces a vivid portrayal of the inebriated Slave. He leaves us with a memorable image of a befuddled yet riotous Bomma waving his flask and cheering on the Adenese militia. This depiction, as Ghosh himself implicitly acknowledges, is an entirely fictional account only thinly supported by documentary evidence. Ghosh carefully and half-ironically inserts the provisos '[w]e cannot be sure of course' and 'it is not impossible that [...]', to undermine our certainty about events and poke fun at the cautiousness of the historian as compared with the bold fantasy of the novelist. Yet the specificity and detail of his images stick in the imagination and despite Ghosh's qualifying phrases we are left with a tangible image of Bomma's spectatorial role in the pirates' raid.

In contrast to the usual stated aims of a historian to provide an unbiased, impersonal account of events and people, Ghosh's methods of research are unashamedly imaginative. As a writer of fiction, he seeks to reconstruct personalities and relationships from often unelucidating archival traces, which is well exemplified in the following passage:

The letters are full of detailed instructions, and beneath the surface of their conventionally courteous language there is a certain peremptoriness, as though Madmun were doubtful of the abilities and efficiency of his inexperienced associate. But at the same time it is amply clear from Madmun's warm but occasionally irascible tone that he regarded Ben Yiju with an almost parental affection. His familiarity with his tastes and habits suggest that he may even

have taken the young Ben Yiju to live in his household [...], in much the same way that artisans sometimes made their apprentices their presumptive kin (*IAAL*, 156).

Here Ghosh examines fragmentary letters concerning business transactions. Most historians would surely read these for their content alone, scanning the detail for any light they could shed on wider economic, social, and political conditions. Yet Ghosh almost entirely disregards the letters' content, scrutinizing their style and tone instead for what this can tell us about the relationship between the two individuals. He looks beyond the polite set phrases, noticing Madmun's 'peremptory' tone, which, he argues, suggests a lack of confidence in Ben Yiju's business skills. He goes further, deducing from Madmun's knowledge of Ben Yiju's 'tastes and habits' that this may indicate that the two men once lived together as patron and apprentice. From dry business letters, Ghosh gleans tiny fragments of information that allow him to mould quasi-fictional characters for Madmun and his young associate.

Ghosh's writing style in this text is largely unobtrusive, yet it contains many startling and memorable images. It may be described in the same terms with which he describes Ben Yiju's writing: 'he wrote a clear, carefully crafted prose, with some arresting images hidden under a deceptively plain surface' (*IAAL*, 154). Ghosh's style is similarly 'deceptively plain' on the surface. Especially in the historical sections he uses a fairly undecorative vocabulary, short sentences and few superfluous words. When talking about the etymology of the name 'Egypt' for example, Ghosh writes in an apparently objective, scholarly way:

Like English, every major European language derives its name for Egypt from the Greek *Ægyptos*, a term that is related to the word 'Copt', the name generally used for Egypt's indigenous Christians. Thus German has its *Ägypten*, Dutch *Egypte*, Polish and Estonian *Egipt*: old resonant words, with connotations and histories far in excess of those that usually attach to the names of countries. A seventeenth-century English law, for example, states: 'If any transport into England or Wales, any lewd people calling themselves Egyptians, they forfeit 40 £' — a reminder that words like 'gypsy' and 'gitano' derived from 'Egyptian' (*IAAL*, 32 - 33).

This passage, written in an academic register and complete with its own footnote, encourages the reader's confidence in the narrator's knowledge about the history of the word 'Egypt'. The deceptively plain style of the passage allows Ghosh to move

into a more personal interpretation of the linguistic meanings of 'Egypt' as compared with 'Masr':

Europe's apparently innocent 'Egypt' is therefore as much a metaphor as 'Masr', but a less benign one, almost as much a weapon as a word. Egypt's own metaphor for itself, on the other hand, renders the city indistinguishable from the country; a usage that brims with pleasing and unexpected symmetries (*IAAL*, 33).

Although still written in a measured, objective tone, with words such as 'therefore' and 'on the other hand' encouraging the reader's continued faith, this passage is a 'carefully crafted' piece of polemic, more suited to a novel than a conventional history book. Ghosh has now departed from his discussion of the different constructions of 'Egypt' in European languages, to describe these words as metaphors for Europe's attitudes towards the country. Ghosh argues that the negative connotations that 'Egypt' has accreted in European languages indicate language's role as a 'weapon' of imperialism. In contrast, he argues that Egypt's word 'Masr', meaning both Cairo and Egypt, 'brims with pleasing and unexpected symmetries'. The unobtrusive imagery of overflowing water suggested by the verb 'brim' has joyful resonances ('brimming with happiness'). In conjunction with the egalitarian word 'symmetries', the positive nuances of 'Masr' are reinforced, and 'Egypt's own metaphor for itself' is preferred to the violent 'weapon' of European linguistic usage.

As well as parodying the figure of the conventional historian, Ghosh also suggests that her great faith in the collection of evidence drawn from a historical archive may be misplaced. Many questions are raised by the notion of an archive. Who compiled it and why, and what did they leave in or out? Most of the evidence in an archive comes in the form of written documents, but can we ever interpret these free of the biases and partialities of their original narrators? Gayatri Spivak (1985: 129), among others, has challenged the foregrounding of historical archives as 'a repository of "facts"', indicating that however disinterested they may appear, archive materials need to be 'read' as carefully as any other literary source. Even assuming that the historian can separate true facts from the biases of the documents' producers, how possible is it to structure a coherent narrative out of the evidence without altering its meaning? From an endless plethora of documents, the historian chooses a limited selection of manuscripts that she considers significant. This selective approach inevitably rules out other, equally plausible ways of accounting for the evidence. And

by explaining the documents in the form of narrative, isn't the historian slotting 'facts' into pre-existing literary forms that shape our understanding of events?

Dominick LaCapra derides the historian's tendency to treat historical documents only 'on the level of content analysis', looking at them for what they can tell us about the historical period alone. He points out the importance of looking at the document in and for itself:

Rarely do historians see significant texts as important events in their own right that pose complex problems in interpretation and have intricate relations to other events and to various pertinent contexts (1985: 38).

Unlike the historians that LaCapra criticizes, Ghosh treats the 'significant texts' of the Geniza as 'important events in their own right'. Consider this important description of the Geniza documents from 'The Slave of MS. H.6':

Each of these documents has a story of its own: of travel from Aden and Egypt, to Malabar and Sicily and then back again to Cairo — medieval histories that somersault into a further chronicle of travel and dispersal in modern times. Their history has the baffling elusiveness of lights seen in parallel mirrors: they are both the stuff of history and history itself, as real as a battle or a temple; they are each a living history and a commentary on the writing of history; a mocking aside on how histories are stolen, bought and traded in the marketplace (1992a: 167).

Ghosh establishes from the outset that the 'story' of the documents in modern times is as important to him as that of Ben Yiju or his slave. As the energetic verb 'somersault' indicates, it is insufficient to consider the Geniza documents for what they tell us about medieval history alone. The extraordinary trajectory of these documents — their amazing 'chronicle of travel and dispersal' — propels the reader through different ages and locations. This fits with Ghosh's historical approach: he may start by looking at the documents for what they tell him about the slave, but he always progresses in a non-linear fashion, jumping from one archival 'node' to another, so that the documents become 'both the stuff of history and history itself'.

Of course, one of the main reasons for Ghosh's interest in the historiography of the Geniza documents is that it provides evidence of the Western academy's culpability both in appropriating Egyptian documents and in obscuring the level of interaction that went on in the medieval Mediterranean region. Drawing on White's

and LaCapra's historiographic interventions, such theorists as Edward Said and Robert Young have argued more broadly that the plain style, supposedly unbiased narratorial voice, and chronological ordering of Western history mask the discipline's imbrication in the imperial project. As Young writes, 'History, with a capital H, [...] cannot tolerate otherness or leave it outside its economy of inclusion' (1990: 4). He means by this statement to suggest that History's all-encompassing rhetoric does not allow for other ways of narrating the past.

We need only examine a short passage from a British historian's account of Mughal India, written in 1867, to see this intolerance of otherness at work:

when the full light of European truth and discernment begins to shed its beams upon the obscurity of the past [...], [it] relieve[s] us from the necessity of appealing to the Native Chroniclers of the time, who are, for the most part, dull, prejudiced, ignorant, and superficial. [...] [W]e have to lament the entire absence of literary history and biography, which in India is devoted only to saints and poets. Where fairy tales and fictions are included under the general name of history we cannot expect to learn much [...] Even in Europe this deficiency has been complained of; how much more, then, is it likely to be a subject of regret, where despotism is triumphant; where the active elements of life are few; and where individual character, trammelled by so many restraining influences, has no opportunity of development (Elliot, 1867: xvi & xviii).

This passage illustrates the arguments of Said and Young in a most extreme way. Sir Henry Elliot denies any methods other than those of 'European truth and discernment' the ability to reveal the workings of the past. It is significant that he emphasizes Indian historians' supposed recourse to 'fairy tales and fictions' in contrast to the enlightening 'beams' of Western knowledge. This depiction of Indians presenting fanciful stories as history recurs again and again in disparaging nineteenth-century accounts of Indian historiography.¹⁰ According to Elliot, any history that does not conform to the Western historical norms derived from the nineteenth-century realist novel is denied the status of history and deemed fictional. Perhaps, then, Ghosh blurs

¹⁰ James Mill, for example, writes that in Indian histories 'the actions of men and those of deities are mixed together, in a set of legends, more absurd and extravagant, more transcending the bounds of nature and of reason, less grateful to the imagination and taste of a cultivated and rational people, than those which the fabulous history of any other nation present us with. The Brahmens are the most audacious, and perhaps the most unskilful fabricators, with whom the annals of fable have yet made us acquainted' (1826: 144). More notorious is Macaulay's withering description of Indian history 'abounding with kings thirty feet high, and reigns thirty thousand years long' (1995: 429). Both historians use Indians' alleged inability to distinguish fact from fiction as a way of extolling the superiority of Western forms of knowledge.

the techniques of novelistic and historical writing in order to challenge the perception that fiction is not a serious form in which to present the past. Elliot's vision of history is univocal, suppressing other versions of the past, while at the same time implicitly providing a justification of colonial occupation. The final sentence, with its claims about Indian despotism and the Indian's lack of personal development, suggests that only European reason can rescue this society from its state of degeneration. Western history in the colonial context therefore has several functions: to persuade Europeans of the corruption of non-Western peoples in the present day, convincing them of the need for colonial intervention; and to alert the 'natives' themselves to the alleged deficiencies of their own historians and persuade them of the superiority of European methods in preserving their pasts.

SUBALTERN STUDIES: DEFENDING A FRAGMENTED VISION OF HISTORY

In discussing postmodernist interrogations of history, I have referred to Said and Young, and clearly their influence lies behind the work of the Subaltern Studies history group of the 1980s and early 1990s. The Subaltern Studies historians attempted to answer the question that arises from Said's work (1995: 24) as to whether it is possible to narrate the past from multicultural, multiple perspectives. They formulated a manifesto 'to promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian studies, and thus help to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in this particular area' (Guha, 1982: vii). In other words, they sought to overturn the tendency of historians of India to concentrate on recovering the stories of leaders, scholars, and other powerful men, in favour of 'discussion of subaltern themes'. The term 'subaltern' is drawn from the work of the Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci. Its literal meaning is a rank-and-file, lowly member of the army, but Gramsci used it to indicate a member of an oppressed class, placing his emphasis firmly on the working class. The Subaltern Studies historians later picked up this term, and extended it to forge a history of anyone who did not belong to the colonial elite, such as peasants, the lower middle classes, and women. They attempted to challenge Western History's univocality by retrieving the usually silenced voices of the working classes and other minorities.

As is well known, part of *In an Antique Land* was published in more scholarly form as the essay, 'The Slave of MS. H.6', in the seventh Subaltern Studies volume (Ghosh, 1992a). Ghosh's approach to history therefore has clear affinities with other Subaltern Studies historians', especially in his attempt to write a 'history from below'. He acknowledges these connections in an interview in which he states that he and the Subaltern Studies historians 'came out of a similar moment in the intellectual life of India' (Silva and Tickell, 1997: 173). In accordance with the philosophies of the Subaltern Studies group, Ghosh censures medieval history's focus on 'the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests' (*IAAL*, 17). To combat this elitist bias, Ghosh searches the archives for 'those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world' (*IAAL*, 17). As the words 'barely discernible traces' suggest, subalterns do not leave much of a mark upon history. Ghosh and the other Subaltern Studies historians by definition work with fragmentary, incomplete archival remnants, and the presentation of their work reflects this, as each volume is a compendious collection of monographs, rather than a single attempt to reconstruct a single history of the subaltern (see Chaturvedi, 2000: x).

Although Ghosh shares many of the concerns of the Subaltern Studies project, I would argue that, through the narrative form of *In an Antique Land*, he goes further than such historians as Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee in trying to rethink the whole way in which history is presented. Despite the fragmentary, monographical form of each *Subaltern Studies* volume, and despite the historians' often radical politics, the essays themselves by and large conform to the conventions of Western history. Most of the Subaltern Studies historians write using the orthodox third-person narrative style, presenting their historical evidence with an appearance of transparency, and confining any reflections on the historiographical process to footnotes. Gayatri Spivak criticizes the 'sobriety' of the Subaltern Studies historians' tone, arguing that it 'will not allow them to emphasize sufficiently that they are themselves bringing hegemonic historiography to crisis' (1988b: 4). By this she means to criticize the Subaltern Studies historians' adoption of the same pretensions to impartiality as colonial historians, and to urge them to 'bring[...] hegemonic historiography to crisis' by challenging the very enterprise of reconstructing the past. Later in the same essay she celebrates the deconstructionist's aim 'to question the authority of the investigating subject without paralysing him, persistently transforming conditions of

impossibility into possibility' (1988b: 9). I submit that in *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh comes close to realizing Spivak's ideal of a self-reflexive history that disputes the authority of the historian without lapsing into a 'paralysing' nihilism. As we have seen, his imaginative methods, use of the first person, intermingling of genres, and disruption of chronological order, enable his attempted creation of a new kind of non-coercive history.

Another important concern shared by Ghosh and the Subaltern Studies historians is to interrogate the concept of the nation-state. In his essay 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?', the Subaltern Studies historian, Dipesh Chakrabarty,¹¹ makes the following point:

'History' as a knowledge system is firmly embedded in institutional practices that invoke the nation state at every step [...] Nation states have the capacity to enforce their truth games, and universities, their critical distance notwithstanding, are part of the battery of institutions complicit in this process. 'Economics' and 'history' are the knowledge forms that correspond to the two major institutions that the rise (and later universalization) of the bourgeois order has given to the world — the capitalist mode of production and the nation state (1992: 19).

Chakrabarty claims that history's emergence as a discipline is inextricably linked with the invention of the nation as an 'imagined community'. He seems to argue here that history, like the nineteenth-century novel on which its narrative form is modelled, is complicit in the recent construction of the nation-state as the 'natural' unit of world politics. Ghosh, like Chakrabarty, seeks to escape from the 'battery of [Western] institutions' that reinforce the centrality of the nation-state. His construction of a history that transcends national borders and focuses attention on other groupings than the nation may be seen as a similar project to Chakrabarty's aim to 'provincialize Europe'. Following Fernand Braudel (1972) and K.N. Chaudhuri (1985), Ghosh's study shifts attention away from the nation-state to examine the interaction and dialogue between different lands situated along the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. Like his forebears, Ghosh indicates that, despite their differences, the culture that was shared by the civilizations bordering on the ocean demands greater attention from historians. As Chaudhuri writes, 'there was a firm impression in the minds of

¹¹ Ghosh recently had a sustained and lively email debate with this historian, in which they discussed colonialism, Tagore, the Indian Mutiny, and the Indian National Army. The debate was subsequently posted on his website (Ghosh, 2001a).

contemporaries, sensed also by historians later, that the ocean had its own unity, a distinct sphere of influence' (Chaudhuri, 1985: 3).

Writing on the dispersal of the Geniza documents to academic institutions everywhere but in Egypt, Ghosh makes the important statement, '[i]t was as though the borders that were to divide Palestine several decades later had already been drawn, through time rather than territory, to allocate a choice of Histories' (*IAAL*, 95). This image serves to remind us that conceptual boundaries divide History on national lines, just as literal borders severed Palestine in 1948. Not a trace of evidence remains in Egypt today about the Jewish protagonists that were so integral to Cairo's history. This shared Jewish-Arabic past is seen as an anomaly, to be parcelled out to Western institutions for specialist study. What Ghosh seems to be arguing is that nationalism has such a hold on our perceptions of history that we rarely stray over state borders in considering the past. Minorities within a nation-state, such as the Jews in Egypt or tribals in present-day India, are denied a voice in history. This is why the network model of history is useful, as it allows the historian to bypass national borders in search of comparisons.

In 1991, the Subaltern Studies historian Gyanendra Pandey wrote an essay entitled 'In Defence of the Fragment' that is helpful to my reading of *In an Antique Land*. He argues in favour of the fragment as a model for historians, using the term 'fragment' to indicate three things. Firstly he asserts that he wants to recover the voices of people who may be seen as '[t]he "fragments" of Indian society'. He states that these human fragments — specifically 'the smaller religious and caste communities, tribal sections, industrial workers, activist women's groups' (1991: 559) — are denied a history by elite historians preoccupied with the broad sweep of nations, leaders, capital, territories, and political groupings.

This typically Subaltern Studies approach to history is made more complex by Pandey's second interpretation of the term 'fragments'. He contests that historians should pay greater attention to such historical fragments as 'a weaver's diary, a collection of poems by an unknown poet [and] [...] all those literatures of India that Macaulay condemned, creation myths and women's songs, family genealogies and local traditions of history' (1991: 571). Such sources, usually deemed secondary by

historians, are as important to our understanding of the past as official documents, reports, and surveys. Pandey's discussion of Hindu-Muslim riots at Bhagalpur in 1989, for example, suggests that official documents on the bloodshed were unreliable, as many had been falsified or destroyed. Those extant official documents gave a more distorted view of the riots than the moving and deeply personal poems of a local teacher (provided on p. 569 of the essay). Thus, Pandey celebrates incomplete or imaginative historical 'fragments' even as more mainstream historians such as Macaulay have condemned them, finding in them a challenge to what he calls 'the state's construction of history' (1991: 571).

The third way in which Pandey advocates fragments in this essay is in his use of form. To some extent he adumbrates a fragmentary narrative form as a model for recounting the stories of society's fragments. Pandey's opening sentences indicate the essay's strategies of incompleteness and repudiation of authority: 'This is not a paper. It is a preliminary statement regarding some of the difficulties of writing the history of violence' (1991: 559). He abandons the third-person mode of historical writing and inserts himself into the narrative early on, describing his own experiences as an aid worker in the Bhagalpur riots and disingenuously expressing discomfort with 'what may appear as an excessive intrusion of the author's self' into the essay (1991: 559). He interweaves past and present, discussing the violence of Partition (as represented in cinema, short stories, novels), and connecting it to the recent riots of the 1980s.

Ghosh similarly uses historical 'fragments' — poetry, anecdotes, and literary texts — to narrate his story of the 'fragments of [...] society' — slaves, members of non-orthodox religions, travellers. One example in which he champions a textual fragment comes towards the end of the narration of Ben Yiju's life, when Ghosh depicts his grief at the death of his son:

He had once had, he writes, 'two children like sprigs of sweet basil...' — but here the sentence breaks off, for the letter has been badly damaged over the centuries. The little that remains of the passage is punctuated with a bizarrely expressive succession of silences, as though time had somehow contrived to provide the perfect parentheses for Ben Yiju's grief by changing the scansion of his prose. It reads:

And the elder [of the two children] died in Aden...

I do not know how to describe of it...

I have left a daughter, his sister... (*IAAL*, 314).

Instead of discounting a document that is so badly damaged as to be almost illegible, Ghosh here turns the fragmentary nature of the parchment into an evocative tool. The ellipses and incompleteness of the document are taken to represent the stuttering, broken speech of grief. Ghosh presents the meagre remnants of Yiju's letter in verse form, so that we imagine with him that time has changed 'the scansion of his prose'.

Elsewhere, Ghosh uses actual poems as historical evidence in the way envisioned by Pandey. In a complex passage, he discusses the rise of Hindu fundamentalism amongst the formerly marginalized Magavira community of Mangalore, and applauds the ironic fact that an image of a *Bobbariya-bhuta*, or Islamic saint, has somehow slipped unnoticed into the local Hindu temple. Towards the end of the passage Ghosh recalls that in Bomma's era, a group of Hindu saint-poets called the Vachanakaras were reinventing Hinduism as a religion of personal devotion and egalitarian communities, undivided by 'rules of caste and kinship' (*IAAL*, 274). The contrast between Vachanakara philosophy and the Hinduism of the brahminical, exclusionary temple of the present day is clear, and Ghosh uses a piece of Vachanakara poetry, translated by A.K. Ramanujan, to underline the distinction:

With a whole temple
in this body
where's the need
for another?

No one asked
for two. (*IAAL*, 275).

A few lines from this medieval religious verse are enough to highlight the Vachanakaras' challenge to organized religion and their emphasis on the importance of individual faith, which differs sharply from the communalist brand of religion practiced by the modern right-wing Hindu party. Ghosh uses the poem as a serious piece of historical evidence that can evoke more succinctly and memorably than prose the distinction between the two religious movements. The crisp, logical simplicity of the poem's question: 'With a whole temple / in this body / where's the need for another?' once again undermines our possible perceptions of the medieval period as a superstitious and barbaric time, making us more inclined to question the assumptions and practices of the present.

As well as poetic fragments, Ghosh more generally scrutinizes the 'minute detail, the trace' (Chew, 2001: 198), for the light it can shed on the past, gleaning information from the absence as well as the presence of evidence. Shirley Chew suggests that, like the explorer-traveller who takes traces such as claw-marks, hair, and excrement as substitutes for the presence of an animal, so Ghosh examines fragmentary letters, linguistic terms, and anecdotal accounts as displaced representatives of Yiju and his slave. Chew gives several detailed readings of Ghosh's handling of traces, concluding that each time Ghosh analyses a fragment he deftly steers his narrative towards an interpretation commensurate with his syncretic, multivalent view of history. Commenting on his ingenious re-reading of the Slave's name as 'Bomma', she describes it as a 'sleight of hand but enough [...] to undermine any pretense on Ghosh's part to scholarly interpretation' (2001: 203).

'Sleight of hand', I would argue, is an apposite way of describing Ghosh's interaction with historical fragments. For example, despite the complete lack of extant information about Ashu, the female Indian slave that Ben Yiju is known to have manumitted, Ghosh creates a suggestive biography of her as an attractive woman from a matrilineal community with whom Yiju fell in love, whom he may have converted to Judaism before marrying, and who bore his two children. Ghosh's depiction of Ashu goes a good deal further than Goitein's supposition that she may have become Yiju's wife and was 'probably beautiful' (Goitein, 1973: 202; quoted in *IAAL*, 229). In the following passage Ghosh manages to draw an extraordinary amount of information about Ashu out of almost complete archival silence, and yet he makes his conclusions seem perfectly rational and measured:

Ashu is not mentioned anywhere else in the entire corpus of Ben Yiju's documents, although her children figure in it frequently. Ben Yiju did not once refer to her in his letters or jottings, and his correspondents in Aden, who were always careful to send their good wishes to his children, never mentioned her either, not even by means of the euphemisms customary in their time, and nor did they send her their greetings. This haunting effacement may in fact be proof that Ben Yiju did indeed marry Ashu, for only a marriage of that kind — with a slave girl, born outside the community of his faith — could have earned so pointed a silence on the part of his friends. Ben Yiju probably converted Ashu to Judaism before their marriage, but the conversion may have signified very little, either to Ashu or to Ben Yiju's friends and relatives. It is also possible that their liaison was modelled upon the institution of 'temporary marriage', a kind of marital union that was widely practised by expatriate Iranian traders (*IAAL*, 229 – 30).

Here Ghosh is not even working with a trace, but with ‘pointed [...] silence’ and ‘haunting effacement’: the seeming refusal of Ben Yiju’s friends to acknowledge the existence of a wife. Ghosh deduces that this absence of evidence ‘may in fact be proof that Ben Yiju did indeed marry Ashu, for only a marriage of that kind — with a slave girl, born outside the community of his faith — could have earned so pointed a silence on the part of his friends’. This excerpt is an interesting example of his sleight of hand. It starts with an element of doubt, the word ‘may’ indicating the conjectural nature of the argument, but this acknowledgement of uncertainty is swiftly elided by phrases indicating assurance: ‘in fact’, ‘proof’, and ‘indeed’. The overwhelming impression we are left with is Ghosh’s tendentious conviction that ‘*only* [...] a marriage of that kind [...] could have earned so pointed a silence on the part of his friends’ (emphasis mine). Other possibilities, such as the idea that the silence might actually be a result of missing or destroyed documents, are not even entertained. The artful one-sidedness of the argument here confirms Chew’s interpretation that ‘any pretense on Ghosh’s part to scholarly interpretation’ is undermined. Yet Chew does not, and nor do I wish to, present this unscholarly, imaginative approach in a negative light. Rather, Ghosh’s treatment of fragments self-consciously reveals the historian’s hands pulling the strings, highlighting the impossibility of knowing the past ‘outside its texts, its traces’ (Chew, 2001: 200).

Perhaps Ghosh’s most explicit discussion of fragments in this text comes in a description of the remnants of Fustat, the ancient capital of Egypt, that still exist in modern-day Cairo:

Today, the entrance to what remains of Fustat lies a short distance from Babylon’s towers, but very few tourists pass through it. Fustat can be smelt before it is seen — it is a gigantic open refuse-pit, an immense rubbish dump. [...] Incredible as it may seem, excavations in this suppurating wasteland have yielded huge quantities of Chinese pottery and other riches: it was here, that some of the earliest and most valuable fragments of Indian textiles have been found.

The last skeletal remains of the city whose markets once traded in the best the world could offer lie a little further along the path: the outlines of a few foundations and some brick walls and arches, pushing through pools of oily slime, clawing at the earth. In the distance shanties grow in tiers upon the ruins, and they in turn fade gently, imperceptibly, into the scraggy geometry of Cairo’s skyline — into a tableau of decay and regeneration, a metaphor for Masr (*IAAL*, 38 – 39).

In this passage Ghosh contrasts the discovery of valuable fragments of Chinese pottery and Indian textiles from Fustat's opulent, cosmopolitan past with the decayed, 'suppurating' present of the ancient township. At first reading, the tone of this excerpt seems to educe nothing but regret for the dissolution of Fustat from 'the city whose markets traded in the best the world could offer' into 'a gigantic open refuse-pit'. And yet, in the final few sentences the narrator's gaze falls on traces of modern-day living that generate a nascent optimism for Cairo's future. Amongst the 'skeletal remains' of Fustat, the narrator notices shanties being built, which he interprets as 'a tableau of decay and regeneration, a metaphor for Masr'. In this conclusion the narrator is heartened by the resilience of Egyptians eking out an existence among the ruins of a civilization. The reference to 'decay and regeneration' as 'a metaphor for Masr' reminds us of the preceding discussion of Cairo/Fustat's history that detailed the battles and shifts of power which have caused capitals to be razed, rebuilt, and relocated over centuries. Read in this light, the city has always seen decay and regeneration coexisting, and fragments and ruins seem less a source of regret than a fertile soil out of which new cultures may grow.

The concept of fragments is of course central both to anthropology and modern cultural theory. Claude Lévi-Strauss compares the 'savage' to the figure of the *bricoleur*, or DIY enthusiast. The *bricoleur*, he argues, employs 'whatever is at hand' (1966: 17) — scraps, odds and ends, fragments — adapting or modifying their original function to tackle a new problem. Like the *bricoleur*, mythical thought 'expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited' (1966: 17). Lévi-Strauss compares post-industrial man, in contrast, to an engineer who fashions specific tools to tackle each different project. Derrida (1978: 285), like Gérard Genette and others, points out that Lévi-Strauss's *bricolage* is also characteristic of the practice of literary criticism, in that the critic similarly borrows concepts from 'the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined'. Yet Derrida scotches Lévi-Strauss's notion of the engineer who tries to stand outside of society and create cultural practices or literary texts from scratch:

The notion of the engineer who supposedly breaks with all forms of *bricolage* is [...] a theological idea; and since Lévi-Strauss tells us elsewhere that *bricolage* is mythopoetic, the odds are that the engineer is a myth produced by the *bricoleur*. As soon as we cease to believe in such an engineer and in a discourse which breaks with the received historical discourse, and as soon as we admit that every

finite discourse is bound by a certain *bricolage* and that the engineer and the scientist are also species of *bricoleurs*, then the very idea of *bricolage* is menaced and the difference in which it took on its meaning breaks down (1978: 285).

Derrida contends that all forms of knowledge and cultural expression — whether post-industrial or ‘mythic’, Western or ‘savage’, scientific or artistic — are products of *bricolage*, of a magpie-like collection of fragments, intertexts, and influences. *In an Antique Land* also helps to reveal that all knowledge is founded on prior texts, epistemes, and discourses, and that the image of Western knowledge as an engineer is a spurious one. If one delves beneath the rhetoric, Western disciplines of history and science are as dependent upon shards and fragments as are more unashamedly *bricoleur* texts. In *In an Antique Land*, by revealing the fractured texts with which the historian works and the personal impulses that lead him or her to privilege one fragment over another, Ghosh provides an evocative account of the *bricoleur* at work.

Fragments are a model of knowledge much vaunted by postmodernist thinkers, who privilege a broken, honeycomb structure over monolithic forms. Valentine Cunningham writes rather disapprovingly that ‘[t]he text according to Theory is fragmented, bitty, broken. It can’t speak out; it stutters; it hesitates; it can’t see; it’s blind; it’s occluded’ (2001: 60). The images that he uses of fracture and loss, broken speech and incomplete vision, are of course entirely appropriate to the historical texts surveyed by Ghosh. The Geniza documents were called the ‘Egyptian fragments’ by historians in the nineteenth century (Goitein, 1967: 3) and, as I have already outlined, the history of the documents’ accumulation in the Geniza and their dispersal to collections overseas has meant that the history they show us cannot be anything other than fragmentary. And yet Goitein writes, ‘[t]he very shortcomings of the Geniza [...] constitute its uniqueness and glory. It is a true mirror of life, often cracked and blotchy, but very wide in scope and reflecting each and every aspect of the society that originated it’ (1967: 9). Goitein’s metaphor recalls Salman Rushdie’s statement:

The broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present. [...] [H]uman beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. [...] Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films (1991: 12).

The similarity between Rushdie's and Goitein's imagery suggests that the fragmented view of history is particularly attractive in narrating the past of minority and/or postcolonial societies. Rushdie, like Ghosh, suggests that histories and memories are inevitably broken, incomplete, and fissured, but that this can be cause for celebration as well as regret. Like a kaleidoscope which contains tiny broken shards of glass that together make a beautiful pattern, so a fragmentary vision of history may be more meaningful than one that attempts to hide the fissures.

Derek Walcott, another postcolonial writer, provides an eloquent account of the importance of the fragmentary historical approach for postcolonial societies in his lecture, *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory*. Totalizing historical accounts, he argues, have judged Caribbean culture to be unfinished, deficient, mimicking: "No people there," to quote Froude, "in the true sense of the word." No people. Fragments and echoes of real people, unoriginal and broken' (1993: n. pag.). Like Pandey and Ghosh, Walcott defends these fragments of postcolonial society by championing the fractured epistemological or artistic approach. In a famous passage he writes:

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments (1993: n. pag.).

It is surely love that causes Ghosh painstakingly to reassemble the fragments of 'small, indistinguishable, intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim' (*IAAL*, 339). No attempt is made to paper over the cracks of uncertainty that run through this history, but as in a collage or mosaic the cracks form part of the aesthetic fabric, illustrating the artificiality of a seamless vision.

ANTHROPOLOGY

Recent debate within anthropology has implicitly taken Lévi-Strauss's notion of the 'savage mind' as a *bricoleur* working with fragments, and extended it to describe the discipline as a whole. Theorists argue with Derrida that the ethnographer, far from being an omniscient 'engineer' who objectively fashions tools suitable to tackle his

field of enquiry, is in fact a *bricoleur*, stitching together disparate materials to make a discourse. Stephen A. Tyler writes:

A post-modern ethnography is fragmentary because it cannot be otherwise. Life in the field is itself fragmentary, not at all organized around familiar ethnographic categories such as kinship, economy, and religion [...] [T]he natives seem to lack communicable visions of a shared, integrated whole; nor do particular experiences present themselves, even to the most hardened sociologist, as conveniently labeled synecdoches, microcosms, or allegories of wholes, cultural or theoretical (1986: 131).

Tyler alerts us to the fact that the ethnographer creates a meaning from the snapshots of life he or she gains from time spent in the field. Although the ethnographer compartmentalizes the information given by participants into 'categories such as kinship, economy, and religion', Tyler argues that indigenous life has no such coherence and that these are interpretations imposed on the material.

Anthropology defines itself by its fieldwork methodology. Just as the historian points to time spent in the archives analysing documentary evidence as the *sine qua non* of the historical discipline, so the anthropologist views time spent 'in the field' as integral to any serious attempt to write about another culture. As Bernard S. Cohn writes, '[w]hat a document is to historians, field work is to anthropologists' (1982: 232). Yet, just as history has been brought into crisis by realizations about the unreliability and partiality of textual documents and the fact that any account of history is embedded in its historical and linguistic setting, so too have anthropologists begun to question their discipline. In particular, the ethnographer's participant-observer role, and his or her textual representations of oral evidence, have come under scrutiny. Ethnographers have long been aware that fieldwork is subject to certain problems. Indigenous peoples may act in a different way due to the ethnographer's presence; they may present accounts of their culture that they imagine the ethnographer wishes to hear; or they may resist investigation altogether, refusing to answer questions and trying to evade examination. Furthermore, living with others is an inevitably subjective and specific experience. One village or sub-community is inferred by anthropology to be representative of a whole society when it is really contingent, only representative of a particular group of individuals at a particular moment. Even the most trenchant apologist for fieldwork is aware of these problems, but from the early 1980s onwards a group of anthropologists began to argue that

fieldwork is also complicated by its eventual presentation as a text. Even in the unlikely event that the people under study should act normally in the presence of the ethnographer, giving lucid and accurate oral testimonies, the ethnographer still has to translate their lives through the act of writing. In parallel with the work of such theorists as Hayden White within history, these so-called 'New Anthropologists' — who include James Clifford, Talal Asad, and Mary Louise Pratt — seek to locate ethnography as a textualized construction.

Talal Asad has been instrumental in pointing out a comparison between ethnography and the act of translation. In 'The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology', he argues that the metaphor of translation is often employed by social anthropologists to elucidate their role. He cites the following statement by Godfrey Lienhardt for its recognition of the similarities between the role of translator and ethnographer: '[t]he problem of describing to others how members of a remote tribe think appear[s] largely as one of translation, of making the coherence primitive thought has in the languages it really lives in, as clear as possible in our own' (in Asad, 1986: 142). This comment reveals many different types of translation that the ethnographer will have to tackle in attempting to explain another culture. Most obvious is the literal translation of the other culture from 'the languages it really lives in' to 'our own'. As Asad explains elsewhere (Asad and Dixon, 1985), this question of language is an area of concern often neglected by ethnographic theorists. He reminds us that most ethnographers have to learn another language in order to interact with the people with whom they live during their fieldwork. They then face the difficulty of translating a different language into their own, often having to explain concepts for which their language has no equivalent word. Many theorists have interpreted this to be a productive, benign process, in which the ethnographer's own language is altered and enriched by the encounter with foreign words and concepts. This is the ideal mode of translation that has been advocated by Walter Benjamin and A.K. Ramanujan amongst others. Benjamin famously quotes Rudolf Pannwitz:

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. [...] The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and

tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign tongue (1973: 80 – 81).

In a similar vein, the Indian poet and translator A.K. Ramanujan writes, '[a] translator hopes not only to translate a text, but hopes (against all odds) to translate a non-native reader into a native one' (in Murthy, 1978: n.pag.). Both writers argue that the translator should transform the spirit of his or her own language by sensitive interaction with the other language, yet both acknowledge the difficulty of achieving this goal.

These optimistic views of translation as a way of reworking one's language and unsettling one's cultural assumptions have been challenged by the recent translation theory of Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, and by Asad's work on the relationship between anthropology and translation. Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) argue that translation has long been entangled in the web of imperial power. Translation, they suggest, usually takes place in a uni-directional process, with texts from non-Western countries being laid open to the authoritative scrutiny of the West. Asad similarly emphasizes the unequal statuses of languages in the colonial and post-/neo-colonial world. He argues that the metamorphosis of language enthusiastically envisioned by such theorists as Benjamin is more likely to occur in a culturally weak language than in one as politically and economically powerful as English. '[T]here is', he writes, 'a prevailing trend for the language of dominated cultures to accommodate to the demands and concepts of the dominating culture. Equally, there are powerful resistances to making any comparable adjustments within the discursive practices of European scholarship' (Asad and Dixon, 1984: 171). In practice, then, translation tends only to remake non-Western languages, while powerful European languages remain virtually untouched by their encounter with other languages and concepts. If ethnography is viewed metaphorically as a translation of other cultures, it becomes clear that it too has tended to unsettle and alter indigenous cultures far more than it has affected the European powers doing the translation. As Anuradha Dingwaney recognizes, both linguistic and cultural translation involve violence, 'especially when the culture being translated is constituted as that of the "other"' (1995: 4).

The issues surrounding *linguistic* translation are therefore not the only ones to be suggested by the comparison between the ethnographer and the translator. As

indicated earlier, it is also important to be aware that the ethnographer translates oral accounts into a written text. The ethnographer records hours of dialogue with members of the studied community and then has to select what he or she considers to be relevant for 'writing up'. Dissenting voices or information that is not commensurate with the ethnographer's vision are excluded from the text. The ethnographer also has to choose a narrative form in which to present her findings. Does she conform to the scientism and impersonal style of 'classic' ethnography, or does she experiment with form, attempting to represent polyphony by transcribing swathes of dialogue with informants or by using a fragmentary structure? Regardless of what form the ethnographer chooses, she almost inevitably translates the other culture using certain recognizable (Western) tropes, which impose meaning onto a vast complexity. James Clifford goes as far as to argue that 'the historical predicament of ethnography' is 'the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures' (1986a: 2). Far from being a transparent reflection of how other people live, then, ethnographic writing invents, translates, and selects its subjects. Furthermore, as the previous discussion about linguistic translation suggests, this process is never innocent, but is always embedded in existing power relations.

These questions surrounding the role of the ethnographer as translator are grappled with in *In an Antique Land*. Ghosh frequently discusses issues surrounding the literal translation of words or concepts into another language. As an ethnographic participant-observer in the Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashawy, he is irked by the impossibility of translating certain concepts into Arabic. For example, Ghosh is interrogated by the teenaged Jabir about his country's attitude towards circumcision, and he is unable to explain himself adequately due to Arabic's linguistic nuances:

'You mean,' he said in rising disbelief, 'there are people in your country who are not circumcised?'

In Arabic the word 'circumcise' derives from a root that means 'to purify'; to say of someone that they are 'uncircumcised' is more or less to call them impure.

'Yes,' I answered, 'yes, many people in my country are "impure".' I had no alternative; I was trapped by language (*IAAL*, 62).

Here Ghosh alerts us to the fact that linguistic translation is a process fraught with complications, which often violently alters the meaning of the original. The innocuous word 'uncircumcised' becomes highly charged in Arabic, with connotations

of impurity and therefore irreligiousness. The comment 'I was trapped by language' is an important one as it makes the reader aware of the limitations of any language. Ghosh's frustration with the language barrier contrasts with the tone of most conventional ethnographies, where the issue of language is effaced and foreign concepts are explained through smooth, unproblematic translation.¹² Interestingly, in this instance Ghosh reverses the ethnographer's usual dilemma of translating indigenous concepts into his own language. In this passage it is the difficulty of explaining non-indigenous ideas to locals that confounds the ethnographer. As so often in *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh is anthropologized by locals rather than the other way round; his language, customs, and cultural practices are defamiliarized by the contempt and incredulity of his supposed subjects of study.

Ghosh, like all ethnographers, has to negotiate the tricky task of translating oral evidence given by native informants into a written text. Early ethnographies tended to rewrite local accounts of culture from a narrative distance, so informants were perceived as a somewhat homogenized 'they', who were observed and understood by the detached ethnographer. More recently, ethnographers have begun experimenting with dialogue as a more nuanced way of representing oral evidence, so that the Other is given a space to reply, argue, and question back (Clifford, 1986a: 14). Ghosh follows this newer, dialogic model of ethnographic textualization. The modern-day sections of *In an Antique Land* brim with conversations, in which ethnographic subjects joke with 'Amitab', question him about his religion or cultural practices, and in turn inform him about their own beliefs. In my interview with Ghosh, he acknowledges the centrality of conversations to the structure of the text. He attributes this influence not to the movement towards dialogism within anthropology, but to James Boswell's *The Life of Johnson*, which he read while living in his Egyptian

¹² In Ghosh's DPhil thesis, for example, Arabic words are constantly explained without apparent hitch. For example, he describes a part of the marriage ceremony known as the *katb al kitab* ('the writing of the book') as follows:

The *katb al kitab* is always conducted in the presence of a *ma'adhun* in every commune (*gariah*). The elders who act for the families of the bride and groom are called *wukala* (sing. *wakil*), which signifies 'authorized representative or attorney'. After the offer and the acceptance the men present recite the *Fatibah* again and sweet drinks and cordials (*sharabat*), which are symbolic of happiness and rejoicing in Nashawy, are served (1981: 46).

Here Arabic words are given in parenthesis after the English, and language is presented as an unproblematic issue.

village and which made him realize ‘the absolute essentialness of conversations to any kind of narrative’ (Chambers, 2003: n.pag.). Whatever his inspiration, the conversational form of *In an Antique Land* allows Ghosh gently to undermine his own narratorial authority. He chooses to include uncomfortable, even humiliating conversations, such as the row he has with the village’s Imam about whether Egypt or India has the best armaments (*IAAL*, 234 – 36). The inclusion of the Imam’s dissenting voice, questioning Ghosh’s ability to explain Egyptian culture when ‘[h]e doesn’t even write in Arabic’ (*IAAL*, 234), and condemning India’s death rites and religious beliefs as ‘primitive and backward’ (*IAAL*, 235) subverts traditional ethnographic assumptions that indigenous people are illiterate and primitive.

The heated conversation ‘Amitab’ has with the Imam not only provides an example of the village people answering back within the text, questioning and challenging Ghosh’s project, but also foregrounds the issue of Ghosh’s position as a third-world ethnographer. As Kirin Narayan argues, any anthropologist — whether ‘native’ or foreign — may be viewed ‘in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations’ (1993: 671). Narayan is surely right to alert us to the multiple allegiances and power structures in which all anthropologists are entwined. Indeed, Ghosh is self-conscious about the ambiguity of his standing amongst the villagers, acknowledging both his privileged position as an anthropologist from that centre of Western academe, Oxford University, and the low status he has in Egypt as a Hindu. His Indian nationality provokes particularly complex and often contradictory reactions from the community in which he lives, as he is at once seen as insider (fellow-inhabitant of a third-world country) and outsider (cow-worshipping, uncircumcised infidel). As David Scott writes on the peculiar position of the third-world anthropologist, ‘the postcolonial intellectual stands in an ambiguous place: neither “inside” nor “outside,” but occupying a “between” always open on both sides to contestation’ (1989: 80 – 81). The Egyptians identify with Ghosh as a member of a country which, as Ustaz Sabry tells his friends, has ‘been ransacked by imperialists’ just like Egypt has, and which is similarly trying to alleviate poverty, a deficient agricultural infrastructure, and other legacies of colonialism (*IAAL*, 134). At times he is treated with extra respect, as when Khamees begs him to ask the Imam for medicine, arguing, ‘[h]e’ll come if you ask him — he knows you’re a foreigner. He’ll listen to you’ (*IAAL*, 233). But Khamees’s claim that the narrator’s

foreignness makes him worthy of attention is undermined by the fact that in many frustrating encounters people do not listen to him at all (see *IAAL*, 125 – 26; 204). At times Ghosh's foreignness even leaves him open to suspicion and aggressive interrogation, as when a taxi-driver cannot understand his desire to call on Shaikh Musa (*IAAL*, 112) and when he is taken in for questioning by police for his interest in a Jewish saint (*IAAL*, 333 – 42).

Technology is seen as by the villagers as being at least as important a marker of civilization as religion or cultural practices. In a humorous scene the narrator gains respect, even awe, for the knowledge he is assumed to have about a diesel water-pump that is manufactured in India (*IAAL*, 72 – 74). He is amazed by the deference with which he is treated after pretending to know about the pump, musing:

I tried to imagine where I would have stood in Jabir's eyes if mine had been a country that exported machines that were even bigger, better and more impressive — cars and tractors perhaps, not to speak of ships and planes and tanks. I began to wonder how Lataifa would have looked if I had had the privilege of floating through it, protected by the delegated power of technology, of looking out untroubled through a sheet of clear glass (*IAAL*, 74).

Yet if technology is a source of respect for him here, the Imam uses it against him as a gauge of India's supposed backwardness in the conversation previously discussed. To Ghosh's later chagrin, he ends up bitterly vying with the Imam over whose country has the better 'guns and tanks and bombs' (*IAAL*, 235). Both men, he soon realizes, are 'travelling in the West' (*IAAL*, 236), speaking the imperialist language that views the invention of violent technology as a measure of civilization (see Adas, 1989).

Ghosh is surprised that the villagers are acutely aware of their community's technological deficiencies, to such an extent that they mistrust his statement that his country is poorer and less technologically advanced than theirs. He speculates:

they had constructed a certain ladder of 'Development' in their minds, and because all their images of material life were of those who stood in the rungs above, the circumstances of those below had become more or less unimaginable. I had an inkling then of the real and desperate seriousness of their engagement with modernism, because I realized that the fellaheen saw the material circumstances of their lives in exactly the same way that a university economist would: as a situation that was shamefully anachronistic, a warp upon time; I understood that their relationships with the objects of their everyday lives was [*sic*] never innocent of the knowledge that there were other places, other countries which did not have mud-walled houses and cattle-drawn ploughs, so

that those objects, those houses and ploughs, were insubstantial things, ghosts displaced in time, waiting to be exorcized and laid to rest (*IAAL*, 200 – 201).

This interesting passage positions the *fellaheen* as looking at their culture from the outside, as a 'university economist' — or, one might argue, an anthropologist — would do. They have internalized Western ideas about 'Development' and progress, concluding that their own possessions are embarrassing and 'anachronistic'. What has caused this realization is not explained, but perhaps we can conclude that academic discourse percolating through television and newspapers, as well as these media's saturation with consumerist images, has led to their feeling that their 'houses and ploughs were insubstantial things'. This sensitive portrayal unsettles the ethnographic assumption that indigenous communities are unaware of how they are perceived from the outside, and that the Other believes his or her cultural practices to be normative. Cultural assumptions are intertextual, with people judging their own and others' cultures according to standards derived from ethnographies, films, journalism. As James Clifford remarks, '[s]uddenly cultural data cease to move smoothly from oral performance into descriptive writing. Now data also move from text to text, inscription becomes transcription' (1986b: 116).

The ways in which the ethnographer, whether Western or 'native', is represented in the ethnographic text have also been interrogated by the New Anthropologists. The ethnographer's experiences in the field of course provoke feelings, desires, dislikes, and prejudice, but these are erased from, or at least marginalized by, realist ethnographic discourse. Mary Louise Pratt reminds us that all ethnographies contain elements of the personal, but in stylized ways. An informal, personal tone is permitted to intrude into conventional ethnographies, but only when it is confined to prefaces and/or afterwords. Pratt argues that these set-pieces — usually describing the ethnographer's arrival, first impressions, and departure — 'play the crucial role of anchoring [the ethnographic text] in the intense and authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork' (1986: 32). Yet from the 1960s on ethnographers have become more willing to allow the self to overspill into the main body of narrative, showing that fieldwork can only be a partial account, highly influenced by the personality and approach of its orchestrator.

Ghosh parodies and subverts the traditional ethnographic trope of confining personal commentary in prefaces or afterwords. He chooses to omit the conventional arrival scene, and his description of the Egyptian village begins with the narrator already settled, somewhat unhappily, at the house of Abu-'Ali. Whereas many classic ethnographic texts begin with an introduction describing the sense of strangeness felt by the ethnographer on arrival at the field site and then banish personal observation from the main body of the ethnography,¹³ Ghosh makes no mention of his arrival, but his feelings of alienation and the curiosity his presence provokes are emphasized throughout. Ghosh too sandwiches his text between a 'Prologue' and an 'Epilogue', but it is worth noting that these are more novelistic terms than the scholarly 'Preface' or 'Afterword', immediately indicating the text's imaginative purchase on anthropology. Yet in a curious reversal of anthropological convention, the Prologue is one of the most straightforwardly academic passages of Ghosh's text, loaded as it is with historical detail, dates, and footnotes. Only in the last two paragraphs does Ghosh situate his interest in the Slave in a subjective space and connect it with his experiences in modern-day Egypt. The Epilogue is more personal, interbraiding descriptions of the exodus of Egyptian workers from Iraq at the beginning of the Gulf War with an account of the last reference to Bomma in an ancient manuscript kept in a hi-tech Philadelphian library. In between the two bookends of the Epilogue and Prologue, Ghosh's text continues to intertwine personal details and seemingly irrelevant information with more academic commentary, where conventional

¹³ Perhaps the most famous example of the personalized 'arrival trope' is the opening to Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*:

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. Since you take up your abode in the compound of some neighbouring white man, trader or missionary, you have nothing to do, but to start at once on your ethnographic work. Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. For the white man is temporarily absent, or else unable or unwilling to waste any of his time on you. This exactly describes my first initiation into field work on the south coast of New Guinea. I well remember the long visits I paid to the villages during the first weeks; the feeling of hopelessness and despair after many obstinate but futile attempts had entirely failed to bring me into real touch with the natives, or supply me with any material (1922: 4).

Here Malinowski invites the reader to share his feelings of disorientation by his unusual use of the second-person narrative voice. He is candid about his inexperience as an ethnographer and his inability to get 'into real touch' with his research subjects. And yet, this personal account of Malinowski's initial uncertainty in the field soon gives way, in the main body of the text, to a more confident, generalizing tone. As Pratt suggests (1986: 31 – 32), the display of modesty and inexperience revealed in the arrival trope is really a device, a way of asserting the ethnography's authenticity by depicting the hardships of fieldwork.

ethnographies would limit themselves to a strictly scholarly discussion of canonical topics such as kinship or ritual.

However unconventional its form, this text nonetheless conveys a wealth of detail about the cultural practices of Egyptian villagers. Consider the following passage in which we learn about the Arabic tradition of blood feuds:

And now, Jabir said, drawing himself up to his full height, there would be a blood feud. That was the law of the Arabs: 'Me and my brother against my cousin; me and my cousin against the stranger.' This was a serious matter: if a man killed someone, then he and all his male kin on the paternal side could be killed in revenge by the dead man's family. They would have to go and hide with their maternal relatives until their uncles and the shaikhs of the land could talk to the dead man's family and persuade them to come to a council of reconciliation. Then, when the grief of the dead man's family had eased a little, an amnesty would be declared. The two lineages would meet in some safe central place, and in the presence of their elders they would negotiate a blood-money payment. That was *thâr*, the law of feud; *damm*, the law of blood; the ancient, immutable law of the Arabs.

'All that for pushing a man off a swing?' I asked, bleary-eyed.

Jabir paused to think. 'Well, maybe a little one,' he said wistfully. 'Just a small feud' (*IAAL*, 70 – 71).

In this passage, the complicated process of the blood feud is unravelled in detail, and new technical terms ('*thâr*' and '*damm*') are introduced and explained. This ethnographic information is communicated in an unobtrusive way, slotted as it is into a collage of direct and indirect speech, personal details and irony. The section begins with Jabir making a simple statement (reported through indirect speech) that there would be a blood feud. The assertion is instantly undercut by the authorial comment that he is 'drawing himself up to his full height' while saying it, which indicates his truculent pride in the custom. The narrator goes on to explain the usual sequence of events in a feud, culminating in the declamation (presumably attributable to Jabir) that this is an inevitable, unchanging practice, 'the ancient, immutable law of the Arabs'. The narrative then returns to the dialogic form, with the narrator's bathetic reminder that the feud in question is only in response to a man being pushed off a swing. Jabir's rejoinder is at once humorous and telling: he hopes there will be 'just a small feud', the 'wistfulness' of his voice suggesting that he has never in fact witnessed this supposedly 'ancient, immutable' custom. Ghosh manages concisely and indirectly to convey that what was once common practice in the Arabic world is today a rare event, regarded nostalgically by the villagers as part of a now superseded heritage. Soon this

interpretation is confirmed by neighbouring villagers' report that the alleged feud had not transpired, as a 'token payment' (*JAAL*, 79) had sufficed to persuade the wronged family to drop their grievance. Jabir's self-conscious portrayal of the Arabs as a warrior-like, intransigent people is therefore revealed to be a distortion of practices that today usually manifest themselves through mere ritualized imitation of the past.

It is worth comparing Ghosh's personal, even playful account of feuding with the more canonical discussion to be found in A.P. Stirling's essay 'A Death and a Youth Club: Feuding in a Turkish Village'. In this essay, Stirling provides several charts and diagrams to explain the genealogy of the village under discussion, and his writing style is more authoritative and monophonic than Ghosh's. The following passage illustrates well the differences between Ghosh's writing and a more mainstream anthropological approach:

If a man is in trouble with his neighbours, his patrikin will come to his aid, and in doing so, will be acting together as a group. But it is not only at times of open fighting that this situation occurs. Quiescent hostility is normal in the villages. For this, the villagers use a word 'küş,' by which they mean a sort of mutual sulking. It implies the state of mind of Achilles in his tent, — one has been wronged or insulted, and broken off normal social relationships. The negative of *küş* is 'to speak to each other'; to say 'We are speaking to each other' (*konusuyoruz*) may sometimes mean 'We have been reconciled.' Any self-respecting lineage is more than likely to be *küş* with at least one other similar group (1970: 172).

Here Stirling makes several generalizations from the specific feud he has already described, using the universalizing nouns 'a man', 'patrikin', 'the villagers', and 'any self-respecting lineage' to suggest that these practices are typical of a wider community than just the village under study. His use of what Johannes Fabian has termed the 'ethnographic present' tense is also striking, as it essentializes the villagers' actions as part of a general unchanging culture.¹⁴ The narrator writes in the third person about the anonymous 'villagers' he describes, employing an omniscient voice that seems able to judge what is 'normal' in the village, and to translate concepts with confident ease. Not without humour, Stirling describes *küş* as 'a sort of mutual sulking', but there is no doubt in his tone when he explains foreign words; he uses the

¹⁴ Fabian defines the 'ethnographic present' as 'the practice of giving accounts of other cultures and societies in the present tense. A custom, a ritual, even an entire system of exchange or a world view are thus predicated on a group or tribe, or whatever unit the ethnographer happens to choose' (1983: 80).

unequivocal verb 'mean' to indicate his knowledge of the Turkish language. He also uses a classical analogy of 'Achilles in his tent' to vivify his description of *küs*. Turkish customs are thus rendered comprehensible by allusion to a familiar Western story, rather than being described in such a way that *Western* culture is defamiliarized and challenged in comparison (as Clifford [1986a] argues is a necessary outcome of ethnography). Ghosh's use of direct speech from a named individual and his reluctance to draw definitive conclusions from an isolated instance of feuding stand in marked contrast to the scientism and generalizations of Stirling's approach.

We rarely get to see Ghosh's narrator at work on his ethnographic data collection. In one of the few moments in which we are reminded of his academic project, a studious villager gives him unsolicited information while he is trying to have a conversation with someone else:

'Women use their forefingers to push corn down the throats of their geese,' added Shaikh Musa's son Ahmed, an earnest young man, who was a great deal more heedful of my duties as a gatherer of information than I. 'Corn, as you ought to know, is harvested just before winter, towards the start of the Coptic year which begins in the month of Tût...' (*IAAL*, 26).

This passage is revealing because it indicates that Ahmed is familiar with the kind of evidence required for ethnographic study: he tells him about agricultural affairs and the locals' conception of time. We are again reminded that informants are not innocent, but that they are subjects self-consciously shaping an intertextual identity for the ethnographer to record. Furthermore, the ethnographer and the local's roles are reversed, as the 'earnest' Ahmed is at pains to steer the narrator back towards his research topics, whereas the latter is more interested in anecdotes and gossip.

Many questions surrounding the ethnographer's role and persona are posed by the New Anthropologists. Does s/he have authority (benign or otherwise), or is s/he portrayed as a simpleton, the dupe of wily locals? How much does his or her voice intrude into the narrative, through the use of the first person and the expression of personal opinions? The example given above suggests that Ghosh's narrative persona is presented in a modest, self-deprecating light as one who has little authority and who has to be taught even the community's most basic customs. The 'I' figure is omnipresent in the narrative, but his position is constantly shifting. Renato Rosaldo

(1986: 88) has drawn attention to 'tripartite author functions' that he argues exist between '(a) the individual who wrote the work, (b) the textualized persona of the narrator, and (c) the textualized persona of the field investigator'. This is a useful division for understanding Ghosh's 'I' narrator, as it draws attention to the fact that 'the individual who wrote the work' is largely absent from *In an Antique Land*. We do learn certain autobiographical details about this individual, such as his educational history and his involvement in a communalist riot in Dhaka in 1964, but about his life at the time of writing we are told very little. His sexual and romantic life, for example, is entirely erased from the narrative, which is perhaps indicative of conformity to ethnography's taboo against admitting that desire or sexual attachments existed during fieldwork.

Ghosh's 'I' narrator tends to slide between 'the textualized persona of the narrator', a thoughtful, perceptive scholar who muses on his experiences in the village and offsets them against his knowledge of Mediterranean history, and 'the textualized persona of the field investigator', who is a more comic character. There is of course also the 'textualized persona of the historian', whose half-ironic pedantry I have already discussed. The 'I' figure is therefore highly multiplex: he is both the academic — at once ethnographer, historian, and linguist — and the *naïf*, a childlike being who does not even know about sex and nature. Sometimes this naïveté is portrayed as being a result of incomplete knowledge of Arabic, as when he causes consternation by his admission that he has never heard the word for 'sex' before (*IAAL*, 61). At other times Ghosh plays along with the idea of himself as a simpleton out of what appears to be sheer exasperation. After young men laugh at him for not understanding the Arabic for 'sex' or 'masturbation', the narrator willfully decides to exaggerate their stereotypes of him, claiming that he believes the reflection of the moon in a pond is the light from Ahmed's torch (*IAAL*, 64).

These examples of the narrator's misunderstandings lead to people being surprised if he shares any attitudes or cultural practices with them. Thus when Ghosh congratulates Khamees on a boy he takes to be his son, Khamees is pleased but astonished that '[h]e understands that people are happy when they have children', concluding, 'he's not as upside down as we thought' (*IAAL*, 172). The language Khamees uses here recalls the story about the upside down house that the grandmother

tells Mayadebi in *The Shadow Lines*. In accordance with the arguments of Said, Ghosh — like the family on the other side of the wall — is constituted by many of the villagers as an Other, a topsy-turvy being who does everything differently. This is why Ghosh is touched when Nabeel tries to put himself in the Indian's situation, commenting that he must miss people at home when he puts the kettle on with just enough water for one. In response to this compassion Ghosh writes:

The conversation quickly turned to something else, but Nabeel's comment stayed in my mind; I was never able to forget it, for it was the first time that anyone in Lataifa or Nashawy had attempted an enterprise similar to mine — to enter my imagination and look at my situation as it might appear to me (*IAAL*, 152).

Here Ghosh aligns Nabeel's moment of insight with his own ethnographic 'enterprise', arguing that both are attempts to look at the world from another's point of view. Ghosh's equation of anthropology with the attempt 'to enter my imagination and look at my situation as it might appear to me' suggests that he believes the ethnographer's most important quality should be empathy, the ability to put him- or herself in someone else's shoes. He is not alone in arguing this. In his by now classic anthropological manifesto, Bronislaw Malinowski writes that the ethnographer should seek to 'grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world' (1922: 25).

And yet, the work of the New Anthropologists has also shown that the concept of a stable, monolithic 'Other' has splintered into a proliferation of 'others'. Malinowski's use of the emphasized word '*his*' in the statement above indicates that the worldview of orthodox ethnographers tends to exclude at least half of the population, as women's experiences are often not taken into consideration. Recent ethnographies are more sensitive to the fact that every subject has a unique identity constituted by factors such as gender, race, age, sex, class, and religion. Thus, in order to 'enter the imagination' of the villagers, Ghosh has to put himself in the position of a variety of different 'others'. He is quite successful in bringing out the tensions between different social classes within the village. For example, he explains that the village was founded by two men, whose descendents, the Badawy and Abu-Kanaka lineages, took on the roles of landowners and Imams respectively (*IAAL*, 117 – 19). Below these two important groups is a sub-class, the Jammâl lineage. This group is

considered 'outside the boundaries of respectability' (*IAAL*, 164) by many of the Badawy and Abu-Kanaka, despite the financial gains the Jammâl have made since the 1952 Revolution. By detailing village hierarchies, Ghosh makes us aware that some individuals, such as Khamees the Rat (a Jammâl), are constrained by prejudice and class restrictions. His treatment of gender is arguably somewhat less perceptive, with few women appearing in the narrative with any depth. James Clifford writes about the short story 'The Imam and the Indian' that '[w]e hear little from women except a few, usually giddy, exclamations' (1991: 8). I would suggest that there isn't a great deal more insight into women's lives in the longer text. One of the few women we are introduced to is Khamees's sister, Busaina, who has left her husband and moved back to her parents' house with her small child. The story is intriguing, and yet Busaina's predicament is little more than a sketch. We see her cheerful resourcefulness when she is trying to sell inferior vegetables at the Thursday *souk* (*IAAL*, 186 – 87), but this vignette is not developed to examine her situation as a single mother. Whether the lack of women's voices in *In an Antique Land* is due to Ghosh's restricted access to women's stories,¹⁵ or to his greater interest in men's affairs, it is hard to say, but the female sex is an Other whose story is not greatly illuminated here.

One final problem of conventional ethnographies that has been highlighted by the New Anthropologists is their tendency to erase historical and environmental factors that may affect the people under study. Arjun Appadurai points out that place is only sketchily delineated in most ethnographical works. He writes, '[t]he circumstances in which [...] [ethnographic] evidence is gathered (those of fieldwork) and the circumstances of the writing up of fieldwork have been much discussed recently and do not need to be revisited here. But [...] the spatial dimension of this circumstantiality has not been thought about very much' (1988: 16). Ghosh refuses to

¹⁵ This seems unlikely, since Ghosh acknowledges in his thesis that in Nashawy women 'are not very closely segregated; they are never veiled, they sit with men, and talk with and meet with them quite freely, certainly without any embarrassment' (1981: 197). In the thesis, Ghosh provides information about women's kinship duties, marriage rituals, and work patterns, that is absent from *In an Antique Land*. However, he still focuses his attention more closely on men and their concerns. Unconscious slips give away this bias. For example, in the thesis Ghosh claims that '[p]eople in Nashawy [...] shake hands constantly. To shake hands and "to greet" are expressed by the same verb, *yisallim*, and everyone in the village is expected to greet everyone else with a hand shake whenever they meet' (1981: 217). He later admits that these universalizing nouns 'people' and 'everyone' are actually used to denote only the male sex: 'the collective exercise of hand shaking is entirely the monopoly of men' (1981: 243).

abstract his ethnographic subjects from their physical environment in the way that Appadurai suggests many ethnographers do. Instead he draws our attention to the tangible nature of the space in which he finds himself, describing many different settings, such as the open fields, the interiors of houses, and the marketplace. In a memorable passage he describes how he got lost in a warren of lanes when trying to find Ustaz Sabry's house:

I set off for his house a little before the sunset prayers, and in my eagerness to get there I forgot to find out exactly where he lived. As a result I was soon lost, for Nashawy was much larger than Lataifa, with its houses squeezed close together around a labyrinth of tunnel-like lanes, some of which came to unexpected dead ends while others circled back upon themselves. [...] After I had passed through the square a second time I swallowed my pride and turning to the long train of children who had attached themselves to me, I asked the tallest among them to lead me to Ustaz Sabry's door (*IAAL*, 123).

While most ethnographers describe space — where they discuss it at all — in a confident, factual manner,¹⁶ here Ghosh describes his location as a puzzle, or 'labyrinth', in which he is soon utterly bewildered. Whereas some ethnographers construct maps of the areas in which they reside,¹⁷ suggesting that they have cartographical skills to represent the land which locals do not possess, Ghosh on the other hand is reduced to asking local children directions. This passage may be read as an allegorical account of Ghosh's entire ethnographic project. Rejecting the lofty

¹⁶ For instance, here is Malinowski describing the geographical location of his fieldwork:

Orangerie Bay is closed, on its Eastern side, by a headland, the first of a series of hills, rising directly out of the sea. As we approach the land, we can see distinctly the steep, folded slopes, covered with dense, rank jungle, brightened here and there by bold patches of lalang grass. The coast is broken first by a series of small, land-locked bays or lagoons, with a flat, alluvial foreshore, and then from South Cape the coast stretches in an almost unbroken line, for several miles, to the end of the mainland (1922: 33).

The limited human gaze is rejected here in favour of a panoramic vision that functions like a film camera panning over the landscape. Malinowski's use of the first-person plural invites us to share his panoptical view of the New Guinea landscape, in a device similar to that used at the beginning of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (quoted in footnote 13, above). Space, then, is depicted by Malinowski as posing no problems of representation for the ethnographer. The ethnographer's roving eye follows the contours of the land without impediment, over hills, sea, and jungle. Narratorial perspective is alleviated far above the prosaic realities of life 'on the ground' in the field site, in stark contrast to Ghosh's depiction of himself hopelessly lost in the Egyptian township.

¹⁷ Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer*, for example, (1940) contains fifteen maps and 'text-figures', which include maps depicting 'Approximate area occupied by the Nuer' and 'The Nuer and neighbouring peoples'. Sarah Lloyd's *An Indian Attachment* (1984), which is a mixture of travel account, autobiography, and ethnography, but which is fairly Eurocentric in its approach, also contains several maps of the village in which Lloyd resides.

vantage point and third-person omniscience of much ethnographic writing, here we see the narrator admitting his disorientation in the village.

Furthermore, historical factors, such as the impact of colonialism on indigenous societies, are particularly difficult for ethnographies to acknowledge (Pratt, 1986: 42). Imperial domination has of course been one of the main factors to allow ethnographers easy access to 'primitive' field sites. As David Scott observes, '[t]he very possibility of the anthropological journey has been linked to the historical occasion of Western European expansion' (1989: 78). And yet, this facilitating bond between colonialism and anthropology is written out of most ethnographic texts. Traditionally, ethnographers have striven to recover a precolonial mindset, unsullied by the West or by contemporary political tensions. For example, in Margaret Mead's classic text *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), the reverberations of colonialism on the culture under study are largely erased from the narrative, and the Samoans are represented as a simple people, uncorrupted by Western influence.¹⁸ Ghosh firmly rejects the ethnographic attempt to extricate the 'primitive mind' undamaged from the wreckage of colonialism. He is constantly at pains to show imperialism's legacy, whether this is through his and the Imam's ugly argument about weaponry, or the villagers' feelings of inferiority for their adobe huts and basic agricultural tools. Furthermore, Ghosh is aware that a new manifestation of imperialism is emerging from the 'oil encounter' in

¹⁸ Consider in the following passage the way in which Mead represents Samoan culture as being entirely devoid of political, religious, and legal institutions, as compared with the more 'developed' society of the West:

In complicated civilizations like those of Europe, or the higher civilizations of the East, years of study are necessary before the student can begin to understand the forces at work within them. A study of the French family alone would involve a preliminary study of French history, of French law, of the Catholic and Protestant attitudes towards sex and personal relations. A primitive people without a written language present a much less elaborate problem, and a trained student can master the fundamental structure of a primitive society in a few months (1977: 14).

Here Mead suggests that the oral nature of 'primitive' societies engenders their structural simplicity. She dismisses the very idea of Samoan social and political organizations, in contrast with France's intricate 'history, [...] law, [...] [and] attitudes towards sex'. She also ignores the upheavals that imperialism have caused within the structure of Samoan society, depicting it as an ancient, unchanging system. Refuting her ahistorical approach to Samoan culture, Derek Freeman (1983: 118) has shown that the decade in which Mead was writing, the 1920s, was a period of great unrest and change, with the different Samoan islands revolting against their American and New Zealander colonizers. He also demonstrates (1983: 121 – 30) that Samoan society is made up of complex political organizations and social classes, far from being a simple system that can be learnt 'in a few months', as Mead suggests.

the Gulf states. Ghosh depicts a village of people who may have wildly distorted views about both India and the West, but who have intimate knowledge of life in the Gulf states, especially Iraq.¹⁹ He explores the advantages and disadvantages that arise from villagers' migration to Iraq, showing both the great material wealth that villagers accrue from work 'outside', and the hatred and prejudice they provoke in that country. In a stark scene near the end of the text, he indicates how caught up in the modern-day neo-colonial system the waves of migrants in Iraq are. Because of the Western Allies' attack on Iraq, thousands of Egyptian men are forced to flee the country in a Biblical scene of depravation and despair. In the text's final paragraph Ghosh describes watching the 'epic exodus' on the television news, desperately scanning the images for a glimpse of his friend Nabeel, but with no success as he has 'vanished into the anonymity of History' (*IAAL*, 353). Unlike many insular ethnographies, then, Ghosh is always at pains to set his village community against the international historical context. The 'anonymity of History' is constantly counterbalanced by his imaginative reconstructions of historical and contemporary characters.

CONCLUSION: *IN AN ANTIQUE LAND* AS A PARTIAL NARRATIVE

I hope to have shown that Ghosh's interrogations of the 'husbandry of the Western academy', in the guise of the disciplines of history and anthropology, are united by a common cause. Many commentators have observed that the projects of history and anthropology are similar. Both disciplines attempt to explain or translate an 'Other': in the case of anthropology, the Other comes from a different place, whereas in history the Other comes from a different time. Critics of history have complained that it neglects the specificities of the culture it describes for the broad sweep of events. Equally, anthropologists have been attacked for their ahistoricity and

¹⁹ Examples of the villagers' ignorance about India and the West include Ustaz Mustafa's gross simplification of India as a place in which '[t]here is a lot of chilli in the food and when a man dies his wife is dragged away and burnt alive' (*IAAL*, 46) and the Imam's belief that there is no cremation in the West (*IAAL*, 235). In contrast, even such villagers as Jabir, who never get the opportunity to go abroad, have detailed knowledge about wages, living conditions, and jobs in Iraq, because of the great number of men from the village who have worked in that country.

tendency to ignore events that have shaped the culture's development. Clifford Geertz playfully describes historians and anthropologists as '[m]uralists and miniaturists, [who] have a certain difficulty seeing what the other sees in contained perfections or in grand designs' (1990: 322). Yet both disciplines, as we have seen, have grown up out of Western Europe's colonization of much of the world from the sixteenth century onwards. Through his narrative that moves back and forth between the two discourses, Ghosh synthesizes and yet challenges both forms of knowledge. In Berkhofer's terms (1995: 195), he manages to 'historicize culture' while 'cultural[izing] history'. He unites the broad sweep of history with the macrocosmic approach of anthropology, without giving either discourse precedence and while pointing out the pitfalls of both. Berkhofer also argues that an 'ideal multicultural history' (or, for that matter, anthropology) needs to contain multiple viewpoints within its narrative, representing both the world of the past and conflicting perspectives in the present (1995: 197). Ghosh achieves this, integrating the stories of both temporal and spatial 'others' by juxtaposing the multi-locale narrative of Ben Yiju and Bomma with the more bounded story of the villages of Lataifa and Nashawy.

One of the most important points to be made by the juxtaposition of the two storylines is that a medieval world of compromise and tolerance has been destroyed by colonialism. Ghosh suggests that most contemporary Egyptians are not conversant with Indian culture, as were many Arabs in medieval times. Nor is it entirely possible for Ghosh, as an Indian, to interact with the Egyptians on their own terms. A powerful referent, Europe, now makes independent dialogue between non-Western countries difficult: they are reduced to speaking a language of 'development', technology, and violence defined by the West. Ghosh arbitrarily fixes on one isolated historical moment to explain the changes that have taken place in international cultural exchange: the moment of Vasco da Gama's arrival in India in 1498. 'Within a few years of that day', he argues, 'the knell had been struck for the world that had brought Bomma, Ben Yiju and Ashu together, and another age had begun in which the crossing of their paths would seem so unlikely that its very possibility would all but disappear from human memory' (*IAAL*, 286). There are many compelling arguments to back up this polemical statement, and Ghosh passionately contends that until the incursions of da Gama the Indian Ocean cultures traded together on a basis of cooperation and bargaining. They were thus completely unprepared for the

determination of the Portuguese to wrest control of trading syndicates, and for their 'unleashing' of 'violence on a scale unprecedented on those shores' (*IAAL*, 288).

And yet, there are gaps in his narrative; moments when it is possible to divine that other interpretations could be put on his story of medieval cultural interchange destroyed by brutal imperialism. For example, Ghosh is reluctant to dwell on Muslim cruelty to Jews in medieval times. His description of the society of Ben Yiju and Khalaf ibn Ishaq comes close to what Mark R. Cohen has termed 'an interfaith utopian' view (1994: xv).²⁰ This historical approach, as Cohen has shown, is a simplification of the intricate relations between Jew, Muslim, and Christian in the twelfth-century Middle East. Cohen's opening remark in *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* is that his study aims to 'go beyond the facile assertion that Jews lived more securely in the medieval Arab-Islamic world than under Christendom. They did. My goal is to explain how and why and thereby foster deeper understanding of Jewish-gentile relations in the medieval diaspora' (1994: ix). Cohen's comment is useful because, while unequivocally asserting that the medieval Arab-Islamic world *was* more religiously tolerant than Christendom, it indicates that the situation is more complex than this, needing a closer investigation of both the reasons for, and any exceptions to, this general rule. He alerts us to the fact that historians who place great emphasis on the harmony between Muslims and Jews in medieval times may have ulterior motives for their approach. Proponents of the interfaith utopia hypothesis, he argues, are often 'Arab apologists' who identify the incursions of Zionism and particularly the creation of the state of Israel as reasons for the demise of intercommunal tolerance. Equally, Cohen reveals that revisionist historians, who seek to prove Islamic persecution of Jews in the Middle Ages, do so out of similarly polemical, pro-Israeli views. Cohen categorically states that the extreme persecution of Jews in the Europe of the Crusades had no counterpart in the Middle East (1994: 3 – 4), but he acknowledges that there are still many instances of the suppression of Jews under Islamic rule in the Middle Ages (1994: 24 – 25).

²⁰ It is worth noting that, despite the fact that Ghosh's work may be interpreted as occasionally bordering on the 'interfaith utopia' model derided by Mark Cohen, the two men are acquainted, and the latter has clearly influenced Ghosh's research. Ghosh acknowledges his intellectual debt to Cohen in his footnote to p. 104.

Ghosh, on the other hand, finds it difficult to explain instances of religious intolerance in the Geniza world. There are very few references to religious persecution in the medieval section of the book, and the reader is almost left with the impression that persecutions never took place. One of the only descriptions of Muslim cruelty to Jews comes towards the end of the book, shortly after a condemnatory narration of the Crusaders' massacres of Jews. Ghosh describes it as follows:

At about the same time, in the far west of North Africa the al-Muwahhid (Almohad) dynasty was gaining in strength, and its armies were advancing steadily through the Maghreb, towards Ifriqiya. Between 1145 and 1146 they took the cities of Oran, Tlemcen and the oasis of Sijilmasa, on the north-western border of the Sahara. For seven months they tried peaceably to convert Sijilmasa's large Jewish population to Islam. When their efforts went unrewarded they put a hundred and fifty Jews to the sword. The rest, led by their judge, quickly converted. They were relatively lucky: at about the same time a hundred thousand Christians and Jews were massacred by the Almohads in Fez, and a hundred and twenty thousand in Marrakesh (*IAAL*, 301).

That is all, and there is no further mention of medieval Muslim intolerance; nor is there any explicit reference to current Jewish/Muslim hostilities. But the passage is an interesting one, for it illustrates Ghosh's reluctance to condemn the Muslim cruelty with the virulence he reserves for the Crusaders. Notice the terms in which he describes the Almohads' behaviour: they are described as trying 'peaceably' to convert the Jews and their patience in the face of what almost appears as willful Jewish obduracy is emphasized. Eventually, when 'their efforts went unrewarded', Ghosh implies that the Muslims had little choice but to kill a hundred and fifty Jews. Then comes the most jarring moment of the passage, when Ghosh writes in the briefest and most neutral way possible of the massacre of over two hundred thousand Jews and Christians. It is hard to see how this incident fits into Ghosh's model of the medieval world as an exemplar of tolerance and syncretism and it is little wonder that he chooses not to linger over it. Perhaps in this passage, whether inadvertently or consciously, Ghosh hints here at another, very different story of the Middle Ages that could be told by a researcher with different leanings. This brief revelation of Muslim cruelty to Jews could be accentuated by a revisionist historian keen to suggest that the tolerance of the Arabic-Islamic world has been overstated. This passage, with its intimations of other possible accounts of the period that could be told, returns us to the notion that history is inevitably subjective and selective.

Elsewhere Ghosh evinces the same marked reluctance to make any criticism of the multicultural trading societies of the twelfth-century Middle East. At times the reader may feel that the Geniza world has become a symbol of everything that is wrong with the present system of globalization and neo-colonialism, rather than a complex, imperfect human society. For example, Ghosh's defense of the twelfth-century slave trade, which he describes as 'a very flexible set of hierarchies' (*IAAL*, 260) is perhaps overly idealistic. He is right to alert us to the fact that slavery in the middle ages was very different from the exploitative and brutal institution it became in the modern world. It is perhaps better regarded as a system of apprenticeship, in which many 'slaves' rose to positions of great power and influence. And yet, when Ghosh asserts that the ties that bound the slave to his master were 'links that were in some small way ennobling — human connections, pledges of commitment' (*IAAL*, 263), I feel he takes his case too far. For most slaves, as indeed for Bomma, slavery may not have been the horrific experience it was for millions of Africans centuries later, but nor does it appear to have been greatly 'ennobling'. However much security the institution provided for the slave, the fact remained that he was his master's possession, free to pursue his own career only if he was manumitted. This system of people owning, buying, and selling other people was surely open to abuse even if, as Ghosh claims, it was still a benevolent institution in the twelfth century.

Another example of Ghosh's idealization of the twelfth century world order comes in his apparent desire to make his reader believe that Ben Yiju's literacy, foreign travel, and religious tolerance were commonplace in the twelfth century. He seeks to locate Ben Yiju's society firmly within the echelons of the upper middle classes, rejecting the notion that they formed an elite:

the members of this community were not born to privilege and entitlement; they were neither aristocrats nor soldiers nor professional scholastics. The vast majority of them were traders, and while some of them were wealthy and successful, they were not, by any means, amongst the most powerful merchants of their time — most of them were small traders running small family businesses. (*IAAL*, 56).

And yet, the impression we get from his own account is that these men, while they may be to some extent self-made and not 'born to privilege and entitlement', they have certainly become some of the 'most powerful merchants of their time'. One suspects a certain duplicity in Ghosh's protestations about the ordinariness of the merchant class

as compared with the supposedly more powerful 'aristocrats [...] soldiers [...] [and] professional scholastics'. On the contrary, S.D. Goitein describes Ben Yiju as a 'scholar [...] versed in Jewish law and lore' (1973: 9) and 'the most important single figure of the India papers preserved in the Geniza' (1973: 186). Chaudhuri (1985: 11) illustrates that despite their relatively low social status, merchants' doings are well recorded in history and command great attention from scholars 'because of the way that the ruling elites and the politically powerful react to the activities, influence, and demands of those who are able to command a large amount of money'. Money talks, and elsewhere in the text Ghosh emphasizes the traders' wealth, particularly in his depictions of the quality of the products they ship out for themselves to their temporary homes overseas. When Bomma disgraces himself by getting drunk during the pirates' invasion of Aden, he is only in the country because he has been sent to buy goods for Ben Yiju's household in India. Extraordinary as it is to think of a twelfth-century citizen sending his servant out on an international 'shopping jaunt' (*IAAL*, 255), Ben Yiju's elite status is suggested still further in Ghosh's remark that the sum of money he spends could have paid 'the wages of a mason or builder for more than two and a half years' (*IAAL*, 256). Ben Yiju is portrayed as consistently demanding the finest goods for himself and his family; his friends send him clothes, household goods, sweets, and paper of a 'matchless' quality (*IAAL*, 268).

When reading *In an Antique Land*, it is important to be aware that the multicultural, well-travelled community of traders that Ghosh depicts is not representative of Middle Eastern society as a whole, but of a specifically *urban* society, a distinction to which Ghosh does not pay much attention. Janet L. Abu-Lughod, following Fernand Braudel and Richard Haëpke, portrays medieval Mediterranean society as an 'archipelago of towns', which term, she argues,

capture[s] the fact that, within the same general region, a variety of social formations coexisted: from the monetized trading centers, already profiting from foreign exchange and already beginning to shape production in their hinterlands for export, to outpockets in the most depressed mountain ridges and valleys, untouched by the changes taking place (1989: 13 – 14).

Her depiction of the unevenness of development in the Middle East of the time contradicts Ghosh's non-hierarchical vision of medieval trade as a 'shared enterprise'

(*IAAL*, 80 – 81).²¹ Abu-Lughod's description of 'depressed mountain ridges and valleys' suggests that many people were excluded from, and even oppressed by, the booming twelfth-century economy which Ghosh writes about so optimistically. Perhaps there is some truth in Gauri Viswanathan's accusation that 'the work cannot get beyond nostalgia' (1995, n. pag.) in its vision of a syncretic, non-hegemonic past.

Ghosh sometimes emphasizes the West's wrong-doings a little too heavily-handedly, just as he occasionally romanticizes the medieval Indian Ocean system. Jonathan M. Elukin has criticized Ghosh's censure of Western academia, writing:

Ghosh's excellent account of the Geniza's discovery is marred by persistent intrusions of a sweeping anti-imperialist sentiment — reminiscent of Edward Said's *Orientalism* — that is not worthy of his otherwise profound capacity for empathy (1994: 138).

The dismissive parenthetical reference to Edward Said goes some way towards explaining Elukin's antagonism towards Ghosh's 'anti-imperialist sentiment'. As a post-doctoral fellow at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, Elukin may well disagree with Said's — and Ghosh's — anti-Western views and sympathetic stance towards Arab states. As such, we may feel that Elukin's attempts to counter Ghosh's anti-imperialist arguments fall into the same trap of making sweeping generalizations of which he accuses Ghosh. Thus he is able to assert '[m]ost Western countries have been largely scrupulous about preserving the documents of their pasts, including the records of disenfranchised peoples' (1994: 138), while giving no evidence to support this statement, and blithely ignoring the fact that Ghosh is not criticizing the West for the quality of its record-keeping, but for its appropriation of other societies' 'records of their pasts'. That said, I feel that Elukin is right to point out that Ghosh does not fully utilize his 'profound capacity for empathy' on the subject of the Western academy. He provides a convincing account of the unscrupulousness of the Western academy, for example in the depiction of the dispersal of the Geniza documents to

²¹ Although Ghosh never uses the term 'archipelago of towns' in Abu-Lughod's sense, he is nonetheless evidently aware of it. In an entirely different context he argues that Cairo, 'like Delhi or Rome, is actually not so much a single city as an archipelago of townships, founded on neighbouring sites, by various different dynasties and rulers' (*IAAL*, 33). Here Ghosh uses the phrase to denote a city that has evolved out of a number of different villages. Yet nowhere in the text does he indicate that the syncretic Mediterranean society he is describing is actually a conglomerate of *urban* satellites, whose economy largely excludes the rural areas.

universities in the West. Yet at other times it may be felt that 'the West' becomes a convenient label upon which to assign blame for everything from the Arab-Israeli conflict to history's obfuscation of cultural interchange.

Towards the end of the text, the medieval syncretism Ghosh has been celebrating seems to dissolve, or at least takes on a darker aspect. A mood of melancholy enters *In an Antique Land* when it is revealed that in middle age Ben Yiju grew increasingly conservative, refusing to allow his daughter to marry the son of a close friend, whose family origins are in Iraq, and choosing instead to marry her off to a cousin. Ghosh writes, 'Ben Yiju chose to disregard his long-standing association with Khalaf and his family: almost as though he were seeking to disown a part of his own past, he now decided that he could not let his daughter marry a "foreigner"' (*IAAL*, 316). Here he implies that Ben Yiju will not permit for his daughter what he once chose for himself: marriage with an outsider. Once again Ghosh chooses not to linger too long on this evidence that the medieval world had its share of xenophobic prejudice. He is soon back on more comfortably syncretic ground, emphasizing the proto-globalized nature of a world in which 'this child of a Nair woman from the Malabar was wedded in 1156 to her Sicilian cousin, in Fustat' (*IAAL*, 328). Yet I would argue that this last statement indicates dark undertones behind the optimism. The reference to the 'child of a Nair woman' reminds us of Ashu, whom Ben Yiju has apparently abandoned in India, never to see her children again. Thus the conclusion of Ben Yiju's story is a deeply ambivalent one, pivoted as it is between an optimistic multiculturalism and a disturbing ghettoism. Clifford evokes this indeterminacy well when he asks, '[w]ill differences be negotiated through intricate relational networks or measured against rigid templates of development and nationhood? Ghosh's pessimism of the intellect inclines him to the latter possibility, his optimism of the will keeps the former alive' (1994: 27).

The uneasy balance between 'pessimism of the intellect' and 'optimism of the will' is also carried over into the book's ethnographic sections. Another gloomily ambivalent undercurrent may be found in the dilemma Ghosh faces when he is pressurized to attend the local mosque. He meets an educated and very religious man, Ustaz Mustafa, who is keen to show him the workings of Islam so he can 'make up

[his] mind whether [he] want[s] to stay within that religion of [his]' (*IAAL*, 48).

Ghosh refuses and is soon suffering paroxysms of guilt for his decision not to go:

I began to wonder why I had not accepted Ustaz Mustafa's invitation to visit the mosque and watch him at his prayers; he had meant well, after all, had only wanted to introduce me to the most important element of his imaginative life. A part of me had wanted to go — not merely that part which told me that it was, in a sense, my duty, part of my job. But when the moment had come, I'd known that I wouldn't be able to do it: I had been too afraid, and for the life of me I could not understand why (*IAAL*, 48 – 49).

Despite his claim that 'if I had a religious identity at all it was largely by default' (*IAAL*, 47), it seems that there is something Hindu in Ghosh's imagination that will not allow him to go to the mosque. He confesses that he is afraid of going, but even the story he tells later about witnessing communalist riots as a child in Calcutta is not sufficient to explain his fears. In my interview with him he was more frank, admitting 'there was already so much pressure on me to convert. And I felt that I had to make a clear distinction that there was no way I was going to convert' (Chambers, 2003: n.pag.). This pressure on him to convert is not explicitly stated in *In an Antique Land*, perhaps because Ghosh does not wish to get too deeply embroiled in debates about the arguably intransigent character of mainstream Islam. He prefers to examine esoteric offshoots of the religion, such as Sufism and saint worship. Perhaps Ghosh's discomfort with some aspects of Islam is best expressed in a passing comment made in his thesis (1981: 215): '[p]eople in Nashawy do not believe that truth or a correct course of action [...] can be relative to individuals or groups. Truth for them, is one and indivisible'. As we have seen throughout this chapter, Ghosh opposes this idea that one can know the truth with absolute certainty. Instead, he is constantly at pains to *contextualize* truths, to show that they are individual and specific to their location and time. Yet the suggestion in his thesis of the unyielding certainty of Islamic doctrine is not carried over into *In an Antique Land*, and explicit discussion of orthodox Islam is an important 'area of darkness' in this text.

Another traveller in the Muslim world, V.S. Naipaul, is less circumspect about his feelings towards Islam. A similar scene to the one described above appears in his travel book, *Among the Believers*, in which Naipaul, too, is encouraged to attend prayers:

'Stay for our prayers,' he said. 'It sometimes has an effect on newcomers, seeing us all at prayer.'

But that was what I didn't want to stay for, and was anxious about: the prayers, the sight of a hundred thousand — or was it 200,000? — bowed in unison, in the avoidable desert of Raiwind (1981: 201).

Like Ghosh, Naipaul is reluctant to take part in the massive display of faith, but, unlike him, he is not afraid to explain his reasons why. Conversion is overtly alluded to here, in Naipaul's interlocutor's statement '[i]t sometimes has an effect on newcomers', which stands in ominous contrast to Ghosh's more charitable interpretation of the invitation to prayer as an attempt 'to introduce me to the most important element of his imaginative life'. Elsewhere in the text, Naipaul describes Islam as 'an imperialism as well as a religion' (1981: 11), and he criticizes its Sharia law, its tendency towards despotism, and its alleged failure to produce anything like a Renaissance in the modern age.

Later in *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh describes Islam in terms that recall Naipaul's fear of the huge crowd 'bowed in unison', at prayer:

I would go up to my room alone and listen to the call of the muezzin and try to think of how it must feel to know that on that very day, as the sun travelled around the earth, millions and millions of people in every corner of the globe had turned to face the same point, and said exactly the same words of prayer, with exactly the same prostrations as oneself. A phenomenon on that scale was beyond my imagining, but the exercise helped me understand why so many people in the hamlet had told me not to fast: to belong to that immense community was a privilege which they had to re-earn every year, and the effort made them doubly conscious of the value of its boundaries (*IAAL*, 76).

Here Ghosh highlights Islam's role in providing an 'imagined community' for its followers. Like the nation-state, he suggests, Islam provides a means of defining oneself against what one is not. Ghosh's description of Muslims' consciousness of the 'value' of their religion's 'boundaries', indicates another possible reason for his refusal to go to the mosque. Throughout this text (and indeed his others) Ghosh demonstrates a deep suspicion for constructed borderlines, which are linked in his mind with the horrors of Partition and communal violence.

This discussion of borderlines leads me to one final and significant omission in Ghosh's narrative, that is, his decision not to discuss the modern-day Arab-Israeli conflict. The Israeli state is never to my knowledge referred to in *In an Antique Land*.

The conflict itself is only mentioned in one oblique passage, already discussed, in which Ghosh compares the partitioning of history on national lines to the physical division of Palestine (*IAAL*, 95). Yet the Arab-Israeli struggle haunts *In an Antique Land*, because the story of Ben Yiju's Jewish community working and trading side-by-side with Arabs contrasts so starkly with current realities. I would suggest that this omission, like many of Ghosh's others, is more effective than an explicit attempt to tackle the subject. By leaving the reader to make comparisons between Ben Yiju's tolerant society and today's post-*intifada* world, he creates a silence at the heart of his narrative more poignant than any polemic. Equally importantly, this lacuna, in conjunction with the other omissions discussed, illustrates the argument that flows throughout *In an Antique Land* that all narratives are partial, they can only tell one story and things inevitably get left out of the frame.

This, then, is the message of all Ghosh's ethnographic and historical research, that knowledge is fragmentary and subjective. The gaps and awkward moments in *In an Antique Land* that I have just been describing are part of this message; they indicate Ghosh's recognition that other versions of his narrative will always be available. *In an Antique Land*, as its composite generic form and publishing history attest, is at once a provisional enterprise and a lyrical plea that all knowledge should be viewed as similarly makeshift and personal. As the ethnographer Jacques Maquet writes:

A perspectivist knowledge is not as such non-objective: it is partial. It reflects an external reality but only an aspect of it, the one visible from the particular spot, social and individual, where the anthropologist was placed. Non-objectivity creeps in when the partial aspect is considered as the global one (quoted in Narayan, 1993: 679).

The same also applies to history: both disciplines should be viewed as a glimpse of the truth from a specific temporal and spatial position, rather than as Truth itself. As is hinted at by Maquet here, and as Ghosh explicitly states, it is the West, with its claim to possess a knowledge that transcends time and place, that has caused immeasurable damage to other worldviews that acknowledge their own partiality.

Chapter Four:

Knowledge, Networks and Silence in *The Calcutta Chromosome*

‘[K]nowledge [can]’t begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge’
(CC, 104).

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh’s fourth novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), defies categorization and resists any easy summary. It opens with a depiction of Antar, an Egyptian working in the information technology industry in the New York of the near future. His hi-tech computer, Ava, shows him the trace of an I.D. card that has been lost in the virtual system, and Antar gradually realizes that it belongs to a former colleague of his, Murugan, who ‘disappeared’ while on leave in Calcutta in 1995. The bumptious (and perhaps somewhat deranged)¹ Murugan had been doing research into the Nobel prize-winning scientist, Ronald Ross (1857 – 1932), whose ground-breaking discovery that malaria is transmitted by the bite of a mosquito was made in Calcutta one hundred years earlier. Murugan had always insisted that Ross’s discovery had been manipulated by an Indian ‘counter-science’ group that had ‘systematically interfered with [his] experiments to push malaria research in certain directions while leading it away from others’ (CC, 36). I wish to emphasize this strand in my reading of the novel, as critics have so far paid little attention to Ghosh’s rewriting of the history of Ross’s discovery.²

Antar becomes obsessed with the idea of uncovering the secret of Murugan’s disappearance and this sets him off on a bewildering journey of encounters (many of them computer-mediated) with characters from both past and present, from Egypt,

¹ Later in the novel, we find out Murugan is a syphilis patient; so some of his more outré beliefs may be caused by the disease. As *The Calcutta Chromosome*’s subtitle, ‘A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery’, suggests, it is never clear what we are to make of the novel’s ‘discoveries’: are they a result of madness, obsession or genuine breakthroughs?

² Tabish Khair (2001) discusses Ghosh’s challenge to the rhetoric of Western science in general terms, but does not analyse his intertextual re-writing of Ross’s discovery, the essay being more concerned with subaltern agency. John Thieme (2000) concentrates on the novel’s challenge to artificial ‘shadow lines’, tracing its allusions to Manichean philosophies and relating this to postcolonial theorists’ arguments that colonial discourse characterizes ‘East’ and ‘West’ in terms of Manichean binaries. Martin Leer (2001) provides an interesting account of the novel’s use of trains and the railway.

India, America, and Britain. He suspects that Murugan may have been right in thinking that Ronald Ross's discoveries had been secretly engineered by an Indian 'counter-scientific' cult. This cult, he discovers, is led by an enigmatic scavenger woman called Mangala, helped by Ross's favourite servant, known variously as Lutchman, Lakshman, and Laakhan. The group of subaltern figures, Murugan suggests, believes that to know something is to change it, because as soon as something is known it is already changed, since by then 'you only know its history' (CC, 104). Mangala and her followers wanted to effect a mutation in their progress towards finding the secret of immortality, which is the ultimate goal of all their endeavours. Their strategy was to allow Ross to make his malariological breakthrough, because 'if you wanted to create a specific kind of change, or mutation, one of the ways in which you could get there is by allowing certain things to be known' (CC, 217). The suggestion is therefore made that the counter-scientific group was streets ahead of orthodox medicine in its research, having long been aware that the malaria vector is the female *anopheles* mosquito. According to Murugan, its members manipulated Ross's discovery to enable their own much more advanced breakthrough, the secret of 'interpersonal transference' (CC, 106), in which the individual is reborn in a new body. This thread of the story allows Ghosh to make the important point that science, technology, and medicine were not conveyed to India by the British in a one-way process of transfer, but were involved in a complex series of cross-cultural exchanges, translations, and mutations.

As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly multi-stranded, straddling the generic boundaries between science fiction, cyberpunk, fantasy, and stories of the supernatural. It also weaves together information about historical movements, such as Gnosticism and Theosophy, with fictional explorations of holographic communication and reincarnation, to create a complex narrative that oscillates between countries and between many different historical periods. The novel juxtaposes scenes from vastly different epochs and places in order to disrupt a linear sense of time and an idea of discrete spaces. More confusingly still, much of the information we have about events is handed down through different accounts, so that the novel has a strong sense of rumour, hearsay, and distortion, and it is impossible to discern 'what really happened'. To give just one example, while the central story of Ronald Ross's research is related for the most part through a long conversation that Murugan and Antar have in a Thai

restaurant in New York in 1995, it is narrated as a flashback memory by Antar a few years later, a narrative anyway interrupted and intercut with scenes involving Urmila and Sonali in Calcutta in 1995. As is indicated by this example of stories within stories, the novel's construction is extremely intricate.

Beneath the novel's complex layers of narrative lies a debate about knowledge and power relations. This chapter's epigraph, '[k]nowledge [can]'t begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge', is taken from a pivotal speech to which I will return at several moments during the course of my discussion in order to examine its multiple implications. Murugan's paradoxical statement wittily encapsulates one of Ghosh's most compelling dilemmas as a writer. How can one challenge the totalizing impetus of the knowledge that has been imposed by the West on its former colonies, without reproducing its claims to universal applicability? Murugan's identification of a knowledge that recognizes its own 'impossibility' draws both on postmodernist thought³ and on a strain of Hindu thought which indicates that recognizing that one does not know everything is the first step towards knowledge. This philosophy is illustrated in the *Upanishads*, in which it is stated:

One thing, they say, is obtained from real knowledge; another, they say, from what is not knowledge. [...] He who knows at the same time both knowledge and not-knowledge, overcomes death through not-knowledge, and obtains immortality through knowledge (quoted in Sen, 1961: 128).

This interesting quotation cannot but resonate for the reader of *The Calcutta Chromosome*, both in its creation of a space for the coexistence of conventional knowledge and its mysterious antithesis, 'not-knowledge', and in the connection it makes between knowledge and immortality. The implication given both by this passage from the *Upanishads* and Ghosh's novel is that conventional knowledge is useful, but only when its limitations are recognized.

What are the types of knowledge that are interrogated in *The Calcutta Chromosome*? I argue that Ghosh explores and develops ideas about science that he began to address in *The Circle of Reason*. In Chapter One of this thesis, I argued that

³ In much postmodernist thought relativism, pluralism, fragmentation, and uncertainty have been invested with a paradoxical authority that leads to Linda Hutcheon's wry observation, '[y]e shall know that truth is not what it seems and *that* truth shall set you free' (1988: 13).

in *The Circle of Reason* Ghosh proposes that science and pseudoscience are more closely related than is commonly believed. The novel's ironic treatment of Louis Pasteur challenges the myth of the scientist as a lone genius, just as its discussion of phrenology, criminology, and plant physiology unsettles any attempt to dismiss these practices simply as examples of pseudoscience. In my chapter on this debut novel, I suggested that Balaram's intermixing of vastly different ideological perspectives on science (from Pasteurian microbiology to Bose's plant physiology) reflects the fact that Western science was hybridized and reshaped by Indian thinkers.

This chapter will contend that these notions are foregrounded and extended in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. The computer-aided research of Ghosh's protagonist, Murugan, reveals fissures in the claims of Western science to autonomy and universal applicability. Ghosh experiments for the first time with the genre of science fiction (SF) in order to question further the boundaries that have been erected to separate notions of scientific 'truth' and fiction. He plays with the notion of 'science fiction' in three ways. Firstly, in accordance with the conventions of the genre, he creates a society set in the then near future of the early twenty-first century, by exaggerating and extending the capabilities of the technology that exists at the time in which he writes. Secondly, he fictionalizes the lives of actual scientists, so that the mainstream, Nobel prize-winning science of the malariologist Ronald Ross is depicted as shading into the distinctly deviant scientific innovations of the fictional priestess Mangala and her followers. Finally, with a playful twist on the notion of 'science fiction', *The Calcutta Chromosome* seems to suggest that many of the grand claims made for science are fictions. I will consider each of these connotations surrounding the concept of 'science fiction' in detail.

GHOSH'S SUBALTERN SCIENCE FICTION:
NETWORK SOCIETIES / NETWORKED COMPUTERS,
CYBERSPACE / CYBERPUNK

The Calcutta Chromosome is a highly intertextual novel, in which Ghosh makes allusions to Indian, Egyptian, American, and British texts on subjects as varied as malariology and Gnosticism. In doing so, he challenges the artificial frontiers drawn

up to separate academic disciplines in a style that recalls the following statement by Foucault:

[t]he frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network (1972: 23).

My way into this novel is to examine its diverse use of intertextuality and to analyse the way in which Ghosh's creation of an encompassing network of references impacts upon the novel's debate about knowledge. My methodology has been informed by Gérard Genette's rigorous definitions of different types of textual reference. Genette refines Kristeva's term intertextuality by proposing five types of textuality, the most important of which for my purposes is the term hypertextuality. He writes, '[b]y hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary' (1997: 5). Genette uses this term to suggest that hypertextuality is the transformation of a single text by another, whether this be through parody, pastiche, or imitation. Examples he gives of such hypertexts include Joyce's *Ulysses* (in its relationship to the *Odyssey*), Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus*, and Henry Fielding's *Shamela*. Genette distinguishes hypertextuality, which concerns a rewriting of a specific text, from what he designates 'architextuality', in other words 'the entire set of general or transcendent categories — types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres — from which emerges each singular text' (1997: 1). This definition of architextuality comes closer to Kristeva's description of intertextuality as the interaction between a large body of texts: 'every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it' (quoted in Culler, 1981: 105).

The Calcutta Chromosome is replete with both types of textuality. Hypertextuality is particularly evident in Ghosh's negotiations with the diaries and *Memoirs* of the malariologist Ronald Ross. A more general architextuality is apparent in the novel's relationship with the genres of science fiction, cyberpunk, nineteenth-century ghost stories, and so on. I will examine both the explicit hypertextual revisionism in this novel and also trace the more subtle allusions to other discourses. I am also particularly concerned to examine more recent understandings of the term

hypertext. Independently from Genette's work, the term has of course also been employed by those working in the field of IT. In the 1960s, the computing expert Theodor H. Nelson used the word 'hypertext' to denote a sense of relationships between nodes of texts connected electronically, as, for example, the internet links texts with other texts, diagrams, and visual images in a non-hierarchical, unconservative fashion (see Landow, 1992: 3 – 4). I will argue that it is significant that the literary theorist, Genette, and the IT specialist, Nelson, use the same terminology to describe both a type of intertextuality and a computer-mediated way of reading.

Going back to the statement from Foucault quoted above, I wish to draw attention to his choice of language when he describes a book as being 'a node within a network', meaning that it cannot be separated from its literary influences and historical context. It is interesting to note, as George P. Landow has done in his influential study *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (1992), that Foucault is not the only theorist to use this image of nodes and networks. Derrida, for instance, writes in a similar vein to Foucault on the interconnectedness of all written works: 'a "text" [...] is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces' (in Kamuf, 1991: 257). Landow argues that the French philosophers' and theorists' predilection for imagery such as 'link (*liaison*), web (*toile*), network (*réseau*), and interwoven (*s'y tissent*)' (Landow, 1992: 8, italics in original) is indicative of a paradigm shift that has taken place in recent conceptual enquiry. Landow contends that this epistemological shift results from a widespread recognition of the need to abandon 'conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity' and replace them with models based on 'multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks' (1992: 2). What Landow does not mention, but what is implicit in his choice of the words, 'centre, margin, hierarchy, and linearity', is that the disruption of these structures, and their replacement by a new emphasis on networks, may have an impact on the relationships between hegemonic and subaltern groups. It is the question of the extent that the new celebration of the network may be said to alter things for the subaltern that preoccupies Ghosh in *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

Landow argues that theorists of both literature and computing have independently arrived at the same conclusion that the network is the most useful model for our experience of reading, writing, and processing data. New dimensions are added to his argument by recognizing that the image of nodes and networks has also been used by several analysts to describe our increasingly globalized, information-based economy and society. Manuel Castells, for example, writes that 'dominant functions and processes in the information age are increasingly organized around networks. Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies' (1996: 469). He goes on to explain what he means by a network:

A network is a set of interconnected nodes. A node is the point at which a curve intersects itself. What a node is, concretely speaking, depends on the kind of concrete networks of which we speak. They are stock exchange markets, and their ancillary advanced services centers, in the network of global financial flows. [...] They are television systems, entertainment studios [...], news teams, and mobile devices [...] in the global network of the new media (1996: 470).

The fact that Castells discusses our increasingly globalized society using the same metaphor of the network that Foucault and Derrida employ in talking about interconnected relationships between texts suggests that a connection may be made between literary strategies and Castells' 'network society'. I would argue that Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* is, in Foucault's terms, 'caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences' to an unusually great extent. Ghosh uses inter-, hyper-, and architextuality as part of a strategy to reflect upon the increasingly interconnected world that it describes; a world which, as Jonathan Friedman puts it, is 'a web, in which adjustments made here are bound to have effects over there' (1999: 21). The wealth of references to be found in *The Calcutta Chromosome* makes the novel appear more overtly 'a node within a network', both in the sense of a network of literary relationships and in the broader sense of being part of a globalized world.

The novel's structure also dramatizes the model of nodes and networks. Ghosh's novel offers a globalized worldview in that it has no central location, and events occurring in Egypt, India, and the US at different historical moments are spliced together. The suggestion once again being made in Ghosh's writing is that places and events, which seem to bear no relation to each other, are in fact linked. The use of the nodes within a network structure allows Ghosh to escape from the idea of a

centre and periphery in his novel. This rejection of centres and peripheries is also reflected in another device in the novel: the use of stories that contain layers of mystery, but have no real revelation at the core, like an onion which has nothing in the centre. Leaving the issue of the novel's structure on one side for the moment, I would now like to examine Ghosh's experimentation with the genres of science fiction and cyberpunk in delineating a technologically advanced, network society.

Ghosh's incursion into science fiction in this novel may come as a surprise to readers who have followed his career, particularly as the genre tends to be seen as a low-brow, speculative medium. In an interview, Ghosh is somewhat dismissive of science fiction and related genres, stating that 'I may have written an IT book, but I'm not into popular culture at all' (Ghosh, 2000a: n. pag.). I will argue that the novel cannot easily be categorized as science fiction (nor, indeed, can it be unproblematically given any other literary label), as it transgresses the borders of science fiction, reshaping the genre for a postcolonial and diasporic context and indicating many other literary influences. Ghosh's literary antecedents are more likely to be Satyajit Ray⁴ and Bharati Mukherjee than such SF luminaries as Robert Heinlein and Frank Herbert. Despite this, the novel was awarded the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke award for science fiction and, as we shall see, it certainly conforms in many ways to the conventions of the genre.

One important feature of science fiction, according to Patrick Parrinder, is that it contains an admixture of fantasy and realism. Parrinder argues that most science fiction layers its narrative with theories derived from current scientific thought, but that it also admits into its discourse at least one impossible 'premise', which allows the plot to move into the realm of conjectural scientific fantasy:

⁴ Ghosh acknowledges the connection with Satyajit Ray in an interview in which he states, '[s]o many interests of mine come from Ray, like my interest in science-fiction, my interest in history' (Silva and Tickell, 1997: 172). Ray, better known for his film-making, also wrote thirty-eight science fiction stories for children, which are allegedly based on the diaries of his central character, the scientist-inventor Professor Shonku (1994). Despite many differences between these children's stories and Ghosh's sophisticated SF novel, the texts share a resistance to categorization as mainstream science fiction, a willingness to allow supernatural or inexplicable events to enter into their narratives, and a view that the quantification, classification, and computation of Western scientific methods are not sufficient ways to understand the universe.

Though backed up by a display of scientific patter, the premise, whether of time-travel, invisibility or (to take more recent examples) teleportation or telepathy, is comparable to the traditional marvels of magic and fairy-tale. Once the premise is granted, however, its consequences are explored in a spirit of rigorous realism (1980: 11).⁵

Other critics, such as Adam Roberts, prefer Darko Suvin's term 'novum', meaning 'new thing', to describe the fantastical concept or device that differentiates the world of science fiction from the one we know. The main 'premise', or 'novum', on which the status of *The Calcutta Chromosome* as science fiction depends, is the fictional creation of a 'technology for interpersonal transference' (CC, 106). By this Ghosh means the development of a system to bring about immortality: 'when your body fails you, you leave it, you migrate [...]. You begin all over again, another body, another beginning' (CC, 108). It is worth noting here that Ghosh's use of the idea of interpersonal transference alludes chiefly to the Hindu idea of reincarnation, but can also be taken to refer to the cultural phenomenon of migration.

Reincarnation and immortality, according to Scholes and Rabkin (1977: 166 – 67), are common tropes in science fiction. They argue that from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Arthur C. Clarke's *The City and the Stars*, writers of scientific fiction have been fascinated with the possibility of science eradicating death. These critics point out that the reincarnation myth in science fiction is usually derived from Biblical sources, particularly the idea of Christ's resurrection. Ghosh changes this; he brings in Hindu ideas surrounding reincarnation, whereby characters hope to be reborn in a repeatable process of 'interpersonal transference', rather than being resurrected in the isolated, Christian sense. Similarly, he plays with the Hindu notion of avatars (a term for the human incarnations of Vishnu that has also been appropriated by computer users to indicate their online identities). The fact that Antar's computer is called Ava, while the name of the other important female in his life is Tara, alerts the reader to the

⁵ I find Parrinder's definition of the 'premise' in science fiction useful, but do not wish to imply that Ghosh employs 'rigorous realism' in his transformation of science fiction. I think that this becomes clear in my concluding section on the novel's eerie ghost stories.

fact that Antar is surrounded by *avatars*, figures whose identities shift and change.⁶ As if in accordance with Parrinder's definition of science fiction, Ghosh backs up his premise of 'interpersonal transference' with a highly convincing 'display of scientific patter', which draws on existing scientific knowledge, such as the discovery of the malaria virus's ability to mutate, and the emerging technology of cloning. In the midst of all this genuine scientific discussion (and, as I shall discuss later, in the midst of a wealth of historical detail about the research of an actual scientist, Ronald Ross), Ghosh projects the possibility of the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation becoming a material reality in the future. Once again we see Ghosh deliberately confusing boundaries: between realism and fantasy; science and religion; 'truth' and fiction.

As Adam Roberts points out, science fiction by its very nature contains certain parallels with the practice of pseudoscience: it draws on existing scientific thought, but admits concepts from outside the parameters of science into its narrative, while still justifying this in language derived from scientific discourse (2000: 8). Both pseudoscience and science fiction straddle the borderline between realism and fantasy. We saw in Chapter One that many pseudosciences are situated in a liminal position between science and the imaginary, nature and society. Pseudosciences have often been initially well-received by mainstream scientists, only to be rejected later on. Their existence unsettles the claims of science to a transcendent access to truth, pointing to the provisionality and cultural locatedness of all knowledge systems.

Like unorthodox sciences, then, *The Calcutta Chromosome* is fantasy couched in a style that is rigorously argued and backed up with seemingly undeniable rationalization. Consider for instance a crucial moment in the novel when Murugan is trying to explain the reasoning behind his belief in the counter-scientific cult:

⁶ There is no such thing as stable identity in this novel. A small boy in a grubby t-shirt crops up in different contexts throughout the novel; he seems to be working for the thumbless Romen Haldar who it emerges is a reincarnation of Ross's servant Lutchman, or Laakhan; Mrs Aratounian is a new incarnation of Mangala and her next manifestation will be as Urmila (who becomes Tara in New York); Phulboni is the pen-name of Saiyad Murad Husain and turns out to be Sonali's father; D.D. Cunningham becomes C.C. Dunn; and even Antar, seemingly the novel's most constant character, has a hidden past as the only person to escape from a virulent malaria epidemic in Egypt. Certainties collapse in this scientific thriller, and interconnections exist between seemingly unrelated people and events.

‘Maybe none of this makes sense,’ said Murugan. ‘But let’s just try and take it on its own terms for a minute. Let’s look at the kind of working hypotheses it yields. Here’s one: if it’s true that to know something is to change it, then it follows that one way of changing something — of effecting a mutation, let’s say — is to attempt to know it, or aspects of it. [...] So let’s run with this for a bit. [...] [L]et’s say that [...] [the counter-scientific cult has] run smack into a dead end [...] They decide that the next big leap in their project will come from a mutation in the parasite. The question now is: how do they speed up the process? The answer is: they’ve got to find a conventional scientist who’ll give it a push’ (CC, 104).

This interesting passage is most representative of *The Calcutta Chromosome* as science fiction. Murugan admits the likelihood of scepticism and incredulity on the part of his listener Antar and, by extension, the reader, acknowledging that ‘[m]aybe none of this makes sense’. However, he requests that cynics take the logic of the counter-scientific cult ‘on its own terms’, asking us to extend the somewhat warped proposition that ‘to know something is to change it’, in order to discover ‘what kind of working hypotheses it yields’. And indeed, once we grant Murugan’s central premise of knowledge effecting a mutation, the rest of the argument follows logically from that premise, as is indicated in Murugan’s use of such quasi-scientific phrases as ‘it follows’. The passage thus gestures towards the process that science fiction as a whole invites us to take part in: we are encouraged to suspend our disbelief and enter into a world in which conjecture becomes scientific reality. Murugan’s repetition of phrases such as ‘let’s say’ and ‘let’s run with this’ is reminiscent of the science fiction writers’ premises or *nova* that allow them to draw us into alternative realities.

In this context, the genre of science fiction may be seen as an entirely appropriate mode for Ghosh to transmit his ideas about the fictionality of much scientific discourse. Like pseudoscience, science fiction distorts the distinction between scientific ‘fact’ on the one hand and fiction, myths, and religious beliefs on the other. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh suggests that science and religion are more closely connected than most scientists would care to admit. This is most clearly indicated in the first two stanzas of a poem written by the mainstream scientist Ronald Ross and used as the novel’s epigraph:

This day relenting God
 Hath placed within my hand
 A wondrous thing; and God
 Be praised. At His command,

Seeking His secret deeds
 With tears and toiling breath,
 I find thy cunning seeds,
 O million-murdering Death (*CC*, unnumbered frontispiece).

Ross's attribution of his discovery to the mercy of God is not an isolated instance of science being linked with religion. Throughout the novel, Ghosh depicts permeable borders between science and religion. Ideas from these supposedly segregated world-views in fact constantly leak into each other, with Gnosticism, occultism, reincarnation, and a belief in miracles informing the work of Mangala's 'counter-scientific cult'.

One of the advantages of science fiction is that it enables writers to impart social commentary in a world that is freed from the everyday details demanded by realism. Ghosh thus projects current concerns about globalization, colonialism, and race into a futuristic setting. This is not an entirely new phenomenon; for example, the preeminent African American science fiction writers Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany interrogate attitudes towards race in their novels. By and large, however, science fiction is a genre that has tended to explore issues of race (if at all) from a white standpoint. Patrick Parrinder goes as far as to argue that 'SF usually flourishes only in highly industrialized societies' (1980: 30). In the early days of science fiction, the genre was often overtly racist, especially towards East Asians. Indeed, the term 'yellow peril' comes from a late nineteenth-century science fictional work, and even as late as Robert Heinlein's *The Day After Tomorrow* (1949) racist sentiment is evident, as the novel depicts a race of 'PanAsians' that conquers America (see James, 1990: 28 – 30). More recent science fiction has moved away from its crude, early tendency towards racism, but race remains a central preoccupation. Science fiction writers often use depictions of space, robots, aliens, or androids as a way of talking about imperialism, race, and exploitation. As Parrinder puts it:

The prospect of space-travel which was held out for mankind by Wells and other twentieth-century scientific prophets took form and substance as writers began to imagine the colonial prospects, the temptations of power, the military and scientific codes of behaviour and the possibilities of a relapse into barbarism that this new imperial mission was likely to breed (1980: 15).

However, science fiction that looks at a new form of imperialism in space tends to look at the issues it raises from the point of view of the colonizer rather than the colonized.

In contrast, Ghosh explores the possibilities of alternative technologies being invented by oppressed peoples in *this* world. He suggests that a new form of science may advance more easily in developing countries than in the West. As Murugan argues:

Think of Ramanujan, the mathematician, down in Madras. He went ahead and reinvented a fair hunk of modern mathematics just because nobody had told him that it had already been done [...] You [...] have to remember that she [Mangala] wasn't hampered by the sort of stuff that might slow down someone who was conventionally trained: she wasn't carrying a shit-load of theory in her head, she didn't have to write papers or construct proofs (CC, 244).

This quotation is significant, as it challenges modern assumptions that extensive training and the knowledge of a large body of scientific work are the only methods to achieve scientific breakthrough. Murugan's comment suggests that knowledge can 'hamper' as well as expedite discovery. His reference to the astounding work of the uneducated mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan⁷ reminds us that knowledge alone is not enough to make scientific discoveries; there is also the need for a kind of not-knowledge, a combination of insight, flair, and imagination that it is not possible to acquire from books.

The New York sections of *The Calcutta Chromosome* depict a network society set in the near future that has been transformed by new communications technologies. In this sense, the novel may also be categorized as cyberpunk, which is a sub-genre of science fiction that emerged in the 1980s to take a 'startling new look at the underbelly of the computerized corporate culture of tomorrow' (Magic Dragon Multimedia, 1996: n. pag.). The novel reveals Ghosh's fascination with virtual reality (VR), computerized research tools, and communication devices.⁸ It explores the reverberations the new communications media are having in third-world countries and on migrant communities in places such as America. The novel begins and ends with

⁷ For more on the biography of this unique Indian mathematician, see Nandy, 1995.

⁸ Ghosh's captivation with technology is clear in his extra-literary life as well, and has led to the development of his sophisticated official website (<http://www.amitavghosh.com/>).

technology (it opens with Antar's computer, Ava, finding the lost ID card hurtling through cyberspace, and ends with a depiction of virtual reality). These features indicate that there are many compelling parallels to be drawn between Ghosh's novel and Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World*, which was published just a few years earlier, in 1993. Although Ghosh has never to my knowledge commented publicly on the writing of Bharati Mukherjee, in her novel *The Holder of the World*, she seems to share with Ghosh an anxiety that the new information technologies may heighten inequalities between developing and developed countries.⁹ Confines of space prevent any further discussion of the parallels between Ghosh and Mukherjee's fiction. However, I submit that these novels, with their attempt to shadow forth an Indo-American brand of cyberpunk, signal the emergence of a new generation of diasporic Indian writers and their reactions to contemporary developments in international communications.

In 1992, Indira Karamcheti coined the term 'cyborg diaspora' in her review of Emmanuel S. Nelson's *Reworlding*, a collection of essays about Indian diasporic writing (1992: 271). A cyborg is of course 'a hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine' (Haraway, 1991: 1), so Karamcheti intends her use of the term to suggest that the current generation of middle-class South Asian migrants are intimately connected to technology. She uses her inventive phrase to argue that '[t]he greater availability of twentieth-century travel and communications technology' (1992: 272) are disrupting the 'fossilization' of an essentialized idea of India within migrant communities. Ananda Mitra has confirmed this point of view, arguing that 'a shared system of communication such as CMC [computer-mediated communication], with its shared language and systems of meaning, can be used to produce communities that do not need geographic closeness' (1997: 58). Although Karamcheti does not precisely

⁹ Mukherjee restricts her focus to virtual reality, not looking at the internet at all, but even so her portrayal of VR as a new mode of transmitting information and recreating histories contains many warnings about the potentially harmful effects the technology may have on postcolonial societies. For example, Beigh comments on her Indian computer programmer boyfriend's attempts to virtually recreate the past:

[b]ecause of information overload, a five-minute American reality will be denser, more 'lifelike,' than five minutes in Africa. But the African reality may be more elemental, dreamlike, mythic (Mukherjee, 1994: 7).

This quotation hints at the way in which virtual reality may reinforce existing stereotypes about cultures, so that virtual reality in Africa will be 'elemental, dreamlike, mythic' as compared with the 'lifelike' image it will provide of America.

theorize her use of this term, I find it useful for my analysis of the South Asian-born and US-resident writer, Amitav Ghosh. This member of the so-called cyborg diaspora is manipulating the American genres of science fiction and cyberpunk in order to question conventional notions surrounding diaspora, scientific discovery, and history.

Since the publication of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* in 1984 and the more recent emergence of actual computer technologies of virtual reality and the internet, the idea of cyberspace, an imagined place created out of computerized data, has entered the public consciousness. Several commentators have observed that the rhetoric of cyberspace slides into the American myth of the frontier, so that computer technologies are made to represent a new space to be colonized by intrepid pioneers (Chesher, 1994; Gajjala, 1996). From his diasporic position, Ghosh explores the technologies of virtual reality and networked computer communications with a more sceptical attitude. Despite his laudatory depictions of the new technologies' potential to collapse spatial boundaries and to encourage the creation of new narrative forms and virtual imagined communities, Ghosh nonetheless recognizes that the attempt to colonize the latest frontier of cyberspace may represent a form of neo-colonialism.

In *Neuromancer*, Gibson depicts a virtual universe created from data, which people can 'jack' into by means of neurologically wired decks. He famously describes this new space as:

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding ... (1995: 67).

This new kind of space, or 'nonspace of the mind', has been widely regarded as a fictional precursor of the technologies of virtual reality (VR) and the internet. These new technologies create similar — if less dramatic — 'constellations of data', which allow computer users to experience a 'consensual hallucination' bearing some resemblance to the vision outlined by Gibson. John Perry Barlow is thought to have been the first person to apply Gibson's term 'cyberspace' to existing computer technologies (see Jordan, 1999: 56), and the term is now widely used to describe the curiously spatial domain created by the internet and VR. It is worth bearing in mind,

however, that Gibson did not write his novel, as many have assumed, as a eulogy to computers and their potential. Rather, he emphasizes that *Neuromancer* is a novel about the present and, as Chris Chesher points out, that its most important and frequently overlooked function is 'social criticism of the processes of alienation in contemporary society' (1994: n. pag.). In this way, Gibson's concerns may be seen to overlap with those of Amitav Ghosh in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Both writers are not so much interested in making predictions about technology for their own sake, but in critiquing current developments towards globalization, corporate domination, social inequality, and governmental surveillance. I will now examine the ways in which the cyberpunk elements of *The Calcutta Chromosome* allow Ghosh to portray the inequalities of contemporary New York society.

The topoi of cyberpunk writing are described by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. as being '[m]icrobiology, data storage miniaturization, bionic prosthetics, artificial intelligence, particle physics, the world-shrinking global grid of communication/control systems' (1991: 187). Many of these themes are touched upon in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, but most obvious is Ghosh's exploration of the 'world-shrinking global grid of communication/control systems'. Antar works from home, as a 'virtual commuter', who had 'never set foot in [his company's] New York offices' (CC, 9), because all his work can be entirely mediated through electronic communication. He works under the watchful 'eye' of Ava, his anthropomorphized super-computer (the computer is equipped with a 'laser-guided surveillance camera' [CC, 7] that scrutinizes Antar's every move). Far from depicting the life of a 'virtual commuter' in the optimistic terms of proponents of globalization,¹⁰ Ghosh projects a repetitive and mundane existence of 'number-crunching' (CC, 9) for workers of the future. Antar is described as 'staring patiently at those endless inventories, wondering what it was all for' (CC, 5). The novel's dystopian depiction of computers, such as Ava, surveying our every move and reporting any lapses to our employers, is regarded by many as being an inevitable outcome of the new technologies. Mark Poster, for example, argues that the new communication networks 'constitute a Superpanopticon,

¹⁰ Manuel Castells, for example, optimistically suggests that the rise of information technologies will 'replace work that can be encoded in a programmable sequence and enhance work that requires analysis, decision, and reprogramming capabilities in real time at a level that only the human brain can master' (1996: 242).

a system of surveillance without walls, windows, towers or guards' (1990: 93).¹¹ Being 'without walls, windows, towers or guards', Poster's nightmare vision of computer surveillance is even more invasive than Bentham's original conception of the Panopticon. The society described by Ghosh is less regimented than Poster's (or Foucault's) depictions, however, as Antar and workers like him develop ways of escaping surveillance. A case in point is the gadget Antar is given that allows him to read pages from a book which are displayed on the wall: '[s]o long as he didn't move his head too much and hit the right key in a steady rhythm, Ava couldn't tell that she didn't exactly have his full attention' (CC, 4). It may not be much of a victory, but such devices that help workers to evade observation are shown to be popular amongst an underclass of people within the booming economy of New York depicted in the novel.

Castells has identified the rise of a new kind of city emerging from the information economy:

Megacities articulate the global economy, link up the informational networks, and concentrate the world's power. But they are also the depositories of all these segments of the population who fight to survive [...]. Yet what is most significant about megacities is that they are connected externally to global networks and to segments of their own countries, while internally disconnecting local populations that are either functionally unnecessary or socially disruptive (1996: 404).

This is an apt description which has many resonances when thinking about the New York sections of *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Ghosh focuses on the lives of the 'internally disconnect[ed] local populations' identified by Castells. He juxtaposes his futuristic society's impressive technology of laser surveillance, email, 'Simultaneous Visualization' headgear (CC, 307), and holographic international communication, with the dispossessed lives of immigrants working as cheap labour in New York. At the end of Antar's long working day, during which he uses advanced technology to scrutinize interminable inventories, he takes a walk into another world. It is his habit each evening to drink hot sweet Egyptian tea at a café in Penn Station, where other

¹¹ This is of course a reference to Jeremy Bentham's famous conception of an ideal prison, or Panopticon, which constrains the subject by giving him/her the feeling of being permanently watched. Foucault extends this model in *Discipline and Punish* to describe power as a set of institutions (schools, prisons, hospitals, asylums, and so on), which similarly inhibit activity by putting people on public display (1979: 200 – 209).

migrants from places such as Sudan, Guyana, and Bangladesh come to chat, watch videos of Hindi and Arabic films, and exchange tips about how to survive in the expensive and technocratic 'megacity' that New York has become. Through the precarious lives of these inhabitants of rent-controlled apartments, Ghosh makes an important criticism of the so-called information society that he depicts. Much of the rhetoric surrounding new information technologies such as the internet stresses their egalitarian qualities and the opportunities they raise for all individuals to leave a trace on history. The following statement by Thomas Frank (2001: 2) indicates the hyperbole surrounding the internet: '[t]he internet was democracy itself, the golden promise of interactivity descended unto earth to help usher us into a populist utopia'. *The Calcutta Chromosome* challenges this perception, questioning whether new technologies and the internet actually change anything for those in the lower strata of the social order. One of the novel's key debates is whether history continues to be slanted by those with the economic capacity to input the data, or whether there are genuinely revolutionary implications in this, the start of the so-called 'digital age'.

I would argue that, in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh shows that for those on the margins of society, the new technologies tend to reinforce rather than overturn existing social inequalities. This idea evokes Mike Holderness's important question, 'Who are the world's information-poor?', from his essay of the same name (1998). Holderness's query indicates that in this world of computerized data, information has become a commodity to be bought, sold, and exchanged in a new model of capitalism. The conclusion that both Holderness and Ghosh arrive at is that many people are impoverished by the new technologies. For example, Antar's friend Tara, a newly-arrived Indian immigrant, is precluded even from finding work as a babysitter because, as she says, '[t]he best jobs are posted on the Net [...]. And I can't afford a subscription. Come to think of it, I can't afford a computer and wouldn't know what to do with it if I could' (CC, 192). Tara's comments indicate that even within the world's most powerful city, there are great sections of the population that have been entirely left out of the 'information revolution', for whom the developments in technology have only been exclusionary. This accords with Castells' statement that

there are large areas of the world, and considerable segments of the population, switched off from the new technological system [...] Differential timing in access to the power of technology for people, countries, and regions is a critical

source of inequality in our society. The switched-off areas are culturally and spatially discontinuous: they are in the American inner cities or in the French *banlieues*, as much as in the shanty towns of Africa or in the deprived rural areas of China or India (1996: 34).

Ghosh's novel explores the lives of those people who are 'switched off' from technological innovations, whether it be third-world women such as Mangala or 'number-crunching' New York drudges like Antar. The 'switched-off' community is depicted as having the advantages of a strong sense of community and a system of support, symbolized in the 'bazaarish feel' of Antar's apartment block, with 'everyone dropping in on each other and sitting out on the stoop on summer evenings, while children played around the fire hydrant' (CC, 15). This liberal humanist vision of society offsets the mechanized aspects of a world in which computerized information has primacy.

However, new technologies such as the internet, it is suggested, also have some potential for radical politics. Several commentators have remarked on the paradoxical ability of cyberspace both to liberate and control. The internet's origins lie in a unique series of encounters between the US military and grassroots counterculture groups.¹² Perhaps because of these origins, the internet is regarded as having simultaneously subversive and conservative implications: e-commerce, anarchist literature, pornography, and chat rooms coexist in the decentred forum of cyberspace. This is reflected in the novel by the fact that, while computer technology is used by corporations for oppressive surveillance of employees, the same technology is appropriated for research into subaltern history by one such employee, Antar. Antar forces his computer to turn her attention away from his workaday life and puts her to use in tracing the hidden history of Ross's Indian laboratory workers' powerful contributions to his discovery.

Perhaps the most interesting features of the internet lie in its creation of a space in which national boundaries become irrelevant, and in the restructuring of narrative that occurs in cyberspace. The novel's form parallels the decentred, web-like structure of the internet: like the new technologies, in this novel Ghosh demonstrates an ability to move effortlessly between countries and time-scales. As John Thieme indicates, the

¹² See Jordan, 1999: 33 – 48; Castells, 1996: 6 – 7; Woolley, 1993: 1 – 37; 125.

novel's portrayal of the internet may be read on a symbolic as well as a literal level: '[i]n *The Calcutta Chromosome* the Web assumes much the same role as weaving in Ghosh's earlier work, functioning as a synecdoche for the interpenetration of cultures' (2000: 280). This 'interpenetration of cultures' is evident in the novel's structure. Most chapters start with a leap to a new temporal and spatial location, allowing unrelated stories to be juxtaposed. Over the course of the novel, connections between the stories become increasingly apparent. At the end of the novel, the interconnected stories dramatically converge. Ronald Ross's late nineteenth-century mission to find the malaria vector; Murugan's quest one hundred years later to trace Indians' contributions to the scientist's discovery; Antar's attempt in the early twenty-first century to find out what led to Murugan's disappearance; and Urmila's journalistic assignment to unearth secrets from the past of the famous writer, Phulboni, all come together in a highly improbable 'perfect moment of discovery' (CC, 306).

Arguably, the novel's dénouement is not entirely successful, as it is over-ambitious and confusingly attempts to tie together too many of the apparently unrelated plot strands. I contend that the novel's main structural success comes in Ghosh's use of scenic intercutting and flashbacks, which proves an effective technique for the portrayal of a network society. This cross-cutting of different scenes may of course be interpreted as a quasi-cinematic device. I would argue, however, that the vast distances in time and space that separate his characters, and the startling diversity of the subjects that Ghosh addresses (Gnosticism, malariology, globalization, future technologies) suggest that his writing techniques may be interpreted more helpfully as an attempt to represent the dislocation created by hypertext. 'Hypertext', in its new, technological sense, is a term used to describe the nature of writing on the internet. I have already indicated that in the work of Gérard Genette, it connotes a text that palimpsestuously transforms another text. Like Ghosh's novel, then, hypertext encourages the collapsing of boundaries between different texts, subjects, eras, discourses, and academic disciplines.

Hypertext, in its electronic sense, also complicates the notion of writer and reader, because the internet user plays a more active role than it is possible for readers of printed media to assume. The nature of hypertext is such that our methods of reading are challenged; if one has a particular interest in a certain topic, it is often

possible to click on a highlighted link and move to a new domain, making digression and disjointedness an inevitable feature of the medium. Hypertext in its literary sense (as described by Genette) also results in a challenge to the fixed relationship between writer and reader, by encouraging the reader actively to make links between the new text and the one onto which it is grafted.

Furthermore, as I will argue in the next section, the novel's status as a text situated on the border between fact and fiction encourages the reader to participate in the creative process. As we shall see, Ghosh playfully interweaves verifiable information about the disease of malaria, the biographies of several scientists, and the geography of Calcutta with outlandish fantasies about reincarnation, phantom stationmasters and occult groups. By doing so, he invites the reader to do some research into what constitutes fact and fiction in this novel and indeed to question the boundary between the two. The many correspondences that the novel has with detective fiction and the quest narrative also indicate that the reader should actively participate in unraveling and predicting the plot. Finally, the novel is deliberately left open-ended, with its increasingly complex plotment encouraging the reader to fill in the blanks and omissions that litter this text. This technique is made explicit when Murugan, speaking of the counter-scientific cult, argues that 'for them, writing "The End" to this story is the way they hope to trigger the quantum leap into the next' (CC, 218). Read metaphorically, this statement can be interpreted as a hope that the reader will make the 'quantum leap' to extend the story beyond the last page. Given the counter-scientific group's belief that to know something is to change it, it follows that no narrative can ever be complete, since to enunciate an idea is to bring about a mutation. It is no coincidence that this argument lends Ghosh's novel an atmosphere of constant motion and flux, much like that encouraged by hypertext in both its senses.

GHOSH'S HYPERTEXTUAL PORTRAYAL OF RONALD ROSS

Returning to Genette's definition of hypertextuality as a type of writing where a text B is grafted onto a text A in a manner that is not that of commentary, the most important instance of this in *The Calcutta Chromosome* is found in Ghosh's treatment

of Ronald Ross's life-story. Ghosh flamboyantly intermixes fact and fiction in *The Calcutta Chromosome* in order to recount an alternative life story of the malariologist Ronald Ross. He draws on Ross's *Memoirs* in order to create a historical frame for what is often a fantastic narrative, referring to real people with whom Ross came into contact, and to actual events. Ross's *Memoirs* was published in 1923, more than twenty years after his discovery, and is a product of his determination to be accorded full credit for the breakthrough and his jealousy lest others (Patrick Manson; Italian scientists such as Grassi) should be viewed as equal partners in the work. The *Memoirs* is a text which provides highly selective excerpts from primary sources — mostly letters that passed between Ross and Manson during the years 1895 – 99 and also some selections from Ross's diary — interspersed with Ross's later reflections on these. Most commentators agree that, despite their immense value for researchers, the *Memoirs* must be handled with wariness as a heavily doctored and biased account of Ross's malaria trials.¹³

Ghosh thus takes Ross's *Memoirs* as his starting point in writing *The Calcutta Chromosome*, but transforms Ross's self-aggrandizing narrative through parody, pastiche, and 'paraleptic continuation' (Genette, 1997: 292) in a textbook example of Genette's hypertextuality. In his previous novel, *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh searched through a wealth of archive material for the 'barely discernible traces' (*IAAL*, 17) that would allow him to reconstruct the story of Ben Yiju's Indian slave. In a similar way, in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, he scrutinizes the *Memoirs* for the infrequent references that Ross makes to his seemingly indispensable Indian patient and servant, Lutchman. This technique invites parallels with such revisionist texts as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* or *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in that Ghosh takes a minor character from the interstices of a text and pushes him centre stage. In the *Memoirs*, Lutchman, on whom Ross initially performs malaria trials and who later becomes the Englishman's servant, is not very prominent, and little detail is provided about his personality or behaviour as a servant.¹⁴ And yet, as Murugan observes, Ross must

¹³ Writing on their decision to publish the full correspondence between Ronald Ross and Patrick Manson, for example, W.F. Bynum and Caroline Overy indicate that in the *Memoirs* Ross's selection from among these letters is highly selective and can be misleading (Bynum and Overy, 1998: v).

¹⁴ References to Lutchman are made in Ronald Ross, *Memoirs: With a Full Account of the Great Malaria Problem and its Solution*, (1923), on pp. 157; 165; 240; 279; 320; 322; 360. The first reference concerns the trials made on Lutchman, who is laconically described as 'a

have found a rare quality in the young Indian man, as he keeps him in his service throughout his malaria investigations of 1895 – 98 (CC, 76), despite the fact that Lutchman was originally a patient rather than an employee. The extent of their attachment is hinted at towards the end of the *Memoirs*, when Ross in a passing comment reveals that he advertised to find Lutchman long after his return to England.¹⁵ The nature of the relationship that would cause Ross to try to find his servant more than ten years after his departure from India can only be guessed at, as the *Memoirs* is virtually silent on the subject.

The Calcutta Chromosome is based on Ghosh's usual meticulous research, and it is worth noting that all the quotations directly attributed to Ross in the novel are exact citations from the *Memoirs*. This includes a rather shocking moment when Ross asks Manson to keep his experiments on Lutchman secret: he writes, '[d]on't for heaven's sake mention at the B[ritish] M[edical] Association that Lutchman is a dhooley-bearer [...]. To give a Government servant fever would be a crime!' (Ross, 1923: 165; quoted in CC, 73). Ross does not fear censure for his experiments on Lutchman on humanitarian but legal grounds. As W.F. Bynum and Caroline Overy point out (1998: xiii), the fact that Ross 'worked before the requirement of informed consent, and in a colonial setting' allowed him to encourage his mostly Indian subjects to take part in his experiments, despite their lack of knowledge about the risks involved.¹⁶ Ross's highhanded treatment of his Indian patients and servants suggests one reason why Ghosh might have felt compelled to write *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Ghosh reads

native' by Ross. He is given water with mosquito dust in it and his condition is monitored; this passage is quoted on p. 73 of *The Calcutta Chromosome*. On p. 165 is the comment that he is a dhooley-bearer, which is also cited on p. 73 of the novel (see my discussion in the body of this thesis, p. 222). He is not mentioned again until p. 240, when Ross describes his move from Secunderabad: 'I left Secunderabad [...] with the smallest possible "kit" — but with my microscope and my faithful Lutchman', a passage which is slightly misquoted on p. 76 of *The Calcutta Chromosome*. On p. 279 of the *Memoirs* he is mentioned in passing as accompanying Ross on another move; likewise pp. 320 and 322. Finally, on p. 360 Ross refers to his departure from India and his attempt to find Lutchman through an advertisement years later (see note 15, below). After that he disappears from the narrative.

¹⁵ 'On the quay we said good-bye to our faithful servants, Lutchman and Berlisi. We never heard of them again, though I advertised for the former in 1911' (Ross, 1923: 360).

¹⁶ This point is further underlined by Gordon Harrison's pointed comment (1978: 88) that Ross was unable to experiment on European patients because 'they expected treatment, not experimentation, "and the papers might talk"', in contrast to Indian patients, in whom the papers presumably had less interest, who were bribed by a "constant flow of backsheesh" to risk their lives for Ross's experiments.

against the grain of Ross's self-righteous account of his work given in the *Memoirs*. In an interview he states, 'it was very interesting to read Ross, as most of the connections (he made) came from his servants, his household' (Silva and Tickell, 1997: 176). The silences and omissions of the *Memoirs*, particularly Ross's refusal to supply any detail about his Indian laboratory workers, suggest fascinating possibilities, and Ghosh constructs a story out of these silences.¹⁷

Many historians of science have been puzzled by the success of Ross's research despite his having shown little early promise in his medical studies and, as Bynum and Overy indicate, despite being 'badly equipped for the task he had set himself'.¹⁸ They substantiate this last point by arguing that he had little knowledge of mosquitoes and was unaware of the latest techniques in malaria research.¹⁹ In the novel, Ghosh supplies a possible explanation for his success that has been overlooked by Western historians. Behind all his fantastical forays into spiritualism, Gnosticism, and reincarnation, Ghosh's main point in this novel is to suggest that Ross was capable of making his name in India only because he drew on the indigenous knowledge he picked up there.

This suggestion can be supported by Ross's own accounts of the malaria quest, in spite of all his efforts to present himself as a lone pioneer of colonial medical research. There are several intriguing moments in the *Memoirs* when it is possible to divine that laboratory assistants played a more significant part in the malaria work than Ross would like to admit. Perhaps the most telling example comes in Ross's account of the circumstances surrounding the crucial discovery that the mosquito

¹⁷ Interestingly, Ghosh is not the first Indian fiction writer to have examined Ross's reputation. In Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993: 493), the characters Lata and Amit visit the Presidency General Hospital. Like Ghosh's Murugan, they are struck by the poem written on the Ronald Ross memorial plaque, and Amit comments, "he sent his servant to get some mosquitoes, then got the mosquitoes to bite him — his servant, that is — and when he got malaria soon afterwards, Ross realized that it was mosquitoes that caused it. O million-murdering death". This flippant simplification of Ross's discovery nonetheless indicates that the idea that Ross exploited his indigenous laboratory workers as part of his malarialogical research is widespread among Bengali intellectuals.

¹⁸ Bynum and Overy, 1998: xii. Their observation echoes Ross's own admission that he 'went forth very badly equipped for the fray' (1923: 129).

¹⁹ 'He knew little about mosquitoes [...]; he had never heard of Romanowsky's stain; and he had to teach himself how to dissect the insects' (Bynum and Overy, 1998: xii).

Anopheles is the carrier of human malaria:

Now, as if in answer, some Angel of Fate must have met one of my three 'mosquito-men' in his leisurely perambulations and must have put into his hand a bottle of mosquito larvæ, some of which I saw at once were of a type different from the usual *Culex* and *Stegomyia* larvæ. Next morning, the 16 August, when I went again to hospital after breakfast, the Hospital Assistant (I regret I have forgotten his name) pointed out a small mosquito seated on the wall with its tail *sticking outwards* [...]. I dissected it at once and found nothing unusual; but while I was doing so — I remember the details well — the worthy Hospital Assistant ran in to say that there were [*sic*] a number of mosquitoes of the same class which had hatched out in the bottle that my men had brought me yesterday. Sure enough there they were: about a dozen big brown fellows, with fine tapered bodies and spotted wings, hungrily trying to escape through the gauze covering of the flask which the Angel of Fate had given to my humble retainer! — dappled-winged mosquitoes [...] (1923: 221 – 22).

In this description, which is also reproduced in part on p. 77 of the novel, Ross fails to name the man who made the observation that the 'dappled-winged' mosquito was a different species. Apart from a patronizing reference to 'the worthy Hospital Assistant', he vaguely reserves his gratitude for a mysterious 'Angel of Fate'. I will come back to the significance of Ross's use of religious imagery later in this chapter. For now, Murugan's terse comment on Ross's unwillingness to credit his assistant with any part in the discovery will suffice: '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' (CC, 77). Ross assumes a tone of modesty while at the same time self-consciously promoting himself. Later, he puts the discovery down entirely to his own skill conjoined with a little luck, erasing his assistant's important contributions from the record entirely: '[b]y an extremely lucky observation I had now discovered [that] [...] [t]he mosquito was the *Anopheles*' (1923: 225; emphasis mine). He concludes by first emphasizing the importance of his individual discovery, writing '[a]ll the work on the subject which has been done since then [...] has been mere child's play which anyone could do after the clue was once obtained' (1923: 225 – 26), going on to explain why he feels that he alone was capable of making the discovery:

I am sure that none of them [his rival scientists] would ever have embarked on so vast and stormy a sea, would ever have been the Columbus of so wild an adventure, would ever have shown — I will not say the patience, the passion, and the poetry — but the madness required to find that uncharted treasure island! Really they have forgotten what was their true vocation — to stay at home and draw the maps after the event, to colour them red, blue, and yellow, to put their own names to the continents and islands, and to draw their salaries — a much more pleasant occupation (1923: 227).

The language of the passage above explicitly equates scientific discovery with exploration and colonization. This is an apt comparison, although not necessarily resonating with the positive connotations of individualism, bravery, and pioneer spirit that Ross intends. Ross's narrative obfuscates the part that local knowledge played in his discovery, projecting a one-directional process of discovery, when in fact cross-cultural interaction created the possibility of a breakthrough. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Murugan reverses his claim to lone discovery, suggesting instead that the servant Lutchman — here depicted as a leader of the 'counter-scientific' cult — led Ross to his achievement by placing the clues in his path. In this ironic subversion of Ross's narrative, it is the Western scientist who is portrayed as a pawn, blindly unaware of the forces that precipitate his victory: "Eureka," he says to his diary, "the problem is solved." "Whew!" says Lutchman, skimming the sweat off his face. "Thought he'd never get it." (CC, 77). Throughout the novel, Ghosh accords far greater agency to Ross's laboratory assistants than the great man — who dismissively regarded Indians as 'swarming and dying millions' (Ross, 1923: 239) — would ever have countenanced.

Most scholars interested in Ross have remarked on his increasingly arrogant sense of his scientific worth and his lack of tolerance towards, and suspicion of, other scientists (which culminated in the breakdown of his friendship with Manson in later life).²⁰ Few, however, have paid much attention to Ross's patrician and condescending attitude towards the 'natives' of the country in which he worked, and Ghosh sets out to fill this lacuna. In the novel, then, Lutchman is given a voice he is denied in the *Memoirs* and, as he did with the slave Bomma in *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh imaginatively recreates Lutchman's possible role.

Ross's mainstream science is portrayed as being manipulated by Lutchman, the fictional Mangala, and their devotees. The 'science' of the mysterious Indian cult incorporates religious ritual and sacrifice into more straightforward scientific practices. Ghosh uses Mangala, Lutchman, and the counter-science group to suggest that a radical alternative to the hegemony of Western scientific knowledge is

²⁰ See, for example, Bynum and Overy, 1998: vi; Nye and Gibson, 1997: 54; Worboys, 1988.

possible.²¹ The implication is that this challenge will only be made if the knowledge and beliefs of third-world countries, such as India, are fused with scientific (and pseudoscientific) concepts from the West. Ghosh here draws upon the work of recent historians of science who suggest that Western science was and is being reinterpreted and remade in India, when Indian scientific enthusiasts splice their own cultural assumptions with Western scientific tenets. David Arnold indicates that the putatively rigid borders between religious 'tradition' and scientific 'modernity' were actually porous for many middle-class Indians who began to turn to Western science from the late eighteenth century onwards:

The extent to which members of the old intelligentsia brought to their 'modern' avocations skills, insights and inspiration derived from 'traditional' backgrounds (rather than simply trading in their intellectual inheritance to acquire new Western knowledge) is an intriguing issue but one that historians have, as yet, scarcely begun to investigate (2000: 8).

It may be argued that, despite its parodic and tongue-in-cheek elements, *The Calcutta Chromosome* is an attempt to represent in fiction this interactive model for science's reception in the colonial context of India. Arnold, citing Raina and Habib, goes on to write:

Scientific knowledge and the ideology of science [...] can be 'actively redefined in the milieu of a recipient culture'. The receiving society, far from being supine, 'subverts, contaminates, and reorganises the ideology of science as introduced by Europe' (2000: 13).

He adds the corollary that, prior to Independence, the extent to which Western science could be 'actively redefined' was constrained 'both by the political and financial control exercised by the colonial regime and by the influence and authority of the international scientific community'. It is possible to interpret Ghosh's novel as a fantastical account of the extent to which Western science might have been subverted, contaminated, and reorganized if the 'political and financial control exerted by the colonial regime' had been less restrictive.

²¹ In this context, the meaning of Mangala's name has significance. The word 'Mangala' means the planet Mars, with which the god of war, Karttikeya, is associated (perhaps significantly, this god is also known as Murugan in south India). These connotations indicate that Mangala's subversive scientific practices represent aggressive resistance to Western scientific techniques.

I would now like to suggest that that the alleged benefits of Western medical knowledge sometimes seem like a fiction in a third-world country such as India, where diseases such as malaria are still endemic. Ross, who was a would-be writer as well as an epidemiologist, wrote a risibly pompous poem about the significance of his discovery of the malaria vector. This poem is inscribed on a memorial stone in a wall of the main hospital in Calcutta, and in the novel Murugan visits the stone and is amazed by the sanguinity of Ross's poem. It is worth emphasizing that this poem is not a creation of Ghosh's and that his description of Murugan's discovery of the Ronald Ross memorial plaque draws on an entirely accurate location at Presidency General Hospital in Calcutta (see Plates 4 – 7).²² Once again the boundaries between facts and fiction are blurred. The poem includes the lines:

‘I know this little thing
A myriad men will save.
O death where is thy sting?
Thy victory O grave?’ (CC, 40).

For all the humanist sentiments of this stanza, Ross was motivated as much by the desire for wealth and fame as by altruism in his pursuit of the malaria vector. Soon after his alleged victory over the grave, he moved to Liverpool, where he hoped to negotiate with entrepreneurs who ‘would not be slow to learn the great advantages which my methods of malaria prevention would confer... on their plantations, factories and trade’ (quoted in Worboys, 1988: 24). This quotation is an instance of the way in

²² During time spent in Calcutta in 1999, I went on a quest of my own to find out if the Ronald Ross memorial wall really exists. I used Ghosh's book as an alternative travel guide, and its descriptions provided perfectly accurate information on getting to the wall (much as the meticulous descriptions in *The Shadow Lines* can be used to navigate through the Brick Lane area of London). After much hunting I discovered the memorial plaque on the perimeter wall of the Presidency General Hospital. Please refer to Plate 4 for a photograph of the Ronald Ross memorial wall; Plates 5 and 6 for the plaques that now mark Ronald Ross's laboratory (described CC, 198); and Plate 7 for a photograph of the hospital itself. Interestingly, while at the P.G. Hospital I managed to procure a copy of a special issue of their journal, *The P.G. Bulletin*, commemorating Ross's discovery. The bulletin mentions Ghosh's novel and goes on to decry the appallingly delapidated state of the buildings in which Ross made his discovery:

In 1927, Ross had visited Calcutta for the last time. A fine gate was built at the SSKM Hospital to commemorate his visit. Till the sixties the gate had been used for the entry of VIPs. Today, a PWD tank built just behind the gate blocks the way. Beside the PWD tank is the foundation stone of a Bicentenary Hall laid by the Governor in 1970, covered by crow shit. A telling tribute to the state of medical research in this part of the country (Sen, 1998: 6).

which advances in tropical medicine at the turn of the century were often inextricably linked with colonial exploitation, profit, and trade.

Advances in medicine also secured great distinction for the scientist who made a discovery and, by association, his nation. The scramble to achieve medical breakthroughs became a point of national pride analogous to the arms race or the competitiveness surrounding polar exploration in the early twentieth century. In the novel, Murugan expresses this well in the following statement:

The mid-nineteenth century was when the scientific community began to wake up to malaria. Remember this was the century when old Mother Europe was settling all the Last Unknowns: Africa, Asia, Australia, even uncolonized parts of herself. Forests, deserts, oceans, warlike natives — that stuff's easy to deal with when you've got dynamite and the Gatling gun; chicken-feed compared to malaria. [...] Governments began to pour money into malaria research — in France, in Italy, in the US, everywhere except England (CC, 55).

As this quotation indicates, Britain was surprisingly slow to recognize the potential of tropical medicine as a source of prestige and financial gain. To give Ross his due, David Arnold has shown that, like many other aspiring colonial doctors, he had to struggle hard in order to overcome the indifference and even outright opposition of the Indian Medical Service to his research efforts (2000: 141 – 42).²³ In his *Memoirs*, Ross writes with impatience on the attitude of his superiors towards his work: 'the Indian Government and especially the Medical Services are utterly ignorant of the importance of this kind of work' (1923: 168). Even though *The Calcutta Chromosome* often gives a negative depiction of Ross's research efforts, there is a moment when the battles he had to fight against the apathy of the colonial authorities are recognized. Murugan grudgingly acknowledges, 'when it came to malaria the

²³ Ross's mentor, Patrick Manson, wrote to the India Office to complain about the bureaucratic obstacles hindering Ross's research. Ross quotes Manson's outcry in his *Memoirs* (1923: 216 – 17):

To our national shame be it said that few, very few of the wonderful advances in the science of the healing art which have signalised recent years have been made by our countrymen. This is particularly apparent in the matter of tropical diseases in which we should, in virtue of our exceptional opportunities, be *facile princeps*. But even in tropical diseases Frenchmen, Italians, Germans, Americans, and even Japanese are shooting ahead of us.

Note the surprise implied by the phrase 'even Japanese' that an Asian nation could outperform the British in malaria research.

Plate 4

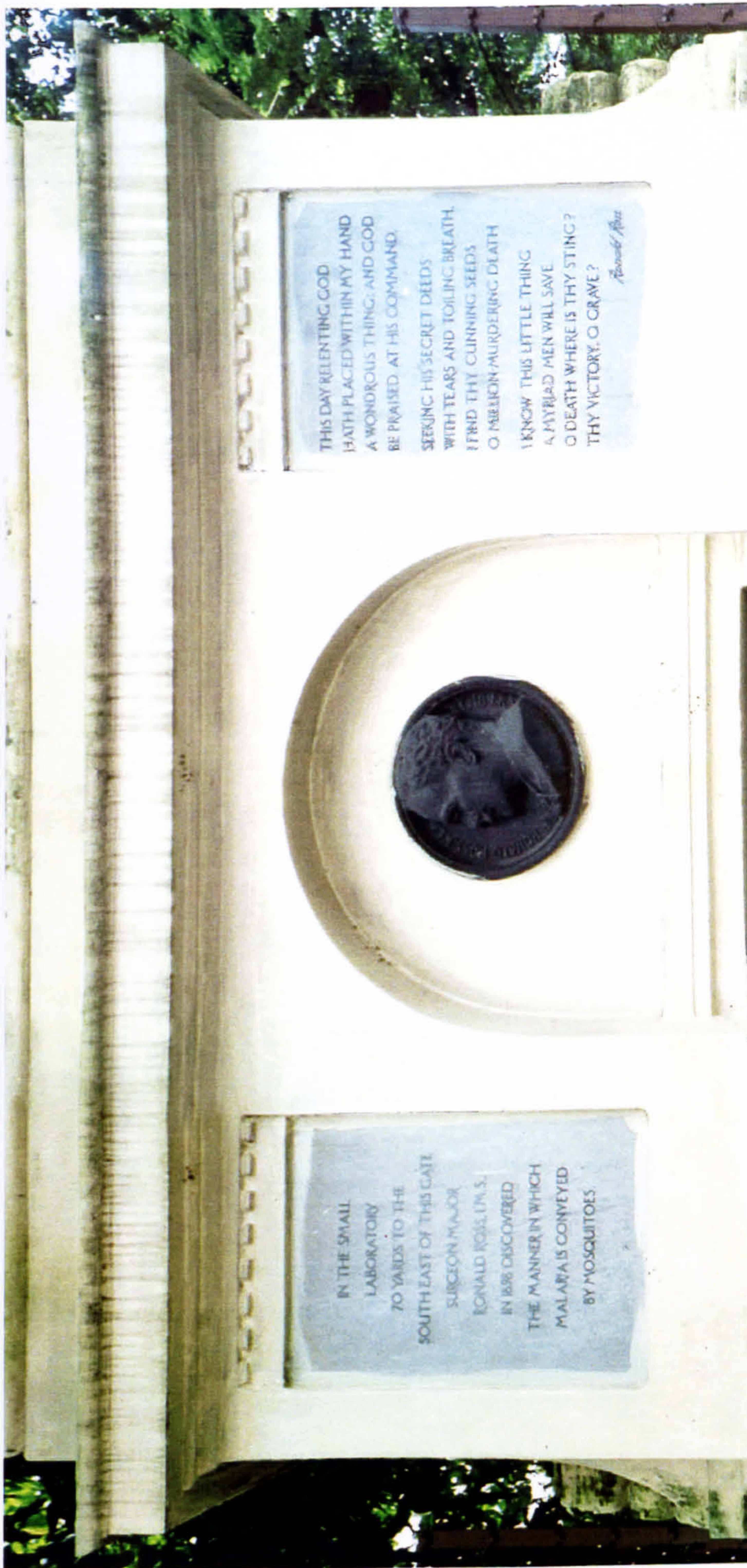


Plate 4. The Ronald Ross Memorial Wall, Presidency Hospital, Calcutta. Photograph by the author.

Plate 5



Plate 5. Plaque marking the Ronald Ross building. Photograph by the author.

Plate 6



Plate 6. Plaque marking Ross's laboratory. Photograph by the author.

Plate 7



Plate 7. The Presidency General (P.G.) Hospital, Calcutta. Photograph by the author.

British were non-starters: the front-line work was being done in France and the French colonies, Germany, Italy, Russia, America — anywhere but where the Brits were. But you think Ross cared? You've got to hand it to the guy, he had balls' (CC, 56).

Perhaps the sharpest irony about Ross's work is that, despite the confident tone of his poem and the undoubted difference his discovery did make, his hope to eradicate malaria fatalities by his discovery of the disease's carrier has in the long term proved to be something of a fiction. In the novel, the initial optimism and subsequent disappointment that followed Ross's discovery are alluded to the very first time the work of the British scientist is introduced: '[a]t the time it had been widely assumed that this epochal discovery would lead to the eradication of what was possibly the world's oldest and most widespread disease: an expectation, alas, that had been sadly belied' (CC, 35). Roy Porter has shown that in spite of Ross's discovery and other advances in medical knowledge, malaria is becoming ever more virulent in third-world countries. This is partly because mosquitoes are mutating and developing immunity to anti-malarial drugs, and partly because poor nations cannot afford to address sanitary problems sufficiently.²⁴ To move back to the narrative, Murugan indicates the disappointing outcome of Ross's discovery in his bitter response to the poem:

Half stunned I look around
 And see a land of death —
 Dead bones that walk the ground
 And dead bones underneath;

 A race of wretches caught,
 Between the palms of need
 And rubbed to utter naught,
 The chaff of human seed (CC, 41).

²⁴ Porter writes that in 1957 the World Health Organization announced that the eradication of malaria would be an attainable goal within an optimistic six years. The pesticide DDT and the drug chloroquine were heralded as potential breakthroughs and the US Congress poured vast sums of money into their use worldwide. Hopes were short-lived, however, due to the unanticipated ecological damage that DDT caused and, even more worryingly, the capacity of the lethal plasmodium to mutate and develop resistance to drugs. When the US Congress's attempt to eradicate malaria by the hoped-for date of 1963 proved unsuccessful, funds were stopped. From then on cases of malaria in India climbed steadily and alarmingly from the 1961 low point of less than 100,000 cases to an estimated six million cases in 1977. Porter concludes this part of his study with the words: '[g]lobally, as wonderdrugs produced superbugs, there were three times as many cases of malaria in the 1990s as there had been in 1961' (1997: 472).

In this poetic riposte, Murugan draws attention to the disparity between the rhetoric surrounding Western medicine and its actual benefits (or otherwise) in the third world.

At this juncture it is also important to realize that the way in which mosquitoes have adapted and become 'superbugs', immune to conventional anti-malarial antibiotics — and, by extension, the way in which the malaria bug itself mutates at different points in its life-cycle — bears comparison with the process of colonialism itself. Like the protozoan parasite that mutates and changes form, colonialism has over time developed into a more insidious and almost unrecognizable neo-colonialism. This process is traced in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, in which the overt colonial domination of Ross's day is shown to have been transformed into a more subtle neo-colonialism pioneered by technologically-advanced multinationals such as the International Water Council. Like the disease of malaria itself, which may lie dormant in its victim for years before resurging, colonialism is a very difficult phenomenon to get rid of, and its knock-on effects continue long after the initial devastation. The language surrounding the disease of malaria lends itself easily to analogy with colonialism, as its vocabulary is peppered with references to 'hosts' and 'parasites'. Manson and Ross agree that 'germs are selfish brutes' (Manson, quoted in Ross, 1923: 154), but seem not to realize the irony of their own selfish role in India's continued subjugation. According to his biographers, Ross recognized that 'the debilitating effect of chronic malaria on a population could undermine the vigour and survival power of a whole nation' (Nye and Gibson, 1997: 22), but he would not have seen that the after-effects of colonialism might have an equally debilitating impact. Furthermore, the analogy of the mutation of the malaria parasite may also be extended to the act of story-telling, which is another important theme of the novel. I shall return to this point that narratives change and mutate in their transmissions through time and different tellers in a later section.

The deleterious effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism on public health are also indicated in research by Roy Porter and others which suggests that malaria can only be prevented by improving sanitation. This explains why economically strong countries such as Italy and Australia have been able to eliminate malaria almost entirely, whereas such countries as India, which cannot afford to address sanitary

problems adequately, have actually witnessed a dramatic upsurge in deaths from malaria since Ross's discovery. Porter demonstrates that attempts to find a way of eradicating mosquitoes (such as the environmentally damaging drug DDT) have proved unsuccessful in the long term. He writes, 'the "commando" approach — going in and striking the vectors with disease-specific magic bullets — fails to deal with the deep problems and is at best a temporary expedient' (1997: 487).

Many medical researchers, including Ross's mentor Patrick Manson, place too much faith in dramatic *coups de microscope* and 'wonderdrugs', shunning the less glamorous but crucial measures of sanitation and poverty prevention that must be implemented to eradicate disease. Despite the tone of Ross's poem, which suggests a premature and self-satisfied belief in the imminent extirpation of malaria due to his discovery alone, for the sake of even-handedness it is important to emphasize that in reality Ross was a keen proponent of sanitation. He was perhaps more sensitive to the exigencies of public health in India than might be assumed by a reading of *The Calcutta Chromosome* alone. According to a recent biography, he was 'acerbic in his denunciation of governmental myopia and inertia in the devoting of adequate resources to combat malaria' (Nye and Gibson, 1997: 33). In his *Memoirs*, he writes, in typically melodramatic prose:

Great is Sanitation — the greatest work, except discovery, I think, that a man can do. Here is a city seething with filth and disease. What is the use of preaching high moralities, philosophies, policies, and arts to people who dwell in these appalling slums — sometimes whole families of them crowded into one cell, mixed with cattle, vermin, and ordure? Your job, Sanitation, is plain! You must wipe away those slums, that filth, these diseases (1923: 186).

Ross's imperialist attitudes are manifest here in the comparison he again makes between his scientific work and explorers' discoveries, and in his stereotypical characterization of Indian cities as 'seething with filth and disease'. He apostrophizes a deified 'Sanitation', which serves to elevate his scientific work almost to the realm of the sacred. His emphasis on the practical application of scientific discoveries, however, shows foresight. It may be inferred that even while Ross was writing his confident poem on the possibility of eradicating at one stroke 'million-murdering death', he was nonetheless aware that this would not be possible without persistent attention to public health and hygiene. Later in the *Memoirs* he writes, '[t]o me it always seemed that the practical application is the summit of all biological research. I

did not undertake this work on malaria in the interests of zoology, but in the interests of practical sanitation' (1923: 193).

The Calcutta Chromosome's challenge to the rhetoric surrounding specific medical 'advances', such as Ross's discovery, is extended to the discourses of science in general. In characteristic fashion, Ghosh introduces his argument about science, fiction, religion, and pseudoscience in India with an interrogation of the artificial boundaries that divide them. Although on first appearance Mangala's spiritualist brand of science could not seem further removed from the historical event of Ross's discovery of the malaria vector, Ghosh's narrative supports the connection. Murugan recounts the true story of a scientist called Julius Wagner-Jauregg, who, like Ross, is part of science's mainstream. In 1927 he won the Nobel Prize for his discovery that the malaria virus could be used to combat the symptoms of syphilis. Out of nearly three thousand sufferers treated with induced malaria, a fifth were cured of their syphilitic madness (see Harrison, 1978: 111). The use of malaria to treat syphilis is significant because its efficacy is a mystery even to its practitioners; as Murugan argues, 'no one really knows how the Wagner-Jauregg treatment worked' (CC, 247).

Our usual assumptions about empiricism in science are undermined by Murugan's contention that Wagner-Jauregg's discovery was the result of a lucky and uninformed guess. In typically colourful language, Murugan argues that Wagner-Jauregg's treatment

was a scientific scandal and medicine was almost grateful to turn its back on it once antibiotics came along. Old Julius didn't worry too much about how it worked either. He was no biologist, remember: he was a clinician and a psychologist. He thought the process worked by raising the patient's body temperature. It didn't seem to bother him that no other fever had the same effect (CC, 247).

This quotation indicates that science, and medical science in particular, consists of many hypotheses or findings that are not fully proven or understood. Furthermore, Murugan describes the treatment as a 'scientific scandal', which was jettisoned as soon as antibiotics came into widespread use. This is confirmed when Murugan indicates the strange consequences of Wagner-Jauregg's discovery: 'until antibiotics, the Wagner-Jauregg process was pretty much a standard treatment: every major VD hospital had its little incubating room where it grew a flock of anopheles. Think about

it: hospitals cultivating disease!’(CC, 247). Once again, this indicates that what one generation considers to be scientifically viable may be deemed deviant by the next.²⁵

The reverse of this statement may also be true when a discredited theory is resurrected at a later historical moment, as Murugan points out in the case of the French scientist Alphonse Laveran. In 1880, Laveran formed his hypothesis that the malaria vector is a protozoan parasite, but this was regarded sceptically by most leading scientists at the time who supported the theory that it was bacteria: ‘[n]o one buys Laveran’s protozoan critter: it’s like he said he found the yeti’ (CC, 69). Only after fifteen years was his theory revived and, as Murugan points out, proof of Laveran’s theory was surprising to most scientists in the field:

Farley had left for India fully confident that Laveran’s theory was headed for medicine’s vast graveyard of discredited speculations: his astonishment at the news of its disinterment could not have been greater (CC, 136).

This reference to the ‘graveyard of discredited speculations’ suggests that medical science is a far more provisional discipline than its apologists would like to admit. The metaphor of the death and resurrection of scientific theories indicates that scientific knowledge is rarely definitive, but that ideas are constantly being challenged, rejected, and sometimes rediscovered. The metaphor is also significant in that it recalls Mangala’s attempt to manipulate mainstream science to facilitate literal reincarnation, or ‘interpersonal transference’ (CC, 106).

If medical science is disposed towards guesswork and bound by cultural limitations, then so are its practitioners, and in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh represents Ronald Ross as a prejudiced and intellectually limited colonial doctor. Perhaps irked by Ross’s racist assumption that Indians were ‘sunk in superstitions, deficient in courage and rectitude’ (quoted in Nye and Gibson, 1997: 44), Ghosh portrays the Nobel Prize winner as a lucky bumbler. This is a controversial depiction of a scientist who has commonly been perceived by historians of science as ‘an isolated investigator, making his discovery of the mosquito borne transmission of

²⁵ Here, the fact that another of Wagner-Jauregg’s scientific interests was eugenicism, and that towards the end of his life he became a member of the Nazi party, further illustrates the fact that an examination of the history of science reveals many embarrassing tendencies. As I argued in Chapter One in relation to scientific and pseudo-scientific investigations into ‘race’, science cannot easily be separated from political motivations.

malaria in spite of the obstructions of the Raj and in circumstances uncondusive to experimental work' (Worboys, 1988: 23). Many historians of science have remarked on Ross's patience and open-minded approach to science. Harrison, for example, writes:

He had, like all first-rate scientists, a deep unreasoned respect for facts that no preconception or bias or will to believe could thrust aside. As easily misled as other men by appearances and plausibilities, he nevertheless took pains while following wrong trails to record a tiny fact that was not on his way and did not accord with the currently plausible (1978: 67).

In contrast, the impression we get from Ross's own memoirs is that he worked as much with faith and passion as with rational deduction. Ross frequently brings religious imagery and allusions into his descriptions of scientific procedure; examples we have already examined include his invocations to an Angel of Fate and to a deified Sanitation. What Ross's references to faith indicate is that his science rests on conviction as much as on reasoning. This is underscored when he writes, '[t]he whole difficulty has been, not to find the mosquito phase of the parasite, but to find the mosquito. In short it is a conquest not of observation, but of faith. Faith carried us through all the years of negative attempts with brindled and grey mosquitoes. [...] The road closes here [many] would have cried. But we looked up and saw the finger of *theory* still pointing the same way' (Ross, 1923: 285 – 86). The reference to looking up and seeing a metaphorical finger directing scientific work is very far from our usual perceptions of scientists as being motivated by logic and deduction alone.

Ross did much to promote the interpretation of himself as an embattled 'isolated investigator', writing in his *Memoirs*, 'I still think that no other method but mine would have solved the problem' (1923: 226). Interestingly, he also tried to steer the course of his own posthumous reputation as a lone genius by keeping a tight control over those documents that would be preserved for posterity. Murugan recognizes this when he claims that Ross 'wants everyone to know the story like he's going to tell it; he's not about to leave any of it up to grabs, not a single minute if he can help it. He's figured on a guy like me coming along some day and I'm happy to oblige' (CC, 51). This assessment is confirmed by Nye and Gibson's observation:

One thing that stands out in assessing Ross' view of his own self worth was the fact that he kept everything. He kept letters sent to him, *apart from family ones*, and whenever he could he got back his own letters from people. He kept

cuttings, telegrams, copies of articles and so on. The Ross Archives, distributed between London and Glasgow, comprise about 30,000 catalogued items, all of which Ross had carefully saved for posterity (1997: 280, my emphasis).²⁶

Ross's obsessive collection of documentary evidence about himself, and his choice of what would be retained and what omitted for posterity has parallels with the novel's portrayal of the International Water Council, which keeps an astonishing amount of its own documentation and trivia in order to 'load the dirt with their own meanings' (CC, 7). As with the Water Council, Ross's manipulation of his own archive has circumscribed the way in which he has been received by history. Only recently has Ross's portrayal of himself as a lone genius been challenged substantially by historians of science, and this challenge has been achieved by a reading of the omissions in Ross's account. Nye and Gibson, for example, argue that 'if Ross had not worked out the role of the mosquito in transmitting the malarial parasites someone else would have done so very soon afterwards' (1997: 279), as an Italian team were hard on his tail in the race to make the discovery. Ross was also emphatically not an 'isolated investigator', and would arguably never have come close to a breakthrough without the help and inspiration of Patrick Manson.

Ghosh, however, questions the myth of 'the lone genius [who] streaks across the field and runs away with the World Cup' (CC, 57) from a different angle. Through Murugan's narrative, he argues that Ross only realizes that the sole carrier of the malaria virus is the anopheles (dapple-winged) species of mosquito after observations made by his mysterious 'dhooley-bearer', Lutchman. Ross never questions whether his supposedly uneducated servant could have hit upon such a sophisticated theorem alone, simply accepting the explanation he is given that 'Lutchman hit upon this bright idea while gambolling in the hills with happy natives' (CC, 78). This lack of curiosity and unwillingness to credit Indians with any intellectual agency is typical of Ross, according to the novel:

²⁶ The quotation indicates in passing Ross's decision to exclude family letters from the archive. The historian of science Gordon Harrison has made more of this, commenting that Ross's wife was entirely written out of his own history: 'Ross has hidden his wife and family almost completely from history with a reticence unusual even in a Victorian officer of the British Army [...] In his published memoirs and in his surviving papers Rosa Bloxam is utterly silent and undefined' (1978: 20).

That's Ronnie and the other guys are the chorus line, or so Ronnie thinks anyway. '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 (CC, 67).

Ross's alleged lack of interest in anything other than the malaria parasite (see also CC, 72, 75) is established to allow Ghosh to posit a fictional theory that Ross's breakthrough was entirely manipulated by his secretive laboratory assistants. This is an exaggerated version of what the Subaltern Studies historian Gyan Prakash argues (1996; 1999): non-Western countries do have agency when it comes to science, and science has been formed in a two-directional process. As Phil Baker puts it in his review of *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 'the colonial master is manipulated by the servants he hardly notices, and Ghosh plays off Western discourses of knowledge against a priestess's "counter-science" of silence' (1996: 23).

NETWORKS OF STORIES

At the start of this chapter I suggested that *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a novel based, above all, on the image of the network. Networks are a conspicuous feature of the novel, with systems of global commerce and international communications a ubiquitous presence. Furthermore, it is clear that the novel itself is not autonomous, but forms part of a complex lattice of texts and genres which are evoked throughout the novel. I have attempted to navigate some of the way through this labyrinth of references, looking, for instance, at Ghosh's rewriting of cyberpunk, both American and Indian science fiction, and the history portrayed in the autobiographical *Memoirs* of Ronald Ross. I would now like to turn to a section of the novel, which I find particularly emblematic of Ghosh's ambitious intertextual project. This is the passage in which the writer Phulboni has a strange experience at Renupur station (CC, 255 – 82). I choose this passage because it is a good example of Genette's 'architextuality', in that it is a tissue of references involving 'a relationship that is completely silent' (Genette, 1997: 4). It is the job of the critic to try to break the silence and make sense of the many references, both generic and specific, that are intended in the Phulboni narrative.

This complex story concerns the trip Phulboni makes as a young man to the remote village of Renupur, as part of an assignment commissioned by the British cosmetics company for which he works. When he reaches Renupur station, he is surprised to find it deserted and 'little more than a signboard and a platform attached to a siding' (CC, 257). The only person to be found there is the stationmaster, a comic character who tells stories about the state of his 'dung'. Because of monsoon flooding, Phulboni elects to spend the night in the signalroom, although he meets strong opposition from the stationmaster, who tells him it isn't safe. Ignoring the stationmaster's insistence that he spend the night at his home, Phulboni makes himself comfortable in the signalroom. Almost immediately he observes some strange occurrences: he finds a handprint on the mat which is missing a thumb; his possessions are flung about, seemingly by some mischievous spirit; and the signal lantern he uses as a light keeps being switched off. He wakes in the night to find the lantern gone altogether, and in the distance sees a bobbing red light, which he follows onto the railway track. Suddenly, an unscheduled train races into the siding he is on, and Phulboni only narrowly avoids being killed. As it passes, he hears an eerie scream of 'Laakhan!', but soon afterwards Phulboni can find no evidence that a train has ever passed that way, as the siding is still rusty and overgrown with weeds. He then sees the lantern once more, but the person carrying it is now heading towards him, so he turns and runs, only just escaping to the signalroom in time. He once again hears a cry of 'Laakhan', and fires his gun in the direction of the lantern before passing out. He wakes up to find himself outside in the company of the stationmaster, who tells him that the lantern has not been disturbed all night.

Just then, Phulboni wakes up properly and discovers himself to be on the railway track with a train coming. He manages to hurl himself out of the way just in time, and this time the train is 'all too real' (CC, 279). It grinds to a halt a mile away and lets him on board, where the engineer tells him that the siding hasn't been used for years and that there hasn't been a stationmaster in Renupur for a generation. The guard then tells him the story of a boy called Laakhan who made the signalroom his home years ago. When an official stationmaster was assigned to Renupur, he took a dislike to the untouchable boy and tried to murder him by switching the points and leading him in front of a train. Not fooled, Laakhan escaped and it was the stationmaster who tripped and fell before the train. It was said that after this Laakhan went to Calcutta, where he

was found by a woman at Sealdah station and given a home (this part of the story is clearly meant to indicate that Laakhan was taken in by Mangala and became Ross's servant 'Lutchman'). Years later, the guard says, a foreign man (evidently Elijah Farley) came to Renupur, accompanied by a young man from the region (Laakhan). Like Phulboni, he was warned against staying there, but laughed it off as village superstition, only to be cut down and killed by the train himself.

Phulboni's story is refracted through several discursive lenses. Not only are there many rumours and stories within the narrative itself, but also Phulboni's account is conveyed by several different tellers. *Urmila narrates the story to Murugan*, but her voice is quickly subsumed to one that appears to belong to an omniscient narrator,²⁷ in that far greater detail is provided than would be probable in a spoken monologue. Furthermore, Urmila is recounting a story that Phulboni had reported many years ago to Sonali's mother, who had in turn told it to Sonali, who passed it on to Urmila. As such, the veracity of this story is highly debatable. This is made more so by the self-confessed doubt of Phulboni as to what happened, and the dreams he has at several points in the story which make everything still more uncertain. This kind of 'tall tale', which has layers of narrative structure but very little tangible at its centre, is clearly in the style of nineteenth-century and Edwardian ghost stories, as well as parodying Indian railway stories (see Leer, 2001: 57). I would like now to trace the allusions, both Western and Indian, which Ghosh intends to make in this section.

Perhaps the most obvious influence on this passage is Charles Dickens's story 'The Signalman' (1866), which contains many similarities of plot and tone with Phulboni's story. The story begins in a comparable way to Ghosh's interpolated story by locating its eponymous signalman in a lonely, isolated signal-box. The narrator remarks, '[h]is post was in as solitary and dismal a place as ever I saw' (Dickens, 1990: 2). The suggestion is made that delirium or madness may be responsible for the events about to unfold, when the narrator is struck by a strange look on the man's face:

²⁷ At the end of chapter 37, Urmila begins her story about 'something that happened to Phulboni many years ago', but after the chapter break there are no more speech marks, and the story progresses in a leisurely way, with descriptions of the monsoon flooding in a level of detail that is unlikely in a spoken conversation. This is a common technique of Ghosh's which we see at several moments in this novel. Another good example comes when Ava reconstructs Murugan's email about Elijah Farley's experiences in Calcutta: once again, Ava's voice slides into that of a third-person narrator.

'[t]he monstrous thought came into my mind, as I perused the fixed eyes and the saturnine face, that this was a spirit, not a man. I have speculated since, whether there may have been infection in his mind' (1990: 3). A similar possibility is never far away from explaining strange events in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, as malarial or syphilitic delirium is a device that prevents the reader from being sure that seemingly supernatural events in the novel are not merely delusions. Like Phulboni's story, 'The Signalman' is a tale that relies on hearsay, which complicates its relationship to truth. As Gary Day points out, it is 'a twice-told tale; the story that is told to the narrator is the same one as he in his turn tells to his readers' (1988: 29).

The most striking motif in both stories is also the same, a red lantern that lures people to their deaths. In Dickens's story, a red light held by a frantically waving phantom appears to the signalman several times, and it is always the harbinger of disaster. The first time the signalman sees the apparition it seems to portend a rail accident that occurs just six hours later; the second time the ghost foreshadows a woman's death on a train that passes through the signal minutes later; and the third time it augurs the signalman's own death. This repeated image of a mysterious red light, conjoined with the signalman's gruesome death by being cut down by a train, are the clearest indications we have that Ghosh's story is to be read in part as a re-writing of Dickens's tale.

Both stories also share a sense of ambiguity at the end as to whether mysterious occurrences can be accounted for by coincidence, or whether supernatural forces are at work. In 'The Signalman', the narrator gives a quasi-medical rationalization for the signalman's vision of a spectre holding the danger light:

Resisting the slow touch of a frozen finger tracing out my spine, I showed him how that this figure must be a deception of his sense of sight; and how that figures, originating in disease of the delicate nerves that minister to the functions of the eye, were known to have often troubled patients, some of whom had become conscious of the nature of their affliction, and had even proved it by experiments on themselves (Dickens, 1990: 7).

Despite the chill that runs down the speaker's spine, this is an eminently sensible interpretation of the vision. Talk of proof, experiments, and patients is, however, immediately undercut by the signalman's revelation that shortly after the phantasm's appearance a major accident had taken place. The narrator promptly argues that

‘remarkable coincidence[s] did continually occur’ (1990: 8), only to be baffled once again by the signalman’s account of the ghost’s next emergence and the death of the woman on the train. In this way, the narrative moves between rational and supernatural explanations for bizarre events. Similarly in Phulboni’s story there are always two possible solutions to the mysterious events at Renupur. For example, when his belongings are swept onto the floor even though the window is shut, Phulboni rationalizes it thus: ‘[f]or want of a better explanation, he decided that the objects must have been blown off when he opened the door’ (CC, 268). Other weird events are put down to absent-mindedness or lack of sleep, although, as in the Dickens story, even at the most rational moments of this narrative there is always the suggestion of the supernatural. When Phulboni’s light goes out for no reason a second time, he is struck by an unreasonable fear, which is described in much the same terms as Dickens’s narrator uses: ‘Phulboni froze; a chill ran down his spine’. He is reassured by the presence of his gun: ‘[t]here was nothing he knew of that was proof against a .303’ (CC, 270), but this comforting thought inevitably points towards the idea of unknown beings that *are* immune to gunfire. Both texts leave it up to the reader to decide whether there is a rational or a supernatural explanation for incidents, and it seems likely that most readers’ reactions will be hesitation and puzzlement. The existence in both stories of uncertainty as to whether the strange events narrated are paranormal or the product of a fevered mind shows that they have the equivocal status that, according to Todorov and others, is characteristic of the fantastic. I have already discussed this literary mode in Chapter One, but it is worth reiterating the point that fantasy’s ambivalent relationship to both scientific rationalism and religion or spiritualism is a useful form for a writer like Ghosh, who argues that neither science nor religion can explain things fully. There is thus a silence at the heart of both narratives, a refusal on the narrators’ part to explain ‘what really happened’.

Two more intertexts for Phulboni’s story are suggested by comments Ghosh made in a recent interview:

in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, I must say there were two very important literary influences. One was *Khuditopashan*, a Tagore story called *Hungry Stone* [*sic*] which I had translated about that time. That had a very powerful influence on me. I think it’s a really wonderful story — a sort of elaborate metaphor of colonialism and this man looking for an identity. And also, I read some stories by Paneshwarnath Renu, which had a very powerful influence on me (Ghosh, 2000b: n. pag.).

Paneshwarnath (also known as Phanishwar Nath) Renu (1921 – 77) was a Hindi writer whose stories and novels, written in the period 1946 – 73, are notable for their sensitive depiction of village life and their socialist slant. It is impossible to be sure which of Renu's stories influenced Ghosh, although it seems likely that the mysterious Renupur station portrayed in Phulboni's narrative is intended as a reference to this writer. The only works by Renu that I have been able to locate in English are a novel called *Maila Anchal (The Soiled Border)* and a collection of short stories, *The Third Vow and Other Stories*. A story in the latter collection called 'Smells of a Primeval Night' does seem to have similarities of theme and tone with the Phulboni story which I would like to explore, but there may be other Renu stories that have relevance; the matter remains open for Hindi-speaking scholars to investigate.

'Smells of a Primeval Night' recounts the story of Karma, a young boy who moves from station to station, helping out the 'relief babu', a railway employee who fills in for other officials. At the time in which the story is set, Karma is working at an obscure station that recalls the isolation of Renupur in the Phulboni story: '[w]hat a joke! Not a single passenger got off this train either. Karma couldn't understand why the rail company had gone to all that expense and built a station here' (Renu, 1986: 141). Descriptions of the monsoon-flooded landscape around the station in this story are very similar to the water-logged scenery portrayed in Ghosh's narrative. In the story, as in the Phulboni narrative, several strange dreams are recounted, which are described in such detail that the dreams and reality merge. In both stories, dreams are related without any explanation so that at first it is impossible to know that they are not actual events. This heightens the narratives' sense of strangeness and emphasizes the possibility that supernatural forces are at work. The best example of a dream that blends with reality comes in the following passage:

Try as he might a thousand times, Karma couldn't free himself from the railway track. He writhed, he screamed, but his body wouldn't budge an inch. He was stuck. The thundering engine raced over him, severing his neck and feet. His head dangled to one side of the track, his feet lay scattered on the other. He quickly gathered up his cut-off feet. Good lord, they had turned into Anthony Saheb's pair of rubbers! Gumboots! And what had happened to his head? Scram, beat it! The damned cur was gnawing his nose and ears. (1986: 136).

Only towards the end of this description do the events become absurd and evidently dream-like, when Karma's feet metamorphose into an Englishman's gumboots and he

is woken up by a stray dog. The subject matter of this passage is also interesting in relation to Phulboni's story, in that Karma's dream (which is repeated, with variations, at the end of 'Smells of a Primeval Night') prefigures a key trope of the Ghosh's story; the dream of being run over by a train. I would argue, therefore, that this story is a starting point for the Phulboni narrative.

Another more canonical story that Ghosh cites as having an influence on the Phulboni section is Rabindranath Tagore's 'The Hunger of Stones'. This has been anthologized in William Radice's collection of Tagore's short stories (Tagore, 1991), but more useful is Ghosh's own translation of the story, which he published in the journal *Civil Lines* (Tagore, 1995). On the surface, there are fewer parallels between 'The Hunger of Stones' and Phulboni's story than can be made with Dickens's 'The Signalman' and Renu's 'Smells of a Primeval Night'. The subject matter of Tagore's story is quite different from Phulboni's, as it tells the story of a tax-collector in the Raj era who takes up residence in a deserted palace in the Muslim princely state of Hyderabad. He soon becomes aware of the invisible spirits of Persian courtiers who had lived in the palace centuries earlier. Through a mysterious process he is able to watch (though without seeing) the activities of these Arabic maidens, although he only passes into their world at night.

As Ghosh suggests, the story may be read as 'an elaborate metaphor of colonialism and [a] man looking for an identity'. Significantly, the main character is a collector of cotton duties, a controversial British tax that drained India of one of its most lucrative natural resources (see footnote 9 in Chapter One, p. 38). This and the tax collector's fondness for British clothes, such as sola-topees, 'English shirts' and 'tight Western pantaloons' mark him out as a Westernized representative of the colonial government, who has complete confidence in reason and materialism as ways of understanding the world. His confidence is shaken by apparitions from an earlier, Muslim India, whose nocturnal appearances make the tax-collector question whether his masters' way of ruling India is any less delusory than the supernatural world he inhabits at night. At the heart of the story, then, is a discussion about meaning and reality. This is indicated by the sense of absurdity that increasingly seems to surround the tax collector's daily duties:

the business of calculating excise duties for cotton lost its urgency, indeed the affairs of the Nizam's entire estate dwindled into insignificance — everything that was actual and current, everything happening around me, people coming and going, eating and working, all of that now seemed increasingly meaningless, devoid of value (Tagore, 1995: 165).

The spirits from an older India paradoxically begin to seem to inhabit a more substantial world: 'I began to imagine that it was here in this eerie, unreal, unholy place that reality lay, that everything else was a mirage' (1995: 158). Added to this, the frequent appearance at the palace of the madman, Meher Ali, with his repeated insistence that '[i]t's a lie, all of it's a lie' (1995: 167), magnifies the confusion as to whose version of reality is to be believed. Superficially, the fact that Meher Ali himself had a narrow escape from the palace spirits suggests that his incantations are intended to warn others away from their grasp. However, in a letter to Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ghosh reveals his belief that this refrain is intended as a warning against the colonists' civilizing rhetoric: '[a]lthough it is true [...] that we do not see this anguish [about colonialism] reflected in Tagore, I think it is actually ever-present, straining against the smooth surface of his prose. For example, the constant refrain [...] of "It's all a lie": this is stated most resoundingly in "Kshudhito Pashan" [...]' (Ghosh, 2001a: n. pag.).

However, as Ghosh acknowledges in his recognition of the contradiction between Tagore's 'smooth [...] prose' and the 'anguish' that lurks beneath its surface, there is a great sense of ambiguity as to how we are to read this story, and it is here that Tagore's story intersects with Phulboni's. As with Phulboni's tale and Dickens's 'The Signalman', this is a story within a story. The stranger's tale of the 'hungry stones' is never completed, as it is abruptly interrupted by the arrival of a train. There are also explicit references within Tagore's text to incomplete narratives. At night the tax collector feels that he becomes 'a character in a story conceived centuries ago but left unwritten and unrealized [...] It was as though the pages of some extravagant romance were blowing through the palace on the summer breeze — episodes that could be followed only to a certain point and no further' (1995: 161 - 62). This suggests an important resemblance between Tagore's and Phulboni's stories: both refuse to spell out their meaning, emphasizing the impossibility of knowing events with any certainty and embracing a sort of silence. This is probably the most telling

parallel between the two texts: the refutation of a perceived Western belief that all phenomena are eventually explicable through language.

Furthermore, both stories are closely connected with trains (Tagore's tale is narrated by a stranger to two cousins who are waiting for a delayed train). This brings me to the significance of the railway in Ghosh's novel. It is interesting to note that, as well as the networks of international communications and a complex intertextual web linking varied literary genres and texts, there is another important network in the novel: the railway network. Trains are an incessant feature of *The Calcutta Chromosome*: Mangala is found by Cunningham at Sealdah station (CC, 145) and later on it is explained that he chose all his assistants by searching the station: '[t]he station hadn't been around that long, but if you wanted to find people who were pretty much on their own, down and out with nowhere to go, that was the place to look' (CC, 243). Various murders are also attempted by luring people onto train tracks; for example, Farley disappears at Renupur, in company of a man who is presumably Lutchman (CC, 154); then there is Phulboni's near-death experience that I have already looked at. The New York migrants meet up at Penn Station; Murugan turns himself in to the lunatic asylum at Sealdah station; Mrs. Aratounian/Mangala leaves a note at the end to say that she's taken a train from Sealdah to Renupur (CC, 303).

Trains are thus a central theme in the novel, which Martin Leer has addressed in his essay 'Odologia Indica: The Significance of Railways in Anglo-Indian and Indian Fiction in English' (2001). In this essay, Leer contends that in *The Calcutta Chromosome* '[r]ailway stations [...] function as the sites where characters and stories appear from and disappear into; centres which connect parallel worlds, a kind of real-world Internet portals' (2001: 55). He fleetingly gestures towards the parallels that may be drawn between the novel's use of railways and the World Wide Web, but does not develop the point. I would suggest that Ghosh constructs in this novel several grids that intersect each other; the railway network that connects the India of Ronald Ross's day being overlaid (but not replaced) by the new technologies of the internet and holographic communication. It seems likely that just as the nineteenth-century invention of the railway was deeply implicated in the colonial project (see Leer, 2001: 41 & 44; Headrick, 1981: 180 – 91; Adas, 1989: 221 – 36), so too these new tentacles of the internet are entangled in more subtle forms of hegemony and control. Just as

the migrants in New York find their own ways of resisting the surveillance created by new technologies, so the subalterns affected by the railways in the Raj parts of the novel also use the trains against the colonial master. As Leer writes, 'the main means of structuring [...] spatial political control, the railway, is turned against [the British]' (2001: 56). This is most graphically shown in the story when Grigson is almost killed by being lured onto the train-tracks by Laakhan.

I would like to conclude this section by pulling out two of the images that recur again and again in examining Phulboni's story and indeed the novel as a whole: these are the symbols of the network and silence. I have argued that in *The Calcutta Chromosome* several different networks overlap: networks of textual references, international computer-mediated communications, and railroads. These networks allow the novel to avoid structural models of linearity, as the network system depends for its existence on the linkage of far-flung nodes. However, also integral to the idea of a network or a web are holes, gaps, and intangibility. Thus, when I tried to analyse the elaborate story told by Phulboni, I found it to be a pinprick in a constellation of references; but in answer to the question 'what happened to Phulboni?', all the story yields is silence and uncertainty. This is one of the most important conclusions to be drawn from this novel; the idea that nothing can ever really be known. *The Calcutta Chromosome* seems to embrace the act of story-telling because it implies an ongoing narratorial fashioning, unlike the notion of 'knowledge' which has connotations of fixity, stasis, and authority.

As such, the image of the malaria bug may be read as a metaphor for story-telling. Murugan reminds us that 'one of the extraordinary things about the malaria bug is that it has the capacity to "cut and paste" its DNA', arguing that it has so far proved impossible to create a malaria vaccine because 'what's special about the malaria bug is that as it goes through its life cycle it keeps altering its coat-proteins. So by the time the body's immune system learns to recognize the threat, the bug's already had time to do a little costume-change before the next act' (CC, 250). The malaria parasite has the capacity to mutate, to adapt to survive new circumstances, like the oral story, which is constantly re-formed to suit new ages and new tellers. Interestingly, the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe has also used the image of the chromosome to describe oral stories:

stories are the very center, the very heart of our civilization and culture [...] it is the story that conveys all our gains, all our failure, all we hold dear and all we condemn. To convey this to the next generation is the only way we can keep going and keep alive as a people. Therefore the story is like the genes that are transferred to create the new being. It is far more important than anything else (Achebe, quoted in Ogbaa, 1999: xvii).

The implication given in this quotation is that each generation updates old stories, making them relevant for a new world, just as chromosomes are at unique configurations of existing DNA.

The evolving nature of stories is also hinted at in a significant passage in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. It comes quite near the end of the novel, when Urmila is trying to explain to Murugan the series of ‘coincidences’ that caused her to find some papers that provide an important connection between Ross’s research and the spiritualist group in Madras. As she explains about how she happened to be sold the papers as wrappings for fish by a fish-seller whom nobody has seen before or since, Urmila begins to suspect that the counter-scientific group has deliberately sent the clues her way. She is still puzzled, asking ‘why would anyone set about the whole thing in such a roundabout way? [...] If they want you to know something why wouldn’t they just tell you — why involve me and Romen Haldar and...?’ (CC, 216). Murugan’s answer is revealing: ‘[s]omeone’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’ (CC, 216). This comment is particularly emblematic of the way that stories work. Rather than ‘just tell[ing] you’ what to think, stories encourage readers to ‘make [...] connections’, so that a ‘whole new story’ is created. Here the suggestion is also made that all narratives contain gaps or silences, which the reader has to fill in for him/herself. No two readers will read a story in quite the same way, and this brings about a plethora of new stories or interpretations. Like the image of the malaria bug, this passage alerts us to the dynamism and potentiality of stories.

I think that Ghosh’s images of story-telling and mutating malaria parasites form a powerful plea that knowledge be regarded as a dynamic process, rather than a fixed entity. It is not that Ghosh is opposed to knowledge, but that in this novel he indicates that all knowledges, whether concerning science, history, or geography, are in fact

provisional, they are stories still being told, still mutating. Donna Haraway expresses it well when she writes:

Scientific practice may be considered a kind of story-telling practice — a rule-governed, constrained, historically changing craft of narrating the history of nature. Scientific practice and scientific theories produce and are embedded in particular kinds of stories. Any scientific statement about the world depends intimately upon language, upon metaphor. The metaphors may be mathematical or they may be culinary; in any case, they structure scientific vision. Scientific practice is above all a story-telling practice in the sense of historically specific practices of interpretation and testimony (1989: 4).

Ghosh seems to suggest that it is only when one recognizes that scientific practice or any claim to knowledge are in fact processes akin to story-telling, that one can actually set off on the mutating, evolving course of knowledge: 'Knowledge [can]'t begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge' (CC, 104). That word 'impossibility' also indicates Ghosh's other important point, which is that full knowledge is not out there for the taking: there will always be silences and gaps in our narrations of knowledge.

CONCLUSION: SILENCE

Throughout this chapter I have explored many of the stories and genres to which *The Calcutta Chromosome* alludes. In this conclusion, I contrast the volubility of this archi- and hypertextuality with another of the novel's key concerns, which, as I have indicated, is silence. The novel suggests that the act of putting anything into writing inevitably distorts the 'truth' of the thing it attempts to describe. This is well illustrated when Murugan is explaining the logic of the counter-scientific cult:

Maybe this other team started with the idea that knowledge is self-contradictory; maybe they believed that to know something is to change it, therefore in knowing something, you've already changed what you think you know so you don't really know it at all: you only know its history. Maybe they thought that knowledge couldn't begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge (CC, 103 - 104).

Although writing and language are not specifically mentioned in this passage, it is implied that the 'impossibility of knowledge' arises from the need for knowledge to be transmitted by language. Murugan indicates that language is insufficient to explain

phenomena and inevitably changes the thing that it attempts to describe. He confirms this by arguing that the secret group ‘would in principle have to refuse all direct communication, straight off the bat, because to communicate, to put ideas into language, would be to establish a claim to *know* — which is the first thing that a counter-science would dispute’ (CC, 103). Ghosh seems to be arguing that any claim to knowledge — whether it be historical, scientific, or aesthetic — is a construct, dependent on its cultural origins. This is not to say that the attempt to gain knowledge is a futile one, but that one must recognize the limitations of one’s attempt from the outset. Thus Murugan arrives at the paradoxical, yet insightful, realization that ‘knowledge couldn’t begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge’. In short, the novel centres around the postmodern realization that ‘the Enlightenment pursuit of “knowledge” has imploded’ (Nunes, 1997: 173).

This recognition comes about because of an understanding of the limitations of language. The novel examines the idea that narratives, even such apparently factual ones as histories, are ‘not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure’ (Hutcheon, 1988: 105). Ghosh extends the argument of *In an Antique Land* that history is a discourse littered with omissions and distortions. He plays with the idea of unreliable evidence and the problems of fashioning history out of written documents; for example, in Murugan’s recognition that Countess Pongrącz’s diaries are untrustworthy (CC, 211). The problem of incomplete evidence is also highlighted, when Murugan discovers a letter from Elijah Farley, which subsequently disappears (CC, 119); and when Ava fails to decipher the full text of a deleted email written by Murugan (CC, 154). The novel’s narrator rarely constructs his alternative histories out of straightforward texts, however. He has to interpret bizarre objects such as an identity bracelet, a bottle of correcting fluid, and even some scraps of newspaper used to wrap up fish. Such instances continue *In an Antique Land*’s suggestion that all historical narratives seek to make sense of textual and non-textual traces, and to make a coherent story out of silences or fragments.²⁸

²⁸ Ghosh highlights this connection in a recent interview in which he states, ‘I think the main influence on this book was *In an Antique Land*’. He goes on to argue that the beginning of the novel is meant almost as a parody of his previous work: ‘[y]ou remember *Calcutta Chromosome* begins with a guy finding in cyberspace a tiny clue, and then he goes off chasing it. So in some ways it’s also a kind of private joke on myself’ (Ghosh, 2000b: n. pag.). His reference to a joke highlights the parodic aspects *The Calcutta Chromosome*. In

Throughout his writing, Ghosh is preoccupied with the notion that language is not a neutral reflection of reality. For example, in a recent interview he argues that in the English language the word 'colonialism' has no connotations of apartheid or racial oppression, but that these implications are present in all Hindi or Bengali discussions on the subject. He also claims that 'a language is not just a discourse, it also contains within itself certain political perceptions, certain metaphysical perceptions' (Ghosh, 2000a: n. pag.). As Neil Postman writes, '[w]e do not see nature or intelligence or human motivation or ideology as "it" is, but only as our languages are' (1987: 15).

Postman's comment indicates that language irrevocably shapes our view of reality. Perhaps for this reason the counter-scientific group rejects language, choosing to work instead with silence and indirect communication. Indeed, Murugan describes the group as 'a crowd for whom silence is a religion' (CC, 218). The fictional writer Phulboni is desperate to understand this silence, and he often refers to a Goddess of Silence whom he begs to enlighten him:

As a tree spreads its branches [...] to court an invisible source of light, so every word I have ever penned has been written for her. I have sought her in words, I have sought her in deeds, most of all I have sought her in the unspoken keeping of her faith [...] as the hours run out, when perhaps no more than a few moments remain, knowing of no other means I make this last appeal: 'Do not forget me: I have served you as best I could. [...] I beg you, I beg you, if you exist at all, [...] give me a sign of your presence, do not forget me, take me with you... (CC, 123 - 24).

This speech illustrates the paradox that writing can be a quest for the perfection and profundity of silence. Phulboni's argument that 'every word I have ever penned has been written for her' evokes inexpressible thoughts that cannot be articulated in language. It is the job of literature to try to enunciate these unspeakable ideas in new ways. Silence, as George Steiner reminds us, is the ultimate, yet impossible aim of literature. Steiner identifies 'the motif of the necessary limitations of the human word', which 'carries with it a crucial intimation of that which lies outside language, of what it is that awaits the poet if he were to transgress the bounds of human discourse' (1969: 60). Michael Wood (1998: 1) agrees that the transcendence of the

all this discussion of the novel's serious critiques of Ross's *Memoirs* and of conventional histories in general, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that Murugan's research is being lampooned here. All researchers slant their research towards their own biases and interests, and Murugan is an extreme example of this, intended as a caricature of the kind of obsession demonstrated by the narrator of *In an Antique Land*.

word is 'what literature longs for', but emphasizes that this is an impracticable goal, 'not only because [literature's] very condition is language but because a complicated fidelity to silence is one of literature's most attractive attainments'. Phulboni seems to recognize this 'complicated fidelity' between language and silence, indicating that the two are inextricable: '[m]istaken 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' (CC, 27). Here, the Word appears as a permanent obstruction to clear understanding. Phulboni intimates that language severely restricts our vision of life, filtering out images that it cannot interpret, like a veil covering the eyes.

Phulboni's invocation to the Goddess of Silence has several effects. Firstly it evokes Valentinian cosmology, a worldview in which Silence is deified as a Goddess and juxtaposed with a male God, represented by the Abyss (CC, 214). The second century thinker, Valentinus, reportedly came from Egypt and formulated a heterogeneous type of Gnosticism in which myths and philosophies from both East and West were intertwined (Roukema, 1999: 129 – 30). Gnosticism was a multifarious religious movement that existed in the first centuries AD and developed alongside the early form of what became accepted Christian doctrine. The movement incorporated such sects as the Manicheans²⁹ and Mandaeans, as well as the Valentinians, but these schools of thought were all predicated on the *gnosis*, or secret knowledge, that the cosmos was essentially dualistic. Gnostics believed that the world was a flawed construction, created by the 'demiurge', a lowly creator God. They held that above this demiurge exists a perfect, unknowable God who was not involved in the creation of the material world. Gnostics believed that man contained a trace, or 'divine spark', of substance from this highest God. *Gnosis* or insight into the obscured relationship between man and God was said to precede redemption from the cycle of death and rebirth, enabling the initiated to find residence in the heavenly realm.

As such, the novel's references to Gnostic and Valentinian thought provide illumination for several of the novel's themes. The Gnostics' veneration of Silence

²⁹ For a comprehensive account of Manichaeism, both as a religion and a powerful metaphor in postcolonial studies, see Thieme, 2000.

resonates with Ghosh's argument about the need for literature to acknowledge the gaps and silences in its fabric. Furthermore, the Gnostics' emphasis on their access to a hidden knowledge and on the importance of keeping this knowledge secret shows that this is a religion that stresses the need for silence and absolute discretion amongst its followers, in a way that recalls the counter-science group. The Gnostics' attitude towards knowledge links with Ghosh's idea of the 'impossibility of knowledge'. The word *gnosis* indicates a process of knowing, rather than complete, unconditional knowledge: '[u]nlike *episteme* (understanding), the term is hardly ever used in an absolute sense [...]: it emphasizes the act of knowing rather than knowledge itself' (Filoramo, 1990: 39). This is not to say that the Gnostics regarded their brand of knowledge as provisional — on the contrary, they saw it as total, divinely sanctioned wisdom — but that they believed their knowledge to be 'experience, a lived experience of spiritual regeneration' (Filoramo, 1990: 41). This stress on the dynamism and flux of knowledge, on knowledge as a process rather than as a static monolith, once again aligns the Gnostics' approach with that of the counter-scientific cult in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Mangala's followers, too, believe in the constant mobility of knowledge, arguing that it changes as soon as it becomes known (CC, 103 – 104). The last reason why Gnosticism is relevant to Ghosh's concerns is that this is a religion that has been written out of history. In line with the maxim that history is written by its victors, Gnosticism has been largely obscured as a religious movement by the distorting lens of mainstream Christianity. Throughout this novel, and indeed his entire body of work, Ghosh is interested in groups who have not had a voice in orthodox histories, and his references to Gnosticism thus fits with his attempt to recover the scattered or destroyed textual remnants of such groups as colonized peoples, dissident religious groups or practitioners of pseudoscience.

Secondly, Phulboni's invocation of silence reminds the reader that many people do not have access to written language, that for every book we read there are countless books that were never written, due to illiteracy, poverty, or social pressures. Tillie Olsen observes:

Literary history and the present are dark with silences: some the silences for years by our acknowledged great; some silences hidden; some the ceasing to publish after one work appears; some the never coming to book form at all (1980: 6).

Olsen's literal analysis of the issue of silence and literature reminds us of the silence of Ronald Ross's laboratory assistants. Without education or financial independence, men such as the historical figure of Lutchman,³⁰ who might have become talented scientists, are confined to the margins of history.

A third perspective on the novel's exploration of silence is found in the notion that silence may be the only appropriate response to incidents of great trauma and suffering. Walter Benjamin writes on the inadequacy of words as a response to such cataclysmic events as World War I:

With the [First] World War a process began [...] which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent — not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth (1973: 84).

Similarly, writing after the Second World War and in response to the Holocaust, George Steiner questions the Arnoldian idea that cultural pursuits such as literature refine the sensibilities. He reminds us that some Auschwitz wardens had a great love of literature, but that their reading of Shakespeare and Goethe in no way diminished their murderous impulses (1969: 23). The knowledge of the literary bent of many concentration camp workers has promoted disillusionment with verbalization among some post-war writers. Samuel Beckett, for example, formulated a radical type of play 'in which a character, his feet trapped in concrete and his mouth gagged, will stare at the audience and say nothing' (Steiner, 1969: 25). Steiner can understand if not entirely condone the writer's 'temptation' towards silence, going on to argue that '[t]he imagination has supped its fill of horrors and of the unceremonious trivia through which modern horror is often expressed' (1969: 25).

It may be that Ghosh's preoccupation with silence in this novel is an ethical response to the horrors of colonialism. Just as the Second World War made its participants 'poorer in communicable experience', so too Britain's hasty withdrawal from India and the cataclysmic events of Partition initially met with silence from writers working in the English language. Whereas regional language writers such as

³⁰ Not to be confused with Ghosh's fictional rendering of this character, who is represented as a powerful and calculating figure.

Intizar Husain and Saadat Hasan Manto wrote stories about the violence soon after Partition, in Indo-Anglian literature for a long time little was written on the subject.³¹ There are many reasons for this silence, including the notion that Indian writers did not want to discuss the shameful violence before a world audience. Yet, another plausible rationale is that the trauma was so bad it was unspeakable. Many writers avoided writing about the violence, for fear that this would give it meaning and legitimacy. Ghosh's creation of a space for silence in this novel may come as a reminder that we should not 'speak for' the subaltern, but rather recognize, with Spivak (1988a), the unrepresentable aspects of the Other's experiences.

Ghosh's recourse to silence may also constitute a response to the suppression of men like Lutchman by the economic and social gags of colonialism. Ross's volubility and eagerness to record everything for posterity is contrasted with the mysterious silence of Lutchman, Mangala, and the counter-scientific cult. The feverish determination of the former to make his name in the annals of Western science is satirically contrasted with the Indian group's more metaphysical goals. Lutchman's and Mangala's apocalyptic fusion of science with religion implies an almost complete refutation of Western rationality and the notion that man is the 'measure of all things' (Hassan, 1967: 6). Their secrecy and refusal to articulate their scientific findings suggests that language has become meaningless and redundant, and that it is no longer possible to 'know' anything with certainty.

Ultimately, Ghosh, like Steiner and Adorno before him, apparently comes to the conclusion that writing — while it may be a woefully inadequate response to the enormities of colonialism — must be remoulded to express and exorcise suffering. In his essay 'Commitment', Theodor Adorno endorses the argument that 'to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' and yet concludes that 'this suffering [...] also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it; it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice' (1977: 188). In his novels Ghosh arrives at a similar conclusion that writing must be used to highlight suffering and to

³¹ The most notable exception, of course, is Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, which was written in English and first published in 1956. After Singh, one of the first English language writers to break the silence was Rushdie, and following the publication of *Midnight's Children* in 1981, there came a great outpouring of literature about the terrible events of 1947.

express the inexpressible. Each of his novels so far has signaled a change in form and style, suggesting that Ghosh is constantly questing for a structure that will better enable him to evoke subjects that have hitherto not been given a voice. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the narrative's intricate convolutions that unravel to reveal few certainties, and Phulboni's mysterious worship of silence, suggest that Ghosh makes room for the presence of a kind of silence in his novel as a reminder of the limitations of language.

Conclusion

Towards the end of Amitav Ghosh's most recent novel, *The Glass Palace*, Arjun, an Indian officer fighting with British forces in the Second World War, ruminates on his colonial consciousness:

it was interesting to think that he [...] might want something without knowing it. How was that possible? Was it because no one had taught [him] the words? The right language? Perhaps because it might be too dangerous? Or because [he] [was]n't old enough to know? It was strangely crippling to think that he did not possess the simplest tools of self-consciousness — had no window through which to know that he possessed a within (*GP*, 428).

Arjun, who has just received a bullet wound to his leg, begins here to question all the tenets that he has previously held dear, and that have made his duties as a soldier easily comprehensible. Confronted with agonizing pain and hostile jungle conditions, all the things that he thought he knew suddenly seem chimerical. He has prided himself on his ability to dance the tango and to eat beef without any sense of disgust, but now Arjun realizes that he and his fellow soldiers are cut off from the concerns and beliefs of their countrymen and are barely recognizable as Indians (*GP*, 439). Arjun senses the existence of a vast spectrum of thoughts and feelings that is inaccessible to him, because of his Westernized upbringing.

The repetition of the word 'know' in this passage indicates that once again Ghosh is asking what constitutes knowledge. Arjun is a product of colonial education, who has not been 'taught [...] the right language' to articulate even rudimentary expressions of self-consciousness. He is positioned as a child 'not old enough to know', and as a stunted, crippled creature. These images recall the rhetoric of nineteenth-century British pedagogy that labelled Indians as 'backward'; unable to develop the superior cogitative abilities that Europeans had supposedly mastered. As the passage suggests, embedded in *The Glass Palace* is a debate about knowledge, and whether it is possible to shake off the values inculcated by a colonial education. In this thesis, with particular reference to his first four major works, I have analysed the ways in which Ghosh challenges science, technology, geography, history, and anthropology, and negotiates with intellectual expertise and imagination the common, though hidden ground between hegemonic discourse and marginalized, even obscured forms of knowledge.

Chapter One discusses Ghosh's interrogation of Western scientific reason in *The Circle of Reason*. The West used its science and technology both, practically, as a means of conquering other countries, and, ideologically, as part of the civilizing mission. Yet, through the character of Balaram, Ghosh indicates that Western science was hybridized in its encounter with Indian intellectuals. Balaram's interest in the science of men such as Pasteur, Combe, Lombroso, and Bose is Ghosh's way of exposing the fact that science has a suppressed Other, pseudoscience, to which it is more closely related than is usually supposed. This is underlined by my research into these scientists, which revealed that both science and pseudoscience are products of contemporary intellectual trends, and that both are to some extent shaped by luck, guesswork, and the imagination. In order to problematize scientific methodology in this novel, Ghosh plays different genres off against each other. For example, social realism rubs up against the fantastic, while the digressive picaresque journey is contrasted with the logical progression of detective fiction. This is a deliberate strategy by which Ghosh hopes to show that all narratives — even such apparently objective discourses as science — are stories that arise from particular times and locations. Ghosh's intermingling of different genres, his wide-ranging intertextual references, and polyglot language also signal a nascent attempt at representing the multilingual societies of the Middle East in fiction.

Chapter Two deals with Ghosh's representations of space in *The Shadow Lines*. The novel foregrounds space by juxtaposing domestic places that are temporally and spatially distant, by allowing familiar place to telescope into the vastness of space, and by eschewing linearity. Ghosh's interest in space seems to have been inspired by the dislocation experienced by many Bengalis since the dismemberment of their *desh* in the 1947 Partition and 1971 war. At the heart of his novel is a critique of the history of South Asian cartography. Maps provide only limited depictions of space, but imperialists exaggerated their achievements. The West's cartographic advances were taken to signify a superior intellect, but it was less widely recognized that these advances were facilitated by the West's colonial expansion (which in turn was aided by new mapping techniques). The map hypostatizes a territorial view of space. By taking nation-states as its 'building blocks', notwithstanding the cultural continuities that exist across borders, the map encourages division and self-interest. Europeans brought this acquisitive view of space to India, and it led to the drive to define the

subcontinent's borders rigidly, culminating in Radcliffe's trisection of the country. Pakistan, a nation that had only recently been conceptualized, was imagined into existence with the help of maps. Yet the country's subsequent fission in the war for Bangladesh indicates that shared cultural values are more important than an imposed nationalism. Ghosh pushes against the closure of cartography and the inflexibility of borders with his image of commodious circles.

Chapter Three focuses on Ghosh's treatment of two discourses, history and anthropology. In *In an Antique Land*, he proposes that the Western academy is partly responsible for the destruction of the medieval non-hegemonic world system recorded in the Geniza. Ghosh is as much interested in the Geniza's own history as in the history that it preserves, denouncing the expropriation of Geniza documents from Egypt by imperialist scholars. History is depicted in the text as being linked to the construction of nations. Ghosh plays History off against histories, using the image of a 'network of foxholes' (*IAAL*, 16) to suggest that beneath History's grand narratives exist traces of subaltern histories. In this respect, he broadly aligns himself with the Subaltern Studies movement, one of whose main aims is to uncover fragments of information about oppressed groups neglected by History. Yet Ghosh is more stylistically innovative than most of the Subaltern Studies historians, inserting his textualized persona into the narrative, interbraiding storylines from past and present, and allowing speculation and imaginative reconstruction to enter his text. His coterminous discussion of anthropology suggests that its fieldwork methodology is based on concealed relations of dominance. The Other's specificity tends to be elided in ethnographic research, as generalizations about the community are made at the expense of discussion about gender, class, age, and historical circumstances. In place of the epistemically coercive discourses of history and anthropology, Ghosh offers a deliberately partial and contradictory narrative. The novel's occasionally pessimistic overtones and telling omissions indicate that other slants could be put on Ghosh's interpretation of history, and that all narratives — and indeed discourses — are necessarily incomplete.

Ghosh returns to a discussion of science in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Chapter Four examines his use of the genres of science fiction and cyberpunk in interrogating the network society and the ontological claims of Western science. His hypertextual

rewriting of Ross's *Memoirs* suggests that the discovery of the malaria vector was facilitated by Indian knowledge. As such, Ghosh reiterates the suggestion advanced in *The Circle of Reason* that Western science was crucially shaped by colonial expansion. He also continues to interrogate science and pseudoscience, highlighting the porosity of their borders and the relative contingency of their academic standing. Ghosh countervails the rigidity of scientific discourse with complex layers of stories. These stories unfurl to reveal little more than uncertainty and silence. Silence is therefore posited in the novel as a radical alternative to the voluble assertions of knowledge.

As a novelist, Ghosh foregrounds fiction as an important instrument of knowledge transmission, highlighting in particular the genre's open-endedness and ability to encompass many different viewpoints. Although his fiction is always grounded in extensive factual research, and although he also produces high quality journalistic texts and reportage, he always returns to the novel as the most apposite literary mode for imparting his non-hegemonic 'not-knowledge'. As well as the critique of traditional academic discourses that is inherent in Ghosh's choice of form, all of his novels depict other forms of art as alternatives to the more inflexible aspects of knowledge. *The Circle of Reason* and *The Calcutta Chromosome* pit fantasy, folklore, and story-telling against the rigidity of colonial science. In *The Shadow Lines*, divisive and non-negotiable colonial cartographies are challenged by Tridib's imaginary maps. The narrator of *In an Antique Land* prefers poems, textual fragments, and local legends to the documents and records usually favoured by historians. And latterly, a similar celebration of art infuses *The Glass Palace's* references to photographers such as Edward Weston and Raghubir Singh, and to the short stories written by the character Ma Thin Thin Aye.

Ghosh continues to write, and his next novel (which focuses on the Sundarbans and is due to be published in April 2004) may move down new avenues. From my critical engagement with a significant selection of his work, however, I would hazard that at the core of his forthcoming fiction there will be found his continuing interest in formal experimentation, and in the ways in which knowledge, however objective and culturally neutral it seems, is in fact ineluctably shaped by culture and power.

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