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### **Postcolonial World Literature in a Cosmopolitical Creole Mode: Amitav Ghosh's Trilogy**

Amitav Ghosh began publishing in 2008 his *Ibis* trilogy. An encyclopedic project, it features larger-than-life characters moving across the Indian Ocean from the banks of the Ganges and Calcutta, East to Canton and West to Bombay, Mauritius, and Cape Town. The trilogy includes *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011) with a third volume, *Flood of Fire*, scheduled for publication in early/mid 2015. As historian Antoinette Burton admirably puts it: "If you have ever tried to explain... the seriality of abolition, indenture, and transportation, or the multiple moving parts of colonial power, you have in *Sea of Poppies* as historically nuanced and narratively accessible an account as you will find anywhere else" (75).

Ghosh has shrugged off the postcolonial label and its racialized implications. In a 2008 interview, he confesses: "I must admit that after years of being asked about 'postcolonial writing' I'm still not sure what it means. I recently heard a critic say that it was just another term for the work of nonwhite writers who write in English. If that is so then there is certainly a postcolonial dimension to my books."<sup>1</sup> In a 2012 address titled "Confessions of a Xenophile," he goes on to explain that, for him, human complexity cannot be reduced to expedient binary scenarios within the cosmopolitan contexts he writes about:

Those of us who grew up in that period will recall how powerfully we were animated by an emotion that is rarely named: this is xenophilia, the love of the other, the affinity for strangers - a feeling that lives very deep in the human heart, but whose very existence is rarely acknowledged. These gestures... may be imbued with both pomposity and pathos, but they are not empty: they represent a yearning to reclaim an interrupted cosmopolitanism. (37)

There continues to be a great deal of disagreement, among theorists and others, about what the postcolonial means in relation to the colonial, the global, and the cosmopolitan. Without rehearsing that thorny debate, I want to note with Robert Young that there is some overlap between the distinct designations "world literature" and "postcolonial writing." For Young, "If world literature is universal, postcolonial literature, though partial [i.e. more local], achieves a certain universality through its relation to the ethical," which he defines as an interest in humanity and the humane "in its broadest sense (which means that it will also be concerned with the lives of animals)" (218). But these universalist concerns must be paired, Young continues, with a "critical focus which challenges inhumanity in its modes of the abuse of power in whatever particular historical form that might take" (218 emphasis mine). He also stresses that a sustained "interest in questions of justice, of human rights, of ecology, ... or the continuing struggles of colonized and indigenous peoples" are constitutive characteristics, since postcolonial literature can never be "neutral." Such an ethico-political stance is, for him,

a necessary condition for belonging to the corpus of postcolonial texts. Ato Quayson's historical overview sums it up well: the field raises "key questions about nation and narration, the struggle between universalism and localism in the literature of the newly independent nations, and the fraught intersections of the aesthetic, the ethical and the political dimensions of these new forms of writing." (Cambridge History on line).

Despite his understandable allergy to the "postcolonial" label, Ghosh conjures structures of feeling and textures of history that make him a postcolonial world writer invested in both the *longue durée* and the ethical representation of everyday life, but in such ways that outcomes are never foreclosed. He never exhibits the kind of "language anxiety" that remains, for Young (among many other postcolonial theorists), "fundamental" to postcolonial writing in "a major European language" (219-20). He uses without qualms languages and dialects as a means of putting into narrative "the mutual exposure in this world of all its worlds" (Nancy 109).

This ethical direction is one of increased openness to shared meaning-making and dialogic exchange. Ghosh negotiates the divide between relativism and moral authority by steering the reader's empathies toward an ideal of inclusivity, rather than one of pure critique. His capacious multilingual style immediately denotes multiplicities: it is a picaresque mix of maritime adventures with ambiguous outcomes, of protagonists who speak a confusing mix of vernaculars and who thereby demonstrate endless flexibility and the ability to survive by revising perceptions and practices on the go. As a result, the narrative destabilization of hegemonic speech and uniform perspective produces a baroque account of the forces that motivate human agents. Momentous social transformations are laced with hilarious and memorable anecdotes as well as quasi-magical episodes that blur languages as well as generic conventions. The first chapter of River of Smoke, for example, is peppered with some four-dozen words of the French-based Mauritian Creole used either in the characters' conversations or to communicate the interiority of the now aging Deeti, the matriarch of the Colver clan established in Mauritius after the Ibis reached its shores decades earlier, "La Fami Colver, as they said in Kreol" (3).<sup>ii</sup>

The success of the "fami," the ship-siblings and their descendants, is that they constitute a new creolized "world" as they come together in the archipelago, far from the Indian subcontinent.

The stylistic thrust of Ghosh's absorbing narrative enfolds the Creolophone reader (that I am) into a condition of complete receptivity; and this suspension of disbelief trumps ideological critique and watchfulness as well as the pitfalls of what Eve Sedgwick has called "paranoid reading" (123), the hyper vigilance or chronic distrust by critics of a writer's tropes and the (conscious or unconscious) desires they might encode. Such distancing and controlling vigilance typically translates into a hermeneutic of negative affects. Rita Felski bemoans this "default position of contemporary criticism" (57) that valorizes cynicism and considers the condition of absorption and enchantment to be "an alarming prospect" (57) for the scrupulous critic intent on resisting the pleasures of the text and the seductions of reading (e.g. Young and his emphasis on the critical).

As an activity that encourages one's initial loss of self into the world of another, reading here is a form of dialogue that opens beyond pre-given cultural meanings so as not to foreclose outcomes. For J-L Nancy, the labor of writing and of reading "is not determined by a goal of mastery (domination, usefulness, appropriation)" (54), but by the always unforeseen potential of real and virtual encounters that bring forth the world of meaning in which "world-becoming engages a displacement of value, and world-forming a displacement of production" (44).

The distinction between process and result, or value and production, which denotes Nancy's debt to Marx, is esp. useful, since fictional worlds that embed new values will also produce new modes of being and new subjects of knowledge. The creation or production of a fictional world that can best coincide with the "being-in-the-world [être-au-monde]" (44) of multitudes is, by this logic, a process of shared communication that is also an acknowledgement of the becoming or mondanisation of subjects under the mundane, material, and immanent conditions of contact and exchange.

On this view, fictional world-forming is a creative means of putting into narrative what exceeds preexisting consensus. The creative process brings together what was distinct, had been divided, or subsumed by the consensus, thereby opening spheres of freedom that offer new potential for the full enjoyment [jouissance] and deployment of more autonomous lives connected within large historic patterns of global exchange in which "human beings create the world, which produces the human, which creates itself as absolute value and enjoyment [jouissance] of that value" (37) [to follow Nancy's reading of Marx's The German Ideology].

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<sup>i</sup> Interview. History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History 2, 1 (2012).  
<http://www.historyofthepresent.org/2.1/interview.html>

<sup>ii</sup> An informative overview of River of Smoke's use of Kreol on  
<http://mauricianismes.wordpress.com/2012/01/04/river-of-smoke/>