



PROFILE

The Spiral Of Reason

What's fascinating is how his oeuvre has developed.....but without ever losing sight of its main concerns

TABISH KHAIR

The past 11 years have been good to fiction written in English by Indians, including non-resident ones.

One can think of many writers who have published important novels and collections of stories in the period, building on the groundwork laid by older generations—by Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Attia Hosain, by Khushwant Singh, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai.

However, it can be argued that some—like Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth—published their (as yet) most significant books before 1995. And some—like Arundhati Roy, Upamanyu Chatterjee or Pankaj Mishra—have published interesting works of fiction, but far too few. On the other hand, Amitav Ghosh, while he started publishing before 1995, has not only been prolific but has also gone from strength to strength. It is this—not the literary awards and honours (or the controversy when he turned down a nomination for the prestigious Commonwealth prize in 2001)—that makes me choose Ghosh as my candidate for the most significant writer of the past 11 years.

Calcutta Chromosome performed the rare feat of being a page-turner without becoming intellectually toothless.

What is fascinating about Ghosh's oeuvre is how it has developed over the past decade or so without losing sight of its main concerns. Published in 1986, *The Circle of Reason* introduced some of these historical, political and thematic concerns. This first novel was more subtle than it appeared to be at first reading. Even its use of the British Raj had little to do with Raj nostalgia in England and the success of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: *The Circle of Reason* was not concerned with the Raj but with the effects of the Raj across time in post-colonial India; it attempted to narrate complex cultural imbrications of which the Raj was only one component; it looked into the relationship between science, religion, technology and nationalism in India. And it did so by providing an interesting Bildungsromanesque journey, that of Alu, a Bengali orphan, from India to Algeria.

Many of these concerns would be taken up—at greater depth and with more fluency—in later works by Ghosh, of which *The Shadow Lines* and *In an Antique Land* were published before 1995, our cut-off year. *The Calcutta Chromosome*, published in 1996, performed the rare feat of being highly entertaining without becoming politically or intellectually toothless. Like Ghosh's earlier work, it was a mixture of genres: science fiction, the colonial adventure, the whodunit, the schoolboy adventure story (a la Hardy Boys et al), the ghost story etc. Like Ghosh's earlier work, it was concerned with narrating history at a tangent—not by overlooking facts but by fixing on them the gaze of an unrelenting questioner—and with overturning binary oppositions, such as that which equates science with the West and religion with the East.

However, *The Calcutta Chromosome* was both bolder and more subtle in its approach to these matters. It had a honed narrative drive, so that serious readers could cull a few PhD theses from it and the railway journey reader could cuddle down simply for an excellent thrill. It appeared that with *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh had arrived not just as a redoubtable thinker—which he has been from the beginning—but also as a highly polished novelist.

This was borne out by the reception of the two novels he published after that—*The Glass Palace* (2000) and *The Hungry Tide* (2005)—both of which were on the bestseller list for months. *The Hungry Tide*, which many critics consider Ghosh's most accomplished novel, is still on the bestseller list in India. Apart from these books, Ghosh published at least one collection of essays, an excellent meditation on India and Pakistan's nuclear aspirations and a travelogue (containing two long essays) during the period.

Critics based in India can assume a rather brusque manner with Indian writers who live abroad. It is a measure of Ghosh's accomplishment as a writer and his complexity as a thinker that he continues to evoke admiration—and sometimes even serious criticism—by critics based in India, while he also remains a highly visible writer internationally. Soft-spoken in person, more inclined to listen than talk, Ghosh seldom startles with a flashy phrase or image, but he leaves the reader with much to think about and re-examine.

(Tabish Khair is currently working on his novel *Filming*.)

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