

# Amitav Ghosh

CONTEMPORARY WORLD WRITERS

ANSHUMAN A. MONDAL

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*Amitav Ghosh*

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# CONTEMPORARY WORLD WRITERS

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ANSHUMAN A. MONDAL

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for Joanna, with love

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## Series editor's foreword

*Contemporary World Writers* is an innovative series of authoritative introductions to a range of culturally diverse contemporary writers from outside Britain and the United States or from 'minority' backgrounds within Britain or the United States. In addition to providing comprehensive general introductions, books in the series also argue stimulating original theses, often but not always related to contemporary debates in post-colonial studies.

The series locates individual writers within their specific cultural contexts, while recognising that such contexts are themselves invariably a complex mixture of hybridised influences. It aims to counter tendencies to appropriate the writers discussed into the canon of English or American literature or to regard them as 'other'.

Each volume includes a chronology of the writer's life, an introductory section on formative contexts and intertexts, discussion of all the writer's major works, a bibliography of primary and secondary works and an index. Issues of racial, national and cultural identity are explored, as are gender and sexuality. Books in the series also examine writers' use of genre, particularly ways in which Western genres are adapted or subverted and 'traditional' local forms are reworked in a contemporary context.

*Contemporary World Writers* aims to bring together the theoretical impulse which currently dominates post-colonial studies and closely argued readings of particular authors' works, and by so doing to avoid the danger of appropriating the specifics of particular texts into the hegemony of totalising theories.

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## Preface

Readers familiar with the Contemporary World Writers series will immediately notice that the organisation of this book does not follow the pattern of previous contributions. Rather than a chronological, novel-by-novel approach, this book offers a more thematic organisation as the best way to approach Ghosh's work. It is up to the reader to evaluate whether this is justified or not. Although all writers hope that all readers will read their books from start to finish, those who are looking for treatment of specific texts can find guidance as to which chapters emphasise which texts in the final section of '1: Contexts and intertexts'. An explanation of the rationale for organisation of this book can also be found there.

Throughout the book, many terms are employed which may be more or less familiar with literature students but which may be unfamiliar to the general reader. It is hoped that these are explained as thoroughly and accessibly as possible, but readers may wish to follow up some of the debates that surround these terms for it is within this wider context of knowledge that the calibre of Ghosh's work can be most fully appreciated. Some of the key texts in the field will be indicated in the notes at the end of the book, along with full citations of Ghosh's published works; the extant criticism can be found in the bibliography.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for supporting the completion of this book by awarding me a Research Leave Grant for the period of October 2005 to February 2006. I would also like to acknowledge the Department of English at the University of Leicester for a period of study leave January–September 2005. Without these two periods of leave from the rigours of teaching and administration, this book would not have been completed when it was. Particular thanks are due to John McLeod, whose kind words of support were instrumental in my securing the AHRC award. Also, for ensuring that the duties and responsibilities of a new job did not interfere with the final few weeks of this leave period, I am indebted to William Watkin and Steve Dixon.

To John Thieme, general editor of the Contemporary World Writers series, I owe my heartfelt thanks for responding to and supporting this project, and indeed for recognising that the time had come for a full-length study of Ghosh's work. As a Ghosh scholar himself, he has offered advice which I have always found welcome and constructive. I owe a debt of gratitude to Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, and her doctoral student Joy Wang, for securing me a copy of her essay along with the other essays published in the OUP India edition of *The Shadow Lines*; a large section of the concluding chapter would not have been possible without their assistance. I would also like to make special mention of Claire Chambers, who sent me a copy of her dissertation and thereby saved me a trip to Leeds. Her generosity was equalled by the usefulness of her excellent dissertation, to which I make reference in Chapter 2 in particular. Emma Parker supplied me with a reference that was overlooked in most of the bibliographies and databases, and I would like to thank

her and my other former colleagues at the University of Leicester – Phil Shaw, Mark Rawlinson, Michael Davies, and Martin Halliwell – for their friendship and intellectual input. Special thanks, in this regard, are due to George Lewis whose companionship has always been highly treasured. Clare Anderson, Claire Mercer, Sydney Jeffers, Prashant Kidambi and other fellow-travellers in the Post-Colonial Seminar at Leicester have all accompanied the gestation of this book and have probably been subjected to the usual moans and groans over a convivial drink and curry. Thanks also to my former student Jenny Richardson for taking the trouble to read a draft of this book to ensure that it remained accessible to the intelligent general reader.

My heartfelt love and respect are due to my parents, Ansar Ali and Anjulika Mondal. Finally, to Joanna Herbert I cannot say enough how much her love and support has meant to me. I dedicate this book to her to repay in some small measure that debt which can never be redeemed.

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## Abbreviations

CR	<i>The Circle of Reason</i>
SL	<i>The Shadow Lines</i>
IAAL	<i>In an Antique Land</i>
CC	<i>The Calcutta Chromosome</i>
GP	<i>The Glass Palace</i>
HT	<i>The Hungry Tide</i>

References to Ghosh's extensive non-fictional works can be found in the notes at the end of the book in the relevant chapter.

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## Chronology

- 1956 Born 11 July in Calcutta to Shailendra Chandra Ghosh, a diplomat, and Ansali Ghosh. Spends early years traveling with parents to postings in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), Sri Lanka, and Iran.
- 1974–76 Attends St. Stephen's College, Delhi University. Graduates with BA in History.
- 1978 Begins DPhil at University of Oxford in Social Anthropology.
- 1979 Learns Arabic in Tunisia.
- 1980 Travels to Egypt to conduct field research for DPhil. These experiences would later form the basis for *In an Antique Land*.
- 1982 Awarded DPhil for thesis 'Kinship in Relation to the Economic and Social Organization of an Egyptian Village'.
- 1983–87 Appointed Research Associate, Department of Sociology, Delhi University. Begins writing *The Circle of Reason*.
- 1984 Witnesses anti-Sikh riots in Delhi after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards.
- 1986 *The Circle of Reason* published.
- 1988 *The Shadow Lines* published. Returns to Egypt.
- 1990 Awarded *Prix Medicis Etrangère* in Paris for *The Circle of Reason*; Awarded the annual prize of the Sahitya Akademi (Indian Academy of Literature) for *The Shadow Lines*.

- 1992 'The Slave of MS H.6' and *In an Antique Land* published.
- 1994–97 Appointed Visiting Professor, Department of Anthropology, Columbia University, New York.
- 1995 Begins reporting for *The New Yorker*.
- 1996 *The Calcutta Chromosome* published. It is awarded the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Science Fiction.
- 1998 *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* published.
- 1999 Appointed Distinguished Professor, Department of Comparative Literature, Queen's College, City University of New York. *Countdown* published and earns Ghosh a place on the final shortlist for the *American Society of Magazine Editors Award for Reporting*. 'The March of the Novel Through History: The Testimony of My Grandfather's Bookcase' wins *The Pushcart Prize*.
- 2000 *The Glass Palace* published. Ghosh declines the Commonwealth Writers' Prize.
- 2001 *The Glass Palace* wins the Grand Prize for Fiction at the Frankfurt eBook Awards.
- 2002 *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces* is published in India, gathering together many of Ghosh's non-fiction.
- 2004 *The Hungry Tide* published.
- 2005 *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of our Times* is published in the United States.

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## Contexts and intertexts

In June 1997 *The New Yorker* magazine published a special issue on English language Indian fiction to commemorate India and Pakistan's fiftieth anniversary of independence from colonial rule. Inside is a photograph of some of the most celebrated English language novelists to have emerged from the subcontinent in recent decades, writers whose presence on the best-seller lists of Western literary markets has been accompanied by the unprecedented density of their citations for major literary prizes – Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, Amit Chaudhuri, and Vikram Seth amongst others.<sup>1</sup> At the back, slightly out of focus, is Amitav Ghosh; the perspective of the shot distances him and he appears somewhat marginal to the main group. The photograph is a large one, taking up almost three-quarters of the double-page spread, but on its left-hand margin is some text, a fragment of an article on the 'forgotten army' led by the Indian nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose, which had fought the British alongside the Japanese in South East Asia during the Second World War. The article is by Amitav Ghosh.<sup>2</sup> This fortuitous layout perhaps emphasises with appropriate clarity Ghosh's literary concern with margins – marginal peoples, histories, episodes, knowledge systems, and beliefs.

Paradoxically, Ghosh has become one of the central figures to emerge from the English language literary field after the success of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* opened up the international Anglophone markets to the new writing emerging from the subcontinent in the 1980s. Moreover, he has devel-