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*Postcolonial Identity and Gender Boundaries in Amitav Ghosh's  
The Shadow Lines*

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This note offers an approach to Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, a text I used towards the end of my course, Indian Fiction in English. I wanted my course to introduce students to the tradition of the Indian novel in English and to evolve a definition of the postcolonial from the texts we studied. In addition, by the end of the semester, I wanted our reading to problematize the transgressive potential of the postcolonial when it needs to accommodate the construction of gender. In the new counter-canon of so-called "Third World" texts that is being formed in the American academy, works are usually selected because they address such subjects as the representation of colonialism, nationhood, postcoloniality, etc. That these are important issues to address does not mean that this new canon—built around what might be called the appropriate form of the "Third World" novel—does not leave much room for other questions to be raised. My approach to Ghosh's novel tried to address one such "other" question while also approaching his novel as a "writing back" to colonial discourse.

Indian Fiction in English was a special topics course that I offered in Spring of 1991; it gave students credit in both English and Asian Studies. At Franklin and Marshall, there is no clearcut relation between the number a course is ascribed and the seniority of students allowed in the class. My course, therefore, included students with varied majors and ranging from first-year students to seniors. Some of them had had no exposure to an English course; most had none to Indian history or culture. Half of the class, though, was made up of either Americans of Indian descent or Indian students temporarily in the United States for study. One of the challenges the course posed was negotiating class discussions so that students with no prior exposure to India felt that they too had the authority to respond meaningfully to the texts we read. I did this partly by building their access to Indian culture and history in shared readings. Essays by writers and critics (such as Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, and Meenakshi Mukherjee), for instance, helped inform students of the debates surrounding the use of English for rendering the Indian experience. Other critical readings—such as selections from *Orientalism*, *The Empire Writes Back*, Rushdie's "Outside the Whale," and Helen Tiffin's "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse"—helped shape the nature of the issues we raised. Through the semester, we worked more or less chronologically from R. K. Narayan, Kamala Markandaya, and G. V. Desani to writers such as Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande. Kipling, Forster, and Conrad quite naturally formed an integral part of the course. We read Indian fiction in English as "counter-discourse," as a response, in part, to earlier universalizing Western texts of English colonial writers. Kipling's *Kim*, in particular, because of its major impact on the Indian novel in English, demanded great attention. While I did not require students to read the novel, I strongly urged them to do so. A background lecture laid out the major themes *Kim* raised that Indian writers had felt the need to respond to, and we considered the

different ways in which Desani, Rushdie, and Ranga Rao (in *Fowl-Filcher*) wrote back to this colonial fiction. The motif of the journey, the adventure, the desire to encompass India, were all themes my students were familiar with, and by the time we read *The Shadow Lines*, students were familiar with the importance of *Kim* as a foundational text for the Indian novel in English.

To approach the Ghosh novel, though, I highlighted another dimension of *Kim*. Since Ghosh's novel is most intimately concerned with the tenuousness of national and other boundaries, I showed my students how *Kim* could be read as not just a boy's adventure story but also a novel concerned with defining borders and boundaries. After all, the great game *Kim* involves himself in has a deadly serious intent: the British secret service is presented as an adult version of boyish adventure, the end result of which is the demarcation and defense of borders, the notion of nationhood that Kipling was at pains to establish. The novel thus provides a cultural justification for Britain's imperial mission. *Kim* allowed the students to understand one way in which Ghosh's novel was a rewriting of colonial fiction.

In addition, Conrad's *The Shadow-Line*, providing as it does an important echo for Ghosh's novel, needed attention. Conrad's short novel suggests that the experience it articulates is a universal one. At the beginning, his narrator says: "One knows well enough that all mankind had dreamed that way. It is the charm of universal experience from which one expects an uncommon or personal sensation—a bit of one's own." Ghosh's novel, on the other hand, insists on the specificity of individual experience. The shadow-lines of Ghosh's novel are specific ones, lines that demand an acknowledgement of "the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror" (200). Initially, the narrator learns to imagine with such precision that his experience reflects that of his ghostly double, Nick, Ila's supposed knight in shining armor in London. Later, though, when the contours of the narrator's knowledge fill out, he realizes that there are no knights, that the construction of a scenario of heroism and rescue are in themselves part of the universalizing heritage of Western colonial fictions.

Having thus set up the antecedents to Ghosh's novel, we were in a position to define the ways in which *The Shadow Lines* could be read as a postcolonial work. The subversive potential of the novel comes from its interest in challenging received notions of normalcy and nationhood at work in writers such as Kipling and Conrad. Ghosh's narrator traverses borders with ease and reinvents himself with all the liberating energy implied by the postcolonial—a condition that allows for and acknowledges dissonance rather than coherence. For the first day of discussion on the novel, I had asked my students to consider the scene under the large oak dining table where Ila and the narrator play houses and where Nick is first introduced as the narrator's shadowy double, his blonde alter ego, always a head taller, always closer to Ila. I gave them the following questions to keep in mind as they analyzed the scene: What is the significance of the childhood game of houses being used to introduce the major issue of racism in Britain? What can this scene tell us of the importance of memory and narrative? In what ways is this scene repeated later in England and how is that moment different from this one? Once Nick has been cast as the narrator's double, how does the novel ask us to read his desires for travel and adventure as opposed to those of the narrator? Finally, I asked them to consider the importance of heroism and rescue as sustaining childhood fictions and to ask whether Ghosh managed to challenge successfully the limitations of these fictions.

Our class discussion began with my asking for responses to these issues. As we worked through my questions, an understanding of *The Shadow Lines* as a postcolonial text

interested in re-writing many received fictions began to emerge. My students were particularly responsive to Ila's need to reinvent her childhood experience with racism. From there we were able to consider the need for the imaginative rewriting of history, culture, biography, and experience that Ghosh's novel so insistently demands. Once the imagination had become central to our understanding of the novel, the various appeals for transgression the novel offers enabled students to see the exuberance in much postcolonial writing. Our class discussion ended with my asking students to engage with the following questions for the next class period: How should we read the fact that Ila, despite (or because of?) travel and opportunity, is doomed to a mundane, even sordid existence? What should we make of the political commitments of May and Ila, their ineffectuality, their naïveté? In what ways are Tha'mma and Ila presented as two alternatives for the struggle for freedom? Where does sexual freedom, particularly for women as it is embodied in Ila's personal struggles, find a place in this novel?

I wanted my approach to the novel to demonstrate that while for the narrator cultural differences can be collectively contained to create not a fragmented self but a self that belongs to many places, which can live freely in its moment accommodating itself to the various pressures placed upon it, for Ila, cultural differences create only a small, quivering self, one incapable of action, and more importantly, even of self-respect. It seems to me that it is not enough to read Ila as an example of how cultural stresses operate on women, but rather to suggest that the particular nuances created by gender lead in Ghosh's text to impotence for the women he represents. Ila and May are therefore condemned to different but similarly lonely lives. Only Tha'mma, the narrator's strong grandmother, is allowed the conviction of her beliefs in a substantial way. Even in her case, though, I find the novel problematic. For if Ghosh is interested in questioning and rewriting the novel as it contributed to nation formation (in his response to Kipling, for example), Tha'mma's notion of freedom is completely defined by the idea of the nation and therefore limited. For her, freedom has meant not just wresting India away from the British but also the conviction that war and blood define nations, that the nations of the subcontinent still need to outline their boundaries in blood in order to erase the distinctions between various regional groups. As her grandson, the narrator, puts it:

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. (77)

But although Tha'mma's desire for nationhood is historically determined, as the only woman in this novel whose convictions translate into meaningful action, her actions and beliefs being represented as dated is problematic. Her natural inheritor, Ila, is allowed only the meanest notion of freedom, for to Ila freedom means the freedom to choose to dance in a disco in Calcutta as she would in London. That Tha'mma has no respect for such an idea of freedom is no surprise. As the narrator sums up Tha'mma's response, he says: "I should have known that she would have nothing but contempt for a freedom that could be bought for the price of an air ticket. For she too had once wanted to be free; she had dreamt of killing for her freedom" (87).

Once my students began to see Ila as a counterpart to Tha'mma and to recognize the constraints placed upon Ila, we were in a position to suggest that although Ila may be read as constrained through her gender and therefore representative of a certain historical truth, nevertheless she is the embodiment of certain fictive and narrative choices that make her merely a sacrifice on the altar of the liberating energy of the postcolonial that the narrator has access to. Although this was a difficult point to get across, my students began to see its value especially when they reflected again on the other women in the novel.

Also, as we glanced back at other works we had read, and reconsidered, for example, Anita Desai's *The Clear Light of Day*, we asked where contemporary women writers would belong in the postcolonial canon of Indian texts in English. Since *The Shadow Lines* was followed in the course by Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* and short stories by Indian women, students were able to query whether in the Indian context, the postcolonial with its energy and exuberance is not the prerogative of male writers. For it seems to me that contemporary Indian women have less room for the self-conscious experimentation and rewriting that so defines the postcolonial. Their agenda is a different one, perhaps better represented in the realistic novel. Clearly, this was too large an issue for the course to explore very fully but I liked us to move, via *The Shadow Lines*, to a question that seems crucial to me and one so far inadequately addressed critically: has the too-quick embracing of the postcolonial marginalized an already marginalized group?

I would say that my approach to *The Shadow Lines* was successful in various ways. Because the novel is so readable, so lyrical, students find it easy to respond to. Ghosh's ways of "writing back" to earlier colonial fictions are also immediately accessible to them. The postcolonial thus becomes a tangible approach that they can see in operation in this text. Because of this, it is easier to introduce and work through the more difficult issue of the representation of women *vis-à-vis* the transgressive potential of the postcolonial project.

## WORK CITED

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### *Teaching Isabel Allende's La casa de los espíritus (The House of the Spirits)*

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As their varied responses to national complexities like the economic recession and the Gulf war show, many students are concerned with issues of sexual, political, and economic repression, and with national identity in general, in ways that they little comprehend. Because Third World and postcolonial literatures emerge directly from such issues, they lend themselves very well to making students more aware of international hegemonic oppression and more conscious of how power works in the United States. Isabel Allende's