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"The Absolute Essentialness of Conversations": A Discussion with Amitav Ghosh.

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CLAIRE CHAMBERS
Leeds Metropolitan University

Introduction:

Amitav Ghosh is a writer of Bengali-Indian origin, who has lived a peripatetic life in Europe, South Asia and the US, and has published six fictional or semi-fictional texts. He also 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 overspills generic categories and defies any easy 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 my conversation with Ghosh, he argues that *In an Antique Land* (1992) should not be considered 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 an outlandish story around the actual history of the British scientist, Ronald Ross, who discovered that malaria is transmitted by the bite of a mosquito. In *The Glass Palace* (2000), Ghosh creates an epic 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. Finally, in Ghosh's most recent novel, *The Hungry Tide* (2004), he creates a broadly realist portrayal of the Sundarbans, which acts as a counterpoint to the dreamlike, unknowable mangrove swamps found in an allegorical section of *Midnight's Children*.

Not only do Ghosh's works transgress generic boundaries, but they also 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. 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 intermingles the mainstream science of such figures as Louis Pasteur and Ronald Ross with pseudo-scientific and religious practices. By doing so, he suggests that the boundaries between science and pseudo-science are porous, that the notion of the scientist as a lone genius is misleading and that countries such as India have hybridized and reworked Western science. In *In an Antique Land*, he celebrates culturally composite religions such as Sufism and *bhakti*. *The Shadow Lines* problematizes the physical borders between nations, suggesting that these obfuscate the emotional and cultural ties between officially separate nations such as India and Bangladesh.

Recent theory's preoccupation with hybridity, "in-between" spaces, and diasporas suggests the centrality of Ghosh's interrogation of boundaries to the postcolonial debate. In her article [in this volume], Sharmani Gabriel perceptively explores Ghosh's depiction of the "shadow lines" that demarcate nations and individuals, illustrating ways in which his portrayal vivifies aspects of Bhabha's and Bakhtin's theories. . Although Ghosh dislikes being categorized as "postcolonial",[1] 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 continues to stimulate debate and discussion. He is particularly known for his contention that knowledge is produced by structures of dominance (especially the military, economic, and epistemic strategies of colonialism), and for his formal experimentation, in which he adumbrates a dialogic, non-coercive method of knowledge transmission. 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,[2] he expressed his unease with the term "Commonwealth", a designation that he suggests orientates contemporary writers around the old power structures of colonialism. He also criticized the Prize for excluding Commonwealth writers who choose to write in languages other than English.

In my conversation with Ghosh I was keen to explore issues raised by his withdrawal from the Commonwealth Writers Prize, such as the Raj's continuing impact on contemporary Indians and

Ghosh's own relationship with the English language. More generally, I invited him to elaborate on the novels' suggestion that knowledge is intertwined with power systems. I questioned Ghosh about his attitude towards ideas of objective knowledge or absolute truth, and asked him whether the novel can challenge the complicity of Western forms of knowledge with imperialism in ways that academic disciplines cannot. I enquired about his literary influences, and found that while he acknowledges a stylistic — if not political — debt to Naipaul, he is less than complimentary about Rushdie. Finally, I was interested in Ghosh's reaction to the political and intellectual fallout of the 9/11 attacks. Ghosh is an eloquent speaker, by turns measured, impassioned and humorous, and he addressed my questions in informative and often unexpected ways. I chose to conduct the conversation informally, rather than imposing an interview structure. My intended list of questions was adapted and reordered as I tried to follow his ideas and respond to the points he raised. Our conversation took place in the summer of 2002 in Cambridge where Ghosh was undertaking research for his next novel, *The Hungry Tide*. It began over lunch in the University Library canteen and continued in the evening in a local pub.

Key words: **Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Ronald Ross, Samuel Johnson, conversations, silence, knowledge**

CC You've just brought out a new book, *The Imam and the Indian*. Could you describe it for me?

AG It's a collection of essays which has been in the works for a long time. It's a long book, about 500 pages. You know, I looked at it and thought, my goodness, I've been busy all these years. There are a lot of articles: there are my reviews of Arabic literature, of Naguib Mahfouz and of Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*. There are also some of the preparation essays for *In an Antique Land*, such as "The Slave of Ms. H.6", and "An Egyptian in Baghdad" . But what it has that you probably won't have seen before are a couple of articles on Cambodia and also my very first papers in anthropology. The anthropology papers were written early on in my writing career, around the time I was writing the first draft of *The Circle of Reason*. These papers are related to my PhD thesis and I think there was a lot of spillover between my thesis and *The Circle of Reason*, because it was so fresh in my mind at that time.

CC Yes, I also noticed an overlap between the Middle Eastern section of *The Circle of Reason* and *In an Antique Land*. For example there's a description of a dancer at a wedding, and it's almost word for word the same in the two texts.[3] Were you working from a diary or from notes from your fieldwork in Egypt?

AG Both of those things, exactly. You know, it's a strange thing about *In an Antique Land*, that so many people think it's a novel. Homi Bhabha teaches it and he told me at great length 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. All the stuff about Egypt comes straight out of my diaries. I kept very extensive diaries, and all those conversations are from them. It was an odd experience; when I was living in the village of Nashawy doing my PhD I used to go to Cairo occasionally to get books out of the library, and once I borrowed Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. That had an enormous impact on me because *Life of Johnson* is all conversations; that's how the whole book is constructed, it's just a series of conversations. And it's riveting because Johnson never did anything; all he did is just talk; he just sat in tea-rooms and talked. And that made me realize the absolute essentialness of conversations to any kind of narrative. So I can see in my diaries a clear split between before and after reading Boswell. After Boswell I began to write down every conversation in meticulous detail, so those scenes, the dancing scences and so on, came straight out of my diaries; in *The Circle of Reason* as well.

CC One thing I find interesting about *In an Antique Land* is that although you're working with all this factual material — both autobiographical and historical — you bring the techniques of a novelist to it. The text is obviously grounded on historical evidence; it was excerpted in the essay "The Slave of Ms H.6", but you use your imagination to recreate what happened to the slave.

AG This library, over the years it's come to mean so much to me. I was not a student here, but I first came here to work on the Taylor-Schechter collection. I remember it was very difficult learning this language, because it's Arabic written in Hebrew and only about ten people in the world even know how to read it. And I used to go up and work in the Taylor-Schechter collection where every head apart from mine had a *yarmulkah* on it; I was the only non-Jewish person there. People were very helpful and slowly I began to figure the language out, and one day I had this amazing experience, the words just leapt off the page and it was like hearing someone from this village speaking to me. It was completely epiphanic; it's almost exactly twelve years ago now, and I had

this sense of a voice across eight hundred years in the Arabic language.[4] If you picked up a text in, say, Anglo-Saxon, written at about the same time, it would be a totally different language. But this language — Arabic — is *so* conservative, it has preserved exactly the same turns of phraseover all these years. So you can read these texts today and get a sense of talking to someone you've actually met. And I think it was that that gave this sense to the book, it really was a villager speaking, coming alive as it were.

CC Well, it's been hailed as an exemplar of the New Anthropology and James Clifford has praised the book for its non-hegemonic attempt to study the Egyptian village. Was this something you were striving towards, to create a non-manipulative anthropological text?

AG I'm not a theoretically-minded person at all, but the reason why I stopped doing anthropology, and I *knew* I had to stop as soon as I finished my PhD, was precisely because anthropology was creating a kind of hegemonic voice. It was an authoritative voice, an *authoritarian* voice, and all the time I was in this village I never had that sense of authority. And essentially, this was because I'm Indian.

CC And you were being questioned by the villagers: "Why aren't you circumcised? Why do you burn your dead?"

AG Yes, I was just as much an object of study to them as they were to me. And I wanted to capture that reality. And now when Jim Clifford says it's non-hegemonic, it's true, I think that *is* what it is, but that's not what I had in mind. I just had in mind trying to represent my own experience as truthfully as I possibly could. In some ways, what he says and what I did coincide, but along two parallel tracks. It wasn't that I went there and started to write *In an Antique Land* with a theory.

CC This seems like a preoccupation of yours though, maybe not consciously, but this question of what constitutes knowledge recurs in lots of different ways in the novels. You make us realize how deeply implicated knowledge is in power structures. There's the problematizing of anthropology and history in *In an Antique Land*, the questioning of science in *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Circle of Reason*, and the interrogation of what constitutes the nation in *The Shadow Lines*. Is this something you're deliberately exploring in your writing?

AG Again I wouldn't say it's conscious, but you're absolutely right, it's true that this is a subject that interests me, more and more. I think, as you say, oneof the essential topics of my writing is, what is it to know? And in some sense, *The Calcutta Chromosome* is really about people trying to escape being known. I think that began to fascinate me — in a world where everything is known, how do you become what is not known, how do you escape the omniscient gaze?

CC In *The Calcutta Chromosome* Murugan says, "knowledge [can]'t begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge"(104). I like that paradox, that you can't know anything unless you realize that you can't know anything [laughs], and that's when knowing starts. Is it a statement you'd agree with yourself?

AG I think that *is* what makes Murugan special, that he understood that, and I think certainly I would say that for myself. But this is a position that's completely contrary to what happens in this library, for instance. The whole idea of doing what people do here is the idea that knowledge can be exhaustive, that everything can be known. And that's what I don't believe, I don't believe that at all. I think we all tell stories about things. And in effect what James Clifford is really saying about *In an Antique Land* is that I acknowledge that mine is not an authoritative reading, I don't even expect it to be exhaustive; it's just stuff that happened to me. Research for me is not the same thing as what it would be for, say, someone in the social sciences. I like libraries, I like research, but for me it's just the beginning of a story. It's true that I do a lot of research, but that's why I know the limitations of research. And when you're writing fiction in terms of history, I think it's important to acknowledge that an historical novel is like any other novel: essentially it's about people. Unless people's stories are interesting, the history itself doesn't matter at all, it's only a backdrop. History is interesting to me because it creates specific predicaments, that are particular to that moment in time and nowhere else. So I'm interested in history to the point that I can represent that predicament truthfully and accurately. But beyond that, history for the sake of history doesn't interest me. And I would say the same about research. It's a beginning, it gives me ideas about what's in the world, it starts me off, that's all.

CC Moving to the subject of science and technology, I'm intrigued by all your references to the history of science. In *The Circle of Reason* you discuss Western scientists such as Louis Pasteur and Irène Joliot-Curie, and Bengali scientists such as Jagadish Chandra Bose and C.V. Raman; whereas in *The Calcutta Chromosome* you focus on Ronald Ross and other scientists

such as Julius Wagner-Jauregg. How does this interest fit in with your concerns about knowledge and power that we've been talking about?

AG I'm very interested in science, especially science and science fiction. And in some part these interests come to me through Calcutta, because science was very important to the city. It wasn't an old city; it was a new city, and the whole idea was that it was a link with the modern West. Science was very interesting to me from my childhood; not in the sense of wanting to do science, but as a set of stories about people, about scientists. And one of the great influences in my thinking on this was Ashis Nandy. He was my teacher and there were just endless conversations about science. I also had a wonderful professor in Delhi called Jeetsingh Oberoi. He trained as an engineer in Manchester and then switched to anthropology, but he was teeming with ideas about science. So this idea of an alternative science, of a resistance to science, was something that was uppermost in my intellectual culture when I was at college, especially when I was in Delhi. And that got me interested in this whole phenomenon of how Indians do science, or how Indians relate to knowledge, and what are the relationships between a Western knowledge and an Indian knowledge. And in a way, *The Calcutta Chromosome* began as a kind of lark. Ronald Ross, the esteemed malariologist who thinks he knows everything: is it possible that he's been so manipulated by the Indians he doesn't even notice?

CC Yes, it's fascinating what you do with these references to the servant Lutchman from Ross's *Memoirs*.[5] There are these fleeting mentions of Lutchman, but he is really written out of Ross's narrative. And then, towards the end of his *Memoirs*, Ross acknowledges that years after he left India, he advertised to find him, which makes you realize there's so much going on in that relationship that we're not being told about…

AG You know, I'm so glad that you looked at the *Memoirs*. People don't believe it when I say this, but my introduction to Ross came from this place where I used to change buses and there I saw the Ronald Ross memorial wall. I became intrigued by Ross's story and that gave me the idea for the plot. And when I started reading Ross's *Memoirs*, I didn't know what to expect, but if you read against the grain, the story is there. I didn't have to make up much of it, it's all just there. This whole thing with Lutchman… And did you read that amazing stuff about Abdul Kadir? Only his blood would produce the malaria specimens? How does that happen? You know when I read that, I thought I just can't believe this…

CC I think the most amazing part of the *Memoirs* for me is the moment, which you quote in the book, when Ross's servants point out to him a particular species of mosquito whose tail sticks out and suggest it could be the malaria vector. Ross thinks it's rubbish, and it's only later that he makes the connection. Then he entirely erases their contribution from the record, just mentioning a "worthy Hospital Assistant — I regret I have forgotten his name" (222). And one just thinks it was the Indians who made the discovery — not you!

AG [Laughs] That's right, that's right. And what's amazing is that he says so; I mean the enormous naïvety of that. Or, for instance, when he goes to that village and the villagers already know which mosquito transmits malaria, they already know that stuff. Ross isn't a stupid man, but it's extraordinary that he should be so lacking in self-reflection as not to see that every important connection in his work comes from either Lutchman, or Abdul Kadir, or that orderly that works for him in Bangalore. I mean, it's incredible, you read the book and it's just all there… I met a woman in America who's writing a thesis on Ross and she said she came to it through my book. I'm so glad to see that someone's finding out this stuff, because really someone needs to approach it from a history of science perspective.

CC On this subject, could you tell me a bit more about your aims in creating the counter-science cult in *The Calcutta Chromosome*?

AG When I started writing *The Calcutta Chromosome* I told myself that if you're seriously trying to write a book that's about resistance to knowledge, then you have to accept that there's stuff *you* don't know. And that's what *The Calcutta Chromosome* is about. People ask me about the end, what happens next? But I wrote that book in really good faith, and I said to myself there are things happening here that *I* don't know, and I have to accept that premise. So when you ask me that, all I can answer is that I don't know. And in some sense I push the story quite a long way from Ross's *Memoirs*, but I'm looking at the *Memoirs* from a perspective like Murugan's. It's like looking through a slatted window-blind, I can see the shape over there, but I can't see what it is.

CC Is this connected with the discussion of silence in the novel? Silence as an alternative to language; the idea that language can't possibly express the whole of reality…

AG It's partly that, but also there's the connection I make with Gnosticism in the novel. Within certain traditions of Gnosticism, silence was a deity. And that's what makes people Gnostics, it's

this belief that there are certain things that can't be verbalized. That's what I was really trying to get at, to say there are certain things that can't be said. So when you ask me what's the answer to this, I feel to be consistent I have to say that that cannot be said. I don't know the answer, that's the premise of the book. Beyond all this, there's a world that cannot be articulated. It also connects with some of the stuff that's in *In an Antique Land*. Because in Sufism — to which there are many references in *In an Antique Land* — there's the whole idea of the *baatani*, which is the silent or the unspoken, which is a great idea in Sufism; that which cannot be perceived through intelligence. So it's a constant idea in mysticism: that which cannot be perceived, that which cannot be articulated, which can be apprehended but not known.

CC Do you think that novels, then, are a good way of expressing the unknowable, compared with other academic disciplines which are predicated on a claim to know?

AG Different people have different ways of approaching things. I think for me the enormous excitement about the novel as a form is that the novel can do anything. I see it as the overarching form. I don't see it necessarily as fictional, I think it overarches fiction, and non-fiction, and history, the present, the past. There are no limits to a novel, nor are there any rules to a novel, so that if I want to write a novel about Cambridge that is about the beetles of Cambridge rather than about the libraries of Cambridge, I'm free to do that. I feel so fortunate that it's become possible for me to do nothing but write novels, because it's the only way that I know to follow through whatever it is that I'm thinking about. It allows you to explore something with a richness and a sense of context, but most of all it allows you to explore people. So I don't think I could really say that the novel appeals to me because it lets me do this or lets me do that. I think what's appealing to me is that it doesn't have any borders, you can really make it what you want. So when people say to me "are your books really novels?" I don't care at all. There was a time when I did, but I realize now that I just do what I can. If I produce a novel, that's fine; if not, then I don't really care.

CC Your work is so difficult to categorize. Salman Rushdie makes the claim, in that controversial introduction to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing*, that perhaps your future as a writer lies more in journalism and non-fiction than in novel-writing (xxii). It seems to me a ludicrous argument, because your work is never just one thing or another, you're always going over boundaries…

AG What really struck me when I read that is that Rushdie's own idea of the novel is so impoverished. To me it's his work that seems like journalism. You can see what he does: basically he goes into a library and reads newspapers of a certain period, or history books, or mythology books of a certain period, and then he puts it into a certain kind of language. To me that's not even fiction, that's something else. But it's interesting that he's working with such a narrow idea of what it means to write a novel, and I think that's also in some way the profound limitation of his work, which he's now discovering. He's really at the end of what he can imagine. Because you look at Marquez, and Marquez was a great journalist. And he still *is* a great journalist, and so much of his work comes from everyday life and everyday sources. So to me it's not even interesting whether it's a novel or not a novel. Even to think about things in these terms reveals the limitations of the person who's thinking about them. Because all the *really* interesting work that's come out in the last thirty or forty years comes out of the boundaries between these things — Calvino, Primo Levi — so much interesting work in contemporary fiction comes exactly out of those boundaries. And it's in this sense that the fictional tradition is so important to me. But I would also say that the real world is interesting, I'm completely fascinated by the real world, the things I see around me. If you were to compare it with painting, there are certain painters who are abstractionists, who work essentially from what they see in their heads. And then there are figurative painters, who see a reality and show you a way of looking at that reality. I am definitely of the latter category, because to me the real world is just endlessly fascinating. And I'm very grateful for that because I can see that I'm never going to run out of ideas for my writing. For example, I've spent just one week here looking at stuff in this library, and I feel I've got enough to keep me going for five years [laughs].

CC I like the way you're talking about the novel overspilling categories and that seems to be very characteristic of your work. In the title of *The Shadow Lines*, you give us this great term, borrowed from Conrad, which is used to question the artificial boundaries that divide disciplines from each other, or nations from each other. Is this something you think about a lot?

AG I do think about it a lot. But there again it's partly just a result of being an Indian from the particular intellectual moment I found myself in. Because disciplinary boundaries never had for us the kind of absoluteness they have in the West. So I think you'll see it's not just me; many Indians who've done really interesting work over the last fifteen or twenty years have similarly combined completely different things. Like Subaltern Studies, which is partly anthropology, partly history, and out of that you get something really rich and interesting. I mean I don't always understand what

Gayatri or Homi Bhabha are saying [laughs], but you get the sense that they're coming out of that same tradition. A lot of these people are people of my generation: we belong to a moment when those disciplinary boundaries weren't really set. We were just trying to talk about the world as we saw it. Some people did this through history, some through criticism, and for me it was through the novel, because for me there's nothing so interesting as the novel. In my view the novel is the most interesting form because nowhere else, not in history, not in anthropology, are people at the centre, individual people.

CC The narrator of *In an Antique Land* complains about being trapped by language, because Arabic is unable to express the word "uncircumcized" as anything other than "impure" (62). How do you deal with the limitations of writing in English, of writing in just one language?

AG It's an interesting question because I'm one of those people who lives in a lot of different languages. Bengali is a language that I'm completely fluent in, in which I think a lot, read a lot. Arabic is also a language that I love to speak. When I'm writing I find myself struggling to express something that in Bengali would be said in a different way, or in Arabic would be said in another way. But I've seen with a lot of my contemporaries — other writers — that the way they deal with the language question is to try to introduce Indian or other words into English. That's not something I can do, simply because the range of languages I'm dealing with is too great; nobody knows all these languages, you know, nobody knows Arabic and Hindi and Bengali. I have an unusual and unique mix of languages. So I don't do that very much, I only occasionally introduce — for example — an Arabic word or a concept. I think that the way linguistic difference really shows up in my work is through something which people in Bengal always comment on, that is, that the shape of my sentences have a very Bengali feel to them. I don't know why that should be, but I think it's true. So many times, in Bengal I've had people say to me, "Of course your books are translated into English, aren't they?" and I say, "No, no, I write them in English" and they say, "But they sound so much like Bengali". And one of the ways in which that is true is that, especially in Bengali story-telling and Bengali writing, there's often a kind of deceptive simplicity to the language, which is something I also strive for. What I look for in language, what interests me the most in a good sentence, is when a sentence can be eloquent without being complicated.

CC You mention that your sentences have this Bengali structure to them, and I sometimes feel that I'm missing out on a lot of aspects of your work, because I don't understand Bengali.

So many of the references in your work are to Bengali texts — Tagore is obviously a major influence and is available to me in translation, but you've also talked about a Bengali travel-writing tradition…

AG Yes, one of the great influences for me, especially when writing *In an Antique Land*, was this wonderful Bengali writer called Syed Mustafa Ali. He was a Muslim Bengali from Calcutta, who wrote a marvellous book about travelling in the North West Frontier Province in Pakistan. He went to Berlin in the 1920s or something, and he was completely fluent in German; he did a lot of work in German, he was a scholar. Then he came back to Bengal and crafted a literary career for himself. In many ways, my career is very much like Syed Mustafa Ali's, so in some ways he's a real exemplar for me. But this book on the North West Frontier is a wonderful book because right from the beginning it has this very funny tone, it's one of the most hilarious books I've ever read. The funny bits that you see in *In an Antique Land*, they owe a lot to this book.

CC I love the bit with the "Indian machine" in *In an Antique Land*, where you're asked for advice on the Indian water-pump, and you pretend that you're almost praying to it; it's so funny. Is that something that actually happened?

AG Oh yes, everything in there actually happened. But it's interesting that you pick up on that bit, because I recently met Vidia Naipaul and that was the bit that he kept asking me about. It obviously had made a great impression on him [laughs].

CC Well, you mention Naipaul, and he's an influence I wanted to ask you about. In an essay you've said that the three most important diasporic Indian writers are Rushdie, A.K. Ramanujan and Naipaul ("Diaspora" 73). It was a long time ago, you may have changed your mind by now [laughs]… But I think you can see elements of Naipaul in your writing, although your politics are very different. You seem to share with him this construction of an interchange between novels, autobiography and travel writing. Do you still feel influenced by him?

AG Absolutely, I think Naipaul is a continuing influence; I have returned to his work again and again and again. As you say, I don't agree with the substance of anything that he says. But his project was what was interesting to me. When I was in college, Naipaul was just about the only Indian writer you could read in English. He showed us that it was possible for us, as Indians, to be

writing in the world, to be read in the world. But most of all, what was powerful about Naipaul's example to me was that he wasn't just writing about India, he wasn't just writing about Trinidad, he was using his writing to claim the whole world. And I think it was an incredibly brave project. I disagree with almost everything that Naipaul says, but he was a real pioneer. I have to say, I think I owe him an enormous, enormous debt. I was in college reading this thing he wrote on the jasmine, and how he recognized it for the first time ("Jasmine"), and I realized I'd had exactly the same experience. Our experience was something that just wasn't being represented. Naipaul was there, and he was representing it, so in that way he was very important to me.

CC One parallel that's struck me between your work and Naipaul's is that in *In an Antique Land* you have this experience when you are invited to the mosque several times and you resist it, you feel uncomfortable with going along. And I think in *Among the Believers* Naipaul has the same kind of reaction…[6]

AG I think that's true; I certainly didn't want to go into the mosque for several reasons. One is, there was already so much pressure on me to convert. And I felt I had to make a clear distinction that there was no way I was going to convert, because I wasn't. It's true, I felt an enormous resistance to going to the mosque. I felt by going I would be mimicking a kind of religious practice which I didn't feel comfortable doing. I mean, I've gone into mosques as a tourist, but I didn't want to go in with friends when they were practising their devotions. I think it's just in bad faith, you know. Even though you respect their beliefs, you just don't want to do that.

CC The final thing I want to ask you about is September 11 and how you think it might affect you as a writer. I mean, people have been talking about how the American novel will have to alter in the wake of this huge event. How do you think that September 11 has affected or will affect your writing? And I suppose that implies you're an American writer, which you are and you're not…

AG I don't think of myself as an American writer *at all*. I think of myself completely as an Indian writer. But September 11 was a very strange thing; somehow in my life, I often find myself with appalling things happening all around me. That was true in Delhi — and that was what it most reminded me of, Delhi in 1984, again you had this kind of fury, of hatred, breaking upon you from all sides. It was a strange experience for me because for years I've been *so* appalled by American policies, so utterly disgusted by what they do in the world. But when something like this happens

there's no point saying "I told you so". You can't look back on the causes, a page in history has been turned and you have to look at it all over again. And this last year, it was almost as though every aspect of my life has been coming back to visit me. This whole situation really comes out of South Asia and the Middle East, and out of that peculiar vortex of Hindu-Muslim relations, Muslim-Jewish relations, I mean everything I've always been writing about. So it's like twenty years of work have come back to haunt me.

For me none of it really comes as a surprise, because I've always been saying this was going to happen; everyone has known it. In 1998, when I was in Karachi, when I was in Lahore, the Americans bombed Afghanistan, and in front of my eyes I could see people going off to join the Taliban. So for years I've felt disquieted at the thought that my children, who have American passports, would now belong to a nation that arouses such widespread dislike around the world. I've been very concerned about that. But now that it's happened, you know, I've come to the conclusion that I hate fundamentalism of all kinds — whether it be Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, or Christian fundamentalism. And this kind of Al-Qaeda fundamentalism is something that I just completely loathe. I saw them trying to destroy the village in Egypt that I lived in. These are young men I grew up with, this is basically the catchment pool of Al-Qaeda. You know Mohammad Atta, who bombed the World Trade Centre: he was from a village a few miles from where I was staying, Kafr ash-Sheikh. Half the people in my village were born in Kafr ash-Sheikh, so all these young kids, you know… When I look back, you can see every aspect of this conflict coming in *In an Antique Land*. When I was there in 1990, 1991, during the Gulf War, I felt I was going mad, because I could see the seeds of generations of conflict being laid. And when I was in America no one seemed to notice, they just thought it was a good war, that they'd won. So I felt deeply, deeply conflicted about it, and what I feel about it now is that really I have a great deal of sympathy for people in the Arab world, in the Muslim world, but that al-Qaeda is no solution, this kind of fundamentalism is no solution.

I feel there are long periods of history when you can be ahead of history, when you can reflect upon it and say "this is what's happening". And there are moments in history when history accelerates to a pace where you can't, and I think we are in one of these moments right now. Because this particular weapon that al-Qaeda — and even Arafat — have unleashed, this weapon of suicide is a weapon that would mean the end of society as we know it. Because Hobbes said — and I think Hobbes is right to say — that the foundation of society is the fear of death. And when we look upon a society which is actively encouraging the passage from that into something else, it seems to me that we're looking at a society that's embracing its own doom. Gandhi always used to say that

the problem with violence is that violence becomes not a means but an end in itself, and this is what this violence has become, it's no longer a means but an end. So it doesn't matter what we do; it's a terrifying thing that we're looking at.

CC It must be hard to live with that fear in New York. I mean, you must have felt quite secure before September 11 and it must change everything now, for you and your family…

AG I *never* felt secure. I told my kids, for a long time I've been telling them, there's some *really* bad stuff going on in this world. I've been out there, covering this stuff as a journalist and I always went to great lengths to show them the pictures, to tell them, "this is what is happening". On September 11 my daughter saw it all happen. She literally saw it all from the window of her classroom. And when I went to bring her home, walking through those crowds, I got there and she said to me, "Where were you? I saw it happen through the window of my history class". And it struck me as a strangely metaphoric thing to say [laughs]. But her best friend's father died.[7] My son, in his class, two kids have lost parents. But my kids have taken it in their stride. And I think it's because I never tried to pretend to them that the world is a safe place. Because from where I sit it doesn't look like a safe place. I've always been telling them about the horror that's out there. But whoever said the world was going to be a safe place? It never was and never will be.

CC Thank you.

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[1] In an interview, Ghosh states that

> 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 Tickell171).

[2] This letter can be read on <www.amitavghosh.com/cwprize.html#letter> [Internet] [Accessed 5 June 2003; link no longer active].

[3] An erotic dance scene in *In an Antique Land* (202) bears a striking resemblance to an equally sensual passage in *The Circle of Reason* (337). The passage from *In an Antique Land* depicts a girl dancing at a wedding in Nashâwy, and in *The Circle of Reason*, wedding dancing is described in almost the same terms, except that this time it is a male character who performs the dance. Both scenes emphasize the stillness of the dancer's torso, which acts as an "exact counterpoint" to the swift movement of the hips; both compare the dance to "love-making" and "geometry"; and both end with the dancer breaking off, laughing. The

close fit of the imagery as well as the fact that both scenes are also preceded by a depiction of wedding guests singing the Arabic song, "We took her from her father's house", suggest that both scenes are modeled on real events. Thus, even in his ostensibly fictional work, *The Circle of Reason*, Ghosh draws upon diaries and notes from his stay in Egypt, which he later reworks in the semi-autobiographical work, *In an Antique Land*.

[4] *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh describes this "epiphanic" moment. Reading centuries-old Arabic texts, he can almost hear the dialect of the village in which he did his anthropological fieldwork:

> Over the next couple of years, as I followed the Slave's trail from library to library, there were times when the magnifying glass would drop out of my hand when I came upon certain words and turns of phrase for I would suddenly hear the voice of Shaikh Musa speaking in the documents in front of me as clearly as though I had been walking past the canal, on my way between Lataifa and Nashawy (105).

[5] For more information on this aspect of the novel, see my paper: Chambers, 2003.

[6] In *In an Antique Land*, the narrator 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] wants to stay within that religion of [his]" (48). Ghosh refuses to go to the mosque, but soon suffers paroxysms of guilt for his decision.(49). Another Hindu traveller in the Muslim world, V.S. Naipaul, also declines an invitation to attend prayers(*Believers* 201). Like Ghosh, Naipaul is reluctant to take part in the collective display of faith, but, unlike him, he is not afraid to explain his reasons why. Conversion is overtly alluded to, when Naipaul's interlocutor remarks ominously that attending the mosque "sometimes has an effect on newcomers". This contrasts with Ghosh's more charitable interpretation of the invitation to prayer as Mustafa's attempt "to introduce me to the most important element of his imaginative life". Later in the text, Naipaul describes Islam as "an imperialism as well as a religion" (*Believers* 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.

[7] Ghosh describes this man's death in a poignant essay he wrote for the *New Yorker*, just after the World Trade Centre attacks ("Trade").

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Claire Chambers is Lecturer in English Literature at Leeds Metropolitan University. She successfully completed her PhD in 2003, and papers she has written have appeared in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* and *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*, ed. Tabish Khair. Address: School of Cultural Studies, Leeds Metropolitan University, Civic Quarter, Leeds, LS1 3HE, U.K. [email: c.chambers@leedsmet.ac.uk]