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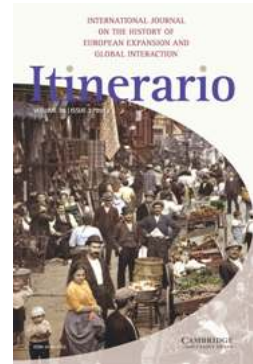
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Between the Walls of Archives and Horizons of Imagination

An Interview with Amitav Ghosh

BY MAHMOOD KOORIA



In the first week of October 2012, Amitav Ghosh visited Amsterdam to give a keynote address on “Confluence and Crossroads: Europe and the Fate of the Earth” organised by the European Cultural Foundation. Ghosh, who graduated in Social Anthropology from Oxford University, is noted for his fictional writings that explore historical and transregional connections. His novels include The Circle of Reason, The Shadow Lines, The Calcutta Chromosome, The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide, Sea of Poppies and River of Smoke. He has also published three collections of essays: Imam and Indian, Dancing in Cambodia and At Large in Burma, and Incendiary Circumstances. In addition, he is a regular writer for The New Republic, The New Yorker, The New York Times and other publications. He has taught at Delhi University, the Columbia University, Queens College (New York), and Harvard University. He has been awarded honorary doctorates by Queens College and the Sorbonne. I met him at the Hotel Ambassade in Amsterdam for a long conversation on the writing of history, historical fiction, and the historian and novelist’s respective crafts. The following lines are excerpts from the interview.¹

You started on your “transnational journeys” during your childhood. Though you were born in Calcutta, you grew up in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and I guess also in Burma. So is this how a “global writer” nurtured his imagination?

Well, first of all, I never lived in Burma as a child, even though my family has had longstanding connections with the region. However, these “transnational journeys” certainly influenced me a lot. My father was in the military, after which he transferred to government service and spent several years in Indian embassies abroad. We travelled along with his appointments. As a little boy I studied in Bangladesh, which was still called East Pakistan; then in Sri Lanka; and then I went to a boarding school in

North India. You know, I was born well after Independence, and if I had grown up only in India the subcontinent as such would have seemed notional. But being a Bengali from an East Bengal family, the subcontinent is very real for me. I feel it is not just India that is my home, but also Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

And after your early schooling you came to Delhi?

Yes, I was in Delhi for five years. I did my undergraduate studies in History at St. Stephens College, after which I studied Anthropology at the Delhi School of Economics. After I graduated from St. Stephens, I decided that I wanted to work, so I took up a job with the *Indian Express*. In fact, I worked there throughout my MA at the Delhi School.

And then you switched to Oxford, and finally to Alexandria?

Yes, somehow my marks at the Delhi School were quite good, and I applied for a scholarship to Oxford and I got the scholarship. From Oxford I decided to do my fieldwork in Egypt, and that is how I landed up in Alexandria.

While you were at Oxford in the late 1970s and early 1980s specialising in Social Anthropology, what was the intellectual atmosphere like, and how did it influence you? I guess the vigour of Evans-Pritchard,² who could be regarded as the guiding star of historical anthropology, and Rodney Needham,³ who worked on Southeast Asian communities in a largely Levi-Straussean framework had not yet lost its appeal.

That is a good question. Evans-Pritchard had left Oxford long before I arrived—he was there until 1970, and I got there in 1978—but of course he was a live presence still, and people used to talk about him all the time. Evans-Pritchard's works had an important influence on me, because he was essentially a writer himself, a very literary writer, and my supervisor, Peter Lienhardt, was his student.⁴ My supervisor was also a literary person and had come to anthropology from literature much like me. He had studied with F. R. Leavis who was a very famous critic in those days. So in some sense, anthropology was never a social science as such for me. It was much more a sort of literary enterprise. And this was very fortunate because I was not at all interested in doing social science. It was just pure luck that I ended up in the one place with the one person who I think I could have worked with. I was not at all interested in structuralist approaches or any of that sort of stuff.

So you were not much interested in the structuralist approaches that Needham offered?

Well, I obviously read it, but by the time I was at Oxford Needham was fighting with all of the anthropologists there. And in any case I was not in Oxford very long. I left for Egypt quite soon, and then I was in North Africa. In fact I finished my PhD altogether in two years and three months, because I was about to run out of funding. I just did not have the time. In that respect, it was all a blur.

Has Egypt had a great influence on you? I mean not only as a nostalgic area of your "field" for the doctoral studies—your later work also absorbed Egyptian socio-cultural landscapes.

Well, to some extent I have described this in *In an Antique Land*. My interest in Egypt was sparked during my time in Oxford. You were expected to choose a place to go to. I just had this peculiar experience where I found historical sources dealing with Indian and Egyptian links. Then I became interested in looking at these connections. In some basic way, my interest was always in history, specifically in historical connections.

By training you are an anthropologist, but you are known as a writer of fiction whose narratives significantly deal with history. Could you tell us about your shift from academics to literature, and from anthropology to history?

I know that they must seem like disciplinary shifts and all that, but to me they were not, because I was interested in writing. I wanted to write novels. At the same time, I was interested in history and in a number of other things. So they all came together. It was all part of my education and my processes of thought. In the first instance I think of myself as a novelist. I don't think of myself as an academician at all. If you read my PhD thesis you will see it has hardly any footnotes, the bibliography must be two or three pages long.

Have you published your PhD or do you intend to publish it?

No, and I am not at all interested in publishing it. It was not really a standard work of social science or anthropology in any sense. Someone has even written a PhD on my PhD! It was not really a standard social scientific or anthropological thesis.⁵

What makes you comfortable to write historical novels and not academic history?

I do not really know how to answer that. To put it simply, I am just not interested in writing academic history, mainly because it is just a different set of questions that one asks. In the first instance, I am interested in characters, in people, in individual stories, and the history is a backdrop. But there is a huge difference between writing a historical novel and writing history. If I may put it like this: history is like a river, and the historian is writing about the ways the river flows and the currents and crosscurrents in the river. But, within this river, there are also fish, and the fish can swim in many different directions. So, I am looking at it from the fish's point of view and which direction the fish swims in. So, history is the water in which it swims, and it is important for me to know the flow of the water. But in the end I am interested in the fish. The novelist's approach to the past, through the eyes of characters, is substantially different from the approach of the historian. For me, seeing the past through the prism of a character allows me to understand some aspects of the past that historians don't deal with. But, I must admit that doing this would not be possible if historians had not laid the foundations.

Most of your works have a central cultural geographical locale, which is of course the Indian Ocean. How did you become interested in seafaring and the maritime world?

This was never a conscious choice. But now, when I look back on my work, I see that I have been involved with journeys across the Indian Ocean from the very beginning. The central episode of *The Circle of Reason*, my first book, was about

a group of people from Kerala going to the Gulf, and I was working in Kerala while I wrote it. At the time I was attached to the Centre for Developmental Studies in Trivandrum. However, that was merely how the connections with the Indian Ocean world started. It was not intentional, but sometimes things are intentional without being intentional. Though it was never part of a planned venture and did not begin as a conscious project, I realise in hindsight that this is really what always interested me most: the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the connections and the cross-connections between these regions.

If it is their cosmopolitan culture which attracted you, as you have mentioned elsewhere, why did you not focus much on overland trading networks, which were no less cosmopolitan?

Somehow the overland connections and networks did not interest me.

You do a lot of archival research for each of your books. Is that because you try your best to make your text and context historically accurate? And if so, then where do you place your imagination?

Imagination is not a sort of floating essence. Imagination begins from particular points in space and time. For me, doing research often sparks the stories; it sparks my ideas. It starts from there, and it goes on from there. So I cannot separate imagination from research as such. And in the case of my recent novels I had to do a lot of historical research because nobody else had done it. I mean historians had not done it. There is very little historical work on the opium trade, which is a bizarre thing because the opium trade played such a large part in our economy until the 1920s. People quite often ask me why is there so little awareness of the Opium War in India. I don't know the answer.

In the case of Asia, the Opium War was a world historical event that changed the continent. Yet the calamity of the war and of the trade remains hidden. The Chinese watched and saw how colonialism had overtaken large swathes of Asia and Africa. It arrived in the form of trade, and the trade was a beachhead for land-acquisition, first peacefully obtained by grants, and then by force.

I read many historical monographs and studies about Canton, yet I still had very little understanding of what I most wanted to know: what was it like to actually be there? I wanted to enter that past, inhabiting the historical time and place. I enter the past in a way that makes me ask what it was like to be present in that place, in that week, on that day. And this is what leads me to archival research, by referring to memoirs, newspapers, diaries, letters, and other primary sources.

It is obvious you would have visited a lot of archives in the world for your research over the last thirty years. Which archives attracted you most in terms of your research questions?

There are many archives that are interesting. The Mahatma Gandhi Museum in Mauritius is a very good archive. The National Archives in Mauritius are also very interesting. The Greenwich National Maritime Museum Archive is another fascinating archive. But at the end of the day, the most important archive for my last two books was definitely that of the India Office Collections, in the British Library.

What are the methods you follow to deal with and interpret the archival material, along with the historical imagination?

I do the two together—writing and research cannot be separated from each other. Until I develop a character, I do not know where to look. It is only after I start writing that I start to discover what I need to know, which then drives the research. I write and I research at the same time. That is why my approach is quite different from the way a historian works. Suppose I am writing about a character, and the character is sailing on a ship. For me it is important to know what kind of ship it is, what the ship looks like, what the character is wearing, and what language he speaks. In general, these are not the questions that historians ask. The character creates the questions which I then proceed to ask. It is the character who provides direction to the research.

Historians approach the past around a certain topic. If they do research on a certain area, for example on trade, they are not interested in linguistic exchanges or the climate of the region. They will be interested in certain kinds of communications and commercial transactions. But for me, let us say, when I write about nineteenth-century Canton, I have to look at all of this, including the languages, the textiles, the businesses, because I am trying to imagine the entirety of their lives. I am not just following a single topic. I am trying to understand what the climate was like, what the weather was like, what they ate. So what I am trying to do and what I have to do as a writer is quite different from the approach of a historian—I am imagining that moment, that place. Perhaps the only discipline that approaches the past in this way is military history, especially in writing descriptions of battlefields. Military historians describe the weather, the terrain, the clothing, the equipment, states of mind and body, and everything else that influences the outcome. These, along with many other commonalities, interest a military historian as much as they do a novelist.

While applying your own imagination to analysis, how do you deal with the questions of ethnocentrism in anthropological terms, or subjectivity in historical terms?

I do not think it is possible to get away from them: there is both an inevitable ethnocentrism and an inevitable historicism. I strongly believe one has to try and look at the past through the eyes of the people there, but of course it is very complicated and difficult. “Presentism” is always a problem.

I am drawn to the past because it provides instances of human predicaments that are unique and unrepeatable, instances that have more to say about the human condition than anything that I could ever make up. I follow those through my characters from different chronological and geographical viewpoints.

Somewhere else you have said that you discover (from the archives) what you want to know. What does that actually mean?

I think that what I was saying was that because I approach something from the point of view of my characters, there are certain things I do not need to research. For example, if my character is a merchant who is dealing in opium, I do not necessarily need to know the price fluctuations of opium over a hundred-year period. That is not what is important for me. What is important for me is what the price was when

he was there, and the fluctuations in price that he himself is dealing with. That provides a natural limit. For me, it is always the characters that drive the story, never the research. For example, I look into the lifestyles and manners of the characters: their food, their pleasures, leisure activities, their everyday life. My effort is to answer those questions as evident from the literature of their times. I cannot write something convincingly on certain plots and contexts unless I see it through my own eyes.

In the early 1990s, you largely dealt with the Geniza records in order to write In an Antique Land. It was a time in which those records were underutilised even in maritime historical studies, apart from the works of S. D. Goitein. Could you explain your engagements with the Geniza records?

By that point I knew Arabic, but I had to learn Judeo-Arabic, which is a very difficult language. It is a variant of colloquial Arabic written in the Hebrew script. One of the main problems was the orthography—that is, deciphering the text. These were handwritten texts, so I was dealing literally with the paper. Reading, understanding, and translating these materials was very hard work. Though Goitein had published some volumes, his works were not accessible to me at that time. So I had to decipher the text, which experience I have described in *In an Antique Land*.

Since you write historical novels and you are an expert in many languages, it must be a great advantage especially when you conduct archival research. How many languages do you know?

I would say I know five: Bengali, Hindi, French, Arabic, and English. I dealt with Judeo-Arabic, but I don't know whether you could consider that another language. However, compared to the European tradition of linguistic scholarship mine is very patchy. Many scholars have used a very wide range of languages. Consider Professor Dirk Kolff. He deals with Dutch, French, Persian, and Arabic. Or look at Professor Engseng Ho, he has Chinese and Arabic. I think this is the most important skill in relation to studying the Indian Ocean region. The Indian Ocean is linguistically very diverse and anyone who approaches it should first learn languages. For my new books I have started learning Cantonese, but I never had enough Cantonese to be at all effective.

Apart from archival sources, what are the other methods or sources that you depend upon to recreate the past?

I look a lot at linguistic records because I am very interested in languages. I also try to talk to people who have lived through certain contexts that my works deal with.

You usually visit places before you talk about them, which might be considered a kind of anthropological fieldwork.

I like to visit places to see what they are like. In my books the places are characters onto themselves. For instance, I spent a lot of time in Canton (Guangzhou). It is a very interesting place. Even experienced Western travellers were astonished by its uniqueness and unfamiliarity, and they talk about it time and again. Canton has one of the earliest mosques in the world. It was built by the Prophet Muhammad's uncle. It is called the Mosque of Abu Waqqas. It is a very ancient mosque, beautifully main-

tained, and pilgrims from all over the world congregate there. So, the city of Canton itself is a character in my recent novels.

Many of your characters belong to diverse geographical and linguistic entities. How do you engage with archival records written in other languages in terms of conveying their contents in English-language fiction? Is this ever a dilemma?

I would not say that it is a problem; it is the reality. There are so many varieties of languages and dialects around the Indian Ocean. And I take this to mean not only in the broader world of the Indian Ocean, which of course we all know, but also in the specific setting of a ship. Shipping crews were incredibly diverse, and we need to cope with this challenging multilingual setting. To deal with this case during the stage of writing, I use different varieties and dialects of English, both of modern English and of early modern English. Fortunately, there are plenty of various dialects and registers of English from the nineteenth century.

Some of your works cross of various time-periods. Why do you want to link different timeframes within a single plot through a “chronological whirlwind”? Why not? It makes the story and the plot more interesting.

The earlier question was motivated by the historian within me. Since historians usually deal with a specific timeframe, it makes me wonder how your work has been received by professional historians?

The reception has been wonderful actually, historians have responded very well to my work. You know, I could not believe that I was invited to speak in Cambridge with Natalie Zemon Davis,⁶ who I consider to be one of the great historians. We had a wonderful conversation with each other. I was also invited by a fascinating Coptic historian, John-Paul Ghobrial, who has been doing some incredibly interesting work. He was telling me about some recent projects which show the medieval connections between Christians in Kerala and Syria. An amazing corpus of new church records was excavated in Kerala by István Perczel, an Hungarian scholar. He has found documents that demonstrate the connections to Syrian Christian churches. Apparently, the connection between the Syrian and Keralite churches was very close. They were always were going back and forth, and they were exchanging letters. To this day, there are churches in Syria which are run by Keralite monks. Professor Perczel has managed to unearth many such records, and he has published them. I wrote a short note on it in my website this April, along with some links.⁷

Did you ever face criticism from any historians in terms of your selection of themes, plots, emotions, or the question of accuracy?

I think most historians at least in the West, if not in India, become interested in history by reading historical novels or seeing movies. That is what arouses people's interest in history. I have found that historians tend to read a lot of historical novels, because it brings the things that they themselves are writing about to life. A lot of historians whose work I have used have said to me that it lends colour to their work—it gives it meaning and context. And I do not claim to be completely accu-

rate. Who can claim to be complete accurate? Nobody can. I do not make claims of omniscience. I try my best and there are mistakes and errors and so on. But I think historians recognise that I try to be current; I make an effort to be as accurate as I can be. I think they appreciate that because they know how much work it entails.

In America and Europe, historians certainly read historical novels. In India many people come to history through social sciences, but there, too, a lot of people come to history through reading novels. Nevertheless, I recollect an experience while I was writing *In an Antique Land*. I gave the draft to one of my friends, who is now an acclaimed Indian historian. After reading it he told me to throw it away, remarking that I was dealing with feelings instead of the trade! We should admit that though emotions have very little effect on history in the *longue durée*, at certain moments they do play critical roles in events, and we cannot ignore such events in a comprehensive way.

Violence and war play a significant role in your work. In the case of your writings relating to the Indian Ocean world, such “aggressive modes” are attached to European identities. Why so? I remember reading Sashi Taroor’s review of Sea of Poppies in The Washington Post, in which he comments that through the novel you are unforgiving towards the “villainous” colonial entrepreneurs. Is that how you accommodate violence?

You know, I find this absurd. I write about sailors and soldiers and working class people. What do you think their lives were like? Middle class people entertain the most fantastic ideas. They will think about their English teacher, who was very sweet and gentle, and patted them on the head. Of course that too is a part of reality, but that is not the reality that I am writing about. I am writing about slave traders and opium traders who were difficult, cruel, and harsh men. Sometimes I think peoples’ minds have become kind of soft. Because they are unable to enter the past, they refuse to consider how harsh life was for the majority of people. One of the very few ships which have been preserved from the eighteenth century lies here in Amsterdam. Just enter that ship and look around—it will give you an idea what life was like sailing on that ship. Even just to see the dimensions—the rooms are tiny, there is almost no space for anyone to move. If you read the log of any ship’s journey you’ll see—they were killing each other all the time—floggings, killings, beatings. Do you think these were soft men? This was not a world where everything took place in a drawing room. Life was savage and harsh. What do you think slavery was like? Or indenture?

So violence has nothing to do with coloniality?

Some of the most violent characters in my books are Indians. The *subedars* were constantly beating other people. This too was reality. I would say that one of the greatest works ever written about Indian history was written by a Dutch professor, Dirk Kolff. His book, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*,⁸ is possibly *the* most important, or at least among the two [or] three really important works on Indian history, written over the last twenty years. He completely changed the sentimental way in which people tend to look upon history. He shows us that India, especially North India, was an incredibly violent place, where the great majority of the men were either sol-

diers, thugs, or some kind of hired hand. It was a society of adventurers. They were on the battlefield much of the time. It was a society in constant turmoil. It wasn't a peaceful agrarian world. When farmers went out to do farming they took spears with them. There was a seamless connection between farming, militancy, and soldiering. The India of that period was built around violence. There were more soldiers in India than anywhere else in the world. They were constantly at war. So it is a most important book for people to read. It really rids them from their static, peasant-based ideas about Indian history.

Aside from In an Antique Land, what about the pre-colonial Indian Ocean world in its tranquillity and serenity?

If you read some ship logs or sailors' accounts, you will see what sailing was like. A sailor's life typically began when they were about nine years old and became cabin boys. They were beaten and subjected to the most incredible kinds of abuse. By the time they got to be thirteen or fourteen, they were doing the same thing to everyone around them. You read these nineteenth-century sailors' logs, and you may begin to imagine what the life of a sailor was like. Just think about it! If you go and look at the ship that I mentioned earlier, you will see that the top of the mast is a hundred feet off the deck. As a sailor, you are working on the top of the mast, on a ship that is going haywire. It is work of incredible danger and violence. Hardly any of them survived their twenties. You know, there is record after record of sailors being tossed about and falling off their ships. And if you fell in the water, you were gone. Those ships couldn't turn around in time to save you. If you fell on deck, and if you hurt your hand, that was the end of your job, you couldn't work anymore. There are ample records about sailors who break their hands, and then commit suicide. Because they know that life is over. So it is a world of incredible grimness. It is a world of unbelievable savagery. What I have written in my books is in some sense a sweetened version of the reality that people actually lived through. I just do not know how to explain that to people, because most people who read books are from the middle class, and they have middle class lives. They cannot imagine these realities.

When you revisit the past through all these harsh and cruel landscapes, is it the person Amitav Ghosh who revisits or the scholar within you?

It is a bit of both. When a historian reads an account of, let us say, sea travel, he is looking at abstractions, at numbers. But I am trying to think of the experience—what it was like, for instance for a lascar? You know how lascars were recruited? They were basically kidnapped. Even sailors were. You know how English sailors were recruited in late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? Ship's captains would pay owners of taverns to drug men who came into the tavern, and then they would take them in their drugged state onto their ships. The men would not wake up until they were half a day out to sea. It was a practice called *Shanghaiing*, and this went on until the mid-nineteenth century. Soldering was easy compared to the brutality of the life of a sailor on a ship. They were stuck on these tiny vessels. If you look at the dimensions, you'll see they weren't much larger than a few rooms of normal—but there'd be hundred men on board. And they were stuck on those vessels for four years. Can you imagine that?

In your recent lecture at Amsterdam, you were talking only about environmental change. Is that mainly because you are worried about the existential crises of numerous historical locales? You specifically mentioned the historical significance of Greece?

We can forget about the historical places, they are basically gone. I do not think they can be defended for long. Just looking out through this window at this canal, how long can Amsterdam defend itself against the water? In case of the three or four meters of sea-level rise, which now seems almost certain, all of this is gone. But what I admire about the Dutch is that they have a very realistic and practical understanding of this. They understand what is coming, and they are making preparations for it. What really horrifies me is that in India, we have no appreciation of what is happening. Just yesterday someone sent me a link: the Ganges and the Indus Deltas are sinking at four times the rate of sea-level rise. Four times the rate! So if the sea level rises by let us say half a metre, that means it is amplified by another two meters. In Bengal alone, a hundred million people live within one meter of the sea. A hundred million people! And the Indus Delta is just as bad. It is going to be severely affected. Bengal is responsible for so much of rice production, and now, because the flow of water has changed, salt water is penetrating deeper and deeper into agricultural land. Very soon, even parts that are cultivated today will no longer be cultivatable. This has already happened in large areas of the Sundarbans. But in terms of public awareness in India, people seem to think that the only important things in the world are cricket and Bollywood. There is no awareness of the nature of the catastrophe that is approaching.

What makes global warming more dangerous than terrorism or separatist movements, which endanger people more directly in their daily lives?

There are two things to be said on that issue. Firstly, compared to the nature of what is happening in the environment, terrorism, elections, and so on are epiphenomena. They are minor compared to the absolutely tectonic scale of the changes that we are now facing. Secondly, a lot of the conflicts that we see, even within South Asia, are significantly related to climate change. In the case of Maoism in Nepal, I have seen a study which shows us that the rise and intensity of Maoist movements in Nepal can be tied directly to rainfall decreases. The same is true in Chhattisgarh and Orissa in India. There is an important dimension of climate change in many of these conflicts. As a result of terrible fluctuations in rain, many people are forced to leave their land, causing enormous population displacement. The problem in the case of Asia, or specifically in India, is that people do not seem to be even looking at these issues through the prism of global change and its destructive effects.

Though you are generally not a controversial figure, some of your stands, specifically related to the acceptance or refusal of certain awards, did bring you to the headlines. I am thinking of the withdrawal of The Glass Palace from the Commonwealth Prize and your acceptance of Dan David Prize. How do you view these issues?

I am not someone who seeks out controversies, as you said. But when life presents you with these issues, you have to deal with them as best as you can. My accept-

ance of the Dan David Prize was a comparatively minor controversy, but it sparked much disagreement. I have explained my views on this in great length. I have clearly stated my views on the matter of cultural boycotts. I do not believe in such kinds of embargoes and the single most important collective body of writers, PEN International, also opposes them. In addition, the question that I raised then was: “does my sympathy for someone else’s victimhood require me to subordinate my judgement to theirs, surrendering all my other beliefs and obligations?” And the most important thing is the prize was not awarded by the state of Israel, but by a private foundation in conjunction with Tel Aviv University.⁹

Whenever you write or give a lecture, you always talk in a global perspective. Did Rabindranath Tagore influence you in this regard, as someone who stood for the idea of universality?¹⁰ Both of you belong to the same cultural spheres of Calcutta.

As a Bengali, reading Tagore has played an important part in my life. And the more I look at him, at his life, at his work, the more prescient he seems. He was a truly visionary figure in the way that he created trans-Asian connections for Indians, especially between Indians, Chinese and Japanese. He also had an uncanny way of understanding the world. Unlike, say, Bankim Chandra,¹¹ he was not a systematic intellectual. But he had an intuitive grasp of issues such as industrialisation, the environment and so on.

*Regarding your non-fictional writing, how does that happen? Is it an anthropological quest that comes from your academic training, or is it an urge to reflect on the contemporary issues as in *The Imam and the Indian and Incendiary Circumstances*?*

I think I would say the second—it certainly does not come from my anthropological writing.

*Since last year, there are plans to film *Sea of Poppies* with Mahmood Farooqui and Anusha Rizvi. What are the developments so far?*

It was not my idea, but they are planning to do it! They have made a wonderful screenplay and now they are seeking funds. I like Mahmood’s screenplay very much. I will tell you a story. Mahmood asked me the dimensions of the *Ibis*, and I gave him the dimensions, which is about a hundred feet for two hundred people and he could not believe it. He said it is impossible. But I had actually expanded the ship, the real ship would have been no more than eighty feet. See, these are the ways in which the past actually really defeats the present.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful for Annu Jalais of National University of Singapore who connected me with Amitav Ghosh. Nicole Santé and Anna Donáth of the European Cultural Foundation and Abdul Rahuf Ottathingal of Jawaharlal Nehru University helped me at various stages of this interview. I am also thankful to Idrees Kanth of Leiden University for his editorial assistance. I am equally indebted to Jos Gommans and Carolien Stolte from *Itinerario* for facilitating publication of this interview.
- 2 Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1902–73), Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford, 1946–70.
- 3 Rodney Needham (1923–2006), social anthropologist at Oxford, 1956–90.
- 4 Peter Lienhardt (1928–86), social anthropologist at Oxford, 1960–86.
- 5 See Neelam Srivastava, “Amitav Ghosh’s Ethnographic Fictions: Intertextual Links between in *In an Antique Land* and His Doctoral Thesis”, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 36:2 (2001): 45-64.
- 6 Natalie Zemon Davis’s works include: *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975); *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-century Lives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000); and *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).
- 7 See Amitav Ghosh, “Hungarian Scholar Finds Bonanza in Kerala Church Archives”, www.amitavghosh.com/blog/?p=3232, April 9, 2012; accessed December 12, 2012.
- 8 Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market of Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- 9 For the full versions of Amitav Ghosh’s explanation, see Shivam Vij, “‘Boycott of Israel would not serve any useful purpose’: Amitav Ghosh,” [Kafila.org](http://kafila.org), April 20, 2010, <http://kafila.org/2010/04/20/boycott-of-israel-would-serve-any-useful-tactical-purpose-amitav-ghosh/>, accessed December 12, 2012; and Amitav Ghosh, “It Is Not Awarded by the State Of Israel,” [OutlookIndia.com](http://www.outlookindia.com), Apr. 20, 2010, www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?265154, accessed December 12, 2012.
- 10 Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Bengali author and first non-European winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1913).
- 11 Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–94), Bengali journalist, writer and poet.