APPENDIX I
Appendix – I

An Interview with Amitav Ghosh

Tolly Club, Kolkata, 12th March, 2009, 6 pm

SB In an e-mail correspondence with Dipesh Chakraborty dated 14th December, 2000, you emphatically stated that your novels are centred on families, and, in a way, writing about families is one way of not writing about nation. So in your novels, right from *The Shadow Lines* to *Sea of Poppies*, we are presented with a family-nation interface. Would you please explicate on this interface?

AG I think from my point of view this interface is actually quite self-evident because one of the things that I see very much, when I look at specially English and American fiction, is that too much of it is about Englishness or Americanness in a sense which is not the case with Indian writing. I am not just saying Indian writing in English; I don’t think it’s even true of the Bengali writings. Almost any book you pick up, any novel about England, [it is like that]. Even today – I was surprised to know – while I was reading this novel about Sheffield which was on the Bookers’ short list, there is again a constant concern with the definition of Englishness, what it means to be English. I just don’t think that in Bengali fiction anyone is writing about *Baangali-yana* (the essence of being Bengali) or something like that. One has to realise that identity does not refer to national identity only, but the *Baangali* identity as well. We have to think of this identity as well. Similarly, one of the basic identities in India is the familial. One cannot really ignore that or merge that into a national one. This is one of the
problematics in our fiction—the definition of a national culture. When you look at the politicians, they are always talking about how all fiction is about identity, and basically when they are talking about identity, they are talking about nation. I think that it is a profound misreading of the work of people like me or any other Indian writers. It is a complete misunderstanding of what people are doing. They are reading their own version of a kind of literary theory, where it is not really applicable in that sense.

SB But then, all your novels, right from The Shadow Lines or Sea of Poppies, you have incessantly engaged yourself in the search of a trans-national Utopia. In other words you simply challenge the grand narratives of the nation. How do you look at this? Is this the way in which an individual could be delivered from the prison-house of the nation?

AG You see, I am not against the nation as an institution. I think the more I grow old, the more I realise the virtues of the nation. Let me say straightaway that I am not at all someone who is opposed to the idea of nationhood. I think the nation as an institution is a vital one and it was especially, I think, in writing The Glass Palace that I came to recognise that the nation is not a trivial thing. It is a very important thing because—if it’s possible to imagine—we always think of the nation as a limiting thing; but, in fact, if you think of the absence of the nation what you get instead? This is what I saw when I travelled in Burma, specially in the border areas of Burma, where the nation almost disappears and according to our standard theories or our romantic belief, you would imagine that some sort
of liberation occurs; in fact what happens is the warlords take over – it’s much worse. This is exactly what you are seeing in Pakistan. You have read my *Countdown*. I stated quite clearly exactly what is happening today. When a nation collapses it doesn’t fall like this all of a sudden; it drains away slowly and what is left is a few powerful institutions like ISI, the army. The glue that joins them is what drains away. That is exactly what has happened in Pakistan. So don’t imagine that I am opposed to nationhood. If you look at our nationhood, at the borders between us and Pakistan, between us and Sri Lanka or the border between us and Burma or the border between us and Bangladesh – these are not trivial borders, they define the reality. What is on the other side is the real thing – it is really different and it is not different because the peoples are different, but because the institutions are different and that is basically what it is; the institutional difference is because of nationhood and this institutional difference is not a trivial difference. So I am by no means saying that the nation is not an important thing; but see if you are writing about the nineteenth century as I have seen, if you are writing about the long durée of time – we can’t write in the same way that a Frenchman can write or the same way that a Swede can write whose nation has persisted for two hundred, three hundred or even five hundred years. For us, how then do we write about the continuity? That institutional continuation for us is not there. For us in writing about the nineteenth century is to try and create this continuity and inevitably to fall back on the institution of the family. But certainly, I think, it is also through the institution of the family that people experience that period. Because, if you think of what happened in India
basically after Plassey, that is 1715 onwards, what is it that happened? In many ways India, like all Asian societies, has been a very conservative society. Many people would consider it a weakness, but I will consider it strength also. We have a deeply conservative society. We have used, like any society, as a custom some notion of sovereignty, some notion of kinship. When that notion of a collective being is shattered, how do you reconstitute it? Also, interestingly, in this space of family there is essence of 'ness' which gives another identity from which one gets a different angle to look at the society or history. This is the thing that I see continuously when I, for example, look at the Indians in Malaysia pre-1947.

SB  What about history? How do you look at the relation between history and the individual? How much is an individual forged by history?

AG  I don't think we can make that distinction. I don't know how you draw the line between the individual and history. The same history does not create the same individual, and that is what is interesting about it. You know hundred different individuals can exist, but the past that is often there is the same. It is interesting to me the way in which you can distinguish that way between individual and history. History stays in the background. Fiction is about characters and about individuals and if you lose sight of that, then you will lose your readers. What can actually fiction do that history can't do? Through fiction you can experience the place and the moment imaginatively in a way which through history you cannot. I mean, for example, I have read in history about the battle in Northern Malaysia, but to read it on the abstract and then to look at the place, to know the
rubber trees, to know what they are living through – they are completely different things.

**SB** I think there has been a clear evolution in your fictional world from *The Shadow Lines* to *Sea of Poppies*. Though the basic issues have remained similar, you seem to dive deeper and deeper into human experience …

**AG** The questions are in many ways similar. I am writing in a different moment in time. I could never have written *The Sea of Poppies* at that age. I didn’t have that authority, that experience. I would never have at that age been able to say to myself that I will write about this book. It is not that I didn’t have that confidence. It is a license that you give yourself. I felt that I can do it now. Your own experience deepens and in that something is gained and something is also lost and one has to recognise that.

**SB** In your novels, you have made a considerable use of silence or non-verbal communication. Would you like to say something on this?

**AG** Even in the Western tradition there was Gnosticism and all. There was a whole idea of silence and the productivity of silence. But yes, what you are saying is right; within a sort of Greco-Roman tradition, silence does not have a value as such. But I am not looking at silence in that kind of way. To me, you know, it is a much more empirical thing. For example, if you look at 1857, the fact that all these people were rising, the fact that they had a very high degree of coordination which is actually occurring. You know, the chapattis are moving and the bangles are moving, obviously not a random event, yet nothing is said. There is no discourse, there is no
programme. Just look at the strange way it occurred. I mean almost as if it were a precluding discourse. My approach to it has been in terms like, say, in Bengali cinema – the way Satyajit Ray uses non-communication in so many powerful ways. Generally within our culture there is a valuation often on non-verbal communication. So, I think, that has also been a major kind of influence on me. Some of the most poignant moments in Satyajit Ray’s work essentially come from moments of non-communication, for example, in the closing scene of Charulata. To me it has always been very powerful. At one level it has also been the political aspect of silence, and especially, you know, when I am writing The Calcutta Chromosome, what really interested me very much is this exhaustive march of Western knowledge – especially the sense in which the computer exhaustively wants to know about different aspects of your experience.

SB Two other very interesting things in your novels are the roles of travel and memory. They seem to create a binary between rootlessness and the roots, or to put it in a different way, between routes and roots. It seems particularly interesting to me because you yourself travel a lot …

AG Of course, I have been much interested in it because it has been a reality of my own life. You know when I started writing about it very few people were actually writing about this kind of experience. You know, to me, what I wanted to do was to represent the reality of my own existence. At that point in time the idea of a novel was very much to do with the sense of place, the sense of rootedness – whether it be a Bengali novel or an English novel. The idea is that the novel is fundamentally about one place,
one moment, one time. I think it is actually interesting if you explore this whole notion of placedness in the novel, how deep it is, how much it incorporates.

SB  In The Hungry Tide, you have used this silence remarkably!

AG  Oh yes! Fokir and his silence! It was one of the most important concerns to me. When I was in the Sunderbans, I knew someone like Fokir. He was very quiet, he hardly ever spoke – which is all very interesting, you know. For me what makes the person interesting is that they resist my knowing of them in their life as well in my writing. Of course, I can make up something on Fokir, but to give him his sovereignty, to give him that inviolate space – I thought it was very important a space where I cannot go, where I don’t know. For me novel, in a sense, also as a form has some interesting parallelism with the march of this kind of Platonic knowledge.

SB  Your readers have constantly been fascinated with your handling of the English language. Do you face any difficulty in handling Indian experience with a foreign language?

AG  It is interesting that you say that. I suppose, in a sense, our linguistic experience as Indians is rather similar to that of Central Europeans – they have also a multilingual world; but if you ask me, this is really the special thing that Indian writing in English brings to English – the idea of a much fractured linguistic inheritance. In a way it makes the writing more difficult and in a way it makes it much richer. I never look at it as a limitation. I look at it as something enormously productive – the fact that...
when I look at something, three words or four words immediately come to
me – there is this constant interference in my head of words and languages.

SB  In *Sea of Poppies*, you have used Bhojpuri words consistently without
giving English words for them. What might have been the purpose?

AG  Some of it will be apparent to you as a Bengali. The Bhojpuri stuff would
not be immediately available. So in my book there is something that would
elude everyone unless they have exactly my own linguistic background. I
like the sense of playing with these words. When we read Tolstoy, for
example, we never knew the meaning of the word ‘caviar’. We never have
seen these things but that didn’t stop us from enjoying it. At some level, if
you think of all the children’s books – we read Enid Blyton and all – I
sometimes think of the phrase ‘pottage shrimp’ – till this day I do not
know what it means. But that has never stood in my way of understanding
these works. I would expect a similar response from my global readers.

*AG – Amitav Ghosh

*SB – Sajalkumar Bhattacharya