Summary

In this thesis I explore and analyse the connections between Ghosh's first four novels. Ghosh's main interest is in the subalterns, and in his novels he tries to excavate and recuperate their historic agency. There are several problems inherent in these attempts, but Ghosh's novels are all founded on a solid methodology. To understand this methodological foundation better, I have chosen to introduce the Subaltern Studies Project, which attempts to analyse and deconstruct colonial sources in order to reconstruct a subaltern consciousness. These scholars have been criticised, among others by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", for replacing one essentialist category, the coloniser and indigenous elite, with another essentialist category, the subaltern. This criticism proposes that the researcher can never be objective, and that in order to minimise subjective distortion the researcher simply has to accept this non-objectivity. I will show how Ghosh has had to deal with this exact conflict in In an Antique Land (1992).

Ghosh's novels explore both the individual and the individual as part of a community. In order to see how Ghosh transcends these communities, most specifically the nation, I will introduce Benedict Anderson's theories. Anderson believes that nations perceive themselves as cut off from the rest of the world. Ghosh does not reject that nations see themselves this way, but he does expose this view as illusory and false. In The Shadow Lines (1988) I will show how Ghosh allows memory and imagination to transcend the nation, and in this way the novel succeeds in establishing, or rather re-connecting the now severed links between the countries India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

In The Calcutta Chromosome (1995) all of these tendencies run together to form a complex, if untidy, cloth. Ghosh weaves together past, present and near future; India, Egypt and the USA; science, religion and myth. The novel is a vast amalgamate where binary oppositions co-exist. In this way Ghosh exposes the illusoriness of seeing the world solely as made up of dichotomies, and these binary oppositions slowly become redundant in the novel. Part of the success of The Calcutta Chromosome thus lies in its ability to counter the binaries which so

often underlie the way in which we perceive the world, an aspect which leads to one of my most important conclusions: that Ghosh's novels all support a view of plurality and non-essentialism and that they all celebrate the "small" narratives, i.e. histories instead of History and relative truths instead of Truth.

Introduction

In the wake of Rushdie's immense success with <u>Midnight's Children</u> (1980) a large number of Indian writers began to appear on the bookshelves in Europe. One of those was Amitav Ghosh, whose first novel <u>The Circle of Reason</u> was published in 1986. Ghosh spent part of his childhood in Dhaka in Bangladesh and part of it in Calcutta in India, and even if he was not born when the Subcontinent was partitioned into India and West and East Pakistan, which later became Bangladesh, it is still an important part of his literary imagination. The Partition of the Subcontinent and the attempt to create two *separate* nations with *separate* identities are among the constituents of his second novel <u>The Shadow Lines</u> from 1988, the influence of which has been so great that we might even have to speak of a "post-Ghosh" generation.[1] One of the goals of this thesis is to identify some of the characteristics that make Ghosh's voice distinct, and I propose to approach this complex issue by looking at his first four novels in which I will explore his two major concerns: subaltern history and agency, and the complex issue of "community".

Ghosh lives in America, but research for his novels frequently takes him back to South Asia. Thus, for instance, he visited Burma when he did research for his fifth novel <u>The Glass Palace</u> (2000) and lately he has spent a large amount of time in the Sundarbans in Bengal, researching river dolphins for his latest novel <u>The Hungry Tide</u> (2004). One of the results of the fact that most of Ghosh's novels come into existence in a dialectic relationship between the world and his imagination is a number of essays which explore the non-fiction aspects of the material used fictitiously in his novels. Examples of this are his books <u>Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma</u> (1998) and <u>Countdown</u> (1999), but also several essays which have been published in newspapers and scholarly articles as the one published as part of the Subaltern Studies Project.[2]

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[1] Viljay T. Kumar, "Post-colonial or Postcolonial? Relocating the hyphen" in Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee (eds.), <u>Interrogating Post-colonialism</u>, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1996, p.199
[2] Amitav Ghosh, "The Slave of Ms. H.6" in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (eds.), <u>Subaltern Studies: Writing on Asian History and Society: VII</u>, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992.

The argument behind this thesis is that Ghosh's first four novels all revolve around a number of central themes. Ghosh's first three novels emphasise different aspects of these complex themes and approach them in different ways, and my intention is to show how these narrative and thematic threads are all woven together to form a powerful climax in <u>The Calcutta Chromosome</u>.

I thus propose the following structure which should ensure a thorough exploration of some of Ghosh's major thematic concerns while also leaving room for an in-depth analysis of his masterpiece <u>The Calcutta Chromosome</u>.[3]

In the first chapter I will look at Ghosh's interest in establishing and re-discovering parallel histories and pre-colonial connections between peoples and countries. The connections have often been neglected in colonial and national historiographies, which have focused on colonial and elite histories. Ghosh constantly challenges the "grand narratives" of history, anthropology, politics etc., and he never accepts the attempts to homogenise and essentialise History; on the contrary, Ghosh wants to break the elite's monopoly on History by stressing heterogeneity and pluralism. As we shall see, Ghosh's novels accept no essential Truth, but only partial truths which become parts of history. This is not a rejection of history per se, but a recognition of how History and Truth are discursive constructs. This is what will lead to my argument that Ghosh's novels seek to transform Truth into truths and History into histories. The first part thus deals with the people whose voices have not been part of History: the subalterns. Excavating a subaltern voice is, however, not an easy task, and one that has to be approached with care. I therefore want to look at the attempts and methodology of the Subaltern Studies Project as it is being voiced by Ranajit Guha, and to supplement his views I have chosen Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's introduction to the volume <u>Selected Subaltern Studies</u>[4] and her (in)famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?".[5] In the second part I turn to Ghosh and I want to look at the

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[3] This is very much my own opinion, and not all agree. Bhatt and Nityanandam argue for instance that: "The Calcutta Chromosome *(1996), sub-titled A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery is probably Ghosh's most disappointing novel.*" (Indira Bhatt and Indira Nityanandam (eds.), <u>The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh</u>, New Delhi: Creative Books, 2001, p.14.)
[4] Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds.), <u>Selected Subaltern Studies</u>, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
[5] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.), <u>Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader</u>, New York: Colombia University Press, 1994.

ways in which he has handled the problems inherent in the excavation of a subaltern consciousness. As mentioned this is no easy task, and by comparing The Circle of Reason with his much more mature novel In an Antique Land I hope to be able to show Ghosh's growing concern with and belief in the possibility of recuperating a subaltern voice which can potentially challenge the essentialism inherent in colonial and nationalist historiographies. One of the difficult tasks that Ghosh has had to face is how to avoid creating an "essential" subaltern, i.e. the danger of creating not a parallel subaltern history, but merely a new grand narrative with the subaltern at its centre, a subaltern History. In the final part I will show how Ghosh has avoided this serious pitfall.

In the second chapter, I will explore how something apparently simple as "community" works on a national and personal basis. I have chosen to focus on Benedict Anderson's classic Imagined Communities - Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism[6] since Anderson's arguments concerning the nation, nationalism, borders and print-capitalism provide excellent tools in relation to Ghosh's novels. In order to achieve a focused discussion I have chosen to look at The Shadow Lines in which Anderson's ideas should become even clearer. My argument is that Ghosh uses memory to connect the past to the present in ways which do not follow the logic of geo-political borders which then become "shadow lines" between people. Ghosh recognises the political reality of borders but he also celebrates the power of the imagi-nation as a means to transcend this political reality, and thus imagination holds the promise of individual freedom.

In my third chapter I turn to The Calcutta Chromosome, and the idea is to show how the tendencies discussed in the first two chapters reach a thematic climax in this novel. I will thus look at the ways in which the novel asserts a parallel subaltern history by creating a "third" space between traditional dichotomies such as coloniser-colonised, civilised-barbaric and on a structural/discursive level between oral-written and history/fact-myth/fiction. To this day, The Calcutta Chromosome is Ghosh's most powerful re-inscription of subaltern agency and in the course of the novel the question "can the subaltern

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[6] Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities - Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, London: Verso, 1991 (first published 1983).

speak?" loses its meaning: silence becomes the ultimate assertion of agency. The other major part of this chapter is the issue of community, and in my analysis I will look at the way in which the lines that normally divide people, such as nationality, gender, age, religion and caste, become not only "shadowy" but irrelevant: the feeling of community, paradoxically, is rooted in alienation from one's surroundings. I thus hope to be able to show how Ghosh's first four novels, even if they look very different on the surface, can be seen as part of a literary continuum whose powerful climax is reached in The Calcutta Chromosome.[7]

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[7] For further information about Amitav Ghosh I refer to his homepage www.amitavghosh.com which contains a large amount of useful material such as essays, email correspondences between Ghosh and other writers, and reviews of his novels.

Subaltern Agency

Gayatri Spivak asks the question 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' All of Ghosh's work to date seems to have been directed towards wanting to answer this question in the affirmative.[8]

I tend to agree with Thieme that one of the recurring elements in Ghosh's novels is the question about the agency of the subaltern classes. I will later return to the question whether or not all of Ghosh's novels answer in the affirmative, but before I do that I would like to look at how scholars have attempted to recuperate agency for these subaltern classes. First I would like to look at the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, but since it is a huge, several-volume-thick project, I have chosen to concentrate on the methodological introduction in the later collection <u>Selected Subaltern Studies</u> edited by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha. In this volume is also a critical introduction to the Subaltern Studies Project by Spivak which builds on her previous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?".

The Subaltern Studies Project is not without its problems, and its views have been challenged and accused of being both essentialist and of creating its own (academic) hegemonies. The introduction and the essay by Spivak simultaneously critique and support the project, and thus they represent a "negotiation" between its strong points and its inherent problems. This is ideal as it allows for a nuanced picture of the Subaltern Studies Project. I thus wish to present Guha's theories and then use Spivak to further nuance the ways in which a retrieval of subaltern voices is conducted. Having looked at Guha and Spivak I want to turn to Ghosh and the ways he has approached the problems of subaltern agency. I want to look in particular at his novel <u>In an Antique Land</u> since it deals both with a retrieval of agency to a slave of medieval times, but also because it contains a number of reflections on the author as a distorting filter which will be

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[8] John Thieme, "The Discoverer Discovered - Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*" in Tabish Khair (ed.), <u>Amitav Ghosh - a critical companion</u>, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003, p.130.

relevant for a discussion of the way in which the researching subject becomes a part of the researched object.

The reasons for choosing the work of the Subaltern Studies Group are that it is the first of its kind to initiate a large scale recuperation of lost agency; and second that the project was conducted in the 1980s which is concurrent with Ghosh's research for In an Antique Land. The same arguments go for choosing Spivak, and especially her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" which has become a classic in post-colonial theory.

Ranajit Guha

Guha defines two groups in his methodological introduction: subaltern and elite. Both terms are semantically unstable and to some extent idiosyncratic, and Guha acknowledges this by stating that:

> Taken as a whole and in the abstract this last category of the elite was heterogeneous in its composition and thanks to the uneven character of regional economic and social developments, differed from area to area.[9]

In Guha's view, subaltern and elite are not essential categories but a structural matter. It is in your socio-economic relation to others that your class affiliation, which is subaltern or elite, is defined. Fernando Coronil argues that:

> Subalternity is a relational and relative concept […] at any given time or place, an actor may be subaltern in relation to another, yet dominant in relation to a third […] dominance and subalternity are not inherent, but relational characterizations.[10]

These structural relationships are not the same throughout India which explains Guha's loose definition. In some regions being a landlord might affiliate you with the elite whereas in other parts of the country it might affiliate you with the subaltern. The academic is thus forced to integrate local relations, i.e. power structures, in his research and this is, of course, one of the pillars on which the entire Subaltern Studies Project rests.

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[9] Op. cit., Selected Subaltern Studies, p.44.
[10] Fernando Coronil, "Listening to the Subaltern: Postcolonial Studies and the Neocolonial Poetics of Subaltern States" in Laura Chrisman and Benita Parry (eds., series editor: Gordon Campbell), Essays and Studies 1999: Postcolonial Theory and Criticism, The English Association, 2000.

Having identified the target groups, Guha argues that history has been associated only with the elite: the colonisers and the indigenous elite. This has lead to what he calls bourgeois-nationalist elitism founded on colonial and elitist historiographies. These historiographies have monopolised history and written their own accounts of it without leaving space for the subalterns. Guha identifies two sorts of nationalism, both of which see Indian nationalism as a development of consciousness within the elite, either the colonial administration - "*British colonial rulers, administrators, policies, institutions and culture*" or the indigenous elite - "*Indian elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas.*"[11]

One way of looking upon Indian nationalism is to see it mainly as a response by the indigenous elite to colonisation. The internal competition in the indigenous elite and its competition with the colonial power lead the elite to gradually learn more about and later enter into politics. In this way the elite sought to influence the way India was governed. Not out of idealism or for the good of the people, but in order to secure a larger share of power, prestige and wealth.

In another dominant view the Indian elite is seen as leading the people from subjugation to freedom. Different emphasis is put on individual figures but it is typical of these approaches that they seek

> to uphold Indian nationalism as a phenomenal expression of the goodness of the native elite with the antagonistic aspect of their relation to the colonial regime made, against all evidence, to look larger than its collaborationist aspect.[12]

Thus the elite is seen as conscious, autonomous and benevolent. The subaltern classes are, as might be expected, characterised oppositely as an unconscious, homogeneous class of followers. An example, discussed by Guha, is the case of insurgency. Instead of looking at how the subalterns perceived the situation, looking at how they handled the situation and what they hoped to obtain by such a dangerous, often deadly, act as insurgency, colonial historiography simplifies the process by, as Guha notes, letting reason be substituted by cause. Forced labour, torture and so on become the main stimuli which trigger off

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[11] Op. cit., Selected Subaltern Studies, p.37.
[12] Ibid., p.38.

rebellion as a sort of reflex action […] as an instinctive and almost mindless response to physical suffering of one kind or the other […] or as a passive reaction to some initiative of this superordinate enemy.[13]

Guha does not argue that colonial historiography, of which the two approaches above are examples, is wrong per se; rather what he seeks to challenge is its monopoly on "Truth" and its monopoly on the term (Indian) nationalism:

[Elitist historiography] fails to acknowledge, far less interpret, the contribution made by the people on their own, that is, independently of the elite to the making and development of this nationalism.[14]

This elitist historiography does not accept or recognise the impact of the people, and it will keep referring to the elite as the cause of Indian nationalism. Thus insurgencies and national movements, i.e. the people, are seen only as effects caused by elite personalities ("*the charisma of certain elite leaders*") or elite political decisions ("*the grinding away of the wheels of the state apparatus and of elite institutions geared to it.*"[15])

I have now defined mainly the elite, which is the class against which Guha sets the project. Their history is not the only history, and the project's aim is to retrieve an "other" voice which is the voice of the subaltern classes. Guha argues that the subalterns represent a class which is in fact truer to Indian nationalism than the elite, and he wishes to focus on the "politics of the people" which consist of subaltern classes both in towns and in the country:[16]

This was an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter. […] its roots [can] be traced back to pre-colonial times [… but] far from being destroyed or rendered virtually ineffective [by colonial rule], as was elite politics, […] it continued to operate vigorously […] adjusting itself to the conditions prevailing under the Raj.[17]

This is one of the places in which Guha's Marxist belief in the subaltern (which would be the proletariat in Marxism) shines through. This class is here seen as

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[13] Ibid., p.47.
[14] Ibid., p.39.
[15] Ibid., p.39.
[16] This is one of the places in which Guha becomes dangerously essentialist, a point which I will not explore further but which is critiqued by Spivak in both the introduction to Selected Subaltern Studies and in "Can the Subaltern Speak?"
[17] Op. cit., Selected Subaltern Studies, p.40.

somewhat uncorrupted by colonialism, and the tracing of their roots back to pre-colonial times serves mainly as a marker of their Indianness. The subaltern class is thus seen as separated from the colonisers both by being present before colonisation and also by making them autonomous and not dependent on other (corrupted) classes such as the indigenous elite and the colonising elite. Thus Guha reverses agency within the notion of nationalism. The elite is seen as a hand-puppet mastered by the British, and the subaltern class is seen as a potentially powerful agent of insurgency. Unfortunately for the subalterns, as Guha argues:

> The working class was still not sufficiently mature in the objective conditions of its social being and in its consciousness as a class-for-itself, nor was it firmly allied yet with the peasantry. As a result it could do nothing to take over and complete the mission which the bourgeoisie had failed to realize. The outcome of it all was that the numerous peasant uprisings […] waited in vain for a leadership to raise above localism and generalize them into a nationwide anti-imperialist campaign.[18]

Guha argues that the uprisings needed leadership, but this does not contradict his earlier statement that the subaltern classes were not unconscious. He argues that neither the subaltern classes nor the indigenous elite had a chance to win a decisive victory over colonialism and their lack of co-operation led to what Guha calls the "*historic failure of the nation to come to its own*".[19]

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

"*Operating from the inside […] the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work.*"[20] This is one of Spivak's important methodological points. The author, i.e. the researching subject, is always a part of his own work, i.e. the researched object. Thus any claim to objectivity must inevitably be false. To counter this the author must openly accept his part in the research, in other words he must accept his status as an interpreting filter. Moreover, when it comes to criticising elite historiography, the academic will

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[18] Ibid., p.42.
[19] Ibid., p.43
[20] Ibid., pp.8-9 (Spivak: Introduction, quoting from Jacques Derrida (translated by Spivak), Of Grammatology, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, p.24.)

have to acknowledge his own status as a member of this same elite class. The benefit, argues Spivak, is that this approach can *"question the authority of the investigating subject without paralysing him."*[21] This is not something the Subaltern Studies Group denies, and it is indeed recognised by Guha:

> There is nothing that historiography can do to eliminate such distortion [caused by the historian's own outlook] altogether, for the latter is built into its optics. What it can do, however, is to acknowledge such distortion as parametric - as a datum which determines the form of the exercise itself, and to stop pretending that it can fully grasp a past consciousness and reconstitute it. Then and only then might the distance between the latter and the historian's perception of it be reduced significantly enough to amount to a close approximation which is the best one could hope for.[22]

However, when Spivak criticises the Subaltern Studies Group it is mostly a critique of their praxis rather than their theory.[23] What she wants to underscore is Guha's recognition that retrieving a "pure" subaltern voice is impossible. She does not see a way in which a subaltern voice can ever be detached from the elite discourse in which it is embedded. The historian who researches subaltern history must never forget his own methodology and his own sources which are elitist and colonial historiographies. The retrieval of subaltern history is, after all, a deconstruction of these mentioned sources and thus the Subaltern Studies Project is inevitably tied up with that which it tries to oppose. Discussing the Subaltern Studies Group's attitude towards subaltern consciousness, Spivak argues that:

> There is always a counterpointing suggestion in the work of the group that subaltern consciousness is subject to the cathexis of the élite, that it is never fully recoverable, that it is always askew from its received signifiers, indeed that it is effaced even as it is disclosed, that it is irreducibly discursive.[24]

As seen, Spivak does not disagree with the general methodology of the project. She wants, however, to do away completely with any trace of a belief that an

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[21] Op. cit., <u>Selected Subaltern Studies</u>, p.9.
[22] Ibid., p.77.
[23] See for instance Spivak's example in ibid., p.6. Her accusations against the group as being essentialist, though, are rather harsh.
[24] Ibid., p.11.

essential subaltern voice exists; and it is with this in mind that she concludes that the subaltern cannot speak.[25]

It should be clear that Spivak's denial of a subaltern voice only refers to the impossibility of retrieving a pure and essentialist subaltern voice. This is why she uses the term "negative consciousness" for what the Subaltern Group retrieves, not a voice in itself, but a voice identified by deconstructing the voice of the elite. Spivak argues that "*for the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself*". She goes on, however, to recognise that "*the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation*" and for Spivak the real question becomes: "*With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?*"[26] Spivak does not want to dismiss the Subaltern Studies Project as much as she wants it to become more aware of the merits and flaws in its methodology.

Spivak's method then, it seems to me, consists of three parts. Firstly, the relationship between subject and object must be laid bare. The subject, i.e. the academic, must also be aware of his own methodology, social status, part of the intellectual circulation of knowledge, and so on. The second part is, I would argue, the deconstructive reading of the sources themselves. This is the level on which most of the readings of the Subaltern Studies Group are conducted, and it is on this level that we can hope to retrieve a subaltern voice. Thirdly, the intellectual will have to keep in mind how he constructs the subaltern. The word "construct" is important, for it is in a dialectic relationship between the intellectual and the sources that a subaltern voice might be heard and re-created. The sources themselves do not represent a subaltern voice, and only in its blanks and silences can it be retrieved, but in the process the intellectual must not forget his own role - you might say his role as an author. But only, as I read Spivak, by reading and writing with a consciousness of all three levels can we hope to hear the silenced voices of the subaltern classes, and this is what she hopes to bring to

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[25] This statement was actually made in relation to the practice of "sati", widow sacrifice. Women subalterns are seen as both "other" to colonial historiography and to post-colonial historiography. In this way they are doubly silenced, op. cit., "Can the Subaltern Speak?", p.104.
[26] Op. cit., "Can the Subaltern Speak?", p.80.

the Subaltern Group: a heightened awareness of the former and the latter levels mentioned.

The subaltern cannot speak in the same way as the elite can, but it is indeed feasible to reconstruct a *possible* subaltern voice: not one that can or should replace the dominant elite voice, i.e. (neo)-colonial and nationalist historiographies - it could never hope to do so - but one that can run parallel with this "official" voice and history.[27]

I now turn to Ghosh and I want to examine how he answers some of the questions asked in the previous section. The questions are mainly whether the subaltern can speak and implicit in this is a question about their agency. Secondly, I also want to discuss how Ghosh deals with himself as a researching subject. How does he deal with Spivak's ideas that a subject cannot represent an object without somehow distorting the image? In answering the first question I return to the quotation from Thieme's essay in the beginning of this section and try to answer it by looking at Ghosh's first novel, The Circle of Reason, and how Ghosh's confidence in the subalterns had increased when he wrote In an Antique Land. For the second question I will look exclusively at In an Antique Land.

Agency in The Circle of Reason

Thieme claims that all of Ghosh's novels have answered Spivak's question about subaltern agency in the affirmative. I tend to agree with Thieme but when it comes to The Circle of Reason it has to be a tentative agreement. Therefore, I will make a brief analysis of whether the subalterns can speak in this novel or not; and if they do speak and assert their agency, what consequences it has for them.

The Circle of Reason consists of three parts, but in this analysis it makes more sense to divide it into only two: the first part in which the orphan Alu arrives in Lalpukur to live with his uncle Balaram, and a second in which Alu is on the

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[27] I have in this short summary of Spivak's main points been very selective: I have not touched upon her critique of the Subaltern Studies Project as being patriarchal and itself a creator of hegemonies based on gender, and I have not been able to go into her critique of the essentialism present in some parts of the project. I think, however, that I have covered the most important areas with regard to the relationship between subject and object, and this is the point of interest when I discuss Ghosh in the next section.

run from secret police officer Jyoti Das. The first part ends when their house is blown up.[28] This part mainly focuses on the comic characters Alu ("potato-head") and Balaram with his shifting obsessions with phrenology, teaching, and later the pasteurean project of cleansing the city with carbolic acid.

It could seem that these subalterns can actually act. After all, they create a school based on voluntary work and Balaram carries out his germ-fighting project. My objection to this interpretation lies mainly in Bhudeb-Roy, the area's corrupt politician, who with the help of the national authorities literally blows up Balaram and his house:

> Then, with a high whistle, a brilliant sunburst of light arched into the sky and the whole forest shimmered in the eerie silver glow. […] then the earth shook and the air seemed to come alive and hit him [Alu] with walls of force, and when he opened his eyes again exactly where the house ought to have been there were orange flames shooting into the sky. (148)

It might be true that the subalterns can try to act, but the result is an immediate and brutal response from the elite. The price of agency and voice is in this case your life.

The second part of the novel follows Alu's flight from the authorities, who think he is a terrorist. He tries to settle in al-Ghazira: he is at this point almost totally silenced and hardly ever speaks, and rather than being the agent of the narrative he becomes the character around whom the narrative revolves. That is until he is rescued from under the ruins of the Star, a collapsed skyscraper. Now Alu is ready to seize agency again, and he introduces a plan for a moneyless society. Again, as readers we sense that the subalterns are acting. But once more the authorities intervene and the result is fatal:

> [Zindi] fought her eyes open, scraping at them with her nails, and darted across [the road]. She caught a bleary glimpse of Karthamma lying beside Chunni and she snatched at her hand, too, and pulled, crying: Come on, quick. But Chunni slapped her hand away […] Then Karthamma's head rolled limply to one side and Zindi screamed […] for she saw that Karthamma was dead; that she had fallen on a

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[28] Amitav Ghosh, The Circle of Reason, London: Granta Books, 1986, p.149 (subsequent quotations are integrated into the text.)

pickaxe, and that the end of the axe had passed through her back and emerged bloodily from her navel. (348)

The moneyless society is crushed by local and national authorities, but also by neo-imperialist oil-traders.[29] Apart from constructing a (ruthless) capitalistic versus (benevolent) socialistic experiment within the novel, the idea from part one is repeated: the subalterns can and do seize agency, but when doing so the authorities immediately react in order to crush any such agency. The result in both examples is death. This is what by the end of the novel becomes almost mythical, an "agency of breath":

> So, sighed Zindi, it looks as though we're safe from the bird-man [Jyoti Das] at last. There's only one way to be sure of that, said Alu. What? Don't ever say 'We're going west' again. As quick as she could Zindi slapped her hand over his mouth. But it was already too late. You've said it, it's done now […] It was nothing less than a certainty: like a sorcerer's incantation those words could conjure a presence out of emptiness. (363-364)

This reinforces my interpretation that the subalterns can try to seize agency but only at a grave cost. Life and security are endangered whenever the characters try as much as to speak. Characters die, are wounded or have to flee for their lives. The Circle of Reason is a novel in which the subalterns are in focus and in which we hear their voices even as they are being silenced. Ghosh expresses his concern with the subalterns and the hegemonies which "straightjacket" them, and I will later show how this is further explored in The Calcutta Chromosome, which can be seen as the first novel in which Ghosh fully articulates a subaltern counter-order.

I turn now to In an Antique Land, which was published in 1992. It is, however, based on Ghosh's research done in the 1980s and extracts from the novel about the slave actually appeared as part of the Subaltern Studies Project. In this novel, which constantly blends fact and fiction, Ghosh presents us with two storylines which are often interwoven. One follows Ghosh's research which has as its object

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[29] Another story about neo-imperialist oil-traders is embedded in the novel, pp. 248-263. This story, too, ends with the victory of capitalism and imperialism.

to follow the traces of the Slave of MS H.6 (the name of a document). The goal is to promote the Slave from being a mere footnote in history to having his own narrative told in which he is the agent. The other follows Ghosh during his fieldwork for his PhD in social anthropology which mainly takes place in two Egyptian hamlets called Lataifa and Nashawy.[30] I will look at how Ghosh handles this situation and how he reflects on the anthropological "subject-object" situation.

Retrieval of Agency in In an Antique Land

The first character mentioned in In an Antique land is "the Slave", and by introducing him first Ghosh has effectively signalled that he, Bomma,[31] is in the foreground of the narrative. Immediately, though, the reader is met with the fact that Bomma's voice is but a faint one: "*His was a brief debut […] more a prompter's whisper than a recognizable face in the cast.*"[32] Ghosh's task is now to reconstruct Bomma's life. Doing this he is faced with the same problem as the Subaltern Studies Group. The sources are not written by Bomma, but by his master Ben Yiju and his trade associates. Bomma is, as mentioned above, scarcely recognisable. Ghosh describes the problem thus:

> It is only at the very end of the letter that the slave makes his entry: Khalaf ibn Ishaq makes a point of singling him out and sending him 'plentiful greetings.' That is all: no more than a name and a greeting. But the reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual, existences are the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests - **the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time.** But the slave of Khalaf's letter was not of that company: in his instance it was a mere accident that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved. It is nothing less than a miracle that anything is known about him at all. (16-17, my emphasis.)

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[30] Ghosh himself drops all accents in names except when they are introduced the first time. I, too, have chosen to drop all accents and thus Nashâwy becomes Nashawy, and Ben Yijû becomes Ben Yiju, and so on.
[31] Even if the Slave is not named until later, I have chosen to use his name from the beginning.
[32] Amitav Ghosh, In an Antique Land, London: Granta Books, 1992, p.13 (subsequent references are integrated into the text.)

Ghosh's argument here is in line with the one presented by the Subaltern Studies Group and also by Spivak. Power and the making of history - even the act of writing itself - are closely intertwined, and in the novel they are closely associated with the elite (wazirs, sultans, etc.). Thus Ghosh does not have direct access to Bomma and his life; rather he has access to Ben Yiju, so Bomma's consciousness becomes what Spivak calls a "negative consciousness": a consciousness created by a (deconstructive) interpretation of the letters of the Geniza in which they were originally found. One of the questions is thus how much interpretation - and implicit in this question how much deviation from the verifiable "truth" - should be allowed. Ghosh's answer to the question is definitely that fiction should be allowed to see the possibilities in the facts rather than let the facts limit the fiction, which is also suggested by Claire Chambers' argument that Ghosh is committed *"to the view that fiction is as valid a way of explaining events as the more prestigious authority of scientific reason."*[33]

In an Antique Land is a genre-hybrid, neither fact nor fiction. In most of the narrative about Bomma, however, Ghosh is concerned with sticking to the facts, quoting original letters and referring to ancient historians - and the notes are plenty.[34] At times, however, when Ghosh has come as far as he possibly can by following factual tracks, fiction is allowed to take over: *"If I hesitate to call it love it is only because the documents offer no certain proof."* (230) Here we see a merging of fact and fiction. Ghosh has exhausted his sources and in the face of uncertainty he offers a *possible* explanation for which he has no verifiable documentation. Instead of being limited by the lack of sources, Ghosh accepts his role as author and "plays" along. It is in this "playing along" that fiction is created:

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[33] Claire Chambers, "Historicizing Scientific Reason in Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*" in op. cit., Amitav Ghosh – A Critical Companion, p.54. The statement is actually made about The Circle of Reason but might as well have been made about In an Antique Land. (That truth and fiction are parts of a dialectic relationship becomes very obvious if In an Antique Land is compared with The Calcutta Chromosome about which Adhikari argues that: "*Ghosh is determined to establish that truth is stranger than fiction.*" (Madhumalati Adhikari, "Telling and Showing: The Cinematic Narrative Technique in *The Calcutta Chromosome*" in R. K Dhawan (ed.), The Novels of Amitav Ghosh, New Delhi: Prestige, 1999, p.274.))

[34] Dixon states that: "*In the hundreds of endnotes to In an Antique Land, there is not one that refers to a European theorist.*" (Robert Dixon, "Travelling in the West" in op. cit., Amitav Ghosh - A Critical Companion, p.27) and this can be seen as Ghosh's way of countering the traditional authority accredited to European academia.

> Despite his obvious delight in the pirates' defeat, it was not the raid that was uppermost in Madmun's mind when he wrote the letter: that honour was kept for Bomma. It appears that Bomma, determined to enjoy his trip to the full, had spent his wages on an extended drinking bout during which he had presented himself several times in Madmun's office, demanding money. […] We cannot be sure of course, but it is not impossible that the Adenese soldiers were cheered into battle by a drunken Bomma, standing on the shore and waving a flask. (259)

One feels that Ghosh enjoys writing about Bomma, that he really wants to create a (hi)story for him. In this part, though, fiction is allowed to take control. From the evidence presented by Ghosh, it is not only that "we cannot be sure" as in my last example about Ben Yiju's marriage. In this instance Ghosh presents no trace of evidence supporting the idea that the drunken Bomma should have been heroically cheering the soldiers into battle. This is one of the instances in which the balance tips over and instead of having a fine balance between fact and fiction in which the two strands run together, fiction is allowed to take over in the narrative. And all of In an Antique Land is indeed a difficult act of balancing meagre facts and intoxicating fiction.

Ghosh uses imagination, i.e. fiction, to fill in the gaps and silences in the documents which he studies. The best example in In an Antique Land of a filling of gaps is the entire part dealing with retrieving the name of the Slave, Bomma. In the documents Ghosh is presented only with the three letters B-M-H, which Ghosh argues is linguistically closer to today's B-M-A which might actually have been B-M-M-A.[35] If my previous example showed how fiction is sometimes allowed to dominate, this is an example of the opposite in which priority is given to history based on scholarly research. The links, preventing a subject from being obliterated by History for instance, to the Subaltern Studies Project are clearly seen and what could be more appropriate in the recuperation of an individual's consciousness/agency than to identify his name? The novel opened with "the Slave", but now Ghosh has come one step further to two possible names: Bomma and Bamma. With the help of a professor of linguistics he arrives at the correct form Bomma. The entire process of naming Bomma is immensely important for

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[35] Op. cit., In an Antique Land, p.246ff.

Ghosh and a crucial step in the recuperation of the Slave's agency. And finally, with the retrieval of his name, Bomma is ready to step out of Ben Yiju's shadow: "*It was thus that Bomma finally came of age and was ready at last to become a protagonist in his own story.*" (254)

Objectivity: Researcher/Subject and Researched/Object

For Spivak it is of the utmost importance that the intellectual accepts his role as a filter, "*Throughout these pages it has been my purpose to show the complicity between subject and object of investigation*"[36], and that the author shows "*a vigilance precisely against too great a claim for transparency.*"[37] I would argue that Ghosh has had to deal with these exact problems in writing In an Antique Land. Padmini Mongia points out the inseparability of subject and object with regards to travel literature:

> Travel, then, is not so much about physical movement and the journey from here to there as it is a figure for different modes of stasis, movement, and knowledge. […] To consider travel as a form of situating the self focuses attention on the traveller as well as on the places and geographies to which s/he travels.[38]

Thus when reading In an Antique Land we have to deal not only with two storylines but with at least three. The two mentioned earlier about the Slave's identity and the people of Egypt; but also the formation of Amitab/v[39] as a (researching) subject:

> Then, after [the duck] had hoisted itself on top, it raised one leg and suddenly its penis appeared […] I watched spellbound: I had had no conception that ducks had penises and vaginas. (60)

Ghosh is not afraid to acknowledge that his knowledge of the world, of peoples, of cultures and so on is far from perfect. He does not want to be the anthropologic "outsider" who has all the clues and who understands the locals better than they

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[36] Op. cit., Selected Subaltern Studies, p.28.
[37] Op. cit., "Can the Subaltern Speak?", p.89.
[38] Padmini Mongia, "Medieval Travel in Postcolonial Times: Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*", in op. cit., Amitav Ghosh – A Critical Companion, p.75.
[39] Since Arabic has no "v" Amitav becomes Amitab.

understand themselves. Obviously, Ghosh tries to obtain as much objectivity as possible, but he never falls prey to the temptation of showing himself as fully objective. He is not, using Spivak's terms, a transparent subject. This is reinforced throughout the novel and nowhere better than in the many scenes in which people ask him about cow-worship and Hindu cremation of the dead. Most of the time Ghosh is able to deflect the questions or answer them briefly, thus remaining in the role of the "objective" researching subject, but on some occasions this tactic fails. In the scene with the village Imam, Ghosh's professional façade dissolves. One notices, for instance, the way in which the grammar signals the immaturity of Ghosh's response by the repetition of the "and" instead of the use of a more formal repetition marked by commas:

> 'We have them too''' I shouted back at [the Imam]. 'In my country we have all those things too; we have guns **and** tanks **and** bombs. **And** they're better than anything you've got in Egypt - we're long way ahead of you.' (235-36, my emphasis.)

Just as Ghosh is writing from a position somewhere between fact and fiction, sometimes keeping them apart but most of the time blending them, so he is both an insider and an outsider in Egypt. He lives with the families there, walks around between them and speaks freely to them in their own Arabic dialect; but at the same time we are constantly reminded that he *is* an outsider, a fact which is mainly seen in the many questions about India from the locals. All of these scenes are part of an acknowledgement of non-objectivity from Ghosh's side, which should, of course, not be taken to mean that the novel and the research behind it are entirely subjective. Again, In an Antique Land situates itself somewhere in-between and thus dissolves the clear demarcations between fact-fiction, subject/researcher-object/researched, and at times, for instance when the locals ask critical questions about India, it even questions the validity of the subject-object construction itself.

In an Antique Land is very aware of itself as both scholarly research and as (global) Indian fiction.[40] Ghosh questions his own methodology in his handling

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[40] In order to avoid a methodological confusion, I have deliberately chosen not to use the term postcolonial. I prefer to see Ghosh as a global, Indian writer for whom colonialism is only one part of a long history. Even if it might somewhat underestimate the impact of colonialism, Susheila Nasta has a point in arguing that: "*my own awareness as a writer reaches back to x-thousand B.C., at the end of which measureless time the British came, and stayed, and left. And now*

of facts and objectivity and by blending them with fiction he achieves not a Grand Narrative but a *possible* narrative. Ghosh does not claim any right to Truth, but in narrating history he *creates* one version of what we might term truth.[41] In this *possible* narrative, in which true and false lose their fixed meaning, Ghosh is able to reconstruct parts of the life of the Slave of MS. H. 6, and in this process Bomma becomes the protagonist of his own story. Ghosh has successfully retrieved some version of his voice and actions, and by doing so he has saved Bomma from oblivion.

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they're gone, and their residue is simply one more layer added to the layer upon layer of Indian consciousness. Just one more." (Susheila Nasta, "Introduction: Stepping out. Reading the 'New' Literatures in a Postcolonial Era" in Susheila Nasta (ed., series editor: Gordon Campbell), Essays and Studies 2000: Reading the 'New' Literatures in a Postcolonial Era, The English Association, 2000.)

[41] Truth refers to the essentialist notion that there is one, objectively verifiable Truth, whereas truth refers to an attitude which sees not one but many truths. The same logic can be applied to the terms History (essentialist, a belief in an objectively verifiable Truth) and history (in which history contains many truths, and in which the entire notion about objectivity is questioned, for instance as a discursive construct as Foucault has it, see for instance Michel Foucault (1977), "Truth and Power" in Hazard Adams (ed.), Critical Theory Since Plato, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, revised edition 1992 (first published 1971), p.1135-1145.)

Nationalism

In the last chapter I discussed the recuperation of a subaltern voice. This aspect was shown to be immensely important to Ghosh as is the rejection of an objectively verifiable Truth about the world. Ghosh does not see the world as a set of dichotomies and binary oppositions, and in his novels he tries to uncover the points where borders meet and/or dissolve in order to see underlying patterns which run parallel to or defy our traditional ways of looking at the world. A good example of this is In an Antique Land where Ghosh establishes temporal connections between the 12th century and the 20th century and spatial connections between mainly India and Egypt. In the following I will continue my thematic reading but this time I will look at nation and nationalism. I have chosen this topic mainly because it plays a significant role in all of Ghosh's novels and nowhere more so than in The Shadow Lines, which will be in focus in the following analysis. For a theoretical introduction to nation(alism) I have chosen Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities - Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. My analysis will be selective when it comes to his theories and my primary interest is whether it can shed light on Ghosh's way(s) of depicting a nation and the effects of nationalism. Thus, firstly a brief, selective introduction to Anderson's theories; secondly a reading of Ghosh's novel The Shadow Lines in the light of these theories.

Benedict Anderson: Imagined Communities

In the beginning of his book, Anderson describes a shift in the way that nations defined themselves, a shift that happened after World War II. Keeping in mind that the partition of the Subcontinent happened in 1947, this is of some importance:

> Since World War II every successful revolution has defined itself in national terms […] and, in so doing, has grounded itself firmly in a territorial and social space inherited from the prerevolutionary past.[42]

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[42] Op. cit., Anderson, p.2.

The creation of India was not one of downright revolution, but the effects were much like the ones mentioned by Anderson. The nations India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are founded on borders drawn by the British before Independence was granted. Thus the Indian territorial space and the partition of the Subcontinent itself are British constructs. As a result of this, the social space of millions of people on the subcontinent was partitioned when thousands had to flee their birthplace and move to one of the new nations created. So when Indians (in the following, implicitly, also Pakistanis and Bangladeshis) define nation and nationalism they will always somehow include the colonial past, a fact which I will later explore in greater detail when discussing The Shadow Lines in which this is a major issue.

Keeping the above problem in mind, I turn to how a nation is constructed and what a nation is. To Anderson there is indeed something "shadowy" about the entire notion of nation:

> I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. [...] Communities are to be distinguished, **not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.**[43]

So how does India imagine herself as a nation? One interesting way seems to be through a shared mythological consciousness. In the introduction to Kanthapura, Raja Rao describes this phenomenon as follows:

> There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sthala-purana, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village - Rama might have rested under this papal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate.[44]

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[43] Ibid., pp.5-6 (my emphasis.)
[44] Raja Rao, Kanthapura, New York: New Directions, 1967 (first published 1938), p.vii.

The fusion between gods and political figures is interesting, and I think it is one that gives credit to my idea that a shared mythological consciousness is a major constituent of Indian nationalism. Gandhi, who is both a historically real person and at the same time a national, mythological character, is an example of a blend between the real world politics and myth, and both these aspects become constituent parts of Indian nationalism.

If we accept the argument that a nation is an imagined community, then we must also consider the notion of community. One way, maybe even *the* way, of maintaining a sense of community is by exclusion, by creating an Other.[45] It is interesting to see how a nation creates this Other and who are constituted as the Other. When I discussed subaltern agency, otherness, too, was important as the subalterns were usually seen as constituting a structural relationship with an elite: the subalterns were Other in relation both to the indigenous elite and to the colonisers. This point will be of some interest when we look at The Shadow Lines a little later.

To Anderson, a nation defines itself temporally in a linear way. The nation moves through time, and the parallel, temporal movement of the inhabitants of the nation creates the feeling of a shared history which reinforces the imagined community and separates the (imagined) nation from the rest of the world. Obviously a community is part of a global development, too, but what creates a feeling of nation is its internal links:

> The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.[46]

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[45] Madan Sarup puts it in the following way: "*Who is a foreigner? The one who does not belong to the group, who is not 'one of them', the other. The foreigner can only be defined in negative fashion. The foreigner is the Other. […] With the establishment of nation-states, the foreigner is the one who does not belong to the state in which we are, the one who does not have the same nationality.*" (Madan Sarup, Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996, p.7).

[46] Op. cit., Anderson, p.26.

In Anderson's definition there are no shadow lines, no looking-glass borders. To the people inhabiting a nation it is a solid entity cut off from the countries surrounding it.[47]

One way of ordering time is via the printed media, which Anderson refers to as "print-capitalism"[48], the role of which is to order the calendrical time for us. By ordering and fixing time, the printed media creates a sense of shared history, and by bringing together news from various places it makes possible a feeling of shared space. Thus the printed media is able to unify and homogenise the potentially huge diversity (heterogeneity) of a nation: time and space are brought together in a limited world, i.e. that of print, which then allows its readers to share a temporal/spatial history. Furthermore, the homogeneity of the printed media assures that everybody in a community is presented with the same way of interpreting the world, interpreting History and for the same "Truth". This creates, in principle, a shared, imagined community. In my analysis of The Shadow Lines, I will further explore the role of print-capitalism.

In the following I will focus on Ghosh's The Shadow Lines. I will look at how the novel deals with the above discussed ideas of nation and nationalism. I will thus look at how Ghosh exposes the illusory nature of national boundaries by creating a parallel history for India and Bangladesh[49] which defies the idea of a nation as a "*solid community moving steadily down (or up) history.*" I will look at the way in which national mythologies, such as the importance of war, are deconstructed, and in that process I will touch upon the function of the printed media which I believe acts as a recognition of how history is not objective but rather a result of a process of selection. Since these themes overlap, I cannot keep them strictly apart, and the above structure is thus more like a framework within which I plan to conduct my analysis.

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[47] Anderson, of course, is aware of the "illusory" nature of the nation as seen in his use of the word "conceived". It should be clear from my analysis that I do *not* argue that nations are illusions and that they are *not* things of the imagination. What is meant by illusory is the belief that by drawing a border, or building a wall as in Berlin, we can separate people who have a shared history, tradition and mythology. When I am using the term "illusory" it is thus as an application of Anderson's theories to Ghosh's novels in which the "imagined communities" become illusory.
[48] Op. cit., Anderson, p.33.
[49] For the grandmother in The Shadow Lines, Bangladesh would, of course, in her youth have been East Pakistan.

An Analysis of Nation(alism) in The Shadow Lines

On the dust cover of <u>The Shadow Lines</u> it says that:

> Out of an intricate web of memories, relationships and images Amitav Ghosh builds
> a vivid and moving story. Its focus is the meaning of political freedom and the force
> of nationalism, the Shadow Line between people and nations - which is the source of
> terrifying violence.[50]

Violence is a keyword here and the story of India is, among others, a story of violence, colonially as mutinies and insurgencies[51]; post-colonially as communal, religious violence and wars with Pakistan and China; and as of late both India and Pakistan now boast the nuclear bomb.[52] This is a classic way of looking upon nationalism, "our" nation against the others, and this is the view which the narrator's grandmother represents. Describing England she argues that:

> It took [the English] a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and
> years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there
> with blood: their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. **They
> know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood**" (77-78,
> my emphasis.)

To the grandmother a nation's borders are physical lines drawn with the blood shed by men killed in battle. Her language is a sign that she does not found her beliefs on "reality", and especially the way she collapses time by referring to "hundreds of years" reveals her reliance on myth. The grandmother is an idealist who would have sacrificed her life for freedom, and this explains her confusion when she realises that there is no visible border between India and Pakistan:

> But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean,
> where's the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same;

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[50] Amitav Ghosh, <u>The Shadow Lines</u>, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001 (first published 1988) (subsequent references are integrated into the text.)

[51] Maybe the Subaltern Studies Group would have preferred: fights for freedom, or acts of liberation.

[52] Ghosh's non-fiction book <u>Countdown</u> from 1999, based on an earlier essay, deals with the politics of the nuclear bomb seen from the point of view of the peoples of Pakistan and India. See for instance Tapan Basu, "Mimic Missions: *Countdown* as Critique of the Nuclear Arms Race in South Asia" in Brinda Bose (ed.), <u>Amitav Ghosh - Critical Perspectives</u>, Delhi: Pencraft International (New Orientations), 2003, and Amar Nath Prasad "*Countdown*: A Portrayal of The Dance of Death" in op. cit., <u>The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh</u>.

it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then - partition and all the killing and everything - if there isn't something in between? (151)

The grandmother is wrong, of course, for it is not at all like before. What she fails to realise is that there is indeed a line dividing India and Bangladesh, a political and discursive line, and Partition has been successful at convincing the people on either side that they are a nation and that the other side is an Other.

If the grandmother's view, in which borders are only all too real, is a traditionalist way of looking at the world, then the narrator's view is more of a post-modern one in which everything becomes discourse. His uncle Tridib teaches him that "*everyone lives in a story […] because stories are all there are to live in*" (182). This relativism becomes a mantra for the narrator who begins to see everything as stories and thus as subjective constructs. In the end of the novel he ponders over the meaning of distance, and he discovers that the borders created by Partition, borders which delineate nations spatially on a map, are indeed "shadow lines":

> I was struck with wonder that there had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people, of good intention, had thought that all maps were the same, that there was a special enchantment in lines. […] What had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that they had created not a separation, but a yet-undiscovered irony […] the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map, when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines - so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free - our looking glass border. (233)

The difference from the grandmother's perception of nation could not be greater. The narrator's deconstruction of nation and borders has clearly shown how the Otherness normally created by these borders, which demarcate the nation, has been turned into a same-ness, a "looking glass border."

To return to Anderson, the reason why the grandmother cannot see the border when she flies over it is because it is an illusory line between imagined

communities. No physical line separates them, but the shared consciousness and the shared discourse of the people in the individual countries give the lines spatial reality. The Shadow Lines is both a recognition of the reality of borders and of nationalism but also a plea to the reader to look past them and deconstruct them. As the title of the novel indicates, Ghosh does not deny the reality of lines (as a belief created by a shared consciousness), but he shows us that they are not as fixed and solid as we might want to believe. Maybe, in the end, Jethamoshai - the grandmother's father's brother - is the one who understands the concept of drawing borders the best, and in him we might hear Ghosh's own voice:

> I understand very well, the old man muttered. I know everything, I understand everything. Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? (214)

I would like now to turn to the function of print-capitalism in selecting and thus reinforcing certain parts of history in an attempt to create a shared communal feeling, i.e. nationalism.[53]

If one had to name a climax in The Shadow Lines it would have to be Tridib's death in Dhaka where he is killed by a mob. The story has a parallel mirror-image in Calcutta where, driving home from school in the school-bus, the narrator and his friends are suddenly faced by a mob. The riot which the narrator experienced is, obviously, a part of his memory. When this, his memory, is questioned by some of his fellow students, who do not remember having heard or read about the riot, the narrator's memory is challenged by recorded history, i.e. the printed media or "print-capitalism". What is interesting to this analysis is the way in which the narrator tries to verify his memory through newspapers. He only finds very little about the riots and, interestingly, as soon as the riots were over, they seemingly disappeared from history:

> The theatre of war, where generals meet, is the stage on which states disport themselves: they have no use for memories of riots. By the end of January 1964 the

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[53] It should be noted that I interpret Anderson somewhat narrowly, and I am aware that my definition of nation(alism) is far from as nuanced and as complex as his. The reason is that my focus is Amitav Ghosh and not Anderson. Therefore, I only use Anderson and his theories when they shed light on Ghosh.

riots had faded away from the pages of the newspapers, disappeared from the collective imagination of 'responsible opinion', vanished, without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves. They had dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence. (230)

The newspapers only report on the incidents in their own region. Thus the Calcutta newspapers do not report on the East Pakistani/Bangladeshi riots even if they must have known about them. The newspapers only report that which is important to their readers; that which is important to reinforce a national(ist) consciousness. The same goes for history books about which the narrator notices:

There were whole shelves of books on the war [of 1962] - histories, political analyses, memoirs, tracts - weighty testimonies to the eloquence of war. [Malik] pointed to another set of shelves, smiling broadly: it was the section on the 1965 war with Pakistan. […] But after half an hour we still hadn't found anything on my remembered riots. (222)

The narrator is right when he sees links between the "*eloquence of war*" and national consciousness. War is where men die heroically, a notion which we have seen already in relation to the grandmother.[54] Riots, on the other hand, are a failure of government, you could say they negate the government and thus riots have no pl/space in a national consciousness.[55] The narrator recognises this and argues that:

the madness of riot is a pathological inversion, but also therefore a reminder, of that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of government, for it is in the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples. (230)

I have shown how borders are exposed as illusory lines dividing people who do in fact have a long tradition and history in common. In The Shadow Lines the ultimate symbol of a borderless, global world is "memory" which is closely

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[54] "*All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power.*" (78)

[55] A nation's government relies on the support of the people and therefore a government is always interested in convincing the population that their way of governing is actually an expression of the population's own views and will: "*Since a state functions better if the population supports it, leaders of states are naturally eager to convince their citizens that they constitute a nation whose will is expressed by the state.*" (David A. Hollinger, Postethnic America, New York: BasicBooks, 1995, p.147.)

connected with seeing and imagining, tools with which the narrator is able to transcend the national demarcations. The narrator's uncle Tridib is the novel's embodiment of this "neo-romantic" longing for a world without borders:

> He said to me once that one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one's own mind to other times and other places. (29)

In Tridib's world the individual can only be free by recognising the discursive nature of the world. Geography, anthropology, history, science, all of these are understandable only through language, and only by seizing control of one's own imagination can one ever hope to be free:

> I tried to tell Ila and Robi about […] the Tridib who had said that we could not see without inventing what we saw […] And then, because she shrugged dismissively and said - Why? Why should we try, why not just take the world as it is? - I told her how he had said that we had to try because the alternative wasn't blankness - it only meant that if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free of other people's inventions. (31)

Ila's issue, the novel proposes, is her memory and as Bhabha argues:

> It is this forgetting [of the violence involved in establishing a nation's writ] […] that constitutes the beginning of the nation's narrative [… and] it is through this syntax of forgetting - or being obliged to forget - that the problematic identification of a national people becomes visible. […] Being obliged to forget becomes the basis for remembering the nation, peopling it anew, imagining the possibility of other contending and liberating forms of cultural identification.[56]

Whereas Tridib has taught the narrator how to shape the world through his imagination which has enabled him to revision the past, in the novel exemplified by the riots in Calcutta and Dhaka, and thus reconsider and deconstruct the nation, Ila has literally seen and experienced the world. She, however, sees only in the optical meaning of the word and therefore she, ironically, never sees in the transcendental and deconstructive sense of the word what is really happening around her. She lives, for instance, together with several left-wing activists, but:

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[56] Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, pp.160-61.

it was often apparent that they had made their decisions long before they asked her
for her opinion. They were all clearly very fond of her, but they seemed to regard her
as a kind of guest, a decoration almost. (97)

Ila lives entirely in the present, "*shut away from the tidewaters of the past and the
future by steel floodgates.*" (30), and she never allows imagination to colour the
world around her or memory to establish connections in/to the past - in The
Shadow Lines this is the equivalent of seeing only the surface of events by which
she misses the underlying structures, the "shadow lines" between people(s) and
countries, for instance.

Memory in The Shadow Lines is *not* about remembering precisely what
did and did not happen.[57] Memory is a symbol of interpretation, of imagining
alternatives to the ones presented by the authorities, e.g. the government, the
printed media, your family and teachers. Only by remembering and seeing past
the initial, surface reality of events can one hope to see the underlying structures
and patterns, what I have called "truth":[58]

> So complete is this silence that it actually took me fifteen years to discover that there
> was a connection between my nightmare bus ride back from school, and the events
> that befell Tridib and the others in Dhaka. […] For a long time after I made the
> discovery it was difficult for me to forgive my own stupidity. But of course, in a
> sense, there was nothing to forgive. I was a child, and like all children around me, I
> grew up believing in the truth of the precepts that were available to me: I believed in
> the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance;
> I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there
> existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those
> separate realities was war or friendship. There was no room in it for this other thing.
> And things which did not fit my vocabulary were merely pushed over the edge into
> the chasm of that silence. (218-19)

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[57] A good example is pages 55-56 in which the narrator tells Ila and Robi about a bomb which fell on Lymington
Mansions during World War II. When he is done, Robi objects to the narrator's story: "*Robi fell into step beside me,
and jabbing me in the ribs, told me not to bullshit: didn't I know that the Germans hadn't developed high calibre bombs
till much later in the war? […] But that's how it happened, [the narrator] said. How do you know, Robi said. Because
Tridib told me. How was* he *to know? He was just a kid, nine years old. Every little bomb probably seemed like an
earthquake to him.*"

[58] Truth (lower case) in this context can only be subjective since it is the product of the individual imagination, i.e. the
individual's memory will be different from any other's. Of course the different memories will share a number of traits,
which is why we can still order them under one heading: "truth".

Memory is not conceived of as static but rather as something which can liberate history from oblivion. Tridib and the narrator do not merely read about places and historic events, they *live* them, and in this process memory becomes not a conservative mechanism whose shared basis creates the aforementioned national consciousness constituted by its alien Other, but rather a tool with which to see beyond these fixities.

The reader of The Shadow Lines finds himself negotiating for a space between nation and imagi-nation, a space in which borders exist and do not exist at the same time. Ghosh never denies the presence of national demarcations and his intention is not as much their removal as it is a recognition that culture, religion and tradition do not adhere strictly to these borders even if we sometimes believe so. This is why nation has to be prefixed to become imagi-nation which recognises the transcendental nature of the human mind which can break down the rigid lines drawn by politicians. The grandmother believes in a world which consists of an "us" and a "them" but the novel shows us that it is not that simple, for who is "us" and who is "them":

> These communities come into being under a great variety of circumstances, are perpetuated for many distinctive ends, and are driven by very different distributions of power. Determining who is 'us' and who is 'them' can be a very different matter from case to case depending on the kind of 'we' at issue.[59]

Hollinger's argument that different communities form heterogeneous relationships which make these communities intersect at various places is echoed in The Shadow Lines in what we might term an "us *in* them" whose central metaphor becomes the mirror image:

> So closely [connected are Calcutta and Dhaka now even after Partition] that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free - our looking-glass border. (233)

Ghosh wants his readers to see past national borders which are after all human constructs, and his hope is that what I have called "imaginary transcendence" will allow people to see similarities instead of otherness. In this way Ghosh's hope is

that the dividing borders might instead become "looking-glass" borders which, instead of separate, bring people together in an idealistic realisation that the world can be an "us in them".[60]

The Shadow Lines recognises that nation, nationalism, historiography and media work together to form intricate networks, which are all part of the complex concept "memory", and which in the end have one purpose: to validate the authority of the government, which, on the other hand, is nothing without a nation. Thus power and control (a government has power and control over its inhabitants)[61] become major elements in this matrix. Nationalism might be an illusion,[62] but it is a powerful one with the potential to kill huge numbers of people. What makes this extremely intricate, as personified by the grandmother, is that some people are willing to die in the name of the nation. For them the nation and nationalism have become integral parts of their identity and it is this (shared) identity/consciousness/memory that The Shadow Lines challenges by claiming a transcendence of borders via imagi-nation. By not denying but rather exposing the matrix ("the shadow lines") that makes nationalism possible, Ghosh has in this novel performed a complex and convincing deconstruction of nation, national borders and nationalism.

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[59] Op. cit., Postethnic America, p.105.

[60] Consider in this connection the narrator's realisation that distance is relative, an insight which he achieves by drawing different circles in his Bartholomew's Atlas (pp.231-33), and compare it to a poem quoted by Hollinger: "*He drew a circle that shut me out- / Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. / But Love and I had the wit to win: / We drew a circle that took him in!*" Hollinger argues further that "*they [by which Hollinger refers to ethnic minorities, but it could as well have been an indefinite "they" referring to almost any sort of community] can no longer be cut out of the circle because they have begun to draw it, as well they should.*" (op. cit., Postethnic America, pp.171-72. The poem is quoted in Hollinger from Edwin Markham (1899), "The Man with the Hoe" from Outwitted in Charles L. Wallis (ed.), Poems of Edwin Markham, New York, 1950.)

[61] Compare note 55.

[62] Note that this is not Anderson's view, but Ghosh's.

The Calcutta Chromosome

In my discussion of subaltern agency in <u>In an Antique Land</u> I suggested that Ghosh has at least two important agendas, one of which is the recuperation of Bomma's subaltern identity and agency. The other, just as important, is the realisation and inscription of non-objectivity on the narrative itself, by which I mean the recognition that the narrative, the narrator and the author do not represent the subaltern objectively but function as filters which inevitably distort. In the <u>Calcutta Chromosome</u>, Ghosh has turned this last paradigm into a narrative principle and by destabilising and fragmenting the novel, and by so totally doing away with any notion of objectivity and essentialism, he has created a "third" space between essentialist dichotomies from which the subalterns can act.

Destabilisation and Decentring as Narrative Principles

The subtitle of <u>The Calcutta Chromosome</u> describes the novel as "*a novel of fevers, delirium and discovery*". When used about the (infallible) narrators in the novel, it hints at their instability:

> Towards the end Ava, Antar's computer, locates [Murugan] in the Department of Alternative States in Fort William, Calcutta; he has become a psychiatric patient. At this point Antar himself is feverish as a result of a recurrence of his malaria. So both the main interpreters of the evidence are, from one point of view, extremely unreliable.[63]

Interestingly, Thieme has chosen to use the term "interpreters" instead of narrators, and this is important in the sense that <u>The Calcutta Chromosome</u> is a detective story involving multiple detectives and multiple narrators whose narratives intersect and cross over in a web so intricate that one does not always know who is the narrator or the narrators.[64] <u>The Calcutta Chromosome</u> can be

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[63] Op. cit., "The Discoverer Discovered", p.137. Furthermore, Leer argues that "*The whole book may be an account of Antar succumbing to a bout of cerebral malaria.*" (Martin Leer, <u>"Stories and Trajectories": Topological Routes and Junctions in the Literary Geography of Amitav Ghosh,</u> (lecture handout 2003: since it is a handout of a, to my knowledge, unpublished essay, page numbers have been omitted.)

[64] Who is for instance the narrator in chapter 5? Is it Antar as might be suggested at the end of chapter 4? And if it is Antar (who wrote the file which obviously is the reason why chapter 5 is told, see p.22) how do we explain the details which would never have been accessible to Antar doing research on a missing person (he would probably not know or

seen as one long acknowledgement that *everything* is interpretation and nothing is told objectively:

> A message was waiting for [Antar] on Ava's screen: the search had yielded a few traces of Murugan's lost E-mail message. But the signals were faint and possibly distorted. Ava had reconstructed a semblance of a narrative by running the fragment through a Storyline algorithm. But she was unable to vouch for the authenticity of the restored text.[65]

This short paragraph is one long questioning of the narrative itself and of the validity of its representation. Note, for instance, the curious fact that "*Storyline*" is spelled with a capital "s". Does this indicate that the "*Storyline algorithm*" creates a narrative which is made to fit with certain cultural and hegemonic standards which the novel does not lay bare? Note then the sheer number of words dealing with uncertainty: "*traces*", "*faint*", "*distorted*", "*reconstructed*", "*semblance*", "*unable to vouch for the authenticity*" and "*restored*". All these words, alongside the "*Storyline algorithm*", destabilise the narrative by questioning its validity and distorting its representational and mimetic value in a way which leaves little or no room for objectivity. Objective Truth has "mutated" and become subjective truths.

I would now like to explore the novel's "doubleness" in which "interpretation" is crucial for the characters but also for the reader who becomes himself a hermeneutic detective, to borrow Thieme's phrase.[66] First then, I would like to follow Sonali Das as she enters the house being built by her fiancé Romen Haldar. In the beginning of this part Sonali is relatively clear-headed and as such we can only assume that she is a reliable source of information: "*It was past one when Sonali decided to go looking for Romen: she couldn't keep still and sleep was out of the question.*" (159) As Sonali enters the house, her state of mind

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be interested in Phulboni's exact words, Urmila and Sonali's exact doings, and so on). All in all we cannot establish Antar as *the* narrator even if he is the centre of attention in the near-future parts. Ava could be the narrator, but then we have the problem about Murugan's remark on page 305: "*Guess we got in while the going was good.*" The "in" of which refers to Ava and her memory/programs; for if somebody is controlling Ava, she cannot be the storyteller. This is another example of destabilisation; we can guess that maybe the Cult are themselves the tellers of this story (after all, to change something they have to know, and to write a novel would be a claim at knowing which might result in a mutation in the Calcutta Chromosome?) but we can never be certain.

[65] Amitav, Ghosh, The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery, New York: Avon Books, 1995, p.126 (subsequent references are integrated into the text.)

[66] Op. cit., "The Discoverer Discovered", p.140.

begins to change and the novel slowly begins to ascend towards its climax. Sonali's senses are heightened and there is a hint of danger:

> Crossing the threshold, she took a few tentative steps into the hall. Then she caught a whiff of an odd smell and came to a sudden halt. It smelled like smoke at first, and she had a moment of panic, wondering whether there was a fire somewhere within. (160)

The thriller-mood is at its highest here: Sonali has crossed the "threshold" to the "other" world and there is no turning back. She smells incense, and getting used to the dark, quiet atmosphere she also picks up the sound of "*drumming, familiar from pujas and festival days, when drums pounded in worship all over the city.*" (161) Slowly Sonali ascends the old staircase which is filled with smoke, and, unfortunately for her, she drops and thus loses her torch:

> She began to pat the floorboards around her, trying to orient herself, swivelling all the way around, banging her hands on the splintering wood. Then it dawned on her that she no longer knew which way she was facing - towards the staircase or away from it: **her disorientation was complete**. (162, my emphasis.)

In the course of a couple of pages, Sonali has turned from being a self-assured woman to being a lost woman crawling blindly around in an old mansion. Panic is imminent and Sonali is "*flailing about, blinded by sweat and smoke, deafened by the noise.*" (162) She is a perfect example of a character being alienated from a normally well-known location, and in this state she, as well as the reader, is ready to witness the ritual performed by Mangala, the leader of the Cult of Silence, the act which will presumably lead to the interpersonal transference of Lutchman's / Laakhan's, who is Ross' assistant and also Mangala's right hand, soul into Romen Haldar. While this act is immensely important to the storyline, the ending of the chapter is more relevant when it comes to the destabilisation of the narrative:

> The drumming rose to a crescendo: there was a flash of bright metal and a necklace of blood flew up and fell sizzling on the fire. Sonali's head crashed to the floor and everything went dark. (166)

These lines are the last lines of the first part of the novel, and the alert reader should be able to guess who the people performing the séance are. The point, however, is that we are not sure; no explicit links are being made for us, and all

we have to go by is a terrified, half-choked woman's eyewitness account - moreover a woman who at the time of seeing what she sees is half-blinded by smoke and incense.

This example shows how the novel is often narrated in a way which questions its own credibility and representational value. In my next example I would like to show another tendency, namely how something which seems obviously unreal can turn out to be real, or if not entirely real then at least be the bearer of clues which push the "reality" of the novel further ahead.

In the chapter leading up to Sonali seeing Mangala's ritual, Murugan has his own close encounter with the paranormal. Bearing in mind that Mrs. Aratounian, Urmila's old school teacher and owner of the house in which Murugan has rented a room, is in fact an incarnation of Mangala, we notice how suspiciously keen she is on pouring Murugan a drink:

> 'Can I pour you a gimlet? Are you sure? Just a chota - a tiny nightcap to bring you sweet dreams?' […] She followed Murugan's eyes anxiously as his gaze strayed to the table. 'No?' she said, squinting at him over her bifocals […] 'Omar Khayyam will do just fine' said Murugan. 'Thank you.' 'Good,' said Mrs. Aratounian. Reaching for a glass, she poured out a careful measure of gin, then added a splash of lime cordial and an ice cube. (120-21)

Why is Mrs. Aratounian so interested in pouring Murugan a drink? If she was merely being kind, would she look "anxiously" and would she use the word "good" when he complies? With the hint at "sweet dreams" it seems to be suggested that Mrs. Aratounian has put some kind of drug into Murugan's drink. Her reasons are never made explicit. It might be to keep Murugan away from the ritual or it might be to get a blood-sample as the dream itself suggests? No matter what the reasons are, the drug creates what at first seems like a nightmare:

> Murugan could not get to sleep. Sweltering under the mosquito net, he lay awake, watching the ceiling fan beat the heavy monsoon air, its stubby blades flashing hypnotically in the thin crack of light that was shining through the stubbornly unfastenable balcony door. […] he could hear the mosquitoes clearly, droning patiently around the bed […] The fan became a blur; the mosquito net melted into a milky fog. He was floating outside it now, looking in, at people he knew, knew very well, even if only through books and papers. […] And now the bearded Englishman

> reappears, dressed in his white coat, smoking a cigar, armed with half a dozen test tubes. He reaches in, with a little butterfly net, pulls it out and expertly traps an engorged mosquito in a test tube. […] The doctor holds it up and shows it to the others, they reach for it eagerly […] and in their eagerness the test tube slips from their fingers, falls to the floor, shatters, filling the room with a thin tinkle of breaking glass. (154-56)

For the reader who is reading The Calcutta Chromosome for the first time, this scene makes little sense. The most obvious explanation is that Murugan is ill, and in his fevers his fascination with Ronald Ross and his assistant Lutchman are woven together to form a complex nightmare. Especially the part where Murugan floats outside the net must be a dream, and this is supported by words such as "*hypnotically*", "*droning*", the fan which becomes a blur, the mosquito net which melts "*into a milky fog*" and "*floating*". But even if this reading is probably partially true, there is still something missing, something which cannot be explained from a "realist" point-of-view. The next morning Murugan walks around in the room and:

> Just as he was about to step through the door he felt a sharp stabbing pain in his right foot. Swearing softly, he stooped to investigate. There was a small gash in his heel. He had cut it on a sharp object, something that was lying on the floor, glinting in the half-light. He picked it up and looked at it. It was an inch-long shard of thin glass, probably from some kind of tube. (157-58)

If the previous examples demonstrated how the novel often questions its own narrative "truth", this example shows us how dream, illusion and fever are given status as fact or at least partial fact.[67] The Calcutta Chromosome weaves together the threads of realism with those of the oral myth in which dreams are given the same potential agency as events in our more conventional realist perception. In this "third" space, between myth and realism, we can begin to discern the subalterns. In my discussion of The Circle of Reason I argued that we have to operate with what I called "agency of breath" in which the spoken word is assigned agency. In The Calcutta Chromosome this idea is explored further, and its power is demonstrated by the fact that "*to communicate, to put ideas into*

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[67] This would also be one way of explaining the novel's subtitle, "*A Novel of Fevers, Delirium & Discovery*" in which discovery (fact, science), fever and delirium (dream, illusion, myth) coalesce.

language, would be to establish a claim to know *[… and] to know something is to change it.*" (104-05)

Finally, I would like to turn to a central part of The Calcutta Chromosome in which Ghosh has combined the above tendencies, that is the destabilisation of the narrative by questioning the narrative itself, but also the potential reality imbedded in what would normally be categorised as myth or fiction. I am of course referring to Phulboni's ghost story. This story is also the one with the most complex web of narrators in the novel: Urmila narrating to Murugan the story told to her by Sonali whose mother told her the story which Phulboni told her when he was drunk; a "narrative thread" which looks like this:

Phulboni (drunk) →Sonali's mother (shortly before her death) →Sonali →Urmila →Murugan

This story is in many ways the epitome of the narrative structure in The Calcutta Chromosome and it serves to underscore both its oral features and its rejection of an objective, essential Truth. In this narrative there are at least two possible points of distortion: the fact that Phulboni was drunk when he told the story to Sonali's mother (and maybe trying to impress and to woo her); and the sheer number of narrators which might have twisted it in the ways in which oral narratives change over time. As in the story about Sonali, Phulboni crosses from the "real" world and into "otherness" symbolised by the remote station Renupur, and thus normal becomes paranormal: his razor blades mysteriously fall to the ground twice without anybody being there, the station-master seems afraid of the station at night, the lantern's wick seemingly lowers itself to extinguish the light, and so on. Nonetheless, Phulboni decides to stay in the station for the night. The reader has previously seen how Mrs. Aratounian might have drugged Murugan's drink, and so it is interesting that Phulboni actually eats the food presented to him by the stationmaster (p.266); for like Murugan, Phulboni is up for a nightmare, a nightmare which will almost kill him in front of a roaring train:

> There was no denying the evidence of his senses: the rails were shaking under his hands, and the vibrations were getting steadily stronger. He laid his ear upon the rail and listened carefully. He heard the unmistakable rumble of an approaching train. It was thundering toward him, very close at hand. At the last minute he flung himself sideways, over the embankment and went tumbling down toward the water (271)

This narrative seems to suggest that Phulboni has had a nightmare in which he has dreamt that he was almost killed by a train. In the dream he also encounters the ghost-like figure Laakhan. These elements - dream, nightmare and ghost[68] - serve to question the truth-value of this imbedded narrative and so does the statement from the "real" train's engineer that "*there hasn't been a stationmaster at Renupur for more than thirty years.*" (276) It is thus evident that the narrative is not mimetic of reality. But how, then, do we interpret the lantern wick that lowers itself, the razor blades that fall down not once but twice? and what about the four-fingered imprint without the thumb, and what about the name "Laakhan"? These last elements are too embedded in the main narrative of The Calcutta Chromosome for them to be dismissed as coincidences; and if there is one thing you learn from the novel, it is that nothing is random and that everything has a (hidden) meaning.

My last example, Phulboni's ghost story, sums up perfectly what I have tried to show in this section of my thesis: the tendency both to question and destabilise the imbedded narrative(s) in the novel and a constant proliferation of meanings within the narratives; narratives which are not objectively true[69] and which do not seem like central narratives are nonetheless very important and contain a large amount of clues crucial to the plot.

A novel usually has some kind of centre, either a person or a group of people around which the novel can revolve. Ghosh's project in The Calcutta Chromosome is to present a subaltern group which has agency while avoiding the pitfall of establishing it as a new centre, without promoting its history to History, and Ghosh has succeeded in this primarily by constantly questioning the narratives presented in the novel:

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[68] Actually the Laakhan-figure resembles not only a ghost but an ignis fatuus or will-o'-the-wisp. These lights, said to be malicious spirits, lead lonely wanderers away from the path and into the swamps where they die in much the same way that Laakhan leads people to their deaths in front of trains at Renupur: http://www.mysteriousbritain.co.uk/folklore/will_o_the_wisp.html Typically of Ghosh, however, Laakhan can also be seen as the totally opposite: a bearer of light, the lantern, which symbolises knowledge. This would of course underscore the Cult of Silence's superior intellect compared to the colonisers such as Farley, Cunningham and Ross, see for instance Madhumalati Adhikari, "The Continuity of Life, Mission and Mystery in *The Calcutta Chromosome*", in op. cit., The Novels of Amitav Ghosh, p.232.
[69] I am aware of the paradox in even putting together the terms "narrative" and "truth", and for a further discussion of their relationship I refer to my discussion about In an Antique Land.

By constructing and 'deconstructing' histories and stories, Ghosh opens up space for various 'presentations', none being 'authentically' representative. […] The way in which the narrative of the novel proceeds - with its evasions and emphases, its claims and curlicues, its areas of visibility and haziness, its doubling back and darting forward motion - the very progress of the narrative warns us against privileging any one re-presentation. (Instead, we are made to notice the areas of omission and tension between two or more narratives and representations. What Ghosh does seek to do - and largely succeeds in doing - is to depict the Coolie (the subaltern, in general terms) as occupying a space that is not transparent to the Babu gaze within the novel (and also the gaze of the Babu/-like reader outside the novel).[70]

This is what I have termed the "third" space which I have tried to approach in this part of my thesis by showing that as the novel form in The Calcutta Chromosome begins to break up and as the narrative is deconstructed, Ghosh is able to "*open a trapdoor into a vast network of foxholes*"[71]*,* and in the stories created out of this network we can begin to see the traces of the subalterns; traces normally left out by colonial historiography both consciously and because they seemingly have no place in the "Grand Colonial Narrative".

Subaltern Consciousness and Agency

According to colonial historiography the colonial experience was a homogenised one which basically included groups of people characterised by being either civilised and rational, that is belonging to the West, or barbarous and irrational, that is belonging to the East.[72] One of the important projects in The Calcutta Chromosome is to show the heterogeneity of the East which in the novel is represented by a diverse group of individuals who span several continents and centuries and who speak several languages. They all, however, share the common traits: malaria and/or syphilis. And most of them are "*fringe people, marginal*

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[70] Tabish Khair, "Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*: *The* Question of Subaltern Agency" in op. cit., Amitav Ghosh - a Critical Companion, p.160.
[71] Op. cit., In an Antique Land, pp.15-16.
[72] See for instance Edward W, Said, Orientalism – Western Conceptions of the Orient, London: Penguin Books, 1995 (first published 1978). Said argues for instance that "*Along with all other peoples variously designated as backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded, the Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment. [...] Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or – the colonial powers openly coveted their territory – taken over.*" (p.207.)

types; they're so far from the mainstream you can't see them from the shore."
(105) This aspect, the Cult's socio-economic make-up, changes later when Babu
people are included in the Cult, people like entrepreneur Romen Haldar and
movie star Sonali Das. I will return to this aspect of the Cult of Silence later.

The Calcutta Chromosome presents us with two strands of research: Ross'
colonial project about malaria and Mangala's whose goal is "*the ultimate
transcendence of nature […] immortality*" (106). The relationship between the
two might be perceived of as dialectic in that both need the other to move on with
their own research. Only Ross does not, like Mangala, see the full picture:
"*There's a lot happening around him, only the stupid son-of-a-bitch is such a
fucking genius he doesn't know.*" (88) The tone is constantly ironic and playfully
disrespectful when it touches upon the colonisers, but the novel always recognises
their political and economic supremacy which is the reason Mangala needs the
colonisers in the first place. As Murugan explains:

> To begin with they [the Cult of Silence], wouldn't get past the guards of the 19th
> Madras Infantry. Even if they did, Ronnie wouldn't believe them. They've got to
> make it look like he's found out for himself. (105)

The novel does not "wish away" the socio-political and cerebral hegemonies
inherent in colonialism. What is suggested is a counter-organisation which pushes
Ross' research in specific directions in order to achieve its own goal, the "ultimate
transcendence of life" as Murugan puts it. This is what justifies calling The
Calcutta Chromosome counter-colonial:[73]

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[73] Postcolonial would suggest that the colonial period is over and might thus, for instance, forget about neo-imperialism.
Also, postcolonial suggests that the colonial encounter is and will always be the major theme for writers from the
former colonies. This is very important for Ghosh and he argues that: "*I have no truck with this term [postcolonial] at
all […] and I don't know a single Indian writer of my acquaintance who doesn't detest it. It completely misrepresents
the focus of the work that I do. In some really important ways, colonialism is not what interests me.*" (in Neluka Silva
and Alex Tickell, "Amitav Ghosh in Interview" in Anna Rutherford (ed.), Kunapipi, 1997, vol. xix, no. 3, Aarhus.) It
should, however, be noticed that counter-colonial is not an attempt to disregard the colonial encounter, but an attempt to
counter the traditional, dichotomised (colonial and post-colonial) historiography which has monopolised the way we
perceive colonialism. Khair argues, in a discussion about Mukul Kesavan, that "*a bid to counter 'official history' need
[sic] not end up in a dismissal of the common body, of human agency. [… What is achieved] in the process is* not *the
dismissal of history,* not *its erosion in favour of personal anecdotes and newspaper reports, but an examination of the
various other versions and elements of human agency that have been left out of 'official' accounts.*" (Tabish Khair,
"The Rape of Parwana: Mukul Kesavan's Inscription of History and Agency" in Anna Rutherford (ed.), Kunapipi,
2000, vol. xxii, no.2, Aarhus.) In short Ghosh's counter-colonialism is a way in which he: a) decentres the colonial
encounter by focusing on other important aspects of the human condition, for instance the quest for community, identity
and so on, while acknowledging the impact and importance of the colonial period/experience. In this way, which is to
some extent affiliated with postmodernism, grand narratives such as History and Anthropology are questioned but, as

> *The Calcutta Chromosome* suggests that different noetic modes, not comprehensible
> within narrow and Eurocentric versions of rationality, may operate in colonised -
> subaltern or Coolie - societies.[74]

The Cult of Silence thus operates within a scientific, cerebral reality, and it is
upon realising this that the novel achieves its great irony, the failure of the
colonisers' agency:

> The failure of, say, Ronald Ross or D. D. Cunningham to discover the 'Calcutta
> Chromosome' and the ability of Mangala-Laakhan to do so stems from the failure of
> the coloniser's concept of rationality in comprehending the colonial subaltern. A
> failure of, one may say, the coloniser's agency in an 'alien' place.[75]

A perfect example of this is the missionary Farley, a classic colonial figure who
sits down by his microscope in order to see Laveran's rod, i.e. how malaria
spreads/reproduces. He does not see anything at all, and only when Mangala
chooses to reveal the secret to him, does he see what he is after:

> First the assistant went up to the woman, Mangala, still regally ensconced on her
> divan, and touched his forehead to her feet. Then in the manner of a courtier or
> acolyte he whispered some word of advice in her ear. She nodded in agreement and
> took the clean slides from him. (150-51)

Smearing freshly drawn pigeon blood onto the slides, Mangala **allows** Farley to
examine them, and now he clearly sees what he is after: Laveran's rod. The entire
situation is controlled by Mangala and it is her nod of agreement, an ingenious
symbol of silent agency, which allows Farley to see what he wants to see. That
the power structure between coloniser and colonised is not merely one of colonial
power and indigenous subordination is underscored at the end of the chapter,
chapter 21, when Lutchman asserts his agency by *leading* Farley to the remote

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Khair mentions, not rejected; b) re-establishes the lines of communication which were severed by colonialism, an
attempt that is very important in <u>The Calcutta Chromosome</u> which counters essentialist notions such as nation,
rational/irrational and science/myth; it is, however, most clearly seen in <u>In an Antique Land</u> in which Ghosh re-
establishes pre-colonial connections between India, Egypt and other Mediterranean countries.
[74] Op. cit., "The Question of Subaltern Agency", p.149.
[75] Ibid., p.150.

station Renupur where he kills him, thus showing ultimate agency: the power to take life.[76]

When Western colonisers came to the third world, they experienced rituals and customs which they had never seen before, and since they did not understand them, they were labelled "irrational", "barbarous", and "uncivilised". Human sacrifice, argues Khair, is for the Europeans the epitome of such barbarity:

> The human sacrifice is probably the most extreme metaphor of non-European […] otherness. In colonial and even certain neo-imperial discourses, it stands as the example par excellence of the other as mindless, herd-like, barbarous and irrational.[77]

In The Calcutta Chromosome the climax in which Sonali sees the interpersonal transference of a Lutchman [sic] into Romen Haldar could be seen as an example of a human "sacrifice". But in the novel it is not portrayed as a barbarous scene but as a mixture of séance/mysticism with the medical/scientific operation:

> Then, reaching into the bag, [Mangala's] movements brisk and businesslike, she took out two scalpels and a pair of glass plates. She arranged the plates and the scalpel in front of her, on a piece of white cloth, and reached into her bag again. She took out a small clay figurine and touched it to her forehead, before setting it down beside her. […] The drumming rose to a crescendo: there was a flash of bright metal and a necklace of blood flew up and fell sizzling on the fire. (166)

As always in The Calcutta Chromosome it is important to look beyond traditional dichotomies. In this example, for instance, the binary oppositions between science and mysticism/religion, and rational/irrational only make sense if we look at both ends of the scale. Note for instance the words that draw the example towards the science/rational end: "businesslike", "scalpels", "glass plates", "arranged", "white cloth" and "bright metal". All these words are associated with order, rationality (especially the orderly fashion in which Mangala arranges her instruments) and science (the white cloth is a synecdoche of doctors and nurses, as is the bright metal of the scalpels). On the other hand, if we look at the other end of the scale, we find words associated with mysticism and irrationality: "small clay figurine",

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[76] The Cult thus has the potential to both give life (interpersonal transference, immortality) and take life (killing people in front of trains).

[77] Op. cit., "The Question of Subaltern Agency", p.149.

"touching [something to your] forehead", "drumming" and "crescendo".
Touching a figurine to your forehead is not something that can be explained
rationally, and the same goes for the drums which reach their crescendo during
the "medical séance". These things are associated with rites of passage, temples,
and mysticism. In this great fusion "blood" becomes the connecting link: In the
rational/scientific sphere it represents the controlled operation, and in the
mystical/irrational sphere it represents the "human sacrifice" discussed above:

> In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, significantly, the 'human sacrifice' is taken over and
> re-inscribed within the subaltern's agency and the subaltern's (suggested) discourses.
> From that perspective it becomes a form of discovery, of furthering life and of
> planned, purposive activity. It becomes in a way the exact opposite of what
> 'barbaric' and 'irrational' stand for - a planned means of personal improvement and
> collective wellbeing.[78]

Ghosh has taken the epitome of what colonisers perceived as irrational and re-
inscribed it in their own causality discourse. By doing so, Ghosh has once again
not merely reversed the colonial dichotomies to favour the colonised; he has
created a dialectic relation between coloniser and colonised which collapses the
dichotomy itself:

> having registered the 'colonial element', Ghosh also undermines it by positing para-
> colonial, subaltern and subversive lines of connection as well. This makes the novel
> not postcolonial (in the sense that 'postcolonial' privileges the 'colonial' experience)
> - but, perhaps, counter-post/colonial (to deploy a prefix used by Murugan). […]
> Ghosh clearly recognises that power (in political and economic senses) remains the
> prerogative of the coloniser, but he also explores through fiction the ways in which
> the colonised, the subaltern, can subvert this power.[79]

This counter-discursive nature of The Calcutta Chromosome is best
explicated by the writer Phulboni, and in this "Ghosh-like" narrator the reader is,
in an allegorical way, given a chance to penetrate deeper into and understand
further key aspects of the Calcutta Chromosome's relation to (subaltern) agency:

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[78] Ibid., pp.149-50. (I take it that Khair's "suggested discourses" refer to what I have discussed earlier, namely the way
in which the narrative constantly deconstructs itself in order to propose not an essential Truth but a suggested truth (and
since post-structuralists see everything as discourse "suggested truth" becomes "suggested discourse".)
[79] Ibid., pp.155-56.

'Every city has its secrets' [Phulboni's] voice began, 'but Calcutta, whose vocation is excess, has so many that it is more secret than any other. Elsewhere, by the workings of paradox, secrets live in the telling: they whisper life into humdrum street corners and dreary alleyways; into the rubbish-strewn rears of windowless tenements and the blackened floors of oil-bathed workshops. But here in our city where all law, natural and human, is held in capricious suspension, that which is hidden has no need of words to give it life; like any creature that lives in a perverse element, it mutates to discover sustenance precisely where it appears to be most starkly withheld - in this case, in silence.' (24-25)

This is the reader's first encounter with the notion of silence as discourse, and in many ways the quotation foreshadows the storyline of <u>The Calcutta Chromosome</u>. In Calcutta secrets live in a suspended form between natural and human, between science and psyche, which means we might be close to the science/mysticism connection which becomes so important later in the novel. The "mutation" that Phulboni talks about is obviously the Chromosome itself but also the Cult of Silence which adapts itself to the current circumstances, a fact which is clearly seen in the end where it has had to adapt to the modern world in order to hack into Ava. Most interesting is the end of the quotation in which silence is articulated, an irony which is always present in <u>The Calcutta Chromosome</u> and which also explains why the novel has no real denouement: the novel as articulation is itself part of a chromosomal mutation which excludes the readers from the real Cult of Silence. The readers become Murugan-like figures who might know a whole lot about the Chromosome but who, nevertheless, fail to dissect its essence. This is also why Thieme sees the reader as *part* of the ending itself:

The final insistence that all the investigators within the text are implicated in the material they are investigating leaves the novel's readers having to consider the possibility that they too are caught in the conspiracy of history. Or, to put this another way, the conclusion suggests that readers have not been playing the role of passive subalterns, but rather, as makers of meaning, empowering themselves through the silent agency of reading.[80]

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[80] Op. cit., "The Discoverer Discovered", pp.140-41. (It seems like a slip from Thieme that he suddenly calls the subalterns passive and his essay does not really support the statement: "*[Phulboni's near fatal accident at Renupur] provides the most obvious example of a subaltern figure exercising power, even if this figure remains voiceless.*" (Ibid., p.135.)

In this way Thieme sees the ending as a brilliant example of "reader-response" theory in which the reader becomes himself a "discovered", hence also the name of his essay "The Discoverer Discovered" which thus refers not only to Antar, Murugan, Urmila, Ross and Mangala but also to the reader himself.

What Phulboni tries to tell the reader is that silence and speech are not each other's opposite and that they do not exclude each other. Some would see discourse as speech or writing and silence as merely a lack of discourse. Phulboni knows that this is false when it comes to the Cult of Silence and the Calcutta Chromosome: "*Mistaken are those who imagine that silence is without life; that it is inanimate, without either spirit of voice. It is not.*" (27) Silence is not the lack of voice, and in the novel it becomes a kind of discourse and an extremely powerful one too: a discourse with the power to cause a mutation in the Calcutta Chromosome. It is in these ways that silence becomes animate and possesses both spirit and voice, and it is yet another way in which The Calcutta Chromosome breaks down traditional dichotomies. Instead of portraying silence and speech (or writing) as binary oppositions, they are allowed to co-exist as parallel discourses and when they are sometimes allowed to meet, as Ross' research and Mangala's medical mysticism do, the manifestation is a powerful mutation in the Calcutta Chromosome which allows for interpersonal transference: immortality.

Having shown the power attributed to language and speech, which is closely related to what I have called "agency of breath", I would like to dedicate a few pages to a discussion of the potential force inherent in the novel's nomenclature. In the following I attempt to see names both in relation to subaltern agency and in relation to my earlier discussion about the novel's drive towards destabilisation and decentring.

The Agency of Names: Christian and Hindu Religion

In the beginning of The Calcutta Chromosome Antar and Ava are presented to us. The names clearly hint at Adam and Eve and it is indeed Antar's job to name the world. Thus Antar and Ava cannot be the narrators since they are themselves creations. The Christian symbolism is reinforced in the closing chapters of the

novel in which Antar creates a visual link with Murugan who is in a mental asylum:

> Antar's eyes fell on the mud-caked thighs and he turned away, with an involuntary shudder. Reaching for Ava's keyboard, he rewrote the vectors of the image. There was a tremor in the image and the man's torso vanished. Now only his head remained, vastly enlarged, much larger than lifesize, blown up to the scale of a piece of monumental statuary. (290)

By introducing Antar to the story of Ronald Ross and the subversive parallel story of the Cult of Silence, Murugan has unknowingly prepared Antar for his inclusion in the Cult. In the Bible John the Baptist can be seen as performing this task in relation to Jesus, not in the least by baptising him. Thus Antar's metaphorical decapitation of Murugan becomes a mirror image of John the Baptist's real decapitation. In a Christian allegorical reading, then, we would have to assert some kind of divine ordering principle, a God, outside the narrative who is in full control of the narrative/the world.

Towards the end of the novel, we learn that Antar has offered to connect Tara to the Internet: "*'I have an old laptop in my cupboard,' he said. 'I could hook it up with Ava and run a cable through to you.'*" In this way we end up with a connection between Ava and Tara which recalls "*Avatar, the physical manifestation of a Hindu god.*"[81] This semi-divine relationship is another assertion of the subalterns' agency and by connecting computer-science and mysticism Ghosh is again able to counter colonial discourse:

> By avoiding this Science-Magic dualism, Ghosh escapes from the direct grip of a colonial discourse: a discourse that posits the 'objectivity' (and, hence, human agency) of 'European' science against the subjectivity and mechanical/historical repetitiveness of the colonised. [...] He avoids, for example, the false man-machine polarity.[82]

Ava and Tara together, woman and (female) machine become powerful demigods capable of, if not utterly controlling, then at least pushing the narrative in a certain direction, which is for instance seen on the first page when Ava "stumbles" on

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[81] Op. cit., Leer.
[82] Op. cit., "The Question of Subaltern Agency", p.148.

Murugan's ID card.[83] The question then is whether the subalterns control only Ava or if they control the entire computer-network which can be seen as a symbol of neo-imperialism. The answer is not as interesting as asking the question, for in asking the question lies the seed of agency. The subalterns might or might not have achieved imperial-like control over communications, but it is beyond doubt that they are able to assert their agency, a fact which their manipulation of Ava clearly exemplifies.

The Calcutta Chromosome enters into a heavily eclectic relationship with history, religion, mysticism, genre, narrative form and technique. It uses Christian and Hindu religion at times, and these are unproblematically paired with Gnostic mysticism and Valentinian cosmology which are themselves paired with Western medical science such as microscopy. The effect is what I discussed in the early parts of this chapter: a total decentring of the notion of a Grand Narrative, and a destabilisation of any essentialist notions. To this end all other elements play their part, and it is from the "third" space created by this constant deconstruction that the subalterns are able to assert their agency.

Imagined Communities: Group, Nation and Globalism

The Calcutta Chromosome begins with Antar alone in his apartment which is also one of a very few inhabited apartments in the tenement. He is not really a part of any social network:

> I [Ghosh] do think if you are Indian or Asian, and this is not necessarily to essentialize, that you think in terms of families. Narratives, when they come into my head, come as families, and that's why *The Calcutta Chromosome* was very important to me because it wasn't about families; it was about people who were completely disconnected, and I think that aspect of it is sometimes unsettling.[84]

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[83] Actually Murugan's American name is Morgan which is also "*a unit for expressing the relative distance between genes on a chromosome based on the frequency with which the genes cross over; one unit equals a theoretical crossover value of 100 percent between two loci.*" (www.dictionary.com) Another example of names being intertextual is Lutchman who is "*named after Rama's Brother in the Ramayana.*" (from Urbashi Barat, "Quest and Subversion: The Empire Strikes Back in *The Calcutta Chromosome*" in op. cit., The Novels of Amitav Ghosh, p.208.)

[84] Op. cit., "Amitav Ghosh in Interview" in op. cit., Kunapipi, Aarhus, 1997, vol. xix, no. 3.

Antar mainly communicates with or through Ava and with his acquaintances from a doughnut shop at Penn Station about whom it is said that "*one of the unwritten rules of the doughnut shop was that they never inquired too closely into the details of each other's lives.*" (19) Via Ava, Antar is connected to the World Wide Web and through this Ghosh could have established a vision for the global community. This is, however, not the case and the relationship between Antar and Ava is, on the contrary, one in which Antar tries to cheat Ava into believing that he is working hard, and one in which Ava is in many ways the master:[85]

> 'Stop showing off,' he shouted . 'You don't have to show me you know everything there is to know. Iskuti; shut up.' But it was Ava who silenced him instead, serenely spitting the phrases back at him. Antar listened awestruck as 'shut up' took on the foliage of the Upper Amazon. (7)

Antar lives a life which is in many ways dominated by silence, a notion which is repeated time and again over the first couple of chapters,[86] mostly as a positive feature, but also with a hint of loss: "*They were all gone now, all those noisy, festive families .*" (16) The people that Antar once had relationships with - his wife, his neighbours, his chess-playing friend, even the old lady in the apartment below - are gone, and Antar has not been able to fill the gaps left by them. The only thing he has left is his work, from which he is soon to be retired, and his superficial pseudo-friendships at Penn Station.

This situation is typical for most of the characters in The Calcutta Chromosome; they are all fringe people who are more or less alienated from mainstream society.[87] In the novel these alienated characters seem to mutually attract one another:[88]

> [Antar] was not in the habit of inviting confidences from strangers, especially someone as loud and brash as this [Murugan]. Yet, appalled as he was by the man's voice and manner, he couldn't help feeling an inexplicable sense of kinship with him. (50)

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[85] Khair, too, sees Ava as a symbol of neo-imperialism, op. cit., "The Question of Subaltern Agency", p.155.

[86] "*Often they sat in companionable silence*" (13); "*It was a relief to escape from those voices in the evenings*" (14); "*[Antar] was always relieved when the banging stopped and the building fell silent again*" (15).

[87] Even if they are Babus socio-economically, Romen Haldar, Sonali Das and Mrs. Aratounian all move on the edge of and all seem to feel the same kind of alienation from the rest of society.

[88] See also, op. cit., "The Question of Subaltern Agency", p.155.

Later in the novel this is repeated between Urmila and Murugan when they are sitting together at the Ronald Ross Memorial hidden from the street by a wall.[89] This attraction is the only hint at an organising principle within the Cult of Silence, and no other criteria seem to matter:

> The most striking characteristic of these inextricably interlinked characters is, paradoxically, their alienation from their immediate surroundings; for any quest to succeed, it seems that the hunter must be free from the bondage of conventional social relationships and must survive poverty, disease, exploitation, marginalization, anything and everything that might weigh down the human spirit.[90]

When I discussed nationalism in The Shadow Lines, the border between the peoples of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh was extremely important as it separated a country's inhabitants from the Others. This is very different in The Calcutta Chromosome. In Romen Haldar's house Sonali sees one of Mangala's rituals, but before that she has a chance to look at the crowd gathered there:

> She caught a glimpse of the tops of dozens of heads, some male, some female, young and old, packed in close together. Their faces were obscured by the smoke and flickering firelight but she spotted a couple of weatherbeaten Nepali faces that she was sure she had seen before, when Romen last brought her to the house. For the rest it seemed like a strangely motley assortment of people: men in patched lungis, a handful of brightly painted women in cheap nylon saris, a few young students, several prim-looking middle-class women - people you would never expect to see together. (164-65)

With the Calcutta Chromosome the Cult of Silence has not only achieved a means of transcending nature; it has also been able to transcend the essential categories that normally make up societies and nations. Men and women are brought together, old, young, educated, poor, and middle-class, all belong to the Cult of Silence.[91] This observation is reinforced by the fact that, socio-economically

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[89] Op. cit., The Calcutta Chromosome, p.219.
[90] Op. cit., "Quest and Subversion: The Empire Strikes Back in *The Calcutta Chromosome*", p.222.
[91] In "The Question of Subaltern Agency", p.151, Khair argues that "*The subalterns are from outside the Babu Circles.*" which I definitely think is wrong. The Cult of Silence clearly rejects the Babu-Coolie demarcation. Khair seems to slightly contradict himself when he argues, p.154: "*Interestingly, in spite of his awareness of what I have termed the Babu-Coolie line of division, Ghosh's community of the chromosome (as depicted in the 'sacrifice' scene, for example) includes people from various classes, regions and religions.*" Maybe Khair is referring to the fact that in the beginning, i.e. the 1890s, the Cult of Silence consisted of subalterns only, and not until later did they include other socio-economic

speaking, Mrs. Aratounian and the first Mangala come from entirely different communities: Mrs. Aratounian is a middle-class Babu and Mangala is a subaltern Coolie. And when it comes to nationalities, Tara and Maria are Indians and Antar is Egyptian. Categories such as these, caste, nationality and religion, normally divide the world into an "us and them" where "them" becomes an alien Other. The Calcutta Chromosome, like The Shadow Lines before it, counters and makes obsolete these distinctions and celebrates instead a heterogeneity which is best perceived of as an "us *in* them.[92]

It is important to stress that The Calcutta Chromosome grounds itself on heterogeneity because the opposite is most often true of the discourses which the novel is written against. One example, as discussed by Khair, is the way in which colonial historiography disregarded India's history before colonialism:

> The second (inter-Orient) level of the colonial myth of India's lack-of-history isolates India from the cluster of relations that have constituted it (both in its parts and as more-than-its-parts) before European colonisation - turning India's history with various other peoples and kingdom-states to an emptiness before the 'arrival' of the colonial presence as the great connecting link. This is the other side of the same coin: it attributes historical agency only or largely to the Europeans.[93]

In The Calcutta Chromosome this tendency is no longer mainly colonial but neo-imperial, and it is now seen to be operative at a global scale. At the beginning of the novel, Antar suddenly understands the discursive hegemonies which underlie this neo-imperialism:

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classes, other religions and so on. If that is Khair's point, I agree with him, but it is important to stress the way in which Ghosh transcends the demarcation between Babu and Coolie, religions, races and so on.

[92] Madan Sarup argues that "*it is philosophical and religious movements, going beyond the political definitions of man, that often grant foreigners rights that are equal to those of citizens. These rights, however, may be enjoyed only within some future Utopian place.*" (op. cit., Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World, p.8.) It is not clear what rights the members of the Cult of Silence have; nonetheless, The Calcutta Chromosome can be seen as Ghosh's vision for a such "Utopian place" which is what I have referred to as the "third" space.

[93] Op. cit., "The Question of Subaltern Agency", p.154. (The first (intra-orient) level "*suggests that India itself is a* purely and solely *colonial construct - that because of European nation-statism, it did not or could not exist as anything other that an interminably divisible, chaotic and ahistoric multitude of parts. It suggests that the agency of 'Indians' themselves was not and cannot be sufficient to create and maintain India. [...] Such a perspective denies narration to Indian history, sees cohesive elements such as 'jâti' (caste) as purely decadent and static, overlooks elements of coherent political* agency *on the micro and macro levels, and mostly explains large Kingdom-states (such as those of the Mauryas or the Mughals) with the help of the terminology of 'adventurism' or 'Oriental despotism'.*" (ibid., p.153.)

> [the International Water Council] saw themselves making History [… and] [i]nstead
> of having a historian sift through their dirt, looking for meanings, they wanted to do
> it themselves: they wanted to load their dirt with their own meanings. (7)

This is probably Ghosh's most direct attack on "History" and its inherent power-structures which create global hegemonies. The Water Council is able to control the writing of History and by doing so it effectively prevents anybody from questioning it - and seeing that Ghosh's projects are all about creating and establishing parallel histories which question and decentre grand narratives this is quite serious; the Water Council attempts to monopolise History, but their attempt is not successful. The Cult of Silence intervenes, most importantly, by controlling Ava:

> Antar shot a quick glance at the 'Time of Conversion' prompt, at the bottom of the
> three-dimensional wraparound image. It said 5:25 p.m. Antar gasped: that could only
> mean that someone had started loading the SimVis system at about the same time
> that Ava stumbled upon Murugan's ID card. (306)

There is never one Truth, and no matter how much you try to control History, Ghosh seems to suggest that it will inevitably mutate into histories. Manipulating History in order to highlight certain aspects of it while obfuscating other aspects has been done before, and is still being done in, for instance, (neo)-colonial and nationalist historiographies, but in the cracks and silences we are able to hear the suppressed, subaltern voices, reconstruct their consciousness and glimpse the effects of their agency. In The Calcutta Chromosome this agency is not limited to a specific socio-economic group. Rather the Cult of Silence is shown as an extremely heterogeneous group which includes rich, poor, old, young, different nationalities and religions. At the end of the novel, the Cult joins together alienated individuals who finally achieve a sense of belonging:

> There were voices everywhere now, in his room, in his head, in his ears, it was as
> though a crowd of people was in the room with him [Antar]. They were saying:
> 'We're with you; you're not alone; we'll help you across.' He sat back and sighed
> like he hadn't sighed in years. (306)

Antar's friends at the train station can be seen as pseudo-friends by which I mean that they form a loosely structured, superficial group of people whose

members never really bond and get to know each other apart from trivial things like what kind of tea they prefer. This kind of friendship can be regarded as a mark of the cosmopolitan traveller who is always suspended between leaving and arriving, a state which is also suggested by the group's choice of meeting place, the train station (Penn Station). This state questions any essentialist notion of home and nation, and, with regard to The Shadow Lines, Dixon argues that:

> Ghosh complicates this 'classical' mapping of the world into East and West by dividing his novel into two parts, 'Going Away' and 'Going Home'. The irony is that his characters come and go in so many directions that the narrator is obliged to pose the question, what is home, and is there such a thing as a discrete homeland separable from one's experiences elsewhere?[94]

In The Calcutta Chromosome Ghosh uses the railroad stations as symbols for this suspension between home and abroad and coming and going, places in which we have to reconsider our notions about time and space:

> The scenes of crossing or near-crossing [the interpersonal transference of the Cult's members into new bodies] seem connected with railway tracks or railway stations in the topological plotting of the novel, just as the three main railway stations of Penn Station in New York, Sealdah in Calcutta and Renupur in rural Bengal seem to be on some kind of web circuit. They function as the sites where characters and stories appear from and disappear into; centres which connect parallel worls [sic], a kind of real-world Internet portals.[95]

In this way the railway stations themselves become "imagined communities" and places where alienated (subaltern) people can create a sense of community. In The Calcutta Chromosome this is seen for instance in the fact that both Mangala and Lutchman have been picked up by Cunningham at the railway station Sealdah: "*Far preferable, in [Cunningham's] opinion, to being surrounded by overeager and half-formed college students.*"[96] (145) The many narratives in The Calcutta Chromosome are all connected to these railways and railway stations, and all the characters in the novel are somehow related to the railways, either appearing or

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[94] Op. cit., "Travelling in the West", p.19.
[95] Op. cit., Leer.
[96] Notice the irony here: Cunningham has actually gotten the most eager "students" of all, and "students" who by far outsmart himself.

disappearing from them. Thus the railway becomes a powerful metaphor for storytelling and narration, and the subalterns' control of the railway becomes a powerful assertion of agency:

> The stokers and engineers were examining the points and switches, trying to work out how the tracks had been switched. Incomprehensible, said the Anglo-Indian chief engineer; that siding hadn't been used in decades, the mechanism had been dismantles years ago. (276)

The subalterns are in control of the railway tracks at least around Renupur, and that Phulboni's near fatal accident was no coincidence is reinforced by the fact that Farley's death happened in the exact same way:

> 'The year I first began this job,' the guard said, 'in '94, there was another who was not so fortunate: he died there - in just that way, lying on the rails, at dawn.'(277)

Leer takes this line of argument one step further when he argues that Renupur can be seen as

> a siding on a single-gauge railway, away from the main line, though joined to the same track, which allows stories to be topologically switched and to exist on different levels[97]

We thus have a strong argument for the idea that the subalterns are able to divert the single-gauge railway called History into sidings, histories, whenever they need to. As with Ross' research, which has been shown to be manipulated by Mangala, the subalterns are able to assert their agency by silently pushing history in certain directions.

The Calcutta Chromosome begins in New York, but the Chromosome is first explored by Mangala in India, and from here it seems to spread in a way that does not adhere to the national borders drawn by the colonisers and the indigenous elite. In fact the Chromosome counters all essentialist notions, such as nation and religion, and in its ever expanding circles of inclusion it brings together, as discussed above, a wide array of people. In The Shadow Lines borders were shown to be illusory and transcendentable by the imagination, but in

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[97] Op. cit., Leer (the quotation goes on to say "*as each others' ghosts*"; for a discussion about ghosts in the novels of Amitav Ghosh, see for instance op. cit., "When Speaking with Ghosts: Spectral Ethics in *The Calcutta Chromosome*".

The Calcutta Chromosome this is taken one step further by allowing the Chromosome physically to transcend national borders, spreading from a centre, Renupur probably, like a virus.[98] Thus the Chromosome becomes what Derrida called an "undecidable"[99] which resides between dichotomies, something which can be explained by reference to the Greek word "pharmakon" which means both remedy and poison, something the effect of which can be both healing and harmful.[100] Thus the Chromosome in the novel is neither a virus nor a cure[101] but both, and in this way the novel counters the dichotomy itself and creates a "third" space between the binary opposition in which the two meanings co-exist.

In the end of The Calcutta Chromosome, the Chromosome has arrived in what might be the ultimate symbol of cosmopolitanism: New York, and having "infiltrated" the heart of the Western world, the novel's almost mocking end marks a shift away from my initial question "can the subaltern speak?" towards a more reflective recognition of the subalterns' agency and consciousness: "how do the subalterns speak and to what effect do they assert their agency?"

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[98] It should be noted that the chromosome as metaphor is in fact Murugan's invention. He uses the idea of the chromosome to describe the Cult's medical science but the metaphor is never verified by anybody inside the Cult itself. Thus the Calcutta Chromosome becomes an undecidable that is suspended between science and myth, and in this way the Chromosome transcends the boundaries between science and myth by including both.

[99] Jacques Derrida, Disseminations, London: Athlone Press, 1981.

[100] Op. cit., Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World, p.10.

[101] Murugan describes to Antar the strange fact that malaria can be used to treat syphilis in the dementia paralytica stage and he argues that: "*malaria isn't just a disease. Sometimes it's also a cure.*" (op. cit., The Calcutta Chromosome, pp.53-54).

Conclusion

The idea behind this thesis has been to explore Amitav Ghosh's first four novels in an attempt better to understand the ways in which they form a continuum. The fact that they can be seen as parts of a thematic whole is interesting and not discernable by merely studying their form: all four novels are examples of different genres, written from different point-of-views, arranged in different ways and with very different plots. Ghosh, however, did not intend the four novels to present an overt four-novel relationship and the conclusions reached in this thesis can be transferred largely to his more recent novels, The Glass Palace and The Hungry Tide. My reasons for looking at the four novels have, however, not been arbitrary and I hope to have made clear the ways in which the four novels intersect. These intersections are largely responsible for the way in which I have structured this thesis and they are what justify my view that The Calcutta Chromosome can be seen as the novel in which the thematic threads from the previous three novels are woven together - even if the final cloth is an untidy one.

I have attempted to show the ways in which Ghosh challenges our perception of History as a series of events which the historian, anthropologist or socio-economist can objectively commit to paper. To Ghosh, History is an infinite number of parallel narratives and none is too little or insignificant to be told. On the contrary, Ghosh shows how seemingly insignificant narratives have the power to subvert our traditional view of History. The narrator's life-story in The Shadow Lines, Bomma's story in In an Antique Land, and the alternative story behind Ronald Ross' malaria research in The Calcutta Chromosome are all examples of such narratives which challenge History's capital "H" and by doing so force Truth to mutate into truths.

In my introduction I mentioned that Ghosh is part of a post-Rushdie generation which came into being after the success of Midnight's Children. In this novel the life of Saleem Sinai, born only seconds after India was granted her independence, is turned into an allegory of the Partition of the Subcontinent into two, and later three, individual countries. For Ghosh, too, Partition is an important historic moment, but instead of focusing on the division it created, Ghosh looks at

the ways in which the three countries are still connected. For Ghosh the nation is *not*, as in Anderson's theory, a separate entity cut off from the rest of the world, and he does *not* accept the division of the world into an "us and them". On the contrary, in his novels Ghosh urges us to see an "us *in* them" which is his way of transcending the geo-political borders which have been only too successful in severing the bonds between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, something which the recent nuclear race between India and Pakistan illustrates only too well. In The Shadow Lines Ghosh draws attention to some of the problems inherent in extreme nationalism, a view which is personified by the grandmother and her willingness to sacrifice her life for the nation. Instead the novel celebrates the power of the mind to transcend fixed notions such as nation, nationalism and national borders. In this way the novel shifts attention from the nation to imagi-nation.

All these notions seem to come together in The Calcutta Chromosome in which subaltern Coolies and Babus are brought together in the Cult of Silence. The Cult is itself an amalgamate which transcends class, gender, age, religion and nationality, and nations created by politicians are thus exposed as illusory. Furthermore, The Calcutta Chromosome refuses to view the world as a series of binary oppositions and it stubbornly brings together what is normally separated: Christian and Hindu religion are unproblematically paired with Gnostic mysticism and Valentinian cosmology, and this mysticism/cosmology is itself paired with Western medical science such as microscopy.

The Calcutta Chromosome is a superb example of Ghosh's belief in histories and truths instead of History and Truth. Take for example the story of Ronald Ross which, on the surface, looks so simple but which is shown to have several parallel narratives attached to it, several parallel truths. What is the truth for Ronald Ross is not necessarily the truth for Mangala, but the strength of The Calcutta Chromosome, and of the Calcutta Chromosome in the novel as well, lies in its ability to handle several truths at a time without necessarily claiming one absolute Truth. And this is indeed the greatest achievement of Ghosh's novels and their most important message: to accept that Truth is a discursive construct and thus always only a partial truth, and that Truth, as well as what we perceive as History, mutates and adapts to our lives and needs over time.

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