



Myth and History in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

The article examines how mythic storytelling interacts with historical records in Amitav Ghosh's fictional works. Ghosh's work brings back forgotten parts of history by using oral traditions and folklore and myth as primary evidence because mainstream historians only focus on documented events that show a nation's progression. Ghosh demonstrates through his comparative study of *In an Antique Land*, *The Hungry Tide* and the *Ibis Trilogy* that he uses myth as an advanced method to decolonize colonial records instead of escaping from authentic historical situations. Ghosh uses multiple narrative threads with interwoven timelines to challenge historical accounts that have excluded certain voices and perspectives. Ghosh's fiction critiques traditional historiography through his use of various knowledge sources which create a more complete understanding of historical events.

The article posits that Ghosh's narratives function as a "shadow history," wherein the documented material and the legendary content stand separated by their established boundaries which Ghosh uses to challenge Western control over "Truth." Ghosh uses his study of the medieval Mediterranean together with his research on the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean to show how myth functions as a method for the subaltern people, who include displaced individuals and enslaved persons and ecologically marginalized groups, to retain their existence, which official state records have blocked from being seen. This study analyzes Ghosh's application of ecological mythology in his 2019 work *Gun Island* which establishes that his combination of myth and history functions as an essential corrective to modern consciousness which the "Great Derangement" has created. The study demonstrates that Ghosh's literary work creates a shamanic transformation of the novelist's role which presents a complete understanding of human and non-human histories that exists in the Anthropocene time period.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, Historiography, Subaltern Studies, Ecological Myth, Post-colonial Archive, The Ibis Trilogy.

I. The Subversion of the Archive –

Introduction to Ghosh's Historiography

Amitav Ghosh stands as a leading "writer-historian" within the current international literary scene [10]. Ghosh uses archival materials to establish his historical research because he views them as sources that present both new information and missing details about the past [14]. Ghosh sees history as a tool that colonial powers use to establish control over territories because they create a world order which excludes all things that exist beyond standard boundaries and every group of people that exists outside mainstream society. His fiction serves as a counter-narrative which creates a "shadow history" that addresses gaps which official documents have left unrecorded [14], [15]. Ghosh combines personal experiences with traditional stories and oral traditions to research historical events. Through his novels, such as "The Ibis Trilogy" and "The Glass Palace," Ghosh invites readers to reconsider the past and question the ways in which history is constructed and remembered [8].

The main point of Ghosh's research about spatial and temporal political matters shows that official historical records depend on "shadow lines" which define national borders and census categories as actual historical evidence of human migration and cultural exchange [9]. The *Shadow Lines* stands as his main research work which demonstrates how national history gets undermined through personal memories and family legends about the Partition of 1947. He proposes that people should seek the actual event "Truth" through common historical myths which different communities have passed down through time instead of relying on the unchanging newspaper articles from that time period. Ghosh believes that memories which people share at kitchen tables provide better historical evidence than maps which colonial offices created. Ghosh presents a new approach to history and memory studies because he shows how people share their personal stories which help them understand their past. Through his research about personal relationships he shows how individual experiences create better historical understanding than traditional historical methods [11].

Ghosh considers myth to be the hidden current that runs through all historical events according to this section. The oppressed people use



this language to protect their identity when their complete physical evidence gets either destroyed or taken away or not created at all[2]. Ghosh establishes equal value between myth and history by using Ghosh's approach to challenge European-centered beliefs about historical development. He replaces the "official" timeline with a cyclical, multi-vocal narrative that acknowledges the presence of ghosts, legends, and non-human actors. The approach expands what people consider facts because it establishes new boundaries for definition according to which all Global South information becomes valid. The novelist serves as a shaman who uses his storytelling to connect the documented past with the created mythic present. Ghosh uses this narrative technique to challenge Western historical storytelling methods while presenting a view that includes multiple perspectives[12]. He demonstrates how non-Western histories become more complex and valuable through his use of myth and reality because these histories have been treated as unimportant or deleted from existence.

II. The Fragmentary Truth – Detective Work and Medieval Legend in *In an Antique Land*

The book displays its generic nature through three different genres which include a traveler's diary and an ethnographic study and an historical reconstruction. The story unfolds through two distinct time periods which show Ghosh's life in an Egyptian village during the 1980s and his intense quest to find a 12th-century Indian slave who appears in a Cairo Geniza fragment[11]. Ghosh employs the detective approach to demonstrate how historians construct historical accounts from incomplete evidence while myths serve as essential links between these disconnected historical remnants. Ghosh's research approach uses his personal life stories together with made-up stories to create a more complete picture of historical events. Ghosh combines his personal story with historical research to create a narrative that blurs reality and fiction which demonstrates that storytelling shapes our historical understanding.

The Archive as a Puzzle

The story's main historical element follows Abraham Ben Yiju who worked as a Jewish merchant together with his enslaved person known from a single letter reference as "the slave of Ben Yiju." The colonial archive shows the enslaved person as an invisible figure who exists only as a minor detail in trade history. Ghosh considers the absence of this archival material to create an intense

unknown which he must solve[15]. He performs what might be called "philological myth-making," where he uses the dry facts of medieval trade routes, legal documents, and communal records to speculate on the humanity of the slave. He uses this method to create an archive hierarchy which shows the merchant as the main historical figure while the slave remains an unknown special case. Through Ghosh's narrative, the slave is given agency and a voice that challenges traditional historical narratives. The method enables historians to create new historical interpretations which focus on the people who have been forgotten throughout time.

The Subversion of Orientalism

Ghosh's study of *In an Antique Land* serves as his critique of contemporary Orientalist historical analysis which treats the medieval Mediterranean and Indian Ocean region as backward areas that eventually developed into European supremacy[7],[14]. Ghosh reveals an environment of "syncretic mobility" which permitted Jews, Muslims, and Hindus to traverse borders without any restrictions that present-day nationalistic systems impose. Ghosh uses regional "social myths" which include the common legends about saints and the community knowledge of the "Baniya" traders and the Malabar Coast oral histories to explain how a Jewish merchant from Tunisia arrived in Mangalore with an Indian slave. Ghosh uses this method to dispute the Eurocentric historical framework while demonstrating how different cultures interacted during the precolonial period. He uses social myths to expose the intricate ways people from different cultures interacted with each other throughout the medieval period[12].

Myth as a Restoration of Agency

Ghosh uses the name "Bomma" for his slave character because he studied local Indian naming traditions in his research. The author presents the slave character with his complete ancestry and personal traits together with his role in human history. Ghosh needs to use this transition for his decolonial work because subaltern groups remain voiceless through official records which they need to express themselves through the author's creative knowledge[15]. The "Antique Land" in *In an Antique Land* represents a location that exists beyond Egypt and India because it represents a vanished existence of common human heritage which people can discover by using the fragment to build a new mythology that includes all people[10]. Ghosh uses history together with myth to create a new version of history that lets subdued groups



express their opinions. He uses storytelling to fight against established historical accounts which lead readers to explore different ways cultures connect with each other.

III. Ecological Mythos – Tigers, Tides, and the Legend of Bon Bibi in *The Hungry Tide*

Ghosh moves from human archive studies into planetary archive research which shows how myths serve as cultural stores of environmental knowledge[13]. The novel presents two historical accounts from the Sundarbans region which show scientific research methods alongside local beliefs about Bon Bibi, the forest goddess. The chapter shows how Ghosh uses indigenous mythology to create a spiritual and practical map of a territory which modern methods cannot accurately measure. Ghosh shows how traditional ecological knowledge helps people understand complex ecosystems in the Sundarbans by combining scientific information with indigenous mythology. Through Bon Bibi, he shows how myths provide essential knowledge about living peacefully with nature, which opposes Western views on environmental protection.

The Myth of Bon Bibi as a Social Contract

For the inhabitants of the Sundarbans, the Bon Bibi legend and her battle against Dokkhin Rai exist as an advanced social-ecological system. The forest rules establish that people can access natural resources for their basic needs but should refrain from obtaining anything beyond that for selfish reasons. Ghosh presents this myth as an ethical chronicle which shows how humans have succeeded in surviving through time in an ever-changing environment. The official account of Sundarbans history describes colonial conservation programs and governmental border controls which treat indigenous practices as criminal activities whereas the mythic account describes a sacred agreement between humans and tigers. The sacred contract serves as a fundamental element which sustains ecological equilibrium by showing how all organisms maintain connections with one another[12]. Ghosh presents a different understanding of how humans interact with nature through his examination of mythic history which contradicts traditional beliefs about human supremacy over the natural world.

The Conflict of Rationalities

The novel establishes its tension through Piya, an American cetologist who represents Western scientific history, and Fokir, a local

fisherman who represents the "mythic history" of the tides. The archipelago's shifting sands and blinding monsoons and unpredictable storms render Piya's GPS system and advanced data sets useless. Fokir uses Bon Bibi songs, which he learned through oral tradition, to navigate the "Hungry Tide" with natural ability. Ghosh shows that environmental scientific history fails to provide complete information because it ignores both sacred geographic sites and localized knowledge which myth protects[14].

Myth as Climate Resilience

Ghosh demonstrates through his novel *The Hungry Tide* that myth serves as a stronger historical record which endures through ecological disasters.[6] Ghosh describes climate change as the "Great Derangement" because it transforms natural environments into unpredictable patterns which destroy the record of human advancement through land reclamation efforts[4]. The local community relies on their traditional myths which follow a cyclical pattern to protect themselves from dangers. The Earth uses myth to tell its history back to humanity because it proves to readers that historical development does not advance in a straight line but instead moves through cycles of environmental assessment. The mythic view of nature becomes the sole solution for achieving an environmentally sustainable future which will remain unstable until the story concludes[3].

IV. The Epical Diaspora – The *Ibis Trilogy* as a Modern Foundational Myth

The *Ibis Trilogy* which includes *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* demonstrates Ghosh's achievement of national epic status through his work[8]. The novels draw from detailed historical research about the nineteenth-century opium trade and the events that led to the First Opium War but their main purpose lies in establishing a foundational myth for the Indian diaspora[10]. Ghosh shows that the millions of indentured laborers who were transported across the Black Water Ocean lost all connection to their historical backgrounds. The characters who board the schooner *Ibis* include Neel who has been disgraced as raja and Deeti who belongs to a low-caste and possesses visionary abilities[12].

The *Ibis* as a Mythic Vessel

The ship functions as a crucible which dissolves all existing historical restrictions that come from the three social categories of caste and religious beliefs and regional identity. Ghosh



presents Jahaj-bhai as a concept which describes a special bond between people who share their experiences of suffering through their shared journey. The social order of traditional Indian society undergoes complete transformation because this practice breaks down all established social boundaries[1]. The British Empire "history" treats these passengers as nothing but goods because their work capabilities were documented through ledger entries. The characters from Ghosh's "myth" become the founding members of a worldwide community. Deeti establishes her shrine in Mauritius to create a holy site which transforms her personal experiences into an everlasting legend that gives her future family members a true origin story which the colonial documents failed to provide[15].

Linguistic Hybridity as Myth-Making

The essential element of Ghosh's mythic construction throughout his trilogy depends on his language usage. Ghosh develops a "living" dialect through his combination of Anglo-Indian and Hobson-Jobson and Bengali and Lascari and Pidgin languages. The linguistic manifestation of the Indian Ocean hybrid world exists in this multiple-language dialect[14]. The historical narrative presents itself through multiple conflicting languages instead of one dominant linguistic system. The Ibis passengers experience linguistic play which transforms their battle to communicate into a heroic process of cultural unification[11].

V. *Gun Island and the Great Derangement* – Myth as Climate Communication

Ghosh uses his later works *Gun Island* and *The Great Derangement* to show that modern progress understanding has created a blindness which prevents people from seeing the actual climate change threat. He asserts that social realism novels lack the ability to depict unpredictable disasters which occur during the Anthropocene because their structure requires them to show only what is typical and what happens in daily life. Ghosh uses ancestral myth power to create his narrative because it can explain modern historical realities which people currently choose to ignore or hide[2].

The Manasa Devi Legend

Deen, the main character of *Gun Island*, works as a rare book dealer who depends on logical reasoning to carry out his work in archival studies[5]. The "Gun Merchant" myth together with his old battle against Manasa Devi, the Bengali goddess of snakes and venomous creatures, leads

him to travel through various countries. Deen starts out believing the legend to be a combination of folklore and "superstition," but he understands that the myth functions as a hidden historical account of climate changes which occurred during the Little Ice Age. The myth presents an ecological warning which "official" history neglected because it shows how Earth functions as a living entity that seeks revenge against human actions[13].

Myth as a Tool for the Anthropocene

Ghosh asserts that myths represent the only existing storytelling method which has always recognized non-human entities including animals and storms and birds and deities as having their own capabilities. The Enlightenment's historical progression cannot provide us with adequate terms to describe our present-day fears because extreme weather events in the "Great Derangement" period now appear to possess supernatural characteristics[4]. The use of myth enables us to understand the phenomenon of planetary displacement. The character of Gun Merchant exists as a modern version of the mythical Gun Merchant through the depiction of refugees who escape the sinking Sundarbans to reach Italian shores. Ghosh uses myth to present their struggle as an eternal human battle against global environmental changes which expands beyond the immediate "migrant crisis" situation that the historical and political term describes. The chapter demonstrates that Ghosh considers myth to function as a vital future technology which enables society to transform climate change history into understandable narratives that humanity can use to take action[15].

VI. Conclusion – The Shamanic Novelist and the Fusion of Past and Present

Amitav Ghosh's literary work shows a new direction for how modern authors should develop their writing. Ghosh establishes a new form of historical storytelling by rejecting colonial archival control because he functions as a shaman who connects actual historical events with existing mythical traditions. Ghosh demonstrates through his entire work that history exists as an active force which develops through time because people need mythological elements for their experiences to gain true understanding. Ghosh's novels use myth and folklore to create a historical framework that challenges Eurocentric views while providing readers with a broader perspective of historical events. Ghosh uses his storytelling techniques which combine reality and imagination to create a platform where underrepresented people can share their



stories which leads to a deeper comprehension of human complexity.

The research study shows that Ghosh's archival subversion in *In an Antique Land* and his ecological sacredness of *The Hungry Tide's* tide country and his creation of a diasporic origin story through the *Ibis Trilogy* all lead to one outcome which shows that the boundaries between myth and history do not exist. Ghosh proposes that people need to turn back to mythological structures because modern society has reached an environmental disaster through its "Great Derangement" which defines the Anthropocene period. The planetary emergency exists as Ghosh's only narrative framework which includes all "improbable" aspects of the current planetary crisis.

Ghosh's fiction shows that telling Global South narratives functions as a process which helps to restore historical accuracy. He uses legend as a medium to recover the voices of slaves and coolies and fishermen who history tried to erase which allows him to give these people back their power. His work shows that historical records track empire movements while myths document soul movements. Ghosh uses this combination to express human experience through "unspeakable" truths which connect past present and future possibilities together.

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