

10/5/8 -- **Amitav Ghosh**, author of In an Antique Land (IAAL), 1992, was recently in Cairo for an Arab Writers Union conference, where I interviewed him. Ghosh's second novel, The Shadow Lines, in 1988, won the Sahitya Akademi Award, India's most prestigious literary award. Since then, he has published The Calcutta Chromosome (1997), The Glass Palace (2000), The Imam and the Indian (2002), and done fieldwork in Cambodia. Ghosh's latest work of fiction, The Hungry Tide (2004) is a story of adventure and unlikely love, identity and history, set in the Sundarban Islands in the Bay of Bengal. He was awarded the Padma Shri Award by the Indian government in 2007. He currently lives in New York and teaches at Columbia University.

The cause of East-West understanding has been well served by novelist, anthropologist and essayist Amitav Ghosh. In a review in The New York Times, Pankaj Mishra describes Ghosh as one of few postcolonial writers "*to have expressed in his work a developing awareness of the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of colonized peoples as they figure out their place in the world.*" He is clearly on a mission these days to fight the escalation of words and arms between East and West, particularly between Islam and the West.

Q: Why is Islam attacked so much in America?

A: America's knowledge of the world is slight at best. It attacks everything that is not familiar.

Q: Is there an Indian-Arab cultural link?

A: There are so many parallels. Mahfouz's situations and characters are instantly recognizable and intimately familiar to Indians, because his entry into understanding them is through their family relations. Family secrets are kept out of sight, in a shrouded place. Mahfouz reveals the elicited facts about them, creating a feeling of truth. He shows them trying to maintain a sense of self-respect in extremes of wealth and poverty.

These questions were appropriate as an entree to Ghosh's lecture, which was about to begin in the newly renovated Arab Writers' Union (AWU) complex in Cairo's magnificent Citadel. The AWU headquarters are now back in Cairo after a hiatus following the peace agreement with Israel, when it moved to Damascus. Ghosh was greeted warmly and launched into a provocative and entertaining meditation on what he called "*xenophilia -- an affinity for strangers*", which he described as very deep but rarely acknowledged in human psychology. It was at the heart of the nonaligned movement, with whole nations taking pride in the transnational friendships of their leaders, such as Nehru, Sukarno, and Nasser. Ghosh even added Mao Tse-tung to the list. Roads were named after leaders from other continents, a gesture not without meaning, for where, he asked, are such names in London or New York? He asserted that contrary to popular acceptance, the real cosmopolitanism is found in the Third World, not the sophisticated West, despite its plethora of globe-trotting businessmen and tourists, touring the Holy Land or Pyramids, oblivious to the real lives of the locals.

His best known work is undoubtedly *In an Antique Land* (IAAL), his intimate and fascinating account of his field work for his Oxford University anthropology degree and his fascination with an obscure 14th century Jewish merchant and his slave, now considered a must-read for anyone interested in Egypt. His lectures in Cairo harked back to this classic of travel, anthropology, history, philosophy. "It is hard to categorize my writing, which falls between genres."

He thanks the spirit of xenophilia cultivated by the nonaligned movement for his

opportunity as a simple Indian to clear the diplomatic hurdles and lose himself in a tiny village in the Nile delta in 1980. *"I prefer to go to out-of-the-way places in my travels."* He clearly remembers his years in Egypt with great nostalgia, and told anecdotes about overcoming communication problems with the villagers by bursting into Hindi film songs when words failed, invariably to be joined by a chorus of villagers who loved the Indian cinema and often knew the words by heart. Despite a total ignorance of things mechanical, he was called on to judge the merits of Indian water pumps, which he solemnly did, thankful that none of them turned out to be defective. Locals were fascinated and appalled by Indian worship of cows and were both solicitous and disdainful of this and other customs, to Ghosh's at times amusement, at times, exasperation.

He credits his years in several Nile delta villages with his success as a novelist, since they gave him the opportunity to *"eavesdrop on an ancient civilization"*, to write his diary and to read.

"I realized while reading Marquez's 100 Years of Solitude that the movement of time is felt most powerfully in a place far-removed from the bustle of the modern world."

They gave him the inspiration to weave themes of Yemeni, Chinese, East African, Middle Eastern and Indian Ocean civilizations into his subsequent works.

IAAL was the result, and served as the foundation for his later collection of essays The Imam and the Indian, the eponymous characters being delegates from two superseded civilizations, vying with each other to establish a prior claim to the technology of modern violence. We understood each other perfectly. We were both travelling, he and I: we were travelling in the West. The only difference was that I had actually been there, I could have told him a great deal about it... In the end the West was only this -- science and tanks and guns and bombs.. We had demonstrated the irreversible triumph of the language that has usurped all the others in which people once discussed their differences. It would have been merely absurd to use those words [right or good or willed by God] for they belonged to a dismantled rung on the ascending ladder of Development -- the universal, irresistible metaphysic of modern meaning. He had said to me, in effect: "You ought not to do what you do, because otherwise you will not have guns and tanks and bombs." It was the only language we had been able to discover in common. (*IAAL*)

East has lost out to West, with its violent totalitarian mindset, a complete reversal

of what we are all taught in both eastern and western secular schools, devoted to churning out reliable producers of material goods and destroying any residual spirituality which our current march to a technological paradise might have missed. This candour in an otherwise mainstream cultural figure is refreshing, even startling, and though Ghosh has no doubt mellowed since the 1980s, there was no sign in Cairo that he had anything but contempt for the American and more generally capitalist vision of the 21st century. *"The most horrifying event following 9/11 is the extraordinary resurgence of imperialism as witnessed in the unfolding catastrophe in Iraq."*

He bemoaned the loss of the cosmopolitanism of the 1950s-1980s.

"Relations are being broken off, with the empire of the West splitting from the Third World,"

inciting xenophobia.

In IAAL, Ghosh also painted a brilliant canvas of the epoch of Arab-Indian trade centred at Aden and Mangalore which brought prosperity and cultural vitality to the Indian Ocean civilizations without any systematic recourse to war, until the fateful 1498 arrival of Vasco da Gama, the Darth Vadar of his era, who ushered in the evils of European imperialism, killing or merely expelling Muslims and seizing control of the Indian Ocean through violence. This earlier peaceful historical epoch is puzzling to contemporary historiographers who represent it as a lack, or a failure, one that invited the interventions of Europe. But this peaceful tradition was a product of a rare cultural choice which owed a great deal to the pacifist custom and beliefs of the Gujarati Jains and Vantias, who *"held that they must never kill anyone, nor must they have armed men in their company. If they were captured and their captors wanted to kill them all, they did not resist. This is the Gujarat law among the heathen."*

[Tome Pires 16th c] Clearly Ghosh found inspiration in this period as a model for what could be if only we can remove our Crusader imperial blinkers and learn to live in peace and humility, to nurture our natural xenophilia, rather than repressing it.

European imperialism presented the choice between resistance and submission; cooperation was not an option. Europe unleashed violence on a scale unprecedented on those shores, as it did in the Americas. The peaceful trade of Muslims, Jews and Hindus in the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf that lasted 500 years was ended over night, and Portuguese hegemony lasted until the arrival of the Dutch and then the British and then the Americans... His description of Darth da Gama is one of the most chilling literary epiphanies I

have experienced, reading it in the context of what is happening daily in the many wars against Muslims.

For Ghosh, the fall of the Berlin Wall is not "proof of the vindication of capitalism" as the conventional wisdom would have it today, but rather *"the last 15 years show that untrammelled capitalism leads to war and empire. The uncontested reign of one system should bring peace, but we see the opposite, with dozens of wars. There was more agreement when the UN was founded"*, which I presume is a nice way of saying "during the Cold War".

Apart from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the aftershocks of this upheaval continue today with impoverished ex-colony Egypt sending 3 million Egyptians to work in Iraq during the Iraq-Iran war, and now to the Gulf, where they meet their Indian peers also in search of a livelihood, or in leaky boats to the shores of Italy, to swim ashore and eke out a miserable existence to feed their starving families at home. Then there is the outsourcing of millions of jobs to educated Indians, who use the internet to help Americans pay bills or buy cheap Chinese goods, in a bizarre system of trade that would boggle the mind of Ghosh's 12th century trader Abraham Ben Yiju.

An important theme in IAAL which infuses Ghosh's concept of xenophilia, is his radical and thought-provoking interpretation of 12th century slavery, which he describes as often a kind of career opening, a way of gaining entry into the highest levels of government or army bureaucracy. It was more like being an apprentice to a craftsman, an accountant to a merchant, more a link that was even ennobling, a pledge of commitment. In literature, it was often used as an image to represent the devotee's quest for God. Through the transforming power of metaphor the poets became their Lord's servants and lovers, androgynous in the longing; slaves searched for their master with a passion that dissolved selfhood, wealth, cast and gender, indeed, difference itself. In poetry it was slavery that was the paradoxical embodiment of perfect freedom; the image that represented the very notion of relationship, of human bonds, as well the possibility of their transcendence.

Q From your writings, it seems that mysticism attracts you. Is this connected with your hope for a renewal of xenophilia. What works would you recommend?

A: Your connection of xenophilia and mysticism is apt. In Eastern traditions, the

beloved is even called "agnabi" in Arabic, which leads me to Rumi. The reaching out to the other; love itself is xenophilia, perhaps the most powerful emotion, yet no one speaks of it. We are faced by a false xenophilia of empire and capitalism, a false cosmopolitanism of MacDonalds and Hollywood culture.

What relationship better fits Ghosh's mystical ideal of union with the Other, than a master and slave, the lover and beloved? In IAAL, Ghosh delves into the mystical Sufis vs Vachanakara saint-poets, the latter pantheistic, with the desire to merge themselves in their Lord. Sufis, on the other hand, supposed a transcendent God. Both see the notion of being held by bonds as the central metaphor of religious life. He relates the 11th century legend of the faithful servant Ayaz of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni who hid in his master's shadow, not chasing after the mythical Huma, whose shadow conferred kingdoms. For Ayaz, the world contained no better kingdom. Perfect love works a miraculous spiritual transformation and the world-conquering Mahmud becomes "the slave of his slave".

Balancing his angry thrusts against Western chauvinism, Ghosh pointed to what is clearly a reaction to this revival of empire -- the rise of fundamentalism, both religious and linguist, in Asia and Africa. *"Bigotry, like imperialism, seeks to remake the world, or at least their corners of it, in their own image."* He criticized the "visceral hostility to all forms of arts" which both Islamic and Hindu fundamentalists have in common, seen when they attack libraries and try to ban books, plays and movies.

However, there is no possibility of returning to the past, the innocence of the nonaligned xenophilia. That was a historical moment which has passed. We can't turn back the clock, nor can we rely on fundamentalism or a sense of permanent victimhood -- Thirdworldism. Rather Ghosh tries to evoke the hopes that inspired that movement -- "the universalism of face-to-face encounters, personal experience and friendships". The West must acknowledged that it has been changed by interactions with the Other, by empire, just as much as the periphery has been, and to recognize "our incompleteness, the need for completion in relation with the Other".