

# *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times*

by Amitav Ghosh, Houghton Mifflin, 2007, 320 pp.

## David Adler

On the cover of this fine book is a photo of 10 men rowing a small boat. They're looking ahead, perhaps at an oncoming threat. Amitav Ghosh, with prose as his oar, assumes a similar outlook toward the world, maintaining a steady gaze at an uncertain future. An Anglophone writer of Bengali origin, he has five novels and a previous work of nonfiction to his credit. *Incendiary Circumstances*, released in hardcover in 2005 and now available in paperback, is his second nonfiction opus. One could call it 'The Amitav Ghosh Reader,' as it collects essays written over a 20-year span for such periodicals as *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *Granta*, *the Kenyon Review* and more.

Ghosh's focus here is 'turmoil,' as his subtitle promises. He is not out to prettify the world – an impossible task when one's subjects are the South Asian tsunami, 9/11, Burma, Cambodia, Kashmir, the India-Pakistan nuclear standoff and so forth. It would be wrong, however, to assume that Ghosh's voice is a despairing one. His dispatches are marked by a palpable sense of awe. To read them is to marvel, as the author does, at the weight and irony of history, the idiosyncrasy and strength of human character against all odds.

In every piece, Ghosh summons an enviable mastery of craft. He holds a Ph.D. in social anthropology from Oxford, and his writing is stamped with the academic rigour of that field. But he engages world politics in a fluid literary style; even his most fact-oriented pieces read like gripping short stories. He tends to favor the first-person voice, in the style of both a memoirist and a narrative journalist.

The final chapter, 'The Imam and the Indian,' finds Ghosh mingling with a group of Egyptian villagers. He remarks: '[S]ome of them had passports so thick they opened out like ink-blackened concertinas' (p. 291). One can only wonder about the girth of Ghosh's own passport. It is hard to keep track of all the places he has called home: Calcutta and Delhi, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Sri Lanka, England, Egypt, Brooklyn. Fluent in multiple languages, a citizen of the world,

Ghosh does not offer brusque opinions or ideological pronouncements. He brings to his work the quiet authority of personal witness and firsthand knowledge.

For a clearer idea of Ghosh's uniqueness, consider a passage from his 1988 novel *The Shadow Lines*. The narrator, reuniting in London with his childhood friend Ila, can't hide his fascination with everything he sees in the Underground. But Ila won't stop and smell the roses:

[I]t would irritate her to see how excited I got when we stepped on to the escalators ... she would tug at my elbows and hiss: Hurry, hurry, you can't stop here, you'll hold people up....

And I would say to her: You wouldn't understand: to you Cairo was a place to piss in.

I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination....

To 'invent' a place, for Ghosh, is not to fabricate or falsify it, but to render it all the more real. And the need to invent is nothing less than a moral and political matter, for 'if we didn't try ourselves, we would never be free of other people's inventions.'

Ghosh's previous nonfiction book, *In An Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale*, is a fine example of this imperative in action. Partly an account of the relationships he developed while doing research in rural Egypt, it is also a learned meditation on the Geniza of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra, a chamber in which Egyptian Jews of long ago would discard their 'letters, bills, contracts, poems, marriage deeds and so on.' Centuries later, the Geniza became 'the greatest single collection of medieval documents ever discovered.' Ghosh seizes on an extraordinary piece of correspondence from the 12th century, written in the dead Judaeo-Arabic language. Unlocking its mysteries to conjure a world lost to Western imperialism, he weaves it into the narrative like a plot line from a thriller. In the process, he practically dissolves the boundary between the distant past and the bustling present, the pre- and post-colonial eras.

'Dancing in Cambodia,' one of the centrepiece essays from *Incendiary Circumstances*, has a similar impact. Written in 1993, it begins with a novelistic (though well-researched) tale of a 1906 trip to France by King Sisowath and his entourage,

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including a young troupe of Khmer dancers. Leaping forward in time, Ghosh recounts how the same royal family brought into its midst a little boy called Saloth Sar, who would later take the name Pol Pot. Venturing into the middle of nowhere on the back of his interpreter's scooter, Ghosh locates Pol Pot's home village and speaks to some of his living relatives, who seem just as grief-stricken and befuddled as anyone else. After diagnosing the madness of the Khmer Rouge and assessing the human and cultural losses of 1975-79, Ghosh charts the re-emergence of classical Khmer dance, showcased all those years ago in France, very nearly erased from the earth.

The remaining 16 pieces vary in length and format. Two of them, 'Imperial Temptations' and 'The Fundamentalist Challenge,' read more like op-eds. 'The March of the Novel Through History' and several others fall under literary criticism, which is not as tangential to turmoil as it may seem. 'The Town By the Sea,' the most recent, is Ghosh's report from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the wake of the tsunami. 'Countdown,' from 1998, is a critique of the nuclear 'bomb cult' in India and Pakistan, as well as a nuanced portrait of George Fernandes, the former anti-nuclear activist who served as defense minister in the hardline Vajpayee government. 'At Large in Burma,' from 1996, recounts Ghosh's meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi and his jungle travels with a group of ethnic Karenni insurgents.

There is no Iraq war piece in this collection. But a theme runs through the pages like a recurring nightmare, and its pertinence is obvious to anyone following Iraq's Sunni-Shia bloodbath. For Ghosh, what we are now calling 'sectarian violence' is no abstraction. In 'The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi' (1995) he recalls, in harrowing detail, the anti-Sikh pogroms that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination in Delhi in 1984. Hundreds were slaughtered without mercy. But Ghosh personally witnessed Hindus undertaking great risk to shield their Sikh neighbours. Uncharacteristically, he joined a small protest march, during which a phalanx of unarmed women surrounded the marauders and shamed them into dispersing. 'The truth,' Ghosh writes, 'is that the commonest response to violence is one of repugnance, and that a significant number of people try to oppose it in whatever ways they can' (p. 202). We can only hope that one day, someone will record the unheralded bravery being mustered by Iraqi civilians at this very moment.

In his 2001 essay 'The Greatest Sorrow,' Ghosh describes how his Delhi experience brought back repressed memories of the anti-Hindu riots he witnessed as a boy in Dhaka in 1964. The effect on his development as a writer could not have been

more profound. With Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy* as a guide, Ghosh also examines the anti-Tamil mob violence that occurred in Sri Lanka in 1983. Further on, in 'The Fundamentalist Challenge,' he arrives at yet another sorry example: the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque by Hindu extremists in 1992, and the appalling mass slaughter of Muslims that followed. In every case, there was abundant evidence of human compassion across ethnic lines, but also 'clear instances of collusion between officials and criminals,' wherein 'the information-gathering function of government was turned to the sinister purpose of targeting minority populations' (p. 45). However futile it may seem, Ghosh argues, demanding accountability is of utmost importance.

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In his preface, citing the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, Ghosh poses 'the question that haunts these essays: is it possible to write about situations of violence without allowing your work to become complicit with the subject?' There is something approaching an answer in this passage from 'The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi':

To write carelessly, in such a way as to appear to endorse terrorism or repression, can add easily to the problem, and in such incendiary circumstances, words cost lives, and it is only appropriate that those who deal in words should pay scrupulous attention to what they say. It is only appropriate that they should find themselves inhibited. (p. 201)

Ghosh is moved to repeat the above at the very start of the book, but tellingly, he omits the final sentence. Is he troubled by what might seem a call for self-censorship? It's clear enough that inhibition can stem either from fear and cowardice or from a sense of public responsibility. Ghosh means the latter, and his rebuke rings clear, even if its target is ambiguous.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Ghosh's call for introspection went largely unheeded. The right flew into a jingoistic fury and cast suspicion on anyone with differing opinions. But there was hubris among the dissenters as well. Another Anglophone Indian novelist, Arundhati Roy, offered the following in *The Guardian*:

In the absence of information, politicians, political commentators and writers (like myself) will invest the act with their own politics, with their

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own interpretations. This speculation, this analysis of the political climate in which the attacks took place, can only be a good thing.

Forget what the hijackers believe, in other words; better to focus on what Roy believes. Far from being a good thing, this was an intellectual charade. Flattering herself as representative of those who ‘ask the hard questions and say the harsh things’ (inhibitions be damned), Roy declared: ‘The world will probably never know what motivated those particular hijackers who flew planes into those particular American buildings.’ Leave aside the fact that she was wrong. The supposed information vacuum didn’t stop her from deciding on all sorts of motivations, all pertaining to U.S. imperialism, none to extremist ideology.

Ghosh, by contrast, had come to grips with the new fanaticism well before the first World Trade Center attack. In 1990 he delivered this verdict on the thuggish Society of Muslims, the group that menaced Egypt’s Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz:

The Society of Muslims have effectively scorned Muslim history: they have rejected all of medieval Muslim scholarship, including the great jurists who set up the four major schools of Islamic law, and they have also claimed the right to interpret the Koran. A century ago it is they who would have been counted the blasphemers, and any one of their current claims would probably have cost them their lives. (p. 274)

This alone is worth more than all the speculation Roy can muster. To be clear: Ghosh certainly sees the need for critique of U.S. foreign policy as well – read ‘Imperial Temptations’ if you doubt it. But he looks at the rise of Islamist aggression as an issue in its own right, not simply as a karmic response to the West. We’re left to speculate, however, about Ghosh’s own response to Roy and the school of radical critique she epitomises. Belonging to no camp or clique, he evinces little interest in the intramural squabbles of the left, which is at once frustrating and refreshing.

Having traversed the continents, and having wrestled all his life with the phenomenon of politically motivated murder of civilians, Ghosh saw 9/11 at close range, as a Brooklyn resident. He concludes ‘The Greatest Sorrow’ with his thoughts about that day. Far from relativising the attack or declaring ‘an absence of surprise’ as Roy did, Ghosh said this:

As a writer I have tried to live by the credo that nothing human should be alien to me. Yet my imagination stops short as I try to think of the human realities of what it must mean to plan a collective suicide over a span of years or to stand in a check-in line with people whose murder has already been decided on; of what it takes to speak of love on a cell phone moments before one's death or to reach for a stranger's hand as one leaps from the topmost floor of a skyscraper. These are new dimensions of human experience, and I realize that they will become a part of the generational gap that separates me from my children: their imagining of the world will be different from mine, and that very difference will create a new reality.

[...] The thickening crust of our awareness is both a sign and a reminder of our unwitting complicity in the evolution of violence: if that which mesmerized us yesterday ceases to interest us today, then it follows that the act which will next claim our attention will be even more horrific, even more resistant to yesterday's imagination, than the last. The horror of these acts is thus exactly calibrated to the indifference upon which they are inflicted. (p. 53)

On July 7, 2007, in the poor Shiite Turkmen village of Amerli in Iraq, a truck bomb containing 4.5 tons of explosives killed at least 150 people and wounded 265. Even the single worst atrocity of the civil war to date aroused little comment. (Update: The coordinated August 14 bombings near Sinjar killed over 500 and wounded over 1500, according to the Iraqi Red Crescent Society.) As I read the story on *the New York Times* website, an AT&T mobile ad popped up and danced around my screen, obscuring the text for a few long seconds. This is how we live now: we cannot even read about the day's death toll without commercial interruption. Ghosh is hardly the first to say it: we are indifferent.

To George W. Bush, that little pop-up is probably useful. The more distractions, the better. We shouldn't focus on every bomb, every internecine massacre, the president has said. The media ought to cover the 'good news' from Iraq. It's hardly surprising Bush would brush aside the fact that informed citizenship, not to mention competent leadership, requires facing the bad news, unflinchingly and with a sober eye. 'Misery is the river of the world,' goes the song by Tom Waits. 'Everybody row.' Ghosh drives home the lesson that surrendering to indifference will only make it worse. With consummate skill and creativity, he helps us row, and somehow never leaves us adrift.

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