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A Genealogy of the *Ibis Trilogy*: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in Bengali Culture

SUMMARY: The tension between a local dimension and a more cosmopolitan one has become increasingly crucial in Amitav Ghosh's writing. Whereas his earlier works, such as *In an Antique Land*, tended towards what was defined as a "subaltern cosmopolitanism" (Hawley 2005; Grewal 2007), more recent novels show attention for a local dimension as well: Bengal.

In Bengali cultural tradition, nationalism and cosmopolitanism have always been at the centre of poetic reflection. The influence of this cultural and artistic tradition on Ghosh's works can hardly be overestimated. Therefore, an examination of how nationalism and cosmopolitanism were dealt with by Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray will contribute to the full understanding of Ghosh's work.

In particular, this paper will demonstrate how Amitav Ghosh, despite his increased focus on the local, does not embrace nationalism, as Bankimchandra Chatterjee, but reproduces the situation of "ideological liminality" (Saha 2013: 21) between the local and the global that can be found in the works of Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray.

KEYWORDS: Amitav Ghosh, *Ibis Trilogy*, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's writings frequently touch upon a wealth of themes and motifs which are common to postmodern and postcolonial literature. However, in the progress from *The Circle of Reason* to the *Ibis Trilogy*, it is apparent that the writer has gradually detached himself

from the poetics of the Rushdian postmodern-postcolonial literary tradition. Therefore, whereas much critical attention has been devoted to Ghosh's adherence to the postmodern-postcolonial canon, his creative path demands a different approach, which takes into account his Bengali heritage.

In fact, the close connection between Ghosh and Bengali cultural tradition has long been established by the writer himself in the essay *The Testimony of my Grandfather's Bookcase*. However, few critics have considered the extent of the influence of Ghosh's cultural upbringing on his novels. For these reasons, this paper aims at examining in depth the relation between Ghosh and three great masters of Bengali culture: Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray. Following the common thread of nationalism and cosmopolitanism, and with regards especially to the *Ibis Trilogy*, this essay will first discuss the troublesome relation between the local and global dimensions in Bengali cultural tradition and then how Ghosh inherits and, at the same time, changes the terms of this debate.

National and Cosmopolitan Perspectives in the Historical Novel

According to the critical model introduced by György Lukács in his *The Historical Novel* (1962), classical historical novels are centred around the history of a Nation. In representing the "prehistory" of the present (Lukács 1962: 337-338), the works by Scott, Tolstoy or Manzoni refer to a very specific national character and often focus on a point in time that is considered fundamental for national unity. Therefore, the historical framework in which these novels are built tends towards a perspective of unity and harmony, a national project.

Despite its being "classical" in many ways, it is extremely difficult to trace such a perspective in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*. The focus of the *Trilogy* encompasses the whole Indian Ocean, from India, to China and the Mauritius, involving all sorts of different people and nationalities. In addition, no reference is ever made to a collectivity which may resemble or represent the Indian nation at its embryo stage.

In fact, it has repeatedly been discussed how Ghosh's novels are informed by a cosmopolitan perspective. In his essay "Amitav Ghosh: Cosmopolitanisms, Literature, Transnationalisms", Grewal argues that Ghosh's work on history aims at constructing a "non-Western cosmopolitanism" which emphasises the connections between non-Western regions of the globe (Grewal 2007: 180). This happens in *In an Antique Land*, where the 12th-century figure of the slave Bomma represents an untimely link between India and Egypt. Similarly, Hawley resorts to the expression "subaltern cosmopolitanism" to describe Ghosh's attention towards the interrelations between subalterns in *In an Antique Land* and in *The Glass Palace* (Hawley 2005: 89).

Ghosh's novels often cross national borders and intersect frequently with the motifs of globalisation and Empire. Many of his works, such as *The Shadow Lines* or *In an Antique Land*, challenge national borders, which are considered artificial constructions and in point of fact porous. In addition, since the British Empire as a transnational and super-national category is at the heart of his prose, especially of the historical novels, Ghosh's writing inevitably reaches a dimension that goes beyond nationalities and nationhood. The super-national dimension of the British Empire, involving the movement of a huge amount of people all over the world, signified, according to Ghosh, the birth of contemporary globalisation. The Empire, then, is significant not only as a period to which postcolonial countries inevitably need to relate, but also as the "prehistory" of the present world condition. Hence, the past does not lead to the creation of a nation state but resembles the present in the extreme porousness of borders and freedom of movement of people.

In the *Ibis Trilogy*, the themes of Empire, globalisation and subaltern cosmopolitanism are once more central. The whole trilogy revolves around opium, which is addressed as a commodity fundamental to the existence and survival of the British Empire. Opium and Empire also set in motion the journey of the Ibis, which boards convicts and indentured labourers on their way to Mauritius. Their diasporic journey

represents the common destiny of many Indian coolies, recruited to work in the plantations of the Empire.

The convicts and labourers are not the only subalterns on board the ship. The lascars of the crew constitute another community that crosses borders and nationalities. In the essay “Of Fanás and Forecastles”, Ghosh maintains that lascars were the first to experience globalisation at its fullest form:

They were among the first to travel extensively; the first to participate in industrial processes of work; the first to create settlements in Europe; the first to adapt to clock-bound rhythms of work-time (the shipboard regime of four-hour work-shifts, or watches, was one of the most exacting disciplinary regimes ever invented); and they were the first to be familiar with emergent new technologies (nautical engineering being itself one of the pioneering technologies of the industrial age). Not least, the lascars were among the first Asians to acquire a familiarity with colloquial (as opposed to book-learned) European languages (Ghosh 2012).

Global workers ahead of time, lascars are a perfect example of cosmopolitanism on Ghosh’s terms: non-Western subalterns.

Nevertheless, as much as Ghosh devotes a great deal of attention to the global and cosmopolitan dimensions, a local scale emerges as well. This is even more apparent if we look at his latest novels, *The Hungry Tide* or the *Ibis Trilogy*. In *The Hungry Tide*, Bengal, and the Sunderbans in particular, are at the heart of the story: local history, geography and culture are issues around which the novel revolves. Similarly, in the *Ibis Trilogy*, Bengal is not only the starting point of the opium trade, but, most importantly, the centre from which the narrative unfolds.

Amitav Ghosh and the Inheritance of Bengali Cultural Tradition

The influence of Bengali cultural tradition on Ghosh’s intellectual and artistic make-up can hardly be overestimated. The writer himself provides a telling account of the reading of his youth in the essay *The Testimony of my Grandfather’s Bookcase*. Ghosh enumerates works from Bengali writers, such as Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath

Tagore or Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, along with novels in English and those in translation from several other languages.

To Bankimchandra Chatterjee Ghosh devotes the last part of the essay, praising him for his prose and his pioneering attitude as the first novelist in India. Ghosh refers to Bankimchandra's bookcase as "the ancestor of my uncle's", thus drawing a descending line from Bankim Chandra's writing to his own. This descent locates Amitav Ghosh in the context of the modern Indian culture born out of the Bengali Renaissance. As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, it was a culture for which literature and books were central (Chakrabarty 2004: 655).

Among the intellectuals of the Bengali Renaissance, an even closer connection exists between Ghosh and Rabindranath Tagore. In many instances the writer has acknowledged his debt to the Bengali Nobel Prize winner. Ghosh translated Tagore's short-story *Kshudito Pashaan* ("The Hungry Stones") into English and admitted the influence of the story on the writing of *The Calcutta Chromosome* (S. Chaudhuri-Ghosh, quoted in Mondal 2007: 34). In addition, Ghosh draws inspiration from universal literature, which, in his essay "Vishwa Sahitya", Tagore defines as not "confined to a particular space and time", and an expression of "universal humanity" (Tagore 1907, in Damrosch 2014: 55).

However, the relation between Ghosh and Tagore is not strictly and exclusively literary. In fact, the works of both writers are permeated by a strong humanism. To Tagore, the humanity of men is a sign of their divinity. The poet names this divine element the "world spirit of Man", which unites and transcends single individuals. A way to perceive this unity of human beings is through imagination, which "makes us intensely conscious of a life we must live which transcends the individual life and contradicts the biological meaning of self-preservation" (Tagore 1931: 53). This "poet's religion", as Tagore himself names it, is closely linked to his poetic life. His belief in God and in human beings is a recurrent leitmotif in his poetry and, at the same time, his reflection on the role of the poet and on imagination draws extensively from this religious perspective. The power of creative imagination puts the poet

in a unique position, for he is able to know through imagination and thus discover universal and eternal truth.

With respect to Tagore's, Ghosh's humanism is less pervaded by spiritualism. In his novels the religious dimension is often considered, but his point of view is mostly secular. However, as in Tagore, the power of creative imagination and of the poet are repeatedly remarked on. In *The Shadow Lines*, the young protagonist is taught to use "imagination with precision", which becomes a declaration of poetics from the author as well. For instance, Ghosh's precise imagination enables him to reconstruct parts of history that will otherwise be excluded from official historical records, such as the stories of the subalterns, thus accessing a truth that is open only to poetry and narrative, and not to academic history. Moreover, in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, the whole novel revolves around forms of knowledge which go beyond the reasoning mind. Similarly, Deeti in the *Ibis Trilogy* is endowed with an ability to see things, which does not involve scientific knowledge, but vision and intuition. This alternative forms of knowledge are not meant to exclude a modern scientific perspective, but, in a syncretic approach, to work as a different way to gain access to the Truth.

Humanism connects Ghosh also to another towering figure of Bengali culture: Satyajit Ray. Ray's humanist vision translates itself in a close investigation of the human soul and is permeated by universal human values. Moreover, Ray conceived the role of the film director in a manner similar to the idea of the poet in Ghosh and Tagore. In his works, Ray points to reach a truth which not only derives from an investigation of the deepest and universal human emotions and values but also from a juxtaposition of different viewpoints. His films summarise different perspectives, which, in turn, contribute to the wider and all-encompassing gaze of the author, to which poetic truth belongs.

In the essay "Satyajit Ray", Ghosh further examines his relation with the works of the Bengali director. An heir to Bengali cultural tradition before Ghosh, Ray was a model for the writer as an artist and as a man, for he "crafted his life so that it could serve as an example

to others” (Ghosh 2004). In addition, Satyajit Ray contributed to shape Ghosh’s imaginative universe, for instance in the interest in science and science fiction, ghost stories and the fantastic. Most importantly, Ray’s visual and aesthetic representation of Kolkata and Bengal are a continuous source of inspiration for Ghosh:

To this day Ray’s work is one of the main anchors that moors me—often despite myself—to the imaginative landscape of Bengal: indeed, to the essential terrain of my own work. (Ghosh 2004)

The centrality of Bengal and Calcutta is indeed an element which Ghosh shares not only with the film director, but also with the entire Bengali cultural tradition.

The Rise of the Motherland

In the late 19th century, the discourse around nationhood involved Bengali regional identity as well as an identification with the broader Indian national context. In this period, the idea of the nation was moulded around the Sanskrit word “samaj”, community or family, which is alternatively referred to Bengal and India, with no clear distinction between the two (Gupta 2006: 310). The country was also equated with the divinity and, in particular, with the Mother-Goddess (*ibid.*: 323). Such an identification gave rise to a nationalist discourse revolving around the idea of saving the motherland (*ibid.*: 324).

This kind of public discourse is well reflected in the works of Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore. Bankimchandra’s novel *Anandamath* (*The Sacred Brotherhood*, 1882) is often considered one of the first nationalist texts of modern India. Tagore’s *Ghare-Baire* (*The Home and the World*, 1916), instead, is in many ways juxtaposed to Bankimchandra’s work for its sceptical attitude towards the nationalist movement.

Set in the late 18th century, approximately at the time of the Sanyasi rebellion, *Anandamath* portrays a group of ascetic warriors, the “Children of Mother India”, who fight against foreign rule in India

The Children deify and worship the Motherland, and renounce every connection with the world in order to pursue the liberation of India. In its ashram, the brotherhood keeps three very different pictures of India: the first is a “gigantic, imposing, resplendent” map of the country before the British conquest; the second is a gloomy map of India “in rags and tatters”, with the sword of British rule hanging over it; the third is a map of “a golden India (...) our Mother as she is destined to be” (*Anandamath*, 51). In this way, the novel represents a version of past India, an idea of present India, and finally projects a future for the country. Through the Children’s civil religion, the country is idealised and objectified into an abstract entity, which focuses on the physical and spiritual characteristics of the Motherland. Similarly, the brotherhood, which combines devotion to the country, a strong ethical stance and a structured hierarchy, reflects the ideal organization of the nation-to-be (Pillai 2008: 39).

With his novel, Bankimchandra Chatterjee proposes a national model which stands both on Hindu principles and on Western conceptions. On the one hand, the brotherhood abides to dharma and is organised on a guru-disciple basis (Pillai 2008: 39). On the other hand, its civil religion can also be interpreted through Comte’s philosophy (Nussbaum 2011: 15). In fact, the Hindu cult of the Shakti, the female principle, is superimposed to a Comtean worship of the Nation and idea of universal brotherhood, which, in turn, combines with the Hindu ascetic tradition and the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* (Lipner 2005: 22). In the concluding scene of the novel, Shanti, one of the leading female characters, puts forward the final stage of this blended civil religion. After the defeat of the British, she and her husband are to renounce even the service to the Motherland and live as ascetics, in abidance to Hindu principles.

Both the Goddess-Mother and the two main female characters, Shanti and Kalyani, reveal the importance of women in *Anandamath*. In many instances, both Shanti and Kalyani stand out for their moral strength and endurance, and become effective members of the brotherhood. In theory, like every other worldly relationship, marriage does

not conform to the principles of the Children. Nonetheless, the connection between women and their husbands proves to be solid, and lasts as a regulating principle in the brotherhood, and in the new, independent Nation.

Along with many other writings by Bankimchandra Chatterjee, published in the journal *Bangadarshan*, *Anandamath* met with an enormous success, and contributed to shape Indian nationalism at a point in time in which the gap between the Bengali middle-class (the *bhadraloks*) and the British was widening. Bankimchandra did not create nationalist feelings *ex-nihilo*, but in blending Hindu teachings with Western ideas laid the basis for a wider reception of the struggle for independence. The hymn to the Motherland contained in the novel, *Bande Mataram*, became central in the Indian independence movement, since it was first sung by Tagore at a session of the Indian National Congress in 1896. *Anandamath* is also said to have inspired the *swadeshi* movement in Bengal (1905–1911).

It is exactly at the time of the *swadeshi* movement that Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare-Baire* is set. Triggered by the first attempt by the British to partition Bengal in 1905, the movement pursued the goal of national independence through the boycott of British products in favour of domestic goods. *Ghare-Baire* and *Anandamath* share many features. Like Bankimchandra's novel, *Ghare-Baire* revolves around a female character, Bimala. Wife of a Bengali landowner, Bimala is progressively drawn away from her husband, Nikhil, because he does not enthusiastically support anti-British campaigns. Instead, she falls for her husband's friend, Sandip, one of the leaders of the *swadeshi* movement. Sandip follows the civil religion of *Bande Mataram* and often compares Bimala to the Mother-Goddess. In addition, he believes that, in order to develop, patriotism needs a concrete object, hence the need to relate it to the cult of the Goddess. On the contrary, Nikhil is more sceptical towards the *swadeshi* movement, and worries less about the superior needs of the Motherland than about how the *swadeshi* movement will concretely affect common people. Thus, Nikhil does not blindly follow the cult of the Motherland, but is more sceptical

and cautious. Bimala's progressive fascination with Sandip's preaching and ideas puts a strain on the couple. In fact, the home in the title is, first of all, Nikhil and Bimala's household, which is caught in the midst of the political fray. In addition, while Sandip represents both the fascination and the dangers of nationalist thought, Nikhil and Bimala voice the conflicts which are inherent to the acceptance or refusal of national ideas.

Such conflicting position was shared by Tagore himself. Unlike Bankimchandra Chatterjee or Gandhi later, the poet could never fully adhere to the national project. In fact, Tagore did not support either a strong nationalism nor pure cosmopolitanism. Indeed, though he was a supporter of Indian independence, Tagore held very sceptical views towards nationalistic ideas:

Tagore stood fast on the narrow causeway, and did not betray his vision of the difficult truth. He condemned romantic overattachment to the past, what he called the tying of India to the past like "a sacrificial goat tethered to a post," and he accused men who displayed it—they seemed to him reactionary—of not knowing what true freedom was, pointing out that it is from English thinkers and English books that the very notion of political liberty was derived. But against cosmopolitanism he maintained that the English stood on their own feet, and so must Indians. In 1917 he once more denounced the danger of "leaving everything to the unalterable will of the Master," be he a brahmin or Englishman. (Isaiah Berlin, quoted in Sen 2001)

Thus, Sen comments, there is an intrinsic dualism in Tagore's position, in that he rejected nationalism and patriotism on the one side, and did not completely endorse cosmopolitanism on the other. Similarly, Tagore opposed Western Imperialism, but did not refuse Western civilization. Finally, he was open to the world, but kept strong roots in Bengal at the same time.

Tagore's "ideological liminality", as Saha defines it, bears the signs of his belonging to a global literary and scholarly community, which he influenced and was, in turn, influenced by (Saha 2013: 21). Indeed, Tagore travelled extensively, to Europe, the US and even Japan, collaborated with Yeats and exchanged ideas with the most renowned

intellectuals of the time, not least Albert Einstein (Sen 2001). Furthermore, Tagore's "worldliness" was based also on his liberal humanism, inspired by the universal spiritualism of the Brahmo Samaj. And yet, according to Saha, it was exactly his spiritual stance that drew him away from his fellow intellectuals in the West, united to a profound distress caused by the coercive actions of the British Raj in India (Saha 2013: 19–20).

Tagore could never solve the tension between these two poles, the local and the global; thus, this opposition continued to inform his life and works. On the one side, he had his international fame and the Nobel Prize; on the other, he was the singer of India and was called by Gandhi to participate in the struggle for independence. On both sides, he could see the terrible consequences of nationalism and cultural separation, such as the First World War and religious sectarianism.

In *Ghare-Baire*, nationalism is analysed in its most dangerous connotations. Cosmopolitanism, instead, is put into relation with the contemporary situation, in which, on the one hand, British Imperialism, and, on the other hand, India's political status made it difficult to maintain a universal and super-national position. Therefore, the struggle between the home and the world is not only that of Nikhil and Bimala's household in front of the political turmoil, but the greater problem of balancing the attachment to the Motherland with a cosmopolitan attitude.

After Independence: From the Nehruvian State to Post-Emergency India

Under the leadership of Nehru, independent India was conceived as a secular state, in which sectarianism and communalism would not weight on national politics, nor one religion would prevail on the others. In light of this, for instance, Tagore's *Jana Gana Mana* was preferred as national anthem to Bankimchandra's *Bande Mataram*, too steeped in Hindu tradition (Dirks 1993: 20). Later, the Emergency marked a watershed after which the "secular consensus", on which Nehru had shaped Indian democracy, was progressively eroded

(Srivastava 2008: 8). With Indira Gandhi's government and the resurgence of religious factions and parties that followed, the Indian national project underwent severe scrutiny and criticism.

The films of Satyajit Ray clearly show this change of attitude towards the future of the Indian nation. Ray's *Ghare-Baire* (1984) is a faithful adaptation of Tagore's novel. Even though the film loses two of the three narrative voices (Bimala, Nikhil, Sandip) of the novel, it still represents the extent of the conflicts which subvert the order of Nikhil's household. Bimala and Nikhil's opening to the world brings about terrible consequences, which are even more emphasised in Ray's version. Unlike the novel, the film opens with a fire image, which evokes both Nikhil's funeral pyre and the destructive violence of the swadeshi movement and the ensuing communal riots (Dirks 1993: 19). In addition, more space is devoted to the relation between Bimala and Miss Gilby, her English teacher. Cooper suggests that the two mirror each other, as both depend on Nikhil and both are displaced from home into the world (Cooper 1990: 40). Ray puts also more emphasis, with respect to Tagore, on the aggression to Miss Gilby, the first, innocent—albeit a colonizer—victim of the violence that spreads into the region.

The hopeless conclusion and this emphasis on violence is even more significant if compared to another film Ray adapted from Tagore's work, *Charulata* (1964). The film represents a similar kind of conflict involving a worldly bhadralok, Bhupati, and his wife, Charu. Unlike *Ghare-Baire*, however, *Charulata* concludes with a hopeful reconciliation between husband and wife, which opens to the possibility of a balance between the home and the world. In the twenty years which divide *Ghare-Baire* from *Charulata*, it becomes impossible to find this equilibrium again.

Both Nikhil and Bhupati are representatives of the bhadralok middle-class, to which Bankimchandra, Tagore, and Ray all belong. In the trajectory between *Anadamath* and Ray's *Ghare-Baire*, the progressively problematic relation of this social class with the Motherland becomes apparent. Similarly, whereas *Anadamath* represents a successful blending of European and Hindu philosophy, *Ghare-Baire*

portrays all the contradictions and conflicts of a cosmopolitan attitude in the Indian national context.

A disciple of Tagore at Shantiniketan, Ray absorbed much of the cultural syncretism which characterised the poet's approach:

I consider the three years I spent in Shantiniketan as the most fruitful in my life [...]. Shantiniketan opened my eyes for the first time to the splendours of Indian and Far Eastern art. Until then I was completely under the sway of Western art, music and literature. *Shantiniketan made me the combined product of East and West that I am.* (Ray, quoted in Sen 2001, emphasis added)

Thus, at Shantiniketan, Ray was introduced to Eastern art and to a cosmopolitan education, which comprised the values of the Brahmo Samaj and elements of the Tagorean reflection on the necessity of women emancipation (Restelli 2012: 107).

Ray believed in the heterogeneity, separateness, and yet permeability of cultures. His films, which portray India in all its heterogeneity and complexity, draw inspiration both from local reality and culture and from abroad—famously his *Pater Panchali* (Song of the Little Road, 1955) was inspired by De Sica's *Ladri di Bicicletta* (Bicycle Thieves, 1948)—and, although directed mainly to an Indian public, are world-renowned masterpieces. In this, the director saw no contradiction, as reciprocal influence between cultures is a recurring feature in every academic subject and cultural production (Sen 1996). Satyajit Ray's universalism was indeed well aware of cultural boundaries, but, at the same time, keen on the idea of crossing them (Sen 1996).

Likewise, Amitav Ghosh's fiction is heterogeneous, syncretic, multifarious, as different points of view combine in his novels. Writing in a post-Emergency perspective, Ghosh often addresses both the issues of colonialism and the dynamics of the independent nation, tackling sectarian and communal violence, along with different forms of state repression. However, while, in Tagore and Ray, engagement in national politics is possible but bears disruptive consequences, in Ghosh, it is often doomed to failure, as it happens with the Morichjhāpi experiment in *The Hungry Tide* or with Arjun's enlistment in the Indian National Army in *The Glass Palace*. In this respect,

Paranjape maintains that in Ghosh's writing the post-Emergency crisis of the *bhadra samaj* translates itself into a loss of faith in individual and collective agency, and thus in the possibility of change or improvement of the Indian nation (Paranjape 2012: 368). This pessimistic reading of the national project significantly changes the terms of the question between the local and the global, with respect to Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray. In Ghosh's writings, nationalism does not seem to be an option, and the national borders are often contested and subverted.

From Bengal to the World

The *Ibis Trilogy* brings to the fore the dimension of the Indian diaspora. On board the *Ibis*, the border of the Black Water is crossed and the community lost or dissolved. Scattered over Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, the protagonists of the trilogy build new lives, families and communities outside India. For instance, after the death of her first husband, Deeti entrusts her daughter to some relatives and leaves the country with Kalua, whom she later marries. Convicted to forced labour, Neel loses his wife, son and properties, to find a new friend in Ah Fatt, an opium eater, and a job in Canton with the Parsi merchant Seth Bahram. Orphaned Paulette escapes the perspective of an imposed marriage and ends up to work with Mr Penrose, a botanist, like her father. Like many others, the diasporic journeys in the *Ibis Trilogy* start with a loss—of both a family and a nation. Nonetheless, in the novels much more significance is given to the creation of new relationships and communities abroad:

This vessel that was the Mother-Father of her new family, a great wooden *mái-báp*,¹ an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come: here she was, the *Ibis*. (*Sea of Poppies*, 328, emphasis in the text)

¹ *Mái-báp* is a collective noun which means “parents”. It can also mean “master”, when used to formally address someone other than a parent. Respectively, *mái* means “mother” and *báp* means “father”.

Through the Ibis, the indentured labourers become “ship-siblings—*jaházbhais* and *jaházbahens*”² (*Sea of Poppies*, 328, emphasis in the text). The nation—fled, lost, dissolved by the Black Water—is substituted by a family united not by blood, but by the shared experience of migration.

It is not uncommon for Ghosh to substitute the national dimension with the familiar one. The author himself has tried to explain his position many times. In particular, it is interesting to compare what he wrote in “A Correspondence on *Provincializing Europe*” and in a later interview:

Two of my novels (*The Shadow Lines*, and my most recent, *The Glass Palace*) are centred on families. I know that for myself this is a way of *displacing* the “nation” – I am sure that this is the case also with many Indian writers other than myself. In other words, I’d like to suggest that writing about families is one way of *not* writing about the nation (or restrictively imagined collectivities). (Chakrabarty and Ghosh 2002: 147, emphasis in the text)

The family can be a representation of the nation where the nation exists. But in the 19th century and even today for many Indians the nation itself is a tenuous idea, it is a work in progress, it is a project rather than a reality (Kumar 2007: 103).

Writing about family rather than nation is both a refusal of the usual focus of most novels, and a form of adherence to the object of narration. Indeed, for the subalterns (included in “the many Indians” Ghosh talks about), who are the centre of the majority of his narratives, national belonging is an idea much less strong than family or local community. As it happens in Tagore’s *Ghare-Baire*, the nationalist discourse is often put forward by the élite and does not take into account the consequences on the lives of the subalterns, who, for example, buy foreign goods simply because they are cheaper.

The attachment that still remains in the Ibis’s diasporic community for India and Bengal is not born out of nationalistic commitments.

² The term *jaházbhais* designates “brotherly kinship”, whereas *jaházbahens* refers to “sisterly kinship”.

On the contrary, the relation that is built with the Motherland stands less on the grounds of a civil religion, than in the realms of memory and affection. For example, in *River of Smoke*, when Neel is working at Seth Bahram's munshi in Canton, he meets the gomusta Baboo Kissim, who tells him that he met his wife and son, whom are waiting for Neel's return to Calcutta. The connection that Neel still feels for the motherland is that with his wife and son, whom he misses and remembers. Baboo Kissim's words revive and strengthen this link.

Similarly, Deeti bases her connection on memory and culture. The beginning of *River of Smoke* presents Deeti and the shrine she has built on Mauritius many years after the events dealt with in the trilogy. The shrine is dedicated to Marut, god of the wind, but is also known as "Deetiji's 'Memory Temple'—*Deetiji-ka-smriti-mandir*" (*River of Smoke*, 8). Located inside a cavern, the temple is decorated with pictorial representations of Deeti's life, in which all the characters on board the Ibis have a place. Deeti learned to paint "Back There, in Inndustan" (*ibid.*: 8), where she was taught by her grandmother. After her first marriage, drawing became for Deeti "not just a consolation, but also her principal means of remembrance" (*ibid.*: 9). The paintings represent Deeti's memory-link with India, not only because parts of her Indian past feature in it, namely her first daughter Kabutri, whom she left in India, but most importantly because she learnt to paint "Back There". Painting, Indian cooking or the Hindu pantheon are all cultural elements Deeti acquired in India, and then adapted to her new diasporic reality. Also Deeti's language bears the signs of this adaptation, for she speaks a mixture of Bhojpuri and Creole.

Even from these two brief examples, it is fair to say that, in the *Ibis Trilogy*, the Motherland assumes first and foremost a domestic and cultural value. In Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath*, it was linked to the cult of the Mother-Goddess or seen as an abstract entity which embraces her children/citizens. Here the motherland is, literally and concretely, the land of one's family, of the ancestors. Speaking in Tagorean terms, the home that is brought into the world is that in which the exiled, indentured labourer or convict used to live

in. In addition, in Deeti's case it is also apparent that the local travels into the global as cultural "tool kit" (Swidler 1986), for she does not change the ways, skills or religious beliefs she learnt "Back There", but maintains and adapts them to the new situation.

Both in Neel's and Deeti's cases, narrative is yet another significant element which keeps memory alive and maintains the connection with the motherland. In the episode with Neel and Baboo Kissim, it is the gomusta's account which revives and strengthens Neel's longing for the lost motherland. In addition, at the beginning of *River of Smoke*, Deeti is said to often tell about "Back Then"; also, her shrine resembles a graphic novel version of the *Ibis Trilogy*. Likewise, Neel is described as "the uncle who loves to tell stories" (*River of Smoke*, 14), which often include his family left in Calcutta.

Therefore, looking at the greater narrative, the whole *Ibis Trilogy*, it can be suggested that Bengal is central to Ghosh's narrative because it is familiar, for it is not just well known to the author, but also it pertains to a domestic and homely sphere. In fact, it is not marginal that Bengal is also Ghosh's motherland. As it happens in the case of his diasporic characters, Ghosh's narratives—not only the *Ibis Trilogy*, but each and every one of them—continuously weave this connection of memory, affection and familiarity.

What is more, like with Deeti, this connection comes also in the form of a cultural heritage. Ghosh's "bookcase" or "tool kit", Bengali and global at the same time, is the starting point of his writing. Bengali culture, and most importantly, its artistic and literary tradition, are revisited and adapted into his novels. Paranjape tries to explain this relationship borrowing from Ghosh himself the notion of the chromosome, for the writer recombines and mutates his genetic pool (Ghosh 2012: 371). In doing so, for instance, Ghosh does return to the juxtaposition between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, but poses the slightly different question of the relation between the local and the global, the home and the world, in a globalized context. Despite the mutation, the influence of the Bengali cultural heritage

is so profound that it is difficult to abandon it and do not write about “things Bengali”:

To this day Ray’s work is one of the main anchors that moors me - often despite myself - to the imaginative landscape of Bengal: indeed, to the essential terrain of my own work. (Ghosh 2004)

Going back to this extract from the essay on Ray, the nautical metaphor that Ghosh chooses is extremely significant. It seems to suggest that, even though his ship sets sail towards the world, his cultural heritage will make him continuously return to Bengal. In other words, in his adherence to cosmopolitanism, Ghosh does not reject India in favour of a worldly or diasporic citizenship. On the contrary, his cosmopolitan attitude strikes roots in the local dimension of Bengal. Tagore and Ray’s “ideological liminality” (Saha 2013: 21) returns, mutated, in the image of a ship which travels the world, but never hauls down his Bengali flag.

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