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Hind Wassef

The force of nationalism has become one of the most potent forces of our present time; witness the increasing number of emergent states and of separatist movements all over the world. Nationalism is born of the notion of a common heritage of a people that stretches over a long past and shared ethnic and/or religious roots. This is particularly so in the post-colonial era where the issue of identity is an urgent quest for Third World countries attempting to assert their individuality as nations and shed the yoke of having been culturally oppressed for a significant period of their history. One does not have to delve very far into history, though, to find that most, if not all, nation-states today are further from the notion of purity, unity, and shared heritage than their official ideologies would like to think. Peoples have moved in time and space and have become culturally and religiously commingled in ways that modern demarcations of nationality fail to consider. Consequently they have become artificial, not only in the sense of being man-made but also in being inadequate: if they unite one group along a certain criterion, they inevitably divide along another. As Amitav Ghosh puts it in an interview, “Today nationalism, once conceived of as a form of freedom, is really destroying our world. It’s destroying the forms of ordinary life that many people know. The nation-state prevents the development of free exchange between peoples.”

In this paper, I shall analyze the ways in which the works of Amitav Ghosh explore the issues of national borders, the historical process by which they have come about, and the resulting ironies that affect people’s lives at times in incomprehensible ways in the post-colonial era rich with contradictions. Beginning with The Shadow Lines, the issue of borders and “partitioning history” is explored in the specific case of India, resulting in a myriad of insider-outsider configurations and in the problematic of how to narrate this partitioned history in writing. This is then fleshed out in In

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An Antique Land, which crosses those precise national boundaries as well as going beyond the present into the past to a time where they did not exist, at least not in the modern restrictive sense. In both texts a complex relationship with other nations is constructed, predominantly with the colonizer, while in the latter text, with a Third World country, namely Egypt. Such multiculturalism survives into Ghosh’s most recent novel, The Calcutta Chromosome, but in a way that explodes the idea of cultural, religious, national or other definitions of identity. The characters are uprooted and located in a zone where they are only connected by their links to the scientific and counter-scientific researches under way. In all these texts, there is a conscious intention on the part of the author to construct a history. It is a personal history in the sense of being motivated by the narrator’s personal need for introspection to search for the origins of the present and it is alternative to the written or known “broad sweeps” of official history, consisting of “historical” events or people from which “ordinary people” and a more genuinely human experience has been left out. This task of recording an alternative history, I shall argue, has become identified with the role of the Third World post-colonial intellectual.

Benedict Anderson, author of Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism, puts forward some ideas on the concept of nation that may help us better understand the convoluted worlds of Amitav Ghosh. Anderson writes, “nationality, or as one might prefer to put it in view of the word’s multiple signification, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind.” He goes on to define the nation as “an imagined political community -- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” ² It is imagined by its people and political ideologues, and these imaginings are fraught with incongruities. One of these is that nation-states, although historically “new” entities, “the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past,”³ as the same entity of united people sharing the same heritage. To illustrate this, Anderson cites President Sukarno’s conception of Indonesia as having endured 350 years of colonialism, “although the very concept of ‘Indonesia’ is a twentieth century invention, and most of today’s Indonesia was only conquered by the Dutch between 1850 and 1910.”⁴ The discourse of most Third World leaders today would echo these same notions and would reveal the same inconsistencies. The reality that most of the borders of Third
World countries were drawn up this century, some by the colonial power and not by the “sovereign” nation-state itself, mostly cutting through existing religious or ethnic groups, would undermine the myth of nation and must therefore be omitted from the national memory. Indeed, these borders become all-important for the nation which it must protect for its own salvation. And here Anderson points to a difference between modern nations and the older empires which sheds particular light on In An Antique Land. Twentieth century state sovereignty is recognized over all the “legally demarcated territory. But in the older imaginings, where states were defined by centres, borders were porous and indistinct and sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another. Hence paradoxically enough, the ease with which pre-modern empires and kingdoms were able to sustain their rule over immensely heterogeneous, and often not even contiguous populations for long periods of time.” As Ghosh would add, “the greater freedom of movement in the world.... In the 12th century, people developed a much more sophisticated language of cultural negotiation than we know today. They were able to include different cultures in their lives, while maintaining what was distinct about themselves.”6 Central to Ghosh’s works is the idea of the exclusiveness, the “non-porous” nature of modern borders which is brought to the forefront when contrasted with the inclusiveness of older communities where no concept of nationality with all its modern trappings of passports and visas existed.

Anderson then investigates the mode of writing that both precipitated the creation of the “imagined community” of the nation-state and is at once the form “which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves and to relate themselves to others in profoundly new ways.”7 What he calls print-capitalism in the form of the novel and the newspaper, allows the author and the reader, two members of the nation who may never meet, to communicate an almost false intimacy. Both modes of writing also allow for simultaneity of events which depicts the throbbing activity of the different members of the nation imagining but unaware of each other’s existence. The disseminated information, particularly in the newspaper, builds the community around it by allowing for sharing of common “facts.” This has particular relevance to The Shadow Lines where the most important event for the narrator, the riots which lead to Tridib’s death, risks being eternally lost if not recorded, and is denied the national importance that would earn it a
place in the press. This shows the separation that exists between official history and the more personal history the narrator is engaged in writing. Indeed the importance of writing is construed when it is the written word that defies forgetting and survives the passing of time by entering History.

For Ghosh and others like him, Indians living in the diaspora, there is a more urgent sense in which the past can be lost by virtue of their being away from it and its daily development. Salman Rushdie, another case in point, in *Imaginary Homelands*, describes this condition: “that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not of capable to reclaiming precisely the thing that is lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.”8 It will be, he continues, as if the writer was looking at a broken mirror, but “The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed,”9 simply because it is another vision or angle from which to perceive and therefore reconstruct history. While writing *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh was living in Calcutta but he has moved and lived in several other places, most recently New York. He also lived in Egypt when doing field work for his PhD dissertation, the material which fueled *In An Antique Land*. If he is a new-comer to the diaspora, he and most other post-colonial Third World writers have the roots of it perhaps since early education when they became versed in the language of the colonizer and speak and write about their “homeland” in that “foreign” language. Any attempt to reconstruct the past as they perceive it must incorporate the colonial experience as part of that broken mirror image. Rushdie puts it aptly when he says, “Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures, at other times, that we fall between two stools.”10 They, therefore, understand and experience most the artificiality of national borders and the cracks they have put through the past. And they must construct the past and present as cracked and as fragmented if they are to do justice to their real conditions.

Ghosh echoes Rushdie’s sentiment in an essay entitled “The Diaspora in Indian Culture,” when he explains that “the links between India and her diaspora are lived within the imagination,” rather than in language of religion, and for this reason “the specialists of the imagination — writers — play so important a part within it.”11 They write their own India from their unique perspective from the outside.
expressing most aptly the colonial experience. His notion that “It is impossible to be imperfectly Indian,”\textsuperscript{12} then paradoxically defines the “perfect” Indian as one who expresses and reflects the living signs of having been colonized, that unique hybrid that is neither Indian nor British but a product of that cultural clash, one who is not “purely,” if we can now ever believe in the existence of such a notion in nationality, Indian.

If the post-colonial era can be described as one of alienation, when a product of two or more cultures is first made aware of this fractured identity, the post-modernist era may be said to have gone beyond alienation. In his article, “Writing Between Cultures,” Stephen Alter points to one of the features of the post-modernist era being the breaking free of literature from the “limited spheres of nationalism, language, or ethnicity. The cages in which writers were once confined have now been sprung open. Essentially, the problem of alienation is less acute today, because the world is so much more complex, so polyglot, so full of competing voices, that most writers have become nations unto themselves.”\textsuperscript{13} Hybridity and multiculturalism have become essential features of our world today, even the more real lenses through which to see ourselves and our worlds.

We may now begin by analyzing The Shadow Lines in light of these issues, which constitute prime concerns for Ghosh. The novel begins with the formation of the diaspora: “In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father’s aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib” (SL, 3).\textsuperscript{14} This is not a permanent move, but for the novel to begin with a “going away,” as is the title of the first of the two sections into which it is divided, is significant. Tridib is the chronicler in the novel, a story-teller in the midst of a multitude of stories and narrators. He gives his legacy to the protagonist-narrator who then actively seeks to complete and reconstruct the story, or history, of his family and, by extension, a history of the nation. He compiles this history through layers of narration and recollection which give the novel its fragmented and non-linear nature, while at the same time this fragmentation mirrors the fact of a history that is dispersed within various geographical locations and various memories. A further level of fragmentation, as Jean Sudrann remarks in her article, “Goings and Comings,” is that the protagonist himself is a dual persona: he is at once a first-person participant in or observer of his youthful stories and mature

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commentator reflecting on past events, putting together pieces.” He is therefore constructing this history, himself as chronicler constructing his other self as part of the history with Tridib as his mentor. For he writes he has “decided” that Tridib looked like him at the age when he first started telling his story.

Tridib instills in the narrator an obsession with the past, an intrigue with reconstituting incomplete knowledge that is on the verge of being irretrievably lost. He lives in the past which is just as vivid and real an experience as the present is for other people, “people like Tridib.... could experience the world as concretely in their imagination..... more so if anything, since to them those experiences were permanently available in their memories” (SL, 29-30). He talks of, “the Tridib who had pushed me to imagine the roofs of Colombo for myself, the Tridib who had said that we could not see without inventing what we saw ... that if we didn’t try ourselves, we would never be free of other people’s inventions” (SL, 31). This is precisely what Ghosh and his narrator are attempting to do: give voice to their own visions however cracked or incomplete they may be. They must be valued as incomplete, reflecting a reality, and as their own “broken mirror.”

Tridib is shown from the very start to be an unreliable narrator, “Nobody was ever quite sure where they stood with Tridib” (SL, 10), for he would tell different people different things about himself, what he does, and his background. People were left to decide which of the versions they wanted to believe. This de-stabilizes the whole notion of “known” history and leaves space only for that which one gathers has happened. Because of this instability of knowledge, not only with regard to what Tridib tells him, the narrator gets different versions of the same story and causes them to co-exist beside, and complement, one another. For example, Ila, Tridib’s niece, tells the narrator the story about her doll, as a metaphor for Nick Price’s, the son of the English family with which her family became close friends, abandoning her in the street. The narrator then tells it to his grandmother to get her reaction and then recalls his own memory of the day because he happened to be there not knowing at the time what had happened. The result is a collective history-telling where contradictory visions are allowed to co-exist to express a dynamic.
The history that Tridib constructs through the narrator is of an English family in England on the eve of the Second World War. This carries the narrative outside India and Pakistan into the land of the colonizer where the reader is met with a surprisingly compassionate tone. Tridib imagines clearly the lives of Tresawsen and his friends from pictures he sees at Mrs Price’s home. He lives and feels their petty arguments and jealousies, affections and confidences and proceeds to construct episodes of their lives, in the greatest detail out of their surroundings. He stops, however, at an emotion he can never know, the knowledge that “in all probability they themselves would not survive the war. What is the colour of that knowledge? Nobody knows, nobody can ever know, not even in memory, because there are moments in time that are not knowable: nobody can ever know what it was like to be young and intelligent in the summer of 1939 in London or Berlin” (SL, 66-7). While History records that a war took place and a certain number of people died, under the euphemism of casualties, it does not delve into the consciousness of people whose worlds are devastated by violence on an international scale. The narrator will be engaged in scratching the surface of the “unknowable” when he is faced with Tridib’s death. But this notion points to the abyss of forgotten “history,” which makes any written history incomplete by definition for something essentially human is lost under its broad sweeps.

In a review of the novel in World Literature Today, G. R. Taneja writes, “The new Indian English fiction of the eighties is free from the self-consciousness, shallow idealism, and sentimentalism that characterized the work of the older generation of novelists.... who started writing in the thirties. The fiction of the eighties takes a maturer view of Indian reality.”16 The English family plays an essential role in Ghosh’s attempt to subvert previously dominant views. The fact that they feature in an Indian family chronicle attests to the convoluted links the colonial experience has fostered between the two cultures. Instead of portraying them as off-spring of the aggressive imperialist power, the author takes a compassionate and human view towards them and incorporates them into his own and his nation’s history. This is not to deny colonialism. On the contrary, it affirms its all too real existence in a “mature” coming to terms with the amalgam that has come to constitute Indian culture and constructs it as such. Indeed, the boundary that is being problematized in the novel is not that which lies between colonizer and colonized, but
rather that which divides India. As Alter affirms, "The novel betrays no anxiety because it attempts to prove nothing and interrogates rather than defines the concept of a totalising India."17

Two views of nationalism and what it means to constitute a nation contest each other throughout the novel. One is voiced clearly by the narrator’s grandmother and the other takes the form of events that comment on this romantic view in more subtle ways. The narrator’s grandmother upholds the belief in a united people fighting for freedom and autonomy and constituting a nation held together by blood. For her, someone like Ila, the product of a cosmopolitan education and hovering between India and London, is an enigma because she escapes categorization, and a traitor because she has bought freedom “for the price of an air ticket” (SL, 87). She protests, “Ila has no right to live there . . . . Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood . . . . They know they’re a nation because they’ve drawn their borders with blood . . . . War is their religion. That’s what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don’t you see?” (SL, 76) Ila later calls this a warmongering fascist ideology but the narrator sees a pitiful side to this kind of thinking: a deep-seated bitterness at the yearning for middle class values of “unity of nationhood” and “self-respect and national power” (SL, 77).

Certainly, her thinking fails to take into account that what the British she is admiring did to India was an assertion of national power that an entirely other nation had to be the victim of. The narrator’s view, however, is insightful in explaining people’s need for the national myth, and how the force of nationalism commands its appeal, although Ghosh, along the same line of argument made by Anderson, would be the first to reveal its shaky foundations.

Most of the events taking place in the text work against the concept of a nation. In his attempt to de-mystify this notion, the author begins with the idea of the national border. He puts forward the perspective that a border, supposedly uniting those who are inside it as well as differentiating them from those who are other, in modern times divides more than it unites. The author shows this in several instances, one of which is through the use of allegory: the partitioning of the grandmother’s original home. This partition went through the house in an arbitrary manner not making architectural sense, but
making this absurdist claim of equality and fairness to both sides. For example, it went through a door, a chest of drawers, and their father’s name-plaque outside. This seems to be reminiscent of the India-Pakistan border, the outcome of the 1947 Partition, which was relatively arbitrary, but laying the same claim to fairness in that the land was divided according to the majority religion in a particular administrative district. It is in reference to this boundary that the notion of “shadow lines” is constructed to connote arbitrariness and artificiality. It is also this border that scars the narrator, his family, and the history he is trying to reconstruct, more so than any border between India and Britain.

The author also reveals the futility of this partitioning in providing any real solution to the disputes, for he tells us they had all longed for this division, “but once it had actually happened... instead of the peace they had so much looked forward to, they found that a strange, eerie silence had descended on the house. It was never the same again after that; the life went out of it” (SL, 121). Although the author may be accused of a naive nostalgia for the past, he is expressing the valid opinion that national borders de-humanize communities because they negate the reality of human and political diversity which is present in any culture. In the interview mentioned earlier, Ghosh says, “When [one] comes under pressure the first response is to say the problem can be solved by division.... An absolutely unipolitical culture is an impossibility. It’s enormously important for us to think of multiethnic states, because every state is multi-ethnic.”

National boundaries are thus made to assert a difference between self and other, frequently at a point of crisis. After the partition takes place, people then emphasize the differences between themselves and the newly-formed outsiders, in a process of demonizing the other. The grandmother’s construction of the elaborate web of stories of the “upside-down house” on the other side illustrates this. These ideologies of difference then become so instilled in people’s psyche and in the culture of the community that while the disputes may be long forgotten, people carry the partition walls in their minds: “they had grown so thoroughly into the habits engendered by decades of hostility that none of them wanted to venture out into the limbo of reconciliation. They liked the wall now; it had become a part of them” (SL, 122).

From allegory the text moves into reality and how partitions
come to affect people’s lives in ways that are difficult to comprehend. When faced with the daunting experience of “coming home,” the title of the second section, the grandmother asks the almost embarrassing question of what is the border. She is searching for something tangible, “trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other.... But if there aren’t any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where is the difference? And if there is no difference, both sides will be the same” (SL, 148). She finds out that the border takes the more abstract form of an airport official, who will stamp her passport.

Displacements then give rise to a daunting set of insider-outsider configurations that we encounter through the confusion the grandmother experiences. Firstly, she cannot “understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality” (SL, 149). Like Ila, she finds she is herself now beyond categorization. She also realizes, as she is told what has become of her home and her family, that she is an outsider in her home town. Her uncles have “scattered” all over the Middle East, Bangalore and other places, and her house has been taken over by Muslim refugees from India, who are insiders as far as Partition has turned Dhaka into a Muslim city, but outsiders because they are homeless refugees. When her son points to the historical fact that they too came to Dhaka as refugees, she is intolerant of the word and says, “‘We’re not refugees...We came long before Partition’” (SL, 129). Movement is an almost natural state of human behaviour depending on where there are optimal conditions for survival. Any person’s ancestors may be traced to a place different from where that person is living. Paradoxically, the concept of a nation’s self-justification lies in an invented myth of presence in the same geographical location from an “immemorial past,” in Anderson’s words. This claim is shattered by a look into no more than the few preceding decades. The grandmother is attempting to lay claim to indigeneity upon this basis, but ironically to a nation that rejects her. She then re-orients herself only to fall into another prison of national consciousness when the reader learns she has donated her jewelry to “‘the fund for the war. I had to, don’t you see? For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us’” (SL, 232). What she cannot see, and what nationalist causes are frequently blind to, is that the “us” and “them” demarcation is based on differences not related to nationality but religion. The real situation is one of Hindus against Muslims. She
is also unaware that the cause she contributes to is what kills Tridib, the chronicler and memory of the community.

The narrator’s reconstruction of this event provides the closure of the text and of the chronicle, for it is the story of the death of the chronicler. To write it, he says he has had to struggle with silence, a silence that comes not from fear or imperfect memory, but more from absence of words and of meaning (SL, 213-4). It is the newspaper that bridges the gap between silence and meaning for the narrator, the official memory of the nation around which the community is built, as remarked by Anderson. Fifteen years later, in university in New Delhi, his colleagues cannot remember the riots he witnessed growing up in Calcutta. To prove they took place, he resorts to the newspapers of the day, with their “urgent contemporaneity” (SL, 222), as enunciators of the nation’s activity. He finds riots being reported in Khulna in East Pakistan, others in Dhaka, as well as those he witnessed in Calcutta. In 1971 East Pakistan seceded from Pakistan and became Bangladesh, its capital Dhaka, which shares a border with India. A mirror image is therefore constructed whereby two actions are taking place as inverted images of each other on each side of the border: Muslims attacking Hindus in Dhaka, Hindus attacking Muslims in Calcutta. These two places were now so closely linked for him that “he only had to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka” (SL, 228) and experience, with imaginative precision, Tridib’s death. This event was on the verge of being “unknowable” for the newspapers only report, “TWENTY NINE KILLED IN RIOTS” or “FOURTEEN DIE IN FRENZY” and it only survives, albeit suppressed, in fragments in the living memory of some of his family. The narrator defies silence and salvages it from oblivion. And with this personal history, he is able to give living voice to the human experience of the consequences of national boundaries; two cities in two different nation-states, ironically united in violence and bloodshed over the same cause, for the riots began because of a stolen relic of a saint that Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs believed in.

*In An Antique Land* also betrays a concern with national identity, or the lack thereof, and travels in both space and time to explore this concept. Ghosh first becomes intrigued with the story of the Slave of MS H.6 after having read E. Strauss’ article on the Geniza documents, amongst which is the first letter mentioning the Slave. The story of the Slave, his life and times, and of the Geniza open up a new world for Ghosh different from, yet an off-spring of,
his present time. Two notions grasp his interest, so much so that he follows the trail of the Slave over several parts of the world. Primarily, he is fascinated by the accident of History that has allowed for the Slave to enter the chronicles of time. He calls it both a miracle and an accident, two notions on opposite sides of the spectrum of human activity, because in either case it is certainly an exceptional occurrence “that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved”(AL, 17).19 Bomma, as we later find out, is the Slave’s name, and the people around him were certainly not of the company of “the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests -- the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time”(AL, 17). And there is no mention of such imposing “historical” events or people in the two letters which mention the Slave’s name, thus signifying a sub-culture to which this “congregation of modest traders” belongs with their different concerns and priorities. Ghosh is therefore, once again, engaged in writing a personal history, one that provides an alternative to the world of statesmen and leaders and fills a gap in human knowledge, while also countering certain accepted notions about national and cultural boundaries and about history itself.

The second idea that intrigued Ghosh was the dynamic cultural amalgams in the twelfth century, a spirit that is no longer alive today, that enabled a Jewish trader “originally” from Tunisia to live in Egypt, Aden and Mangalore, participating in all realms of public life and engaging in trade without the notion of being of a different “nationality.” National borders are all too rigid today and the author attempts to trace the process by which they became thus. With this quest in mind, he begins his journey in Egypt doing research for his dissertation but also with the story of Bomma pursuing him: “I knew nothing about the Slave of MS H.6 except that he had given me a right to be there, a sense of entitlement” (AL, 19). Bomma becomes his second self, the Indian in the Middle East 800 years ago, and the key to understanding, indeed re-writing, his present.

Ghosh is consciously writing a history, be it that of the twelfth century or of the twentieth century Delta village in Egypt. In both instances, as in The Shadow Lines, his construction is based on “fact” and research of some kind and an arduous piecing together of all the information into a coherent whole, but one that draws attention to the gaps in its knowledge rather than a myth of completeness. Thus it remains his unique view, his own construction of events. Ahmed Abu
Zeid, in his article, “The Anthropological Novel: Between Ethnographic Reality and Creative Imagination,” puts it aptly when he compares the creative writer and the anthropologist, two identities which Ghosh combines, saying that narrative is a crucial component of both modes of writing in spite of the supposed objectivity that should guide the latter. And in narrativizing, the author is unquestionably giving something of his own creation, fostering his own connections, which is necessarily a subjective activity. Abu Zeid quotes Paul Ricoeur as saying that while history opens up the doors of knowledge for us, creative narrative can sometimes give the essence of that world, something one may not find in the archives.20 And here literature emerges as the complement to history and ethnography, Ghosh’s location being precisely in this complementarity.

The different worlds that Ghosh depicts in his novel come to comment on one another in light of their differences and similarities. Before introducing Ben Yiju and his world, the author goes into the history of Cairo and how it happened that the Jewish trader found himself there. The different names given to Cairo by the various conquerors and peoples who have inhabited it throughout the centuries, from Babylon to al-Fustat in the Islamic era to al-Qahira in the tenth century, attests to the vibrant movement that characterizes human history. In this way Ben Yiju found himself engaged in the flourishing trade between the Mediterranean and India for “Jews figured prominently among these migrants and those amongst them who moved to Masr generally chose to join the ‘Palestinian’ congregation in Babylon. Ben Yiju was thus following a well-marked trail.” (AL, 55) No national boundaries, in the sense we have today, restricted such movement. And when he went to live in Aden and Mangalore, there too no question of nationality arose that made him an outsider or refugee in the modern sense.

Ghosh’s research sheds more light onto the world of Ben Yiju. For example, he learns that the hybrid language, Judeo-Arabic, was in fact very close to Arabic, the dialect used in the Egyptian Delta villages the author lived in, to be precise, except that it was transcribed in Hebrew characters. (AL, 103-4) Also, the Middle Eastern Jews used the same name for God as do the Muslims, Allah. Thus people of different backgrounds lived in unison rather than in the forced uniformity we know today, indeed they created their own crossbred cultures as a product of such commingling.

The Geniza, then, emerges as the perfect metaphor for its
people and for the spirit of the times, for the documents collected in it come from the parts of the world from which Jews have migrated to Egypt. Eight hundred years later the same documents go through a mass exodus, not unlike that of the Egyptian Jews in the 1950s. The documents end up primarily in Cambridge but also in libraries of most European capitals. Their “original” home is Cairo only because they happened to remain there for a number of centuries, and even that is forgotten as the source of the documents. (AL, 90). The blame lies not only with the scholars and collectors who dispersed it, for Ghosh writes, “In its home country however, nobody took the slightest notice of its dispersal. In some profound sense, the Islamic high culture of Masr had never really noticed, never found a place for the parallel history the Geniza represented, and its removal only confirmed a particular vision of the past” (AL, 95). Here the modern view of a unified monolithic culture is made to contrast with the celebration of multi-ethnicity that is seen in the depiction of the Medieval world. The crowning illustration of this is in the guardian of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra who was originally Nathan and had to become Shehata because of the rigidity of categories that deny a person to “straddle two cultures,” in Rushdie’s words. This belief in categories is further fleshed out in the author’s interaction with the people of the two Egyptian villages.

In a spirit of humility, he attempts to gain the friendship of the villagers and come to know them and their beliefs and customs as well as tell them about his. The exchange, however, is not on equal footing and the reader is soon reminded that the setting is now the post-colonial Third World replete with boundaries, where what human beings have in common is suppressed in favour of what separates them. In Lataifa he engages in a discussion on religious custom and informs the inhabitants, to their utter perplexity, that his religion is Hinduism. Not knowing what it is, they attempt to introduce him to Islam, “Now that you are here among us you can understand and learn about Islam, and then you can make up your mind whether you want to stay within that religion of yours.... You will see then how much better Islam is than this ‘Hinduki’ of yours”(AL, 48-51). Although this may contradict the notion of cultural relativism which is such a valued concept for intellectuals, the spirit is not offensive or aggressive. What is actually at play is the attempt to mould the other into an image of one’s self, particularly when that other is seen as amicable and “one of us.” In the case that the other does not yield to
transformation, the alternative is to uphold and re-affirm the barriers that make him different. Also in Lataifa, during the month of Ramadan when Muslims fast, the author wanted to join them in sympathy but was met with the protest that “only Muslims fast at Ramadan” (AL, 75). He then attempts to understand their behaviour, “to belong to that immense community [of Muslims] was a privilege which they had to re-earn every year, and the effort made them doubly conscious of the value of its boundaries” (AL, 76). This is not the monolithic “Islamic high culture” per se, but its popular residual form. With it the author points to the same idea he has expressed in The Shadow Lines, that people carry boundaries in their minds as well as those that appear on maps.

A similar discussion takes place in Nashawy, the second village the author visits, in this case about the Hindu custom of cremation and veneration of cows. Again he is met with the intolerant, but not self-righteous, response that “[you] should try to civilize your people. You should tell them to stop praying to cows and burning their dead” (AL, 126). It becomes apparent that the boundaries in question are not national but more deeply religious and posing under the guise of national identity. A similar confusion is at the core of the riots that the author recounts in The Shadow Lines, particularly when the grandmother classifies “us” and “them” according to religious identity but her vision of freedom is of a nation-state consisting purely of “us.” Indeed the author recalls those riots and reflects upon the explosive power of symbols, religious or national, in shaping identity: “cities going up in flames because of a cow found dead in a temple or a pig in a mosque; of people killed for wearing a lungi or a dhoti, depending on where they find themselves; of women disemboweled for wearing veils or vermillion, of men dismembered for the state of their foreskins.... But I was never able to explain very much of this to Nabeel or anyone else in Nashawy... I could not have expected them to understand an Indian’s terror of symbols.” (AL, 210) Such incidents sound all too familiar in the world we have come to inhabit today, a world neatly divided up, or so people seem to wish, that is intolerant of deviation and of difference. Ghosh exposes the nation as a myth, Anderson’s “imagined community,” but one that is built on symbols with such potent signifying powers that they have the ability to unite and divide people largely by de-humanizing them. Building on the same theme he treats in The Shadow Lines, Ghosh develops it to comment on the interaction between two Third World countries.
thus exploring the nature of South-South dialogue which is supposed
to express ideologies of solidarity primarily because of the shared
colonial experience. This dialogue in fact ends up pronouncing the
death of Bomma’s world that was a perfect declaration not only of
South-South but of global interchange.

The final episode we encounter of this cultural exchange, one
between the author and the Imam, turns into an argument over whose
culture is “better,” the scale of measurement being how advanced the
warfare technology is of each country. The values of “the things that
were right, or good, or willed by God,” which Ghosh associated with
the essence of his and the Imam’s cultures and the time of Ben Yiju
and Bomma, now belong to a “dismantled rung on the ascending
ladder of Development” (AL, 237). They have been supplanted by
modern values of progress and technology, essentially Western
colonial concepts: “we had both resorted, I, a student of the ’humane’
sciences, and he, an old-fashioned village Imam, to the very terms that
world leaders and statesmen use at great, global conferences, the
universal, irresistible metaphysic of modern meaning.... It was the
only language we had been able to discover in common” (AL, 237).
Ostensibly speaking in Arabic, a language of the Third World and a
hybrid of which united Bomma, Ben Yiju and Khalaf, they are
communicating through the signs of the colonizer, or more correctly,
the language of colonialism which would rank nations or cultures
according to economic or warfare strength. The split between the
world of statesmen who have the power to make History and that of
people is also discernible here, although ironically the line between
them has been blurred as the statesman’s discourse has infected that of
the people. It is statesmen that draw borders, but people leave the
human imprint by creating the melting pot of sub-cultures to subvert
these borders. Ghosh is attempting to chronicle precisely that world of
dynamic human activity, and in this sense to write an alternative
history. He came to Egypt to try to find a vestige of the spirit of the
world of his Medieval protagonists, “a world of accommodations that
I had believed to be still alive, and, in some tiny measure, still
retrievable” (AL, 237).

In the constant movement in the novel back and forth between
the modern and the Medieval world, the death of multi-ethnicity is
mirrored in its very place of origin, that is in Ben Yiju’s life. And
here, both the European colonizer and “Islamic high culture” are held
responsible. With the Portuguese discovery of India and the
flourishing trade routes, the “unarmed” nature of that region’s trade with tacit rules of “bargaining and compromise” makes it an easy prey for the Europeans (AL, 287). Ghosh depicts the European advent as “aggression, pure and distilled, by unleashing violence on a scale unprecedented on those shores. As far as the Portuguese were concerned, they had declared a proprietor right over the Indian Ocean: since none of the peoples who lived around it had thought to claim ownership of it before their arrival, they could not expect the right of free passage in it now” (AL, 288). The author then views the demarcation of boundaries as a European colonial concept that invades a land founded upon co-existence and compromise. And the obsession with the artificial notion of national boundaries and identity that divides people today is therefore necessarily a descendent of this. With the trade routes monopolized in this way, the traders become exploited in ways that were alien to their lives before and it is at this point that Ben Yiju thinks about leaving India. He is prompted also by another manifestation of the intolerant Islamic high culture that Ghosh mentioned earlier as having dispossessed the Geniza and its peoples. The forces of Al-Mowahid (the Arabic means “the unifier”) are storming through North Africa converting Jews to Islam, either peaceably or by the sword. This arouses Ben Yiju’s anxiety over his family and he longs to “reaffirm his bonds with them through a familial union,” namely by marrying his daughter, by his Indian wife, Ashu, to one of his brothers’ sons (AL, 303). Here the advent of a crisis prompts the reaffirmation and strong adherence to family ties in an attempt to assert one’s identity in the face of that crisis. In the world of co-existence between cultures that predominated earlier, nobody needed to assert their identity because it was never questioned. Only when a threat is perceived does it breed intolerance and an assertion of self against the threatening other. Ben Yiju is so intensely under the strain of this crisis that he refuses to marry his daughter to his friend and fellow tradesman, Khalaf, because his origins were in Iraq unlike Ben Yiju’s in Ifriquiya, “almost as though he were seeking to disown a part of his own past, he now decided that he could not let his daughter marry a ‘foreigner’. Precisely that assertion signals the end of Bonna’s world, and makes Ben Yiju feel sick at heart” (AL, 316).

The author himself experiences a similar emotion when he returns to the village, a mirror image of Ben Yiju’s own return to Aden, to find a mass exodus to Iraq. History is again being made and
while the Egyptian Diaspora is recorded on television, ordinary people like Nabeel fail to appear on the screen and “vanish into the anonymity of History”.

Ghosh, however, does not leave his reader without a glimmer of hope that Bomma’s world may still be alive. Significantly, the vestiges take the form of popular culture rather than official History, thus reaffirming the triumph of what is essentially human over official ideology. While in Mangalore on Bomma’s trail, the author hears a story about the shrine of the Bhuta whose cult was a popular mystical religion that Bomma may well have participated in. The tale tells of a road that was to be built and that was to cut through the shrine, but the sacred edifice defied the construction and the bulldozers that were brought for its demolition were frozen to the ground so that the road had to be diverted (AL, 265). Upon hearing this story, the author and the reader both recall a similar one told in the Egyptian village about a Sufi, Islamic mystical saint, except that it featured a canal rather than a road (AL, 139). Ghosh fosters a link between the two cults and the two cultures not only through the story but also through their being popular cults subversive to a more official religion: Sufism being the “subversive counter-image of the orthodox religions of the Middle East,” and the Bhuta-cult “beneath the Himalayan gaze of canonical Hindu practice” (AL, 263-4).

The second vestige is one that links Judaism to Islam in the shape of the tomb of Sidi Abu Hasira, or Ya’akov Abou Hadzeira. Both Jews and Muslims alike visit this shrine and when the author looks up his history, again under “folklore” rather than “religion,” he learns that the festivities associated with his pilgrimage resemble the Moulids, or popular festivals celebrating birthdays of saints in Islamic communities (AL, 342). These two connections form a triumvirate between Judaism, India, and Islam, in other words joining together Ben Yiju, Bomma and Ghosh, and present day Damanhour, Egypt. Bomma’s world has in fact triumphed and the fact that people will continue to be connected by virtue of their being human. It remains to be said, however, that the dominant ideology and activity in our world today is to assert difference and uniqueness in identity, something which Ghosh attempts to provide an alternative to in his writing.

In the more surreal world of The Calcutta Chromosome, Ghosh’s latest novel, this interconnectedness between people, unbeknownst to them, is most definitely a prominent theme and it is what gives it its illusory character. Concepts of nationality are
exploded and supplanted by a literary no-man's-land where everyone in the novel turns out to be somehow linked together by their relationship to the research on malaria. Here too, the protagonists, Murugan and Antar, piece together a scattered history through investigative work that takes them across boundaries of time and place, if not physically, then through the virtual reality of the Internet.

The dominant group that controls this history, its investigators and participants is organized as a cult of science that believes that "knowledge is self-contradictory; ... that to know something is to change it, therefore in knowing something, you've already changed what you think you know so you don't really know it at all: you only know its history" (CC, 103-4). They have discovered a cure for syphilis with one version of the malaria virus and are orchestrating events and people in the novel in a very controlled manner to feed into their brand of research. They do not approach research directly but meander around it in much the same way as the narrative does around this history. And it is this sub-culture of science that is dominant and subverts mainstream science in a similar way that mystical cults subvert orthodox religions in In An Antique Land.

This group of alternative scientists also connects people to serve its cause. Their conceptions lead to a passage to immortality, "'interpersonal transference,'" which we see somewhere else in the novel, namely the Internet and its hologram, virtual reality manifestations. The expert on this technology is called Antar, the name of an Egyptian folk hero, thus linking modern technology to folklore, indeed giving precedence to folk culture as the basic manifestation of modern technology. The latter has not discovered anything that was undiscovered by the former. The common element between the Internet, folklore and disease is that they all cross boundaries and succeed in connecting people and drawing attention to their common attributes and weaknesses. And in a final literary tour-de-force illustrating this interconnectedness between people, Antar becomes the clue to the mystery as well as the detective because the malaria virus, the cure for syphilis and a part of other carriers/researchers all survive in him.

It is perhaps ironic that in the post-colonial era the power of nationalism and the nation-state, the formation of which independence movements strived towards, comes to be questioned by intellectuals and writers who supported nationalism. Ghosh attempts to find the links between people rather than dwell on the differences or the myth

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of separateness that keeps them divided across borders. *The Shadow Lines* was a case history illustrating a personal tragedy that was caused by the multitude of separations his home land witnessed. *In An Antique Land* was an attempt to historicize these divisions by looking at their absence in a time long gone. *The Calcutta Chromosome* takes this issue to an abstract and imaginary level where people from different times and places become interconnected as a result of technology and disease: the two plagues as well as saving graces of our time. Although this world view makes for a deconstruction of any form of collective identity, at least one which is based on a conscious emphasis on difference with regards to the outsider, it also makes for a more real existence and awareness of our place on this earth.

**NOTES**

4 Anderson, 19
5 Anderson, 26.
6 Interview with Amitav Ghosh, “Lessons From the 12th Century,” 52.
10 Rushdie, 15.
12 Ghosh, “The Diaspora in Indian Culture,” 77.
Interview with Amitav Ghosh, “Lessons From the 12th Century,” 52.


