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Lila Azam Zanganeh interviews Amitav Ghosh May 2011

The author Amitav Ghosh discusses the link between anthropology and writing, The New Yorker*'s edit of his essay on the Iraq war, and John Updike's worst book.*

Many novelists start out dreaming in their bed at night. As Sartre describes in *The Words*, they dream of how they'll write these wild romantic novels. But Amitav Ghosh seems to come from quite a different place. As a young man he worked as a journalist; his first job was at the *Indian Express* newspaper, based in New Delhi. He next earned a PhD at Oxford in social anthropology, followed by a stint in Egypt. As he tells Lila Azam Zanganeh, our "Nabokovian" interviewer, his background in anthropology—as opposed to, say, an MFA—might have been the best training imaginable for his fiction and essays: "What does an anthropologist do?" he asks. "You just go and talk to people, then at the end of the day you write down what you see.… It trains you to observe, and it trains you to listen to the ways in which people speak."

Ghosh published the first of his six novels, *The Circle of Reason*, in 1986, and his career was given a boost when France awarded the book a prestigious Prix Médicis Etranger. While he lives in Brooklyn, writes in English and feels at home in the New York publishing scene, his sensibility is clearly that of an internationalist. Enabled in his career by writers such as Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul, he cares almost nothing about identity in its narrowest sense. Why? Because of India. "One of the reasons why is because anybody who's lived in India knows that India is incredibly, incredibly

diverse.… That's one of the wonderfully liberating things about India; it lets you be exactly who you want to be."

This has been decisive in his life as a writer. In the relationship between his fiction and his ample body of nonfiction, his focus has been to decipher the world as it already is, but also, as the *New York Times* has it, to be "archaeologist of the powerless." "If you were to divide writers," he says, "like people do divide painters—between the abstractionist and the figurative painters—I'm definitely a figurative person. I mean it's the world that interests me."

Ghosh, who turns fifty-five in July, launched his "Ibis trilogy" with 2008's *Sea of Poppies*, a finalist for the Booker Prize. The novel, writes Gaiutra Bahadur in the *New York Times*, "is big and baggy, a self-styled epic with colossal themes and almost a dozen major characters, including the son of an American slave (who is passing as white), the orphaned daughter of a French botanist (who is passing as a coolie) and an Anglophile raja (who has been wrongly sentenced to a penal colony on Mauritius)." To envision it, writes Alan Cheuse in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "imagine if Charles Dickens had signed on for a berth on the Pequod." *River of Smoke*, the second in the trilogy, will be out in September.

In April, Ghosh was awarded Canada's Blue Metropolis Literary Prize, with a cash award of ten thousand dollars in recognition of his lifetime literary achievement.

Our interviewer Lila Azam Zanganeh's book *The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness* is out this month from Norton. Orhan Pamuk calls it "A lucid and joyful account of the great writer's art, written with all the playfulness that the subject deserves." She conducted this interview in early 2007 at Ghosh's writing studio in Brooklyn, and presents it here in her ongoing Hugging the Shore interview series. She describes Ghosh as serious, if not somber, with calm features and pondered, almost meditative speech.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: I'm curious to know if in your studies, when you went to Oxford, and in your anthropological studies, if somewhere in the back of your mind you knew that the path was going to lead to writing novels, or how you came to it—how the little throb came.

Amitav Ghosh: It was absolutely my first love. It was what I always wanted to do. But for us in India, certainly when I was a kid—when I was in my teens and so on—there was no such thing as a literary career. It was not something you could aspire to. Because the possibility of making a living by writing was unthinkable. And I thought, what do I do which is close enough? So I became a journalist. In fact when I was eighteen, I took my first job. First, I worked as a journalist, and at a certain point I realized that it wasn't going to let me do my writing. So then I went to the University to do a masters degree, and somehow I ended up with a scholarship to go to England, which was wonderful because mainly I just wanted to travel. So that's how it happened. It was just a set of accidents really.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: When did you start writing fiction?

Amitav Ghosh: I wrote when I was in my teens. But I started really, in earnest, when I was twenty-four.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: And was that your first novel?

Amitav Ghosh: Yes, that was the *Circle of Reason*, which won the Prix Médicis Etranger.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: In France, you have quite a following, and you have had it for quite a while.

Amitav Ghosh: Well it was wonderful! It was just magical; the book did amazingly well in France, it got the Prix Médicis Etranger, it sold a lot. So I felt very, very grateful to France for that.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: As a Nabokovian, what's incredibly important to me as I read literature is to envision the details and to visualize the concreteness of things. Of course with your background in anthropology, you're always giving a sense of concreteness of images, of things—the way boats look, or canals. How do you think [anthropology] informed your writing from the beginning—if at all?

Amitav Ghosh: I was an anthropologist for two years.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: In Egypt.

Amitav Ghosh: In Egypt, yes. The time I spent there was absolutely the fundamentals of my education as a writer.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: How so?

Amitav Ghosh: What does an anthropologist do, really? You just go and talk to people, then at the end of the day you write down what you see. So what it really does is trains you to observe, and it trains you to listen to the ways that people speak. So it's really a very important thing to teach yourself: to observe, as a writer. And I think basically that was where I learned that. The other thing was that I also read a lot when I was there, and that also very influenced me.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: What did you read?

Amitav Ghosh: I read Marquez for the first time while I was living in the village. I read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which really in some strange way had a very powerful impact on me at that time.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: How?

Amitav Ghosh: When you're living in this very tiny place, [with] a thousand people or something, your temptation is to think of it as being outside the flow of history. In reading Marquez you begin to think of all the ways in which the whole world is visible in the microcosm of this one small place, like Marquez's Macondo. Another writer who had a very powerful influence on me at that time was James Boswell. I read the whole of the *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. And it had this enormous influence on me because what Boswell really does, what is so miraculous about the *Life of Johnson*, is that he listens to people speak. And I see when I look back on my writing of those years that there's a pre-Boswell period and a post-Boswell period. In the post Boswell period, I'm just listening so much more closely to what people say. And I think that was a very powerful thing for me; it got me to listen.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Salman Rushdie is nine years older than you. There's this idea that *Midnight's Children* was the door that opened the path to Indian [fiction in English]. Is that so? Was Indian

literature thriving before *Midnight's Children*? Did that book influence many would-be authors to dedicate their lives to writing? Did it make it more accessible? And did Rushdie influence you in many ways?

Amitav Ghosh: I think *Midnight's Children* was very important in the sense that it suggested the existence of a market. It was a curious thing, if you remember what it was like in the late 1970s, early 1980s; there was a whole wave of books from Latin America, from other parts of the world, and *Midnight's Children* was a part of that. So suddenly people from Africa, from Asia—we could see a new audience coming into being. In that sense, yes. It was a set of books. Again, Marquez was an important writer, and Mario Vargas Llosa, who indicated the possibility of telling the sorts of stories that we could tell. So in that way, yes, I think it was very important… But personally, I think much more important to my development as a writer were writers like V.S. Naipaul. I mean [in terms of] the people that [I] read when I was in my teens and twenties.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: You're constantly compared to V.S. Naipaul.

Amitav Ghosh: Whether one agreed or disagreed with it—and I never did agree with it as such—his project was to claim the world from a point of view other than that which has been handed down from the West. So he was a traveler. He was seeing the world. He was writing about the world. He refused to be limited by Trinidad, as it were. Which is in some ways a strength and in some ways a weakness. But it was the nature of what he was doing which was so powerful, so interesting. I can see [this] very much in myself: my interest in going to Egypt, my interest in writing about Egypt and Burma and Cambodia and so on. In some sort of complicated way they all link back, and Naipaul is very much a kind of important figure, an important figure to depart from, as it were.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: But how so? Depart from how exactly?

Amitav Ghosh: Especially in his essays and his nonfiction writing. I don't think I would agree with more than like ten or twenty things that he says. I think he's completely wrong about a lot of things.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Like what?

Amitav Ghosh: His representations of India, his representations of Islam. I think very often they're just mistaken. They're just in fact a sort of perverse kind of autobiography rather than representations of what he sees. But the thing that I respect about Naipaul is that he was struggling with something. He was struggling with something that he was trying to do truthfully, pushing himself. He was never doing what's comfortable, or what's easy. He was always pushing himself.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: You mention his traveling as somehow containing a form of weakness. You also write about such an extraordinary variety of places. How are you able to overcome that weakness? I mean in the midst of traveling, did you still attach yourself to roots?

Amitav Ghosh: Very much so. I was very lucky in that unlike Naipaul I was from a large country—a large, increasingly self-confident country. Often I think the weaknesses of Naipaul's work come from the fact of his having grown up in a circumstance where there were very intense small conflicts. Where he, I think, could never really claim Trinidad for himself, and never felt enabled to claim it for himself. But I felt very much that I was looking at the world as an Indian. So I think that was certainly

one of the huge differences.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: What did your parents do?

Amitav Ghosh: My father was a bureaucrat. But he also worked for a while for the Indian External Affairs Ministry. So with him, in my childhood too, I traveled a lot. In fact I spent two years of my life in Iran.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Where?

Amitav Ghosh: In Tehran.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Then you know Iran better than I do.

Amitav Ghosh: May well do, but it was a long time ago.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Was your father part of the elite that came out in some of your novels, of the English-speaking, educated upper middle class, that was created by the Raj?

Amitav Ghosh: No, he was very much a middle-class boy who actually during the Second World War ran away from home and joined the army. But that gave him a certain kind of mobility.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: The Indian army?

Amitav Ghosh: Then the British-Indian army. Which I write about at some length in *The Glass Palace*. But no, at home we always spoke Bengali. So I feel myself very lucky in that unlike many Indian writers, I'm very much part of two cultures: the Bengali-speaking culture and an English-speaking culture.

> That's one of the wonderfully liberating things about India; it lets you be exactly who you want to be.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: In my reading I found that so many people want to attach little categories onto you or your family, you yourself come from this kind of India, and therefore it influences your writing in such and such a way. But with India being such a complicated place, my sense is that this kind of judgment is hasty and ill-conceived. But I know one of the things that come up constantly in your books is the question of "who are we?" When I read your *New Yorker* essay, "The Town by the Sea," what struck me is that it's as though this idea of a tsunami could also almost work as some sort of powerful metaphor for the identity of a country being completely washed away. And because there's always this idea of struggling over who we are: Are we the colonization imposed on us, are we something else altogether? Could we ever wash ourselves free of the stamp of civilization? And all of a sudden there's this idea that well what if we do, what if civilization is washed away and we start from scratch?

Amitav Ghosh: People often talk about identity. It's not one of the things which really is washing about in my head at all. One of the reasons why is because anybody who's lived in India knows that India is incredibly, incredibly diverse. I mean it would be almost impossible to define what it means to be, moreover to say that everyone who identifies themselves as Indian is [the same as] what they are.

That's one of the wonderfully liberating things about India; it lets you be exactly who you want to be. And in many, many different ways. At the same time it also offers you these incredible civilizational resources. Myths and poetry and…

Lila Azam Zanganeh: So much of the critical literature on you pigeonholes you as a writer who is interested in the question of identity. Do you think that's the curse of the Indian writer in the post-colonial age?

Amitav Ghosh: I never read critical writing, because if you start doing that you just get very caught up in that. I don't think it's anything to do with my work, because, I've noticed, that especially people who come out of a literature background in America, I think they're taught to think primarily about identity.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: That's true.

Amitav Ghosh: I mean from the age of like fourteen onwards when they first read *Catcher in the Rye* or whatever, they're taught that that's what literature is about. So that's what they think it's about.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: You don't like *Catcher in the Rye*?

Amitav Ghosh: It's not that I dislike it. But it's not something which I respond to very powerfully. But no, I'm not talking about *Catcher in the Rye*. I'm talking about the pedagogy of literature in America—and I think increasingly around the world—is one which is about identity, whether it's relevant or not. I don't know why that should be the case but so it is.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: What do you think of the whole post-colonial studies movement in the U.S.? Because it has certainly helped the emergence of Indian writers.

Amitav Ghosh: Very much so. And that's mainly what I think about it. When I started writing twenty years ago, writing in English was seen as a tenuous thing [for writers like me] to do, a marginal thing to do. And the sorts of reviews we would get, it would be like, you know the singing dogs? It's just interesting because they do it. But I think that's what really changed.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Only 20 years ago?

Amitav Ghosh: I would say. I think that's what really changed with people like Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha. I think they really changed the grounds of the debate so that it was no longer possible to take that position in relation to us. So I really respect what they've done. Does it in any way inform my writing? I don't think so.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: You embody such a remarkable diversity especially in your nonfiction. I mean aside from someone like, say, John Updike, it's rare to see someone who writes so much fiction and substantial books in volume, who is also very much involved in writing essays as well. I mean your *New Yorker* pieces seem like they require a lot of research and travel and observation. So do you feel like there's a driving obsession, or unifying force behind your work?

Amitav Ghosh: One thing I will say is that if you were to divide writers, like people do divide

painters—between the abstractionist and the figurative painters—I'm definitely a figurative person. *I mean it's the world that interests me*. The world completely fascinates me. I want to see it, I want to know it, I want to write about it. It gives me pleasure, you know? Even when I'm writing about something completely horrific, it engages me. So yes, it's in that sense that I suppose writing nonfiction was something I did. But I do it less and less now.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Why is that?

Amitav Ghosh: I just enjoy writing fiction more. And nonfiction, yeah, it's faded a bit for me.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Fiction is so sensual and sprawling, and all kinds of characters come up, and there's almost a fairy tale element. Nabokov always said that the best novels are fairy tales. Good novels are fairy tales. And he even called *Remembrance of Things Past* a fairy tale, Proust's fairy tale. In that sense, are you a Nabokovian, are you interested primarily in aesthetics? It doesn't seem so. Do you think your writing is also driven by a political quest?

Amitav Ghosh: I think all important writing comes out of some sort of passionate engagement with the world around it. I mean even with Proust, you see so much his engagement with the famous Dreyfus case, and that was so central to everything he did. So yes, I mean I think you know the political world is very important. And that's also a part of being Indian. Whenever I'm in India, just growing up in India, half your conversations are political, as it must be with Iranians.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Yes, always.

Amitav Ghosh: Always! It amazes me when you see in Western reviews people saying—ohhhh as people talk about politics it's so strange. I think maybe in the West they don't, but we do all the time.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: So your literature you say will be innately political as well?

Amitav Ghosh: It is. But I think for me, my great heroes of writing are… One of the great sources I draw from is Balzac. In some very important way my engagement in writing comes from a very Balzac-ian source; it just interests me. What I see around me interests me, this human comedy. I'm interested in the literary part of it, I'm interested in every aspect of it. That's why I think I'm drawn to the novel even more than writing nonfiction, because only the novel allows you the completeness of representation. To me, the novel is important because it's such a complete form of utterance. It allows you to represent your utterance in all its nuances, in all its representative possibilities, in all its expressive possibilities in a way that nothing else can.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: I agree. Even if you love music or architecture or sculpture, nothing comes quite as close to this satisfaction, in terms of absorbing consciousness, as the novel. But to circle back to the criticism of your work, it's really quite extraordinary how everybody had a different opinion as to why you're writing, where you're coming from—

Amitav Ghosh: Yes, and they often send me these questions and things, and I mean, you know…

Lila Azam Zanganeh: I mean half of the things I read about you recently said that Amitav Ghosh is a writer basically obsessed with identity. It made me wonder somehow about the diaspora. Is there a rift

between people writing outside India and people writing within India?

> One thing I will say is that if you were to divide writers, like people do divide painters—between the abstractionist and the figurative painters—I'm definitely a figurative person.

Amitav Ghosh: I think the question of the diaspora is very, very interesting. I'm not really a diasporic in the sense that I grew up in India. I'm returning to India. So I've been away for a while. But the trajectory of my life is really one of travel rather than being in the diaspora. But being in the diaspora completely fascinates me and I think this has been the most important thing to me about being outside India. I've really come to realize that the most interesting thing about being Indian is that India is not in one place. I think this is in some very important way the pattern of the future. What we see today in that nation-state is fading to be replaced by these enormous diasporic civilizations. India is one, China is one, England is one, France is one. Today it's in fact those countries which are more and more tied to the model of the nation-state that seem more and more parochial—like America. So I think that's a very interesting thing that is so striking. When I started writing, if you were invited to Europe or America you went in to do a reading, and you would see maybe one Indian face in the audience, and it would be all Europeans. Now it's completely changed. I mean anywhere you do a reading, it's like 60 to 70% of your readers are diasporic people, are Indians!

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Really, 60 to 70% are diasporic or Indian?

Amitav Ghosh: Well, I don't think you can make that distinction anymore. That distinction has faded, most of all in the work of cultural production. Almost every major Hindi film that's now produced in Bollywood is actually aimed, the whole cultural effect is defined by the diaspora. They are produced by the diaspora, they have diasporic themes. So twenty years ago it was the other way around. India was exporting to its diaspora. Now that whole relationship has changed very much, the relationship between India and the diaspora.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: You mean twenty years ago—India was exporting or importing?

Amitav Ghosh: Exporting.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: So now?

Amitav Ghosh: Now the diaspora is exporting *to* India. The diaspora is determining the ways in which cultural products in India are shaped. Which wasn't the case twenty to thirty years ago. But again, it goes in cycles: I mean the entire Indian national movement was invented in the diaspora. Gandhi in the diaspora, Gandhi in South Africa, even, say, what I describe in *The Glass Palace*, the garden party in America. When I was growing up in India you thought of the diaspora as being way out there, as just being very far away. You thought of them as a kind of periphery to your metropolis. But it's actually a much, much more intimate relationship. To me, to explore that relationship has been something completely absorbing.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: When you talk about cultural production, obviously you're talking about writing as well. Do you have a large readership in India? You just said that you are receiving the *Légiond'honneur* in India? I'm sure that's also a seal of popularity.

Amitav Ghosh: Yes, my books are very well received in India. That's in some sense my primary audience. Now, every school child reads one of my books or essays, so I get a lot of questions.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: That's wonderful.

Amitav Ghosh: It is wonderful.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: It's really fascinating that your main readership is in India now.

Amitav Ghosh: I think of it as such. Yes, I mean, India and the diaspora, I would say. I mean, take this café I come into. One of the men who runs it came to me the other day. He didn't know that I'm a writer or anything. So he said, "I know this girl, she's Indian, she said to me, 'Oh, you must read this book, it's so important to me.'" And it was one of my books!

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Which?

Amitav Ghosh: *The Glass Palace*. But [when] he saw it, he recognized me from the picture.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: That's incredible.

Amitav Ghosh: The Indo-Burmese diaspora is now spread out around the world. And you know, when they read *The Glass Palace*, it gives them something to recognize who they are, where they came from, what happened, the entire history, because they didn't know. Because what I do think is true is that human beings live life in narrative. Where the narratives don't exist, in some way life doesn't exist. So I wish I could tell you how often I get letters from here, there, everywhere, saying thank you, you've given my life a shape.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Salman Rushdie coined the phrase "the Empire writes back." Could we say that now the diaspora is writing back to India?

Amitav Ghosh: I think it's a much more dialogic relationship—not one way or the other. In this generation, I don't think one can even talk of diaspora anymore. I think the myth of countries of immigration like America is that when people come here they renounce their other identities and become American. But in fact what we see today is exactly the opposite. I think that's what Americans just don't understand.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Not giving up their identity.

Amitav Ghosh: They're not. In fact, they're not even moving. They're just taking planes.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: You mean, like you they're moving constantly…

Amitav Ghosh: Constantly. I mean that's true of almost everyone I know. I mean there's no sense in which you suddenly say to yourself that I'm remaking myself into another citizen. What you actually do, is you do become a citizen off this moving entity called the diaspora.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: But when you said that in the seminars where you were invited to speak, in America or Europe, you used to see only one Indian face, and now they are 60 to 70 percent diaspora,

you mean 60 to 70 percent of the audience is Indian diaspora?

Amitav Ghosh: What I'm saying is this: it's not that the diaspora wasn't there before. It's just that twenty years before, if you went to a town in America, or you went to a town in Europe, the local Indians wouldn't care about a writer coming. But now it's completely changed. Throughout the world now you have these Asian literary festivals, people go to them. It's one of the very interesting things that I find in looking at the Indians who are abroad. You go to any small town in America, the local college, one of the English teachers will be Indian. People always think of Asians as being just involved in addressing science. Actually what you see is that this whole Asian diaspora is very profoundly involved in the production of ideas, in literary production, cultural criticism.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: But still, isn't there a difference between a writer living and writing in India, and you?

Amitav Ghosh: Sure. One of my friends who does live there wrote a very powerful piece saying, unless you're dealing with the old business of coping with the bad traffic and this and that, it doesn't really seep into your work.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: What doesn't seep into your work—India?

Amitav Ghosh: Yeah, just the frustrations of daily life or you know, maybe it doesn't, I don't know.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: So he was claiming that he was more Indian than you in a way.

Amitav Ghosh: *She*, in fact. I don't know if she'd make that claim. But yeah, I think location does have something to do with it. Location is important. But I think much more important than location, actually, is language. For example, the idea that what you see increasingly nowadays, of say Englishmen, or English Indians living in India, writing about India without knowing the language, or any of the languages, it just seems so odd to me. I mean I think language is much more important than location.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Do you think your vision is more global so to speak—since you write about Burma and you've written about so many different places—than somebody living in India? There must be a difference between the way you perceive even the diaspora or India from a distance living here nine months a year, and somebody who is sitting in Calcutta all year long. Rushdie, for instance, seems to be much more global. Yet in most of his well-known books, he is also deeply grounded.

Amitav Ghosh: His books are national projects. One book was sort of like a modern history of India, the other is modern history of Pakistan. But I don't think one can write about India like that. So, yeah, that project has no reality to me. Because India is either something you see absolutely at a ground level, or you see it in the way it spills over. But the project of writing about the Indian state—or of any of those states—it just seems to be, in an imaginative sense, a strange thing.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Why?

Amitav Ghosh: Because no one experiences India like that, I don't think, except politicians, really.

> I don't think one can even talk of diaspora anymore. I think the myth of countries of immigration like America is that when people come here they renounce their other identities and become American. But in fact what we see today is exactly the opposite.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Recently a specialist of American and English literature in Paris, one of the most prominent, told me she's not impressed with the likes of Philip Roth or John Updike. But she's actually very impressed with Indian writing. In her opinion, right now, Indian writing is at the helm of the English literary world.

Amitav Ghosh: To me there's no doubt about it. I look around at my contemporaries, and it would be hard to think of a group of writers who are more productive or interesting, and I think that's why people read us.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Whom do you admire?

Amitav Ghosh: Vikram Seth, Michael Ondaatje—his work is incredibly interesting to me. There are just so many. When I walk into a bookshop in India, I just think, I could spend, you know just the day…

Lila Azam Zanganeh: And is that new? Has this happened in the last twenty, thirty years?

Amitav Ghosh: Yeah, I think it's happened in the last ten or fifteen years. But you know, people often say to me, "Why is it that people around the world want to read Indian writing?" I tell them that there's no trick to it: people want to read it because it's good. And I think it's even more than that: what I would say about Indian writing is that it speaks to people.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Why?

Amitav Ghosh: Take a writer like Arundhati Roy. She's not afraid of talking about emotion. About very essential, powerful, human emotions. And that's what you don't find in American writing anymore.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Playful high jinks and post-modern…

Amitav Ghosh: It's just so ironicized, it's just boring. I can't read any American writing anymore; it's just not interesting to me. So I think that's what happened really.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Perhaps there's a complex in America about narrative. You have to make it so contrived for it to be intellectually acceptable.

Amitav Ghosh: I think, in a way, a certain condition of American life where people become very isolated from other people eventually reflects itself in the work. Often when you read it, you just get a sense that people are not curious about other people. Or else that they are so curious that it becomes obsessively concerned with the sort of psychologizing of people. But you know emotion, and passion, and all those things, I think that's why people all around the world read us, because people know that those are real things and they respond to them.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Who are the women writers from India you like? You've mentioned Arundhati

Roy. Do you like Jhumpa Lahiri?

Amitav Ghosh: Anita Desai, she's a great favorite. Kiran Desai, who's a very dear friend… You know, it's such a long list, I could just go on. It's a very fortunate moment to be an Indian writer.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Is Indian writing—just by virtue of its contact with so many different cultural layers—enriched constantly by the language of…

Amitav Ghosh: Constantly!

Lila Azam Zanganeh: In your writing too, there are all these words that you weave in, and it always enriches the texture of the language. Even to foreign ears. For me as a Persian-speaker, there are some words I understand, but…

Amitav Ghosh: Sure. Absolutely. It varies from parts of India. I mean if you go to Delhi, the writers who write in English and the writers who write in Hindi don't have much to do with each other. But in Calcutta, this is a very fortunate thing. I mean, I'm close friends with most of the major Bengali writers, their work influences… I read them, they read me: I feel a very deep sense of connection and gratitude.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: How does their work in Bengali, how does that influence you?

Amitav Ghosh: Oh! Very much! It's something I've often tried to explain to people. The Bengali storytelling voice is a very inviting and warm voice. I don't really know how to explain it to you but it's a very intimate voice which invites you into the story. And whenever I get stuck in my work, I always try to listen to that voice.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: I understand, I love it. But is there also, by virtue of writing in English, the fact that you want to be exposed to a larger readership and a larger market? So is there also a rift there within India between those who decide to write in Indian languages and those who write in English?

Amitav Ghosh: There has been in the past. But it's another thing that's completely changing. Because with the development of the Indian economy what's actually happening now is that three or four major publishing houses have launched these enormous translation programs. So actually if you go into an Indian bookshop today, the books that are next to mine may have been written in Bengali, you wouldn't know.

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Lila Azam Zanganeh: And it works? Are they sold?

Amitav Ghosh: Yes! They sell enormously.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: I'm always interested to know, this is a question I asked Updike a couple of months ago.

Amitav Ghosh: Oh my God, I reviewed that book of his...

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Oh you did, which one, *Terrorist*?

Amitav Ghosh: Yes. It was just trash. TRASH. It was completely racist. I reviewed it in the *Washington Post*. I just made a list of all the skin colors.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Brownish this, brownish that?

Amitav Ghosh: You know you look at that stuff and you suddenly realize…

Lila Azam Zanganeh: He was disconnected.

Amitav Ghosh: Completely! His obsession is basically a nineteenth-century obsession with race. The strange thing is you can't help [thinking] Updike doesn't have to write about this. He can write about Connecticut, which he knows. But clearly he himself feels it's not enough. He has to reach out to the world. It's pathetic. The narrative voice, it was pseudo-Arab!

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Now that you're more drawn to novels and fiction, I'm interested to know how you are able to combine fiction and nonfiction—are those two different toolboxes? You know, how, what draws you to go to Egypt and all of a sudden to come back and write a novel [about] that—how does it coexist?

Amitav Ghosh: They're not really different toolboxes. But it's also true that there's a difference between writing fiction and nonfiction. With nonfiction you always do have a responsibility to what's out there. You can rearrange, but it's like the clay; it's like being a potter; the clay is out there and it resists you and you have to shape it. Whereas writing fiction is more like music—you shape it, it's in your head, by the time it comes out of your mouth, it's already shaped. There is a huge difference, but they inform each other.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: I know that you're moving away from it. Yet I still hoped to discuss your nonfiction and the pieces you've done. You've written about the U.S. intervention in Iraq.

Amitav Ghosh: Yes, when the Iraq war was beginning in 2003, before it started, I was so disturbed and so upset, I wrote this piece on why this kind of imperialistic venture is doomed to failure. It came out in *The New Yorker* in March 2003, literally weeks before the war. So I wrote it and sent if off. They wrote back and said yes, we like it, we'll run it. Then for the next week we had these violent arguments, they wanted me to change it completely. They actually wrote out [their own] paragraph and sent it to me.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: They wrote a paragraph in your essay?

Amitav Ghosh: They dictated a paragraph to me and said we want you to put this in.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Really?

Amitav Ghosh: Yes, I remember it. It said, "The modern connotations of the word 'empire' also show how the context of imperialism has changed. For many, especially in America, it is a reminder of an image that played a significant part in discrediting the Soviet Union: the 'evil empire.' This is not a purely rhetorical anxiety; the unease goes deeper than that. A substantial proportion of America's

population remains unconvinced of the need to undertake a new version of a 'civilizing mission.' This is what distinguishes America from the imperial nations of the past."

Lila Azam Zanganeh: I assume you're writing a new novel right now. Can you tell what it's about?

Amitav Ghosh: No, I never feel comfortable talking about these things.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: What's your writing schedule?

Amitav Ghosh: Some days it's 10 to 6; some days it's maybe 9 to 5, some days it's like 7 to 4. But for me writing is like music. It's not just that you're working towards the book. But if you're not writing a sentence, you lose your pitch.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Where does inspiration usually come from?

Amitav Ghosh: It comes from lots of things: from traveling, from speaking to people, from my family. You know I have a *huge* Indian family. I listen to their stories; I listen to what people say. But one of the great things about being from India is that you know there are so many stories to tell you could go on forever and I think people will go on forever. It's one of the things which I really do realize now that I look back on the past—this has been India's great strength: storytelling, always. India's influence on the world such as it was has always been through stories.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Even from *The Mahabharata*.

Amitav Ghosh: So many of the *Arabian Nights* come from Indian stories. Aesop's *Fables* come from Indian stories.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: That's right.

Amitav Ghosh: If you look back on that past, it's so humbling. Really as a contemporary Indian writer, you look back on that history and you feel: nothing I could do could even come close.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Is there such a thing as Indian-ness?

Amitav Ghosh: No.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Being Indian?

Amitav Ghosh: No, one of the wonderful things about being Indian is it gives you this wonderful chameleon-like quality. I always tell my wife: any statement you make about India, whatever you say, the opposite is also true!

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Would you say that your work has in any way been informed by thinking on the consequences of colonization in India?

Amitav Ghosh: Absolutely. Certainly with *The Glass Palace* I thought of that very much.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: And do you think that formerly colonized Indians are finding their own

independent voice or is their voice always fraught with "Englishness"?

Amitav Ghosh: One of the interesting things about the Indian voice is that it's always been a composite voice. As late as the nineteenth century every Bengali learned Persian; it was normal! We've always learned Sanskrit. No one in India has ever spoken in one voice; it's not something anyone thinks of. But this much is clear: India and China in the 18th century controlled 50% of world trade. After the end of colonialism they controlled less than 2 percent of world trade. But what is happening? The balance is being righted. India and China will again control 50% of world trade. And it's taken us… We're just now awakening from the long night of that colonial experience.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: The *New York Times* review of *The Glass Palace* said that you seem to be very much concerned with the idea that Indians have to find this new voice that was no longer fraught with the paradigm of the colonized. The reviewer claimed that *The Glass Palace* was just posing the question: how can we be human? Would you agree with that?

Amitav Ghosh: Yeah, I think so.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: A question about influence—as Harold Bloom would call it "the anxiety of influence." In the post-colonial world many say that an Indian writer or, for instance, an Iranian writer should be concerned primarily with Indian or Iranian writing. But in fact you seem to be just as influenced, just as inspired, by Bengali writing as you are by the likes of Marquez.

Amitav Ghosh: Very much so. I mean the filmmaker Satyajit Ray, for example, was a huge influence on me, it was an enormous influence, completely formative for me. That's exactly where I come from. But equally I think for me, three or four other writers have been very important. One is Balzac, one is Proust, and I think most of all: Melville.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: Really? Which Melville? Melville of "Bartleby," Melville of *Moby Dick*?

Amitav Ghosh: All of them, actually. But most of all I suppose *Moby Dick*.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: I can see that, also your anthropological background—the boats and the whaling. But precisely how so, *Moby Dick*?

Amitav Ghosh: Oh I think it's just a magnificent, magnificent book.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: You spoke at the very beginning of this conversation about how you learned to be a writer in Egypt while doing anthropology because it was mostly looking and listening. So is that why perhaps in your writing you don't feel that there's a frontier between so-called anthropology and narrative because they're constantly interconnected?

Amitav Ghosh: Yes, absolutely. That's one of the things which always interested me so much about Melville, that for him the real and the imagined are always on the verge of interpenetrating each other. And so much of *Moby Dick* is just nonfiction. Melville was a great observer. Other books like *Typee* are so finely observed. I think he was the one 19th century English-language writer who really was able to write about other peoples in a genuine [way]. You can see what drives him is a genuine interest in Polynesia.

Lila Azam Zanganeh: And like you perhaps he chose fiction in the end because fiction is a far better tool and texture to explore metaphysical issues.

Amitav Ghosh: In a way it is. I recently re-read *Moby Dick* and—especially considering all that's now happened—he uniquely understood the kind of strange and crazy compulsions that his country was and still is capable of.