

LOOKING FROM THE WRONG END OF THE TELESCOPE: REVERSAL AND ITS LIMITS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S "THE IMAM AND THE INDIAN"

Pankaj Sharma

Professor, Department of English
Chaudhary Devi Lal University, Sirsa

ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's essay "The Imam and the Indian" gives its title to his 2002 prose collection. It restages a colonial hierarchy inside one Egyptian village. An imam presses an Oxford-trained Indian anthropologist for numbers. Which country has more tanks, he asks: Egypt or India? Neither man built that scale of value. Neither can step outside it. This paper reads the exchange as a study in reversal and its limits within postcolonial criticism. Reverse the gaze, and the instrument stays the same. Ghosh's telescope is still ground in Enlightenment categories of progress and civilisation. The argument draws on four thinkers. Ashis Nandy supplies colonialism's civilising claim. Homi Bhabha's theory of colonial mimicry explains why Ghosh's English prose cannot escape the apparatus it describes. Edward Said's critique of representational authority sharpens the point. Gayatri Spivak's warning against ventriloquising the subaltern sharpens it further, and together they frame the imam as neither mouthpiece nor dupe. Ghosh's essay, the paper argues, refuses a comforting counternarrative in which the once-colonised author simply wins. Neither the imam's insistence on hardware nor Ghosh's retreat into civilisational depth escapes one inherited hierarchy of nations. The essay even implicates its own Western-published form in the mimicry it names. That self-implicating restraint, not a triumphant reversal, is the paper's real argument. It recasts "The Imam and the Indian" as a methodological statement for postcolonial criticism at large. Reversing who holds the telescope, the paper concludes, is not the same task as grinding a new lens.

Keywords: postcolonial literary criticism; Amitav Ghosh non-fiction; reverse gaze postcolonial theory; colonial mimicry Homi Bhabha; Ashis Nandy intimate enemy; civilisational hierarchy colonialism; subaltern speech Gayatri Spivak; Egypt India colonial encounter

A great deal has lately been written to bring the colonial past, and the habits of mind that sustained it, into fuller view. Representation and awareness have become something close to a working consensus among readers of postcolonial writing: that the discipline exists to make visible what colonial narrative worked to keep invisible. It is tempting to define postcolonial literature simply as writing that came after empire. That definition is too loose to be useful. What actually marks a text as postcolonial is not its date but its posture, specifically the extent to which it turns, critically and sometimes uncomfortably, back on the colonial relationship itself, rather than merely inheriting the world that relationship built. The aim, at its most ambitious, is not to relitigate the past for its own sake but to work out how coloniser and colonised might eventually stand on some

common ground. That aim remains distant. Before it is reachable at all, a prior task has to be done: understanding, in some detail, the history and the self-image of the colonising West, on its own terms and against them.

Contemporary postcolonial writing pursues that task in several distinct ways. Some critics dissect the machinery of empire directly — the administrative categories, the legal fictions, the pseudo-scientific racial taxonomies that made colonial rule appear orderly rather than predatory. Others work at the level of culture, trying to loosen the residue that colonialism left behind in language, education, and self-perception long after the flags came down. A third mode, less often named as a distinct strategy, is quieter and more unsettling: it takes the analytic gaze that once travelled outward from London or Paris toward the “primitive” world, and turns it back on the coloniser. The colonised object of study becomes, briefly, the observing subject; the West becomes the specimen. Call this looking from the wrong end of the telescope. The metaphor is worth taking seriously rather than treating as merely clever, because it makes a specific and slightly uncomfortable claim: reversing who looks through the instrument does not change the instrument. The telescope, its lenses ground in European Enlightenment categories of civilisation, progress, and rational order, stays exactly what it was. Only the direction of the gaze has changed. When, in Homi Bhabha’s phrase for a related phenomenon, the empire “writes back,” it tends to write back in the grammar it was given, not in a grammar of its own devising. Salman Rushdie’s needling of British royal tradition as backward and slightly absurd is one example of the type: sharp, and effective, and conducted throughout in the idiom the British themselves used for centuries to describe everyone else.

Amitav Ghosh’s **The Imam and the Indian**, a collection of essays written across different points in his career, works this same difficult territory, though with considerably more self-doubt than either the polemicist or the satirist allows himself. Ghosh trained as a social anthropologist before he became a novelist, and it shows: the essays that grew out of his fieldwork do not simply accuse the West of arrogance from a safe distance. They put the author himself inside the apparatus he is examining, and they let him come off badly as often as not. The title essay is the clearest instance, and it is the one this analysis concentrates on.

The essay recounts an episode from Ghosh’s years of doctoral fieldwork in a small village in the Nile Delta, where he lived among Egyptian farmers in the early 1980s while completing his doctorate at Oxford. An argument develops between Ghosh and a local imam, and it is not the argument either man might have expected to have. The imam does not defend Islamic tradition against a supposedly secular, Western-trained visitor in the way the anthropological cliché would predict. Instead he presses Ghosh on a startlingly literal question of comparative development: which country, he wants to know, has more advanced military technology, more guns, more powerful weapons: Egypt or India? He assumes, reasonably enough given what “progress” has

come to mean in the twentieth century, that this is the measure that counts. Ghosh, uncomfortable, tries to change the terms of the comparison, gesturing toward India's civilisational depth, its philosophical and religious traditions, its antiquity. The imam is not interested. He wants tanks, not temples.

What makes the scene sting is not that the imam is wrong to ask the question. It is that both men, an Egyptian villager and an Indian anthropologist trained in Oxford, are arguing inside a scale of value that neither of them built. Neither the imam's insistence on hardware nor Ghosh's retreat into spiritual heritage escapes the same underlying grammar: a hierarchy of nations ranked by their proximity to a European standard of modern power, with the West sitting silently at the top of the ranking as the assumed reference point neither man ever directly names. This is the telescope, doing its work regardless of who happens to be holding it. Ghosh cannot simply refuse the imam's terms, because he has no other vocabulary of comparison ready to hand, no vocabulary that was not itself produced by the same history that put guns and tanks at the summit of the hierarchy in the first place. And that is the essay's real discomfort, sharper than anything a simple accusation against the West could produce: the two men reproduce, in a mud-brick village far from any imperial capital, exactly the ranking that the empire spent two centuries teaching the rest of the world to accept as natural.

Ashis Nandy's account of colonialism helps to explain why the argument takes this shape rather than some other. Nandy's contention, developed at length in his study of the psychological structure of British rule in India, is that colonialism was never merely a matter of guns and administration. Its distinctive move was to attach a civilising mission to conquest, to insist that domination was, at bottom, a form of tutelage, a temporary hierarchy that would eventually produce equals rather than permanent subjects. Strip colonialism of that civilising claim, on Nandy's account, and what remains is not colonialism in its full historical sense at all, merely occupation. The claim to be teaching, uplifting, modernising is not incidental to the system; it is close to the system's actual centre of gravity. If Nandy is right, then the imam's question in Ghosh's essay is not a betrayal of some purer, precolonial way of measuring a nation's worth. It is a demonstration of how completely the civilising claim succeeded. Not merely in subjugating the colonised militarily, but in teaching them to judge themselves and their neighbours by the coloniser's own preferred scale of achievement, long after the coloniser has physically left.

This is where the telescope analogy earns its keep as more than decoration. A weaker version of postcolonial critique would stop at exposure: it would show that the imam has internalised a Western standard, name that internalisation as a wound, and move on, satisfied that the diagnosis has been made. Ghosh's essay is more unsettling than that because it refuses to let its narrator stand outside the wound and simply describe it. Ghosh does not win the argument with the imam by producing some alternative, decolonised standard of value that would let India come

out ahead on its own terms. He cannot produce one, because the essay's deeper and more troubling suggestion is that no such standard is currently available to either man. Not to the villager measuring modernity in rifles, and not to the Oxford-trained anthropologist reaching, a little desperately, for the consolation of ancient philosophy. Both men are looking through the same instrument. One has simply been handed the eyepiece end and the other the objective lens, and the essay's quiet joke, if it can be called that, is that this reversal changes surprisingly little about what either of them can actually see.

There is a further layer to the encounter that a reading confined to the surface of the argument will miss, and it comes from the very fieldwork that produced the essay. Ghosh's years in the Nile Delta were spent chasing a set of medieval documents, the Cairo Geniza papers, which record, among a great deal else, the life of a twelfth-century Jewish merchant trading between Egypt and the Malabar coast and the Indian slave who worked in his household. That research, which Ghosh developed at greater length elsewhere, uncovers a world in which Egypt and India were connected by ordinary commerce, correspondence, and even intimacy centuries before either country had heard of Europe as a rival, let alone a ruler. No ranking of guns applied then, because the scale that produces such rankings had not yet been invented; ships, letters, and household arrangements moved back and forth across the same sea on terms neither side needed to justify by reference to a third party's yardstick. Ghosh does not interrupt his argument with the imam to deliver this history as a rebuttal. The essay is honest enough to show him losing the exchange in real time, without the rescue of a clever retort. But the research sits behind the scene like a held breath, an answer the narrator has and does not use, because it is not the kind of answer the imam's question was built to accept. The gun-and-tank scale cannot be defeated by an appeal to an older, gentler scale; it can only be shown to be one scale among others, invented at a particular moment for particular reasons, and mistaken by both men in the room for the only scale there is. That, more than any line of dialogue, is the essay's real argument, and it is delivered by the shape of Ghosh's scholarship rather than by anything either character says aloud.

The imam's own position in this exchange deserves more care than a straightforward postcolonial reading usually gives it, and here Gayatri Spivak's question about the subaltern's capacity to speak is useful chiefly because of how uncomfortably it applies. Spivak's warning is that even sympathetic accounts of a subordinated figure risk speaking for that figure rather than letting the figure speak, dressing ventriloquism up as representation. Ghosh's essay is alert to this danger in a way that a less careful writer would not be. The imam is not rendered as a mouthpiece for some authentic, pre-colonial wisdom that the Western-trained narrator has lost. That would flatter Ghosh's readership while quietly reducing the imam to a symbol. Nor is he treated as simply deluded, a man who cannot see past the propaganda of modern nationalism. He is allowed to want what he wants, on his own terms, and to press his interlocutor rather than defer to him. If the essay speaks for anyone, it arguably speaks most uncomfortably for Ghosh himself, caught out and

unable to answer, which is a considerably harder thing for an author to admit in print than a diagnosis of someone else's false consciousness would be.

It is worth pressing on a complication the essay does not fully resolve, because a serious reading owes it that much rather than smoothing it over. If the telescope is genuinely the same instrument regardless of who holds which end, then Ghosh's own essay, written in English, published by a major Western house, read overwhelmingly by an audience formed in the same institutions that produced the ranking it critiques, is not obviously exempt from its own diagnosis. Edward Said made a version of this point with characteristic bluntness: the scholar who writes about the Orient for a Western readership, however sympathetically, still occupies a position inside the very apparatus of representation he sets out to interrogate. There is no clean outside from which to conduct the critique. Ghosh, to his credit, does not pretend otherwise. The essay's tone is closer to rueful self-implication than to triumphant unmasking, and that restraint is precisely what distinguishes it from a great deal of writing on the same subject, writing that is often more interested in assigning blame cleanly than in admitting how thoroughly its own vantage point has already been shaped by the history it condemns.

None of this should be mistaken for an argument that the reversal accomplishes nothing. Something real does change when the gaze turns around, even if the instrument itself does not. The imam's question, uncomfortable as it is, forces a kind of honesty that a purely defensive posture would avoid: it makes visible, in a single exchange, exactly how deeply a hierarchy invented in nineteenth-century Europe has been absorbed by people who never asked for it and have every reason to resent it. That visibility is not nothing. Diagnosis is not cure, but a disease correctly named is at least a disease that can eventually be treated, whereas one that goes politely unmentioned cannot. Ghosh's essay performs the diagnosis with unusual honesty precisely because it refuses the more flattering alternative, the one in which the once-colonised writer discovers, conveniently, that he was right all along and the coloniser simply failed to see it. Ghosh finds instead that he, too, has been looking through the borrowed instrument, and he says so.

Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry, mentioned earlier only in passing, deserves a fuller hearing here, because it explains something about the essay's own prose that a reading of plot alone would miss. Mimicry, in Bhabha's account, is the colonised subject's near-perfect but never-quite-complete reproduction of the coloniser's manners, speech, and standards — near enough to unsettle the coloniser's sense of his own uniqueness; not quite complete enough to be mistaken for the real thing. Ghosh's essay is written in a supple, unmistakably literary English, addressed in the first instance to readers formed by English-language publishing rather than to the villagers it describes. That is not a hidden failing to be exposed with a flourish; Ghosh never pretends the essay is anything else, and pointing it out is not an accusation so much as an observation about where the piece stands. But it does mean that the very medium carrying the critique of the West's

ranking system is itself a product of that system's most successful export: English literary prose, trained at Oxford, published for London and New York. The essay does not escape mimicry by writing about it. It practises a version of it, self-aware and, on the evidence of the writing itself, faintly uneasy about the fact. That unease is not a flaw in the argument. It is closer to the argument's proof, since a writer entirely at peace with his own position inside the apparatus he is describing would have far less reason to write the essay at all.

Read alongside the rest of the volume, "The Imam and the Indian" turns out to be less an isolated set piece than a statement of the whole book's method. The collection gathers essays written across a long stretch of Ghosh's career and across a wide geographical range: the Nile Delta, the Indian diaspora in various parts of the world, questions of nationalism and language closer to home. What holds these otherwise scattered pieces together is a recurring refusal to let any single vantage point, colonised or colonising, claim the last word. Essays elsewhere in the book return more than once to figures who sit awkwardly between categories: migrants who are neither fully of the country they left nor the one they have entered, scholars whose training pulls them one way while their loyalties pull another, communities whose sense of belonging was drawn by an imperial cartographer's pen rather than by anything the community itself chose. The imam and the anthropologist, arguing past each other in a Delta village, are simply the sharpest single instance of a condition the whole book keeps circling back to: the discovery that identity, after empire, is rarely a matter of recovering some intact prior self, and much more often a matter of working out how to live inside inherited categories that fit badly and cannot be easily discarded.

The broader implication for postcolonial method follows fairly directly from this. Criticism that sets out to expose a totalising colonial narrative does itself no favours by replacing it with an equally totalising counter-narrative, in which the West appears as a single, unbroken, five-century project of domination stretching without interruption or internal contradiction from one century to the next. That version of the argument, however satisfying it may feel to write, commits the very error it accuses its opponent of committing: it flattens enormous historical variation into a single story convenient for a single verdict. Ghosh's essay avoids that trap not by softening its critique but by keeping it local, specific, and self-implicating: one anthropologist, one imam, one argument in one village, rather than a sweeping indictment of an entire civilisation conducted from a comfortable distance. The wrong end of the telescope, used this carefully, still shows less than a critic might wish. But it shows something true, and it shows it about the viewer as much as about the thing viewed, which is more than a confident, totalising accusation usually manages.

A reader sympathetic to a more assertive postcolonial politics might object at this point that the reading offered here is too willing to sit with paralysis, too content to describe a stuck situation without pressing for a way out of it. The objection has force. Diagnosis without any gesture toward remedy can become its own kind of comfort, a scholarly performance of humility

that changes nothing for the imam, for the village, or for anyone outside the essay's readership. But the objection mistakes restraint for resignation. Ghosh's essay does not claim that the hierarchy of guns and tanks is permanent or natural; it claims only that no ready alternative scale currently commands the same authority, and that pretending one already exists, reaching, as the narrator briefly does, for the consolation of ancient philosophy, solves nothing and may make the underlying problem harder to see. There is a difference between refusing a false remedy and refusing to look for a real one. The essay's discomfort is productive precisely because it declines the false remedy, leaving the harder work of building an actual alternative scale to criticism written after it, criticism that can only do that work honestly once the first, uncomfortable diagnosis has been made. A cure attempted before the disease is correctly named tends not to hold.

What, then, does the analogy finally establish, and where does it leave a reader who wants more than a demonstration of stuckness? It establishes, at minimum, that reversing the direction of the gaze is not the same operation as building a new instrument, and that postcolonial writing which mistakes the first for the second risks a kind of self-congratulation it has not actually earned. Ghosh's essay is valuable precisely because it resists that self-congratulation. It shows two men, on opposite sides of a colonial history neither chose, arguing inside a single inherited hierarchy, unable, for now, to step fully outside it. That "for now" matters. The essay does not claim the situation is permanent, only that it is present, and that pretending otherwise would be a comfort rather than an insight. A postcolonial criticism willing to sit with that discomfort, rather than resolving it too quickly into either triumph or blame, is doing something closer to the difficult work the field was meant to do in the first place: not simply reversing who holds the telescope, but slowly, unglamorously, learning to grind a different lens.

WORKS CITED

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces*. Ravi Dayal Publisher / Permanent Black, 2002.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.