Citation:

Abstract:
Commenting on the world he imagined for The Sea of Poppies, Ghosh has said that it is Melville rather than Conrad who influenced him. I, however, seek to examine Conrad’s presence in Ghosh’s works primarily via Conrad’s 1924 essay, “Geography and Some Explorers.” Meditating as it does, on “known” and “unknown” corners of the earth, the essay captures some of the remaining magic associated with those “unknown places.” Like Marlow’s nostalgia in Heart of Darkness for an earth where places to discover were available, Conrad’s late essay is also a document of nostalgia and yearning as he talks of “geography fabulous.” The domain of the novel Conrad helped hone (the adventure novel), has a hundred years later been filled by many postcolonial writers. The most interesting of these, in the Indian context, is Amitav Ghosh, whose novels have taken upon themselves to revisit “geography fabulous” and reveal it as “geography militant.” Yet, even as Ghosh’s concerns are postcolonial ones, his reliance on the tropes of adventure allow us to explore continuities between these two writers rather than to see their interests in opposition to each other.

Keywords:
Amitav Ghosh, Herman Melville, Chris Lydon, Geography fabulous, Adventure, Colonial adventure.

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GEOGRAPHY FABULOUS: CONRAD AND GHOSH

Padmini Mongia

In an impressive body of work often located in South and South East Asia, Amitav Ghosh revisits territory many readers of novels in English have known through colonial writers such as Conrad, Kipling, and Greene. This is not a surprise. Several writers we categorize under the rubric postcolonial are impelled, at least in part, by a revisionist agenda, which leads us to question the worlds the colonial novel offered. Among these postcolonial novelists, Amitav Ghosh is one of the foremost, and not only in the context of India. His training as an anthropologist and his involvement in academic debates inflect his novels so strongly that the latter are often more scholarly than novelistic in their engagement with issues that concern postcolonial theorists and historians. Ghosh’s works, more than those of other writers on the world stage, are critical to an ongoing understanding of the previous two centuries and their legacies in this one.

What might it mean, then, for Ghosh to say, as he did in a 2008 interview after the publication of *Sea of Poppies*, that breaking the imperial gaze brought by Kipling or Conrad did not interest him? Conrad’s maritime world, Ghosh said, contained few, if any, Indian or South Asian characters of note. The few that appear there are caricatured, whereas Ghosh claimed that Melville is the truly cosmopolitan writer with whom he wanted to engage. There is no denying the truth of Ghosh’s understanding of Conrad: Conrad’s colonial worlds, situated though they may be outside Europe, are peopled by Europeans, Europeans disintegrating through their location and their interaction with the locals with whom they come into contact. Yet, one ghost
hovering over Ghosh, it seems to me, is that of Conrad. Kipling seems a more distant ancestor, but Conrad, concerned with the moral and psychological ambiguities that mark his characters and deliberating on particular moments of contact between Europeans and others, seems an unlikely figure for Ghosh to distance himself from.

By probing Ghosh’s comments on Conrad and Melville, I want to understand better the weight behind what seems an unnecessarily precise distinction between affilliative connections. In order to tease out what may be at stake in Ghosh’s position, I will work my way through Conrad’s “Geography and Some Explorers,” a late essay which has received little attention except as another articulation of Conradian concerns better spelt out in Heart of Darkness. Through this essay I argue for the presence of Conrad in Ghosh’s work. Having done so, I address his comments quoted above and try to dismantle the simpler oppositions implied by the binary colonial/postcolonial.

**GEOGRAPHY AND SOME EXPLORERS**

“Geography and Some Explorers” was published in Britain by Strangeways, in a limited edition of thirty copies, in January 1924. In February that year, it appeared as “The Romance of Travel,” again in Britain, in a publication called Countries of the World that came out between 1924 and 1925, and was intended as “a photo-illustrated gazetteer of all the world’s countries and regions in alphabetical order.” ¹ Conrad’s essay was included in the first volume of the publication and afforded prominence by being cited on the cover itself. ² In

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² Although Conrad’s essay is cited often, there is next to no sustained work on it. Ray Stevens’ “Conrad, Gilbert Grosvenor, The National Geographic Magazine, and ‘Geography and Some Explorers’” is the only full-length article I have found on the essay. The article addresses, as its title suggests, the life of Conrad’s essay in The
addition, this first volume also carried an essay on Conrad by the series’ editor, John Hammerton. Later that year, in March 1924, Conrad’s essay was published under the title “Geography and Some Explorers,” in The National Geographic Magazine, complete with sixteen full-page illustrations, selected by the staff at the magazine without any consultation with Conrad. It featured as the lead article in the magazine. On 24 August 1924, an extract from the essay was published as “Conrad on Geography,” in The Oakland Tribune, just two weeks after Conrad passed away.

At the time of the essay’s publication in both Britain and the US, Conrad was a well-known, much celebrated writer. By the time the work appeared in the US, he had already been on the cover of Time magazine and had completed a successful literary tour of the country the previous year. Peter Mallios’ fascinating Our Conrad examines the concerns and impetus behind the North American embrace of the Polish/British writer. The construction of Conrad as a literary master had as much to do with his will-to-style as it did with the ways in which he could be seen as a European frontliner to where the novel was heading. Not surprisingly, then, Conrad’s late essay was sought after and solicited by Gilbert Grosvenor at The National Geographic. Conrad was a name, and a respected authority on matters of exploration, the sea, geography, and the foreign. His status was the main reason for the several appearances of his essay within a very short time, as if it were some sort of composite reflection on hitherto disparate and scattered concerns. Further, Grosvenor approached Conrad with a proposal for a series of essays on “seamen explorers especially for the Geographic” (Stevens, 198). As Stevens points out, “[t]his request was

National Geographic Magazine, rather than Conrad’s text itself. I rely on Stevens’ essay for the publication information shared above.

3 Stevens points out that Grosvenor, the President of The National Geographic Society, accepted American rights to Conrad’s text even though it “was not written as narrative for a photographic essay, the way submissions to The National Geographic Magazine were customarily published” (197). The illustrations published with the essay had little, if anything, to do with Conrad’s text. As a result, the meditative, personal quality of Conrad’s piece is subsumed by the celebration of fearless exploration, as implied by the photographs.
consonant with Grosvenor’s compelling desire to increase interest in geography by increasing the circulation of *The National Geographic* and by broadening the *Geographic’s* base of appeal” *(ibid)*. Conrad declined the invitation, citing lack of time and knowledge, but he did suggest writing a “general article on a period of sea exploration in its picturesque aspect at some indefinite time in the future” *(ibid)*.

Conrad’s prominence may help explain the lack of reaction to what seems to me a series of interesting but contradictory approaches to geography and exploration within the essay. Whereas Conrad’s text positions itself to reflect on what he calls “geography,” the piece is a much more explicit meditation on “exploration.” Ranging from Columbus to Tasman to Captain Cook, the work examines different moments of geographical/seafaring exploration, addressing variously the travails and trials that attended these journeys. The essay seems neatly divided into different stages of geographical awareness—geography fabulous (the medieval phase), geography militant (the post-Columbus phase), and geography triumphant (the phase prevalent at the time of Conrad’s writing)—but, as Shirley Chew astutely suggests, “by linking from the start his fanciful mapmaking with the deeds of adventurous men, Conrad draws geographical discovery into the province of romance” *(119)*. Further, Chew goes on to emphasize their similarity:

- both have their origin in action, in particular the lonely endeavors of the heroic individual in distant places and times;
- both yearn to ‘remake the world in the image of desire’; and
- both, in their moments of greatest intensity, are characterized by a perfection that carries with it its own dissolution *(119)*.

While Chew’s essay is focused on Conrad and Naipaul, my interest in her reading of Conrad’s late work lies in the attention she pays to the nostalgia that inflects his comments on geography. Chew rightly underscores the “all-consuming” *(120)* quality of Conrad’s nostalgia, so pervasive that his meditation is able to ignore, amongst other features, the Great War “or the decline of sea power in the face of new technology and inventions” *(120)*.
As a result, despite his efforts to organize and categorize different stages of geographical awareness, Conrad himself collapses the distinction between geography and exploration that he is at pains to make. From the beginning of the text, where he distinguishes them, only then to see them as coterminous, the essay remains a paean to geography, but geography of a particular kind. The easy transposition of titles for this work when it was first published in Britain and the US may say it best: “the romance of travel” and “geography and some explorers” are one and the same. That world of boyhood wonder when the young Conrad gazed at blank spaces on the map and vowed to visit them, a moment remembered in *Heart of Darkness* and in “Geography and Some Explorers,” is the one that accentuates what Conrad has to say about geography as a science and explorers as the tools for at least some part of that geography.

The power of romance—romance understood as expressive of heroic action, lonely men, and distant places—is exerted not only in the worlds that Conrad created in his fictions and lived out in his own seafaring days. It is that same power that I see in Ghosh’s writing, even as I am acutely aware of the ways in which Ghosh revises the idea of romance that compelled writers such as Conrad. Perhaps there is no work more explicitly responsive to Conrad’s essay and its celebration of the force of romance than Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*. Drawing its title from Conrad’s story, “The Shadow-Line,” Ghosh’s novel creates an unforgettable character in its nameless narrator: a boy stuck in Calcutta who learns to dream with precision as he learns that places are to be imagined, and so must be imagined with care. This passion for travel has been nurtured and developed in the narrator through his uncle Tridib; they spend hours poring over Tridib’s tattered copy of Bartholomew’s Atlas, as Tridib—his uncle—tells him stories of places with magical names. “[T]hose names, which were to me a set of magical talismans because Tridib had pointed them out to me” (20), help train the young narrator to use his “imagination with precision” (24), laying the groundwork for the narrative imagination that leads him to construct the moving and cathartic tale he tells.

Those hours spent gazing at the atlas recall Conrad’s childhood passion for maps, of which he speaks in “Geography and Some Explorers”: “[M]ap
gazing [. . .] brings the problems of the great spaces of the earth into stimulating and directing contact with sane curiosity and gives an honest precision to one’s imaginative faculty” (13). Just as Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* dreams of visiting the white heart of Africa as a boy, so did the young Conrad. The magic associated with travel and discovery that so compels Marlow’s urge to visit the Congo in *Heart of Darkness* has a distinct flavor, particular to the period Conrad evokes in the novella. But the excitement and childish wonder associated with unknown spaces and a world newly-discovered, that both Marlow and Conrad recall from their boyhoods, is shared by the nameless narrator of Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*. Tridib gives his nephew, through their map gazing, “worlds to travel in and . . . eyes to see them with” (20). Not only capable of using his imagination with precision, the narrator becomes a storyteller who uses his passion for travel and adventure to discover the mystery of space and contiguity rather than the limitations placed by boundaries of geographical difference determined by national borders.

Like Conrad’s meditation on map gazing, Ghosh’s narrator’s meditation on space reveals nothing but the mystery of distance. Despite the honest intentions of map makers who believed in the “enchantment of lines” (228), the narrator discovers the tenuousness of borders which do not separate but reflect sameness, so that Calcutta and Dacca become in *The Shadow Lines* the “inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free—our looking-glass border” (228). Inevitably, Ghosh’s meditation on borders and distance has a different inflection from Conrad’s boyhood passion for maps. While both are compelled by the mystery and attraction of the unknown, Ghosh’s novel struggles with late-twentieth-century concerns, particularly the imagined community of the nation. The rapid changes between “known” and “unknown” in the maps that fascinated Conrad have given way to new realities in Ghosh’s novel, which he approaches in ways unimaginable to Conrad or in Conrad’s time. Yet, despite these differences between Ghosh and Conrad, the power of romance remains an important feature in the works of both novelists.
GHOSH AND LYDON

Chris Lydon’s program, produced by the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University, was set up as a conversation with world writers on the global stage. On 20 November 2008, Lydon introduced Pamuk and Ghosh, his guests on this show, as the children of “Achebe and Naipaul,” each telling “the other side of the story.” In the interview, Lydon asks Ghosh if he saw himself “confronting Kipling and Conrad, […] old voices which told the world story one way.” Ghosh agrees with Lydon that indeed these writers told the story one way, and adds that of Kipling he has nothing to say. On Conrad, Ghosh comments: “his was a more ambiguous voice.” But when Lydon proposes to him that it may be Ghosh’s “project to retell those stories from the subcontinent’s point of view,” the writer’s response is strong and forceful: “No, not at all.” Ghosh goes on to add that Conrad does not evoke a strong response from him and does not interest him; the author who does interest him is Herman Melville, who Ghosh considers the greatest writer America ever produced. It is Melville’s more cosmopolitan vision that compels Ghosh, who again reminds us that “Melville is the only nineteenth-century nautical writer who paid enough attention to Indian sailors.” But of the lascars—for example Asian and Arab sailors—there is no mention in the worlds of either Conrad or Melville, and it is “their absence from the imaginative record of sail that made [Ghosh] curious about them” and compelled him to explore their story.

Ghosh is right that the stories of the lascars are not the stories that either Conrad or Melville told, although occasionally lascars do appear in both their works. However, Ghosh’s rejection of the mantle of respondent to colonial writers such as Conrad and Kipling appears odd given his stated interest in telling the story that Conrad and Melville did not. What might it mean, then, for Ghosh to say that Conrad does not interest him? Why would Ghosh so deliberately want to distance himself from Conrad and assert his artistic links to Herman Melville?

Inadvertently, perhaps, by placing both Pamuk and Ghosh within a “writing back” model, Lydon may have set up the response Ghosh gives. It is
hardly surprising that Ghosh should reject Lydon’s model where the children of “Achebe and Naipaul” are simply telling “the other side of the story”: Ghosh understandably sees his own mission as a writer as quite separate from being a respondent to the colonial fictions of Kipling and Conrad. Returning the imperial gaze seems a limitation of Ghosh’s agenda, which is a sprawling set of concerns offering alternate visions of the history and intellectual traditions which we have inherited in the 20th century.

That said, it remains of continuing interest to me not that Ghosh should prefer to align himself with Melville, but that he is so invested in distancing himself from a forebear from whom it is impossible, it seems to me, to do so. Even if Conrad’s ghost may not hover as near Ghosh as it did for Naipaul, Ghosh’s set of chosen interests were visited a century before by Conrad. These, loosely put, would include not only the colonial encounter and its residues, but more importantly, although with great delicacy, the romance of travel and adventure, and the allure of distant places.

That romance that Conrad locates in his boyhood imaginings of adventuring and glory, of going to places nobody he knew had visited, is an allure Ghosh’s novels also reflect. In his Lydon interview, Ghosh mentions meeting some Indian sailors in Alexandria who invited him to join them on their sea voyage. He was certainly young when this encounter took place, but what is startling is that he packed his bags and went down to the port to join the sailors, only to see their ship sail away. That romantic response to the unknown, to a journey leaving behind known structures that makes Ghosh say of these sailors “they were truly free,” is one that Conrad’s characters seem to understand so well. Nor, it seems to me, is Ghosh able to distance himself from the magic of places, the allure of distance, the hypnotic quality contained in the names of places and the ways we imagine them, however different that imagining is in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries from the ways the appeal of unknown places was articulated by Conrad in the previous one.

Another answer to the question of why Ghosh needs to distance himself from Conrad and align himself to Melville may lie in Ghosh’s self-placement, in this 21st century, as a cosmopolitan American writer. That Ghosh is placed in the interview in the same context as Conrad is no surprise, given that the
empire has been writing back quite robustly in the US (as well as in Britain) for
in the last fifty years and longer. However, to see Ghosh in the context of
Melville, and to hear Melville’s cosmopolitanism celebrated, is to see the US
outside of that “isolation” that is so much a part of the country’s understanding
of itself. Just like the rest of Ghosh’s interview, it also firmly connects the time
of the interview with the British colonial past. Ghosh explicitly states that he
started writing *Sea of Poppies* when Bush Jr. invaded Iraq. From the outset,
Ghosh wants us to connect the British in India and the opium trade that
fundied the empire to the US in Iraq and the US dependence on foreign oil.

Connecting the time of the American invasion of Iraq with a US which
had just elected Barack Obama, Ghosh says Melville is the true ancestor of
Obama. And, why? Because Obama’s family and affiliations are reflected in
those worlds Melville created, whether in Moby Dick or in Melville’s other
narratives of exploration and anthropological curiosity. To see a trajectory
linking Melville to Obama, on one hand, and to our cosmopolitan novelist, on
the other, is definitely to widen the contours of literary history where Indian
novelists, writing in English, of empire and its aftermath, have been placed.

Such a context restricts these authors’ scope and interests to the “writing
back” model. This paradigm, so important in the 80s and 90s when it served,
to help clear space for novelists such as Ghosh, now seems restrictive and
outmoded. As we look back now on three decades and more of energetic
activity in the area known as postcolonialism, we can reflect on what was once
a fruitful opposition between the terms colonial and postcolonial. Works such
as the series *Europe and Its Others* (pub. University of Essex) or the first
anthologies that appeared in the 1990s, such as Chrisman and Williams’s
*Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, helped solidify a tension between
the colonial and postcolonial. Increasingly, though, the value of the “writing
back” model appears limited, in part because it fossilizes a relationship that
ought to be and is more productive than the one suggested by the binary on
which it is based. Ghosh’s alliance with Melville rather than Conrad, then, may
be a way for him to widen the conversation on the novel and to steer it away
from the national or empire-and-its-aftermath model that has been so
influential in literary studies.
REFERENCES


