

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* and Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*: History and the future of Indian writing in English

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By a curious synchronicity, two heavyweights of Indian Writing in English (IWE), Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, have, in the first half of 2008, published historical novels almost simultaneously. In addition, both novels were longlisted for the 2008 Booker Prize (an award which Rushdie's own *Midnight's Children* has effectively won three times over, having been voted "Booker of Bookers" for the prize's 25th and then for its 40th anniversary), and Ghosh, though not Rushdie, then made it as far as the shortlist, the prize being won in fact by another Indian, Aravind Adiga with *The White Tiger*. Comparison, then, invites itself: while my personal opinion is that Ghosh's historical vision impresses while Rushdie's disastrously fails, I shall await with interest the full-length studies that will no doubt appear comparing the two novels in detail.

Both are beyond doubt historical novels in the acceptation first popularised by Walter Scott, although there are immediate significant differences between the two writers' projects. Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* alternates between the Mughal empire under Akbar and the Renaissance Italy of Machiavelli, linking the two via the appearance of a Florentine wanderer, Mogor dell'Amore, at Akbar's court in Fatehpur Sikri and the presence in Florence of Qara Kōz, a Mughal princess with magical powers. Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* narrates a more recent period, namely earlier nineteenth-century India in the time of the East India Company: it relates India to the wider world since its theme is the transporting of indentured labourers and convicts to the island of Mauritius on the ship *Ibis*, and offers a remarkably broad canvas of characters - from the low-caste Bihari ox-cart-driver Kalua and Deeti, the woman he rescues from a sati, through Baboo Nob Kissin, pen-pushing clerk and flamboyant devotee of Krishna, to Paulette, Bengal-raised daughter of a French botanist, and Zachary, a deceptively white-seeming freedman mulatto from Baltimore who becomes the vessel's second mate.

It is new for Rushdie to attempt a fiction set back so far in the past, unless one counts the Arabian dream chapters of *The Satanic Verses*; *Midnight's Children* has been read, and with good cause, as a historical novel, but it deals with the recent past. Ghosh, by contrast, has already explored a (somewhat later) period of imperial history in Asia, starting from the late nineteenth century, in *The Glass Palace*. A further structural difference is that *Sea of Poppies* is the first part of a trilogy (incidentally a popular novelistic convention in the Bengali tradition), and its narrative is therefore unfinished, whereas Rushdie's is (I would say thank goodness) a single, self-contained narrative.

Generically, both are somewhat complex and difficult to define in a nutshell; a degree of experimentalism is common to both, as too are painstaking research and studied intertextuality. Rushdie's degree from Cambridge was in history, and Ghosh's training was as an anthropologist: these novels show the two at pains to demonstrate their research skills, with lengthy bibliographical credits appearing at the end of both. Rushdie, indeed, goes as far - in earnest or in play - as to blur the fiction/non-fiction divide by listing his historical sources in alphabetical order, over a six-page bibliography which might more aptly grace a straightline academic study.

The Enchantress of Florence marks Rushdie returning in force to the genre with which he made his name, magic realism: his previous novel, *Shalimar the Clown*, had used magic-realist effects fairly sparingly, but here the fantastic *Thousand-and-one-Nights*-type tricks pile up, if anything tediously, starting from the moment when Akbar magicks an imaginary woman into becoming his favourite

wife. The novel's fantastic elements coexist rather awkwardly with spoonfuls of dubiously digestible factual material - topographical data on Fatehpur Sikri that might seem straight out of a Lonely Planet guide, historical information about Florentine politics or Central Asian warfare that has all the vitality of a medieval chronicle. Historical novel thus meets fantasy in a fiction that might recall Scott's *The Talisman*, the neglected masterpiece admired by Edward Said that also depicts the East-West encounter; but Rushdie, alas, falls far short of Scott.

Generically, Amitav Ghosh has in the past used magic realism more sparingly than Rushdie - discreetly in his first novel *The Circle of Reason* and fused with non-realist genres such as science fiction and ghost story in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, but elsewhere not at all. *Sea of Poppies* begins as if it is going to be magic-realist, with the young Bihari woman Deeti "seeing" the apparition of a two-masted ship, a "vision not materially present in front of her" (Ghosh, 7) on the Ganga outside the opium factory in Ghazipur; but this premonition of the Ibis turns out - like the voice from the dead near the beginning of Vikram Chandra's otherwise realist novel *Sacred Games* - to be the book's sole approximation to magic realism. Nonetheless, it somehow does not feel quite appropriate to categorise *Sea of Poppies* unqualifiedly as straight realism, for - a shade disconcertingly till the reader gets used to it - this novel's dominant register is comedy. In the past it is Rushdie rather than Ghosh who has been associated with the comic, yet here, and despite the presence of such self-evidently severe themes as sati, labour exploitation and racially skewed justice, the timbre of Ghosh's writing is resolutely light and ludic - as, to cite but one instance, in the bizarre moment when Baboo Nob Kissin discovers that Zachary is labelled in the vessel's log as "black" and exultantly concludes he must be a manifestation of Krishna, the Black Lord. This strong presence of the comic in *Sea of Poppies* is likely to disorient some of Ghosh's critics in the world of postcolonial studies, but others may conclude that he is working within a tradition of Bengali humour and that the comedy is a means of highlighting the resilience and resourcefulness of the ordinary person in the face of oppressive structures.

Intertextuality is certainly a key feature of both novels. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, the magic powers of Qara Kōz recall similarly gifted women figures from other magic-realist novels - Sierva Maria in Gabriel García Márquez's *Del amor y otros demonios / Of Love and Other Demons* or Blimunda in José Saramago's *Memorial do Convento / Baltasar and Blimunda*. Mogor dell'Amore's conversations with Akbar may remind the reader of the similar exchanges between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan in Italo Calvino's *Le città invisibili / Invisible Cities*, while the emperor's love-relationship with his (at least in the novel) imaginary wife Jodha echoes Adolfo Bioy Casares' *La invención de Morel / The Invention of Morel*, whose narrator falls in love with a computer-generated woman. In *Sea of Poppies*, the Ibis recalls multiple moments from Herman Melville's maritime writings, resembling the vessels of *Moby-Dick* in its mix of ethnic origins, "Benito Cereno" in its past as a slave-ship, and "Billy Budd" as a locus of on-board class violence; Lewis Carroll - a favourite in Bengal - is present in a Calcutta banqueting sequence (Ghosh, 232) that evokes his Mock Turtle and his "beautiful soup" in its "hot tureen"; and the IWE tradition too is paid homage to in a trial for forgery that recalls the one in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*. It remains to be seen, however, which out of Rushdie's and Ghosh's intertextual practice is the more productive.

Meanwhile, the two novels certainly converge in demonstrating a rich exuberance of language. In Rushdie's narrative, however thin or flat the story, the writing has the denseness and inventiveness that its author's readers have come to expect from him, but it does not present any real innovations on his previous practice. Ghosh, by contrast, breaks new ground: while *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* certainly had their share of non-English lexical items, Indian or more generally Asian, *Sea of Poppies* in numerous places piles up the Indian (Bengali or Bhojpuri) or lascar-pidgin terms to the point where some readers might begin to get confused. Here Ghosh's practice resembles that of Vikram Chandra in *Sacred Games*, with its accumulations of Bombay argot; and Ghosh, like

Chandra, has chosen to meet readers halfway by placing a glossary, not in the novel itself but on his official website. Amitav Ghosh has said before now that one day he will write a novel in Bengali, and whether this novel and the trilogy it will be part of it form a staging-post on that road remains to be seen.

Finally and inevitably, the reader of both novels has to ask the questions, "what is this book about?" and "was it worth reading"? Last-ditch defenders of Rushdie will no doubt respond that his latest book is a significant exploration of the East-West meeting and of cultural pluralism as - it could be argued - evinced in observations of the type: "There is no particular wisdom in the East ... All human beings are foolish to the same degree" (Rushdie, 286), or: "discord, difference, disobedience, disagreement, irreverence, iconoclasm, impudence, even insolence, might be the wellsprings of the good" (Rushdie, 310). Whether, however, such gnomic observations stand up in the context of this novel's one-dimensional, tinsel narrative with its accretions of clichés and stereotypes both eastern and western, dry-as-dust chronology and box-of-tricks magic realism, is quite another matter. Amitav Ghosh, meanwhile, while also signifying "miscegenation and mongrelism" (Ghosh, 442) in terms that might appear to parallel Rushdie, succeeds - as Rushdie does not - in pushing his fictional practice into new dimensions of formal and linguistic experimentation while, most importantly, telling a moving story that embodies the capacity of ordinary folk to survive and celebrate despite the oppressive incursions of power. It may sound subjective, but while when I turned the last page of *The Enchantress of Florence* I concluded I had not been able to identify with a single character for a single minute, when *Sea of Poppies* came to an end I was genuinely sorry, while also more than pleased that I will meet Ghosh's characters again in the second instalment. Who then is going in the right direction, Rushdie or Ghosh? *The Enchantress of Florence* seems to me one of Rushdie's least interesting novels, a damp squib on a par with *Grimus* and *Fury* and a great disappointment after the return to form of *Shalimar the Clown*; while I read *Sea of Poppies* as the work of a Ghosh at the height of his powers, surprising and charming his readers on the level of the page while maintaining a constant human commitment. The war may be on between the flashy gyrations of the postmodern and a surprisingly flexible and resistant Indo-Anglian realist tradition, within the fraught terrain, with its increasing globalised burden, of Indian Writing in English.

WORKS CITED

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