

criticism

## About Borders and Connections

by Fakrul Alam

TO READERS WHO HAVE BEEN keeping track of the recent course of Indian fiction in English, Amitav Ghosh is a familiar name. This is because Ghosh has authored three distinctive novels: *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), and *The Calcutta Chromosomes* (1996). Ghosh is also the author of *In an Antique Land* (1993), a most unusual text which combines his expertise in anthropology — he has a D. Phil. in Social Anthropology and has taught the subject at Delhi University, the University of Virginia, and Columbia University — with his immense skills in weaving narratives. All of these books have attracted wide notice and some of them have been translated into other languages. The French edition of *The Circle of Reason*, for example, has even won one of France's most important literary prizes. However, *The Shadow Lines*, awarded India's Sahitya Akademi Award in 1989, is Ghosh's major work to date and it seems to me that we have at least four good reasons to reflect on it in our country: it is a novel set in part in Dhaka; it is a book which concerns itself with the Bengali Diaspora; it is a thoughtful reflection on the emotional havoc caused by borders in our part of the world; and it is an eloquent albeit understated plea for connections which need to be made between the past and the present and between different parts of the world if we are to redeem the nightmarish aspects of contemporary history. What follow, then, is a reading of *The Shadow Lines* which indicates its most important themes and which reveals Ghosh's sensitivity and maturity as a writer.

*The Shadow Lines*, is an accomplished and compelling work. Essentially a somber novel about the "shadow lines" that link people despite differences in space and in time, it is also a book about memory and desire, about the role of the creative imagination and the power of sympathy in human relationships. It is, in addition, a "rite of passage" novel, for in the course of the narrative, the nameless narrator is transformed from a glib youngster

spellbound by the stories told to him by his cosmopolitan relatives to a mature young man who has come to know much about himself and the way public events and private lives are interconnected. In the process, the narrator discovers his true vocation: with the growth in his power of perception, he will be a chronicler of the connections between people and places he had once seen as existing independently of each other and of the tragic-comedy of life.

Although not directly a novel about the contemporary Indian diaspora, *The Shadow Lines* has much in it that shows Ghosh's interest in this theme and the diasporic consciousness. The first part of the novel, for example, is titled "Going Away," and in the first sentence Ghosh indicates how a chain of events can be set in motion by one overseas trip. In 1939, thirteen years before the narrator's birth, his father's aunt, Mayadebi, left for England with her husband and their eight-year-old son, Tridib, and reestablished contact with the Prices, an English family that had made an Indian connection when Mrs. Price's father had settled down in Calcutta and had in the process come across Tridib's grandfather. As a result of the English trip, Tridib falls in love with Mrs. Price's daughter, May. Eventually May visits Tridib in Calcutta, where she stays with the narrator's family. She and Tridib then join Mayadebi and the narrator's grandmother as the Indian women fly to Dhaka, then the capital of East Pakistan, but once their home city before they left it in a mass exodus of Bengali Hindus to West Bengal. In Dhaka, Tridib is killed in a race riot after Mayadebi and the grandmother involve him and May in an expedition to bring away their uncle. Although May survives as do the two sisters, she is haunted by the nightmarish moment of the riot when she had inspired Tridib to an act of daring in front of an enraged mob. At the end of the novel, the narrator, on a year's research stint in England, meets May and has an affair with her as they try to come to terms with Tridib's death.

This brief outline of Ghosh's compli-



Amitav Ghosh

cated plot indicates how he has woven a story based on people who are constantly traveling across frontiers and intermingling despite differences in race or nationality. The London scenes of the novel represent perfectly the cosmopolitan city created by a global diaspora. Ghosh's London is a megapolis where one encounters Bangladeshi restaurants, retail shops run by South Asians, Muslim mosques, the smell of African or Caribbean curry, posters advertising the latest Hindi films, and "quick exchanges in a dozen

dialects of Bengali".

But the mass migration of Bengalis to England is of course only one aspect of the Indian diaspora. Within South Asia itself, recent history records several mass population movements of Hindu Bengalis from East to West Bengal, and of Muslim refugees from India's Bihar or Uttar Pradesh or West Bengal to Pakistan. Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* offers glimpses into the lives led by these migrants. We get to hear also of Indian families scattering all over the world. While the narrator's grandmoth-

er's uncle had decided to stay in Dhaka, for example, his sons and daughters have either moved to Bangalore or Calcutta or the Middle East "or God knows where".

With so much movement of people from one part of the world to another, what, precisely, constitutes a "home"? The narrator, for instance, can think of Calcutta as home, but for his grandmother the city can only be so in an invented sense. As the title of the second section of *The Shadow Lines*, "Coming Home", indicates, home to her really means Dhaka, but when she gets there the city is nothing like the birthplace she had known. In fact, among Ghosh's major themes in the novel are that in a permanently unsettled world, "home" is what we create only through a combination of memory and desire, and that in the contemporary world it is difficult to distinguish between "coming home" and "going away" when you are moving all the time.

Like *The Circle of Reason*, then, *The Shadow Lines*, is a novel of the movement of people across national borders and of traveling. But Ghosh's characters seem to yearn for a world without boundaries. Tridib, the man who had exerted a formative influence on the narrator's life, thus tells him the story of Tristan, a story of a hero who "was a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across-the-seas". This, of course, is also Tridib's story, and the narrator's too. It is a story that expresses a nostalgia for a world where immigration and customs officials did not exist, where you did not cross into another country by flying over an imaginary line, where you did not give up your home because of political upheavals, or where you did not lose your faith in "the stillness of the earth".

But, as the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* discovers, the people of India can no longer recognize a world without borders or a settled world, for diasporas have become their lot. They have, therefore, become fearful, aware "that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets

that one inhabits can become suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood". That is why the uncle of the narrator's grandmother refuses to move from his home, for as far as he can see, "Once you start moving you never stop."

Moving, however, has its compensations. For one thing, when you have "no home but in memory [you] learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection". The narrator, for one, has become a master storyteller because of his experience of unsettled lives and his knowledge of the diasporic consciousness. He has also learned that people can become more, and not less, "closely bound to each other" after officials have drawn border lines, since these lines, paradoxically, lock them "into an irreversible symmetry". At the end of the novel, therefore, Ghosh's narrator thinks more of linkages that of separations. He has had a glimpse into the "final redemptive mystery" of Tridib's death: Tridib had given up his life in an act of faith, an act that gives the lie to frontiers and suggests that shadow lines unite us despite the boundaries that disperse people and divide them.

*The Shadow Lines*, then, is a book rich in themes and of special interest to readers in Bangladesh. It is also a pleasure to read and is written in a style which combines humor, elegance, and wistfulness. Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, is intermittently dazzling but on the whole overwritten and his most recent work of fiction, *The Calcutta Chromosomes*, is a more a *jeu d'esprit* than a serious work and is overplotted. It is only in *The Shadow Lines* that Ghosh strikes the right balance in articulating his deeply felt concerns about the movement of people across the world and inter-cultural connections. Ghosh is now only forty-one years old and it is reasonable therefore to expect much more from him in the future, but even if he does not write another line, I have a feeling that *The Shadow Lines* will assure him a place amongst the premier novelists writing in English in the last quarter of this century.

books

## Convivial Contest Picks Literary Jewels in The Crown

by Kanina Holmes

IT WAS A LOCATION WELL SUITED TO the occasion. Some of the world's best authors were ceremoniously wined and dined in the same building where William Shakespeare registered all his works.

Amid crystal-clinking and genial babble in a banquet room at London's Stationers' Hall, dignitaries, diplomats and celebrated authors saluted the winners of the tenth Commonwealth Writers' Prize.

This year's contest, between more than 200 entries, was so exciting, said Kee Thuan Chye, a Malaysian judge, that "there should be a warning from the Surgeon-General that judging the Commonwealth writers' competition is hazardous to your health."

Trinidadian author Earl Lovelace won the best book award for *Salt*, which explores the mixing of cultures in the West Indies. Major themes include

racial tension and reconciliation and the contradictions between old attitudes of vassal and landowner and new, more liberated ways of thinking.

"Trinidad and Tobago provides a very useful theatre for that wrestling and living together," Lovelace said at the ceremony. He then waved his £10,000 winner's cheque and gave a victory whoop.

Lovelace is part of the extraordinary literary talent to arise from the small twin-island state. Other writers of international stature include V S Naipaul and his brother Shiva, C L R James and Derek Walcott.

Canadian playwright Ann-Marie MacDonald won in the best first book category for her novel *Fall On Your Knees*. It is the tale of four sisters, taking readers from Cape Breton Island on Canada's east coast, through the battle-

fields of the First World War and on to the jazz scene of New York city. The novel has been described as "a story of inescapable family bonds, of terrible secrets, of miracles, racial strife, attempted murder, birth and death, and forbidden love."

MacDonald said "the greatest compliment" for her stemmed from the recognition that "people with different perspectives all identified with my book."

Besides the two main awards, prizes were given to eight writers from four regions: Commonwealth Africa; the Caribbean and Canada; Eurasia; and South-East Asia and the South Pacific.

This year's winners tackled issues ranging from betrayal within a Zimbabwean family, Indian communities living in South Africa, the search for identity by a young Samoan woman, death, life and love in the south-western

United States and the sinking of the Titanic.

Gala events may not be an unusual way of saluting authors. But the way in which these prizes are administered is somewhat unconventional.

Whereas tension and secrecy feature prominently in the run-up to many literary award ceremonies, in this contest, the judges and authors get a chance to meet and mingle in the days leading up to the announcement of the winners.

"This isn't the kind of literary prize where people are corralled in pens," said Hermione Lee, who chaired the judges' panel. She denied that this kind of close contact put the arbiters at risk of being swayed by the authors' personalities. "I don't think it actually affected our judgement," she said.

Lee and her colleagues prefer to look at the benefits of this informality — the connections authors make with one

another and the valuable advice that more-seasoned writers can pass on to budding talent.

Canadian prize-winner MacDonald praised the healthy open atmosphere, and said: "It's not like choosing the next pope or anything."

She said that for her, the most important part of the event was making connections with writers from different parts of the world. When she arrived in London she was greeted with a group hug from people from nine countries.

"It felt so unliterary," she said. "It was fantastic."

Organisers conceded that the event might suffer from a lower profile than some international literary competitions.

Dr Alastair Niven, head of literature at the British Council and a former Commonwealth Writers' Prize judge, said the contest might have been lim-

ited by a misconception that novels must focus on the Commonwealth — a topic "Britain hasn't been terribly excited by" in recent years.

However, "the impact of this prize is very relevant" in the authors' home countries, said Niven. "It's big news in Zimbabwe." International recognition instilled a sense of confidence in a writer.

He hoped that, with more time and publicity, the competition would grow in stature.

The competition is sponsored by the Commonwealth Foundation, which supports the work of the non-government sector in the Commonwealth. While a decision has been made to continue administering the awards from London, the annual ceremony is to rotate around member countries. — *Gemini News*

profile

## The Lasting Popularity of Somerset Maugham

by ASM Nurunnabi

SOMERSET MAUGHAM IS ONE of the most admired and widely read authors of this century. His long and varied life is reflected in his versatile achievement as short story writer, novelist, dramatist, critic, essayist, and autobiographer. His style and method acquired a classical sense of form, lucidity and detachment of attitude to human frailty and the ironies of existence perhaps on account of his up bringing in Paris and an early familiarity with the work of the French naturalists.

His first novel, *Liza of Lambeth* which is a realistic portrayal of slum life, was the result of his later experiences as a medical student in London.

Then followed the Ashenden stories which were based on his experience as a British intelligence agent during World War I. His extensive foreign travels in search of new background and ways of life provided inextricable materials for his writings. Unlike his contemporaries Bennett, Galsworthy, and Wells, Maugham was not interested in fiction as the vehicle of social criticism. Instead



Somerset Maugham

he savoured the singularity, paradox, and sheer unexpectedness of individual lives, in other words "the personal drama of human relationships"—all is grist that comes to his mill in the fields of short stories, novels and plays. As a result, Maugham could paint exotic Eastern scenes with an economy of ex-

pressions and exactitudex as he observed a wealth of bizarre incidents and human idiosyncrasy in various places and locations, where passions were stripped of the masks of conformity and convention demanded by more civilised communities, with amused tolerance and an unerring eye for the significant details.

Maugham's career as a dramatist covered a long period of three decades. Within a year of the production of *Lady Frederick* in 1907, he was in a position to rival the popularity of Shaw with four other plays running in London. The caustic, satirical portrayals of elegant society as conveyed in the plays such as "Home and Beauty," *The Circle*, *Our Betters*, and "The Bread Winner" continued to enjoy a steady success with their elements of dexterous craftsmanship and sparkling epigrammatic dialogue.

Maugham's achievement as a novelist, though somewhat uneven, is equally worthy of praise. In the opinion of literary critics, the authenticity of deep feelings in perhaps his most popular work,

the long autobiographical "Of Human Bondage" is vitiated by prolixity and an abundant expression of sentimentality. The critics also view that in *The Razor's Edge*, written when he was over seventy, and "Catalina," Maugham is perceptively out of his native element in ambitious explorations of uncharacteristic themes. Essentially a master of shorter forms of fiction, he makes far greater impact in "The Moon and Sixpence," based on the career of Gauguin, and *Cakes and Ale*, his own favourite. In its narrative expertise, perception, and credibility of characterisation, *Cakes and Ale* is indisputably Maugham's most completely realised novel.

It is, however, in the short story form that his extraordinary gifts are most brilliantly displayed. Maugham from the first made Maupassant his model. The prominent characteristics of his short stories were "the compact, dramatic story", tightly knit, with a sharp suspense which overlay the ending. To this end, it is said that Maugham developed with consummate skill the device of the narrator incorporating his

own urbane, ubiquitous presence as ringside spectator, thereby lending to his tales the heightened verisimilitude of the conversational eyewitness account.

There are other characteristic aspects of his writings. One of Maugham's favourite and most typical themes lies in his sardonic clinical diagnoses of human folly in such stories as "The Lion's Skin," *Before the Party*, "The Door of Opportunity." Yet Maugham never explicitly moralises. He presents life, as he sees it, dispassionately with the result that his very lack of comment seems to carry its own acid implication. He acknowledged in his autobiographies his lack of that emotional warmth and sympathetic involvement which would, as he said, have given his work "intimacy, the broad human touch."

Maugham saw himself as an entertainer, and he was a supremely successful one, with his work, broadcast, televised, filmed and translated into many languages. The extent of Maugham's espionage and propaganda work in two

world wars is revealed in some important biographies written by those who knew him intimately.

Maugham's own career had been largely a triumph of determination and will, the success in three genres of a man not naturally gifted as a writer. In 1957 Maugham replied to a question about what life had taught him by saying: "Chiefly, I think to take things as they come." He may have indeed learnt in old age to adjust to the vagaries and flux of the world, but for eight decades he had attempted to control and impose a pattern on his life life-not merely his professional career but also his emotional and spiritual being. Feelings, because they threatened to overwhelm judgement and to cause pain, were thus feared and reason preferred. Spontaneity, because exposed a person to humiliation, was kept in check by a vigilant self-discipline, and if a relationship failed or an erosion disappointed, the suffering was submerged beneath a facade of cynical resignation. Above all, life's chances and mischances were kept from disrupting the pattern.