

Ecology in the novel

In his new novel, *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh returns to the classic imperial brutality of the Opium Wars. But the writer we meet in a Brooklyn café follows current affairs just as keenly.

Sea of Poppies is the first book in a trilogy about the British warfare in China around 1850, at a time when the Indian production of poppies was monopolized and forcefully imposed on the Chinese market. His native Kolkata and West Bengal form the points of departure in most of his books, but there is still plenty of variation.

Ecological profile

In this novel, shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2008, we join in as a barge travels down the Ganges. Due to its many rivers, India used to be a great maritime nation for domestic traffic, something that has now all but gone, even though petrol is heavily taxed and the country is a world leader within wind technology.

“More than anything, this is just a matter of mentality”, Ghosh says. He thinks the sails will soon be back on these rivers, and as a writer of fiction he is more than willing to make his contribution to such a development.

“The art of the novel is still dominated by themes from past centuries”, he continues. “There’s too much bedroom and too much psychology, and not enough environment. We mustn’t forget that local knowledge can contain vital strategies for survival.”

West Bengal

His previous novel, *The Hungry Tide*, has a stronger ecological profile. It is about the Sundarbans, the unique Bengali swamplands.

“There is a symbolic scene towards the end of this book in which a local man saves the life of a female anthropologist when the hurricane is approaching. He does so by tying them both to a tree trunk, using himself as a shield for the young woman. But this is not purely symbolic: if you climb a tree, you stand a better chance of surviving a storm like that.”

“In 2003 there was a business syndicate that launched an exclusive hotel project in the Sundarbans. But people like this do not understand the value that lies in an area of this kind. When the tsunami struck during Christmas in 2004, this area remained unscathed because it was able to absorb the storm.”

“One of my essays, *The Folly of the Sundarbans*, contributed to the abandonment of this project. When I have readings from my books in India, it is always attended by a couple of influential businessmen. Can you imagine Bill Gates dropping in on a book launch?”

India and Egypt

Ghosh himself studied anthropology in Egypt, and still feels strongly attached to the country. He points out the important role that literature plays in developing countries.

“Take this example: Naguib Mahfouz’ impact on Egypt shows the potential the novel has, because the unveiling of family life becomes all the more striking when society functions under political censorship.”

But he also sees danger signals.

“West Bengal used to be an industrial centre, but unfortunately the area has not been able to participate in the development that has taken place in other parts of India. The same goes for Egypt, for that matter: They have had the same political leadership for 30 years, and my guess is that we will see a political crisis there soon.”

The Mumbai terror

The Indian nation was recently facing another form of political crisis, after terrorists attacked several targets in Mumbai. Ghosh praises the government for never losing its calm by threatening to attack Pakistan, even though public pressure to do so was immense.

“During the last 10-15 years, India and Pakistan have grown closer. And it is clear that these attacks ultimately were just as much directed towards Pakistan and their government, because the purpose evidently was to bring the two countries into conflict with each other again.”

India’s literary scene has always been prolific, and at present it seems to be flourishing more than ever. Yet one can gain the impression that the writers form a particular clique within its society, and they very often live overseas. Furthermore, like many of his colleagues, Amitav Ghosh is reluctant to discuss the Indian caste system. They might write about it, but they fail to condemn it.

Caste and race

“The Indian government has done what it can to eradicate the caste system. Officially it was abolished a long time ago, and now the state has guaranteed that 35 % of the coveted government jobs are reserved for the casteless.” Yet when I ask him to comment on this from a human rights perspective, he says I should talk to a sociologist.

But he readily elaborates on the topic of the English. I ask him for his opinion on Edward Luce’s new book, *In Spite of the Gods*, which has received excellent reviews from several people that know India well. In this book, Luce maintains that India still owes a lot to its former colonial masters.

“This is arrogance”, Ghosh says. ”Above all, the British administration was purely racist. Their heritage, which is the cause of so many of our current problems, is that some people think they tower above the rule of law. But I am not surprised by Luce’s claims, because after all, everywhere you will find Brits travelling the World congratulating each other.”

Certainly there is a great writer behind every literary masterpiece, and when Amitav Ghosh grabs his fur hat and strolls into the cold Brooklyn night, I notice that several guests follow him with their eyes. And Ghosh’s ecological turn is timely, even if literature seems to be at its best when the subject matter is human beings; revealing psychological and societal structures that deserve to be exposed. This is one of those writers who can master both.