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Article

The Politics of Language and Memory: Decolonization in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract: This paper argues that Amitav Ghosh's fiction enacts a decolonizing practice through two interlocking modalities: (1) the politics of language as his sustained creolization of English and foregrounding of multilingual contact zones and (2) the politics of memory as his construction of counter-archives that unsettle imperial historiography. Across The Shadow Lines (1988), The Hungry Tide (2004), the Ibis trilogy (Sea of Poppies, 2008; River of Smoke, 2011; Flood of Fire, 2015), and Gun Island (2019), Ghosh reimagines the Indian Ocean world as a polyphonic space where personal recollection, vernacular speech, and subaltern testimony reassemble histories fragmented by colonialism and the nation-state. Researcher coins four analytic lenses, such as vernacularization as a method, creolized narration, tidal memory, and the counter-maritime archive, to show how Ghosh's narrative forms, dictional strategies, and memory-work reframe sovereignty, belonging, and ecological vulnerability beyond imperial and nationalist frames. The paper demonstrates that Ghosh's decolonizing project lies less in thematic denunciation than in formal and linguistic innovations that restore the opacity, plurality, and mobility of colonized lives.

Keywords: decolonization; cultural memory; multilingualism; Indian Ocean; creolization; subaltern archives; climate memory

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Introduction

Debates on decolonization in South Asian literature often hinge on representation: who speaks, in which language, and upon what memory of the past. Amitav Ghosh's oeuvre provides a rare synthesis of these questions, locating the politics of decolonization not only in explicit critique of empire but in the textures of language and techniques of remembering. His novels traverse Kolkata lanes and Sundarbans estuaries, Calcutta Dhaka family routes and Canton opium hongs, Mauritian plantations, and Mediterranean ports, mapping an archipelago of encounters where colonial capitalism, ecological precarity, and linguistic mixture intersect. This paper proposes that Ghosh's fiction advances decolonization along two axes. First, language: Ghosh systematically unsettles monolingual English by embedding Bangla, Bhojpuri, Arabic, Hindustani, lascar argot, and Canton pidgins, and by rendering translation visible rather than seamless. Second, memory: he mobilizes testimony, rumour, family recollection, material objects, and ecological traces as counter-archives against official narratives. These axes converge in his formal tactics, polyphonic plotting, braided timelines, glossarial paratexts, and documentary intrusions that return the reader to the frictional reality of contact zones. The argument unfolds through close readings of four clusters: *The Shadow Lines* (memory/nation), *The Hungry Tide* (translation/subaltern memory), the Ibis trilogy (creole language/counter-maritime archive), and *Gun Island* (climate memory/global mobility). In this study, the researcher developed four concepts: vernacularization as a method, creolized narration, tidal memory, and counter-maritime archive to articulate how his fiction performs decolonization at the level of form.

Decolonization, Language, Memory:

Decolonization, beyond the transfer of political power, involves dislodging epistemic hierarchies that privileged imperial languages, archives, and temporalities. In literary terms, it requires reconfiguring the relationship between dominant tongues (e.g., “Standard English”) and vernaculars, and between official histories and lived or suppressed memories. As contemporary scholarship demonstrates, the mid-20th century marked a shift in focus from colonial to postcolonial studies, emphasizing the need for interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks that can address the complexity of postcolonial discourse (Chernetska et al. 45). Memory studies distinguish between communicative memory (living social recall) and cultural memory (institutionalized forms) (Assmann 110). Memory studies distinguish between communicative memory (living social recall) and cultural memory (institutionalized forms). Ghosh’s novels navigate their entanglement: domestic stories, rumours, and toponyms flow into chronicles of trade, migration, and disaster, testing what counts as historical knowledge.

Three premises guide the readings that follow:

1. **Language is not neutral**: linguistic registers carry histories of coercion and accommodation; creoles and code-switching index alternative communities of practice.

ISSN 2349-4948

2. **Archives are plural**: boats, glossaries, songs, and tidal geographies function as archives alongside state records.
3. **Form is political**: non-linear temporality, catalogic prose, and documentary insertions are ornaments and instruments that redistribute authority.

***The Shadow Lines*- Memory Against the Cartographic Nation:**

Centered on a Kolkata narrator's recollection of kinship ties spanning Kolkata, Dhaka, and London, *The Shadow Lines* interrogates how borders are imagined and remembered. The novel's structure, assembled from memories rather than chronological narration, performs a critique of what I call the cartographic double bind: national lines promise security yet proliferate violence and amnesia. As contemporary scholarship on decolonization in Ghosh's writing demonstrates, his narratives create "room in their mind for the sense of nationalism against the Eurocentric culture" through the representation of characters' sensibilities that resist colonial frameworks (Mohan 2)

Vernacularization as Method:

Ghosh makes translation palpable: Bengali and Hindi expressions appear without italicized exoticism; their meanings surface contextually through social use, not footnoted authority. This vernacularization as a method accomplishes two decolonizing moves: (a) it refuses the readerly comfort of total transparency, and (b) it recentres local speech communities as epistemic anchors, not mere colour.

Memory's Polycentrism:

The pivotal riot in Dhaka and its reverberations are reconstructed through partial recollections, conflicting accounts, and spatial palimpsests. Family memory, Tridib's stories, Tha'mma's nationalist certitudes collide with the narrator's belated comprehension. The novel thus dislodges the singular nation-state narrative, suggesting that cultural memory emerges as a translocal weave rather than as a bounded national archive. Decolonization here is the recovery of relational histories that "shadow" borders rather than confirm them.

***The Hungry Tide*-Translation, Subaltern Testimony, and Tidal Memory:**

Set in the Sundarbans, *The Hungry Tide* triangulates a cetologist (Piya), a translator/fisherman (Fokir), and a local schoolteacher/translator (Kanai). The novel's central ethical and aesthetic innovation is its mediation across unequal linguistic competencies.

Creolized Narration in the Estuary:

While the narrative is in English, communication depends on gestures, riverine knowledge, and fragments of Bangla folk songs. The creolized narration here is lexical; it is infrastructural: boats, tides, and place-names ("Morichjhãpi") are vehicles of meaning. The text demonstrates how non-propositional knowledge embodied in Fokir's tacit navigation exceeds the archive of scientific English. Decolonization thus

ISSN 2349-4948

entails honouring forms of knowledge that cannot be fully translated into metropolitan discourse.

Tidal Memory and the Morichjhãpi Archive:

By recalling the 1979 Morichjhãpi massacre—absent from many national histories—the novel constructs what I term tidal memory: a memory form attuned to cyclical submergence and revelation. Like the tides that erase and return land, subaltern memory recurs attempts at erasure. This approach aligns with methodological challenges in writing subaltern histories of the Indian Ocean, where "the intense mobility that underpinned society and social transformation on water, land, littoral and river rendered subaltern peoples targets of colonial management and surveillance" (Anderson 503). The novel's interleaving of bureaucratic files, rumours, and oral testimony dramatizes how the politics of memory operates through counter-temporalities that refuse closure.

The Ibis Trilogy- Creole English and the Counter-Maritime Archive:

The Ibis trilogy relocates the center of global modernity from Atlantic paradigms to the Indian Ocean, reframing the nineteenth-century opium economy as a story of indenture, diaspora, and linguistic invention.

Language Politics -From "Standard English" to Laskari Multiverse:

Ghosh's linguistic bravado as Bhojpuri cadences, Hindustani slang, lascar argot, Canton pidgins, and Mauritian Creole performs a decolonial sabotage of monolingual prestige. This approach aligns with recent scholarship on creolization, which emphasizes how "Language Making processes in multilingual postcolonial societies" challenge traditional linguistic hierarchies and create new forms of cultural expression (Krämer et al. 52). Crucially, he does not translate everything, nor does he italicize to signal otherness consistently. The glossarial paratexts and in-text explanations create a readerly apprenticeship: one learns to inhabit a contact language rather than consume it as exotic garnish. This is vernacularization as a method at the maximal scale. The researcher calls the trilogy's narrative voice an estuarine English: a flowing register where converging tongues remake the channel itself. Characters like Paulette, Neel, Deeti, Kalua, and Zachary speak in overlapping idioms that refuse racialized hierarchies of fluency. The effect is to redistribute narrative authority: jokes, oaths, trade terms, and recipes become legitimate carriers of historical meaning.

Building a Counter-Maritime Archive

Ships' logs, manifests, botanical lists, and opium tallies are set alongside songs, tattoos, rumours, and courtroom scenes. Such archive pluralization counters the imperial ledger by incorporating materials typically excluded from historical canons. Recent scholarship on postcolonial oceanic studies demonstrates how "the transnational turn in the humanities has also brought into focus aspects of postcolonial literature that emphasize maritime connections and oceanic networks" (Chandrasekaran and Moorthy 112). The indentured ship becomes an itinerant archive, and the novel an ethnography of circulation. This counter-maritime archive de-centers

ISSN 2349-4948

imperial protagonists and shows how oceanic labour as lascars, coolies, and compradors shaped global capitalism.

Narrative Form as Collective Memory

Serial form across three volumes mirrors the longue durée of commodity flows and diaspora formation. Recurrent motifs, such as the seed, sail, salt, opium, and bind disparate geographies into a mnemonic network. The trilogy thus reimagines memory as collective and logistical, not strictly personal: remembrance travels with routes, cargoes, and creoles.

***Gun Island*- Climate, Migration, and the Future of Decolonization:**

Gun Island extends Ghosh's decolonial project into the Anthropocene, linking Bengali folklore, Italian refugee corridors, and North American fire ecologies. Language politics appears in the friction of field linguistics, Bengali mythic lexicons, and bureaucratic migration-speak; memory politics emerges through myth as archive, where legends forecast ecological catastrophe.

Climate Memory:

The novel treats storms, saline intrusion, and species displacement as memory media: the environment "remembers" extractive histories via altered patterns. This climate memory bridges the human and non-human, asking decolonization to account for ecological debts left by imperial capitalism. Contemporary ecocritical scholarship emphasizes how Ghosh's work offers "a nuanced understanding of the essentiality of decolonial ecological ethics with its emphasis on alternative forms of knowledge that originate from the spaces that have been stifled, restrained, vilified" (Karmakar and Chetty 234). As in *The Hungry Tide*, skilled local knowledge (crab fishers, boatmen) and diasporic expertise (museum workers, translators) collaborate in a new epistemic common.

Mobility and Multilingual Solidarities

Refugee crossings are narrated through polyglot interactions in Bengali, Arabic, Italian, and English, making intelligible the solidarities of the moving. The novel insists that hospitality and interpretation are twinned political acts; interpreters and storytellers become guardians of life. This multilingual approach reflects broader theoretical developments in literary studies, where scholars examine "what it means to know or not know a language, particularly when that language is marked 'foreign'" (Saraceni 78). Decolonization thus expands from redressing colonial memory to rehearsing multilingual futures under climate stress.

Four Concepts for Reading Ghosh's Decolonial Practice

1. **Vernacularization as Method:**

   Ghosh treats the vernacular as content to be translated and as a method for structuring narrative attention. His prose compels readers to practice relational understanding, recognizing limits, and learning through context. This interrupts the colonial habit of effortless legibility.

ISSN 2349-4948

2. **Creolized Narration:**

   Beyond code-switching, Ghosh's narration absorbs the syntax, rhythm, and semantic fields of multiple tongues, producing an estuarine English. This creolization dilates what counts as "literary English" and dismantles residual hierarchies of diction, a formal corollary to social decolonization.

3. **Tidal Memory:**

   Memory in Ghosh is hydrological: it floods, recedes, deposits silt. This concept names a non-linear, recurrent temporality whereby suppressed events (e.g., Morichjhãpi) resurface through rumor, song, or landscape. Tidal memory undermines state-managed closure and keeps unfinished justice in circulation.

4. **Counter-Maritime Archive:**

   The Indian Ocean novels curate an archive anchored in mobility: manifests, recipes, nautical slang, and oral lore. By treating circulation itself as archival, Ghosh contests the terrestrial, capital-letter "Archive" and re-centers the oceanic proletariat as historians of their own movement.

Lexical Democracy in the Ibis Trilogy:

Ghosh's dialogues teem with lascar idioms and Bhojpuri-inflected speech. Curse phrases and work-terms (for rigging, cargo, or cooking) carry narrative weight: they are colour and semantic engines that move plot and reveal social relations. The glossary is a paratextual pedagogy, guiding readers into a speech community rather than policing correctness. This lexical democracy is a decolonizing ethic: no register is inherently subordinate.

The Ethics of Translation in *The Hungry Tide:*

Interpreting between Piya and Fokir, Kanai mediates power. However, the novel repeatedly shows the surplus of the untranslatable gesture, environmental acuity, and affect that resists capture. Ghosh's point is not that translation fails, but that failure is constitutive; acknowledging it is ethically superior to the colonial fantasy of perfect equivalence.

Objects as Memory Nodes in *The Shadow Lines:*

Maps, houses, and street names become mnemonic devices: they trigger palimpsestic recollection that unsettles nationalist teleology. Memory is spatial and relational; its politics lie in how spaces are narrated and by whom.

Myth as Future Archive in *Gun Island*

The Manasa legend functions as an anticipatory memory, a story that remembers risk before it manifests. By suturing folklore to climate patterns, Ghosh remaps the line between "superstition" and "knowledge," a decolonial refusal to rank epistemologies by colonial criteria.

ISSN 2349-4948

Form, Ethics, and Readerly Labor

Ghosh enlists the reader as a collaborator. Paratexts (glossaries, maps), catalogic passages (of plants, cargo, winds), and braided timelines demand readerly labour learning words, tracking routes, and tolerating ambiguity. This labour is ethical training for decolonial reading: to listen across difference without demanding instant clarity; to accept opacity (Édouard Glissant's term) as relational rather than obstructive. The novels thus re-socialize reading away from mastery toward convivial understanding.

Conclusion:

Amitav Ghosh's fiction decolonizes by how it speaks and how it remembers. Through vernacularization, creolized narration, tidal memory, and counter-maritime archives, his novels realign authority away from imperial languages and official histories toward polyphonic, mobile, and ecologically embedded forms of knowledge. Decolonization in Ghosh is not a postscript to nationalism but an ongoing practice of relation, a readiness to let languages mix, archives proliferate, and memories return with the tide.

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