

## Contested Homelands: Geographies of Belonging And Dislocation In Amitav Ghosh's Travelogue Dancing In Cambodia At Large In Burma

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### Abstract

*This paper investigates the complexities of home, belonging, nation, and identity through the lens of Southeast Asian countries and diasporic narratives. Focusing on Amitav Ghosh's "Dancing in Cambodia, at Large in Burma," it examines how he weaves personal accounts and travel experiences into an anthropological exploration. The paper delves into lived experiences within specific geographical and historical contexts, highlighting the fluidity and contested nature of "home" and "belonging." It analyzes how Ghosh navigates diverse notions of nationhood in Southeast Asia, particularly amid extreme isolationist policies in Cambodia during the late 20th century. The paper critically examines the articulation of Third World ideologies and their potential for exclusion and violence, focusing on concepts like cultural authenticity and nationalism. It emphasizes the importance of diasporic voices and diverse perspectives in challenging dominant narratives and understanding historical events like French colonization, Pol Pot's regime, and minority resistance. The paper acknowledges the role of violence and trauma in shaping individual and collective memory, exploring how narratives can function as tools for healing and remembrance.*

**Keywords:** Cambodia, Ghosh, Anthropological exploration, French colonization, Asia, Third World.

### 1. Introduction

The late 20th century was a turbulent time for Southeast Asia. The scars of Western colonization and imperial rule still ran deep, shaping regional politics and national trajectories in complex ways. Nowhere were these scars more evident than in the fractured landscapes of Cambodia and Burma (Myanmar). Ravaged by foreign occupations, civil wars, ethnic violence and even genocide, these nations grappled with painful histories while seeking to forge independent futures after decades of turmoil.

It was against this tumultuous backdrop that writer and anthropologist Amitav Ghosh embarked on an illuminating journey through Cambodia and Burma in the early 1990s. Weaving together journalism, travel writing and scholarly analysis, Ghosh captured intimate glimpses into the lives of ordinary people struggling to rebuild their societies. His resulting work, *Dancing in Cambodia,*

*At Large in Burma,* stands out for its textured portrayals of individuals finding meaning and identity amidst instability. Blending vivid description with critical insight, Ghosh explores the complex interplay between colonial legacies, nationalist aspirations, traumatic memory and resilient culture across fractured communities.

This paper delves deep into Ghosh's multilayered travelogue, teasing out its key themes around belonging, dislocation and contested notions of nationhood against the sweeping tides of history. It analyzes Ghosh's depictions of Cambodia's dance traditions, situating them within the country's attempts at cultural revival and healing in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge genocide. The paper also examines Ghosh's ties to Burma, assessing how his family history fuels a desire to illuminate obscured narratives that counter dominant historical accounts centered on colonial figures. Overall, the paper underscores Ghosh's nuanced, empathetic approach to investigating identity and the politics of representation across porous national borders. It ultimately argues that amidst violence, upheaval and loss, Ghosh finds profound meaning in the resilience of individuals and communities as they navigate the complex terrain of home and nation.

### **The Allure of Elsewhere: Travel, Longing and Fluid Notions of Home**

"Travel does not merely broaden the mind — it makes the mind," remarked Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw. Indeed, the impulse to travel beyond one's familiar horizons holds an enduring appeal tied deeply to human curiosity about people, places and cultures that differ from our own experiences and assumptions. The voyage outwards allow an inner journey inwards; by engaging with diverse landscapes and lives, we can locate ourselves more profoundly amidst the vaster web of humanity.

Amitav Ghosh keenly understands travel's capacity to transform perspective. Much of his nonfiction actively examines the encounter between the self and the foreign, assessing how navigating unfamiliar spaces can reorient one's sense of meaning and belonging. Ghosh investigates the allure of elsewhere through the lens of postcolonial displacement and diaspora. Raised across India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka by a diplomat father, he explores the condition of not wholly belonging anywhere, yet finding fragments of home across different lands. His characters in *The Shadow Lines* ache with "the longing to escape the imprisoning boundaries of nationhood and cultural identity and join the mainstream of human history" (Mukherjee 153).

Indeed, for Ghosh travel becomes a means of escaping restrictive identities imposed by external forces. By wandering far from singular notions of 'home,' one can construct a self freed from homogenizing national or ethnic categories. This sentiment permeates his semi-autobiographical *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*, where he probes the plurality of identity through cross-cultural encounters. Ghosh travels widely to understand places and people with empathy yet distance, an outsider who belongs everywhere and nowhere. His observations in Southeast Asia highlight fluid belonging, conveying people who feel simultaneously at home and estranged whether in ancestral or adopted lands.

Ghosh suggests that the very concept of 'home' loses coherence amidst the tumult of migration, exile and globalization. People cling to shattered pieces of identity and culture even as the changing world transforms their sense of self and community. Through lyrical travel accounts, he explores this fragmentation not as loss but as liberation. By fragmenting narrow identities, we expand our horizons of selfhood. Home becomes manifold — we inhabit temporary homes in multiple locations, belonging both here and there or perhaps nowhere at all. For Ghosh, travel facilitates this unmooring, allowing identity to drift across once-impermeable borders of culture and place.

### **2. Exploring Shared Humanity Amidst Difference**

Travel can foreground difference, inviting critical reflection upon one's own assumptions by encountering radically foreign experiences. The 'shock of the new' compels assessment of why unfamiliar practices provoke particular reactions. Ghosh seizes on these moments of disconnect, diving deeper to unearth fundamental qualities of a shared human condition. He

shifts from confusion to nuanced comprehension by contextualizing behaviors within cultural logic and historical circumstance. This interpretive ethnography ultimately builds empathy, affirming human dignity across even seemingly incomprehensible practices.

Consider Ghosh's account of stumbling upon a Cambodian roadside food stall after Pol Pot's ouster. The proprietress startles him by casually mentioning cooking dog meat. After recoiling instinctively, Ghosh pauses to reflect:

That was my first, unthinking reaction; but then, moments later, I remembered where I was — in a country where people had been reduced to eating insects and roots and even the bark of trees...What right had I to turn up my nose at someone else's food? (Ghosh 27)

Rather than condemn her actions as barbaric, he situates them within the desperate hunger and deprivation afflicting Cambodia post-genocide. Her pragmatic adaptation to crisis suddenly seems reasonable, even as it offends his personal sensibilities. This shift from visceral reaction to thoughtful interpretation epitomizes Ghosh's emphasis on locating foreign behaviors within specific cultural contexts before passing ethical judgement.

Ghosh frequently ponders perplexing phenomena through metaphor and allegory to affirm an underlying, universal essence. In Cambodia, he likens the national obsession with generating good fortune to his native India's astrological culture. Though outward practices differ, the inner longing for stability and prosperity remains constant across humanity. Even radically divergent worldviews ultimately express shared hopes and fears.

Ghosh locates resonances between Southeast Asian religious traditions and Western belief systems to stress cosmological continuity. A Cambodian woman's tiny spirit house homage seems akin to roadside Christian shrines across Southern Europe. Burmese Buddhists' obsession with numerology echoes Pythagoreans' mystical faith in numbers. Everywhere Ghosh wanders, he finds threads of common belief — different yet strangely familiar. This sense of uncanny recognition compels deeper reflection upon what beliefs and rituals reveal about enduring aspects of human nature.

### **Elusive Origins: Tracing the Roots of Cultural Hybridity**

Issues of authenticity, adaptation and exchange permeate Ghosh's depictions of Southeast Asia's complex cultural landscape. He investigates how supposedly 'pure' rituals or practices often reveal hidden histories of blending and reinvention. Through vivid ethnographic accounts, he emphasizes the elusiveness of pinpointing any cultural form's true origins.

In *Dancing in Cambodia*, Ghosh explores the royal Khmer classical dance as a powerful, yet fluid symbol of national identity. This intricate dance form, passed down through elite families across centuries, appears an iconic embodiment of 'authentic' Cambodian culture. However, peering behind the veil of its prestigious heritage reveals surprising foreign infusions altering its style and significance over generations. What began as an animistic village ritual transformed through mixing with Indonesian, Thai and French court styles into a cultural spectacle and political tool. The dance's feet, once planted in folk belief, now conveyed elite power and nationalist sentiment.

To Ghosh, tracing these mutations highlights the inevitability of change amidst the ebb and flow of global forces. Cultural 'purity' remains an illusion, while continual reinvention sustains relevance. Through the embodied movements of Cambodian dancers, he glimpses the footsteps of history, imprinted by shifting aesthetic tastes, religious currents and political needs upon an evolving artform.

In *Burma*, Ghosh investigates his own hybrid heritage as an Indian descending from diasporic lineages, including a Chinese grandfather who settled in Rangoon. This diverse ancestry enriches his sense of identity, linking him to a broader Asian inheritance even as it blurs the boundaries of national belonging. Ghosh suggests that attempts to demarcate singular ethnic lineages appear futile amidst centuries of migration and intermingling. By acknowledging diffuse origins, we can view identity itself as an ongoing process of exchange and adaptation.

### **Confronting Violence, Memory and Trauma**

While partly steeped in lyrical memoir, Ghosh's travelogue never flinches from depicting Southeast Asia's engulfing political violence and despair. The beauty of temples and dances remains haunted by the ghosts of horror endured. In sensitively recounting individuals' experiences of brutality and loss, Ghosh's writing counters the risk of history reducing victims' suffering to mere statistics. He restores dignity through detail, naming specific villages destroyed or lives upended so testimony can redeem their struggle from obscurity.

In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge's utopian visions fueled nearly four years of genocidal bloodshed from 1975-1979. Led by the revolutionary Pol Pot, the regime mercilessly persecuted suspected dissidents and minorities in purging those deemed threats to its agrarian ideals. The educated middle-class faced particular decimation as everything hinting of foreign influence faced elimination. An estimated two million Cambodians perished due to executions, starvation, disease and overwork under the Khmer Rouge's totalitarian rule.

When Ghosh enters Cambodia in early 1993 after the peace process began, the society remains deeply traumatized. Citizens wrestle to comprehend how cruelty erupted from visions of equality, how neighbor turned against neighbor as comrades became butchers. The landscape itself conjures the recent suffering with its prominent absence — once vibrant villages stand deserted; ruined homes litter a silent countryside emptied by mass relocation and death.

Against this backdrop of devastation, the classical Khmer dance that captivated and sustained the Cambodian court for centuries nearly faced extinction. Over ninety percent of the country's practicing artists died during Pol Pot's revolution, despite the regime proclaiming support for indigenous arts. Dance apparently symbolized bourgeois decadence; urban performers faced persecution as enemies of the state. Dance masters who trained through family lineages for generations were beaten, executed or forced into grueling rural labor till they collapsed. The young Pol Pot and his elite comrades had ironically discovered classical Khmer identity through its arts at elite Cambodian schools blending colonial and nationalist curricula. Their monstrous visions corrupted a deep love for tradition into justification for cultural cleansing.

After the Khmer Rouge falls in early 1979, the dance tradition gradually revives through the resilient spirit of survivors determined to reclaim and pass on their heritage. The Ministry of Culture desperately seeks elder dancers practiced in the ancient repertory. Chea Samy, the wife of a prominent Khmer Rouge cadre, emerges improbably from beneath the regime's shadow. Once the premier dancer, her eminence and family ties spared her enough to endure. Though initially placed under house arrest, she persisted in observing rituals and training secretly to keep tradition alive even amidst perpetual terror.

Samy now leads fellow outcasts — orphaned, malnourished or abandoned youths whose talents survived even if their families did not — in slowly resuscitating the classical repertoire. They begin practicing in dilapidated temples, reassembling dance, song and musical composition through shared memory and collective will despite lingering trauma. Each trained movement becomes an act of resilience and remembrance, a revival sprouting from the ashes of cultural destruction. Their sacred art restores beauty and hope from devastation, articulating the nation's enduring grace.

### **Identity Politics: Expressions of Nationalism and Resistance**

A people's heritage artforms often carry profound political resonance. As expressive embodiments of shared history and ideals, they convey powerful messages about belonging, legitimacy and sovereign rights. Ghosh investigates how dance and craft traditions became tools for asserting contested nationalist visions within Southeast Asia's volatile political landscape. He reveals the interweaving of these artforms with complex ideological strands — they turbine charged with identity politics.

In colonial Cambodia, King Sisowath strategically presented Khmer court dance during a 1906 French exhibition to proudly showcase his kingdom's cultural achievements to distant European audiences. The exotic artistic display aimed to strengthen French patronage of his rule by emphasizing Cambodian civilization's long artistic lineage and global merit. However, it also affirmed to citizens that their sovereign equally treasured safeguarding native cultural sovereignty despite close alliances abroad. The corps of elite state dancers touring across Francophone cities embodied these interlocking ambitions. Each elegant gesture communicated essays about continuing autonomy and dignity.

Decades later in 1979, Cambodian exiles — refugees and resistance forces alike — return from the borders to begin resurrecting traditional arts extinguished under Pol Pot's regime. Dance ensembles led by Chea Samy perform in temples where the ancestral spirits' protective presence seems to consecrate their defiant revivalism amidst the violating silence. The refugees embrace these resuscitated forms to reassert their communal bonds and values despite rupture. Through embodied motions resonant with history, they crystallize their enduring nationhood. This act of resuscitating endemic heritage traditions centers cultural reclamation as a means of empowerment and healing. It transforms displaced wanderers back into anchored citizens.

Meanwhile in Burma, artisans sustain ancient craft forms underpinning cultural identity despite decades of internal political turmoil. In villages like Amarapura, famed for its exquisite silk weaving, violent upheavals continually threaten the community bonds and mentorship enabling such specialized artforms to endure. Caught between brutal government repression and militant resistance offensives, these craft sites become casualties of chronic conflict. With storing wealth near impossible due to currency volatility, fine textiles function as easily traded capital to keep communities afloat during instability.

Such artistic heritage holds deep political symbolism — its persistence signals cultural endurance against those seeking to shatter continuity. Just as the Cambodian classical dance embodied the radiant spirit of the nation, the gossamer Burmese silk woven in Amarapura from rare golden lotus threads expresses the country's resilient grace despite raging storms. Generations of weavers gift each thread, each motif, to sanctify this luminous heritage promising rebirth.

### **Dialectics of Power: Expressions of Cultural Supremacy and Genocide**

Cultural glory furnishes political legitimacy and popular authority to the power holder able to command the reservoir of symbolic meaning. The greater the lineage of accumulated prestige pervading an artform, the more its aura glows with significance to affirm sovereign exceptionalism. Possess the dance of gods and goddess, the tapestry of emperors and queens, and the populace will revere your dominion as heaven-favored, predestined through inheriting ancient wisdom. Inferior rivals lack comparable cultural capital to validate their counter-claims. Power thus flows not just through political machinations, but the weight of history made sacred through artistic lineage.

However, while cultural authority girds leadership, it also threatens those in power when expressions counter their interests or control. Then the politicized weaponization of identity turns swiftly from exalting gallantry into rationale for heinous elimination. Rebellious rituals and seditious symbols that venerate alternative orders must face suppression to secure state stability. What rulers once proudly proclaimed heritage masterworks become reclassified as toxic threats. The meaning of dances, songs and colors change swiftly from cherished touchstones to vilified markers of treachery against the regime.

In Cambodia, Pol Pot's forces initially carefully documented classical dance during their conquest, recognizing its importance for posterity even as they prepared banning its practice. However, this small bold gesture acknowledging tradition's depth paled against the maelstrom force of revolutionary maximalism. Fanatic young cadres soon compelled legions of elderly performers into grueling rural communes, where their lack of agricultural skill doomed them.

By distorting sovereignty's meaning into racial purity, the new rulers condemned Cambodia's most acclaimed cultural ambassadors as enemies of the reinvented state. They violently compelled Hong, crumbling with hunger and age in Bosba labor camp, though his mastery once commanded princely courts. They sentenced eminent dance teacher Khun Phirun to execution for hiding his credentials. They forced students to violate their teachers' corpses as proof of re-education's absoluteness. All for the delusion that by shattering continuity with history could year zero utopia emerge.

This perverse cultural rupture marred the revolutionaries more than their victims. As Tuol Sleng prison camp commander Comrade Duch confessed during United Nations trials for crimes against humanity decades later, "We forever destroyed Cambodia's traditional culture that, if properly developed, could have been beautiful...it is heartbreaking." His acts against teachers caused particular remorse.

Such bitterness invades the lingering emotions of Cambodian artists who survived the Khmer Rouge era. They still wrestle to reconcile youthful visions that seduced revolutionary peers towards betrayal against mentors and disavowal of cherished traditions. Cultural scholar Daravuth Ly studied classical dance as a passionate teen member of the Khmer Rouge arts circle dedicated both to the organization and the preservation of indigenous tradition against modernizing corrosion. He helped compile detailed biographies on hundreds of performers before the central party expelled him to rural farms once urban purges began in 1975. Four years enduring quotidian terror while witnessing beloved teachers' destruction haunts Ly as he now works to sustain the same institutions destroyed "by those blinded by power." The emotional complexity reveals a nation still struggling to reconstitute its soul.

### **Confronting Colonial Legacies: Reckoning with Cultural Alterity**

The gravitational waves of European colonialism continue rippling across Southeast Asian politics, identity and knowledge long after formal direct rule ended in the mid-20th century. Its legacies linger through imported infrastructures blending uneasily alongside endemic ones in both landscape and mindset. Foreign frameworks of administration, language and historiography accommodate some regions and interests better than others, sowing disparity and grievance.

In Burma, the economic and cultural axis drastically shifted during over a century of British colonial reorganization geared towards extracting resources. Colonial scholars and soldiers mapped once proudly autonomous villages and principalities onto peripheral provinces administrable from the urban headquarters of imported Indian bureaucrats. They dismissed indigenous hereditary authority and homogeneous worldviews, imposing a fragmented hierarchy favoring foreign enterprise.

The new material capital flowing through export conduits altered consumption patterns and status relations. Guthrie writes, "The book, the boot and the umbrella were probably the three most significant Western items incorporated into Burmese culture under colonialism." Literary tastes moved from court poetry to penny dreadfuls; rough-hewn sandals replaced by European leather boots as footwear signifying progressive wealth and worldliness rather than hereditary rank; parasols shifted from sacred symbols of kingship to ubiquitous accessories across striving middle classes (Guthrie 237). Western commodities redefined models of class and privilege.

The paradoxical legacy of British infrastructure simultaneously integrating Burma while spurring alienation continues today. Networks of rail, steamships and telegraph should theoretically spur connectivity, yet uneven access and control breed resentment. Groups feeling marginalized by foreign systems embrace violent insurgency, shattering communities relying on stability. Ghosh encounters devastated outposts subsisting through the grace of ancient craftsmanship despite squandered resources and regular turmoil from battling camps aiming to capture the state. He highlights the glaring irony that the Kandawgyi Palace hotel boasting

highest colonial luxury in the heart of Yangon faces halls occupied by starving refugees rendered homeless by conflicts fueled partially over inequalities established through colonialism. The refined tea rooms and art galleries of exclusive neighborhoods depend on mass immiseration meters away.

In Cambodia, French overlords strategically patronized the beleaguered arts establishment to deepen cultural dependency and fealty. Directed by Auguste Pavie, the archetypal Orientalist “scholar administrator,” the *École Française d'Extrême Orient* (EFEO) dominated interpreting Angkor Wat’s archaic splendors throughout French Indochina for decades. Its paternalistic Orientalist lens portrayed native custodians as incapable of properly safeguarding heritage without Western intervention. Meanwhile, the *École des Beaux Arts* in Phnom Penh indoctrinated elite Cambodian youth in European aesthetics and technique, alienating them from their artistic lineage’s contexts and forms. Students devoted years emulating French postures while abandoning indigenous ones to signal progress and sophistication.

Covert theater and dance departments at the infamous Lycée Sisowath school channeled Khmer court arts into politicized spectacle supporting French political theater. This institution birthed both the showcased 1906 Paris colonial exhibition troupe and the 1970s Khmer Rouge inner circle that demolished traditional society. Its alienating colonial curricula nurtured raging reformist passions “against the bankruptcy of the entire cultural establishment” through the paradoxical weaponization of Cambodian identity against itself (Ghosh 37). Western institutional frameworks continued channeling systemic violence from colonialism into neocolonial and revolutionary nation building projects alike.

### **The Lure of Cultural Authenticity: Interrogating Notions of Indigenous Purity**

Visions of cultural authenticity frequently fuel nationalist projects struggling to affirm identity within contentious postcolonial landscapes. Movements claim empowerment through reviving practices deemed ‘pure’ expressions of communal history, often portraying them as organic artifacts threatened by foreign influence. However, the political deployment of authenticity as cultural artillery masks complex entanglements between so-called indigenous and exogenous traditions. Distinguishing originally endemic artforms from later assimilations proves impossible amidst continual migration and exchange.

In *Dancing in Cambodia*, Ghosh inspects fantasies of cultural purity by unraveling the Cambodian court dance's hybrid international roots. While cast locally as a pristine ancient tradition nurtured in relative isolation, its choreographic foundations and institutional practices actually blend various external inspirations. The Kingdom of Angkor likely incorporated aesthetic elements from touring Indian ensembles in codifying its animated martial and spiritual folk dances into elite repertoire for appeasing temperamental deities.

When Thai military conquests toppled Angkor in the 15th century AD, many dispossessed court artists fled east to nouveau Khmer principalities where they taught Indianized dance forms to adorn fledgling royal pageantry. Some captives were spared to train the next generation of Thai classical dancers in what Western visitors would eventually distinguish picturesquely as distinct indigenous styles. Movements, musical patterns and costumes diffused fluidly across once more porous borders until hardening nationalist identities recently demanded purification.

Through examining the crystallization of traditions, Ghosh reveals the artifice underlying calls for cultural authenticity. He highlights how deliberate resurrection fuels politicization; the Cambodian government elevates fading village rituals into urgent matters of state heritage to combat alienation and anchor national identity. This paradoxically risks homogenizing inherently decentralized and diffuse practices through institutional formalization. The quest for the authentically Khmer risks effacing ever-shifting endemic diversity through hegemonic preservation agendas.



Ghosh suggests perhaps longing itself continuously reinvigorates cultural expression more than the illusory recovery of any static artifacts from an idealized past. Through his lyrical travel accounts, he conveys culture as always in motion between invention and remembering.

### **Cultural Memory: Art Preserving Social Cohesion Amidst Loss**

Violent ruptures tear communal fabric, leaving individuals struggling to comprehend radical discontinuity in once familiar seas now turned strange by displacement's currents. When home becomes horror, reality's coordinates warp. Trust fractures when death and suffering erupt from within rather than external threats. Survival amidst intense pressure challenges notions of identity, as coping turns persons against values they cherished just yesterday. Extreme traumatic rupture threatens to unmoor psyches from coherent narratives making existence meaningful.

Healing from communal trauma requires reconstituting connections between past and present to regenerate faith in human bonds beyond present chaos. Collective memory sustains identity through reminding communities of shared foundations and ideals that define their essence. Symbolic cultural expressions transmit memory and meaning across generations. The embodied movements that express identity furnish portable vessels for sailing beyond tumultuous storms. Even while fleeing through jungles or tents, refugees carry old songs and dances inside their hearts to sustain communal spirit. Their lineage passes implicitly onto youth absorbing heritage manifestations that conjure ancestral worlds destroyed yet somehow still present through invocation.

In Cambodia, classical court arts preserved cultural memory amidst the ravages of war and revolution. Dancers mentally reviewed thousands of gestures learned through decades of arduous training conducted silently to build bodily intuition transcending reliance on words or scripts. When taking refuge, they silently rehearsed in mind and gesture by night to keep bloodlines alive. The young watched and unconsciously absorbed until maturity allowed participating more actively through imitation and improvisation.

Master musician Arn Chorn Pond performed for torture interrogations in a child prisoner camp until the Vietnamese overthrew Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in 1979. He later led fellow orphans in reviving court songs by pronouncing syllables remembered from elder relatives and monks under a full moon. They lacked contextual understanding but felt profound recognition - an intuitive calling towards reconstituting wrecked lineage. Their humble singing spiraled into the explosive revivalist scene thriving in refugee camps. Banned arts made survival sanctuaries vibrant with resilient culture.

The exiled troupe gathered by Chea Samy relied on collective muscle memory and peer collaboration to slowly reassemble the enormous classical lexicon missing written notation. Each could only initially recall brief segments, building choreographies through integrating fragmentary personal catalogs. By sharing memory's shards, suddenly fuller structures emerged from the shadows of oblivion. Pieces crystallized from tattered sheets of recollection knit together by trusted bonds. This willingness to expose private pain and make public loss for communal integration furnished resilience against trauma's persistence. Their interdependence analogizes Cambodia itself - multiplicities forging identity through exchange.

### **Cultural Geography: Exploring Transnational Affiliations**

While nations demarcate themselves through distinct political and ethnic markers, the cultural landscape reveals more amorphous, ephemeral borders interwoven by migration, commerce and conquest. Gods, foods, festivals and family lineages flow between once neighboring empires in Southeast Asia, bearing civilizational undertones uniting Malay, Siamese and Khmer realms beneath later Christian, Buddhist and Hindu cosmologies dividing them.



Ghosh investigates this regional intercultural fusion during decades traversing Indian Ocean tradescapes. In *Dancing in Cambodia*, he notes festive village altar offerings to neak ta spirit guardians resembling Southern Indian folk ritual deposits. This cultural osmosis epitomizes the Hinduized kingdoms projecting Indianized power and faith across mainland and archipelagic Southeast Asia over 1,500 years through sublime temples and eclectic courts fusing Sanskrit and vernacular cultures. Cambodian classical dance movements even replicate the intricate fingering of temple bas-reliefs depicting episodes from the Indian epic Ramayana about the righteous prince Rama. Through dancing bodies, architectural motifs and everyday practice, the symbolic universe of ancient India continually reinvents itself abroad.

In Burmese borderlands, the intertwining of ethnolinguistic communities undermines attempts to demarcate distinct realms. Ethnic minority Karen villagers in Myawaddy easily converse with cross-border Thai Karen near the Moei River concerning extended clan networks despite recent territorial disputes. Meanwhile in Mandalay, the cultural capital, mosques and Hindu temples signal generations of South Asian diaspora assimilation. This echoes earlier Indianized kingdoms where Theravada Buddhism grafted onto the medieval Hindu-animist order, syncretically blending philosophical precepts and folk customs.

Ghosh's travelogue conveys Southeast Asia's core cultural zone defying decisive theoretical or cartographic fragmentation into separate geo-civilizational spheres. He emphasizes how mundane transactions in marketplaces and homes sustain interrelations through continually diffusing ideas and identities despite shifting political configurations. States may come and go, but the grassroots embrace of hybridity persists.

### **Cultural Translation: Navigating Cross-Boundary Meaning**

Travel immerses sojourners within foreign symbolic spheres where familiar references suddenly lose coherence. Interpretive horizons shift as different phenomena gain significance through alternate organizing logics. The impatient outsider blunders, blind towards things the native sees yet dismissing their worldview that bestows legibility. Bridging incomprehension requires humility and critical reflection concerning the traveler's own assumptions. By recognizing frames that values and empowers specific meanings over alternatives possibilities, the visitor progresses towards enlightened engagement with unfamiliar lifeworld.

Cultural translation thus facilitates comprehension and dialogue through seeking shared terms resonating despite varied cosmologies. Anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt suggests this interpretive process starts by recognizing the outsider's "lack of access" and right to representation while responsibly pursuing ethical engagement (Pratt 7). Travelers must probe their positionality to unpack biases that both enable and inhibit understanding. Self-conscious perception and representation therefore minimizes ignorant projection.

Ghosh enacts cultural translation through sensitively navigating unfamiliar Asian terrains shaped by divergent powers, histories and beliefs. By carefully contextualizing foreign concepts and practices within local worlds rather than his own expectations, he engenders insightful exchange. In Burma, decoding alphanumeric representations requires grasping their esoteric astrological code. Once their mystical functions reveal themselves, ambiguous sidewalk scratches disclose their protective magic safeguarding homes from menacing spiritual forces. Mysterious spirit houses and offerings also emerge as meaningful practices for honoring capricious spirits demanding appeasement amidst Southeast Asia's flux. Rituals managing volatility make sense within a cosmos calibrated differently than Ghosh's secular humanist worldview that might otherwise dismiss such actions as frivolously superstitious. However, openness to alternative cosmologies conveys coherent cultural logics where others might perceive chaos or quaint folkways ripe for modernist correction. Each distinct universe holds its own integrity.

Cultural translation thus requires avoiding the imperialist gaze that typifies foreign landscapes and lives through the hostile lens of incompatibility with European bourgeois models. Within

Burma's sensuous sacred spaces, one must surrender militaristic scout mentality for the flaneur's unhurried rhythm lingering to soak details. This immersive orientation eschews aggressive routes across conquered terrain in favor of meandering wonder that lets unique essence gradually emerge on its own indigenous terms. Such poetic engagement transmits possibilities beyond imposed limitations.

### **3. Whose Story? Issues of Representation and the Travel Writer's Gaze**

The travel writer treads perilous terrain, tasked with sensitively conveying foreign scenes to unfamiliar audiences often harboring problematic assumptions. Western readers particularly approach accounts of distant Eastern lands already filtered through Orientalist frames positioning the "exotic" East as irreconcilably alien, inscrutable and passive. European imperial literature typically depicts it awaiting Western intervention to remedy mystery and volatility holding its denizens back from "progress." The travel writer's unique positionality affords access to deconstruct such harmful biases through experiential accounts underscoring shared humanity beyond exoticization. However, the travel form also risks further distorting foreign lives by carelessly aestheticizing complexity. Balance remains necessary for avoiding both sterile brevity and romanticization when representing cross-cultural encounters.

Ghosh recognizes Orientalist legacies permeate globalized discourse, flourishing even in contemporary Indian society fostering alterity towards fellow Asian cultures deemed not modern or "civilized" enough. Ethnocentric Hindus and Cosmopolitan elites adopt Orientalism's core ideological functions, positioning religious minorities, tribal groups and Eastern/Southeastern neighbors as essentially backwards and passive populations awaiting assimilation or development tutelage from cosmopolitan saviors who embody the properly modern postcolonial state. Such toxic exclusions prime the landscape for ethnic and religious violence contradicting pluralist rhetoric. They require vigilant confrontation.

However, Ghosh also critiques radical postcolonial theorists who condemn all representation of subaltern groups by intellectual elites as furthering Eurocentric hegemony and denying oppressed voices space for self-articulation. He invokes their often privileged Western metropolitan positions against their own prohibitive stances. As an Indian writer ethically committed to illuminating silenced narratives from Asian homelands, Ghosh balances elucidating injustice while celebrating the creativity flourishing amidst external threats to autonomy in Burma's craft villages and Cambodia's performance troupes.

Ghosh acknowledges that despite empathetic intention, his overseas Indian positionality irrevocably shapes the travelogue's perspective. He remains a friendly stranger, wandering through dreams of cultures never fully claimable as his own. This inescapable distance even as an insider to the region guards against totalizing proclamations. By situating observations as personal impressions within esoteric worlds rather than definitive declarations, Ghosh conveys postmodern uncertainty bespeaking travel's ephemeral encounters. He avoids pretending full comprehension, sitting respectfully as story and ritual convey meanings beyond words spoken by hosts. This humility before myriad untranslatable truths underpins the travelogue's episodes, highlighting communication's limits in fostering ethical engagement.

### **4. Conclusion**

Amitav Ghosh's travelogue proves remarkable for illuminating the complex interplay between homelands and exile, memory and violence, cultural rupture and resilience within two little addressed Southeast Asian nations at critical modern crossroads. His lyrically rendered personal encounters convey the trials of ordinary individuals battling to sustain personal dignity and communal heritage amidst the wreckage of idealistic nationalism and revolution. Through investigating dance, myths and craft traditions, he reveals the symbols anchoring collective

identity and agency for populations struggling with displacement and the psychological burdens of survival under rupture.

Ultimately, *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* affirms culture's profound impact in healing and empowerment after devastation. The stories of performers regrouping amongst refugee tents and orphans haltingly pronouncing half-remembered royal lyrics reveal symbolic actions transforming dispersed exiles back into anchored citizens. Resuscitating dance rekindles their social bonds and continuities with history beyond the chaos threatening to erase national identity. Each pirouette pays tribute to ancestors and future generations.

Ghosh rejects condensed historiography reducing nations to timelines of famous battles and kings. Instead he resurrects obscured voices Perlman describes as "lives lost in testimony" — insignificant persons traditionally considered unworthy of attention as lacking relevance to the grand political narrative. Yet they embody the resilient spirit communally conjuring better futures. His travelogue magnifies these unacknowledged struggles, conveying eloquent meaning within humble yet potent attempts at continuity amidst rupture. Their efforts to weave beauty from sorrow exemplifies the creativity sustaining culture despite exploitation and erasure. They turn loss into myth and ritual to redeem today's profanities.

Ghosh ultimately eschews definitive verdicts on such complex dilemmas in favor of highlighting contingent relations through ethnographically situated human stories. Their diverse expressions, for all the pain endured, confirm life's abundance transcending Powers that fail to recognize the sacred everywhere even in calamity's mud. Folk still dance with abandon before dawn so the sun might rise. That shared grace persists despite all.

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