Crossing the Shadow Lines: Essays on the Topicality of Amitav Ghosh's Modern Classic

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RIOTS, CROWDS AND THE COLLECTIVE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S POLITICAL IMAGINATION

From *The Shadow Lines* to *Gun Island*

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ABSTRACT • This article, using the riots in *The Shadow Lines* (1988) as a point of departure, maps a more general system of representations of multitudes within Amitav Ghosh's work. Its implications, in turn, can shed light on Ghosh's relationship with the idea of collectivity, which is more fraught with tensions and ambivalence than it may initially appear. More precisely, I argue that Ghosh's work is deeply concerned with the various ways in which collectivities, masses and gatherings of different kinds can affect, enhance, diminish or threaten individual existences, and tries to find a reconciliation between the collectivity and the individual. As a result of these anxieties, Ghosh tends to represent crowds and multitudes chiefly in two modes: as an anonymous, dehumanized and threatening mass; or as a community of individuals bound together by spontaneous human solidarity. In turn, this tends to exclude from his imaginative horizon certain kinds of collectivities that do not fit in either of the two modes, such as various kinds of explicitly politically engaged movements. Besides *The Shadow Lines* – the moment in which Ghosh lays the foundations of this system of representations –, the article considers other works of fiction and non-fiction – most notably "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi" (1995), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *River of Smoke* (2011) – in order to show how the characteristics of this system have remained consistent throughout Ghosh's career. The point of arrival, finally, is Ghosh's recent work on climate change and migration – *The Great Derangement* (2016) and *Gun Island* (2019) – in which the shortcomings of this system of representations, as regards Ghosh's intervention in current public debates, come to light with particular clarity.

KEYWORDS • Amitav Ghosh; *The Shadow Lines;* Crowds; Riots; Political Imagination; Activism.

1. Introduction: Between the Individual and the Collective

Communal riots are unquestionably a central element of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), which is, in its author's words, "a book […] about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them" (Ghosh 2005b: 201). The second half of the novel, in fact, largely revolves around the gradual revelation of the details of the death of Tridib – the narrator/protagonist's uncle and mentor – at the hands

of a murdering mob in Dhaka, as well as around the protagonist's attempt to make sense of riots from an ethical, political, historical and psychological point of view. While the significance of riots in *The Shadow Lines*, especially in connection to communalism, nationalism and Partition, has been variously explored in the past (see Huttunen 2008; and Roy 2010: 111-129), in this article I would like to suggest that the riots in *The Shadow Lines* can be used as a starting point to map a more general system of representations of crowds and multitudes within Ghosh's work. The implications of this system of representations, in turn, can shed light on Ghosh's relationship with the idea of collectivity, which is more fraught with tensions and ambivalence than it may initially appear.

This ambivalence has recently become more prominent, as Ghosh has put an increased emphasis, at least from a theoretical point of view, on the concept of collectivity. In *The Great Derangement*, his 2016 essay on climate change, Ghosh picks up a quarrel with John Updike about the definition of the novel, taking, as terrain of contention, *Cities of Salt* (1987) by Rahman Munif, already reviewed by Ghosh in his influential 1992 essay "Petrofiction". Ghosh comments on Updike's own review of Munif's book, specifically on Updike's argument that *Cities of Salt* is not a novel. As Ghosh explains, for Updike "the reason why *Cities of Salt* does not feel 'much like a novel' […] is that it is concerned not with a sense of individual moral adventure but rather with 'men in the aggregate'. In other words, what is banished from the territory of the novel is precisely the collective" (Ghosh 2016: 78). Ghosh, on the other hand, rejects the idea that the novel *should* be concerned exclusively about individual moral adventures, and argues *for* the presence of the collective within the territory of the novel: in the context of the climate crisis, this is a crucial aspect of our imagination that we need to recover, because climate change is "in every sense a *collective predicament*" (Ghosh 2016: 80, emphasis mine).

Interestingly, the endorsement of the collective does not necessarily echo Ghosh's previous definitions of his own novelistic practice. Several earlier interviews, on the contrary, put considerable stress on *individual predicaments*. In an interview with Frederick Luis Aldama, he states that "in the end my real interest is the predicament of individuals" (Ghosh and Aldama 2002: 86-87) – as opposed to the tendency of anthropology towards "[making] people into abstractions" (Ghosh and Aldama 2002: 86). Ghosh further expanded the same point in another interview – this time specifying his own approach to historical narratives:

> My fundamental interest is in people – in individuals and their specific predicaments. If history is of interest to me it is because it provides instances of unusual and extraordinary predicaments. […] to me the historical (or non-fictional) aspect of the situation is interesting only insofar as it creates a unique predicament for a character. (Hawley 2005: 6)

It might be easy to frame Ghosh's newly declared interest for "men in the aggregate" and their *collective* predicament as a recent development connected to the climate crisis. However, I think it is more productive to argue that Ghosh's work has *always* presented – and still presents – a tension between the collective and the individual.

More precisely, throughout this essay, I argue that Ghosh's work is deeply concerned with the various ways in which collectivities, masses and gatherings of different kinds can affect, enhance, diminish or threaten individual existences, and tries to find a reconciliation

between the collectivity and the individual. As a result of these anxieties, Ghosh tends to represent crowds and multitudes chiefly in two modes: as an anonymous, dehumanized and threatening mass; or as a community of individuals bound together by spontaneous human solidarity. In turn, this tends to exclude from his imaginative horizon certain kinds of collectivities that do not fit in either of the two modes, such as various kinds of explicitly politically engaged movements. As mentioned, my starting point is going to be *The Shadow Lines* and its riots – the moment in which Ghosh lays the foundations of this system of representations. I then move to other works of fiction and non-fiction – most notably, "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi" (1995), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *River of Smoke* (2011) – in order to show how the characteristics of this system have remained consistent throughout Ghosh's career. My point of arrival, finally, are Ghosh's recent works on climate change and migration – *The Great Derangement* (2016) and *Gun Island* (2019), in which the shortcomings of this system of representations, as regards Ghosh's intervention in current political and public debates, come to light with particular clarity.

2. *The Shadow Lines*: Riots vs. the "Indivisible Sanity"

In *The Shadow Lines*, riots are described, first of all, as a loss of the self. In several instances, the participants in a riot are described as a homogeneous mass, acting as a collective entity which appears mechanical, inscrutable and relentless. A good example is the passage in which the narrator's bus is stopped by a rioting mob in Calcutta. That mob is connoted as a tentacled and snake-like monster that threateningly flails at the protagonist: "Looking ahead through the windscreen, I saw a scattered mob milling around the Circus. As I watched, one limb of the mob broke away from the main body and snaked out towards us. And then I was thrown off my feet as our bus, brakes screeching, came to an abrupt halt" (Ghosh 2005c: 249). It is impossible to distinguish specific individuals within this mob – each of their actions merges into a sinister, collective act.

This point is reiterated with clarity in the novel's final description of mob violence, when May tells the narrator her version of the events. May's account only allows the reader to see Tridib vanishing into the mob and emerging as a corpse, while the crowd scatters:

> the mob dragged him in. He vanished. I could only see their backs. It took less than a moment. Then the men began to scatter. I picked myself up and begun to run towards them. The men had melted away, into the gullies. When I got there, I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They'd cut Khalil's stomach open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they'd cut Tridib's throat, from ear to ear. (Ghosh 2005c: 307)

While the final image of Tridib's corpse allows the reader to surmise how he was killed, the *sight* of the killing eludes the reader. As such, Tridib's death does not have clear, identifiable perpetrators that can be blamed. Therefore, the violence committed on him seems strikingly impersonal. To paraphrase Ghosh's own words from another description in "Petrofiction", the mobs in *The Shadow Lines* are "faceless crowds, a massed symbol of chaos" (Ghosh 2005a: 151).

There is another aspect that is peculiar to Ghosh's representation of riots: they are systematically described as a subversion of everyday life and relationships. Riots are uncanny in Freud's classical sense: they emerge from the familiar and they subvert it into a twisted version of itself. Consistently, the narrator, on the bus, describes how Calcutta, during the riot, turns into a dangerous, unfamiliar, disturbing environment: "We could not recognize the streets we were careering through. We did not know whether we were going home or not. The streets had turned themselves inside out: our city had turned against us" (Ghosh 2005c: 249). More importantly, the riot reveals how "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" (Ghosh 2005c: 250). This subversion can be connected with the suppression of individuality, because the self, during a riot, is equally estranged from itself – it morphs into a different being, controlled by the multitude. The narrator, in framing the riots as uncanny and as a suppression of the self, seems to be espousing classical crowd psychology that sees rioting as a kind of frenzy – a surrendering of one's rational capacity to mindlessness – and the rioting crowd as an "amorphous, monolithic and pathological entity" (Scott and Drury: 2017, 11).[1]

If riots are an uncanny subversion of normalcy, it is something common, mundane and familiar that the narrator elects as their counterpoint. He defines "the madness of a riot [as] a pathological inversion, but also therefore a reminder of that *indivisible sanity* that binds people to each other independently of their governments" (Ghosh 2005b: 282-283, emphasis mine). He provides a concrete example of this "indivisible sanity" when he mentions how the various religious and ethnic groups of Kashmir managed to stand united in a "spontaneous show of collective grief" (Ghosh 2005b: 276) in the occasion of the theft of the sacred relic from the Hazratbal mosque – the event that had sparked riots all over the Subcontinent in 1964, including the one in which Tridib had been killed. Although "there were innumerable black-flag demonstrations, every shop and building flew a black flag, and every person on the streets wore a black armband", the narrator remarks how "in the whole of the valley there was not a single recorded incident of animosity between Kashmiri Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs (Ghosh 2005b: 276-277). What this passage illustrates, therefore, is a different mode in which people can gather as a collective entity, in a moment of solidarity, tolerance and religious syncretism.

While the marches in Kashmir are explicitly framed as the diametrical reversal of the communal riot, there are other examples in the novel of the "indivisible sanity" that binds people together. In the section about Tridib and his family's stay in London during World War II, both the narrator and other characters lay significant stress on the way the Londoners acted towards each other in wartime. It is Mayadebi, Tridib's mother, that first discusses this with Alan Tresawsen, the brother of her host Mrs. Price:

[1] For an alternative, more recent psychological interpretation of crowd behaviour that rejects the idea of the mindless, irrational, pathological crowd, see Stott and Drury (2017) and Hopkins et al. (2016).

> Well, [Mayadebi] said, laughing, the couple of months she had spent in London had been so exciting – the atmosphere had changed so dramatically […]. Everyone was so much nicer now; often when she and Tridib were out walking people would pat him on the head and stop to have a little chat with her; the shopkeepers would ask her how her husband was, and when he was to have his operation. But it wasn't just her – everyone was being friendly with everyone else; why, just that morning his sister, Elisabeth [Mrs. Price], had said that old Mrs. Dunbar who lived down the road had actually been civil for the first time in living memory…
> Yes, [Alan] said, that's true – there's a kind of exhilaration in the air.
> Yes, that's the right word, said Mayadebi: exhilaration. I've been lucky, I've been able to watch England coming alive. (Ghosh 2005b: 81-82)

The protagonist shares this exhilaration: when he arrives in London, years later, he expresses his desire to experience England as it was during the war – he wants "to know England not as *I* saw her, but in her finest hour" (Ghosh 2005b: 71, emphasis in the original). What Mayadebi is describing – and the protagonist is fantasizing about – is the forging of a collective identity that, unlike the riot, is not a diversion from or a perversion of everyday relationships, but rather their enhancement. It is a process of community-building that is rooted in everyday life, energizing it with tolerance and solidarity. At the same time, within this process, the individual is not smothered or erased by the multitude. Before Mayadebi's description of the Londoners, the narrator introduces – and speaks at length of – a number of characters, juxtaposing them to the collective upheaval of solidarity, as if to strike a balance between collective and individual dimension: the reader is introduced not only to Alan Tresawsen, but also and his friends Dan, Mike and Francesca Halévy. This group of friends represents a small, politically active and joyful community, which the narrator sets as representatives of England "in her finest hour".

The Shadow Lines, therefore, presents the reader with two models: the mass as mindlessness, which erases individuality in a pathological and often violent distortion of everyday life and relationships; and as a hopeful sense of collectivity that spontaneously and organically *emerges* from everyday life and relationships, in which individuals are still visible. These are Ghosh's principal modes of representing crowds, and, albeit with variations and specificities, are ubiquitous in his work.

3. Crowds, Violence and (thick) Descriptions

Each of Ghosh's two main modes of depicting "men in the aggregate" has a specific relationship with violence. Ghosh's seminal essay on violence, "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi", may help to clarify this point. *The essay* is tightly linked to *The Shadow Lines*, as it is focused on the event that prompted Ghosh to write the novel in the first place: the 1984 riots in Delhi targeting the Sikh community after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. In the conclusive part of the essay, Ghosh reflects on how a writer should talk about violence "without reducing it to mere spectacle" (Ghosh 2005b: 201). This involves avoiding a gory (and aestheticizing) representation of violence, as it happens when journalism, cinema or literature linger in "the bloody detail or the elegantly staged conflagration that closes a chapter or effects a climax" (Ghosh 2005b: 202). Ghosh's

response is that writers, to provide an ethical narrative of violence, should focus (also) on the *resistance* to it.

More specifically, Ghosh argues that:

> My experience of violence was overwhelmingly and memorably of the *resistance* to it […]. What I saw at first hand […] was not the horror of violence but the *affirmation of humanity*: in each case, I witnessed the risks that perfectly *ordinary people* are willing to take for one another. […] The truth is that the *commonest response to violence* is one of repugnance and that a significant number of people try to oppose it in whatever way they can. That these efforts rarely appear in accounts of violence is not surprising: they are too *undramatic*. (Ghosh 2005b: 202, emphasis mine)

This passage is one of the building blocks of Ghosh's humanism and poetics. Ghosh argues that the resistance to violence is both natural and common, it is carried out by ordinary men and women and often takes "undramatic" rather than spectacular forms. Human beings, therefore, are instinctively oriented towards opposing violence and supporting each other, upholding everyday relationships of solidarity. The "indivisible sanity", in other words, ultimately binds them together, at least as long as they are not compelled by external forces like divisive or supremacist ideologies. These considerations, on the other hand, have consequences for literary representation: a writer, Ghosh argues, should try to "find a form – or a style or a voice or a plot – that could accommodate both violence *and* the civilized willed response to it" (Ghosh 2005b: 202). I would argue that this means finding a form that, on the one hand, prevents the spectacularization of violence by avoiding a graphic, detailed or obsessive representation of violent acts, and that, on the other hand, describes – this time, at length and with abundance of details – the widespread, spontaneous resistance that human beings put up against violence.

The two broad representational strategies that Ghosh recommend for "violence *and* the civilized willed response to it" can also be attached to the forms of representation that Ghosh employs for the two different forms of multitudes that I identified in the previous section. In *The Shadow Lines*, riots are described as fundamentally shapeless, chaotic, to be visualized only through several layers of mediation or through fragmented images. This is consistent with their nature as an amorphous mass where individuals disappear, but also in line with Ghosh's idea of de-spectacularizing violence while providing a testimony to it. Tridib's death needs to be recounted – in fact, it structures the entire novel – but, alongside the riot that causes it, it can only be "[described] at second hand" (Ghosh 2005c: 280) by other characters (the protagonist's father, his uncle Rob, May), not by the narrator, and through narrative techniques that reject a direct description of violence (such as Rob's account, which is actually the retelling of a recurring nightmare about the day of Tridib's death).

Events like the marches in Kashmir or the collective solidarity of the Londoners, instead, require realistic, detailed, imaginatively rich descriptions that do justice to the way communities and individuals help and support each other as part of their everyday life, or engage in active, spontaneous and natural resistance to violence. Creating this kind of description can be considered one of the primary tasks of Ghosh's art of fiction. Mark Frost argues that Ghosh's chief interest lies in the description of "a total picture of a place

and its time, the landscape, the clothes, the languages" (Frost 2016: 1538), in what he calls, after Clifford Geertz, thick descriptions.[2] In a similar vein, Alessandro Vescovi, elaborating on a concept presented in *The Shadow Lines* – the idea of 'imagining with precision' that the narrator sees as Tridib's cardinal lesson[3] – states how Ghosh's fiction is animated by the idea that historical data must be located in an imaginatively vivid context to become knowledge (Vescovi 2011: 136). I would like to argue that such features of Ghosh's style and poetics are activated when he describes instances of collectivity in which individuals can express themselves and that enable the unfolding of everyday relationships and of bonds of solidarity, as opposed to descriptions of violent crowds (or crowds affected by violence) which are instead represented through various stylistic or narrative forms of mediation and fragmentation.

We shall now consider two examples of this recurring, dichotomic opposition between the two typologies of multitude, the two representational strategies attached to them, and their different relationships with violence. The first one is the very last passage of *In an Antique Land*, where Ghosh juxtaposes a moving reunion between himself and a group of Egyptian friends with images and tales of collective violence in Iraq. On the one hand, the reunion is the culmination of an entire volume of ethnographic portraits of the Egyptian *fellaheen* and their environment, and is populated with familiar faces to whom the reader has been gradually introduced throughout the narrative. Thick description and relationships of solidarity and friendship are, once again, matched. On the other hand, this reunion is haunted by the spectre of violence, which takes the form of images, of anonymous crowds, either of perpetrators or of victims of violence. Isma'il, one of Ghosh's friends, tells a gruesome tale of how, while he was working in Baghdad, a mob had descended upon a crowd of Egyptians who were celebrating a football victory, killing several of them. Later, Ghosh and his friends gather around a television screen to watch the dramatic exodus of the Egyptian migrants escaping from Iraq, due to the imminent

[2] The classical point of reference for the concept of thick description is Geertz's 1973 essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" (Geertz 2000), although Geertz himself borrows it from philosopher Gilbert Ryle. With this term, Geertz means a description of an event within a given culture that, far from simply describing what it is happening from a factual point of view (as in a 'thin' description), includes all the possible interpretations of that event within that culture, including possible misreadings and parodies; and that in turns allows the anthropologist to sketch "a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which [all the possible meanings of the event] are produced, perceived and interpreted, and without which they would not […] in fact exist" (Geertz 2000: 7). Similarly, Ghosh's descriptions of cultural realities generally make sure that readers not only visualize gestures and events, but are also able to decode their (various) meanings within that given cultural context (if not immediately, in the course of the narrative).

[3] "Among other things, Tridib was an archaeologist; he was not interested in fairylands: the one thing he wanted to teach me, he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision" (Ghosh 2005c: 29).

outbreak of the First Gulf War. They attempt to locate Nabeel, another friend that had moved to Iraq and is now missing, but to no avail: “We were crowded around the TV set, watching carefully, minutely, looking at every face we could see. There was nothing to be seen except crowds: Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History” (Ghosh 1992: 353). Once again, there is a clear connection between an anonymous, faceless, dehumanized crowd – in which no individual, including Nabeel, can be identified – and the enacting of violence – committed in this case, *against* the crowd. Collective violence – inflicted or endured – defines the last pages of the book, but, once again, it appears through a second-hand description of a riot and through the fragmented images of a television news reportage.

The second example of the dichotomy between the two types of crowd and styles are Robin Chinnery’s different descriptions of Fanqui-town, the busy foreign enclave of Canton, in *River of Smoke*. In his letters to Paulette Lambert, the painter offers a minutely precise description of the place, stressing the ethnic diversity and chaotic vitality of the place, providing vivid sketches of both individuals and groups. Smitten by Fanqui-town, Robin repeatedly expresses his desire to paint a monumental scroll that captures the layered, multicultural life of the enclave – an apt metaphor for Ghosh’s own enterprise. Ultimately, however, the letters become Robin’s *only* portrait of Fanqui-town in its multicultural splendour, as the scroll is never painted: Robin is forced, like the other Europeans, to leave Canton as the opium crisis intensifies. What he does produce after leaving, however, is a series of paintings of Fanqui-town being burnt down by the fire caused by a riot. The paintings are actually the rendering of a recurring nightmare that keeps coming back at him, which in turn accurately predicts the way Fanqui-town will be destroyed a few years later.

It could be argued that Ghosh’s art echoes Robin’s predicament: its mimetic, enthusiastic representation of everyday life in a variety of times and places – and, more importantly, of the people that inhabit those realities – is haunted by the potential for violence that can emerge from those very same collectivities and spaces. Ghosh celebrates the former, and does so in detailed, imaginatively vivid thick descriptions; but he is also ethically compelled to represent the latter when it manifests itself. He does so, however, in a mediated, fragmentary form – in this case interposing dreams (or rather, nightmares) between his readers and the violent crowd that burns Fanqui-town to the ground.

4. The Responsibilities of Joining and Humanism

“The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi” is crucial for another reason: it introduces the idea of ‘joining the crowd’ as an ethical dilemma. In the essay, Ghosh describes how, in the aftermath of the 1984 riots in Delhi, a march was being formed to protest against the outbreak of violence. Normally not keen on joining this kind of gatherings, Ghosh refers to a passage from V.S. Naipaul to explain his feelings towards such events up to that point:

> In his incomparable prose, Naipaul describes a demonstration. He is in a hotel room somewhere in Africa or South America; he looks down and sees people marching past. To his surprise, the sight fills him with an obscure longing, a kind of melancholy; he is aware

> of a wish to go out, to join, to merge his concerns with theirs. Yet he knows he never will; it is simply not in his nature to join crowds. (Ghosh 2005b: 197)

However, this time, Ghosh joins the protest march "without a second thought" (Ghosh 2005b: 198). Joining a crowd, Ghosh argues, is imperative in moments of civic and political crisis, even for writers: "Writers don't join crowds – Naipaul and so many others teach us that. But what do you do when constitutional authority fails to act? You join and in joining bear all the responsibilities and obligations and guilt that joining represents" (Ghosh 2005b: 202).

These passages encapsulate many of Ghosh's ambivalent attitude towards multitudes. Crowds are, indeed, attractive: they promise a sense of community that individuals, on their own, cannot achieve. They are also, at times, a political necessity. But, while affirming the ethical necessity to join crowds, Ghosh, intriguingly, cannot help conveying a sense of lingering uneasiness towards that act of joining – reminding his readers that there are "responsibilities and obligations and guilt" to be faced in this act. "Guilt" is the most intriguing term, because it implies that there is an inevitable element of regret in every form of joining. This could be reasonable for someone who joins a riot or any form of violent crowd, but it is curiously out of place and overly dramatic in a context that focuses on the importance of collective action.

The reason for Ghosh's ambivalence, I would argue, is that the neat distinction between the two types of crowds that we have sketched so far can become, at times, dangerously blurred. A passage in *River of Smoke* may help clarifying this. The passage revolves around Neel, the Bengali *zamindar* who has taken shelter in Canton to elude the British authorities. Drunk and overexcited – hence already in a state of psychological alteration – Neel joins a riot that breaks out as a protest against the execution of an opium dealer. This passage allows us to experience Ghosh's understanding of the psychology of riots from the perspective of a participant:

> Neel too was shouting obscenities now. His voice was no longer just his own; it was the instrument of a multitude, of all these men around him, these strangers who had become brothers – there was no difference between his voice and theirs, they had joined together and the chorus was speaking to him, telling him to pick up the stone that was lying at his feet, urging him to throw it, as the others were doing – and there it was, one among a hailstorm of stones and bottles, flying across the Maidan, hitting the soldiers on their helmeted heads, raining down on the mandarin in his tent. (Ghosh 2011: 378-379)

Adopting the perspective of someone who is allowing himself to be involved in collective violence, the passage shows that joining a riot, that "amorphous, monolithic and pathological entity" waiting to engulf and destroy the observer, might be described, with a shift of perspective, in terms of shared enthusiasm towards merging with a greater whole. The loss of the individual self, which characterizes the riot, is clearly present, as Neel surrenders himself to the multitude, but while *The Shadow Lines* always puts the reader in the position of observing this process in its clear, undisguised horror, here the reader gets to experience Neel's perception of a genuinely exhilarating experience, a

moment of shared fellow-feeling with newfound “brothers”, which prevents him to fully realize the violent nature of his actions.

This passage allows us to spell out one of the crucial relationships between the individual and the collective in Ghosh’s fiction, tightly connected to Ghosh’s anxiety towards the “responsibilities and obligations and guilt that joining represents”: individuals, in Ghosh’s fiction, are often confronted with multitudes of various kinds, and asked to respond to these multitudes, either by rejecting or joining them. Their personal predicament, in many cases, involves choosing which community, which form of “men in the aggregate”, they want to join, and why. This choice is never easy, as misjudging the nature of the community you are joining might mean becoming complicit in actions that you might not agree with (at least, at first) – most notably, but not exclusively, violence. This, however, is also Ghosh’s own predicament as a writer and public intellectual. Ghosh tries to exorcise the possibility by allowing his writing to actively celebrate multitudes only when they can be understood through the humanist ethos – the “affirmation of humanity” – that he introduced in “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi”. Another way to put this is that Ghosh celebrates multitudes only when he perceives them as wholly unsullied by any form of divisive ideology – cultural, political or religious – and, on the other hand, tends to downplay any possibility for a political framing of multitudes if he can rather work within a humanist, universalist framework based on spontaneous solidarity.

An exemplary case of this operation is the narrative about the settlers on the island of Morichjhãpi in *The Hungry Tide.* These refugees, in the novel, clash with the Indian authorities to defend their right to occupy a piece of land in the Sundarbans – and are ultimately massacred by goons hired by the government. This is possibly the most extended description of a popular movement in Ghosh’s fiction. However, I would argue that he has allowed his fiction to engage at length with this historical episode because it can legitimately be framed as a struggle for fundamental human needs (food, land, a home) detached by any political ideology or programme – a pure humanist struggle for the “affirmation of humanity”, as it were. There are several moments in which this framing is established, and many come from Nirmal, the elderly teacher who describes the events unfolding in Morichjhãpi in his journal and quickly becomes passionate about the fate of its inhabitants. While watching the refugees in protest, he frames theirs “shouts of defiance” as an existential cry on behalf of humankind:

> the people in the boat [the refugees in Morichjhãpi] began to shout in unison, “*Amra kara? Bastuhara*. Who are we? We are the dispossessed.”
> How strange it was to hear this plaintive cry wafting across the water. It seemed at that moment, not to be a shout of defiance, but rather a question being addressed to the very heavens, not just for themselves, but on behalf of a bewildered humankind. Who, indeed, are we? Where do we belong? (Ghosh 2004: 254)

Another pivotal moment in this humanist framing is when Kusum, one of the refugees, laments the persecution of the authorities and voices out what she and the other inhabitants of the island stand for:

> it seemed to me that this whole world had become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No one could think this is a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. (Ghosh 2004: 262)

Thus framed, this is a struggle that ignites Ghosh's literary imagination. This is a multitude that can be joined (as Nirmal does), and write about (as Ghosh does), without compromising one's own individual self: rooted in a shared experience of humanity, the multitude ultimately reveals itself to be not an other, which is to be joined by surrendering the self, but a mirror of the individual.

5. Conclusion: *The Great Derangement, Gun Island* and the Limits of Ghosh's Political Imagination

Guided by a humanist framework, Ghosh's work has systematically juxtaposed an image of "faceless" crowd embedded in violence with communities of ordinary individuals that resist that violence by upholding human solidarity. This dichotomy in the representation of crowds, however, leaves Ghosh's art of fiction unequipped to represent other multitudes. I want to focus here on political collectivities in protest, asking not for "the affirmation of humanity" in elegiac or joyful tones, but for systemic and radical change in righteous anger and political self-awareness. This lack of representation, I argue, is particularly relevant for the last phase of Ghosh's production – the essay *The Great Derangement* and the novel *Gun Island.* This phase, on the one hand, represents a moment of remarkable public engagement for Ghosh, who has tackled the global crisis of climate change and connected it (in *Gun Island*) to the predicament of contemporary migrants. Neel Mukherjee argues, in a review of *The Great Derangement*, that "at a time when the idea of the *engagé* intellectual is unfashionable and in full-blown retreat, here is a book that triumphantly announces its return" (Mukherjee 2016). As noted at the beginning of the essay, this is also a moment in which Ghosh has explicitly stressed the importance of recuperating a sense of the collective. Ghosh's political approach in this phase, however, appears more problematic if we look at it through the lenses of Ghosh's system of representations of crowds and multitudes that I have been sketching so far.

A noticeable aspect of both books is that, while discussing the politics of climate change and the migrant crisis, they offer a rather limited representation and a narrow understanding of popular and political movements. *The Great Derangement* ends with the recommendation that secular, activist movements should join forces with people of faith to create enough political momentum on climate change. Apart from this aspect, however, the discussion of popular movements that emerges from the book is limited to a specific form of criticism: Ghosh accuses modern activism to be focused on "an exercise in personal expressiveness" (Ghosh 2016: 131); and, in particular, he quotes a passage by Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* to voice the idea that, in a context of general disempowerment of the public sphere, a march or a demonstration is "little more than an orgy of democratic emotion, an activist-themed street fair, a real-world analogue

to Twitter hashtag campaigns: something that gives you a nice feeling, says you belong to a certain group, and is completely divorced from actual legislation and governance" (Scranton 2015: 62). Activism, for Ghosh, lacks a genuine collective dimension – he considers it as trapped in an individualizing imagery and in an obsession with personal self-expression. The problem Ghosh had with John Updike's conception of the novel and the role of the collective in literature – the fact that it is framed as an "individual moral adventure" – reappears, for Ghosh, in the realm of (popular) politics.

In *The Great Derangement*, however, there is little attempt to imagine which form a new political collectivism should take to avoid the form of "the individual moral adventure" that contemporary activism allegedly embraces; and there seems to be little trust in the fact that such re-imagining may emerge from activism itself. Moreover, there is also much that Ghosh leaves out in his account that could have balanced the image of the "activist-themed street fair" as the symbol of contemporary grassroots politics. As sci-fi writer Vandana Singh argues, Ghosh should have "looked at the history of social movements in general and their potential for engendering systemic change, and then examined climate justice movements in that context" (Singh 2017). Singh, in particular, argues that the role of indigenous peoples over the world deserves a special mention because "not only has indigenous resistance stopped or stalled fossil fuel projects, but the experience of peoples from the Dongria Kondh in India to the Standing Rock Sioux in the US reveals the brutal face of industrial civilization" (Singh 2017). Indigenous activism, therefore, provides examples of "alternative ways of thinking and being" that could also be used as a starting point for the "wide, sweeping infrastructural changes" that we need to survive climate change (Singh 2017). My point is that Ghosh's lack of engagement with the history of popular movements, conjoined with a rather pessimistic dismissal of the possibility of grassroots politics, is indicative of some limits of Ghosh's political imagination as regards the representation of multitudes, especially when dealing with crowds and communities that actively engage in participatory politics and oppositional struggles.

Those limits, however, are consistent with the system of representations of crowds and collectives discussed in this article, and it can be explained through it. Ghosh has always been very cautious when it comes to representing crowds that actively and self-consciously participate in a political struggle: the spectre of the "amorphous, monolithic and pathological entity" of the riot, hiding within any exhilarated crowd, prevents Ghosh from lending his imagination to multitudes that cannot be articulated within the humanist framework that he is comfortable with. This, however, posits serious limits to his intervention in the political issues of the present, as well as to his desire to recover a collective aspect in novelistic practice. So far, his strategy to find a middle ground between the individual and the collective has been to conceive multitudes that are rooted in everyday relationships, in solidarity, and express their "undramatic", spontaneous resistance to violence by upholding their belonging to a common humanity and opposing divisive politics and ideologies. While this position is not incompatible with the effective literary representation of *some* struggles (as *The Hungry Tide* shows), it is not an effective framework to give voice to a whole range of contemporary (or past) protest movements, which may employ a rhetoric of forceful confrontation, lay emphasis on breaking the flow

of everyday life, are often a far cry from being "undramatic" and spontaneous, and are involved in complex, historically stratified debates about politics, strategies, tactics, economics and ethics that cannot be reduced to "the affirmation of humanity". It should be underlined that this lack of representation exists irrespective of Ghosh's support for the political causes or positions espoused by activists or popular movements: it simply shows that these movements are outside his literary imaginative horizon.[4]

Such an imaginative gap is blatant in *Gun Island.* This ambitious novel, in which Ghosh variously intertwines the climate crisis, the life-stories of migrants coming to Europe, and a reflection on the limits of rationality and secularism, reaches its climax precisely in a stand-off between different types of crowds, on the Mediterranean Sea. As a migrant ship is approaching the Italian coast, two groups of activists rush to meet it: a mob of right-wing activists whose aim is to prevent the ship from landing, and a number of activists that want to welcome it and bring the migrants to safety. Neither group is particularly remarkable, but it is striking how the pro-migrants activists, in particular, mostly limit themselves to shout a few rather generic slogans and to have a short and inconsequential discussion about violent and non-violent tactics, before the actual resolving mechanism of the novel is activated. Following the apparition of a "storm of living beings" (Ghosh 2019: 307) – birds and cetaceans – that surrounds the migrant ship and swirls around it in a marvellous spectacle, the Italian admiral in charge of the situation decides to ignore his orders and let the migrants in. While the episode is meant to provide the novel with a hopeful conclusion, it is significant that such hope comes from the individual decision of an enlightened member of the military, and, on a symbolic level, from an arguably miraculous, non-human apparition. Notably, it does not come from a collective, popular effort to make the authorities accountable for either the migrant or the environmental crisis. *That* kind of narrative of a collective force, however, would step outside the poetics that Ghosh's work is comfortable with as regards the representation of crowds, and that has been set rather stably since *The Shadow Lines.* Held back by a deeply-felt ambivalence towards collectivities that vocally push for political action – arguably emerging from the experience of riots at the heart of *The Shadow Lines* – Ghosh's fiction prefers not to imagine that kind of crowds with adequate precision.

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[4] Recent examples of works, both in fiction and non-fiction, that do engage imaginatively with protest movements, specifically with environmental activism, are Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) and Naomi Klein's essay *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (2014). Powers' novel, which describes the lives of nine characters defined by their relationship with trees, also depicts a complex portrait of a group of environmental activists, which several of the protagonists end up joining. Powers manages to describe in detail their predicament, their idealism, their shortcomings and their difficult and sometimes questionable choices, while, at the same time, never letting the culprits of environmental devastation off the hook. Klein's book, on the other hand, while providing a detailed analysis of the historical events and ideologies that engendered the current climate crisis, is noticeable for its extensive cavalcade through the history of a vast number of environmental movements around the world – both indigenous and otherwise, both Western and non-Western.

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