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Crisis, Combat and Culture: Reading Ghosh's *Dancing in Cambodia* in 2022

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ABSTRACT

Twenty years have passed since the publication of Amitav Ghosh's non-fictional anthology *Dancing in Cambodia, at Large in Burma* when this is being written – a slightly less popular one as compared to other non-fictional works like *In an Antique Land* (1992), *Countdown* (1999), *The Imam and the Indian* (2002), *The Great Derangement* (2016) and *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021). That human kind has proved itself probably the 'fittest' to survive in the history of evolution in the past decades is unquestionable; questions only pertain to the ways and means it has used to attain the unsurmountable position that it presently holds in the 'Great Chain of Being'. The questions pertaining to the stupendous repercussions of an unceasing thirst for material progress and power are as pertinent in 2022 as they were during colonial times and before. They seem only magnified as the world stands spectator to the grim realities of the evacuated "unreal cities" of Ukraine, decimated into "heaps of broken images" by the Russian troupes.

Such crises pose serious challenges to human resilience and questions about the role of art, literature and cultural artefacts in society. Ghosh has responded to such man-made crises in his non-fictional works as in his novels. The present paper would try to look at how *Dancing in Cambodia* reaffirms the identity of a civilization in shatters and show its resilience through the medium of art.

Key words: Ghosh, *Dancing in Cambodia*, crisis, culture, art, resilience

"...that other infinitely more important reality: the fact that they knew; that even walking down that street, that evening, they knew what was coming--not the details, nor the timing perhaps, but they knew, all four of them, that their world, and in all probability they themselves, would not survive the war. What is the colour of that knowledge? Nobody knows, nobody can ever know, not even in memory, because there are moments in time that are not knowable." (Ghosh *The Shadow Lines*)

"The truth is, sir, that men do what their power permits them to do. We are no different from the Pharaohs or the Mongols: the difference is only that when we kill people, we feel compelled to pretend that it is for some

higher cause. It is this pretence of virtue, I promise you, that will never be forgiven by history.” (Ghosh *Sea of Poppies*)

Twenty years have passed since the publication of Amitav Ghosh’s non-fictional anthology *Dancing in Cambodia, at Large in Burma* when this is being written – a slightly less popular one as compared to other non-fictional works like *In an Antique Land* (1992), *Countdown* (1999), *The Imam and the Indian* (2002), *The Great Derangement* (2016) and *The Nutmeg’s Curse* (2021). That human kind has proved itself probably the ‘fittest’ to survive in the history of evolution in the past decades is unquestionable; questions only pertain to the ways and means it has used to attain the unsurmountable position that it presently holds in the ‘Great Chain of Being’. The questions pertaining to the stupendous repercussions of an unceasing thirst for material progress and power are as pertinent in 2022 as they were during colonial times and before. They seem only magnified as the world stands spectator to the grim realities of the evacuated “unreal cities” of Ukraine, decimated into “heaps of broken images” by the Russian troupes.

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***Dancing in Cambodia, at Large in Burma* (2002)**

Dancing in Cambodia, at Large in Burma is a short book containing basically five travel-narratives. They are real-life stories, “first-hand accounts” about people whom Ghosh had met and interviewed during his stay at those places. *Dancing in Cambodia* is based on Ghosh’s visit to post-Khmer Rouge revolution Cambodia in 1993; *Stories in Stone* about the iconic temple of Angkor Wat as a symbol of cultural pride for Cambodia. *At Large in Burma* was written during his visit to the country in 1995-96 and shows Burma’s struggle for democracy under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi. *The Town by the Sea* is about his visit to post-2004 tsunami Andaman and Nicobar Islands, while *September 11*, the fifth narrative is about the catastrophe of 9/11 attacks of America in 2001.

The narratives blend literary style of story-telling and fiction with that of historical writing and journalistic writing. Each section can be read at multiple levels: simply as a fictional story, simply as a real-life story, as history of events, as a collective history or anthropological case-study of a race or a people, as a political history narrating the rise and fall of ideologies, as well as a study of how a civilization collapses and rises back from ashes. Each of the stories is also about the psyche of individuals who, at a crucial moment, took decisions that affected the lives of a whole community or race of people.

The plot of *Dancing in Cambodia* comprises two parallel sub-plots – one in the past, the other in the present, (and the third person narrator, Ghosh himself, keeps switching between the two) one in 1906 and the other in 1992-93. Ghosh juxtaposes two images of the same nation separated by almost eight decades. The narrative begins with the description of Cambodian classical dancer-troupes landing in Marseille, France at the *Exposition Coloniale* in June 1906 under old Sisowath, the virtually powerless Francophile king of French-colonized Cambodia, for whom landing on the soil of Europe and attending the grand exhibition was “the fulfilment of a lifelong dream”. (Ghosh 1) Nevertheless, the colourful regalia of the Cambodian Khmer classical dancers, inheritors of more than a thousand years-old dancing tradition, and the elegant princess Soumphady of Cambodia did seem exotic to the Europeans. The other parallel sub-plot in the narrative is of Cambodia of 1993, which was just coming out of the shock of the Khmer Rouge Marxist Revolution that had taken place under the leadership of Pol Pot – a Big Brother-ish figure in Cambodia, who was told to be responsible for the country being in shambles.

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“Social Engineering”: the Cambodian Genocide

Historical annals call the Khmer Rouge revolution a ‘genocide’ in which approximately 1.5 to 3 million Cambodian people were killed during the four years (1975-79). Khmer Rouge, a radical communist political group took over the capital city of Phnom Penh and the entire country in 1975 after a decade of insurgency. Monarchy was uprooted and, following the civil war, almost 25% of the population was decimated. During their brutal four-year rule, the Khmer Rouge was responsible for the deaths of nearly a quarter of Cambodians under the leadership of Pol Pot “The Cambodian Genocide was the result of a social engineering project by the Khmer Rouge, attempting to create a classless agrarian society. The regime would ultimately collapse when the neighbouring Vietnam invaded, establishing an occupation that would last more than a decade.” (*Holocaust and Genocide Studies*)

During Ghosh’s visit to Phnom Penh, the post-Khmer regime situation in the country is described through Molyka, an urban middle class civil servant, who looks scared even to drive through the city because “the government’s underpaid (often unpaid) soldiers were increasingly prone to banditry and bouts of inexplicable violence.” (7) In his unique journalistic style, Ghosh gets the readers to know the horrendous consequences of the revolution from Molyka. While travelling in a taxi with her, they come across a state soldier in his teens, “but instead of a guitar he had an AK-47 in his hands” (7). Molyka’s interview also reveals how destructive / disruptive forces take over societies in a very systematic and organized manner by targeting their ‘base’ as well as ‘superstructures’:

“... the social group that was hardest hit by the revolution: the urban middle class... they were herded into rural work-camps; the institutions and forms of knowledge that sustained them were abolished – the judicial system was dismantled, the practice of formal medicine was discontinued, schools and colleges were shut down, banks and credit were done away with; indeed the very institution of money,

and even the exchange of goods and services, was banned... it was a war on history itself... no regime in history had ever before made so systematic and sustained an attack on the middle class..." (8-9)

Among the many sufferers and survivors that Ghosh interviews in the book, Chea Samy is a notable figure for two reasons: she was one of the most popular dancers of Cambodia in the 1990s who had learnt dance from Princess Soumphady, and more importantly, she was the sister-in-law of Saloth Sar (another name for Pol Pot) but had equally suffered along with her family at his hands. The usurper, who was "a very good boy" (12) to Chea Samy during his childhood, had killed nine of his family members including his father, as Ghosh tells. Chea Samy tells Ghosh that Saloth Sar had got radicalised during his stay for higher studies in France. One might easily recall Orwell's *1984* in Ghosh's description of the communist dictator Pol Pot: "to her, as to most people in Cambodia, the name 'Pol Pot' was an abstraction; it referred to a time, an epoch, an organization, a form of terror – it was almost impossible to associate it with a mere human being, one that had brothers, relatives, sisters-in-law." (10)

Like most other communist dictators, a demi-god figure, a personality cult was created out of him by his party-workers. His posters were hung on the walls of the city. All forms of artistic expression were banned including the Cambodian classical dance. The starving dancers were sent to camps to work in the kitchen. Chea Samy reports to Ghosh that, numerous famous dancers, including King Sisowath's daughter-in-law, were killed. His granddaughter was left to bleed to death after her breasts were sliced off. With the singular motive of turning Cambodia into an agrarian economy, all modes of communication and media were blocked. "Anyone thought to be an intellectual of any sort was killed. Often people were condemned for wearing glasses or knowing a foreign language." (BBC News)

Trauma, Rehabilitation and Resilience: Role of Art

After the fall of Pol Pot regime in 1979, the Vietnamese took over Cambodia and the Khmer-imposed restrictions were withdrawn gradually, although the country took long to regain normalcy. The genocide had killed millions, giving a greater blow to the cultural heritage of Cambodia. Ghosh writes: "It was the strangest of the times... The country was like a shattered slate: before you could think of drawing lines on it you had to find the pieces and fit them together." (13-14)

Memory and oral testimony are significant modes used in constructing history. As a trained anthropologist and researcher, Ghosh combines individual memories to document individuals' real stories that create history within the sweeping phase of a larger historical event. One example of this is the recollection of the post-insurgency period in Cambodia by Eva Mysliwiec, who has "vivid memories of that period" (13). Ghosh pens down her recollections of the mental state of the survivors:

"... the volcanic outbursts of speech that erupted everywhere at unexpected moments. Friends and acquaintances would suddenly begin to describe what they had lived through and seen... Often people would wake up in the morning looking worse than they had the night before: they would see things in their dreams; all those things they had tried to put out of their minds when they were happening

because they would have gone mad if they'd stopped to think about them... as though the past had been unfolding like a turning reel, and say, simply, Camera." (13-14)

Questions are raised about the discrimination made to less powerful countries like Cambodia by the UN which sanctioned virtually no funding to Cambodia after the catastrophe while countries like America and Japan were heavily funded during the Second World War. The role of peace-keeping bodies of the UN are also called into question by Ghosh during his conversation with Sros, a young Cambodian, whose father had been promised by his father that there would be peace in the country in his lifetime, his father had promised him the same, and now Sros was promising the same to his nephews and nieces but peace never dawned despite the UN's intervention.

If on one hand Ghosh notes how a civilization can be annihilated step-by-step by attacking its systems and institutions, he also describes how the Cambodians tried to re-erect and restructure it. The first step was distribution of food to everyone by the new government – the reconstruction of economic 'base' – and finding survivors with knowledge and skills.

Surprisingly enough, in parallel with food and employment the Cambodian ministry started making efforts to relocate the surviving classical dancers and dance-teachers, ninety percent of whom had been killed. It is in this step by the government that one finds answers to questions about the utility and purpose of art. Dance and other performing arts have allegedly minimal role to play in such circumstances and therefore, are often among the last things that are thought of during such crises. The trauma caused to the dancers during the dictatorial regime is articulated by a dancer who could only dream of dancing because all forms of art were shunned. The classical dancers' situation has been compared to that of the chain-smokers – they would lie awake "wondering who was going to be called out next. That is when I would dance, in my head." (15) But Chea Samy and the others took up the task of reviving and resurrecting the nation through dance despite all difficulties. Ghosh writes: "They had found themselves adrift in the ruins of a society which had collapsed into a formless heap, its scaffolding systematically dismantled... They had had to start from the beginning, literally like ragpickers..." (15)

Chea Samy, at 60, shattered in health and deprived of famine, collects a handful of musicians and some orphans, and resumes teaching classical dance with her extraordinary persistence. Ghosh contrasts their persistence with that of Pol Pot. The latter's persistence in exercising his power came from his ideological commitment; To Pol Pot, terror was essential to exercise power and was an emanation of virtue. On the other hand, Samy and her fellow-dancers began to revive the classical dance tradition – "out of the ruins around them they began to create the means of denying Pol Pot his victory." (16)

The culmination of their efforts and a renaissance of Cambodian cultural heritage is found in the Cambodian national dance festival of 1988 in the capital city of Phnom Penh – the first of its kind since the revolution, where the dancers trained by Chea Samy were to perform. Ghosh calls it "a moment of epiphany" (44) where dance-teachers and students from all over the country had flocked to Phnom Penh, and most of them were seeing each other for the first time since the Khmer regime. As reported by Proeung Chhieng, a dancer and

participant at the festival, “we cried and laughed while we looked around to see who were others who had survived.” (44)

There was material scarcity for the performance: the performers had to use thin calico instead of silk. Electricity and lighting were barely available at the old Bassac theatre, and it was scorching hot. Onesta, a relief-worker tells Ghosh how she was astonished at the response of the people: “the city was in shambles, there was debris everywhere... there was no money and very little food – I could not believe that in a situation like this people would be thinking of music and dance.” (45) Eva Mysliwiec, mentioned earlier, saw old and young people, soldiers, children – all crying when the musicians appeared on the stage for the first time and the dance began. She tells Ghosh how the people sitting next to her had wept throughout the dance performance, and said: “We thought everything was lost, that we would never hear our music again, never see our dance.” (45)

Ghosh’s works show individual as the locus of change. It is interesting to note how the nationalism of Chea Samy, an old dancer in her sixties, rebuilds Cambodian identity through dance, while her brother-in-law’s ‘nationalism’ was the cause of its loss. At a collective level, it is a case study in how dance (and art per se) becomes the means of human resilience through which a people combat their crisis amidst all unfavourable circumstances. Ghosh writes elsewhere:

“Yet if the experiment was proof of anything at all, it was ultimately of the indestructibility of the middle class, of its extraordinary tenacity and resilience; its capacity to preserve its forms of knowledge and expression through the most extreme kinds of adversity.” (9)

Crisis and Combat through Art: The Present Context

As this is being written, a month has already passed since the Russian forces infiltrated the Ukrainian land, and the world has already witnessed the political resilience of this seemingly insignificant nation. In the context of what happened in Cambodia, does art have a role in the Ukrainian crisis? The Fortune magazine wrote on March 22, 2022: “Putin considers Ukraine a part of Russia and therefore denies its heritage. He knows that without art, Ukraine will have a weaker identity. Consequently, it will be easier to make Ukrainians assimilate to Putin’s population.” While print, electronic and digital media are taking note of statues, paintings, other significant artefacts being covered and shifted by the Ukrainian civilians in important cities like Kyiv, the BBC has reported of many museum-workers sleeping next to Ukrainian cultural tokens instead of protecting their families amidst constant shelling by Russian invaders.

In a town outside Kyiv, around twenty-five art pieces by Maria Prymachenko, one of Ukraine’s most famous artists about whom Pablo Picasso had said that he bowed down before her art, were burnt as the museum was bombed. Windows of the leading art museum of Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second-largest city, have already been blown out, exposing 25,000 art pieces to freezing temperatures and snow, making it impossible to control the humidity and temperature. A magazine wrote this line below an image of shifting a Christ idol from a cathedral – “Jesus Christ is now safe inside a bunker” – that raises questions on religion as an institution during such times.

But similar to what happened in Cambodia, resistance through art continues, though it might not be expressly visible. Artists who have had to flee have been offered shelter to keep producing art throughout war in Ukraine. According to curator Anna Potyomkina, creating art while bombings are happening is a part of the resistance. Anna Naurobska, the head of the rare manuscripts department, tells *The Economic Times* that she still doesn't know where to store the collection of more than 12,000 items being packed into boxes but she is firm that - "This is our story; this is our life. It is very important to us," (*Economic Times*) Ihor Kozhan, General Director of the Andrey Sheptytsky National Museum - "Museum has to live. People have to be there, and first of all children. They have to learn the basics of their culture," (*Economic Times*). Twitter reported of 'Babushka' Anna, who, when the bombs fell in Mariupol, grabbed her five-month-old niece & her most precious painting—and ran. Her daughter soon joined her in Romania. Babushka's son remained in Ukraine to fight. These are instances and figures similar to those in Ghosh – stories of ordinary people taking extraordinary decisions at crucial times. They deny to let dictators and power-hungry politicians triumph through art, and strive to protect their national identity.

Conclusion

'Dancing', a leitmotif in the text, is significant to the history of Cambodia as it is to this narrative. The account begins with the Cambodian dancers dancing in Paris and ends with them dancing in Cambodia, with another dance – a dance of death and destruction in between. What is most remarkable in Ghosh's account is art's role as a container for remembrance. Memory is not passive and critical to the agency of a people. Art is a means of resilience at such times of crisis. Comparing this narrative of almost half a century back with the present times of Russia-Ukraine crisis, one finds that art has never kept behind passively in this struggle of preserving national identities.

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