CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSION
Roger Sharrock, in *The Figure in a Landscape*, says that a poet is “not a camera, but a consciousness.”¹ This profound observation is very useful in analyzing not only poems but all creative writing. The novels analyzed in the preceding chapters are not photographs of life as it is lived; they are re-creation of life as perceived and transformed by the novelist’s perception and imagination.

With his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, Amitav Ghosh made an intriguing debut, exploring themes and probing into forgotten episodes of history. Essentially an anthropologist by profession, he tries to shatter the myth of west superiority. *The Circle of Reason* can be considered a bildungsroman describing the growth of Alu, a Bengali orphan. The novel incorporates elements of the picaresque, the novel of ideas, and also reads like a thriller or detective story. The reader’s sympathies lie largely with Alu, who is an entirely innocent fugitive from the police; sympathies also extend to Das, who has been inducted into the police force only reluctantly – he is far more interested in observing and drawing rare birds than in tracking human quarry. By the end of the novel, Das abandons his pursuit, and indeed his job altogether. The linear narrative techniques of the text are thereby set against a multi-voiced, self-consciously cyclical structure.

The plot of *The Circle of Reason* stands on certain historical events: the Indian nationalist struggle of the 1930s, the Bangladesh war of 1971, and the migration to the Middle east from 1970s onwards. However, the main theme of the novel seems to be the period of British colonization of India. Ghosh’s characters – Balaram in *The Circle of Reason* – exhibit continuing impact of the Imperial regime’s educational policies on the postcolonial India. The novelist tries to point out that the culture, tradition, and ethos of India received a serious setback because of the Raj. Thus the interpretation by the western scholars of India’s geography, history, etc. to legitimize
colonial rule is a clever ploy according to Ghosh. Similarly, the British tried to prove that the western knowledge is based on sound principles of logic, experiments, and reason, whereas the Indian knowledge is mostly dependent on hypothesis and thus lacks the universal acknowledgement. Ghosh wants to negate this notion and tries to prove that the eastern knowledge also has universal appeal. Thus the superiority theory as propounded by the western scholars stands exposed to scrutiny and critical examination.

*The Circle of Reason* debates the relationship between science, technology, and nationalism in India, which reaches back to the beginning of the nineteenth century. While not fully accepting the conventional science-tradition division, Ghosh problematizes the science-is-west and tradition-is-east dichotomy by interrogating the status and worth of different branches of science in India. The novelist makes an important point that science, technology, and medicine were not conveyed to India by the British in a one-way process of transfer, but involved in a cross-cultural exchanges, developments, and experiments.

The novel closely examines philosophies of reason, science, and technology. Reason is interpreted in different ways by philosophers as diverse as Plato and Chomsky. The colonial discourse hinged on only one aspect of reason, which manifested itself in material advances. *The Circle of Reason* seems to support the hypothesis that science is a product of history and society. The novel suggests that science is not only based on a series of ground-breaking discoveries but also to a great extent on intuition. The so-called pseudo-science has also got importance, though, it is judged by history as a failed branch of knowledge. In this context, the novel highlights Lombroso’s criminology, phrenology, and the plant physiology of Jagdish Chandra Bose.
Looked from this angle, Balaram’s attitude towards science evinces a hybridizing tendency, and in this respect, he unwittingly challenges western scientific discourse. In the light of Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry, Balaram’s enthusiasm for both mainstream western science and pseudo-science exposes the disturbances in the discourse of science. Bhabha points out that “mimicry is at once resemblance and menace.”

Hence Balaram’s choice of scientific gurus reflects both the achievements and the shameful hidden history of western science. Contrary to the boundaries that are often perceived as separating science and pseudo-science, the two had the influence on each other, and the social and the political issues helped to determine the extent of their success or failure.

Pasteur’s identification of germ was central to the foundation of tropical medicine, a branch of health care which in the nineteenth century was oriented towards maintaining the health of soldiers and administrators in the colonies. This discovery of Pasteur paved the way for tropical medicine, which revolutionized the treatment of diseases in India. The advances in medical care are an important pretext for the west’s argument that their occupation of non-western countries was a civilizing mission. Rudyard Kipling brings out this viewpoint when he writes:

Take up the White man’s burden --
Send forth the best ye breed --
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives’ need;
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild –

Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child.

...
Take up the White Man’s burden
The savage wars of peace
Fill full the mouth of famine
And bid the sickness cease.\(^3\)

What the imperialists failed to recognize, however, was that the expansionist activities introduced new diseases and also aggravated the existing diseases by polluting the environment. This led to a devastating impact on the native population. A classic example is the case of Southern America, where almost the entire native population – the Red Indians – were wiped out by the “new diseases” brought from the west, viz, yellow fever, plague, and also sexually transmitted diseases.

The Circle of Reason is a story of obsession – obsessive insanity. It is also a detective story, a story of exile, a travelogue, a Marxist protest, etc. The narrative technique employed shares sometimes the characteristics of magic realism. There are a lot of characters, time zones, and locales in the novel’s complex plot. A recurring pattern in the novel is the destruction of many by the actions of a few. Ghosh uses narration as the thread to weave the chance events into a pattern – across continents and across time. Chance and exile are the major themes of this novel. Jhyothi Das, who becomes a full-fledged migrant, finds himself forever on the run. In a sense, like other contemporary meta-fictional texts, The Circle of Reason is about narration itself. It is also about patterning, the various personal efforts at the imposition of order on a chaotic world, in order to come to terms with it, in order just to live. The book is about aesthetic quest necessary for the motivation and survival of the artist in every soul in an inherently deadening, hostile, and uncertain environment. The major characters create and float in a sea of metaphors. Carbolic acid runs through the book connecting the three parts. So do birds, sewing machines, germs, and The Life of Pasteur.
The circle of Reason presents history as a collective memory which gathers in a symbolic fashion all that existed in the past into all that happens in the present. Ghosh’s narrative method, combined with his treatment of history, weaves delicate connections between different phenomena, so that no event becomes absolutely autonomous. This generates mobility with which history traverses past and present, creating an acceptable fluid pattern of time. This novel offers a grim exploration of the oppressions of migration, where reason and capital become metonymic, circulating forces in the world. Focusing on a motley group of migrants drawn from various parts of India on an imaginary island Al-Ghazira and then Algeria, the novel marks the search for meaningfulness of those whose lives are displaced by globalization, and whose very bodies bear the violent marks of this passage, this history.

Critics have tended to overlook Ghosh’s first novel in favour of The Shadow Lines and In an Antique Land, because the later novels are concerned more with the themes and problems that have dominated postcolonial studies recently: diaspora, migration, hybridity, and the like. Both of the later novels have received international attention, have been the subject of scholarly articles, and are making their way onto syllabi in North American and British universities. The Circle of Reason, which was enormously popular in India, was less enthusiastically received in the west. This novel, however, deserves more critical consideration by scholars of postcolonial fiction than it has received because it points to the state rationalities that shape postcolonial experience.

The novel combines a critique of the repressive aspects of postcolonial societies with a qualified hopefulness about the possibilities of postcolonial modernity. It articulates this critique at both philosophical and social levels, dwelling
on the oppressive as well as emancipatory aspects of Enlightenment Reason and at the same time sketching the role of force in the state and civil society. It imagines ways of superseding a repressive postcolonial modernity by presenting an account of an alternative utopian project. This sense of possibility is conveyed by the figure of weaving, a figure that emphasizes the imbrication of people’s lives and their capacity to creatively transform these lives. The novel also explores the phenomenon of migration, seeing in the experience of the nomad an escape for the repressive elements of modern rationalities and social forms. However, it does not idealize migration per se, and carefully distinguishes between the laboratory experience of bourgeois migrants and the much harsher circumstances of subaltern migrants.

The Circle of Reason does not ultimately provide neat answers to the questions it raises. On the one hand, Ghosh points to the complicity between the discourses of reason and the apparatuses of police in the postcolonial nation-state. He dramatizes the workings of the legal-bureaucratic apparatus of the state and depicts the unsuccessful attempt by subaltern people to enter the domain of civil society.

The Shadow Lines presents three generations of Indian and British families who experience the buildup, the actuality, and the repercussions of the 1947 Partition of India into West Bengal and East Pakistan. The novel follows a nameless narrator who works to discover by interrogating and re-imagining the past the reasons for his cousin Tridib’s death. However, the past for these characters is separated geographically. The concept of the international borderline is central to this text and this theme is explicitly explored when Jethamoshai considers the implications of the creation of nation and the ambiguity of Partition. Indeed one level of this novel concerns the random and, many times, ambiguous political lines that divide nations and identities. It can also be interpreted as the mysterious relationship that is created
by borders, implying that we understand our relationship to the world in distorted geographic terms based on dividing political lines. Therefore, *The Shadow Lines* posits that maps create borderlines that define and enforce geographical and ideological limits on humanity.

This novel tempts us to interpret the text as national allegory, an allegory for the British handling of India. But beyond individual connections there is a connotation that the novel as a whole constitutes the nation. Whereas *The Circle of Reason* is about eloquence, search for metaphor, and the narrative capabilities of the narrator and his characters, the breath-taking compass of *The Shadow Lines*, with its axis on the Indian subcontinent’s specified context, coils together geographical distances and deliberately attempts to break many myths while taking the country’s history, culture, and political situation in its stride. The division of the novel into two parts – “Going Away” and “Coming Home” – is in itself a conscious attempt on the part of the novelist to dismantle some of the time-tested notions of experience and eloquence. These words, all by themselves, cannot encompass the subtleties of coming and going which overlap any number of times. In an on-going process of continuity, strict compartmentalization of the notions of coming and going might become arbitrary as the text testifies to the intricacies of these in both the parts. And when national boundaries are constantly drawn and re-drawn, the meaning could take an ambiguous turn while the processes of coming and going get marginalized.

The silent search of the narrator which forms the core of the novel throws the notions of secularism, nationalism, and freedom into disarray. In effect, it implies a search, a probe oriented towards a domain which has thrown many such illusions in sharp contrast to a sensitive individual’s attitude that rises above narrow considerations and shallow confines of the political exigencies. Hence, the basic
problem one is confronted with in this sphere is not merely that of eloquence, but that of communication which comes to the fore a number of times. Michel Zeraffia says, “The novel is no more the work of imagination than it is a reflection of reality: its essence, its necessary quality, lies in the expression of the connection between the real and the imaginary.”

The novel is also in many ways a bildungsroman, tracing the growth and development of the narrator from childhood to maturity. It is part of the Indian experiment with the non-fiction novel whose first significant landmark was Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*; it is as postmodernist a work of fiction as Farrukh Dhondy’s *Bombay Duck*. Many more labels can be affixed to *The Shadow Lines*, each as valid as the other. This novel explores the relationship between fact and imagination and this theme continues through the use of the geographical metaphor and the journey motif implicit in its title – derived, significantly, from Conrad and in the titles of its two parts, “Going Away” and “Coming Home.” This metaphor pervades the novel and enables it to extend and to expand spatially and temporally. This is of course a traditional method for the novel that sets out to discover the relationship between imagination and reality. Facts can in fact distort reality much more than imagination can. Thus the intensely felt horrors and the betrayals of the riots in Bengal following the theft of the Prophet’s hair hardly find a mention in the newspapers outside Bengal, and when the narrator recalls the event his friends suggest that he might have imagined it all. The question that Amitav Ghosh raises or seems to ask his readers is whether or not one can draw a demarcating line between imagination and reality, and the implied response that he offers is “No.” There indeed cannot be a dividing line between imagination and reality. Ghosh seems to suggest that there can only be a “shadow line” between imagination and reality, since reality
is too vast and complex a concept to be circumscribed within historical chronology or geographical contours. A place is more than its geographical and historical features. It carries a deep imaginative meaning.

Amitav Ghosh does not elaborate the meaning of concepts and ideologies. On the other hand, he insinuates the readers into the world of history through the mind of characters, their painful and nostalgic recalling and recollections and it is these psychic intrusions that make the narrative sequence of the story more complex. The novel therefore becomes a series of random reflections, for it reflects “reality itself in the process of its unfolding… tendencies of a new world still in the making.”

Personal histories, family histories, and the history of the nation are weaved into a thin and transparent gossamer of imagination. They are restructured in a quest for meaning, a quest for knowledge.

The novel urges the reader’s involvement in actively constructing an interpretive framework that runs parallel to the characters’ traumatic and anguished recounting of the past. Especially the grandmother’s remembrances of her painful and haunting past are vividly and dramatically presented. They give validity to her existence, meaning to her chaotic and tense life. The grandmother, the narrator, Tridib, Ila, and many other non-Indian characters present a multiplicity of voices characterized by variegate discourse and language to recollect their experiences. This is nothing but a striving after meaning and reason for the stifled thoughts of the past tormenting their psyche. Replete with interpretive potential, an appealing aspect of the novel is its multifocal dimension, and a structure fragmented and episodic, successfully leading to a conclusion that the historical events of the past, political rivalry, religious and communal strife, and even personal trauma and nostalgia are beyond objectification. Through multifocal narrative, Ghosh lends meaning to social
and political chaos reflected in the individual’s search of a meaningful existence
enacted in memory as a relived experience.

The meaning of political freedom in the modern world is, for Ghosh, a
complicated and an intricate one. It is without a clear solution. In a land where culture
and communities thrive on mutual hatred and antagonism, the quest for meaning is
liable to end in failure. The “journey motif” which runs through the fabric of the story
– like the grandmother’s journey to Dhaka in the second part of the novel and the
narrator’s journey backwards in time – is symbolic of the quest for meaning in life.

The narrative in *The Shadow Lines* takes us across the international border,
continents and cultures, child time and adult time, past and present with such ease that
one is simply intrigued. It interrogates complex themes like political conflict, national
identity, and cultural dislocation – through the use of memory, nostalgia, multiple
subjectivities, and overlapping stories. As for the historical contradictions that must,
of necessity, mark the biography of the nation, they are projected through the highly
nuanced and multi-layered metaphor of the shadow lines.

Spanning roughly four decades from the forties to the eighties, the narrative
builds on the life and interaction of two families – the one, the narrator’s (including
Tridib’s), and the other, the Prices of London who have been closely associated with
Tidib’s family throughout this period. *The Shadow Lines* transcends the narrow
categorization of an Indian novel. The story centers on Tidib, the narrator’s uncle. No
less vivid and memorable are the portraits of the narrator’s grandmother, his cousin
Ila, and the English girl May Price. The novel creates a wonderful scene of
relationships – uncles and aunts are interspersed easily and without any confusion in
the course of the narrative, as are also different locations: Calcutta, Dacca, and
London. We learn that Tridib was born in 1932, had been to England with his parents
in 1939, where his father, an important diplomat in the Foreign Service, had received medical treatment. May Price (with whose family they shared a close relationship) had begun a long correspondence with Tridib in 1959. Tridib died in a riot in 1964, while May was on a visit to India. It is not, however, such events that make up the vital texture of the novel: we are made aware of them only incidentally. What holds our attention is the delicate thread out of which the narrator creates a larger than life portrait of Tridib, who uses his imagination not to fantasize but to expand his sense of meaning and erase the narrow barriers of lines and partitions.

*The Shadow Lines* takes the reader into the consciousness of several characters, particularly those of the narrator’s grandmother, Ila’s parents, and May Price. Each consciousness emerges in light and shade, etched with its own individual quirks and idiosyncrasies; each character is caught between shadow lines in the wasteland of prejudice, dogma, and a narrow nationalism. The novel ends with the mystery of Tridib’s voluntary death – a death symbolic of his sacrifice for humanity. Ghosh subtly suggests that shadow lines divide, tear, embitter human beings; this artistically leads to the sudden revelation or Joycean epiphany experienced by the narrator towards the end of the novel. It is a novel with a message and a philosophy.

*The Shadow Lines* focuses on the meaning and shades of political nuances in contemporary life. The universal urge for political freedom, the response to violence, and strident nationalism are some important aspects of contemporary life in the subcontinent that are stressed in this novel. The vision of life presented is a dynamic desire to find a harmonious and complete relationship with the rich diversity of the modern world. The quest for political freedom, the violence in modern life, the role of rumour in riots – all graphically are presented. *The Shadow Lines* stresses the urgency of preserving the memories of saner and humane transactions for cultural self-
determination and inter-personal communication. The novelist seems to stress the responsibility of media in keeping alive public memory about indivisible sanity of communities to prevent recurrence of insane frenzy. *The Shadow Lines* is undoubtedly “an eloquent critique of colonial hangover and cultural dislocation in postcolonial situation as also the psychological make-up of the contemporary man who thrives on violence.”

In *The Calcutta Chromosome* there are many innovative aspects imbied – science, philosophy, fantasy, reincarnation theory, etc. It is a highly readable novel with a judicious mix of fact and fiction, philosophy and science, mystery and humour, and the memorable portraits of nineteenth and twentieth century India (Farley, Grigsan, Cunningham, Phulboni, Mrs. Aratounian, film star Sonali Das etc.), the use of American colloquialisms (“grab-a-bite”, ‘dickhead.” “Are you kidding?” etc) and Bengali phrases (“Shoreshe-lish,” “dhakaiparotha,” etc.). The introduction of the supernatural gives a new look to the novel. The novel seems to suggest that there are worlds at the edge of the known areas about which very little is known. The incidents in the novel are cast into the vortex of Gothic imagination. This imagination transports and transforms them into a strange, mysterious, and unfamiliar world.

In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh approaches human affairs from unconventional points of view like anthropology, medical science, psychology, history, and sociology, and thus gathers considerable information to understand complex human psyche. This novel is peppered with a “breath-taking intensity and variety.” It represents “history, science, Egypt, Bengal, the fluid interflow between rural and urban, between cultures and civilizations, the play of ideas.” Ghosh is perceptive towards the propensities of the new world order in the making, in which both historicity and contemporaneity are relevant. Thus like V.S. Naipaul and Salman
Rushdie, Ghosh detects the experiences of the past and the present to explore the physiological and psychological aspects of human beings.

Like *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosome* redeems a gap between regions of the rulers and the ruled. These novels have immediate as well as historic relevance because they deal with history and politics. *The Calcutta Chromosome* reconstructs the past not from chronological order of events, but from scattered events which are rather ironical. Naipaul’s *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), and *The Way in the world* (1955) and Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995) are the paradigms of this phenomenon. Roger Bromley is of the view:

…narratives particularly represent our ideas about everyday life by producing cultural images and stereotypes of it. They thus have an important function in representing the past, because they provide crucial forms in which memories are made. Memory is not simply the property of individuals, but a complex cultural and historical phenomenon constantly subject to revision, amplification and forgetting. Memory is therefore a construction. Memories are actively invoked and reinvented by cultural interventions.¹⁰

No doubt Bromley is writing in British context but one can read it with a sharper focus on contemporary novel writing in general, especially with reference to writers like Ghosh, Naipaul and Rushdie, who represent our “ideas” by producing cultural images and stereotypes through the past.

Ghosh uses Mangala, Lutchman, and the counter-science group to suggest that a radical alternative to the hegemony of western scientific knowledge is possible. The implication is that this challenge will only be made if the knowledge and beliefs of third-world counties, such as India, are fused with the scientific concepts from the west. Ghosh here draws upon the work of recent historians of science who suggest
that western science was and is being reinterpreted and remade in India. In fact, the reality of transmigration is central to understanding *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Transmigration implies a surplus of time within the living present.

The novel has been variously defined by reviewers as a science fiction, a thriller, even a ghost story, obviously with valid reasons. It does incorporate a few features of these genres: it is set in a mildly dystopic future, characters mysteriously disappear, the supernatural creeps in, and suspense is created about the denouement. So, as the story is based on the attempt at unravelling the secrets of the malaria research with the help of advanced technology coming into use in the future, the form of the novel coherently fits its content. The message of the novel is echoed in the slot by the way it is structured. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is organized in a sort of “loose” system of Chinese boxes, where Antar’s story contains Murugan’s, which in turn encloses Ross’s. The system is “loose” insofar as one box constantly interferes with the others; events, characters, details incessantly reverberate from one level to the other, so that the limits between the stories narrated become elusive, just as the boundaries between science and counter-science have been shown to be porous and blurred. Murugan’s intrusion into the “real” history of Ross and his research implies another level of overlapping, the one between fact and fiction.

Ghosh seems to suggest that the boundaries imposed to divide different modes of knowledge can be overcome, provided there is a fusion of official and alternative forms of knowledge. These boundaries are created by the ruling power (colonial in this novel). Therefore fusion of these can be a solution to the negation of eastern knowledge in the colonial discourse. This power decrees the hegemony of one mode (the western) and the subaltern of the other (the eastern). The novel seems to suggest through Antar’s challenge in unravelling the mystery of Calcutta Chromosome that
any human knowledge is not definitive. It is also fluid in the sense that established or discovered postulations or theories are susceptible to changes or are being proved false. So, these are, in a way, like open ended questions with many answers or interpretations. *The Calcutta Chromosome* forces its readers to engage with the possibility of an alternative historiography, in which traditionally disempowered subjects prove to be the real puppet-masters. The counter-science cult led by Mangala, a scavenger woman, can only operate through silence, but the fictive reconstruction, in which Murugan, Antar, and ultimately Ghosh engage, subverts the hegemonic dominance of western logocentrism all the same. In the novel Ghosh plays with the belief that well before science identified its cause and remedy, malaria was successfully treated by indigenous methods in tropical countries and that such “unscientific” cures were dismissed as “fevers” and “delirium.” Mangala and Laakhan represent non-Eurocentric, non-Anglophone knowledge that is not credited because it is not articulated in terms acceptable to the west. As an exploration of the bases of knowledge, *The Calcutta Chromosome* does not endorse empirical observation alone or intuition: knowledge and truth are shown to be beyond the sole possession of either the east or the west.

*The Glass Palace* records the historic events in three countries: Burma, Malaya, and India. The novel may earn the distinction of being called an epic, given its scope and sweep of events. A whole century of colonial rule of these countries is portrayed: from Anglo-Burmese war of 1885, to the World Wars, up to the age of cyber revolution, and thus bringing together history, fiction, and autobiographical records along with memoirs. For compilation of this mammoth work, Ghosh used material derived from a variety of sources – recollections and remembered accounts
of his father, uncle, and several other living persons whom he met; the diaries, notes and official records; history books etc.

This novel relates India and Burma in the shared colonial experience, during which a new sense of selfhood and national identity took shape among the peoples of the two countries. This novel recapitulates the fortunes of an extended family of Indian immigrants from the British conquest of Burma in 1885 to the Democracy Movement of Aung San Suu Kyi of 1996.

Ghosh attempts to locate in the history of time and nations such people as the beleaguered group of races of British occupied territories in South East Asia. He does this by weaving things around Rajkumar and a bewildering and often poignant family scattered though post-imperialist dislocation in various parts of the Asian continent. Thus, the consequences of such disbanding – political, sociological – are depicted through the experiences of loss, exile, and the search for a homeland.

Once monarchy is disbanded in Burma, the royal family is exiled first to Madras and then to a remote coastal village, Ratnagiri, between Bombay and Goa. The royal family gets “polluted” by establishing relations with local people even though Queen Supayalat tries to maintain her distance. Dolly the servant maid is the only one that stays on faithfully.

The novel shows how Burma and Malaya are denuded by the colonial power by trading in timber and rubber. Rajkumar’s story is shown in relation to that of Rajkumar and Dolly’s sons to those of Saya John’s son and grandchildren. There are no well-marked points where one story stops and the other starts. Stories are intermingled; various characters appear and disappear as quickly. The fabric of the novel is based on the heights of colonialism and also on the gravity of World Wars.
The Glass Palace portrays several levels of movements and awareness within the colonial perceptions of India’s loss of selfhood and fragmentation of the social system. The emergence of questioning within the Indians, particularly among the educated middle class was an important feature of the process towards the “recovery” of the sense of selfhood. In the characters of Uma Dey, her husband Beni Prasad Dey, and her nephew Arjun, Ghosh creates this struggle that developed on a larger scale during the 1920s and 1940s.

The novel is firmly located in place and time. It meticulously records the dates of every important event from the invention of the auto-combustion engine (1885) to the Second World War (1939-45). There are frequent time shifts and space shifts in the novel. Apart from Burma and India, the narrative takes place in Singapore, Malacca, Malaya, etc. Ghosh employs the techniques of “acceleration” and deceleration in The Glass Palace. In these techniques the speed of actual time is constant, but the speed of narrative time fluctuates: it accelerates and decelerates. Ghosh employs the technique of declaration also. “Declaration” is slow-speed narration: the use of a long segment of the text for the representation of a short stretch of story-time.

If we consider The Glass Palace as a loose, bildungsroman constructed around the life of Rajkumar Raha in Burma, Malaysia and India, it can also be considered, on a more subterranean level, the acknowledgement of those changing parameters from the history of colonial India through its post-independent nationhood that determine the personal and psychological identities of the author himself.

Amitav Ghosh uses Burmese with such mastery that he does not gloss. He refers to Buddhist festivals with familiarity. He is well versed in the history and geography, the fauna and flora, the dress, the customs, the diet, and the landscape in Burma. Through Ghosh, we learn about elephants, the growth of rubber plantations in
Burma, about old Raj to the present government in the USA, the political turmoil in Burma. Though the first chunk of the book consists of a number of parts, the reader’s interest is maintained by the sweeping changes in locales and movement of characters. Telling history can be an arduous task, since story needs to be told not only from characters’ point(s) of view but also from the point of view of readers who may not have the knowledge of history. Ghosh, as a serious writer having a lot of insight in historical details, communicates these ideas with confidence.

European countries, particularly Britain, held on to their colonies for a long time because they were successful in indoctrinating the Indian masses into believing that the British were the best rulers that India could possibly have. They directed the purpose of western education to create a class of people who would be obedient to them. Maucaulean system of education was best suited for this purpose. As a result, a large group of educated people were completely faithful to the British and it was through such people that the British were able to hold on to their colonies for a long time. Arjun is a typical specimen of this English educational system. His training in the army channelized his energy and vigour for the selfish interests of the British. By serving in the army Arjun is supporting the interests of the British, not of India. He is being exploited to maintain the interests of the Empire but he does not realize this. He has been so completely taken in by the “goodness” shown by the British that he cannot see through their crooked intentions. The medals he has received have actually made him thick-headed and completely slavish.

One might be under the wrong notion that the demon of colonialism died with political independence. A class of people, especially those educated in English medium, would always remain grateful to the British and would always be servile to
them. Amitav Ghosh explicitly remarks in a talk with Lukose Mathew that he has no good opinion of the institutions left behind by the British. He says:

We grew up hearing that British institutions, especially the rule of law, have decayed. We think it because of our fault that the rule of law decayed. But the British had two sets of laws: one for the whites and another for the Indians. Some people now step into the shoes of the British and think they are above law. We are left with a law which has inequality as its founding principle.¹¹

This statement by Amitav Ghosh is an anti-thesis to the imperialist view that the British were a civilizing force who provided us with knowledge and made us progressive. Conversely, the British rule exploited us economically and culturally. Thus it was regressive for India. Ghosh believes that a false sense of gratitude to the British for a wrong cause has harmed our country. These people would never be able to understand the harm done by the British. Until and unless this false sense of obligation is removed, independence in the real sense will not be achieved. Therefore it is the psychological domination which is highlighted most in this novel.

Jatiya Sengupta writes, from postcolonial point of view, “Ghosh’s rendering of British colonialism and its aftermath in the three countries is an interplay of fact and fiction in an illusory place of imagination to create an awareness of the experiential reality of the post-colonial worlds.”¹² As observed by Ranjita Basu, “History is a brooding presence in Ghosh’s books almost a living entity able to shape the lives of his characters.”¹³ The novel portrays political and cultural complexities through the author’s concepts of nationalism, imperialism, and the subjugation of gender, class, and caste. Ghosh believes in transgression of the frontiers of nationality, and for him, nationalism seems to be an illusion and a force of violence and destruction. He presents a unique rendition of history in fiction from an
international perspective and writes imaginatively about the process of colonization in India, Burma and Malaya. In an interview, Ghosh says about his “transformative experience”:

Writing this book has completely transformed me as a person and as a novelist. Very few novelists get that experience. It was not just the vastness of the material, or the hundreds of different voices, or that for me writing this book was unlike anything I, or other writers I know, had written before. It was what I saw and what I began to I recognize while writing this . . . you know, it changed my understanding of history.14

The historical and the personal blend into a perfect harmony in this novel. Ghosh himself says, “It’s coming together of the many themes of my earlier novels. Writing this novel was like fighting a war.” Furthermore, he says that he attempts in it “to humanize history, to make it a part of the existential grammar of the living.”15 The novel is structured into seven parts displaying various shades of human personality of several nationalities like King Thebaw and his queen, Rajkumar and Dolly, Beni Prasad Dey and Uma, Saya John, Arjun, Dinu, and many more “colonized victims.” The blurb says:

Through the intertwining stories of Dolly and Rajkumar, the history of the twentieth century is told across the three generations, spread over the interlined parts of the British Empire: Burma, with its conflicting undercurrents of discontent; Malaya, with its vast rubber plantations; and India, amid growing opposition to British rule. With World War II and the terrifying Japanese juggernaut, Rajkumar’s universe is once again set adrift ... his family makes a treacherous 1000-mile trek to India. The door to Burma closes behind them, and the glittering lights of an extraordinary civilization are finally extinguished.
The colonial power, known for its alleged exploitation, dehumanized people who came under its purview. Ghosh turns the silent page in the colonial history and reads the complicity of the Indians with the British and their role in continuing the colonial system. Arjun, the District Collector Beni Prasad Dey, and Rajkumar firmly believe in the supremacy of the British. They accept the ruler’s supremacy. As part of the colonial system they exercise power over the natives and also the colonized Burmese. Beni Prasad is completely dehumanized in his approach to the royal family. Arjun as an officer in the British Indian Army is subservient to his British officers. He cannot differentiate between serving India and serving the British. The complicity of the Indians with the British reaches its culmination in Rajkumar. He is a completely dehumanized figure. His trade of indentured labour, relationship with Ilongo’s mother, and his dream of Burma as a “golden land” show his lack of refined human values. He staunchly believes that the colonizer is not only promoting their life but also protecting their life in Burma. All these characters exercise their power over the others who are weaker than they are in terms of power – It could be economic status, education or knowledge. Through his exposure of the complicity of the colonized with the colonizer, Ghosh seems to say that violence is related to power rather than modernity or colonization. In The Glass Palace “glass palace” functions as a metaphor. Glass is brittle and implies transparency; palace is the symbol of power. Glass Palace is an illusion that is created around power. The people in the glass palace do not have the liberty to throw stones at others. The colonized people are always imprisoned in the glass palace and they lose the capacity to throw stones at their colonial masters. The more the colonized attempt to describe the colonizer’s exploitation and violence, the more do they reflect on the complicity of the colonized with the colonizer’s ideology.
The action of *The Hungry Tide* is set on the Sundarbans island of Lusibari. When Kanai first invites Piya to visit his Aunt’s hostel on Lusibari, he explains that the name itself is a relic of a bygone, colonial era. Ghosh chose to set *The Hungry Tide* in the Sundarbans for obvious reasons. The tide country is not simply a remote and hostile environment where nature can be studied in its awesome power; it is also where human bond develops with constant interaction among the settlers. It is in fact a kind of border zone of different kinds of interaction – cultural, ethnic, etc.

In this frontier, different cultures have mixed and interacted forming a kind of synthesis. This settlement has a great significance in the colonial history. It successfully erased from the memory of the people, the impact of the imperial governance. There is a great historical irony in Kanai’s description to Piya of how the area was settled in the nineteenth century by British officials serving the Viceroy Lord Canning, searching for a suitable location for an eastern port to rival their western port of Bombay. Ignoring strong local advice about the unsuitability of the Matla River for a major sea port due to its tendencies for flooding and cyclones, Canning established his new port. Sure enough, within four years, a cyclone struck and the city was abandoned. In naming the town “Canning” after the name of the Viceroy, there is a subtle indication that this town is a slave or a vassal to the Malta River. Kanai’s narrative therefore maps out a new kind of cultural geography, where the remnants of the British rule not only survive but also stand as a mute testimony to the Raj.

In *The Hungry Tide*, the challenge of the dispossessed is registered via the human make-up of the tide country. Each incomer to the country has been compelled by far-away political events to flee their home and seek a new start. Interestingly, the island of Lusibari had first been populated as a result of a philanthropic colonialist, the Scot Sir Daniel Hamilton, who had bought land from the forestry department in
order to give an impoverished rural population a chance to settle in new land and begin new agricultural projects.

The refugees had no support what so ever – political, financial, etc. Moreover, they were on the run from political displacement in their homes. Having arrived in India’s frontier territory, the refugees soon discovered that they were not entirely welcome there either. They had thus been rounded up and taken to a “government resettlement camp in central India… to a place called Dandakaranya, deep in the forests of Madya Pradesh, hundreds of kilometers from Bengal” (118). Ghosh narrates how the political brutality savagely marauders the dark jungle. Thus The Hungry Tide enacts its own voyage into the recesses of political inferno. The novel has two climaxes: the storming of Morachjhapi, and the storm which destroys Fokir. There is great silence about the two climaxes. Neither event is narrated in minutiae; rather, Ghosh employs a narrative technique of cutting from “before” to “after” in each case, as if to draw attention to the human limits of what can be narrated and what is unspeakable.

The legend of Bon Bibi is an important narrative element in The Hungry Tide. We come to know about its importance when we read that Kanai, along with Kusum, watched a performance on this theme earlier. Irony and repetition are used not just as plot devices, but also as narrative techniques. It is not just that one tiger attack follows another, but also that one story of a tiger attack follows an earlier narrative of horror.

Ghosh emphasizes the possibility of creating a “deep communication” in The Hungry Tide. The Sunderbans seems to be the most appropriate locale for establishing this deep communication between nature and its inhabitants. This is shown to be plausible and pragmatic through interactions between the urban and the rural characters in the novel. Ironically, the ecological communication in the
Sundarbans is so deep-rooted that it almost always supersedes human communications. The Ganges flows from the Himalayas across northern India, emptying into the Bay of Bengal. The river delta creates a vast archipelago of islands, the Sundarbans, where mangrove jungles grow quickly on land not reclaimed by the tide. The tidal surge from the sea can cover three hundred kilometers, constantly reshaping or devouring islands, with just the tops of the jungles often visible at high tide. This is the tide country, home to the Bengal tiger, huge crocodiles, sharks, snakes, impenetrable forests, and a few people trying to scratch out a living. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sir Daniel Hamilton decided to create a Utopian society there, offering free land to those willing to work as long as they accepted the others as equals, regardless of caste or ethnicity. It is a difficult life that leaves most women widowed at a young age and land barely farmable if the saltwater of the hungry tide cannot be kept from flooding their fields.

The conceptualization of India as a nation is the outcome of colonial rule and its impact on the ethos of the people. In the pre-independence period, the use of the term “nation” for India was applicable to colonial India, which consisted of present-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The British were attuned to the European situation in which people belonging to one civilization were not only divided on the basis of language, religion, and denomination, but were also involved in protracted wars and continuous violence to establish nations and states. So the colonists never viewed India as one nation. Seeley comments, “India is...only a geographical expression like Europe or Africa. It does not make the territory of a nation and a language, but the territory of many nations and languages.” So there were earlier attempts to negate this orientation by conceptualizing India as a nation. Gradually different modes of conceptualization emerged in response to unfolding realities. For
instance, the noted historian Radhakumud Mookerji\textsuperscript{17} had asserted the essential unity of India based on natural geography, an ancient pan-Indian Hindu culture, economic self-sufficiency, and the interdependence of her constituent regions. In the light of this assumption if we were to read \textit{The Hungry Tide} certain interesting points might be noted.

Firstly, \textit{The Hungry Tide} is set in the Sundarbans where there are no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea, even land from water. The tides reach more than two hundred miles inland, and every day thousands of acres of mangrove forest disappear only to re-emerge hours later. For hundreds of years, only the truly dispossessed and the hopeless dreamers of the world have braved the man-eaters and the crocodiles that rule there, to eke out a precarious existence from the unyielding mud. The arrival of Piya, though born to Indians, yet stubbornly American, the Delhi businessman, Kanai, disturbs the delicate balance of settlement life and sets in motion a fateful cataclysm. When Piya hires Fokir, an illiterate local fisherman, to guide her through the backwaters, Kanai becomes her translator. From this moment, the tide begins to turn. Kanai, the translator of cultures, finds himself stripped down of all urban defences facing a tiger in a swamp. At the mercy of the Bon-Bibi, Kanai confesses, “I had always prided myself on the breadth and comprehensiveness of my experience of the world I had loved, I once liked to say, in six languages. That seems now like the boast of a time very long past. At Garjontola I learnt how little I know of myself and of the world” (353).

Amitav Ghosh, as the author of \textit{The Hungry Tide}, also insists that the poor be heard: Perhaps, this is also the point of entry of “subaltern studies” in the novel. The term “subaltern” is drawn from Gramsci’s essay “On the Margins of History” and is used by the \textit{Subaltern Studies} group to identify a mode of historical practice that seeks
to recover an indigenous culture which it assumes to be unaffected by colonialism.

This contentious claim is most clearly made in Ranajit Guha's "Introduction" to the first of the Subaltern Studies volumes:

Parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal characters were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes ... This was an autonomous domain.... Far from being destroyed or rendered virtually ineffective ... it continued to operate vigorously ... adjusting itself to the conditions prevailing under the Raj.¹⁸

Amitav Ghosh lets the tide country break down the barriers of both society and also people. Setting The Hungry Tide in the Sundarbans allows Amitav Ghosh to create a setting where everyone is on an even footing. It is not just the legacy of Sir Hamilton, but the hostile environment erases all societal strata because everyone is an equal in the struggle to survive in the hostile environment. This theme runs continuously throughout the novel. Nirmal, a poet at heart who constantly invokes Rilke, approaches retirement feeling that his life was poorly spent because he never lived up to his revolutionary ideals. Nilima is the practical side of their marriage, building a cooperative trust, which brings hope to many lives. She, however, is unwilling to do anything that might upset the government whose favours she needs. Their middle-class upbringing and college education bring them no luxury, just the gratitude and respect from the locals in the tide country for the services they provide. This is a life Kanai does not understand. In the Sundarbans, his wealth, servants, and pride have no value. While he feels himself to be superior to Fokir, on the river he needs Fokir's skills to provide for his survival. Piya, who feels closest to the animals she studies, and needs Kanai's translation skills and Fokir's local knowledge of the river and wildlife to do her research on the river dolphins.
What becomes evident from a reading of *The Hungry Tide* is that the model of “nation” per se is actually an ideological phenomenon, a matter of ideas and concepts, adhered to by certain groups and communities. Nationalist ideologies are formulated in order to gain and retain hegemony. They are not “givens” but are constructed and expressed in political terms.

In the individual chapters on the novels of Amitav Ghosh discussed in this study, the author’s intention is to bring to a central focus some of the dominant themes in the Indian English novel as presented by Amitav Ghosh. “Self, Family, and Society” is neither a theoretical concept nor a sociological principle. It is not employed in the study as a yardstick to measure the success or the failure of the novelist or his novels. Since the novels of Amitav Ghosh basically explore the quirks and turns common in human relations, the self, the family, and society are used as a theme and variation which have explicatory convenience and exploratory lucidity. A significant conclusion that emerges from this study is that the achievement of Amitav Ghosh as a novelist consists in his sensitively responding to the various socio-cultural problems that Indians have been facing for a long time. The response crystallizes into an imaginative construct, the meaning and the relevance of which consist in making sense of modern India, its problems, its people, and its fast-changing socio-cultural milieu.
References


5. *The Shadow-Line* is a short novel based at Sea by Joseph Conrad. The shadow-line depicts a young man at a crossroads in his life, facing a desperate crisis that marks the ‘Shadow-line’ between youth and maturity.


