Chapter II

2. History

In recent times, a great body of historical fiction has emerged on the literary scene. Many Indian English novelists have turned their attention to the past as much to trace the deepening mood of nationalism. In fact, a close study of the contemporary novels reveals writers’ preoccupation with the historical past. They bring out their historical milieu. Writers like Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar, Chaman Nahal, Shashi Tharoor, Salman Rushdie, Ghosh are interested in blending fact and fiction to create a historical novel. These novelists are concerned with history. They are beyond the traditional way of assessing events. They have to blend history with their vision and philosophy. It is because a historical novel is nothing but an evaluation of a segment of historical reality as projected by the novelist. Their technique of writing fiction makes them describe their vision or world-vision. However, a distinction must be made between the conscious use of history and its sub-conscious presentation. The setting of most of the historical novels is in the context of some historical framework unless the novelist willfully places his action in an imaginary locale hoping to highlight a special metaphysical or political point of view. The historical novel represents no surface wave of escapism but a deep, unconscious movement towards national homogeneity. It is in the historical novel only that the actual day-to-day problems of life can be encountered, examined, exposed, challenged and rectified.

Historical fiction entertains as well as instructs the readers. The factual and informational values of history illuminate the subject. The historical fiction amalgamates
the two. It is because of the notion that historical sense and reality enter into the sphere of art imperceptibly. Historical fiction writers attempt to enshrine a period in their books. In fact, every novelist is a historical novelist. Actually, the historical reality, in terms of time and space, forms an integral part of a work of art. It is transmuted in the process of giving it a creative expression. In the process, it achieves wider dimensions of universality and at times a state of timelessness.

The historical novelist is none but a historian but history imposes limitations on him. He is not free to distort history. He has to adhere to factual accuracy. The novelist is obliged to be careful in research into the period he has chosen for presentation and every detail of that period has to be accurate. The historical novelist not only has to detail the layout of a geographical region but also about the people living in that region, their mode of speech, their dress, their habits, their peculiar traits and countless other characteristics of that particular community. He should guard against anachronism. The historical novelist should not infiltrate too much history into the plot of novel. He should avoid many historical figures in the novel. So that only R.K. Dhawan in “Introduction: The Novels of Amitav Ghosh” cautions: “History puts the other at disadvantage since a great majority of characters who have an independent historical reality can hardly be made amenable to the author’s designs or the exigencies of the plot. The interaction for historical and fictional characters, and the interaction of the two kinds amongst themselves, is the most challenging part of writing a historical novel” (16). Murari Prasad in “The Shadow Lines: A Quest for Indivisible Sanity” also says:
An effective fiction, it emanates from a particular historical moment which intersects the narrator and the nation at a crucial point of their evolution and growth [...] The novel is rich in signifying transactions that do not depend for their effect on ‘solid slabs of continuous experience’ but on the potentiality of the materiality marshalled by the author to anchor his perception of reality. It quickens our conscience and triggers our response to the mingled frenzy of violence, idealism, passion and intrigue that has amputated the narrator’s intimate history and geography. (17)

In India, historical novels have been written in response to historical movements or events such as Gandhian movement, imperial rule, partition of India and the emergence of the new India. The historical novelists took much interest in depicting the freedom struggle in their novels. Some of the historical novels are Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*, Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie*, K.A. Abbas’s *Inquilab*, D.F. Karka’s *We Never Die* and C.N. Zutshi’s *Motherland*. The novels dealing with the freedom struggle give vivid pictures of the exploitation and the arrogance of the foreign rulers. They can also be taken as the portrayal of an awakened people struggling for their rights. The growth of the historical novel in India also coincided with the intensification of the struggle for Indian freedom, especially after the First World War. The historical novels also portray the religious and political difference between Hindus and Muslims and the resultant widespread disturbances, causing destruction of human life. They also deal with partition and the large-scale migration of people from one country to the other. Hence, a number of novels were written on the theme of partition, the destruction it brought and the plight of the
refugees. They record the reign of violence and bloodshed. They remain the telling commentary of the breakdown of human values. These novels were filled with a strain of despair and disillusionment.

Ghosh’s *Reason* offers a clear perception of history. In it, Ghosh has not attempted to bulldoze history into some other preoccupation. History retains its historicity. History becomes a process and it hinges on characters who are representatives of important historical tendencies. In fact, history is retraced through different ways. Pradib Dutta in “A Voice among Bullet Holes: The Circle of Reason” says that: “history is traced in the first part through ideas on science and change, and in the second section, through the Damanhouri story, as a narrative from which early lessons are to be drawn. The difference in historical understanding corresponds to the distinction between an intellectually cosmopolitan culture and a more rural one. Being memory, history is fashioned by the way people collectively look at their inheritance. It is subject to culture” (42). Ghosh in *Reason* touches upon the effects of post-war and post-colonial ethos. The novel is an enactment of hybridized historicity, in which the historical facts are impossible to be outside history or the west.

In *Lines*, the narrative seems to be disparate and fragmented but each story has its own historical validity. So that only Premindha Banerjee in “The Narrator and the Chronicling of Self in *The Shadow Lines*” says:

Published in 1987 *The Shadow Lines* presents historical dates going back to 1939. The dates are significant not for an examination of
historical events, but for the reconstruction of the events of public history and their shaping discourses on the narrator. The narrator’s enlightenment also coincides with the recovery of history through personal memory - a memory, which had remained buried in the interstices between the domain of public knowledge and private understanding. This history includes immediate personal experiences. To illustrate, when the narrator visits the Prices in England, he demonstrates his familiarity with the people and the material objects because he has imaginatively encountered them all through Tridib’s stories. Another example that can be cited is the photograph of Dan Mike and Francesca, which encapsulates a moment in time. It validates the existence of a history that is reconstituted through the narrator’s memory and retrieved through this text. History is thus documented and foregrounded through personal perceptions and memories. Tridib, Ila and the narrator - all pursue disciplines like archaeology and history. So, these characters are supposed to have a historical sense. But the elucidation of the text is largely dependent on the perception and conferral of meaning by the narrator himself. (44)

**Lines** is set against the outbreak of the world war second (1939) and the post partition communal riots of 1964 in some parts of India and Bangladesh. (erstwhile East Pakistan) The fictionalized narrative is interwoven with history and validated by actual experiences in the lives of the major characters. It is this intersection of the public and the private domain, which enables the narrator to adopt an interrogative mode and speculate about
the premises on which historical events can be known and accessed. Seema Bhaduri in “Shadows, Lines and Freedom: A Historical Reading of The Shadow Lines” says: “Lives of the characters in this novel are determined largely by their ideas of freedom and this idea is shaped by the history of the times [...] The major characters, here, move towards a global humanitarianism coming to grips with the realization that freedom can’t be geo-politically defined or delimited” (223). This observation is applicable to Tha’mma, the unnamed narrator’s grandmother. She thinks of freedom in terms of political freedom for the nation. It means freedom from the colonial power. She subscribes to a view of freedom forged in the crucible of violent anti-colonial struggle. She cannot see how Ila can seek her freedom by living in London as she does not belong there. She believes

Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood, with their brother’s blood and their father’s blood and their son’s blood. They know they’re a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood.

(SL 77-78)

Borders to Tha’mma are absolute physical and tangible realities. As she plans to fly to Dhaka in 1964, she wonders whether she would be able to see the border between India and Bangladesh from the plane. Meenakshi Malhotra in “Nationalism and the Question of Freedom in The Shadow Lines” observes:

That Tha’mma’s ideas are interpolated and undercut in the novel is quiet obvious. What need to be mentioned here is that her views on freedom
and the nation, and her severe criticism of Ila’s choices fit into the larger contemporary discourses of gender and nation. To be more precise, they are indicative of the uneasy relationship between overarching nationalisms and individual freedom(s) of its citizens, especially its women. (147)

Moreover, characters in *Lines* appear to have an intimate relation with history: Tridib pursues a Ph.D. in Archaeology, Tha’mma has lived through the partition, and the narrator’s visit to London is prompted by the need to “collect material from the India Office Library, where all the old colonial records were kept, for a Ph.D. thesis on the textile trade between India and England in the nineteenth century” (SL 13). The opening of the novel itself smacks of historiographisation, as does the background of wars against which the narrator plots his own history and that of others.

In *Lines*, the narrator becomes the historian. Tridib appears as his authority. The believer is the historian and the person believed is called the authority. However, it is true enough that the individual’s thought process cannot be replicated by the historian. What matters is “the act of thought itself, in its survival and revival at different times and in different persons: once in the historian’s own life, once in the life of the person whose history he is narrating: Tridib’s comments on Ila’s imperviousness to places which matches the narrator’s own feelings (SL 20-21), May’s comment on Nick-”he’s not at all like us” (SL 53), and the narrator’s eventual realization of the truth of the statement, Tha’mma’s comment regarding the narrator’s obsession with Ila and the narrator’s eventual discovery of it (SL 89-90). The intimacy with elsewhere includes both broadening down and broadening out. At the superficial historical and domestic level,
the novel covers the period from 1939 to 1964, with a brief meaningful extension into grandmother’s forcefully revengeful reactions against the Muslims at the time of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965.

While Tridib, the protagonist of the novel, is born in 1931, the narrator is born in 1952. But the actual ‘events’ of the novel start in 1939, while their narration is made about 1979 when the narrator, now a grownup man of about 27 years, recalls the memories of earlier times encapsulated in his childhood. The main focus is on the early 1960s when the narrator is about 10-12 years of age. In 1962, the war with China takes place. In 1963, Maya Debi’s husband is posted in Dhaka as Counsul General and the Hazratbal incident takes place in Srinagar resulting in communal riots which continue sporadically in Dhaka till early January of 1964 even after the recovery of the Holy Hair of the Prophet. It is in one of such cases of violence that Tridib gets killed. This traumatic event is shrouded in the irony that it happens when it should not have happened. The narrator recalls all these and earlier events through his own memory of his childhood memories which include the memories of others, imagination, hearsay, guesswork, partly his own. The labyrinthine cobweb of this memory novel is woven slowly by him, moving between events and characters, reality and imagination, plain light narration and reflection, amusement and puzzlement, suspense, terror and shock—all culminating in the final stage of calm of mind, all passion spent. The world of his memories and imagination is so well fused at the end with the real world that the transition of memory and imagination with the reality of the present of consciousness with conscience is hardly noticed.
There are, however, other characters in the novel whose historical memory functions as the obverse of recorded factual history as codified in history books. Tha’mma, who is technically a refugee from Bangladesh—though she vehemently denies it—is a living testimonial of the Partition in 1947. The narrator himself is an eyewitness of the riots in Calcutta in 1964 though when he tries to prove it to his colleagues using the traditional medium of recording history—the newspapers—he initially meets with disappointment. While material on the war with Pakistan floods the newspapers, there is no visible record of the narrator’s mnemonic history: “I nodded silently unnerved by the possibility that I had lived for all those years with a memory of an imagined event. (SL 222). Eventually, he does find it along with discovering that its mirror image had occurred on the other side of the border, in Khulna, East Pakistan. He also discovers that the main historical events such as the trouble in East Pakistan and the restoration of the sacred relic in Kashmir find no mention in the local newspaper and he wryly comments: “It was after all, a Calcutta paper, run by people who believed in the power of distance no less than I did” (SL 227).

In Lines, the logic of the partition appears to be arbitrary. The lines that divide India from East Pakistan as illogical as the lines of the circle the narrator draws on the map with the help of his compass and pencil. These lines are merely whims of politicians and nothing else as they cannot enforce cultural difference nor can they separate the two communities living across the border. The absurdity of the partition is given in the story of the grandmother’s ancestral house in Dhaka. It is a metaphorical and comic rendering of the theme in the novel. When Tha’mma was still a young child the house had been
partitioned with the dividing lines going through doorways and the lavatory bisecting an old commode. Even the old nameplate had been partitioned into two. It is nothing but force. It questions the logic of the political violence. Someshwar Sati in “Interrogating the Nation, Growing Global in The Shadow Lines” observes:

Ghosh further illustrates this theme by demonstrating that identical realities exist across territorial division, which were originally meant to mark out differences. When still a child both the grandmother and her sister visualised the other side of the partitioned house as being upside down—as inverted image of their part of the house. But when the two returned to Dhaka to rescue their uncle they are presently surprised to find out that on the other side of the line there existed an identical reality. Category of difference and otherness is thus presented as a deceptive construct, as a fabrication of the human mind, as an illusion without any grounding realities. In the novel national frontiers are described as ‘looking-glass borders’ that create an image of otherness only to see itself reflected. (56)

Commenting on the effect of partition, D.K. Pabby also in “Theme of Partition and Freedom in Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan and Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines” says:

The real sorrow of the partition, however, as portrayed in the two novels under review, was that it brought to an abrupt end a long and communally
shared history and cultural heritage. The relations between the Hindus and
the Muslims were not, of course, always free from suspicions, distrust or
the angry rejection by one group of the habits and practices of the other;
but such moments of active malevolence and communal frenzy were a rare
and transient exception to the common bonds of mutual goodwill and
warm feelings of close brotherhood. Even if there were some disruptions
on some rare occasions, the rich heterogeneity of the life of the two
communities was never seriously threatened. The Hindus never ceased
from paying homages at dargahs; the Muslims continued to participate in
Hindu festivals; and traders of both the communities continued their usual
exchange of goods and services in the bazars, etc. Indeed, one can assert
with confidence that the dominant concerns of the Hindu and Muslim
intellectuals throughout the nineteenth century and till about 1935, were
more with creating free spaces for enlightened thought than with confining
people within their narrow religious identities. Organizations which
nurtured violent hatred towards each other and incited communal passions
did exist, but at the very margins of the solidly and healthily functioning
social and cultural order. It is the unthoughtful decision of partition and
hollow love of ‘nationalism’ that let the mischief off and out. (141-142)

Ghosh reveals a sense of history and a firm grasp of socio-cultural and historical material
when he catches alive the trauma of emotional rupture through the emotional baggage of
the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the partition of India and the
miasma of communal hatred breaking out into riots in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) following the Hazratbal incident in Srinagar in 1964. The violence erupted in Calcutta on 10th January 1964, “the day the first cricket test match of the 1964 series against England” (SL 168) was to begin at Madras. A rumour spread that the Tala tank had been poisoned by the Muslims. The most poignant expression of the communal divide manifests in human relationships. Later, as a research student reading newspaper clippings about the 1964 events in Teen Murti House library in Delhi, the narrator recalls the motivations for riots in Calcutta:

In Calcutta rumours were in the air-especially that familiar old rumour, the harbinger of every serious riot-that the trains from Pakistan were arriving packed with corpses. A few Calcutta dailies printed pictures of weeping, stranded Hindu refugees, along with a few lurid accounts of the events in the East. On 8 and 9 January, with refugees still pouring in, rumours began to flow like floodwaters through the city and angry crowds began to gather at the stations.

And so, the events followed their own grotesque logic, and on 10 January, the day the cricket Test began in Madras, Calcutta erupted. (SL 228-29)

The outbreak of communal strife in Dhaka following the disappearance of the sacred hair of the Prophet Mohammed on 27 December 1963, exposes the fragile demarcation of political frontiers.
In *Land*, the narrative is based on history. It has a historical dimension. Characters and events are viewed from the perspective of historical research. In it, Ghosh reveals the inter relationships between the Indian, Egyptian, Jewish, and Islamic cultures and their histories. The central background is twelfth century, around 1130 A.D. The history centres around the character Abraham Ben Yiju, the Jewish merchant, who came from Aden to Mangalore for trade and his Indian slave. He married a slave girl called Ashu, belonging to the matrilinial community of Nairs and lived in Mangalore for nearly two decades. To be authentic in history, Ghosh has made use of a few disconnected clues, a few scraps of paper including some of Ben Yiju’s letters preserved as medieval documents in various Universities and research centres. The transcriptions of the letters written by a merchant in Aden named Kalaf ibn Ishaq to Ben Yiju in Mangalore were used by Ghosh to make it a historical novel. He came upon those letters when he was a student of social anthropology at Oxford. He came upon those letters in the winter of 1978 which provided him the clues to the story of a slave of MSH 6 (the catalogue number given to one of Khalaf’s letters in the National and University Library in Jerusalem). The first letter, written in the summer of 1148 A.D. when Palestine had turned into a thoroughfare for European armies preparing for a crusade against Islam, appeared in an article written by the eminent scholar, E. Strauss. It was published in the 1942 issue of a Hebrew journal, *Zion*. The second letter of Khalaf ibn Ishaq was included in a collection entitled *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (1973) translated and edited by Professor S.D.Goitein of Princeton University. This letter was prefaced with a few words about Ben Yiju and it contained a footnote about the slave. Ben Yiju was introduced as
a Jewish merchant, originally of Tunisia, who had gone to India by way of Egypt, as a trader, and had spent seventeen years there. A man of many accomplishments, a distinguished calligrapher, scholar and poet, Ben Yiju had returned to Egypt having amassed great wealth in India. The last years of his life were spent in Egypt, and his papers found their way into his synagogue in Cairo; they were eventually discovered in a chamber known as the Geniza. (AL 19)

The footnote, very brief, merely described the slave as Ben Yiju’s Indian “slave and business agent, a respectable member of his household.” (AL 18)

The letters made Ghosh restless because they spoke not only of two merchants but also of a slave. In each of his letters addressed to his friend Ben Yiju, Khalaf ibn Ishaq had singled out the slave, mentioned him by name and sent him “plentiful greetings” (AL 16). This was something unimaginable in the Middle Ages. An amazed Ghosh explains:

That is all: no more than a name and a greeting. But the reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual existences are the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests—the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time. But the slave of Khalaf’s letter was not of the company: in his instance it was a mere accident that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved. It is
nothing less than a miracle that anything is known about him at all. (AL 16-17)

Ghosh came to learn from Strauss’s article and Goiten’s book that the letters had been recovered from a ‘Geniza’ in the biggest Palestinian synagogue in an unusual hybrid language. Known today as Judaeo-Arabic, it was in fact, “a colloquial dialect of medieval Arabic, transcribed in Hebrew script and liberally stewn with Hebrew and Aramic” (AL 103). Most of the Geniza documents were written in it and there was only a handful of scholars in the world who could decipher this bafflingly esoteric language. Ghosh was determined to trace the “antique” world of the Jewish merchant and his slave. With a view to verifying the authenticity of the available material, Ghosh had gone to Tunisia and learnt Arabic; in 1980, he was in Egypt, “installed in a village called Lataifa, a couple of hours journey to the south-east of Alexandria” (AL 19). He returned to Egypt twice again, in 1988 and then in 1990. The search continued in Mangalore and culminated in Annenberg Research Institute, Philadelphia, where the ‘last testament’ of the Slave’s life—a handwritten document stating that Ben Yiju owed a sum of money to his slave for household purchases—was preserved. Thus, what one finds in the story of Ben Yiju is not an imaginary picture, but an authentic account of the twelfth century. Hence, it is history. In fact, it is the abundance of verified facts that reinforces the historical dimension of Ghosh’s book. For instance, in the first section of the book (“Lataifa”) one finds an introduction of historical facts about “the Egyptian Babylon” and a description of Ben Ezra’s Synagogue and its Geniza in Cairo, as mentioned by the British historian A.J. Butler. The tenth chapter of this section (that details the loot of the
Geniza documents by European scholars from eighteenth century onwards) is pure history. Again, in the second section entitled “Nashawy,” one finds historical documentation. The third section, “Mangalore,” contains the accounts of ibn Batuta, the folk life of Tulunad, the history of Tulu language and culture, and the life story of the Mogera fishermen. In this section, there is plenty of information about the trade relations between India and the Middle East during Ben Yiju’s life time. Each and every information is supported by corresponding historical documents mentioned in the end-notes.

The story of Abu Ali and Shaikh Musa in Lataifa and that of Ustaz Sabri and the Imam in Nashawy introduce a number of unforgettable characters. It is not mere narration but delightfully presented stories within a story. Along with the rise and fall of the larger society, one notices the progression of the major characters. Gradually, the narrative part of the book assumes a self-sufficient form.

At the historical level, as at the temporal, Ghosh’s narrative runs on parallel lines. There were tremendous political disturbances in the Middle East when Ben Yiju left for India. The European superpowers were uniting for a Crusade against Islam. Ben Yiju’s return to Aden after seventeen year’s stay in Mangalore coincided with the political turmoil over large areas in the Middle East and North Africa. The raids of Ifriqiya, Yiju’s homeland, by Sicilian armies and the forceful conversion and large scale massacre of the Jews were followed by famine and disease, leading to the exodus of a substantial section of the Jewish population. Then, in the twentieth century, there were the two world wars and the Holocaust. When Ghosh visited Egypt in 1980 and 1988, the Iran-
Iraq war was going on. His last visit to Egypt took place soon after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The newspapers were talking of vast flood of Egyptian workers pouring out of Iraq, and his co-passengers in the taxi from Cairo to Damanhour “talked randomly of disaster, killing and vengeance’ (AL 350) in confused apprehension. Hundreds of thousands of American and European troops were being mobilized for an all-out attack on Iraq. It was the greatest army ever assembled in the Persian Gulf since the days of the Crusades. But amidst “this tornado of grand designs and historical destinies,” (AL 15) the lives of the common people continued uninterrupted. The Indian Ocean trade that brought the Jewish merchants from Tunisia to Aden and then to the Malabar Coast, and that gave rise to a unique culture of accommodation, mutual trust and compromise, had flourished amidst these political up-heavals. Ghosh peeps through the “foxholes” (AL 16) of history to trace that singular tradition that had brought Ben Yiju and his Indian slave into close contact, and their “small, indistinguishable, intertwined histories” (AL 339) which prevailed until some centuries ago, but which then became partitioned in several areas where they had once existed.

The historical narrative of the Land centres round Abraham Ben Yiju and his Indian slave named Bomma. It is not easy to present facts of history in a narrative vein. But, like a master craftsman, Ghosh has interwoven history and narrative with a rare dexterity in the story of Ben Yiju. The task was stupendous: arranging the varied materials in historical sequence and building up the complete account of the twelfth century out of fragmentary documents. Although at a few places Ghosh had to have recourse to imagination to fill in certain gaps (for instance, his remark about Bomma
cheering Adenese soldiers with a flask of wine to fight against a group of pirates raiding merchant vessels is not supported by historical document), he remained more or less faithful to the available material. He did not sacrifice historical authenticity to the claims of fiction. Ghosh’s search for the origin of the slave provides the readers with a wonderful study in social anthropology and a valuable “insight into the uses of History” (AL 270). The story takes the reader back to an antiquated world in the Middle Ages when, despite religious, social and geographical divisions, “a culture of accommodation and compromise” (AL 288) had spread over a wide area in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent that made the crossing of the paths of the Jewish merchant and his Hindu slave possible.

The name “Bomma,” which had once “had a wide currency within Tulu Culture,” (AL 250) relates the slave to the “Bhuta-cult,” the worship of spirit deities which is still practised in certain areas of Tulunad. The name was derived from the name of a deity of the Tulu myth, “Berme “ or “Bermeru,” the “principal figure in the pantheon of Tuluva Bhuta- deities. (AL 254) “Bermeru” was not the same as the Brahma of classical Sanskritic mythology. But in course of time, “with the growth of Brahminical influence, the Tulu deity “Benne” had slowly become assimilated to the Sanskritic deity, “Brahma” (AL 254). Bomma had been born in one of the several matrilineal communities of Tulunad that played an important role in the Bhuta-cult. The Bhuta-cult was not considered to be religion at all. In fact, “it fell far beneath the Himalayan gaze of canonical Hindu practice” and it was “dismissed as mere ‘devil worship’ and superstition.” (AL 264)
Although most of the Geniza documents, in which Bomma figures, refer to him as Ben Yiju’s slave, the actual terms of his service were completely different from those which the word “slavery” suggests to-day. The medieval concept of slavery was, as Ghosh relates:

In the Middle Ages institutions of servitude took many forms, and they all differed from “slavery” as it came to be practised after the European colonial expansion of the sixteenth century. In the life-times of Bomma and Ben Yiju, servitude was a part of a very flexible set of hierarchies and it often followed a logic completely contrary to that which modern expectations suggest. (AL 254-260)

In the Middle East, as in a large part of North India, “slavery was the principal means of recruitment into some of the most privileged sectors of the army and the bureaucracy” (Al 260). It was also used by merchants and traders as a means of recruiting apprentices and agents. The “slaves” recruited in this way were often given a share of the firm’s profits and they “could generally be sure of obtaining manumission” (AL 260). Again servitude was used, over a large part of the medieval world, “as a means of creating fictive ties of kinship between people who were otherwise unrelated” (AL 260). The slaves were often inducted into the household of their masters and regarded as their family members.

But the most elusive aspect of the medieval concept of slavery was its role as a “spiritual metaphor”. During Bomma’s own lifetime, a group of “pietist and fiercely
egalitarian” (AL 260) poets of south India, who were known as “Vachanakara Saint-poets”, used slavery as a poetic image,

to represent the devotee’s quest for God: through the transforming power of metaphor the poets became their Lord’s, servants and lovers androgynous in their longing; slaves, searching for their master with a passion that dissolved selfhood, wealth, caste and gender indeed difference itself. In their poetry, it was slavery that was the paradoxical embodiment of perfect freedom; the Image that represented the very notion of relationship, of human bonds as well as the possibility of their transcendence. (AL 260-261)

The Arabic speaking religious world in the Middle East, which Ben Yiju had hailed from, was also being rocked under the tremendous impact of the Sufis—the mystics of Islam. In spite of the wide gulf separating, the medieval Sufis from the Saint-poets of Southern India, there was, in fact “a commonality in the nature of their quest” and “a similarity in their use of poetic imagery” (AL 262). To the Sufis as to the Vachanakaras, the notion of slavery constituted “one of the central metaphors of religious life”—“metaphors of perfect devotion and love strung together in an intensely charged, often erotic, spiritual imagery” (AL 262).

The poetic imagery and spiritual metaphors might well appear remote from the mundane relation between a merchant and his agent. Bomma was probably not familiar with the teachings of the contemporary saint-poets. But since he belonged to a
community which had long been relegated to the fringes of the orthodox and hierarchical Hindu society, he must certainly have been intimately aware of the “great range of popular traditions and folk-beliefs which upturn and invert the categories of Sanskritic Hinduism.” (AL 262) As a well-educated person, Ben Yiju, for his part, might well have been acquainted with the teachings of the Sufis. At the same time, he might have “shared in some of the beliefs and practices that have always formed the hidden and subversive counter-image of the orthodox religions of the Middle East: the exorcism cults, the magical rites, the customs of visiting saints’s graves and such like” (AL 263). And it was, in all probability, those “inarticulate counter-beliefs” that formed a common ground between the patriarchal Jew and the matrilineal Tulu, “who would otherwise seem to stand on different sides of an unbridgeable gulf” (AL 263).

This unique culture which had been born of the subversion of the categories of Hinduism, Islam and Judaism and was nurtured by the “peaceful traditions of the oceanic trade” and the “pacifist customs and beliefs” (AL 287) of the merchants-irrespective of their religious faiths in Malabar and the Middle East, collapsed after the appearance of the maritime powers of Europe on the Indian Ocean. The arrival of Vasco da Gama on the Indian Coast on May 17, 1498-about three hundred and fifty years after Ben Yiju left Mangalore-and the consequent political developments sounded the knell of the strange world of Ben Yiju, Ashu and Bomma and marked the beginning of the European supremacy in the Indian Ocean trade. The European aggression put an end to the singular traditions in which the Eastern trade, itself the product of a “rare cultural choice,” (AL 287) had flourished for centuries.
In a sense, Land is the story of two Indians in Egypt. The first one is Bomma, the slave and business agent of the medieval Jewish merchant, Ben Yiju, who followed his master when the latter returned to Aden around 1148 A.D. and remained faithful to him till the end of his life. The other Indian is Ghosh who, in 1980-about eight hundred and fifty years after Ben Yiju’s voyage to India-travelled to Egypt to trail the story of the slave of MS H. 6, a story miraculously preserved in the footnotes of history. It is a strange, colourful world-at once medieval and modern-presented in the garb of a traveller’s tale. It is here, in the Egyptian backwater, that Ghosh sought to retrieve the remnants of the antique civilization of the twelfth century. His guides in both the villages were his neighbours: Abu Ali, his obese, gargantuan landlord; Shaikh Musa, the gentle and good-humoured village elder; Jabir, the son of Ali’s cousin; Amm Taha, Ghosh’s caretaker in Nashawy, who had a rare skill “in ferreting out ... the most jealously guarded of household secrets” (127); the self-reliant and individualistic Busaina; Zaghloul, the superstitious weaver who was very fond of stories and “had a manner of telling them that was marvelously faithful to the metaphorical resonances of his chosen craft” (AL 137). Ustaz Sabri, the well-educated and knowledgeable school teacher, battling, with the other youngmen of his neighbourhood, against ignorance, poverty and exploitation and fashioning post-Revolution Egypt into the path of Islam; the college students, Ismail and Nabeel: Khamees the Rat, the beady-eyed local wit; and the village Imam with whom Ghosh had a serious quarrel. It is almost a pageant of characters carefully observed and faithfully presented. Ghosh narrates, from the viewpoint of a social anthropologist, the lives of these people—their dialects, manners, social and religious customs and points out the commonalities and differences between medieval Masr and the post-Revolution
Egypt. One learns about the exploitation of the poor, landless “fellaheen” (the unlettered peasants) by the Pashas and the British, the Revolution of 1952 under the leadership of Jamal Abd Al Nasir, the redistribution of land, the massive co-operative movement that sought to organize the land-owning farmers, and the Suez crisis of 1956. Apart from the history of modern, developing Egypt, there is an account of another Egypt, teeming with poverty, superstition, miracles, blood-feuds and exorcism rituals—a world not far removed from the antique world inhabited by Ben Yiju and Bomma. Although Ghosh found there men like Ustaz Sabri who were aware of the age-old and intimate ties between Egypt and of the similarity of the problems “that had been bequeathed to them by their troubled stories,” (AL 134) most of the villagers had no clear idea about the country where Ben Yiju spent seventeen valuable years of his life. But it was with these simple and largely unlettered fellaheen, who were devoutly religious but had no interest in politics, that Ghosh felt at home since they seemed to belong to a familiar world. In spite of their ignorance of India and her people and religion, which is evident from the barrage of questions they asked him: questions invariably about cow-worship, the burning of the dead, circumcision of men and clitoridectomy of women that often non-plussed him, they befriended Ghosh and provided him with the information he needed for his research. Some one like Busaina even earnestly proposed: “You had better not go back. Stay here and become a Muslim and marry a girl from the village” (AL 172).

When Ghosh revisited the villages seven years later, he was astonished by the changes that had overtaken them. There was no electricity at Lataifa in 1980. Someone had bought a diesel water pump from a nearby town. Such machines were “generically
known as ‘al-makana al-Hindi,’ the Indian machine, for they were all manufactured in India’ (AL 72). The whole village had gathered on the courtyard of the owner, waiting expectantly as Ghosh, the “doktor al-Hindi,” who had been invited to give his expert opinion, examined the machine. But in 1988, he found refrigerator in every house, new brick buildings in place of adobe houses, calculators, TV sets, cassette players, and even food processors. The people owed their prosperity to the Gulf money. Most of the young men of the villages had left Egypt by that time to find jobs in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, but mostly in war-riven Iraq whose own men had gone to the borders to fight with Iran. The “gleanings from that distant war” (AL 299) had worked a silent economic revolution in rural Egypt and changed the lives of the fellaheen. People were sending their children to schools and colleges and were talking about development. But ignorance, fanaticism and superstition still prevailed. Ghosh was asked the same embarrassing question about Hinduism, the burning of the dead and the “purification” of women in India over and over again. It was one such question from the Imam of Nashawy that made Ghosh flare up and enter into an angry altercation with the religious fanatic who publicly humiliated him for the burning of the dead in his country. Ghosh details:

it seemed to me that the Imam and I had participated in our own final defeat, in me dissolution of the centuries of dialogue that had linked us... We had acknowledged that it was no longer possible to speak, as Ben Yiju or his slave, or any one of the thousands of travellers who had crossed the Indian Ocean in the Middle Ages might have done; of things
that were right, or good, or willed by God; it would have been merely absurd for either of us to use those words, for they belonged to a dismantled rung on the ascending ladder of development. (AL 236-237)

And Ghosh felt himself “a conspirator in the betrayal of the history that had led [him] to Nashawy; a witness to the extermination of a world of accommodations that [he] had believed to be still alive, and, in some tiny measure, still retrievable” (AL 237).

But his backward journey to Ben Yiju’s world was not altogether un-rewarding. Despite ignorance and superstition, religion and politics, and the seemingly unbridgeable gulf of time and culture, Ghosh could trace points of contact with the ancient civilization Ben Yiju had come from. It was still alive both in Egypt and in India—in the inarticulate beliefs and religious practices of the people.

One major discovery of Ghosh in Mangalore was a shrine devoted to a spirit-deity known as “Bobbariya-bhuta”, “deemed by legend to be the spirit of a Muslim mariner and trader who died at sea” (AL 271). The deity was venerated by a small group of fishermen along the Malabar Coast, known by the name of “Magavira” or “Mogera” who had traditionally belonged to the margins of the caste structure of the orthodox Hindu society and had been closely linked with the foreign merchants and mariners who came to trade in Malabar. Their links with foreign merchants were “commemorated in the traditional symbol of their distinct identity,” (AL 271) the Bobbariya-bhuta cult. The shrine Ghosh visited was “a large modern building, modelled after a classical Hindu temple” (AL 273). It was situated in a rapidly developing village of fisherfolk that owed
its prosperity to the Gulf money. The temple bore the posters of a “fundamentalist Hindu political organization, an upper-caste group notorious for its anti-Muslim rhetoric” (AL 273). But the real surprise awaited him inside the remodelled temple whose main place was reserved for the most Brahminical of Hindu gods, Vishnu:

Once we went inside, however, it turned out that one small aspect of the past had ingeniously escaped reinvention: the spirit of the Bobbriyabhitta still remained in the temple although in a wholly altered guise . . . he stood beside the image of Vishnu, but at slightly lower level. The old symbols, the mace and the pillar, had been dispensed with: he was now represented by an image, like a Hindu god. (AL 274)

And an awe-struck Ghosh remarks:

I had to struggle with myself to keep from applauding the ironies enshrined in that temple. The past had revenged itself on the present: it had slipped the spirit of an Arab Muslim trader past the watchful eyes of Hindu zealots and installed it within the Sanskritic pantheon. (AL 274)

**Palace** brings together history, fiction, autobiographical records and memories. The colonial experience and his memories are loaded with a sense of pain and suffering of the large numbers of people who lived through those phases of history. In reconstructing the history of Burma’s transition from a kingdom to a republic, between 1885 to 1995 – the period covered by the **Palace**, Ghosh has used materials 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 and history books and so on. In it, history is woven into fiction and an epical saga of the colonial regime of Burma. Localised contexts of Burma and India become the sites of self-consciousness, self-enquiry and a process of recovering the lost selfhood. Ghosh seeks an understanding of the past to have a bearing upon the present. Santosh Gupta in “Looking into History: Amitav Ghosh’s The Glass Palace” says: “The past is remembered not as a dead, remote period, but as a flowing on, into the present post-colonial situations of multi-ethnic, pluralist societies, of boundaries, and mutations of nations imposed by the colonial rulers and complex cultural diversities of a persistent political struggle for democratic and egalitarian system” (243).

Palace relates India and Burma in the shared colonial experience, during which a new sense of selfhood and national identity took shape among the people of the two countries. Crossing the borders between two countries, historical characters like king Thebaw and his family and purely fictional characters, like Rajkumar, Dolly, Saya John and Uma reflect upon the historical events and their impact upon the colonised people. Ghosh in Palace writes about the effect of foreign invasion:

In a few decades the wealth will be gone – all the gems, the timber and the oil – and then they too will leave... This is what awaits us all, this is how we will end – as prisoners, in shanty towns born of the plague. A hundred years hence you will read the indictment of Europe’s greed in the difference between the kingdom of Siam and the state of our own enslaved realm. (GP 76)
Lata Chaturvedi in “The Glass Palace: A Critical Assessment” observes that “The book is a sincere and sustained effort to present a historical document through a series of characters, time and space, i.e. three interconnected parts of the British Empire: Burma, with its widening rifts and undercurrents of discontent, Malaya, with its sprawling rubber plantation, and India amid growing opposition to British rule” (113).

In **Burma**, Ghosh says that with the assumption of power by General Ne Win in 1962, Burma was closed for outside world for nearly three decades. It slipped into inaccessibility. Its people lost touch with the passage of time. Once Burma had been the most developed country in the world but later it became one of the United Nations ten least developed nations on the earth. It was caused by the tragic downward growth after the British pulled out from Burma. Many felt that General Aung San, who had negotiated the Panglong Agreement that offered a quasi-federal union to minority groups, was the only public figure who could avert a war. Upon his assassination and the imposition of military rule, the country began to tear apart. During the military regime, the Karenni, one of the small groups who had been seeking some form of independence, had been chased into ever-diminishing nomadic lives by the military. Ghosh writes: “There are five major Karenni refugee camps and together they form a minuscule, fight-knit nation-on-the-move, consisting of some six thousand people” (95). However, on the futility of war Ghosh raises a question “what does it take... to sustain an insurgency for fifty years, to go on fighting a war that the rest of the world has almost forgotten” (93).

The first is the visit to Marseilles in June of 1906 of king Sisowath of Cambodia and a troupe of nearly a hundred classical dancers and musicians from the royal palace at Phnom Penh. The second is Ghosh’s visit to Cambodia in January of 1993 in search of Pol Pot’s sister-in-law, who was said to be one of the country’s greatest dancers. Contemporary newspaper accounts suggest that the French were entranced by the exotic king and even more so by the dancers. Ghosh writes:

> the Marseilles newspapers had been full of fantalising snippets of information; it was said that the dancers entered the palace as children and spent their lives in seclusion entirely around the royal family; that several were the king’s mistresses and had even borne him children; that some of them had never stepped out of the Palace grounds until this trip to France.

(3)

Ghosh in *Burma* describes king Sisowath as a neo-colonial collaborator who sought to imitate the France. His brother, Norodom, who succeeded to the throne, was an annoyance for forty years to the French. Sisowath’s grandson, Thiounn, became increasingly influential among the Cambodians elite who studied in France. Ghosh sees his role as “immediately recognisable to anyone who has ever inhabited the turbulent limbo of the Asian or African student in Europe – that curious circumstance of social dislocation and emotional turmoil that for more than a century now has provided the site for some of the globe’s most explosive political encounters” (24). In 1952, Thiounn inducted Saloth into the French communist party with hideous future consequences.
Ghosh wants to speak to Chea Samy, who was very close to the king Sisowath and more importantly, princess Soumphady. Princess Soumphady had been in charge of the dancers. She had been a surrogate mother for them. Chea Samy is the country’s direct connection to terpsichorean tradition. Molyka likes to escort Ghosh to Chea Samy. Molyka is a thirty-one-year mid-level civil servant who had braved a great deal in her own life. In 1975, when the Khmer Rogue had taken Phnom Penh, she was evocated with her family members to a labour camp in the province of Kompony Thom. Three years later she lost her father, two brothers and a sister. Her mother became a terrified woman, and her brother became guilt-ridden. Hence, Molyka was little bit hesitant to take Ghosh to Chea Samy, since Samy was Pol Pat’s sister-in-law.

In 1925, Chea Samy came to the palace as a dancer. In 1925, when king Sisowath died, his son’s favourite mistress, Luk Khan Meak, who was also a dancer, brought several of her villagers to the Palace, including Chea Samy’s future husband and his brother known as Saloth Sar. He was later known to be only as Pol Pot. Saloth Sar was given a scholarship to study electronism in Paris in 1949. In France, he was influenced by the leftists and communists. Later, on his arrival, he began to work for the Indo China Communist Party. In 1963, he disappeared and again in 1975 he reemerged as Pol Pat, when the Khmer Puoghe seized the power. Later in 1979, the Vietnamese brought about the collapse of Pol Pot’s regime and the evacuers began struggling back to their villages. During his regime, as many as 90 percent of the country’s pre-revolution artists were killed. It is as Ghosh writes: ‘It was a war on history itself, an experiment in the reinvention of society. No regime in history had ever before made so systematic and
sustained an attack on the middle class. 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” (10). In fact, “they had to start from the beginning, literally, like rag pickers, piecing their families, their roots, their lives together from the little that was left” (18). They had to reinvent Cambodia’s culture. In doing so, “they began to create the means of denying Pot his victory” (18). However, in 1988 with the efforts taken by Chea Samy, the classical Cambodian dance was once again performed in Phnom Penh.

In Burma, Ghosh contradicts the king Sosowath and Pol Pat. King Sosowath chose the path toward social transformation. He offered an exhortation to his countrymen to imitate French technology. Pol Pot locked himself away in his Parisian garret and spent a lot of his time in thinking and writing. His mind turned inward, towards a fundamentalistic apocalyptic vision of social change. He admires the French Revolution’s Robespierre.

The second essay in Burma, “Stories in Stone” is about Ghosh’s visit to Angkor Wat, the twelfth century Cambodian temple. The temple is described by Ghosh as “a monument to the power of the story” (54). It is encrusted with religious iconography. Its history as a building is heavily overlain with the biographies of things and other potentates. To the west, it is a stereotypical of the romance of lost civilizations “of lost glory, devoured by time” (56). Where as in Cambodia, it seems to represent modernity of all things. “For entire generation of Cambodians [...], it became the opposite of itself: an
icon that represented a break with the past—a token of the country’s belonging, not within the medieval, but rather the contemporary worlds” (60).

The third essay in Burma, “At Large in Burma” is a reflection on Ghosh’s meeting with Aung San Suukyi. In 1980, Ghosh and Aung San Suukyi were students at Oxford. Now, Ghosh remembers her as being a 35 year-old woman “leading a life of quiet exiled domesticity on a leafy street in North Oxford, bringing up two sons, then aged seven and three, and writing occasional articles for scholarly journals” (75). Her second and third meetings with her were in late 1995, when he attended two of her weekend public meetings that she conducted from her gateside. These happened during the house arrest that had been imposed in 1989 and then lifted in July 1995. In 1991, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for peace in absentia. In Ghosh’s third meeting in July 1996, she had changed as he found her animated but no longer light-hearted. She seemed more guarded in her responses to questions, as if anticipating a future role outside her house, in the world of politics. Her involvement in politics seemed to be serendipitous. Her mother was Burma’s ambassador to India and her father Aung San led the Anti-Fascist people’s Freedom League to a great victory in the 1947 election but he was assassinated. In 1988, she had to return to Rangoon as her mother suffered from a stroke. Then the military had taken draconian control over her country and after several riots against SLORC (the State Law and order Restoration Council) she stepped forward for election and was put under house arrest. Ghosh recognizes that the subaltern in the world and in history is ignored. But Aung San Suukyi proves that it cannot be ignored. Ghosh admits:
In the post-modern world, politics is everywhere, a matter of symbols, and
the truth is that Suukyi is her own greatest political asset. It is only
because Burma’s 1988 democracy movement had a symbol, personified in
Suukyi, that the world remembers it and continues to exert pressure on the
current regime. (83)

Ghosh’s non-fictional writings like “Countdown”, Dancing in Cambodia, At
Comedy in Cairo”, “The Slave of MS H 6”, The Imam and the Indian, ‘An Egyptian in
Baghdad”, “The Fundamentalist Challenge”, “Categories of Labour and the Orientation
of the Fellah Economy”, “Tibetan Dinner”, “The Diaspora in Indian Culture”, and “The
March of the Novel Through History” deal with history. In these essays, he talks about
the historical events like the nuclearisation of the subcontinent, the current political crisis
in Burma and Cambodia, the maintenance of cultural heritage, pre-European commerce
between India and Africa, fundamentalism, anthropology and economics in local
communities, and the diaspora. It is as John C. Hawley in Amitav Ghosh : An
Introduction says : “Viewed with a less narrow focus, many of these pieces share in
common the author’s abiding concern for the impact of broad historical movements on
individuals caught up in events beyond their control, the importance of connections
between the past and the present, and the desirability of finding avenues for
communication that obviate nationalistic manias” (19). Ghosh is a historical novelist.
He blends fact and fiction in all his writings. So, it is worth to conclude with
R.K.Dhawan’s opinion as expressed in “Introduction: The Novels of Amitav Ghosh”:
Amitav Ghosh’s engagement with history is not the same kind as that of a historian, but this does not in any way lessen its significance as historical fiction. The fictional framework renders history more readable and lively and he is able to involve the reader more than what history does. Ghosh’s fiction reveals that the novelist’s involvement with history is his prime obsession. Indeed, he interjects a new dimension into his encounter with history. His fiction is imbued with both political and historical consciousness. Ghosh is a novelist who virtually blends his novels to the needs of history; they largely derive their purpose and shape from it. (14)

References


