Chapter VI

A GLANCE BACK AND FORTH

A major feature of post-colonial literature is the concern with place and displacement. The special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being, with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place. The dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of postcolonial societies whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention or a mixture of the two. Beyond their historical and cultural differences, place, displacement and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity
and authenticity are features common to all post-colonial literature in English.

Ghosh’s fictional world is a curious blend of scholarship, history and philosophy with literature, suffused with a profound humanism rendered in a unique style, characteristic of the Indian tradition. It deflates the vision of dominant power structures and decentres the Euro-centric notions, thereby forming a new idiom as part of the postcolonial dialectic. Ghosh has a liking for the narrative that juxtaposes events in time and space in a way that reflects the contemporary dislocated self. Spurred by the concerns and liking of the times, his novels are innovative explorations into the impact of colonial encounter on the cultural, social and political lives of erstwhile colonies as diverse as India, Egypt, Myanmar and Bangladesh, with a canvas large enough to accommodate wide range of characters.

The novels of Amitav Ghosh are about the past. They interweave the freedom struggle, independence, partition, the birth of Bangladesh, sexual exploitations and love-making. They are developed in different locales. They deal with exploitation before and after colonialism. He is free from the British way of using English. Ghosh has no restrictions of spelling, sentence structure, grammar etc. He twists and turns words. He uses the English language skillfully and artistically. His style can be compared to a flowing river with all its moods.
Ghosh takes the reader through many parts of the world. A keen interest in Anthropology and in places of today and yesterday makes his novels interesting as well as informative. He wanders through the ancient land of Egypt as well as war ravaged London during the Second World War, through Dhaka, before and after partition. Coming and going, arriving and departing finds a fragment place in his fiction. This is not merely a geographical or physical movement but also a movement from ignorance to knowledge and awareness and understanding. There are no barriers of time and space in Ghosh’s novels. He uses time to a maximum effect because yesterdays, today and tomorrows fuse into one. The reader moves in and out of this scenario and responds to it in such a way that significance and meaningfulness are obviously underlined. Past, present and future fuse into one. Meanwhile, the reader is able to move with the characters. His novels are not limited clock-time as they do not deal merely with external. We get the impression that events lie outside the normal dimensions of time, as in *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

*The Shadow Lines* is a novel of three generations. The three generations from the narrator’s family spread over Calcutta, Dhaka and London weave the ground of the novel. The title ‘The Shadow Lines’ philosophically unfolds the life struggle of mankind in choosing light and darkness. *The Shadow Lines* traces nearly a half century of interlocking relations among three generations of two families, one
Indian and one British. The Hindu - Muslim conflict takes place simultaneously in Dhaka and Calcutta.

The unnamed narrator knew there was war time in London. His grandmother’s confusion between her childhood Dhaka and the present day foreign city becomes a symptom of the violence done to people by artificial borders and partitions. After a futile argument about whether London or Calcutta is the site of real history and important politics, the narrator realizes the shaky ground on which he too claims possession of people and places he has largely invented. Ghosh recognizes the political stakes involved in drawing connecting lines like airline routes, across the shadow lines of national boundaries and historical periods. Full of complex cross cultural encounters The Shadow Lines makes a unique contribution to the debate over difference and otherness that have galvanized the contemporary post-colonial world.

Divided into two parts called “Going Away” “Coming Home, the novel beautifully shifts from past to present and from present to past. Ghosh manages in a masterly way two kinds time: time past, i.e., memory and time present, i.e., reality, War, terrorism, riots; the contemporary man thrives on violence and lives amidst it and becomes a victim in the novel. The author shows us a glimpse of this world where violence and crude barbarity prevails. The time space of the novel
extends from 1939 to 1974 with 1964 being a very important year for the characters.

Communal strife and public turmoil are interwoven with private upheaval. Almost all the characters in the novel are caught in the vortex of murderous rampages through various violent times as the narrator suffers in the riots of 1904 in Calcutta Robi, Mayadebi. Tridib, May and Grandma are trapped in the mob violence of Dhaka; Tridib and Mayadebi witness London during the days of the Second World War in 1939. Even though the places are different, being Calcutta, Dhaka and London, human beings suffer equally in the hands of violence.

Due to social conditioning, the role of rumour in riots or mass movement is deep-rooted. The young school boys willingly believe that a certain community has poisoned the water in Calcutta. Later as a research student, reading newspaper reports in the Teen Murti House Library in Delhi about the 1964 events, the narrator recalls the motivations for riots in Calcutta. The novel shows how geographical boundaries at times lead to cultural differences which in turn create hatred among people. The loss of a saint’s relic in Kashmir triggers off riots in Pakistan. Amitav Ghosh dramatizes the violence that is at the heart of the novel. Being trapped in the riots that erupted after India Gandhi’s assassination, the writer has an immediate understanding of
the insecurity and violence that riots bring along with them. The riots all follow a similar pattern, suspicion, distrust and rumour.

The partition of India is the centre of focus. Ghosh brings out the brutality of drawing lines across a nation to form two nations, one having an East which is separated from its West Wing by over a thousand miles. Due to partition, thousands of men, women and children died a cruel death. Most of them were innocent rustics staying in Punjab and Eastern Calcutta who had nothing to do with either of the two dominions. The partition of India is chronicled in history as a big, bloody and unfortunate divorce. Along with it the violence that is concomitant when borders are futilely drawn, is also elaborated.

The novels of Amitav Ghosh are born in the crucible of cross-cultural reading habits. His imagination is as necessarily diasporic as it is postcolonial. He often explores the identity of the world traveller. The Circle of Reason occupies a unique place in the field of postcolonial diasporic life as it depicts the condition of people with lost home, displaced and migrants in search of their livelihood. This novel follows Indian characters from a Bengali village town Egyptian town to an outpost in the Algerian Sahara. The scientific reason with which Balaram is obsessed combines Hindu ideas of purity and western notions of cleanliness with Louis Pasteur’s microbiology; Balaram’s
vision of social progress through weaving suggests both Gandhi’s nationalist self sufficiency and a global multinational economy in which technology recognizes no continents and no countries. However, this eccentric version of reason is almost wiped out in the novel by forces of unreason, ambition, paranoia territoriality and violence.

Balaram’s last disciple, the mysterious Alu, is chased across oceans and continents as a narrative of shifting. It is a picaresque story spread across the international space of diaspora. In Al Ghazire, Alu’s socialism links the eradication of germs with the elimination of money. The final scenes are more earnest and down to earth, favouring the migrant’s adaptive ‘making do’ and ‘being human’ over the purist strictures of science and religious tradition. Reason and the past both circle back in the form of Balaram’s favourite book, the Life of Pasteur which has also travelled from Bengal to Algeria.

In an Antique Land reveals Ghosh’s research abilities and interest in anthropology. As a post-colonial writer in Ghosh’s personality cultural heritage and identity become important facets. History is easily interwoven into the narrative framework and Ghosh attempts a comparative study of Asian and African, Indian and Egyptian, Jewish and Islamic cultures, using the autobiographical traveller’s tale to study the past, Ghosh’s canvas here is vaster than that of his other novels.
Character delineation has been handled expertly by Ghosh in most of his novels. His three-dimensional characters, Abu Ali, Musa Mustafa Jabir, Sabry et al. bring life and colour to his fiction.

There are three parallel stories in *In an Antique Land*. First, the story of a Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju, who came from Aden to Mangalore for trade eight hundred years ago, and his Indian slave. He married a slave girl named Ashu, belonging to the matrilineal community of Nairs, and lived in Mangalore for nearly two decades. Secondly, the story of modern Egypt that Amitav Ghosh relates from first-hand experience in two Egyptian villages. The third story is about Amitav Ghosh’s search for a story, i.e., his search for the antique world of Ben Yiju and his slave and the story he builds up from the disconnected and fragmentary medieval documents including the letters of exchange between Ben Yiju and his friends in the twelfth century. The three stories interpenetrate and form an intricate texture. It makes the conscious reader alert. One has to pause and ponder as to which level of the narrative serves as the functional device. The book is divided into four sections: Lataifa, Nashawy, Mangalore and Going Back, beginning with a prologue and rounded off with an Epilogue. It is almost a circular journey.

Ghosh does not sensationalize issues; what is presented by him is more a report on a socio-anthropological research project-complete
with detailed end-notes than fiction; however, he manages to offer
tantalizing glimpses of indistinct and indistinguishably intertwined
histories of migrant and diasporic existence in an Egypt of some
centuries past, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and
Muslim. In a brief epilogue to In an Antique Land, Ghosh recounts the
end of his search for Bomma’s tale: ‘Bomma’s story ends in
Philadelphia.’ It is an irony that fits perfectly the tale of a traveler,
diasporic, that the documents that testify to the life and death of the
unknown Indian slave have finally found a resting-place in the rare book
room of the Annenberg Research Institute in the heart of downtown
Philadelphia, possibly as far removed in space and time from Bomma’s
travels with Ben Yiju as it was possible to be.

The Calcutta Chromosome plunges into the colourful medical
history of European research into malaria a century ago. It begins with
the unlikely discoveries of Ronald Ross, an imperial army doctor in India
who, despite ignorance of microbiology, about how malaria is
transmitted, nonetheless managed to win a Nobel Prize for helping to
understand the disease. In an ingeniously plotted narrative, Ghosh
unravels some mind-boggling alternative possibilities for where Ross
knowledge really came from and what it might very radically entail.

Ghosh’s protagonist, the Egyptian researcher Antar, works in
New York with a highly advanced computer. The machine, Ava,
outlandishly blends the visionary empowerment of recent Internet type; it can do anything, speak any dialect, find any document.

In stylized prose emphasizing dialogue and description, Ghosh employs conventional devices of the mystery, the science fiction adventure, and the Victorian ghost story.

But after the novel’s controlling plot lays down the last bit of secret knowledge, it turns out to be very much about control, and about knowledge. And although Ghosh typically does not wear his politics on his sleeve, the implication of this novel’s secret history is that control of medical knowledge is wrenched away from Europeans in the past and bestowed on Indians in the past, present, and future.

The fantastic world of the novel presents a process of various thematic and technical experimentations and innovations. The novel has primarily the theme of search for immortality. The theme of search for immortality moves through a list of female characters: Mangala, Mrs. Aratounia, Urmila, Tara and others. Similarly, the male characters, Antar, Murugan, and Laakhan or Lakshman desire to attain immortality by performing something to the satisfaction of their own.

The story of the novel weaves around the past, present, and the future. When the novel begins, the theme of immortality and identity is privileged. It highlights the theme of the rustic infiltration into the world
of science\knowledge to control the ultimate transcendence of nature, and proves the theory of migration of soul(s). Transmigration of the soul is based on the assumption of transmigration of personality - a chromosomal effect on the body and soul. This theme highlights the Indian theme of *kalchakra* (the wheel of time) as Murugan and later Antar, the two computer experts, are chosen to be the subsequent Laakhans to the succeeding Mangala. In the whole novel, Ghosh employs ‘Magic realism’ to highlight the impossibility of the happening without losing the immediacy of its existence.

Ghosh’s novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* also exemplifies the theme of science versus counter-science. In fact, Ghosh emphasizes secrecy, mystery, and self contradictory knowledge and confronts what he calls conventional science with the ingenious knowledge and method of uneducated Indians. The novel is also based on the theme of disappearance and discovery.

The book *Dancing in Cambodia, At large in Burma* is a social historical chronicle divided into three parts: Dancing in Cambodia, Stories in stone and, At large in Burma.

Dancing in Cambodia weaves two historical encounters. 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 Amitav Ghosh’s visit to Cambodia in January 1993 in search of Pol Pot’s sister-in-law, who was said to be one of the country’s greatest dancers. The political analysis of the impact of French colonization of Cambodia, the aftermath of decolonization and its subsequent humiliation are portrayed in the book.

The second essay “Stories in Stone” is Ghosh’s visit to Angkor Wat, the twelfth century Cambodian temple. This book explains the purpose to which the story of the temple is told by priests, politicians, colonial explorers, Western tourists and ordinary Cambodian citizens. The third essay “At large in Burma” is a reflection on the author’s three meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi. The first encounter was more than a meeting. In 1980 Ghosh and Aung, San Sun Kyi were students at Oxford and Ghosh remembers her as being a thirty five year old lady bringing up two sons. His second and third meetings with her were in late 1995, when he attended two of her week - end public meetings that she conducted from her gateside. “At large in Burma” considers the significance of activist Aung San Suu Kyi for the Burmese people oppressed by a dictatorial government.

Basically, at the time of author’s visit to Burma and even prior to that, two forces were working in Burma forces of orthodoxy and status quo represented by the army and democratic forces, seeking change that have been headed by the Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu
Kyi. Ghosh analyses the political situation in today’s world. Politics goes by symbols. If you have strong symbols, you will remain in public memory, otherwise not.

In the novel, **The Glass Palace** Amitav Ghosh depicts the calamitous effects of imperialism in three nations: India, Malaya and Burma. Ghosh is a humanist who through his writings has raised his powerful voice against all kinds of tyranny and oppression. He disapproves of domination of man by man at all levels: political, military and economic. In most of his novels Ghosh has exposed how imperialism has done immense harm to the conquered nations.

The European countries, particularly Britain, held 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 the Indian could possibly have. They directed the purpose of Western education to create a class of people who would be obedient to them. As a result, a large group of educated people were completely faithful to the British and it is through such people that the British were able to hold on to their colonies for a long time.

The concept of the equality of all human beings irrespective of their nationality, religion, caste, culture or social and political status gains supreme significance in Ghosh’s humanistic views. In order to
express his concern, he has given fictional expression to the practices that block human freedom and tend to subjugate man\woman. The dehumanizing behaviour of the rulers has been presented through their treatment of their subjects. Queen Supayalat has several maids to attend to her. These maids are young girls, orphans; many of them just children. The worst thing is that these girls have not come willingly to work there. They were purchased by the Queen’s agents in small Kachin. This brings out the inhuman attitude in the behaviour of the Queen of Burma. She doesn’t ever bother to give a thought to the human status of these girls. The way these girls serve the queen and the conditions under which they are kept are considered to be natural and normal by the rulers. For these rulers the very concept of humanism has different meanings for the rulers and the ruled. The repeated depiction of the inhuman conditions under which the maids work and the way they are asked to show respect and regards to the queen implies the novelist’s criticism of the forces hostile to human dignity. Apart from the practice of employing the girls to serve the queen and her family, there is another practice that shows the lack of concern for human values among the rulers; this is the practice of Shiko. According to this practice, the attendants have to prostrate before the queen to show their respect for her. Ghosh depicts these things to show how the different practices adopted by the rulers tend to dehumanize people.
The postcolonial perspective informing Ghosh’s understanding of human values can be traced from the rejection of authority of the imperial powers to set the standard for others. The imperialists impose their culture and thinking on their subjects through the self-ascribed role of the representatives of humanism and modernization. It is a typical style of the colonialists to perpetuate their hold on their subject; this Ghosh introduces through the presentation of humanistic concerns which, for a colonizer, is synonymous with the promotion of the cultural value of the colonizers.

The Glass Palace spans three generations and three nations over a period of two centuries. It is partially based upon the experiences of Ghosh’s uncle, Jagat chandra Dutta, who had been a timber merchant in Burma. The novel narrates the histories of Burma, Malaysia and India. The colonial rule of nearly a whole century in Burma, Malaya, and India starting from the Anglo-Burmese war of 1885 depicted in The Glass Palace. The novel begins in the pre-independence era and ends in post independence days. The author has taken great efforts to give a beautiful description of the Royal Palace in the Mandalay rubber plantations, activities in timber trade, etc.
In the very opening scene, the author reveals the crude and brutal greed of the people at various levels. The royal couple surrender and the Burmese public, who had stood in fear before the couple, immediately loot the palace. In a single scene the greed of the colonizer is shown. The plight of the Indian soldiers and the British army are pathetically portrayed. Many peasants joined the profession. It was money that drew them to this profession. The Indian soldiers fought for their British masters. They did it because of orders from superiors, without protest or conscience. Another theme in the novel is resistance to imperialism. Indians settled in Burma have a different view of things. Indians serving under the British rule in the British Indian army are weapon in the ruler's hands. The Indians in Burma were made to do very mean jobs.

Ghosh wrote about families and nations to highlight the sense of dislocation. He has described the aspiration and defeats of dislocated people in India, Burma, China, Malaysia and America, such as King Thesaw, Queen Supayalat, Saya John, Rajkumar, Dolly, Uma, Alison, Dinu, Neel, Arjun, Hardayal, Kishan Singh, Jaya and Ilango. The clash of cultures is introduced in the opening pages of the novel. The booming of English guns and the imperialist threat are the indicators of the transfer of power and the transition in cultural position. Rajkumar's graduation from a petty immigrant lad through his apprenticeship under
Saya John to a businessman in the timber trading circles of Burma suggests the hybrid nature of the colonized.

The actual protagonists in this novel are not kings and queens but the commoners like Dolly, Rajkumar, Saya John, Uma, some of them orphaned or displaced. These people are driven from Burma to India, Malaya, Singapore and back again, repeating each time-pattern of history. The whole action of the novel can be summarized thus: skilled in the art of survival, Rajkumar gradually succeeds in becoming with the loyal help of his friend Doh say, Saya John and others, rich and respected members of the Indian community in Burma. Thereafter he tracks down Dolly, the devoted maid of Queen Supalayat with whom he has fallen in love at first sight as a boy during the British take-over of Mandalay. Dolly lives in the distant Indian city of Ratnagiri, where she has made a life-long friend of Uma, an unruly wife of the Indian district Collector. Through Uma’s good office Rajkumar is finally able to marry Dolly. By the close of the novel, many of the characters have their lives torn apart. They are refugees, political prisoners and survivors.

One would expect a sense of desolation and dejection at the end of the novel that deals with so much of human tragedy, wars, deaths, devastation and dislocation. But in this novel, the two surviving members of the families in Calcutta and Burma meet through their
common bond of photography which is a new avenue to revive their contacts/confluence.

There is every scope for further research in this Ph.D. thesis. One can compare the writings of Amitav Ghosh with those of any other Indian writers such as Kushwant Singh or Manohar Malgoankar concerned with freedom struggle and partition theme, and trace where they meet or disagree. There also can be a comparative study of Amitav Ghosh, the male postcolonial writer on the one hand and Nayantara Sahgal, the female postcolonial writer, as these two are political fiction writers, and the study can investigate how and where gender cuts across their fictional boundaries.