Chapter IV

TRAVEL AND DISPLACEMENT IN

THE CALCUTTA CHROMOSOME AND DANCING IN
CAMBODIA, AT LARGE IN BURMA

The fantastic world of the novel presents a process of various thematic and technical experimentation and innovations. Many questions regarding the “Fevers, Delirium and Discovery” are raised by
Ghosh; to make the answers comprehensible to the reader, the writer plays with time, space and the story-line. The novel has multiple stories embedded in the main story. Some critics have evaluated *The Calcutta Chromosome* as a medical thriller, a Victorian ghost story, and a scientific quest.

The whole book is rather a search for and history of the elusive and alluring “Calcutta Chromosome”. It is unusual because it cannot be isolated and detected by standard techniques. Unlike our regular chromosomes, it is not present in every cell. It is not even symmetrically paired. It does not run from one generation to the other. Ghosh fantasizes that this chromosome develops out of a process of recombination which is unique to every individual. It is found only in the non-regenerating tissue, the brain. It can be transmitted through malaria. It is a unique type of chromosome because it does not possess the usual properties of chromosomes which could enable the transposition of certain personality traits. And thus, if developed, it could enable migration from one body to another with a fresh start, without earlier blemishes. The novel is stimulating for its intriguing allusions to genetics, cultural colonialism, noble scientists and their relationship to the disease that continues to kill many. The novel brings together three searches.
1. The first is that of an Egyptian clerk, Antar, working alone in a New York apartment in the early years of the twenty first century to trace the adventures of L. Murugan who disappeared in Calcutta in 1995.

2. The second pertains to Murugan’s obsession with the missing links in the history of malaria research.

3. The third search is that of Urmila Roy, a journalist in Calcutta in 1995 who is researching the works of Phulboni, a writer who produced a strange cycle of ‘Lakhan Stories’ that he wrote in the 1930s but suppressed thereafter.

The novel has two sections:

1. August 20, Mosquito Day

2. The Day After

The first section is devoted to the recollection of certain scientific facts in a very thriller mode of fiction. L. Murugan, a man interested in the cause of malaria and Ronald Ross, arrive in Calcutta looking for certain clues to the enigmatic Calcutta Chromosome, but disappear mysteriously. The second part is related to the attempts to trace the adventures of Murugan and the strange truth of what took place on these fateful days of August 1995.
The story of the novel moves through the closing years of the nineteenth century into the whole of the twentieth century, and then passes on to the early years of the twenty first century. Apparently, it covers the colonial and the post-colonial years of Indian history. The narrative covers over a hundred years. The cinematic devices of flash forward or flashback come handy to Ghosh. He mingle s fact with fiction. At one level the reader is willingly taken on a journey into time and at the same time, to different countries like America, England, Egypt and India. Ghosh compresses or expands according to his convenience the actual time period of an event. This highlights the parallels between two events that took place at two different periods of time. The technique also constructs contrasts between two events of different periods.

There are three different levels of the narrative. In one strand of the story-line we have Antar, an Egyptian computer clerk. Antar works day and night all alone with his super intelligent computer named Ava. He is working in the early part of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. He tries to relocate the adventure of an India born American scientist L. Murugan. Antar tries to find out the reason behind the incomprehensible fact that Murugan disappeared in Calcutta in 1995. The second level of the story-line is historically true and it revolves around the British Scientist Ronald Ross’ who discovered the manner in which malaria is conveyed by the mosquito in 1902. The third level describes the super human powers of Mangala and Laakhan. At this level Ross, result is reduced to
a subordinate activity only which, is controlled by more potent powers of Mangala and Laakhan.

The story begins in a New York apartment where Antar is working. Antar works for the International Water Council, a global organization that explores and examines the depletion of the world's water supplies. One morning the computer Ava produces an I.D. Card with a small chain attached to it. The card is badly damaged, symbolizing for us, the bruised ego to the card owner. When Antar gives the necessary commands, Ava recreates the card. It becomes clear that the card had originated in Calcutta. It also creates a holographic projection of the man to whom the card once belonged. Antar comes to know that the man was L.Murugan who had worked for a non-profit organization that served as a global public health consultancy and epidemiological data bank. Actually Antar had also worked there once. Murugan is the most entertaining character of the novel.

Murugan felt that there was a conspiracy behind malaria research. He left for Calcutta in search of all missing links. He reached Calcutta on 20th August 1995 and the very next day vanished. With the use of cinematic techniques, on the one hand, Ross is shown making the final breakthrough and on the other, Murugan is trying to prove his hypothesis that Ross has been literally led by the nose to the discovery by forces beyond his comprehension. In Calcutta Murugan spots all the missing links as well as the conspirators. Smoothly floating through
past, present and future Murugan weaves the narrative into a coherent whole. The conspiracy seems to be eternal. It is the conspiracy of a mediocre society against those who are deserving, original and genuine. The conspirators try to confuse Murugan and trap him into their experiment.

Phulboni is the greatest living writer of Bengal. He has also won national award. He is the chief exponent of this cult of silence. The team consists of marginalized people. Some of them were picked up by Dr.D.D.Cunningham from the railway station to serve him as research assistants. It was at Cunningham’s laboratory Ross discovered the malaria bug. Secrecy is used by Ghosh as a technique of procedure. For this group of bright researchers, silence is the only religion. They try to keep their research a secret. Ghosh suggests that an Austrian Clinician Julian Von Wagner Jauregg was ahead of Ronald Ross on malaria research. He was working on the clue that artificially induced malaria could cure or at least mitigate syphilis. But even before that, in 1890s, Mangala, a sweeper woman had achieved remarkable success from Syphilis whom Dr. Cunningham had found at Sealdah Station and trained her as a laboratory assistant. Murugan believed that Mangala was genuine. She was moving in the right direction in malaria research due to her instinctive understanding. She had noticed that malaria works through a different route; malaria can cause irreparable damage to the brain; it can even cause hallucination.
Mangala had developed a particular kind of malaria that could be induced in pigeons. She had also developed the technique of transferring malaria from a pigeon to a patient of syphilis. Secretly she started treating patients in Cunningham’s laboratory. Her treatment produced strange side effects. The patients often developed personality disorders. These symptoms in the patients were actually randomly assorted personality traits which the patient imbibed from the malaria donor to the pigeon. The special contribution that the Calcutta Chromosome makes is that it suggests transference of personality traits.

Murugan had spent many years on his extensive research. His clues indicate that Ross’ discovery was only a small part of the overall project of Mangala to attain immortality through the Calcutta Chromosome. Mangala tried again and again to stabilize and catch the chromosome in the process of transmission. But she failed. She needed more information on the malaria bug. That is why she needed Ross’ help; “She actually believed that the link between the bug and the human mind was so close that once its life cycle had been figured out, it would spontaneously mutuate in directions that would take her work to the next step”. (TCC 208)

But to know something is to create it Breaking the law of silence she planted crucial clues in Ross' head and took the research in the
right direction. Ross was just a tool. Murugan also believed that Mangala and Laakhan did succeed in transplantation of the Calcutta Chromosome. In fact Laakhan himself is a living example of interpersonal transference of the Calcutta Chromosome.

Both Laakhan and Mangala are characters who change their identities. Ghosh underlines the value of secrecy in matters of intellectual property. The whole atmosphere of the book suggests that there is much theft and deceit in this field. There is one Elijah Monroe who comes to Cunningham’s Laboratory to detect the ongoing experiments. Laakhan stages a train accident and kills Elijah Monroe. Similarly, another friend of Ross J.W.D. Grigson also faces a near fatal accident in Secunderabad, when he senses that something crucial is going on. Laakhan meets Phulboni thirty six years after Grigson episode. It clearly means that it is not exactly Lakhan who meets Phulboni but his spirit or his spirit in some other body. Phulboni is writing a set of stories on Laakhan. The real name of Phulboni is Saiyed Murad Hussain, an eminent writer. He has taken the tribal name, Phulboni. This character is designed by the author to convey his viewpoint from time to time.

The mythological references of names at times make the characters archetypes. Mangala, the sweeper woman appears in different forms. When Murugan comes to Calcutta in 1995 to trace the malaria story, he discovers an esoteric cult of image worshipers.
Murugan comes to know that the image is that of Mangala; she is called ‘Mangalabibi’. People worship the deity to commemorate her reincarnation.

Through this Goddess metaphor, Ghosh insists on the necessity of coming back to life. No one dies. Nothing ends. Resurrection is a must. The journey of the soul independent of any particular body is an established Hindu concept. The body dies but the soul travels into another body and lives on. Mangala, a human being, attempts to master the act of transferring souls.

Mangala and Laakhan are from the very lowest rung of Hindu Caste System. Mangala of the sweeper caste is worshipped in blood and flesh. Ghosh has shown that the repositories of truth, science and higher knowledge can be a “dhooley bearer” Laakhan and a sweeper woman Mangala. He demolishes the false concept that class superiority and right to knowledge go together. Here is wishful undoing of Indian caste system and an assertion of the right to knowledge irrespective of class, caste, creed, culture or colour. Twice in the course of the novel, Laakhan is shown as a torch-bearer, metaphorically, a bearer of knowledge. Ghosh universalizes the theory by making people of all religious background accept the entire drama. Hindus (Murugan, Sonali, Urmila), Muslims (Saiyad Murad Hussain alias Phulboni, Antar) and
Christians (Mrs. Aratounian and Countess Pongracz) – all accept the transmigration of souls.

Latchman works as Mangala’s assistant. He has used an assumed name, though his real name is ‘Laakhan’. Laakhan belongs to Renupur and has a connection with Phulboni. He also has an identification with Roman Haldar, with a gap-toothed boy, a printed T-shirt boy, a fish-seller boy, and a boy in Sonali’s house etc. The station master has a story about Latchman or Laakhan. Laakhan kills the station master when the station master tries to kill him. The station master who meets Phulboni is none other than the ghost who attempts to kill Phulboni.

Murugan was a patient Syphilis. He got rid of it totally. At the end, Murugan felt that the story of Calcutta Chromosome worked, as the spirits of Mangala and Laakhan are reincarnated in Mrs. Aratounian and Roman Haldar respectively. When Antar sees on the Sim. Vis. System, Murugan appears near the auditorium with two women Tara and Sonali. The merging of illusion and reality is best described in the closing lines:

He (Antar) felt a cool soft touch upon his shoulder and his hand flew up to take off the Sim Vis Headgear. But now there was a restraining hand upon his wrist, and a voice in his ear. Tara’s voice, whispering: keep watching, we’re
here; we’re all with you. There were voices everywhere now, in his room, in his head, in his ears, it was as though a crowd of people were in the room with him. They were saying: “we’re with you, you’re not alone; we’ll help you across”. (TCC 256)

In this novel, Ghosh instigates a change in form in his writing, experimenting for the first time with the genre of science fiction in order to question the boundaries which have been erected to separate notions of scientific truth and fiction. Ghosh plays with the notion of science fiction in three ways. Firstly, in accordance with the conventions of the genre, he creates a society set in the near future that has technological capabilities. Secondly, he fictionalizes the lives of actual scientists, so that the mainstream science of Ross is depicted as shading into the distinctly deviant scientific innovations of the imaginary priestess Mangala and her followers. Finally, with a playful twist of the notion of science fiction, the novel seems to suggest that many of the grand claims made for science are fictions.

Bakhtin in “Epic and Novel: Towards a Methodology for the study of Novel” has posited that a novel is a “process” and not a “product” and therefore emphasizes the “spirit of inclusiveness which in turn makes it open ended” (Bakhtin 45). Ghosh’s novel, considered to be a “Spine-
Chiller” (Mukherji 76), must be read for a second time to realize that it is not a mere scientific thriller but a novel about the many mysteries of life and the many deep rooted cravings of man in general. In a scientific thriller, everything is resolved satisfactorily at the close of the novel but in *The Calcutta Chromosome* the theme of search for “immortality” moves through a never ending line of female characters: Mangala, Aratonnian, Urmila, Tara. One also hopes to meet many more Laakhans, Murugans and Antars through the ages. They desire a journey to the unknown. Their quest is for immortality.

Ghosh believes that the purpose of science is not only to reveal but also to create the special contribution that the Calcutta Chromosome makes; it suggests transference of personality traits, thus suggesting immortality. As Murugan excitedly tells his researcher Antar, “Just thing, a fresh start; when your body fails you, you leave it, you migrate – you or at best a matching symptom logy of yourself. You begin all over again, another body, another beginning a technology that lets you improve on yourself in your next incarnation” (TCC 91-92). Murugan has spent many years on his extensive research. His clues indicate that Ross’ discovery was only a small part of the overall project of Mangala to attain immortality through the Calcutta Chromosome.
Foucault in the “Order of Discourse” states, “Discourse is the power which is to be seized” (Foucault 52-53). This power is traditionally controlled by patriarchy/colonizer. But in this novel, the Discourse of Silence, typically female in nature, has been handed over to Mangala. Here are the lines:

… wouldn’t you say that the first principle of a functioning counter-science would have to be secrecy? The way I see it, it wouldn’t just have to be secretive about what it did (it would not hope to beat the scientists at that game anyway); it also would have to be secretive in the way it did. It would have to use secrecy as a technique or a procedure”. (TCC 83)

The colonized Mangala is the upholder of the cult of secrecy and by this weapon she controls Ross, Farley, Grigson, Cunningham and all those so-called white male investigators of the malaria parasite. Those who come in the way like Farley are cursorily destroyed. Mangala uses the potent weapon of silence to score intellectually, over her male counterpart Ross and others. She tries to find a cure for syphilitic paresis through counter-science or faith. Rose endeavours to solve the mystery of malaria through science. Against this, the power of folk medicine is ratified by Ghosh. The rustic infiltration into the world of science / knowledge to control “the ultimate transcendence of nature”
(TCC 90) is an attempt to improve the theory of “migration of the soul” (206). Transposition of personality is an extension of the Indian concept of the transmigration of the soul. In the novel, the boundaries between the real and the unreal get quickly dissolved.

Ghosh deconstructs and dismantles the western sense of superiority by Indian irrationality. These beliefs are said to have no scientific basis, yet their strong presence in India can easily be left. Ghosh uses the tool of blind religious beliefs. Michael Adas states that “colonial scientific practioners elevated their brand of science, presenting it as proof of their superior reasoning powers, and the cause of the west’s material domination of the world” (Michael Adas 67). In The Calcutta Chromosome, Ghosh problematizes the universalist claims of Western Science and questions the widespread tendency of historians to view scientists as geniuses who work alone, fermenting epistemological revolution for the benefit of mankind.

Thematically and technically Ghosh has deconstructed the traditional Western forms. His constant “border-crossing” from fact to fiction, the disruption of the realities of the narrative techniques in fiction, has been done away with as something ineffectual or superfluous. This experimentation has enriched him with a double vision that enables the writer to present a cross cultural critical analysis.
In this novel, Murugan reverses his claim to lone discovery, suggesting instead that the servant Lutchman – here depicted as a leader of the “counter-scientific” cult - in fact led Ross to his path. In this ironic subversion of Ross' narrative, it is the Western Scientist who is portrayed as a pawn, blindly unaware of the forces that precipitate his victory. “Eureka” he tells in his diary, “the problem is solved. “Whew!” says Lutchman, skimming the sweat off his face. Though he’d never get it” (TCC 77).

The “science” of the mysterious Indian cult incorporates religious ritual, sacrifice and reincarnation into more straightforward scientific practices. 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 countries such as India are fused with 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, when Indian scientific enthusiasts splice their own cultural assumptions with western scientific tenets. David Arnold indicates that the supposedly rigid borders between religious “tradition” and scientific “modernity” were in fact porous for many middle-class Indians who
began to turn to Western Science from the late eighteenth century onwards.

The extent to which members of the old intelligentsia brought to their “modern” avocation skills, insights and inspirations derived from “traditional” background (rather than simply trading in their intellectual inheritance to acquire new western knowledge) is an intriguing issue but one that historians have as yet, scarcely begun to investigate. (David 8)

The novel is an attempt to represent in fiction their interactive model for science’s reception in the colonial context of India. Raina and Habib wrote, “Scientific knowledge and the ideology of science can be actively redefined in the milieu of a recipient culture. The receiving society, far from being supine, subverts, contaminates, and reorganizes the ideology of science as introduced by Europe” (TCC 13).

Prior to independence, the extent to which western science could be actively redefined was constrained both by the political and financial control exerted by the colonial regime and by the influence and authority of the international scientific community. It is possible to interpret this novel as a fantastical account of the extent to which western science might have been subverted, contaminated and reorganized, if the
political and financial control exerted by the colonial regime had been less constraining.

The benefits of western medical science sometimes seem like a fiction in third world countries like India where diseases such as malaria are still endemic. Ross wrote a poem about the significance of his discovery of the malaria vector. The poem was inscribed on a memorial stone in a wall of the main hospital in Calcutta, and in the novel Murugan visits the stone and is amazed by the sanguinity of Ross’ poem. This poem, which is not a creation of Ghosh’s, reads as follows:

This day relenting God
Hath placed within my hand
A wondrous thing an God
Be praised. At His command
Seeking His secret deeds
With tears and toiling breath,
I find thy cunning seeds,
O million – murdering death
I know this little thing
A myriad men will save.
O death where is thy sting?
They victory O grave. (TCC 31)
Ross was motivated much by the desire for wealth and fame in his pursuit of the malaria vector. He moved to Liverpool where he hoped to negotiate with entrepreneurs who “would not be slow to learn the great advantages which my methods of malaria prevention would confer on their plantations, factories and trade” (Michael Worboys 24). The quotation is an instance of the way in which advances in tropical medicine at the turn of the century were often inextricably linked with colonial exploitation, profit and trade.

In India, the writers have gone back to their roots very seriously and the Indian English writers have not totally rejected the language of the colonizer; they have very vigorously gone for creolization/hybridization of the adopted language and thus, the indigenous words have been very freely accommodated. Ghosh has followed the Indian practice of using native words like ‘bibi’, ‘dhoob’, ‘Added al Turab’, ‘Iskuti’ etc. He has not disturbed the syntactic norms of the English language. What he practices is abrogation of the language of the centre and appropriation of that language for the expression of post-colonial experience. Ghosh has not only employed an indigenous theme of the Great Mother Goddess Kali but has also projected the awareness, nuances and ambiguities of the post colonial consciousness.
The two contrasting societies are clearly etched: the society of the colonizer led by Ross and the other culture conducted by Mangala. The irony of the situation is that the so-called masters are mere puppets in the hands of this powerful woman. The colonizers were in search of temporal truths and the colonized natives were motivated by the higher goal of eternity. The tussle between the western and eastern civilization is highlighted and victory is granted to the extensively oppressed and exploited. The equation of power is not limited to political overtones but is carried on to the world of mechanical and intuitive knowledge. Murugan and later Antar, the two computer experts are chosen to be the subsequent Laakhans to the succeeding Mangala. One comes to know during the course of the novel that Tara is being specifically cultivated to pilot this mysterious cult. The continuity of motivation, action and achievement is never ruptured. The Indian philosophy of the ‘Kalchakra’ is highlighted and reestablished.

Allegory, a characteristic form of post-colonial writings, creates, deconstructs, restructures, and reaffirms myths. The mythical character of Ramayana, Laxman and Urmila, Murugan, the much revered God of south India are interwoven into the text. Simultaneously, to reenact the eternal war between Satya and Astaya, Tara, Urmila and Mangala are introduced into the text to recharge the concept of the mythical Goddess Kali/Durga. The story-line moves with many under tones. The historical incident of Ross’ invention is consciously shrouded in mystery. Ghosh
the fiction writer turns himself into a historian. The constant blending of fact and fiction has generated a situation where past has lost its antiquity. But crossing over the physical time, the writer has invented new allegorical meanings. The collision between the west and the east has also been projected symbolically through an ideological conflict between tradition and modernity, faith and reason, scientific knowledge and intuitive knowledge.

Ghosh seems to be proficient in the use of magic realism. It dissolves the boundaries between the physical and spiritual truths and explores the possibilities of existence at various levels of consciousness, which greatly assist subversive aesthetics. Trapping the possibilities of magic realism, Amitav Ghosh makes a mingling of hard scientific facts with folklore in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, to assert the supremacy of ancient Indian in the world of knowledge. The practice of folk medicine by the character Mangala and the rustic infiltration into the world of knowledge to control “the ultimate transcendence of Nature” (*TCC* 90) are founded on the theory of migration of souls. Indian faith concedes the migration of human souls from one body to another by virtue of a supreme power that is all-inclusive. The novel subverts the conventional western notions about knowledge, death, immortality and reincarnation.
Another interesting fictional device employed by Ghosh is the subverting of accidental cause and coincidences to restore the subaltern’s potential of comprehensibility and historicity. Throughout *Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Glass Palace*, accidental cause and coincidences which epitomize the incomprehensible are turned into a pattern and thus made eminently comprehensible for those inclined to hear from and learn the language of the subaltern.

Ghosh makes us realize that the kind of stories in which the tropical medicine of men such as Ross is embedded are stories of exploitation and unequal power relations. He appears to suggest that it is only when one recognizes that science and, indeed, any discourse are processes akin to story-telling that one can actually set off on the mutating, evolving course of knowledge; as Murugan puts it, “knowledge can’t begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge” (*TCC* 104). That word ‘impossibility’ also indicates Ghosh’s other important point, i.e knowledge is not the one there for the taking; there will always be silences and gaps in our narrations of knowledge.

Ghosh’s travelogue, *Dancing in Cambodia At Large in Burma* is a pure travelogue. With an anthropologist’s eye for accuracy and authenticity Amitav Ghosh studies life, art, culture and social and political institutions of the places he visits. Displacement has been a central concern of Ghosh’s works. Coming and going, departures and arrivals have always been relevant symbols of his narrative structure.
Travel is a very complex psychological process. It changes the traveller in many ways. A writer who has a proper sense of time and distance can write a good travelogue. The travel writer has to weigh the flow of time and its distance in the place of his/her description. For instance, in writing about Cambodia and Burma, Ghosh has to view these countries in historical perspective.

If traveling is juxtaposed with living at affixed place, we can easily see the influences of traveling on a person. To begin with, it makes a person more flexible in her/his routine and life style. It opens new possibilities in her/him regarding both the world and her/his own self. The traveler seems to realize, “I never knew these things existing in the world as well as I never knew I had all these possibilities in me” (DC 66). Reading about a place different from actually visiting it, as getting a description of a sweet piece is different from actually eating it.

Traveling can be either real or fictional, or a combination of both. Traveling can be for a definite purpose like earning money or getting education and knowledge. It can be just for fun as well. In the present world many travels are aimed at searching the roots. At times the traveling may be irresistibly in love with a particular place. There can be a thousand more reasons for traveling. In any case traveling remains a powerful human sensation, a jolt.

V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie have also written travelogues. Naipal is, of course, the most famous travel writer of our times. Salman
Rushdie in the prologue to his travelogue *Jaguar Smile* says that when he visited Nicaragua he never intended to write a book or write at all for that matter. But the Nicaraguan experience shook him so deeply that he had no choice left but to record all his experiences in the form of a travelogue. We can take Ghosh’s travelogue in the light of the above comment. Only a writer who has a proper sense of time and distance can write a good travelogue. For one thing, travel writing is always nostalgic. This writer here is trying to capture various images of a place or place; she/he has to balance the time of her/his actual visiting and writing and also the distance between her/his place and the place she/he is writing about. But this is not all. The travel writer has to weigh the flow of time and its distance in the place of his/her description.

One just cannot grasp the chaotic realities of present day Cambodia and Burma unless one knows how the time has roughly flown in those countries. As a perspective author and politically alert observer Amitav Ghosh has tried to comprehend Cambodia and Burma and their respective recent pasts of extreme isolation. Both the countries have been colonized earlier; both had traumatic dictatorial regimes. Both the countries practised politics of complete isolation or iron curtain in recent past. Ghosh tried to reconstruct the scenario during the regime of isolation. The book is a significant social historical chronicle. It is divided into three parts:
The opening section, “Dancing in Cambodia” is a compact socio-political analysis of the impact of French colonization of Cambodia, the aftermath of decolonization and its subsequent humiliations and fantasies. The aesthetic nature of the Cambodia population is revealed by their fascination for art and dance, which could not be suppressed even during the ravages and cruel social engineering of their oppressive ruler, the late Pol Pot. Dance becomes the central metaphor for this section. Amitav Ghosh uses the non-linear narrative, which shuttles backward and forward in time with unfurling of layers of memory. This narrative technique shows the impact of the past on the present milieu in Cambodia, struggling to seek an identity as an independent nation.

King Sisobath was the last king of Cambodia before Pot Pot took over. The first chapter begins with an anthropological description of the sea journey of King Sisobath. Cambodia was colonized by the French. It was king Sisobath's lifelong dream to visit the land of the colonizers which is France. The mindset of the colonized is clearly portrayed by
the author. Sisobath went along with his entourage of several dozen princes, courtiers, officials and most importantly a troupe of nearly a hundred traditional classical dancers and musicians from his royal palace in Phnom Penh. His journey started on 10th May 1906 in the afternoon. He was on board a French Liner, Amiral Kersaint. We are amazed at the child like joy of the King and his group, “The King, who had been crowned two years before, had often spoken of his desire to visit France, and for him the voyage was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream” (DC 1).

For other members it was a cherished opportunity to step out of their cloistered existence. They were going to perform for the colonizers. It was their moment of showing and proving themselves at the immense fairyland, Marseille where an exhibition had been organized on the theme of France’s colonial possessions. They were going out of their country for the first time. The colonized situation of the dancers is sensitively portrayed in these tantalizing snippets of information of which Marseille newspapers were often full:

It was said that the dancers entered the palace as children and spent their lives in seclusion ever afterwards; that their lives revolved entirely around the royal family; that several were the king’s mistresses and had even born him children;
that some of them had never stepped out of the palace grounds until this trip to France. (DC 3)

The colonized situation of dancers is sensitively portrayed. Their excitement and joy at visiting the “superior” land on one hand and their inferiority complex and anxiety on the other have been described in a very delicate fashion. Ghosh is a master in weaving words. Precision is his supreme attribute. When he describes these dancers there is no sexual undertone. There is nothing erotic in his vision. He describes them just as they are.

We can almost pity the dancers, with their hard and close-cropped hair, their fingers like those of young boys, their arms and hands like those of little girls; they seem to belong to no definite sex. They have something of the child about them, something of the young warrior of antiquity and something of the woman. (DC 4)

Accompanying these excited dancers, as their guide and head is King Sisobath’s eldest daughter, Princess Soumphady. An elegant lady with an immense presence, royal manner and style, she has an electrifying effect on the audience at Marseille. She is her own woman, a woman of substance. She admires the French women, their clothes and head dresses but nevertheless declines to dress up like them. She holds her
ground: “No! The princess said after a moment’s reflection. No! I am not used to them and perhaps would not know how to wear them” (DC 5).

This can also be taken as an indirect hint at the Indians’ fascination for Western Style of dressing. Almost a century back these Cambodian Women had a sense of pride about their distinctive attire suited for the variety of their dances.

Ghosh hints at problems that arose out of France’s colonization of Cambodia. Khmer is one powerful tribe at Cambodia. Khmer Rouge and other minority groups resorted to Guerilla war tactics. Pol Pot’s tactics simply breed hatred. His target was Vietnam and Cambodia’s own Vietnamese minority. Ghosh suggests that the fact that Pol Pot lived the formative years of his life in the “elitist, racially exclusive culture of the court” might have had a permanent impact on him. An overdose of ideology of national and racial grandiosity might have damaged Pol Pot’s thinking. This man was an unashamed racist. As Ghosh described the reaction of one Khmer Rouge defectors, “As far as the Vietnamese are concerned, whenever we meet them, whether they are militaries or Civilians, because they are not ordinary civilians but soldiers disguised as civilians, we must kill them, whether they are men, women and children, there is no distinction, “they are enemies” (DC 25).

When Vietnamese broke Cambodia in 1979, the country became “like a shattered slate; before you could think of drawing lines on it, you
had to find pieces and fit them together” (DC 16). And what actually did the fitting in was nothing else but the traditional Cambodian art forms. In the post-revolution period, the Cambodian ministry of culture launched a project to relocate and gather the trained classical dancers and teachers. The results of this search were shocking. Almost ninety percent of the artists had been killed in the Pol Pot regime. Anyone who survived found living to be a miracle. If one dancer found another dancer they would shout:

‘you are still alive!’ And then they would cry thinking of all those who had died. One well-known surviving dancer described her condition during the Pol Pot time, I was like a smoker who gives up smoking. I would dream of dance when I was alone or at night. You could get through the day because of the hard work. It was the nights that were really difficult; we would lie awake wondering who was going to be called out next. That was when I would dance, in my head (DC 16).

As if to reinforce the significant role of culture and art in the process of national reconstruction even in the most trying circumstances, Amitav Ghosh tells the readers:

Like everyone around her, Cheasamy too had started all over again – at the age of sixty, with her health shattered by the years
of famine and hard labour. Working with quiet, dragged persistence, she and a handful of other dancers and musicians slowly brought together a ragged half-starved bunch of orphans and castaways, and with the discipline of their long, rigorous years of training, they began to resurrect the art that Princess Soumphady and Luk Khun Meak had passed on them in that long-ago world, where King Sisowath reigned. (DC 18)

Inspite of all the political turmoil and chaotic-anarchic situations, one thing that kept the spirit of the ‘nation’ alive in Cambodia is its rich cultural heritage of music and dance. This becomes evident from the vivid description of the cultural festival that was held in Phnom Penh in 1988 amidst the destruction of social economic, cultural and political fabric of the country:

But people flocked to the theatre the day the festival began. Onesta Carpene, a Catholic relief worker from Italy was one of the handful of foreigners then living in Phnom Penh. She was astonished at the response: the city was in Shambles: there was debris everywhere, spilling out of the houses, on to the pavements, the streets were jammed with pillaged cars, there was no money and very little food – I could not believe that in a situation like that people would
be thinking of music and dance. But still they came pouring
in and theatre was filled far beyond its capacity". (DC 52)

Another foreigner Eva Mysliviec, a Quaker relief missionary, who
also witnessed the first performance, recalls it thus:

When the musicians came on the stage she heard sobs all
around her. Then, when the dancers appeared, in their
shabby, hastily made costumes, suddenly everyone was
crying – people wept through the entire length of the
performance. (DC 52)

Here music and dance stand for life itself. It is as though the
collective Cambodian voice is saying, “to live is to sing and dance”. The
sudden and spontaneous bouts of joy only strengthen the belief that
artistic heritage is the very life and soul of a nation. The tears at the first
performance are the tears of finding life again. It is as though, “I’d
thought I’d died but no, I’m alive I’m living”. In fact Ghosh develops the
passion for dance and music as symbols of politics of resurgence in
Cambodia. These art forms gave the beleaguered Cambodian people
an identity and certitude, a badge of authenticity. The author sums up
the mood as “a kind of rebirth, a moment when the grief of survival
became indistinguishable from the joy of living” (DC 52). The social and
political history of Cambodia from 1906 to 1993 has been narrated with
an added human dimension. In 1906 Cambodian performers went to Europe for showing their native skills. These native skills will, in future, give them strength to live and dream.

Ghosh blames the French for a good bit of Pol Pot’s extremes, starting with the racism that madmen may have picked up from them. Ghosh describes the Khmer Rouge agenda as racist nationalism aimed at Cambodia’s Vietnamese minority. The troubles began when Saloth Sar went off to Paris. The author makes an interesting comparison between Pol Pot and King Sisowath - and broadens his observation still further. In “The trip to France”, he writes,

‘The dream of his whole life’, evidently cast King Sisowath’s mind into the same kind of turmoil, the same tumult of shock and bewilderment that has provoked generations of displaced students – the Gandhi’s, the Senghor’s and the Kenyatta’s, amongst thousands of their less illustrious countrymen – to close their doors upon the cold unfamiliarity of Wintry’s Western cities and lock themselves into their rooms to pour their hearts out in letters, recording their impressions for those they had left at home”. (DC 39)

King Sisowath chose the opposite path toward social transformation: rather than burning his culture to the ground, he offered
an exhortation to his countrymen to initiate French technology. The King’s choice seems to have been the one that is now more influential in former colonies, but Ghosh, repulsed by Pol Pot, concludes that “no one is likely to thank” (DC 42) Sisowath for his accommodating attitude towards the colonizer. Ghosh ends his essay, recording that the dance tradition that King Sisowath had brought to Marseilles which Pol Pot had nearly succeeded in obliterating, was restored to its former glory in 1988. Chea Samy and a few others like her had managed to pass along what they knew, and in that year, classical Cambodian dance was once again performed in Phnom Penh.

The Chapter “Stories in Stone” is devoted to a description of various aspects of the twelfth century Cambodian temple Angkor Wat. Many stories are carved on these elegant structures. Cambodians call Angkor Wat, ‘A monument to the power of the story’. This monument is a sort of a gigantic abacus of story telling. It is a big, huge architectural device. It is said to be the largest single religious edifice in the world. It seems to be self-sufficient and complete in its setting and dimensions where each part is complementing the other. The setting is Mountain Meru. It is a mountain in Indian mythology.

People around the globe view Angkor Wat as a unique powerful symbol of the romance and glory of a lost civilization. But for Cambodians, it is a symbol of modernity. This also reflects a phase of decolonization, confusions and uncertainties, alongside a vigorous
glorification of the past. Although Angkor Wat is undisputedly a temple, it does not figure in anything that has to do with religion or anything old-fashioned. “Many factory-produced commodities, bear it as a logo. It is stamped on uniforms, civil and military; it figures on the logos of large corporations, like bank, indeed, the erstwhile Kampuchea Airlines even succeeded in transforming this most earth bound structures into a symbol of flight, by lending it a pair of wings” (DC 56).

Ghosh’s training as an anthropologist helps him here. He found the legend of the accidental discovery of Angkor Wat by the nineteenth century French explorer Henri Mohout. The temple was restored with all latest available scientific and technical methods. This central cultural image of Cambodia is also a symbol of change and modernity. Ghosh writes, “For an entire generation of Cambodians, including politicians as different in ideology as Prince Sihanouk, Son Sann and Pol Pot, Angkor Wat became a symbol of modernizing nation-state” (DC 60).

Ghosh’s description of Cambodian intellectual crisis applies to India as well. Seeking refuge in past glories to compensate for today’s inadequacies is a recurrent feature of many newly liberated states. Ghosh uses the narrative technique, a story told by a monk to recall the glory and restoration of Angkor Wat.

“At large in Burma” is mostly a linear narrative. Its topic is struggle for democracy in Burma. But Ghosh has a personal link with Burma as
well. He says that writing about Burma is an attempt on his part to get at his roots. He wants to explore places his parents and relatives had lived in or visited before the birth of the Indian Republic in 1947. He writes,

To me, the most intriguing of these stories were those that my family carried out of Burma. I suspect that this was partly because Burma had become a kind of lost world in the early 60’s, when I was old enough to listen to my relatives’ stories. It was in 1962 that General Ne Win, the man who would be Burma’s long time dictator, seized power in coup. Almost immediately, he slammed the shutters and switched off the lights: Burma became the dark house of the neighbourhood, huddled behind an impenetrable, overgrown fence. It was to remain shuttered for almost three decades. (DC 65)

At the time of Ghosh’s visit Aung San Sun Kyi was under house arrest. 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. He writes,

In the post-modern world, politics is everywhere a matter of symbol and the truth is that Suu Kyi is her own greatest political asset. It is only because Burma’s 1988 democracy movement had a symbol, personified in Suu Kyi, that the world remembers it
and continues to exert pressure on the current regime. Otherwise, the world would almost certainly have forgotten Burma’s slain and dispersed democrats just as quickly as it has forgotten many others like them in the past. (DC 83)

Ghosh is conscious of the double standards adopted by erstwhile colonizers and developed nations. In theory they support democracy, freedom of speech and liberty for people of all races, but for political and economic gain support dictatorial and terrorism inclined regimes.

Burma has been fighting civil wars since its independence in January 1948. There has been a communist uprising. Military coups have decided the order of the day. Ghosh tries to analyze as to what went wrong in Burma and where things go wrong. It used to be one of the richest countries in Asia and yet now it lists in UN’s ten least developed nations on earth. About two third of the country’s population is Buddhist. But during the colonial rule, Britishers favoured minorities over ethnic Burmans. Even the army had names after the minorities like ‘Karen’ Rifles, ‘Shan’, Mon and so on. But things were to change and change for better.

It takes a military dictator to believe that symbols are inert and can be manipulated at will. Forty years after his assassination, Aung San had his revenge. In a strange, secular reincarnation, his daughter Suu Kyi came back to haunt those who had sought
to make use of his death. In 1988, when Burma’s decades of discontent culminated in an anti-military uprising, Aung San Suu Kyi emerged from obscurity as one of country’s most powerful voices, the personification of Burma’s democratic resistance to military rule. (DC 74)

The Karen army had been fighting for fifty years. Ghosh suggests that many of those involved in the conflict have by now forgotten the source of their grievance. Others remember promises made to them (by the British) that Burmese governments refused to honour. Ghosh draws an overall conclusion that has implications in conflicts elsewhere and in several of his novels: “Burma’s borders are undeniably arbitrary”; he writes.

... the product of a capricious colonial history. But colonial officials cannot reasonably be blamed for the arbitrariness of the lines they drew. All boundaries are artificial; there is no such thing as a ‘natural’ nation, which has journeyed through history with its boundaries and ethnic composition intact. In a region heterogeneous as South-East Asia, any boundary is sure to be arbitrary (DC 100).

The marginalization of an Indian migrant in the Burmese civil war is shown by Amitav Ghosh as an eminently post-modern encounter. Ko Sonny was a regimental commander with the Karenni insurgents. His
real name was Mahinder Singh. His family had been settled in Burma for three generations. His parents were born there; his father was Sikh and his mother Hindu. His plight is due to youthful idealism. While studying Physics in the University of Rangoon, he championed the cause of Karenni and other minority students. He was arrested in 1988 and after the release, due to police harassment he escaped to the border. Sonny’s plight is similar to many student dissidents caught in the throes of civil war. Their hopes and aspirations of a normal career have subsided and they are now full-time insurgents. Ghosh shows the social impact of such commitment to a cause, through the misfortunes which have occurred to Sonny. His girl friend, a Burmese in Rangoon, gave up waiting for him and married someone else. In 1994 his mother died of a heart attack and he came to know about it months later. After years of fighting, he has limited options and income.

Inclusiveness, harmony and tolerance seem to be the lessons of history which Amitav Ghosh is trying to impart through his travelogue. The thought-provoking, stimulating travelogue thus becomes a metaphor of our times and an allegorical political message for multi-cultural, multi-racial nation states striving for existence in the post-modern world.
Works Cited


Chapter V
EXPLOITATION AND COLONIZATION IN
THE GLASS PALACE

The Indian Novel in English, as the “Third World Novel,” refers to “representations of colonialism, nationhood, post coloniality, the typology of rulers, their powers, corruptions and so forth” (Ahmad 124). Ahmad sees the novel a literary form engaged in postcolonial consciousness; a study of its thematic range indicates that the novel also attempts to universalize humanistic gesture, for human nature and social relationships are as important as interplay of power and national relationships. Amitav Ghosh is