CHAPTER V

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh’s novels deal with the most contemporary issues such as modern man’s perennial problems of alienation, the quest for freedom and existential crisis. Restless, rootless and unsettled, he is in search of peace, comfort and shelter. His sense of belonging is shaken. The bliss of freedom has disappeared. Life has become nothing but silence and pauses without harmony and destination. There is a vast gap between words and the world. The disturbance caused by the gaps and absences and seamless silences forces Ghosh to craft his novels on the victims of history. The undocumented histories of ordinary people and the chronologically ordered histories of historical characters are subtly dovetailed into his novels, making explicit a confluence of history and human insights. The strategy of subversion, a common feature of postcolonial histories is visible in the novels of Ghosh.

Colonial historians constructed historical records to suit the European sensibilities so as to secure complete authority over the colonised population. Postcolonial writers attempt to tell the other side of the story to accommodate not only the key events experienced by a community but also the cultural context through which these events are interpreted and recorded. Historiography is problematised and it is claimed that the written history is
incomplete as something essentially human is lost under the broad sweeps of history. Deriving strength from political sovereignty, the postcolonial writers began to relegitimise history by rewriting it from the perspective of the colonised. Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *The English August: An Indian Story* (1988) is a downright rejection of imperialist machinery. The plight of a Western educated youth during colonialism and his sense of rootlessness are highlighted in the novel. Like Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee too follows the trend set by Salman Rushie and decolonises English language to express the cultural distinctiveness of India.

Seamless interweaving of history and fiction, public events and private lives find expression in the novels of postcolonial writers. The publication of *Midnights Children* (1981) brought about waves of change and applause among the reading public. Rushdie's novels decolonised English language by domesticating it. In the Western academia, the readers were awestruck to see the ease and confidence with which an Indian handled an alien tongue. When *Midnight’s Children* was awarded the prestigious Booker Prize in 1981, the Indian literary world was thrilled to witness the glorious position attributed to Rushdie.
Mukul Kesavan’s *Looking through Glass* (1995) draws sustenance from the history of India. The sequence of events leading up to Partition and independence is narrated carefully with the painstaking eyes of a historian. Kesavan re-visits ‘official history’ and re-examines the colonial and nationalist versions of quit India movement which eventually led to independence and Partition of India in 1947. Kesavan doesn’t dismiss history but examines various other versions and elements of human agency that have been left out of ‘official’ accounts. The novel tellingly re-inscribes the agency of peasants as against the assumed leadership and lack of action of the educated urban middle class of India.

Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1993) is an attempt to retell the political history of India through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters from *The Mahabharatha*. The novel draws on its vast canvas a clear picture of the perpetuation of colonial regime in the Indian sub-continent and the postcolonial rule till the declaration of Emergency and its aftermath. The story of colonisation and decolonisation is narrated from the perspective that de-centres the colonisers and foregrounds Indian systems and ways of life. Tharoor makes a direct indictment in scathing terms against the entire gamut of political set up. Through this novel Shashi Tharoor establishes that the colonial inheritance deeply rooted in the policy of ‘divide and rule’ is dead set
to divide, fragment and disintegrate the country into small pieces shattering the dreams of the founding fathers of the nation.

Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* (1993) brings out the entire post-independence India in the fictional vision. He portrays the mid-twentieth century Indian society in all its diversity. Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* encompasses all the major historical events of twentieth century India. The Jallian Walla Bagh massacre, Quit India movement, Cabinet mission Freedom movement Muslim League and its role, riots and bloodshed, Language riots, Chinese aggression, Pakistan War, Liberation of Bangladesh, the declaration of Emergency and various other historically important events find elaboration in the pages of this novel. *Midnight’s Children* not only inspired many Indians to start writing novels in English but also to write ‘in the local language’ (Ashcroft et. al, 1989: 38).

An analysis of the novels written in India during the postcolonial period reveals that many of them who tried to assert themselves on the global literary scene were determined to rewrite the incomplete history by delving into the consciousness of people whose worlds are devastated by the violence engendered by the historical events like World Wars and Partition. The
distinctive and confident voice of Amitav Ghosh reverberates through the Indian literary scene during such a crucial period.

The present study, as it had been suggested earlier, is based on the assumption that the fictional works of Amitav Ghosh reflect a confluence of history and human insights. The undocumented histories of ordinary people and the chronologically ordered histories of historical characters mix and merge throughout his fictional works. Reconstructing history entails imagination, intuition and insight. The information that Ghosh has gathered from history is supplemented by his intuitive insights and the factual details that he has collected through careful research and observation. A spokesman of the common people, Ghosh brings to light the agony and ecstasy, the pain and pleasure that they have undergone by giving voice to fictional characters and thus tries to depict the impact of great historical events upon their lives. Postcolonial resettlement of the post-Partition period and the subsequent increase in the diaspora, alienation and displacement are also focused in his works. Reconfiguration of the histories of the South-East Asian countries like, Burma, India and Malaya and the repercussions of the British annexation of Burma to British India in 1895, the First and Second World Wars, the Japanese invasion of Burma, the sense of rootlessness experienced by the people, migration and the resultant identity crisis and hybridity in language,
religion and culture in their colonial and postcolonial phase find elaboration in his novels.

The thematic diversity of his novels and the innovative features of his artistic visualisation have accorded him world-wide readership. Characters hailing from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and traditions, who follow different cultures and languages populate his novels. Thus it is a miniature globe that he presents in his novels. Historical events like the Second World War and the post-Partition communal riots which broke out in certain parts of India and Pakistan, the Pakistan-Bangladesh division are foregrounded in his novels. Ghosh notices that human sufferings and sacrifices, their trials and tribulations are left unrecorded in history. These unfilled voids in history have compelled Ghosh to trace out the missing links.

The fictional narrator whom Ghosh introduces in *The Shadow Lines* is an impartial historian who strives to present in record the aftermath of historical events on the lives of ordinary people. In *The Glass Palace* he creates fictional characters to fill in the gaps and retains significant historical characters to fulfil the target of framing an alternate history. In *The Circle of Reason* Ghosh addresses the experience of postcolonial migration, alienation and rootlessness, and delves deep into the psyche of people caught up in the
vortex of Partition. The novel problematises the precarious life that the migrants live in the gulf countries and the transience of freedom and material prosperity in modern life. In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh rewrites Western medical history by exposing the fact that the foundation of scientific knowledge in the West is the intrinsic and intuitive wisdom of a handful of marginalised illiterates from the East. In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh prophesies an impending global ecological crisis and tries to suggest solutions for the problem through the voice of fictional characters. The dire necessity of the day to protect the fauna and flora and the aquatic animals are also carefully researched and focused here. This novel is analysed from the ecological and ecofeminist perspective. In each novel Ghosh deals not with a single nation and the life of its people but with a multiplicity of nations and the lives of people who follow multiple religions, cultures, ethnicity and language.

Bakhtin’s theoretical models are used to read and analyse the fictional works of Ghosh. The subtle amalgamation of the traditional mode of oral narration and the new generic variety of polyphonic narration in Ghosh’s works remain unparalleled in the current literary scenario. Traditional mythologies like the Nachiketa myth and the newly fabricated myths like the Bon Bibi myth are incorporated into the body of the text to give a glocalized colour to the cultural identity of postcolonial countries. Through this strategy
Ghosh indirectly hints that postcolonial countries are in no way inferior to the colonising West.

A polyphonic reading of Ghosh’s fictional works opens up a new perspective in literary criticism. The polyphonic narration allows Ghosh to give freedom to his characters to express their distinctive world-views and ideologies. Unlike the traditional novels in which authorial voice reigned supreme, holding an overall control over all the characters in the novels, Ghosh allows the narration to sieve through the perspective of different characters as well as narrators. The authorial voice is heard only as that of an impartial commentator, at par with other narrators, neither high nor low but enjoying equal status.

Another noticeable feature of his novels is that they maintain maximal contact with the contemporary reality in all its open-endedness. Being the author of a polyphonic novel Ghosh’s novels does not put a finalising period at the end. As Bakhtin has suggested in *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*:

Ghosh excludes all one-sided dogmatic seriousness, and does not permit any single point of view, any polar extreme of life or of thought to be absolutized. All one-sided seriousness, all one-sided pathos is handed over to the heroes, but the author, who
causes them all to collide in the “great dialogue “of the novel, leaves that dialogue open and puts no finalizing period at the end.’ (Bakhtin, 1984: 165)

The ideological tensions of life are left unresolved leaving many loop holes for the readers to interpret future in their own way.

An analysis of his novels reveals that Ghosh’s travel and fictional works are closely linked as he depicts characters ‘on the move.’ Ghosh’s world-wide travel and his life in various locations of the world helped him to come into contact with different cultures and languages. The experience of the immigrants expressed in his novels must have been the direct representation of his personal experiences. Calcutta is a kind of constant that runs through all the novels of Ghosh as it has been a centre of his imaginative world, just like Madna in the novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee and Malgudi in the novels of R. K. Narayan.

Unfulfilled hopes and aspirations of the post-War and post-Partition India lead to an increase in the diaspora. The problems faced by the diaspora and the post-War aesthetics of postcolonial migration and resettlement are vividly recaptured in his novels through the depiction of refugees and orphans. Echoes of identity crisis, sense of alienation and displacement felt by the
migrants, homelessness, rootlessness, cultural and linguistic hybridity; all resonate through his novels. They critique historiography and try to re-examine and re-define history from the perspective of the colonised. The migrant characters depicted in his novels develop an intense longing to return to their cultural roots, to their home, their place of origin. In an interview given to the S.S Music Channel telecast on 06-09-2006, Ghosh has suggested that life in America has become 'incredibly suspicious.' and expressed his intense longing to return to India. Recently he has purchased a property in Goa and is thinking of coming back to India. This ‘return of native’ can be identified as the real life version of many of the anecdotes he has already sketched in his fictional works.

Rajkumar the penniless orphan migrates to Burma, metamorphoses into a capitalist and business magnet but ends up as a pauper and returns to India. Dolly, his wife, though accompanied Rajkumar to India, returns to Burma and joins the Buddhist nunnery in Sagaing in Burma where she breathes her last. Piya the researcher in *The Hungry Tide* returns from New York to the Sundarbans in India to pursue her research, abandoning the sophisticated life in America. Ila in *The Shadow Lines* feels so terribly alienated in London that she regrets having opted to marry a white man disregarding the genuine love shown by her cousin.
Ghosh considers novel as a diversity of speech types, sometimes even diversity of languages and a diversity of individual voices artistically organised. Heteroglossia which means ‘social diversity of speech types,’ is, according to Bakhtin, the indispensable prerequisite of the novel as a genre. It is the internal stratification of different registers within any single national language. Novelistic discourse is a profound intermixture of linguistic social registers, which is achieved in the novel by the creation of fictional characters. They contribute to the heteroglot variety of the novel by using a particular kind of language and by having a particular viewpoint on the world around them. Characters may use a different dialect, jargon or personal idiosyncrasy of utterance as most of Ghosh’s characters do, adding to the variety of style which make up the novel’s style as a whole.

Polyphony and heteroglossia, makes Amitav Ghosh’s fictional world unique. Numerous voices or discourses emerge and engage in dialogue with one another in his novels. The ideological incompatibility of different characters as well as contradictions in the society find expression in his polyphonic novels. Neither the character nor the narrator is subordinated to the authorial voice. As in the novels of Dostoevsky, ‘a plurality of unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices’ is the chief characteristic of his novels. Through polyphony Ghosh deconstructs the
accepted canons of Eurocentric grand narratives and tries to bring to the forefront those who were on the negative side of the binary; the subalterns, the marginalised, and the oppressed.

Stylistic innovations and linguistic experiments are some of the strategies employed by Ghosh in his novels to ‘write back to an Empire’, an authority which had used language as a weapon to subjugate the colonised. Polyglossia, diglossia, heteroglossia and code-switching are some of the unique devices which enable him to re-inscribe the cultural discreteness of postcolonial societies.

Amitav Ghosh’s creative output is staggering large and wide-ranging which provides immense scope for further literary research. The chronotopic flexibility that has enabled Ghosh to move freely in the spatio-temporal realm can be explored in detail using Bakthin’s theory of chronotope. Cinematic techniques like collage, montage, crosscut; jumpcut and photomontage are some of the significant features of his fictional works which deserve an indepth analysis.

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