CHAPTER I

Introduction

Postcolonial discourses, in general, stem from the historical experience of colonialism. The postcolonial writers all over the world assert that their countries possessed a prestigious history, culture and heritage; and they also valourise the past from which they have drawn the raw materials for their works. Postcolonial discourses cease to be mere adaptations of the West. A radical dismantling of the European codes and a postcolonial subversion and appropriation of dominant European discourses become visible in the process of cultural decolonisation. The traditional view that all ethnic and cultural groups as having unique characteristics and that they are bound with their own territorial entity and cultural roots has been interrogated in postcolonial discourses. Moreover, it has been asserted that the roots, the unique character and even the territorial entity are generated through their migration from one region to the other or from one settlement to another settlement. The search for food and shelter is the primary motive of migration, but the materialistic pursuit for resources and ideals also nurtures migration by exploring routes to
remote lands and cultures. Hence ‘routes’ too influence, determine and produce culture.

The colonial invasion in general and the British invasion in particular over the Eastern regions like Asia and Africa were inspired by their urge to conquer and appropriate the rich resources of the East. The imposition of European culture, the teaching of the English language, the emergence of new branches of learning and knowledge, institutions of administrations and judiciary and the introduction of trade-links helped to establish the Empire of the West. The middle class educated elite who had internalised the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity emerged as a new corrective force and they questioned and resisted the colonial power policy and its supporting manifestations. The postcolonial school of thought such as Orientalism and New Historicism and other different branches of learning opened up new vistas of enlightenment to the oppressed. The newly enlightened generation made an attempt to translate the dreams of the oppressed into reality by organising nationalist movements which in turn were supported by postcolonial writings.

Paradoxically enough, it was the same colonial education which was imposed on the natives that kindled the hopes and aspirations of rebuilding the
past among the colonised. With the attainment of freedom, people attempted to reconstruct their art, architecture, heritage and status, which in turn inspired them to work for self-realisation.

Postcolonial enlightenment tried to help the marginalised people to move from the margins to the centre. The necessity for providing the due share to the subalterm groups by creating new options and opportunities led to the emergence of subalterm studies which gave an intellectual fillip to the Tribals, Dalits and secluded women.

The present era witnesses a new hybrid school of global theory known as globalisation in which knowledge and information, goods and services move freely across the borders. In this context, it is highly interesting to study the fictional works of Amitav Ghosh, who is an emerging postcolonial voice in a ‘glocalized perspective’ ‘in which the global is transformed at the local level’ (Ashcroft et al., 1989, 218).

The study focuses on the role played by the author in highlighting the confluence of history and human insights by analysing the cultural, social and political framework of the historical and fictional characters in his fiction. The way in which Amitav Ghosh interweaves within his narrative framework cultures of different nations like Burma, India, Malaya, Bangladesh, Africa
and England is being analysed. The study also focuses on the craft employed by the author to weave the social, cultural and political events of different nations and those of the past, present and future.

The narrative strategies employed by the author to integrate the fictional and historical characters and to recreate the history of nations by filling up the *gaps* and *absences* are also analysed in the course of the study. An attempt has been made to illustrate the position of Amitav Ghosh in the postcolonial literary scenario and his role in reconstructing the lost cultural heritage and myths of the communities he came into contact.

One of the assumptions on which the study has been based is that in a core culture, even when the culture encounters socio–political and economic changes in its due course of survival, the cultural traits will remain constant. The resourceless, rootless, unsettled people are more vulnerable to cultural subjugation of the colonial masters. The metaphor of orphans and twins depicted in Ghosh’s novels seems to suggest the tragic consequences of the Partition and the subsequent realisation of the suffocation of human aspirations.

The historical characters portrayed in the novels of Amitav Ghosh are the true representatives of the socio–cultural and political set up of the region,
culture or nation concerned; whereas the fictional characters seem to have their prototype in the society but is subjected to transformation to suit the texture of the work.

The study intends to utilise the primary works of Amitav Ghosh and the secondary sources of information to explore the confluence of history and human insights. All the fictional and non-fictional works including travelogues, prose pieces and articles of Amitav Ghosh are reviewed. However, the thesis will be confined to the following five novels: *The Circle of Reason* (1986) *The Shadow Lines* (1988) *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) *The Glass Palace* (2000) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004) The major non-fictional works of Amitav Ghosh such as *In an Antique Land* (1992) and *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998) and the collection of prose pieces titled *The Imam and the Indian* (2002) have also been analysed to support the ideas expressed in his novels.

The secondary works such as review articles and critical works on Amitav Ghosh, which come within the purview of colonial, postcolonial and subaltern studies, have been analysed to trace the network of literary theories made use of in his novels. Secondary sources available in the Internet and
interview articles in journals also have been explored to support the arguments.

Chapter One introduces the rationale, assumptions, mode of exploration and the framework of the study. An attempt has been made to define and justify the title of the thesis and discuss its relevance in the present literary scenario.

Chapter Two describes and analyses the theoretical development of the study beginning with colonialism and the subsequent emergence of Commonwealth literature to postcolonialism in order to locate and identify the fictional works of Amitav Ghosh in the theoretical framework. Literary theories formulated by the Russian theoretician and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin are studied in relation to the narrative strategies employed in the fictional works of Amitav Ghosh.

Chapter Three illustrates the pattern of the confluence of historical and human insights in the novels of Ghosh in the light of the postcolonial theory discussed in the second chapter.
Chapter Four tries to explore the narrative strategies employed by the author and it highlights his linguistic experimentation using innovative techniques.

Chapter Five summarises the observations made in the body of the text to a conclusion.

Amitav Ghosh is the recipient of a number of awards for his published works. His first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) was translated into many languages. Its French edition received the *Prix Medicis Estranger*, a prestigious literary award in France. His second novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) won two prestigious Indian prizes, the *Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award* (1989) and the *Ananda Puraskar*. His third novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) won the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1997. The novel was filmed by Gabriele Salvatores, the Oscar winning director of *Mediterranno*. Ghosh is the winner of the 1999 Pushcart prize, a leading literary award, for an essay that was published in the Kenyon Review. Amitav Ghosh’s fourth novel *The Glass Palace* (2000) is the winner of the 2001 Frankfurt e-Book Award sponsored by the International eBook Award Foundation at the Frankfurt Book Fair in January 2005. *The Hungry Tide* (2004) was awarded the Hutch Crossword Book Prize, a major Indian award. He was awarded *Padma Sri* by the
Government of India in 2007. Amitav Ghosh’s work has been translated into nineteen languages and he has served on the jury of the Locarno Film Festival, Switzerland and the Venice Film festival.

Over the past two decades or so, Amitav Ghosh has enthralled readers with novels and travelogues. Much less known is the fact that, simultaneously, Amitav Ghosh has been writing non-fictional prose, reflective essays, political commentary, book reviews, autobiographical articles, academic expositions and translations from Bengali and literary anthropology. His non-fiction work *In an Antique Land* (1992) is subversive history in the guise of a traveller’s tale. It is an amalgam of fiction, history, travel-writing and anthropology which makes us rethink the political boundaries that divide the world and generic boundaries that divide narrative styles. The collection of prose pieces titled *The Imam and the Indian* (2002) shares with his fiction certain characteristic subjects and concerns like the connection between past and present, between events and memories and between people, cultures and countries that have shared a past. The travelogue, *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998) is based upon the author’s travel experiences to countries like Cambodia and Burma and his personal contacts with the native people he had met. *Countdown* (1999) is the result of Amitav Ghosh’s journey into the Pokharan area where Indian government tested five nuclear devices
and he expresses the opinion that the pursuit of nuclear weapons in the subcontinent is the moral equivalent of civil war. *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (2006) is a compilation of essays spanning two decades.

In the context of rising political, social and religious unrest, where the world is torn up by terrorism and violence, a study of the novels of Amitav Ghosh which envisage a borderless world of peace, fraternity and love will be highly significant. In the era of globalisation and against the background of the social construct namely the global village, the study is expected to provide a tool to the readers to perceive the recurring historical events from a new literary perspective.

When the ecological and environmental problems pose a great threat to the existence of living beings on earth, it is mandatory on the part of the contemporary writers to raise the consciousness of the people across the globe and find solutions for the problems. Ghosh in his latest novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) warns humanity of an impending ecological disaster. Unless people are ready to discard some of the crazy ideas of development, designated as ‘maldevelopment’ by Vandana Siva (Merchant, 1996: 276), global warming and other similar disasters will devour us altogether. Cyclones
and earthquakes will become common phenomena, taking a heavy toll of lives. Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* is a reminder to the human community that unless it exercises caution and restraint in the exploitation of nature, it may have to encounter terrible consequences. His prophetic vision came true with the outbreak of *tsunami* which hit the coastal areas of the Bay of Bengal and obliterated fauna and flora. The catastrophe devastated the whole area rendering many human beings homeless and producing an equal number of orphans without any means of subsistence. Even as India was recovering from the terrible destruction unleashed by the hungry tidal waves, different areas across the globe like New Orleans in America, Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula, Western Cuba, Southern half of Florida and the Caribbeans had witnessed untold disaster, when extremely dangerous category five storm known under different names like *Katrina, Wilma, Beta and Rita* raged all over these areas during the record breaking 2005 hurricane season between June and November. In this context a study of the novels of Amitav Ghosh written with such foresight and intuitive wisdom will be highly rewarding.

To fix Amitav Ghosh in one particular country or culture will be misleading, as he has lived in different locations of the world. Ghosh’s life has been somewhat nomadic. This rootless existence is reflected in his novels as the characters spend most of their lives on the move. Fiction,
travelogues, essays, articles, - Amitav Ghosh’s written output is staggeringly large and wide ranging. A visiting professor at various universities like University of Virginia, Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania and American University in Cairo, Ghosh has also held the title of Distinguished Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at Queen’s College, City University of New York. Currently he is a Visiting Professor in the Department of English and American Literature at Harvard. Critics hail him as one of the new generation of cosmopolitan intellectuals writing in English, emerging from the Indian literary scene with a distinctive and confident voice. Apart from being an acclaimed Indian English writer, Ghosh is well known as an anthropologist, an economist and above all, as a globe trotter. He has proved his ability in writing on varied topics like diaspora life in *The Circle of Reason*, the vision of a borderless world as in *The Shadow Lines*, science fiction as in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, re-inscribing history as in *The Glass Palace*, and ecological disaster as in *The Hungry Tide*.

The present study is based on the assumption that Ghosh’s novels reflect a confluence of history and human insights. History no longer remains an unalterable construct. Jago Morrison observes:
The fabric of history, collective memory and social time within which, a century ago, fiction could locate itself has been subject to profound interrogation and transformation (Morrison, 2003: 7).

The voice of the common man, his struggles and sacrifices which went unnoticed in the annals of history began to acquire a prominent place on the pages of fiction. Historiography centralised power structures and eulogised their political, cultural, social and economic policies but excluded the plight of the marginalised and the oppressed. In *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) Nietzsche states that the meanings of history are always reflection of power (Morrison, 2003: 16). Morrison notices that Foucault’s observation on history has similar overtones:

Drawing on Nietzsche’s work a century before, Foucault’s genealogy seeks to frustrate the attempts made by traditional academics and writers to present history as a well-understood, rational development towards civilised enlightenment. Instead, he tries to show a much messier series of struggles, a series of ideological and bodily coercions and subjugations, by means of which dominant discourses secure their own emergence as ‘rational, ’true’ and ‘right’ (Morrison, 2003:20).
Ghosh’s fictional works clearly echo Foucauldian analysis. History ceases to be the forte of those who wield power. The twentieth century postcolonial novelists are currently engaged in retrieving the lost history in which the powerless, the marginalised and the subjugated assert themselves and move towards the centre.

Michael Holquist in his introduction to Bakhtin’s *Dialogic Imagination* points out some of the similarities and differences between novel and history as follows:

Histories are like novels in that they insist on homology between the sequence of their telling, the form they impose to create a coherent explanation in the form of narrative on the one hand and the sequence of what they tell on the other…. The novel differs from history in that it dramatizes the *gaps* that always exist between what is told and the telling of it, constantly experimenting with social discursive and narrative asymmetries… Both history and novel strive to give narrative shape to material of encyclopaedic variety and plenitude (Bakhtin, 1981:Introd. xxviii).
Morrison observes that “in the earliest realist traditions of the novel historical engagement appeared nothing like so problematic as it has come to seem in contemporary writing” (Morrison, 2003:11). The awareness that history is only a human construct and that gaps, absences and silences in history have to be filled in by reconstructing it has become a dominant concern for the contemporary writers. Dhawan, a critic on Ghosh observes:

The novelist concerned with history is beyond the traditional ways of assessing events; he has to blend history with his vision and philosophy” (Dhawan, 1999:14).

Reconstructing history entails imagination, intuition and insight. The role played by the masses in the formation of history which went uninscribed has to be inscribed. Historiography has to be re-defined by correcting the lopsidedness and avoiding biased conceptions and filling in the gaps.

Postcoloniality comes alive on the pages of Amitav Ghosh’s novels when he tries to supplement the information that he has gathered from history with his insight and observation. In his novels, he assumes the role of a spokesman for the common people and brings to light the agony and ecstasy,
pain and pleasure that they have undergone through the voices of fictional characters and thus tries to depict the impact of great historical events upon their lives. Reconstruction of a nation, search for identity and cultural roots also achieve great significance in the fictional world of Amitav Ghosh. Properly documented public events and the undocumented personal lives of individuals in the society are woven together like warp and woof in his novels. This subtle fusion of chronologically ordered history and private experiences of individuals makes his novels an arena for the confluence of history and human insights. Philip Darby, a well-known critic endorses the assumption that ‘fiction’s contribution to historical or political understanding flows from the novelist’s insight, intuition and above all creative imagination and asserts that these are the qualities lacking in academic analysis (Darby, 1998:34). Hence an attempt is made in this study to analyse the confluence of history and the novelist’s insight, intuition and creative imagination that has gone into the making of the fictional works of Amitav Ghosh. Ira Pande reviews Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* as follows:

Spanning centuries and generations and straddling the space of three countries India, Burma and Malaysia, this is a saga that could have exhausted the skills of a lesser writer. But in the hands of Ghosh, a historian by training, an adventurous traveller
and a sensitive writer of fiction, it becomes a confluence of all the three (Pande, July, 2000).

Rejecting the traditional practice of choosing one nation, its people, its culture, customs and conventions as the background of an individual fictional work, Ghosh makes a configuration of nations with heterogeneous characters representing plurality in religion culture and so on. Reconfiguration of the histories of the three South-East Asian countries, Burma, India and Malaya and the repercussions of the British occupation of Burma, 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. History has recorded the British annexation of Burma in 1895 as a great historical event. But the pain, agony and torture experienced by the members of the Burmese royal family when they were suddenly deprived of their sovereign power, the tortures they suffered in exile, the plight of the orphan attendants who followed them in their exile, the role played by the Indian soldiers of the British–Indian army in awakening national consciousness among Indians and the plight of the subalterns under the burgeoning capitalists of British India were left undocumented in history. The significance of these gaps in history compelled
Ghosh to trace the missing links. 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.

While the journey of Burma from colonialism to liberation and then to a Republic forms the backbone of *The Glass Palace*, *The Shadow Lines* is set against the background of major historical events like the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the Partition and the subsequent communal riots and the impact of these events upon the life of ordinary people. Khudiram Bose, Bhagha Jatin and Subhash Chandra Bose, true patriots and revolutionaries who sacrificed their lives for the sake of India have become a part of Indian history. This fraction of history is taken up by Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* through the fictional representation of a grandmother and her unconditional love and admiration towards a revolutionary youth who happened to be one of her classmates. The recalling of her classroom experience, her anti-imperialist attitude, and her ardent desire to support the revolution show the significant role played by ordinary people for the liberation of India.

History can never be all-inclusive. Pallavi Gupta, a critic on Ghosh, underscores “the inability of historical discourses to speak/enunciate in totality
because something will inevitably elude its grasp” (Gupta, 2001: 81). The mystery behind Tridib’s martyrdom and the nature of his entanglement with May Price are left out as gaps in history. The unnamed narrator in the novel tries to explore the mysteries and writes down his family chronicle to be remembered by posterity.

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 is divided into three different sections called *Satva*: Reason, *Rajas*: Passion and *Tamas*: death. The precarious life that the migrants live in the gulf countries, the transience of freedom and material prosperity in modern life are foregrounded in this novel. The Nachiketa myth of *Kathakopanishad* and the ancient oriental oral narrative tradition have been employed by the author to distinguish his personal style.

*The Calcutta Chromosome*, acclaimed as a ‘scientific thriller’ begins in the early twenty-first century when Antar, an Egyptian computer programmer and systems analyst in Newyork suddenly finds the ID card of an old colleague L.Murugan flashed on his computer screen. Rewriting Western medical history is the pivot around which the novel moves. After revealing
some of the historical facts about malarial research, Ghosh exposes 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.

_The Hungry Tide_ is written against the backdrop of the Partition of the erstwhile Pakistan into Pakistan and Bangladesh. The ensuing flood of refugees in search of better fields to settle, Morichjhapi rebellion and its cruel suppression by the Bengal government, the sufferings and sacrifices made by the dispossessed and disinherited refugees are all brought on the canvas. The dire necessity of the day to protect the fauna and flora and the aquatic animals are also carefully researched and focused upon in this novel. This novel is analysed from the ecological and ecofeminist perspective.

Ghosh has widened the horizon of English language by adding ever new linguistic registers and cultural terms which he has acquired through his travel and his stay in various locations of the world. Hence an attempt has been made in this study to focus upon the contributions he has made to enlarge English vocabulary.

Apart from the thematic diversity, the innovative narrative strategies that Ghosh has experimented in his fictional works and travelogues have accorded a world-wide readership to his writings. In this context it seems to be
highly relevant to examine the narrative strategies that he has developed for his fictional works.

Critical studies on Amitav Ghosh have been until very recently, mainly confined to thematic studies. A stylistic analysis of his novels has not been formulated, as the stylistic uniqueness of his novelistic prose has not been properly recognised. His craftsmanship in prose and the distinctive features of the narrative strategies he has employed in his fictional world shall not go unnoticed, therefore; a chapter is set apart exclusively to deal with this topic. Literary theories propounded by Mikhail Bakhtin like dialogism, polyphony and heteroglossia have been used as a framework to analyse the techniques of his narration. The philosophic vision of the orient is polyphonic; embracing into its fold the multiple voices and multiple ideologies of different cultures, languages and religions and Ghosh’s fictional works seem to fit into this scheme. Sue Vice, a leading critic on Bakhtin notes:

Polyphony has often been taken to be synonymous with either dialogism or heteroglossia. Precisely the term refers to the construction of voices of characters and the narrator in the novel, as its etymology—the Greek for ‘many voices’ suggests. The
term’s simple musical metaphor refers to ‘the co-presence of independent but interconnected voices’ (Vice, 1997: 112).

Bakhtinian polyphony and heteroglossia, when transposed into Amitav Ghosh’s literary arena, undergo an artistic reworking. His novels become polyphonic when he suffuses them with voices of different narrators and characters. Some of the speakers in his fictional world take contradictory philosophical and ideological stances, but 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’ (Bakhtin, 1984:6) is the chief characteristic of Amitav Ghosh’s 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, the downtrodden and the oppressed. His novels, thus, foreground the need to erase the boundary between binary oppositions like superior/inferior, positive/negative in such a way that the hierarchy implied by the opposition is thrown into question.

The multifarious linguistic devices employed in his works are virtually the trumpcards used ‘to write back to an Empire’ which used language as a
weapon to subjugate the colonised. Polyglossia, diglossia, heteroglossia and code-switching are some of the conspicuous constitutive factors of the linguistic experimentation that make his novels unique. Chapter Four seeks to explore the novels of Ghosh in the light of these linguistic devices and Chapter Five presents a summation of the observations.