Chapter VI

Conclusion

The research began with the hypothesis that history can be interpreted and defined not only as a biography of kings and queens but also as a record of lives, participations, contributions made and impacts felt by ordinary people in a particular period and time of history. The reason behind such a proposition is the undeniable challenge that history of unhistorical people in Ghosh’s seem to pose against the traditional documented historiography which has so far attempted to trace, re-capture and record lives of only great figures of the past. Ghosh’s works provide a glimpse of ordinary peoples’ lives enduring violent blows of events in history.

The research attempted a study of presence and relevance of history, along with its reworking, reinvention, re-examination and its impacts on the nation and family and also the migrant population, in the works of Ghosh. The study, which began with the hypothetical understanding of the relevance of history in his works, has led to the confirmation of such a perception that Ghosh’s treatment of history is different, because his focus is on the history of ordinary unhistorical figures of the past. The precise choice for this particular research was to
study the works of fiction of Amitav Ghosh as they exemplify Ghosh’s regard for history.

A conscious depiction of history in the works of Ghosh confirms the need to read and understand his narratives in the vast backdrop of a historical past or documented history that he has chosen to represent his works with. What was portrayed in Ghosh’s narratives was the consideration of an undocumented past that was overlooked by traditional historiography. The undocumented past was read through the eyes of insignificant people and thus Ghosh espoused the need to hear the voice of the voiceless. Thus perspectives, like that of the subaltern, oppressed, or the subjugated female, or the colonised other, were discussed verily suggesting an alternative historical stance. His works displayed ordinary people’s thoughts, contributions, pains and afflictions, trials and tribulations and also the fascination some of them felt for the colonial way of life in the course of events in history.

What the research delineated in order to vouch and hold true the proposition above may be recapitulated thus:

Chapter I “Introduction” commenced with a highlight on conventional notions of history as a subject that signifies inquiry, research, exploration or information and a study of the past biographies of
great men. The chapter also attempted a brief critical introduction to the author’s life, works and achievements. Relevant characteristics that make up Ghosh’s works and their relation to historical restoration were also discussed. The chapter then delved into different ways in which literature perceives history, interpreting and decoding traditional historiography to suit the writers’ artistic purpose, and also to project the past from different points of view. The chapter then examined the Western and Eastern approach to history as seen in the works of Western authors like Shakespeare and Brecht and also Indian writers like Raja Rao, Khushwant Singh, Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh.

The chapter viewed Amitav Ghosh as a writer who made use of history in an interpretative light: history read by him in the light of the common man. Various events in history in Ghosh’s texts that present an alternative understanding of history, where the text projects history of the ordinary citizens of the country rather than biographies of kings and queens, was outlined in the chapter. What then followed was the presentation of Ghosh’s characters in a historical light. They were not only ordinary people but also active participants and at times active players in the historical events. The chapter also gave a brief outline of the research thesis and its organisation into relevant chapters. Lastly the
Chapter II “Re-examination of History” began with the perception that conventional historiography demanded a re-examination of the past in the form of new thoughts, new perceptions and an altogether new interpretation of history. Philosophers and historians that belong to various schools of thoughts like the post-modern and the post-colonial had been studied in the chapter as their focus was on reading history of marginalised people and their perspectives of the past. A re-examination of history in Ghosh’s texts also projected a challenge and a subversion of traditional historiography and an incorporation of alternate views of the past or views of the marginalised and the ordinary. Ghosh’s works have also been studied as narratives that establish an interconnection between the historical events and the ordinary ignored sections of the society. The focus of the chapter turned to a re-examination of public events in the light of private histories that unearthed not only the pain and pathos of ordinary people as they were trapped in events in history of the nation, but also simultaneously related stories of the advantage and gain that public history had on private lives of ordinary people. The relevant characteristic of such a re-examination was the articulation of the unhistorical people’s strong nationalistic zeal in their participation in the
freedom struggle, and also the revelation of the psychology of ordinary people lured by fame and life pattern of the colonisers.

The subsequent re-reading of Ghosh’s works led to the perception of the authorial restoration of female perspectives of the past. In other words, the chapter examined Ghosh’s remapping of history for the significance of the presence and contribution of women towards the history of the country. The chapter attempted a post-colonial re-interpretation of history aiming to remap the colonised rather than the coloniser, alongside a post-modern re-interpretation of history that highlighted the utter insignificance and ultimate nothingness of life on earth. Subsequently the chapter also uncovered adequately and brought to light historical events that had passed out of public historical records but events that played important roles in peoples’ lives.

Chapter III “History and Imagination in Amitav Ghosh’s Novels,” demonstrated Ghosh’s imaginative and fictional methods employed in the reinvention of history incorporating the real and the unreal, the factual and the fictive. A re-constructed alternative reality and truth was integrated as part of a reading of the chapter through strikingly imaginative narrative techniques like memory, diary as a-historical narrative and also memoir used to give a definite purpose to history. Different narrators were identified in the chapter that upheld the objective
and aim of voicing the other side of history. In other words the chapter studied how Amitav Ghosh used history against imagination, or reality against fiction.

The chapter attempted to bring about the co-existence of the real and the fictional that evolved out of historical events Ghosh’s novels. Thus his texts were studied through a presentation of parallel narratives of the historical and the fictional with fictional narrative occupying the centre stage. The chapter rendered a new interpretation of public history whereby history was viewed from a familial or cultural or personal tilt. What was also reflected was the author’s belief in no single legitimate version of truth and fact but rather infinite interpretations to truth. Truth and reality had been read from versions that had never been touched so far. Therefore the credibility of metanarrative as a narrative form that undermines all other narrative truths was rejected in the reading of truth in Ghosh’s texts.

While history acted as a backdrop and a base that supported Ghosh’s imaginative construction, the chapter highlighted how Ghosh perceived the importance of bringing about a blend of the two worlds, the historical and the imaginative. Ghosh’s imagination was discussed as one that was drawn towards a presentation of Eastern ideas and beliefs of the counter-science and the supernatural to defy Western pride on science.
Primordial practices and beliefs on rebirth, transposition and transcendence of the soul of the dead were highlighted as beliefs that are not bizarre and preposterous but accepted as a representation of the identity of people. The chapter also displayed the presence of magic realism in Ghosh’s texts - folklore and myths placed alongside the real. Oral history was seen as offering a challenge to scripted documented historiography.

What was also looked into as part of the chapter was the historiographic metafiction that unearthed history of the suppressed, like women or victim of Partition, etc, as they were painted as dynamic, strong willed and even independent. Therefore history and imagination saw ordinary unhistorical characters as individuals offering stringent competition to western historical figures, with unhistorical ordinary characters elevated in stature and significance to historical figures. What was also probed in the context of the real and the fictive was the way in which Ghosh’s imagination internalised his characters’ anxiety and exasperation over historical events like the Partition.

Chapter IV “Juxtaposing History: Nation and Family,” projected the notion of history and family as important entities in an individual’s existence. Both nation and family were perceived as defining an individual’s sense of identity, impinging on the individual realisation that
one cannot do without the other as both co-exist in any individual’s life. The chapter viewed the concurrence of history with nation and family placing history of the nation parallel to the history of the family. An event in history as having bearings on the history of the nation and also on the private life of an individual, which helped presenting both a macrocosmic and microcosmic view of history was also studied in the chapter.

In conjunction with reading the writer’s juxtaposition of parallel histories of the nation and family, the chapter also analysed the interweaving and merging of stories of the nation with stories of the common people and their families in Ghosh’s novels. What was also viewed in Ghosh’s juxtaposition of nation and family was the confrontation between the nation and the family. The predilection that Ghosh had for private history rather than public history was not only visibly present but also dominant. National events were given secondary importance as they were made to only appear as mere passing comments in the course of the familial narratives. The chapter viewed how Ghosh prioritised and privileged family over nation or the microcosmic over the macrocosmic.

What was also studied in the chapter was the way in which the story of the family was directly or indirectly affected by the history of the nation. The individual loss of a family member in a public happening like
Partition or communal riots was exhumed and brought to light as important revelations present in Ghosh’s works. Thus a perception of nation in Ghosh was read as essential only as long as it led to an equal perception of family as it created a space to envisage Ghosh’s narratives of families affected by these communal disturbances.

Submerged or voiceless histories of ordinary people were provided some space in Ghosh’s texts. Such a binary and hierarchical opposition of the recorded history of the nation and unrecorded history of the family was basically an authorial attempt to voice the voiceless and also to remap the history of the nation to accommodate the voiceless history / histories. A toppling of hierarchies between the public history and the private history leading to an expansion of horizons was particularly discussed in Ghosh’s approach to the history of the Partition of the country. Traditional history that maintained the hierarchy of presenting the history of the nation was seen shifting its focus to the history of little people. What was identified was a subversion of grand narratives for privileging the subaltern voice. Thus the emphasis of the chapter was the study of private history in the light of public history of the nation in the novels of Amitav Ghosh.

Chapter V “Impacts of History: Migration and Displacement” viewed Ghosh’s novels as narratives of history highlighting histories of
migration and displacement as well. Migrant characters and their stories were seen to be exhibiting a ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factor of migration directing an involuntary expulsion/eviction or a voluntary shift of residence to a foreign land respectively. Impacts of migration on characters have also been addressed as one that results in rootlessness and alienation and as one that has also promulgated financial gain and stability for the family members of the migrants and themselves alike.

Partition as one major reason behind displacement and the creation of refugees and asylum seekers living in constant dread and fear in an unknown land was dealt with in the chapter. Partition created a dual conflict of migration and displacement leading to dilemma and perplexities in the hearts of people. On the one hand these migrants were trapped in memories of home and a yearning to return while on the other hand they were unable to identify themselves with their native country with the intrusion of history into their lives.

Pretence, duplicity and disinterestedness of authority and governments towards hardships of displaced people, forcefully extradited to an unfamiliar land for no fault of theirs, was an issue of concern explored in the chapter. What was also looked into in the treatment of the displaced people was the impartial treatment doled out on refugees by those in power and authority in the form of violence and yet another
migration was also demonstrated as the weakness of not only helpless ordinary people but also that of the royals to safeguard their country and defend their sovereignty.

Relocation for a better way of living, for employment opportunities and also for freedom from social constrictions is the cause of voluntary migration that has attracted people to leave for foreign lands. The above aspect of migration was also taken into account. Despite enjoying benefits as overseas employees these migrants faced discontentment. For in the process of earning wealth for their family back home, migrants are at times subjected to a tremendous amount of torture and oppression. What the chapter also examined was the amity, solidarity and unity amongst fellow migrants in their journey from home to an unfamiliar land. This camaraderie was a noteworthy projection in the course of the chapter.

Diaspora, an important aspect of migration was also discussed as an inevitable component. It has been recognised as a dispersion of people from their native land to an unknown foreign land, as they look forward to a possible return home. Some of Ghosh’s characters belong to a diaspora while there are also others that show no yearning for their native country but ironically hanker over memories of their adopted country.
The research arrived at the following findings in the process of this study:

A re-examination of the works of Amitav Ghosh revealed that Ghosh’s projection of history was towards histories of ordinary people rather than chronicles of historical figures. He is more concerned about the silenced histories of unrecorded unhistorical figures of the past rather than the documented history of great figures of history. His works achieve their purpose as they are able to exhibit unrecorded private histories that have so far been silenced and suppressed.

In the beautiful blend of the historical with the unhistorical it is identified that Ghosh places the imaginative and the historical on the same plane as that of the unimaginative and unhistorical thereby giving equal importance to the imaginative creative unrecorded histories and that of recorded history alike.

The next finding of the research is directed towards a challenge that Ghosh’s novels holds out to. Imaginative history has not only been placed alongside recorded history but narratives of unrecorded little histories of ordinary people challenge grand narratives of documented history. A revelation of the little truths of insignificant people through his imagination placed in the context of history makes for an exciting reading of Ghosh’s texts.
Interestingly, another finding pertains to a stand that Ghosh takes in juxtaposing nation and family. What is arrived at is that Ghosh not only gives equal regard to both nation and family but he also accentuates the stand of the family above that of the nation. Thus national events are given secondary importance as they become mere historical markers in the course of the narratives of the family. The stance that he takes here is a conspicuous and prominent discourse that bends itself more towards the family rather than the nation. His novels are works that contain narratives more inclined towards an enhanced claim that private history has over public history of a nation.

Amitav Ghosh’s novels attempt a post-colonial re-interpretation of the past, thereby re-examining history of the coloniser through a reading of the colonised. Through such a re-interpretation Ghosh looks at the world not from the centre but from the periphery. His focus is on marginalised rather than on the powerful. His characters assert their identity, individuality and self-respect. Women have been portrayed as strong contenders in the political, social and familial arena and it reveals Ghosh’s gender concerns; thereby re-examining history of the coloniser through a reading of the colonised. John McLeod in *Beginning Postcolonialism* states that postcolonialism is not
... as if colonial values are no longer to be reckoned with.

It does not define a radically new historical era, nor does it herald a brave new world where all the ills of the colonial past have been cured. Rather ‘postcolonialism’ recognises both historical *continuity* and *change*. On the one hand it acknowledges that the material realities and modes of representation common to colonialism are still very much with us today, even if the political map of the world has changed through decolonization. But on the other hand, it asserts the promise, the possibility, and the continuing necessity of change, while also recognizing that important challenges and changes have been achieved (33).

Ghosh’s works have been found in agreement with McLeod’s perception of postcolonialism. Ghosh looks at the world not from the centre but from the periphery. His focus is on the marginalised rather than on the powerful. His characters exhibit a fervent assertion to regain their identity, individuality and self-respect. Traits of colonial continuity are found present in some of his characters that refuse to detach themselves from colonial values and life pattern. Simultaneously changes in points of view and representations of the subalterns are found and can no longer be subdued. They want to be heard and they can now speak.
Women occupy a special regard in the works of Ghosh. They have been portrayed as strong contenders in the political, social and familial arena. Ghosh is not only free from bias with gender issues and concerns, but also emerges as a sensitive twenty first century writer ready to give a woman the same position and reverence as that of a man. His women characters may not be the protagonists of his texts but nonetheless they possess individualistic traits as matriarchs, leaders in the field of politics and even as priestesses.

Another very important inference deduced out of the study is the deliberate representation of the transposition and transcendence of the soul of the dead in Ghosh’s texts. Two important conclusions may be arrived at here: firstly these are illustrations of a postcolonial disbelief in the Western endeavor of civilizing the colonised and secondly it also affirms not only Ghosh’s acceptance of the colonised East’s assertions of the supernatural set in opposition to the Western notions of civilization but is also respectful of these primitive practices of his fellow colonised brethrens.

Finally, the research arrives at the identification of Ghosh’s works as migrant literature. It concludes that his works constitute several features like experiences of migration, the migrant sense of rootlessness a search for identity, diaspora and displacement and critique of migrations
like ‘push’ and pull’ factors. Thus it deems fit to consider Ghosh’s texts as characterising migrant literature.

The findings above acknowledge the importance and worthiness of Amitav Ghosh in Indian English literature, to which he has contributed immensely, particularly in the light of a re-invention of historical perspective. It upholds his believes in perceiving history in its entirety. His reading of the past is one that spells out the consciousness of a writer towards the need to unfold what documented historiography has left out. He presents the past by remarkably decoding recorded history for the history of the unheard. His treatment of history is in itself a mark of a genius as he does not rule out the credibility of recorded historical events but enhances historical events by showing the other side of history. The other side of history throws a lot of light on aspects of the past that has been hidden and never revealed before. In doing so Ghosh is actually carving out a place for the silenced voices by establishing a platform for them to share stories of their side of the past. In actuality the basic realisation of a need to create a platform for the ordinary marginalised people of the country to share their experiences of history has made Ghosh’s works an ocean of information. By allowing his central characters to speak out loud he makes an attempt to display their histories alongside the history of the great and the powerful. Thus Ghosh quite
obviously attempts to write biographies of ordinary people. These biographies that have been laid bare before his readers only enrich history further. What is on display in his narratives are numerous contributions and participation of citizens of the country in different historical events that would have otherwise been left unattended to.

Added to this is the interest that Ghosh reveals through a presentation of events that would have otherwise been relegated to the background and preferred to be forgotten. He brings such historical events to the fore yet again with the sole purpose of elevating the histories of ordinary people. While these may be minor events in history, ordinary people experience violent repercussions when hit by these events and Ghosh sketches their sense of violence and trauma effortlessly.

Great histories of great nations may have failed to record lives of their subjugated rulers but Ghosh follows suit what history left behind. The decrepit lives of the last king and queen of Burma and their princesses can never go unnoticed in the eyes of Ghosh because this historic exile of the Royal Family is one that is accompanied with an even greater exposition of the might and strength of the colonisers and the weakness of the Burmese king to contain and control his sovereignty. At
the same time this piece of history also depicts the angst of the queen, who was helplessly confined with no means of retaliation to win back their position and status. Is it sufficient for history to only record events in history in a nation without even a reference to the repercussions of such events on an individual and a family? Ghosh answers to this question through a presentation of the pain and turmoil that takes place in a family with the interference of historical events in a nation. Thus it may not be inappropriate to honour Ghosh’s contribution to the literary world.

As stated at the outset the doctoral research is directed towards a study of Ghosh’s fiction and the presence of history in his novels. However at this point it may be mentioned that his non-fictional works also have history as the same thread that weaves them together. If history has been re-defined in fiction to achieve the author’s objective, history is also adequately dealt with in his non-fiction that serves as turning points in the writings of Ghosh elaborately displaying the purpose and intention of historical insinuations in his works. It is only pertinent to testify that Ghosh’s works, both fiction and non-fiction, dispensed the perception of history in its entirety giving an overall interpretation of the past.
The doctoral thesis has certain limitations of its own. The confines of the doctoral thesis are specifically up to the point where the study only perceives history as a turning point in the works of Amitav Ghosh. However it may be identified that there are interesting areas of study that could be carried out for the future like a post-colonial re-interpretation of Ghosh’s works. This is a theme that has been touched upon in the course of a reading of history of his works but it does leave open a wide avenue for further interpretation on the subject that could unravel a tremendous amount of validity left to be brought to the fore. Facets of post-colonial reading that would present history of the colonised instead of the coloniser, diverting a focus towards - the subaltern subjects’ regard of the world hearing their voices, their eager assertion to regain their identity, independence and sense of worth and establish their history - is a suitable area of study for future research.

Another possible subject for future research is the theme on gender equality. Women concerns could be of relevance especially today when female liberation and emancipation is a battle that is being fought by women all over the world. Presentation of women as strong, efficient and capable of making a mark in the world is projected in Ghosh’s texts. Ghosh’s travelogues as literature and literature as travelogue need attention of the research scholars. Ghosh’s works as migrant literatures
deserves due scholarly attention. These issues, if addressed, would prove
significant to Amitav Ghosh research in the future.

To conclude it may be said that the thesis has adequately studied
both primary sources and secondary materials to arrive at an elaborate
presentation of the relevance of history in the works of Amitav Ghosh.
What holds the research together is the fact that in all his works, be it
fiction or non-fiction, history is the thread that holds his works together.
It may be stated here that what Ghosh represents is history not in its
barest form but history that has been re-invented, re-examined, re-defined
and re-interpreted to establish its relevance to all irrespective of any
distinctions in the society.