CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

“The English word ‘history’ is derived from the Greek word *istoria* meaning inquiry, research, exploration or information. In a broad sense history is a systematic account of the origin and development of humankind, a record of the unique events and movements in its life. It is an attempt to recapture however imperfectly, that which is, in a sense, lost forever” (Sreedharan 1). While the above definition reiterates history as a retrieval of the past, historians like R. W. Emerson and Thomas Carlyle define history as a subject that traces the essence of the past innumerable biographies of great men. The above definitions therefore imply a focus of history on the life and actions of only historically great men of the past.

The question that evolves is whether history should always be perceived as worthy of reading only about historical figures. Does history mean a reading of only the lives and actions of kings and queens? E. H. Carr in *What is History?* defines history in a different manner thus: “History means interpretation” (23). This clearly suggests that the past can be read in various ways. In fact Carr’s understanding of history as worthy of interpretation makes possible different ways of perceiving
history. It is not adequate to merely deduce history as a subject that studies the history of only great men. Allan G. Johnson states that “historians tend to be more interested in events and issues that are limited in time and space, and rely on historical records that take various forms” (131). A historian then represents and moulds these facts and records as per his approach.

History is not fundamentally what the historian formulates of these facts and documents. It is only one possible interpretation of the past. There are different perspectives and dimensions of history. This therefore implies that there are different ways of perceiving and interpreting history. This different reading of history appears to challenge the traditional understanding of the past. Only then will history be appreciated in its entirety. E. H. Carr continues to state that it is important to perceive “history as a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past” (30). It is this unending dialogue between the present and the past that paves way for literature to study and perceive these recorded events of history in a different way and from diverse points of view.

Literature, which reflects the writer’s personal observation of life, makes interesting use of history. In a manner typical of the historian the litterateur also interprets and decodes history to suit his objective and
purpose of creativity. A litterateur is merely making an attempt to interpret history from a different point of view giving history a different perspective. His interpretation of history does not imply his questioning the credibility of any historical records nor does he fictionalise any historical event. To a certain extent he merely tries to perceive the past through the narratives contrary to the traditional reading of history. Instead, a litterateur’s approach to history is through the reading of the past as one that also regards the lives of historically unimportant insignificant people.

Historical themes and figures gain a significant place in Western writers as well as Indian writers, ever since the time of chronicles. William Shakespeare’s use of history was one of pure invention and artistry. “Brilliant fictions, and perhaps equally brilliant propaganda, the history plays [of Shakespeare] are understood to be precisely art, not life, imagination and truth” (Belsey 103). In line with Shakespeare are writers like Leo Tolstoy and Bertolt Brecht who also use history in their works. Tolstoy’s War and Peace and Brecht’s Mother Courage and her Children utilize history to portray ordinary lives amidst extraordinary historical events. Sometimes history in literature was used to express ideology as observed in Bernard Shaw’s plays.
Akin to Western literary writers, Indian writers in English too make use of history in multifarious ways. Pre-independence Indian English writers Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan project nationalism and also nationalistic fervour in their works. The Indian English novels written up to the 1960s like Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* and R. K. Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma* are mainly concerned with large public issues and social problems of the individuals. They showcase episodes of history as it takes place in a particular period and time. They project events rather than reactions, participations or implications of the events on people.

The above statement is true in the case of Raja Rao. Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* merely narrates the events and happenings of the past at a time of the resurgence of India under Mahatma Gandhi’s leadership. Themes that are central to the novel are the nation’s struggle for freedom through Mahatma Gandhi’s call of non-violence and non-cooperation against the British subjugation and brutality. As C. D Narasimhaiah points out: “For *Kanthapura* is India in microcosm: what happened there is what happened everywhere in India during those terrible years of our fight for freedoms” (236).

Like Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan stages merely the coming of Mahatma Gandhi to Malgudi with people so drawn towards the man that
they join hands with Gandhi to fight against the British. The novel projects the travel of Mahatma Gandhi to various places and his meetings with the people as he sits to talk to them about plans of actions for the freedom struggle. Narayan’s interest is more inclined towards the historical figure, Mahatma Gandhi and less bent towards the ordinary individual. He is more eager to tell his readers about the state of affairs in India’s struggle for freedom rather than the quotidian point of view. “R. K. Narayan simply shows us what happens in our society in a detached manner. But yet he is aware of the causes of suffering, not of only middle class society, but underdogs as well” (P.K Singh 38). In spite of Narayan’s awareness of the sufferings of ordinary people, seen throughout the novel, celebrates Mahatma Gandhi and the nationalist spirit. In Rao’s and Narayan’s eyes, India is presented in multiple hues of its politics, culture and society.

These writers brought in new themes, new techniques, new style and new approach to the form of the novel. . . . . By imaginatively treating the contemporary themes, these novelists have sought to explore and interpret India significantly in its various aspects-social, economic, cultural, political and the like (Asnani 25).
Even when the quotidian helplessness is presented, they are portrayed as passive victims of political events. Post-partition writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Khushwant Singh and Chaman Nahal present events of the Partition of the country as a theme in their works of fiction. These writers depict the historic partition of the country in their works alongside projecting histories of ordinary people. Their characters are not only ordinary people but are also helpless and passive victims of the Partition of the country. They are usually people too weak to act and react to the turmoil of time. They would rather await their fate to define their lives and their lot. Their novels trace the individual as an important figure and also as a silent spectator and a casualty in the forces of history.

The *Train to Pakistan* (1956) recounts the Partition of the country in 1947 that caused disunity and border fights amongst the Hindus and Muslim communities, finally resulting in the death and displacement of millions of people. The novel traces the helplessness of ordinary people who are made victims of circumstances. Too weak to fight back against authority the people of Manomajra village “… did nothing but sit and sigh” (Khushwant Singh 120). Singh presents a bird’s eye view of the history of Partition through the narrative of the communal conflict seen in the small village in a tiny magnitude. Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi* (1977) reflects the reaction of common people to history, in the form of the
widespread discontentment about Partition. Nahal projects the mayhem and the pain common men and women face as victims:

The rest (of the women) were subjected to mass rape, at times in public places and in the presence of large gatherings. The rape was followed by other atrocities, chopping off the breasts and even death. Many of the pregnant women had their wombs torn open” (Nahal 293).

The protagonists of Khushwant Singh’s and Chaman Nahal’s novels are vulnerable, submissive and unable to act. They detach themselves from history rather than act against it. The victims try to grope with the situation and await and accept their fate. History in the works of these writers show common people as fatalities and sufferers huddled together in the refugee camp waiting in obscurity of what lies ahead. True to the words of Shyam Asnani the post-independence novels present “communal frenzy, political manoeuvrings, social disparities and corruption in the bureaucracy” (25).

Post-independence novel from the 1970s reveal an altogether different take on history, by which history is filtered of an individual. Writers in English like Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and Amitav Ghosh exemplify the horror of history in the mind of individuals.
While the old established novelists, no doubt, have a historical relevance, it is the writing of the new young novelists of the 1970s and 1980s and 1990s that has advanced the tradition of the Indian English Novel by shifting the focus from the socio-politico-economic themes to the exploration of the individual’s interior world. They are no longer interested in the depiction of the external world, the outer weather, the physical atmosphere or the visible surface action. Their forte is the exploration of the limitless depths of mind, the hidden contours of the human psyche (Asnani 26).

Writing at a time when India has already been living in the tumult of Partition, these writers project in their works themes that reflect the Indian political situation, the ramifications of post-Partition and also portray protagonists fundamentally opposite to great figures of history. Their characters are ordinary and easily identifiable people; secondly they are not passive individuals but active participants. These writers question the certainties of the past seeing private lives in the background of public events. With these writers history has gained an altogether different meaning and value. Events in history are not merely narrated nor are the victims of history mere onlookers and passive sufferers. Their characters
too are eager to raise voice against any injustice meted out on them and react against any atrocities that may come their way.

As stated above, history still occupies a stronghold in the works of contemporary Indian writers in English like Rushdie, Tharoor and Ghosh. However it is their approach to history that is interesting. Their projection of the past is one that is entirely different from that of the old established writers like Raja Rao and Khushwant Singh. John Thieme writes:

Earlier Partition novels, such as Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Manohar Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), had dealt with the physical horrors of Partition. Now, with that experience at least partially digested, it became possible to look in the rear-view mirror and consider the longer-term consequences, both communal and personal, that followed in the wake of Partition and these often involved traumas that were as much psychic as physical (“Foreword” i).

Holding true the above, these writers of the 1980s, 1990s and the recent years focus on the Partition of the country but their protagonists are not historical figures but ordinary people. How the past affects these ordinary people are of utmost importance to the writers. The individual is no longer a helpless passive victim who surrenders himself to the fate of
history. The individual is eager to tell his story and wants to be heard. If his participation in and reaction to an event in history are of equal importance, then why should he be ignored? The common man can no longer be pushed to the periphery. “The novel of the seventies and eighties has turned introspective and the individual’s quest for a personal meaning in life has become a theme of urgent interest for these writers” (Asnani 24-5). Therefore it is important to perceive history through the eyes of the common man. In other words the quest for selfhood in the context of history makes their novels contemporary.

. . . it was unanimously decided that the big shift in Indian writing in English, post-independence era, came with Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1983) because he established what had remained since then “the most distinctive pattern for the Indian novel, the family chronicle, that is also a history of the nation, a distorted autobiography that embodies in an equally distorted form, the political life of India (Mandal 39).

In other words, instead of the macrocosmic view of history seen in pre-Independence Indian writers, or the microcosmic view of history seen in the post-Partition writers the contemporary Indian novelists explore a macrocosm of public history within the microcosm of private history.
Salman Rushdie in *Midnight’s Children* fuses public events with his narrator, Saleem Sinai’s familial life. As the narration proceeds Saleem presents the journey of his grandparents Dr. Aadam Aziz and his wife Naseem, simultaneously also presenting the progress of the Indian struggle for Independence from the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Quit India Movement, the Cabinet Mission, the Muslim League and its role in partitioning the country, riots, the war with China, the theft of the sacred relic from the Hazratbal mosque, the war with Pakistan and the liberation of Bangladesh. With the progress of India’s struggle for Independence Dr. Aziz too passes through various situations, which are connected with the history of India’s struggle for freedom. The novel captures the individual’s involvement in the nationalist movements in a critic’s words thus:

Rushdie depicts the individual as occupying a position of centrality in the scheme of things, both public and personal with his usual flourish. Incident after incident in the narrative reiterates this idea of centrality. No longer is the individual merely connected to history but is shown to attempt [an]‘active-literal’ role in the making of history of his times (Ravi, “History, Politics” 55-6).
Shashi Tharoor’s *The Riot: A Novel* (2001) narrates the plight of the individual caught in the Babri Masjid riot that historically resulted in the death of many people. Amongst the Hindus and Muslims was also found dead an American, Priscilla Hart who had come to India on a population control project. In the narration of the death of this young woman, Tharoor also brings to the fore the dark and murky side of political events that affect the lives of people. One such innocent life lost is that of Meetha Muhammed. He was a young innocent Muslim boy who brings tea for the District Magistrate and becomes a victim of the riot as well. The point that Tharoor tries to make here is that public events can have disastrous repercussions on people to which none are ready to account for. What good has any historical event been to the common people other than bringing about a great loss of innocent lives – such rhetoric seems to pervade his novel. Tharoor makes an attempt to convey to his readers that since history takes a toll on the lives of people both great and small, then history should be studied from the point of view of the common man.

Similar to Rushdie and Tharoor Ghosh projects as passion and sincere dedication in his portrayal of the individual as a victim of history. His novels define him as a man close to the history of his country especially the repercussions of the Partition of the country in 1947. This
event in the history of India makes a visible presence in his novels. Various historical events like the riots, violence and colonial rule, nationalist sentiments, national movement for freedom and Partition alongside presenting the impact of history as seen in the countless dislocations and conflicts, migration and displacement of people are issues that are dealt with adequately by Ghosh in his novels. For Ghosh history is a subject that is constantly explored.

His texts almost seem to state that it is not enough to read history as a subject that has been passed down upon us through a conventional documentation of the past. History can be read from diverse perspectives and varied points of view. In his reading of history there emerges a portrayal of that aspect of the past that has never been looked before by traditional historiography. Riots, violence, colonialism and Partition that make up documented traditional history are similar themes that are discussed by Ghosh in his texts; yet his projection and reading of these themes is entirely different.

The works of Amitav Ghosh exhibit his closeness towards the history of his country and the devotion that he has towards people and the society. History, people and society feature as strong pillars on which his novels rest upon. His is a reading of the past through the eyes of the insignificant people and not great figures of history. His novels
reverberate with the idea of a need to hear the voice of the voiceless. Historical discourse in his works should be discussed from the perspective of the subaltern agency. The coloniser-colonised divide visible in his novels has to be read on the same plane giving relevance not only to the coloniser but also the colonised other. The presence of history in the works of Amitav Ghosh reveals his attempt to uphold the importance of those people that have so far been the least regarded lot.

Ghosh therefore steers clear from the conventional way of reading history and interprets history through the eyes of common people. Ghosh revisits the past with the intention to present an unorthodox perspective of conventional history, thereby replacing conventional history with alternative history like personal or familial history. He re-examines the past and discovers an altogether new truth of history that in a way reinvents a new dimension of the past. Ghosh believes in what may be termed as an alternative way of understanding history which aligns itself more with that realm of history of the masses rather than traditional historiography of kings and queens.

His central characters are not historical figures but ordinary people whose lives would ordinarily never be regarded as worthy of documentation. They are not only commonplace but are readily identifiable and could be seen representing the millions of citizens of
India. His protagonists are individuals exemplifying the lives of the populace of the time. Such an individual is Thamma in *The Shadow Lines* who is a patriot and an active participant in the history of the country, an agent like Rajkumar Raha (*The Glass Palace*) who aids the coloniser for his personal gain and at times his characters like Mangala and Laakhan in *The Calcutta Chromosome* are contributors towards a historical event like the malaria research. His characters are no longer viewed as individuals that are helpless passive victims of the forces of history. He is rather an active participant, an agent and sometimes even a contributor to the historical events.

Historical events of any magnitude are bound to directly or indirectly affect people irrespective of a person’s position and status in life. The repercussions of such events on a common man in particular are more than often drastic and debilitating. Public history paves way for Ghosh to study private histories of people as they are directly affected by historical events like riots and Partition. He imaginatively connects the factual and the fictional or the real with the unreal bringing out a blend of the two in his works. He thus places public history and private history in close proximity alongside one another in order to unravel the effect that a historical event may have on private personal history of a family or even an individual. Amitav Ghosh presents the Partition of the country as black
history with its severe repercussions on people especially the masses. Apart from loss of lives and property the one obvious effect of Partition is migration and displacement of the populace. Ghosh writes about the plight of the people forced to migrate to another land; a new and unknown land that opens its door of uncertainty and insecurity to the migrants. Therefore people and history that make up his novels have bearing that are not only strong but also reflective. The historical reality forms an integral part in the works of Ghosh and gets presented in a way that brings out his intellectual brilliance as well as his ingenuity.

Ghosh’s personal history is impressive to any lover of his works. Born on 11th July 1956 in Kolkata, Amitav Ghosh is a privileged child fortunate to have studied in the best institutions in the country as well as abroad. His academic record is not only impressive but also a significant contribution to his literary career. It results in the publication of texts that have directly emanated from his academic pursuit. Ghosh completed his school education from Doon School, Dehradun, his B.A (History) from St. Stephen’s College, Delhi University and M.A (Sociology) from Delhi University and was awarded a scholarship to pursue his PhD (Anthropology) from St. Edmund Hall, Oxford. From his childhood, Amitav Ghosh was an avid reader and a prolific writer. However it was only after his graduation that he realised that he wanted to be a writer. He
got a job in *The Indian Express* as an apprentice earning Rs 300/- a month. His work experience as a journalist has further contributed towards his thought process and his way of perceiving things in an enquiring manner. In an interview with Kavita Chibber he states that “I soon realised that in the long run, journalism in India and racking 1000 words at the end of each day was not what I was looking for” (Interview with Chibber).

It was a career in writing that he wished to take up as his vocation though his parents had wanted him to be a chartered accountant. In the long run a career in writing as a litterateur emerged and that is how he became a star in the literary world. Ghosh’s writings exist as samples of his extensive knowledge and information that has its base in his academic achievement. His works display his sound knowledge of subjects ranging from history to sociology to anthropology. Therefore Amitav Ghosh’s varied subjects in academics display the anxiety of the man to attach himself more to man, his society, his nation and its history. History is a subject that gets him closer to the frivolousness of events in history especially towards ordinary people while Sociology enables him to study mankind as important and significant irrespective of man’s position and status.
In conversation with Michelle Caswell Amitav Ghosh expresses the value of a novel:

. . . as a form that is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life – natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love and sexuality. As I see it the novel is a meta-form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writing, rendering meaningless the usual workaday distinctions between historian, journalist, anthropologist etc (Interview with Caswell).

For Ghosh there is no better form of expression than the novel. His works vouch for the statement that he makes above.

Amitav Ghosh’s works are creations of a writer in the quadruple roles of the historian, sociologist, anthropologist and journalist. He has written fiction as well as non-fiction. His non-fictional works comprise of travelogues and essays.

Ghosh’s first novel *The Circle of Reason* published in 1986 won him the Prix Medicis Estranger Award in 1990. The novel gives a three-pronged description of the protagonist’s relation with the people he meets and the places he visits. Divided into three sections; *Sattva, Rajas* and
*Tamas*, the novel centres on Alu (Nachiketa Bose), the protagonist’s multiple migrations from Lalpukur in Bengal to Kolkata, Kerala, Al-Ghazira, Algeria until his return home. The text demonstrates migration and displacement of people, especially Alu, as they come across different challenges in the journey of their lives.

The theme of migration and displacement is also prevalent in *The Shadow Lines* (1988). The novel that interweaves memory, history and fiction reflect themes such as distorted freedom and meaning of nation, effects of historical events on ordinary citizens and painful memories of displacement and dislocation. The narrative takes the readers back and forth in time reviving memories of the Datta Chaudhari family and their close English friends, the Prices. The novel discusses various themes: unreciprocated love, failed marriage, binding friendship, distorted freedom, a painful memory of migration and dislocation and history that is the one source that holds them together. Private history is fused directly with public history unravelling the distortion that history causes to a family and even an individual. Ghosh beautifully sets his text against the backdrop of memories that cling to the minds of his characters. As they unfold these reminiscences they bring in a sense of worth and value of the past in their lives. The novel centres on a death in the Datta Chaudhari family that disrupts their peace. Yet Ghosh does not give a direct
presentation of the death. He instead builds up the life of Tridib, the narrator’s young uncle and the important place he occupies in the heart of the unnamed narrator only to allow the description of the tragedy to sink in deep later in the novel. The progression of the novel in this manner privileges private histories to public histories that victimises common people and also turned a blind eye to their loss and pain. The novel won the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Ananda Puruskar.

Ghosh’s travel experiences impact his novels with a precision and perfection characteristic of a good researcher. Interestingly Ghosh’s travel to Egypt in relation to his PhD research work comes to life with the novel *In an Antique Land* (1992). His taking notes in his note book of all that he sees, people that he meets and places that he visits have all transpired into a beautiful presentation of narratives in the novel. His travel to Egypt has not only given him his doctoral degree but has also given the world a text that reveals Ghosh’s closeness to people and society. *Land* does not only trace the story of the slave Bomma and the trade that prevailed between India and Egypt but also records experiences of Ghosh with people he meets and makes friends with. The text has themes of migration experienced by the historical as well as fictional characters as they are forced to leave their land and migrate to another land in search of employment.
The text combines history, autobiography, travelogue, anthropology and fiction. There are two narratives in the novel; the first narrates the life of a twelfth century Indian slave, Bomma, who works for an Arab Jewish trader, Abraham Ben Yiju and the second deals with Ghosh’s own experiences as an Indian researcher in an Egyptian Fellahaen village. The prime concern and focus of the novel is on interrelationships of the people rather than nation states and their rulers. What Amitav Ghosh relates in the text is the mobility and movement of the pre-colonial trading networks between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean with a similar mobility and a similar pattern of migration between the post-colonisation period and the contemporary globalized world. “Ghosh’s Egyptian characters, figures that would be relegated to the margins of more conventional histories, come alive as individuals in their own right” (Thieme, “Amitav Ghosh” 261).

Amitav Ghosh revisits history of the discovery of the malaria vector in his novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) to unravel contributions made by Indian researchers who have often been ignored by the Europeans. In the novel, Ghosh weaves in yarns of the present and the past and the possibility of finding immortality in the future. In an attempt to bring in the real essence of the novel Ghosh leans on a historic event in the world of medical science. Significantly Ghosh’s inclination towards
identifying the importance of women in the society and their contributions is also an important aspect prevalent in the text. His women characters in the novel emerge as strong and tough personalities. At times they appear to be taking control over situations. Ghosh makes an attempt to restore subaltern agency through an illiterate female priestess, Mangala, who directs the entire scientific research carried out by the English scientist, Ronald Ross. Thus through Mangala, Ghosh presents an altogether different reality of history. Written with the intention to replace conventional reading of the past with an alternate reading, the novel which leaves behind a fascinating but indefinable mystery with its admix of the science, fiction and fantasy won the Arthur C. Clarke Prize for science fiction in 1997.

*The Glass Palace* (2000) narrates stories that unfold the darker ramifications of political events on people. It is no narrative of the great and powerful. The story moves between Burma, India and Malaya beginning in the nineteenth century spreads across several generations and covers several decades of public histories of these countries. In the manner of a buildungsroman, the text traces the story of an orphan Indian migrant Rajkumar Raha to Burma, Rajkumar’s plight in the context of the Burmese history of the British invasion into Burma and its subsequent colonial rule and the time that Rajkumar returns as an old man to his
country to live the life of a destitute. *Palace* is another novel that narrates stories of people and families: stories that unfold the twists and turns in life having diverse effects on the characters. Ghosh’s novels are about people, their lives and their families, but in the backdrop of history.

Historical themes like colonialism and its impact, the World War, and how it tampers with the lives of Indian soldiers in the British army and their ultimate brush with nationalism, imprisonment of the Burmese royals and their migration – all these are handled with precision in the novel. Though the text has great history embedded in it yet Ghosh prefers to present family as its stronghold. Amitav Ghosh weaves narratives of the life of his protagonist, his budding romance and marriage to a maid of the Burmese royal, his temporary migration, dislocation and experience of loss, exile and a search for home. *The Glass Palace* won Ghosh the Grand Prize for Fiction at the Frankfurt International E-Book Awards. Though he also won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Fiction for the book, he declined the award, expressing his objection to the book’s classification as part of Commonwealth Literature.

Ghosh’s next novel, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) won him the Hutch Crossword Book Award in 2005. He visited the swampy region of the Sunderbans to arrive at a beautiful narrative blending the real and the unreal. A thorough depiction of Ghosh’s knowledge and research in
cetology as well as his retrieval of a historical event into his fiction are fascinating features in this novel. Ghosh folds in several narratives: the most obvious is the research on the river dolphins by a cetologist Piyali Roy, a non-resident Indian brought up in Seattle and her visit to the Sundarbans, then comes the story of Fokir, an illiterate fisherman who has great knowledge of the path of the river and who assists Piyali; and next comes their interconnectedness with their interpreter in Kanai Dutt, a Delhi based entrepreneur. All these three narratives diverge in the most important narrative i.e that of the lives of the Morichjhapi incident in the Sundarbans. The novel that begins as a quest of the river Dolphins unfold itself thus into different narratives that illustrate the history of migration and displacement, about power politics that hold people at ransom, biodiversity that is seriously threatened, where people become less important than the preservation of tigers, and also the mysterious legends of the land and how it developed in the hands of a philanthropic coloniser.

Amitav Ghosh, in the same novel, orchestrates the conflict between wilderness and civilization and presents history of migration due to Partition. The novel exposes the effort of the writer to enliven his imagination and bring to life fictitious characters and a fabricated location
like Lusibari alongside engulfing the readers in the labyrinth of the magical and the real.

*Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first volume of The Ibis Trilogy brings out stories of the coloniser’s exploitation of the poor and illiterate indentured labourers, who are to be transported to the British colonies in Mauritius. Set in the 1830s, *Poppies* is an epic tale told in the background of the Opium Wars, about the people on the Ibis, originally a slave ship. The passengers in the ship hail from different corners of the world that the slave ship is ready to transport Indian indentured labour from the Indian Ocean to the British colonies in Mauritius. On board the ship the voyage has not only been adventurous but also tumultuous. There are attempts made by the inmates to set themselves free from the clutches of the Subedar and captain of the ship, murders yet with no path to freedom as they sail into the sea, their old family ties are washed away and they view themselves as ‘jahaj-bhais”, or ship brethrens who will build their lives and themselves in the remote islands where they are being taken. The book was nominated the Man Booker Prize 2008 and was a co-winner of the Vodafone Crossword Book Award in 2009.

Amitav Ghosh’s *Dancing in Cambodia At Large in Burma* (1998) is a pure travelogue, where Ghosh studies the life, art, culture, social and political institutions of the places he visits. He brings in a historical
perspective through his attempts to comprehend Cambodia’s and Burma’s recent pasts of extreme isolation – as colonised nations that witnessed dictatorial regimes. *Countdown* (1999) was written immediately after India’s nuclear testing on 11th May 1998 followed by the nuclear tests conducted by Pakistan. Amitav Ghosh visited Pokhran, Siachen glacier and Pakistan and spoke to both the common people and important personalities of India and Pakistan. What Ghosh describes is the outcome of the tests on common man that brought nothing but cancer, skin diseases and the birth of deformed children. Ghosh strongly believes that the nuclear tests were enactments of political games by India and Pakistan. *The Imam and the Indian* (2002) is a collection of eighteen prose pieces written over twenty years. Ghosh’s concern here is the connections between the past and the present, events and memories, cultures and countries that have shared a past. Issues of story and history, migration and diaspora come alive in the essays.

From the above discussion of his works, it is obvious that Amitav Ghosh’s use of history is a common thread, which unites most of his works, which are the result of Ghosh’s wide travel and research on journalistic assignments. His response to history could probably be linked to his academic research in social anthropology. The essential insights in the novels of Amitav Ghosh lie in his “profound historical sense, a strong
humanitarian drift, a witty but compassionate insight into man and his society, an attempt at interlacing the time past and the time present in the crucible of memory” (Tapan Kumar Ghosh, “Beyond The Shadow Lines” 151). Ghosh interjects a new dimension in his encounter with history, which could be described hypothetically as postcolonial and subaltern in perception.

Ghosh’s novels are about people, their lives and their families. He paves way for the millions of voices that have been buried to oblivion, sacrificed to the pyre of bloodshed and violence in the annals of history. He advocates for a reading of their histories as a means to display their thoughts, contributions or even sufferings and afflictions in the advent of a historical event. His novels are so well researched with a thorough attention to detail shedding information in abundance on varied subjects like weaving and phrenology, culture and etymology, history of medical science, cyber technology, machinery, myths and legends. His works are packed with historical truth in abundance as well as knowledge that enlightens and hence John Thieme in Amitav Ghosh writes about Ghosh thus:

Like Edward Said, Ghosh draws attention to the artificiality of the East-West binaries of Orientalism. Like Homi Bhabha, he demonstrates the hybrid, interstitial
nature of cultures, as articulated through language. Like Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies scholars, he endeavours to recuperate the silenced voices of those occluded from the historical record (251).

Amitav Ghosh is a writer of great excellence and distinction and his works that make significant reading are worthy of research and study.

The doctoral thesis “Re-inventing History: A Study of Amitav Ghosh’s Novels” aims to study and analyse the author’s use of history with special attention to his fictional works. For this purpose Ghosh’s primary materials like his novels, articles and interviews, and also secondary sources including books, reviews and articles would be examined.

The thesis has been organised into six sections as given below:

Chapter I: Introduction
Chapter II: Ghosh and Re-examination of History
Chapter III: History and Imagination in Ghosh’s Novels
Chapter IV: Juxtaposing History: Nation and Family
Chapter V: Impact of History: Migration and Displacement
Chapter VI: Conclusion
Chapter I “Introduction” opens with definitions of history as understood by various historians. It makes an attempt to look into the influence of history on literature at different points of time by different Indian writers in English. The chapter also introduces Amitav Ghosh’s life, works and sums up the dominant characteristics in his fiction. It views Amitav Ghosh as a writer who makes use of history in an interpretative light: history read in the light of the common man. The chapter also gives an outline of the research thesis and its organisation based on a hypothetical understanding of Ghosh’s works in the context of their description of history and historical/personal narratives.

Chapter II “Ghosh and Re-examination of History” attempts to study the novels of Amitav Ghosh in the context of an examination of history and the decoding of an alternative history, which may highlight certain historical points of view that have so far been overlooked. Ghosh’s novels appear to steer clear from the traditional and conventional understanding and meaning of history itself. His emphasis is more on the historical truths of individuals whose real worlds and daily experiences are not recorded, despite the fact that their lives have been affected by history. A discussion into Ghosh’s re-examination of history will be looked at with the inclination of the narration towards closeness to private history rather than public history. Ghosh’s re-examination and revisionist
approach of history will be discussed in detail and will be presented not through the nationalist historian’s voice, but through a postcolonial reinterpretation of history. Such a re-examination helps understand Ghosh’s approach to women’s history and post-modern disbelief in nothingness which are issues discussed in this chapter.

Chapter III “History and Imagination in Ghosh’s Novels” attempts to examine this re-invention of history in relation to the techniques used by Amitav Ghosh to incorporate both the real (history) and the unreal (imagination) in his works. In other words it would study how Amitav Ghosh uses history against imagination, or reality against fiction. While history acts as a backdrop and a base that supports his imaginative construction, the chapter will highlight how Ghosh perceives the importance of bringing about a blend of the two worlds. The chapter attempts to bring about the co-existence of the real and the fictional that evolves out of historical events in the novels of Ghosh.

Chapter IV “Juxtaposing History: Nation and Family” attempts to understand and analyse Amitav Ghosh’s approach to history through a representation of the notions of nation and family in his novels. The chapter will explore the presence of a parallel history of the nation along with the history of the family and a possible interweaving of the public and the private events in Ghosh’s texts. What will also be analysed in the
Chapter V “Impact of History: Migration and Displacement” projects the presence of migration and displacement of characters in both his fictional and non-fictional works. The chapter will closely look into how Amitav Ghosh links up migration to the re-examination of history where pre-independence struggle and the Partition of the country forced the populace to migrate from their native land to a foreign land to seek shelter and subsistence for their family and themselves. The chapter will also address impacts of migration tracing the characters’ experiences of travel to distant areas. Ghosh’s novels will also be studied from the point of view of the reception of migrants by host country once they reach a
new land. Another important aspect that the chapter will look into is the bond of friendship amongst fellow migrants on their journey and the foreign land. Lastly, Ghosh’s reflection of diaspora will also be discussed.

The final chapter, “Conclusion” would briefly review the arguments put forth in the previous chapters and sum up the research findings on the works of Amitav Ghosh. It would summarise Ghosh’s ideas on alternate history, history and imagination, nation and family and also migration and displacement. An evaluation of Ghosh’s contribution to Indian writing in English in the light of a re-invention of historical perspective and explication of his works will also be discussed. A link between Ghosh’s fictional works to his non-fictional ones would also be looked into, in order to examine and assess Ghosh’s affinity to history. The chapter will finally underline the scope and limitations of the PhD thesis on Amitav Ghosh and outline the issues for further research on Amitav Ghosh’s works of fiction.