Chapter II

Amitav Ghosh and Re-examination of History

History in the context of literature can no longer be approached as a subject that documents only great events and great figures of history. Modern historiography demands a re-examination in the form of new thoughts, new perceptions and an altogether new interpretation of the past. This new interpretation of the past is a re-reading of history of the disregarded subjects that are usually forgotten and ignored by documented historiography. It is a contemporary trend of reading the past from the point of view and the perspective of marginalised people rather than studying history of only great and powerful people of antiquity.

History in Amitav Ghosh’s works is not only a narrative of historical events but also a means of establishing an interconnection between the historical events and the ordinary people living during the times. The individual is hit by a historical impact and his story needs narration as much as the nation’s. The individual is not to be relegated to the background and pushed to oblivion. History in Ghosh’s works is hence a record of ordinary people’s lives so far overshadowed by traditional historiography. Thus Ghosh debunks monumental history that gives a one-sided reality of the past. In doing so Amitav Ghosh first of all
attempts a rejection of conventional historiography and secondly presents largely a re-reading and a re-examination of history. Hence it is important to understand how Ghosh treats history with imagination in his fiction.

Ghosh debunks monumental historiography when he displays a narrative of the individual rather than that of the nation. He presents the past of the nation as a subject matter that belongs to one and all – the powerful and the weak, the rulers and the ruled alike. For this reason there is a need to look back and retrace the past and map the terrain of history for the role played by ordinary people. Ghosh therefore presents Partition from the eyes of ordinary characters like Thamma (Lines) and Kusum (Tide). Thamma, especially affected by Partition is a character very much part of the Indian and East Pakistan history. Kusum sacrifices her life for the sake of her people yet history has no place for her. Ironically, changes in positions and even surroundings due to historical upheavals are felt by the powerful and the weak alike. An individual’s life changes course with the intervention of a historical reality and truth. It is these ordinary people’s lives and experiences that Amitav Ghosh finds the key to a reconsideration or a re-invention of history. Where the conventional historian fails, a writer like Ghosh succeeds. Like Shakespeare, taking liberty with a history play only to make a colourful depiction of Elizabethan’s ordinary life of taverns and pilgrimages,
Ghosh too decodes and deciphers history differently only to re-examine and review the past in the light of a common man’s role in it. Such a re-examination of the past enables him to look into the true meaning and value of history as an ideal construct of the personal as well as public history. Sometimes a re-reading culminates in a re-invention of history.

To understand Ghosh’s re-invention of history it is of primary importance to understand Ghosh’s juxtaposition and alternative viewing of the private and public histories. Public history often has severe consequences on private lives and histories of ordinary people yet no attempts are made to view political/historical event from the perspective of the private histories of ignorant citizens, who are simply made to face its consequences much against their will. At times the repercussions of public history are so severe that it brings about drastic changes to their lives. For instance the Partition of the country has not only been a great set back in the history of the country but also a national and individual loss that is irreparable. It is a wound that has not yet healed in the hearts of people and to this day it remains a tragedy that has found no cure. However at the end of all, the little yet diverse and heartrending stories of ordinary people that are usually results of an event of history fail to make a mark in historical records. What is documented and remembered is only public history in the eyes of the historic Partition that divided the country
into two. Other than mention of great loss of lives and property, history has failed to follow and carry over stories of ordinary individuals seriously affected by this public history. Does any historian mention the impact of Partition on common people like Thamma (Lines) or the refugees in Tide who were made to pay the price of national history they have no share in? The answer is in the negative for it is only public history that has been found worthy of record while private history of an individual and family is conveniently sidelined. However if history has failed to come to terms with private histories, creative writers compensate for the discrepancy through the stories of pain and suffering of little people. Be it Lines or even Tide, Ghosh takes it up as his duty to trace the lives of numerous citizens as they are made to bow down to the game of power politics.

While Thomas Carlyle defines history as a biography of great men Ghosh’s definition and perception of history primarily includes individuals in a nation. He believes that only then can a true validated perception of history be surmised. Hence Ghosh’s novels exemplify the assertion that history should be defined as a subject that examines the biographies of ordinary people. He gives them space to share their stories, so long suppressed in their hearts, and thus vent their feelings of loss and pain to the world. Ghosh is eager to re-examine history because he is not
ready to simply shy away from a historical truth that has hit the country so hard yet whose individual plights have not found space in traditional history. These are usually the forgotten and disregarded lot of the nation. For example, the narrative of *Palace* is not only a biography of King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat and their three princesses but also a biography of an ordinary citizen like Rajkumar Raha. The mapping of Rajkumar’s rise and fall takes place in the backdrop of Burma’s colonialism and the Second World War. If conventional historiography can record Burma’s loss of its kings and queens as banished prisoners in the hands of the British, why has history failed to record the history of an ordinary man? Such rhetoric emerges in Ghosh’s re-interpretation of history that views individual history in the backdrop of public history.

Another aspect of Ghosh’s re-examination of history is seen in Ghosh’s unwillingness to compromise private histories for public histories. He unearths the pain and pathos that ordinary people are placed in and are made to undergo and suffer once they are trapped in the extraordinary situations and events of history. Akin to the historical figures there are numerous, unhistorical figures whose lives have gone through tremendous changes both positive and negative due to an event in history. Why should history disregard the loss, pain and turmoil of ordinary people? What history has failed to do, could be reinvented in
fiction. That is what Ghosh does when he recreates private histories of loss and pain of ordinary people in his texts. Such an act of re-interpretation privileging private over public history is an act of transgression of the former.

The above statement is true in the case of Ghosh’s *Lines*. Amidst the backdrop of the riots of 1964 that broke out in Khulna district, *Lines* traces the unrecorded personal history of the Datta Chaudhary family who lost their son, Tridib in the riots. Though the Khulna riot finds very less significance as a historical event for the world to remember, Ghosh’s intention to give narrative space can be read in two ways. First of all, he attempts to show how a small event in history shatters ordinary people’s lives and secondly he is able to highlight the element of transgression that transforms an ordinary event to be seen now in a new light. For example, the narrator is surprised that only a small column in the newspaper is dedicated to the event in history that brings about “a timeless moment in the tortured consciousness of the [Datta Chaudhary] family” (Eakambraram 97). Robi, the narrator’s cousin wakes up at night with images of the killing of Tridib by the mob. Thamma, the grandmother loses all vigour and love for her native land, Dhaka, the country she wants to fight for liberation. The nationalist in her that devoted her love towards Dhaka almost comes to an end with this intrusion and inference
of the public event into her private world. Again, the riot in Khulna may be a mere local riot that bears no consequence in comparison to the other great uprisings and upheavals in the world. Yet Amitav Ghosh is able to project the importance of this episode to the readers only by portraying the event as more valuable, venerable and momentous than public history. Private history of a wound that may never be healed is represented in Ghosh’s text through a re-reading of an event in the history of the country.

Nonetheless the construct of public versus private history is perceived not always from the point of view of individual loss and pain but also from the gains and benefits that a public event impresses on an individual’s course of life. For example, the events like the fall of the Burmese empire and colonial rule act as a boon that gives a new lease to Rajkumar’s life in Palace and helps in his meteoric rise to create a business empire and a name for himself. Ghosh’s novels reveal how the above dimension of history should never be overlooked. If the exile of the Burmese Royal Family had never occurred perhaps Rajkumar would have still been working at a tea stall with Ma Cho. This unspoken and unrecorded private history of Rajkumar’s life that Ghosh traces in the novel is more emphatic and ecstatic to Ghosh than the public history of
British colonisation of Burma. Thus Ghosh juxtaposes private and public history and shifts his focus and attention from public to private.

Such an act of shifting focus from the dominant discourse to the marginalised is another of Ghosh’s attempt to use history as a mere passing comment to elaborate on a more meaningful insight into the effect of history as a way of re-reading it. The past in Ghosh’s texts has only been referred to as “a short report at the bottom of the page, with a headline which said: Twenty-nine killed in riots” (Lines 223). Here Ghosh merely provides a very small space for the actual event and focuses his attention on the intensity of the impact of the riot on ordinary people. Interestingly the event may have been referred with less significance in the history of a country: but for those affected by it, the riot depicts a dark phase in life. As seen in Lines, history snatched life’s meaning to Tridib’s family members. Ghosh’s perception of history here reveals his sensitivity and consciousness to internalise the pain of the people neglected by history. His motive and intention here reminds one of Bertolt Brecht’s focus on Mother Courage and her private loss in war. Amitav Ghosh, like Brecht recreates history from the viewpoint of little people, so much so that the historical event is translated into a larger medium, expressing huge potentials of historicising, greater than what conventional historians could achieve.
In making an effort to touch aspects of the past that have been left untouched by conventional historians, Ghosh debunks, deconstructs and repositions the conventional understanding of history to arrive at a revisionist view of the past. Challenging traditional views of history, Ghosh accommodates marginalised individuals and their stories thereby subverting great historical narratives for alternate views of history. Such a revisionist approach creates possibilities of an alternative perspective and reading of a historical event as may be seen in his novel *Chromosome* where Ghosh utilises Murugan’s research titled: “An Alternative Interpretation of Late 19th Century Malaria Research: Is there a Secret History?” to support his standpoint and conviction.

What Ghosh does through his character, Murugan, is to look at the malarial research as a discovery not solely made by Ronald Ross. Ghosh tries to highlight certain possibilities whereby the marginalised section may have played important aides to the historical figures of the time. Ghosh substantiates his claim through Murugan who was of the view that behind Ross were some catalytic people like Mangala and Laakhan, who drove Ross to carry out the research. It was these people who planted clues in Ross’s head and manipulated his research in the direction they wanted it. If Mangala and Laakhan had been catalysts to Ross’s success and making of history, why should history marginalise them? Why
should these marginalised people not be given their due? Such is the approach of Ghosh’s re-invention of history in his novels particularly *Chromosome*. “. . . [T]he novel is in many ways clearly interested in the struggle to make the unknown known” (Gordon Scott). Amitav Ghosh seems to suggest that Ross’s discovery was only a minor subset of this experiment of the ‘Calcutta chromosome’. What is important is the exposition of what history has refused to record in the history of the malaria vector.

The fictional re-reading and revisionist approach of history, as seen in Ghosh’s works should not be understood as a move to deny any historical event. It may subvert history and challenge traditional history but the purpose behind the whole effort is to merely re-examine and re-interpret existing events in history. Such an effort actually debunks monumental historiography that records only the glories of the historical figures like Ross. Though Ghosh does not question the accuracy of conventional history, he certainly questions the lack of incomplete representation of the significant and the insignificant, the powerful and the weak alike. He therefore views history in its totality without being prejudiced or biased.

In his act of re-examination, re-interpretation and subversion, Ghosh listens to voices that are muffled and muted. He prefers to confer
on these less significant people a dignity, a place of importance and a space to validate their contributions. Ghosh believes in their skills and therefore emerges with a need to re-examine and give space to these ordinary people who represent the alternative reality of history that has so far been sidelined by documented history. Of the ordinary people, presented in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Tapan Kumar Ghosh writes: “His (Ghosh) aim is not to write a scientific treatise on malaria but to present an alternative version of the story and through it hint at an alternative reality” (Tapan Kumar Ghosh, “A Journey to the Unknown” 250). His works enhance the contributions made by ordinary people as well. These people can no longer be made less important, unacknowledged and disregarded characters. The implication here is that the act of chronicling past events should also provide a place of prominence to the contributions and achievements of ordinary people no matter how little the achievement may be. Only then will a reading of history achieve its comprehensiveness.

It is interesting to analyse Amitav Ghosh’s approach to woman’s history in his attempt at the re-examination of individual history. Ghosh gives his female characters a platform to voice and exhibit their views and priorities.
A goal of historians has been to tell an “objective truth” – truth as it might be seen by an objective or unbiased, observer. But . . . even the historians who struggled hardest to write the objective truth about history, usually left out the perspective of women: women who played an active role in the public events were often forgotten quickly (Jone Johnson Lewis).

Amitav Ghosh is sensitive towards gender balance and equilibrium in his presentation of re-examined history. Women, as many feminist historians point out, have been pushed to the margins or wiped out by male historians. History has a tendency to ignore women and their participation. However it is important to represent women in history in order to have a deep and balanced understanding of history. Melinda L. Zook says “The goal of women's history has always been, first and foremost, to restore women to history in order to gain a more perfect picture of the past” (Melinda L. Zook). Ghosh’s re-examination also helps restore women to history. Ghosh is responsive towards views, opinions and contributions of women characters, who are not only great historical figures but particularly ordinary middle class women. His works restore women’s perspectives of the past into fictional narrative, thereby, remapping their history.
Some of Ghosh’s women characters can be discussed to arrive at the point mentioned earlier. Thamma in *Lines* is concerned about the liberation of her country from the clutches of the British rule and subjugation. She is fascinated and enthralled by nationalism and freedom of her country even as a young girl in college. Her nationalistic passion and love for her country is seen in her deep-rooted desire to work with the freedom fighters, to cook for them, to wash their clothes, to run their errands, in fact to do anything that would be of help to them. Thamma finally donates the only treasure, her cherished gold chain gifted to her by her husband on their first wedding anniversary: “I gave it away, she screamed. I gave it to the fund for the war. I had to, don’t you see? For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out” (*Lines* 237). In Thamma, Ghosh presents woman’s concern for freedom and her political awareness.

Another woman character, Mangala in *Chromosome*, represents knowledge, strength and power. Mangala, the brain behind the malaria research is never given her due recognition for records only project the discovery of malaria made by Ronald Ross, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1906. Ghosh re-examines history by drawing in significant possibilities of the contributions made by Mangala who could have been the real discoverer of the malaria vector. She directs her assistant,
Laakhan to further instruct and plant ideas into the mind of Ross, and in doing so; she launches herself on the path of immortality of man, treading the path untrodden ever by a woman. Uma Devi in *Palace* emerges as a woman who lends her voice to the practice of non-violence for the fulfilment of her cherished dream of political freedom. Kusum in *Tide*, sacrifices her life in the Morichjhapi incident, fighting for the cause of the refugees. Nilima (*Tide*) is the woman who works for the development of the people of Lusibari, a town created by Sir Daniel Hamilton, to live in peace, harmony and equality.

Ghosh advocates the need to identify the contributions made by women seeking a balance of women against men. Conscious of their apprehension, their plight and their keenness to make themselves heard, he provides them a platform to make their voices heard. He gives them the importance they never had in spite of their involvement and participation in a glorious past. By giving voice to a woman’s perception and her individualistic opinions, Ghosh provides an alternative vision of the past. His women characters may not come through as the protagonists of his novels but they do play roles that are crucial. They cannot be suppressed nor can they be ignored.

Through a re-reading of the past, Ghosh is engaged in a postcolonial re-interpretation of life itself. To understand Ghosh’s act of
postcolonial re-interpretation one needs to elaborate on postcolonialism as a contemporary trend in Indian literature. Literally the term ‘postcolonial’ refers to the period after colonial rule and control. The focus of postcolonialism here is on people once under the rule of colonialism and on “the product of human experience, but human experience of the kind that has not typically been registered or represented at any institutional level” (Young 13). Postcolonial history reads history not from the centre but from the margin’s discarded perimeter. It presents history of the colonised people written by them in the language of the coloniser as a reply to the coloniser. Thereby he has enabled the study and understanding of history and heritage of the postcolonial nation from the point of view of the colonised people rather than the coloniser. The point of view of the colonised people reflecting the contemporary trend of post colonialism displaying resentment against colonial regime is also prevalent in literature. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) are major voices of postcolonial literature reflecting the past from a different perspective presenting a different point of view.

Postcolonial writers and many other younger writers today give the unnoticed ordinary individual a role that is definite and distinct. Vikram Seth’s travelogue, *From Heaven Lake*, is a factual account of Seth’s
journey from China to India through an unusual route of hitch hiking. Seth’s focus is on the common people, who are victims of a historic Cultural Revolution. His interaction with these people depicts the dire repercussions of the Cultural Revolution on the lives of these people. Children were “encouraged to turn against their parents, teachers and every one in authority . . . half the cultural heritage of China – books, temples, works of art – was destroyed” (Seth 76). Such a re-examination of history often delves on the individuals as victims of political regimes and dynasties. Norbu, one of the poor yet hospitable Tibetans says:

Do you know what we have suffered, here, our family, because of the Chinese and their Cultural Revolution? My father spent thirteen years in prison, and I spent twelve, because of them. . . . In those days, you know, in this area, even the people on the streets would turn away when we passed, would pretend not to know us, children of counter-revolutionaries, even those we had thought of as friends (Seth 143-5).

Thus fictional or non-fictional writings of contemporary Indian writers in English revolve around stories unheard and un-historicised but nevertheless, they are stories horrid and true.
Analogous to the above discussed postcolonial writers, Amitav Ghosh’s novels display ordinary characters and their experiences of imperialism and its impact on them. Monumental history has so long ignored colonised people who are now free from all colonial dominance but people who are still suffering from its impact. Ghosh’s narratives are not stories of colonialism or the imperial rule of the British. This is what post-colonial re-interpretation of history is all about. “Postcolonial theory hinges upon the coloniser/colonised ‘other’” (Bijay Kumar Das 221). Ghosh’s narratives are about such marginalised colonised other.

Amitav Ghosh’s point of interest in postcolonialism is to make “sure that you are looking at the world not from the centre but from the margin’s forgotten edge” (Young 16). He seeks to identify the turmoil of the colonised ‘other’ as well as regard the reaction of the colonised other after his emancipation from the iron rule of the coloniser. Ghosh’s works depict a study of the vulnerability, the suffering and the final emergence of the colonised other as one who is ready to liberate his country from the harsh and cruel treatment imposed and meted upon him by the British regime. Such a reflection reveals the colonised other as people eager to regain their identity, individuality and self-respect.

Amitav Ghosh brings forth what heavy price colonialism and nationalist ideologies have caused the common people. British colonial
rule results in the partition of the country and also its people bringing in a sense of loss, displacement and migration of citizens especially the common men who are more often the worst affected and the worst sufferers: “Postcolonialism listens to stories of exploitation and dispossession, hardships and desperate journeys of migration. . . . The problem is not only that the subaltern cannot speak, in Gayatri Spivak’s often cited phrase, but also that the dominant will not listen” (Young 19).

The voices of these common people that can no longer be subdued also reveal such an anxiety of not being listened to. The narrator in *Lines* presents adverse effects of nationalism through his grandmother, who initially supports nationalist ideology, but later turns against it after Tridib’s death in the riots. Hence Ghosh re-examines nationalism through a projection of post-independence loss of faith in nationalism springing from experiences of Partition, migration and displacement.

Ghosh’s postcolonial re-interpretation of the past also reflects or asserts a postmodernist disbelief in traditional history, an indispensable characteristic of re-inventing of history. Post-modernist school of history challenges traditional history and its grand narratives, as one that is too limited and narrow. It questions the certainties of traditional modes of thinking, social organisation and the human self as well. In subverting accepted modes of thought and experience postmodernism reveals the
meaninglessness of existence. It is history that depicts human experiences of a kind that has not been registered or represented in any traditional historiography. Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1954) is an example of a postmodern text that displays the absurdity of existence on earth; a parody of traditions and conventions.

The postmodern belief in utter insignificance and ultimate nothingness of life on earth emerges as a characteristic feature of Ghosh’s re-examination of history. The struggle, the ideology and firm base of reaching out for the wonderful and the novel ultimately disintegrates and vanishes into thin air. In *Reason*, the characters experience a sense of nothingness and meaninglessness of life. Like Camus’ Sisyphus, Ghosh’s Balaram or Alu also live through a sense of waste of existence. The title, ‘The Circle of Reason’ reflects the novel’s sense of nothingness, when the protagonist’s search for reason leads him on to a journey that ends at the point where he began. Hence the ‘circle of reason’ becomes an existential metaphor. Balaram who is struck by his faith and eradication of germs through carbolic acid finally meets with his end in the fire that killed him and his wife, Toru Debi. Alu himself was leading a life of a migrant with the fear of being caught by the police after he was accused of being a terrorist. There is no sense of belonging in the world for people like Alu and the Calcutta whore, Zindi who have been running away from
one place to the other with the breakdown of the system. Their lives are unsettled and disoriented. A sense of collapse of existence on earth is filled in the hearts of those who are continuously seeking the meaning of existence in life. Such a postmodern re-examination of history marked by empty faith is typical of the postmodern belief in disintegration of life into nothingness.

The meaning of existence and the purpose of life in unity and togetherness, an opposing tendency to the previous discussion, is also espoused by Ghosh through his presentation of the other side of colonialism. *Tide* is one novel, where Ghosh identifies colonisers as individuals worthy of appreciation in their attempt to improve the lives of the colonised, the need to come together and realise their worth and solidarity. In contrast to a postcolonial view of the coloniser as imposing a repressive and stereotypical colonial regime, Ghosh looks at a coloniser like Sir Daniel MacKinnon Hamilton in *The Hungry Tide* as one who dreams to create in the Sunderbans, a utopian society, a society with no division and distinction, a society that provides equal opportunities and benefits to all in the eyes of the law: “. . . to build a new society, a new kind of country. It would be a country run by co-operatives, he said. Here people wouldn’t exploit each other and everyone would have a share in the land. . . . that this place could be a model for all of India; it could be a
new kind of country” (*Tide* 52). Such a depiction of the philanthropic nature of the coloniser in the midst of an authorial postcolonial understanding of colonialism renders Ghosh as a distinguished novelist, whose re-examination of history merits a serious study.

Ghosh’s re-examination of history accounts for serious study because it uncovers some historical truths that may have simply passed out of public record thereby bringing to the fore a wealth of information, a recollection and a glimpse of the past. He plants forgotten history ardently to suit his imaginative zeal. In *Palace*, Ghosh depicts the historic Long March of 1961 that forced Indians to flee Burma and return to their native country with the wake of the Second World War. In an interview, Ghosh mentions “It’s strange there were over 400,000 of them Indians, and there is such a silence about it” (Pande). This is the silence that Ghosh is not prepared to bury the hatchet and wipe out the hidden truths of the past. He makes use of this historical fact to present the hardships that these migrants are placed in, when they return leaving all that they have left behind. In the character of Rajkumar in *Palace*, the Long March becomes an expression of the loss of his daughter-in-law who leaves behind her daughter, Jaya to the care of her dispossessed grandparents. There is starvation, illness, disease and even death of a number of migrants. Ghosh does not want the pain, loss and death of innocent lives
to go unnoticed and disregarded. He projects the dismal condition that these 400,000 people were subjected to that history is silent about. Much like Rajkumar who reaches his country with no security and a home to even shelter his head, Ghosh brings to light the sad plight of numerous other Rajkumars. Thus a re-examination of history is imperative, for, it helps to build an awareness of events like the Long March that has been ignored for decades. Similar to the above discussion is Ghosh’s *Lines* in which, with Tridib’s murder his family members suffered pain, loss and complete disintegration of their lives and existence.

A reading of history is incomplete without a reference to nationalism of its citizens as subjects of the imperial rule of the British for over a century. It is this access to the nationalistic fervour of ordinary people that Amitav Ghosh creates in his texts. History would then be re-read from the ordinary people’s great nationalistic fervour, passion and enthusiasm. Ghosh is looking for admittance and accommodation in the history of a nation of nationalistic zeal of ordinary people because nationalism is embedded not only in the hearts of the great and powerful but also the masses. They are equally mindful of the need to fight against imperial rule of the British government as their historical counterparts. When Ghosh brings in a need for a re-examination of history he does highlight the necessity of comprehension and narration of the common
people’s participation in history. His ordinary characters are people who are active and vibrant with a zest to stand out for their country and themselves. Patriotism in his protagonists does emerge very distinctly. His central character is an ordinary man who wants to make his presence felt, his voice heard. Ghosh’s strong conviction that nationalism also burns in the heart and spirit of unhistorical figures makes him give voice to their patriotic zeal. Hence his greatest and utmost concern in incorporating history into his works of fiction is to bring to the fore ordinary individuals, who seek to create history for themselves. Refusing to allow his identity to be submerged in the torrent of history the ordinary citizen of a nation attempts to carve a place for himself in the period of history. Thus Ghosh’s novels re-create the ordinary citizen as a transformed and transgressed individual.

In *Palace*, Hardayal Singh, an officer in the British army is one such man who feels the suffocation and gesticulation of time and of being a mere puppet in the hands of his masters. In Hardayal Singh, Ghosh paints the portrait of a common man no longer willing to remain a passive victim. Instead he sees in Hardayal a man who is ready to make his contributions in the freedom struggle of his country. Ghosh finds it important to project Hardayal Singh’s nationalistic zeal that is representative of the pain and torture that lingers in the hearts of the
numerous ordinary Hardayal Singh. Engaged in his service to British imperialism he is portrayed as a conscious character emerging with a sense of awareness:

Well didn’t you ever think this country whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time – what is it? Where is the country? The fact is that you and I don’t have a country – so whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time? And why was it that when we took our oath it wasn’t to a country but to the King Emperor – to defend the Empire? (Palace 330).

Through Hardayal’s character Ghosh reflects a man caught between conflicting loyalties: loyalty towards his office and love of his country. When Hardayal says, “I don’t have a country” (Palace. 330), the author is able to convey the sense of waste, uselessness and alienation felt by him. Hardayal Singh’s awakened consciousness makes him act in two ways. Firstly he aligns himself with the Indian National Army and fights for the freedom of his country. Secondly he instills into the minds of his fellow brethrens like Arjun the essential need to fight for ‘their’ country and not for the British. Hardayal infuses into the mind of Arjun the duties of the Indians, the call to fight for their land. Arjun who was very happy
to have found a place for himself in the British Army enters into a mental conflict that eventually enables him to have the first glimpse of individuality, a moral responsibility as well as a realisation of service to his country as more important than service to the British. Therefore Ghosh’s texts, as seen above, reflects a re-examined history as a perspective in the eyes of the colonised other.

A re-examination of history in the text of Amitav Ghosh may also be viewed from the perspective of characters that are lured and enticed by the coloniser’s fame and glamorous life styles. The colonisers have rooted themselves so strongly amidst the colonised that the latter anxiously wait for an opportunity to be of service to the former. Any acceptance by and an association with the British appear to bring joy, happiness, pride and a sense of responsibility on the part of the colonised. It is the kind of approval that ordinary colonised people have been waiting for so long. In spite of their associations they experience a sense of anxiety of acceptance. Such an experience so far ignored by history is underlined by Ghosh.

Ghosh brings out the anxiety of the colonised in some characters. Arjun in *Palace* dances with joy when he is recruited in the British Army. Arjun feels a great sense of responsibility towards his office and also thinks that he is represents the rest of the country by serving his
colonisers. It is this misconception of the colonised, who has been duped by the coloniser that needs a reinterpretation of history. Ghosh may have deliberately brought in this aspect only to emphasise the need to reframe the mistaken faith and duties that the colonised have been led to. This is a mirage that needs to be broken and Arjun in Palace is brought face to face with this reality. It is an undertaking that Ghosh sets himself to wipe out through the character of Hardayal Singh. The colonised ‘other’ has to wake up from his slumber and revive in his heart the pride and love for his country and its people and not his colonisers. It is imperative to bring back their real identity and the responsibility they owe to their country. They cannot be allowed to go astray. Ghosh wants to show the manipulation of the British and the snares that they have laid for the confused colonised other. Amitav Ghosh does triumph in his attempt, when Arjun cuts off his association from his colonisers and sacrifices his life for his country. Thus it becomes crucial to sever the enticement and entrapment faced by the colonised to serve the coloniser.

Entrapment of the past also features in a reading of history that . . . seeks an understanding of the past to have a bearing upon the present. The past is remembered not as a dead, remote period, but as flowing into the present, postcolonial situations of multiethnic, pluralist societies,
of boundaries and the mutations of nations imposed by the colonial rulers and complex cultural diversities of a persistent political struggle for democratic and egalitarian system (Santosh Gupta 243).

The past has to be read as an echo that will continue to ring in the ears and lives of the present. It cannot be wiped out of memory nor can it simply be pushed to limbo. Several of Ghosh’s works have characters that are reflections of the past in the present. These people and their present behaviour are seen as products of an inevitable past. British imperialism and its association with the colonised people have a great impact on the culture and identity of colonised people of the land. Ghosh is convinced that after the British left their colonised land they also left behind them a tinge of their Englishness.

Some of Ghosh’s characters reveal traces of their colonised mind and their Englishness. Ila in *Lines* has been exposed to the lifestyle of the English since her childhood. She is so ingrained in it that the English fundamental nature and essence stays on with her. She attempts to adopt the life style of the coloniser and relates better with them than with her own people. Ila completely refuses to associate herself with anything that is not English. The clothes she wears and her outlook to life are
representative of her new identity which may be termed as ‘hybridity’, a
term coined by Homi Bhabha. Bhabha may have referred the term in
relation to writers that belong to both cultures. Yet it may not be
inappropriate to associate the term with characters like Ila, who are Indian
by blood and origin, and yet indoctrinated by British culture. At the club
she is very open about her choice of drink and orders for beer. She has
distanced herself from her Indian culture and amalgamates with
something that is never hers and craves for something that does not
belong to her. Her identification with her British counterparts who belief
in power and freedom for oneself and bondage for the other has come
close to the way Ila thinks when she says: “Do you see now why I’ve
chosen to live in London? Do you see? It’s only because I want to be free.
. . . Free of you! Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you” (Lines
88-9).

What Ila sees and the way she relates to her colonisers is a domain
that her country is yet to grapple with. She ignores and hates her own
country and people only to align herself with the foreigners. Despite her
desire for the amalgamation of cultures and her seeking this new identity
by dissociating herself from her original Indian identity, Ila, in London
does not gain acceptance nor is she welcomed. The colonised ‘other’ will
never be treated at par by the coloniser. She faces discrimination at
school and distrust amongst her classmates. Her marriage with Nick is bound to fail, for right from her childhood Nick is utterly ashamed to be seen with an Indian. The coloniser here imposes his authority on the docile and submissive colonised. Yet Ila fails to see it all. Ghosh tries to re-look at the history of these people who are caught in a flux of change and disassociation from their original identity and culture.

Thus it may be concluded that a re-examination of the historical past in the novels of Amitav Ghosh elucidates a strong inclination of the author towards an illustration and a celebration of ordinary individuals. What Amitav Ghosh seeks to give his readers are narratives exhibiting a re-reading of the history of the masses rather than the historical events themselves. The alternative reality and history of the masses gives history a complete reading allowing Ghosh to re-interpret and decode the unmapped secrets of history. Ghosh translates the other side of history and projects contributions and experiences of the silent and usually suppressed voices of history. These silent and invisible figures that live far away from the historical figures are widely perceived by Amitav Ghosh as significant characters. His narratives bring the narration closer to individual private history, rather than the country’s public history, thereby creating a mere commentary of public history. In doing so he projects history of the colonised rather than the coloniser.
Nationalist fervor has to be re-examined as an experience that is felt not only by historical figures but by unhistorical figures alike. They are allowed to emerge as heroic as their historical counterparts in their nationalist zeal. He re-examines history in a way that aligns itself with feminist historians and their sentiments. Ghosh’s sensitive approach to the marginalised sections of the society unravels his concern for the presence of women and the subaltern subject in his texts. He depicts his women characters as strong willed, determined and endowed with leadership qualities. A re-examination of history is incomplete without presenting the space that Ghosh has carved out for his women characters. Not only women but also dispassionate narrations surrounding a colonial ruler, Sir Daniel Hamilton, and his genuine efforts to build up the Sunderbans into a utopian society is also an unbiased presentation of history by Ghosh. Thus the past cannot be segregated from the present, since effects of the past lie closely embedded in the present. Ghosh’s works reflect a continuous process of interaction between the present and the past. This reading of history has adequately been dealt with by Ghosh.

To re-capitulate, a re-examination of history widens the historical perspective and outlook of the past giving history a complete and holistic understanding and approach. History that fails to represent a holistic perspective of the past fails to have a full meaning. The philosophy
behind the works of contemporary writers like Amitav Ghosh is the idea that “however important historical forces may be, the individual is equally important and can never be relegated to the background….” (Ravi, “History, Politics” 56). Thus what history means to the individual may be the focus of Amitav Ghosh’s works but how Ghosh presents a blend of actual accounts of history with unrecorded accounts of the past is the focal point of the next chapter. The next chapter will examine how Amitav Ghosh uses history against imagination or reality against fiction. For as a literary writer his imagination helps him reach higher levels of perception far beyond the capacities of the historian.