Chapter III

History and Imagination in Amitav Ghosh’s Novels

The chapter examines how Amitav Ghosh uses history against imagination and how he represents reality against fiction. In other words, it observes how a literary writer employs his imagination in the act of historicising, and views how a writer’s imagination helps him reach higher levels of perception far beyond those of the historian. It will examine Ghosh’s re-invention of history in the light of his narrative skills that incorporate the real and the unreal, the factual and the fictive. Different stories of fictional characters wrapped around historical events will be studied in the chapter in order to highlight the beautiful blend of the historical with the unhistorical or the real with the unreal and the imaginative. In Ghosh’s attempt to re-read history through imagination, one can perceive his zeal to adopt alternative modes of perception of cultures and cultural representations, which reveal a subversion of colonial, imperial representations.

Ghosh’s inclination towards the marginalised people will be read through a juxtaposition of historical and unhistorical characters. He provides his unhistorical characters an alternate space as he positions them as competitors to historical characters. Ghosh’s imagination also takes the shape of the fancy and the bizarre in his works. Not ready to
simply brush aside the supernatural and primitive beliefs and practices his
novels sustain the irrational and the fantastical, very often manifesting
folklores and myths. As a writer of fiction, he succumbs to his creativity
and the fancies of the fictional world even while depicting history. He
paints a picture of the unreal set against the real with his leanings always
towards the creative impulse.

The terms ‘history’ and ‘imagination’ operate in diverse spheres of
knowledge and thought. While history is a body of knowledge that
renders an empirical documentation of actual past events, imagination
enters an unauthenticated sphere of intuition, experience and creativity.
As Nigel Thomas says, imagination is “. . . traditionally, the mental
capacity for experiencing, constructing, or manipulating 'mental imagery'
(quasi-perceptual experience)” (Thomas). Imagination according to him
is:

. . . as responsible for fantasy, inventiveness, idiosyncrasy, and creative, original, and insightful thought
in general, and, sometimes, for a much wider range of mental activities dealing with the non-actual, such as
supposing, pretending, 'seeing as', thinking of possibilities, and even being mistaken (Nigel J. T. Thomas).
If history belongs to the sphere of logic and rationality imagination belongs to that of a-logic or a-rationality. It is such an experience of history and imagination that the reader encounters when he/she reads Indian writers like Rushdie, Tharoor and Ghosh.

Contemporary Indian writers like Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and Amitav Ghosh convey an imaginative understanding of history through their writings. The close proximity of the historical and the fictional in their texts helps underline multiple and perceptive readings and interpretations of the past. In Salman Rushdie’s novel, *Midnight’s Children*, his narrative of history brings to the fore stories of fictional characters like Dr. Aziz and his wife Naseem. Their grandson, Saleem Sinai narrates stories of his grandparents and their involvement in the national struggle for freedom of the country. The Azizs are not only subjected to various forces of history but also play active roles in the political upheavals in the country. Similar to Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh’s fictional works also make parallel presentation of the historical and the fictional. Despite the narrative space that Ghosh gives to history, his fiction nevertheless occupies the centre stage. For example, Ghosh’s *Lines* has both the historical and the fictional alike. The Partition of the country and the Khulna riots as events in history are employed by Ghosh in the novel to balance with their consequences on his imaginary
characters whose fates criss cross with the historical episodes. Thus his text is not a mere narration of historical events themselves but a narrative that gives imagined accounts in relation to history. Historical events act as a channel and a mechanism for an original and innovative reinterpretation of history.

Such imagined accounts in relation to history leads to an innovative reinterpretation of history. However a representation of the past in this manner compels a writer to pen under certain limitations - cultural, social or political. As R. K. Dhawan remarks: “He [a writer of fiction] is not free to distort history; factual accuracy has to be strictly adhere[d] to” (“Introduction” 15). Such limitations are dated even to Shakespeare’s times when Shakespeare created an older Falstaff and a younger Henry IV to suit his imaginative thesis of the old Vice corrupting the innocent youth.

Taking cue from Shakespeare, one could point out that, Amitav Ghosh too does not distort a historical event. He rather renders a new interpretation of the event by viewing history from a familial or cultural or personal slant. It is important to understand here that the presence of the fantasy or the unreal alongside the historical and the real in his fictions does not imply a recreation or a questioning of history. His only strife in bringing the real against the unreal is to present a different appeal
and perspective of the past. He embarks upon a journey to see history through the eyes of the common man. Ghosh’s focus is not on the events themselves but on the ill effects of the events of history, on these helpless ordinary citizens of the country.

With the objective of presenting ordinary people’s point of view of the past, Ghosh paints fiction on a vast canvas of a historical fact to recreate reality - a reality of a connection that ordinary peoples’ lives may have had with an event in history. Ghosh constructs alternative reality and truth that was otherwise thought of as nonexistent in conventional historiography. Ordinary peoples’ genuine and actual stories that have never been acknowledged are structured by Ghosh through his strikingly imaginative and fictive methods to give a definite purpose to history. The imaginative methods Amitav Ghosh uses in his novels highlight his creative excellence and expertise in sustaining a blend and creating a balance of the imaginative and the historical.

It will be seen here that Ghosh employs certain methods in order to amalgamate the two worlds of history and imagination. Ghosh uses memory, a diary and also a memoir as mosaics of narration - to reconstruct history and imagination. In *Lines* Ghosh presents a perfect amalgamation of the private lives and public events through the memories of his characters that unfurl the novel’s artistic beauty and reverberation.
Memories of London during the World War II as explained to the narrator by his uncle Tridib, stories of East Bengal before the Partition that his grandmother Thamma tells him, foreign travels to Cairo, London, Paris, Florence and several other countries - these are stories that Ila shares with the narrator. The most poignant memory in the novel is Tridib’s death that lives in the minds of his relatives - Thamma, Robi and May Price - who unravel narrations that remain closely embedded in the mind of the narrator. Such an important memory of his death in Dhaka amidst Khulna riot is deliberately kept to the end of the novel. The novel till that point of memory only attempts an innocent description of the narrator’s family, with the narrator’s memory always going back and forth to Tridib. For an instance one can observe how the narrator’s memory of London is described by the narrator:

When we came out of the tube station I stopped them and pointed down the road. Since this is West Lane, I said, that must be Sumatra Road over there. So that corner must be where the air raid shelter was, . . . . And that house, that one, just down the road, over there, on the corner of Lymington Road, I know what it’s called: it’s called Lymington Mansions, and an incendiary bomb fell on it, and burned down two floors. That was on 1st Oct 1940, two days before
your uncle died. . . . Robi fell into step beside me . . . didn’t

I know that the Germans hadn’t developed high calibre
bombs till much later in the war? But that’s what happened,

I said. Because Tridib told me (Lines 55-6).

Only at the end of the novel one understands why the narrator is
obsessed with Tridib, when the narration divulges the truth about Tridib’s
death. The narrator’s consequent narrations by three eye witnesses -
Thamma, Robi and May Price - describing the unfortunate but historical
circumstances surrounding Tridib’s death unwinds through their
memories of the gory incident. Robi remembers the death of his brother
vividly: “I remember it (Jindabahar Lane, Dhaka) because my brother
was killed there, he said in a riot – not far from where my mother was
born. Now do you see why I remember?” (Lines 243). May Price lives
with this guilt: “I thought I’d killed him. I used to think: perhaps he
wouldn’t have got out of the car if I hadn’t made him, if I’d understood
what I was doing. . . . he must have known he was going to die” (Lines
251).

Throughout the novel the narrator traces memories and connects a
series of events to search and ultimately unravel the connections between
Tridib’s death and the historical event of the communal clash that took
place in Dhaka. The newspaper record at the Teen Murti House Library
takes his memory back to the nightmare bus ride as he was returning home from school and the events that took place in the riot in Dhaka. The narrator begins to sew bits and pieces of recollections and remembrances of the impact of Tridib’s death had on those close to Tridib. These are memories that help him ultimately emerge out of the silence that he has been living with.

The above elaboration on Ghosh’s use of memory as a narrative technique accentuates his art in two ways: memory first of all activates the narrative and secondly it helps in the random or conscious selection of events that go into the maze of the memory narration. Such a use of memory as a narrative prompt helps to understand how Ghosh manages his narrative strands through memories of the past. It may not be wrong to state that the crux of *Lines* in itself is the revelation of the other side of history that Ghosh re-creates through the facet of memory as a narrative technique.

Other than memory as a technique of narration Ghosh also restructures history through alternative methods of narration, such as truth revealed through a diary as employed in *Tide*. This a-historical or unhistorical narrative through a diary creates a pathetic awareness of the torture and torment that ordinary citizens are subjected to due to historical events. Nirmal’s diary contains stories of the lives and struggles of the
refugees in Morichjhapi. Nirmal records the refugees’ experiences as seen and felt by him along with others. While historical records can only describe peoples’ despicable conditions at the wake of the Partition, Nirmal’s diary specifies individuals’ pathetic sufferings subject to their point of view. Presenting a pathetic picture of a divide between the rich and the poor, Ghosh, through the use of diary, depicts the upper castes as fortunate and privileged. For the elites are able to settle themselves in Kolkata while the poor low caste Hindus were moved to areas outside West Bengal, in the inhospitable dry forest regions called Dandakaranya, in Orissa and Chattisgarh.

Ghosh’s use of diary helps to throw light on the history of Partition as well as the history of migration. These migrants from Bangladesh live in concentration camps known as Permanent Liability Camps and meet with great opposition from the local people who attack them with bows and arrows. Their woes do not end here; for politics interferes into their sad plight. The CPI (M) stand up for these Bengali refugees who they say should and can be accommodated in West Bengal. They even assure them that once in power they will rehabilitate them in West Bengal but ironically once in power the CPI (M) completely lost interest in the poor people while the refugees who took them seriously moved out of Dandakaranya and settled themselves in the Sunderbans. There the
refugees are meted out with even serious oppositions; for the government claimed that the area is a reserved area for the preservation of tigers and thus the refugees remain unwanted all over. Thus goes the history of the migrants affected by Partition.

Nirmal addresses his diary to his nephew, Kanai Dutt. “You Kanai, were among the last to see Kusum in Lusibari, in 1970. That year, on the eve of the performance of the Bon Bibi Johuranama, she vanished as if into the eye of a storm” (Tide 143). The narrative unfolds historical truths that have been preferred to be buried and forgotten. What Nirmal records in his diary is the struggle of the refugees not only as an observer but also as an active participant in the brawl against the government. Nirmal relays the painful struggle of these poor people, who have fallen prey to the unfulfilled promises of the government. The refugees’ lamentable resistance has been created by Ghosh with a definite purpose in the novel. Ghosh does not want such historical events, which display the atrocities of the government towards its subjects, to be simply wiped out of the memories of people. Always speaking for the voiceless through his novels Ghosh uses Nirmal as his mouthpiece in the hope of bringing to life what is left untouched as well as voicing a ray of hope for change. Nirmal’s diary ends thus:
I will hand it to Horen in the hope it finds its way to you. I feel certain you will have a greater claim to the world’s ear than I ever had. . . . Your generation will, I know, be richer in ideals, less cynical, less selfish than mine (Tide 278).

Other than Nirmal’s diary in Tide, Ghosh employs memoir in The Calcutta Chromosome. Interestingly, in Chromosome, Ghosh does not authenticate Ross’s Memoir of 1923. While diary represents unhistorical writing the Memoir presents the historical view. Hence Ghosh subverts the Memoir. Ross’s Memoir throws a lot of light on a possible presence, aid and support of an Indian assistant in Ross’s research. In the novel, Murugan who doubts the authenticity of Ross’s Memoir confirms his source of knowledge saying:

Look, the great thing about a guy like Ronald Ross is that he writes everything down. You’ve got to remember: this guy’s decided he’s going to re-write history books. He wants everyone to know the story like he’s going to tell it; he’s not about to leave it up for grabs, not a single minute if he can help (Chromosome 44).
What is interesting for Ghosh in Ronald Ross’s Memoir is that,

The silences and omissions, particularly Ross’s refusal to supply any detail about his Indian laboratory workers, suggest fascinating possibilities, and Ghosh constructs a story out of these silences (Claire, “Postcolonial Science Fiction” 62).

There are several intriguing moments in the Memoir that hints on the role that his laboratory assistants played in the malaria work than Ross would like to admit. Most of the connections that Ross made in the research came from his servants whose names he always remains vague about:

Now, as if in answer, some Angel of Fate must have met one of my three “mosquito men” in his leisurely perambulations and must have put into his hand a bottle of mosquito larvae, some of which I saw at once were of a type different from the usual Culex and Stygemia larvae. Next morning, the 16 August, when I went again to hospital after breakfast, the Hospital Assistant (I regret I have forgotten his name) pointed out a small mosquito seated on the wall with its tail sticking outwards (Chromosome 66).
The fact that Ross does not acknowledge his local assistants’ identity and contribution and gives only a one-sided description of the discovery is ironical. It only reveals the hierarchical suppressive collaboration of the coloniser with the marginalised colonised people in making possible the breakthrough in the world of medical science. Hence Ghosh’s critique attempts to topple this hierarchy as seen below:

Throughout the novel, Ghosh accords far greater agency to Ross’s laboratory assistants than the great man [Ross] – who once described Indian’s as “swarming and dying million” – would ever have countenanced (Claire, “Postcolonial Science Fiction” 64).

Thus whether it is narration through memory, diary or even memoir, Ghosh’s imaginative use of them to authenticate unhistorical records is interesting.

Not only the above narrative methods but also the presentation of different types of narrators helps to create an ideal blend of the historic and the imaginative. These narrators create an interlace of narrative voices that take up the arduous job of storytelling. In *Lines*, Ghosh employs the first person narrator to relate memories of places as narrated to him by Tridib. He narrates experiences of other characters alongside placing his own involvement in the story. Tridib has earned himself great
respect and reverence in the eyes of the narrator as “Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with” (Lines 20). Memories of places as narrated to him by Tridib and Ila are so planted into his mind that he creates mental images of these places narrated to him. He strictly adheres to what his uncle Tridib had taught him to do: “[T]he one thing he wanted to teach me, he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision” (Lines 24).

It is also interesting to examine Ghosh’s narrative voice. Narration is triggered mostly by the young narrative voice. Nevertheless the author takes the baton away from the hands of the narrator at the most crucial moment and places it on Robi and May to narrate their part of the stories of the riot in which Tridib died. The narrator says that he can only give a second hand story of Tridib’s death through the stories of Robi and May. The first narrative account is more of a silent but true report of the newspapers and official histories through which Ghosh is able to rest the other three narrative accounts of Tridib’s death. The first account of Tridib’s death by the narrator’s father who seeks to divulge the truth that Tridib died in an accident. The second narration by Robi, a witness to Tridib’s killing, comes in the form of a nightmare that haunts him. The third by May, also a witness, is a personal account of her loss of her dream of love and marriage with Tridib.
In most of his fictional narratives Amitav Ghosh places the third person narrator as the narrating voice. Giving great flexibility to the author, the third person narrators are by and large subjective narrators that are at liberty to describe the feelings and thoughts of the characters. He can freely invent and create facts of little people who have no place in the grand narratives of history. The third person narrators are at liberty to move from little narratives to grand narratives back and forth, so much so they become effective mouthpieces of Ghosh’s discourse on history and alternative history. The novelist can penetrate the character’s mind through these narrators, which a traditional historian is never free to do so.

Amitav Ghosh employs the third person narrator to connect the three strands that give shape to *The Calcutta Chromosome*: Mangala and Ross represent the narrative of the past, Murugan and Urmila stand for the present and Antar and Tara symbolise the future, though the main narrative of the third person narrator in the novel impinges on a presentation of discovery, fever and delirium. The narrative voice here helps to knit stories of the past, the present and the future evenly. It circles around the scientific research of the malaria vector and magic. The novel not only contains stories of the discovery as known and read in historical records, but also diverts itself into stories with direct links to
the scientific research of malaria. These are stories that contain some secret and hidden truths behind historical reality. To unravel this hidden truth, the narrator weaves his narrative through the presentation of the character of Murugan who is obsessed with the history of malaria that led him to the conviction that Ronald Ross was no solitary genius. There was a secret society that helped Ross yet the society’s contribution has been completely ignored and never recorded in the history of medical science. Ghosh beautifully weaves in the three narrative strands together to achieve the ultimate success of the ante-research of Mangala.

Through a narrative management that employs third person narrators and first account narrators simultaneously, Ghosh is able to unravel and re-write history, thereby providing an alternate perception. Ghosh’s narrative management through different types of narrators and characters relates stories that remain incomparable to any kind of grand narrative of the nation. These narrations are personal, but they are what the nation-state pays no heed to. To Ghosh there could have been no better way of presenting history but through his imaginary stories and characters that are a manifestation of a foreboding dark cloud behind the lives of numerous individuals who may have been victims of an event in history.
Ghosh’s narrative style as seen in his unique narrative medium and narrative voices impinges on the need for an alternate perception of history. The need for an alternate perception of history is based on Ghosh’s firm belief that there cannot be only one legitimate version of truth and fact. Truth and reality should be read from the point of view of all. The world in itself comprises of diverse human existences so much so that every individual has his or her version of truth and reality to share. “Metanarrative that represents a totalizing explanation of things like Christianity and Marxism” (Lyotard) cannot be accepted as the only version of truth. Amitav Ghosh discards the credibility of metanarrative as one that undermines all other narrative truths. His novels challenge grand narratives with diverse little narratives by little people. He speaks for the little people when he says through Nirmal:

. . . Lusibari was forest too once – this too once belonged to the government. Yet Sir Daniel Hamilton was allowed to take it over in order to create his experiment. And all these years, Nilima had often said that she admired what he did. What was the difference, then? Were the dreams of these settlers less valuable than those of a man like Sir Daniel just because he was a rich shaheb and they impoverished refugees? (Tide 213).
In the above passage Ghosh creates a counter-narrative that questions the government stand towards immigrants and the colonisers. This is the reason for a great inclination that Amitav Ghosh has towards a display of stories of ordinary people. He brings about a revelation of little truths of little people through his imagination in the context of history.

The Morichjhapi incident that took place in 1979 at the wake of Bangladesh independence had severe repercussions on thousands of refugees’ lives and hence they were made homeless and were forced to leave their native land. These helpless refugees have been duped by the government for a safe place to stay but were ultimately reduced to creatures even below animals. Ghosh is not ready to simply wipe out from the minds of people and from the pages of chronicles, the eviction, migration, loss, distress, trickery and even death these poor helpless refugees are subjected to. Ghosh here takes a strong stand for the rights of the dispossessed. He is conscious of their situation and is anxious to tell their stories to the world. These people have varied and intense stories they wish to share that Ghosh wants history to take notice of. Thus through his fictive imagination, Ghosh creates ordinary fictional characters that are filled to the brim with stories of historical events as felt and experienced by them.
The unhistorical characters’ rendition of their personal ‘histories’ at times brings in a direct convergence of history and imagination with one another in Ghosh’s works. In other words, while writing about his imaginary characters Ghosh appears to be traversing the path of history onto which his imaginary characters perfectly merge.

Ghosh’s power of imagination and his penchant for authenticating history juxtapose and complement one another as seen in the novel *Palace*. Rajkumar’s struggle for survival as a young boy gets juxtaposed with Burma’s history of colonisation. The novel begins with the sound of canons that could be heard coming from the side of the river. The only person who could recognise the sign was the protagonist Rajkumar. He recognises the canons as those belonging to the British and as a foreboding of the British rule over Burma. True to the quick sightedness of the boy the British do pose a threat to the Burmese monarchy. The colonial invasion because of Burma’s richness of timber and teak is advantageous to Rajkumar, who carves a name for himself as a rich Indian timber businessman. Ghosh traces the life of Rajkumar from the time he sets foot in Burma, his struggles through his settling in Burma as a successful man and is final return to India after the Second World War. The novel is all about ordinary people like Rajkumar and their life history that is given reconnaissance amidst a grand history.
In writing the fictive story of Rajkumar, Ghosh is also writing the history of Burma that lost its age old heritage, monarchy and the royal family. Colonisation stripped Burma of its monarchy bringing unrest and instability to the entire country till today. The last king of Burma, King Thebaw, was stripped of all powers as a king. He and his queen, Queen Supayalat and the three princesses were forcefully evicted out of their country and exiled to India to live as prisoners there with no scope of a return home. Burma ultimately saw the death of King Thebaw as a prisoner in Ratnagiri, India. Viewing Burmese history as a backdrop to Ghosh’s story one could comment that Burma’s loss of monarchy is irreparable till date, and the British invasion has weakened Burma, not only as a monarchy but as a military ruled country as well.

When Ghosh anxiously unravels the implication of British invasion on Burma he also exposes historical insinuation on an ordinary person like Rajkumar. At the same time Ghosh only discusses a piece of history to lay more emphasis on the character of his protagonist. While Burma lost it all to colonialism, Rajkumar builds his home on the debris. His stay in Burma has given him all that he was snatched off in his native land: family, home, love and even wealth. It is as if Ghosh creates the character of Rajkumar as one subjected to the various turns in history. If an event in history gives him all that he seeks for in Burma his return to India once
again as a poor helpless man has close relations with a great event in the history of the world.

History and imagination move hand in hand with the story of Rajkumar and the World War II that forced Rajkumar’s return to his native country. World War II is another event in history that Ghosh presents to bring about a convergence of the historical and the imaginative. With the bombings of Japan over Rangoon in the Second World War in 1942 there occurred the historic Long March in Burma. This March compelled thirty thousand Indians to leave Burma and return home. Rajkumar is one such migrant who had to pack his bags and leave. However the interference of history into the life of Rajkumar had a different impact on him. Unlike the interference of history that occurred in 1885 that brought him wealth and prosperity, this time history has a totally different impact on him. Rajkumar had to go back to his native country leaving behind all the wealth and riches that he had earned for himself. From a wealthy timber businessman in Burma, Rajkumar is now reduced to a landless citizen in his own country, India. Thus the imaginary stories of his invented characters stride hand in hand with recorded historical events.
Other than the use of imaginary stories as an alternative mode of perceiving history, Ghosh employs Eastern cultural beliefs as an alternative mode of perceiving history. For this purpose he presents Eastern ideas and beliefs to counter those of the West. If science is a prerogative and pride of the West, counter-science and the supernatural are the privilege of the East. In no account is Ghosh ready to shun counter-science, superstition and a belief in the supernatural, which are representative of the Indian culture and beliefs of the people. Ghosh is ready to place before us primitive beliefs and practices against scientific experimentation and research. His intention here seems to create a place of acceptance of Eastern beliefs and values identifiable with Indian culture, traditions and customs. Amitav Ghosh’s *Chromosome* presents Indian culture, witchcraft and supernatural beliefs that acknowledge his faith in the Indian system of thought. Ghosh does not disregard the primordial beliefs and practices of these people as absurd or preposterous. On the other hand he gives insights into the oriental sense of spiritualism, their trust in birth and rebirth, transposition and transcendence of the soul of the dead. In the novel *Chromosome* he establishes the character of Mangala and her assistant, Laakhan as representatives of an Indian idea of witchcraft and supernaturalism, seen in the following passage:
She folded her hands... muttering a prayer. Then suddenly a scalpel appeared in her right hand; she held the bird away from her and with a single flick of her wrist beheaded the dying pigeon. . . . she picked up the clean slides, smeared them across the severed neck, and handed them to the assistant (Chromosome 127).

The passage describes the cultural practices usually associated with an illness or a disease the cure, to which is believed to be only through witchcraft. These are practices identifiable with the primitive beliefs of the people and are still prevalent in several parts of the country. Murugan’s ideas, beliefs, convictions and supposition of the presence of a secret society that work on supernatural powers are areas of interest that Amitav Ghosh wishes to infer through his narrative. This in the long run is also his effort to establish subaltern history and culture of the Orientals.

A similar Indian belief in the life after death is presented as possessing infinite value than the temporary quest for the material in the case of the Westerners. While Ross was working towards the discovery of the malaria vector, the Indian subaltern female’s real study is beyond the malaria research. In reality Mangala has been working on a technology that would help interpersonal transference thereby achieving immortality of the soul. Thus the migration of one soul to the other, once the body
fails, or as Ghosh terms it the “interpersonal transference” (Chromosome 90) through the Calcutta chromosome occupies a central role in the novel. In fact everything in the novel appears to be working towards this end of the transposition. Ghosh’s narrative is more drawn towards the research of the marginalised Mangala rather than the research of Ross. Thus Ghosh produces a lace work of counter history through imagination, superstition, Oriental beliefs which are privileged over logic, rationality and documented history.

Ghosh’s inclination towards the marginalised people further invites a reading of a connection of a possible tension or conflict through the juxtaposition of two groups of characters: historical and unhistorical. He therefore brilliantly dwells on an alternative space of characters that are not only common but also ignorant, illiterate and untrained. What is even more striking is the way in which these characters appear to be offering stringent competition to the historical characters as seen in Chromosome, where the real master behind the secret society is none other than Mangala, who is the priestess:

The woman Mangala was seated at the far end of the room, on a low divan, but alone and in an attitude of command as though enthroned . . . . On the floor . . . clustered around the woman’s feet, were some half-dozen
people in various attitudes of supplication, some touching her feet, others lying prostrate (*Chromosome* 125).

Mangala is the woman who Farley witnesses treating syphilitic patients. She is the one who selects with great expertise the slides for Farley’s experiment in Cunningham’s laboratory. “. . . it was not the young assistant but the woman who went over to the stack of drawers by the wall; it was she who selected the slides that were to be presented to him for examination. . . . she was not only familiar with the slides but knew exactly what they contained” (*Chromosome* 120-21).

The fact that there was an Indian assistant who had been of great help to Ross, makes Ghosh present stories of these marginalised people as characters possessing far more superior knowledge than Ross. He gives an average status to the western minds who have all along been working as per the directions of these little people. While Ross thinks that he is making the discovery, Ghosh presents him as the one who has been discovered by Mangala to help carry out her research once she has made up her mind. In fact they have been planting clues in Ross’s head. Their effort met with a success. Mangala and her assistant, Laakhan do migrate from one body to the other across generations even across borders and territories. Fascinatingly Amitav Ghosh’s imagination completes itself with the transmigration of the soul from one body to another as seen in
Mangala to Mrs Aratonium to Urmila to Tara and that of Laakhan to Roman Haldar to the fish seller to Lucky.

In the beautifully weaved yarns of the real and the unreal creating an ensemble of a colourful fabric, ordinary characters have risen above and beyond the historical characters. “The counter-science cult led by Mangala can only operate through silence, but the fictive reconstruction, in which Murugan, Antar and ultimately Ghosh engage, subverts the hegemonic dominance of western logocentricism all the same” (Thieme, “Amitav Ghosh” 264). These silences that feature in the characters of Mangala and Laakhan are those of strong and powerful characters working towards achieving something more elaborate and extraordinary than Ross’s research. Interestingly, Ghosh infuses together the Indian and Western approach towards scientific methods of research in arriving at their separate glories. His objective is to extend recognition and praise not only to the powerful European elite but also to the downtrodden people of the East. In reality Amitav Ghosh wishes to look back over European history that has not only been very biased but has always suppressed subaltern voices. Hence he creates the counter-narrative that privileges Eastern beliefs and approach to science over Western attitudes.

In other words Amitav Ghosh’s thesis on history and fiction relies on the subaltern voices. M.H. Abrams in A Glossary of Literary Terms
defines subaltern as “a standard way to designate the colonial subject . . . a British word for someone of inferior rank” (237). In Chromosome, Ghosh projects Mangala as the subaltern woman, who is given a position of authority and who earns a place for herself as a leader and a priestess. Amitav Ghosh opens “up a discursive space in which the notion of giving voice to the hitherto silenced subaltern is a viable imaginative possibility” (Thieme, “The Discoverer Discovered” 130). He is of the conviction that Ross’s malaria research has actually been manipulated by “an illiterate” (Chromosome 121) woman named Mangala. Despite her alleviation Mangala does not gain any recognition as the brain behind Ross’s research and discovery. Hence “. . . Ghosh’s narrative discredits the Western scientist and instates an Indian subaltern female in his place.” (Thieme, “Amitav Ghosh” 264). Gayatri Spivak, who asks the question ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ may find an answer to the question in this novel. In bringing women characters like Mangala to the fore as a strong and manipulative force Ghosh seems to be answering Spivak’s question in the affirmative. Acceptance of the voice of the subaltern or the suppressed has never found a place in any elite’s record. Hence in talking about Ross’s discovery, Ghosh conveniently places the subaltern before Ross and further carves a place for them.
The works of Amitav Ghosh are an interesting blend of fact and fiction. Particularly in his attempt to voice the subaltern, Ghosh creates what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction: “Historiographic metafiction shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured” (120). Thus historiographic metafiction redefines historical truth and reality. The objective behind this redefinition of history is to unearth histories of “. . . the protagonists of historiographic metafiction [that] are anything but proper types: they are ex-centricics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history” (104). This in a way leads to the discovery of histories of suppressed people such as colonised people or women as espoused by Ghosh. His works articulate a concern for women especially the suppressed and the marginalised.

Particularly commendable is Ghosh’s role as a gender sensitive writer dedicated to the cause of women Ghosh paints his fictional women characters as strong willed, independent and at times even as leaders. Ghosh creates dynamic and strong women characters, be it Thamma (Lines), Zindi (Reason), Uma (Palace), Kusum (Tide) Mangala (Chromosome) and Queen Supayalat. They are models of female authority, strength and courage and also reflect Ghosh’s creative imagination.
Ghosh’s women may be ordinary matriarchs but still can be instigated with patriotic fervour. The fact that as a young girl in college, Thamma had been waiting for an opportunity to be part of the freedom fighters of the country demonstrates the spirit of the girl to not allow herself to be cowed down by societal norms and expectations. She is an independent woman who crosses boundaries to support her son and herself after the death of her husband. At home she is more of a matriarch occupying the best and biggest room and maintaining the discipline and decorum of her family members.

Another female character, Zindi (Reason), as the leader of her fellow migrants, protects them and works for their welfare. Similarly, the wife of the District Collector does not hesitate to break her marriage when she finds that marriage restricts her. Her tour around the world only gives her a chance to put into practice her beliefs and values of freedom. With the death of her husband she moves to New York, a land free of any gender oppression and becomes a matriarch for liberal minded individuals in the United States. In her ultimate entrance into power politics as a follower of Gandhi working towards emancipation of her country and people, Uma gives up her identity as the wife of the District Collector and commands a separate space of respect and individuality of her own. Similarly Kusum in Tide was not ready to surrender to authority.
She would rather fight for survival and dignity and give up her life than be disregarded as human.

In presenting women, both subaltern and elite, Ghosh portrays their trauma due to certain historical events. His imagination internalises his characters’ anxiety over the past though they have no share in its formation and design. His characters are unhappy about the past historical events like Partition. Hence they see the offensiveness of history at every end. Colonialism that led to the historic Partition of the country in 1947 has earned great reference in the novels of Ghosh. This event in history is projected by him as seen through the eyes of the ordinary and the unimportant. Characters struck by this event question the past and the wisdom of creating such a past event. To illustrate the analysis above, one could examine Ghosh’s representation of Thamma in *Lines*. Politics that has divided nations and hearts into two has been of no significance to either of the citizens of the two countries. To ordinary people, Partition means a visible wall or trenches that separate one country from another. Thamma says: “But surely there’s something – trenches, perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land” (*Lines* 151). In reality the dividing line of a split is left to the imagination of the people. The dividing wall is simply left to the imaginary boundaries that common people are made to construct in their minds.
“The border isn’t on the frontier: it’s right inside the airport. You’ll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards” *(Lines 151).*

When Thamma questions the Partition she is vocal about the dilemma of all the victims of Partition. She views Partition as an imaginary wall caused by history but led to the loss of priceless life, peace and freedom to live where one wills. Ghosh appears to be asking each one of his readers whether it is fair after all for Partition to have destroyed native identities of people like Thamma. Thamma comments on the peace in Dhaka: “There weren’t any forms or anything and anyway travelling was so easy then. I could come home to Dhaka whenever I wanted” *(Lines 152).* But with Partition life changes for her:

. . . it had suddenly occurred to her then that she would have to fill in ‘Dhaka’ as her place of birth on that form, and that the prospect of this had worried her . . . at that moment she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality *(Lines 152).*

Other than presenting people’s reaction against colonial rule and Partition, Ghosh depicts characters that acknowledge the British rule over their country, India. In fact they are even supportive of colonialism. They
appreciate and furthermore take great advantage of the presence of the British in the country. Such a character positioned quite contrary to Thamma is Rajkumar in the novel *Palace*. For Rajkumar, the British of Burma made on the pretext of tax levied for logs on the British merchants, was a blessing. His success story of rising from rags to riches was due to this invasion. It did not really matter to him if Burma lost its king and monarchy itself. What mattered to him was the profit he could make out of this invasion. Hence he looked up to the British as allies and helped import indentured labourers even from his country to work as slaves for the British in Burma.

Rajkumar as a British agent of colonisation acts as a model for all those Indians who begin to identify themselves with the traits and characteristics of their colonisers. Like the British, Rajkumar is exploitative in nature. Nothing comes before him besides his personal gain and advantage. He is dehumanised to the extent that he does not look beyond anything else other than his pursuit of wealth. Ironically, Rajkumar believes that the invasion of Burma by the British was a blessing for the Burmese economy that would certainly collapse without the patronage of the British. Ghosh mocks at the mental set up of such people whose country is being ruled by these exploitative colonisers yet who could see nothing beyond their own individual gain. Unlike Thamma
in *Lines*, who hankers over a return home, Rajkumar in *Palace* never once mentions of home. For him home is where he can live comfortably amidst property and luxury. There is no sense of belonging and identity that is attached to Rajkumar. While Thamma is confused about the nature of her identity, Rajkumar is only happy to identify himself with his riches. At the same time, Ghosh also creates the character of Hardayal Singh in *Palace*, to present the consciousness of those who are divided by allegiances they owe to their masters and their country. Hardayal Singh finally surrenders his service as a soldier in the British Army associating himself with the Indian National Army fighting for the freedom of the country. While on the one hand there is Rajkumar who is so blinded by his material gains and on the other hand there is Hardayal Singh whose patriotic zeal forbids him to remain loyal to the enemies of his motherland.

Other than Rajkumar and Thamma Ghosh’s fictive imagination brings out no diverse characters. One such is a set of characters highly supportive of and is greatly influenced by western education - the foundation of power and hegemony of the British. The introduction of the English language and western form of education by Lord Macaulay was with the obvious objective of producing a class of people to serve the English empire. This would in return help them in consolidating power in
the colonies. This strategy of the colonisers was successfully adopted in the country. Some of the colonised people fail to understand the real intention of the British. They instead considered it a matter of pride that they can speak the language of their masters and are ready to serve them. These are the people who are so anxiously waiting to align themselves with their colonisers that they are blinded to the atrocities meted out to their country and people.

According to history the British justification of their colonial rule harped on the need to bring about necessary reforms, development, and civilization and upgradation of these colonies. The truth is in the British’s concern about militaristic imperialism of consolidation and expansion of the British Empire. Characters like Beni Prasad, Arjun and Dinu in the novel *Palace* are classic examples of how British rule could influence the coloniser. Through these characters Amitav Ghosh makes an attempt to represent blind reverence of the colonised towards western culture and ways of life that has made them indifferent to their mother country. These people live with a sense of awe about the British and consider themselves fortunate once they find acceptance by their colonisers. Indians like Beni Prasad are not only willing agents but also submissive emissaries of the British. They uphold the policies of progression of their masters. In their desire to be one with their masters a
fear lurks in their minds lest they fall short of the Englishmen’s expectations. “His sense of inferiority is so ingrained in his personality that “there seemed never to be a moment when he was not haunted by the fear of being thought lacking by his British colleagues” (Biring 100). To impersonate an Englishman is all that Arjun Roy had placed his efforts and focus on. He is proud and considers it an honour that he is commissioned to serve as an officer in the First Jat Light Infantry. English morals, values, ethics, dress code and even eating habits are aped by him that he has oriented himself to internalise European values. Dinu sees Hitler and Mussolini as violent leaders but fails to see the true intention of his own master.

These characters discussed above are examples of colonial internalisation of the colonised, a relevant issue that Ghosh explores in his depiction of colonialism. He draws attention to the repercussions of an attachment and a regard that a colonised subject has on the master. The colonised fails to recognise the real intention of the presence of the British in their country. They continue to live in admiration of their masters and denigrate their countrymen. His novels examine the impact of the characters internalisation of the colonised, particularly in the case of characters like Rajkumar, Beni Prasad and Arjun. Rajkumar, who made the most out of British invasion in Burma finally lost all his wealth
and so did his son, Neel with the advent of the Second World War. Rajkumar thinks that if British patronage is lost to Burma it will seriously affect Burmese economy. Little did he realise that this loss will also have serious repercussions on his own business venture. With the advent of the war, Rajkumar was forced to return to India as a destitute begging for a roof to shelter him from Uma who was against his exploitative attitude towards his fellow brethrens. Such an internalisation leads these characters to live a life of hollowness, fear and uncertainty. Once back in India, Rajkumar lost the essence of life as “the Ganges could never be the same as the Irrawaddy” (Lines 544). Beni Prasad lived a life always in fear of his masters. Commenting on the immense power that the District Collector, Beni Prasad welded, his wife, Uma says, “. . . the position had brought him nothing but unease and uncertainty” (Palace 186). Hence he commits suicide when he fails as an agent of the British.

In contrast to the characters that internalise the coloniser, Ghosh also presents characters, which gradually decolonise their minds. Palace reflects the process of decolonisation of the colonised mind. Greater part of Arjun’s life in the novel Palace circles around his desire to be a part of the British army, yet when the time comes he transforms. When he gets a chance to serve his master he considers it to be an achievement in itself. He could see nothing beyond the uniform and his oath of service. He is so
blinded by his faith and allegiances to the British that he is angered when students and workers of the Congress Party laugh at his occupation. What others can perceive about his occupation, Arjun has failed to see - Who is he fighting for? Is it for his country or for the British? Is he not fighting against his own countrymen? Why has he failed to see that he is an Indian and needs to rid his country of all its usurpers? - He needs to ask himself these questions if his service to the British is more important than service to his motherland. In asking these questions Ghosh wishes to speak for all those Indians who are so immersed by English values that they have completely forgotten their own identity. How much more will people like Arjun demean themselves? They have been so indoctrinated by the colonial ideologies of the British that they have failed to think of themselves. Ghosh wants to awaken people like Arjun from their trance and hit them hard with patriotic zeal.

The process of decolonisation begins with Arjun’s self introspection, with the advent of World War II that saw the emergence of the Indian National Army. “It is not until the Japanese Inspired Fifth Columnists defeat the British army in Burma that the character Arjun has his epiphany, realizing his own complicity with colonialism” (Aldama). Seeing hundred Indian troops change their loyalties enrolling themselves as fighters of the Indian National Army, Arjun strangely feels that
perhaps he has been made a mere tool in the hands of the British. He knew that he had been serving the wrong side of the army. It is now when he does feel the need to rise above being a sahib in the English Army fighting against his own brethrens. Arjun dies a martyr fighting for the freedom of his country. Like Arjun, Dinu is unable to see the ill intentions of the British. He does realise that Hitler and Mussolini are tyrannical and destructive leaders yet he fails to realise the exploitative nature of the British towards his own country. “What Dinu sadly misses out is the fact that the British too are guilty of “racialism, rule through aggression and conquest” (Kinshuk Majumdar 30). Through the characters of Beni Prasad, Arjun and Dinu, Amitav Ghosh narrates stories of people who are so influenced by western education, manners and behaviours that they have become easy pawns in the hands of the British. They have become instruments in the game of the British diligently carrying out the expansionist policies of the British that the English have shrewdly posed as reforms.

Ghosh’s imagination also takes the shape of fancy and the bizarre in his works. Not ready to simply brush aside supernatural and primitive beliefs and practices Amitav Ghosh gives in to the irrational and the fantastical like folklore and myths. In presenting myths that have their roots only in the memories of the people and history that stands for record
based on proof, Ghosh identifies them as representatives of the people and the land they live in. An amalgamation of the real and the fantastical finds place in Ghosh’s texts in what may be identified as magic realism, a term:

... originally applied in the 1920s to a school of painters, is used to describe the prose fiction of Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina . . . . Gabriel Garcia Marquez in Colombia, Isabel Allende in Chile, Gunter Grass in Germany, Italo Calvino in Italy, and John Fowles in England. These writers interweave, in an ever-shifting pattern a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and descriptive details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth and fairy tales (Abrams 195-6).

Magic realism stems from the dissociation, dismissal and disregard of myths by the Europeans as tales that belong only to the savage and the barbaric. The root of magic realism is more easily understood and associated with non European cultures. Just as the objective of magic realism is to understand reality better by bringing about a blend of the magical elements with realistic atmosphere, Ghosh also employs myth as
another way of re-reading and studying the history of the land and its people.

Commenting about writers using myths to represent history Nishat Zaidi says that they “. . . use myth to represent history of the people of their land from the side that has been othered” (106). Such a use of myth or oral history poses a challenge to scripted and documented historiography. In sync with the belief in the supernatural, Amitav Ghosh also gives vent to his imagination in the realm of myths and legends as seen in the cult of Bon Bibi in *Tide*. The legend of Bon Bibi, presented simultaneously along with the Morichjhapi incident from the annals of history, occupies an important place in the hearts and lives of the people of the tide country. The tide country comprises of two-third of the land that lies in Bangladesh and one third in India. Keeping in mind the geographical map of the area and the historical incident, Ghosh presents the feelings of oneness and solidarity of the people living in the tide country. To them physical boundaries make no difference to their solidarity and camaraderie towards their fellow human beings who were once their brethrens. Through the myth of Bon Bibi, Amitav Ghosh displays the unifying effect the legend has on the people. This is the exact purpose of the use of magic realism as a narrative mode that Ghosh presents in the text. The amalgamation of the magical and the real ignites
a fellow feeling in the hearts of people like Kusum who on seeing the refugees coming from Dandakaranya immediately identifies with them. “These are my people, how could I stand apart? We shared the same tongue, we were joined in our bones; the dreams they dreamt were no different from my own. They too had hankered for our tide country mud; they too had longed to watch the tide rise to fill flood” (Tide 165). To ordinary people like Kusum the myth and legend of the place is more important and meaningful than the unnatural imaginary boundaries that were created by official historical records.

What comes across in the reading of the novels of Amitav Ghosh is the idea that Ghosh constructs little histories of ordinary people that have been drawn out of historical events. The silenced stories that have never found space in any historical records are narrated with an imaginative fervour by Ghosh as possible happenings and experiences of people. He successfully maintains the relevance of history that permits him to construct imaginary histories. His narratives have also exposed Ghosh’s beliefs and stand with regard to subaltern consciousness and the need to explicate their importance. He steers clear from the conventional narrative techniques and substitutes his narratives with memory used as a technique, epistolary narrative of private accounts and at times oral narratives. His purpose as a writer of fiction to bring in the element of the
fantasy into the world of the factual is well achieved. “Ghosh’s fiction has given credibility to an implausible fantasy” (A.G. Khan 187). Through his imagination experienced in his insightful reading of history, Ghosh succeeds in presenting the subaltern approach to history. It is this creative imagination of Ghosh that makes him juxtapose history with nation and family, because family and nation are two assets important and significant in the life of man. This perspective and the research explored with it will be dealt with in the following chapter.