CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION

“Amitav Ghosh today cheerfully, if humbly – bears numerous mantles of responsibility in the world of the book (case): anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist, travel – writer, teacher, and slips in and out of these veiled categories with admirable aplomb.”¹

Ghosh’s entire oeuvre bears testimony to the verity of this statement. It is precisely this tendency to betray borders; be they of genre as suggested by Brinda Bose in the above quote, or in terms of themes or even the protagonists’ travelling across boundaries in search of their own selves or identities; that the present work has tried to analyse. In the preceding chapters, the attempt has been to peruse his fictional works in terms of the major thematic concerns voiced therein. Besides serious and varied thematic concerns, the amount of erudition that his novels imbibe is rare in works of fiction. Much like Zindi in The Circle of Reason, Ghosh succeeds in mesmerising his readers with the immense knowledge, just by his manner of presenting it:

“They had lived through everything Zindi spoke of ... yet it was only in her telling that it took shape; changed from mere incidents to a palpable thing, a block of time which was not hours or minutes or days, but something corporeal... that was Zindi’s power: she could bring together empty air and give it a body just by talking of it.”²
Before we come to a conclusion regarding the thematic patterns in Ghosh’s novels, it is not just appropriate but essential to take a cursory glance at his chief concerns in his non-fiction. Throughout Ghosh’s versatile career, his fictional writing has been accompanied by non-fictional work of all kinds: travelogues, reportage, academic articles, journalism and criticism. Marked by eclectic subjects, his non-fiction is bound by the same core themes and issues that animate his fictional writing. A clear demarcation between fiction and non-fiction is another of those artificial boundaries that Ghosh insistently interrogates, the overcoming of which constitutes one of the central threads running through the work. The major issues dealt with in his essays range from nuclearisation, political crisis in Burma and Cambodia, pre-colonial commerce between India and Africa, to religious fundamentalism and anthropology and economics in local communities. Many of these non-fictional pieces share with his fiction, Ghosh’s abiding concern with broad historical movements, events which are beyond the control of individuals, at the same time concentrating upon the predicament of the individual under such circumstances.

Many of his novels either originate in his non-fictional works or are related to them as they share several episodes. Thus, his PhD dissertation, the essay ‘The Imam and the Indian’ and the historical article, ‘The Slave of MSH.6’ each have a different and significant relation to In an Antique Land. Similarly Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma and the reportage of ‘India’s Untold War of Independence’ both are significantly related to The Glass Palace.
The close and complementary relation between them is clear, the boundaries dividing them less so.

Most of his subjects are an outcome of his serendipitous meetings with ordinary individuals and visits to places. His volume *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*, comprising of three essays “Dancing in Cambodia”, “Stories in Stones” and “At Large in Burma” shows Ghosh, the anthropological and historical researcher at work and prepares us for the rich reservoir of verified historical knowledge, that we shall encounter in his fiction.

*Countdown* shows Ghosh, protesting against the nuclearisation of the subcontinent. Provoked by 1998 test of five devices at Pokhran, the book is a purely humanistic appeal, to consider the Indo-Pak relations and refrain from a proliferation of these weapons of mass destruction. In an interview with Outlook on 17 July 2000, Ghosh clarifies his purely moral motives behind this appeal:

“A lot of the people I had to meet in order to write *Countdown* were horrible, as was the subject itself... but I grit my teeth. I wish I hadn’t had to do it, but I had to. It was a personal duty; any writer worth his salt had to tackle morality particularly the morality of history.”

*The Imam and the Indian* (1988) which was to inspire his novel *In an Antique Land* comprises of eighteen prose pieces, all of which are in a way precursors of his concerns in his fiction. ‘Tibetan Dinner’ discusses the theme of the fate of the migrant in today’s world, a theme dealt with in detail in *The Circle of Reason* and discussed in his forthcoming novels.
“Four Corners” is set in a popular tourist destination in America at the intersection of four states of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Utah. The essay introduces the most insistent theme: the notion of borders. The tourist destination is called Four Corners because these four states are said to meet in this lunar landscape and remind us that all borders are arbitrary.

“An Egyptian in Baghdad”, which records Ghosh’s visit to Egypt shortly before the Gulf War, subsequently appears as epilogue in his book In an Antique Land. Here he introduces the theme of the fate of the migrant subaltern who is overlooked in the annals of history which is an integral part of almost all his fictional works.

“The Ghosts of Mrs.Gandhi” (1995) reminds us of The Shadow Lines and discusses the effect of fear on the memory of the individual, a major theme in The Shadow Lines. In this essay, he emphasizes the empathy of fellow human beings for the victims of such riots, actions which do not find a mention in journalistic and historical records.

“Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel” (1992) shows his interest in the Indian/African mercantile trade of the middle ages.


“The Relations of Envy” published in Ethnology in 1984 is based on his thesis for D.Phil in Social Anthropology. These
essays, alongwith novels like *In An Antique Land* bring forth, Ghosh the researcher, and scholar, and highlight his obsession with history. His essay, “Categories of Labour and the Orientation of the Fellah Economy” published in an anthology *The Diversity of the Muslim Community* edited by Ahmed al-Shahi in 1987, again takes us to the world of *fellaheen* and dwells upon their social relationship.

A glance at his vast non-fiction shows Ghosh heavily engaged in political, cultural and historical analysis of a plethora of subjects. They are a reflection of his thematic concerns in his novels. The collection like *The Imam and the Indian* is a true precursor of his novel *In An Antique Land*. Thus Ghosh’s versatility and multifaceted talent is brought forth not only through his contribution to the fictional world but also in the field of non-fiction. The major concerns are the same but expressed through a different medium. These non-fictional works are as rich in their content as the novels. An acquaintance with these non-fictional works is crucial in order to have a holistic view of the writer and his fiction.

Coming to Ghosh’s fictional works, which have already been dealt with in detail in the previous chapters. As discussed in chapter- two of the present work, Ghosh’s first work of fiction *The Circle of Reason*, makes use of Magic Realism, a style inspired by Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Although inspired by Rushdie’s masterpiece, this first novel by Ghosh, truly touches upon the various themes, he would experiment with in his subsequent novels. The author’s heartfelt sympathy with the victims of history, who
are forced into exile by circumstances, is evident in this novel and recurs in the rest of his fiction as well.

The theme of exile is introduced in this novel with his portrayal of an entire exilic community’s sufferings and predicament. Ghosh tries to probe deep into the psyche of his protagonists to lay bare the impact of this displacement, on the minds of the characters. The drive to see across the physical and mental barrier and blur this distinction is touched upon in this novel but discussed in detail in *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

Amitav Ghosh essentially is a writer of histories. All his fictional works bear testimony to the fact that he is forever posing the query as to whose history, are we referring to. In *The Circle of Reason*, Balaram who has always been fascinated with science is forced by his father, to get a degree in history. In his merging of the two subjects, science gets precedence over history and he emphasizes those events that advanced scientific knowledge.

“He had his own version of Calcutta. For him it was the city in which Ronald Ross discovered the origin of malaria, and Robert Koch, after years of effort, finally isolated the *bacillus* which causes typhoid. It was the Calcutta in which Jagdish Bose first demonstrated the extraordinarily life like patterns of stress responses in metals; where he first proved to a disbelieving world that plants are no less burdened with feeling than man.”

Ghosh’s interest in looking beyond the official annals of history written from a political perspective is evident here as Balaram’s notion of the history of Calcutta excludes any details of political situation. Rather it reveals historical happenings that
actually did take place but were deemed insignificant for posterity’s notice. Ghosh’s love of revealing the subaltern’s history and his peculiar predicament is another favourite concern, voiced in almost all his fictional works and non-fiction as well, as already discussed. In the very first novel he traces the journey of Alu, his protagonist and later makes him share space with a group of migrants belonging to the lower economic strata in the society. Here he combines the themes of feminism with the migrant subaltern as a number of occupants in Zindi’s house are women.

Journey or travel is one motif that forms an integral part of all his novels. While in The Circle of Reason it is a group of migrant labourers, in his later novels we witness mass exodus or migration where entire communities are displaced. Ghosh feels very deeply indeed about such victims of history who are forced into exile by circumstances beyond their control. In the midst of this predominance of travel and migration, Ghosh does succeed in connecting the loose ends of intersecting plots. Rather circularity in itself is a major theme in The Circle of Reason.

It is Balaram’s obsession with obscure sciences like Phrenology and cleaning with carbolic acid that lends circularity to the plot shifting from one place to another. Apart from recurring at regular intervals, these obsessive sciences, manhunts, theory of queues, and carbolic acid themselves form a part of the theme of the novel.

The Circle of Reason is a perfect example of Ghosh’s experiments with genre. The novel, along with his other works deludes classification. It can be seen as a novel of exile, detective
novel, a travelogue or a feminist text. Although touches of Rushdie’s characteristic *Magic Realism* are observed, yet on the whole the narrative is straight forward. The novel has a proliferation of characters and locations, which is a prominent trait of Ghosh’s works.

Before we trace the development of Ghosh’s thematic concerns in *The Shadow Lines*, it is pertinent to glance at Ghosh’s comments mentioned in his essays:

“Looking back today, it strikes me that *The Circle of Reason* could... be identified as an exodus novel, a story of migration in the classic sense of having its gaze turned firmly towards the future. I was working on the last part of the book in 1984 when the riots broke out... the violence had the effect of bringing to the surface of my memory, events from my own childhood when I had indeed been in a similar situation.”

*The Circle of Reason* is both loosely plotted but also tightly knitted together by a series of recurring images. Its open-ended linear narrative is crossed with patterns of weaving which is the central metaphor in the novel, while at the same time weaving is used as a synecdoche for the nature of Reason which is both-linear and circular, liberating and oppressive. Through subalterns in the form of illegal immigrants in a fictional Gulf country, who constantly transgress boundaries, Ghosh shows how Reason is thwarted by the emotional ties of tradition and empathy with fellow human beings.

While writing *The Circle of Reason*, Amitav Ghosh witnessed the anti-Sikh communal riots that followed in the wake of the
assassination of the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984. The experience shook him deeply and found expression a decade later in an essay entitled “The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi”. Ghosh admits in this essay that this experience was pivotal to his development as a writer because it inspired his next novel *The Shadow Lines* and even influenced *In an Antique Land* though indirectly.

“... *The Shadow Lines* ... became a book not about any one event, but about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them... I had to resolve a dilemma, between being a writer and being a citizen.”

*The Shadow Lines* has a special emotional significance for the readers of the subcontinent. It is a very unconventional partition novel that deals with the much written about subject, without even articulating it. It is a novel that deals with the impact of fear; deeply ingrained in the subcontinent’s masses post-partition; on the memory not just of the individual but the whole of the subcontinent.

The entire story is built around the central trauma – the murder of the narrator’s uncle Tridib, and the narrative moves back and forth in time. But above all this juggling of time and space is Ghosh’s concern with the arbitrary nature of nations and borders and a need to look beyond these divisions. This concern overrides all the major themes he deals with, and recurs with renewed vigour and changed context in all his works. Ghosh the writer of Histories, tries to analyse the impact of gory riots during and post-partition on the collective consciousness of the people of India, Pakistan and
Bangladesh. Ghosh’s narrator draws a circle on a map, with Khulna at its centre and Srinagar on its circumference and notes that:

“...Hanoi and Chungking are nearer Khulna than Srinagar, and yet did the people of Khulna care at all about the fate of the mosques in Vietnam and China (a mere stone’s throw away)? I doubted it.”

Tridib’s desire to meet May at a place really free, without any history, belonging to no particular nation, like complete strangers: although called pornographic because of its sexual content, the letter expresses Ghosh’s yearning for a place free of borders and divisions. Tridib’s yearning for a time and space before subcontinental borders is a desire that can exist prior to historical and geographical demarcations and is not realisable but functions as a critique to mock at the predominance of borders in our world.

The novel has a non-linear narrative. This looping non-linear narrative is generated by the question – do you remember? *The Shadow Lines* thus gives voice to the silence borne out of fear in every Indian’s subconscious mind- a result of personal and national trauma. The author begins his probe into history after he has a discussion with his friend regarding riots and he sifts through the newspapers to establish the veracity of the riots etched in his memory. The narrative then moves backwards in time and Ghosh keeps juggling with time and space to join piece by piece, the puzzles of his memory.

“*The Circle of Reason* had grown upwards, like a sapling rising from the soil of my immediate experience; *The Shadow Lines* had its opening planted in the present, but it grew downwards,
into the soil like a root system straining to find a source of nourishment... At the heart of the book, however, was an event that had occurred in Dhaka in 1964, the year before my family moved to Colombo: in the unlit depths of my memory, there stirred a recollection of a night when our house, flooded with refugees, was besieged by an angry mob. I had not thought of this event in decades, but after 1984 it began to haunt me... I went to libraries and sifted through hundreds of newspapers and in the end, through perseverance, luck and guesswork, I did find out what had happened. The riots of my memory were not a local affair; they had engulfed much of the sub-continent”.

The reader travels back in time and memory along with the narrator to put together the pieces of the puzzle in a very impactful novel that dives into history to put across the very contemporary notion of futility of these divisions and boundaries.

In The Shadow Lines, Ghosh dispenses with elements of Magic Realism and fantasy which indicated that The Circle of Reason was written in awe of the Rushdie spell in Midnight’s Children. The Shadow Lines has a tightly plotted structure and a greater realisation of individual characters. In Ghosh’s characteristic carrying forward of parallel narratives in parallel time zones, Time and Space in The Shadow Lines are constantly shifting from one location to another and from one moment to another without any forced transitions. The technical skill is thus sharpened in this second novel beyond a mere imitation. Being a memory novel, its form follows the ebb and flow of thoughts, as it unravels the impact of a difficult trauma which is personal and at the same time linked with larger historical forces and public events.
In its form the novel presents the transgression of these shadow lines, moving across space and time, in the process revealing the futility of the apparently permanent borders. The narrative unfolds through an unnamed first person narrator whose uncle Tridib’s death is the centre around which the entire novel revolves. The narrator was not present at Tridib’s death so the tragedy haunts him all the more. He constructs his memories through the assimilation of other people’s recollections of the event- Tridib’s younger brother Robi and May Price an English woman with whom Tridib was romantically attached. It is through their narratives, that his own is assembled and the novel discloses how an event is woven through interconnecting narratives.

This concern with national, religious and individual identities in the modern world is just one of the themes that run through Ghosh’s next book *In an Antique Land*. This is incontrovertibly an unclassifiable text. Even its non-fictional status is uncertain as already discussed in chapter four of this work. It brings together in one work many of the themes, issues, and ideas that recur throughout his novels. It is a new genre, something that is a blending of a travelogue, a diary, an anthropological record combined with some imagined sections.

Continuing the travel motif in the tradition of his entire oeuvre, Ghosh not just covers miles in this work, but also centuries in terms of time. Tracing the life history of Bomma, a twelfth century slave, he takes us through exhaustive diaries and records, interspersed with his experiences of living with natives in rural Egypt during his search. Ghosh himself confesses: “Within the
parameters of history I have tried to capture a story, a narrative, without attempting to write a historical novel.”

The book begins with his actual journey to Egypt during his studies at Oxford University, his response to the surroundings as an alienated immigrant, then soon plunges into a research scholars world of books, libraries, documents to track down the history of Abraham Ben Yiju, a mid-twelfth century trader and his slave; to whom a few letters from the time refer. Like all immigrants, Ghosh also feels alienated as a student in Britain, but the cultural displacement and alienation suffered by him in the Egyptian village of Nashawy, is even greater. The natives’ persistent questions regarding his culture, religion and customs make him feel lonely and segregated. His sense of exclusion increases in the month of Ramadan when the entire Muslim community fasts and prays together, Ghosh says:

“A phenomenon on that scale was beyond my imagining, but the exercise helped me understand why so many people in the hamlet had told me not to fast: to belong to that immense community was a privilege they had to re-earn every year, and the effort made them doubly conscious of the value of its boundaries.”

Particularly significant in aggravating Ghosh’s dis orientation is his dialogue with Imam Ibrahim, which has been made the subject of a comprehensive essay by the title: *The Imam and the Indian*. Both size each other up in terms of Western standards and enter into a heated argument, lending a new dimension to post-colonialism.
“... the Imam and I had participated in our own final defeat, in the dissolution of the centuries of dialogue that had linked us: we had demonstrated the irreversible triumph of the language that has usurped all the others in which people once discussed their differences. We had acknowledged it was no longer possible to speak, as Ben Yiju or his slave, or anyone of the thousands of travellers who had crossed the Indian Ocean in the Middle Ages might have done for they belonged to a dismantled rung on the ascending ladder of Development.”

The revelation here is the consciousness of the post-colonial citizens of two ancient civilizations vying for superiority over each other in their semblance to the supposedly superior West.

In *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines*, the effects of colonialism are seen in the relationship between Indians and Britons and in the haunting presence of partition or in Balaram’s struggles with the colonial education system. Whereas in *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh tackles colonialism directly tracing the various political problems of today – between Hindus and Muslims in India/Pakistan, Jews and Arabs in Israel/Palestine.

Ghosh the Indian is forever apprehensive of such questionings and arguments, with the Egyptians especially those based on religion. Ghosh reveals to his readers the consciousness behind this fear of religious symbols and fundamentalism, even in an apparently gentle civilization. He cites one incident about the fear which is the predominant factor behind *The Shadow Lines*. When he was six years old, his father was working in the Indian diplomatic mission in East Pakistan. On one particular day in January of 1964 his father told him to stay upstairs with their cook, with the shutters
closed and the door firmly shut. All day long, the garden had been filling with people. The cook was visibly frightened and Ghosh still retains the image of the swelling mob:

“I can see the enraged mob and the dancing flames with a vivid, burning clarity, yet all of it happens in utter silence; my memory, in an act of benign protection, has excised every single sound.”

The scene left an indelible imprint on Ghosh’s memory as he says:

“The stories of these riots are always the same: tales that grow out of an explosive barrier of symbols, of cities going up in flames, because of a cow found dead in a temple or a pig in a mosque; of people killed for wearing a lungi or a dhoti, depending on where they find themselves; of women disembowelled for wearing vermillion. Of men dismembered for the state of their foreskins. But I was never able to explain very much of this to Nabeel or anyone else in Nashawy ... Theirs was world that was far gentler, far less violent, very much more humane and innocent than mine. I could not have expected them to understand an Indian’s terror of symbols.”

But the apparently rooted and stable culture; reveals centuries old history of travel, movement and inter-cultural crossing as James Clifford says:

“The men of the village had all the busy restlessness of airline passengers in a transit lounge. Many of them had worked and travelled in the Sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf... a few had visited Europe; some of them had passports so thick, they opened out like ink-blackened concertinas.”
Like the rest of Ghosh’s novels especially *The Shadow Lines* coming and going, home and away, are constantly shifting in meaning and implication. If in 1980 Ghosh is away from Egypt, by 1988 he is at home there, and his Egyptian friends are abroad in Iraq.

Ghosh continues his direct concern with colonialism in his next novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome* wherein he returns to some of the themes first introduced in *The Circle of Reason*—science, reason, colonial power and expanded upon in *In an Antique Land*. These themes are combined with the technical skills used very effectively in *The Shadow Lines*, in which a tightly plotted narrative moves back and forth in space and time. *The Calcutta Chromosome* blends elements of the thriller, the detective novel, science fiction, ghost stories and historiography that deals with scientific knowledge in the form of colonial medicine in a colonial society and its reception by the colonised.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* too like Ghosh’s other fictional works defies the boundaries of genre. On the outside it bears the semblance of science fiction but a closer scrutiny would reveal history, scientific research, memory, technology and psychological ailments. Ghosh makes a unique experiment in *The Calcutta Chromosome* by combining various themes and techniques. He amalgamates here literature, science, philosophy, history, psychology and sociology.

Ghosh won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for science fiction for this novel, yet it is not a conventional science fiction. Unlike a conventional post-colonial novel Ghosh makes the natives travel to
the land of the colonists in *The Shadow Lines*, similarly in *The Calcutta Chromosome* the natives far exceed the colonisers in knowledge and scientific research and even guide Ronald Ross towards already reached conclusions for the furtherance of their own work.

The main concern of *The Calcutta Chromosome* is the colonised subaltern and how to give a place of prominence to him while at the same time highlighting his subaltern status. Even the irrationality of the subaltern through the sacrifice scene is used as a means of depicting the advancement in terms of scientific achievements.

Like all spiritual movements, the secret cult meditates on the scientific prospects for the transmigration of soul. In the words of Murugan, the chief connecting link who discovers the secret cult and puts the ends together: “information could be transmitted chromosomally, from body to body. When your body fails you, you leave it, you migrate you or at least a matching symptomology of yourself.” In short, “a technology that lets you improve on yourself in your next incarnation.”

Ghosh here wants to integrate the past and the present by highlighting the two main points that can be drawn from the book— the role of the colonist who exploits but is largely ignorant of local culture and knowledge and the very different attitudes to knowledge and research in East and West.

Although it is a work of science fiction situated in past as well as future, it is like Ghosh’s other novels a rewriting of
histories. Ghosh himself confesses. “I think it’s a pity that science fiction always seeks to project into the future: it’s just as interesting to project into the past.”

Ghosh has always looked into the past and viewed it from a different perspective: that of the obscure unwritten about colonised individual who is nevertheless a true representative of his times.

Amitav Ghosh’s next novel is his most commercially successful work to date. It marks a departure from the formal experimentation of In an Antique Land and The Calcutta Chromosome. Although it’s a grand historical romance of epic dimensions having a geographical canvas as vast as that of In an Antique Land, yet the narrative is straightforward and linear. In contrast to Ghosh’s previous fascination with the western diaspora in his previous novels, here he focuses on the Indian diaspora in South East Asia, and the novel centres around Burma. Ghosh’s earlier concerns with nationhood and diaspora and communities that transcend the shadow lines of political borders are extended further in this novel. Blood relations as well as ties formed by circumstances generate communities which intersect with and move beyond the social boundaries of race, class, religion and nationality. As in In an Antique Land, this is a polyglot diasporic community which is violently uprooted at the close of the novel because of war, and embarks on the long march from Burma and South East Asia to take refuge in India. It attempts to depict the impact of these upheavals brought about by the political problems of Burma and the tremors in British Empire on the subaltern as well as the elite. Thus Ghosh’s diligent recovery of the forgotten
episodes in History testifies his interest in the history and predicament of the subaltern.

A post-colonial epic of great magnitude, *The Glass Palace* is Ghosh’s rendition of the history of three South Asian countries, Myanmar, India and Malaysia, all sites of the British empire through the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries. Ghosh, the writer of histories, represents cultural crossovers, conflicts and the pervading concern for the fate of the migrant in today’s world. The dominating urge of the homeless migrant to form a nation is another major theme predominant in the novel. Beginning with major political upheaval in Burma, the novel proceeds to witness more such political mass-exodii and migrations.

There is a proliferation of characters; a prominent feature of Ghosh’s novels all connected by major cultural and political conflicts defying all borders of race and geography. Apart from diminishing all physical divisions, Ghosh celebrates and explores diversity, hybridity and difference. Journeying from an amorphous nationless state to that of conscious nationhood, the new migrant feels privileged and complete. The process involves a poignant scattering of people across man-made boundaries. The novel records the experiences of first such races living in British occupied colonies. Here the characters range from members of the Burmese royal family to commoners like Dolly, Rajkumar, Saya John and Uma. All the characters are united by the rough winds of historical displacement, and it is the commoners who play a more vital and significant role in the attempts at bridging borders.
Whereas characters like Rajkumar and Dolly are forever trying to establish their own identity in the face of British colonialism; others like Beni Prasad Dey and Saya John always want to conform to the coloniser’s mannerism and language. All this and Uma’s direct involvement in the freedom struggle after Beni Prasad Dey’s demise, make it a predominantly post-colonial novel. Through the experiences of the widely travelling Rajkumar, Ghosh describes the suffering and tribulations of the exiled victims of the breaking of nations and consequent displacement.

The most significant theme which forms a part of this post-colonial narrative is the resistance against imperialism. In dealing with this theme, Ghosh describes in detail the dilemma and inner conflict faced by the Indians especially officers, in the British army. Arjun and Hardayal express their scepticism and distrust of the very idea of nation. They wonder who are the people and the nation, they are fighting to defend. Though Hardayal had realized this ironical situation quite early in life; Arjun admits it after several initial setbacks. Arjun in the battle of Jitra is a confounded and emotionally distraught individual, who is caught between two worlds.

The Glass Palace illustrates Ghosh’s persisting style of picking up a period or situation in history and bringing it alive with a blend of fact and fiction. In this novel the crossing of boundaries is more on a physical level, when historical happenings take the characters across nations. The predicament of the Indian Army officers during the war reveals the insignificance of these divisions.
The Hungry Tide stands in immediate contrast to the grand and epical The Glass Palace. Although many of the narrative techniques of the previous novels like the use of flashback and memory, parallel narrative strands have been employed, its scope is less ambitious than his other works. The time frame of the novel extends to some thirty to forty years and in contrast to the previous novels the action is concentrated in one geographical area.

The Hungry Tide, which is Ghosh’s sixth novel, is set in the exquisite islands of Sunderbans in West Bengal. The place has been brought to life by Ghosh, the researcher’s description of minute details not just of the flora and the fauna, but even the local populace. No work by Ghosh can be complete without a dwelling deep into the history of the place where it is set. He traces the entire history of establishment of these islands, from the visionary Daniel Hamilton, to the nomenclature of the islands which are named after the various British relatives of Hamilton and discoverers. The Morichjhapi massacre is discussed in detail lending a touch of reality to the dreamy setting of the novel. The real life massacre is blended fantastically with the main storyline, involving an eclectic group of characters. The Morichjhapi incident dramatises the conflict between different ways of thinking and being, between the logic of modernity and the ensuing politics of ecology on the one hand, and the ways of life of indigenous peoples and their relationship to the environment. The novel explores the dilemmas resulting from the clash between different ways of viewing environmentalism and conservation. The novel raises the
question whether environmentalism is really worth it or is it merely a western hype.

The setting of the novel in the very heart of nature, lends predominance to the ecological perspective. This concern with the ecology of the geographical location makes it an ecological novel. Nature is shown as a hostile factor for human-beings, in the beginning of the novel, when Ghosh describes the Mangrove forests and the lurking dangers of tigers. At the very outset Ghosh warns us: “Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles.”

Despite all the hostility of the geographical setting, nature, for the inhabitants, is a bountiful mother. The representative of science Piya, besides providing minute details of the river dolphins, plays the role of an avid environmentalist. The dolphin that she studies represents the gentler aspects of nature and called as the ‘Messengers of God’. These beautiful creatures can predict even the slightest change in the behaviour of the sea, or big threats like cyclones. Science and nature are brought together by dreamers like Nirmal. He alludes to mythological stories in describing the birth of the river dolphin or the shushuk.

The subaltern figure is at the heart of the novel and the text focuses on his place in the scheme of things as determined by state authorities in Calcutta or New Delhi, or environmentalists in the West, or even in the minds of the representatives of scientific knowledge and modern education. As the novel reaches its climax it is environment itself which forms the most significant character in the novel. For it is the ‘tide country’- the novel’s central metaphor.
that constitutes the common point of reference that binds people like Piya, Kanai, and Fokir together. *The Hungry Tide* is a plea for the many different people who live on it and have a justified claim on it, a reassurance that their voice is being heard and they will not be sacrificed in the name of development or environmentalism.

The erasure of borders, Ghosh’s recurring theme is put to effect by nature. “The speciality of mangroves is that, they do not merely recolonize land; they erase time. Every generation creates its own population of ghosts.”

In this novel, Ghosh meditates on the ordinariness of borders, involving more personal divisions between men and women. Just as the tides of the sea blur the sense of permanent division between land and sea, Ghosh’s protagonists recognise the transience of these divisions between individuals irrespective of their social class. The borders between the familiar and the uncanny are very thin, and as the very setting of the novel shows, constantly shifting.

In this novel also Ghosh experiments with and melds various genres. Ghosh, the researcher is at his best in presenting an exquisitely researched account of the river dolphin. In the garb of fiction, it is a work of scientific and historical research and a very methodical and minute research at that.

Ghosh’s penchant for the creation of a Marxist society without any division and hierarchies as is visualised initially by Alu in *The Circle of Reason* is visible in this novel as well. Sir Daniel Hamilton’s vision of a world free of petty differences of caste and class gave birth to this group of islands. Ghosh’s
depiction of the eclectic society varies, not just in the backgrounds of the people, but also in religious beliefs.

Like his other works, in this novel too, Ghosh carries narratives in a parallel manner alternating between Nirmal’s diary which Kanai is reading and Piya’s scientific research adventures.

Through an analysis of Ghosh’s fictional works, the proposed work has tried to unravel the various thematic concerns that have recurred in his novels. The omnipresent travel motif and the desire to dream of a world free of divisions and separations have been inculcated in all his works, though in varying manners. The predicament of the migrating subaltern and the changing perspectives of the post colonial subject are discussed, involving a variety of characters in diverse and exotic geographical settings that change with each of his work. All his works characteristically defy any categorisation in terms of genre. His *Sea of Poppies* (2008) though is not included in the research work yet a reading of the same reveals his persistent post-colonial concerns. The book concerns the life of rural opium farmers in colonial India. Like always the travel motif is present here also, there the travel is through water and the victim of post-colonial predicament is the female subaltern lending the novel strong feminist undertones. The novel is the first among the proposed Ibis trilogy, the second part of which was published recently in June 2011 and is named *River of Smoke*. Set during the eve of the first Opium War between China and Britain in the 1830s, the journey of the characters is carried forward from where *Sea of Poppies* left it. Starting from Mauritius, the book is set mainly in the port-city of Canton.
called Guangzhou. Through an eclectic group of characters thrown together by circumstances and ambitious pursuits—and their struggle to cope with their losses, *River of Smoke* explores life in the foreign commercial settlement, and the politics of the opium trade. Ghosh once again displays his penchant for travel and crossing borders.

But this dissolution of border must not be misconstrued as an advocacy of non-existence of nation states. Ghosh himself says in an interview with Subash Jeyan: “What I would want for the world is a world of secular and equal nation states”\(^{19}\) According to him, nation states have advantages of their own. He says:

> “It’s only when you have been in places where the nation state doesn’t exist that you begin to see the advantages of the nation state. Especially the time spent in Burma was very instructive to me, because you see large swathes of the country side where the nation state has ceased to exist. And you know what’s taken its place? Not freedom and liberty you know. What takes its place are warlords. And I see to day that there is really a desperate struggle between forms of political order and essentially what is warlordism. ... To me the imperialistic ideal is absolutely loathsome. But similarly the ideal of religious extremism is simply not what I would want to live under.”\(^{20}\)

Ghosh’s choice of fiction, as the mode for his depiction of the subaltern life has come under repeated scrutiny. He expresses his love of fiction as a genre.

> “Another great hero of mine is Balzac and again you have exactly the same kind of engagement with the working class, the
prostitutes and similarly with the capitalists, the artists, the sculptors. You see this is exactly what I love about the novel. It allows you that range, those different forms of exploration. "21

To conclude the proposed research work, Ghosh’s fiction reveals recurrent patterns of the major themes of boundary crossing and travel which chiefly involve the subaltern class with each fiction involving mass movements of individuals. A vision of a borderless space where all divisions blur and disappear predominates all the themes. Ghosh diligently researches each situation and location, emphasising the history behind it, in all his fictional works which are difficult to classify.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


