Chapter 3

The Postcolonial Nation

Section I - History, Memory, Nation

Postcolonial critics have described third world literature as defined by history, nationalism, anti-colonial struggle and secularism. Certainly in the novels of Amitav Ghosh, specially in *The Shadow Lines* as well as *The Glass Palace* we see this happening. Ghosh, through his writing aims like other post-colonial writers “to restore historicity and density to the communities they describe, to explore forgotten, neglected, and once peripheral cultural archives.”

In all his novels Amitav Ghosh deals with history. He is also obsessed with journeys and border crossings. Borders are constructed and dissolved at the same time. While communities, groups and identities merge as well as get created, Ghosh also combines different disciplines to understand the notion of the nation and how it affects identities. History, Politics, Archaeology, Geography and Anthropology come together in different ways in his novels. The impact of imperialism and colonialism and the response of the colonized are focal points of his works. The past is studied along with the present. In fact Ghosh uses history as a tool “by which we can begin to make sense of – or at least come to terms with our troubling present.”

He writes about his homeland from the outside and therefore must necessarily “deal in broken
mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost.” Interestingly, *The Shadow Lines* can be seen as a story of mirror image relationships between people, places and periods. Time also moves back and forth and history is non-linear because it relies heavily on memory. In trying to understand and define the nation, Ghosh and other diasporic writers focus on the family and home as the central unit in their fictional world. It is home and homelessness, the going away and the returning to the home that moves his stories forward. It is from the home that counter-narratives of the nation arise.

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956 and from his childhood was exposed to stories of the Indian freedom movement and partition. He was also influenced by his father’s experience as an officer in the British-Indian Army during World War II. His mother’s experience of partition and his father’s account of the war against the Japanese in the East play a prominent role in both *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*. Thamma’s memory of Dacca in *The Shadow Lines* and Arjun’s experience in Burma and Malaya in *The Glass Palace* are culled from childhood memories. “He has used these memories to construct the concept of freedom and its numerous connotations in the modern world . . . .” Both the novels weave memory and history to examine the concept of nation. The novels also examine the concept of freedom by focusing on loss or exile. In his novels, the journey is more important and it helps unravel the personality of the traveler.
The Shadow Lines (1988) “is an acclaimed masterpiece and evokes postcolonial situations, cultural dislocations and anxieties in the period between 1962 and 1979. This post-national period is an important period in modern Indian history as it encompasses the Chinese aggression, the Indo-Pak war in 1965, the death of Nehru and the naxalite movement in Calcutta. At the same time it explores the pre-partition period and life of his grandmother in Dacca. The naxalite movement and the violence it unleashed does not find mention in the novel. However, communal violence, in the form of Hindu-Muslim riots in Calcutta and Dacca play a central role. Memory and friendship spans cultures and England and India are connected by the bonds of friendship between the Datta Chaudhuris and the Tresawsen - Price family.

The novel is divided into two parts, Going Away and Coming Home. In both the sections the past is brought to light by the unnamed narrator. Both the sections deal with family, friends and journeys. The journey is central to the novel and as the various characters move back and forth, private and public histories get reconstructed. Ghosh invents the native narrator situated within postcolonial India reflecting on events and persons that dominated his early life in Calcutta in the 1960s and then later in London. He also reveals aspects of history that impacted his family much before he was born. While he is the link between both the sections, every character is linked to him and each other. We are introduced to Tridib at the beginning of the novel as the son of Mayadebi, the narrator’s grand aunt. He was eight and the narrator so
identifies with him that he believes he was eight too. Though he had gone away to England in 1939, we see him mostly in Calcutta. “For years he had lived in their vast old family house in Ballygunge Place with his aging grandmother.” (The Shadow Lines 6) It was in Calcutta that he mentored the narrator. “Tridib was an archaeologist, he was not interested in fairylands: the one thing he wanted to teach me, he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision.” (SL 24) It was only through the imagination that one could be transported “to a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror.” (SL 29) Conversation with Tridib was always related to travel, always about faraway places. Tridib would recount stories about Lionel Tresawsen’s journey from a village in southern Cornwall to Fiji, Bolivia, the Guinea Coast, Ceylon and finally Calcutta. Tresawsen had travelled and worked at various colonial outposts. It was in Calcutta that he had met Tridib’s grandfather, Mr. Justice Chandrashekhar Datta-Choudhuri and the friendship they struck up was continued by their respective families.

*The Shadow Lines* is a generational story. It involves three generations of the narrator’s family spread over three cities – Dhaka, Calcutta and London. Characters belonging to different nationalities, religions and cultures co-exist in a close knit fictive world. As in *The Glass Palace*, families are linked to each other through marriage and travel. This seems to be a typical post-colonial phenomenon. Diaspora, movement, travel and dislocation are very much part of the post-colonial condition. Family ties and relationship are
formed with history in the background. The first generation meet and form
ties in pre-independence India. The second generation continues to maintain
ties across countries. We are given the details of the national movement
through Thamma. Thamma, the narrator’s grandmother is one of the chief
protagonists along with Tridib and the narrator. She is the link with colonial
India and her memories of the freedom struggle are vivid. She was brought up
in an environment of the terrorist movement in Bengal during British rule. She
recalls those days with fondness:

And then her voice slow and dreamy with the effort of
recollection, she told us about a boy who had been in college
with her in Dhaka, decades ago, in the early ‘twenties ….. He
always sat as far back as possible in the lecture room and since
he never said anything, nobody took much notice of him.

Then one morning, when they were halfway through a
lecture, a party of policemen arrived led by an English officer
and surrounded the lecture room. (SL 36 - 37)

As she narrated the story she fingered the necklace she always wore. This
action of hers foretells the actual giving away of the necklace later in 1965,
during the Indo-Pak war. As if the thought of fighting for the nation and the
martyrdom of the young freedom fighters had inspired her to do something
for her country. She was aware of the secret societies like Anushilan and
Jugantar that had sprouted all over Bengal at the time. It was the shy quiet
boy, who sat at the back, who was caught for planning the assassination of an
English magistrate in Khulna district. As was their practice, he was convicted and exiled to the Andamans like many before and after him. Thamma was caught up in the growing nationalist sentiment. “She was fascinated, long before that incident, by the stories she had heard about the terrorists: about the heroism of Khudiram Bose and the sad death of Bagha Jatin…” (SL 38) To her, in one corner of Dacca, freedom meant everything, even if it meant killing for it. “It was for our freedom: I would have done everything to be free.” (SL 39)

Thamma had lived in colonial and post-colonial India. Her husband was a functionary of empire and with him she had travelled to Burma. Like many Indians, both educated and uneducated, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled, her husband had travelled for employment. Having received a modern, western education he had become an engineer with the railways and had been posted to Burma. She had spent the first twelve years of her married life in places like Moulmein and Mandalay. Places that recur once again in The Glass Palace. The narrator’s father was born in Mandalay in 1925, but every year Thamma would return to Dhaka to visit her parents. However, her widowhood compelled her to return to Calcutta where she would spend the rest of her life. Then partition ensured that she could never return to her natal home. Her old home and her Jethamoshai and aunt were to become part of her past. But the past was constantly alive for her. When asked what they usually talked about, “did they have any views, for instance, on the recent war with
China? Oh we are not interested in anything as current as that, my grandmother would reply. The past is what we talk about.” (SL 127) Before independence and partition she could always go home or “come home to Dhaka whenever I wanted.” (SL 152) There was no paraphernalia of the nation-state like forms, or visas or passports that were required. But now, she would have to in her passport enter Dhaka as her place of birth. She lived in India and called herself an Indian, “and 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.” (SL 152) Her confusion echoed that of many like herself who were dispersed by colonialism and its aftermath.

One day a letter from Mayadebi arrived in the form of an invitation to visit her in Dhaka where her diplomat husband was now posted. But she was afraid. “I feel scared. Do you think it will be wise after all these years? It won’t be like home any more.” (SL 149) The memory of home was itself a fractured one because the ancestral home had been divided by a family feud. Thamma’s father and her uncle, Jethamoshai, “were both lawyers and their quarrels took a particularly vicious legalistic form, in which very little was actually said.” (SL 122) Interestingly the brothers, like our political leaders, especially Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah are lawyers, who preside over the divisions of the ancestral home. It is as if the partitioning of the house foretells the eventual partitioning of the nation.
Soon things came to such a pass that they decided to divide the house with a wooden partition wall: there was no other alternative. But the building of the wall proved to be far from easy because the two brothers, insisting on their rights with a lawyer-like precision, demanded that the division be exact down to the minutest detail. (SL 123)

The splitting of the house and later splitting of the country, as it assumed nationhood, is symptomatic of the split “perceptions of post-colonial cultures.” Thamma had seen how a house had been partitioned, with a wall being built right through it. But how were countries partitioned? How would she know the difference where India ended and East Pakistan began? Would she be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. “When my father laughed and said, why, did she really think the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas.” (SL 151) If in the modern world there were no visible or distinguishable borders and everything remained the same then “What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn’t something in between?” (SL 151) Partition really begins in the minds of men and in the desire for a nation-state citizens are often made to sacrifice their homelands. This leaving behind did not always ensure a new beginning. And every beginning was tinged with sadness, bitterness and sometimes hatred as the communal riots that happened at regular intervals indicated.
“Historical events have provided Ghosh with raw material against which he studies the historical truths like the meaning of nationalism and political freedom in the modern world.” His characters reconstruct the past in order to deal with the present. Time moves back and forth, just as the characters do. Time, like national borders is fluid and porous and past and present must co-exist in order to construct identities. That nationalism is a fictive construct comes through in the episode narrating her preparation and journey to Dhaka. Though she longs to come home she is actually a foreigner in a foreign country. The country too is new. Dhaka of 1964 is no longer the Dhaka of pre-partition days. “The driver pointed out the sights to my grandmother as they went by: the Plaza Picture Palace with a fifteen-foot hoarding of Ben-Hur hanging outside, the Gulshan Palace Hotel, Ramna Race Course, and so on. It’s all wonderful, she said. But where’s Dhaka?” (SL 206)

When she finally enters the old dilapidated sections of the city does the past catch up with her. But:

She hates nostalgia, my grandmother, she has spent years telling me that nostalgia is a weakness, a waste of time, that it is everyone’s duty to forget the past and look ahead and get on with building the future – so now slowly, she reminds herself of the duty that has brought her here, her duty to take her uncle away from his past and thrust him into the future. (SL 208)
But it is not to be. The past has a tenacious hold on the present and can even deny the future. Thamma’s group gets caught in the communal violence that engulfed both India and East Pakistan after the Hazrat Bal episode in Srinagar. Tridib, Jethamoshai and Khalil the rickshaw puller are killed. Rivers of blood despoil the homeland and its memories. When an angry mob surrounded Khalil’s rickshaw, May rushed to save Ukil babu and Khalil. Tridib followed her. May was untouched because she was a white woman but Tridib and Khalil died while trying unsuccessfully to save Jethamoshai. But their sacrifice revealed “that invisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments.” (SL 236)

Ghosh also complicates the notion of family and subsequently that of the nation. As mentioned earlier, the house is divided by the brothers themselves much before the actual partition of India. Thamma having experienced the bitterness between two families was always “a little nervous when she heard people saying: We’re like brothers.” (SL 123) Ghosh here, critiques the “nationalistic idiom of brotherhood.” Moreover we see Jethamoshai welcoming Muslim refugees into his home so as to not have to hand over his brother’s share of the house to the rightful claimants. The concept of brotherhood is turned on its head, just like the upside down house of Thamma’s childhood memories. At the same time we learn that it was not only Bengali Hindus who became refugees at partition, but Bihari and Bengali
Muslims as well who had to flee from places like Murshidabad in Bengal and Motihari in Bihar. Saifuddin, the mechanic wants to know whether Tridib had ever been to Motohari. Like Thamma, he too has fond memories of his birthplace, but “there’s a lot of trouble there now.” (SL 209)

Ghosh reveals the “festering malevolence” (SL 214) in the minds of men that ultimately leads to violence in the nation-state. It is this malevolence that claims innocent victims.

In making Thamma one of the chief protagonists, one who makes a determined bid to reclaim the past and intervene in making a difference to the future. Ghosh provides us with a gendered narrative of history. She is the matriarch and it is her line of the family as well as that of her sister’s that we read about and identify with. Similarly it is the displacement of the ordinary middle class Hindu, along with poor Muslims that is highlighted. The fear and havoc that riots create are revealed by Ghosh when he portrays the anatomy of a riot. After the sacred relic disappeared from the Hazratbal Mosque in Srinagar on December 1963, there was no violence in Kashmir though there were black flag demonstrations. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs protested together in a show of unity, in the tradition of our “syncretic civilization.” Ghosh gives credit for this to the leadership of Maulana Masoodi, “an authentic hero, forgotten and unsung today as any purveyor of sanity inevitably is in the hysteria of our subcontinent.” (SL 225 – 226) Protests
spread to West and East Pakistan even as the sacred relic was restored.

Ironically the riots in Khulna erupted and spread to Dhaka just about the time Srinagar celebrated the recovery of the relic. In Dhaka, Tridib, Thamma, Mayadebi, May, Robi, Jethamoshai and Khalil were among those caught up in the riots that killed three of them. While in Kashmir Maulana Masood could quell the flames, in Dhaka, on that fateful morning there was no one to do so. Khalil, Tridib and May could not save Jethamoshai, and Khalil and Tridib had to be sacrificed. While Srinagar and East Pakistan were in turmoil there was hardly any reference to any trouble in the Calcutta newspapers. A conspiracy of silence prevailed. Intellectuals and journalists concerned themselves with political events and power struggles. The life and death of ordinary humans did not concern them. Therefore Ghosh moves away from documented history to the world of stories. “Ghosh finds in the spoken word, which relies on the dynamics of memory, a way of recapturing the foreclosures and absences of written records. These alternative accounts can be recovered only through individual and communal memory, in reminiscence and in rumor.” 9 Thamma and Tridib are the chief narrators of this alternative version. Ironically, Thamma disliked Tridib, who according to her was a ‘loafer’ and a ‘wastrel’. She wanted her grandson to have nothing to do with him. While Thamma stands for the nation as seen from the domestic sphere, Tridib symbolizes the various imaginings of the nation. If the nation is an imagined community, as defined by Benedict Anderson, then, it must be an imagined mosaic of the little histories along with the grand narratives.
Even though the focus is on Thamma and her life and family in Calcutta the story assumes a transnational dimension with the inclusion of the Tresawsens and the Prices. Blood relatives merge with those forged by friendship and intimacy. In London too, historic events act as a background and World War II brings a class conscious city onto the streets and into the underground. The war, Nazi fascism, the persecution of the Jews form the backdrop of friendship between ordinary humans across class and culture. The war precedes the division of the subcontinent but it will ensure the loss of empire for Britain. Similarly Tridib saw May Price as a baby in 1939 when he went to England and they met in India again. By then love had blossomed only to be cut short by Tridib’s unfortunate death in Dhaka. May Price, the English girl is the perfect foil for Ila. May falls in love with Tridib, Ila’s uncle and Ila falls in love with Nick, May’s brother. While May is comfortable with her identity, Ila is not. While May visits India, Ila wants to run away from India. Since childhood she had been travelling all over the world and her western ways hold an exotic appeal for the boy narrator. Unlike Tridib and his protégé, the narrator, Ila does not travel with her imagination, as a result she does not belong anywhere. “Tridib often said of her, the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all.” (21)
She is part of the bourgeoisie elite, western educated, who rejects her roots and relatives in India. She seeks an identity in England and leaves India hoping that by physically living there and merging with a western lifestyle she would be accepted. She marries Nick, the same Nick Price who “was ashamed to be seen by his friends, walking home with an Indian.” (SL 76) Ila voluntarily seeks exile but is unable to form real ties and is therefore rootless and lost. Tridib on the other hand lives in his imagination. He stands for a rich, eventful past whereas Ila symbolizes the materialist present. Tridib’s was a desire to live life to the full, a hunger for knowledge and a desire to connect with people, a desire “that carried one beyond the limits of one’s mind to other times and other places and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror.” (SL 29) While Ila “lived in a present which was like an airlock in a canal, shut away from the tidewaters of the past and the future by steel floodgates,” (30) the narrator realizes that what Tridib wants to teach him “was to use imagination with precision,” (SL 24) “which means to be able to recognize the contemporareity of the past, to be able to see different times and places as inextricably intertwined with one’s own.” 10

Ghosh posits the narrow nationalism of Thamma with the cosmopolitanism of Tridib. Tridib’s imagination helps him to connect with people, build ties of empathy and friendship. Political frontiers are fragile and exclusive national pride and militant nationalism is destructive. Like Tagore,
Ghosh advocates a humanism that is universal and where love and friendship are the means of survival in a violent world.

**Section II - Locating Dislocation**

Historically the term ‘diaspora’ was used to describe the dispersal of the Jews across the world. ‘Diaspora’ described their collective exile from their homeland. Today this is used in a larger context to signify the displacement of groups of people due to a variety of reasons. This dismemberment from the homeland of large populations in Asia and Africa has been historically traced to imperialism and more specifically, British imperialism. Most certainly in South and South East Asia colonialism impacted the migration of large populations. “The export of Indian slaves, the expulsion of convicts from the subcontinent to penal settlements in various parts of the Indian ocean, and the recruitment of laborers through indenture during the colonial period are cases in point.”¹¹ It was not just convicts who were transported overseas but political activists charged with sedition who were imprisoned beyond the boundaries of the motherland. Balgangadhar Tilak was incarcerated in Mandalay and Veer Savarkar at the cellular jail in Andaman. Much before them Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last emperor of India was exiled to Rangoon, where he died and was buried far away from his beloved Delhi.
Coinciding with British colonialism in South Asia, “South Asian immigrants, since the early nineteenth century, comprised various groups including traders, imperial auxiliaries, ‘free’ immigrants and long term immigrant professionals.” At the same time changes in economic policy, land disputes and the requirement of professionals led to the movement of people within India. As will be seen in the two novels of Amitav Ghosh taken up for study, people migrate within the country as well as outside it. Of course, the march of colonization saw the overthrow of monarchies and dynasties in India as well as in Burma, as depicted in The Glass Palace. Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor was exiled to Rangoon and King Thebaw and his family were exiled from Mandalay to Ratnagiri. The British policy of divide and rule first resulted in the division of Bengal, in 1905, into East and West Bengal and then the final trauma of partition in 1947 displaced and uprooted thousands. This displacement and loss of homeland finds an echo in The Shadow Llines. So in both The Glass Palace and The Shadow Lines, Amitav Ghosh focuses on dislocation as a byproduct of history and more specifically of colonialism.

A brief look at Ghosh’s life will give us a glimpse of not only his ouvre but the way in which journeys and migration have impacted his life and literary output. Ghosh was born on July 11, 1956 in Calcutta. He spent his childhood in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and then St. Stephens College, Delhi. He studied at Oxford where he was awarded a D.Phil in Social Anthropology.
He traveled to Egypt as a researcher where he pursued his studies in Social Anthropology. In 1999, he joined the faculty at Queen’s College, City University of New York, as Distinguished Professor in Comparative Literature. He is married to American author Deborah Baker and now divides his time between New York and Goa where he has homes. Ghosh’s father Lieutenant Colonel Shailendra Chandra Ghosh was an officer in the 12th Frontier Force Regiment of the British Indian Army and was in General Slim’s fourteenth army during the Burma campaign. Ghosh’s uncle Jagat Chandra Datta lived in Rangoon and Moulmein. According to Ghosh, “the seed of this book was brought to India long before my own lifetime by my father and my uncle, the late Jagat Chandra Datta.” (The Glass Palace 549).

Ghosh’s peripatetic life does find parallel in the innumerable journeys that his characters make in his novels. His life as a student and teacher in India, his travels across the globe as a researcher, his interest in social anthropology and his fascination with history are revealed in his novels and travelogue. A much traveled social anthropologist, Ghosh’s journeys allow him to keenly observe and study economic and social history across countries. The themes of exile, displacement, departures and arrivals recur over and over again in his fictional writings. The Glass Palace captures the postcolonial concerns of loss, displacement, dislocation and exile as it recounts the fall of the Burmese monarchy and the intertwining stories of those connected with it. The novel begins with the distant booming of guns, heralding the arrival of the
British to upper Burma. The person who announced the impending arrival of the English is Rajkumar, “a kalaa from across the sea- an Indian, with teeth as white as his eyes and skin the color of polished hardwood.” (GP 3)

Rajkumar is an orphan so also is Saya John who was brought up by Catholic priests in Malacca. Saya John is half Chinese. Ma Cho, the half Indian food stall owner also does not appear to have any relatives. Rajkumar’s family home was in the port of Chittagong, “hut his father had quarreled with their relatives and moved the family away, drifting slowly down the coast, peddling his knowledge of figures and languages, settling eventually in Akyub, the principal port of Arakan- that tidewater stretch of coast where Bengal and Burma collide in a whirlpool of unease.”(GP 13). Rajkumar knew nothing more about his family except that his family name was Raha. At the outset he begins his journey as an orphan and his travels into Burma and outward underpin this post colonial texts. The Shadow Lines, the other text being studied is also preoccupied with journeying. Traveling across geographical terrains with historic events in the background ensure a retrieval of the past and a moving forward as well.

Rajkumar was named prince but was a pauper. However, he was determined not to remain one. Many years later, while proposing to Dolly he tells her, “I have no family, no parents, no brothers, no sisters, no fabric of small memories from which to cut a large cloth. People think this sad and so it
is. But it means also that I have no option but to choose my own attachments.”

(*GP* 147) He had a hunger for success and his first job in Mandalay was at a food stall. Right at the beginning of the novel we are introduced to three characters, neither of whom is completely Burmese. They are outsiders settling into Burma. Rajkumar is the pauper who will become rich as a prince, and Saya John a successful contractor. Rajkumar’s advent coincides with the British invasion and he joins the crowds ransacking the royal palace. With the Burmese army having surrendered, the British were the new rulers of the kingdom. We are shown the royal response:

The Queen was screaming, shaking her fist. ‘Get out of here. Get out.’ Her face was red, mottled with rage, her fury caused as much by her own impotence as by the presence of the mob in the palace. A day before, she could have had a commoner imprisoned for so much as looking at her directly in the face. Today all the city’s scum had come surging into the palace and she was powerless to act against them. (*GP* 33)

The powerful had suddenly become powerless, but Queen Supayalat held her own and the person who was most feared and hated by the people was being seen differently. “Now through the alchemy of defeat she was transformed in their eyes. It was as though a bond had been conjured into existence that had never existed before. For the first time in her reign, she had become what a sovereign should be the proxy of her people.” (*GP* 34)
In defeat the royal family become one with the people. Finally as a former queen she was being entrusted by her helpless subjects, ‘with the burden of their inarticulate defiance.’ (*GP* 34) The Burmese knew that with defeat would come displacement. They would become a subject race.

In the palace the girls who looked after the princesses were nearly all orphans. “They’d been purchased by the Queen’s agents in small Kachin, Wa and Shan villages along the kingdom’s northern frontiers.” (*GP* 20) From the outer fringes of Burma they were transported to the royal fort in Mandalay and now with the British invasion everything would change for them. Likewise “Dolly had been brought to Mandalay at a very early age from the frontier town of Lashio: she had no memory of her parents or family.” (*GP* 20) It is this young orphan girl, poor and unskilled who will leave a lasting impression on the reader. Though a servant girl she reigns over Rajkumar’s heart. Her quiet dignity, beauty and fortitude imbues her with heroic qualities.

In world literature, exile has been a key theme, especially in epic narratives. It has been associated with the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires. Overthrow of dynasties and political wranglings have led to the exile of many a king. In the Mahabharata and Ramayana, exile plays a key role in unraveling the mysteries of human existence. It is a necessary condition that puts humans to the test. However, exile in the classics is marked by a
triumphant return home after heroic exploits. In modern literature, exile has been shown to be an outcome of war, colonialism, imperialism and totalitarian regimes. These have resulted in large scale human dislocation, both forced and voluntary, resulting in the severance from homeland, native culture and traditions. “The condition of exile involves the idea of a separation and distancing from either a literal homeland or from a cultural and ethnic origin.”  

As shown in the beginning of this section, ‘diaspora’ has been associated with the exile of the Jews from their homeland. “Diaspora, the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions, is a central historical fact of colonization.” Such large scale movement of people, both colonizers and the colonized created a crisis of identity in both. Writers, both colonial and postcolonial have problematized the idea of ‘exile’ with reference to home, community, religion and nation. 

_Gora and Kim_ take up issues of ethnicity and identity faced by their protagonists. As we see in Ghosh’s works the location of home and nation are problematized. Another form of exile takes place when colonized people are forced to follow a colonial educational curricula that exiles them from their culture, traditions and mother-tongue. Those who acquire such an education move up in the colonial class system and are often uprooted from their villages and towns to either metropolitan cities or to far flung colonial outposts in the country. This kind of migration is seen in both _The Shadow Lines_ and _The Glass Palace_. _The Shadow Lines_, in the words of Suvir Kaul is about “Growing Up Inter/National”  

In _The Glass Palace_ Beni Prasad Dey
the collector of Ratnagiri is a member of the hallowed ICS and is posted out of Bengal to the Western coast of India. His wife Uma accompanies him. As a civil service officer he emulates his English bosses in food, clothes, language. In fact his lifestyle is modeled on that of the British and he expects Uma to do the same.

The Collector who arrived in 1905 was an Indian, a man by the name of Beni Prasad Dey. He was in early forties, and an outsider to the Ratnagiri region: he was a Bengali from Calcutta, which lay diagonally across the map of India, at the other end of the country. Collector Dey was slim and aquiline, with a nose that ended in a sharp, beak-like point. He dressed in finely-cut Savile Row suites and wore gold-rimmed eye glasses. (GP 104)

Exile, dislocation and diaspora are pervasive themes in The Glass Palace and right at the beginning of the novel we are introduced to Rajkumar who has been dislocated into an alien environment. King Thebaw, his wife Queen Supalayat, their daughters and their maids including Dolly are forced into exile by a change of power. In the complex plot of the novel, spread over two centuries, three generations and spread over South and South-East Asia, and America, all occurrences are interconnected around the central theme of exile. For Thebaw and his family, exile is catastrophic. For Rajkumar and Saya John, colonialism and its commercial requirements come as a boon.
They move further away from home in search of a livelihood and prosperity. Home is wherever there is a livelihood. Economic activity helps forge kinship ties. Destiny brings Rajkumar to Mandalay. “It was chance alone that was responsible for Rajkumar’s presence in Mandalay.” (GP 4) He, who had been so rich in family, was alone now, with a Khalasi’s apprenticeship for his inheritance. But he was not afraid, not for a moment. His was the sadness of regret – that they had left him so soon, so early, without tasting the wealth or rewards that he knew, with utter certainty, would one day be his.” (GP 14)

Rajkumar befriends Saya John, a contractor of Malay-Chinese origin and starts working with him and learning about the teak business. Both prosper, thanks to the British demand for teak. Their hard work and canny entrepreneurial talent turn lumber into gold for them. To them colonization is a boon. However, British greed for wood turns against the Burmese royal family. Mathew, Saya John’s son tells Rajkumar, “The English are preparing to send a fleet up the Irrawaddy. There’s going to be a war. Father says they want all the teak in Burma. The King won’t let them have it, so they’re going to do away with him.” (GP 15) However, despite the king’s best efforts, the British entered Mandalay and the royal family is exiled to Ratnagiri, an isolated part, over a hundred miles south of Bombay, in India. This remote town was not only far away from Burma, but during the fierce monsoons was practically cut-off from Bombay, the Presidency Capital. To be sent away to a place they had never heard of before was a double banishment. Not only are
they being exiled but none among their many courtiers are willing to accompany them. “….. there were no volunteers.” “They were neither the King’s friends nor his confidants and it was not in their power to lighten the weight of his crown. The burdens of kingship were Thebaw’s alone, solitude not the least among them.” (GP 41) While in power the king and the royal family had lived behind high walls, away from the prying eyes of the people. Out of power, it is the ordinary people who feel for him and not his ministers and courtiers. The only volunteers are Evelyn, Augusta and Dolly, “who were orphans; they alone of the palace retainers had nowhere else to go, no families, no other means of support. What could they do but go with the King and the Queen?’ (GP 42) Cut off from their homes and villages, the girls had no option but to accompany the royal family to ensure their security and livelihood. Their poverty and orphan status force exile on them. It is many years later when Rajkumar asks Dolly to marry him, that she returns to Mandalay, much against her wishes. Dolly at first refuses to marry Rajkumar because she fears another change of environment. At Ratagiri she confesses to Uma, “I’ve lived here nearly twenty years, and this is home to me now.” (GP 112) She doesn’t want to go back because:

If I went to Burma now I would be a foreigner – they would call me a kalaa like they do to Indians – a trespasser, an outsider from across the sea. I’d find that very hard, I think. I’d never be able to rid myself of the idea that I would have to leave again one day, just as I had to before. You would
understand if you knew what it was like when we left. (GP 113)

And truly she and Rajkumar are forced to leave Rangoon after the Japanese invasion and the loss of their son Neel.

_The Glass Palace_ recounts the exilic conditions of a number of minor characters, Saya John, Ma Cho, Uma, Dinu, Alison and Neel among others. Saya John is “brought up by Catholic priests, in a town called Malacca.” (GP 10) The priests were also from different parts of the world brought together by the civilizing mission of colonialism. “These men were from everywhere – Portugal, Macao, Goa.” (GP 10) They also renamed him along with giving him a new religion. From Malacca, Saya John left for Singapore to work as an orderly in a military hospital where he encountered many Indians:

‘The soldiers there were mainly Indians and they asked me this very question: how is it that you, who look Chinese and carry a Christian name, can speak our language? When I had told them how this had come about, they would laugh and say, you are a _dhobi ka kutta_ – a washerman’s dog – _na ghar ka na ghat ka_ – you don’t belong anywhere, either by the water or on land, and I’d say, yes that is exactly what I am’. (GP 10)
This ‘no where man’ state is a consequence of exile during colonial times and points to the crisis of identity and hybridization as a result of displacement.

The novel is about movement. Towards and away from The Glass Palace in Mandalay. Dolly and Rajkumar’s family and friends crisscross the globe. Uma, after being widowed, leaves Ratnagiri and travels to Calcutta, Europe, England, America and Malaysia. Saya John’s son Mathew marries an American, Elsa who he meets during his sojourn in America and Neel Raha travels to Calcutta to produce a film where he meets Uma’s niece Manju and falls in love with her. Arjun, Uma’s nephew becomes an officer in the British Indian Army. “The first months of the war found Arjun and his battalion on the frontiers of Afghanistan.” (GP 312) And from there his battalion travelled to Saharanpur and then to Singapore in the eastern theatre to try and blunt the Japanese invasion. The novel works at several levels. As a family saga, a political novel with its focus on the nationalist movement in India and later in Myanmar, and then as a story of exile. The most poignant and tragic aspect of the novel is the story of Thebaw and his exile in Ratnagiri. The novel begins with the shattering of the kingdom of The Glass Palace. It traces through the fall of a kingdom and the flight of its king, the impact of colonialism and imperialism on the lives of the silent majority. It is not a grand narrative but an extra-ordinary story of ordinary people.
The Glass Palace has history as its backdrop. But it is not a story of kings and empires but of those who wait on them, the cogs in the wheel of empire. It is subaltern history at its best. Royalty is stripped of grandeur. The British everywhere refer to him as ex-king Thebaw. They refuse to ‘shiko’ to him and Queen Supalayat. But it is ironical that though he is made to leave Mandalay on bullock carts and humiliated before his subjects, “The King was greeted with gun salute and a guard of honor” (GP 61) in Ratnagiri. To compound the irony of the situation, the exiled Thebaw and his entourage arrive in a ship named after Robert Clive, the one who laid the foundation of the British empire in India. But in a twist of fate, Thebaw finds himself, even as he loses his kingdom. He retreats into a shell, refuses to step out of Outram House and spends all his time looking out at the sea. His binoculars are his constant companions. He is the first to inform the city of impending storms and dangers. “Unseen on his balcony Thebaw became the town’s guardian spirit, a king again.” (GP 80) But in reality his every movement was monitored by the British. He had to secure permission to run his household and always had to get clearance for any expenditure. But his generous spirit would not be restricted. According to Mumtaz Naglekar, grand-daughter of the former Vazir, Thebaw would regularly give away precious stones and artifacts because he had no money to offer as gift. Thebaw was obsessed with mirrors and gifted several to temples like the Bhagwati temple which his daughters frequented. The Muralidhar, Rameshwar and Vittal temples in
Ratnagiri also received donations from Thebaw. He is shown as one who cared for the people of Ratnagiri:

The King knew what people said of him in Ratnagiri, and if he was alarmed by the powers attributed to him, he was also amused and not a little flattered. In small ways he tried to do his duty by the role that had been thrust on him. Sometimes women would stand on their roofs, holding high their newborn children in the hope of attracting the imagined benedictions of his gaze. He would keep his glasses trained on these credulous mothers for several minutes at a time. It seemed a very small thing to ask for and why should he not grant those things that were in his power to give? (GP 78)

Deprived of royal duties, he busied himself with Buddhist rituals and practices. He got a Buddhist temple built at Outram House and repeatedly urged the British to allow him to conduct the ‘ear-boring’ ceremony of his daughters. This ceremony is considered “the most important and necessary event in the life of a girl of the Buddhist religion.” 16 Lack of funds, British bureaucracy and cultural ignorance ensured that the ceremony to mark the coming of age of a Burmese girl was delayed and could only be performed in the 24th, 23rd, 20th and 19th year of the princesses’ lives. The rare visit he made
to a dhobi’s house invited immediate censure from the commissioner. Thebaw suffered not only political exile but his social life was severely curtailed.

Queen Supalayat, however, led a life of illusion and she remained exiled from reality. Refusing to accept her change of status she expected to be treated as a monarch and would not be cowed down by the British. Her demeanour remained unchanged throughout and she considered everyone to be her subjects.

The Queen, on the other hand, was exactly where she was meant to be: sitting rigidly upright on a tall chair, with her back to the door. This, Uma knew, was a part of the set order of battle: visitors were expected to walk in and seat themselves on low chairs around Her Highness, with no words of greetings being uttered on either side. This was the Queen’s way of preserving the spirit of Mandalay protocol: since the representatives of the British were adamant in their refusal to perform the shiko, she in turn made a point of not acknowledging their entry into her presence. (GP 106)

Queen Supayalat remains a symbol of resistance throughout the novel. Recorded history supports this depiction of a strong willed queen. In fact Ghosh also portrays her as one who knows her mind and brooks no opposition. “Of all the princesses in the palace, Supayalat was by far the fiercest and most willful, the only one who could match her mother in guile
and determination.” (GP 38) She too indulges in the politics of exile and banishment at the court level and in family matters.

In order to protect him from her family she stripped her mother of her powers and banished her to a corner of the palace, along with her sisters and co-wives. Then she set about ridding Thebaw of his rivals. She ordered the killing of every member of the Royal family who might ever be considered a threat to her husband. Seventy-nine princes were slaughtered on her orders, some of them new-born infants, and some too old to walk. To prevent the spillage of royal blood she had had them wrapped in carpets and bludgeoned to death. The corpses were thrown into the nearest river. (GP 38 - 39)

She has also been held responsible for the war against the British and preventing Thebaw from signing a treaty with the British.

The war too was largely of Supayalat’s making: it was she who had roused the great council of the land, the Hluttdaw, when the British began to issue their ultimatums from Rangoon. The King had been of a mind for appeasement; the Kinwun Mingyi, his most trusted minister, had made an impassioned appeal for peace and he was tempted to give in. Then Supayalat had risen from her place and gone slowly to the centre of the council. It was the fifth month of her
pregnancy and she moved with a great deliberation, with a slow, shuffling gait, moving her tiny feet no more than a few inches at a time, a small, lonely figure in that assembly of turbaned noblemen.

The chamber was lined with mirrors. As she approached its centre, an army of Supayalats seemed to materialize around her; they were everywhere, on every shard of glass, thousands of tiny women with their hands clasped over their swollen waists. She walked up to the stout old Kinwun Mingyi, sitting sprawled on his stool. Thrusting her swollen belly into his face, she said, ‘Why, grandfather, it is you who should wear a skirt and own a stone for grinding face powder.’ Her voice was a whisper but it had filled the room.

(GP 39)

Her obduracy had ensured the collapse of the monarchy and they had been shipped from Ratnapura to Ratnagiri where they spent thirty one years as prisoners. The last of the Konbaung dynasty, Thebaw and the royal family lived in penury while the British plundered the treasury and the countryside, rich in teak and gemstones.

Though the British maintained that Thebaw and his family were the only prisoners, the British had incarcerated one more member, Moung Lat, for
fifty four years, in Cannanore, North Kerala. Moung Lat was a cousin of King Thebaw, with equal claim to the throne. He escaped Supayalat’s rage because at the time of Thebaw’s accession, he was in British custody. He tried to launch a guerilla war in the jungles of Toungoo, then under British control. In 1873 he was arrested, taken to Aden and then transferred to Cannanore in 1875. He lived quietly, fell in love with Eveline, the elder daughter of an Australian widow, Henrietta Godfrey. On 29th April 1878 they were married at St. John’s church, Cannanore. The Prince was not allowed to wear the traditional Burmese royal dress and finally wore a suit. His son who died six days after birth was buried on 19th August 1887 at the same church. The Prince and his family were then moved to Bangalore. In 1927, the government released the Prince and after fifty four years he returned to Rangoon on 28th January 1928 with his family. He died on 20th January 1936. However, during the Japanese invasion in World War II the family had to return to Madras, exiled once again. Just as Thebaw’s family suffered poverty and humiliation so did Moung Lat. Same was the fate with Bahadur Shah, the last Mughal emperor of India. Exile, loss and loneliness was the lot of kings and queens in South and South- East Asia, wherever the British set foot on.

The woman characters are pivotal to the novel and link the three generations together as well as take the plot forward. Amitav Ghosh portrays them as independent, intelligent, free-spirited and fearless. Perhaps the winds of change sweeping across the country with the rise in national consciousness
resulted in the depiction of the women as individuals with minds of their own.

In an age of purdah they step out of their homes and travel across countries.

Though circumstance, more than choice, dictates their action, they make
independent decisions and do not look back. Uma is not content with just
being the collector’s wife. She refuses to be moulded by her ICS husband and
is more influenced by her friendship with Dolly. Unlike her husband, whose
range of knowledge was limited to England and Europe, Uma’s knowledge of
Burma prevented the collapse of the first meeting between King Thebaw and
the collector. It is she who recognized the Pagan Pagoda and impressed Queen
Supayalat. “‘Oh?’ the Queen nodded: she was impressed by the way the
young woman had intervened to save the situation. Self possession was a
quality she always admired. No, this Mrs. Dey had done well to speak when
she did.” (GP 108)

Uma’s anti-colonial instincts are sharpened by her interaction with the royal
family, especially Dolly.

One night, plucking up her courage, Uma remarked: ‘One
hears some awful things about Queen Supayalat.’

‘What?’ (GP 113)

‘That she had a lot of people killed … in Mandalay.’

Dolly made no answer but Uma persisted. ‘Doesn’t it frighten
you.’ She said, ‘to be living in the same house as someone like
that?’
Dolly was quiet for a moment and Uma began to worry that she’d offended her. Then Dolly spoke up. ‘You know, Uma,’ she said in her softest voice. ‘Every time I come to your house, I notice that picture you have, hanging by your front door….’ ‘Of Queen Victoria, you mean?’ ‘Yes.’ Uma was puzzled. ‘What about it?’ ‘Don’t you sometimes wonder how many people have been killed in Queen Victoria’s name? It must be millions, wouldn’t you say? I think I’d be frightened to live with one of those pictures.’ A few days later Uma took the picture down and sent it to the Cutchery, to be hung in the Collector’s office. (GP 114)

Through the Queen, Ghosh critiques enlightenment thought and institutions. It is Queen Supayalat who tells the collector in no uncertain terms that notions of English superiority are false. That the West is as cruel and barbaric as the East. That there is no rule of law for the ‘other’, it only exists for the British, and that in carrying out the bidding of the English masters, the collector sahib is nothing but a glorified servant.

A tiny trilling laugh escaped the Queens lips. ‘Collector sahib, Sawant is less a servant than you. At least he has no delusions about his place in the world.’
The Collector started at her. ‘I am frankly amazed.’ He said, ‘that Your Highness should choose to make light of such a scandal.’

‘Scandal?’ The Queen’s eyes hardened as she repeated the English word. ‘You have the insolence to come here and speak to us of scandals? There is no scandal in what my daughter has done. The scandal lies in what you have done to us; in the circumstances to which you have reduced us; in our very presence here. What did my daughters ever do, Collector – sahib, that they should have to spend their lives in this prison? Did they commit a crime? Were they tried or sentenced? We have heard so many lectures from you and your colleagues on the subject of barbarity of the Kings of Burma and the humanity of the Angrez; we were tyrants you said, enemies of freedom, murderers. The English alone understand liberty, we were told; they do not put kings and princes to death; they rule through laws. If that is so, why has King Thebaw never been brought to trial? Where are these laws that we hear of? Is it a crime to defend your country against an invader? Would the English not do the same?’ (GP 150)

Burma had not been exposed to Western ways and the Royal family were fiercely proud of being Burman. They spoke Hindustani fluently but found that the Indian civil servants, who were often Parsis or Bengalis could not
speak Hindustani fluently. These brown sahibs knew English but not
Hindustani. They were Macaulay’s children while the Burmese had remained
free from contamination.

Uma, not content with being a collector’s wife chooses to walk out of
the suffocating marriage. Her widowhood kept her away from society for a
while but an invitation from Dolly salvaged the situation. Thus began her
journeys across the world. Dolly too moves from Mandalay to Ratnagiri and
then after marriage to Rajkumar to Rangoon. Though Rajkumar constantly
made trips to India and Malaya, Dolly stayed put in Rangoon. “It had been
hard enough to leave Ratnagiri to come to Burma; she was not in a hurry to go
anywhere else.” (GP 195 - 196) But the war forces her and Rajkumar to leave
Rangoon. As Rajkumar tells her:

‘Yes. But its hard, Dolly- its hard to think of leaving:. Burma has
given me everything I have……But if there’s one thing I’ve learnt in
my life, Dolly, it is that there is no certainty about these things. My
father was from Chittagong and he ended up in Arakan; I ended up in
Rangoon, you went from Mandaley to Ratnagiri and now you are here
too. Why should we expect that we are going to spend the rest of our
lives here? There are people who have the luck to end their lives where
they began them. But this is not something that is owed to us. On the
contrary we have to expect that a time will come when we will have to
move on again. Rather than be swept along by events, we should make plans and take control of our own fate.’ (*GP* 309 - 310)

Rajkumar and Dolly take control of their fate but luck did not favor King Thebaw’s family. Thebaw died in exile at Ratnagiri on December 1916, at the age 58, of a heart attack and the Queen returned to Burma with two of her three children in 1918. Princess Faya, Thebaw’s eldest daughter married Sawant, their coachman. Though she accompanied her family to Burma she chose to return to Ratnagiri, with her daughter Tutu, much against the wishes of her family. She was prepared to live alone knowing fully well that Sawant would continue to live with his official wife, dividing his time between the two. Faya had three children but only Baya Su, better known as Tutu survived. Faya became deranged and died a lonely death. Like Faya, her daughter Tutu akka (1906-2000) continued the process of assimilation. She married Shankar Pawar, a State Transport bus driver and bore him seven children. Her husband died in 1976. Though impoverished she was accorded the sobriquet of Ratnagiris ‘Mother Teresa’. She took in orphans and stray dogs and shared her meagre rations with them.

This researcher was involved in the post modern project of bringing the text to life by including the stories of Thebaw’s descendants. The past and the present were brought together through a study of archival material, newspaper accounts and meetings with Princess Faya’s grandson, Chandu
Pawar, and the family in Ratnagiri. Princess Tutu, who died in 2000, reportedly aged 105, not only lived in poverty but was also dis-housed by a court order. Thereafter her son, Chandu Pawar and his sons moved to the outskirts of the town where they work as garage mechanics. They speak only Marathi and like their female ancestors have married into the local community. They expressed a desire to visit Burma but such a trip is out of their reach. Visitors from Burma have visited them in the past and expressed sympathy for their condition but neither the Burmese Government nor the Indian Government has helped them in any way. The aim of locating and writing about them was to give back the subject position to the forgotten real-life characters vis-à-vis Amitav Ghosh’s fictional ones. The objective, as with Ghosh, is to participate in and interrogate the past by juxtaposing fiction and fact.

*The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*, straddle continents and momentous events, but finally narrate stories about individuals and families and the way in which they negotiate issues of nation, nationalism and identity. In the novels, Ghosh depicts how frontiers are tenuous and that they cannot prevent people from crossing borders. While Thibaw and his family are forced to cross borders and lose their country, Tridib and Uma are individuals without a country of their own and it is their imaginative and assimilative powers that enable them to not only cross frontiers with impunity, but also go beyond.
Notes


5. ibid 12.


9. ibid 42


12. ibid 2.

14. ibid 69.


16. Political Department, 1914 (Comp 311) Maharashtra State Archives.
