CHAPTER 5

Indianness and Its Critique in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason*, *In An Antique Land*, and *The Hungry Tide*

It is almost obvious that India and Indianness have been variously imagined and constructed within CIWE, which has generated serious critical discussions. However, both critics and readers will unanimously agree with the fact that Indian English Fiction was ‘constructed’ almost as a new genre of literature to challenge certain ideological premises upheld by the native Indian writers writing in the vernacular languages of India. Hence, the recovery of Indianness by authors like Salman Rushdie has found certain specific directions in the last decades of the 20th century. Subsequently, one can clearly observe that many authors of CIWE, who do not reside in India, depict this recovery of Indianness in the context of their cultural and spatial dislocations often resulting in their utter loss of identity. Parallely, they go through the experiences of ‘hybridity’¹, as post-colonial critics would like to suggest that the time now is for a migrant like Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, who live and write between cultures. This is also because they are free from all kinds of political constraints born out of nationalism.

Amitav Ghosh’s treatment of Indianness has to be considered in terms of his own theory of narrative and how he makes the idea of a family represent the nation. Moreover, his constant search for family history and the ways in which identity get implicated are at the root of his theory of the novel. In his conversation with Dipesh Chakrabarty, he states:

First to take the question of the novel and the family. Novels almost always implicitly assume a collective subject: this is what actually provides the background, milieu, setting, dialect etc. Sometimes the collective subject is the nation itself...In India collectivities such as nation, class, generation, culture etc. do
not have the same imaginary concreteness that they do elsewhere. This is one of the reasons why Indian (African) writers so often look to a different kind of collectivity, the family. In my case, the family narrative has been one way of stepping away from the limitations of 'nation' etc.—I think this is true also of many others. (Ghosh and Chakrabarty 166)

This idea of the family becomes relevant when one examines his novels like TSL, IAAL, TCC, and TGP. But how the form of the novel is received in a seemingly different time and milieu of the late 20th century is yet another signpost of Ghosh’s attempt to discuss the formal aspects of the novel as a genre. In his essay “The March of the Novel” Ghosh suggests how the ideas of a tradition as well as contemporary situations play a dominant role in the reception of the novel. He considers the novel form as an open-ended medium of expression that accommodates myriad forms of experiences. The personal and the contextual are implicated in the ideas of the nation and location in such a way that many aspects of the places, that he describes, become so intrinsic to his novel. That is why, any discussion of how India emerges from the novels of Ghosh makes room for an analysis of his views on Indianness that also reminds of his personal connection with India in a particular way.

Till date, Amitav Ghosh has written eight full length novels, one novella and two non-fictional works till date. Like Rushdie, Ghosh too has shown a tendency to make Indianness a representational mode following the narrative structure easily traceable in the Indian epics, the Puranas and other mythological stories, but with marked differences with Rushdie. While doing so, Ghosh also provides a critique of the grounds on which the Indian narrative culture has been studied so far. Such a critique is also to be studied in terms of his concerns over many of the inherent problems in the formation of Indian culture and history. Ghosh does not simply use Indianness as a representational mode, just like Rushdie does, but presents it as one of the tropes through which the entire Indian culture is sought to be re-read.
However, any discussion of Amitav Ghosh's fictional works should be done against the idea of Calcutta as a myth. Ipsita Chanda, seeks to consider the mythification of Calcutta like this:

Here we attempt to understand some ways in which the mythified Calcutta enters the actual life of the citoyenne who is also an outsider—the experience of 'negotiating' the myth and in the process learning to inhabit the real space that it delineates. (Chanda, *Cultural Studies* 230)

So, it is assumed that a mythical Calcutta is a part of Ghosh's consciousness, because the very reality of living there or not living there as well as the experiences of Calcutta (or Kolkata) as an Indian city, actually form his self. The myth of Calcutta, which is concentrated in certain places and the 'little' histories connected with these places, is clearly visible in many of his novels like *TCR*, *TSL*, *TCC*. So, a mythical city lived in a particular way is a significant marker of Ghosh's Indianness.

Ghosh has made several attempts to describe his state of mind as that of an Indian. One such example can be seen in the following lines:

Living abroad also made me understand that India is not just sub-continental India. Since the 19th century Indians have been pulled out of India. To be an Indian is also to be a part of this global community...I am Bangladeshi, I am also Indian; I am a Bengali, I am also a west Bengali. All these things coexist within us. You experience yourself as a multiplicity.5

This kind of self-analysis gives us a first-hand scope to study the ways through which Ghosh comprehends India, and how the inherent multiplicity of India provides the means to define the notion of Indianness to readers of a diverse background. However, a critique of the 'invented tradition'6 always runs as a constant throughout all his novels.

Being mainly a historian and a social anthropologist by profession, Ghosh’s intellectual engagement with the idea of India and everything Indian are
to be seen in terms of what he intends to state about modern Indian diaspora in his essay “The Diaspora in Indian Culture”:

The Modern Indian diaspora...is not merely one of the most important demographic dislocations of modern times, it now represents an important force in world culture. The culture of the diaspora is also increasingly a factor within the culture of the Indian subcontinent. (243)

Thus, Ghosh’s discussion of Indian culture in terms of the diasporic sensibility is important, as it reflects many things related to his upbringing as an Indian author. He further states:

We tend to take for granted that there is and should be, a relationship between India and the ‘Indians’. But in fact, the relationship is a genuine historical anomaly: in the first place because we have to recognize that the links are not those of language, religion, politics or economics. In a sense the links are those of culture but again of a kind of culture in which the most important cultural institutions as we — usually understand them—for example, language and religion—are absent...the simple fact that the links between India and he diaspora are lived within the imagination. It is therefore an epic relationship; an epic without a text... (247)

Such a perception often enables him to write about India from the unique contexts of the diasporic sensibility. When Ghosh articulates in the essay that “it is impossible to be imperfectly Indian” (Ghosh, 250), perhaps he also defines the ‘perfect’ Indian as one who is capable of expressing the living signs of colonialism. This also produces the unique hybrid in the author who is neither Indian nor British, but a product of the clash among multiple cultures. Ghosh’s treatment of Indianness as a representational mode has to be studied keeping all such ideas in mind.

It has been broadly observed that the diasporic Indian sensibility reached out to its audience in two possible ways: a. Down the memory lane, b. Through a re-appropriation of history, epics, legends, myths of the native land. As Jancy James writes, for the expatriate Hindu writers from India, India’s epics, legends,
and mythologies function both as a resonance and stimulus to exhibit the culture that he has left behind. Moreover, epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been decisive forces in the formation of the Indian mind. In some writers however, for representations, characters and contexts from the two epics are brought forth and hence the need to encode such heavy referentiality. (James, *Writers of Indian* 199-200). As Ghosh also states: “As anthropologists and indologists have shown us, the symbolic spatial structure of India is infinitely reproducible” (Ghosh, *The Imam* 248). Similarly, the idea of India too can be reproduced as and when necessary. Whenever an Indian author leaves India, Indianness enters into the vocabulary of the everyday life of the author in a new country. As Ghosh states: “Just as the spaces of India travel with the migrant, India too has no vocabulary for separating the migrant from India” (249). If India has failed to develop a national culture, it should not be seen as a lack, because it is in itself the form of an Indian culture. Thus, Ghosh opines that anybody anywhere having the most intimate links with India is Indian. The mother country simply does not have the cultural means to cut them off (250).

The ‘Indian’ elements in the novel *TCR* can be traced in terms of the reference made to Sanskrit classics, 20th century Bengali literature, and a number of South East Asian narrative traditions exemplified by the Panchatantra and the Jataka Tales. In this novel, we perhaps encounter Ghosh’s first attempt at looking at Indianness in the mythical line, although not exactly as a representational mode. The importance of storytelling, mythology and modern art of novel writing is implicated in a comment made by A. S. Louis James who states: “Amitav Ghosh’s works introduces a number of ‘languages’, including those of the Indian folktales, the *Mahabharata*, journalism and the memory patterns of extended family radically deconstructing traditional novel form” (James, *The Novels* 52). This is perhaps true, as *TCR* showcases Ghosh disproval of the Western concept of ‘realism’ in fiction writing, and then his exploration of the Vedic concepts of Maya (illusion) and Transcendence to question the
problematics of Western Realism (TCR 112). However, the idea of Reason is another main pre-occupation of the author in the text. As the title of the novel suggests, the idea of Reason is circular, and the view about Reason that emerges in the novel, through the character of Balaram Bose, is antipathetic to linear historiography. Another character Bhudeb Roy opposes the vision of circularity, because he believes that it is in terms of the “straight lines” that the technological advances of Europe, America and Japan have taken place.

In order to deal with the theme of illusion vs reality, Ghosh provides two examples in the novel. The first is the incident between Bhudeb Roy and Balaram Bose during the Saraswati Puja celebration. The village entrepreneur Bhudeb Roy organizes a Puja of Saraswati identified as the Hindu Goddess of Learning, and “a six-foot image of Maa Saraswati, with spinning electric lights behind the eyes and a silver-foil halo was commissioned in Naboganj, the nearest large town” (29). But the self-proclaimed ‘rationalist’ Balaram discovered that “Bhudeb Roy’s motives were not wholly spiritual” (29). He rushes to the platform and tears off the dyed cotton hair, revealing the clay figure underneath:

Balaram paused for a moment, his hand poised over the images head and laid the clay skull bare. He pointed to the peeled head with the light still bravely flickering inside and turned around. This he said to the electrified crowd, is not Saraswati.

This is not Learning, he said, knocking the clay with his knuckles. This is vanity.

(31)

In one sense, the image of Saraswati is ‘vanity’ because in the Vedic tradition she is a feminine principle and aspect of nature, and only becomes ‘knowledge’ in flowing through the “enlightened” devotee like Bhudev Roy who is certainly not ‘enlightened’. Balaram exposes the image not because it mis-represents tradition, but because it does not represent Western rationalism.

The other example is about the enactment of Tagore’s dance drama based on the Chitrangada’s appearance to Arjun at the end of the novel. In this story taken from the Mahabharata, the soldier princess Chitrangada is divinely gifted
with physical beauty just for one year to attract Arjun. As Mrs Verma tells Dr. Mishra in the novel:

Chitrangada is the king of Manipur’s daughter; she’s been brought up like a man, and she’s a great hunter and warrior and all that, but she’s not — well very pretty. Then one day Arjuna goes to Manipur and she sees him handsome, a great hero and warrior—so naturally she falls in love with him. She goes to him and declares her love, but he turns her away. Then she gets very depressed because she thinks he can’t possibly love a woman who looks like her. So ugly, you know. So she goes to the gods and asks them to give her the gift of beauty for just one year. They do and Arjuna falls in love with her, and they sort of get married I think, but she doesn’t tell him who she is. But as the year passes Arjuna hears more and more about the heroism of Chitrangada, and he longs to meet her and is half in love with her, though he doesn’t even know who she is. Chitrangada sees all these and she learns finally that appearance don’t matter, so at the end of the year, when her beauty is gone, she stands before him and says something like: I’m no beautiful flower, I am not perfect, my clothes are torn and my feet are scarred and so on, but I can give you the heart of a true woman. Then Arjuna, too sees that beauty is only deception, an illusion of the senses. (383)

Thus, according to the story, Arjun understands the illusion of the physical and that real beauty lies in the beneath. As Yumna Siddiqui states, Ghosh also points out how national identity is staged in a bourgeoisie diasporic community through the public displays of cultural patrimony. In the play, Chitra is renowned for her high ethical character and wins Arjun with her inner grace. But Kulfi, a prostitute in the novel, who plays the role of Chitra in the novel, attempts to entice Jyoti Das, the police officer, with her decidedly erotic appeal. This is an example of Ghosh’s playful undercutting of a ‘high’ cultural discourse by introducing absurd elements by which he lampoons the quasi-religious cultural project in India (33).

In both the examples, Ghosh’s attempt has been to show how ‘truth’ can be understood only by passing through illusion. In the first, religion is unveiled, in the second, physical reality is dissipated to reveal the godly. But, it is interesting to note that in order to deconstruct traditional views Ghosh has
substantially borrowed from the epics like the *Mahabharata*. Balaram's search for a new vision of reality, reflected in the chapter 'A Pasteurized Universe' brings to mind the Vedic legend of the Samudra Manthan, in which the milk ocean of creation was churned by the gods and demons using a snake to separate the poison from 'amrit'. Shiva drank the poison to purify the Universe and the gods drank Amrit. But just like the gods who one-sidedly drank Amrit, Balaram too has one-sided strategy (114). This is what is finally asserted by the narrator of the novel.

Such examples draw attention to how various cultural forms are ingrained in the lives of the common Indian people and how cultural proliferation starts with many inherent problems. But the central myth used by Ghosh in this novel is that of Nachiketa that plays a major role in mediating and communicating truth in a modernist sense. Ghosh's Indianness can be best explained in the way he deploys the Katha Upanishadic myth of Nachiketa to represent Alu, or Nachiketa Bose, who resembles the mythical Nachiketa, and who finally comes to know that truth is present only in scientific reasoning and rationalism. Thus, the enlightenment of mythical Nachiketa runs parallel to the 'enlightenment' of Alu at the end of the novel. In this novel, Ghosh also draws interesting parallels between the ideas of the Hindu sages and modern science. As the narrator of the novel tells:

> [t]here were certain very curious parallelisms between the ideas of the ancient Hindu sages and modern science. If this was true, and many very learned authorities believed it to be so, then it was definite proof that over the centuries those ancient and completely rational ideas had been perverted by scheming priests and Brahmins to further their own interests. It was urgently necessary, therefore that the society make known to the masses of Hindoostan how they were daily deceived and cheated by the self-styled purveyors of religion. For example, it was certain that the pandits and brahmins had distorted their ancient Hindu idea of God, the Brahma, into their thousands of deities and idols, so that they could make money quicker...As for the real Brahma, he was without attributes, without form, nothing but an essence, in everything and in nothing. (46-47)
Thus, Amitav Ghosh intends to explain that even before British colonialism, there could be found another intellectual ‘colonialism’ existing in India through the Hindu Brahminical culture.16

It is important to note how Ghosh connects his ideas of ‘oppression’ to the cultural past of the Hindus. Because, in ancient period, the self-styled transmitters of religion exploited the common people and cheated them of their rightful earnings and robbed them of their rights. Thus, each new God became a ‘steady new source of income’ for the Hindu Brahmins who turned a deaf ear to the real concept of religion. But scientific rationalism will make human free from the clutches of their hands and make them understand that “the Universal Egg of Hindu mythology”, according to rationalist like Gopal, is a “Cosmic Neutron” and they should “propose to begin all their meetings with prayers and salutations to the Cosmic atom” (47). Then again, going through the epics, the rationalists found answers too many magical events, objects and creatures as one finds in the novel:

It was decided for example, that the Sudarshan Chakra, the legendary wheel of fire, was actually an example of ancient fireworks, and Gopal was applauded for his ingeniously down to earth suggestion that the mythical clawed bird of the *Ramayana*, Jatayu, was no early phantasm but one of the last surviving pterodactyls. (48)

Thus, this novel makes several attempts to uphold the significance of scientific rationalism by making references to Hindu myths and epics. Such references in the text of the novel also throw light on the way explanations of mythical events, objects and creatures are offered.

Another specific way to read this novel is to examine the idea of Reason and its various connotations. Many Indians during the Bengal Renaissance embraced the ideals put forward by the Enlightenment thinkers. As Yumna Siddiqui writes, in using the word Reason in the title of the novel, Ghosh invokes
one of the key values of 19th century Bengali culture. She also quotes Tapan Raychoudhury who stated:

Rational assessment of current needs and received traditions, both indigenous and alien, became the hallmark of Bengali thought in the 19th century. Arguably, this development marked a total discontinuity in the history of the region. A product of the colonial encounter, it was a development with explosive potentialities which acquired a measure of autonomy. (qtd. in Siddiqui 19-20)

This reminds of the different ways the writers and social reformers of India, in the 19th century, criticized any blind adherence to custom and superstition, and to the ways they urged their fellow human beings to order their lives in rational terms.

Moreover, Ghosh has extensively used the metaphor of ‘weaving’ to suggest his method of storytelling as a narrative technique the main purpose being to create connections by intertwining various discursive threads. As one finds in the novel:

So many words, so many things. On a loom a beam’s name changes after every inch. Why? Every nail has a name, every twist of rope, every little eyelet, every twig of bamboo on the heddle. A loom is a dictionary glossary thesaurus. Why? Words serve no purpose; nothing mechanical. No, it is because the weaver, in making cloth, makes words, too, and trespassing on the territory of the poets gives names to things the eye can’t see. That is why the loom has given language more words, more metaphor, more idiom than all the world’s armies of pen-wielders.

(74)

This is one of the important ways to metaphorically present the author as a weaver.

However, it is in THT that we again find another interesting example of Ghosh’s use of mythology that helps to explain the notion of Indianness in his novels. In this novel, Ghosh seeks to find out why Indian myths and legends are so rooted in the psyche of the Indian people. The reference made here is that of Goddess Ganga and the legend of her descent from heaven. References made to
the tearing off Ganga’s torrents by Lord Shiva exemplify such rootedness. But Ghosh’s use of Indianness in this novel can be best examined in terms of his re-interpretation of Hindu mythology and legends, and their connections to the creation of the Sundarbans. As Kanai, the Delhi based reporter, reads through the pages of his Bengali script:

In our legends it is said that the goddess Ganga’s descent from the heavens would have split the earth had Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by tying it into his ash-smeared locks. To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way: as a heavenly braid, for instance, an immense rope of water, unfurling through a wide and thirsty plain. That there is a further twist to the tale becomes apparent only in the final stages of the river’s journey—and this part of the story always comes as a surprise, because it is never told and thus it is never imagined. It is this: there is a point at which the braid comes undone; where Lord Shiva’s matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle. (6)

Besides this kind of religious beliefs, there are certain other beliefs as can be seen through Ghosh’s conflation of mythology and legends is the story of Bon Bibi. This story comes alive when the people of Lusibari are seen preparing for stage performances of the Glory of Bon Bibi. When Kanai expressed his ignorance about Bon Bibi, Kusum’s reply is “You mean you don’t know the story of Bon Bibi?” (101). But, at that moment, Nirmal’s reply is: “Don’t bother yourself with it. It’s just false consciousness: that’s all it is” which shocks Kanai. Nirmal tells him: “The statues are of Bon Bibi. You would think that in a place like this people would pay close attention to the wonders of the reality around them. But they prefer the imaginary miracles of gods and saints” (101-102). But to Kanai’s utter surprise, during the staging of the show, the story of the Goddess Bon Bibi “did not begin either in the heavens or on the banks of the Ganges, like the mythological tales with which he was familiar. Instead the opening scene was set in a city in Arabia and the backdrop was painted with mosques and minarets” (102-103). At first, Kanai thought he would be bored by the rustic entertainment. But surprisingly he found himself “absorbed and even after the show had ended
was unable to erase some of the scenes from the mind.” (105). This is one of the ways in which Ghosh questions the premises of many accepted ideas in society.

Kanai is an interpreter, a translator and runs his bureau to serve expatriate communities which is a group of people who frequently emerge in Amitav Ghosh’s novels. So, metaphorically, Kanai also becomes the interpreter of the stories related to the Morichjhapi incident for the readers. But, like it is typical of all Ghosh’s novels to re-interpret facts and established ideas, THT presents an interesting parallelism between mythology and geology. And this is where Ghosh is at his best while rationally explaining certain aspects of Indian life and society in terms of Indian mythologies. Ghosh is found hinting at the idea of circularity when Nirmal utters these lines:

Look at the size of their heroes, how immense they are...heavenly deities on the one hand, and on the other, the titanic stirrings of the earth itself— both equally other worldly, equally remote from us. Then there is the way in which the plots go round and round in both kinds of stories, so that every episode is both a beginning and an end, every outcome leads to other. And then of course there is the scale of time yugas and epochs, Kaliyuga and the Quaternary. And yet mind this—in both, these vast durations are telescoped in such a way as to permit the telling of a story.

Nirmal further relates Ganga to an incarnation of Vishnu and God’s missteps. He begins like this:

May be I would start with the story of Vishnu, in his incarnation as a divine dwarf, measuring out the universe in three giant strides: I would tell them about God’s missteps and how an errant toenail on one of his feet created a tiny scratch on the fabric of creation. It was this pore [of Ganga].

Then again to show the relation between the mythical and the real, Nirmal states: “Look comrades, look”, I would say. ‘This map shows that in geology, as in myth, there is a visible Ganga and a hidden Ganga: one flows on land and one
beneath the water. Put them together and you have what is by far the greatest of
the earth’s rivers’’ (181). Following his interests with location and history, it is
pertinent to state that Ghosh, in this novel, implicitly or explicitly takes history to
be the force that can irrevocably alter the lives of the common people and in the
context of India it has happened so many times. Colonial history has already
brought in such alternations. Like one finds in Salman Rushdie, India in Ghosh’s
*THT* also emerges through his perceptions of the ‘constructed’ nature of Indian
history. This hints at the fact that even the mythical line has been a
‘construction’, and this is what is both important and interesting while exploring
the notion of Indianness as a representational mode in *THT*.

Ghosh’s engagement with the idea of Hindu mythical culture and its
various repercussions in the Indian society can also be traced through *IAAL* one of
the most significant fictional works that he has penned. His critique of India’s
Hindu Brahminical traditions and culture is quite explicit in this novel.
Published in 1992, this novel is based on the research he had conducted for a D.
Phil. in Social Anthropology at Oxford. Here, he conducts a research on the
network of traders and their slaves operating between North America and South
West India in the middle ages. His research also provides a large cultural space to
discuss issues in contemporary times with reference to the hybrid languages and
practices circulating without any national and regional boundaries. Ghosh’s
inclination towards “Subaltern Studies” becomes evident from the ways the novel
*IAAL* enables one to examine how one’s response to certain things and situations
are conditioned by one’s own history and culture. The scholar protagonist of this
highly experimental work gathers parallels in history which reveals the unifying
elements of various religious traditions, in the history of India’s cultural past.

*IAAL* narrates the story about Bomma, a slave, and is set in the 12th
century world of flourishing trade between Masr in Egypt and Mangalore in the
South-western part of India on the Indian ocean. Ghosh’s critique of Indianness is
to be addressed and examined through the story of Bomma in this novel. The
story of MS. H 6\textsuperscript{19} with which the novel begins is based on a scholastic search into the name of the slave Bomma who established himself to be the son of several matrilineal communities of Tulunad or Mangalore during the pre-Brahminical days. As stated by Sharmila Mazumdar, Bomma’s story is one of religious assimilation. The local deity of the Bhutta cult merged with the gods of Sanskrit Brahminical Tradition. ‘Berme’ the Bhutta deity becomes Bomma, under the influence of the name Brahma—one of the Hindu Trinity. The slave is so named under the Mongrel God Bomma—common for the boys of that region. Though Bomma was called a slave, his relationship with the master may not have been the same as had existed between a master and a slave in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century European colonial context. It was more of a commitment as in many cases Bomma acted as his master Ben Yiju’s representative in Egypt (Majumdar, \textit{The Novels of Amitav Ghosh} 185).

Amitav Ghosh, the author of the novel, provides a unique example of Indianness in terms of his critique of Brahminical Hinduism of pre-medieval times by revealing certain important aspects of religious assimilation through the story of Bomma and his master Ben Yiju. As the author-narrator writes:

\begin{quote}
Perhaps the most elusive aspect of medieval slavery is its role as spiritual metaphor, as an instrument of the religious imagination. In south India, amongst the priest and fiercely egalitarian Vachnakara saint-poets of Bomma’s own life time, for example, slavery was often used as an image to represent the devotee’s quest for God: through the transforming power of metaphor the poet’s became their lord’s servant and lovers, androgynous in their longing, slaves, searching for their master with a passion that dissolved selfhood, wealth, caste and gender, indeed difference itself. In their poetry it was slavery that was the paradoxical embodiment of perfect freedom; the image that represented the very notion of relationship, of human bonds, as well the possibility of their transcendence. (260-61)
\end{quote}

Then, Ghosh states that the Sufis of that time regarded the Vachanakara saint poets as “pantheistic and blasphemous in their desire to merge themselves in their Lord.” But for the “Sufis as for the Vachanakaras, the notion of being held by
bonds was one of the central metaphors of religious life” (162). Bomma and Ben Yiju might not be aware of the Vachanakaras and the Sufis. But Ghosh argues:

> [e]ven the most mundane institutions have their life-giving myths, and against the setting of that distant backdrop of legend and metaphor,...the elements of slavery...would have appeared, perhaps not as demeaning bonds, but rather as links...human connections, pledges of commitment, in relationship that could just as well have been a matter of mere exchange of coinage. (263)

So, it is Ghosh’s interest in retelling history that runs as a constant in this novel. As Ghosh again opines:

> Bomma may never have known of the saint poets of the time and their teachings, but he would certainly have been intimately acquainted with some of the great range of popular traditions and folk beliefs which upturn and invert the categories of Sanskritic Hinduism. (263)

Ghosh perhaps suggests that Hinduism had been standardized and codified to suit the present contexts. So, unlike in Bomma’s time, under the idea of Hinduism a kind of homogenization is going on in contemporary times, following which an entire community is expected to remain under one umbrella (Tiwari 46). Ghosh here presents his extraordinary scholarship of doing a parallel study of history itself. As he conducts more and more research on Bomma, his enquiries result in the finding of a rich storehouse of knowledge about the 12th century Tulu culture centered around Mangalore. In one sense, this history also foreshadows how the Aryans in some sense practiced high Sanskritic tradition, while the local Dravidians had followed the Bhuta Cult, the local form of worship. So, there were both Brahmin temples and Bhuta shrines in Mangalore. As Ghosh states, the Bhuta cult was closely tied to the land, and the Brahmins were often excluded from its rituals and celebrations. But, the Brahmins played an important role in different aspects of religious life in the region because they were the standard bearers of the Pan-Indian Hindu tradition that formed the other half of the folk religion of Tulunad (151). The point Ghosh raises here is that under the dominant
cover of the Hindu traditions, “there was a good deal of trafficking between the two pantheons: some Bhuta deities would occasionally appear within the mists of high Sanskritism, while others fell from favour and vanished into netherworld” (152). But the superiority of Hinduism is evident even during the time of the author’s visit to the fishing villages of Mangalore as part of his anthropological study. As Ghosh writes:

When we approached it [the Bobbariya-shrine], I noticed that its walls bore the posters of a fundamentalist Hindu political organization, an upper-caste group notorious for its anti-Muslim rhetoric: it was a clear indication that this community, so long relegated to the peripheries of the Hindu order, had now resolved to use a political short cut to break into the Sanskritic fold. Having transformed its social and economic position in was now laying claim to the future, in the best tradition of liberalism, by discovering a History to replace the past. (273)

Although there is no such direct reference to Hindu mythical culture in this novel, Ghosh’s reference to pre-Brahminical Hinduism, the God Brahma, and so on, clearly reflect his concern over the hegemonic structure on which rests contemporary notions of Hinduism which he tried to critique.

Thus, it is evident that various ideas of India emerge from Amitav Ghosh’s novels, and it becomes more obvious when he represents Indianness as part of Indian modernity (nationalism) that had almost changed the fate of India in the postcolonial period. His idea of India is visible through his response to both the Nehruvian and Tagorian discourse of nationalism. For example, Ghosh’s ideas of Indian nationalism bear proximity with that of Tagore as he said: “India has been trying to accomplish her task through social regulations of differences, on the one hand, and the spiritual recognition of unity, on the other” (Mondal 110). On the other hand, Ghosh is also borrowing from the Nehruvian idea of India which is an ‘ancient palimpsest’ as well (as found in The Discovery of India) as a ‘metaphor for history’ (111). Thus, it needs mentioning that locating Indianness in Ghosh’s novels has to be aligned with the discussion of the
interdisciplinary nature of Indian culture and the way he has tried to examine that culture.

The fictional works of Amitav Ghosh should be read in connection with the nineteenth century Indian Writing in English that began with a presupposed idea of the relative insignificance of the Indians in general and the Bengalis in particular in a world of changes. So, attachment to the past of India helped in negotiating the notion of insignificance and worthlessness. But, the changing perceptions and attitudes in nineteenth century Bengal, as scholars like David Kopf had argued, established the Bengali intellectuals as the first Asian group whose mentality was transformed by a crisis in identity resulting from the encounter with the West. The Bengali experience following the Hindu revivalism in the late 19th century Bengal, helped in the mediation of certain new ideas and influences that shaped modern Indian life (Mukherjee XXIII-XXIV). But, what is so interesting about this phenomenon is the emergence of a strong nationalist project on the basis of a glorious Hindu past on the one hand, and a simultaneous awareness of being a part of a glorious British empire which nurtured the hope of steady and quick progress on the other. Many intellectuals like Meenakshi Mukherjee, Tapan Ray Chaudhuri and others have addressed these issues with much critical insights, and it is almost presumable that Ghosh were sure to get influenced by such an intellectual discourse in Bengal. So, any study of Amitav Ghosh should be done keeping in mind that he is a product of the Bengal Renaissance that brought in many visible changes in all spheres and activities of society including literature.

It is also important to note that the central characters in Ghosh’s major fictional works are travelers and diasporic exiles who exemplify the “migrant sensibility” which according to Rushdie is one of the central themes of this century of displaced persons. Unlike the other diasporic writers preoccupied mostly with the middle class people set in the West, Ghosh expresses his particular concern with the Arab world (IAAL) and the so-called East (TGP, TSL,
This clearly means that his fictional landscape is deeply connected to India's 'near abroad' or the other parts of the South East Asia. It should be asserted that Indianness in Ghosh's novels also contains an urge for searching and discovering something new. But, while discussing the notion of Indianness as a critique of representation, one should also acknowledge that with such a critique, he is trying to transcend the discursively constructed cultural differences, lines and borders. Thus, the discussion of Indianness must be aligned with his deliberations on class, race or ethnicity. But, Ghosh also deals with the 'constructedness' of such concepts to make his readers aware of the different other possible ways of constructing ideas of India and the world. Shashi Tharoor makes an interesting comment in this regards:

[...]he singular thing about India is that you can only speak of it in the plural. There are, in the hackneyed phrase, many Indias. Everything exists in countless variants. There is no single standard, no fixed stereotype, no 'one way'. This pluralism is acknowledged in the way India arranges its own affairs: all groups, faiths, tastes, and ideologies survive and contend for their place in the sun... That Indian mind has been shaped by remarkably diverse forces: ancient Hindu tradition, myth, and scripture; the impact of Islam and Christianity; and the two centuries of British rule. The result is unique, not just because of the variety of contemporary influences available in India, but because of the diversity of its heritage. (8-9)

Tharoor's articulation of these views foreshadows the issue of representation by an Indian English author in the context of 21st century India.

It should be a matter of further investigation that in novels like *TCR, TCC* and *IAAL* Amitav Ghosh tries to reveal the gaps in the metaphysics of modernity, and thereby open up a space for other ways of thinking and being. Thus, the discussion of Indianness against such a context, bear tremendous significance. But Anshuman Mondal states that Ghosh is not trying to replace modern knowledge with 'other' knowledge. In fact, his novel *TCR* resembles the 19th century attempts of the Bhadralok intellectuals to achieve parity with Western scientific knowledge by trying to hinduise science. As Mondal states: the
rationalists' attempt in *TCR* to find antecedents to western science in ancient Hindu scriptures is represented as being absurd (Mondal 57). Ghosh's career as a historian as well as an anthropologist offers valuable insights into the difficulties raised by the very idea of 'knowledge' born out of the colonial discourse. Thus, his staging of the 'subaltern knowledge' as 'anti-knowledge' challenges colonial monopoly of knowledge that Ghosh is criticizing. Through a novel like *TCC* Ghosh suggests that one should re-read the historical records, uncover its subtexts, and rewrite its narratives to come up with a whole new story about the past. The search for Indianness in Ghosh's novels against such a background thus becomes an enriching experience.

Robert Dixon states that Ghosh's importance is increasing day by day along with the ways colonial discourse has been globalized today. Moreover, his background as a historian and anthropologist, his rejection of the colonialist discourse on grand narratives, and his supposed links with the Subaltern Studies project, make his novels interesting sites for conducting postcolonial study. Dixon also finds that Ghosh's characters in the novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but 'dwell in travel' in cultural spaces that flow across the borders. Thus, one often finds the visible influences of the places and their cultures on Ghosh's characters in most of his novels. A novel like *THT* beautifully exemplifies what Ghosh tells that it is actually possible to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers when the most essential humanity is invoked. Thus, it is in this line of discussion that Amitav Ghosh, as a major exponent of CIWE, is to be conducted (Dixon, 9-35). Ghosh's concern over the individual facing the world has given Indian English fiction a new dimension. By depicting the elements from everyday life—history, natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love and sexuality, he draws attention to the interdisciplinary nature of any knowledge system, and the present status of the once-colonized communities as they position themselves in various parts of the world. Thus, he considers the novel as a meta-form that transcends the boundaries of history, journalism, and
anthropology. Such a realization both enriches and problematizes the discussion of Ghosh and the way he has sought to represent India and Indianness in his novels.

End Notes:

1 In Bhabha's use of the term, 'hybridity' suggests the many different forms of the migrant or minority discourse that usually flourishes in the diasporas of the postmodern and postcolonial period. Thus, hybridity releases an individual from the singular identities often constructed when class, race and gender are used as primary categories.

2 I would like to assert that any attempt to discuss Indianness as a representational mode in the novels of Amitav Ghosh has to be connected with the trajectories under which he is addressing the different aspects of India. It is quite obvious that Ghosh as a historian and a social anthropologist keeps himself busy with the nature of Indian history, language, and culture, and the consequent discourse of Indianness as shaped by them. Whereas Rushdie's engagement with Indian history, language and culture is to be read as an attempt to nostalgically reclaim the past (mainly his Indian childhood) from his state of migrancy.

3 One of the most important aspects of Amitav Ghosh as an author is the exploration of how narratives structure our lives. Ghosh's main endeavour in all his novels is to read and reread the histories of the common people in the places they live in. Ghosh's Indianness can be read in terms of two aspects—his use of the Indian mythical tradition as representational mode, and his critique of the same notion of Indianness which tends to exclude many vital elements in the lives of the common people.

4 However, I would like to clarify that the study of Indianness in terms of India's narrative culture in Amitav Ghosh's novels is not free from limitations. Compared to Rushdie's, Ghosh's novels are few. Unlike Rushdie, Ghosh's main preoccupations are history and anthropology, and references to Indian mythology and epics occurs only occasionally in his novels. His novels not only talk about representations as such but about how such representations have been done in Indian cultural history.

6 As discussed by Eric Hobsbaum, it refers to a set of symbolic and ritualistic practices which are designed to inculcate values and norms through repetition, and establish the sense of continuity with a past which may be either real or imaginary. The idea of such traditions often establishes and legitimises social cohesion and relation to some kind of authority. However, they can also promote socialisation by inculcating beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour in society.

7 Amitav Ghosh beautifully draws on this line of thought and shows how his characters are concerned with the origin of creation, the purpose and goal of life, the concept of Karma, mysteries of death, dichotomy between good and evil and so on. Every great civilization has its own treasure of myths, and Ghosh seems to be aware of this situation.

8 It is the world’s first well organized compilations of fables. However, its origin can be traced in the Upanishads in which some of the characteristics of birds and beasts are compared to those of the human beings. It is based on the teachings of one Vishnu Sharma to the wayward sons of king Amarashakti of Mabilarupya. Vishnu Sharma's way of imparting education through storytelling proved how a set of appropriately chosen stories could play an effective role in educating the youth. In the Indian tradition The Panchatantra is almost the Nitisastra or the wise conduct of life. It has many stories in common with the Buddhist Jataka tales. Dr. Johannes Hertel, was an early Western scholar to study The Panchatantra. The Panchatantra was translated from the Sanskrit by Franklin Edgerton in 1924. Among the modern translations, see Arthur W. Ryder's translation of the text.

9 Native to India, the Jatakas are the stories that tell about the previous lives of the Lord Buddha, in both human and animal form – but, in whatever form, he exhibits some virtue that the tale thereby inculcates. A. K. Warder in his Indian Buddhism argues that the Jatakas are the precursors to the various legendary biographies of the Lord Buddha. Also see E. B. Cowell's translation of the standard Pali collection of the Jatakas stories in The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births.

10 Saraswati is the Goddess of learning. She is the daughter of Brahma. According to the story available in the Brahmanda Purana, Brahma was getting ready for creation, and while in meditation sattvaguna (sublime quality) began swelling up in his mind wherefrom a girl was born. Brahma asked her who she was. She answered: "I am born from you. You fix for me a seat and duties." Then Brahma told her that her name was Saraswati and ordained that she should stay on the tip of everybody's tongue. You dance especially on the tongues of learned people. You should also exist on earth in the form of a river, and assuming a third form you should live in me too." And Saraswati agreed to this (Mani 695).
11 Tagore has always been an influence on Ghosh, one example of which is Ghosh’s acknowledgement of Tagore’s classic story “Kshudito Pashan” a work to which Ghosh is greatly attached (Ghosh, Imam, xiv). However, a reference to Tagore’s play Chitrangada in this novel helps to recall the Mahabharata. Here in this case, by referring to Tagore’s play Chitrangada, Ghosh is not only acknowledging his indebtedness to Tagore, but also trying to show how very often situations faced by the Indian people are to be easily traced in the epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

12 According to the legend, Samudra Manthan or the churning of the ocean was a momentous event that took place at the dawn of creation. The gods knew that the churning would yield Amrit, or the elixir for immortality and eternal youth. But the task was almost impossible without the participation of the ashuras, or the titans. So, preparation started. Mount Mandara agreed to serve as the churning rod and the divine serpent Basuki decided to help as the churning rope. After the elixir was churned, a quarrel broke out between the gods and the ashuras as to who should be so privileged for a first sip. However, the gods tricked the ashuras and became immortal (Das 8-9).

13 Perhaps, Ghosh is here alluding to the politics of the upper class Hindu Brahmins who wanted to secure superior status in society as the transmitter of the Vedas or the words of the Gods through oral storytelling. But such ideas need to be re-examined with the help of rationalism or enlightenment which are undoubtedly Western constructs. However, the interesting point is that Ghosh critiques the preference of Western rationalism to Eastern mysticism which is one of the main concerns of Ghosh in this novel.

14 In the long philosophical history of India, many examples of myths and legends are used to emphasize discussions and debates depending on which myth is being used in which context. For example, in the Mahabharata Dharma asks Yudhisthira about the most surprising phenomenon in the world. Yudhisthira’s reply is that all have to depart to the Heavenly abode, yet those who are alive think as if they were immortal. This has frequently been quoted in the villages of India. But, the myth of Nachiketa provides a contrary interpretation of immortality, as he discovers the secret of the soul and learns that man is indeed immortal.

15 Nachiketa is the son of Vajashrava who is known for his perseverance. In course of some events, his father offers to give him to lord Yama who symbolizes death. But Nachiketa impresses upon him and receives enlightenment on the true nature of Brahman. He understands the real nature of soul and becomes famous for his rejection of material desires and the emancipation of the soul from rebirth.
Ghosh, in this novel, seeks to examine in rationalist terms the various aspects of Indian religion and intellectual history whose preference of one tradition over the others has undoubtedly created problems in the history of India. At the same time, Ghosh is also trying to re-read the Indian mythical culture rationally. One instance may be when Gopal, the alley of Balaram states: "It has been proved beyond all doubt that the Universal Egg of Hindu mythologies is nothing but a kind of Cosmic Neutron" (47).

THT helps in discovering the role of Amitav Ghosh as a novelist, a journalist, and a historian. In this novel, he intertwines accounts of the Morichjhapi Massacre of 1979 in the Sundarbans and the history of riverine dolphins (*Orcaella Brevirostris*) which are an integral part of the island's history and ecology. Ghosh, dramatises the last phase of the refugee problems in the Sundarbans. After partition, the local people had moved to West Bengal in search of better life. In the 60s, they were pushed inland from their original place into central India. Dandakaranya was conceived as a long-lasting solution to the problem of settlement. But gradually it turned out to be 'banishment' rather than rehabilitation. The refugees felt alienated, and between 1965 and 1978, more than 12,000 families deserted the settlement. The West Bengal government managed to send many of these refugees back, but about 25,000 managed to return to West Bengal and built a settlement on the island of Morichjhanpi. The then government of WB was unhappy over the refugees returning back to the state. It was declared that the Morichjhapi settlement was an illegal encroachment by 'deserters' on forest land earmarked for the protection of endangered tigers. The refugees were given an ultimatum to evacuate the island by 31st March, 1979; when that proved futile, the government started an 'economic blockade' that severely affected the refugees. The state police finally cracked them down in mid-May 1979. In *THT*, the Morichjapi Massacre is traced by a witness Nirmal who documents the incident in his diary kept for his nephew Kanai.

The term Brahmin has been used only to refer to the highest rank of the four Hindu castes. Traditionally, the Brahmins have been both priests and scribes of Hindu India. Thus, they played an important role in the evolution of literary traditions in many of the Indian languages. The idea of ritual purity gave them a monopoly over the scriptures. The superiority of the Brahmins as a caste still persists in post-independence India in which regional variations, while the challenges from the Dalit literary movements resist any form of caste privilege (Thieme 33).

Ghosh’s "The Slave of MS. H. 6" was originally contributed to the Subaltern Studies Project, which can be used to explore the faultiness of the dominant discourses in order to provide alternative accounts of histories that reveal the cracks in the colonial archaeology of knowledge. Read the entire essay in Ghosh's *The Imam and The Indian* (169).
20 However, this novel is to be read more in connection with the “Subaltern Studies” Project. As Robert Dixon writes: “Like the works of the Subaltern Studies scholars, and unlike the work of other diasporic Indians such as Spivak and Bhabha, these texts seem almost wilfully to avoid European theoretical models, grounding their method in a rigorous elaboration of archival and field research which offers itself as a series of ‘extended metaphor’ for allegorical interpretation. These texts also share the concern with recovering subaltern consciousness as theoretical fiction that motivates an allegorical reading of the past while seeking to avoid the “slide towards essentialism”’ (Dixon 26).

21 As discussed by David Kopf in his *British Orientalism and Bengal Renaissance*, along with the policies of the British Orientalists, there emerged the Bengal Renaissance whose literary attempts fell into two categories—firstly, the popular notion of the Renaissance built on the exploration of Indian heritage, and secondly, an awareness and questioning of the problems in the British Indian historiography. In this book, a comprehensive survey of the emerging stage of the Bengal Renaissance is available. Kopf has also referred to the writers and thinkers whose works actually paved the way for a greater Indian Renaissance.

22 The writers involved in this project were—William Jones (1746-1804) who contributed to the discovery of Indian golden past, Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) who initiated the trend of modern reform movements in India, and William Carey (1761-1834) who gave birth to modern Bengali prose. Implicit in them are the ideas of historical rediscovery, linguistic and literary modernization, and socio-religious reformation which rendered a heavy influence on subsequent writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1904) who frequently used the term Renaissance either in the context of enrichment of the Bengali language and literature or the modern reinterpretation of the Hindu tradition, Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950) who continually used the term to refer to the age of the great Bengali novelists, the Bengali nationalist Bepin Chandra Pal (1858-1932), whose autobiography *Memories of My Life and Times* considered the whole nineteenth century as a glorious period of Renaissance (Kopf 3).

23 Answering to a question asked by Michelle Caswell, Amitav Ghosh states that for him the value of the novel as a form is that it is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life—history, natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love, sexuality. For him the novel is a meta-form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writing, rendering meaningless the usual workaday distinctions between historian, journalist, anthropologist etc. Such an idea of the novel makes tremendous sense in the context of India and we should acknowledge Ghosh’s attempt to strengthen the status of Indian English fictions in IWE after Salman Rushdie.
Works Cited:


