CHAPTER TWO

Centre versus Margin: The Spectrum of Identity through Postcolonial Prism
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Like Edward Said, Ghosh draws attention to the artificiality of the East-West binaries of Orientalism. Like Homi Bhabha, he demonstrates the hybrid, interstitial nature of cultures, as articulated through language. Like Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies scholars, he endeavours to recuperate the silenced voices of those occluded from the historical record. (Thieme 251)

Ghosh alights upon various historical contexts and illuminates human predicament in his fiction, focusing on the concept of centre versus margin from postcolonial perspective. As he skims the age of colonialism, he maps its growth, phenomenology and fall, and portrays its reverberations in the societies in the postcolonial period. He concerns himself with the themes of displacement, disintegration of culture, crumbling of history and the mouldering of identity into nothingness, all of which are seen in strong affiliation with colonialism in the milieu. Exploring the logic behind the tremendous impact created by the imperialists with the utmost motive of profit, Ghosh fills up the gaps in the grand narrative of the colonisers’ version of history. His fiction becomes an effective medium for recreation of history perceived through postcolonial prism, facilitating the process of filling up the gaps in the discourses produced during the period of hegemony.
According to Claire Chambers, Ghosh "does not fully accept the conventional science/tradition division, or set it on the East/West axis. Rather he problematizes the Science-is-West and Tradition-is-East dichotomy, breaking down myths by his interrogation of the status and worth of different branches of science in India" ("Historicizing Scientific Reason" 37). The Circle of Reason and The Calcutta Chromosome address the epistemological hegemony, the West's undermining of native knowledge in the Orientalist perspective and reluctance at acknowledging native contribution to the area of knowledge, especially science. The West conceived of scientific knowledge as their mainstay, and the East incapable of even comprehending, let alone contributing to science.

Orientalist discourse ideated the irrationality of the East and blindly envisaged a distancing of the East from science and reason. In The Circle of Reason, reason becomes a motif representing the Western concept of reason and science, symbolised by Louis Pasteur's Principles of Sterilisation. The two central characters, Balaram in the beginning and Alu in the later part, pursue a quest for reason so fervently as if it were a religion and they form movements resembling cults with Pasteur signifying the god image. Alu and Balaram identify the pursuit and perpetuation of reason to be their life's purpose. Pasteur is their sole guide to reason. Reason becomes a cult belief rather than an essential perspective of applying common sense to analyse and solve situations. Any idea or philosophy for the betterment of the society is grotesquely bent to fit Pasteur's framework.
Ghosh counterposes the long tradition of weaving as an alternate discourse to Pasteurian Science. The narrator takes the time and space to relate the history of weaving in the context where Balaram makes Alu undergo an apprenticeship in weaving with Shombu Debnath, a traditional weaver fallen into bad times. Alu simultaneously pledges his allegiance to weaving as well as Pasteurian science. While the native art sustains him, the foreign ideal traumatises him.

When Balaram recognises political and ethical contamination of the people through Bhudeb Babu, he organises to spray the entire place of the meeting, the banyan tree, with disinfectant, while the meeting is on. His only explanation is, "To the banyan tree . . . There's no part of the village more littered with filth" (CR 128). Alu presumes himself to be Pasteur's heir and takes up responsibility to continue his quest. Alu muses: "Pasteur had discovered the enemy, the Germ, but he had never been able to find him. All his life he had tried to launch war but, like a shadow, the enemy eluded him . . . where is the germ's battleground?" (CR 302) When Alu traces all the evils to the root of money, he seeks to purge it with a kind of ideal communist commonwealth. But distended to Pasteur's proportions, he plans a cleaning of all the places contaminated with money, like cash counters with carbolic acid. Money is considered the source of spreading 'germs.'

*The Circle of Reason* is a native experiment with Western science that is carried out diligently through two generations but fails to yield the desired solutions in the contexts therein. Balaram and Alu undertake epic struggles
making enemies all around them. They quiver at the threshold of insanity as they try to apply Pasteur's principles and realise them in real life situations. Their quest of reason jeopardises everything and everybody around them. The novel is a political treatise which attempts to undermine the Manichean concept of binarism. In a binary construction, each pole is ideally the opposite of the other, not containing elements that are evident in the other side of the binary in question. However, in *The Circle of Reason* the purity of the two poles in binary constructions, such as science and religion, body and soul, and the East and the West is dismantled. As a consequence, new connections transcending the barriers between the different poles within the binaries are established.

Balaram loses his life as well as those close to him in his initiative to follow reason. Alu grazes with death and after a tumultuous journey of life, he realises the futility and irrelevance of Pasteur's principles. To both of them Pasteur's principles represent a transcendental allegory rather than science. They idolise it into a metaphysical framework and try to transpose it to suit life's needs. In a way, Ghosh satirises their idolising of reason to underline the ineptness of the West in projecting Western science as the autocratic authority of reason and knowledge. The quest in *The Circle of Reason* goes a full circle. The reason guided by Pasteur is passed from hand to hand like a relay baton throughout the novel. The novel ends with disillusionment and the burning of the book, *Life of Pasteur*, once considered sacred, in a funeral pyre. Pasteur's science is the metaphor of reason that is treasured and propagated as a
solution, a remedy to all problems in the society by Balaram as well as Alu, only to be discarded as irrelevant in the end, a realisation, late in coming.

The theme of purity runs through all the three parts of the novel. The first part, "Satwa: Reason," shows the quest for purity on a scientific level as Balaram disinfects the village of Lalpukur with carbolic acid to destroy the germs brought in by recent refugees. The concept of purity is also deconstructed through the hilarious student organization called the Rationalists, who blend ideas from the Hindu religion with Western natural science. There is also the suspicious 'science' of phrenology, which defies the purity of the mainstream natural sciences in its capacity to treat both the inside and outside, the mind and the body of human beings. The second part, "Rajas: Passion," shows how ideological purity is sought in the mock socialist movement, which considers money and private ownership as impure. The third part, "Tamas: Death," describes the fusion of all the thematic binaries of the text. It also emphasises the fact that life would be impossible without germs or impurity. The irony is that this revelation comes from the same book that has triggered all the preceding quests for purity, that is, René Vallery-Radot's *Life of Pasteur*, which is the offspring of Western rationalism and reason. Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* foregrounds the idea that the notion of purity behind binary constructions is not valid because one cannot exist without the other. Even scientific knowledge, which claims objective perspective, is humanly constructed.
Critics like Alan J. Bishop argue that even subjects such as mathematics, which are believed to be culture-free and universal, are humanly constructed and have a cultural history. In his essay, "Western Mathematics: The Secret Weapon of Cultural Imperialism," Bishop refers to Lean's documentation of nearly six hundred counting systems in Papua New Guinea and Menninger's study of the recording of numbers in knotted strings and wooden tablets (80-81). Establishing that all cultures have generated mathematical ideas, just as all cultures have generated language, religion, morals, customs and kinship systems, Bishop asks a pertinent question:

...two twos are four, a negative number times a negative number gives a positive number, and all triangles have angles which add up to 180 degrees... But where do degrees come from? Why is the total 180? Why not 200, or 100? Indeed why are we interested in triangles at all? The answer to these questions is, essentially, 'because some people determined that it should be that way.' (80)

Reason does not belong to any particular country. *The Circle of Reason* firmly establishes this fact through the character of Balaram, who talks all the time about the importance of reason in spite of seeking remedy in phrenology which was the Indian superstition of popular religion and astrology in the nineteenth century. Balaram, who considers *Life of Pasteur* an epitome of reason, says: "Science doesn't belong to countries; Reason doesn't belong to any nation. They belong to the history – to the world" (*CR* 54). When Gopal
asks him about the choice of weaving, Balaram replies: “Man at the loom is the finest example of mechanical man; a creature who makes his own world as no other can, with his mind . . . The loom recognises no continents and no countries. It has tied the world together. . .” (CR 55).

During the colonial era, natives were ruled by a power endorsed by a structured system of knowledge that projected them as “weak-willed, inferior, secondary, effeminate, and unable to rule themselves” (Boehmer, “Postcolonialism” 351). The conceptualization, “oriental,” is European in origin and it served its purpose of dominating the defined. In consequence, this knowledge structure muted the colonised. According to Bishop, the secret weapon is secret no longer.

The muteness is what postcolonial thinking seeks to cure. The muteness is perhaps a dimension of the disintegration of native history, culture, literature, language, pride, identity. Postcolonial discourses strive to find their lost voices amidst the chaos of European hegemonic noises. The muteness had been imposed on the colonized as a custom during the colonial era, whereas articulation had been established as the coloniser’s authoritative domain. The designed establishment is gradually shaken in its foundations and gradually reconstructed brick by brick by postcolonial thought and discourses in the venture to revoke the imposed muteness and reconstruct their identity.

Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* shows a postcolonial understanding of the scientific mechanism at work, by speculating the past rather than imagining the future which is more common in science fiction. Ghosh has
designed the novel with technical brilliance, blending the historical, anthropological, cultural and epistemological questions. The novel combines science fiction and detective plot. It is a novel that takes the reader through a thrill ride full of mystery and suspense, simultaneously, making the reader rack her/his brains trying to decipher the meaning and come to terms with the narrative. The novel is composed of seemingly disjointed narrative threads moving at a speed that challenges comprehension, towards a final convergence and resulting revelation. The various narratives of the novel are set in different time zones, in different time settings and they stand for the quests of different characters. The novel begins in a very unpretentious setting in America, the time somewhere in the twenty first century. From then on the narrative moves between the past and the future.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* has three connected story lines taking place at three distinct time settings. One narrative is about the Nobel Prize winning scientist, Ronald Ross, at his research on malaria. Another narrative is about Murugan who tries to detect a mystery behind the malarial research. The third narrative deals with Antar trying to find out what happened to Murugan, who had mysteriously disappeared during his adventure. Antar, a computer programmer, with his super computer, a prototype called AVA/IiE, seeks to trace his long lost co-worker, Murugan, who went to Calcutta in pursuit of certain missing links in the history of malarial research undertaken by Ronald Ross, the Nobel Prize winner. It is a field of research for which Murugan is ready to jeopardize his entire career. In order to find answers to some
questions and to resolve some doubts, Murugan undertakes the journey from which he does not return. Antar, hailing from Egypt, and Murugan, from India are of almost the same age and like many other characters in the novel, are diasporic entities.

The various quests are foregrounded by episodes and narrations from history, especially that of the early malarial research represented by Cunningham, Farley, Laveran and Ronald Ross. While one narrative thread sheds light on the quest of Antar in search of Murugan, another guides the reader through the quest of Murugan. Yet another line narrates the quest of a young investigative journalist, Urmila, who tries to know the meaning of a famous writer, Phulboni’s early work, “Lakhan Stories.” The three narratives are punctuated now and then by convergences as Murugan connects Antar and Urmila. In the centre of these narratives, a secret, mystic organization is slowly unveiled. The mystic organization is constituted by at least two subaltern agents, Mangala and Lakhan in various impersonations and incarnations. Mangala is a ‘sweeper woman’ and Lakhan is a ‘dhooley bearer,’ both hailing from Renupur, and probably belonging to the lower most rungs in the hierarchy of Indian caste system. There is also Sonnali, Phulboni’s illegitimate daughter seeking the same mystery because her dear ones are deeply involved in it.

Murugan’s preoccupation with the history of malarial research springs from his relating to Calcutta, the place he lived his early life, also being the one where Ross completed the last and most crucial part of his research. Further,
Murugan has incurred malaria as well as syphilis. At a time when syphilis was a killer disease, when antibiotics were unknown, artificially induced malaria was used to cure or at least mitigate syphilis in a most advanced stage. The process earned Dr. Julius von Wagner – Jauregg the Nobel Prize in 1927. Mangala, the mysterious subaltern agency, around whom the various narratives swirl, uses a variant of the process to cure people.

Simultaneously, Mangala's keen intelligence identifies certain oddities during the process. What begins as a healing ritual is continued as a serious research into the procedure of interpersonal transference, when Mangala and her team note a transfer of certain personality traits from the malaria donor to the receptor. As any true researcher, she seeks to refine and wield her accidental finding and thereby evolve and perfect the mechanism for interpersonal transference of a sort. The essence of interpersonal transference that Mangala conceives is not the “Oriental” mythology of transmigration of souls, but it is strongly rooted in genetic science something vaguely similar to cloning.

Mangala observes and understands the transference of knowledge or a part of the personality from one person to another, before the study of chromosome or even the term was known. Murugan signifies the DNA matter responsible for this transference as “the Calcutta chromosome.” He defines it as “a chromosome that is not transmitted from generation to generation by sexual reproduction. It develops out of a process of recombination and is particular to every individual. That's why it's only found in certain kinds of
cells . . . It only exists in non-regenerating tissue: in other words, the brain” (CC 213).

Mangala seeks to refine the transference for knowledge's intrinsic worth, and whenever her research meets with a dead end, external agents, European as well as Indian, geniuses as well as ordinary minds, are manipulated into forwarding her means unconsciously, sometimes consciously. She becomes the driving force behind a tumultuous movement, a master chess player, moving her coins, as she wants them to. She leads Ronald Ross through the discovery that the anopheles is the vector through which Malaria is spread. Further, she directs the quests of Antar, Urmila and Murugan. Mangala's conception of knowledge is similar to that of the great mathematical genius, Ramanujan, outstanding in the empirical level, but only lacking in the details according to common standards, due to lack of formal education, the reason why the genius remained hidden for long. Mangala is a natural genius like Ramanujan.

The aim for seeking refinement in the mechanism is the advancement of knowledge more for its own intrinsic worth than for its utilitarian value. The transference of knowledge has as its ultimate goal, the development of the same, bypassing the formal research requisites of grounding any search for the new, upon a systematic study of the past. The mechanism once perfected will facilitate the furtherance of knowledge, their ultimate aim. On the other hand, as the mystic side of the entire episode may imply, this does not aim at making an individual immortal. However, the entire mechanism works in a mysterious
way and all transference and operations are carried out in deep secrecy and pregnant silence. Silence is the religion, and secrecy the language of the subaltern agency as against articulation. As Paul Sharrad says, “. . . the subaltern speaks by not speaking, but by existing, invisible and silent, at the ‘heart of darkness’ of colonial life” (222). Silence is not followed for the sake of secrecy. Rather it is rooted in their philosophy of knowledge. The philosophy has a strange logic that seems most relevant from their perspective in their situation. Murugan outlines the philosophy as follows: “May be this other team started with the idea that knowledge is self-contradictory; may be they believed that to know something is to change it . . . Maybe they thought that knowledge couldn’t begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge” (CC 91).

In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, it is the belief system that to reveal something was to claim knowledge, thereby effecting a mutation of the thing known, with the final result that the knowledge no more exists. In simple terms they clearly understood the arbitrariness of knowledge. Hence, humbled by the indefinable nature of knowledge, founded in profound Indian philosophy, the agency resolves and resigns to silence. In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba points out that science and prejudice are not necessarily counterposed to one another. She explains how Western science developed as “an impulse to master the globe by incorporating, learning from, as well as aggressively displacing other knowledge systems” (61).
In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh gives a new rendering of the silence embodied by the native. Silence is a pervading theme in the novel presented in contrast with articulation. The silence of the colonised here shows an utmost dimensional change. Here the silence is deliberate and it teases and shuns articulation which is the method of the coloniser. The followers of the "Silence" are not compartmented in class or gender specific terms. The secret movement functions as a cult and the choice of followers is not restricted by labels. What E. A. Thomas says about the postcolonial writers is applicable to Amitav Ghosh also: "For the postcolonial writers, writing itself is a search for regeneration, an attempt to redefine their past by interrogating the Western construct of their history. So the postcolonial is supposed to designate a counter-discourse of the colonized others . . ." (17).

Throughout *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Mangala and Lakhan evolve as prototypes, once they perfect the art to interpersonal transference. They set the pace of the novel. They can be perceived as the power icons in the novel. The logic behind the characterisation of Mangala and Lakhan is that they are paradigms of the colonial Other conceived by the West. As Boehmer puts it in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, the colonial Other "signifies that which is unfamiliar extraneous to a dominant subjectivity, the opposite or negative against which an authority is defined" (21). The Other evolves as a subaltern agency. Yet the subaltern agency in this novel does not appear in open light. They are ever in the shadow, operating in silence and secrecy as against the dominating Western agency represented by
Cunningham or Ross. The cult of Silence proceeds with the initial part of their research parallel to that of malarial research making use of the same lab but with implications much different from those intended by the directors of the labs. Science is here represented as an articulating force, while silence is the language of counter-science. As Murugan explains to Urmila: "... the first principle of a functioning counter-science would have to be secrecy..." (CC 91).

The postcolonial archetype, Prospero-Caliban, reappears in the context as Cunningham and Mangala. Mangala learns the basics of microbiology from Cunningham and moves ahead. Here the colonised, signified by Mangala, does not verbally curse the coloniser signified by the doctor cum scientist, yet he is consumed by the mystic machinery, powered by the cult of silence.

The cult takes the magnitude of an organised religion and the chief, in this case, Mangala wields power like a god acting as a provider as well as an executor of power and judgement. The cult has its own set of devotees setting about in a quest for identification with the silence, to be accepted into the transference. Phulboni is a desperate follower of the movement who represents a search different from Antar, Urmila or Murugan. Phulboni is down to earth literal in searching, roaming the streets in a drunken state often. Nevertheless, he also pursues the same in and through his works as he confesses in the award function. His speech in the function bears testimony to the feelings within:

For more years than I can count I have wandered the darkness of these streets searching for the unseen presence that reigns over
this silence, striving to be taken in, begging to be taken across before my time runs out . . . to beg—to appeal to the mistress of this silence, that most secret of deities . . . to show herself to me (CC 25).

The theme of science versus counter-science runs like a thread in Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*, which suggests the possibility of an alternative historiography. While science promoted by Western logocentrism speaks about inventions and discoveries explicitly, counter-science surrounded by mysticism and secrecy operates through silence: *The Calcutta Chromosome* interweaves a network of traces— from the history of late nineteenth-century malaria research, theological movements generally deemed to be heretical in the West and slightly futuristic information technology *inter alia*— to provide the possibility of an alternative subaltern history, which exists in parallel with colonial history as an equally (or possibly more) potent epistemological system, albeit one which has traditionally operated through silence rather than articulation (Thieme, “The Discoverer Discovered” 131). Ghosh’s aim is to subvert the hegemonic dominance of Western discourse based on binary oppositions in which the colonial subject is viewed as an inferior thinker. Exploring Ghosh’s attempt at deconstructing the dichotomy between official Western science and alternative Eastern science, Isabella Brurschi defines *The Calcutta Chromosome* as “postcolonial allegory questioning the certainties, neutrality and objectivity of Western knowledge and thus denouncing colonial
appropriation, which is not only military, economic and political but also cultural" (65).

Through the character of Mangala, Ghosh foregrounds the original thought process and epistemological enquiry of an Indian female subaltern who was the brain behind the discoveries of Ronald Ross. Though there is the need for Coleridge's concept of “willing suspension of disbelief” to understand the idea of interpersonal transference of knowledge presented in *The Calcutta Chromosome* with all its anthropological richness, Ghosh’s aim of focusing on such interpersonal transference cannot be ignored because it attempts to destroy the barriers between elite and subaltern classes. As John Thieme states, “The novel's repeated emphasis on silence provides a reading of the subaltern which suggests that a figure, denied a voice by hegemonic cultures and deemed heretical in Christian thinking, could exist as a viable power player in his and in this case even more, her own right” (“The Discoverer Discovered” 138-139). In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Ghosh intends to establish the fact that discoveries of the subaltern cannot be dismissed as irrational in spite of the differences in the methods of science and counter-science.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* ends in an ontological deadlock. However, the whole expression of the silence, juxtaposed with articulation, through the various quests can be allegorically perceived as the native or the colonised reiterating their voice and reconstructing their identity, thereby emphasising their existence as an independent force. This aspect goes a long way in proving the discourses of the articulators, the scientific men or the colonisers, false.
As Madhumalati Adhikari says: “Postcolonial writing mystifies the real and demystifies the mystified . . . Amitav Ghosh in *The Calcutta Chromosome* as a postcolonial writer has rearranged the simplistic equation of life, death and immortality to prove that 'word manipulated artistically' can establish theories that are true and yet stranger than fiction” (182).

In a broader understanding, there is a resultant blurring of lines between silence and articulation, between science and counter-science. As Phulboni puts it: “Mistaken are those who imagine that silence is without life: that it is inanimate, without either spirit or voice. It is not: indeed the Word is to this silence what the shadow is to the foreshadowed, what the veil is to the eyes, what the mind is to truth, what language is to life” (*CC* 25). In *The Calcutta Chromosome*, silence leads to an experience that transcends the superficial level of comprehension. As N. S. Bhakt says, the reader is forced to think much about the silence that pervades the novel: “The mystery at the heart of the story is never completely resolved by the author, leaving much to the reader’s understanding and perception” (144). The subaltern always speaks, though in a different way and in a voice very subtle.

*The Circle of Reason* and *The Calcutta Chromosome* create an epistemic debate between the West and the East, where the voice of the West is loud and clear while the East speaks through silence. The constructed hegemony of European knowledge is deconstructed in these novels. While the pursuit of an obsessive course after Pasteurian conception leads only to logjams and complications, in *The Circle of Reason*, the burning of *Life of Pasteur* signifies the
volition of native knowledge. Along this line of reasoning *The Calcutta Chromosome* foregrounds the power of the subaltern agency against the grounds of established science. The identity of native epistemology is the subject of concern in these novels. *The Calcutta Chromosome* captures a reversal of roles between the centre and the margin.

Colonialism is a major force that shapes the destiny and identity of the characters in *The Glass Palace*, *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*. Drawn against the background of colonialism, the opium trade and the Opium wars, these three novels outline the immediate impact of colonialism on people of the world at large. *The Glass Palace* is a saga of human beings engaged in the course of their lives contextualising the history of the British invasion of Burma. The novel is wrought in epic proportions through the tumultuous span of history, starting from Northern Burma's fall under British colonialism, moving through the period of the Second World War and the overthrow of colonial rule in India and Burma and ending in the contemporary age in a mood of reconciliation. It spans a period of about one hundred and eleven years. Precisely the events in the novel swing from 1885 to 1996.

The first note of *The Glass Palace* is the triumphant march of the British Indian army into Burma after the defeat of the Burmese troops. Soon after, the purpose of the war is revealed to be the East India Company's greed for Burma teak and their reluctance to pay the import duty. This is followed by the hurried deportation of the Burmese Royalty to India. From then on Burma, the nation that knew no hunger and boasted cent percent literacy among men
and women, is laid waste. The entire social and political set-up disintegrates into ruins under the colonial plunderers' rule.

In the background of this fast shifting political and social terrain, the characters are set in motion. Defining coherent identities to people in a colonial set up is not viable. Hence, as Mondal states, “Addressing the psychological and affective effects of colonial ‘defeat’ as much as its political or economic dimensions, this constitutes a more humanistic attempt to recuperate some measure of subjectivity and agency as a viable basis for a future decolonisation of the mind and the body” (30). To King Thebaw the loss of his kingdom just takes him to higher pursuits of the intellect and human life. He becomes even greater than a king to the people of Ratnagiri. The Queen is led on by dedication to her husband to undertake a willing exile from which she again reaches her nation Burma before death.

Rajkumar, who begins as a derelict alien, “a kala from across the sea—an Indian,” climbs the ladder of socioeconomic status with his hard work, strategic planning and cunning (GP 3). He shows a keen instinct for survival. Through the entire course of the story Rajkumar keeps moving. He seems never at rest till the very end. Crossing the borders becomes his trait. Rukmini Bhaya Nair points out the similarities between Rajkumar and Ghosh: “... the pivotal figure of Rajkumar seems to me an in-text metaphor for Ghosh’s own authorial persona, as he perceives himself. Like Ghosh, Rajkumar is a boundary-crosser, who makes several transitions across national frontiers during his lifetime” (166).
Dolly starts her life as an orphan slave to Queen Supayalat. She stays on with the royal family through thick and thin, binding herself to it. She seems to have no deliberation in controlling the course of her life. This springs from her reluctance to leave the home that she knows, the one with the royal family. When she begins her new life with Rajkumar she has to sever ties with the King’s family most unwillingly. As she moves on with her family life, she forms new relationships. She lives through many ordeals in her life including her son Dinu’s struggle with polio, the resulting estrangement with her husband, the war, Neel’s death and the exodus to India at a ripe old age with Jeya, her newborn granddaughter to take care of. She lives through these ordeals and many more, with King Thebaw’s words as her first unconscious and later conscious guiding light. Compassion is her destination. Shobha Ramaswamy aptly says: “Dolly is archetypal ‘earth mother’ capable of bringing a semblance of order even to the chaos of Outram house. Dolly is an outstanding example of adaptability to the vicissitudes of life” (98). Dolly’s absorption in Dinu’s convalescence occupies her mind all the time and she changes her sleeping pattern. She avoids gatherings, tea-parties and picnics so that she can devote most of her time to look after Dinu.

Chapter Sixteen of *The Glass Palace* shows how Dolly learns the art of compassion when she stays in the hospital in Rangoon to look after her polio-affected son Dinu. The scene in which Dolly finds the dead body of a child in the corridor becomes a powerful “objective correlative” in T.S.Eliot’s term. Stepping out of her room in the hospital, Dolly finds a stretcher in the corridor.
A child’s body is lying on it, covered with a white hospital sheet. Though Dinu is sleeping a few feet away, she cannot control her fear:

Falling to her knees in the corridor, she had torn away the sheet that covered the corpse. The child had been a boy, of Dinu’s age. Again that night, she’d thought of the child’s body; she’d thought of what her life would be like in Dinu’s absence; she’d thought of the dead boy’s mother. She’d begun to cry—it was as though her voice had merged with that of the unknown woman; as though an invisible link had arisen between all of them—her, Dinu, the dead child, his mother. (GP 211)

This scene invites comparison with the climax of Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day*. In the remarkable final scene of *Seize the Day*, Wilhelm, who is in pursuit of Tamkin, finds him speaking to someone under the canopy of a funeral parlour. He moves forward towards Tamkin but is prevented by the policeman who has been ordered to keep a way clear. Tamkin has disappeared and Wilhelm is trapped in the crowd. The pressure of the crowd brings him into the funeral parlour. He stands along the wall with others and looks towards the coffin. He gazes at the face of the dead. His eyes shine hugely with instant tears. The dead man is gray-haired. He has two large waves of gray hair at the front. But he is not old. His brows “were raised as though he had sunk into the final thought” (117). Wilhelm is struck by this meditative look and he cannot leave the place. He cries “first softly and from sentiment, but soon from deeper feeling” (117) at the sight of a dead body. In spite of the tinge of horror, he
remains beside the coffin. His eyes are filled with tears when the visitors move towards the standing bank of lilies, lilacs and roses. Standing a little apart, Wilhelm begins to cry. His efforts to collect himself are useless. He cries with all his heart. The fact is that both Wilhelm and Dolly see themselves and humanity in the anonymous corpse.

Uma evolves from an erring young wife to a district collector to a Congress celebrity and freedom fighter through her own struggles including the social constraints of widowhood. Ilongo’s life though not very detailed in portrayal crosses a great chasm. A son born to a slave rubber plantation worker of its owner, Rajkumar, and spurned, he grows into a true socialist leader.

Dinu survives through his own search in life. He passes his phases of trauma, his struggle with the initial crippling stages of polio, the depression that followed, the death of his love, Alison, each leaving in him a change of perspective, but on he moves in his vocation of photography, which itself is a secret mysterious weapon against the threatening communist government in Burma. In the end of the novel, the communist Burma with the one glowing hope, democracy, symbolised by Aung San Suu Kyi, is the backdrop into which Dinu is set as one of the many who expect a change to take place.

Beni Prasad, the collector, and Manju, Neel’s wife, do not have the adaptive quests for identity that the above mentioned characters project. When Uma wants to split from the collector and when Neel meets his tragic death, Beni and Manju find their identities shattered. The things which mattered to
them before their traumas, the collectorship for Beni and the baby for Manju do not lead them on. They end their lives. Alison, however, is different. She is neither a diehard survivor nor a downright quitter. The same may be said of Manju’s twin brother, Arjun, who lives and dies a soldier. The character of Arjun gains its significance because his destiny is entangled with the course of history. Ghosh is always interested in the description of how the individual is affected by contemporary social developments. Ghosh states that the seeds of Arjun’s character were planted for him by many people including his father, who participated in the Second World War: “. . . the character of Arjun is one that was very compelling to me from the start of the book and remains compelling to this day because the way in which his history is enmeshed with the histories of the families around him” (“Diasporic Predicaments” 1). Arjun is a three-dimensional character, undergoing transformation from being a person who justifies his elitism to a person who makes an analysis of human predicament.

All these characters pursue their quest for their identities in a kaleidoscopically changing postcolonial set up. The personal identity sought after by a character is complex and multidimensional. The milieu creates a dynamic state of social, economic, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, national and historical dimensions in the identity. At the social level one may deduce Rajkumar’s struggle as to carve a place for himself, a black skinned, ‘kaala...Indian’ in his land of exile, or Uma’s, a widow’s carving her own rightful place as a free potential individual leading a country to independence.
Prime to these, the evolution of national identity from a colonial chaos is the culmination of the theme of identity in the novel. Ghosh methodologically leads through events and dialogue amidst his many characters the creation of a national identity. The novel begins in the verge of Burma falling totally under colonial reigns with the help of recruits from India, the jewel in the crown of the Empire. While icons which had once symbolised the nation, the Mughal Empire, were crumbling under the iron fist of colonialism, the mood in India represented by Indians inside and outside the country is one of resignation and submission. For many it was a blessing in disguise as they saw the long upheld social and economic tables turned. The colonial government was gradually hailed as a harbinger of change and reform by many of the well informed and most educated in the colonised countries, of course trained by the colonial masters. Ghosh writes: “Rajkumar had come to be convinced that in the absence of the British Empire, Burma’s economy would collapse” (GP 306). But Queen Supayalat expresses a different view which became true in the pages of history later:

Yes, we who ruled the richest land in Asia are now reduced to this. This is what they have done to us, this is what they will do to all of Burma. They took our kingdom, promising roads and railways and ports, but mark my words, this is how it will end. In a few decades the wealth will be gone—all the gems, the timber and the oil—and then they too will leave. In our golden Burma where no one was too poor to write and read, all that will remain
is destitution and ignorance, famine and despair. We were the first to be imprisoned in the name of their progress; millions more will follow (GP 88).

Queen Supayalat's view is that many colonised people will end up as prisoners in shantytowns born of the plague. The loss of identity is inevitable, especially when people are forced to move from their native land to some other hostile environment. When Uma asks Dolly whether she feels lonely in Ratnagiri, Dolly says: “If I went to Burma now I would be a foreigner, a trespasser, an outsider from across the sea” (GP 113) because many changes have taken place during the years. As far as Dolly is concerned, it makes no difference because she is used to live within high walls.

*The Glass Palace* launches a vehement criticism at the coloniser's justification of the hegemonic system. Queen Supayalat asks the collector:

> We have heard so many lectures from you and your colleagues on the subject of barbarity of the Kings of Burma and 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)
The fact that the spirit of *The Glass Palace* is anti-colonial is proved when Dolly replies to Uma’s question whether she is frightened of living in the same house with Queen Supayalat, who had a lot of people killed in Mandalay. Pointing at Queen Victoria’s picture hanging by the front door of the collector’s bungalow, Dolly asks Uma: “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” (*GP* 114).

Colonial propaganda is noted as it goes farther than violating the national geographical boundaries and colonises the minds of the people. There is an illusionary confusion wherein the coloniser is mistaken for the nation, the self. The identity of the colonised is completely lost. Indian soldiers are led on through expeditions of conquering, after a motivating brainwash to make them believe that they were bound to stand by their Empire (colonial), in the sacred duty of liberating people from monarchic subordination. Decolonising of the mind becomes an essential step in regaining the country’s identity, the people’s lost identity. There is a conversation among Dinu, Uma and Arjun on the day of Manju and Neel’s wedding where Dinu points out the status of the Indian society before the British came in, arriving at the perspective that India had been no better and the British were not bad after all. Here Uma substantiates the true colour of colonial rule by citing the example of Burma, an egalitarian society with universal literacy and good life status for women, dragged down to dump by colonialism.
Uma points out that the Empire is guilty of aggression and conquest. She says to Dinu: “How many tens of millions of people have perished in the process of this Empire’s conquest of the world—in its appropriation of entire continents?” (GP 294). Dinu is not convinced as he catalogues the positive events that have happened after the arrival of the British, especially the introduction of law against untouchability, sati and caste discrimination. Uma argues that the idea that imperialism is an enterprise of reform is false. She reminds that Burma was also conquered and subjugated though there was neither caste system nor mistreatment of women. When Dinu points out her frequent use of the English language in spite of her strong indignation, Uma retorts sharply: “Many great Jewish writers write in German. Do you think that prevents them from recognising the truth?” (GP 295). This view is the basis of Ghosh’s postcolonial vision.

With the reclamation of national identity the quest ends. In the course of the quest one can observe a subverted history being reconstructed. History which is a backdrop in the beginning of the novel slowly becomes a tapestry into which the story is woven. The lives of the characters are intertwined inextricably with history. Considering Ghosh a Utopian like Pláto, More, Rousseau, Proudhon, Kropotkin and Marx, Gauri Shankar Jha explains how Ghosh creates his world of Eden out of chaos from an optimistic perspective:

*The Glass Palace* is the human interest story of the great Indian diaspora, its loss and longing in the term of war and colonisation, and displacement as permanent state of the dreamer, ending with
liberating resistance of Aung San Suu Kyi. The fall of the Glass Palace of the last King, his last journey to Ratnagiri as his last resort, the king as compassionate prophet, soldier caught between loyalty and conscience—all form a part of the existential grammar of the living Republic of Ghosh. (71)

The Glass Palace shows history having a great impact on the lives of the people in the novel and focuses on the flow of history which is deduced through common man's history. The characters are no mere puppets in the hands of history. They act and react as human beings in a drastically changing milieu. They adapt themselves to the utmost possible limit their individuality permits. The characters do not just coexist in the greatly eventful course of history. The protagonists are the signs of the period. Further their actions cause and signify the course of history. A. S. Dasan vouches that Ghosh's "reconstruction of history explores the psychological dilemmas experienced by individuals whose quest for personal identity is a predominant theme" (The Indian English Novel Then and Now 83). Perhaps for the first time, history ceases to be a mere textual record of extraordinary unidirectional happenings in popular life. The very freedom movement in India which is projected in common history as a rightfully justified unanimous uprising, is shown in its true colours with many strands of diverse opinions long in making and clearly founded in reason.

In The Glass Palace, history is shown at its making. Besides it is a history of diaspora and decolonising, not colonising. As it places the common man in
context and weaves history around, history gains life from identity. Meenakshi Mukherjee, who comments on the end of a novel that deals with so much human tragedy, wars, deaths, devastation and dislocation, observes that the last section of the novel is electrifying: “When the two surviving members of the families in Calcutta and Burma meet through their common bond of photography— which incidentally is a running motif in the novel— there is in a sense an opening up of doors. The most unexpected are the last three pages which encapsulate past and present, evoking a mood of reconciliation and peace through a startling and bizarre image. Each reader of *The Glass Palace* will pick out a different strand from this weave of many stories” (Web).

Chapter Forty-Seven of *The Glass Place* describes the public meeting addressed by the charismatic leader Suu Kyi in 1996. There is a large crowd, which includes women and children. The volunteers are wearing saffron tunics and green longyis, which stand for democracy movement. Suu Kyi, a symbol of hope, is described thus: “A slim, fine-featured woman stepped up... Her hair was dark black, and gathered at the neck. She was wearing white flowers above her hair. She was beautiful almost beyond belief” (541). Jaya, who has come to Suu Kyi’s house with Dinu, thinks that Suu Kyi’s laughter is her charisma. As Napoleon becomes one of the characters in *River of Smoke*, the Nobel Prize winner Suu Kyi appears in *The Glass Palace* as a powerful leader. Ghosh fuses fact and fiction in these two novels. Ira Pande aptly says, “Hope, reconciliation, affirmation and faith in Suu Kyi’s presence leads the wheel to turn yet again. A perfect arc brings the book to a perfect end” (Web).
The contemporary significance is that Suu Kyi received the European Union's 1990 Sakharov Prize for human rights at the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 29th October 2013.

Any event in history is multidimensional and man is apparently the part and parcel of history. History in The Glass Palace throbs with vitality. History is realised and reasoned out in the form of fiction. As Ghosh sketches the predicament of an individual in a complex, mercurial, postcolonial, historical milieu, set on his or her quest for a relative as well as independent identity, a postcolonial history is reconstructed in its true proportions with no marginalisation of any kind as presented in the novel, The Glass Palace.

The Ibis Trilogy intends a journey into the colonial past and evokes an overt realisation of the consequences of colonial oppression and exploitation joining hands with blatant hypocrisy. The first and second books of the Ibis Trilogy—Sea of Poppies and River of Smoke—narrate the sea of pain, failure and loss signified by the poppy fields and a river of human struggle and fall along the journey of the opium cargoes. The first book, Sea of Poppies, is set in the early years of the establishment of the East India Company. It describes the problems of the marginalised before and after the arrival of the coloniser and also depicts how the landlords of India were humiliated by the colonial power. Before the arrival of the colonisers, the poor people suffered due to the luxury and indifference of the landlords. After the arrival of the colonisers, both the poor people as well as the landlords experienced many difficulties because of the materialistic attitude of the colonisers. A synthesis of Michel Foucault's
idea of power structures constructed by hegemonic forces and Edward Said's concept of the worldliness of the text is identified in Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. Ghosh shows his intense humanism in his portrayal of the sufferings of the subaltern during the colonial period. His focus is on the physical, economic, religious and judicial subjugations.

*Sea of Poppies* prepares the ground for staging human drama in the context of the Opium Wars. The novel gauges the influence and the effects of Opium and its cultivation in India and China. It begins with the recording of life around the compulsive opium cultivation, the resulting agricultural monoculture in North India under the British colonial rule and the disintegration of the rural life around it. Deeti, one of the main characters in the novel, is an opium farmer. Her husband Hukam Singh turns an opium addict after being introduced to it while incapacitated and hospitalised, serving the British army. Being employed in the opium factory after retirement, he is unable to give up the habit in spite of having lost his potency.

Compulsive opium cultivation and monopolised trading of the produce, a convenient exploitation venture, totally disrupts the delicate system that existed in the rural economy of India. Prior to the imperialist intrusion, agriculture involving food crops sustained a well-balanced system of life and took care of all the needs of the farmers concerned. Deeti ponders: "The hut's roof was urgently in need of repairs but in the age of flowers, thatch was not easy to come by: in the old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the
damage of the year before" (SP 29). *Sea of Poppies* relates how the farmers were tricked or forced into accepting loans which they could not repay and hence brought under the control of the opium traders, the East India Company.

Always at the brink of extreme poverty, the farmers could not make ends meet. While opium is the magic product that sustains the colonisers and makes their rule flourish, the producers, the Indian farmers are in no way benefited. At the end of the opium harvest, Deeti is in such a situation that she takes a loan from the grocer at an exorbitant rate of interest. The last straw is her husband's death. Ghosh's choice of characters is not coincidental or random but strategic and representative, directed at giving a real critical image of the milieu represented.

Along *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*, Ghosh illustrates in detail the horrors wrought by the addiction to opium. Addiction is portrayed at various levels of degeneration among people in various strata of the society. The prevalent proximity of the deadly substance corrupts many a man irrespective of age, status or profession. The captain of the Ibis owes his weak, retiring disposition to the same lethal habit. His closeness to the substance, as his ship transported it, had tempted him into acquiring the habit. He recalls to his second mate, Zachary Reid, "I know of no salt who doesn't sample his cargo from time to time" (SP 435). The stark reality about the pathetic degradation that awaits an opium addict is presented through the character of Ah Fatt, Neel's fellow convict. When Neel meets Ah Fatt, he is in the withdrawal period in extreme trauma, unrecognizable as a human being.
Besides the destructive influence on individual lives, there is the very burden of the forced cultivation of opium as the chief crop jeopardising the general economy of India. Deeti contemplates the state of villages where “everyone’s land was in the hock to the agents of the opium factory: every farmer had been served with a contract, the fulfilling of which left them with no option but to strew their land with poppies” (SP 193). Poppy is perceived by Deeti to be “the carrier of Karmanasa’s malign taint” (SP 193). Karmanasa is a tributary of the Ganges which was believed to be capable of erasing “a lifetime of hard-earned merit” with its touch (SP 192).

Opium becomes a major force that influenced and changed for worse, the life of large multitudes of people and societies in India and China. The substance may be identified as the chief cause behind any quandary that the characters come by in the milieu. As Ghosh mentions in his interview to Michelle Caswell, “There was really no getting away from opium: in this period, India, China and England were joined by a sea of poppies.” Of the poppy seed, Deeti ponders: “it was this miniscule orb—at once bountiful and all devouring, merciful and destructive, sustaining and vengeful. This was her Shani, her Saturn” (SP 452). The opium factory is revealed to be a place of extreme oppression besides being a place that could easily entice the workers into becoming addicts. The work, apart from creating a tempting proximity to the drug, was inhuman and unhealthy. *Sea of Poppies* shows the pathetic plight of Indian labourers through the eyes of Deeti who goes in search of her husband Hukam Singh in the Sudder Opium Factory. It was like a dim tunnel,
lit only by a few small holes in the wall. A startling scene unfolds before her eyes:

. . . a host of dark and legless torsos was circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons. This vision—along with the overpowering fumes—made her groggy, and to keep herself from fainting she began to move slowly ahead. When her eyes had grown more accustomed to the gloom, she discovered the secret of those circling torsos: they were bare-bodied men, sunk waist-deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge. Their eyes were vacant, glazed, and yet somehow they managed to keep moving as slow as ants in honey, tramping, treading.” (SP 94-95)

Even the monkeys that lived around the Sudder Opium Factory are affected by “a miasma of lethargy” hanging over the factory’s surroundings and they never chatter or fight unlike others of their kind. The factory’s effluents are enough for them to resume their “stupefied scrutiny of the Ganga and its currents” (SP 91). A similar experience is described in River of Smoke when Bahram spends “most of the morning in a chair by the window, looking in the direction of the river . . .” (RS 525). At the end of the novel, Bahram dies because of his attempt to swim in the river of smoke!

Besides, there are parts of the factory where the very work location is precarious. For instance, in the room where the opium was set to dry, the boy workers have to climb cathedral high shelves, holding on to the scaffolding,
like acrobats, throw opium balls, the size of coconuts, to pass them with one hand, "that too at a height where the slightest slip would mean certain death" (SP 96).

Opium makes its destructive influence felt at every stage of its manufacture and trade with benefits pertaining only to the imperialist traders. The transportation and the authoritatively justified trading of the substance into China ensured the establishing of opium as the most lucrative business owned by the empire. In spite of the glaring evils wrought by opium cultivation and addiction, British traders promoted it in China for sheer economic reasons.

Burnham, a British businessman, refers to China in Sea of Poppies, "... there is nothing they want from us ... But, we, on the other hand, can't do without their tea and their silks. If not for opium, the drain of silver from Britain and her colonies would be too great to sustain" (112). Besides the trade of opium was not one of choice on China's side, but rather one of enticing and smuggling. Mr. Doughty, the pilot of Ibis brags about the role of the East India Company and other British and American companies in making China take to opium at a large scale. He claims that "the yen for opium would still be limited to their twice-born if not for the perseverance of English and American merchants" (SP 112). The amount of revenue earned out of the trade was so immense that it sustained the British rule in the other colonies. But the revenue was not derived out of selling opium as a medicine but promoting its addiction.
When portending war, Mr. Burnham says to Neel: "The war, when it comes, will not be for opium. It will be for a principle: for freedom—for the freedom of trade and for the freedom of the Chinese people" (SP 115). The traders show psychological conditioning when they seem to believe what they project, what they assume. The colonial hypocrisy cannot be better exposed than when Mr. Doughty emphatically states that "war is not merely just and necessary, but also humane . . . Indeed humanity demands it. We need only think of the poor Indian peasant—what will become of him if his opium cannot be sold in China? Bloody hurrenzads can hardly eat now: they'll perish by the crore" (SP 260). The projection of selfish motives as altruism is what aids in establishing traders as colonisers.

The voice of those in power attempts to justify their role as colonisers all through. Mr. Burnham dares justify the most inhuman slave trade from Africa and hail it as a blessing in disguise. He opines: "As I see it, Reid, the Africa trade was the greatest exercise in freedom since God led the children of Israel out of Egypt. . . . The situation of a so-called slave in the Carolinas—is he not more free than his brethren in Africa, groaning under the rule of some dark tyrant?" (SP 79). They are guided by misleading short-sightedness clad in hypocrisy. They run their affairs with the prime motive of preserving self while they appear to be genuinely concerned with their subjects, the natives. While they hail the freedom of trade, they are least mindful of respecting individual freedom where it concerns their others, "that which is unfamiliar and extraneous to a dominant subjectivity, the opposite or negative against which
an authority is defined" (Boehmer, Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors 21), the Indians and the Chinese in this novel.

All through the novels, the voice of the oppressor is juxtaposed with the voices from the margin. Sea of Poppies is thickly populated with people from marginalised societies: the poor, Dalits, the coloured and women. Jodu, Zachary Reid, Deeti, Kalua, Paulette and the various girmityas aboard the Ibis are representative of the marginalised. Each character is forced to the margins and taken advantage of in the novel. However their state of oppression does not silence them.

In the background of these characters, marginalisation, oppression and exploitation have patterns that clearly overlap with the colonial distribution of power. The hierarchy in the novel arranges the society, prioritising the colonisers and then the privileged natives such as the rich or those belonging to the assumed higher castes. The coloniser is privileged over the colonised irrespective of economic, social or cultural backgrounds.

Neel, about his presence in the dock, wonders about the inequality in the colonial judiciary system and senses the revelation of Mr. Burnham and his ilk, who were exempt from the law, having become "the world's new Brahmins" (SP 239). Neel Halder, the Zamindar of Raskhali, is accused of forging promissory notes in the name of Mr. Burnham, signed in proxy with Mr. Burnham’s knowledge, and penalised. The motive behind is the taking over of the Raskhali Zamindary.
Diversity of caste or colour has been a prevalent ground for oppression. Social discrimination based on caste or colour is the run-of-the-mill in the West as well as the East. In the zeal to attain the civilised state, the different communities overlook the senselessness of these boundaries and fervently keep them up as part of development. The discrimination and the adjoining prejudices have been unexceptional in the societies for a very long time; their rootedness precedes the colonial age.

In the postcolonial context, the subaltern may be a native or the doubly marginalised colonial dalit. The subaltern takes multiple shapes in Amitav Ghosh’s fiction. His novels spread out the power structures for examination with the marginalised subalterns in focus. Alu and his companions constitute the subaltern in *The Circle of Reason*, Mangala and Lakaan in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Kusum and Fokir in *The Hungry Tide*, Rajkumar, Dolly and Ilango in *The Glass Palace*, Deeti, Kalua, Jodhu, Zachary Reid and the girmityas and the various travellers aboard the Ibis in *Sea of Poppies* and Chi-mei and Ah Fatt in *River of Smoke*.

The marginalised natives many a time constitute the class of the doubly marginalised in the native society as well as the colonial set up. Deeti and Kalua are the best examples to this fact. Deeti is a female colonial subject in a patriarchal or even male-chauvinistic colonial society. At the stage where Ghosh had only a loose collection of story elements for beginning the story narrated in *Sea of Poppies*, he found himself meeting the eyes of a woman who did not exist, and wondering who she was. He talks to David Larsen in an
interview published in the *New Zealand Listener* about the creation of the character of Deeti: “She came to me while I was thinking about something else, in the way that characters sometimes come to you. I just saw her face. I had such a vivid sense of what she was like, of her grey eyes. She claimed the book for herself, really. I thought of her right from the start as someone who’s forced into leaving the only place she knows. Which is this little village in rural Bihar, I knew that about her” (Web).

Deeti is in a constant state of oppression and is safe nowhere. Starting with her rape on her wedding night by her brother-in-law, throughout her poverty stricken life with her impotent husband, under the immodest eyes and cruel jeers of the brother-in-law, even through her escape from becoming a sati with Kalua, till she finds safety in foreign shores, Deeti’s life is like a live landmine. During times of crisis, this condition of extreme marginalisation threatens her very existence.

Kalua is as vulnerable to hurt, insult and exploitation as Deeti, being a member of a supposed low caste, the leather workers’ caste. This fact of their social status is significant in drawing them to each other as they show mutual understanding and recognition, along with love, respect and concern. He is close to losing his life at least three times in the novel before he escapes his identity. He is outrageously insulted and sadistically tortured by the landowners in his village for failing to win them a wrestling match. Deeti, who is haunted by images of her own violation on her wedding night, is a secret witness to the scene of Kalua’s humiliation, and she wonders: “So it could
happen to a man too? Even a powerful giant of a man could be humiliated and destroyed, in a way that far exceeded his body’s capacity for pain?” (SP 57). The lack of security in life is just one side of being at the margin. The dearth in dignity is what moulds their place or rather its absence in the society.

Deeti’s voice in the novel is deeply reflective and bold. Through her eyes, many concrete manifestations of inequality and oppression are perceived. She is representative of the class of the poor in the margins, significantly portrayed in Ghosh’s fiction as active agents of resistance and change. Far from being a passive subject, an embodiment of a silent other, she survives and creates an identity for herself and hers. On one occasion she questions the basis of the inhuman trade of opium. When a sirdar asks Deeti why she was risking her husband’s life by sending him to work in an opium factory, knowing he was an addict, she snaps back at him, “How would you earn your living if not for afeemkhors (opium addicts)?” (SP 98).

Through the portrayal of the influence of Opium and its trading and the actual motives that drive its promotion, Ghosh unearths the irony of the masquerade that the Empire and the opium tradesmen put up in the name of free trade and divine mission, and how they project their economic motives in the guise of principles of freedom and religion. Deeti becomes Ghosh’s mouthpiece not just in this context. She rises against any form of oppression even when it is not directed against her.

All the major characters in Sea of Poppies are in some way closely associated with Ibis, the schooner. But the central group comprises of the
marginalised. On board the schooner their state of bondage and their uprooted identity make them a close knit community. Severed from their identities, they overlook their differences and promise mutual commitment as brothers and sisters, begotten by Ibis. Deeti proclaims: “. . . from now on, there are no differences between us; we are jahaz-bhai and jahaz-bahen to each other; all of us children of the ship” (SP 356).

In this context, a comparative study of Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* with Melville’s *Moby Dick* throws new light on the theme of voyage. The essential similarity between Ghosh and Melville is that both of them present voyage as a recurrent theme, describing two different value systems. The values followed at sea are totally different from those followed on land. On the ship, the words of the captain are final and ought not to be questioned. In *Sea of Poppies*, the Captain of the Ibis speaks to the crowd on the deck: “The difference is that the laws of the land have no hold on the water. At sea there is another law, and you should know that on the vessel I am its sole maker. While you are on Ibis and while she is at sea, I am your fate, your providence, your lawgiver” (SP 404). In *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab points a loaded musket towards Starbuck and says: “There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one captain that is lord over the Pequod” (436). Ahab clearly exploits the sailors’ belief in fate to manipulate them into thinking that the quest for Moby Dick is their common destiny. The Pequod describes equality and fellowship in the midst of a racist, hierarchically structured world. The ship’s crew consists of men from all corners of the globe and all races who seem to get along
harmoniously. The Pequod, which derived its name from a Native American tribe in Massachusetts, is a symbol of doom. It is painted a gloomy black and covered in whale teeth and bones, literally bristling with the mementos of violent death. It is, in fact, marked for death. Thus, both Ghosh and Melville mould their characters based on the pyramidal structure in which the authority of the Captain of the ship remains unquestioned.

In the process of establishing a close-knit community the Ibis is not an exception. When Neel enters the prison, Bishu-ji counsels him in anticipation saying, “When you step on that ship, to go across the Black Water, you and your fellow transportees will become a brotherhood of your own: you will be your own village, your own family, your own caste” (SP 314). In contrast to this feeling of kinship among the natives, in spite of the ideals of modernity that the colonisers seem to uphold, in reality, they try to keep the social disparity of the native society intact and sidestep whenever they are called to intervene.

The feeling of colour or caste is as strong as it is rampant. The Captain of Ibis freely consents when the subedar on board the Ibis, Bhyro Singh, requests permission from the Captain to prosecute Kalua for the charge of marrying Deeti, a woman from a higher caste. Deeti already happened to be related to the subedar through her late husband Hukam Singh. The captain construes of the Indian caste system as something akin to the pattern of racial prejudice and empathises with the subedar. He argues his standpoint with Zachary Reid: “Why, what do you think would happen in Maryland if a white
woman were to be violated by a Negro? What would you, or I, or any of us, do with a darkie who'd had his way with our wives or sisters? Why should we expect the subheddar and his men to feel any less strongly than we would ourselves?” (SP 482).

Zachary Reid, the second mate in Ibis, is ever conscious that “he owed his mate’s berth to nothing more than the colour of his skin and a few misbegotten muscles” (SP 362). He passes himself off as a white though he is half black. He bears his identity with fear and apprehension. He has witnessed violence against the coloured and recalls the cold-blooded murder of his co-worker in a shipyard, before he enlisted in Ibis. The overlapping of the caste system with the racial pattern demonstrated by colonialism, further legitimises the application of postcolonial theory in reading the situations of discrimination. The incident also brings to light the hypocrisy of the colonial rule in speaking of the mission of civilisation. Another aspect that is illuminated here is the fix in which the subaltern is positioned with no rule, native or colonial, guaranteeing a respectable life.

The pages of history show that the British prison system in the latter half of the eighteenth century was designed so as to force the prisoners from British colonies lose their identity. The dehumanising experience Neel Halder is subjected to in prison is a testimony to this fact. When the new set of jailers takes Halder into their custody, they tear his dothi and laugh at him: “Now here is a real Draupadi . . . clinging to her sari” (SP 287). They take hold of his kurta and tear it apart and comment: “More of a Shikandi if you ask me”
They open his mouth forcibly and count his teeth. The scene in which the sepoys examine Neel Halder's hind parts to ensure whether he carries any venereal disease shows the cruelty extended to the prisoners:

Neel's struggles presented no challenge to them and they quickly tore off the remnants of his clothing; then they held him upright, pinioning his limbs so as to fully expose his naked body to his jailers' scrutiny . . . Neel was now standing with his legs apart and his arms over his head while the orderly searched his flanks for birthmarks and other ineradicable signs of identification. (SP 288 - 89)

The whole process is to humiliate Halder. Many of the prisoners "would gladly have died – or rather killed – rather than be subjected to the shame of having their nakedness exposed" (SP 288). The ordeal is followed by the process of inscription, which changes Halder's identity. His hair is cut short and the words, "forgerer alipore 1838," are inscribed unevenly by the tattooist upon his forehead (SP 292).

The worst level of dehumanisation is experienced by Neel Halder when the guards decide to break the good relationship between Ah Fatt and him. The guards have a wager between them and they first inform Halder that he will be treated better if he urinates on Ah Fatt. Halder rejects the offer immediately. Then the guards tempt Ah Fatt with a piece of opium and succeed in making Ah Fatt urinate on Halder. As K. M. Chandar says, "... this act of a criminal urinating on the Kingly Halder is the final and
humiliating act of bringing Halder to the level of any other ordinary human being having been subjected to total ignominy" (188).

The state of oppression is portrayed in different ways in Ghosh’s novels. In *The Glass Palace*, the coercion shown by the royalty towards the commoners is evident in the way ordinary citizens are expected to crawl on all fours before queen Supayalat even when expected to do her bidding and bring things to her. In *Sea of Poppies*, Neel Halder maintains a similar attitude as long as he is the Zamindar of Raskhali. One may observe a blueprint in Lalpukur in the novel *The Circle of Reason* and the Sundarbans, especially Morichjhapi in *The Hungry Tide*.

In *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, Elleke Boehmer defines postcoloniality as “that condition in which colonised peoples seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical agents” (3). Their consciousness and voice pose the powerful counter narrative to the loud discourses of power in the name of colonialism, racialism, caste or sexuality, thereby making an “undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization—the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination” (Boehmer 3).

Though oppression is rampant in all the depicted societies the oppressor is not without the ‘anxiety’ that Bhabha observes in the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. This is an upshot of subaltern agency. Ghosh never portrays a subaltern who is not an active agency. The subaltern agency is ubiquitous throughout his works in shifting shapes, sometimes in broad
daylight, sometimes in the shadows. This kind of an agency voices the alternative discourse to the West's in *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

Said's *Orientalism* is "an important diagnosis of how imperialism worked in the realm of intellectual and cultural discourse" (Ryan 196). Said reads 'Orientalism' as the prejudiced construction of the East by the West; as a differential inferior in contrast to the dominant superior image of itself. Orientalism has played the lead in the West's creation of knowledge about the East.

Colonialism is more than a process of political and economic domination of geographical territory. Of course, the political and economic influence cannot be underplayed. But beyond that, the European powers enforced their cultural as well as social 'Superstructure' or 'Ideological State Apparatus', blindly estimated as ideals, upon the colonized. Transplanting these foreign ideals into the Eastern soil directed the death and decay of the native inherent patterns. The colonial process further took care of the occlusion of the very existence of a civilised past in the colonised countries. The net result was the colonisation of the mind.

In reaction to this process of colonization, the concept of 'decolonising the mind' promoted by writers like Ngugi wa Thiang'o has ensued. Decolonization, as Boehmer says, demands "a symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of dominant meanings" (*Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* 3). It is an immense search for the roots. Decolonization involves in much more than just a reversal of the colonial process. It does not only aspire to
reverse the infiltration of Eurocentric ideals into the societies but also aims at rediscovering the roots that were lost in the social battlefields of colonialism. Decolonization is a coordinated attempt to redefine and reconstruct the identity of the societies, the people and their minds. It is an astronomic process that the once colonized, spontaneously undergo in order to recreate themselves.

Colonial discourses have meticulously constructed a power structure, which assumes a European cultural dominance. Out of this belief is created a Manichaean binary system, the west symbolizing all that is forward and the east anything that is retrograde. Postcolonial discourses seek to deconstruct the structure that underlines an occidental superiority against an oriental inferiority. In the words of Elleke Boehmer, “the postcolonial is that which questions, overturns, and/or critically refracts colonial authority—its epistemologies and forms of violence, its claims to superiority” (“Postcolonialism” 351).

One common tactic of the West in justifying their act of colonising is the attribution of the lack of civilization to the natives. Hence colonising becomes a mission of civilization. In *Sea of Poppies*, the English judge in his concluding address at Neel’s trial remarks: “... if this crime proved difficult to deter in a country such as England, then it is only to be expected that it will be very much more so in a land such as this, which has only recently been opened to the benefits of civilization” (*SP* 235). A similar attitude is evident in
Mr. Burnham’s words: “Freedom, yes, exactly . . . Isn’t that what the mastery of the white man means for the lesser races?” (SP 79).

A very good instance is when Mr. Burnham tries to convince Zachary Reid, the second mate of his schooner, that British meant freedom to the natives. Amidst all these blaring colonial voices there is one voice that rings with the true standpoint of the coloniser. Captain Chillingworth observes in *Sea of Poppies*: “. . . the difference is only that when we kill people we feel compelled to pretend that it is for some higher cause. It is this pretence of virtue, I promise you, that will never be forgiven by history” (SP 262). Ghosh uses the Captain’s voice to authoritatively underline the hypocrisy of the coloniser. As the Captain foresees, history gets back to the power discourses and unmasksthe true identity of the assumed centre of power through postcolonialism.

The aim of the British was to establish their supremacy in all the aspects of human life. The discrimination showed in the quality of food given to Indian prisoners is an example. *Sea of Poppies* describes the two kinds of food taken by Neel. When he is the Zemindar of Raskhali, he arranges a grand party with delicious food for Mr. Burnham, Mr. Doughty and Zachary. After he becomes a prisoner at Alipore jail, he gets only the kind of food which produces nausea in him, creating a stomach-clenching revulsion. The contrast between the past and the present haunts his mind: “. . . he lifted a few morsels to his lips and forced to swallow them. It was as if he had ingested a handful of burning embers for he could feel each grain blazing a trail of fire through his
entrails" (SP 268). Ghosh uses magic realism to describe the effect: "That night his dreams were plagued by a vision of himself, transformed into a moulting cobra, a snake that was struggling to free itself of its outworn skin" (SP 268).

The novels, *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke* as with *The Glass Palace*, effectively showcase and subvert the Orientalist attitude that the colonisers treasured, hence justifying their act of colonising. According to Said, Orientalism is an institutionalized belief system that was created by the coloniser to know and to dominate what they came to know, that is the character of the people of the Orient. The process may be compared to the basic of a language that becomes a means by which man comes to terms with and controls the world. Each language has its own principles of differentiating and labelling concepts. Orientalism was the coloniser’s language to make sense of the colonized and the world around. The language was not just used by the colonised but also instilled in the minds of the colonised.

Ghosh lucidly brings forth the Orientalist attitude hoarded by the colonial representatives in his novels. *River of Smoke* is a criticism of the Orientalist attitude, misconceptions and generalisations about China. Lord Napier’s book on his experiences in China is found to contain the following lines: “It has pleased Providence to assign to the Chinese—a people characterised by a marvellous degree of imbecility, avarice, conceit, and obstinacy” (RS 420). However, Ghosh does not stop with presenting the Orientalist discourse. He counters it with alternate altercative discourses from the Chinese and the Indians. William Jardine in the send off party on the
occasion of his departure to England acclaims thus about China: “... in China
a foreigner can go to sleep with his windows open, without being in dread of
either his life or property, which are well guarded by a most watchful and
excellent police; business is conducted with unexampled facility and in general
with singular good faith” (RS 405).

*River of Smoke* describes the causes of the First Opium War (1839-1842).
It focuses on two kinds of export, namely, export of opium to China and
export of Indians to Africa, the Caribbean and the Far East as indentured
labourers. While *Sea of Poppies* portrays the export of indentured labourers in
detail, *River of Smoke* describes the export of opium to Canton. As Tim Adam
says, “on one level, *River of Smoke* is a remarkable feat of research, bringing
alive the hybrid customs of food and dress and the competing philosophies of
the period with intimate precision; on another it is a subversive act of empathy
viewing a whole panorama of world history” (Web). Ghosh’s postcolonial
vision is clearly identified in *River of Smoke* which describes how the lifestyle of
the Chinese was affected by opium and most of the army men were addicted in
the 1830s.

The total number of addicts in China in the 1830s was about 12 million.
As V. S. Joseph Albert says, “the Chinese were made to swim in the ‘river of
smoke’ by the deliberate and well-planned strategy adopted by the Westerners”
(“Worldliness of the Text” 4). Neel, who tells Compton about the monopoly
of the British on the opium trade in the Bengal Presidency, focuses on the
strategy of the Europeans: “It was not the Achhas who started sending opium
to China: it was the British. Even if every Achha washed his hands of opium, nothing would change in China; the British and Americans would make sure that opium continued to pour in" (RS 485). In the eighteenth century, several restrictions were imposed on foreign trade by the Chinese Government. Guangzhou (Canton) was the only port open to foreign trade. The East India Company purchased silk and tea from China and had to offer silver in return. In 1834 the East India Company’s monopoly of trade with China came to an end and all mercantile activities were handled by private British, American and Parsee firms. Instead of receiving silver, China exported silver to Britain in enormous quantity.

Two important developments happened in the 1830— the expansion of opium smuggling and the rise of free-trade imperialism. Opium poppy cultivation had long been established in India and had provided an important source of revenue to the Mughal Emperors. In 1761 the East India Company obtained a monopoly over the opium production of British India, and soon afterwards the drug began to be shipped to China as part of the Company's triangular trade between India, Guangzhou and Britain. The opium trade was of considerable economic importance to the British. The profits from the East India Company’s contributed significantly to the revenue of the government of British India, to the British government itself through tax on imported tea from China. From the 1820s onwards British trade with China was in surplus, as the huge outflow of silver used to buy opium greatly exceeded the money the traders paid for Chinese tea.
In 1773, opium export to China was 1000 chests, but it increased to 81,000 chests in 1884. Instead of receiving silver from the Western world, China exported silver to Britain in enormous quantity. The export of silver from China to Britain weakened the economic position of the Qing government and so the Emperor appointed Lin Zexu as Commissioner of Canton to put an end to opium import. In March 1839 Lin Zexu arrived in Canton. In Chapter Fourteen of River of Smoke, Ghosh describes the arrival of Lin Zexu: “... there was nothing stern or stone-faced about the Commissioner ... in his eyes was a look of keen and active intelligence” (426). Lin Zexu orders that “a single atom must not be hidden or concealed” (433). In his Proclamation to foreigners, Lin Zexu says:

How does it happen then that you bring opium to our central land, chousing people out of their substance and involving their very lives in destruction? I find that with this thing you have seduced and deluded the people of China for ten of years past. Such conduct rouses indignation in every human heart and it is utterly inexcusable in the eyes of heaven. (RS 431)

Lin Zexu took vigorous action, detaining the foreigners in their warehouses in Guangzhou, and forcing them to surrender their stocks of the drug. In due course he seized over 21,000 chests, worth some six million silver dollars, and destroyed in public as evidence of the government's firm decision. He stopped all foreign trade while instructing his naval patrols to prevent Westerners acquiring food and water.
When news of the crisis in Guangzhou reached London in August 1839, the representatives of the British opium traders lobbied for coercive measures against the Qing government, supported by the industrial capitalists who wanted to open the China market to their products. The Whig government was also receptive to a more forceful China policy. On 4th September 1839 the British fired the first shots of the undeclared Opium War. Lin's blockade of factories and the confiscation of opium made the British Cabinet take a decision on 1st October 1839 to send out a punitive expedition. On 3rd November, more serious clash occurred near the Bogue forts at the mouth of the Pearl River. Lin Zexu begun to mobilise the people of Guangdong for guerrilla warfare, and at Sanyuanli there was a remarkable battle between local self-defence forces and isolated British units resulting in serious British casualties. But the British had superior technology, better ships, artillery, rifles and better strategies. The British Navy played a major role in defeating the forces of Lin Zexu. The iron paddle-steamer Nemesis, in particular, terrorized the countryside around the Pearl River delta between Hong Kong and Canton, destroying forts and war junks without much resistance. On land, Chinese bows and primitive firelocks proved no match for British muskets and artillery. In September 1840 Lin Zexu was recalled to Peking in disgrace, and Qi-shan, a Manchu aristocrat related to the Emperor, was installed in Lin Zexu's place to deal with the foreigners. Qing Dynasty lost control of a population of 300 million people. General Anthony Blaxland Stransham was knighted by Queen Victoria for leading the Royal Marines to
victory. The last page of *River of Smoke* describes the appearance of Canton after the Opium Wars: “One night during the wars, Canton was bombarded by British and French gunships. A mob set fire to the factories; they were razed and never built . . . after winning the war the British had quickly put an end to Chinese efforts to prohibit the drug . . . the new enclave was like a monument built by the forces of evil to celebrate their triumphant march through history (552-53). Thus, Lin Zexu’s order to suppress the opium trade augmented the intensity of the conflict between China and Western countries, and ultimately became the *casus belli* to declare war on China.

The words of Thomas J. Arnold, an English Protestant Missionary to China in the late nineteenth century during the Qing Dynasty, are worth mentioning here. Arnold wrote to W. W. Hull on 18th March 1840 about the Opium War:

This war with China really seems to me so wicked as to be a national sin of the greatest possible magnitude, and it distresses me very deeply. I really do not remember, in any history, of a war undertaken with such combined injustice and baseness. Ordinary wars of conquest are to me far less wicked, than to go to war in order to maintain smuggling, and that smuggling consisting in the introduction of a demoralizing drug, which the government of China wishes to keep out, and which we, for the lucre of gain, want to introduce by force. (Web)
A postcolonial reading of *River of Smoke* shows that the Opium War was not about opium at all. It was the first step designed to open China along with its markets and resources for exploitation. The War itself physically opened China. With the opening of the five treaty ports, foreign trade flourished. The treaty ports, which lay on the South Eastern Coast of China between Shanghai and Canton, gave Western merchants access to the most developed parts of China where the economy was at its best. Western merchants mainly bought silk and tea from China. The export of tea from China increased to 42,000,000 kg in 1855 from only 7,500,000 kg in 1843, an increase of more than 500%. The export of silk rose to 56,000 bales in 1855 from 2000 bales in 1843. With the increased demand on Chinese silk and tea, the tea and silk producing regions around the treaty ports expanded and benefited from the foreign trade. More and more farmers abandoned the production of food stuffs to produce silk and tea. As a result, food prices were driven quite high. The unemployment group swelled and became increasingly poor due to inflation.

The meeting between Bahram and Napoleon on St. Helena is “a brilliant episode which shows the confluence of history and imagination” (Albert 6). The episode is an example of the reconstruction of history with its inclusion of historical characters such as Napoleon. As Fred Weinstein observes, novelists reconstruct events as carefully as any historian, “putting real people in imaginary situations, and imaginary situations in documentary narratives, augmenting the significance of historical events by plausible, internally consistent, but more obviously unverifiable depictions of the
subjective intentions of people” (12). The event which describes the meeting between Bahram and Napoleon substantiates this statement. Bahram and Zadig inform Napoleon that the flow of silver “pours away from China to Britain, America and Europe” (RS 173). Napoleon’s reply is history: “What an irony it would be if it were opium that stirred China from her sleep” (RS 174). He further asks Bahram whether his trade in opium is evil or not. The question shocks Bahram and he is temporarily at a loss for words. Bahram then replies that opium is like the wind and that “a man is neither good nor evil because he sails his ship upon the wind” (RS 175). Napoleon directs his piercing gaze at Bahram and says: “But a man may die, may he not, because he sails upon the wind?” (RS 175). These words are steeped in irony because Bahram dies trying to sail upon the wind. Chitralekha Basu aptly says: “Bahram is like a metaphor for the dilemma that’s central to the book – free trade versus protectionism. While the canny businessman in him can wax philosophical, he is all too aware that his hands have been tainted” (Web).

James Grande considers Bahram “an enthralling hero, of Dickensian vitality and pathos” (Web). River of Smoke is a pretext for Ghosh’s articulation of the concept of hybridity on one level and the problem of survival of the subaltern on another level. His British merchants described in River of Smoke are fully realized characters, yet they are, as Chandrahas Choudhury says, “similar to free-trade fundamentalists, adroitly dodging any moral criticism of their position” (19).
Ghosh’s views on the consequences of free trade promoted by the Western countries today indicate his postcolonial standpoint. In the interview held on November 24, 2011, Ghosh talks to Angiola Codacci about the parallels between the Opium War in the early 19th century and the opium war going on today, especially in countries like Mexico, pointing out the absence of reference to the trade of opium in the pages of history:

The bulk of the opium produced in India in the early 19th century came from the East -- from Bihar. Very few historians have dealt with this subject in any detail. Why? One can only speculate. One possible reason is that the writing of Indian history is still heavily influenced, through patronage and other means, by British institutions, which clearly have no interest into delving into this aspect of the past. Indians equally, for reasons of shame or guilt or whatever, prefer not to dwell on this. We've chosen to forget that much of modern India was actually built on this drug. Amar Farooqui for example, has shown in his book *Bombay: Opium City* that Bombay probably would not exist but for opium. (Web)

Ghosh’s analysis presented in the interview gains its significance because the British went to war against China in the name of Free Trade, even though the main commodity that they were exporting, that is opium, was produced under a state monopoly in the Bengal Presidency. The events of the past prove that some Western powers would go to any lengths to preserve their economic supremacy. According to Ghosh, the history of opium is a history that has
been absolutely silenced. In his interview, Ghosh says to David Larsen: “What was done to China is one of the great historical crimes. No one discusses it in the West today. But anyone who looks at the opium trade cannot, simply cannot, believe that the West ever meant well by the rest of the world. It was pure aggression and greed, there’s no other way one can parse it” (Web).

The Ibis Trilogy first took real shape in Ghosh’s thoughts while he was investigating the history of indentured workers in Australia and New Zealand. The purport of Ghosh’s novels is his portrayal of human beings as taking on an eternal struggle. Ghosh deals with various tough and breaking situations in his novels, the state of affairs suggesting defeat as a central symbol. In spite of his optimistic outlook, a sense of pessimism may also be discerned in the portrayal of the historical predicament. Ghosh himself admits this fact. In his interview with Frederick Luis Almada, Ghosh reflects: “... the absolute fact of defeat and the absolute fact of trying to articulate defeat to yourself and trying to build a culture around the centrality of defeat” (89). Mondal identifies this sense of defeat as a postmodernist perception of the world as hopelessly impaired.

The sense of defeat is evident in the portrayal of events in history, when the events trigger a vicious cycle. When Ghosh dwells upon themes like religious fanaticism as in The Shadow Lines, events melt down to utter despair. While tackling the multiple dimensions of a nation like India, the concept of nationhood turns into an absurd dream beyond realisation, long past its time of repair. Sometimes the portrayal of the milieu underlines the mood of
*Hamlet.* Nevertheless, human being is never portrayed as a subject of defeat. Ghosh’s characters, in general, are diehard survivors, who possess a keen instinct for struggle and survival.

Ghosh’s conception of humanity is that of undying quest. Though the context is colossally detrimental, the characters transcend the situation and establish their identity. Beyond the depicted circumstances humanity carves its own niche with its inherent power to change, possessing an indomitable quest for enhancement. Ghosh’s characters attempt this quest in the face of extreme adversity. They strive to make meanings. Ghosh juxtaposes the centre against the margin and creates relative identities in the context of history. The colonial relationship is deduced only when both the parties concerned are active agencies. Ghosh brings to the surface the identity of resistance counteracting coercion, upholding the ideals of equality, freedom and dignity.

In Spivak’s view, “When the subaltern speaks, there is not enough infrastructure for people to recognize it as resistance speech” (“Can the Subaltern Speak” 1). Ghosh understands this aspect and with his humanism creates the infrastructure in which the silenced reclaim their voices, in the very contexts that forced upon them the silence. As Rushdie states in his “Imaginary Homelands,” “. . . redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it” (14). As a logic parallel, Ghosh recreates the past to salvage the muted voices and moves towards the recuperation of the oppressed and the marginalised.
Ghosh's novels being set against the background of history, the characters are part of history, deeply involved. History has been tainted with the accusation of constituting "unsubstantiated hagiographies" as described in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* (65). It has been diagnosed as an advocate of the powerful, voiced majority and is now being recuperated in various epistemic dimensions. Its gaps are filled, silences questioned, misconceptions clarified and mistakes rectified. Working in these lines, Ghosh, an anthropologist and historian, intensively recreates history in his fiction.

Ghosh's preoccupation with the questions of identity, displacement and home is one of the most important characteristics of postcolonial literature. *The Shadow Lines, The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies* deal with these questions against the backdrop of history. The setting chosen for these novels also contributes to the effective presentation of the themes, especially the Sunderbans in *The Hungry Tide*. This concept will constitute the central argument of the third chapter of the thesis.