"He discovered my silence—my silence—discovered it, owned it, possessed it like it never was possessed before."  

That is what history often does—it seeks to discover, own and possesses the other ways of knowing the past. In this paper, I will primarily deal with the silences in the grand narratives of history, or the deliberate historical erasures which have not been dealt with, as they were not so significant as to influence the corridors of power. In most of his fictional and non-fictional works, one finds that Ghosh ‘does history’, that is to say, in his fictional representation Ghosh is also engaging in a kind of historiography which may be described, borrowing Edward Said’s terms, as “frankly revisionist” and “intellectually insurrectionary”. This does not imply entering a debate as to the aestheticism or representation of reality within the fictional mode; rather it is acknowledging that the fictional mode allows Ghosh the possibility to do much more than conventional or subaltern historiography would have allowed him to do. Ghosh’s preference for the fictional mode had been well articulated by the author himself in his essays as well as in the interviews. Ghosh has, for example, pointed out in a discussion with Claire Chambers the reasons behind his preference for the fictional form:

I think for me the enormous excitement about the novel as a form is that the novel can do anything. I see it as the overarching form. I don’t see it necessarily as fictional, I think it overarches fiction, and non-fiction, and history, the

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3 Ibid. v.
present, the past. There are no limits to a novel, nor are there any rules to a novel, so that if I want to write a novel about Cambridge that is about the beetles of Cambridge rather than about the libraries of Cambridge, I’m free to do that. I feel so fortunate that it’s become possible for me to do nothing but write novels, because it’s the only way that I know to follow through whatever it is that I’m thinking about. It allows you to explore something with a richness and a sense of context, but most of all it allows you to explore people.⁴

In the same interview Ghosh also talks about how he writes fiction in terms of history. History is interesting to him because it creates specific predicaments. The novel form allows him to represent that predicament truthfully and accurately.⁵

In this context, I would like to deal with subaltern historiography which had a significant influence on Ghosh; one may note here that he himself had contributed an article in the *Subaltern Studies* series.⁶ The themes that are to be found in the series have also been explored in Ghosh’s fictional world, albeit from a much more varied perspective, as he takes recourse to the fictional mode of expression. I would also try to analyse in this paper the notion of intellectual history, as is put forward by K.N. Panikkar in the Indian context. In relation to this, I would also explore the representation of the subaltern characters in Ghosh’s fictional world with reference to silence as a form of communication as well as that of resistance. In Ghosh’s exploration of the several historical events, what becomes manifest is his deliberate attempt to bring out all the versions of an event and to narrate different stories, which have hitherto been untold or have often been deliberately silenced. This also largely accounts for his preference for the

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⁵ Ibid. 30.

fictional mode or the story-telling mode over all the other forms of narration, like those of historical, anthropological or ethnographical mode. In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator and Tridib tells us in their own different ways that we live in stories and we ought to live in our stories, otherwise we will waste our lives living in other people’s stories or being appropriated by it. We need also to tell our stories, else we will be silenced by somebody else’s, and this is the endeavour that Ghosh undertakes in all his fictional works.

R. John Williams, in his article “‘Doing History’: Nuruddin Farah’s *Sweet and Sour Milk*, Subaltern Studies, and the Post Colonial Trajectory of Silence”, discusses the trope of ‘silence’ in regard to the objectives and methodologies of Subaltern Studies and analyses it in the context of Farah’s text. He discusses silence as operating in a tripartite trajectory in the subaltern studies:

1) There is an imposition of silence by a colonial or neocolonial state through mechanisms such as official historiography and middle-class discursive hegemony—a process fuelled by domination and greed. This forced silence is largely the domain of the colonial elite, and is manifested in the entire field of discursive power in venues of official historiography, literature, journalism, documentation, etc. 2) an insurrectionary act of drawing attention to that silence, calling it out, mapping its genealogy, and identifying the hypocrisy of its boundaries—a process fuelled by resentment. 3) a revisionary act of speaking from that silence, giving it a voice, an identity, and eliminating its absence—a process motivated by optimism (however naive). These last two trajectories are the domain of the postcolonial/subaltern scholar, writer, citizen, or intellectual.

Ghosh addresses all these silences in his novels and also does something more: he privileges the memories of individuals and families through the telling of stories— not

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necessarily of only the subaltern— but also of others, so that a true heteroglossia emerges without any one story subsuming all the others. Although in most of his works one finds this engagement with historiography and history, but in this chapter, I would like to concentrate primarily on three of his fictional works— *The Circle of Reason*\(^9\), *The Glass Palace*\(^10\) and *Sea of Poppies*\(^11\).

The Subaltern Studies group or collective is a group of South Asian scholars who were engaged with writing history from below. The *Subaltern Studies: Writings on Indian History and Society*\(^12\) began in 1982 as a “series of interventions in some debates specific to the writing of modern Indian history”\(^13\). It was initially inspired by Ranajit Guha, a historian from India who was then teaching at the University of Sussex. They are a group of eight scholars writing from India, the United Kingdom and Australia who formed the editorial collective till Ranajit Guha retired from it in 1988. It is also described as a postcolonial project of writing history.\(^14\) The subaltern historiography came up as a reaction against elitist schools of history— in this case, the nationalist school of history, the Cambridge school of history and the Marxist school of history. The nationalist school and the Cambridge school of history present opposite spectrum of things: the former carries on in accordance with the meta-narratives of nationalism in trying to decolonise the past, and the latter tries to write a sceptical view of Indian

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\(^12\) Ranajit Guha , ed., *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1982).
\(^14\) Ibid. 467.
nationalism. The subaltern collective, however, emerges mainly from the failure of the realisation of the Marxist collective consciousness\(^{15}\) to represent the subaltern:

> For it is this failure of the subaltern to act as a class-conscious worker that provides the basis for representing the subaltern as resistant to the appropriation by colonial and nationalist elites, or to various programs of modernity. The subaltern is a figure produced by historical discourses of domination, but it nevertheless provides a mode of reading history different from those inscribed in elite accounts.\(^{16}\)

It is also significantly different from Marxist historiography and also from the ‘history from below’, because of the influence of postcolonial theory and, to some extent, that of deconstruction. Dipesh Chakraborty rightly points out that its difference also lies in the question it raises about history-writing. He points out three differences of the Subaltern Studies from the ‘history from below’:

...a) a relative separation of the history of power from any universalist histories of capital, (b) a critique of the nation-form, and (c) an interrogation of the relationship between power and knowledge (hence of archive itself and of history as a form of knowledge).\(^{17}\)

Both the nationalist and the Cambridge school of historians failed to acknowledge the movements of ordinary people independently of the elite. The stated purpose of the *Subaltern Studies* was to restore the subaltern as the subject of its own history. Ranajit Guha, in his introduction to *Subaltern Studies*, states that:

> We are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography...for its failure to acknowledge


\(^{16}\) Ibid. 9.

\(^{17}\) Chakrabarty, 472.
the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny. This critique lies at the very heart of our project.¹⁸

Guha also pointed out another significant difference: that the standard tendency in Marxist historiography or in ‘history from below’ was to relegate peasant consciousness as backward or pre-political, which would ultimately make it difficult to represent the subaltern in terms of elitist history. Instead he felt that the peasant in colonial India read his world perfectly. The main problem that the subaltern historians faced was that the peasants did not speak through archival documents that were the original prerogative of the historians; so, in order to recuperate or reconstruct the subaltern voice, the subaltern historian resorts to other disciplines like anthropology and sociology. Guha’s affiliations take a linguistic turn as he questions the objectives and power relations involved in the archives and resorts to an act of reading that is primarily against the grain. By thus emphasising on the act of reading, he questions the textual properties of archived documents and the power relations involved in the textuality as well as in the representation. Several other developments took place after Rosalind O’Hanlon and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak pointed out the lack of feminist engagement in Subaltern Studies. Several seminal essays were contributed in this regard by Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Susie Tharu and others in The Subaltern Studies series. From postcolonial historiography it also moved towards post-nationalist historiography and the privileging of the fragment. The archive was also questioned in terms of epistemology, where history was regarded as a European form of knowledge and where the Euro-centricism in history was critiqued. Their engagement with the history of sciences also took a new direction, as

they investigated the role of European enlightenment and other pseudo-sciences, which, in a way, helped Europe to maintain its empires.

The word ‘subaltern’, which was first used in a non-military sense by Antonio Gramsci, is often said to refer to the proletariat; however, it was actually used by him as a code word so that he could get his writings past prison censors. The word ‘subaltern’ is derived from the Latin word, *subalternum* (*sub*: under; *alter*: another), meaning subordinate under the rank of the captain. After the use made by the subaltern historians collective it has now marginalised oppressed and subordinate groups like the peasants, worker etc. The Gramscian concept of the subaltern is also related to another important concept which is that of hegemony. Hegemony is the dominance created by an organisation or a state through the creation of consent. Gramsci talks about two realms within the state— the political society and the civil society. The state operates not only through coercion, but also through the creation of consent, and this is done usually though the mechanism of the civil society. The role of the subaltern within this structure of hegemony is also contradictory. The subaltern historians have tried to address issues regarding the methodology of history and the recuperation/reclamation of the subaltern voice by a re-reading the archives. It has been difficult to reclaim the subaltern voices from official archive, primarily because Europe remains a “silent referent”19 (Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his book, *Provincializing Europe*, points out how “Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge”.) behind the objective, purpose and methodology of such disciplines, so that it is difficult to represent the other within the disciplinary parameters. Chakrabarty points out:

It is that insofar as the academic discourse of history— that is, “history” as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university— is concerned, “Europe” remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian,” “Chinese,” “Kenyan,” and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called “the history of Europe.” In this sense, “Indian” history itself is in a position of subalternity; one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of this history.

Such disciplines do not have the flexibility in the methodological apparatus to accommodate alterity, because these are informed by European epistemology. Ghosh, therefore, resorts to fiction in order to write about the untold stories and to give the subaltern a voice, so that the later is rendered visible without appropriating their alterity.

Ghosh does history in his fictional as well as non-fictional works. Throughout his novels he involves himself with thorough research— so much so, that the readers have a feeling as if the characters spring out of the magic hat of history to tell us about their silenced past. If one goes through Ronald Ross’s memoirs and biographies on Ross, one finds that the relationship between Lakshman and Ross in *The Calcutta Chromosome* is informed by history. The characters like Colonel Buckland, Kishan Singh, Arjun and Hardy in *The Glass Palace*, the characters in *Sea of Poppies*, especially Ah fatt, Paulette Lambett and Neel, all seem to come out of the pages of history. As in *In an Antique Land*, one finds that in almost all his works, the boundaries of genres share a precarious and liminal space and ultimately dissolve in each other. Ghosh’s story-telling actually involves doing ethnography, history, anthropology, photography, cetology— all at the

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20 Ibid. 28.
same time, so that what stares at us out of the printed page is a rich medley of life in its entirety—a colourful world of stories stitched together, almost in the same pattern, as the jamdani saree in *The Circle of Reason* creates an imaginative life of its own. The characters here speak for themselves without the historian, the anthropologist or the ethnographer usurping their voices and playing at claims to the truth. Thus, when I claim that Amitav Ghosh is doing history in his novels, it doesn’t only mean history, but all the other subjects that help him reclaim his past for himself as well as for the future generations to come.

*The Circle of Reason*

In the third chapter, “Historiographical and Conceptual Questions”, of his book titled *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony: Intellectuals and Social Consciousness in Colonial India*\(^\text{23}\), K.N. Panikkar writes about ‘Intellectual history’, which is not yet a part of the Indian historiography. According to Panikkar, intellectual history is different from conventional historiography because of the methodology it applies. He refers to Perry Miller and suggests that the way he does history is different from his predecessors because of Miller’s ability to demonstrate the inter-dependent character of intellectual activities. Intellectual history, in a sense, “emphasizes the connection between thought and deed”\(^\text{24}\), the emphasis being not on the influence of ideas in the abstract, but rather on being a part of the dynamics of social activity. It also emphasises that ideas emanated form a particular discipline go on to influence several other disciplines, that is, it emphasises the inter-dependent character of an idea. Panikkar then goes on to analyse the


\(^{24}\) Ibid. 55.
intellectual history of colonial India. He feels the necessity to critique existing history.
The history of intellectuals in India has been primarily studied from two opposing perspectives— the intellectual brought up on the native tradition and the intellectual brought up on the Western tradition. The complex relationship that both these influences on an individual as well as on the society might have is thus reduced by such easy simplification. The cultural-ideological conflict is also historicised with the same sense of dichotomy:

The cultural-ideological struggle in colonial India had two mutually complementary facets. The first was directed against the backward elements of tradition, culture and ideology and was expressed in terms of the reformation and regeneration of socio religious institutions. The second was in attempt to contend with colonial culture and ideology. The first formed a part of the second; what gave birth to the first was an awareness of the inadequacy of traditional institutions to cope with the new situation created by colonial intrusion.\(^\text{25}\)

It is quite natural that Western knowledge systems would have had a significant impact on the socio-cultural reality. However, the nuances of such influences cannot be easily categorised in terms of simple binaries. The idea, while travelling out of its historical context, would lose certain aspects of meaning and gain other meanings, as it finds a new context and a new locale (Panikkar, Gyan Prakash). This aspect of the ideological struggle has often been overlooked in conventional historiography. The image of the occident— as was created by the colonisers, the image of the occident— as was filtered through books and selective learning and the image of the occident— as was developed in the light of European science and rationality, were appropriated and evolved in the Indian context within the ambit of a complex struggle. Most of the historical depiction of

\(^{25}\) Ibid. 58.
the cultural regeneration, the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century and the impact of Western science and philosophy follow a rather straitjacket explanation. History has largely been silent on how these ideas penetrated the basic fabric of society and what new meanings these ideas acquired with the change of locale. In the colonial structure the Indian mind was also faced with obvious disadvantages, like the colonial administration, the educational system relevant at the time, the economic disparities etc. While Panikkar is concerned with the history of intellectuals during the colonial period, in this chapter, I would rather like to show how Ghosh concentrates on the history of the spread of ideas—the journey of an idea from one historical background to the other, from one epistemology to the other, so that this idea undergoes radical changes and acquires new meaning. The penetration of the ideas is not limited to the intellectuals, but it spread from the intellectuals to the middle class and from the middle class to the subalterns. An idea can percolate to and influence the basic fabric of society. Conventional historiography often gets strangled between truth claims and easy essentialisation. As I have already pointed out earlier, Ghosh in his fictional and non-fictional works is doing history. In *The Circle of Reason* he is attempting to do a different type of history. It is an intellectual history, so far as it marks the journey of an idea in a different terrain. It is not that Balaram is an intellectual; but rather an ordinary person, who has assimilated certain ideas and made them his own. He is also doing history in the way he is trying to present a social reality within the framework of a magic realist narrative, which further entails the complexity with which he is dealing.

Ghosh’s plot is extremely well-structured. There were a lot of developments in the field of science during the enlightenment and thereafter, riding piggyback on the
wealth generated by the empire. It was primarily science and developments in education that had marked this empire building process as different from the empires of the other ages— in the sense that it combined ideology, business, science and force together. By introducing the character of Balaram, the readers are given an insight into how the science of Pasteur and the pseudo-science of phrenology might have had a significant impact in a faraway village. *The Circle of Reason* deals with the problems that ordinary intellectuals might have confronted in facing up to the ideas of Western sciences. It is remarkable in a way to find how significant ideas of Western science are appropriated in a faraway village. Ghosh is again attempting to do history in a way where historiography itself often fails. Ghosh thus recuperates information from the silences of history to create a fictional world, where the complexities of the influence can be re-lived in social situations.

**Phrenology, Pasteur, Carbolic acid and Balaram**

One of the primary symbols in *The Circle of Reason* is René Vallery-Radot’s book, *The Life of Pasteur*. The three parts of the book are based on the symbolism of the book— it actually becomes almost a sort of “talismanic object”. The book is divided into three parts— Satwa, Rajas and Tamas which represent the three states of the mind that can broadly be translated as calm, active and passive. Ghosh uses the nearest poetic correlates to describe the three states— Reason, Passion and Death. These three terms refer to the taxonomy of Hindu philosophical system of the *Sankhya* tradition referring to the

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physiology of the mind. These three terms comprise the *tri-gunas* corresponding to the basic concepts of the Ayurveda. ‘Tri’ means three and ‘gunas’ means qualities, and these three qualities constitute the human nature, as opposed to the three *doshas* (*vata*, *pitta* and *kapha*). According to traditional Ayurveda, these are the three energies of the mind. In the Aswamedha Parva of the *Mahabharata* (Sections XXXVI and XXXIX), one gets a clearer explanation of the ‘gunas’. The discussion and reference to the three ‘gunas’—‘sattva’, ‘rajas’ and ‘tamas’— are to be found in the Fifth Section of the Fourteenth Book of the *Bhagavad Gita*.28 I would also like to add that the importance and the interpretation of three gunas vary in accordance with its application in different tradition within the Hindu philosophy. I am specifically referring to it in terms of medieval physiology and astronomy because of the closeness of the reference to phrenology. This mind-body connection is carefully woven throughout the story connecting medieval physiology with the pseudo-science of phrenology. Thus a European scientific discourse of phrenology is being subtly inter-connected with aspects of Hindu physiology.

These are the connections that are present throughout *The Circle of Reason* and in fact it is what completes the circle. Two things are evident in what Balaram does. In his admiration for both mainstream science, like that of Pasteur, and pseudo-science, like Phrenology, what fascinates Balaram is the connection between science and society and this is what he attempts to achieve in all his experiments. In order to understand how Ghosh is doing history and how history is the silent stream that continuously waters his fiction, making it alive and throbbing to the readers, one has to know how in the context of *The Circle of Reason* he uses the history of phrenology, and the history of

Pasteurisation as well as his use of carbolic acid. One of the basic markers of the empire building process during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries was the development of ideology based on scientific and technological advancements. Science and the narratives of scientific knowledge were used to justify the empire and the white man’s burden and it was done primarily through the promotion of scientific racism. Scientific Racism is the use of scientific findings to attest the views and beliefs of the differences of races— references to racism can go as far back as to Aristotle and Plato. Scientific Racism believes in the hierarchy of the superiority and inferiority of races. Such findings have often been politically motivated to support an ideological viewpoint. Scientific Racism has been promoted through several disciplines like that of physiognomy, anthropology, phrenology, craniometry et al, by the construction of typologies and classifications of human beings into distinct biological races. Carolus Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist, physician and zoologist, known as the father of taxonomy, laid the bases for binomial nomenclature and was also a pioneer in defining the concept of race among human beings. Within the category of Homo sapiens he proposed four categories— Americanus, Asiaticus, Africanus and Europeanus. The categories were initially based on location and later classified in terms of skin colour. Linnaeus’s classification formed the basis of several studies on the differences of races and, in fact, many philosophers like Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant and Augustan Comte came to develop their ideas on the progress of races and the classification of races. Arthur Gobineau's “An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races”\(^{29}\) (1853–1855) also proposed that there were basically three races, and that race mixing led to the collapse of civilisation. Polygenist theory also alleged that there were different origins of mankind,

thus making possible both the conception of different biological human races, and the
classification of other humans as akin to animals without rights. The fact that these
theories had a significant impact in the colonial period is evident in the fear of
miscegenation and racial discrimination that had existed during that period. A lot of
colonial and postcolonial literature explores this fear. In *Sea of Poppies*, one finds Ghosh
developing this idea. Such racist theories became associated with the expression
‘Survival of the Fittest’ coined by Herbert Spencer in 1864. In fact, the tremendous
influence that such texts had on the masses can be evident in the sale of George Combe’s
*The Constitution of Man*\(^\text{30}\), which far surpassed the sales of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*\(^\text{31}\)
in the nineteenth century. Its influence was so considerable that it had its impact even on
Calcutta, where Akshay Kumar Dutta based his book *Bahyabastur sahit manabprakritir
sambandha bichar*\(^\text{32}\) (2 volumes 1851, 1853) on Combe’s *The Constitution of Man*. It
would be relevant here to point out that Akshay Kumar Dutta (15\(^{\text{th}}\) July 1820-18\(^{\text{th}}\) May
1886) had knowledge of several languages, was probably the first Indian to write on
comparative linguistics and was one of the initiators of the Bengal Renaissance.
Radhaballabh Das’s *Manastatva Sar Samgraha* (based on Combe and Spurzheim) was
published by Calcutta Phrenological Society in 1845. Raja Rammohan Roy was also
greatly influenced by phrenology. Roy had actually sent twelve Hindu crania to the
Phrenological Society in Edinburgh and the phrenological findings pointed out that the
faculties of acquisitiveness and secretiveness were well-developed among the Hindus.
Raja Rammohan Roy’s skull was also studied by the Edinburgh phrenologists after his

\(^{30}\) George Combe, *The Constitution of Man: Considered in Relation to External Objects*


\(^{32}\) “BANGLAPEDIA: Akshay Kumar Datta,” *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*,
death in Bristol in 1833 and was found to possess the faculty of dignity of character.\textsuperscript{33}
The Calcutta Phrenological Society was established way back in 1845. All these suggest that Ghosh is not just creating a queer character (Anthony Burgess, in his review of the book in New York Times, had referred to Alu as a “deformed protagonist” who is “to be expected in some brands of magic realism.”\textsuperscript{34}) in keeping with the magic realist tradition; rather, characters like Balaram are actually grounded in our past. Ghosh in his portrayal of Balaram is thus doing history. Burgess had pointed out in the same review that the novel “follows the same line of extravagance in the service of truth”; but Ghosh is not actually creating a character in terms of magic realism or devoting the narrative framework of the novel to the demands of magic realism; rather such strange incidents did happen or could have happened, as is found in the great impact that phrenology had on the Bengali intellectuals of that time.

The influences of Phrenology and Physiognomy can be felt also in the works of many major nineteenth century novelists like Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot and Oscar Wilde. In Charlotte Bronte’s \textit{The Professor}\textsuperscript{35} there were no less than thirty references to physiognomy and phrenology. Bronte is obsessed with the physical features of the character to suggest to some extent that their morality and character is dependent upon external features. Balzac also used whole heartedly his belief in physiognomy and phrenology in his novels. One of the most important representations

of physiognomy in popular culture is to be found in the 1930’s film *The Wizard of Oz*\(^{36}\). Contemporary animations are also good examples of physiognomy because their activities are often determined by their physical features.

Phrenology, Craniology, Physiology, Physical Anthropology all have their lineage in the distinction of races. Phrenology is derived from the Greek word, ‘phren’, meaning mind and ‘logos’, meaning knowledge. It was developed by the German physician, Franz Joseph Gall, in 1796 and its foundation lies in the belief that personality traits can be predicted on the basis of the size and shape of the skull. Phrenology acquired great popularity in the later half of the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century. Phrenologists believed that the mind has different mental faculties which are represented in different parts of the brain. The personality of a person thus can be measured by the developments in different areas of the brain. In a sense, it can be said to be an advanced extrapolation of the old medical theory of the four humours in the Western medieval theories. Ghosh’s structuring of the novel into the three gunas and using phrenology as part of this theme is thus subtly inter-connected. Phrenology is, however, to be distinguished from craniology, which deals with the shapes and sizes of skulls and physiognomy, which is the study of facial features.

Gall, in his work published in 1819 “The Anatomy and Physiology of the Nervous System in General, and of the Brain in Particular, with Observations upon the possibility of ascertaining the several Intellectual and Moral Dispositions of Man and Animal, by the configuration of their Heads” describes the doctrinal principles and intellectual basis of phrenology. In 1824, Andrew Combe laid down the four basic principles behind Gall’s

phrenology. These principles were published in the *Phrenological Journal and Miscellany* and stated:

1. That the mind in endowed with a plurality of innate faculties.
2. That each of these faculties manifests itself through the medium of the appropriate organ, of which the brain is a *congeries*.
3. That the power of manifesting each faculty bears a constant and uniform relation, *ceteris paribus*, to the size of the organ or part of the brain with which it is more intimately connected.
4. That it is possible to ascertain the relative size of these organs during life, by observing the different forms of the skull to which the brain gives its shape.37

The method that Gall employed to understand the personality traits of an individual was to feel the bumps in the skull. Gall’s most important collaborator was Johann Spurzheim (1776-1832) who popularised the term phrenology and also helped in disseminating phrenology in the United Kingdom and the United States. Colonialism had preceded the racial sciences by almost a hundred years, but the social sciences provided the ideology to sustain it for a considerable period of time. The science of race was also called Eugenics. Racial purity and improvement of racial stock was the primary concern of the eugenists. The Eugenics movement was named by Francis Galton, one of its illustrious founders and cousin of Sir Charles Darwin. Mohan Rao, in his article “‘Scientific’ Racism: A Tangled Skein”38, describes how in terms of action the movement could be divided into two aspects— the positive eugenics of Galton and the negative eugenics of Clapperton. Positive eugenics was concerned with racial purity and

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37 As stated in Miller.
improvement of race by allowing the brightest and the best to breed. The negative
eugenics concerned itself with criminals, outcasts and obviously the poor, with the
intention of reducing their numbers. After the advancements of neurosciences and
biological sciences, phrenology and other branches of eugenics were discredited as
pseudo-science, which is to mean that it employed fallacious application of scientific
methods to reach its conclusions. Although such sciences were discredited later, they
pilfered into other branches of knowledge like psychology, anthropology etc., so that
even in the twentieth century instances of racial discrimination abound. Institutional
discrimination of races had taken a new direction in the concept of the welfare state and
its immigration policies, apartheid and also communalism. Although the pseudo-sciences
might have died, its legacy lives on.

The appeal that phrenology had was that it could be easily mastered and that it
was a science which could immediately be related to society, a science which claimed
that the nature of human personality could be hereditary:

There could no longer be any doubt, he used to say, that the
skull and therefore the character are to some degree
hereditary. Wasn’t that why Lambroso was so celebrated—
for demonstrating the hereditary nature of character?
Wasn’t that why the American laws of 1915 prescribing
sterilization for confirmed criminals were enacted? 39

Another strange thing happened: it could also question the very social dynamics for a
poor man’s bumps in the head might show him to be intelligent and the rich man to be
stupid. Phrenology was so influential that it began to be used like astrology for
predictions regarding marriage or the future of a newly born child. It also became
associated with social reform movements. Balaram gets himself into trouble in trying to

39 Ghosh, Circle of Reason, 11.
predict the future of Bhudeb Roy’s son. The phrenologist took notable interest in penology, education, psychiatry and criminology. Phrenology and Physiognomy also became a potent metaphor for nationhood, as Richard Twine rightly points out:

The 19th-century ideology of nationhood drew upon the physiognomic coding of the body as an unproblematic site of truth to produce many such narratives that were important to nationalism and the legitimation of both Eurocentrism and colonialism.40

Ghosh uses all these historical facts to create the character of Balaram. Balaram basically learns his phrenology from a single book. Based on the single book, *Practical Phrenology*, picked up from College Street, Balaram rather comically sets about measuring skulls. The narrator comically describes how Balaram had ‘discovered’ Phrenology while describing his claws. The word ‘discovered’ rightly suggests how Balaram on the basis of just one book had appropriated the science of phrenology:

It was a kind of instrument, with three arms of finely planed and polished wood, each tapering to a sharp point at one end and joined to the others by a calibrated hinge. Balaram had designed it himself, soon after he discovered Phrenology.41

Alu became a subject to Balaram’s analysis and ironically, in some weird, sense Balaram’s prediction proved true in the long run:

You’d have to change your head if you read Spurzheim or Gall— wouldn’t be able to live with that confusion.42

Alu gets his name also from the fact that he has a very big head. Science and stories are thus seamlessly connected. There is an interesting debate that Ghosh brings in between Gopal and Balaram; it throws significant light on the narrative structure as well as on the

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40 Twine, 74.
42 Ibid. 9.
science-pseudoscience and science-reality debate. The appeal that phrenology has for Balaram is that it is not abstract and it is immediately related to man:

What’s wrong with all those scientists and their sciences is that there’s no connection between the outside and the inside, between what people think and how they are. Don’t you see? This is different. In this science the inside and the outside, the mind and the body, what people do and what they are, are one. Don’t you see how important it is?43

Balaram’s liking for phrenology and the science of Pasteur is primarily because of this connection. In a sense, it is a comic rendering of the Bengali intellectual of the postcolonial period trying to improve his society on notions of European sciences and the universal march of reason. However, Balaam’s endeavour to bring in such changes led him mostly to trouble and an ultimately death. Balaram’s notion of reformation and cleanliness inspired by Pasteur actually took him to a comical level, when he tried to campaign for clean underwear. Balaram’s confrontation with the village tough, Bhudeb Roy, who knows all the right manoeuvrings to rise up in society, ultimately leads to trouble for the whole family. Balaram uses his phrenology to make a damaging prediction of Bhudeb’s son which starts the animosity between them and later on, the incident of Balaram destroying the Saraswati puja, because of his strange phrenological ideas, adds fuel to the fire. He finds out that the clay skull of the deity’s head, according to his phrenological notions, represent vanity rather than learning. It is quite evident to the readers that Balaram’s phrenological predictions are actually based upon his own relationships, likes and dislikes.

Balaram is also fascinated by the mainstream science of Pasteur. However, what he makes of their ideas is his own. He has to leave his Calcutta job in a newspaper office.
and become a school teacher in a village called Lalpukur, because of his humiliation resulting from what transpired when he went to meet Madame Curie. His fascination for Science had begun in his childhood, when his father, a timber merchant in Burma, decided to have electric lights in their house; his experiments with science began in Presidency College. He became one of the important members of the rationalist society—‘Society for the dissemination of science and rationalism among the people of Hindoostan’. It was Gopal who lent Balaram the copy of Mrs. Devonshire’s translation of René Vallery-Radot’s *Life of Pasteur*. It was this copy that had significantly transformed Balaram’s life. Balaram was quick to derive connections between science, rationality and mythology, so that Brahma, the God of Hindu mythology, became another manifestation of the atom. His fascination for Pasteur also arises from his desire of reforming the society. Balaram’s understanding of Pasteur is also ironic and, in a sense, appropriated by his own reformative and socialistic zeal:

Do you remember why he left his promising studies in crystallography? It was because the brewers of France came to him and said: What makes our beer rot? It was that question, asked by simple people, which led to the discovery of what he called the ‘infinetesimally small’ – the Germ, in other words.

In a way his response to Pasteur is emotional and it is not informed by any proper understanding of the science itself. The supposed objectivity of science is reduced to the subjective impression of the scientist in the minds of ordinary persons like Balaram:

Who did the silk farmers of Europe go to when decease struck their silkworms and whole provinces lay devastated and groaning in misery? …Who but Pasteur? They went to him and they said: Save us. And when he saw their

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44 Ibid. 47.
45 Ibid. 49.
Balaram’s ideas of Pasteur are connected to the welfare of the society, which he, in his own capacity, is trying to achieve in the distant village of Lalpukur. Balaram’s ideas are more concerned with the history of science, which is more subjective rather than the objective science devoid of any connection with the society. Balaram with his crazy experiments do achieve some success and some benefits for the society. His constant endeavour to clean the village with carbolic acid, to keep it germ-free during the refugee influx, when the Bangladesh war of 1971 was taking place, actually helps the village to remain free of chronic diseases. His endeavour to set up a new type of school— the Pasteur School of Reason inspired by Pasteur and based on the Kantian philosophical schema— also achieves some success. The school had two departments— the Department of Pure Reason and the Department of Practical Reason to accommodate two different forms of thought— abstract and concrete. Balaram head the Department of Pure Reason and Shombhu Debnath headed the Department of Practical Reason. The school not only turns out to be useful to the villagers, but also becomes profitable till Bhudeb Roy’s nefarious designs bring an end to everything. Pasteur and Phrenology meet an incendiary end in the village of Lalpukur.

Balaram’s experiments have a significant historical lineage in the postcolonial intellectual’s attempts to conceive the idea of a modern nation built on the foundation of modern science and universal reason. It was also a desperate attempt to connect between Indian myths and history and Western science. The history of Balaram is thus the intellectual history that Panikkar is talking about: where the thought gets united with

46 Ibid. 49.
deeds. Balaram might not be an intellectual who is trying to come to terms with modernity on the basis of universal reason; but he suits the purpose better, because he is a refugee trying to learn his way to reform. His limitations provide a sort of comic relief to a well-structured narrative. The fact that Bengali intellectuals like Rammohan Roy and Akshay Kumar Dutta were considerably influenced by phrenology, suggests that a fictional representation of Balaram is not far removed from reality. By focusing on his character Ghosh is doing history in a way which a historical narrative would not probably have allowed him to do— to chronicle Balaram’s history is thus to describe the middle-class intellectual attempting to put reason into perspective and to unite Brahma with the cosmic atom. Balaram is not an intellectual in the sense of those who would find a place in intellectual history; but he and his deeds are more relevant to the process of depicting the complexities that the postcolonial reformatory zeal based on English education and fascination for Western science introduced in India. It is an impulse that Balaram shared with the intelligentsia of the country who wanted to develop India into a secure and modern country. The narrator’s sympathies are with Balaram, as is evident throughout the first half of the novel in spite of the rather humorous depiction of him. It is also a pointer that the narrator is not merely satirising phrenology; by giving it an equal space with Pasteur he is rather trying to emphasise its purpose— that of reforming the society, which was, without a doubt, a good endeavour. Secondly, it might also be an oblique pointer to how history often does injustice to those who fail by obliterating from its records their contribution. Bruno Latour has pointed out:

The history of the sciences is seldom just to the defeated or even, for that matter, to the victors. It accords too much attention to the latter and not enough to the former. A more
just approach would be to treat both victors and defeated symmetrically.\footnote{Bruno Latour, \textit{Pasteurization of France} (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1988) 31.}

History has always shown its apathy to the failures of intellectuals forgetting that their failures are what ultimately guided somebody to the path of success. I would also like to recall here the famous poem by Auden, \textit{Musee des Beaux Arts}\footnote{W. H. Auden, “Musee Des Beaux Arts,” \textit{Selected Poems}, Ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1979) 79.}, where Icarus’s failure symbolises how the artistic failure was lost in the apathy of the continuity of life.

In the first chapter, “The Sign of Science” of his book \textit{Another Reason}\footnote{Gyan Prakash, \textit{AnotherReason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India} (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2000).}, Gyan Prakash points out that the British Raj endeavoured to create a secure and modern colony under the crown, and, later on, after independence it was the intelligentsia, primarily educated in English and Western knowledge systems, who strove to build a modern India in terms of universal reason and science. This modernity during the colonial period was positioned to be like the West, but not quite equal to it:

Compelled to use universal reason as a particular means of rule, the British positioned modernity in colonial identity as an uncanny double, not a copy, of the European original – it was almost the same, but not quite. In the colonial context the universal claims of science always had to be represented, imposed and translated into other terms. This was not because Western culture was difficult to be reproduce, but because it was dislocated by its functioning as a form of alien power and thus was forced to adopt other guises and languages.\footnote{Ibid. 6.}

The Western-educated indigenous elite, on the other hand, attempted to do somewhat the same thing:

Enchanted by science, they saw reason as a syntax of reform, a map for the rearrangement of culture, a vision for
producing Indians as a people with scientific traditions of their own.\textsuperscript{51}

Science became a sort of cultural authority in the complex struggle for modernity.

People like Balaram appropriated the notion of universal reason and science, so that pseudo-sciences as well as mainstream sciences were given the same standing and both stood for reason. Balaram’s understanding of phrenology is based on one book and so is his understanding of Pasteur. He is more concerned with Pasteur’s biography rather than his scientific theories. It is the inspiration that a reading of Pasteur’s biography provides in relation to what he had done to society which is more important to Balaram than the scientific achievements of Pasteur. Ironically, Balaram places Pasteur in a social context— as a representative of people. It is, however, known that Pasteur assisted in the production of two luxurious commodities— silk and beer. Bruno Latour, in his book, \textit{The Pasteurisation of France}, presents Pasteur as a canny scientist who knew how to keep afloat his finances and he has pointed out there is also a colonial connection to Pasteur’s researches. Pasteur had changed the methodology of his research from the outer space to the contained laboratory of the colonies.\textsuperscript{52} Latour tells us:

\begin{quote}
With each parasite conquered, the columns of soldiers, missionaries, and colonists became visible on the map of Africa, Asia, sailing up the rivers and invading the plains.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

Ghosh is thus doing history in \textit{The Circle of Reason} from varying perspectives. In this novel, he is not interested in showing how the colonisers used racial sciences to their advantage which can be found in several history books; rather his primary focus is to point out how the fictionalism of science and pseudo-sciences was used to their

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. 6.
\textsuperscript{52} Singh. 56.
\textsuperscript{53} Latour, 141.
advantage to sustain and secure the ideology of the empire. Ghosh is also exploring the possibility of the complexities of the journey of scientific ideas in a completely different terrain appropriated by the native elite and also the subaltern to generate a new meaning for their lives. Thus from the silences of mainstream historiography Ghosh is unearthing the several possibilities and complexities of the journey of scientific ideas, decolonised and appropriated in a different scientific framework. Science and technology had a significant part to play in the sustenance of the empire and has now been given a historical representation in books, such as Daniel Headrick’s *The Tools of Empire* \(^{54}\) and Zaheer Baber’s *The Science of Empire* \(^{55}\).

The general satire and humour that Ghosh uses while describing Balaram’s obsession with phrenology, a racial science, totally appropriated by Balaram and put into effect in a totally different context, suggest that any one-dimensional analysis of the impact of European enlightenment on India before and after the colonial period would be an easy reduction of the hybridization that such an influence had undergone. Balaram also creates an alternative system of education which, though inspired by Pasteur, actually follows its own course by introducing indigenous arts like weaving and sewing. The fact that weaving as an art form has now been lost because of colonial greed and modern machines, also gets a significant space in the novel. Shombhu Debnath, who teaches Alu, is a master weaver who had learnt his art from the Basaks of Tangail. Balaram’s school achieves its purpose in providing a useful education to its pupils by mixing the traditional and the Western. Throughout the novel we find a conscious attempt


on the part of the writer to make connections that would lead to the understanding of life as a whole, which would, in a sense, be a privileging of the circular reason over the linear reason. The mixing of different forms of knowledge that Balaram achieves in his own limited capacity is a way towards such an understanding. This is a connection that objective knowledge obsessed with truth claims finds difficult to make. Balaram’s science, however ludicrous, attempts to connect the thought and the deed. The characters in this novel are also somewhat obsessed with theories: Balaram is obsessed with phrenology and Pasteur; Bhudeb Roy is obsessed with the theory of the straight lines; Professor Samuel is obsessed with the theory of queues and Jyoti das’s father is obsessed with chaos. This might also be an indictment and reproof for the intelligentsia of the postcolonial Indian modernity which was obsessed with theories. The debate between Gopal and Balaram regarding science points out the conflict of India’s tryst with modernity. On the one hand, the mind becomes “a dumping-ground for the West” and, on the other, there is always an attempt at trying to come to terms with the universal reason:

Science doesn’t belong to countries. Reason doesn’t belong to any nations. They belong to history— to the World.  

Ghosh is here satirising the notion that theories come first and facts later. The fact that Ghosh chooses a pseudo-racial science, with which Balaram is fascinated, is also a pointer to the ways in which the elite actually assimilated such concepts uncritically. It also reflects on the subjectivity of scientific discourse itself. Claire Chambers points out:

Pseudo-science, like a distorting mirror, reveals the subjectivity and dangers of mainstream scientific discourse.  

\[57\] Ibid. 54.
Balaram’s failure, in a sense, also underlines how unique endeavours like that of Balaram and also later references to the true socialists are soon forgotten. Another aspect that is also brought to book is the way in which the state and its machineries find it difficult to understand anything that is unique or different. That is why people in the police are easily duped and instigated against Balaram, because within the limitation of their discourses there is no place for alterity.

Ghosh is thus doing history in *The Circle of Reason*. Some critics might find characters like Balaram and Alu rather strange and queer, which is probably in keeping with the narrative demands of magic realism; but, however fantastic they may seem, Ghosh’s characters wink at us straight from the silent graveyards of history.

*The Glass Palace*

*The Glass Palace* is an epic family saga by Ghosh which covers a long span of time starting in Mandalay in 1885, when the chief protagonist Rajkumar is stranded as the sampan on which he works as a serving boy is waiting in the boat for repairs; the novel goes on till the 1940’s with Jaya visiting her uncle Dinu in Burma and it ends with the assertion of Jaya’s son having written the book which his mother could not. It is a “family saga”\(^{59}\), as John Thieme points out, and continues with the inter-twined histories of primarily four families— those of Rajkumar’s, King Thebaw’s, Uma Dey’s and Saya John’s— who are engaged with their individual and collective destinies in a period of great historical turmoil. The novel incorporates in its corpus several important historical

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events, like the deportment of King Thebaw to Ratnagiri after he lost to the English forces within just a matter of fourteen days. In this war the Indian forces under the British colonial army are made to fight in places like Burma, Malaya, Singapore, and Malaysia. This contains several historical ramifications in their defeat in the hands of the Japanese, the formation of the INA, the Sepoy Mutiny and the forgotten Long March of the Indians returning from Burma. The Glass Palace tells different stories of several individuals giving us varied perspectives on life lived in the background of significant historical events.

“Dhobi ka kutta…na ghar ka na ghat ka”\textsuperscript{60}: The Story of Rajkumar and the forgotten Long March

This is how Saya John describes himself when asked by Rajkumar about having a Chinese face and a Christian name— “Dhobi ka kutta…na ghar ka na ghat ka”. Rajkumar’s, like Saya John’s, is a story enmeshed with coming and going. Orphaned at an early age of eleven, Rajkumar has to fend himself from an early age— from working as a serving boy in the ship to a serving boy in Ma Cho’s shop, working for Saya John, building up a timber business with him, becoming a timber merchant and then a rubber merchant. His story could have been a Cinderella-like success story or, in other words, a successful American dream; but his essential rootlessness catches up with him. His story becomes that of a quintessential twentieth century refugee lost in the backyard of history.

There was a huge number of Indians working in Burma before the Japanese invasion, primarily because Burma became a part of the British Empire and a huge number of people worked in Burma either on their own volition or because of the

\textsuperscript{60} Ghosh, Glass Palace, 10.
colonial policies. History is largely silent about the fate of those people after the Japanese invasion of Burma. Hugh Tinker, in his article “A Forgotten Long March: The Indian Exodus from Burma, 1942”, calls this huge Indian exodus from Burma ‘A Forgotten Long March’ and talks about the general plight of the refugees:

There is no significant historical lesson to be learnt from the narrative which follows, except the lesson of human endurance. The Twentieth Century, even more than any age before, is the age of the refugee. In almost every instance, the refugee instinct is spontaneous—unpremeditated—disorganised; it is individual, or familial. Nobody directs the refugee to depart; no regular organisation assists him on his way; and when he arrives eventually at his destination, nobody really wants him to stay. The refugee who is assisted to settle in a new environment, or the refugee who is expedited back to his former home, are the exceptions to the normal rule that once people become refugees they never entirely lose that status. The refugee is the world’s most unwanted man. But somehow he survives. The present narrative is a story of survival.61

Tinker begins his article by commenting on the plight of the refugees with these lines. Rajkumar’s story is also a story of survival and a lesson of human endurance. His is the story which Hugh Tinker depicts in terms of the narrative of the historian, while Ghosh conjures him up out of the narrative of the novelist. The plight of the refugees can be seen best in Ghosh’s portrayal of the Morichjhâpi incident in The Hungry Tide62. Rajkumar is reduced to his subordinate self as a refugee in Uma’s house, although he somewhat redeems himself in that one simple act of love-making at the end of the novel.

From the beginning we are aware of the strong instinct of survival that Rajkumar possesses, besides possessing the grit and determination that enables one to survive in

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hostile environments. He was the only one in the family who, despite being sick, survived the journey, when all the others of the family were wiped out. He also survived the Long March back to India when many others did not. Ghosh, in most of his works, emphasises the survival instinct of the refugee and the migrant— the desperate attempt to cling to life. Rajkumar also reminds us of Zindi in *The Circle of Reason*. His maturity was evident even at an early age, when he did not use his mother’s bangle to buy himself a return trip, but used it instead to bargain for an apprenticeship. Rajkumar worked in Ma Cho’s shop when the famous fourteen days’ war began, which ultimately led to the deportation of King Thebaw [1885- 1916] to Ratnagiri. As the troops entered the city the common people invaded the glass palace to get whatever spoils they could before the soldiers took them away. It was then that Rajkumar met his childhood sweetheart Dolly, a girl of immense beauty, who would later become his wife rather in serendipitous circumstances. It was Saya John who saved him from the angry mob and later allowed him to work with him. Rajkumar slowly gathered money by working his way to importing workers from India to work in British oil fields. He then sought his way out through worldly manipulations and became rich as a timber merchant. He got a plum contract from a company which was going to build a new rail road through the teak areas. With the help of the banker, D.P. Roy, in Rangoon, he managed to be invited to the Collectors House at Ratnagiri. D.P. Roy was Uma’s uncle; Rajkumar easily befriended Uma and later managed to convince Dolly to leave Outram House and marry him. Eventually he is well-settled and has two sons, Neeladhri and Dinu. He also has an illegitimate son, Ilongo.
The historical turmoil again decides to unsettle Rajkumar. He fights with his own destiny and his destiny catches up with him—the inevitable destiny of a migrant seems never to leave him. The events in Europe directly affect the lives of ordinary people. England has declared war on Germany and Rajkumar, languishing with pneumonia, reassesses his business. He decides to sell all his other properties to finance the collection of great quantities of timber, because he felt that the British and the Dutch would need those timbers in the time of war to reinforce their defences in the east. His wife, Dolly, accuses him of war profiteering. Rajkumar goes to the bank to make his payments to the workers when the bombing starts. The Japanese forces drop bombs near Rajkumar’s plantation and the elephant starts to panic and runs wild, because of which the logs get loose and Neel gets crushed under it. So, before Rajkumar could return to his plantation in Pazundaung, Neel is already dead. Manju in her grief questions the veracity of such wars and other historical events that had shattered their lives, although they had nothing to do with it:

She longed to know what kind of being this was that felt free to unleash this destruction: what was it for? What sort of creature could think of waging war upon herself, her husband, her child—a family such as hers—for what reason/Who were these people who took it upon themselves to remake the history of the world?63

After Neel’s death Manju’s world is shattered forever, while Rajkumar and Dolly just embark on their duty of going on with living. Rajkumar then decides to go to Huay Zedi to wait out his time till things improve in Rangoon. They wait for several weeks, but with no sign of improvement, with the Japanese advance accelerating day by day, and with Manju’s behaviour becoming erratic, they decide to make a last effort to reach India.

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Thus begins Rajkumar’s yet another tryst with destiny— the Long March back to India. The better routes being reserved for the English, the Indians had to fight their way through extremely difficult terrain with very little help from either side of the border, so that very few could survive the journey. Ghosh describes the situation in poignant detail:

There they were confronted by a stupefying spectacle: some thirty thousand refugees were squatting along the river-bank, waiting to move on towards the densely forested mountain ranges that lay ahead. Ahead there were no roads, only tracks, rivers of mud, flowing through green tunnels of jungle. Since the start of the Indian exodus, the territory had been mapped by a network of officially recognized evacuation trails: there were ‘white’ routes and ‘black’ routes, the former being shorter and less heavily used.64

Unable to cope with her grief, Manju ultimately drowns herself. Rajkumar, Dolly and the child reach Lankasuka in such a pitiable condition that they could not be recognised initially. Hugh Tinker’s article gives a detailed description of the routes that the refugees use, the apathy of those in power and the plight of the refugees who were ultimately able to return to India. Almost one lakh people were in the camps from where they started their Long March— from where they started returning to India at different points of time; out of them, few people survived (according to different estimates it is believed that around 25,000 to 30,000 people were able to cross to India via Manipur) and fewer people lived to tell the story. Tinker ends his article with the following lines:

…the story of the march by the Indians out of Burma faded out of the public consciousness, and now - more than thirty years later – many of the participants are dead, and the story is forgotten.65

64 Ibid. 468.
65 Tinker, 15.
The narrative of the forgotten Long March, where so many people were uprooted, and so many died, points out the deliberate silence of history as well as the wilful amnesia of the people who were in power. By foregrounding the narrative of the Long March as part of the several ordeals of the protagonists, Ghosh does justice to the memory of several people who had died and could not tell their story and also several others who survived and wanted to forget the trauma.

**King Thebaw and “the silence of exile”**

King Thebaw, the last king of Konbaung kingdom of Burma (Myanmar), was deported to Ratnagiri after he was defeated by the British Empire in the third Anglo-Burmese war of 1885 during the famous fourteen days’ war. King Thebaw had married his two half-sisters, of whom Queen Supayalat had a considerable influence on him. At the time of Thebaw’s accession, half of Burma was already under British possession. The British, under the pretext that King Thebaw was a tyrant, which he was not, had waged war on him, defeated him and then deported him and his family to Ratnagiri to die in complete isolation. King Thebaw lived in virtual isolation with a very meagre pension in a dilapidated house in Ratnagiri. The colonial policy of silencing the power of an individual by dislocating him was followed meticulously— the King of Burma languished in Ratnagiri, while the Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar languished in Rangoon. This was an effective ploy since a direct violence on them might meet with resistance from the masses, whereas dislocation would slowly silence their presence from the collective memory of the people.

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Ghosh weaves these historical details into his story and allows them quite a significant space, while they somehow get associated with the fate of Rajkumar. Ghosh also weaves into the narrative the fate of Thebaw’s three daughters, one of whom was married to the gate-keeper, Shrimant Gopal Bhaurao Savant. He, however, changes the name of the gatekeeper to Mohan Sawant and also tries to show under what circumstances the King’s eldest daughter fell in love with Sawant. The issue of racial purity and the fear of miscegenation are thus subtly woven into the text.

The miserable plight of King Thebaw after he was deposed from Burma was silenced out of historical narratives as well as out of public consciousness for a considerable period of time. The metaphor of the glass palace and the introduction of the royal family members as characters in the novel serve several thematic purposes, especially from a postcolonial perspective. It challenges several colonial claims made during the period. Burma was a prospering and wealthy country under King Thebaw, although there were several crimes committed within the royal family under the command of Queen Supayalat, such events actually leading to the accession of Thebaw, but in no circumstance was King Thebaw a bad ruler. Prosperity and education flourished in Burma, unlike in any other part of the sub-continent. Thus Ghosh, in a way, challenges the claims of the ‘white man’s burden’ as somewhat preposterous. King Thebaw’s virtual isolation in Ratnagiri might have also silenced the historical narrative, but the novel unfolds in such a way so as to suggest that the King acquired a somewhat mythical importance and still lives in the memory of the people of Ratnagiri. The British had actually failed in their intention, for what they wanted was that “the King should be lost
Instead, in everyday life of the small town of Ratnagiri, the King had acquired a great deal of significance. When Jaya visits Ratnagiri long after King Thebaw was dead, she finds his memory has outlived him in Ratnagiri’s public consciousness:

_Thiba–Raja_ was omnipresent in Ratnagiri: his name was emblazoned on signs and billboards, on street-corners, restaurants, hotels. The King had been dead more than eighty years, but in the bazaars people spoke of him as though they’d known him at first hand. Jaya found this touching at first, and then deeply moving – that a man such as Thebaw, so profoundly untransportable, should be still so richly loved in the land of his exile.  

Dolly also is able to save her son Dinu when he contracts polio, because the King appears in her dream and tells her to rush Dinu to a hospital.

The real historical characters also enable Ghosh to expose the Empire’s fear of miscegenation— a theme which has been explored from varied perspectives in postcolonial literary theories. A severe crisis falls upon the Collector of Ratnagiri when his British masters rebuke him, as they come to know that King Thebaw’s eldest daughter had married a coachman. He is ultimately compelled to commit suicide. The British had reduced King Thebaw to abject degradation and a meagre pension, they did nothing to improve his condition; instead when they heard of miscegenation, they had put the blame on the Collector. Race had always provided the Empire with an ideology of self-justification. A lot of pseudo-sciences were evolved to prove the superiority of one race over the other and, therefore, the justification of the Empire in terms of ‘the white man’s burden’. Any particular ideology always evokes a sort of hybrid response, where the propagator and the propagated soon start believing in terms of the ideology. The fear of

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67 Ibid. 136.
68 Ibid. 491.
miscegenation and the mixing of the races have always haunted the Empire and this theme is intricately woven into the text of the novel:

...the smell of miscegenation has alarmed them as nothing else would have: they are tolerant in many things, but not this. They like to keep their races tidily separate.69

The appropriation of such pseudo-sciences is also to be found in The Circle of Reason as I have earlier pointed out. Several forms of racial discrimination are foregrounded in the text without assuming a central importance, thereby not disturbing the telling of the story.

**The Mimic Men of the Empire**

I am not talking about the postcolonial mimic men like Ralph Singh in V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*70; rather I would like to focus on those mimic men who had actually sustained the empire. By writing his own memoir, Ralph Singh tries to come to terms with his identity and solve his psychological problems related to the abandonment and displacement that he has gone through because of the empire. The act of writing is to do justice to one’s own memory and also to come to terms with one’s own lack of identity. The narrator in *The Glass Palace* is almost engaging himself in the same activity, albeit in a slightly different way. The attempt may be described not primarily as trying to come to terms with one’s own identity, but rather as coming to terms with one’s own past. One should not be strictly judgmental about it; rather one must tell one’s story and also have the ears to listen to other stories. *The Glass Palace*, like most of the other novels of Ghosh, tries to resist being judgmental and thus presents different sides of the same stories, as if to enlarge and engage our sympathies towards difference. Uma realises later

69 Ibid. 173.
that Rajkumar had got engaged in another relationship because of Dolly’s isolation. The
love-making scene at the end of the novel does away with the sense of animosity that
prevailed in their relationship. The historical narratives are usually fixated within a
particular perspective. What Ghosh’s novel does is to place all the different types of
stories told from varied perspectives in front of us, so that the silences in the historical
narratives are now brought to light.

The Collector is a perfect example of the mimic man and he makes life almost
miserable for Uma by imitating his colonial masters. Ghosh develops his character within
a limited space with deft humorous touches. The Collector in his abject servility refers to
his British colleagues as “… amader gurujan – our teachers…”71. He does his best to
follow the mannerisms and the table manners of the colonial masters—so much so that
he forces Uma to do the same and makes sarcastic remarks when she does not live up to
his standards. The narrator sarcastically remarks about the Collector’s treatment of his
wife:

The wifely virtues she could offer him he had no use for: Cambridge had taught him to want more; to make sure that
nothing was held in abeyance, to bargain for a woman’s soul with the coin of kindness and patience. The thought of
this terrified her. This was a subjection beyond decency, beyond her imagining.72

The Collector finds it difficult to tackle the Queen who is forthright in her condemnation
of him as well as of the empire. The ideology of the empire has been imprinted in the
Collector in such a way that when he tries to explain the goodness of the empire, he fails
miserably. The Queen tells him:

71 Ghosh, Glass Palace, 136.
72 Ibid. 153.
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?73

The Collector is almost taken aback at the Queen’s response to the scandal. He is unable ultimately to live up to the demands of the colonial administrators. He is made the scapegoat because of the scandal and, therefore, loses his tenure as the Collector of Ratnagiri. His wife also deserts him and he is ultimately left to commit suicide.

The theme of the mimic man is also brought to the fore while talking about the Indians in the colonial army. The dilemma and the question they confront, and the contradictions and the internal turmoil they face bring forth the other story— that of the mimic men in the colonial army. King Thebaw is defeated by the British army consisting of a large number of Indian soldiers. Saya John, Rajkumar as well as the Burmese people are stupefied at the spectacle of the Indians marching in the victorious army. Saya and Rajkumar try to reason it out:

…these ghostly men, these trustling boys? How do they fight an enemy who fights from neither enmity nor anger, but in submission to orders from superiors, without protest and without conscience.
…these men who would think nothing of setting fire to whole villages if their officers ordered, they too had a certain kind of innocence. An innocent evil. I could think of nothing more dangerous’

‘Saya,’ Rajkumar shrugged offhandedly, ‘they’re just tools. Without minds of their own. They count for nothing.’74

Arjun and his family are greatly elated when Arjun gets an opportunity to enrol in the Indian Military Academy in Dehra Dun. It was something of an achievement keeping in

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73 Ibid. 150.
74 Ghosh, Glass Palace, 30.
mind the racial policies of recruitment in the higher ranks of the British army which excluded most men in the country. The rules were similar in the army as was in the administrative service. Like the Collector, Arjun, Hardy and the other Indians working as officers in the army were particularly aware of the food habits and the table manners of the colonial masters, and any lapse was considered a failing in terms of courage and integrity. In spite of all the projected camaraderie in the army ranks and the pretension of equality, the Indian officers, however, were discriminated against in different ways. Whenever a quarrel or any other issue cropped up, where a comparison is to be made between an Indian and a British officer, the Indian officer was inevitably discriminated against. Within the communal nature of their lives is integrated an ideology of the army with complex symbols of pride and honour in such a manner that it becomes difficult to question the values from within the system. The mechanical nature of the system subsumed any independent notion or ethical thinking. People like Arjun and the Collector were made to believe that the notion of modernity lies in this little volition of dress codes and eating habits. Dinu rightly points out to Arjun:

> ‘It’s not what you eat and drink that make you modern: it’s a way of looking at things…’

The ideology of the superiority of the British over the Indians had percolated down to the lower ranks of soldiers, as they often refused to work under an Indian Officer. The disturbances in the ranks began when the Indian soldiers are made to fight other people’s battles in other people’s places. It is Hardy who starts thinking on this line and later Arjun is also perturbed when he is called a mercenary. The conviction that he had had—that soldiering was like any other profession—now begins to waver in him. It was not

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75 Ibid. 279.
merely this conviction but also the ideology of freedom that was promoted in the army ranks. The army was so enmeshed in metaphors and symbols that they thought that they were actually liberating people, giving freedom to people and protecting them from tyrants. Giani Amreek Singh tells Uma:

> We never thought that we were being used to conquer people. Not at all: We thought the opposite. We were told that we were freeing those people. That is what they said — that we were going to set those people free from their bad kings or their evil customs or some such thing. We believed it because they believed it too.\(^76\)

It was not merely an ideology that the colonisers propagated for their benefit; but it was an ideology that they believed in— a firm conviction in ‘the white man’s burden’. There are two English characters in the novel who also give us the other side of the story— Mckay Thakin and Lieutenant Colonel Buckland. Thakin’s death and Buckland’s defeat shows us the tremendous courage and conviction one requires to maintain such an empire.

The true realisation of the mimic man comes when Arjun talks to Dinu about the nature of their equality:

> You see, they really believe in what they’re doing; they believe that the British stand for freedom and equality…and that’s why it’s so hard for them when they discover that this equality they’ve been told about is a carrot on a stick – something that’s dangled in front of their noses to keep them going, but always kept just out of reach.\(^77\)

Thus when Hardy has a quarrel with Captain Pearson, it is Hardy who is blamed. In Singapore there are disturbances in the army ranks as several Indians try to break ranks. Arjun and Hardy try to find answer to their questions. Hardy questions the Chetwode

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76 Ibid. 224.
77 Ibid. 284.
Hall inscription which had so long motivated them. They try to seek out answers as to why they are being transported to different places and whose war are they fighting:

…where is this place whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time?\(^78\)

The racial discrimination becomes more blatant in Singapore where the Indians were not allowed to enter certain clubs or use certain pools. The local people also treated the Indian soldiers badly because they failed to understand why they were fortifying the empire with their lives. To the people of the Indian Independence League they were mere mercenaries\(^79\) and to Alison they were just “a manufactured thing, a weapon in someone else’s hands”\(^80\). Arjun realises that they are fighting a meaningless battle where there would be no credit and no blame if they lost. It was “risking everything to defend a way of life that pushes you to the sidelines”\(^81\). Arjun’s battalion is almost routed by the Japanese. Arjun survives with the help of Kishan Singh and then Arjun, Hardy and several others join the Indian National Army and try to find some meaning to their life.

**The Subaltern**

The narrator uses the metaphor of the potter to show how a true subaltern is sometimes at an advantage. Arjun has a hallucination as he tries to cope with the tremendous pain resulting from his injuries, while hiding in the culvert to save Kishan Singh and himself from being captured from the Japanese forces:

He had a sudden, hallucinatory vision. Both he and Kishan Singh were in it, but transfigure: they were both lumps of clay, whirling on potters’ wheels. He, Arjun, was the first

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\(^78\) Ibid. 330.
\(^79\) Ibid. 346-347.
\(^80\) Ibid. 376.
\(^81\) Ibid. 406.
to have been touched by the unseen potter; a hand had come down on him, touched him, passed over to another; he had been formed, shaped – he had become a thing unto himself – no longer aware of the pressure of the potter’s hand, unconscious even that it had come his way. Elsewhere, Kishan Singh was still turning on the wheel, still unformed, damp, malleable mud. It was this formlessness that was the core of his defence against the potter and his shaping touch. 82

In this brilliant image of the potter shaping the clay the narrator perfectly describes the advantage of people like Kishan Singh over people like Arjun and Hardy. These people like Arjun and Hardy with their English education would be more malleable to the ideology, like the notion of equality and freedom, propagated by the colonial masters, rather than Kishan Singh, to whom nothing else, except kinship and immediate loyalties, would matter. It would be difficult to impart to Kishan Singh and such others the notion of honour, ideology, equality, because the vehicle through which it can be carried, that is language and education, is not available to them, and this lack is what ultimately protects them from being so easily shaped by other people. Arjun also realises how difficult it is to get rid of the empire, because it has shaped and coloured every aspect of his life and has become an “indelible stain”83, and his death is, in a way, a sacrifice, because he felt that this empire cannot be destroyed without destroying oneself.

_The Glass Palace_ thus presents in the form of a dialogic interaction several sides and several stories of the empire without privileging one over the other, and thus restores from the records of history a multiplicity of voices, which would have been otherwise silenced, dragged into isolation and eventually buried by the historical narratives whose primary concern is the privileging of the powerful. The forgotten Long March, the plight

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82 Ibid. 430-431.
83 Ibid. 518.
of King Thebaw, the conflicts in the army are all retrieved from memory, to show that although they might not have a place in history, they still shape and influence the life of several generations of people. Ghosh does well to tell these stories, thereby doing justice to the memories of those individuals who were once caught in this historical turmoil.

*Sea of Poppies*

In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh does history by bringing to light the deliberate silences of history regarding the opium trade that significantly sustained the revenues of the empire for a considerable period of time. Opium was produced in India and was exported to China, and this led to mass addiction to opium in China. It was the empire’s strategy to correct the imbalances of trade with China, so that they do not have to pay everything with their silver. The Chinese emperor did not have the need for any Western trinket except for silver. The novel is significantly set in a period just before the opium wars with China. It was Kunal Basu, another Indian novelist writing in English, who first entered this forbidden terrain of opium fiction. Kunal Basu’s first novel, *The Opium Clerk*[^84], begins when the opium trade is well-established, that is, with the birth of Hiran in the year of the Sepoy Mutiny (1857). The novel traces the life of Hiran and Douglas, the son of the infamous Jonathan Crabbe. Hiran follows the opium route that takes the opium chests through several impediments like cholera and sea storms, past Malacca, Macao and Hong Kong to Canton, where he is caught in his superior’s game of deception and counter-deception, corruption and connivance. The novel in a sense loses touch with history and concentrates on Hiran and Douglas and, although the plot loses focus, there is

a sense that it is “God’s Own Medicine”\textsuperscript{85} that starts dictating terms. Basu’s novel, however, creates in great detail the ambience of Calcutta during that period. The difference between \textit{Sea of Poppies} and \textit{The Opium Clerk} lies in the fact that Ghosh does history in a much more informed way than Basu, so that his characters are either informed by history or come out of history. Ghosh begins his novel at a point of time much before Basu, which enables him to richly explore the significant debates of history. \textit{Sea of Poppies}, which forms the first part of the trilogy, is all about locating the characters in their contexts. It consists of a vast medley of characters from different backgrounds—a dispossessed zamindar, an English merchant, a mullatto sailor from America, a Bengali upper-class baishnab as well as a gomusta, a half-Chinese-half-Persian convict, a French girl brought up in a Bengali manner, and an impressive range of subaltern characters—the indentured labourers on board the sea. The speckled assortment of characters is typical of marine life. The canvas is that of the long forgotten history—of opium trade which sustained the Indian merchants as well as the empire for a considerable period of time. The three main metaphors which integrate \textit{Sea of Poppies} are opium, Ibis and Deeti’s shrine. The plot revolves around these three main metaphors. It is Deeti’s shrine which will ultimately carry forward the story to the other remaining parts of the trilogy. Ghosh’s doing of history is also different from that of Rushdie’s. Rushdie’s \textit{The Enchantress of Florence}\textsuperscript{86} was also published at about the same time as Ghosh’s \textit{Sea of Poppies}. \textit{The Enchantress of Florence} moves seamlessly between the Mughal Empire during Akbar’s reign and the Renaissance Italy in Machiavelli’s time. The two places are inter-linked with the appearance of a Florentine wanderer, Mogor

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid. 34.
dell’ Amore, at Akbar’s court and the presence of Quara Koz, a Mughal princess, in Florence. Both the novels display pain-staking research, and Rushdie even appends a six-page bibliography to the novel. Novels such as these almost challenge the fiction/non-fiction divide, so that even varied subjects coalesce in order to tell a story, _In an Antique Land_ being one of the finest examples of this blurring of generic boundaries. It also suggests that this is the reason why Ghosh chooses the fictional mode over the anthropological or historical forms of writing, while the other obvious reason for this conscious choice is that the fictional mode does not engage in truth claims. Rushdie’s _The Enchantress of Florence_ doesn’t seem to be as successful as _Sea of Poppies_ as a historical novel, probably because Rushdie mixes history too much with the fabulous. The predominance of magic realism also somewhat decreases the seriousness of the historical fiction. Christopher Rollason makes an interesting comparison between the two novels in his article “Amitav Ghosh’s _Sea of Poppies_ and Salman Rushdie’s _The Enchantress of Florence_: History and the future of Indian writing in English”87, and suggests his preference for _Sea of Poppies_:

...while when I turned the last page of _The Enchantress of Florence_ I concluded I had not been able to identify with a single character for a single minute, when _Sea of Poppies_ came to an end I was genuinely sorry, while also more than pleased that I will meet Ghosh’s characters again in the second instalment.88

Ghosh’s novel succeeds precisely because of the way in which it does history and also because of the relevance of his historical material to the past which still intrudes the present. Another reason for this success lies in the sparing manner in which he uses

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88 Ibid.
elements of magic realism, so as not to hinder the telling of the history. Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown*\textsuperscript{89} and *Midnight’s Children*\textsuperscript{90} had been more effective in its fusion of history and magic realism then *The Enchantress of Florence*.

**Opium**

History has been suspiciously silent about the Opium trade that had sustained the British Empire and used to generate more than fifty percent of the revenues spawn by the East India Company. Just as one finds a significant lack of “petrofiction”\textsuperscript{91} in the modern world, where great number of economies have been sustained by oil, similarly one does not find too much fiction on opium which ironically sustained the empire and also created the foundation of capitalism. The opium trade carried on by the British Empire not only sustained the empire, but also native traders and even cities like Calcutta and Bombay. It affected the lives of millions of people. While much emphasis has been laid on exploring the ideologies of the empire, and the drain of wealth and man power, not much research has been carried out on the opium trade and the economic imperialism that had sustained the empire, its scientific activities. In an ironic manner, it is on opium that the foundation of modern India has been laid. The cities that still contribute significantly to the volumes of trade even to this day, like Bombay, Singapore, Hongkong, and Canton, were founded on the opium trade. The infamous opium triangle involved Britain, India and China. The Indian peasants were forced to grow opium under the monopoly and control of the East India Company; it was then smuggled to China to pay for the huge trade imbalances with

\textsuperscript{91} Amitav Ghosh, *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces* (Delhi: Ravi Dayal, Permanent Black, 2003) 75.
the later country. The local gentility and the businessmen often assisted the East Indian Company with finances and even helped them with ships in the opium wars with China. Amir Farooqui’s interesting study, *Opium City: The Making of Colonial Bombay* explores the importance of the opium trade for the businessmen of Western India, particularly of Mumbai, and also the significant role that it later played in the generation of capital on which the foundation of modern Mumbai stands. Opium was produced in the poppy fields of Bengal and Bihar and then sent to Bombay via Rajasthan, then to Karachi and then by sea to Daman. A large number of Indian traders like Parsis, Marwaris, Gujarati Banias and Konkani Muslims participated and profited form this trade. Of the forty-two foreign firms that operated in China in the 1830’s, most were owned by the Parsis. Jamshedjee Jeejibhoy in partnership with Jardin and Matheson dominated the opium trade with China. Ghosh also makes a subtle reference to the Parsees. Ah Fatt’s father is a Parsee who operates his business in Canton in China. It was the capital accumulation in these years which led to the transformation of Bombay as one of the leading commercial cities under the empire. The share of the opium trade in Bombay was much larger then that of Calcutta, although Calcutta also played a very significant part in the maintenance of production and distribution of opium. Farooqui’s book primarily concentrates on the opium trade in the western part of India, particularly Bombay; one does not find much historical writing on the opium trade in Calcutta. What opium was to the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, oil is to the twentieth century. Ghosh in his novels repeatedly uncovers the economic imperatives of the empire and the way it affected the lives of millions of people. *The Glass Palace*, for example, shows how

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the business of rubber and teak had made the British expand their empire to places like Burma and Malaya. Opium thus ruled the destiny of the empire and also that of the millions of people who lived under its yoke. These are the aspects of the empire which had made it different from all the other empires of bygone ages. Not only in its ideology, but also in the nature of its trade the whole colonial empire was different from any other empire. This is how Ghosh does history through his fiction by almost re-enacting the past through the lives of individuals. Ghosh introduces the theme of opium through several characters like Aditi and his husband, Mr. Burnham and his Gomusta, the captain of the ship and Ah Fatt. Aditi’s husband, who was a soldier in the army and got himself wounded, managed to get a job in the Sudder opium factory in Gazipur. He himself consumed opium to relieve himself from the pain. When Deeti was her daughter’s age, poppy was a luxury and was grown in little amounts which was sufficient for them to use in cooking meat and vegetables. The enormous appetite of the Company and its factories had changed the lives of these villagers— so much so that they were forced to produce opium. The profits that they acquired were so minimum, that Deeti had to go on postponing the repairs of her hut. It was Subedar Bhyro Singh who actually arranged the marriage between Deeti and Hukam Singh. Deeti realised on her marriage day that Hukam Singh was an opium addict. Ghosh weaves a mystery behind the birth of Deeti’s daughter, which is revealed later. It was opium which had decided the fate of her wedding night. Deeti took her revenge by drugging her mother-in-law to elicit a response. The opium world and the world of the sailors are difficult to negotiate and the language that Ghosh uses is naturally filled with expletives. Yet Ghosh makes this language colourful and also makes it relive its own imaginary life in the novel, thus adding to the
meaning of the novel, which is much beyond the appended chrestomathy in the U.S. edition of the book. The dominant mode of narration in this novel is humour and every detail is revealed with empathy— which is characteristic of Ghosh— so that the harsh world becomes endearing and even comic to us. Deeti gets a feel of the opium factory and almost becomes sick when she goes to the factory in order to bring her husband back to the house as he has fallen sick. Again it was the gift of opium that had enabled Deeti to engage Kalua to bring her sick husband back home. The Zemindar of Raskhali, Neel Ratan Halder, loses his estate on charges of forgery. It was because Mr. Burnham had incurred losses in the opium trade, due to China trying to stop opium trade, that Neel ultimately loses everything and becomes a convict who is transported to Mauritius. Ah Fatt, the convict and the captain of the ship are both opium addicts. Their destiny is also in some way regulated by opium.

**Opium, The Bible and Free Trade**

The difference between the British Empire (which also includes the other empires of Europe, with England, France, Spain, Holland and Portugal as the major players and which flourished since the eighteenth century) and the other empires in history is the ‘pretence of virtue’ that was sustained throughout the expansion, sustenance and maintenance of the empire. The empire took recourse to The Bible as well as other scientific and economic discourses to justify and sanctify the notion of the ‘white man’s burden’. Britain’s imperial poet, Rudyard Kipling, wrote a famous poem, *The White Man’s Burden*, in 1899 as a response to the American takeover of the Philippines after the Hispano-American War. The poem, in a sense, is characteristic of the notion of
imperialism and how this rhetoric was used in different languages to justify the empire as a noble enterprise:

Take up the White Man’s burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
...
Your new-caught sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child.\(^9^3\)

The Bible and other scientific discourses were also used to justify the empire. Racial differences were emphasised through the development of several new disciplines like anthropology, craniology, phrenology et al.

After the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the British East Indian Company forced the farmers of Bengal and Bihar to grow poppy and retained monopoly over the production and export of opium. Since then the East India Company’s hold on the sub-continent was primarily based on the profits generated by the sale of opium to China. In the 1820’s China was importing 900 tons of Bengal opium annually.\(^9^4\) The Chinese emperor, perturbed by the mass addiction that opium caused, made several attempts to ban the opium trade. There were debates in the British parliament and debates everywhere regarding the ban of opium; the merchants sought to justify the opium trade in terms of The Bible, used the economic notion of free trade and ultimately convinced Britain to wage war against China. In defiance of Chinese opium prohibitions opium was smuggled to China by the British. The opium produced in India under the monopoly of the East India Company was traded to China. China tried to restrict the tremendous inflow of opium. The Qing Government attempted to regulate contact with the outside world, thus

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limiting trade to the port of Canton (now Guangzhou). Before 1840, only the port of Canton was open for foreign trade and all trades with foreign countries were channelled through it. It was known as the ‘Canton Trade System’. Having reached Canton, the Western merchants could only deal with a group of Government-appointed merchants called ‘Gong Hang’ (‘officially authorised firms’) which had a monopoly on the trade with the West. The volume of the trade, the prices and even the personal activities of the Western merchants were controlled by the Gong Hang, which, in turn, was responsible to the Governor-General of Liangguang. The Western merchants were forbidden to have any contact with the Chinese except in trade and they had to live within a specific district in the city. Diplomatic relations between Britain and China under the Qing dynasty worsened as they tried to restrict the inflow of opium and then completely ban the opium trade which culminated in the Anglo-Chinese Wars. It led to the first opium war (1839-1842) and then to the second opium war (1856-1860) which resulted in China’s defeat. Thus the opium trade was forced on it through the ‘Unequal Treaties’ — the Treaty of Nanjing and the Treaty of Tianjin. The Treaties included provisions for the opening of additional ports to unrestricted foreign trade, and allowed the secession of Hong Kong to Britain. These humiliating treaties ultimately led to the downfall of the Qing dynasty in 1912 after the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901). Sea of Poppies is significantly framed in a time period just prior to the opium wars, and this allows Ghosh to explore the debates concerning free trade and opium. In an interesting conversation among Mr. Burnham, Mr. Doughty, Zachary Raid and Neel at Neel’s dinner party, Mr. Burnham elucidates his arguments in justification of the opium trade:

‘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. Free Trade is a right conferred on Man by God, and its principles apply as much to opium as to any other article of trade. More so perhaps, since in its absence many millions of natives would be denied the lasting advantages of British influence.¹⁹⁵

In this one speech Burnham touches on the manifold hypocrisy of the empire. Opium is thus being forced on the Chinese in the name of freedom, in the name of God and in the name of free trade. The pretence of virtue is evident in the gyrations of his speech—from the practical necessity of exporting opium he initiates a religious justification:

‘that British rule in India could not be sustained without opium---that is all there is to it, and let us not pretend otherwise. You are no doubt aware that in some years, the Company’s annual gains from opium are almost equal to the entire revenue of your own country, the United States? … Does it not follow that it is our God-given duty to confer these benefits upon others?’⁹⁶

Even the colonisers were not able to save themselves from “God’s Own Medicine”; rather they were also implicated by it. In this novel we find that the captain of the ship, Hukam Singh, and Ah Fatt are all opium-addicts. Similarly Ah Fatt’s father and Neel’s father had benefited from the opium trade. Ghosh thus recuperates the history of opium from the long silences of the grand historical narratives through a dialogic interaction between the coloniser and the colonised.

**Indenture and the Ibis**

Amitav Ghosh touches upon another important aspect of history which had remained silent for a considerable period of time. There have been several fiction-writers who belong to the Girmitiya Diaspora and have written about their condition, especially the

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⁹⁶ Ibid. 115.
Fijian Indian Diaspora, but there has not been much writing from India. It was the history of almost three million people who were transported to several islands like Mauritius, British Guyana, Fiji, Surinam, Jamaica and other such places after the proclamation of the abolition of slavery in 1833, when there was an immediate impact on the plantations because of great shortage of labour. The slaves were replaced by Indian coolies. Between 1842 and 1912 more than half a million indentured labourers from India went to the Mauritius. A large number of convicts were sent to the islands in 1814-15 from the Calcutta ports. Calcutta became a convenient centre from which coolies were sent to Mauritius and other islands under the empire. The Mauritius islands and the Bourbon Islands were captured by the East India Company with the help of the Indian sepoys; and after that the transportation of labour from Calcutta for the sugar colonies became a regular affair. The colonisers had a commercial comptoir in Calcutta along the Hooghly River. There were also lots of agents for Mauritius planters in Calcutta. Basic of the migrants came from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and very few came from south India. It was such a situation that the predominant language of the labourers became Bhojpuri. The rapidity with which these coolies learnt the Bhojpuri language is also astonishing, considering the fact that most of them were hardly literate. Sea-sickness, outbreak of epidemics and lack of medical facilities on the ship resulted in death of the coolies. In Sea of Poppies, we find some are killed in fights, some die of disease, while some commit suicide and some escape. Trouble often breaks out in the ‘coolie ships’ because of ill-treatment, lack of food, poor living conditions etc. They were disembarked usually

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at the Depot in Port Louis, which was also known as ‘Coolie Ghat’ and has been later renamed as Aapravasi ghat.\textsuperscript{98}

The indentured labourers had a life of their own. They developed fictive kinship amongst themselves and also married beyond their caste restrictions. Intra- as well as inter-religious marriages were often encouraged. Ghosh tries to depict the tension that was creeping up as these new relationships were beginning to materialise on board the Ibis. From Munia’s bhauji Deeti soon becomes the bhauji of the ship-mates, as she tries to fight the injustice done to the ship-mates in several occasions. The transition was not smooth as the past was not something that one could easily relegate to the background. Kalua, who belongs to a lower caste and is considered untouchable, contrives to save Deeti from being burnt as a sati; then, in order to escape the vigil of society, they seek to escape to Mauritius. The past, however, seems to catch up with them in the form of Bhyro Singh, the Subedar, on board the Ibis. The Subedar had recognised Deeti by his own admission from the very beginning, but didn’t give the information away for fear that he might lose his reputation. The Subedar seeks out an opportunity to whip Kaloo as the latter tries to save Deeti from the Subedar’s nefarious intention and in the process accidentally kills a guard. Kaloo kills the Subedar and escapes in a boat with the help of Serang Ali, Jadu and the convicts. An interesting relation also develops between Jadu and Munia in which Kaloo and Deeti also get entangled. Jadu is a muslim and, therefore, the other lascars, and even Paulett, warn him about his overtures. Jadu does not listen to them and finally is severely beaten, which compels him to escape. This relationship does not easily materialise at this point and psychologically Ghosh represents the tensions in the relationships perfectly. The jahajbhais and jahajbahens are trying to develop a kinship,

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
but in the process they are faced with several impediments that come forcing their way from the past. There are also attempts to form new relationships, and marriage proposals are moving around. Ecka Nack, the leader of the hillsman wants to marry Heeru, though Heeru is actually married. There are attempts at radical departures from the conventional norms of society. Ghosh brings these radical stories out of history, as he does in the case of *The Hungry Tide* and suggests how the subaltern can often script their own story. Although by crossing the ‘kalapani’ they have supposedly lost their caste, but these differences have been embedded in them in a way that they have become a way of life for them. It is in accordance with their relation with past and their earlier status that they are trying to negotiate with the present.

**Slaves and Coolies**

Ghosh weaves into the story another historical fact which is that the indentured labourers or the coolies from India were actually a replacement of the slave trade. The conditions of the coolies were not much different from the slaves. The Ibis is actually a slaver ship from Baltimore which is out of business because of the abolition of slavery. Burnham’s conversation with Zachary makes the purpose of Ibis clear:

> ‘Thought not,’ said Mr Burnham. ‘Lucky thing that particular disease hasn’t taken hold in your parts yet. Last bastion of liberty, I always say— slavery’ll be safe in America for a while yet. Where else could I have found a vessel like this, so perfectly suited for its cargo?’
> ‘Do you mean slaves, sir?’
> Mr Burnham winced. ‘Why no, Reid. Not slaves—coolies. Have you not heard it said that when God closes one door he opens another? When the doors of freedom were closed to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful of it— the Asiatick.’

After the abolition of slavery it was difficult to run the sugar plantations in Mauritius and the other islands. So a lot of Indians were sent by ships to these islands. As was often the case, the conditions of these ships were miserable, there were no medical facilities and people were transported like cattle and food stock. The slaver ships were often bought from the United States to be used for the transportation of coolies, which is ironical in the sense that it reflected almost a similar predicament for the coolies. When Jadu first entered the Ibis, he discovered the heavy iron chains and bracelet-like clasps and he was soon aware that this ship was used to carry human beings:

He picked up one of the chains, and on looking more closely at the bracelet-like clasps, he became convinced that it was indeed meant for a human wrist or ankle...The depressions were so close to each other as to suggest a great press of people, packed close together, like merchandise on a vendor's counter. What kind of vessel would be equipped and outfitted to carry human beings in this way?¹⁰⁰

The Ibis was repaired and re-structured at the port; but except for the chains, the condition of the coolies was not much different from that of the slaves. Neel and Ah Fatt, the two convicts on board, are treated in an extremely harsh manner by Bhyro Singh and Mr Doughty. The treatment of Kalua and Jadu is also not much different from that which was meted out to the slaves. Violence is an exemplary act. As I have already mentioned earlier, violence is everywhere in Ghosh’s fictional and non-fictional world.

**Miscegenation**

The issue of miscegenation is something that has always troubled the colonisers. The emphasis on racial superiority and on protecting the mingling of races was one of the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 143.
most potent ideologies of the empire and it sought to protect it in all manners possible. One finds this issue in *The Circle of Reason*, then in *The Glass Palace*, and then again in *Sea of Poppies*. The whole story of Deeti and Kaloo is a violation of the principles of caste. Kaloo is a ‘chamar’ by profession and thus an untouchable—so much so that one must even be careful about crossing his shadow. Yet it is Kaloo who saves Aditi from the funeral pyre and then later marries her. However, there is no final escape for them, as they find Subedar Bhyro Singh on board the Ibis, who is bent on taking revenge on them. He gets his opportunity to whip Kaloo and his wish is granted by the captain of the ship:

> I will not deny these men, who have served us faithfully, the justice they seek. For this you should know, gentlemen, that there is an unspoken pact between the white man and the natives who sustain his power in Hindoosthan—it is that in matters of marriage and procreation, like must be with like, and each must keep to their own. The day the natives lose faith in us, as the guarantors of the order of castes—that will be the day, gentlemen, that will doom our rule. This is the inviolable principle on which our authority is based—it is what makes our rule different from that of such degenerate and decayed peoples as the Spanish and Portuguese. Why, sir, if you wish to see what comes of miscegenation and mongrelism, you need only visit their possessions...101

Justice is here equated with colonial authority and colonial rule. The notion of justice is thus also a rhetoric implicated in the practicality of maintaining the empire. The brother and sister relationship between Paulette and Jadu also serves to defy the colonial propriety in matters of race. The most important character in this regard is Zachary himself who is a mullato. His mother was a slave who was ultimately given her freedom. So, in the ship’s list of crews, Zachary is registered as black. When the first mate comes to know about it, he tries to use Zachary to become the captain himself. Thus these little

101 Ibid. 482.
tensions occupy an important portion of the novel and easily set up a dialogue between the various possibilities of resistance that such racial discrimination might have undergone.

Ghosh’s fictional and non-fictional works are informed with a great deal of historical research. History is always the starting point for his novels. It acts as the main actant in his works by providing the specificities of time and place. History has been obsessed with grand narratives and especially the narrative of the nation, so that the narrative of families and communities has been silenced by its grand intentions. Ghosh places the history of the nation parallel to the history of the family, so that individual stories and memories are placed alongside significant political and historical events. He emplaces the individual as struggling against the backdrop of history. His characters seem to stare at us straight out of history. It is the ordinary individual’s unique predicament that is important to Ghosh. He re-reads the conventional archive and recuperates and reconstructs the lives of ordinary individuals. He recuperates from history the silences of individuals, like Alu who strives to create a utopian world free from corruption and free from money, Dinu who silently resists the military regime from within the realm of photography, or Deeti and Kalua who try to break the barriers of a rigid class-based society and dream of starting a completely new life. Not only are these individual voices retrieved, but also retrieved from the lost pages of history are whole generations, like that of Rajkumar (and people like Ghosh’s uncle, who had made themselves familiar to a new world, made it their own, and had then lost it altogether without a trace, eventually sinking in anonymity and history’s deliberate forgetfulness) who thrived in places like Burma. Ghosh recuperates from history the long forgotten
trade relation between India and Egypt, the greatly accommodating world of Bomma, where even a slave finds a mention in the letters of traders, and also the world of the native intellectuals or village Imams who are lost in the circle of reason trying desperately to keep pace with modernity in terms of science, medicine and technology.

The influence of the Subaltern Studies Collective is evident in his works, where there is always an attempt to address the silences and recuperate the subaltern voice from history. His choice of the fictional mode, where any strict boundary seems to dissolve, is itself an attempt to do history, while, at the same time, staying away from the wrangling of truth claims that such grand and meta-narratives of history are susceptible to. By acknowledging the possibilities of alternative forms of knowledge, he is able to address the silences of the subalterns; their stories themselves are re-constitutive of an alternative order of things, where the perceived order of the centre and periphery are, in a sense, lost.

I have quoted R. John Williams at the beginning of the chapter and have shown how he points out the several manner of doing history in context of Farah’s text, which is somewhat applicable to Ghosh’s works. Ghosh also does history by re-inscribing the individual stories in his fictions and by challenging the imposition of silence rendered by colonial and nationalist historiographies, where people like Rajkumar, Fokir, Deeti are all but forgotten. It is an insurrectionary act in that his preference for the fictional mode is itself a critique of the rigid boundaries of disciplines, like history, anthropology etc., which, by the way of insisting on a rigid methodology, privilege a hegemonic voice and seeks to suppress alternative forms of knowledge. It is also a revisionary act in that he not only addresses the silences of history, but also gives them a voice, so that people like Arjun, Alu, Zindi, Neel are not lost in the deliberate and wilful amnesia of history. In
Ghosh’s works, history is weaved with story-telling in such a manner that individual stories silently act themselves out in the backdrop of history. There never can be a single linear history parading itself as fact; rather all that there can be are stories—stories contradicting, overlapping and acknowledging each other. The way Ghosh does history in a sense validates what John Berger had said: “Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one”\textsuperscript{102}. 

\textsuperscript{102} I am quoting this line as quoted in the first page of Arundhati Roy’s \textit{The God of Small Things}, Arundhati Roy, \textit{The God of Small Things} (New Delhi: Indialnk, 1997).