Chapter – III

Reclaiming History

Literature is a social institution, using language as its medium. It reflects life, and life is, in large measure, a social reality. The writer himself is a member of the society, possessed of a specific social status. Attempts are made to describe and define the influence of society on literature, and to prescribe and judge the position of literature in society. This sociological approach to literature is particularly cultivated by those who profess a specific social philosophy. The writer conveys truth and, necessarily, also historical and social truths. Much of the most common approach to the relations between literature and society is the study of works of literature as social and historical documents, as assumed pictures of social and historical reality.

Consequently, historicism becomes a critical movement, insisting on the prime importance of historical context to the interpretation of texts of all kind. It enjoys a long trading of influence upon many disciplines of thought, recently experiencing a lively renewal in contemporary literary criticism. The most prominent late twentieth century critical fashions, such as poststructuralism and postmodernism, have ended up being understood through the images of history they imply.

Historicism takes its rise from the convergence of literary interpretation and historical explanation demanded by the particular modes of expression of different nations at different times. Peter Brooker defines ‘Historicism’ in *A Glossary of Cultural Theory:*
Historicism implies a historical approach that sets a text of tests in an appropriate post historical context. As such even when the appropriate historical context is thought to be the present rather than a past time of writing, the description ‘historicist’ would apply to a wide range of approaches across different disciplines. (123)

Normally, the history, properly understood is discontinuous, catastrophic and always in crisis. The doctrine of progress therefore disguises or ignores the reality of a contradictory experience of power and exploitation, resulting as an accomplice of ruling class interests.

In the most general sense, historicism asks to look at the world from a historical point of view, afforded by the study of the past. It takes its rise from the convergence of literary interpretation and historical explanation demanded by the particular modes of expression of different nations at different times. Historicism negotiates the conflicts, and shows them to be the rule in interpretation and not just a hypothetical difficulty. In its most rigorous form, it defines itself against a successful reconciliation of past and present dividing itself as a result of dialogue with the past.

To most traditional historians, history is a series of events that have a linear, casual relationship. They believe in objective analysis in uncovering the facts. Traditional historians generally believe that history is progressive, that the human species is improving over the course of time, advancing in its moral, cultural and technological accomplishments.
While analysing the historical writings, one can easily understand the canonised version of historical narrative. Very often these writings are either biased or only eulogising the ruling class and the elite. The sufferings of the lower class are very often ignored. This canonised version of history is seen as a truthful representation of the past.

A partial break with these assumptions, coinciding with an awareness of the limits of formalist critical method, occurred in the United States in a movement termed New Historicism in the 1980s. The term New historicism was coined by Stephen Greenblat in 1982 to describe the method of interpretation of the Renaissance texts. It is the mechanism of drawing together a wide variety of discourses from unlikely provenances, and involves them in the interpretation of literary work. New historicism rejects the traditional historicist notions of continuity, progress and underlying historical unity. Instead, it seeks to read literary texts alongside or against other generally neglected contemporary documentary or imaginative texts. Brooker defines New historicist method in *A Glossary of Cultural Theory*:

> New Historicist method therefore is not only critiques earlier influential, historical critical paradigms, while at the same time departing from a history based on continuity and the unified subject, but unsettles received distinctions between canonic literary and other kinds of less or differentially valued texts.(179)

New historicism has now come to occupy a wider area of occupation in newer territories across the globe. It has made useful contributions to the growth and
development of postcolonial and multi-ethnic discourses, coming out of the developing nations.

The text embodies the concept of new-historicism which defines the literary work as a produced representation of real into imaginary. According to this concept, the text is over determining in nature, and it is a product of certain signifying practices, whose source and reference is history itself. According to Terry Eagleton in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*:

> the literary work is the product of certain produced representation of real into an imaginary object. ‘The textual real’ is related to the historical real, not as an imaginary transposition of it, but as the product of certain signifying practices, whose source and reference is, in the last instance history itself. (67)

New historicism becomes more flexible. It adapts more and more radical disruptions of tradition. The interpretative exchanges between past and present become sharper and more critical. New historic critic J. Jerome McGann in his *In the Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* points out the task of New Historicism: “To the historic imagination, history is the past, or perhaps the past seen in as through the present; and the historical task is to attempt a reconstruction of the past, including perhaps the present of that past”(105).

History in new historic perspective cannot be understood simply as a linear progression of events. At any given point in history, any given culture may be progressing in some areas and regressing in others. That is, history is not an orderly
parade into a continually improving future. Historical narratives of the marginalised people have been such an important feature of new historicism. History, which is based on the archive of institutional power, is an undocumented one as far as the subaltern historian is concerned. The subaltern historian Gyan Pandey observes in *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* that:

Some of the most sophisticated writing in the social sciences continues to reduce the lives of men and women to the play of material interests, or at other times to large impersonal movements in economy and society over which human beings have no control…the emphasis placed on these factors often leaves little room for the emotions of people, for feelings and perceptions. (37)

New historicism, influenced by Marxism owes something to postmodernism. However, New historicists tend to exhibit less skepticism than postmodernists and to show more willingness to perform the ‘traditional’ tasks of literary criticism: that is explaining the text in its context, and asking how the text enforces the cultural practices that it depends on for its own production and dissemination.

New historicism is a theory applied to literature that suggests literature must be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic. Unlike previous historical criticism, which limits itself to simply demonstrating how a work was reflective of its time, New Historicism evaluates how the work is influenced by the time in which it was produced. It also examines the social sphere in which the author lives. In addition, new historicism acknowledges that any
criticism of a work is necessarily tinged with the critic’s belief and the social structure. Most new historicists begin a critical reading of a novel by explaining themselves, their background, and their prejudices. New historicist represents a significant change from previous critical theories like new criticism, because its main focus is to look at things outside the work, instead of reading the text as a thing apart from the author.

In Amitav Ghosh’s novels attempts are made to alter the received historical opinion without evading the notions of historicity. They serve as a microscopic lens in showing all the details of the ‘out of focus’ historical narratives. Ghosh deals with the brand of historical fiction, which can also be termed as docu-fiction. He documents the untold part of history or the most neglected areas, in fictional mode suggesting universal humanism as a remedy to all personal and historical maladies. While developing knowledge beyond the limitations imposed by socio-cultural prejudices, Ghosh repudiates violence in all its forms and as a humanist affirms freedom of ideas and beliefs, celebrating equality of all human beings. He recognizes personal and cultural diversity caused by geographical dislocation.

It is in this new historicist context that Amitav Ghosh dares to enter into the fragmented world of some ordinary and unheroic characters languishing in alienated lands. The central concern of his work is the relationship of the individual to culture and history. To Ghosh, history is closely related to fiction and is more about people and their responses than about events and their causes and effects.

Ghosh is known as a post coloniatlist writer because of his contempt for imperialism and its consequent violence and prejudice. He believes that art has a special
role to play in opposing the forces that alienate people and communities. For him, one of the ways of promoting empathy and understanding is through the act of remembering and narrating stories about human endeavour and suffering. Eminent postmodernist critic Jean-Francois Lyotard in “The Postmodern Condition” talks about the disillusionment of all grand narratives including history like this: “After the arrival of post structuralism and later post-colonialism on the academic scene, history in its institutionalised, canonical form has been repudiated and its objective truth claims have been questioned” (509-10).

The novels of Amitav Ghosh are allegorical, in that they rectify the status of history as an objective record of the past, by asserting it as the relation of the individual to his/her past. As a result, colonisation, recolonisation and neo-colonisation have become the recurring thoughts in Ghosh’s works. By evaluating a segment of historical reality, Ghosh documents the authoritarian attitude and the oppressive nature of the socially powerful establishments on helpless individuals. Having lived in Bangladesh, India, Srilanka and Burma, Ghosh has a rich experience of colonisation and its subsequent repercussions. Ghosh creates a piece of virtual life which is significant in the colonised point of view. His works are realistic presentations of the colonial atrocities. He sympathises with the sufferings of the people caused by the shifting of locations and forming of boundary at the time of partition.

Ghosh’s historical novels are an evaluation of a segment of historical reality. His fiction reveals that his involvement with history is his prime obsession. Like any other historical novelists Ghosh’s fiction is imbued with both political and historical consciousness. As a matter of fact, historical sense and reality enter into the documentary
framework of Ghosh’s novels. The perception of history evolves in Ghosh’s narratives and he never attempts to distort history into some other preoccupation. What happens in Ghosh’s writings is that history is refracted through the prism of the socio-politico cultural aspects of the voiceless. Ghosh has a longstanding preoccupation with histories, and can move almost effortlessly across different cultures. History, fiction and travelogue are combined into a classified whole in his works.

Ghosh’s formative experiences involve travel and encountering cultural differences. Born in Calcutta, as a son of an officer in the British Indian army, Ghosh spent his childhood in Dhaka, Colombo and Iran. Being a social anthropologist, Ghosh received his Ph.D. on the cultural and social milieu of Egypt from Oxford University. This first hand experiences with history, prompts him to investigate into the dark corridors of history which is very often shelved in the opaque covers of enigma. Eventually Ghosh makes an attempt to recover histories of the ordinary people that are excluded from the canonised histories which are suppressed within the so called elite narratives. Anshuman A. Mondal in his *Amitav Ghosh – Contemporary World Writers* observes:

The convergence between disavoval of Indian nationalism’s grand narratives, suspicion of the state, and postmodern theory has been most forcibly articulated by a group of radical revisionist historians with whom Amitav Ghosh has had close personal and professional ties. This group, known globally within postcolonial studies as the Subaltern Studies Group, was initially composed of a number of Bengali historians who had
themselves been steeped in the discourses of the Enlightenment through their intellectual affiliation to Marxism and its grand narratives of a universal history as well as their political investment in communist parties, both Marxist and Maoist. (26)

While Ghosh was teaching in the Delhi School of Economics, he was associated with the Subaltern Studies Collective, a university group conducting research in the history of contributions made by the subaltern or the underprivileged sections of the society. Radically departing from the traditional notion of history as a record of the activities of the elite, the group promoted an understanding of history that equally valued the handiwork of millions of nameless people whose influence on the course of events had gone unrecorded because of their perceived social insignificance. The forgotten histories of such people are an important element in the works of Ghosh, as is evident in his first novel *Reason*.

In *Reason*, Ghosh shows that, for the residents of the third world countries in the late twentieth century, the utopian myth of a New World of wealth and opportunity has been transposed into the oil rich states of the Middle East. The novel illustrates that while there is some truth in Indian rumours of great material success to be had in the Gulf, the reality for migrants tends to be very different.

In a harrowing passage in *Reason* migrant workers who have been shipped to al-Ghazira are described by Ghosh as follows by Ghosh thus:

…those ghosts behind the fence were not men; they were tools-helpless, picked for their poverty. In those days when al-Ghazira was still a real
country they were brought here to slip between its men and their work, like the first whiffs of an opium dream; they were brought as weapons, to divide the Ghaziris from themselves and the world of sanity, to turn them into buffoons for the world to laugh at. (261)

The description of the workers as “ghosts”, “tools”, ”weapons” and “buffoons”, contrasts with the hope represented by the “New World” in European narratives. The faceless migrants Ghosh describes, on the other hand, come from previously colonised countries and therefore have no such privileged relationship with their “New World”. Ghosh observes that their experience of migration is evidently tainted by neo-colonialism. Ghosh’s use of the passive tense such as “were brought” hints at the multinational corporations that are responsible for the exploitation of the labourers. In the light of this discussion of migration, Ghosh rewrites and updates the problems of migration from a post colonial standpoint.

Since the discovery of rich oil reserves in the early twentieth century, the Gulf has become a region characterised by dislocation and population flows. The whole of the Middle East has been affected by the post – Second World War oil boom. Even the economies of the so-called oil-poor countries, such as Egypt, Jordan and Yemen, are heavily reliant on remittances sent by migrant workers in the oil rich countries to their families back home. Attracted by the easy availability of work and high wages as offer, large numbers of Arab and Asian migrants flock to the Gulf States each year. Allan.M.Findlay in the Arab World observes that: “From the mid 1970s to mid 1980s, workers from poor Asian counties such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and the
Philippines were also encouraged to come over, as they were seen as being more cheaper and more reliable than indigenous or other Arab labourers” (107). Yet, expectations of the good life are frequently dashed by the exploitation, poor conditions and xenophobic abuses that are common features of migrant existence.

While the oil rich countries are eager to benefit from the inexpensive and often highly skilled labour of these workers, little effort is made to integrate them into the society. Immigrants tend to be spatially segregated from the indigenous populations and are assigned barren land, such as former desert sites. After the mid 1980s, workers from both Asia and other oil poor countries are forced to accept lower wages and, in some cases, job cuts. The decrease in demand has not stemmed the inflow of labourers. Immigrants are increasingly forced to work illegally, in spite of maltreatment and insecurity.

Many of these issues are dramatised in the *Reason*, with the oil economy appearing as an oppressive system. The first glimpses of this system are from on board the boat *Mariamma*, which transports Alu and a small group of immigrants to al-Ghazira. En route, Ghosh narrates the plight of these Indians who avail themselves of the alleged employment opportunities, consumer goods and freedom and rights of this Promised Land. *Mariamma*’s engine is defective and the immigrants spend several days stranded on the ocean, wondering if they will ever reach the gulf. Yet the narrative suggests that they are fortunate in travelling on board which is not that much expensive and comparatively safe boat. “Some boats are so overcrowded with people desperate to emigrate that they capsize or sink, while others are apprehended by the harbour
police” (*Reason* 169). A disturbing description is given of Karthamma, a heavily pregnant Malayali woman who is convinced that if she can get to al-Ghazira her child will have “houses and cars and multi storeyed buildings” (*Reason* 177). When her labour pain starts, she resists it with all the strength of her will, between screams demanding the papers that she believes will convey Ghaziri citizenship and rights on her baby.

Indigenous suspicion and fear of the immigrant community mean that the latter tends to be sequestered in separate living areas. Here, the places, where locals and foreigners live, work, eat and shop are clearly demarcated. Most immigrants live on a narrow inlet known as “Ras al-Maqtu’, the Severed Head” (*Reason* 196). The Ras is a shanty-town, characterised by “roofs of corrugated iron and halved oil-drums, with … crazily angled wooden platforms and tracery of pumpkin vines” (*Reason* 196). It is populated by people “from all the corners of the world” (*Reason* 226). There are Baluchis and Bangladeshis, Egyptians and Moroccans living, by using their wits to survive. The heterogeneous and multicultural atmosphere of the Gulf, precipitated by a global capitalism, is evoked by this description of a bazaar near the Ras:

On one side of the road, jostling for space, were tiled Iranian chelo-kebab shops, Malayali dosa stalls, long narrow Lebanese restaurants, fruit-juice stalls run by Egyptians from the Sa’id, Yemeni cafes with aprons of brass studded tables spread out on the pavement, vendors frying ta’ameyya on push-carts—as though half the world’s haunts had been painted in miniatures along the side of a single street. (*Reason* 344)
The bustling microcosm described in this passage contrasts sharply with the stile “concrete-and-glass cliff of hotels and offices” (Reason 344) that lines the Ghaziri district on the other side of the town. Such dislocation of place creates problems for the migrant which is told by Ghosh through Karthamma. Yet, Karthamma’s confidence in the inexhaustible prosperity and opportunities of al-Ghazira is shown to be unfounded. On arrival, she and the other newcomers find accommodation with the larger than life Egyptian madam Zindi. Zindi’s house provides refuge for a group of migrants from Egypt, the Indian subcontinent and North Africa, on the condition that they find work and contribute towards the house’s upkeep. As Zindi points out, work in al-Ghazira is far scarcer than the Gulf’s reputation suggests: “there are hundred, thousands of chhokren [boys’...] begging; begging for jobs” (Reason 180). Many of those in the house who manage to find work suffer terrible misfortune. Kulfi works as a cook in a rich Ghaziri house, which is an easy and lucrative job, until she is sacked because of a misunderstanding due to her poor understanding of Arabic. Professor Samuel does an accounting job in a western style supermarket, for which he is paid under the odds because he does not possess a work permit. He loses his position when he inadvertently startles a Ghaziri woman who, perhaps influenced by racist stereotypes of Indians, assumes that he means to molest her. Abusa another worker is reported to the police for working illegally and is never heard again. Worst of all, several other immigrants are killed at the construction sites by faulty equipment or materials. The “litany of calamities” (Reason 201) portrayed may be seen, in the light of Peter N. Woodward’s research into migrant labour in Saudi Arabia, as an accurate reflection of migrant
experience. Peter N. Woodward in his *Oil and Labour in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Oil Boon* demonstrates that “undocumented workers in the oil rich states submit to unhealthy or even dangerous working conditions, long working hours, few employment rights and hostility from the local population” (32)

The life style of most Ghaziris differs dramatically from the perilous existence of the migrants. Ghaziris live in modern, districts, wear fashionable Western cloths (*Reason* 209), and often have hobbies such as helicopter or aeroplane flying (*Reason* 346). They do their grocery shopping in sterile, brightly lit supermarkets. These supermarkets, such as the one in which Professor Samuel works, are full of imported products: “freshly frozen Australian lamb and Danish mutton, French cauliflowers and Egyptian cabbages” (*Reason* 208). This illustrates al-Ghazira’s confluence with, and reliance on, the forces of globalisation. For consumer goods, Ghaziris go to the Star, a new shopping mall that reveals a great deal about the concomitant hubris and vulnerability of the oil-exporting states.

Y.A Sayigh points out in *Arab Oil Economy* that “the oil rich nations have some of the highest levels of import per capita in the world and 93 percent of the goods imported come from outside the Arab wealth into the world economy” (32). Through the character Haji Fahmy, Ghosh tells the atrocities of the Multinational Company’s in gaining upper hand on oil rich countries. Ghosh goes back in time to describe al-Ghazira in the days before the multinational companies arrived on their quest to find oil. At that time al-Ghazira was far from rich, but the country was ruled by its own leader, the Malik, and still had a certain amount of autonomy. After oil was discovered there, the British
sent a resident to al-Ghazira to persuade the Malik to sign a treaty giving them exclusive digging rights. The Malik angrily rejected their advances, drawing on “histories of the great Baghdad and Cairene dynasties” (Reason 249) to formulate a plan of Arab resistance. Rather than bombing the Ghaziris into submission, the so called “Oilmen” chose more indirect methods of persuasion. They spread rumours about the Malik’s madness, undermining public confidence in him and cultivated his half brother, the Amin, as an alternative leader. They brought in acquiescent Asian labourers to show the Ghaziris that strikes and union agitation cut no ice with them. In a masterly piece of propaganda, they also introduce “specially grown date palms; unique palms which could thrive on any soil” (Reason 257), in al-Ghazira. These palms were allowed to bloom in a patch of barren ground in order to impress on its inhabitants “the things the world could do for the forgotten land of al-Ghazira” (Reason 257). However, Ghosh says that this humanitarian rhetoric is merely intended as a smokescreen to hide the Oilmen’s real intentions to appropriate the land for oil development. Thus, a seemingly benign application of scientific and technological knowledge in practice merely serves to mask colonial ambitions.

Viewing through a new historic aspect of history, Reason is a critique of the Oil Encounter which can be connected to the recent political developments such as the so called ‘war of terror’. Colonial sugar, spice etc. have all received due attention, while oil, remains under-discussed given its determining role in contemporary economics.
In Ghosh’s essay “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel in *Imam*”, which is a central statement of his literary goals in writing about oil and the late twentieth-century phenomenon of globalisation, he observes:

As one of the few people who have tried to write about the floating world of oil, I can bear witness to its slipperiness, to the ways in which it tends to trip fiction into incoherence. In the end, it is the crafts of writing, itself-or rather writing as we know it today – that is responsible for the muteness of the Oil Encounter. The experiences that oil has generated run counter to many of the historical imperatives that have shaped writing over the last couple of centuries and given it its distinctive forms. (78-79)

The novel changes course as Alu, wrongly suspected to be the murderer, goes into exile first in Kerala and then the imaginary Middle Eastern oil state of al-Ghazira. From the moment that Alu goes on the run, Ghosh introduces a new formal framework of the picaresque. This genre is peculiarly appropriate for the presentation of the Oil Encounter and globalisation.

The novel also focuses on the misery and displacement caused by the Bangladesh war and on the lack of job security or legal rights faced by migrant workers in the Gulf States. Although it is never encouraged to view Alu a rogue, he is technically an illegal immigrant and rabble rouser. For, most of the time he is trying to evade the policeman, Jyothi Das, who suspects him of belonging to a “extremist” terrorist movement responsible for the destruction of his village.
In contrast to recent theory’s celebration of the enabling possibilities that the postcolonial migrant allegedly finds in “in-between” spaces, Ghosh depicts the experiences of a migrant underclass of undocumented workers in the dominant culture of al-Ghazira. The Star is al-Ghazira’s tallest and most opulent building, so-called because of its “five pointed arms” \(\text{(Reason 263)}\). The abrupt disintegration of the mall signals the Ghaziris’ economic dependence on foreign consumer and technological goods. The Star collapses before it has even been opened, creating a mountain of rubble, strewn with televisions, radios, washbasins and refrigerators. Alu, who has been working on a construction site there, is trapped beneath its wreckage for days. His narrow escape from being flattened by the weight of imported technological goods makes literal the crushing effect that consumerism has had on the Gulf states’ economics. Al-Ghazira’s reliance on foreign technologies and skills means that many construction projects are too expensive to be completed and that the Ghaziris have become a minority in their own country. This is evident in a description of “the entrails of unfinished buildings festooned across the skyline, and the flow of people with their inexplicable nationalities” \(\text{(Reason 321)}\). The Star may thus be usefully interpreted as a symbol of the subjugation of the Gulf States to the forces of global capital.

The date palms become a battleground on which the struggle for control of al-Ghazira is played out. Despite the rebels’ initial success in burning down the palms, the Oilmen prevail and the Ghaziris find themselves in a state of submerged colonialism: “the whole country was Oil town now” \(\text{(Reason 263)}\). Strikes, trade unions and demonstrations are banned and protestors are brashly put down by “the newest and best
guns and helicopters and computers, money can buy” (Reason 261). The Oilmen’s strong-arm tactics are not employed with any degree of emotion: “This was no feud, no tyrants died; there was no fratricide, no regicide, no love, no hate. It was just practice for the princess of the future and their computers – an exercise in good husbandry” (Reason 262).

The most damning indictment of the nexus between capitalism, technology and (neo-) colonialism is given in the portrayal of the ship Mariamma’s arrival at al-Ghazira. The lure that the Middle East exerts on the migrants on board is embodied in their first glimpse of the lights strewn along the peninsula at night. Ghosh comments on the implications of al-Ghazira’s illuminations.

…through a century and a half the same lights have shone in one part of the globe or another, wherever money and its attendant arms have chosen to descend on people unprepared for its onslaughts, and for all of those hundred and fifty years Mariamma’s avatars have left that coast for those lights carrying with them an immense cargo of wanderers seeking their own destruction in giving flesh to the whims of capital. (Reason 189)

Ghosh portrays the sufferings of the neglected workers in foreign countries who very often lead a vagabond’s type of life. By using the tool of new historicism, Ghosh identifies the problems of the migrants who expect mercy from the establishment, which remains as a dream.

Likewise, Ghosh in Lines explores the issues of religion and nationality, of belonging and displacement, and of the necessity of suppressing memories that threaten
to disrupt the tidy narrative of history and national identity. The narrator in *Lines* is persistent in putting pressure on his friends and relatives to probe their memories, to search through their personal archives for material that conforms to his recollections. He finds himself reminding them of forgotten events and supplementing their experiences with stories heard from others.

Ghosh asserts that these suppressed memories form the foundations of the accepted historiography in the tacit agreement of historiographers to leave them uncovered. Their exclusion from the narrative of the nation’s history, then, is essential to the production of knowledge about national identity.

With regard to history, since it is individual and private, each effort becomes an attempt at historicisation and each recollecting individual becomes an amateur historian. As the narrator states, “people like my grandmother who have no home but in memory, learn to be very skilled in the art of recollection” (*Lines* 194). Fred Weinstein in his *History and Theory after the Fall: An Essay on Interpretation* observes the growing interest of writers towards faction (fact and fiction):

Unlike earlier generations of novelists who did not like history or historians, for whom history was a nightmare from which they were trying to awake and who would have escaped from history into a world of art, not only are there novelists currently who have come to appreciate the uses of history… but a number of them want to claim history for their own. (11)
Amitav Ghosh’s engagement with historiography—the method involved in writing history—evinces itself in *Lines*. The novel attempts to reconstruct history on its own logic of individual memory and interpretation. The autobiographical discussions are intended to bring readers closer to the real world of people, to the turmoil, and conflicts that they experience in their everyday lives. This point is well illustrated in *Lines* with regard to the riots of 1964 and the political condition in India at that time. Referring to the newspapers in the archives, the narrator tells us the complete facts regarding the sacred relic, the rumours of poisoned water, and the reactions of the governments of India and East Pakistan. These are the ostensible fragments from which mainstream history is constructed. What he does tell us later is his own bewildered experience as a child during the riots, his estrangement from his best friend Montu, who is a Muslim, and the death of Tridib which forms the “real world” of ordinary people who live in history.

The historical events that form the backdrop of *Lines* are the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the partition of India and the feelings of communal hatred that erupted in East Pakistan following the Hazratbal incident in Srinagar in 1964. The novel is not a recapitulation of these historical events in the sub-continent. In fact to call Ghosh’s novel as mere political allegory would be facile. Instead, what Ghosh shows is the impact of politics on the lives of ordinary people and on human relationships. Historical events have provided Ghosh with raw material against which he studies the historical truths like the meaning of nationalism and political freedom in the modern world.
Sugatha Bose and Ayesha Jalal in *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* observes:

The arbitrariness of borders, and the gap between maps and reality, could have been personally vouched for by millions people during the partition of 1947 as they found themselves on the wrong side of a border hastily drawn up by Cyril Radcliffe and his boundary commission, which partitioned an entire subcontinent without leaving its offices in Delhi by using out of date and inaccurate maps. (165)

Alluding to this observation, in *Lines*, in a moment of lucidity, the senile Jethomoshai points out: “It’s all very well, you are going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then?” (*Lines* 211). In the face of this, the belief “in the reality of nations and borders … that across the border there existed another reality” (*Lines* 214), shows the unspeakable horrors that accompanied partition.

In *Lines*, Ghosh focuses on three forms of violence that marked the course of the last century: violence witnessed during periods of war, violence resorted to by extremist organisations in pursuit of their goals, and the faceless violence that erupts during communal riots. Ghosh diligently portrays the face of fear in the wake of mob frenzy, mayhem and massacre, a phenomenon that is unique to the subcontinent. It has become a common feature in the history of the subcontinent that at regular intervals these riots erupt causing large scale destruction and untold suffering, thus playing havoc with the lives of innocent individuals (*Lines* 218).
The narrator could not remember the exact dates, but recollects that a test series was to be held on that day in which the wicket keeper Budhin Kunderan made his maiden century on debut. After a careful research in the library he discovers the reasons and connections between the riots in Calcutta and Dhaka that became the cause of the catastrophe in the family. The narrator goes through the papers of the period of tragic incident and finds the news items in bold print with the tie: “sacred relic reinstalled” (Lines 224). Then he looks for the news related to the incident. The disappearance of the sacred relic known as Mu-i-Mubarak which was believed to be the hair of Prophet Mohammad himself from its place in Hazratbal Mosque on 27 December, 1963 two hundred years after it was installed in Kashmir, resulted in a great stir and” . . . “life came to a standstill in the valley of Kashmir” (Lines 225). All the people of the valley irrespective of their religions attended the public meetings addressed by members of all the religious communities. Riots started in the valley but the targets were the properties of government. The disappearance of the relic brought all the people together.

People demonstrated with back flags and wore black armbands. “But in the whole valley there was not one single recorded incident of animosity between Kashmiri Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs” (Lines 225). And this became possible because of the leadership of Maulana Masoodi who organised “the various communities of Kashmir together in a collective display of mourning” (Lines 226), under one black flag. The impact of the disappearance of relic resulted in accusations by Pakistan. Its religious authorities “declared that the theft of the relic was an attack on the identity of Muslims” (Lines 226). Pakistan spoke of ‘genocide’ and described it as an attempt to uproot the
hopes of Kashmiris preventing them from being their own spiritual nation. The Mu-i-Mubarak was ‘recovered’ by the officials of Central Bureau of Intelligence on 4th January 1964. After reading the same report for fifth time the narrator suddenly remembers that his grandmother, May, and his uncle Tridib left for Dhaka the day before the relic was reinstalled. And this time he finds everything clearly connected. Meenakshi Mukherjee in ‘Maps and Mirrors: Co-ordinates of Meaning in The Shadow Lines’ observes: “the narrator’s desperate search in the archives to recover lost events has to be seen as an example of insisting upon one’s story, a resistance to being swallowed up by narratives made up by others” (264).

The narrator remembers his school days when riots took place in Calcutta. On one of his school days the narrator waits for his overcrowded school bus, but to his surprise finds only a dozen boys who sit on a bench at the back. ‘They all stare at his water bottle, which is followed by a rumour that ‘they’ have mixed poison into Tala Tank from where the water supply is made to entire Calcutta. The word ‘they’ is neither asked nor answered but is understood. The narrator on his way to home finds the streets empty “except for squads of patrolling policemen” (Lines 202). Every object creates fear in one’s heart when things are not normal and this time it is a rickshaw parked in the middle of the road. The narrator says: “At that moment we could read the disarrangement of our universe in the perfectly ordinary angle of abandoned rickshaw” (Lines 203). A mob is seen moving towards the bus and soon starts pelting stones on the bus. The bus loses its way and enters the street where it has never been before. The narrator says that Tublu one of the boys cried “for all of us… It would not be enough to say we were afraid: We
were stupefied with fear” (*Lines* 204). Ghosh makes it clear that violence is inextricably linked to fear: ‘It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets one inhabits, can, become, suddenly and without warning as hostile as a desert in a flash flood…. It is the special quality of fear of the war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror” (*Lines* 204).

The narrator proceeds to describe the death of Tridib, but he feels that he has no words to give meaning and the strength to listen. Riots start in Khulna in East Pakistan when a demonstration protesting against the disappearance of Prophet’s hair turns violent. The riots result in killings, though the army was sent immediately to put down the ‘disturbances’. The riot spreads to neighbouring towns and districts from Khulna. It results in fleeing of refugees to India. Soon rumours start leading to fear “especially that familiar old rumour, the harbinger of every serious riot that the trains from Pakistan were arrived packed with corpses” (*Lines* 228). Pictures of the weeping refugees justify the rumours. Retaliation of violence is most expected in such situations and soon mobs go on rampage through the city, killing Muslims, burning and looting the shops and houses. Thus it is through self destructive violence that the people of the subcontinent assert a common inheritance and affiliation; in the near symmetry of their killing of each other they deny that they might be different in the first place.

The trauma of riots and carnage leaves a lasting impression on the minds of the individuals who witness the gruesome violence and loss of human life. This experience is presented in the novel through Robi. He accompanies Mayadebi, Tha’mma, Tridib and May in their visit to his grand uncle. Tha’mma and Mayadebi with the help of Khalil
convince their insane uncle to follow their car in the rickshaw. Robi sees a crowd when
the car turns the first corner. Fire is lit in the middle of the road and many sit around it.
Robi understands that they have been waiting for the car. “He knew then, because of the
chill spreading outwards from the pit of his stomach, that trouble had come to him at last”
(Lines 218). After that day Robi has nightmares haunting through adolescence and
youth.

The narrator is concerned with the impact of this event on life in Calcutta and
Dhaka. Novy Kapadia in “Imagination and Politics in Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow
Lines” rightly points out:

Amitav Ghosh’s greatest triumph is that the depiction of communal strife
in Calcutta and erstwhile East Pakistan, and its continuation in
contemporary India, is very controlled and taut. There are no moralizing
or irrelevant digressions. Lucidity and compactness are achieved primarily
by his unusual narrative device. (30)

The narrator who has witnessed the terrible incidents and lived with their memory
cannot convince his friend whose explanation is not very different from explanations
given by historians: “All riots are terrible, Mallik said. But it must have been a local
thing. Terrible or no, it is ‘hardly comparable to a war’ (Lines 221).

The fact that the past which he has internalised within himself is without any
“historical” importance unnerves the narrator. He says: “I was determined now that I
would not let my past vanish without trace: I was determined to persuade them of its
importance” (Lines 221). According to Ghosh, history speaks only about the major wars.
Sympathising with the ordinary, he dwells into the repercussions of the riots and condemns those who are concerned only with big wars.

The narrator finds huge volumes on wars, the national freedom movement, political analysis, etc., but nothing at all on his vividly remembered riots. Shaken by insecurity he “nodded silently, unnerved by the possibility that I had lived for all those years with a memory of an imagined event” (Lines 222).

After a lot of searching he finds the riots mentioned in newspapers. It is only in an offhand way, whereas news of cricket matches or splits in political parties make headlines and also recur with discreet regularity. The riots are initially referred to as ‘stray incidents’ in small script; a week after the same newspapers thought it right to declare that “normalcy had been restored” and after that the riots were never mentioned by anyone or recorded in history books: “By the end of January 1964, the riots had faded away from the pages of newspapers, disappeared from the collective imagination of ‘responsible opinion’, vanished, without leaving a trace in the histories and bookshelves (Lines 30)”.

History, therefore, conditions people into believing only in the reality of its own making. Every form of reality which is personal and not part of written history is written off as imaginative. The novel also shows how notions of nationhood are created. Though an individual like the narrator may not be able to free himself from the terrifying memory of Tridib’s death in the riots, he is expected to believe that he is living in a ‘free’ country among ‘free’ people. The narrator’s grandmother is a victim of a notion of nationalism which is fictional rather than factual. While on the one hand she aspires for
political freedom, on the other, she subscribes to a stereotypical form of hero-worship in the name of nationalism and patriotism, so much so that when the reality around her does not match with this idea, she starts living in an imaginary world which fits into the framework of the ‘reality’ created by history books.

National history ignores the existence of individual parts in its records. In *Lines* the narrator who has been a victim of the riots of 1964 in Calcutta and Dhaka is shocked to learn that his friends don’t know anything about the events. They talk only about China war and Pakistan war, and not about the riot. R.G. Collingwood in *The Idea of History* views: “there are records of events, well preserved in public and private archives, but how these events affected ordinary people and ordinary families may never be known without the autobiographies of ordinary people”(30).

With serious concerns of a historian, Ghosh points out at the tragic turn of events in history of Asia and Middle East and particularly India though *Land*. Ghosh, who is more concerned with the untold stories which are not in the ‘popular’ histories, gets the details of the once thrived cultural contacts between Egypt and India during the 12th century A.D. after reading an article written by E. Straws in a Hebrew Journal *Zion*. The article deals with new sources for the history of Middle Eastern Jews. It contains a long letter written by a merchant in Aden and sent to a friend and business associate who was then living in the town of Mangalore in India.

In 1978, while going through the manuscripts in Oxford Library, Ghosh happened to come across a reference about Abraham Ben Yiju, a Tunisian Jewish merchant who came to India via Egypt around 1130 AD and his South Indian slave,
Bomma. This accidental encounter with some of the Geniza documents which has reference about the twelfth century Jewish trader and his South Indian slave turns out to be a form of enlightenment for Ghosh. The discovery persuades Ghosh to follow the footprints of history to retrace the once lost world in the fabric of modern history. By tracing the life of this slave, the text unravels the fascinating history of the cross dissemination of culture, religions and traditions of India and Egypt. Ghosh leaves for Egypt in 1980 to pursue work on re-establishing the twelfth century life of trade and commerce between Egypt and India and thereby remould the story of the master slave Ben Yiju and Bomma which had been left hidden under the layers of dominant narratives.

Ghosh analyses all available records that were originally found in Geniza – a storehouse of old records – of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra in Babylon. This holds the greatest single collection of medieval documents ever discovered. Ghosh further follows trails left by the Hebrew journal, *Zion*, letters of medieval traders translated and edited by Professor S.D. Goitein, of Princeton University. An article by a historian E. Strauss, in the 1942 issue, and it bore the title ‘New Sources for the History of Middle Eastern Jews and contains transcriptions of several medieval documents. Among them is found the pieces of information which makes Ghosh pursue the threads of fragmented stories to weave a coherent picture of the twelfth century world.

The narrative often shifts from the personal narrative of Ghosh in Egypt, describing his experiences as a research scholar trying to reconstruct the life story of Bomma to the historical narrative dating back to the twelfth century Egyptian Jewish trader Ben Yiju.
Ghosh attempts to recover the historically situated, lost, forgotten subjectivities of a group of traders and their servants who had trades relations extending from the African subcontinent to South Western India.

Later, Ghosh undertakes a journey to Egypt to trace the history of Ben Yiju and his helper Bomma of Tulunad. During his research work at Oxford, Ghosh discovers a letter apart from so many other letters. Bomma is a fictitious name given to the real life character Masaleya Bomma who was a servant of Ben Yiju at Mangalore.

Ghosh being a new historian dwells on the subaltern lives, since they are not normally emphasised by the canonical historian. Since Ghosh emphasises with such section, he had to face a lot of difficulties in getting the details of the subalterns who are faraway from the mainstream. Edward Said in *The Location of Culture* discusses the inaccessibility of the sources of subaltern history:

> We find frequent reference to such things as gaps, absences, lapses, ellipses, all of them symbolic of the truths that historical writings is after all writing and not reality, and that as subalterns their history as well as their historical documents are necessarily in the hands of others. In other words, subaltern history in literal fact is a narrative missing from the official story. (20)

The work of the Subaltern Studies Collective intervenes in the production of academic history by attempting a historiography that restores agency to the subaltern classes. Here, subaltern history attempts the history of the subaltern classes even as it
deals with the theoretical issues on determining just what materials constitute the historical record.

As a part of his research work, Ghosh pays a visit to the places in Egypt where Abraham Ben Yiju and his servant Bomma lived. Discovered as a footnote in a document, Bomma – the Indian slave to the Tunisian Jew, Abraham Ben Yiju – is a mysterious and compelling figure. Bomma initially appears in the written record in a letter penned in 1148 by the trader Khalafibn Ishaq to his friend, Abraham Ben Yiju. The letter, bearing the catalogue number MS H. 6 of the National University Library in Jerusalem, published in the Hebrew journal Zion in 1942, gives Ghosh the details. As a young student at Oxford, Ghosh first encounters Bomma in 1978, in a book of translations titled Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders, by Professor S.D. Goitein. This initial encounter provides Ghosh the impetus to track Bomma’s trail, a trail with virtually no signposts, but a journey that Ghosh meticulously shares in the Land. From being merely a name and a greeting, Bomma, through Ghosh’s efforts, gains a geographical home, a personality and a professional life.

Ghosh’s process of tracking down Bomma’s traces is a laborious and difficult one. It has as much to do with scholarly world of manuscript chasing and reading as it does with Ghosh’s own site of knowledge production as an anthropologist in the 1980s. The construction of Bomma’s story is informed by the anthropologist discovering that story. Almost like an inter-leaved book, it weaves a relationship between Bomma and Ghosh, two Indians, one a slave from the 12th century and the other a privileged
anthropologist. This inter-weaving is premised on the long reach of the historical arm, so that Ghosh’s world is clearly shown as shaped by Bomma’s eight hundred years earlier.

Much of Ghosh’s narrative is built upon the careful piecing together of details in manuscripts. In this process, the slave Bomma, gains a name, an occupation and even emotions. The preservation of the documents themselves makes a compelling story. Most of the documents that interest Ghosh come from the Geniza of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra outside Cairo, in Fustat. Ben Yiju belongs to the congregation of this synagogue, which he joined when he moved to Cairo from what was known in medieval times as Ifriquiya and is now Tunisia.

For more than eight hundred years, writings were deposited in the Geniza, stemming from a wide spread custom at the time and one still practiced among Jewish group today:

The practice of depositing their writings was ‘intended to prevent the accidental desecration of any written form of God’s name. Since, most writings in that epoch included at least one sacred invocation in the course of the text, the custom effectively ensured that written documents of every kind were deposited within the synagogue. (Land 56)

The Geniza, or the chambers where these documents were housed, remained miraculously untouched until 1890, when the old building that Ben Yiju saw in the early 1100’s was turn down.

Ghosh looks at history from the point of view of a postcolonialist and gives his own reading into the characters of the two periods, that is, those of the twelfth century
and those others of his own time. In the twelfth century the countries of the world were separated from each other by barriers of immense stretches of water and insurmountable mountains and yet brought together by a common humanity; and the modern world, which has been reduced to a global village, has been ironically broken up by “narrow domestic walls” erected by the imperialists.

Ghosh’s postcolonial attitude becomes clear in his description of the vandalism of the Geniza by the Western powers. Here he talks about the 18th century Egypt when she was no longer the ‘mother of the world’: “Masr had long since ceased to be the mistress of her own destiny; she had become a province of the Ottoman Empire, which was itself enfeebled now, allowed to keep its territories only by the consent of the Great Powers” (Land 80).

Ghosh points out the utter callousness of the colonisers to their subject and the abject demoralisation of the colonised. The Geniza becomes a symbol of the intellectual superiority. Thus the vandalism of the Geniza not only highlights the contemptuous indifference of the imperialists to the age old treasures, the age old values of the East but also defines Ghosh’s attitude to the two worlds he creates in the book – one historical and the other fictional.

Ghosh explains how the division, these walls between man and man, were the result of a new cult that was introduced by the power hungry imperialists in the wake of colonisation – “the cult of science and tanks and guns and bombs” (Land 236). Once colonisation began, hate and suspicion replaced what was “right or good or wiled by God
for they belonged to a dismantled rung on the ascending ladder of Development’’ (Land 237).

While visiting Egypt, the narrator Amitab discovers that his identity is suspected in the eye’s of the Egyptian authorities because it does not conform to their expectations. Visiting the tomb of a Jewish Saint in Egypt, but being neither Egyptian, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, nor Israeli, he eludes the categories that define the tomb in the eyes of the state. He is detained until his identity is established and proven not a threat.

Ghosh’s post colonial perspective is also evident in the way he portrays the pre-colonial times when there were no barriers between Abraham Ben Yiju, the Jewish merchant from Egypt who settled in India for twenty years, and his Indian slave, Bomma: “Thus to speak of Ben Yiju living in ‘India’ or to refer to Bomma as an ‘Indian’ is not to anticipate the borders and the political vocabulary of the twentieth century” (Land 284).

A sharp contrast has been drawn between the pre-colonial and post colonial situation as far as the concept of slavery as it was eight centuries ago:

. . . their arrangement was probably that of patron and client than master and slave, as that relationship is now understood. If this seems curious, it is largely because the medieval idea of slavery tends to compound contemporary conception, both of servitude and its mirrored counter-image, individual freedom. (Land 259)

Against this has been juxtaposed the post colonial concept of servitude prevalent in Egypt under British rule before the days of the Revolution:”Those were terrible times, he said, before Jamal Abdal Nasir and the Revolution of 1952, when the Pashas, the a
King and their ‘kindly uncles’, the British army, had their way in all things and the fellaheen had been forced to labour at their orders..." (Land 194). Through Land Ghosh sympathises with the poor because in any space of time they are the neglected one.

Ghosh mingles fact and fiction in Chromo, in order to recount an alternative life story of Ronald Ross whose, ground breaking discovery that malaria is transmitted by a bite of the mosquito had been made in Calcutta one hundred year before. For this, Ross got the Nobel price in 1902. Ghosh brings out the involvement of some Indians in the discovery that is conveniently excluded in the canonical forms of History. He draws heavily on Ross’ Memoirs in order to create a historical frame for what is often a fantastic narrative, referring to real people with whom Ross came into contact, and to actual events. Ross’ Memoirs published in 1923, more than twenty years after his discovery, is a product of his determination. The Memoirs is a hybrid text, which provides highly selective excerpts from primary sources – mostly letters that passed between Ross and his mentor Patrick Manson during the years 1895, and also some selections from Ross’s diary – interspersed with Ross’ later reflections on these. Most commentators agree that, despite their immense value for researchers, the Memoirs must be handled with suspicion as a heavily doctored and biased account of Ross’s malaria trails. In the novel, Murugan confirms this when he argues that Ross “wants everyone to know the story like he’s going to tell it;” he’s not about to leave any of it up for grabs, not a single minute if he can help it” (Chromo 51). Ross tried to steer the course of his own posthumous reputation as a lone genius by keeping a tight control over those documents.
Ross’ obsessive collection of documentary evidence about himself, and his choice of what would be retained and what omitted for posterity bears an uncanny resemblance to the novel’s portrayal of the International Water Council, which keeps an astonishing amount of its own documentation and trivia in order to direct the way in which its history is interpreted, or as Ghosh puts it, “to load the dirt with their own meanings” (*Chromo* 7).

Ross’ *Memoirs* projects the heroic narrative of scientific discovery. But Ghosh, through *Chromo* reads his narrative against the grain, in order to deconstruct and displace Ross’ narrative. Claire Chambers in her essay “Post Colonial Science Fiction: Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome*” notes that “Ross’ text is a highly biased account of the events which led to his breakthrough” (60). During his research, Ghosh notices that there are several marginal references to Ross’s household – in particular to Lutchman, his servant. Ghosh in an interview with Neluke Silva and Alex Tickell says that “most of the connections Ross made came from his servants” (220). Thus through Murugan, Ghosh reverses the authority of the colonial situation. This in turn reverses the direction of scientific knowledge and challenges the western narrative of scientific discovery. In doing so, Ghosh shows how subalterns and their knowledge trouble the very concept of discovery. Thus it is clear that the colonial scientists drew a lot from the indigenous systems of knowledge. This is echoed in the observation of Claire Chambers in ‘Post Colonial Science Fiction’ that “the scientific knowledge was less a one-way process of scientific discovery than a dialogic process of interaction and interdependence” (58). Nevertheless *Chromo* suggests that we re-read the historical record, uncover, its subtexts,
and rewrite its narratives so as to come up with a new story about the meaning and value of science from a property new historic perspective.

In *Memoirs*, Lutchman, on whom Ross initially performs malaria trials and who later becomes the Englishman’s servant, is not very prominent, and little detail is provided about his personality or behaviour as a servant. And yet, as Murugan correctly observes, Ross must have found a “rare quality in the young Indian man, as he keeps him in his service throughout his malaria investigations of 1895-1898” (*Chromo* 76), despite the fact that Lutchman came to him as a patient rather than an employee. The extent of their attachments is hinted to towards the end of the *Memoirs*, when Ross in a passing comment reveals that he advertised to find Lutchman long after his return to England. The nature of the relationship that would cause Ross to try to find his servant more than ten years after his departure from India can only be guessed at, as the *Memoirs* is virtually silent on the subject.

It is worth noting that all the quotations directly attributed to Ross in the novel are exact citations from the *Memoirs*. This includes a rather shocking moment when Ross asks Manson to keep his experiments on Lutchman secret: Ghosh writes, “Don’t for heaven’s sake mention at the B[ritish] M[edical] Association that Lutchman is a dhooley-bearing. To give a Government servant fever would be a crime!” (*Chromo* 71).

Ghosh exposes the utilitarian attitude of Ross and the colonial regime as a whole towards the Indians who were used as guinea pigs in malaria trials. Ross does not fear censure for his experiments on Lutchman on humanitarian grounds, but because the latter is a government employee and therefore too useful to be put at risk. Ross’s high handed
treatment of his Indian patients and servants suggests one reason why Ghosh might have been angered into writing *Chromo*. The silences and omissions of the *Memoirs*, particularly Ross’s refusal to supply any detail about his Indian laboratory workers, suggest fascinating possibilities, and Ghosh constructs a story out of these silences.

The “science” of the mysterious Indian cult incorporates religious ritual, sacrifice and reincarnation into more straightforward scientific practices. Ghosh uses Mangala, Lutchman and the counter science group to suggest that a radical alternative to the hegemony of Western scientific knowledge is possible. The implication is that this challenge will only be made if the knowledge and beliefs of third world countries, such as India, are fused with scientific concepts from the West. David Arnold notes in *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India* that:

> It is hard to see how, even at superficial level, Western Science could have functioned in many parts of the world without being able to draw upon ‘local’ knowledge and ‘native’ agency of various kinds many of the scientific discoveries formerly claimed for the west have been traced back to earlier sources of indigenous knowledge. (13)

This staging of subaltern knowledge replicates the colonial monopoly of knowledge that Ghosh is challenging. Subsequently he finds a means of representing counter science as knowledge. This is further reiterated by Ghosh when he says that “knowledge couldn’t begin without acknowledging the impossibility of knowledge” (*Chromo* 104). Thus, the discourse of scientific rationality is shown to be founded not only on reason, but also on faith. Ghosh here executes a strategy whereby subaltern
knowledge which is pre-modern and non-western, that includes ‘belief’, ‘superstition’, ‘myth’ and ‘religion’ are distanced from modern knowledge. He makes an attempt to construct the subaltern epistemology as a ‘presence’ that “would in principle have to refuse all direct communication, strength of the bat, because to communicate, to put ideas into language, would be to establish a claim to know—which is the first thing a counter-science would dispute” (*Chromo* 103). Ghosh, here brings out the idea that the language of counter-science is ‘silence’.

Analysing through a new historic point of view, Ghosh asserts that the repositories of truth, science and higher knowledge can be a ‘dhooley bearer’ Laakhan and a sweeper Mangala. Ghosh demolishes the false concept that class superiority and right to knowledge go together. Here it can be seen that the undoing of Indian caste system and an assertion of the right to knowledge, irrespective of caste, class, creed, culture colour, is the prime concern of Ghosh.

By bringing the underprivileged into the focus of attention, Ghosh hints at the current justified trend in the field of scientific research where the rights of the subject are fervently advocated. To Ghosh, human or animal subjects that are experimented upon are perhaps more important than the researcher. It may be recalled that it is Laakhan who offers to drink Ross’s medicine first. Thus through a new historical point of view Ghosh brings recognition to those who do the spade work for all the grand discoveries.

*Palace* is set against the background of political turmoil resulting from the cruelty and oppressions exercised by the British imperialists and the attempt by the native rulers to suppress the democratic rights of the Burmese. Amitav Ghosh’s engagement with
some of the serious issues facing ex-colonies is reflected in *Palace* also. His sympathy for the colonised is very evident that he once withdrew the novel from the list of Commonwealth Foundation Award. Ghosh interrogates the imperialist epistemology that works exclusively through the central Western consciousness. It is animated throughout by a strong postcolonial impulse to create an epistemology counter to the Eurocentric constructions. Ghosh challenges the institutionalised perspectives of the colonial history and the canonized opinion of the colonial rule.

To Ghosh, the colonial experience and its memories are loaded with a sense of pain and suffering of the large numbers of people who lived through those periods of history. In *Palace*, Ghosh reconstructs the history of Burma’s transition from a Kingdom to Republic, from 1885 to 1995. He uses materials derived from a variety of sources such as recollections, details from his father, uncle, friends, diaries, notes, history books and official records. Ghosh seeks an understanding of the past to have a bearing upon the present. Through the past, he brings the boundaries and mutations of nations imposed by the colonial rulers.

While looking at *Palace* through a new historic perspective, Jayita Sengupta in “Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* through Postcolonial Lens” observes: “Ghosh’s rendering of British colonialism and its aftermath in three countries is an interplay of fact and fiction in an illusory place of imagination to create an awareness of the experimental reality of the post colonial worlds” (16).

*Palace* relates Indian and Burma in the shared colonial experience. At this time a new sense of a selfhood and national identity takes shape among the people of the two
countries. Through the historical character King Thebaw and purely fictional characters like Raj Kumar, Dolly, Saya John and Uma, Ghosh brings out the impact of colonisation on the colonised people.

The atrocity of colonisation is clearly evident right from the beginning of the novel. The British army deposes King Thebaw, the last of Burma’s kings. “At Mygingan, which was under the command of the Hlethin Atwinwun, the defenders were forced to abandon their positions after a bombardment that lasted several hours. A few days later, without informing King Thebaw, the Burmese Army surrendered” (Palace 26).

The British starts killing the people and plunder their wealth. They decide to send the royal family to exile:

And now the war was over, and he the King, was sitting on the balcony of a garden pavilion, waiting for a visit from colonel Sladen, the spokesman of the conquering British. The evening before, the colonel had called on the king and informed him, in the politest and most discreet language, the Royal family was to be transported from Mandalay the next day. (Palace 39)

The king is kept in darkness about his place of exile. Finally the colonel informs them that they would be sent to India. “The Royal Family was being sent into exile, the colonel told the assembled notables. They were to go to India, to a location that had yet to be decided on” (Palace 41).
The novel reveals in clear terms how tactfully and shrewdly the British have conquered countries and subjugated the whole population, exiling kings to erase them completely from public memory at home. Bahadur Shah Zafar, the first of the Mughals deportated to Rangoon, a generation ago after killing the two princes right in front of the public, and the Burmese King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat’s exile to Ratnagiri in India are such astute moves by the conquering Britain. Having forced the rulers into a life of obscurity, they freely plunder the Burmese natural resources – the teak, ivory, and the petroleum. The pretext-of-a reason that the English choose to go on a rampage in Burma are made clear at the very beginning of the novel. The British send troops and conquers Burma over a trivial quarrel about tax levied for logs on the British timber companies:

… a few months ago there’d been a dispute with a British timber company a- technical matter concerning some logs of teak. It was clear that the company was in the wrong; they were side stepping the kingdom’s customs regulations, cutting up logs to avoid paying duties. The royal customs officers had slapped a fine on the company, demanding arrears of payment for some fifty thousand logs. The Englishmen had protested and refused to pay; they’d carried their complaints to the British Governor in Rangoon. Humiliating ultimatums had followed. One of the King’s [Burmese King Thebaw] senior ministers, the Kinwun Mingye, had suggested discreetly that it might be best to accept the terms; that the British might allow the Royal Family to remain in the palace in Mandalay, on terms similar to those of the Indian princes – like farmyard pigs in
other words, to be fed and fattened and by their masters; swine, housed in sites that had been tricked out with a few little bits of finery. *(Palace 21-22)*

The brief description of the process of British occupation of Burma suggests the pattern of their colonisation and exploitation. Ghosh’s deep sense of history is revealed in his interview “The Chronicle Interview: Amitav Ghosh- *The Hungry Tide*” with Hasan Ferdous: “I find history completely absorbing and fascinating. I am always interested to discover aspects of history; it adds a kind of richness to one’s experience of place. [...] about history, one of the very important things in a text is that it becomes a place where those cultural interactions are performed in the most difficult possible ways” (4).

The atrocity committed by the British in the name of colonial subjugation is told in detail by Ghosh through various well-captured events. Their aim is to plunder the teak forests of Burma. Ghosh here says that like any other invasion of British in the colonised countries, in Burma also their aim was to plunder the wealth of the country. “The English are preparing to send a fleet up the Irrawaddy. There’s going to be a war. Father says they want all the teak in Burma. The King won’t let them have it so they’re going to do away with him” *(Palace 15)*.

As Ghosh narrates the stories of the people’s reaction to these momentous historical events and changes, he presents the discontent and disapproval of the people: “The servility and surrender of the Indians to the British – the Burmese felt was a warning to them to prevent them from going to such extents of surrender to the power of the British colonial masters” *(Palace 3)*.
The king tries his maximum to withstand the British army. He is unwilling to surrender. Here the king serves as the mouthpiece of Ghosh in attacking the mighty British Army. This is clearly evident through the Royal proclamation issued from the palace:

To all Royal subjects and inhabitants of the Royal Empire: those heretics, the barbarian English Kalaas having most harshly made demands calculated to bring about the impairment and destruction of our religion, the isolation of our national traditions and customs, and the degradation of our race, are making a show and preparation as if about to wage war with our state … His majesty, who is watchful that the interest of our religion and our state shall not suffer, will himself march forth with his generals, captains and lieutenants with large forces of infantry, artillery, elephanteric and cavalry … will efface these heretics and conquer and annexe their country. (Palace 16)

The novel builds up many little narratives in a new-historic point of view to present the many voices inside the countries, Burma and India, during the one hundred years of political struggle in the subcontinent. As observed by Ranjita Basu in “The Novels of Amitav Ghosh”, for Ghosh “History is a brooding presence in Ghosh’s books, almost a living entity able to shape the lives of his characters” (215). Ghosh portrays political and cultural complexities through the concepts of nationalism, imperialism and the subjugation of the subalterns. He believes in transgression of the frontiers of
nationality, and for him, nationalism seems to be an illusion and a force of violence and destruction.

Going into detailed portrayal of the working system of the felling and collecting of mighty teak trees, Ghosh brings out the loneliness, horror, sickness and hardships of the lives of men engaged in the whole process: “The initial felling of the forest was done by elephants with the result that the clearings were invariably scarred with upturned trees and ragged pits” (Palace 71).

Rajkumar is very much worried, when he sees the British using the elephants beyond their capacity. Earlier, in Burma, elephants were used in pagodas and palaces for ceremonies. But using elephants for commercial purpose makes everyone sympathetic for the animals. “Yet until the Europeans came none of them had every thought of using elephants for the purposes of logging. It was the Europeans who saw that tame elephants could be made to work for human profit. It was they who invented everything we see around us in this logging camp” (Palace 74).

Ghosh then dwells upon the poor living conditions of the Burmese slaves in the teak camps. The Britishers are not concerned with their safety. Death use to come in many guises for the slaves. Russell’s viper, the maverick log, the charge of the wild buffalo are very common. But it is the anthrax disease which takes a huge toll. “Anthrax was common in the forests of Central Burma and epidemics were hard to prevent… In its most virulent forms anthrax would kill an elephants in a matter of hours. An entire working herd of a hundred elephants could be lost within a few days” (Palace 92).
The slaves are not even provided with sophisticated weapons to counter the animals. Modern weapons are only found with the Britishers. The slaves are very often attacked by the elephants. The Britishers are not worried about the slaves’ safety. The killing of the slaves by the elephants is a common sight during the colonial era in Burma. “The dead oo-si lay under a tree, battered and bloody, just a yard or two from the elephant’s chain-shackled feet (Palace 94).

Even the dead body of the slave is not given due respect. Since the assistant is on leave they couldn’t bury the body. The slaves can bury the body only after getting the consent note from the Assistant. They should bear the difficulties and health hazards till the arrival of the Assistant. Ghosh reaffirms the idea that the British treat the slaves as tools and not as human beings.

In the ordinary course of things, the funeral would have been performed immediately after the body’s retrieval. But because of the forest Assistant’s absence, there arose an unforeseen hitch. It was the custom for the dead to be formally released from their earthly ties by signing a note… The dead man’s note of release had still to be signed and only the Assistant, as his employer, could sign it. (Palace 96)

Even though the slaves are aware of the hazards in their job they have no other way but to obey the colonisers. Their safety is totally ignored by the British. When the king and his family are shifted to Ratnagiri in India, the Britishers start emptying the precious things in Burma. Ghosh in a series of events tells that wealth was the prime motive behind such colonisations. The whole country has changed.:The British
occupation had changed everything. Burma had been quickly integrated into the Empire, forcibly converted into a province of British India... resources were being exploited with an energy and efficiency hitherto undreamt off. The Mandalay Palace had been refurbished to serve the conqueror’s recondite pleasures... the Queen’s Hall of Audience had now become a billiard room. (Palace 66)

The Empire does not want the king to mingle with the people of Ratnagiri. People who come from Burma to see their King are denied permission. Even the king’s servant could feel the sense of alienation. Even though they are servants, the condition of the king and them are almost similar. The servants are very nostalgic about their country. Through the servant, Dolly, Ghosh narrates this nostalgic feeling. Dolly’s voice was emphatic. “If I went to Burma now I would be a foreigner – they would call me a Kalaa like they do Indians – a trespasser, an outsider from across the sea. I’d find that very hard” (Palace 113).

Meanwhile Dolly befriends the collector’s wife Uma. One day when Dolly visits the collector’s house she sees the picture of Queen Victoria. It makes Dolly shudder. She says to Uma about her opinion of Queen Victoria. “Don’t you sometimes wonder how many people have been killed in Queen Victoria’s name? It must be millions, wouldn’t you say? I think I’d be frightened to live with one of those pictures” (Palace 114).

When the teak forest is almost exhausted, the British turns to petroleum excavation. Since the coastal Burma is rich in petroleum products, they exploit it at the expense of the life of the people. Here also the people are exposed to the risky nature of
the job. “In this way some of the pools have gradually become wells, a hundred feet deep or even more. Some of these wells were so heavily worked that they looked like small volcanoes twin-zas were lowered in, on ropes holding their breath like pearl dives” (Palace 123).

Apart from these human scenes of colonisation, Ghosh also deals with the larger question of Europe’s greed. Everything becomes a resource to be exploited-wood, water, mines, people etc. Burma becomes the mine of wealth for the British. Forests are cut on a very mass scale without giving any thought to the hazards of environment that such an unthinking act would cause. Burma becomes the mine of wealth for the British. “In a few decades the wealth will be gone-all the gems, the timber and the oil and then they too will leave” (Palace 88).

Mental colonisation is even worse. For example, Saya John in Place does not see the English as usurpers. For him, they are superior. From them, he has learnt the art of using everything for his own benefit. The Europeans, for him, stand for efficient exploitation. To him, it brings profit. He does not know anything beyond this immediate gain, nor does he want to know. Later it is seen Arjun boasting of his connection with Westerners. In his mind, he has accepted that the western style is better and therefore desirable.

The colonial power, known for its alleged exploitation, dehumanises the people who come under its purview. As the colonial discourse often reveals, the colonial owner uses the machinery to control the colonised “object”. Ghosh turns the silent page in colonial history and reads the complicity of the Indians with the British and their role in
continuing the colonial system. Arjun, Beni Prasad Dey, the District Collector and Raj Kumar firmly believe in the supremacy of the British. They accept the ruler’s supremacy. As part of the colonial system they exercise power over the natives and also the colonised Burmese. The District Collector recognises his defeat in his failure to live up to the expectations of the British officers. The District Collector is completely dehumanised in his approach to the royal family. Arjun as an officer in the British Indian Army is subservient to his British officers. He cannot differentiate between serving India and serving the British. This incapacity leads him to fight for the British in their usurpation of Burma. He fails to recognise that he is used as an instrument by the coloniser to kill his neighbour. This could be understood as an extension of the coloniser’s violence, but at the same time it is also the dehumanisation of Arjun in his complicity with the colonial power.

The complicity of the Indians with the British reaches its culmination in Rajkumar. He is a completely dehumanised figure. He staunchly believes that the coloniser is not only promoting their life but also protecting their life in Burma. All these characters exercise their power over the others who are weaker than them in terms of power. Through his exposure of complicity of the colonised with the coloniser, Ghosh seems to say that violence is related to power very often.

Similarly, analysing through a new historic point of view, Ghosh through the subtext in the form of Nirmal’s diary in Tide retrieves the history of Morichjhapi, that stands as one of the darkest spots in the history of human kind. Ghosh elaborates:
“Morichjhapi incident was widely discussed in the Calcutta press, English as well as Bengali” (*Tide* 402).

Moreover, the events leading to Morichjahapi Massacre is recorded in the article “Dwelling on Morichjhapi” by Annu Jalais. In her article, Jalais remarks that the reasons leading to the massacre have its roots in the “intricacies of caste, class, and communal differences” (3). When India was partitioned in 1947 along communal lines, there was a migration in huge numbers of East Bengali Hindus to West Bengal in India. The first wave of migration consisted of higher class Hindus who were persecuted by their low class Muslim tenants. They fled and found a haven in the homes of their affluent friends and relatives in Calcutta. Meanwhile the low caste Hindus found nowhere to go and “they squatted on public and private lands” (4). The migration continued during the fifties and sixties and later in 1975, after Mujib Rahman’s assassination and Zia Ur Rahman’s rise to power in Bangladesh. The last remnants of low-class Bengali Hindus who were persecuted by communal attacks fled and sought refuge in West Bengal. As the refugees influx got out of control, the Congress government under B.C. Roy sent them “to various inhospitable and infertile areas – most infamous amongst them being Dandakaranya, semi-arid and rocky place” (5), which is now a part of Chattisgarh.

The Marxist opposition denounced it and promised that if they came to power they would settle them in West Bengal and Jyoti Basu, who was the leader of the opposition demanded in a public meeting in 1974, “that the Dandakaranya refugees be allowed to settle in Sundarbans” (5). But contrary to what was expected, when the Left came to power in 1977, they failed in implementing their promise. However, the
refugees, hoping that there would not be any opposition, congregated at railway stations to move towards Sundarbans. But the government prevented them from going to the Sundarbans. They were denied food and water and were asked to return. However many refugees managed to escape and some of them went to Sundarbans “where they had relatives, who were brought there during the early period of the century by the Britishers to clear the forest for cultivation” (6). Subsequently “of the estimated 1,50,000 refugees, some 30,000 braved government opposition and sailed to Morichjhapi and under the leadership of one Satish Mondal, a refugee sympathizer of the Communist Party they settled there” (11). But the government reacted by saying that refugee settlement in Morichjhapi was unauthorised and violation of the Forest Act and added that the permanent settlement would disturb the existing and potential forest wealth and also create ecological imbalance in the area.

The subsequent eviction of refugees at Morichjhapi as recounted in Nirmal’s diary is a recapitulation of the details mentioned by Annu Jalais. Her document reads:

Thirty police launches circled the island, thereby depriving the settlers food and water, they were also tear-gassed, their huts razed, their boats sunk, their fish and tube wells destroyed, those who tried to cross the river were shot at, several hundred men and women and children were believed to have died during that time and there bodies thrown into the river. (17)

As Annu Jalais remarks, no one ever knows how many lost their lives, but what is known is that no charge was laid against the policemen and the politicians who launched the attack. Based on this account, Ghosh in Tide creates a space for a dialogic discourse
on the conflict between the environmentalists and the refugee settlers who fight against the eviction. The contending views are voiced through Nirmal and Nilima who are politically and ideologically opposed to each other. Here Nirmal voices the refugee settlers and Nilima the government. When Morichjhapi is in turmoil, Kusum, one of the activists, approaches Nilima for medical help for her people. But Nilima refuses to offer help as she does not want to distance herself from the government and getting into trouble. She “could not offer to alienate herself from government” (*Tide* 122). She makes herself clear:

> I simply cannot allow the Trust to get involved in this. There is too much at stake for us. You’re not involved in the day-to-day business of running the hospital, so you have no idea of how hard we’ve had to work to stay on the right side of the government. If the politicians turn against us, we’re finished. I can’t take that chance. (*Tide* 214)

Ghosh airs the view of the government further when Nilima tells her opinion about the refugee problem. Her insensitiveness towards the cause of the refugees is revealed when she says, “These people are squatters; that land doesn’t belong to them: it’s government property. How can they just seize it? If they’re allowed to remain, people will think every island in the tide country can be seized. What will become of the forest, the environment” (*Tide* 213).

But Nirmal, who is a revolutionary and a humanist to the core, is quick to retort that it is discriminatory against the settlers. Referring to the Britisher Sir Daniel Hamilton, Nirmal says that Sir Daniel was allowed to take it over for his settlement. He
retorts: “Were the dreams of these settlers less valuable than those of a man like Sir Daniel just because he was a rich Shaheb and they impoverished refugees?” (*Tide* 213)

Ghosh, through his mouthpiece Nirmal finally discloses the reason behind the government’s adamancy in evicting the refugees. Nirmal says, “that island Morichjhapi, wasn’t really forest … Parts of it were already being used by the government, for plantations and so on. What’s been said about the danger to the environment is just a sham, in order to evict these people, who have nowhere else to go (*Tide* 214)

Ghosh identifies himself with the problems of the refugees, their fierce steadfastness, braving thirst and hunger, brushing aside the threats of police violence, as they listen to the callous, dehumanising announcement through loudspeakers: “This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all over the world” (*Tide* 261).

Though Nirmal and Kusum perish in their fight for justice, Ghosh through their story opens up a debate for posterity. When environmentalists world over press for preservation of the forests of Sundarbans and even contribute towards it, they should think of the dispossessed people of the place who have nowhere else to go. Ghosh emphasises the view that it is not humane enough to create spaces for tigers to thrive by evicting the poor islanders from their homes. At this juncture, it is worth to note Kusum’s words to Nirmal who later helps the settlers in their struggle against eviction which reflects Ghosh’s humanistic concerns: “This whole world has become place for
animals and our fault, our crime was that we were just human beings trying to live as
human beings always have, from the water and soil” (*Tide* 216).

Ghosh thus sympathises with the displaced people who are deprived of their home. In the name of constructing dams, factories etc. the government very often neglect the rights of the displaced. This is a common sight in our country. In most case a lot of time is wasted to rehabilitate the displaced. This causes a sense of isolation and homelessness among the people and at most time it is the tribals and such voiceless who are affected.

Echoing Ghosh’s view, Pankaj Sehesharia in an article entitled “Blame Game” in *The Hindu Literary Magazine* remarks:

> Thousand of acres of productive land are being acquired to create Special Economic Zones at the cost of thousands of families and millions of existing livelihoods; traditional tribal lands are being mined and drowned with impurity … huge infrastructure projects and dollar earning tourism projects are being advocated in land where traditional communities are being displaced in the name of wild life preservation. (2)

In such cases, it is always the tribals who are at the receiving end, whenever the issue of the preservation of wild life and policies of economic expansion are discussed. And the truth is that the flora and fauna are not destroyed by the tribals, but by poachers and timber merchants who make fast money by bribing the forest officials. Seksharia regrets that “all the problems of the tiger and forest are being laid at the door of the tribal and to complete exclusion of everything else” (2).
Though Amitav Ghosh does not suggest any solution for the ever raging conflict between the settlers and the ‘eco-friendly’ officials, but by highlighting the plight of the refugee settlers who have nowhere else to go, he has invited his readers to participate in a dialogue to find out and understand the real issues at stake.

Similarly *Poppies* deals with the highhandedness of the Mandarins of the East India Company, which indulged in opium trade between the Britishers and the Chinese. Thus, *Poppies*, the first part of a projected trilogy, is based on the world it was in the 19th century just before the opium trade and subsequent opium wars between the British and the Qing dynasty of China. In the 18th century, to meet up the trade deficit with the Qing dynasty, East India Company started to export opium to China. The company cultivated opium in the Ganjetic plains and sold the opium to the smugglers in Kolkata. The smugglers then smuggled it to China.

Historian Frank Sanello in his *The Opium wars: The Addiction of one Empire and the Corruption of Another* says that “The Opium wars, were the climax trade dispute and diplomatic difficulties between China under the Qing dynasty and the British Empire after China, sought to restrict illegal opium trafficking. It consisted of the first opium war from 1839 to 1842 and second opium war from 1850 to 1860” (23).

Referring to this aspect of the ignored part of history, *Poppies* is a vibrant and textured depiction of the historical moment at the time when China declared it would prohibit the importation of opium, which was decimating its addicted citizens. The East India Company, which had been forcing Indian labourers to turn over their fields to the growing of poppies, was willing to declare war to save their profits.
*Poppies* unfolds in north India and the Bay of Bengal in 1838 on the eve of the British attack on the Chinese port known as the first opium war. In a new historic perspective Ghosh analyses two greater economic themes of the 19th century the cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese market and the transport of Indian indentured workers to cut sugar cane for the British islands such as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad.

With opium trade and opium war as the background, the novel explores in detail the East India Company – run opium factory at Ghazipur, the workers whose life depends on it and its produce “for in eastern India, opium was the exclusive monopoly of the British, produced and packaged entirely under the supervision of the East India Company, except for a small group of Parsis, few native born Indians had access to the trade or its profits” (*Poppies* 85). At another level *Poppies* tracks the origins and the journey of the first batch of the Indian diaspora, the indentured labourers of the nineteenth century. This class of people, who supplies cheap labour in the British Empire, that too, after slavery is abolished, travels under horrendous conditions to escape the poverty and deprivation in their native land. Thus *Poppies* chronicles the life and ambitions of the grandiose empire builders and the effect of their action on ordinary Indian people.

Against this background, *Poppies* paints a poignant picture of the human devastation caused by imperialism. *Poppies* starts with the journey of the ship *Ibis* carrying opium and undentured labourers from the Gangetic plains to the port of Calcutta. Since the slave trade has ended, Benjamin Burnharn, the owner of the ship has kept it
intact and switches over to the transportation of the exiled prisoners and coolies. This exploitative trade makes him very rich. Thus the stories of piracy and cruelty, often growing out of opium trade exists side by side.

The ship becomes a microcosm of the life in land full of tumult and unexpected twists of fate. The labourers have no choice but to submit them before the atrocious living condition and sometimes sadistic overseers aboard in the *Ibis*. Benjamin Burnham’s intention in moving to Calcutta is to position himself to bid in the opium auctions of the East India Company. “In the good old days people used to say there were only two things to be exported from Calcutta: thugs and drugs – or opium and coolies as some would have it” (*Poppies* 76).

Ghosh conveys the highhandedness of the imperial power when they force the farmers and zaminders of the gangetic plain to cultivate opium. He writes:

> Little did they know of the perils of the consignment trade and how the risks were borne by those who provided the capital. Year after year, with British and American traders growing ever more skilled in evading Chinese laws, the market for opium expanded, and the Raja and his associates made handsome profits on their investment. (*Poppies* 85)

The East India Company, making opium trade, the primary contact with China plays havoc on the health of the people of China. Ghosh is of the view that, but for the opium trade the Company’s revenue for globalising its colonies would not be possible. Through Burnham, Ghosh says:
To put the matter simply: there is nothing they want from us – they’ve got it into their heads that they have no use for our products and manufactures. But, we on the other hand, can’t do without their tea and their silks. If not for opium, the drain of silver from Britain and her colonies would be too great to sustain. (*Poppies* 112)

Ghosh here exposes the ugly face of British commerce during the nineteenth century by saying that, for opium trade they did not follow any principles and there only aim was to break the fabric of the country, thus making it congenial for opium trade. Since opium is a product which creates instant market, the British make use of this situation to amass wealth for their colonisation. Burnham, while telling about the trade to Reid conveys:

> British rule in India could not be sustained without opium … 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? Do you imagine that British rule would be possible in this impoverished land if it were not for this source of wealth? And if we reflect on the benefits that British rule has conferred upon India, does it not follow that opium is this land’s greatest blessings? (*Poppies* 115)

It is clearly evident that the budget of the East India Company depends upon the revenue earned through opium trade, thus evading the health and progress of the colonised. This highhandedness of the Empire is evident in the ship *Ibis*, which carries the coolies, known as *grimitiyas*, as part of the opium trade. They are not given enough
food and water. The rules of rationing of drinking water make the grimitiyas suffer. The iron hand of captain Chillingworth makes the coolies shudder:

By early afternoon, the day’s allowance of drinking water had dwindled to a point where men were fighting for possession of those gharas that still contained a few sips … They climbed the ladder and began to beat on the gratings of the hatch: water! Listen, up there! Our gharas need to be filled … there was a near riot: dozens of men scrambled up the ladder on a desperate effort to force their way out on deck … The lathis came crashing down on the grimitiyas’ skulls and shoulders, knocking them backside, one after another. (Poppies 401-42)

History says about the atrocities of the Empire through some incidents like the Jalian Wala Bagh massacre, the Wagon tragedy etc. But there are stories of untold torture and horror in the opium trade were the health and life of the farmers was shattered on their journey in such ships, dreaming for a brighter future.

In the ship, there is only one law: the law of highhandedness and muscle power. The coolies are trapped in the confines of the ship. It is clearly evident when Chillingworth mentions the nature of the law of the ship: “The difference is that the laws of the land have no hold on the water. At sea there is another law, and you should know that on this vessel I am its sole maker. While you are on the Ibis and she is at sea, I am your fate, your providence, your lawgiver” (Poppies 404).

The suffering and torture in the ship are severe that the labourers look for some escape route. After the talk by the captain, the labourers are gripped with fear psychosis.
This fear psychosis makes them more subdued. They are able to realise that they are entering into a state of existence in which their waking hours will be ruled “by the noose and the whip” (Poppies 404).

Ghosh vividly portrays the urge of the labourers to go home when they see a distant island. The pull of the land is irresistible for them. By seeing the far away island one of the labourers, a middle aged man jumps into the sea: “this man made a sudden turn, shoved a lascar aside, and vaulted over the deck rail” (Poppies 405). Meanwhile, making use of this commotion, two more migrants break through and make the leap, “hurling themselves over the bulwark” (Poppies 405). This makes the guards frenzy and “they start to flail their lathis in an effort to herd the men back into the dabusa” (Poppies 405).

The three migrants who jump into the sea because of the pull of the land finally face a watery grave.

... one of the three swimmers had already disappeared below water, the other two were thrashing against a current that was sweeping them towards the open sea. ... within a few minutes the swimmers’ head vanished, but still the birds remained, wheeling patiently above, as they waited for the corpses to float back to the surface. Although the bodies were not seen again, it was clear from the way the birds were circling in the sky that the corpses had been seized by the outgoing tide and were swept towards the horizon. (Poppies 406)
Here Ghosh proclaims the White’s perceived political and economic superiority over the colonised. In this context, *Poppies* appears as an interpretative shadow of the colonial ideology and the subsequent hegemony which counters and dislodges the canonised version of history. Thus *Poppies* is an honest attempt to recover the viewpoint of the colonised subjects.

If it is the Imperial colonisation Ghosh describes in *Poppies*, it is the political colonisation of the congress leaders in India, which Ghosh depicts through the anti-sikh riot, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi”, a piece from his collection of essays *Imam*:

> Nowhere else in the world did the year 1984 fulfil, its apocalyptic portents as it did in India. Separatist violence in the Punjab; the military attack on the great Sikh temple of Amritsar, the assassination of the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi; riots in several cities; the gas disaster in Bhopal-the events followed relentlessly on each other. There were days in 1984 when it took courage to open the New Delhi papers in the morning. Of the year’s many catastrophes, the sectarian violence following Gandhi’s death had the greatest effect on my life. (*Imam* 47)

Ghosh records that the one memory that stands out most clearly is the moment when it seemed inevitable that he would be attacked because he was in a group of Hindus protecting the Sikh neighbours. What Ghosh says is important to note, beyond the spectacle of the violence, is “the risks that perfectly ordinary people are willing to take for one another” (*Imam* 61).
Moreover Ghosh provides a powerful account of the riots following Indira Gandhi’s assassination:

The targets were primarily young Sikhs. They were dragged out, beaten up and then burnt alive … Fire was everywhere, it was the day’s motif. Throughout the city, sikh houses were looted and then set on fire, often with their occupants still inside … over the next few days, some twenty five hundred people died in Delhi alone. Thousand more died in other cities … Entire neighbourhoods were gutted; tens of thousands of people were left homeless. (Imam 51-52)

Ghosh observes that it is because of the connivance of the then ruling party, that the riots continued in larger proportions. Many congress leaders at that time showed their loyalty towards the Gandhi dynasty by annihilating the Sikhs: “Certain loyalists in her party had begun inciting the crowds gathered there to seek revenge. The motorcade of Giani Zail Singh, the president of the Republic, a Sikh, had already been attacked by a mob” (Imam 48-49).

Ghosh while contemning this genocide violently says that he was a mute witness to the violence in Delhi were men “armed with steel rods and bicycle chains … stopping cars and buses” (Imam 49) were common sights. Ghosh is of the view that the political colonisation of the congress party was at its pinnacle during the anti-sikh riot. Ghosh being a witness to anti-sikh riots in New Delhi, laments over the inefficiency of the government in controlling the riots. He sarcastically remarks:
In India there is a drill associated with civil disturbances: a curfew is declared; paramilitary units are depleted … No city in India is better equipped to perform this drill than New Delhi … Every few minutes, we turned to the radio, hoping to hear that the army had been ordered out. All we heard was mournful music and descriptions of Mrs. Gandhi lying in state; of the comings and goings of dignitaries, foreign and national. The bulletin could have been messages from another planet. (Imam 53)

Ghosh observes that even though some of the survivors of the 1984 violence are compensated, the perpetrators of the violence are still elusive. Meanwhile a pamphlet entitled “Who Are Guilty?” produced by some journalists at that time gives the details of the who’s who of the riots. But the government is not much bothered about it. Ghosh says: “to this day, no instigator of the riots has been charged (Imam 59). Ghosh is of the view that the human right documents such as ‘Who Are the Guilty?’ are essential to the process of broadening civil institutions. They are the weapons with which society asserts itself against a state that runs criminally amok, as this one did in Delhi in the November of 1984.

Another dark page of history which Ghosh sheds light is the Babri Masjid demolition and the subsequent violence. Religious fanaticism, which is a bane for India very often, raises its ugly head through such religiously sensitive issues. Here again Ghosh points out the lethargic attitude of Indian Government. The government was unable to counter the Hindu sentiments triggered by L.K. Advani through his ‘rath yatra’. The BJP was able to create a picture that it has a nation wide support for its mission. The
sentiments of the minorities were totally ignored to reap political gain by the BJP. Ghosh observes in his essay “The Fundamentalist Challenge” in *Imam*:

On 6th December 1992, several thousand Hindu supremacists tore down a 400 year old mosque in Ayodhya, claiming that the structure was built upon the birthplace of their mythical hero Sri Rama. The Indian government, despite ample warning, was culpably negligent in not taking action to prevent the demolition. Thus, through CNN, the whole world witnessed the destructive frenzy of a mob of Hindu fanatics attacking an archeological site, in the service of an utter delusion. (280)

Here vote bank politics plays an important role. The congress government under P.V. Narasimha Rao did not take action purposefully for the fear of losing the Hindu votes. Even though riots and violence were anticipated, the politicians concerned do not give importance to stop the demolition. Ghosh is of the view that its repercussions were seen in Pakistan and Bangladesh: “Temples were attacked and destroyed in both countries. In Bangladesh, which has a substantial Hindu population, a great many Hindu shrines were destroyed and desecrated; Hindu owned business were attacked and looted; many Hindus families were driven from their homes”. (*Imam* 281)

Ghosh is of the view that since religion is a very sensitive issue, anything untoward will create pogroms in the places throughout the world were its related issues are found. Intensifying the sensitive nature of religion, politicians of such hue make political issue out of it, thus reaping political mileage for their own benefits. In countries like India, religion has become a commodity, by which the vested interest can make
polarisation of votes. The subsequent Mumbai riots and other religious based violence escalated, after the Babri Masjid demolition. Since BJP got politically advantage in the elections at that time, this technique was followed by Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat. As a result, the infamous Gujarat carnage happened, which is also another black mark and a national shame like the Masjid demolition.

Ghosh points at the capacity of the state to enable violence with the sole purpose of its survival. In “The Reign of a Headless Horse”, in Lest We Forget referring to Gujarat carnage, Ghosh says, “It has become clear that the machinery of state and possibly even the financial apparatus of the commercial world were bent to the task of instigating and supporting mob violence”. (20) He sees “two of the most important forces of order in society turned to exactly the opposite purpose of undermining peace and promoting violence” (20). Ghosh states that “this is a clear and culpable dereliction of duty on the part of the BJP-led government and the PM” (21). According to Ghosh, that the incumbents in power should differ in their political belief is an inevitable fact of democracy. The violence in Gujarat is able to instill permanent fear among the Indians, irrespective of their religion. The fear is due to the shattering blow to the faith in the nation’s affiliation with its controlling power, the state. Gujarat is not only a site of nerve-shattering physical violence but also the state that ideologically dishonoured its community’s faith in it. The violence in the name of religion in the Indian nation state could be perceived under the fabric of Hindu nationalism. This allows for an explanation of crisis in identity for the Hindus. Thus the secular status of the nation is overlooked in Hindu nationalism.
Count is a response to the testing of nuclear weapons in India and in Pakistan respectively in the summer of 1998. The events evoke a sense of euphoria among the ruling classes in Pakistan and in India alike, although an articulate segment of activists, intellectuals and artists in both these countries immediately indicted their governments’ decision to formally participate in the nuclear arms race in imitation of the more ‘developed’ nations.

Ghosh’s approach to the issue at hand is neither purely programmatic nor purely polemical. Instead, his training as a social anthropologist prompts him to travel to his field of inquiry – the Indian subcontinent – in search of answers to the question of the need for the bomb in the region.

His first stop is at Pokhran, the site of the nuclearisation of South Asia. But the people of Pokhran, he discovers, are peripheral to the prominence projected on to Pokhran in national and international circles. Indeed, Pokhran’s local inhabitants represent themselves to Ghosh as victims of a process over which they have had no control. Between the nuclear test for ‘peaceful’ purposes conducted in 1974 and the nuclear test for ‘military’ purposes conducted in 1998, Ghosh is told, “some twenty children had been born with deformities in the limbs. Cows had developed tumours in their udders. Calves were born blind, and with their tongues and eyes all attached to the wrong parts of their faces. No one had heard of such before” (Count 11).

In contradistinction to the indifference of the people on the street, a strong sense of the necessity of the bomb, Ghosh discerns, grips the elitist echelons, the professional classes, the bureaucracy and the mainstream politicians, of Pakistani as well as of Indian
society. On either side, well-coached arguments in favour of nuclearisation from the
socially elite sections are predicated upon a premonition of an impending crisis – but
curiously, the crisis to come is never attributed to an external agency.

Both George Fernandes, India’s then Union Minister of Defence and Qazi
Hussain Ahmed, an eminent functionary of Pakistan’s principal religious party, the
Jamaat-e-Islami, speak to Ghosh at length about the crisis doomed to overtake their
respective countries, reiterating a theme which he is destined to listen to time and time
again in his encounters with people in high places in the two countries:

The word crisis was on everyone’s lips. Yet the rooms in which it was
spoken were invariably neat, well appointed, filled with books, paintings,
vases, lamps – all the usual accoutrements of well – ordered lives. I took
to glancing out of windows at the mention of the word – looking, as it
were, for visual confirmation outside. But almost invariably the streets
were just as orderly as the interiors of the houses I was visiting.

(Count 55-56)

Ghosh, hear laments about the loss of self-esteem among the ordinary citizens.
The lack of national pride among Pakistanis and Indians is commented upon by some of
the most influential persons in either country, while rationalising their country’s nuclear
policy. He says:

… the bomb is much more than a weapon and it concerns matters much
larger than a mere defence policy. It is a great vessel filed with all the
unfulfilled aspirations and thwarted dreams of the last fifty years –
ambitions of a larger and grander place in the world, for a rearrangement of global power, for a re-birth of national pride. (*Count 18*)

Yet, the “re-birth of national pride” via the bomb is not an agenda set up by the masses of the two countries concerned. In the ultimate analysis, Ghosh concludes, it is the slogan of a privileged minority in India and in Pakistan struggling to retain their hegemonic position in societies in the face of many, many democratic onslaughts on their privileges—“The landscape of India teems with such insurgencies: the country is seized, in V.S. Naipaul’s eloquent phrase, with ‘a million mutinies now’ … The bomb-cult represents the uprising of those who find themselves being pushed back from this table of power’; it is the rebellion of the rebelled-against, the insurrection of an elite” (*Count 18*).

Ghosh’s argument remains that the nuclearisation of the Indian sub-continent has been carried out despite, and in fact against, the will of the majority of its people. In Ghosh’s novels attempts are made to alter the received historical opinion without evading the notions of historicity. They serve as a microscopic lens in showing all the details of the ‘out of focus’ historical narratives. Ghosh deals with the brand of historical fiction, which can also be termed as docu-fiction. He documents the untold part of history or the most neglected areas, in fictional mode, suggesting universal humanism as a remedy to all personal and historical maladies. While developing knowledge beyond the limitation imposed by socio-cultural prejudices Ghosh repudiates violence in all its forms and as a humanist affirms freedom of ideas and beliefs, celebrating equality of all human beings. He recognises the accommodation of personal and cultural diversity which is essential for a vibrant humane world.