CHAPTER – V

THE INFLUENCE OF NON-FICTIONAL WORKS ON HIS NOVELS
Amitav Ghosh is such a novelist who has a rare talent of presenting what is generally known as non-fiction as a fictional art. Non-fictional works have a great deal of influence as well as inspiration on Ghosh's fiction. Ghosh, a globe trotter, has been to many parts of the world. Most of his novels and works are transformed travelogues. All these experiences and memories provide him the raw material for fictional works. This part of the study takes up those fields of investigation in which his non-fictional works influence his novels.

All writers, all artistes, are involved in the quest to read and/or construct our importance in (and to) an infinite universe in which we are but accidental specks, infinitesimal creatures struggling with, and controlled by, our genetic inheritances. We need to narrativise our parasitical, seemingly irrelevant existence in order to salvage any dignity at all. Amitav Ghosh is most of all involved in this quest for narrative significance, in trying to find a place for himself and other human beings in the universe, and thus to re-order it. This quest is expressed less in philosophical terms and more in political and social terms. This artistic intent is apparent in all of Amitav Ghosh's works, be they classified as fiction or not. Thus, recuperating history, reading/recording one's personal experiences, creating fiction, studying various phenomena are all seen as activities that blend into each other, as attempts at achieving some measure of personal dignity, some degree of personal and collective significance.

Amitav Ghosh's writing reflects the recent concern of anthropologists with the porosity of cultural boundaries. According to Renato Rosaldo:

In contrast with the classic view, which posits culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns, culture can arguably
be conceived as a more porous array of intersections where distinct processes cross from within and beyond its borders.

(Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social analysis 20)

The characters in Ghosh's novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but 'dwell in travel' in cultural spaces that flow across borders and the 'shadow lines' drawn around modern nations states. These novels also remain bound up in the notion of a universal humanity; they postulate a global theory of the colonial subject.

Ghosh has moved further in the direction of global theory than in his first novel The Circle of Reason, where the flow of trade was over determined by an asymmetrical economy of power that favoured western interests. It is clearly evident in his next piece of art The Shadow Lines which is a fictional critique of classical anthropology's model of discrete cultures and the associated ideology of nationalism. The 'reality' is the complex web of relationship between people that cut across nations and across generations.

In the first section of the novel the author examines the movement of the characters away from a point of 'fixity', a 'centrality' which in the Indian context had been the joint family system or one's ancestral home which while it expected its inmates to eflace one's individual self for the well - being of the family, sustained them, gave them strong roots and a sense of belonging. In this section Ghosh examines mainly Ila's moving from such a 'centrality' to show how and why she goes wrong. Ila's ancestral family has lived in a small, middle - class puritanical world, a world of genteel decorum, with well - defined values where, as the narrator tells everyone was busy with his/her job. Ghosh shows how
important it was for the urban middle class to be educated and hold professional jobs for the rewards of owning one’s house or living on a pension. Going to school / college or working in an office encouraged hard work, obedience and conformity to the norms of society. It was essential for everyone in this world to be successful, to have a clear idea of one’s home and one’s nation 'with a clear – cut border – line'? Even as a child, the freedom and the privileges he enjoyed were hard – earned and had to be resolutely guarded and preserved; otherwise he would end up where some of his relatives were, precisely because they had not used their brains and passed examinations.

**The Imam and the Indian**, a non-fictional book containing eighteen prose pieces written in around twenty years can no doubt be called the base of most the novels and non-fictional works of Amitav Ghosh. Several prose pieces of the book later became the foundation of his major works. The pieces in the book are arranged instead in accordance with the circumstances of their writing. The first five narratives, for example, were all writers in short intensely focused periods of concentration. Looking back on their chronology, we can understand that their dates coincide with gaps between the longer works of Ghosh. Amitav Ghosh quotes in the acknowledgement of the book about the link between these prose pieces and his longer works:

The title piece ‘The Imam and the Indian’ was written in Delhi, in 1985, in that fallow period that separated my first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, and the second, *The Shadow Lines*. I did not know it then, but the writing of ‘The Imam and the Indian’ signaled the
gestation of another project — my third book, *In an Antique Land* —
which I was not to embark on until 1989.

(The Imam and the Indian Acknowledgements)

The above statement made by Ghosh is complete in itself in proving the
influence of non-fictional works on his novels. Ghosh’s article ‘The Slave of Ms
H.6’ mentions the story of an Indian slave Bomma. The article was the raw
material for Ghosh which he used very beautifully in his *In an Antique Land*. The
various experience during his story in the Arab world which later took the form of
these prose pieces are reflected and mentioned clearly in his novels *The Circle of
Reason*, *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*.

How the world of trade and commerce flourished in the Indian Ocean, the
Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf is vividly portrayed in the pages of *In an
Antique Land*. The title denotes ancient Egypt and her rich culture. It also recalls
the past glory of Mangalore during twelfth century, as a bustling port. Ghosh’s line
of research about the slave of MS H.6 took him not only to Oxford, but also to
Tunisia to learn Arabic. Later on in 1980 he visits Egypt, installed in a village
called Lataifa, a couple of hours journey to the south — east of Alexandria.

*In an Antique Land* can also be called a historical study which deals with
three major themes. Ghosh studies through these the writers search for the life of
Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant originally from Tunisia, and his Indian slave
Bomma, a native of Tulunad. Second is his deep and penetrating insight into the
cultural and social development of Egypt from the crusades to operation Desert
Storm and Third is the dreams and aspirations of ordinary human beings and the
effect of political and historical changes on their lives. To deal with these themes
the author has selected the form of a traveller's tale, but this form is only a part of
the entire design. Actually, Amitav Ghosh desires to study the effect of history on
mankind through this form. Brilliantly and systematically he arranges all the three
themes, and successfully creates a unified story.

Compared to Ghosh's most celebrated novel The Shadow Lines, In an
Antique Land is not as effective and powerful in its use of symbols (maps, mirror
and houses) and images. But there are so many common things, which we can
identify such as both the books, are masterpiece in use of language and
administration of time. We can find the study of effect of time or history on
ordinary man's life in his own individual way. In The Shadow Lines, we have a
character called Tridib, an outsider and in In an Antique Land we have a moving
character called Nabeel – both are victims of political unrest and are lost in the
footprints of history. Both represent the modern man's feeling of alienation,
existential crisis and a quest for freedom. Modern life celebrates terror and
violence as the universal condition of life, and both are innocent victims of it.
Nabeel and Tridib are both in search of roots and identity. Both find human
existence meaningless, futile and complex in this world. They are disturbed by the
disorder, chaos, anarchy and boredom of the modern world. Their life is nothing
but silences and pauses without harmony and destinations. Both have paid a great
price to fulfill their aspirations. The thought process, which starts in The Shadow
Lines, reaches it culmination in In an Antique Land.

Ghosh portrays Ben Yiju's stay for more than seventeen years in
Mangalore. His social and professional life extended far beyond his family. Ben
Yiju was much faceted personality, a poet, calligrapher, businessman, all rolled
into one. Ghosh draws a vivid picture of Ben Yiju's closest business connections which lay with a group of merchant whom he and his friends in Aden referred to as the 'Baniyan of Mangalore - Hindu Gujaratis of the 'Vania' or the trading caste.

We can also find Ghosh struggling to solve the riddle of the slave of MS H.6 Ghosh took the help Professor Viveka Rai to solve this problem. Ghosh at first solves the problem of the correct name of the slave:

It was possible then that the single 'M' in the name was actually doing duty for two of its kind (as in Arabic). If that were so, it would mean that there were actually four letters in the name: 'B-M-M-A.' If I then filled in a short vowel after the first letter, the result was 'Bomma' or 'Bamma', names which I knew to be common in certain parts of India.

(In an Antique Land 249)

The historical reading made by Ghosh through his research works is one of the major thing present in all his works especially novels. Ghosh studies the nations through their history, ancient or recent. The longs stays and frequent visits made by Ghosh in various countries directly or indirectly contribute in his fiction writing. Ghosh's long stay in the Arab world, learning Arabic there, sharing experiences with common people of that country helped him to make The Circle of Reason a readable book where the main character Alu also lives in the arabic country when he is chased by police. The other characters of the novel, their way of living especially in the arab world, their problems, their doubts, their confusion about God and Allah, the basic services, the threat of Gulf war and its after effect
are all portrayed in a realistic manner by Ghosh in *The Circle of Reason*. Only a well research can provide minute details, which are present in the novel.

Ghosh’s articles ‘The Relations of Envy’ and ‘Categories of Labour’ are present in *The Circle of Reason*. These articles are based on chapters of the thesis for which he was awarded a D.Phil. (Ph.d.) in Social Anthropology by Oxford University in 1982. The article were completed however in Trivandrum, at the center for Development studies, where Ghosh also wrote the first draft of *The Circle of Reason*.

Ghosh’s yet another prose piece ‘The Ghost’s of Mrs. Gandhi’ is not an ordinary prose piece but has prime importance for Ghosh because through this piece he projected his feelings and experiences which he witnessed at the time of 1984 riots which took place after the assassination of the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Ghosh, through his speeches, interviews and writings admits that the sectarian violence following Indira Gandhi’s death had the greatest effect on his life. The experiences of that period are profoundly important to his development as a writer.

Ghosh not only witnessed the violence of 1984 but the violence at the time of the partition of Bengal was also alive in his mind through the stories told by the elder members of his family. Ghosh was shocked when he saw a scene, which he later penned in ‘The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi’:

> With cans of petrol they went around the localities and systematically set fire to Sikh houses, shops and gurudwaras…. The targets were primarily young Sikhs. They were dragged out, beaten up and then burnt alive. … In all the affected spots, a calculated
attempt to terrorize the people was evident in the common tendency among the assailants to burn alive the Sikhs on public roads.

(The Imam and the Indian 51)

When Ghosh went back to his desk November of 1984, he found himself confronting decisions about writing that he had never faced before. His next novel was bound to be influenced by his experiences, but he could see no way of writing directly about those events. The riots were generated by a cycle of violence, involving the terrorists in the Punjab, on the one hand, and the Indian government on the other. This was the time, which made tremendous developments in Ghosh as a writer. He express himself as following:

To write carelessly, in such a way as to appear to endorse terrorism or repression, can add easily to the problem and in such incendiary circumstances, words cost lives, and it is only appropriate that those who deal in words should pay scrupulous attention to what they say. It is only appropriate that they should find themselves inhibited.

(The Imam and the Indian 61)

Not only Ghosh felt his duty as a writer, a representative of society but also he expresses his feeling as a true human being by referring Naipaul in the following words:

Writers don’t join crowds – Naipaul and so many others teach us that But what do you do when the constitutional authority fails to act? You join and in joining bear all the responsibilities and obligation and guilt that joining represents. My experience of the violence was overwhelmingly and memorably of the resistance to it.
When I think of the women staring down the mob, I am not filled with a writerly wonder. I am reminded of my gratitude for being saved from injury.

(The Imam and the Indian 61)

The first section of *In an Antique Land* ends at the point where we find scholarly depletion of the treasures of the Cairo Geniza by Cambridge University, intercut with Ghosh’s account of his own experiences in the modern Egyptian village of Lataifia. In the revised version of *The Imam and the Indian* Ghosh now develops continuities between the fate of the Geniza material and his own insertion into the history he is writing as an Oxford graduate researching in Egypt. Recognizing that the Imam is a representative of tradition Ghosh wishes to interview him about his role as a healer, but he is confounded to find that the Imam has totally lost faith in his profession. All these experience and stories which Ghosh used in his non-fictional works Ghosh used in his non-fictional works adopt the forms of various characters in his novels. The characters who speak about India, compare it with neighbour countries like Pakistan, comment on the tradition regarding a birth of a child to marriage and then to the way and rituals of funeral. It can be find especially in his first novel *The Circle of Reason* where we meet characters like Abu Fahl, Abusa and Malik in at Ghazira.

All these character have been present in Ghosh’s non-fictional works, but with different identities. Ghosh skillfully uses them in a novel form to tell the reality, their way of living, the happiness and sorrows which they share, their customs and traditions and above all their vision regarding life and death.
Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* is considered different in comparison to the three novel written by him because of the subject and the treatment of suspense and horror through the story of Ronald Ross. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is extension of the journey to the west in comparison to *The Circle of Reason*. Amitav Ghosh's famous prose piece 'The Hunger of Stones' was published in 1995. It is the translation of Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Kshudhita Pashan*. As an allegory of the colonial condition, it is a work of extraordinary suggestive power and atmospheric richness. Ghosh finished the translation shortly before he began writing *The Calcutta Chromosome*. It has a profound influence of this novel as well as its successor, *The Glass Palace*.

*The Calcutta Chromosome* present us with a template for understanding this complex textual mode operative in Ghosh's work, one which explain his literature of haunting. The DNA analogy of grafting allegorizes the archival search that constitutes detection in the novel: Murugan’s suspicion that Ross’s analyses of the Anopheles mosquito was rigged, leads him to the real architects of the discovery – a group of folk medicine practitioners with immortality on their minds and no interest in the cure for malaria. But this new knowledge comes about through continuous fragmenting and grafting of hypothesis and speculations: each narrative about Ross's discovery is haunted by the probability of another truth that confounds its credibility. Then there is the further allegory of cutting, splicing and recombining literary genres and traditions. This is medical thriller, ghost story, murder mystery, philosophical rumination and historiographic project. And finally, at the meta-textual level, Ghosh grafts a larger vernacular tradition of ghost fiction onto this novel in English.
The noticeable thing about *The Calcutta Chromosome* is that it is not reflects the influence of Tagore's story but to some it shows the influence of Satyajit Ray also. Ghosh has described each and every detail minutely. He not only writes about the roads, squares, museums and other famous things about the city but also tells his readers about the varieties of fish, the life of medium class people as well as the poor people who work to eat in a metro city.

Amitav Ghosh, in the acknowledgements of *The Imam and the Indian* expresses his views regarding the influence of non-fictional works on his novels in a very realistic manner. He writes:

> Readers who preserves with these pieces will discover that despite the difference in form and diction, they share with my fiction certain characteristics subjects and concerns most notably my interest in patterns of work. It was during my stay n Egypt that I learnt that even the most mundane forms of labour can embody an entire metaphysic a discovery that was to have a profound influence on my novels.

(*The Imam and the Indian* Acknowledgements)

Amitav Ghosh's works are eclectical in nature. He never tries to make a fantasy only to entertain his readers. The most noticeable thing we can find in his novels is the fictionalization of facts. Facts which he experienced in his research work in his non-fictional works or the real stories which was told to him by his father, family members or uncles and aunts. As we have discussed earlier in the chapter that his *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Glass Palace* have a profound influence of Tagore's *Kshudhita Pashan*. Ghosh also includes the memories
provided to him in the form of stories by his father and an uncle who also was a military like his father. Ghosh finely clarifies the picture in front of his readers:

The seed of this book was brought to India long before my own lifetime by my father and my uncle, the late Jagat Chandra Datta of Rangoon and Moulmein. But neither my father nor my uncle would have recognized the crop that I have harvested. By the time I started work on this book, the memories they had handed on to me had lost their outlines, surviving often only as patterns of words, moods, textures. In attempting to write about places and times that I knew only at second and third hand, I found myself forced to create a parallel, wholly fictional world.

(The Glass Palace Author’s Note)

The interesting thing about this millennia novel is that how soundly its postcolonial stance rests upon reliably old - fashioned narrative foundations. Family sagas with a sweeping historical backdrop were always a failsafe item in the publishing world from Forsyte Saga to Gone with the Wind. This is because the travel writer travels to Myanmar, Ladakh or Somalia and records his own adventures and misadventures and presents them as a fictional work.

Time is obviously relative, as the narrator has realized, as fielding in Tom Jones. Ghosh skillfully manipulates time in The Shadow Lines through his two major characters in the novel. The Grandmother and Tridib have their different opinions and definitions of time. Tridib is an archaeologist working for his Ph.D degree. He is engaged not just in the study of fact but rather in the imaginative reconstruction of fact, which makes the past a part of the present. In the same way
Ghosh blends his non-fictional works as an inspiration and a link while creating fiction. Ghosh in some extent reminds us of Freud. To Freud both psychoanalysis and archaeology were quests for, and serious studies of, whatever came before in the life of civilization or the life of the mind, for it is the past that organizes the perceptions of the present. Both are concerned with burial and excavation, with making present of a lost past:

Just as the archaeologist builds up the walls of the building from the foundations that have remained standing, determines the number and position of the columns from depression in the floor and reconstructs the mural decoration, so does the analyst proceed when he draws his inferences from the fragments of memories, from the associations and from the behaviour of the subject of the analysis. Both of them have an undisputed right to reconstruct by means of supplementing and combining the surviving remains.

(Freud, Proust and Lacan: Theory as Fiction 21)

In the same way Ghosh plays his role skillfully while choosing the details from his non-fictional works in his fiction. Ghosh plays the role of a historian. Indeed, the historian is as much of a story-teller as the fictionalist, for both tell stories, shaping their narratives from the chaotic formlessness and flow of episode, event and emotion, and by selecting, omitting, heightening and expanding on their material they discover meaning.

The interest in the individual even while trying to map a new way of looking at the world, even while attempting to write a new history, can be seen in Ghosh’s very first novel, The Circle of Reason. This novel presages his other
works, for it signals most of his later preoccupations. In this very first work, Ghosh shows his involvement with the idea of the border, and the crossing of the border. The necessary limitations of the bordered nation-state are imminent in the writing of this novel.

In Amitav Ghosh's worldview all such borders that hem us in and attempt to define us should be challenged, be they political, cultural, linguistic, racial, communal, spatial or even temporal. All these borders are constructs and meant for crossing. In the view of Ghosh perception is all — imagination and articulation can enable us to cross all such shadow lines. This is essentially an act of the imagination as the young hero of *The Shadow Lines* is taught by his hero and mentor, Tridib, who gives him 'Worlds to travel in and eyes to see them with'. Ultimately, travel becomes a spiritual quest in Ghosh's novels, which is very important for personal significance in a meaningful world.

In Mukul Kesavan's words, "Ghosh buffs his imagination against the grif of recorded lives."( The Hindu 1) Ghosh thus explores historical moments constructions in order to give form, and thus content, to his own narrative impulses and gives us complex pictures of interpenetrating lives of individuals, the interaction between their individual narratives.

We come to know from Ghosh's book that Queen Supayalat was feared and admired blindly by the people of Burma. The unceremonious removal of the king and the pregnant Queen from Mandalay to distant Ratnagiri in the west coast of India, the reverse movement of Bahadur Shah Zafar's deportation to Rangoon a generation ago was an astute move by the conquering British, successful in humiliating the royal couple completely, also erasing them from public memory at
Forgotten and abandoned, the king and the queen led a life of increasing shabbiness and obscurity in an unfamiliar territory while their country got depleted of its valuable natural resources—teak, ivory and petroleum. The rapacity and greed inherent in the colonial process is seen concentrated in what happened in Burma and the author does not gloss over the fact that Indians were willing collaborators in this British enterprise of depredation.

Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma is one of the finest non-fictional works of Ghosh which again displays his research abilities. Cambodia made international headlines in April 1998, when the Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot died of heart attack at the age of 72. Born Saloth Sar, he grew up in a relatively prosperous farming family in Kampong Thong province—the heart—land of the then French protectorate. He studied radio electronics in Paris, where he won a scholarship in 1949. His political career took off when during the 1950s he scaled the ranks of the fledgling underground Communist Party and became secretary general in 1962.

The death of the deposed tyrant has browsed an international hue and cry. It has also led to many pertinent queries about Pol Pot's motives, his politics of Social engineering and the milieu in which he perpetuated one of the worst genocides in the twentieth century. An answer to such queries and an understanding of the factors which fed Pol Pot's politics of isolation are found in the book. The demise of Pol Pot and the question that it has raised about his regime has made Amitav Ghosh's book an important political document. It is no longer just a travelogue and the impressions of a sensitive author about exotic South-East Asian nations. With an astute eye for detail and fluent prose, the
author blends fact and observation to create an important work of history,
ecology and politics.

Ghosh then tells us about a discovery that he made about the paradoxical
character of the Angkor Wat Temple being a uniquely powerful symbol of the
ance of last civilizations and ancient glory devoured by time for many people
round the globe; whereas for Cambodians it serves as no less a vivid symbol of
dernity:

Images of Angkor Wat are so common in Cambodia, so inescapable
that after a while they become an assault upon the visitor's senses;
the visual equivalent of radio - music played on public loud
speakers. There are so many of them, everywhere, that at first the
images appear to be omnipresent, ubiquitous. But the impression is
misleading; the images are not ubiquitous - infact they are never
where one expects. Angkor Wat is, for example, undisputedly a
temple, yet it never figures in anything to do with religion, or indeed
in any context that might be called 'traditional' or old-fashioned.
It's likeness appears instead on certain factory-produced
commodities, like beer; it is stamped on uniforms, civil and
military; it figures on the logos of large corporations, like banks;
indeed, the erstwhile Kampuchea Airlines even succeeded in
transforming this most earthbound of structures into a symbol of
flight, by lending it a pair of wings.

(Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma 56)
As an anthropologist that Ghosh is, he found out that the legend of the accidental discovery of Angkor Wat by the nineteenth-century French explorer Henri Mahout is a kind of myth no more and no less true that any of the others inscribed upon the temple. And commenting on the story of the ‘restoration’ of the temple by applying the most scientific methods available, with help from Indian archaeologists also, the writer reinforces the paradoxical stance of this central cultural symbol of Cambodia:

The story is a familiar one, for in this century many other parts of the world have seen their present being technologically and symbolically superseded by the relics of their past. But in Cambodia the process went further than elsewhere. For an entire generation of Cambodians, including politicians as different in ideology as Prince Sihanouk, Son Sann and Pol Pot, Angkor Wat became a symbol of the modernizing nation-state. It became the opposite of itself: a token of the country’s belonging, not within the medieval, but rather the contemporary world.

(Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma 60)

Ghosh in the remaining pages of the book analyses like a true anthropologist as to what went wrong and how that made Burma, after fifty years, one of the United Nation’s ten least developed nations on earth, and a byword for repression, xenophobia and civil abuse. The decline started, he was told, with the assassination of Aung San on 19 July 1947, though he was the country’s acknowledged leader and the hero of its independence movement. Suu Kyi, eminent human rights activist and a 1991 Nobel Peace Prize Awardee, still living
in a kind of house arrest in Rangoon, is Aung San’s worthy daughter and she was only two at the time of her father’s assassination. Since it attained its independence in January 1948, Burma has seen civil wars, communist uprisings, military coups and continual fighting are amongst its sizeable minority groups – the Karen, the Raphine, the Shan, the Mon, and several smaller groups. The Burmans are otherwise predominantly Buddhist and form two-thirds of the country’s population. During the colonial times, the British recounting policies favoured minority groups over the ethnic Burmans. The British Burma Army was thus formed largely of the units such as Karen Rifles and the Kachin Rifles. Consequently, after the independence, civil war was inevitable with insurgents outnumbering the government troops who in any case were inexperienced. Interpreting the subsequent events of civil strife and political turmoil, Amitav Ghosh writes:

In takes military dictator to believe that symbols are inert and can be manipulated at will. Forty years after his assassination, Aung San had his revenge. In a strange, secular reincarnation, his daughter, Suu Kyi, came back to haunt those who had sought to make use of his death. In 1988, when Burma’s decades of discontent culminated in an anti-military uprising, Aung San Suu Kyi emerged from obscurity as one of the country’s most powerful voices, the personification of Burma’s democratic resistance to military rule.

(Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma 74)

Besides the obvious struggle for democracy and freedom, this section also reflects several other crucial aspects of contemporary politics. The author raises
several questions about development by implication. Ghosh tries to tell that it is impossible for a nation to develop in isolation, especially in this last decade of the twentieth century, when the technological revolution has made the world a ‘global village’. Later in this section, the position and role of minorities in a decolonized, newly independent country is also raised. This question becomes very relevant in the aftermath of the bloodbath of Bosnia Herzegovina and Serbia. The desire of national minorities or ethnic groups to seek independence, a political phenomenon which has increased in the 1990s is reflected in the book, by the struggle of Karens for independence. It is a fact that the Karen army had been fighting against dire odds for fifty years.

A majority of the Karen warriors regarded the war against SLORC as a direct continuation of the war against Japanese. Some Karenni families had been at war for three generations, and many of their fighters had spent their entire lives in refugee camps. The author makes no political comment, he does not glorify the heroic struggle by the ethnic minority, the Karens against the ruling Burmans. Instead he raises several pertinent, political questions, which make this travelogue very intriguing, relevant, gripping and contemporary. For instance he says that the struggle of the Karens raises a fundamental question about how ethnic minorities can be accommodated in a multi-cultural democracy. He recalls an anecdote by Thailand’s monarch king Bhumibol who said that if Burma became democratic it would have the same effect it had in Bosnia, only worse.

The marginalization of an Indian migrant in the Burmese civil war is cleverly shown by Amitav Ghosh as an eminently postmodern encounter. Ghosh brings out the reality through the story of Ko Sonny. He was a regimental
commander with the Karenni insurgents. His real name was Mahinder Singh. His family had been settled in Burma for three generations. His parents were born there: his father was Sikh and his mother Hindu. He was studying physics in the University of Rangoon and was arrested in 1988 and after his release because of police harassment escaped to the border. Sonny’s plight is similar to many student dissidents caught in the throes of civil war. Their hopes and aspirations of a normal career have subsided and they are now full time insurgents. Ghosh shows the social impact of such commitment to a cause, through the misfortune which have occurred to Sonny. His girlfriend, a Burmese in Rangoon, gave up waiting for him and married someone else. In 1994 his mother died of heart attack and he came to know about it months later. After years of fighting, he has limited options and income. The alternatives are either to join the underworld in Thailand or remain in the jungle. The only hope is restoration of democracy and a process of national reconciliation launched by Aung San Suu Kyi, the only figure who has popular support among ethnic Burmans and minorities.

Peaceful resistance to the rule of the Military Junta still continues to be the mainstream of Suu Kyi’s non-confrontist struggle. She holds regular public meetings at her residence in the University Avenue. She answers questions from the public on all subjects ranging from food and health to politics and literature. But it appears to Ghosh that in spite of her mass appeal, SLORC has succeeded in keeping its hold on power as they have succeeded in creating systems of surveillance that are unparalleled in the scope of their inclusiveness. Burma’s military rulers are an exception and that appears to be the reason why they have
been able to hold on so long to power in spite of Suu Kyi’s popular appeal and mass base.

Ghosh introduces his characters also by beginning a new tale about each of them. During the course of this tale, the characters are introduced, their character is built and they are then allowed to narrate another story about their family or village. This helps the author in establishing them as true characters.

It is this quest that is constant in Amitav Ghosh’s Works, even when they seem to cover a wide canvas of genres. From magic realism, through anthropological notes, journalistic essays, and science fiction, to a truly immense historical novel, Ghosh peruses this problematic, how to put the individual back in the center of the narrative even while not negating similar attempts of other individuals. Hence, of the major story tellers of the world, and Amitav Ghosh is a story teller almost equal in Indian English to R.K. Narain, Ghosh is one who will sympathies with the attempts of his characters, however ridiculous they may seem.
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