CHAPTER – II

THE WRITINGS OF AMITAV GHOSH
The writings of Amitav Ghosh are based on the study of the eight books out of the books so far written by the author. The first is a novel named *The Circle of Reason* (1986). The book is about the aesthetic quest necessary for the motivation and survival of the artiste in every soul in an inherently deadening, hostile and uncertain environment. Almost all the major characters in *The Circle of Reason* try to understand and constitute the world and hence motivate their actions through patterning of some kind. In fact the principal quest in the novel seems to be one for the right metaphor.

The novel has three sections Satwa, Rajas and Tamas. The novel begins from Lalpukur where in the family of Balaram and Toru Bose his nephew enters. Balram’s wife Toru Debi brings him when he had lost his mother and father:

Years later – thirteen to be exact when people talked about all that had happened, sitting under the great banyan tree in the center of the village, it was reckoned that the boy’s arrival was the real beginning. Some said they knew the moment they set eyes on that head. That was a little difficult to believe. But, still, it was an extraordinary head – huge, several times too large for an eight-year-old, and curiously uneven, bulging all over with knots and bumps. Someone said: It’s like a rock covered with fungus. But Bolai-da, who had left his cycle-repair shop and chased the rickshaw which was bringing Toru-debi and the boy home from the station, all the way to the house on his bamboo-thin Handy legs, wouldn’t have that. He said at once: No, it’s not like a rock at all.

It’s an alu, a potato, a huge, freshly dug, lumpy potato.
There is description of Balaram’s college life and his friend Gopal and Dantu. We also come to know about Balaram’s hobby to study people by the size of their head’s and his use of Carbolic acid as an antiseptic. We are also introduced with ASP Joyti Das who is the investigating officer to the complaints of Bhudeb Roy against Balaram Bose.

Balaram thinks that it is his moral duty to kill the germs and for this he can do anything:

So Balaram started a campaign. He went around the shanties, warning people of the swift death they were calling on themselves. He called meetings and urged them to contribute what they could to buy carbolic acid. People listened to him, for they knew he was a school master, but hey hesitated. It was not till he started a fund with a bit of his own money that they threw in a few annas and paisas. Soon they had enough to buy a fair quantity of disinfectant. Then, very systematically, with the help of a few volunteers, Balaram began to disinfect every exposed inch of the new settlements.

Balaram is very much fond of the book The Life of Pasteur which was presented to him. This was the only book which provided Balaram with logics to prove his point whenever he needed. One day Balaram’s wife Toru Debi burns all the books in his library but Alu any how succeeds to protect a copy of The Life of Pasteur. Balaram in the book claims that reason and science are universal.
Balaram’s face was suddenly flushed. He jumped to his feet: Be quiet, Gopal. Don’t say anymore. You don’t know what you’re saying: Science doesn’t belong to countries. Reason doesn’t belong to any nation. They belong to history – to the World.

(The Circle of Reason 55)

The role played by the book Life of Pasteur is even more intricate. We are first introduced to it in the text when Balaram, worried about the seeming lack of emotion in Alu, lectures to him about passion. In embarrassment at the boy’s wide-eyed silence which touches him, he reads to Alu from the book and stops there for a moment:

Suddenly Balaram felt himself strongly touched by the boy’s wide-eyed silence. He felt his throat constrict and in embarrassment he reached for the copy of Vallery Radot’s Life of Pasteur which always lay beside his chair. When he stopped and put the book down he saw tears in Alu’s eyes.

(The Circle of Reason 29)

When Toru Debi burns Balaram’s books, Alu retrieves one. Then in a display of emotions and affection he hugs Balaram and gives him the retrieved Life of Pasteur “This time the tears were Balaram’s.” (The Circle of Reasons 34)

The book helps in forging a bond between generations. And the bond extends to a passionate fight against germs the seeming root cause of illness and by extension the ills of society. In this confusion, the cleanliness and purity merge and carbolic acid becomes a weapon not only against infections and diseases but against the wicked, the impure – against all enemies of mankind. Life of Pasteur
inspires a young Balaram’s campaign for clean underwear, as it does his campaign against infectious diseases during the war. The weapon used in the second campaign is then used in his fight against Bhudeb Roy and what he stands for. Balaram, with quite a bit help from Shombhu Debnath, disrupts a public meeting addressed by Bhudeb Roy and clouses him and a few others with carbolic acid. This scene is replayed in the second section of the book named Rajas: passion in al-Ghazira when Hajji Fahmy has Adil the Blue and his cousin to bathe in antiseptic because they were dirty:

The Hajj Said: we won’t have any fighting or beating here. But still, it is true – these men are dirty. They’ve dealt in dirt so long you can see it caked on their skin. Fighting and beating won’t do them any good. What they need is a bath. A good proper bath, with lots of antiseptic to kill all the dirt that’s clinging to them. They’ll bathe themselves – we won’t do anything but watch quietly and then they can go.

(The Circle of Reason 315)

GJV Prasad rightly comments:

The Circle of Reason is not merely circular but a finely patterned novel and when seen as a whole displays the intricate ‘buti work’ of a master weaver in the making. The journey from ‘Satwa’ through ‘Rajas’ to ‘Tamas’, the three parts of the novel, is not a straightforward narrative but one full of resonances harkening back and forth like an unfolding raga circling and repeating notes and sequences of notes, each contextually different.
Ghosh has portrayed beautifully the role of Bhudeb Roy who with the help of his wealth and manpower becomes the supreme power in Lalpukur:

Soon a curious crowd was paying daily court to Bhudeb Roy. He enjoyed it immensely but made sure his men were never too far away to prevent indiscipline. People brought him disputes to settle, questions to answer, and they heard many of his views on the world, but nobody had the courage to put the real question to him.

(The Circle of Reason 93)

But Balaram obsessed with his notion of the superiority of Reason thinks different things. He implies his concept and starts a school. The School of Reason:

The rest of his plans were clear. The School of Reason was to be open to everyone in Lalpukur - to men and women, boys and girls, people of any age at all. The School would have two main departments. After much careful thought Balaram had decided to name one the Department of Pure Reason and the other the Department of Practical Reason.

(The Circle of Reason 107)

The School was taking shape in Balaram's mind but the problem was to choose a perfect name for it. Balaram solves this problem by remembering Louis Pasteur:

So it's all very simple, you see. Balaram said, looking straight into Shombhu Debnath's eyes. Simple and beautiful: Knowledge coupled with labour - and that, too, labour of a kind which
represents the highest achievement of practical reason. Our school will be the perfect embodiment, the essence of reason. And so, naturally, it can only be named after the greatest of all the soldiers of Reason Louis Pasteur.

(The Circle of Reason 109)

Balaram, who talks of reason all the time, practically, seems to lose it himself. It is also ironic that he who swears by science relies on nineteenth century Pseudoscience, Phrenology, which is close to the Indian superstition of popular religion and astrology that he opposes. Pradip Dutta remarks:

His search for a new western vision of reality, reflected in the chapter titled “A Pasteurized Cosmos” brings to mind the Vedic legend of the creation of the world, in which the milk ocean of creation was churned by the gods and demons using a snake to separate poison from the ‘amrit’ (ambrosia).

(The Novels of Amitav Ghosh 46)

There are various instances such as Alu who is running from India to Al-Ghazira through a ship where he meets Zindi, Karthamma and the Ras where he meets Prof. Samuel, Rakesh and Kulfi. In the last section of the novel Alu is in the basement of a huge building when it collapses but anyhow luckily he returns safely with the help of Abul Fahl and Rakesh. All the characters are caught up in a non-productive circle. In addition to all this, there are many physical circles created in the novel. They exhibit various moods and the mental states of different characters. Almost all the major characters of the novel belong to the lower –
middle or middle class. In drawing circles Ghosh brilliantly blends geometry, science, anthropology and philosophy.

It is sure that every author has a creation, which is the best of all his works, can be called his or her inspiration or has an inter-relation with his other works. Amitav Ghosh’s masterpiece and the most celebrated novel *The Shadow Lines* is a book, which won the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award, Anand Puraskar and several other awards. *The Shadow Lines* is a book mainly about human relations and human behaviour as well as it also throws light on political and individual freedom, the partition between two countries and the loss of native land etc.

There are various characters in *The Shadow Lines* including the narrator who is a chain between all the characters. The Grandmother or Thamma (Thakur ma) has her own ideas about culture and freedom. The development and the growth of Thamma’s character encapsulates the futility and the meaninglessness of political freedom which was otherwise supposed to usher in an era of peace and prosperity for all. During the days of her childhood and youth, she had her sympathies with all those who were fighting for the cause of freedom. In fact, she too wanted to earn small portion of the glory enjoyed by some of her classmate ‘terrorists’ by running secret errands for them or even cooking for them and washing their clothes. The aim was to be associated with such a group of persons, actively involved in fighting for a pious cause. In response to a question by the narrator Thamma replies:

She put her hands on my shoulders and holding me in front of her, looked directly at me, her eyes steady, forthright, unwavering. I would have been frightened, she said. But I would have prayed for
strength, and God willing, yes, I would have killed him (The English Magistrate). It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free.

(The Shadow Lines 39)

P.K. Dutta establishes his argument by focusing on the human relationships, which he sees as structured around the different families in the novel:

It is significant that Ghosh does not extend the problems that emerge from the narrator’s social difference with his slum-dwelling refugee aunt. Further, the capacity of the family as an institution to create differences by allowing some members to exercise oppression and control is not something that enters the terms of Ghosh’s enquiry.

(Social Scientist 70)

Despair is the dominant note struck by Amitav Ghosh in The Shadow Lines. The trauma of partition continues through three generations. The agony of displacement, the sense of alienation in the adopted land, the constant dream of return to one’s land is the common theme in this novel. Thamma, the narrator’s grandmother, belongs to the generation that had to uproot itself in 1947. When she is all set to go to Dhaka to rescue her Jethamoshai, she inquires if she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the airplane:

But surely, there’s something — trenches, perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land.... But if there aren’t any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I
mean, where’s the difference then? And if there’s no difference, both sides will be the same; it’ll be just like it used to be before.... what was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything if there isn’t something in between?

(The Shadow Lines 151)

The unnamed narrator of Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines confides to the readers as he narrates humorously the incident of his grandmother’s preparation for her journey to Dhaka, the place of her birth, from Calcutta where she has been living with her childhood days and remembers those days before the partition of Bengal when she should “come home” to Dhaka whenever she wanted without having to fill up forms as she required to do now. Prior to the partition, Grandmother ‘came’ home to Dhaka from wherever she was. Now, it means going to Dhaka, a place she can no longer call home not merely because as usual after marriage, women in India forfeit their claim on their parental homes but also because Dhaka now is bound by frontiers of nationality:

You see, in our family, we don’t know whether we’re coming or going – it’s all my grandmother’s fault. But of course, the fault wasn’t her at all: it lay in language. Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for journey which was not a coming or going at all a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the proper use of verbs of movements.

(The Shadow Lines 153)
The special quality of Ghosh's writing is movement and shifting of events from place to place. There is a lot of movement in the novel, to and from places. Someone or the other keeps going or coming back either literally as in Tridib's case or because of him, the narrator who travels a lot without actually travelling. In fact journeying is the central motif of the novel. Yet it is not as if only the characters keep moving from place to place. The cyclical movement of the narrative, which the narrator manipulates, with the help of the stream of consciousness narrative pattern facilitates the author to handle the movement across time from 1981 back to the 1960s to the 1940s and beyond. The narrator goes into the past not only through 'memory' but gives the 'going to' and 'coming back' a concreteness and credibility which a novel which has sweeping historical events as its backdrop requires. Ghosh employs references to houses, photographs, maps, road names, newspapers, and advertisements to give validity to his perception of the times he is writing about.

In the second section of the book entitled: Coming Home, Ghosh delineates the grandmother's symbolic search for a 'point of fixity'. If Ila goes away from home, the grandmother travels to a home which is no longer home. Dhaka was the ancestral home of Tha'mma and her sister Mayadebi. It was here that they born and brought up. After marriage the two sisters travelled with their families- Mayadebi with her husband on his diplomatic posting abroad and Tha'mma with her family to various Railway colonies in Burma. Although Th'amma has been living in Calcutta for years, it is Dhaka which is her 'home'. And to her, 'coming' and 'going' has been in relation to this 'home'. It is here at home that she has struck her roots.
Tha’mma grew up in a big joint family with everyone living and eating together. But when her grandfather died the ancestral house was partitioned because of the conflict between her father and her uncle. Tha’mma remembers her house in Dhaka with nostalgia although the house in which she lives now is fairly large and comfortable. There’s something missing here, she feels. That house had become ‘home’ for her because it had grown over the years, both physically and in terms of relationships:

It was a very old house. It had evolved slowly, growing like a honeycomb, with every generation of Boses adding layers and extensions, until it was like a huge, lop-sided step-pyramid, inhabited by so many branches of the family that even the most knowledgeable amongst them had become a little confused about their relationships.

(The Shadow Lines 121)

Chronologically, the story begins with a passage of time in colonial India when the narrator was not born. The year 1939 is historically significant for the outbreak of the Second World War and the upheaval caused by that epochal event. The Tridib-May component of the story is told to the narrator, twenty-one years later. Tridib narrates the events to an inquisitive eight year old boy. The romantic relationship that develops through correspondence between May and Tridib is significant. Ghosh explores this mysterious and quaint relationship and the abiding intimacy between the Price family and Tridib’s family. It is seen as transcending the Shadow line of nationality and cultural boundaries. The reality of nationality, cultural segregation and racial discrimination is the central theme of
the novel. The author questions the validity of geographical boundaries and celebrates the union of aliens pulled together by self-propelling empathy and attachment. Tresawsen and Mayadebi, Tridib and May, Jethamoshai and Khalil transcend the prevailing passion of war, hatred and communal acrimony.

This is the hallmark of the novel. It recognizes and acknowledges the violence in our lives. There is state terror; there is majority communalism and minority communalism. The novel makes no distinction, takes no sides. Ghosh shows that even characters like the grandmother and Ila, who do not indulge in violence are on the fringe of it. There is a certain cruelty in the way Ila breaks away from her family to adopt to the more cosmopolitan life style of London. The quest for freedom and its meaning makes the novel very contemporary.

Amitav Ghosh also very sensitively handles the complexities of majority and minority communalism. The narrator remembers that the school bus was nearly empty because of a rumour circulated that the whole of Calcutta’s water supply was poisoned. The dozen odd schoolboys in the bus do not doubt or question the authenticity of the information. Even the young minds were conditioned to assume and believe that it was ‘they’, the Muslims, who had poisoned the water. Amitav Ghosh with his sensitive use of language and unique narrative technique highlights that such irrational behaviour was not confined to that particular incident. He shows that in the highly surcharged atmosphere of suspicion and distrust, rumour has become institutionalized. The narrator is recalling these events much later as a research student in the 1990s. The author very subtly conveys that events in the novel are also contemporaneous and can be linked to many incidents in the 1980’s.
The Calcutta Chromosome, written by Amitav Ghosh in 1996 has a totally different approach and content in comparison to his other fictional works. The novel reflects the quality as well as specialty of Ghosh as a master of suspense and thrilling episodes which are created very beautifully. The fantastic world of the novel presents a process of various thematic and technical experimentations and innovation. The Calcutta Chromosome has a subheading, which is ‘A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery’. Ghosh raises many questions regarding ‘Fevers, delirium and Discovery’ and to make the answers comprehensible to the reader, the writer plays with time, space and the story line.

The novel by Ghosh in the first time reading proves to be a scientific thriller but in the second time we can realize that it is not a mere scientific thriller but a novel about many mysteries of life and the many deep seated cravings of man in general. In a Scientific thriller, everything is resolved satisfactorily at the close of the novel but in The Calcutta Chromosome the theme of search for ‘immortality’ moves through a never-ending line of female characters. Mangala, Mrs. Aratounian, Urmila, Tara and one also hopes to meet many more Laakhans, Murugans and Antars through the ages. Indira Bhatt rightly point out:

Ghosh has manipulated the time span as an exploitation of relation between antecedent and present, between the time span of that is told and the time it takes to tell, between narrated time and narrational time, between matters attended to scenically and in detail and matter scanted or sketched.

(The Novels of Amitav Ghosh 237)
The novel opens with the description of AVA, a computer which was in Antar's house and it take's us to Murugan, Sonali Das, Urmila, Phulboni and to the British period where the researchers were trying hard to find a vaccine for the cure of Malaria. They were trying the well-equipped Indian laboratory where D.D. Cunningham and noble winner Ross were working on it. The opening pages of the novel beautifully introduce us to a character named Murugan:

It began to appear, a few second later, slowly, letter by letter, and then suddenly Antar knew. Already, where there were no more than four letters infront of him, he had darted over to Ava’s keyboard and fed it in, along with a search command. The name was L. Murugan. (The Calcutta Chromosome 18)

Ghosh also takes us to the past and tell us that it was first time in the world when someone discovered that mosquitoes cause Malaria, and the place was Calcutta in India. He beautifully describes in his own way:

Walking past St. Paul’s Cathedral, on his first day in Calcutta, August 20, 1995, Murugan was caught unawares by a monsoon downpour. He was on his way to the presidency General Hospital on lower circular road, to look for the memorial to the British scientist Ronald Ross. It was an arch, built into the hospital’s perimeter wall, near the site of Ross’s old Laboratory. It had a medallion with a portrait and an inscription that said: 'In the small laboratory seventy yards to the southeast of this gate surgeon - major Ronald Ross L.M.S. in 1898 discovered the manner in which malaria is conveyed by mosquitoes.
Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* is not limited to a short period but covers a period of around 150-200 years. The main narrative of the novel involves examination of the history of late nineteenth-century malaria research by a possibly deranged Calcutta-born man named Murugan (also known as Morgan) who works for an international public health company called Life Watch and uses an Americanized slang register, which characterizes him as a Diaspora subject. Murugan has had a lifelong obsession with the history of Malaria research, which has led him to the conviction that Ronald Ross, the British scientist who was awarded the 1902 Noble Prize for medicine for his work on the life cycle of the malaria parasite which four years earlier had isolated how the disease is transmitted, was not a ‘lone genius’, a brilliant British dilettante who outstripped all of the contemporary scientists in the field. Murugan believes there is a secret history that has been erased from the scribal records of the colonial society and from medical historiography more generally. Murugan has devoted himself to uncovering the hidden truth. Murugan shares his ideas with Antar:

*He* (Patrick Manson) doesn’t have time to do the work himself so he’s looking for someone to carry the torch for Queen and Empire. Guess who walks in? Ronnie Ross. Trouble is Ronnie’s not exactly a front-runner at this point. In fact the century’s biggest breakthrough in malaria research has happened recently but it’s passed Ronnie by way back in the 1840s a guy called Meckel found microscopic granules of black pigment in the organ of malaria
patients black spots, some round, some crescent shaped, tucked inside tiny masses of protoplasm.

(The Calcutta Chromosome 59)

There are references of Urmila and Sonali who are working for the Calcutta Magazine and are linked with all this in some way or the other. Urmila reminds Sonali about Phulboni the writer who in his youth worked in Renupur district for some time and has some link with a person named Laakhan who according to Phulboni was present at the time when he was been attacked in the station. Phulboni then wrote a set of stories:

I've been doing a little research, Urmila said to Sonali, and I've discovered that where Phulboni was a young man he wrote a set of stories. They were published in an obscure little magazine and have never been reprinted. I managed to find the right issue in the National Library. I've never even heard of them, said Sonali. Well, the stories are very short and they all feature a character called Lakhan, Urmila said. In one he's a postman, in another he's a village schoolmaster, something else in another.

(The Calcutta Chromosome 93)

Versed in medical journalism, in The Calcutta Chromosome, Ghosh embarks an arduous explanation of chromosomes and their functions. At full speed in this breakneck rom through medical discoveries, folk rituals, murders, hallucinations, transmigrating souls, and scary panoptical computers owned by the futuristic mega corporations, we encounter a syphilitic homeless woman, Mangala, an untrained genius who, in pursuit of the little known scientific discovery that the
malaria bug could be used to regenerate decaying brain tissue in the last stages of syphilis, stumble upon a DNA conglomerate that she cannot name and that is *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Ghosh through Murugan discloses here that why has he chosen the name of the book *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Murugan tells to Urmila about what he had discovered in context of Ross and his competitors:

> What am I saying? Well, what I’m saying is this: I think Mangala stumbled on something that neither she nor Ronnie Ross nor any scientist of that time would have had a name for. For the sake of argument let’s call it a chromosome: though the whole point of this is that if it is really a chromosome, it’s only by extension so to speak—by analogy. Because what we’re talking about here is an item that is to the standard Mendelian pantheon of twenty-three chromosomes what Ganesh is to the gods, that is, different, non-standard, unique—which is exactly why it eludes standard techniques of research. And which is why I call it the *Calcutta Chromosome*.

*(The Calcutta Chromosome 206)*

The most interesting part of Ghosh’s writing in the novel is that the villagers Laakhan and Mangala prove their dominance all over the novel. They control Ross and D.D. Cunningham and these British scientists act as a puppet in their hands. In a tragic incident Farley who suspected and was about to know the game of Mangala and Laakhan disappears and is never seen again. Ghosh describes Mangala in a very beautiful way:

> Murugan shrugged. Similar things have been known to happen, he said. Think of Ramanujan, the mathematician, down in Madras. He
went ahead and re-invented a fair hunk of modern mathematics just because nobody had told him that it had already been done. And with Mangala we're not talking about mathematics: we're talking about microscopy which was still an artisanal kind of skill at that time. Real talent could take you a long way in it – Ronnie Ross's career is living proof of that. With this woman we're talking about a whole lot more than just talent, we may be talking genius here. You also have to remember that she wasn’t hampered by the sort of stuff that might slow down someone who was conventionally trained: she wasn’t carrying a shit – load of theory in her head, she didn’t have to write papers or construct proofs. Unlike Ross she didn’t need to read a zoological study to see that there was a difference between Culex and Anopheles.

(The Calcutta Chromosome 202 – 03)

Ghosh in his scientific fiction reveals that Ronald Ross never knew and felt that illiterate villagers have guided him:

That’s probably why she got behind Ronnie Ross and started pushing him towards the finish line. She was working towards something altogether different. and she’d begun to believe that the only way she was going to make her final breakthrough was by getting Ronnie Ross to make his. She had bigger things in mind than the malaria bug.

(The Calcutta Chromosome 203)
The book ends with so many incidents and accidents with some puzzles unsolved. One of these is about Laakhan the boy who lived in the signal room in Renupur Railway Station. Laakhan is always present whenever accidents take place in that area such as the death of a Stationmaster and at the time of attack on Phulboni the writer. Each major character in the novel is haunted by a secret that links him or her to the vital Calcutta Chromosome mystery. Mangala and Murgan are syphilitics; the alluring Sonali is in search of her natural father, Phulboni for immortality as a writer and so on. These investments turn the larger postcolonial epistemological ventures into tales of personal sustenance. The familiar other beckons the detective, the journalist, the writer and the missionary to a large ethical quest. Each Character is not just haunted by a ghost but by someone else who is besieged by ghosts.

Amitav Ghosh’s next novel *The Glass Palace* (2000) has a totally different theme and treatment in comparison to previous novels as well as it is one of the lengthiest novels of Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh in this novel displays his qualities of an author who has much to do with history and the events of past with records. Ghosh took five years to write *The Glass Palace*. Amitav Ghosh read hundreds of books, memories, travelogues, gazetteers, articles and notebooks published and unpublished while writing the novel. He traveled thousands of miles, visited and re-visited, so far as possible, all the settings and locations that figures in this novel. He sought out scores of people in India, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand.

Amitav Ghosh’s father late Lieutenant Colonel Shailendra Chandra Ghosh fought in the Second World War as an officer of the 12th Frontier Force Regiment, a unit of the then British - Indian Army. He was in General Slim’s Fourteenth
Army during the Burma Campaign of 1945 and was twice mentioned in
dispatches: he was thus among those 'loyal' Indians who found themselves across
the lines from the 'traitors' of the Indian National Army. He died in February 1998
and never saw any part of his manuscript. In his absence Ghosh felt how deeply
his book was rooted in his experience, his reflection on the war and his self-
questioning.

The Glass Palace is a clear-cut example of Amitav Ghosh's writing which
reveals that how much labour, traveling and research are the part of his writing.
After arranging the matter and linking it to history Ghosh has been able to create a
543 pages book, a book which took a very long period of five years to take shape.
The novel is based on the military career of the writer's father and an uncle's life
as a trader in Burma. It covers the interconnected experience of three families in
Burma, India and British Malaya from 1885 to the present.

As we discuss about the writings of Ghosh's eight books including fictional
and non-fictional works at the same time we are making an attempt to find out
why Ghosh uses uncommon title for his books. The Glass Palace is such a title that
one may think its story might be centered to a Palace or any kingdom but it's not.
There are references about the fall of the Burmese Kingdom and the British
invasion in which Indian soldiers participate actively from the British side. The
main story line moves around many characters present in various places, which
provide motion to the novel.

The Glass Palace begins with the description of a food stall of Ma Cho near
the western wall of Mandalay's fort where an eleven-year-old orphan boy
Rajkumar worked. He was well known as Kalaa from across the sea -- an Indian.
Rajkumar worked on a boat as a helper and the boat owner was busy for a month and couldn’t afford to feed his crew that long so he decided to leave his workers to find their job for a month. Ma Cho an half Indian woman who ran a food stall there said Rajkumar to work but also told him that he will only get three meals and a place to sleep. She gave him the job to carry bowls of soup and noodles to customers. On the far side of the bridge there was the great golden hti of Burma’s kings. Under the spire lay the throne room of the palace, where Thebaw, king of Burma, held court with his chief consort, queen Supaylat.

Ghosh has described very beautifully the inner scene of *The Glass Palace*, but the reference of *The Glass Palace* comes only twice in the whole book. Ghosh has minutely taken care about each and every detail and when we read we feel as if we were presently watching it. Ma Cho in reply to curious Rajkumar tells about it:

It’s very large, much larger that it looks. It’s a city in itself, with long roads and canals and gardens. First you come to the house of officials and noblemen. And then you find yourself in front of a stockade, made of huge teakwood pasts. Beyond the apartments of the Royal family and their servants – hundreds and hundreds of rooms, with gilded pillars and polished floors. And right at the centre there is a vast hall that is like a great shaft of light, with shining crystal walls and mirrored ceilings. People call it *The Glass Palace*.

(*The Glass Palace* 7)
There is the description of Saya John, a teak trader who delivered supplies to teak camps. He used to come to Ma Cho’s stall at night or whenever he had spare time from his work. Rajkumar noticed the illegal relationship between him and Ma Cho. Sometimes he came with his son. His clothes were those of a European and he seemed to know Hindustani. His son Matthew was a seven-year-old child but talked in a way that a boy of fifteen or sixteen years does. He had a dream to buy a Motor Wagon, which he told to Rajkumar. He was hugely impressed that a child of that age could know his mind so well on such a strange subject.

Rajkumar's father, his brothers, sister and mother died of fever. Only Rajkumar survived. Ghosh portrays him as a boy of strong will to live. He was from a rich family where everything was available for them, but now he had to work and eat. He had a never-ending spirit to fight the complexities of life:

At daybreak the Sampan stopped at a sand bar and the crew helped Rajkumar build a pyre for his mother’s cremation. Rajkumar’s hands began to shake when he put fire in her mouth. He, who had been so rich in family, was alone now, with a Khalasi’s apprenticeship for his inheritance. But he was not afraid, not for a moment. His was the sadness of regret that they had left him so soon, so early without tasting the wealth or the rewards that he knew, with utter certainty, would one day be his.

(The Glass Palace 14)

The glimpses of prejudice are also present in the novel when being an Indian people attack Rajkumar when they know that there is a majority of Indian
sepoys in the British army that is attacking the Royal army of King Thebaw. Surrounded by mob Rajkumar utters that they are not English soldiers they are Indians. Then questions began and people asked turn by turn who are they? What are they doing? Etc. I don’t know was his reply and they started beating him mercilessly but ultimately Saya John who was raising a small, blunt-nosed pistol in his hand saved him miraculously. But this incident proved a lesson to Rajkumar in such a way that he decided to control his tongue before speaking anything in a land where he was all alone.

Amitav Ghosh portrays the greed of common people very beautifully. The time comes when Burma went totally in the control of British Army and the sepoys started looting the palace. The local crowd also not wanted to miss this golden opportunity so they started their actions keeping the knowledge in mind that their king had surrendered and there’s nobody to punish them when they enter the big and heavy gates of the palace. In a similar incident when the mob was taking teakwood frames, chairs, silver and oil lamps etc. Ma Cho also enters there where he faces Queen Supayalat who now was a queen for name only, without any powers in her hand:

There was a woman inside, standing by the latticed window in the far corner. Ma Cho gasped Queen Supayalat! The Queen was screaming, shaking her fist ‘Get out of here. Get out’. Her face was red, mottled with rage, her fury caused as much by her own importance as by the presence of the mob in the palace. A day before, she could have had a commoner imprisoned for so much as looking her directly in the face.
Fiction, at its best, provides us with ‘addresses’ for the lost actors in the historical chronicle. By dwelling on small details and bestowing on ordinary lives an attention that the historian’s stricter annals cannot afford, a writer creates an interior history. Such an internalized record of emotions runs parallel to explicit factual accounts and fills them out. At this elusive juncture, story meets history and makes it a little more comprehensible. A genre like novel especially is suited to the task of bringing content back to those empty frames from which colonial subject is always vanishing.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair rightly comments on Ghosh’s writing:

Ghosh’s technique is simply to borrow the war journalist’s tripod, lenses and so forth and then swivel his view finder so that it alights on families living out their in tumultuous times. It just happens that the subjects of his current book (The Glass Palace) are Burmese citizens, but one can easily imagine Ghosh ‘Photographing’ Afghan refugees or Kashmiri pandits using the same documentary method. Indeed, he has used the strategy with success in several previous works – dealing, for example, with the enigma of divided Bengal in The Shadow Lines or establishing homely connections with a conventionally ‘exotic’ Egypt in In an Antique Land.

(Amitav Ghosh A Critical Companion 164)

Non-Fictional Works

Amitav Ghosh’s In an Antique Land (1993) is very well known work of his art. The present study deals this book as non-fictional work because it is, after
reading, clear that the book reflects Ghosh's rare talent of presenting non-fictional as a fictional art and it cannot be purely read as a fictional piece of work. The reason behind this is that so many techniques and devices are used by Ghosh such as fiction, history, travel – writing, his experience and anthropology etc. all these different things join together to create In an Antique Land. It would be easier to understand in the words of Bharati A Parikh:

*In an Antique Land* is a unique experiment in writing. It can be read at different levels, a work of History or Anthropology, or a travelogue. Amitav Ghosh creates an authentic world. In this way *In an Antique Land* attains the supreme intellectual synthesis.

(The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh 157)

*In an Antique Land* gives us a moment of being proud as it gives a glimpse of India's sea faring merchants, their adventurous spirit and their encounter with several countries. We can find history, geography, voyages, trade, adventure, magic, memory and multiple points of view in this book. Ghosh brings in his memory of his childhood experience or riots in Dhaka and the present predicament of Iraq war of 1990. The indigenous culture of Jews migrated from Tunisia, settled in Africa in the twelfth century is at the core of the book.

Structurally *In an Antique Land* is divided into six parts, beginning with the prologue and closing with the Epilogue. The rest of the parts consists of 'Latifia' with twelve chapters, 'Nashawy' contains seventeen chapters and the third part entitled 'Mangalore' has ten chapters and the last section 'Going Back' has seven chapters. Thus, within various geographical boundaries of Egypt, Aden,
and Mangalore, Tunisia and in modern times between India and the U.S.A. the action of the narrative is spread out. Middle Ages, as well as the 20th century are the focus of the novel. Thus the time span extends from 1132 AD to 1990, and the picture evoked is more than eight hundred years of history.

We can find several characters, many dramatic moments, both in the historical past and immediate past. Ghosh in the course of his study, visits the ancient cities of Cairo, Alexandria, and lived in Nashawy and Lataifa. His close contact with the rustic people of Egypt gives him an insight into human nature. Every time India is mentioned he is on the defensive; a very natural response when one is a cultural ambassador of one’s country. Several customs, encounter with inquisitive people in the countryside in Egypt, his visit to Cambridge University Library, U.K., make Ghosh more intent on finding the whereabouts of Bomma, the slave of Ben Yiju. More interesting is the fact that Ben Yiju was a Jewish trader from Tunisia who went to Aden and then settled in Mangalore, India, for seventeen long years. Here he had his business agent, member of the household, Bomma, who went to Aden on his behalf with his consignments.

In an Antique Land is not a novel like The Circle of Reason and The Shadow Lines. Amitav Ghosh himself admits in an interview with a Bengali daily Ananda Bazar Patrika:

No. this time I am not writing a novel. Not even sociology, history or belles – letters based on historical research. My new book cannot be described as anyone of these. It’s a strange sort of work. Within the parameters of history, I have tried to capture a story, a narrative,
without attempting to write a historical novel. You may say, as a writer, I have faced a technical challenge.

(Ananda Bazar Patrika 4)

The three stories interpenetrate and form an intricate texture. It makes the conscious reader alert. One has to pause and ponder which level of the narrative serves as the functional devices. It is almost a circular journey. En route, the past easily infiltrates into the present and vice versa. There is an expansion of time, place and persons, but the bonds of interconnections between the varied events in the book never slacken. The reason behind this is that in the first person narrative, the "I" is not simply a narrator or a chronicle but a witness and a participant as well: the all-pervasive presence of this "I" has tied together all the facts and events in the book.

The story begins with the prologue and in the prologue itself the author describes the entire frame-work of the book. He writes:

I came upon professor Goiteins book of translations in a library in Oxford in the winter of 1978. I was a student, twenty-two years old, and I had recently won a scholarship awarded by a foundation established by a family of expatriate Indians. It was only a few months since I had left India and so I was perhaps a little more befuddled by my situation than students usually are. At that moment the only thing I knew about my future was that I was expected to do research leading towards a doctorate in social anthropology. I had never heard of the Cairo Geniza before that day, but within a few months I was in Tunisia, learning Arabic.
During his stay at Abu – ‘Ali’s house, the author comes into contact with an elderly man called Shaikh Musa who is a friend, Philosopher and guide. Throughout his research Shaikh Musa and his family are kind and warm towards the writer. Shaikh Musa’s two sons Ahmed and Hasan are two contrasted characters in their choice of occupation and in their way of life. Hasan’s character represents the change of attitudes after education and the Revolution:

Ahmed worked as a clerk in a factory near Damanhour, and he was thus counted as a mowazzaf, an educated, salaried man, and like all such people in the village, his clothes, his speech, his amusements and concerns, were markedly different from those of the fellaheen. Hasan, on the other hand, fell on his father’s side of that divide, and it was easy to see that their shared view of the world formed a special bond between them.

At one level, the first section of In an Antique Land gives us the information regarding the social and cultural history of Egypt and at another level it provides us the information about Geniza synagogue – the historical storehouses. The second section called ‘Nashawy’ describes Ghosh’s visit to Lataifa after eight years. It is a story of social and cultural changes during these eight years, as Shaikh Musa Says:

Everything’s changed in all these years that you’ve been away, said Shaikh Musa. All this time I used to say to myself, the doctor will
come back one day, he will come back soon, every one comes back to Masr; they have to because Masr is the Mother of the world.

(In an Antique Land 115)

The second section also describes the two cousins’ contrasted characters – Nabeel and Isma’il. Ghosh meets them for the first time when they were students of an agricultural training college in Damanhour. Both of them wanted to become officers in the Nashawy co-operative since their boyhood. Both Nabeel and Isma’il are fine young men, rational and individual in their thinking. They can interpret life with clarity and they have a bright vision of life. Both respect Ustaz Sabry, an intelligent teacher and thinker rather than Imam Ibrahim – an orthodox thinker of religion. Ismail describes an incident of Ustaz Sabry’s art of disputation. He narrates an argument he had once with an East German, a communist military expert who was attached to their unit. This incident focuses on Ismai’l’s faith in the rational attitude to life:

Do you believe in God? The German had asked, and when Ustaz Sabry answered yes, he certainly did, the German replied: so then where is he, show me?

Ustaz Sabry countered by asking him a question in turn. ‘Tell me’, he said, do you believe that people have a spirit, the spirit of life itself? ‘yes’, the German answered, so then Ustaz Sabry said to him: ‘Where is this Spirit, can you show it to me?

It is in no one place, the German replied. ‘it is everywhere – in the body, the head…’

And that, Ustaz Sabry said, ‘is exactly where God is’.
Nabeel, being a sensitive boy, hates his family’s poverty and is determined to escape his poverty and his family’s condition. The history of both Nabeel and Ghosh remains the same. Both are the victims of political and social unrest. Both shared the same emotional phenomena. As the author describes it:

The stories of those riots are always the same: tales that grow out of an explosive barrier of symbols — of cities going up in flames because of a cow found dead in a temple or a pig in a mosque; of people killed for wearing a lungi or dhoti, depending on where they find themselves; of women disembowelled for wearing veils or vermilion, of men dismembered for the state of their foreskins. The fact was that despite the occasional storms and turbulence their country had seen, despite even the wars that some of them had fought in, theirs was a world that was far gentler, far less violent, very much more humane and innocent than mine.

Ghosh and Nabeel both have some major things common in them. Both do not know the causes of unrest, yet they are innocent victims of unrest and historical changes. Ghosh is a victim of partition and Nabeel is a victim of the Gulf war.

The third section of the book has a great deal of difference in comparison to the previous two sections. The first two sections of the novel deals with the cultural and social changes in Egypt but the entire third section named Mangalore deals with Ben Yiju’s seventeen year stay in India. Ben Yiju’s marriage with a
Nair woman Ashu, his fatherhood, the story of his misfortunes (the death of his first son) and his return to Egypt, with his Indian slave Bomma are the main events of this section. Like earlier sections, this section too, is remarkable for Ghosh’s deep insight into history. The section begins with the geographical description of Mangalore and it also focuses on its language and customs:

The Language of Mangalore is called Tulu, and it is one of the five siblings of the Dravidian family of languages; it is rich in folk traditions and oral literature but it does not possess a script of its own and is usually transcribed in Kannada. It is this language that has given the area around Mangalore its name, Tulunad: like so many other parts of the subcontinent it forms a cultural area which is distinctive and singular, while being at the same time closely enmeshed with its neighbours in an intricate network of difference. (In an Antique Land 244)

The last section, as the title indicates ‘Going Back’, completes the author’s search at two levels – his search for Bomma’s life at one level and his search for the cultural and social conditions of Egypt and India, at another level. This section describes the condition of Egypt in 1988 – after the Gulf war. The scientific inventions have brought a complete change in all walks of life. Now the people of Egypt are not dependent only on land. The younger generation has migrated from Egypt for job opportunities. Nabeel and Ismail who dreamt of setting in Egypt have also gone to Iraq. Nabeel ‘who always wanted a job where he couldn’t have to get his hands dirty’ has migrated from his own country. Except Shaikh Musa’s house all the houses have a refrigerator and a television set.
The story of Egypt's development begins with the descriptions of 'the mud walls' at Abu - Ali's house and ends with the introduction of all sorts of comforts and luxuries. The 'mud wall houses' are now turned into luxurious three storied buildings. Nabeel, Ismai'l Mabrouk - Shaikh Musa's nephew had a dream to remove the pains and hardships of their families. Due to this reason they have to leave their homeland:

The flow had started in the early 1980's, a couple of years after the beginning of the war between Iraq and Iran, by then Iraq's own men were all tied up on one front or another, in Iran or Kurdistan, and it was desperately in need of labour to sustain its economy. For several years around that time it had been very easy for an Egyptian to find a job there; recruiters and contractors had gone from village to village looking for young men who were willing to work 'outside'. People had left in truck - loads: it was said at one time that there were may be two or three million Egyptian workers in Iraq, as much as a sixth of that country's population. It was as if the two nations had dissolved into each other.

(In An Antique Land 293)

Nabeel has gone to Iraq to earn money with a dream to provide comforts and happiness to his family. But he has to pay a great price for this noble cause. His dream is fulfilled; but he has to sacrifice his life - an innocent young man's sacrifice.

Thus, In An Antique Land is a beautiful study of the effect of socio - political changes on ordinary men's life. The study of Ben Yiju and Bomma's life is only an apparent theme of the book. On the contrary Ghosh describes the history of any developing country like Egypt or India. Nabeel is a representative of all
Young men of developing countries, full of dream that is lost in the passage of time. Ghosh ends the book questioning the relevance of wars, the lessons from history and the aim of our life. He also asks us what we are looking for. Peace, comfort or happiness? Ghosh's final question to his readers is what is the meaning of civilization?

The next non-fictional work by Ghosh is *Dancing in Cambodia, At large in Burma* (1998). The book gives a rather misleading impression to the reader who glances at its title. It seems that it is Ghosh's narrative description of his travels through these two countries after they achieved independence from their colonial rulers. But as we progress along, the first impression soon gives way to a serious realization that the book defies conventional literary classification of a 'travelogue' or 'travel-story.' D.K. Pabby expresses his views regarding the book in the following manner:

It is an imaginative rendering of complex responses of a scholarly researcher and sensitive writer of the organizing process of the evolving of a nation for two South Asian countries Cambodia and Burma in their Post-Colonial phase. These responses make no doubt, a fascinating reading having been rendered in elegant and rhythmic prose revealing the harsh realities of the political, socio-political, socio-cultural, economic and ethno-reginal problems that these countries were confronted with after throwing off the yokes of slavery.

*(The Novels of Amitav Ghosh 275)*
These countries are still grappling with the problem of evolution of their distinct national identities; and the writer appears to hold a mirror to the other nation-states in the region and the continent. This thought provoking and disturbing book is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 “Dancing in Cambodia” appeared in a shorter version in *Granta* 44, Summer 1993; Chapter 2 “Stories in Stones” in *The Observer Magazine*, 16 January 1994 and the Chapter 3 “At large in Burma” appeared in *The New Yorker*, 12 August 1996. The first and the third chapters are covered in about fifty pages each and the middle one is genuinely sandwiched into only eleven pages.

Chapter one “Dancing in Cambodia” starts with an anthropological description of the sea journey of King Sisowath along with his entourage of several dozen princes, courtiers, and officials and most importantly a troop of nearly a hundred classical dancers and musicians from the royal palace at Phnom Penh. For the king, the journey has started on 10 May 1906, at two in the afternoon; aboard a French liner called Amiral – Kersaint, was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream and desire to visit France. For others it was a cherished opportunity to step out of their own land and to stage the first ever performance of Cambodian classical dance in Europe, at the Exposition Colonial in Marseille, an immense fairyland of an exhibition centered on the theme of France's colonial possessions. The ‘colonised’ situation of the dancers is sensitively portrayed in these tantalizing snippets of information of which the Marseille newspapers were often full:

It was said that the dancers entered the palace as children and spent their lives in seclusion ever afterwards; their life’s revolved entirely around the royal family: that several were the King’s mistresses and
had even borne him children; that some of them had never stepped out of the palace grounds until this trip to France. European travellers went to great lengths to procure invitations to see these fabulous recluses performing in the palace at Phnom Penh: now they were here in Marseille, visiting Europe for the very first time.

(Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma 3)

Accompanying these smart dancers, as their supervisor and head, was the eldest of the King’s daughters, princess Soumphady, whose royal manners and style of dress had an electrifying effect on the Marseillias crowd. Though she admired very enthusiastically the clothes and hats of the French women, yet she politely declined the suggestion to wear clothes like those. This was perhaps an indication of the sense of pride that she and other Cambodian women felt about their distinctive attire suited for their variety of dances. Ghosh learns the remaining story of king Sisowath and Princess Soumphady’s 1906 journey to France through Chea Samy, a sister-in-law of Pol Pot, and a teacher at the School of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, in 1993. The car-journey with his friend Moylka who was a mid-level civil servant and a poised, attractive woman in her early thirties, was quite a hazardous one, as it was four months before the country-wide elections to be held under the auspices of United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia. The personal interview and encounter with Chea Samy reveals the latter’s connection with the royal palace as also with the renowned revolutionary Pol Pot who never showed any favours to his relatives during the period of his rule. Amitav ghosh describes the situation thus:
Chea Samy was working in a communal kitchen at the time, cooking and washing dishes. Late that year some party workers stuck a poster on the walls of the kitchen: they said it was a picture of their leader, Pol Pot. She knew who it was the moment she set eyes on the picture. That was how she discovered that the leader of the terrifying, inscrutable ‘Organisation’, Angkar, that ruled their lives, was none other than little Saloth Sar (Pol Pot).

(Dancing in Cambodia. At Large in Burma 14)

Pol Pot came to power in 1975 and quickly set about transforming the country into his vision of an agrarian utopia by emptying cities, abolishing money, private property and religion and setting up rural collectives. Pol Pot became notorious by ruthlessly trying to impose his vision of a perfect society. He was considered the architect of Cambodia’s brutal killing field’s regime and has been held responsible for the deaths of two million Cambodians, in his attempt to turn the country into an agrarian Maoist Utopia between 1975 and 1979. Such is his infamy that even after his death people of almost all the world thought only one thing. ‘a time to remember his murderous reign of terror and to pursue justice against other Khmer Rouge leaders who share the guilt’ Weeks before his death, the USA has sought Chinese help to put Pol Pot on trial.

Pol Pot’s vision of social utopia was influenced by his life with hill tribes in remote northeastern Cambodia. These original Khmers were self-sufficient in their communal living, had no use of money and were untainted by Buddhism. In the opening section of his travelogue, Ghosh shows how Pol Pot and his associates targeted the middle class in their attempts at social engineering. Again, Ghosh
brings variety to his narration by the manner in which he depicts the uprooting of the middle classes. Ghosh here presents the example of his friend Molyka who was a mid-level civil servant. Her family was from the social group that was hardest hit by the revolution, the urban middle class. Molyka as a thirteen-year-old was evacuated with her whole extended family, fourteen in all, to a labour camp in the province of Kampong Thom. This was part of the process of re-education and social cleansing. She was separated from the others and sent to work in a fishing village, on Cambodia’s immense freshwater lake, the Tonle Sap. She worked as a servant and nursemaid for a family of fisher folk. She did not return to Phnom Penh till 1979 when the Vietnamese over-ran the Khmer Rouge of the fourteen people from her family who had been evacuated, ten were dead.

Using the example of a colleague and friend, Ghosh generalizes on the plight of the urban middleclass:

City people by definition, they were herded into rural work-camps; the institutions and forms of knowledge that sustained them were abolished - the judicial system was dismantled, the practice of formal medicine was discontinued, schools and colleges were shut down, banks and credits were done away with; indeed the very institution of money, and even the exchange of goods and services, was banned.

*(Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma)*

Using examples from history, Amitav Ghosh shows that no previous regime had made such systematic and sustained attacks on the middle class. Ghosh also related Cambodia’s civil war to contemporary politics. He expresses the view
that Cambodia's situation was different in comparison to other countries and there was not a civil war in the same sense as Somalia's or the former Yugoslavia's. Fought over the fetishism of small differences: it was a war on history itself, an experiment in the re-invention of society.

Conversing with the people who relate anecdotes about their family history, is another device used by Ghosh to convey his impressions. It also gives the discourse, the form of a story. For instance, Ghosh learns various things when he interviewed Chea Samy. Very strangely he knows that she also had worked like other people:

In 1975 when the Khmer Rouge seized power Chea Samy and her husband were evacuated like everyone else. They were sent off to a village of 'old people', long time Khmer Rouge sympathizers, and along with all the other 'new people', were made to work in the rice-fields. For the next couple of years there was a complete news blackout and they knew nothing of what had happened and who had come to power: it was a part of the Khmer Rouge's mechanics of terror to deprive the population of knowledge.

*(Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma 14)*

After 'breaking' of Cambodia by the Vietnamese in 1979, the country became like a shattered slate. In the post-revolution period the Ministry of Culture launched an effort to locate the classical dancers and teachers who had survived. As if to reinforce the significant role of culture and art in the process of national reconstruction even in the most trying circumstances. Amitav Ghosh expresses this as following:
Like everyone around her, Chea Samy too had started all over again—at the age of sixty, with her health shattered by the years of famine and hard labour. Working with quiet, dogged persistence, she and a handful of other dancers and musicians slowly brought together a ragged, half-starved bunch of orphans and castaways, and with the discipline of their long, rigorous years of training they began to resurrect the art that Princess Soumphady and Luk Khun Meak had passed on to them in that long-ago world, when King Sisowath reigned. Out of the ruins around them they began to create the means of denying Pol Pot his victory.

(Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma 18)

In the second chapter entitled ‘Stories in Stones’ Amitav Ghosh explores the significance of an important cultural symbol of the twelfth century temple ‘Angkor Wat’ in the cultural life and ethos of Cambodia. Speaking of Angkor Wat as ‘a monument to the power of the story,’ Ghosh writes:

This is true in a perfectly literal sense: with every step a visitor takes in this immense, twelfth century Cambodian temple he finds himself moving counters in a gigantic abacus of story-telling. The device is a vast one—it is said to be the largest single religious edifice in the world—and it provides its own setting as well as a cast of galactic dimensions. The setting is Mt. Meru, the sacred mountain of ancient Indian myth, whose seven carefully graded tiers provide the blueprint for the temple’s form. The cast is the entire pantheon of gods, deities, sages and prophets with which that cosmos is peopled.
The third and the concluding chapter of Amitav Ghosh's book is "At Large in Burma". The section starts on a nostalgic note. By use of the memory technique, Ghosh recalls the childhood tales he had heard about Burma. He confirms that his interest in Burma developed through the tales narrated by his aunt and her husband, nicknamed "Prince". As an anthropologist, Ghosh relates this story telling to an Indian tradition:

Like many Indians I grew up on stories of other countries: Places my parents and relatives had lived in or visited before the birth of the Republic of India, in 1947. To me, the most intriguing of these stories were those that my family carried out of Burma. I suspect that this was partly because Burma had become a kind of lost world in the early 60's when I was old enough to listen to my relatives' stories. It was in 1962 that General Ne Win, the man who would be Burma's longtime dictator, seized power in a coup. Almost immediately, he slammed the shutters and switched off the lights. Burma became the dark house of the neighbourhood, huddled behind an impenetrable, overgrown fence. It was to remain shuttered for almost three decades.

Ghosh's uncle nicknamed 'Prince' left Burma for Calcutta in 1942, in the last, panic stricken weeks before the Japanese Army marched into Rangoon. Though Prince spoke nostalgically about the magnificence of Burma and called it, 'the richest country in Asia except for Japan where people were very generous and
hospitable to the strangers, the author discovered the harsh reality that ‘Burmese nationalism practically started with anti-Indian riots.’

Very cleverly the author shows the clash between the forces of orthodoxy and status quo as represented by the military junta ruling as SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) and the forces of change seeking democracy, headed by Suu Kyi and her followers. She spearheaded a peaceful non-resistance mass movement to restore democracy and civil liberties in her country, despite house arrest, mass arrests of her followers and stringent surveillance. This section has strong political overtones. Ghosh relates Suu Kyi’s predicament of house arrest to the postmodern dilemma. He writes:

In the postmodern world, politics is everywhere a matter of symbols, and the truth is that Suu Kyi is her own greatest political asset. It is only because Burma’s 1988 democracy movement had a symbol, personified in Suu Kyi, that the world remembers it and continues to exert pressure on the current regime (military junta). Otherwise, the world would almost certainly have forgotten Burma’s slain and dispersed democrats just as quickly as it has forgotten many others like them in the past.

(Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma 83)

In the perceptive analysis of the socio-political-cultural crisis in Cambodia and Burma, presented in extremely readable and elegant prose, Amitav Ghosh has presented, by implication, a prophetic vision for India also in the context of the complex process of national reconstruction. Inclusiveness, harmony and tolerance seem to be the lessons of history that Amitav Ghosh is trying to impart.
his complex but gripping travelogue. The thought provoking, stimulating
tavelogue thus becomes a metaphor of our times and an allegorical political
message for all multi-cultural, multi-racial nation states striving for existence in
the postmodern world.

Ghosh’s next non-fictional book is named Count Down (1999). If The
Shadow Lines (1988) is a fictional narrative about the absurdity of the two nation
tory which was translated into the partition of India on the eve of India’s de-
colonization, the persisting fantasy of a fight to the finish between two nations,
India and Pakistan (nurtured by fundamentalist elements in either nation) is put
into perspective by Amitav Ghosh in this non-fictional essay.

Countdown was written in response to the almost tit for tat testing of
uclear weapons in India and in Pakistan respectively in the summer of 1998. The
events evoked 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 indicated their government’s decision to
formally participate in the nuclear arms race in imitation of the more developed
nations.

Several of these critiques have been reproduced in an anthology of writing
against nuclear weaponisation entitles Out of the Nuclear Shadow (2001). This
anthology includes statements by various organizations as well as diverse
individual statements exposing the presence of nuclear weapons in the
subcontinent or, for that matter, anywhere in the world. These statements are, as
the editors of the anthology, Smitu Kothari and Zia Mian observe, “both analysis
and action in their attempt to understand and challenge the causes and
consequences of the nuclearisation of South Asia.” (Out of the Nuclear Shadow 13)

The opening seems to satirize the great ‘outpourings’ of joy on the part of the BJP members and sympathizers who organized festivals and handed out celebratory sweetmeats in the streets after the successful nuclear tests. It is a great irony that the dust from the test site was also sent around the country ‘so that the whole nation could partake in the glow of the blasts’. Some great champions of the blasts are also said to be thinking of building a sacred monument at the site – a ‘Shrine of Strength’ that could be visited by pilgrims. The author comments ironically on the floral tribute of the then honorable Prime Minister who visited the site:

On 15 May, four days after the tests, the Prime Minister flew to Pokharan himself, accompanied by several members of his party. A celebration was organized on the crater left by the blasts. The Prime Minister was photographed standing on the craters rim, throwing flowers into the pit. It was as though, this were one of the crowning achievements of his life.

(Countdown 6)

But on the other hand, the people living around the nuclear test site weren’t jolly and jocund; rather they were sad and gloomy. They had never heard of cancer in this area. But now, they are afraid, they will begin to get cancer after the test, as they would have been after 1974 when the first nuclear blast was conducted on the same site. A more powerful jolt than that of 1974 was felt especially by the people of the village, Khetolai, six kilometers from the test site.
The people of the village are mostly ‘Bishnois’, members of a small religious sect whose founder had forbidden the felling of trees and killing of animals. They thought of themselves as the world’s first conservationists. But the irony lies in the fact that the blast created such havoc that the felling of trees and killing of animals will be the order of the day. The people of village who were most threatened and terrorized by the blast described their pathetic plight to the author. The author observes:

It was very hot... About two thirty there was a tremendous shaking in the ground and a booming noise. They saw a great cloud of dust and black and white smoke shooting skywards in the distance. Cracks opened up in the walls of some of their houses. Some of them had built underground tanks to store water for their livestocks. The blast split the tanks emptying them of water... Later on, officials came around and offered them small sum of money as compensation. The underground tanks were very expensive. The villagers refused to accept the money they were offered and demanded more.... ‘The only people who benefit from these tests are the politicians’ said a young man. ‘They bring no benefits to anyone else in the country’.

(Countdown 10)

Amitav Ghosh alone is not protesting these tests but famous author Arundhati Roy recently came down heavily on these nuclear tests and rightly predicts:
When everything there is burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day. Only interminable night. Temperatures will drop to far below freezing and nuclear winter will set in. Water will turn into toxic ice. Radioactive fallout will seep through the earth and contaminate groundwater. Most living things animals and vegetable, fish and foul will die. Only rats and cockroaches will breed and multiply and compete with foraging, derelict humans for what little food there is.

(The End of Imagination 12-13)

Amitav Ghosh, a great champion of the cause of peace and prosperity, harmony and integration, also met K. Subrahmanyam, a civilian defence expert. He told the author that nuclear weapons weren't military weapons. According to his view 'India wants to be a player and not an object of this global nuclear order.' The author thinks that India’s nuclear programme has nothing to do with defending the country. Chandan Mitra, a historian and journalist is also of the same opinion. Ghosh also met and talked with to Ram Vilas Paswan who told him that these nuclear tests were not in the Indian national interest. Ghosh also tells his readers about his travels to the distant and dangerous areas and the experiences of soldiers of India and Pakistan in the Siachin Glacier, Leh, Ladakh and Surankot etc. He reveals a very interesting fact that a single chapati eaten by a Pakistani soldier on the Siachin glacier bears a cost of about Rs. 450.

The author also met and interviewed Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami and Asma Jahangir, a social and democratic activist in
Pakistan. Asma Jahangir is famous for her defence of the rights of religious minorities, for her work on behalf of women: her dogged interrogation of Pakistan blasphemy laws, her refusal to cave in either to government pressure or to fundamentalist death threats. In her interview with Ghosh she said:

They actually believe that I was some kind of demon. They believed that by defending a case of blasphemy I was encouraging blasphemy against the Holy Prophet. They believed that I stood against all decent norms. That I was a kind of devil incarnate that would wreck the whole social fabric of Pakistan.

(Countdown 64)

Moreover, Asma’s reply also shows her hatred for the 15th Constitutional Amendment regarding the Shari’a -- a great constitutional upheaval by which the legal and judicial system will collapse and the administration will go to the ‘dictates of a handful of people.’ So, in her opinion, first of all the intrusion of religion and religious orthodoxy into the politics of Pakistan must be eradicated. Ghosh tells his readers that any form of religious orthodoxy into the politics of Pakistan must be stamped out. Ghosh tells his readers that any form of religious orthodoxy is a cancerous wound, which eats into the vitality of a fair religion.

Amitav Ghosh’s Countdown beautifully presents horrendous and horrifying dismay and disgust, which has been generated by nuclear explosions. It also points out to several malpractices on the part of the leaders in both India and Pakistan. Ghosh also presents his worries about tackling the present day ecological problems. It is clear that Countdown is not simply a travelogue of lines and
statements but also a fine piece of profound thinking of most crucial issue of nuclear explosion crouched in limpid prose.

Ghosh's next piece of art is *The Imam and the Indian* (2002) which contains prose pieces written over 20 years which deals with so many different topics such as history, present day riots, the problem of oil, categories of labour and Indian culture etc. It is clearly evident that these prose pieces have provided Ghosh with the raw material for his novels and other books. In the first prose piece named, "The Imam and the Indian" Ghosh presents his experience while his stay with the people of Alexandria during his research work where he has to face their arguments in which they tell him that to burn the dead is not a fair thing and Ghosh should tell his countrymen to stop this practice immediately. Some light mood moments are also presented in the essay when the villagers ask the author if they get on to their donkey and ride steadily for thirty days will they make it to India?

In the next essay entitled "Tibetan Dinner" Ghosh describes about a dinner with a rock star's ex-wife. This was a charity dinner and money was to be sent to the Tibetan refugees to provide them some help. Ghosh also tells us about the Tibetan drinks and foods in the essay. His next essay "An Egyptian in Baghdad" is about a young man as an assistant in a Photographers shop in Iraq. Ghosh makes a call from New York but Nabeel was not present in his house at that time. Ghosh tells an interesting fact that so many young people left their country in order to get job in Iraq and other Arab countries and they sent their messages in a cassette which also contained the instructions about the money they were sending such as
how to spend it etc. Ghosh brings out the reality through Ismail who tells that the Iraqis are wild and so many years of war had made them a little like animals.

"The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi" is Ghosh’s one of the most popular essay, which also is the base for his most celebrated novel *The Shadow Lines*. Ghosh presents a very realistic picture of Indira Gandhi’s killing and the riots, which followed as an aftermath. Ghosh tells us about Mr. and Mrs. Bawa who were surrounded in the riots but escaped safely with the help of their neighbours. In his essay "The Human Comedy in Cairo" Ghosh tells the readers about the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz who won the Nobel prize in 1989. The interesting story behind this comedy was that the news had broken over the wires before the committee could get through Mahfouz. He was asleep when his wife woke him and told that somebody wanted to congratulate him. As a matter of fact it was she who wanted to congratulate him. Ghosh describes the life and works of Mahfouz in the essay and also about the newspaper reports in which Israelis declared Mahfouz’s politics to be perfectly acceptable. Ghosh’s next essay “The Oil Encounter and the Novel” tells the importance of the oil industry and about the writer who had produced some works in this concern. Ghosh describes about *Cities of Salt*, a novel in which we know about the people of Harran (A place in Arab) and Americans who lived in the oil town. Ghosh also tells about Munif who was editor in chief of an Iraqi journal related to Oil and Development.

In his next scholarly essay “Empire and Soul: a review of The Baburnama” Ghosh introduces his readers to *The Baburnama* - the autobiography of India’s first Mughal emperor, Zahiruddin Mohammad Babur (1483 – 1530). Ghosh provides us each and every detail about Babur, his uncles and cousins and his first
campaign when he led an army to Samarkand at the age of thirteen. Ghosh reveals that Babur at critical moments went into the women’s quarter to ask advice and his twenty years love with wine and sometimes Majun – a narcotic. Ghosh finds that as a writer, an intellectual and a soldier, Babur stood very far above the men of his time. In his next prose piece “The Relation of Envy in an Egyptian Village” Ghosh tells us about the evil eye belief which occurs in so many forms such as jealousy related to wealth and rivalry between the brother’s wives (Salaiiaif) in a large household. He shares the story of the people of Nacaawy when a woman stared at a cow for few minutes and the cow gave no milk from that day. In another instance a neighbour demanded some milk of goat from family and from that day the goat only gave blood in place of milk. “The Slave of MS. H.6.” is another prose piece which was later expanded in In An Antique Land by Ghosh which tells the story of Ben Yiju and his Indian slave Bomma. Ghosh’s “The Fundamentalist Challenge” deals with the description of Tasleema Nasreen’s Lojja and the religious extremists attack of 6 December 1992 on a 400-year-old mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu fundamentalists.

The above description of Ghosh’s writings show his development as a writer who uses various things in his writings as history, autobiography, day to day event, human relations and riots etc. Ghosh has mastered in both fiction as well non – fictional works, essay etc. Ghosh’s selection of the different titles clearly presents the metaphorical sense which is a part of his writing. His imagination is as necessarily diasporic as it is postcolonial, being a product of specific histories of the subcontinent in the twentieth century. There can be no doubt that Ghosh’s own academic antecedents - history, sociology, and
anthropology — illuminate his fictional and non-fictional works. In particular, he is concerned with the Indian / South Asian Diaspora in different regions of the world, and he homes his novelistic skills in areas that overlap with his research interests. It may be said quite surely that Ghosh is one of the leaders of the global league and no one would today dare categorise him only as an ‘Indo-Anglian novelist’ and he has surely emerged as a theorist.
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