CHAPTER IV
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The Nation and the Family in Amitav Ghosh’s Novels

After Rushdie initiated the exploration of the performative micro-narrative of the familial space in *Midnight’s Children* (1981), the project has subsequently been taken up by a number of Indian novelists. Amitav Ghosh is by far the most prominent among them. In this chapter devoted exclusively to him, I propose to look mainly into four of his novels – *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2005) and finally *Sea of Poppies* (2008) to discern the new dimensions that Ghosh has explored in this family-nation interface. Since Ghosh has been preoccupied with this exploration right from the beginning of his career as a novelist, I have also included a short section on *The Circle of Reason* (1986) where he took up this issue for the first time.

The prominent factor behind the grooming of Ghosh as a novelist is his training in Anthropology. He is by turn a sociologist, a historian, a teacher, an essayist alive to a range of crucial contemporary issues from terrorism to conservation of Nature, a travel writer, and can slip in and out of these categories with remarkable aplomb. But behind all these, it is Ghosh the anthropologist that has decisively shaped his focus as a novelist, and has engaged him in the task of putting the individual back in the centre of the narrative. In an interview to John C. Hawley in 2004, he categorically states: “My fundamental interest is in people – in individuals and their specific predicaments. If history is of interest to me it is because it provides instances of unusual and extraordinary predicaments” (6). Particularly concerned with the South Asian diaspora in the different regions of the world, Ghosh has set himself in the task of narrating an anti-Hegelian history
of the world incorporating the hitherto left-out narratives of the common individual, the predicament of individuals against the historical backdrop, their attempt to resist the hegemony of the nation through their own stories and search for their own identity. In the essay, "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi," Ghosh writes:

It is when we think of the world the aesthetic of indifference might bring into being that we recognize the urgency of remembering the stories we have not written" (62 emphasis added).

This is in 1995, and in an interview taken by me on 13th March, 2009, Ghosh seems to reiterate the importance of the individual over the nation’s history with equal emphasis:

…the same history does not create the same individual, and that is what is interesting about it. History remains at the background, but hundred different individuals exist living the history in their own ways. An artist aims to bring these different stories to the fore…

The observation unmistakably points to an anthropologist’s dedication to ‘remembering’ stories that otherwise slip from consciousness and from recorded history. Clearly, it is the act of re-membering and unraveling the existing grand narratives and understanding the ways in which they trap individuals into roles the narratives devised for them, and the rejection of such roles and such meta-narratives while constructing one’s own narrative, role and significance that have been Ghosh’s prime concern as a novelist of the postcolonial times. Right from The Circle of Reason (1986) till Sea of Poppies (2008), Ghosh has remained engaged in the exploration of all these varied issues. In all these novels, which are essentially family sagas against historical backdrops, and even in quite a few of his essays, Ghosh examines the role of the individual in the broad sweep of
political events, the dubious nature of borders among nations and peoples, the role
of memory in one’s recovery of identity in the march of time, the importance of
narrative in shaping history.

Interestingly, it is this preoccupation with the individual and Ghosh’s
postcolonial instinct to foreground their story that family has assumed such central
position in all his narratives. The familial space (ghar, sangsar, parivar, home) is
the most immediate emotional space to any individual in the Indian society. So,
for Ghosh family stories are always important because it is through these family
stories that the history is experienced. In an interview to Neluka Silva and Alex
Tickell and later to me², Ghosh has asserted that for Asians in general and Indians
in particular, the family is always a space where they can make their connections
most readily. So, whenever Ghosh thinks of narratives, he thinks of them in terms
of families. But at the same time, family is a unit in itself. So instead of just
offering the site of receiving the onslaughts of history, it offers the individual a
liberated space that situates his identity away from the confines of the
“restrictively imagined collectivities”. What Ghosh himself says in this context to
Dipesh Chakraborty is worth reproducing:

...Two of my novels (The Shadow Lines, and my most recent The
Glass Palace) are centered on families. I know that for myself this
is a way of displacing the ‘nation’...In other words, I’d like to
suggest that writing about families is one way of not writing about
the nation (or other restrictively imagined collectivities) (Ghosh
and Chakrabarty 147).

He elaborates a little later:
First, to take the question of the novel and the family. Novels almost always implicitly assume a collective subject: this is what usually provides the background, milieu, setting, dialect etc. Sometimes this collective subject is the nation itself (one sees this most clearly in the work of the magical-realists). Sometimes it is a culture or a class (very common among Brits and Europeans) or (as in modern US writing) 'a generation'. All of these are clearly subsets of the nation – since the boundaries of the culture, class or generation are usually assumed to coincide with the boundaries of whatever country the writer happens to be from. In India, collectivities such as nation, class, generation, culture etc. do not have the same imaginary concreteness that they do elsewhere (even today, I think). This is one of the reasons why Indian (and African) writers so often look to a different kind of collectivity, the family.

In my case, the family narrative has been one way of stepping away from the limitations of 'nation' etc. – I think this is true also of many others (166 emphasis added).

There are at least two interesting things that distinctively mark Ghosh's treatment of the familial space. To begin with, it is an imagined space which would reaffirm and consolidate the bonds of personal love, security, selfless feeling, and in all these, would potentially be able to replace the troubled profile of the nation and all its discontents. But at the same time, this familial space is in no way unproblematic. It does not only refer to space where one feels 'at home', but also a space that involves power. Family is often a space that one strives to dominate, not necessarily through violence, but often by playing the role of a
caring guardian or any other central figure. It then becomes a territory, which is no more limited to the *roots*; it is a space to be created, expanded and protected subjectively. Consequently, and most importantly in the fictional world of Ghosh, it is this nature of family that enables it to be relocated transnationally, beyond the ‘shadow lines’ of the borders of the home country, in different foreign physical spaces, so that it is no more a simple journey away from home/family, but from one home/family to another. Ghosh’s basic point of contention seems to be that home is everywhere; it only needs to be reinvented. So, in Ghosh’s fictional world, transnational home/family is compatible with the idea of *routes* (and no more limited to roots).

Ghosh’s world is peopled with characters who engage themselves in an irresistible quest for such a family and are able to invent it in a transnational location. That is how they are able to combat the angst of the diaspora. Ghosh’s novels contest the concept of the fixity of the familial space and focus on its fluid contours, and his basic point of contention seems to be that amidst these fluidities, home/family is everywhere; only it needs to be invented.

In fact, Ghosh has never really felt comfortable with the geographical borders among nations and the whole system of nation-states as a whole. In an interview with Sheela Reddy in 2002, Ghosh opines:

The whole system of nation-states is coming under increasing strain. The rich countries are essentially more and more a single unit: borders don’t really apply. At the bottom of the scale, in countries like Pakistan and Burma, again borders have melted away and there’s a general collapse of the state. I think we are at a point...
where the ideal of the nation as a way of organizing society is no longer holding (Hawley 5).

Again, in another interview,

...today, nationalism, once conceived of as a form of freedom, is really destroying our world. It’s destroying the forms of ordinary life that many people know. The nation-state prevents the development of free exchange between peoples (qtd. in Wassef 75).

And in doing this, Ghosh is only following the recent trends in Anthropology. In his article, “The Transit Lounge of Culture” the American anthropologist James Clifford has attempted to frame Ghosh’s work in the context of recent developments in the discipline of Anthropology. Texts like Gloria Anzaldua’s Borderlands/La Frontera (1987) have shifted Anthropology away from the study of separate cultures to comparative intercultural studies and diaspora cultures that are not oriented towards lost origins or homelands, but are produced by ongoing histories of migrations and transnational cultural flows. Once we begin to focus on these intercultural processes, Clifford argues, the notion of separate, discrete cultures evaporates; we become aware that all cultures have long histories of border crossings, diasporas and migrations (7).

This interest in the cross-cultural mingling across the borders and the resulting new, multidimensional identity of the diasporic migrant is clear in Ghosh’s own words: “My fiction has always been about places that are in the process of states coming unmade, or communities coming unmade or remaking themselves in many ways” (Reddy 2002). The breaking and remaking of communities can be seen even in his very first novel, The Circle of Reason (1986).
The novel initiates Ghosh’s sustained engagement in a project to establish that nations may not be coming undone or even remaking themselves as yet, but the unmaking and remaking of individual lives fuelled by legitimate and necessary aspirations and creation of transnational family, of course render the borders of nation-states porous.

I

Hope is the Beginning

“Ghosh’s work… underlines the novelist’s interest in traveling as a metaphor for the human condition,” says James Clifford (7-8). Ghosh’s characters travel a lot, wilfully or under compulsion. Most of his novels are all accounts of human journeys, figurative and literal, and most of these journeys are on water bodies, which itself is an interesting trope to highlight the fluidity of borders. This gives Ghosh the scope to explore the issues of dislocation, migration and cultural cross-mingling – all of which problematise, in the case of The Circle of Reason, the subaltern historiography. The novel is a complex tapestry of stories of individuals whose lives overlap, pull apart and separate – and sometimes find each other again in new contexts. It is quite natural for a novelist that he would bring in a lot of themes and concerns in his first novel, one overlapping into another. The Circle of Reason is at once a detective story, a story of exile, a travelogue, a Marxist protest and a plea for humanistic camaraderie. Similarly, Ghosh is a bit unsure about the narrative technique as well – mingling magic realism intermittently with a straightforward and realistic technique. He also tends to juggle a lot of characters, time zones and locales in his tale. But as with all great
novelists, even this first novel unmistakably points to what is going to be his preoccupation in the later years.

The novel opens in a small village in Bengal, Lalpukur, and deals with the picaresque adventures of one Alu, who, in his search for identity, amidst his Quixotic adventures in rural Bengal to the city of Al-Ghazira and finally to El-Qued, a desert town in remote Algeria. What strikes us at the very beginning is the very name that Ghosh chooses for his protagonist, Alu. This nomenclature is a sufficient indicative of the anti-Hegelian stance that is going to preoccupy Ghosh more and more in the later years. 'Alu' is a rustic nickname of the commonest of the commoners. But in Ghosh’s world, this very Alu makes his forceful entry from the periphery to the centre, with his indomitable spirit with which he undertakes his quest for his identity. It may be quite interesting to note in this connection, Alu’s formal name, Nachiketa. Like this mythical character in the *Katho Upanishada*, who engaged himself in a quest for his identity, Alu’s story is that of an individual whose life is a conscious (and subconscious) attempt to define his own identity. It is in this intertwining of Nachiketa and Alu that Ghosh easily fits into the project of Subaltern Studies.

After beginning his life with a displacement (he has to shift to his uncle’s household after his parents’ death), life’s unpredictable coincidences bring Alu towards the middle of the novel to the boat *Mariamma*, where the second phase of his quest starts in association with Zindi-al-Tiffaha. Zindi (the Urdu word for ‘being alive’) not only has an indomitable spirit, but she is the zealous matriarchal head of a family that she weaves around her with illegal migrants who all cling to her in order to remain alive against all odds and disruptive forces of life. Zindi’s patronizing benevolence settles Alu in a new family. A family thus
instantly grows out of collage of all sorts of displaced people – one immensely
different from another – but all of them have wilfully put aside the burden of their
troubled past and ‘travelled light’ into Zindi’s household. They are remarkably
reticent about their past as they cling to life and look forward to the future by
resorting to odd jobs and moments of fellowship that happen their way. Stripped
off its protection and comfort, they are also liberated from the repressive
structures and narratives of the nation. (Ghosh will take up this theme later in
much greater detail in Sea of Poppies.) Robin Cohen in his book Global
Diasporas (1997) represents the contemporary global migration in quite
favourable terms. In his book, he has stressed that globalization today has been
more a boon than a curse for the diaspora because of its liberatory and
ameliorative aspects. Though what he says mainly applies to the bourgeoisie
migrant, leaving out rather strikingly the subaltern migrant workers who are
placed in a position quite more difficult and different from their bourgeoisie
counterpart, one remarkable point that Cohen makes is very relevant to what
Ghosh undertakes to do in his fiction. One advantage of the diasporic migration
that Cohen celebrates is the multiple affiliations and associations that
globalization offers to compensate the angst of the displaced social identities. It is
this ability of transnational adaptation that leads these illegal, marginalized
subaltern figures to enthusiastically participate in the project of fashioning their
lives in creative and unorthodox ways, resulting in creation of new families.
Refused an active role in the grandnarrative of the nation, they live their micro-
lives most vibrantly in these newly created familial spaces. The urgency and
solidarity that these family units express foreground the importance of the micro-
stories of these marginalized figures. Zindi’s makeshift family of lodgers is an
agglomeration based not merely on chance but on mutual need and hence much more immediate, intimate and fast, and not governed by any lineage or blood ties or property relations. It is, therefore, an ‘extended family,’ sociologically. Denied any political or economic subjection, the familial space is their only domain to shape the identity, not only for the people who take shelter in her family, but also for the figure who gives them the shelter. Yamuna Siddiqi, in her essay, “Police and Postcolonial Rationality in Amitav Ghosh’s The Circle of Reason,” discusses the interesting role of Zindi in this new family. Siddiqi observes how the figure of Zindi, a large-bodied, rough-tongued, tough Egyptian migrant, who stands in sharp contrast to the ideal of the docile, respectable, chaste homemaker. But still, Zindi is the heart of the household – “not as the modest, unsullied bearer of tradition, but as the big hearted den mother who bullies, cajoles, wheels and deals to keep her family intact and afloat” (Chowdhury 30).

There is a clear contractual relationship in this family which gives Zindi the power to dominate and her much needed identity as the matriarchal head. Yet the family unconsciously weaves into her all sorts of emotional ties, as is evident when Jeebanbhai asks Zindi to provide information about Alu. She responds, “Police, I suppose? No I can’t. You know that’s one thing I couldn’t do to them. Whatever happens in the future, in the past they all ate my bread and salt. They’ve become part of my flesh” (CR 304). Zindi refuses to betray the familial ties that, on the one hand, finally resolves Zindi’s identity crisis, and on the other, lends the status of transnational utopia to her house, for here at last, the migrant subaltern finds the shelter that his nation has refused.

But still, this family is not a permanent space. It cannot be, because Ghosh has always emphasised the fluidity of contours, and the urgency of life seems to
be evident from sliding from one family to another. Hence the embarkation of Alu, Zindi, Kulfi and her son, Boss in search of a further new familial space in the desert lands of El Qued. Forced into exile again and again by events beyond their control, what sustains them all along is the “queue of hopes” that “stretches long past infinity” (CR 409). It is this hope that helps Alu slide into one role from another and finally by the time he waits for Virat Singh and his ship that would carry him (and his new born family!) home, he has learnt that reason will remain incomplete without the touch of human emotion. Equipped with this new knowledge, Alu is illuminated by a new hope to enter a new family transnationally.

Ghosh’s intentions are, therefore, clear. His project is to foreground those marginalized figures whose story the grandnarrative of the nation’s history has never bothered to incorporate, but whom the nation has not been able to hold back within its borders either. The novelist in Ghosh notes with wonder how these figures never refrain from weaving new patterns of life through creation of new families across time and continents. Paul Sharrad, in his essay “Fabricating Community: Local, National and Global in Three Indian Novels” remarks that national and global are intersecting spaces, just as they are also in opposition. So, Sharrad says unambiguously, “…we have to continue to think with, through and beyond the national without simply subscribing to an anti-national hostility or ‘end of history’ post-national globalised triumphalism” (14). In fact, Ghosh himself never rules out the validity of the existence of the nation, though he has constantly made us aware of the potential threats in its official maps and borders. Ghosh has categorically stated that he is not against the Nation as an institution, nor does he think that the institution will wither soon and suddenly. ⁴ But Ghosh’s
diasporic and postcolonial imagination draws our attention to the porosity of the nation’s borders and the transnational relocation of the diaspora which makes this intersection of the national and global a resourceful space. As home becomes multiple, identity becomes more and more ambiguous, rich and complex.

II

The Redemptive Mystery

In an interview to John Hawley in 2004, Amitav Ghosh expresses his unambiguous views on borders. Asked to reflect on his engagement with borders, literal and metaphorical, in his novels and essays, Ghosh observes:

What interested me first about borders was their arbitrariness, their constructedness – the ways in which they are ‘naturalised’ by modern political myth-making. I think this interest arose because of some kind of inborn distrust of anything that appears to be ‘given’ or taken-for-granted… (Hawley 9).

In his second novel, The Shadow Lines (1988), Ghosh focuses exclusively on the nature of the national border – a typical postcolonial issue that claims his attention more and more in his subsequent novels. As the grandnarrative of the nation is increasingly threatened by the micro-stories of the individual neglected hitherto, the nation’s porosity and its failure as a restrictive space are becoming evident. To explore this porosity and to fill up the absence and fissures that characterize this national histories of South Asia, Ghosh takes up the task of retrieving alternative family histories that would fill up these fissures and fight the trauma that lies therein. The Shadow Lines is a subjective narration of the story of two families, one Bengali middleclass and the other British, who live through some of the most
traumatic events in their respective nations. The narrator’s contact with other characters and their lives traces the political and social, intellectual and emotional parameters of an English speaking bilingual, metropolitan middle-class Indian subjectivity. This subjective retelling of history gives a new angle from which Ghosh invites us to cast a new look at the established notions of Indianness, Freedom, Home and Family. The public chronicles of nations are interrogated in this novel by prioritising on the one hand, the reality of the fictions people create around their lives (‘stories are all there to live in, it was just a question of which one you chose’ SL 182) and on the other by recording the graphic, subjective details of individual memories that do not necessarily tally with the received version of history. In this connection, Ghosh points to the existence of a space that all human beings inhabit irrespective of the geographical location described in the map. This subjective space is liberating, immensely richer than the geographical space and can be constructed through imagination. Hence, only those characters having the faculty of imagination can challenge distance (by creating a ‘secret map of the world of which only I knew the keys and coordinates’ (SL 194), and can enjoy real freedom from the throes of the nation.

The Shadow Lines is basically a memory novel skillfully weaving together personal lives and public events in three countries – India, England and Bangladesh. The members of three generations of two different families belonging to all these three nations line up in a close-knit, palpable fictive world. Some phenomenal world events like the Second World War and the partition between India and East Pakistan, and some interesting coincidences make the stories of these families interpenetrate in such an inextricable way and bring the characters from various generations of these two families so close to each other, that
ultimately, it becomes impossible to keep their stories separate and distinct from each other. Finally we get to be introduced to a great cross-cultural bonding and a new transnational family emerging out of it. On the one hand, one large family consisting of members having intimate blood relations, breaks up into two distinct units under the traumatic pressure of a political event that engages itself in the dangerous game of imagining borders where there were none; on the other, two families, separated not only by thousands of miles across the globe, but also by language, religion, customs and culture, become so close to each other, that ultimately the lines demarcating them reduces to the point of becoming non-existent. They become ‘shadow lines’, eventually problematising the concepts of nation, family and borders. The novel thus narrows down what is going to be Ghosh’s concern for the next few years – the imaginative quality and futility of geo-political borders, the struggle between the official history and the lived story, the role of the familial space in this struggle. Ultimately, we come to understand that the Bartholemew’s atlas is no more a dependable guide to the world because “the solid lines,” to quote Meenakshi Mukherjee, “dividing countries turn into glass, through which it is clearly visible that Chiang Mai in Thailand is spatially closer to Calcutta than new Delhi, Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is” (267). In the novel, Ghosh has brilliantly used the metaphors of the map and the mirror to interrogate the rationale behind the drawing of borders. While the map constantly attempts to sensitise to the lines of difference, and consequently the existence of the ‘other’, Ghosh draws our attention to the mirror image, which foregrounds similarity, and sees the ‘other’ image only as an extension of the self. So, the national border between the people of India and Bangladesh, or between any two countries, for that matter, resembles the mirror’s boundary, in which self
and its reflected other are the same. Therefore, the different borders of nationalism, religion, racism can never divide the fundamental identity of people on both sides of the boundary, or render them changed into ‘the other’.

The historical backdrop of the novel has been woven out of some of the phenomenal events in the world history – the Freedom Movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the partition of India and the miasma of communal hatred breaking out into riots in Bangladesh following the Hazratbal incident in Srinagar in 1964. Against this backdrop we meet three generations of family spread over Dhaka, Calcutta and London – characters lining up from varied nationalities, religions and cultures in a close-knit, intricate fictive world. The events revolve round itinerant Mayadevi’s family, its long-lasting and eventful friendship with the Prices in London, Tha’mma, the narrator’s grandmother, her emotional ties with Dhaka and the shock she receives there. On the one hand is the narrator’s family consisting of his grandmother, Mayadevi’s elder sister, and his parents; on the other are Mayadevi, her husband, a diplomat, and their three sons, Jatin, Tridib and Robi. Jatin’s daughter, ila, is always away with her parents. The narrator’s family is settled in Calcutta where his Tha’mma, a stern middleclass matriarch, is a headmistress. Mayadevi’s family, except Tridib, keeps on going around the world. Tridib is stationed at his ancestral house in Ballygunge place, but can travel round the globe through his imagination.

One thing is remarkably common among the members of all these families – almost all these characters undertake journeys – some coming home and others going away, some wilfully and others under compulsion, some physically and a few others through imagination. As they travel, they are caught up in a struggle to prevent their own stories from getting lost under the narratives of the history. The
site that Ghosh finds most suitable to the effective exploration of this struggle is the family, which itself is, far from being an unproblematic or homogeneous space.

Ghosh’s use of familial space has several dimensions. The most obvious use of the family in the novel is not much different from the way Ghosh’s predecessors have been using it over the decades – its synecdochic role as a social microcosm. The grimly humorous description of the division of the Dutta-Chaudhury joint family in Dhaka after a quarrel (which strongly contests the conception of family as the domain of purely unselfish love and solidarity) is a moving, but not-so-new trope of the partition of Bengal. When the ancestral home was partitioned, the brothers insisted on their rights with a lawyer-like precision so that the dividing shadow line went through doorways, making them inaccessible and a lavatory ‘bisecting an old commode’. The brothers even bisected their father’s name on the nameplate! What was even worse was that this physical partition necessitated a mental partition as well – the two sisters engaged themselves in inventing childish stories in order to create the necessary ‘other’ out of the members residing on the other side of the wall.

But, more interesting is Ghosh’s exploration of the familial site in its nuclear form. In the novel, he explores the inherent complexities of ‘family’ as a space, with its complex interconnections of resemblances, affiliations, differences, hostilities, affective bonds and dependence within the Indian, specifically Bengali middle class. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in her essay “The Division of Experience in The Shadow Lines” points to an interesting politics within the familial space. She draws attention to the division of the members of the family into active and passive. The division of character types begins with the vivid contrast between the
two sisters of this family, Tha’mma and her sister, Mayadevi. While Tha’mma is widowed young; she is a self made woman, hence proud, stubborn and strong-willed, unlike Mayadevi, who is beautiful and well-settled through a successful marriage. Again, the narrator, we are told, does not resemble his grandmother in features, but Mayadevi. Mayadevi’s son, Robi, on the other hand, resembles his aunt. But interestingly, no member of the family is able to be free of the others in spite of the distances, hostilities and absences that separate them. The most striking family relationship is however marked by identity, not difference – that between the narrator and Tridib. His entire life is indicative of an identification that he deliberately sets up with Tridib. He sees through Tridib’s eyes, studies history like Tridib does, thinks Tridib’s thoughts, and finally loves Tridib’s lover. Tridib also exerts considerable influence on Robi and May by living eternally in their memories. Thus, the family becomes an important means of achieving solidarity against a world of difference and otherness. There are of course differences within the family itself, but despite differences, there are ties and links within the structure that produces such kinship as to engage all these differences in a dialogic relationship.

But this in no way suggests that the familial space is an uninterrupted seedbed of love and sacrifice, blessings and bliss. It is a site of contest as well, a space to desire, strive for and be protected zealously. It is these characteristics of family that necessitate it to be created subjectively. Family, therefore, is not a given, but a construct. It creates gendered differences in accordance with the conventional social rules laid out by the division of labour. This is reflected in the narrator’s own family at Calcutta – his father is the breadwinner, an upper middleclass professional man aspiring to move higher in the social ladder, and his
mother, a typical housewife – the stay-at-home cook, happy to do the household
chores, but dominated by her husband as well as her mother-in-law. The real
power in the family rests, at least for a considerably long time, with Tha’mma, the
grandmother. She is a self-made woman, securing for herself a successful career
as a headmistress and bringing up her only son successfully. The power she
commanded in the process makes her a dominating presence in the household.
She mutes the roles of others by taking them over in some measure; she does not
cook, but sees to it that strong discipline keeps everything in order. So for
Tha’mma, family is a site to create and sustain her power. Following her
retirement from teaching, she suddenly finds herself displaced from this centre of
power – her influences diminish in the school and within the family. As power
slips out of her hand, we find her trying pathetically to retrieve it by visiting her
school, where, alas, she is now an unwelcome presence!

It is in this context that we have to see Tha’mma’s views of Nationalism,
for her ideas about the nation are inseparable from her ideas about the family and
the matriarchal role she enjoys in that family. Her nationalism, which is
essentially European in spirit, is animated by a Puritan sense of work and
discipline, and carries for her the earnestness of religion, informing her every
thought and deed. The nation is an extended family for her. So it has the same
sacrifice behind its creation, same blood ties, same kinship, the same inviolable
spirit and the same necessity to protect its sanctity and exclusivity. Tha’mma’s
own family has been her own creation, through her own struggle, refusing help
from her relatives. It is this personal history of struggle that shapes her sense of
nationhood and of the formation of the Indian nation-state. One recollects what
she says about Britain to her grandson:
It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother’s blood and their father’s blood and their son’s blood. They know they are a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood…War is their religion. That’s what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don’t you see? (SL 78)

Creation of a family and of a nation, to Tha’mma, are almost identical, both being a space to exercise authority and enjoy freedom. Family and nation are also spaces where identity is created and inscribed on the individual members who are supposed to carry forward the family-nation tradition. This freedom is forged through violent anti-colonial struggle, and, once achieved, maintained zealously by excluding all ‘others’ who belong to the opposite side of the border. This readiness to identify and exclude ‘common enemy’ unites those within. It ratifies boundaries and deepens the ideology necessary to mould an internally coherent national or familial identity. Tha’mma, as part of the generation which agreed to dream a new nation, must perforce believe in the reality of nations and borders beyond which ‘existed another reality’ permitting only relationships of war and friendship ‘between those separate realities’. It, therefore, legitimizes the claim of the state to be the sole agent and authority of violence. It is in this spirit that she looks down upon the immigrants from Bangladesh, identifying them as ‘refugees’
and cautiously distinguishing herself from them even though she herself came from the same country:

My grandmother, looking out of her window in amazement, exclaimed: When I last came here ten years ago, there were ricefields running alongside the road; it was the kind of place where rich Calcutta people built garden houses. And look at it now — as filthy as a babui’s nest. It’s all because of the refugees, flooding in like that.

Just like we did, said my father, to provoke her.

We’re not refugees, snapped my grandmother, on cue. We came long before Partition (SL 131).

The difference that existed between Tha’mma’s sophisticated, well groomed family and the poor family of his own relative is highlighted in the next few pages. When her daughter-in-law expresses her sympathy for these poor relatives and suggests that they should perhaps do something to help her, she retorts:

Why? ... Did anyone do anything to help me when I was living out of that? Don’t get taken in by these stories. Once these people start making demands it never ends. Anyway, she looks quite capable of managing by herself (SL 136).

Tha’mma deliberately does this, in order to construct the ‘other’ out of this segregated branch of the same family tree, segregated by the shadow lines of economic disparity, culture and education, but primarily, the Partition, which suddenly has turned Dhaka into a ‘foreign’ country for Tha’mma. Tha’mma badly needs this in order to protect her identity, which she thinks she has created over the years, within her family, as well within the nation. It is in this same spirit
that she assumes the role of a knight, whimsically trying to rescue her Jethamoshai (uncle), who she thinks needs her help, living in a ‘foreign’ country, all by him.

But this nationalist zeal of Tha’mma fails because she comes to realize that borders have a tenuous existence, and that not even a history of bloodshed can make them real and impermeable. Lines on the map are the handiwork of administrators and cartographers, who believe in ‘the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders on the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland’ (SL 233), but ultimately fail to keep human beings and their cultures separate. That is why she is perplexed to find that there is no physical sign of borders between India and East Pakistan. Her shock at the shortcomings of her exclusionary nationalism is clear as she muses:

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 will be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn’t something in between? (SL 151)

This also clearly shows Tha’mma’s deep anxiety at the melting away of his own identity, which she has meticulously defined in terms of various borders.

Finally, her neatly compartmentalized ideas of nationality, freedom and home – all get jeopardized. She fails to understand ‘how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality’. She momentarily forgets the division between coming and going and is caught between the memory of her
roots and her much nourished nationalism, between belonging and citizenship, as her education in the falsity of the nationalist construct begins with the preparations for her journey to Dhaka, her birthplace. Her neat ordering of the world (“she liked to be neat and in place”) is disturbed when she realizes that by filling in Dhaka as her place of birth on her passport, ‘her place of birth had come be at odds with her nationality’ (SL 152). The entire problem of nationality and home gets terribly jeopardized as Ghosh plays with the peculiar use of the verb aschi for ‘I am coming’ in Bengali, which connotes both coming and going. Tha’mma’s present visit to Dhaka is a homecoming. But she realizes at the same time that for immigrants like her to come home is to arrive in a foreign country. Throughout the visit, Tha’mma is caught up in angst as she frantically searches for the pre-partition Dhaka of her childhood in spite of her being a naturalized Indian citizen. Her strong loyalties and affiliations to the city of her birth surface as she likes to identify herself as a native Dhakaian from the older parts of the city, who is contemptuous of the alien inhabitants of new residential localities. But she cannot, at the same time, ignore the cruel reality of her alienation in her own homeland when Tridib reminds him provocingly: “... but you are a foreigner now, you’re as foreign here as May” (SL 195). Her confusion continues as she emotionally declares to her estranged uncle: ‘we’ve come home at last...’ (SL 212). This sufficiently points to further contradictions of the local and the national identities. The paradox between home and abroad, going and coming, is interrogated through Tha’mma’s repeated confusion of this distinction during her ambitious journey to her old home to take her old uncle ‘home at last’ in her ‘invented’ country ‘to which he belonged’. The naming of the two sections as ‘going away’ and ‘coming home’ aptly sums up the postcolonial condition where, especially for the
immigrant, ‘going away’ or ‘coming home’ challenges essentialist notions of
belonging and identity.

Tha’mma’s idealistic subscription to the grandnarrative of nationalism
receives even a further blow from her Jethamoshai who refuses to accept this
myth of nation and refuses to migrate. When Tha’mma enthusiastically declares to
her, “We’ve come to take you home with us,” he points to the arbitrariness and
irrationality of borders:

Move? Move to what?...I don’t believe in this India-Shindia. It’s all
very well, you’re going away now, but suppose when you get there
they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do
then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere.

As for me, I was born here, and I’ll die here (SL 215).
Though this simplified logic of equating nationality with the birth place is no
more tenable in the post-independence nation, this attitude itself posits a valid
challenge to Tha’mma’s imagined place of the nation.

In fact, what happens on that fatal day at that old house at Jindbahar Lane
in Dhaka, gives Ghosh enough material to jeopardize all the established notions of
family, brotherhood, nationalism and nationality. Here is a senile old man,
Jethamoshai, the lone member of the joint family left behind, who is seen
defending his house against his rightful claimants, his own brother’s daughters,
long after the partition. But then, he has created a new family here with Khalil, the
rickshaw puller. He has not only allowed him staying with wife and children in
the house but has also become the surrogate grandfather to his children. (And we
are also informed that this Jethamoshai, in his salad days, was so orthodox that he
would not have allowed a Muslim to pass his way!) Tha’mma’s sudden surge of
filial affection at the horrifying prospect of an old man abandoned by his kin to
die among his enemies seems out of place in this new family. This incident utterly
confuses the meaning of family and outsider, friend and foe in the field of
community formation. The narrative reiterates Tha’mma’s estrangement from her
home and kin to turn notions of filial duty and nationalist sentiments upside down
before they culminate in the horror of the climactic scene of Tridib’s death.

So, till the end of the novel, Tha’mma remains imprisoned in the myth of
the nation. Her response to Tridib’s death as well as her donating her last few
pieces of jewelry to the war fund show how deeply steeped she is in the nationalist
rhetoric, from which she can never free herself to reach a home of her own. This is
primarily because she has her home and family fixed in memory and they are
exclusive in nature. Therefore, in spite of the sacrifice and the sincerity that went
behind its creation, it remains a restrictive space. Unable to cross the shadow
lines, she fails to realize that unless one looks into the future and engages oneself
into the creation and nourishment of a transnational family through the acceptance
of co-existence and humanitarian ties across cultures independent of political
managers, one continues to be tyrannized by the stories of others. The secret of
life, therefore, seems to lie in the attempt to transcend borders.

Freedom eludes Ila as well. Unlike Tha’mma, freedom, for Ila, is nothing
but freedom from the various impositions of a family (and hence, the hegemonic
desire of the family, like that of the nation), and the right to do what she pleases in
the permissive society of a country like England. While Tha’mma’s family, still
bearing traces of displacement, attempts to settle down in a new land by
constructing a new identity in relation to built urban spaces, Ila as the privileged
dughter of a senior diplomat, travels across the world, and attempts to articulate a
cosmopolitanism having grown up in different parts of the world. Brought up in international schools, having visited India in the summer holidays, she decides to study and live in England, because to her, the family and the Indian society will never give her the freedom she desires. To her, unfortunately, the site of family and the kinship bonds therein do not offer any feel-good factor, but appear to her as a source of tyranny through the machismo and oppressions of the Indian patriarch. This is evident from her reaction to Robi’s attempt of restraining her in the discotheque in Calcutta: “Do you see now why I’ve chosen to live in London? Do you see? It’s only because I want to be free….free of you! …free of your bloody culture and free of all of you” (SL 88-89). With this dream of being free of the patriarchal social structure, Ila rejects everything that is Indian (both her family, and by extension, her originary nation) and tries to seek an identity for herself in an alien land. While Tha’mma frantically excludes the ‘other’ in order to secure the borders of her family (and nation), Ila’s constant endeavour is to exclude herself from her family and her nation, and be included in the imaginary fluid space in a foreign land. But this romance of freedom in an alien space ultimately leads her nowhere. In reality she is lonely and miserable and fails to find a space of belonging because though she rejects one bond, she cannot engage herself in a meaningful familial bond elsewhere. She rejects her roots to identify herself with the West. For Ila, travelling is not about crossing borders and inventing new places, but instead submitting too eagerly to the confines of this new space with a futile aim of finding happiness and freedom. She rejects difference, a choice that leads to a fruitless search for acceptance and commonality. So, in her projected fantasies of assimilation, the narrator notes, “she herself was always unaccountably absent in the pictures” (SL 22). The
struggle to be recognized by others in their terms is articulated when Ila displays her trauma on her doll, Magda. Ila’s desire to be accepted continues into her adulthood, culminating with her marriage to Nick and her pseudo-political activism. In an ironic moment, Ila criticizes the narrator’s lack of importance:

...you’ve spent your whole life living safely in middleclass suburbs in Delhi and Calcutta. You can’t know what this kind of happiness means: there’s a joy merely in knowing that you’re a part of history (SL 104 emphasis added).

Seeking validation in London and in its politics, Ila belittles the narrator. But hardly does she realize that it is her willingness to be incorporated in the history of others, which is nothing but an effort to establish legitimacy in others’ stories that ruins her. Her lack of imagination, combined with her vain desire to gain importance in others’ narratives, appears to be her worst fault. Not being able to strike any inter-personal relationship which is the basis of belonging to a nation, Ila fails to find a space in a ‘family’ (even metaphorically) and also in a nation (England) and fails miserably in the interstitial space, failing to link up both.

So, Ila’s life, ultimately, is a long series of self-deceptions, from the stories woven around the school yearbook pictures to her last assertion that there is nothing wrong with her marriage. This is really unfortunate, because Ila also has always been keen to build a house, synonymous to family. For her, house is a desire, which she has dreamt of all along her life – a house with a husband and a Magda. But she cannot fulfill this desire due to her lack in the essential power of imagination – she does not understand the importance of a veranda. In real life she negates her root family but fails to recreate another across the borders. She escapes Robi’s machismo in the West, but ends up in marrying Nick who cheats
her. In fact, Ila’s love for Nick was never spontaneous, but a pathetic necessity for Ila, who thought this would give her a family in the West, which would eventually give her a nation as well. She thought that she would be incorporated into the story of the West easily through this marriage. That is why she has always tried to hide the truth about the mean nature of Nick and has drawn a picture of him as a knight in armour saving a damsel in distress. This continues all through the novel. Her concoctions bounce back at her and her servile obsession with the West finally leaves her rootless and lost. Being unable to find a home for her either in India or in England, she is never free from the tyranny of either of these nations. Her journey across the world has merely been from one tyranny to another and for ever she remains a ‘minor to nationalist discourses’ (Daiya 49). Through Ila, Ghosh is able to problematize the conception of Indianness in the post-diaspora period. The post-colonisation era in India has witnessed large-scale emigrations to Western Europe and the emigrants attempting to actively imitate the high-culture of Western Europe. Consequently, they have ended up in a pathetic dependency on and subjection to another metropolitan culture, having the same gender and racial difference.

So both Tha’mma and Ila are failures in their lives, as Rajeswari Sundar Rajan puts it, because of their failure to ‘belong’ to any new space (289). Neither of them can successfully create a family which could have given them this comfortable sense of belonging, and a stable identity. Their unimaginative characters dump them both as blind subjects of the subcontinent’s history. With no story of their own they are made to oblige to the pedagogic demands of the nation.
Tridib and the narrator, on the other hand, belong to this world, because they can create this family. They have a rich faculty of imagination with which they create their own stories and recreate time and place subjectively. This protects them from being trapped into others’ construction of reality. All through the novel, Ghosh stresses on the faculty of imagination because it is this faculty alone that is liberating, this alone can help one transcend borders. All those who travel are not necessarily cosmopolitan. Ila is a classic example. She is the migrant postcolonial, and marks a locality in her shifting spaces by charting a personal pattern in the standard plan of international airports. But in the process she misses the inherent richness of the place so miserably, that she remembers an international airport only in relation to the position of the restroom situated in it:

I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one’s imagination; that her practical, bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more nor less true, only very apart...although she lived in many places, she had never travelled at all (SL 21).

The passage states that our lives are essentially structured not only by the conception of reality presented by nationality and borderlines, but by the stories we tell ourselves. In other words, we are not only shaped by our nationality, but by the way we let this shaping affect us. Ila has the opportunity to travel, to access cultures beyond the Indian borderlines, but she forsakes the privilege to focus on constructing her own borderlines.

Throughout the novel, Ghosh juxtaposes innumerable pictures of places Tridib ‘imagined with precision’ with Ila’s quotidian view, to emphasise on the creative aspect of his imagination. Tridib could experience the world more
successfully in his imagination than Ila who experiences only through senses. So it is Tridib who is a true cosmopolitan in the novel, and can create family anywhere in the world. With only a picture of his pen friend May in his hand, he applies his imagination so precisely that the ‘family’ he builds in England imaginatively, does not lack a single detail:

Where have you been all this while, Tridibda? Somebody said. It must be three or four months…

I’ve been away, I heard him say, and nodded secretly to myself.

Away? Where?

I’ve been to London, he said. To visit my relatives.

His voice was grave, his voice steady.

What relatives?

I have English relatives through marriage, he said. A family called Price. I thought I’d go and visit them.

Ignoring their skeptical grunts, he told them that he had been to stay with old Mrs. Price, who was a widow. Her husband had died recently. She lived in north London, he said, on a street called Lymington road; the number of their road was 44 and the tube station was West Hampstead. Mrs. Price had a daughter, who was called May (SL 11).

This is of course a lie, for Tridib had not been to London during this time, but the way he takes a mental journey to these places and creates a family there, is more real than that he could have done actually and physically. Equally surprising is the detail he gives about May, whom he had not seen in the recent past:
He reflected on that for a moment and said, no, she wasn’t sexy, not in the ordinary way – she was thickset with broad shoulders, and not very tall. She wasn’t beautiful or even pretty in the usual sense for she had a strong face and a square jaw, but she had thick straight hair which came down to her shoulders in a glossy black screen, like a head-dress in an Egyptian frieze, and she had a wonderful, warm smile which lit up her blue eyes and gave her a quality all her own, set her apart (SL 11).

The relationship between Tridib and May thrives on imagination and prospers without any physical proximity between them. May was only a little baby when Tridib first saw her in London. But this remoteness does not obstacle his growing love for her. In his correspondence with May he expresses his desire to meet her as a stranger, in a ruin:

He wanted them to meet as the completest of strangers – strangers-across-the-seas – all the more strangers because they knew each other already. He wanted them to meet friends and relatives – in a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers (SL 144).

This remoteness does not obstacle Tridib’s growing love for her, rather it helps him to transcend borders and make all his stories universal:

…it happened everywhere, wherever you wish it. It was an old story, the best story in, Snipe said, told when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries Europe – it was a German story in what we call Germany, Nordic in the north, French in France, welsh in Wales, Cornish in Cornwall: it was the
story of a hero called Tristan, a very sad story, about a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across-the-seas… (SL 186).

This universal story of love, which unmistakably points to an ability to create a familial bond, is essentially redemptive. Tridib exhibits this redeeming feature throughout the novel; May and the narrator get a taste of it in an embrace in the last line of the novel. Thus, Tridib’s relation with May becomes a metonym for the possibility of making human connections across the cultural differences with which Ghosh structures the entire novel. Tridib, in the novel, is cast as the paradigmatic figure of migrancy and hybridity through whom Ghosh explores the possibility of the creation of a successful, transnational, multifaceted identity.

The narrator is equally capable of travelling across the world and through time by virtue of his imagination. He instinctively knows the importance of a veranda to make a house complete or has learnt from Tridib ‘how to imagine the roofs of Colombo.’ He knows every detail of the Price house much before he actually visits it. It is precisely here that Ila fails lamentably – even when she is physically placed within various transnational locations, she can never build the house of her desire. The narrator’s psyche, as he travels across the world, absorbs cross-cultural interactions which help him, in the course of the novel, shed the particularities of his origin and narrow nationalism instilled in him by his grandmother, and grows up as a true postnational cosmopolitan like his mentor. Tridib, who has a wealth of information on varied subjects ranging from Mesopotamian Stellae to the plays of Garcia Lorca, reveals a disdain for ‘creatures who sink to the bottom of the sea of heartbreak when they lose sight of their herd’ (SL 18).
Ghosh's project in *The Shadow Lines*, therefore, is to create a postnational utopia, which thrives on the mysterious pull between two souls across the borders. Ghosh explores this pull not only between Tridib and May but also between various sets of individuals and families, who engage themselves in significant humane relationships that are redemptive. This empathy that develops between Tresawsen and Mayadevi, Tridib and May, the narrator and May, Jethamoshai and Khalil help them transcend the partitions created by war, communal violence and racism. As Murari Prasad rightly observes, “Ghosh … passionately searches for strategies for survival in a violent, hate-filled world of narrow divisions and finds in love the enabling and productive action to tide over separatist propensities of communities and nationality groups” (91).

This gives us a new meaning of the phrase ‘shadow lines’ used by Ghosh. While the shadow lines are commonly assumed to signify the lines of demarcation that result into hostility, they may also refer, very significantly in Ghosh, to the invisible links that bind people across the borders. In *The Shadow Lines*, there has been a repeated attempt by Ghosh to highlight the ‘indivisible sanity’ of people beyond borders which has the potential to ensure warm and wholesome international amity. As for example, Ghosh does not forget to remind us how, Mayadevi, during her stay in England during the Second World War, had received warmth and friendship from everyone in war-torn London. Or, in a different context, the author says:

...as always, there were innumerable cases of Muslims in east Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, often at the cost of their own lives, and equally in India of Hindus sheltering Muslims (*SL* 229-30).
These men and women demonstrated that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments. And that prior, independent relationship is the natural enemy of the government, for it is in the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples (SL 230).

Hence, the shadow lines may as well point to liberty and hope that they usher in the individual lives. When Tridib sacrifices his life for establishing a transnational family, he actually consolidates these shadow links. So, ultimately, Tridib is ‘a man without a country’, a man whose imagination and cross-cultural identifications enable him to think beyond frontier limits and earn him a citizenship of a utopia that Ghosh has engineered in his fictive world. The narrator and May unravel the redemptive mystery and, at the end, follow him to this utopia.

This, in no way, signifies that global village is an unproblematic site or the opposition between the personal and the political is a simple, binary opposition. Rather, Ghosh draws our attention to the web like nature of the space where innumerable stories vie with each other in order to be heard. Memory plays an important role here because memory shapes one’s stories, as has been exemplified in the different accounts of Tridib’s death recounted by Robi and May. While for Bangladeshi restaurant owner, Malik, the 1964 riots are rather insignificant compared to war, for Robi, they prove to be the most disastrous event in his family, and the traumatic memory of the event goes a long way in shaping Robi’s views on Indian nationalism:
...and then I think to myself, why don't they draw thousand of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every place a new name? What would it change? It’s a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory? (SL 247)

Robi can never taste freedom in life because he can never free himself from this traumatic memory.

May, however, attains freedom, because she finally learns to look back at this memory from a different angle. For her, this loss could have been more traumatic, as she was, in a way, responsible for his death; and secondly, this made her lose the man of her love. Hence, for a long time since his death, she struggled with herself to come to terms with his death. But with her liberal insight into the importance of cross-cultural mingling, she ultimately learns to view this death as a sacrifice. May’s insistence on seeing the death as a sacrifice not only helps her to cope with life positively (while Robi’s memory remains disruptive forever), but through this view, Ghosh seems to foreground the necessity of individual sacrifice to consolidate human bonds transnationally. One must remember that the space of family receives its nourishment through the sacrifice of the self. Tridib’s sacrifice, therefore, is a necessity for the sake of the world’s familial bonds.

In this way it can be seen that The Shadow Lines has moved a long way from the totalizing narrative of homogenized community as discernible in Raja Rao’s Kanthapura. Standing in the vortex of violence and murderous rampage, Ghosh has reiterated the necessity of the mental creation of transnational family, an effective site for the sustenance of human relationships irrespective of borders. By focusing on ‘the occult zone where the people live’ (Fanon 183), Ghosh has not only used this novel as an eloquent critique of colonial hangover and cultural
dislocation in postcolonial situation, but also found a satisfactory answer to the postcolonial diasporic angst.

III

‘Live, my Prince; hold on to your life’

In his brilliant essay on In an Antique Land, Samir Dayal has remarked that “cosmopolitanism is not to be claimed as exclusively the fruit of Western expansionism” (113). Dispersal and scattering of people have continued to be characteristic of the South Asian history, and it is in this scattering that the genesis of the modern nation may finally be located. The disruption of cognate groups and communities and their eventual coming together has therefore, become one of the basic constituents of the history of South Asia. Interestingly, the scattering and the gathering go on simultaneously, creating innumerable families at the sites of the breaking of nations, as Homi Bhabha points out that the moment of scattering is also a time of gathering:

Gathering of exiles and émigrés and refugees; “gathering” on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafes of city centres; gathering in the half-life; half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another’s language, gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees and discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present (LoC 139).

The families that grow from this gathering are the building blocks of the transnational utopia that Ghosh invests in and it is in this scattering and gathering
that Ghosh finds the theme of his most capacious next novel *The Glass Palace* (2000). The novel deals with a struggling group of races inhabiting British occupied territories in South East Asia. In this yet another exploration of the effect of history on the lives of individuals, Ghosh’s central concern seems to focus, once again, on the ‘minor’ characters, to restore a different history that might otherwise simply pass out of public record. Asked to comment on his detailed narration of the Long march, a key event in *The Glass Palace*, when Indians fled Burma fearing Japanese invasion, Ghosh expresses his surprise at the silence of the recorded history on this traumatic event:

It’s not been written about at all! There’s a single article by a historian, that too an Englishman, Hugh Tinker. On the Indian side, there’s nothing except unpublished memoirs by survivors.... It illustrates the degree to which are truly oblivious about our own history. I had to hunt for survivors in Bengal; I eventually interviewed about 10 or 12. It wasn’t easy finding them; something like the long march shortens your lifespan by 20 years. Doing the interviews was extremely painful. It was just the absolute knowledge of what they went through on the March, and the realization that the whole exercise was meaningless! There was no need for the Indians in Burma to flee when the Japanese approached – many Indians did stay back. It makes you realize the degree to which Indians felt themselves to be the sheep of the British; the delusions that governed their lives (*Outlook* 17 July, 2000).
So, Ghosh’s task in the novel, as Rukmini Bhaya Nair aptly sums up in her essay “The Road from Mandalay,” is to provide 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, Ghosh creates an interior history, an internalized record of emotions running parallel to explicit factual accounts and filling them out.

_The Glass Palace_, which is an elegy for the diasporic condition that is a product of history, has been designed on a vast canvas, literally including both kings and commoners – all united by the event of colonial displacement. There are recognizable historical and political figures – the last of Burmese royalty, King Thebaw and Queen Supalayat, the Burmese Princesses and of course the famous contemporary political figure, Aung San Suu Kyi – to etch the realistic borders of the fictional lives of Rajkumar, Dolly, Uma, Saya John and two successive generations in their families intertwined inseparably. But soon we realize that it is not a story of kings and queens; they merely provide the backdrop for Ghosh’s incisive historical sense and sensibility. The author would rather borrow the war-journalist’s tripod and lenses and then swivel his viewfinder so that it alights on ordinary, marginalized families living out their lives in tumultuous times, and their engagement in creation of innumerable families through which they forge their identity amidst innumerable dispersion and scattering caused by war. But as Ghosh charts the complex sociological and political repercussions of such disbanding through experiences such as of loss, exile and search for a home, we find him focusing on the mobile contours of home. Moreover, when the intricate power-play of the rulers is played out in the history of individual lives, Ghosh observes how some endure and cling on to life, while others succumb.
Rajkumar, the pivotal figure in the novel is endowed with a single will to live against all odds. As the story opens in Mandalay in 1885, we discover eleven-year old orphan, Rajkumar, stranded in a port. He is already displaced from his roots. Originally from Chittagong, his father moved his family to Akyab, an important port in Burma. But both his parents die en route, and the mother’s dying words to Rajkumar are: “Beche thako, Rajkumar. Live, my Prince; hold on to your life” (GP 14). From this moment till the end of the story, this is exactly what he does – engaging himself in the task of inventing a family where none exists, by building lasting bonds of trust with strangers – the boatowner, the nakhoda, Ma Cho, a half-Indian, a half Chinese food stall owner, Saya John Martins, a Chinese Christian contractor, Doh Say, an elephant herder working in the teak forests, to name only a few. And in all these, Rajkumar engages himself in creating a subjective position around him and the novel narrates how he, slowly yet steadily, cruises his career to enviable heights of success. His struggle begins the moment his mother leaves her, and Ghosh evokes the image of a catfish at this moment to summarise his position. A catfish is characterized by its power to survive against all odds, even when there is absolute scarcity of water. In a similar spirit, Rajkumar exhibits ample prudence in his realization that it is futile to go back to Chittagong. He rather strikes a bargain with the boatowner, with a will to look forward, securing for himself a membership in a new family (on the boat) in absence of his original one. The boatowner's reading of this resilient boy is a sufficient indicative of his future:

The old man looked him over. The boy was strong and willing, and, what was more, he had survived the killer fever that had emptied so many of the towns and villages of the coast. That alone
spoke of certain useful qualities of body and spirit. He gave the boy a nod and took the bangle – yes, stay (GP 14).

The author’s comments that follow are equally futuristic:

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* (GP 14 emphasis added).

Since then, he has been a frequent boundary-croasser, making several transitions across national frontiers during his life time. He creates his own history through tenacity, endurance, and a remarkable readiness with which he forsakes the past and adapts to all changing situations. It is not that Rajkumar never suffers from the pains of dislocation. At least once, when he seems to be losing his grip on the plantation he owns, he becomes aware of his slipping identity. He confesses to Dolly:

*My father was from Chittagong and he ended up in the Arakan; I ended up in Rangoon; you went from Malay to Ratnagiri and now you’re here too… there are people who have the luck to end their lives where they began them. But this is not something that is owed to us…* (GP 310).

Yet on another occasion, his contact with the Indian raftsmen, who travel downstream to Rangoon from the upcountry Burmese forests, evokes in him nostalgia for Chittagong and his boyhood days. But he is only momentarily in the grip of such emotions and he is quickly able to control them. He actually reinvents
himself in this new place. Therefore, Rajkumar is truly multicultural. He is a reinvented migrant, who, left to himself, has been able to find a place in the new society by dint of his enterprise, under the assumption that he will be soon absorbed into and by the established cultural order. He thus escapes ending up in underclass or ethnic ghettos. The story of Rajkumar, therefore, is Ghosh’s another way of addressing the vital problematic of the settling and resettling of communities and individuals amidst the confluence of nations and nationalities who is able to gather in the half-light of foreign tongues “the signs of approval and acceptance” (LoC139). Saya John’s impressions of Rajkumar (Saya John himself is something like an older Rajkumar – a man who has travelled the world and creating micro-families everywhere) when he discovers him anew as they are waiting in the chartered bank to secure the timber contract, record this ability in him:

Saya John moved back a little, withdrawing a pace or two to observe him better. Suddenly, from that altered angle of vision he had the impression that he was looking at someone he had never seen before, a reinvented being, formidably imposing and of commanding presence. In that instant there flashed before Saya John’s eyes a clear vision of that Mandalay morning when he had gone racing down an alley to rescue Rajkumar – he saw again as a boy, an abandoned kalaa, a rags-clad Indian who had strayed too far from home. Already then, the boy had lived a lifetime, and from the look of him now it was clear that he was embarking on several more (GP 132 emphasis added).
Rajkumar is a self-made man, having absolute command over his life (true to his name, which means prince; like a prince, he is the monarch of all that he surveys!). Soon, he secures a position in Burma, turning this place of exile to a favourable land of fortune. From a mere crew on a boat, he becomes a rich and powerful member of the Indian community in Burma, through the spoils of the trade in teak, rubber and slaves. But his hard-headed preoccupation with business does not deter him from his romantic pursuits. This leads him to track down Dolly and marry her through Uma’s good offices. There are, therefore, clearly two components in the story of Rajkumar’s success. On the one hand he has been instinctively drawn to create a family through the bonds of blood, a creation of a familial space around him, populated by his wife, Dolly and his sons, Neel and Dinu. It is for the nourishment of this familial space, he works like a giant, undertaking schemes to earn more money to sustain the family of his creation. On the other hand, he creates innumerable families outside the bonds of blood, sometimes out of professional necessity, sometimes other, out of sheer instinct. Illongo, his son outside the bond of marriage, may be Rajkumar’s illegal child, but he points to the irresistible bonds that his father creates in various places. This is how Rajkumar’s life gets intertwined with the lives of Uma, Saya John, Doh Say like a spider’s web – a still centre from where shimmering strands radiate in various directions. It is this ability to forge his subjective identity in innumerable foreign spaces, along with his instinctive foresight characteristic of a successful businessman, and his never-say-die attitude that he takes to life, that breeds in him a diasporic hope that sees him through all his dislocations in life. It is so deeply embedded in him that it does not leave him even at the most difficult moments of his life, when he takes part in the soul-destroying long march from Burma to
India, after losing his son and his estate to the war. This formidable will to live that he manages to sustain even at this crucial phase of his life (along with his wife, Dolly) assumes such superhuman proportions, that his daughter-in-law, a commonplace woman whose link with life is only too tenuous after her husband’s death, finds it almost repulsive:

...it made Manju wince to watch her: not because of her obvious pain, but because of her willed imperviousness to it. They were so strong, the two of them, Dolly and Rajkumar, so tenacious – they clung so closely together, even now, despite their age, despite everything. There was something about them that repelled her, filled her with revulsion... (GP 469 emphasis added).

Their constant encouragement to move and move appears to her as a torment, but Rajkumar and Dolly won’t let her stop:

... as always her tormentors were bearing down on her: Dolly was shouting at her: ‘Get up Manju, get up.’

‘No,’ she said.’ Please let me be. Just a little longer.’

‘You’ve been sitting there since yesterday,’ Dolly shouted. ‘You have to get up, Manju, or you’ll stay there for ever. Think of the baby; get up.’... ‘We won’t let you die, Manju. You’re young; you have the baby to think of...’ Dolly took the child out of her arms and Rajkumar pulled her to her feet. He shook her hard, so that her feet rattled.

‘You have to go on, Manju; you can’t give up’ (GP 472 emphasis added).
This is the secret of Rajkumar’s success. Those like Manju, who cannot imbibe it from him (and Dolly), perish helplessly. But she nevertheless realizes before her death that her child, who has imbibed the die-hard will to live from its grandparents, and is equally ‘greedy for life’, will be safer in their hands: “she heard the sound of (the baby’s) crying and she was glad that her daughter was in Dolly’s arms. With Dolly and Rajkumar the child would be safe; they would see her home” (GP 473). The cry of the child has been brilliantly used, a couple of pages later, to symbolize the diasporic hope, that keeps all the uprooted people to trudge along against all odds, when Rajkumar finally reaches Uma’s house at the end of the perilous journey:

Rajkumar was kneeling on the pavement. He held out his arms and they saw that he was holding a child, a baby – Jaya. Suddenly the baby’s face turned bright, dark red and she began to cry at the top of her voice. At that moment the world held no more beautiful sound than this utterance of rage: this primeval sound of life proclaiming its determination to defend itself (GP 478).

It is the same determination to clutch at life against all odds that keeps Dolly going. After she is forced to leave Burma and move to Ratnagiri, it is her most haunting obsession that the Burma she has left behind is lost to her forever. She suffers from a sense of loss, which, according to Kiran Desai, every immigrant suffers from. Her displacement from her native roots and her discomfort with her own changed identity is clear when she declares to Uma, the collector’s wife that she could now never return home:

‘Do you ever think of going back?’
'Never.' Dolly's voice was emphatic. 'If I went to Burma now I would be a foreigner – they would call me a kalaa like they do Indians – a trespasser, an outsider from across the sea. I'd find that very hard, I think. I'd never be able to rid myself of the idea that I would have to leave again one day, just as I had to leave before. You would understand if you knew what it was like when we left (GP 113).

This is the diasporic condition of a native, as Avtar Brah would like to identify it in her article, "Diaspora, Border, and Transnational Identities". Dolly's position at this moment is not free from ambivalence. She was 'free', she was told, for she was a slave in the erstwhile kingdom of King Thebaw and his Queen, and now no more a prisoner. But in her heart of hearts, she knew that her life was bound with that of the princesses who she had been 'enslaved' to look after. At this moment, she embodies the sanctity of the Burmese Royal Family and its regal authority that seems increasingly threatened in the wake of exile. But ultimately Dolly overcomes this feeling and engages herself successfully in the task of forging a new family in this new place. This is true for both Dolly and Rajkumar, both of whom seek to re-ascertain their rights over Indian and Burmese territories appropriated as 'home' in turns. After a few years, Dolly's life in Outram house at Ratnagiri is the only life she knows: '…where would I go,' she asks, 'this is the only place I know. This is home' (GP 119).

Her friendship with Uma is worth-mentioning too, because this is for the first time that Dolly is able to come out of the stereotypical role that she has been playing hitherto in the royal family, and create around her a subjective-identity in a new familial space. Interestingly, by the middle of the novel, the family of Dolly
and that of Uma are so intricately linked with each other, that they become inseparable. Dolly slips from one family to another with remarkable ability. Eventually she once again bids good bye to this place, once her place of exile and then her newfound home of twenty years, takes ‘a last glimpse of the lane: the leaning coconut palms, the Union Jack…’, and shows an exemplary zest for life as she embarks on a new life of freedom with Rajkumar, clutching her cloth bundle to her and wiping her tears. What is particularly striking about the experiences of Dolly caught in the moment of the breaking of nations, is her remarkably easy sliding into alien cultures, illustrating how new associations are forged in the mazes of history, the past is recast in transformed patterns and unspoken allegiances. And she can do this only because her quest for home primarily involves a quest for family consisting of her husband, sons – which not only gives her security and freedom, but more importantly, a new identity. It becomes a subjective space where she invents a new Dolly – no more a slave girl, but a wife and a mother in charge of a family. She carries this identity forged through the bonds of blood till late in life, when she takes a new journey alone in search of Dinu, her son. After living that identity to the fullest, her insatiable quest for fulfillment of life now leads her to a search of yet another new family, a larger (and universal) one perhaps, than the smaller one comprising herself and her husband. She finally joins the Sagaing Monastery, as she had always willed. It is at this serene moment when she finally delivers herself from all the narrow confines and wins the membership of a large transnational family.

Thus, Both Dolly and Rajkumar find their ultimate meaning of life not only in their immediate familial space, but in being able to spread their bonds of kinship much further. At the end of the novel, we discover to our pleasant surprise
that Rajkumar finds his final home in Uma’s Calcutta house, and has not lived only for her granddaughter Jaya, but has in the mean time cemented a strong bond of serene love with Uma, all their bitterness forgotten and forgiven. Thus Ghosh’s delineation of characters of Rajkumar and Dolly is really a unique way of addressing the vital problem of settling and resettling of communities and individuals amid the confluence of nations and nationalities. Through these two characters, Ghosh successfully proves that travelling is not just between two geographical locations or two points in history, but it is actually the ability to shift from experience to experience, both in terms of time and space, erasing all boundaries between two people’s experiences in disparate geographical contexts and at discrete historical junctures.

Uma, too, is a citizen of the world. The grand European tour opens her to another bigger and more fascinating world. Though she is later caught up in the Indian Nationalist cause and is part of the intelligentsia of the subcontinent in a peculiar way, she is still more than just a colonized native. She is more of a hybrid colonized subject who does not meet the notion of exile head on, for her hybrid nature depletes the term ‘exile’ of its older paradigm of oppression and introduces to the experience of postcoloniality a dimension whereby the colonized/colonizer binary is sufficiently diluted.

Another interesting component of the novel is Arjun’s relation with his subordinate, Kishen Singh. Arjun’s entry into the Military Academy at Dehradun prompted by the notion of passionate service to his country receives a rude jolt in his colleague Hardy’s ironic reduction of it:

…this country whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time – what is it? Where is this country? The fact
is that you and I don’t have a country – so where is this place
whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and
every time? (GP 330)

In the face of such growing insecurity about Indians fighting under the Imperial
army, the author seems to find the ineffably close and intimate ties between Arjun,
an officer, and his subordinate, Kishan Singh, the only lasting bond of love in the
otherwise emotionless, mercenary exercise of war. The denunciations made by
several characters in the novel about the cruelty of the Raj and the excesses it
perpetrated seem to suddenly fall flat against the sublime forging of human
relationships in another strife-less condition. The guilt of serving in the war seems
to be overridden by other more compelling truths that face these men at every
stage of their encounters with nations and themselves. The bond of love and
feeling that develops between Arjun and Kishen Singh transcends all borders (he
recalls how even colonel Buckland spoke of his father’s ‘powerful and
inexplicable’ bond of love with the Indian soldier and the English officer in his
times) and makes a new family possible: Kishen Singh, who asks Arjun for
protection, from the shelter of his parted feet, “had become more than himself – a
village, a country, a history, a mirror for Arjun to see refractions of himself” (GP
332).

Again, Dinu’s love for Alison bridges the distance that divergent
geographies and races usually create. Dinu and Alison are denied a life of
togetherness, but not before they surrender before the knowledge of their more
powerful need for each other and the happiness it can bring in its wake. This
relation of love is curiously symbolic of exiles coming together, as it were, of
families meeting out of a shared compulsion across disputed and dispossessed
territories and relocating themselves in new home(s). Ghosh seems to reiterate here the importance of such a newfound home in the midst of despair and wartime disillusion. This explains why weddings and group portraits form the bulk of matter in *The Glass Palace*, as Rukmini Bhaya Nayar observes in her essay ‘The Road from Mandalay’. 10

Dinu perhaps realizes the ultimate secret of survival when she relates a story he had heard from his father, to Alison on the night of their very private wedding. He recalled how Rajkumar, fascinated by Dolly, managed to buy her some sweets while she, along with other palace girls, was being taken to exile:

He watched her open the packet...he was amazed... the first thing she did was to offer some to the soldiers who were marching beside her. At first he was angry; he felt betrayed...why was she giving them away... especially to these men, her captors? But then, slowly he understood what she was doing and he was glad... he saw that *this was the right thing to do – a way to stay alive. To shout defiance would have served no purpose* (GP 446 emphases added).

What are the building blocks of this transnational family, then? Definitely not an attitude of defiance, but that of empathy which alone can bring people close to one other. Both Rajkumar and Dolly are sufficiently equipped with this quality. That is why they can readily extend their kinship outside the immediate familial bonds. Very surprising yet revealing is Rajkumar’s empathy with the general mourning at the loss of the king and the sudden occupation of Burma at the beginning of the novel:

Rajkumar was at a loss to understand his grief. He was, in a way, a feral creature, unaware that in certain places there exist invisible
bonds linking people to one another through personifications of their commonality. In the Bengal of his birth those ties had been sundered by a century of conquest and no longer existed even as a memory...but there should exist a universe of loyalties that was unrelated to himself and his immediate needs – this was very nearly incomprehensible (GP 47).

Though he does not consciously understand it, this is what earns Rajkumar a transnational citizenship ultimately. Dolly, in her turn, learns compassion, while she lies in the hospital with her son fighting death. She becomes quiet and introspective, listening to other mothers crying over their dead children:

... she’d found herself listening to voices that were inaudible during the day: the murmurs of anxious relatives; distant screams of pain; women keening in bereavement. It was as though the walls turned porous in the stillness of the night, flooding her room with an unseen tide of defeat and suffering....she’d began to cry – it was as though her voice had merged with that of the unknown woman: as though an invisible link had arisen between all of them – her, Dinu, the dead child, his mother (GP 181-182).

It is this interior growth in her that sustains her all through.

So, while barriers and boundaries seem to define the psyches that attend the making of nations and nationalities in The Glass Palace, the author seems to collapse these margins and presents a set of characters who are ‘at home’ everywhere. In the postcolonial condition, which is primarily defined by experience of loss and sense of displacement, it is this ability to relocate new spaces and adapt to these spaces that gives an edge to Ghosh’s characters. They
belong to a new group of people unfettered by the burden of otherness, and
wonderfully blessed with a diasporic hope, equipping them with a rare strength to
fight diasporic anxiety.

The remarkable feat that Ghosh seems to achieve in *The Glass Palace*, is
his jugglery with so many margins, nations and nationalities, and ultimately to
collapse all these differences in one home. His position has been neatly summed
up by Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay “The Anxiety of Indianness” where she
has suggested that for Ghosh, “words like ‘marginality’ and ‘hybridity’ seem
irrelevant…, and segmenting the worlds into first and third regions a rather absurd
activity” (185). Ghosh has thus earned for his fictional characters a freedom from
the throes of the nation, as they move unhindered and unrestricted in there
peregrinations across the vast spaces of the worlds and cultures they understand
and internalise.

Ultimately, in Ghosh’s fictional world, as we find in *The Glass Palace*, the
colonial and the neo-colonial subjects are enlightened enough to slip out of the
imperial gaze and subordination which is expected of them by the nation. They do
not belong exclusively to the group of the ‘other’, but Ghosh rearticulates their
identity, taking a less oppositional and more liberal view of the colonizer-
colonized relationship. Ghosh is, therefore, a postnational writer, whose
unmistakable focus is on the transnational identity that is forged across all spatial
and temporal borders.
IV

Home is Where the Orcaella are

_The Hungry Tide_ (2005) marks a distinct shift in Ghosh’s focus. From his preoccupation with the exploration of the arbitrary and vexing nature of national borders in his earlier novels, he now turns to the personal divisions among individual human beings. After the complex family structure stretching over several generations in _The Glass Palace_, _The Hungry Tide_ seems almost intimate. Nevertheless, it shares Ghosh’s concern for the individual against a broader geographical backdrop. The novel dramatizes an interesting encounter between the so-called educated elitist bourgeois characters on the one hand and the traumatized, mostly illiterate, marginalized subaltern characters inhabiting the underdeveloped Sunderban regions of West Bengal. In the course, Ghosh registers and responds to the social and economic disparities between these two classes and explores the tools to recuperate suppressed subaltern histories and to advance their calls for social justice. _The Hungry Tide_ raises the question of whether ‘home’ can be independent of caste, creed, religion and even nation and nationality, whether ‘family’ can be formed of people hailing from different origins and a fluid space like the Suderbans can be an appropriate space for that. Here too, Ghosh goes postnational as his basic thrust is on the formation of family beyond national origin and even species origin. Like _orcaella_ which can move through artificially created borders, one can really bank on transnational interactions.

Locating the theme of his novel in the remote Sundarbans, Ghosh engages himself in the task of finding the possible clues to the effective communication between these two almost antonymous groups. Finally his search ends in an ethical vision where he finds this communication possible through the civic
possibilities created by the agency of the cosmopolitan individual. The disparities cannot be removed through economic power alone, but through the transformative power of close human relationships configured through altruistic love, as *The Hungry Tide* ultimately shows. Help is only possible when love creates empathy, fights away the traumatic past, and consolidates a kinship bond among various unequal social standings.

Ghosh chose to set *The Hungry Tide* in the Sunderbans for several reasons. The tide country is not simply a remote and hostile environment. It is also a locale with constantly changing boundaries, keeping with the flow of tide. The tide comes twice daily in the Sunderbans, resulting in a constant reshaping of the land. This only forces the individuals to transcend the social and linguistic borders and divisions among them. Consequently, they come closer to each other and form a new family. This space is fluid and hence most suitable for nation-neutral and ‘family’-oriented formulations. To transcend the established geographical and more importantly social borders was, in fact, an essential condition embedded in the very creation of the locale Lusibari. Sir Hamilton, we learn, had bought ten thousand acres of land and invited poor people to come and inhabit the place only on one condition – there would be no caste system and no tribal nationalisms. It is, moreover, a zone of several different kinds of interaction among cultural, national, ethnic, linguistic and religious communities. It is, in short, a border zone. Kanai explains this to Piya in the following way:

This is, after all, no remote and lonely frontier – this is India’s doormat, the threshold of a teeming subcontinent. Everyone who has ever taken the eastern route into the Gangetic heartland has had to pass through it – the Arakanese, the Khmer, the Javanese, the
Dutch, the Malays, the Chinese, the Portugese, the English. It is common knowledge that almost every island in the tide country has been inhabited at some time or other. But to look at them you would never know: the speciality of mangroves is that they do not merely recolonize the land; they erase time. Every generation creates its own population of ghosts (*HT* 50).

The significance of the tide country is that it is a frontier territory, where different cultures have interacted for centuries, but it has, for ever, refused to be colonized or domesticated permanently. It has, rather encouraged demolitions of boundary and mingling of cultures.

It is in this region of intricate archipelagos replete with hunger and catastrophe, Ghosh intersects the contemporary narratives of Piya Roy and Kanai Dutt with the past narratives of Kanai’s aunt and uncle, Nilima and Nirmal Bose. Piya, an American cetologist of Bengali heritage, is in the tide country to conduct fieldwork. Kanai is a successful Bengali businessman living in Delhi, a reluctant visitor who has come only to collect a notebook left by his deceased uncle. His uncle Nirmal and his aunt Nilima have been living and working in the tide country since the 1950s. Interestingly, all these four characters are cosmopolitans, “professing in different ways to be citizens of the world. While all of them have cultural ties to the region of Bengal, they have no direct link to the tidal country they now reside in” (*Tomsky* 56). To orient themselves, they draw upon worldly views in an attempt to transcend the social and cultural boundaries separating them from the subaltern inhabitants. Piya exhibits cultural hybridity and simultaneously subscribes to the universal discourse of secular rational science. Kanai, on the other hand, speaks six languages and mobilizes his professional
translation skills in the service of multinational capital. Nirmal and Nilima are educated city-dwellers, who are committed to the ideals of international socialism.

The novel charts the gradual but utter transformation of all these four characters through their experiences in the tide country. When Nirmal and Nilima leave Kolkata to settle down in the tide country, they are shocked when their confrontation with a subaltern alterity makes clear the insularity of their affluent, scholarly lives. Horrified to learn of the high levels of poverty, corruption and death in the Sunderbans, Nirmal and Nilima subject their beliefs to scrutiny:

…the realities of the tide country were of a strangeness beyond reckoning. How was it possible that these islands were a mere ninety-seven kilometers from home and yet so little was known about them? (HT 66)

The rest of their life is a story of their struggle to create separate subjective spaces for each of them amidst this destitution. Nilima did not want to come here at first. But once she reaches the place, she engages herself gradually in the task of taking herself to the centre of a space she created around herself – a family, a home, an empire – which is exclusively her own. In the process, Nilima gradually evolves to become Mashima (aunt), a position that involves love, care, and authority – all in one. She establishes the women’s union and seeks support from outside. Over the years, she establishes the Badabon Trust and becomes its prime mover. This is her ‘family’, her newfound home, where Nirmal, ironically, is almost a stranger.

But Nirmal, on the other hand, has not been sitting idle all this time. Faced with the plight of the tide country’s marginalized people, he turns to the writings of Lenin for consolation, but finds that critical reading offers no “definite
answers” to the lack of a civic infrastructure. He cannot accommodate the
destitution of rural Bengal within familiar and historically dominant narratives of
Marxism. For all his beliefs, he finds the views he had always presumed
universally applicable are ineffective in this subaltern space. Where the rhetoric
of liberatory Marxism fails, Nilima’s establishment of a NGO – the Badabon trust
– and her conversations with local women highlight a pragmatic way to make
positive contributions in an unfamiliar society through community-building. This
leads Nirmal to a quest of his own, which is even more surprising. In his
association with the Morichjhapi movement, Nirmal at last finds the subaltern
consciousness that he had been seeking all his life. Ultimately he not only
empathizes with this world but also identifies with the refugees as he
acknowledges the universal yearning of the wretched of the earth, the millions
without a home. In an epiphanic moment, Nirmal realizes that he emotionally
belongs to this space:

“Who, indeed, are we? Where do we belong? And as I listened to
the sound of those syllables, it was as if I were hearing the deepest
uncertainties of my heart being spoken to the rivers and the tides.
Who was I? Where did I belong? In Kolkata or in the tide country?
In India or across the border? In prose or in poetry?
Then we heard the settlers shouting a refrain, answering the
questions they had themselves posed: ‘Morichjhapi chharbona. We
will not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may.’
Standing on the deck of the bhotbhoti, I was struck by the beauty of
this. Where else could you belong, except in the place you refused
to leave? I joined my feeble voice to theirs: "Morichjhapi charbona!" (HT 254)

Nirmal’s notebook is a personal record of his transformative experience in the tide country. In this notebook, he records his transformation from a failed writer and leftist intellectual to an animated writer and empathizer, something he has not been able to do for the last thirty years. The oppression of the refugees sharpens a sense of urgent responsibility in Nirmal: “for the Poet himself had told me,” he writes in his notebook, “This is the time for what can be said. Here / is its country. Speak and testify” (HT 275). Ghosh sets up Nirmal as a solitary figure who challenges the silencing of history, rebuking the failures of academics and international community to speak of the violence perpetrated. As Nirmal immerses himself into the refugee community, he documents the ways in which societal structures alienate the impoverished. He glimpses the persecution faced by the refugee population, confronted as they are by hegemonic apparatuses: the police, the NGOs, and Kolkata’s political society. Nirmal’s disillusionment with the complicity of the elite now prepares him for a new life. He takes the membership of a new family, and engages himself in the task of being an empathetic witness to subaltern, diasporic suffering, though he is not able to bring about a radical civic change. This sense of empathy is the basis of Ghosh’s ethical vision, and serves as the gel in creation of the familial bond between the elite and the subaltern. What began as a mere curiosity in Nirmal towards the ‘other,’ takes the shape of a selfless love, making him a member of the Morichjhapi family.

Morichjhapi itself is a family born out of the will to live that connected thousands of uprooted refugees. Their aims, as Nilima puts it, “were quite
straightforward. They just wanted a little land to settle on. But for that they were willing to pit themselves against the government. They were prepared to resist until the end” (*HT* 119). But this indomitable common will to survive against all odds strengthens the kinship bond within them and make them all members of one *bastuhara* (homeless) family. Interestingly, it is in this new family created out of a condition of homelessness, that they declare their common identity- *amra kara?* – *bastuhara* (*HT* 254) (who are we? – we are the homeless) and it is as a family that they fight till the end.

Kanai is an economically successful man. And commensurate with his achievements is the insularity of the privileged city-dweller. His smugness is after all, paradigmatic of the self-satisfied and self-important well-educated bourgeois citizen. As his aunt Nilima observes, “things have come very easily to [Kanai] so he doesn’t know what the world is like for most people” (*HT* 208). But placed in a locale where all boundaries are only tentative, and hence all attempts to otherise only absurd, Kanai’s experiences and meetings with the ‘other’ begin to work a transformation in him. This initiates in him an examination of the self, the condition that makes Ghosh’s ethics possible. We see this process at work in Kanai’s denigration of Fokir, a low caste fisherman. Kanai’s abuse stems from his need to assert his class inflected authority and reconstitute his social and cultural norms. When he insults Fokir, Kanai becomes conscious of how entrenched his class and cultural convictions are within him. This difference is resolved only at the moment of crisis, when all the snobbish sense of superiority in him collapses revealing his helplessness in the hands of that very ‘other’. It is through this experience that his cosmopolitan vision arises, replete with glaring moral truths. He not only grasps the structures of violence and oppression operating within the
dominant social order, but in his epiphany, Kanai sees the decentring of his identity and values, and the extent of his bourgeois false consciousness. This is replaced with an emancipatory though humbling consciousness. Kanai confides to Piya that he is a changed man, in awe of the “shocking novelty” of the emotions he feels. Such profound feeling inculcates an alternative mode of knowledge, a humanist awakening inherent in Kanai’s concluding remarks: “…at Garjontola I learnt how little I know myself and of the world” (HT 353).

But our obligations as citizens of the world, in the face of civic inequalities and suppressed histories, like those of Morichjhapi, do not end only with empathetic witnessing. Ghosh wants us to act positively and socio-politically. Only then we can begin to transcend the failures of modern nation-states by inaugurating a new family composed of effective and ethically responsive networks. Nilima and Piya engage themselves in creation of this new family in the novel through their discharging of social responsibilities.

The most interesting thing about The Hungry Tide is the way in which the desire to create a subjective space, combined with the altruistic impulse turn Nilima and Piya as true cosmopolitans. When Ghosh invests in the concept of postnational utopia, his faith primarily rests on such characters as these. What primarily began as Nilima’s pastime in an unfamiliar land where she was a complete stranger, gradually earns for her the central subjective position in the space she creates around herself in the form of the Badabon trust. Yet the success of this trust which lends Nilima the role of a caring mother-figure of the entire community comes primarily from the altruistic impulses that guide her all along. She is spontaneously concerned about the well-being of each and every member of this community and she goes to all possible extent to secure their well-being.
That is why she accepts Piya in her family and later on shows active interest in her project. Finally, Nilima agrees to collaborate with her in the project because she feels that it will benefit not only Moyna and Tutul, but the entire fishermen community in the region. Thus the family she creates around her is essentially the expression of her selfless love. This is a case of radicalized love – self-sacrificing and genuine, operational irrespective of the nation-state and its border. And importantly, she herself is transformed in the process.

An even more classic case of transformation is Piya. Piya comes to this place merely as a researcher, but ultimately she earns for herself a membership of transnational family as she responds to selfless, eternal needs of greater humanity. *The Hungry Tide* narrates how Piya’s challenge in the novel is to establish an effective, deep communication with not only the mute world of the *orcaella*, but also with the subaltern, feral community of Sundarbans, where traditional language serves no purpose. One of the toughest barriers to globalization is that of language. Ghosh attempts to overcome it in *The Hungry Tide* and, later on, in *Sea of Poppies*. In *The Hungry Tide*, he is exploring the possibility of creating a ‘deep communication.’12 In the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans, a deep communication is easily possible between nature and its feral inhabitants. But Ghosh’s uniqueness in the novel is to enact a meaningful deep communication between the urban and rural characters in the novel. The mute, mutual attraction that develops between Piya and Fokir in the course of the novel is a classic example of this. They do not follow each other’s language, and they represent antonymous social, economic and cultural positions, but that does not deny them a familial bond which holds them together even in the moments of imminent death. The bond, in fact, transcends death, because the project in which Piya engages
herself after the catastrophe, is her heartfelt attempt to eternalize Fokir’s memory, and save him from getting lost in history. This is precisely how the familial bond saves the personal (hi)stories of characters like Fokir who come into life and pass away without creating any ripple in the waves of official history. Thus in Ghosh’s fictional world, the ‘unimportant’ individuals and voiceless nobodies are brought to the centre. Moreover, this familial bond alone can give birth to an ethical response to the problem of subaltern injustice, and involves a fundamental transformation of one’s world-view, because this bond is consolidated through radicalized love, a love that is born out of mutual trust and respect.

Piya’s quest for her home has been narrated in detail in the last few pages. After the traumatic experience during the storm, Piya is seen to engage in this quest at two levels – outwardly, she starts wearing saris and tries to establish a speechless communication with Moyna. Inwardly, she is quite busy, as we learn later, in relocating and establishing her in the new home – considering the pros and cons, arranging for necessary permissions in a way we engage ourselves arranging the nitty-gritty when we move over to a new house or locality. It is ironical when Nilima suggests that she should go back to her ‘familiar’ (and familial) space in America because ultimately she discovers this familiar space neither to be America, nor even Kolkata, but the Sundarbans. And Ghosh is meticulously careful to allow Piya a fortnight’s time so as to affirm that it was not an impulsive decision but a thought over plan.

The novel closes with a vision of this new cosmopolitan activity. Kanai is about to publish Nirmal’s notebook, with the aim of reaching international communities of readers and scholars. At the same time Piya is collaborating with Nilima – a union between the global and the local that promises to empower the
subaltern inhabitants of the tide country through Piya’s academic and international contacts. As readers, we are urged, at the end of the novel, into thinking towards the hope of social and political transformation possible in real life (and not only in fiction) through the creation of familial bonds. In the Author’s Note attached at the end, Ghosh refers to real life counterparts of Nirmal and Nilima – Sri Tushar Kanjilal and Shrimati Bina Kanjilal. He refers to their voluntary activities at Rangabalia (at Sunderbans) and speaks very high of how their efforts have brought about positive changes in the area. This only confirms Ghosh’s faith in the altruistic value of such bonds in today’s world.

Throughout the novel, Ghosh has questioned the traditional, familiar spaces where we have always conveniently located people. In a geographical space with fluid contours, he has presented us with a host of such familiar spaces suddenly becoming unfamiliar. Thus, Nirmal and Nilima live side by side for years but are unknown to each other, divided by different dreams for their lives, and by a lack of respect for the other’s way of embracing life; Piya is completely a foreigner in her own familial space inhabited by her own parents, where ‘speech was only a bag of tricks’ (*HT* 159); Kanai, the translator of language and cultures, is stripped of all urban sophistication and finds himself powerless before Fokir in the swamp. Consequently, we have a series of new relations and creation of new spaces which mock the established social conventions – Piya learns to love Fokir, transcending the barriers of language, class and even the social institution of marriage. Nirmal falls in love with Kusum. Kanai, cured of his snobbishness and informed with humility, comes back to Lusibari, with a new attempt to establish effective communication with the past as he embarks on the project of rewriting the experience of Nirmal.
Perfectly in keeping with this, therefore, are the interesting definitions of home given by Piya and Nilima at the end of the novel:

Piya smiled. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Not at all. In fact it’ll be good to have him home.’

Piya’s choice of words surprised Nilima so much that she dropped the spoon that she was using to stir the tea leaves. ‘Did I hear you right?’ she said, directing a startled glance at Piya. ‘Did you say “home”?’

Piya had said the word without thinking, but now, as she reflected on it, furrows appeared on her forehead.

‘You know, Nilima,’ she said at last, ‘For me, home is where the Orcaella are; so there’s no reason why this couldn’t be it.’

Nilima’s eyes opened wide and she burst into laughter. ‘See, Piya,’ she said. ‘That’s the difference between us. For me home is wherever I can brew a pot of good tea’ (HT 400 emphasis added).

This concluding conversation between Nilima and Piya, where each of them defines ‘home’ in her own way, in fact summarizes Ghosh’s concern throughout the novel. This also perhaps gives us an answer to the question as to why Ghosh has chosen the Sunderbans as the setting. The Sunderbans are borderless; where one’s familiar markers for identity are constantly shifting. First, according to Hamilton’s rule it was impossible to tell who’s who and what their castes and religions were; and more importantly from a natural point of view, there are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, the river from the sea. What can be a better place to reinvent one’s home!
We will All be *Jahaz-bhais* and *Jahaz-bahens*

There is, again, a big leap from the intimate, smaller space to the vast, transnational world in Ghosh’s latest novel, *Sea of Poppies* (2008). In this first part of a trilogy conceived on a vast compass of time and space, Ghosh deals with the problems and politics of the diasporic movement in history in such minute details, as has not been attempted earlier. In the process, he explores a host of interesting issues – the sense of loss involved in the state of homelessness, the role of memory in recreation of transnational family, and the truth behind the seductive pleasures of ‘feeling at home’ in homes, genders, communities and nations.

The desire to feel at home, which Yi-Fu Tuan describes as ‘*topophilia*’ in his book *Topophilia: A Study of Environment, Perception, attitudes and Values*, is a characteristic of all people everywhere (See endnote 3, Chapter I for details on *Topophilia*). This *Topophilia* engages man incessantly in quest for home and creation of family in the most unfamiliar spaces. It gives the diaspora the identity he badly needs. Closely related to this is the question of handling the memory, because the creation of the new family depends largely on the judicious handling of the ‘luggage’ of memory and the cultural burden that every migrant or exile carries with himself. Again, as we have discussed in Chapter I, it is impossible to generalize this problem, for memory posits different kinds of problems to exiles and immigrants. The immigrants can look at the state of homelessness rather unsentimentally; and as they embark on a new life transnationally, they do so without any burden of memory. But for the exiles, the task is different and difficult. All these issues assume interesting proportions in Ghosh as his fictional world is inhabited mostly by travellers, who undertake journeys, figurative and
literal. Interestingly, most of these journeys are on water bodies. In *Sea of Poppies*, this event of travelling becomes all the more complex because along with the travelling theme, Ghosh, in this novel, combines the issues of dislocation, migration and cultural cross mingling.

*Sea of Poppies* is about a voyage on the *Ibis* – a ship that takes coolies, convicts, sailors and officers to Mauritius. The backdrop of the journey is very important – the beginning of the opium war in the early nineteenth century. Much have earlier been written in different forms of literature on the Indigo Plantation, but no Indian writer writing in English before Ghosh had thought of focusing so intensely on this opium trade of the British in the entire network of China, India, Mauritius, Trinidad and Maldives in the nineteenth century as an offshoot of the consolidated colonial power. As a result, like Dinabandhu Mitra’s *NeelDarpan* (1860) this book becomes an *Opiumdarpan*, as it were, as with the help of a brilliant narrative, Ghosh is able to bring together a motley crew of sailors, convicts, migrants and even lovers gathering from as varied corners of the world as one can think of – from the interiors of Bihar and Bengal and other parts of Asia, and even England and the United States - all of whose lives have been intricately linked with the opium politics. The slump in the opium trade affects lives of Bhojpuri peasants and factory hands in Gazipur as much as the fortunes of the English merchants as well as the Bengali Zamindars. The *Ibis*, the tall masted ship, therefore becomes a floating cauldron of different histories, geographies, language and culture. The other interesting metaphor of such mingling of incongruent components is Deeti’s shrine, which, like any other shrine in a poor/middle class Hindu Indian family, encapsulates a motley assembly:
There was a small alter inside, with statues of Shivji and Bhagwan Ganesh, and framed prints of Ma Durga and Shri Krishna. But the room was a shrine not just to the gods but also to Deeti’s personal pantheon, and it contained many tokens of her family and forebears—among them such relics as her dead father’s wooden clogs, a necklace of rudraksha beads left to her by her mother, and faded imprints of her grandparents’ feet taken on their funeral pyre...

*(SoP 9)*

Let us now take a look at some of the prominent passengers on board. Neelratan is the educated, polished zamindar of Rashkhali estate whose fast losing economic solvency could never make him compromise with his refined taste, culture, his etiquettes or his babu tradition of having lots of attendants and even his personal mistress. Ultimately, it is shocking but not uncommon that this most refined of the zamindars falls a victim of colonial game plan and was cheated by Mr. Burnham. He is consequently convicted as a forger and is on the *Ibis*, on his way to be deported to Mauritius. Sarang Ali is one of the most important crew but with a not so remote history of a pirate; Ah Fatt, an opium addict and a convict of Parsi and Chinese descent. Zachary, second mate of the ship, is the key representative of the hybridity of race, class, costume and language impelled by the sea trade. He is not at all a ‘pucca sahib’ (his father was white and his mother was a quadroon). Nor is Paullete a ‘pucca’ memsahib. She is the daughter of a French Botanist at the royal Botanical Gardens across the river from Kolkata. Born to French parents she grew up more as a Bengalee having got Jodu’s mother, a poor boatman’s rustic but efficient wife as her foster mother. This at once would remind us of Jodu (a subaltern figure on the *Ibis*) who is an interesting foil to
Paulette, but how similar at the same time – born to a boatman, but growing up with Paulette in the affluent ambience of Mr. Lambert’s sylvan bungalow, and Ghosh does not forget to remind us that he never felt at home in his native village where he went back only for a brief period of time after the death of Mr. Lambert.

Then there are the girmitiyas – the ‘lesser mortals’. Deeti represents the poor and the oppressed Bhojpuri subaltern and engages our attention in the first part of the novel with a tragic tale of how she loses all her sources of decent living to opium, which she describes as the shani (evil) of her life. Engaged in a daily struggle to remain alive by growing and selling poppy seeds, she loses her husband, falls victim to social and sexual oppression of her in-laws, is saved by Kalua from being a sati and ultimately finds a refuge on the ship. Kalua, with his strong gigantic physique could not resist the tyranny of the society either, not only because he was poor but also because he was a low caste – a chaamar. Saraju is a midwife who had made a mistake in the delivery of a thakur’s son and this caused her to be driven away from her ‘home’. Munia, a mussahar, saw her parents and her illegitimate son burnt to death before her own eyes. Then there is Dukhanee who is a married woman, travelling with her husband having long endured the oppressions of a violently abusive mother-in-law. Also on the deck are Ratna and Champa – they are there since their husbands’ lands have been contracted to the opium factory, leaving them with nothing to sustain them. Heeru has been deserted by her husband. And there are hillsmen from the plateaus of Jharkhand who have brought with them stories of a land in revolt against its new rulers, of villages put to flames by the white man’s troops. So, the reader cannot miss the one common luggage that all these marginalized have-nots share among
themselves – the luggage of a painful, traumatic memory of tyranny, suffering, pain.

What subsequently becomes interesting in the novel is the thread that ties all these characters together. All of them want to live even when they are thrown in the most hostile conditions of life. Undeterred by tyranny, they engage themselves in a quest for a new home. The novel, in its three sections, tries to narrate the transition of these varied people from their original homes where they had been rooted, to this new home en route, as a new family emerges on the Ibis. ‘Land’, ‘River’ and ‘Sea’ – the topographic themes of the three sections into which Ghosh divides his tale of migration speak of unimpeded space – of a journey of deliverance from a claustrophobic setting to a more and more open space. The novel “lurches unsteadily from the despair of marooned lives to the hope of reprieve, from the dull certainties of confinement to fleeting portents of an unborn freedom,” – as Professor Swapan Chakraborty says in his review of the novel in The Telegraph on 8 August, 2008. If we follow the narrative closely as the Ibis gradually makes its way from Kidderpore through the mohona and falls out to the Bay of Bengal, we will be able to trace the different phases of transition of this shift to a new home, a new family.

Leaving the land, however, in spite of the pain and subjugation, is not easy. The pain, unease, confusion and a sense of apprehension that loom large on the initial phase of the journey are not unusual. All sorts of superstitions, rumors and apprehension grip them:

Up to this point, the migrants had avoided the subject of the Black water – there was no point, after all, in dwelling on the dangers that lay ahead. But now, as they sweated in the steamy heat of the
jungle, their fears and apprehensions bubbled over. The pulwar became a cauldron of rumors: it began to be whispered that their rations on the Black Water ship would consist of beef and pork; those who refused to eat would be whipped senseless and the meats would be thrust down their throats. On reaching Mareech, they would be forced to convert to Christianity; they would be made to consume all kinds of forbidden foods, from the sea and the jungle; should they happen to die, their bodies would be ploughed into the soil, like manure, for there was no provision for cremation on that island. The most frightening of the rumors was centered upon the question of why the white men were so insistent on procuring the young and the juvenile, rather than who were wise, knowing, and rich in experience: it was because they were after an oil that was to be found only in the human brain- the coveted mimiai-ka-tel, which was known to be most plentiful among people who had recently reached maturity. The method employed in extracting this substance was to hang the victims upside down, by their ankles, with small holes bored into their skulls: this allowed the oil to drip the oil slowly into a pan.

So much credence did this rumor accumulate that when at last Calcutta was sighted, there was a great outburst of sorrow, in the hold: looking back now, it seemed as if the journey down the Ganga had given the migrants the last taste of life before the onset of a slow and painful death (SoP 246-7).
At the same time they feel a strong pull from behind as memories of the land makes them nostalgic:

But even when removed from view, the island could not be put out of mind: although none of them had set eyes on it before, it was still intimately familiar to most – was it not, after all, the spot where the Ganga rested her feet? Like many other parts of Jambudvipa, it was a place they had visited and revisited time and again, through the epics and Puranas, through myth, song and legend. The knowledge that this was the last they would see of their homeland, created an atmosphere of truculence and uncertainty… … … Among the women, the talk was of the past, and the little things that they would never see, nor hear, nor smell again: the colour of poppies, spilling across the fields like abir on a rain-drenched Holi… … … No matter how hard the times at home may have been, in the ashes of every past there were a few cinders of memory that glowed with warmth- and now, those embers of recollection took on a new life, in the light of which their presence here, in the belly of a ship that was about to be cast into an abyss, seemed incomprehensible, a thing that could not be explained except as a lapse from sanity (SoP 396-8 emphasis added).

In an interview to The Outlook on 26 May, 2008, Ghosh confides to Sheela Reddy about how this diasporic pain had been one of the major interests behind writing the novel:

I think we have such a distorted idea of our history of the 19th century in some ways. When you actually look at the past, it was so
different. From writers like Naipaul and so on, we had a picture of what it was like for the Indian migrants after they arrived in places like Mauritius. But for me what was so hard to imagine, so incredibly poignant, was the moment of departure. What did it mean for them? They were farmers, the most rooted people. The courage it took at that time for a bihaari to set out across the kala pani is something you and I can barely conceive of. I felt so moved by that, such admiration for them in a way that I wanted to write about it. I wanted to think about it in detail, what it was really like, the actual moment of departure when you see everything you know disappearing behind you.

And yet, life, for these characters does not end up in stagnation. It cannot, because the people are on the Ibis, which itself is a trope for movement, shifting its nautical position every hour. The challenge of the characters therefore is to struggle with memory, turn it into a positive zest for life and engage indomitably in the task of forging a new home, out of the dungeon like pulwar and the prison cell where they are supposed to rot. Most of the characters in the novel, Deeti, Paullete, Kalua, Nob Kissin, carry the knowledge of their private histories and try to conceal them and resort to different kinds of guile. But significantly, they fail to keep their own identity separate and ultimately mix with others to establish meaningful relations with others on board, cutting across all boundaries whatsoever. This transforms them, as they take on new membership in a new family. Neel is a classic example of this transformation. He naturally begins with a sense of loss:
With departure looming, the images and memories Neel had tried
to bar from his mind came flooding back: of Elokeshi, of his home,
of his husband-less wife and fatherless child. When he dozed off, it
was only to be visited by a nightmare, in which he saw himself as a
castaway on the dark void of the ocean, utterly alone, severed from
every human mooring. Feeling himself to be drowning, he began to
toss his arms, trying to reach towards the light (So 342).

But then, this zaminder, who had always relied on his attendants to ensure his own
comfort, and who had never even touched food cooked by anyone other than a
brahmin, realizes that in order to remain alive, he will have to engage himself in a
meaningful relation with others. Caste, riches, and cultural boundary – nothing
can keep him aloof any more as he willingly engages himself in the task of writing
letters for other prisoners. The transformation in Neel is possible only because
gradually he can transform pain to a positive impetus. At the beginning, Neel
shudders at the prospect of living alone with Ah Fatt:

Spinning around in disgust, Neel clutched the bars of the cell,
calling out after Bishuji: You can’t leave me here, have some pity,
let me out… (SoP 316).

But gradually, he started taking care of Ah Fatt, bathing him, feeding him, taking
care of him like a mother:

To take care of another human being – this was something Neel
had never before thought of doing, not even with his own son, let
alone a man of his own age, a foreigner. All he knew of nurture
was the tenderness that had been lavished on him by his own
caregivers: that they would come to love him was something he
had taken for granted… it occurred to him now to ask himself if this was how it happened: was it possible that the mere fact of using one’s hands and investing one’s attention in someone other than oneself, created a pride and tenderness that had nothing whatever to do with the response of the object of one’s care… (SoP 325-326 emphasis added).

The passage marks the beginning of a transition in the Zamindar. For the first time in his life, he is informed with altruistic responses. So when he starts creating a subjective identity by adopting this altruistic role, he forges a familial bond with a stranger, whom he was repulsing at the beginning. A family is instantly formed out of the sheer will to live, between two convicts, proving all barriers of nationality, culture, economic difference and language, porous.

The bond is consolidated further by a touching reciprocity on the part of Ah Fatt. After the post-sodomization scene between the convicts, their shock takes them to a world of uncommunicative silence:

…although the incident on the fo’c’sle deck had lasted no more than a few minutes, it had hit them with force of flash flood, sweeping away the fragile scaffolding of their friendship and leaving a residue that consisted not just of shame and humiliation, but also of a profound dejection. Once again…they had fallen into uncommunicative silence (SoP 463-4).

But ultimately a ‘deep communication’ is possible between these two convicts outside the conventions of language. In his heart of hearts, Ah Fatt could feel for Neel. The bond of love that developed between them gives birth to righteous
anger in Ah Fatt. His brutal elimination of the first Mate is a transgression of the law but is a classic case of consolidation of the familial bond.

Aziz Ahmed makes an important point in his essay “The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality” where he addresses the politics of migrancy, as he differentiates between the different classes that compartmentalize different groups of migrants. “Postcoloniality is also, like most things, a matter of class,” he observes (Ahmed 16). One of the greatest achievements of Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* is his success in breaking away with this class-barrier. The readiness with which Paulette adapts herself with the girmitiyas on board, points to this achievement. Of all the characters on the move, Paulette is perhaps the one who floats the most, as she continues to fluctuate through the social groups she inhabits from time to time. In the beginning, she also suffers from pain, though her journey was so different from Neel. Even for her the beginning of the journey (or an adventure in her case) was not without the pull of the memory. But she overcomes the pain as she takes an active part in pulling all her resources together to bring freedom for the main four prominent figures on the *Ibis*. Right from the beginning of the journey, the readiness with which Paulette mingles with the girmitiyas, sheds off all her past and adapts with the new, is the secret of her successful adventure on the *Ibis*. She, too, goes through a total transformation, as she declares, “from now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings-*jahaz-bhais* and *jahaz-bahens* – to each other. There’ll be no difference between us” (*SoP* 356). This again shows how the *ibis* becomes a site of new community-formation – communities constituted of lives unfixed from the cultural moorings.

It would be pertinent at this point to invoke Bhabha once again, for in his essay “How Newness Enters the World”, he suggests inexhaustibly new, exciting
ways of thinking about identity born from 'the great history of the language and landscapes of migration and diaspora' (LoC 235). Bhabha particularly has in his mind those who live 'border lives' on the margins of different nations, in between contrary homelands. Borders are crucial because they are important locations where one contemplates moving beyond them. Therefore, as Bhabha remarks in "Locations of Culture," the borders are full of ambivalence, as "we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, post and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (LoC 1). So for Bhabha, the border is the place where all these come into, and a new, shifting complex form of representation emerges, defying any attempt at binary patterning. These 'in-between' spaces, therefore, "provide the terrain of elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity" (LoC 1).

In his essay 'DissemiNation', Bhabha focuses on the importance of 'performance' as the means by which these new, hybrid identities are forged at the sites of borders. Standing at the border, according to Bhabha, the migrant intervenes actively in the transmission of cultural inheritance or tradition of both the home and the host land, rather than passively accept its customs and pedagogical wisdom. He, therefore, becomes an agent of change, and the 'subject' is produced from the process of hybridization. This hybrid identity is never total and complete in itself, but remains perpetually in motion, open to change and reinscription.

Avtar Brah's idea of 'diaspora space' (209) is equally relevant here. According to her, a 'diaspora space' is an intersection of borders where all identities become "juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed, or disavowed; where the
permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate, and where the accepted and
the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be
disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition” (208). It is in this new space,
where new families are formed breaking all the barriers.

Deeti is another character who enters this new family on the Ibis. If the
family of Neel and Ah Fatt bears the mark of a private understanding, the case of
Deeti is fraught with traces of social rhetoric. As soon as the journey begins, one
notices with wonder how Deeti appoints herself the guardian of all the single
women caring for their safety, admonishing Munia for her frivolity but never
failing to guard her with her protective presence. She is the busiest woman on
board ready even to brave the formidable maistries, and even taking an initiative
in Heeru’s marriage. She suddenly becomes the bhauji (sister-in-law), which helps
her to overcome the memory of her own daughter, the last tie she had with the
Pain is definitely there. But keeping with the starboard and larboard movement of
the ship, the people on board lurch from the memory of the land they have left to
the hope as well as the fear of the future. And finally, as sea-sickness is over with
the Ibis becoming steady, all the characters overcome the physical as well as the
mental pain.

What, then is the source of this new energy? It is an indomitable spirit to
struggle for life. This has been a characteristic in all novels by Ghosh. In the face
of new threats all the characters from different economic status, races, cultures
and castes, come close to each other as they huddle together in a new emotional
space where co-residence rather than blood determines the family. And what is it
that gives them the necessary push forward? What keeps them alive? It is at this
point that a judicious handling of memory becomes necessary. Look at their
different sources of sustenance. Neelratan would remain alive for the sake of his
wife and child:

...his tears dried on his cheeks and he spread out his arms to pull
his wife and son to his chest. Listen to me, he said: I will stay alive.
I make you this promise: I will. And when this seven years are
over, I will return and I will take you both away from this accursed
land and we will start new lives in some other place. That is all I
ask of you: do not doubt that I will come back, for I will (SoP 271).

So he is carrying the luggage of memory, which is essentially a fond memory, and
which helps him to fight. For Paulette and the girmityias it is a freedom from a
tyrrannical society that has oppressed them in their own land. So for them, they
would prefer amnesia, trying to travel light, because their memory is a heavy
burden.

Another very interesting aspect of the novel is how convergence of
cultures entails that of languages. Languages shuffle and mix as much as do class
registers, lowly and lordly idioms, the oral and the graphic. From Neelratan’s
sophisticated tongue to Serang Ali and Jodu to Ah Fatt we hear a whole farrago of
tongues ranging from chaste Bangla to Lascar Pidgin, pointing, once again, to the
motley of cultures which they represent. It may be quite interesting to note in this
connection, the innumerable references to achar in the novel: the girmityias talk
of its different varieties and recipes! This achar or chutney can appropriately be
read as a symbol of the cultural mingling that takes place in the novel.

So, for Ghosh, a new home is possible not out of a sense of loss, but of the
ability to transform all hostile conditions of life into a source of positive energy.
Deeti’s pregnancy and Heeru having a proposal of marriage from Ecka are two of many symbolic events that Ghosh uses to show this indomitable spirit and how the flow of life is kept uninterrupted en route. And secondly, the construction of this new home is achieved through a judicious handling of memory and amnesia.

Belonging in any one place requires a judicious balancing of remembering and forgetting. ‘Forget the painful memory and carry the fond memory as part of your luggage as one would carry the favourite photographs of one’s ancestors or the family deities’ - this becomes the new survival mantra. The girmitiyas in Sea of Poppies would carry with them the fond burden of their marriage practice and try to practise all the rituals in all possible ways even at the face of all hostilities only to feel at home.

Thus at the end, we find a new family created en route out of this cultural mingling. And even this is not the ultimate conclusion. At the end, Ghosh has only promised us a new beginning with a further mingling of varied culture when we find four characters embark on a further new life taking the hybridity formed on the Ibis in further motion. And most importantly and suggestively they don’t even have their small putlies (bundles of clothes) this time. This is perhaps Ghosh’s answer to unheimlichkeit, where the mystery of lived human experience transcends the artificial borders of nation and race.
Notes

1. Refer to Annexure I for the whole interview. One can also refer to the novelist’s interview to *First City* published as ‘Shadow Script’, New Delhi, September 2000: 30, referred to by Brinda Bose in the introduction to her edited book *Amitav Ghosh : Critical Perspectives*, 18. In that interview, Ghosh defended his choice of fiction over history:
   
   I think fiction has always played that part. If you look at Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* … I think the difference between the history historians write and the history fiction writers write is that fiction writers write about the human history. It’s about finding the human predicament, it’s about finding what happens to individuals, characters. I mean that’s what fiction is … exploring both dimensions, whereas history, the kind of history exploring causes, causality, is of no interest to me.


3. The *Katho Upanishada* narrates the story of Nachiketa who asked Yamaraja, the God of Death for the blessing of the knowledge of the self which is the only means of liberation. After initial hesitations and after having tested Nachiketa’s keenness on receiving this knowledge, Yamaraja finally blessed him with the knowledge of the Brahman. Nachiketa’s quest for knowledge started with the basic question – ‘who am I?’ which is a quest
for his own identity. The quest was fulfilled with his ultimate realization ‘Tattwomosi, Swetoketo’ – ‘You art none but Brahman himself’.

4. Refer to my interview cited above.

5. It is worth nothing in this connection how Benedict Anderson in his famous book Imagined Communities (London: Verso, 1992: 173) outlines the significance of the map in the nation’s desire to consolidate its sovereignty over every square centimeter of its territory. Similarly, Bill Ashcroft discusses, in The Post-colonial Reader, (London: Routledge, 1997: 133) the power of geography, maps and mapping in people’s ways of imagining the world. He looks at the map as ‘a prime means of textualizing the spatial reality of colonized people, by enforcing Eurocentric view of spatiality.’

6. The narrator’s desperate search in archives to trace the reports of the riot is an example of his attempt to recover marginalized (or lost) personal stories, and thereby save himself from being trapped into the story of others.

7. Refer to endnotes in chapter I for Agyeya’s interesting discussion on subjective space.

8. Kiran Desai is recorded to have said this in a video interview carried on the site www.bbc.co.uk (Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction).

10. Formation of new family (as well as formation of new nations) is always accompanied simultaneously by fear and hope, prejudice and openmindedness. A new member in the family is very much like an immigrant – both are ‘foreigners’ in the new space, and are observed carefully by the other members of the space (the family members, the civil society or state agencies). The immigrant, in between the old and the new families or between the old and the new nations, has to negotiate cautiously in order to be incorporated in the new space and able to move towards new social and political liaison. Wedding is one very important event to enable this family formation, while group photos document this formation. These two therefore have been used brilliantly by Ghosh as tropes of family-formation throughout the novel.


Another interesting discussion of cosmopolitanism is there in Ania Spyra, “Is Cosmopolitanism Not for Women? Migration in Qurratulain
Hyder’s Sita Betrayed and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*.” She says, “cosmopolitanism … does not rest simply on global mobility, … traveling between communities and nation-states, crossing boundaries in a relentless search for a space of belonging. It is active belonging, rather, that I see as an important variable in my understanding of cosmopolitanism”. All these four characters in *The Hungry Tide*, in different ways, engage themselves in the task of ‘active belonging’ in a foreign space. Bruce Robbins, in his essay “Comparative Cosmopolitanisms” in Bruce Robbins & Pheng Cheah ed. *Cosmopolitics* iterates the importance of this active belonging when he speaks of “a density of overlapping allegiances rather than the abstract emptiness of nonallegiance” – it is only when people see themselves as part of many realities that they feel engaged enough to struggle for the shift in the world’s unequal distribution of power. The lives of Piya, Kanai, Nirmal and Nilima are classic examples of this.


I think the world has been globalizing for a long time. It is not a new phenomenon, but one that has achieved a new kind of intensity in recent years. The only real barrier to a complete uniformity around the world is not the image but language. Images can be exchanged between cultures, but the domain where globalization has truly been resisted is that of language. We can send e-mail, which can be instantly translated, but that is shallow communication. For any kind of deeper, resonant communication,
language is essential. All such communication is always deeply embedded in language.

In The Hungry Tide and later on, in Sea of Poppies, Ghosh attempts to overcome the barrier of language and establish a ‘deep communication’ transcending the limitations of language.

Works Cited


Bhattacharya, Sajalkumar. An Interview with Amitav Ghosh. March 12, 2009. (to be published, attached as Appendix - I)


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