understanding and trust between the people of two alien cultures.

Ghosh’s main concern in this novel, like in his other novels, is to trace the flow of cultures across national boundaries. Every society is constantly in a state of flux right since ancient times because travel and migration have been an essential part of human existence. Every society evolves its own cultural traditions and practices as a result of a collusion of diverse peoples, their cultures and religious beliefs. Robert Dixon aptly remarks:

“\[The characters in Ghosh’s novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but dwell in travel, in cultural spaces that flow across borders – the ‘shadow lines’ drawn around modern nation states.\]”

Ghosh highlights the cultural hybridity by creating some striking parallels in the cultural and spiritual traditions of the two Eastern countries. He takes up Mangalore in India to showcase the evolution of its culture as a result of a wide array of cultural and religious practices prevalent among the members of its varied religious hierarchies.

While searching for Bomma’s history and origin, Ghosh discovered the cultural syncretism of India represented by Mangalore and its Tulu culture. Divided into caste hierarchies, these people shared many common aspects in their forms of religious worship and in the common language they used, called as Tulu. The Brahmins and the Dravidians or Shudras shared their deities and forms of worship, in their worship of the Bhutas and Sankritic deities.
“…. The Tuluva people participated enthusiastically in the worship of both sets of deities. There was no contradiction in this, of course, for to them Bhutas and Sanskritic deities represented aspects of divine and supernatural power that shaded imperceptibly into each other.” (AL-252)

The name ‘Bomma’ itself is a perfect example of hybridisation. His name is a derivation of the Tulu deity Berme, which became assimilated to the Sanskrit deity ‘Brahma.’ In Egypt there was also a blending of the Jewish and Arabic cultural and religious beliefs. It is incredibly astonishing to know that, Jews and Muslims, now staunch enemies, were in the medieval era united by their religious bond.

“When they (the Jews) invoked the name of God in their writings it was usually as Allah, and more often than not their invocations were in Arabic forms, such as insha Allah and al-hamdul-illah.” (AL – 261)

In the medieval context, the master-slave relationship was not demarcated on strictly rigid lines. In fact the two categories had tremendous possibilities of sliding into one another to create a mutual bond of trust and faith. The word slavery had an entirely different meaning from what it means today. It was a means of entering the army or bureaucracy and the slaves who were apprenticed with traders or merchants could rise to the status of partner or shareholder. In the Vachankara Saint poets of medieval India slavery was a metaphor to represent the devotee’s quest for God.

“In their poetry it was slavery that was paradoxical embodiment of perfect freedom; the image that represented the very notion of relationship, of human bonds, as well the possibility of their transcendence.” (AL - 261)
These spiritual mystics – the Sufis in Egypt and the Vachankara Saints in South India – greatly influenced mundane life. It created bonds of love and faith that transcended the worldly bonds of caste, gender, wealth etc and fostered communitarian values, secularism and spiritualism. The Sufi tradition also influenced Judaism. One of the Sufi Jews Abraham Maimonides remarked once that the Sufis were, ‘worthier disciplines of the prophets of Israel than were the Jews of his time.” (AL - 261)

This shows that the people of the East were truly secular and rational in their outlook. They did not have xenophobia in respect of the foreign traders who frequented their land regularly. This is in contrast to the medieval period in Europe where people still carried a hangover of the dark ages. They had little concern for values like secularism and rationalism. Their idea of the other people was coloured by the typical Christian notions of religious divisiveness and differences in faith.

During his second visit to the Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashawy, Ghosh finds that they have fallen to the emerging forces of Urbanisation. Poverty and love for lucre has forced many young men to migrate to foreign countries especially Iraq. The Gulf War has generated tremendous opportunities for employment. But a strong wave of threatening insecurity, distrust and suspicion gripped the Gulf countries and Egypt.

Jabir, Amitav’s young friend in Egypt had shaved his beard when Ghosh questioned him, he said, “There’s been trouble between the government and certain Islamic groups, and they
were worried that something might happen to me—even though I don’t belong to any group or party …. This is a Muslim country. And it isn’t safe to look like a Muslim.” (AL-309)

Imam Ibrahim, found it degrading to use the traditional medicine that he earlier used to prescribe for the villagers. He now trusted injections and modern medicine. While earlier Ghosh would freely visit the tomb of Sidi, Abu Kanaka when it was not guarded by uniformed officers. In his visit to the tomb during the second visit to Egypt, Ghosh is treated with suspicion that is usually associated with foreigners. The officers interrogate him at length after being finally relieved.

In India too the cosmopolitanism and communal harmony represented by the culture of Manglore had degenerated into religious fundamentalism. Just as the Arab world is strife with conflicts between Jews and Muslims, in India it has driven a wedge between Hindus and Muslims. Ghosh visited one of the Hindu temples in Manglore, but was shocked to discover that it had lost its essence of commonality of forms of worship, of the ties that bound the people despite their caste hierarchies.

When we approached it, I noticed that its walls bore the posters of a fundamentalist Hindu political organisation, an upper-caste group notorious for its anti-Muslim rhetoric…..

The respect and faith that the people had for foreign traders is evident in their worship of the deity Bobbariya-Bhuta to commemorate their link with foreign traders. This deity was considered to be the spirit of a Muslim Mariner and trader who died at sea. Ghosh points out how the Bhuta-cult represented by
the marginalised now made hard attempts to enter the brahminical or sanskritic fold, putting an end to the entire history of friendship, mutual love and communal harmony that prevailed during the medieval times.

The past had revenged itself on the present: it had slipped the spirit of an Arab Muslim trader past the watchful eyes of Hindu Zealots and installed it within the Sanskritic pantheon. (AL - 274)

The medieval history that Ghosh revives through the Geniza presents the picture of the past in all its objectivity. The writer succeeds in tracing the trajectory of history in future also. The song of the Vachanakaras takes us on a journey into the past, and can give us solace in the face of the harsh realities of the present.

With a whole temple
In this body
Where’s the need
For another?
No one asked
For two. (AL-275)

The novel establishes that 20th century has witnessed the loss of secular, genuinely religious and cultural values that were practiced in the medieval era. The growing Westernisation and Urbanisation have transformed traditional societies. The rise of religious extremism and fundamentalist organisations has eroded the social fabric of the nation in countries like India as well as Egypt.
References:


23. Ibid, p.86.


CHAPTER IV

POLITICS OF POWER
Politics of Power

In *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh vehemently denounces the categories of ‘nation,’ ‘geographical boundaries’ and identity. He launches his critique against extremist nationalism. His central concern in this novel is to point out the arbitrariness associated with national boundaries. Nationalism and the complex issues of national identity, he believes, are rooted in the concept of nation:

What interested me first about borders was their arbitrariness, their constructedness – the ways in which they are ‘naturalised’ by modern political mythmaking. I think this interest arose because of some kind of inborn distrust of anything that appears to be ‘given’ or taken – for – granted…I think these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded.¹

The concept of nation originated in the West and was a part of the colonial enterprise that aimed at spreading capitalism, its markets and economy in the colonised countries. It is rightly pointed out that: “In Europe down the centuries, there was a symbiotic relationship between the ideas of nation, state and market. In our case (India), this process is being encapsulated into five or six decades of decolonisation.”² In India the nation is still in the stage of infancy. It has also been a site of numerous political, ethnic and religious conflicts considering its vast diversity of faiths, religions and cultures. Comparing the Indian
nation with that of Britain or America, Ghosh says, “In countries like India the nation as such is still too young and tenuous an institution to have acquired this axiomatic status.”

Ghosh points out the emergence of nationalism as a political ideology in the 20th century and its repercussions in England as well as India. He places England against the backdrop of the II World War in the early forties. In India, the political atmosphere is rife with the struggle for freedom against the British rule. Decolonisation intensified the feeling of securing nationhood for India. For the vast majority of Indians ‘nation’ was the guarantee of the fulfillment of their aspirations and hopes of securing a distinct national identity and homogenising differences. Fredrik Watkins says, “Obscure as its origins may be, the growth of nationalism is clearly associated with the rise of ideology.”

Ghosh recaptures the memories of the World War II to highlight the fact that all modern wars are ideological wars. The war involved most of the leading nations of Europe like England, Germany, Russia, etc. It was a war of the ideologies of Nazism, fascism and nationalism.

Through the characters of Alan, Snipe, Mike and Dan who are Leftists Ghosh describes the activities of revolutionary Marxists who were seriously engaged in fighting racist policies during the period of the 1920’s in England. Dan belonged to the Trotskyist left and wrote pamphlets against Nazism while Alan
Tresawsen worked for the Victor Gollancz’s The Left Book Club as an editor. The struggle of Trotskyists and its progression is carried down to the contemporary times. Ila, an Indian and her comrades are Trotskyists. They are revolutionary Marxists. Their fight is against racism and capitalism associated with the nation-state.

Ghosh depicts the political hypocrisy of Ila’s friends who consider Ila backward and immature because she belonged to India a Third World nation. “They would talk of her as ‘our own upper-class Asian Marxist.’ This seemed to please them: they had an acute sense of history and perhaps they saw Ila as a link with the Fabians.”

This also reminds of the split in the followers of Marxist ideology, which saw the rise of two factions – The revolutionary Marxists and the Fabians. The Fabians were socialists who regarded that society could be reformed by parliamentary action. The indoctrination by nationalism and historiography is presented through the character of Thamma, the narrator’s grandmother. She has a very high consciousness of her sense of national identity, which is rooted in the history of the subcontinent. Thamma has witnessed the birth of India into nation, the political divisioning of the country and the creation of Bangladesh. To her, the nation is a central force in the life of an individual. It is an ideal to be lived for. She associates progress,
sacrifice and identity with the nation. Her idea of the nation is reflected in her strong belief in sacrifice for the motherland.

“Hasn’t Maya told you how regimental flags hang in all their cathedrals and how all their churches are lined with memorials to men who died in wars, all around the world? War is their religion. That’s what it takes to make a country.” (SL-78).

Tomlinson rightly points out the process through which a sense of national identity and belonging is constructed. It is through, “the flag and its rituals, the national anthem, state ceremonials – deliberately intended by the administrative institutions of the nation – state to enlist identification.”

Thamma has lived through the partition of the subcontinent. She had witnessed her homeland Dhaka becoming the capital of a new country, Bangladesh. Through the geopolitics behind partition Ghosh explodes the myth of nationhood. He depicts it through the bitter family feud that led to the partition of Thamma’s ancestral house in Dhaka. The two families of Thamma and her uncle Jethamoshai had lived together since generations but soon they had become rivals:

Soon things came to such a pass that they decided to divide the house with a wooden partition wall... The brothers even partitioned their family’s old nameplate. It was divided down the middle by a thin white line, and their names were inscribed on the two halves – so tiny that nobody could read them. (SL-123).

This refers to the hatred between Hindus and Muslims, who had shared the feelings of friendship and brotherhood but turned enemies after partition. The power of geographical
boundaries that conjures up images of strangeness and difference for the people living across the border is beautifully brought out in the metaphor of ‘the upside-down house.’ Thamma and her sister Mayadebi never stepped into the other divided portion of the house. Thamma would frighten Maya by describing life in the other half of their house:

“Everything’s upside-down over there, I’d tell her; at their meals they start with the sweets and end with the dal, their books go backwards and end at the beginning..... They write with umbrellas and go walking with pencils ...But you know the strange thing was that as we grew older even I almost came to believe in our story.” (SL-pp-125-126)

For Thamma geographical boundaries running between nations are as real as the wooden partition that divided their ancestral house in Dhaka. When her son, the narrator’s father tells Thamma that there is no physical border between India and Dhaka, Thamma seeks a reconfirmation of her belief in fixed geographical boundaries, which she has strongly internalised:

“But surely there’s something – trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land. Don’t they call it no-man’s-land?” (SL-151).

Having witnessed a lot of bloodshed to preserve geographical borders – the partition, the riots, the division of Bengal, Thamma is shocked to learn that nothing separates Dhaka, her erstwhile home from her present home in Calcutta:

“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 were it all for then – partition
and all the killing and everything – if there isn’t something in between?” (SL-151)

Thamma’s faith in nationalism obstructs her perception of understanding the fast changing realities of the world. She is unaware of the fact that in the post nationalist phase, the definition of ‘home,’ ‘identity’ and ‘belonging’ have undergone a change. When she uses the words ‘coming’ and ‘going’ to connote ‘coming’ in Indian language, Ghosh refers to the complexities of belonging and identity in the present day age of diaspora and globalisation. Thamma’s feeling of radical nationalism is intensified when she comes to know that Jethamoshai, her old uncle who has been abandoned by everyone, is in the care of a Muslim family of Khalil, a rickshaw driver:

And her eyes grew misty at the thought of rescuing her uncle from his enemies and bringing him back where he belonged, to her invented country. (SL-pp-136-137)

Thamma’s anguish is aptly expressed by Ernest Gellner. He suggests that, “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.”

Thamma’s dislike of her brother-in-law, the Shaheb, Mayadebi’s husband is mainly attributed to his cosmopolitanism. She detests his Europeanisation. Being a high-ranking official in the foreign services he has learnt the art of his trade. He lives abroad, indulging in Lavish parties, drinking and hankering after better positions. This is a comment upon people, especially Indians of the elite category who remain Indian by colour but are
English in their thinking. Thamma points out his hypocrisy: “….. the Shaheb’s wardrobe was divided into sets of hangers, each with its own label. Calcutta Zamindar, Indian diplomat, English gentleman, would-be Nehru, South Club tennis player, Non-Aligned statesman--- whatever he wore, there was always a drilled precision about his clothes which seemed to suggest that he was not so much wearing them as putting them on parade.” (SL-34) Thamma’s dislike of Ila is also due to her urge to become a part of English society. Her notions of national identity dissuade her from believing that Ila can be a part of England just by the mere fact of living there:

“She doesn’t belong there----- 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’ve drawn their borders with blood.” (SL-78)

Jethamoshai is reluctant to leave Dhaka when Thamma asks him to leave Dhaka and stay with them in Calcutta. The comment of Jethamoshai reflects his understanding of national politics, “Once you start moving you never stop. That’s what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don’t believe in this India-Shindia. It is all very well, you are going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? 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)
The death of Tridib in the communal riots that take place in Dhaka in 1964 shows how the feeling of nationalism and national identity resurface in conditions of political turmoil. According to Benedict Anderson, nationalist sentiments are impermanent and have a tendency to ‘surge and decline.’ And as Tomlinson says it is usually during conditions such as war that nationalist sentiments tend to emerge more strongly. In the year 1965 war breaks out between India and Pakistan. And Thamma’s nationalistic fervour regains a fresh lease of life. She had not forgotten the death of Tridib who was killed by Muslim rioters. She extends the hatred for the rioters to the entire people living across the border. She contributes to the war fund. “We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out.” (SL-237)

The newspaper reports carry the news of the riots. But they are hardly mentioned once the riots ended, while war, elections, cricket match etc received extensive coverage. Ghosh refers to the politics of the print media: “What is it that makes all those things called ‘politics’ so eloquent and these other unnameable things so silent?” (SL-228) The media shields issues of political importance from the public view by fanning rumours and diverting the attention of public from important issues:

A few days later the Indian High Commissioner in Pakistan was summoned to the External Affairs Ministry and informed of the Pakistani government’s view that communal incidents in East Pakistan were being played up by the Indian press in order to divert the peoples attention from the serious happenings in Kashmir. (SL-230)
Ghosh highlights the failure of nationalism by hinting at the acts of insurgency and demand for political autonomy by the different states of India. Robi, Tridib’s younger brother who is in the Indian Administrative Service is keenly aware of these political realities in India. The death of Tridib and his own experiences give him the awareness that seeking freedom by sketching geographical boundaries is merely an illusion:

“Why don’t they draw thousands of little lines through the whole subcontinent and give every little place a new name? What would it change? It’s a mirage; the whole thing is a mirage. How can anyone divide a memory? If freedom were possible, surely Tridib’s death would have set me free?” (SL-247)

The 80s was a significant decade in world politics. Ghosh traces the rise of European capitalism, the impact of the political ideologies of the West, the process of colonialism and finally the emergence of global capitalism. And as he depicts the current political crises, Ghosh also refers to reconfiguration of power relations in the new global order and also shows how the conventional binaries between tradition/ modernity, self/other, local/global and the first/third worlds have become absolutely untenable.

Discussing the complex ramifications of colonialism, Ghosh goes on to show how the grand narratives of science, Reason, Progress and rationality were used by the west as a part of its political strategy to consolidate its rule in the colonised countries. In the novel The Circle of Reason, Ghosh portrays the character of Balram Bose, a schoolteacher in a small village of East Bengal,
Lalpukur, who is incredibly obsessed with Western scientific theories and discoveries. His love for the legacy of Pasteur, his passion for solving the everyday problems of common people and his discovery of the germ surpass all the bounds when Balram decides to find the germ in human body and society. He becomes a demi-god figure with his drive to purge human body and society from moral and material corruption. He goes about cleaning the refugee shanties with buckets of carbolic acid:

But Lalpukur was churning like cement in a grinder, and Balram was busy chasing its shooting boundaries with buckets of carbolic acid, his hair wafting behind him, in the germ free air.  

Balram’s love for reason, logic and carbolic acid becomes enmeshed with the dislike that he develops for his employer Bhudeb Roy. Balram is well versed in practical affairs and is thoroughly greedy. Balram unnecessarily picks up quarrels with Bhudeb Roy and his sons. His love for abstract ideas of reason and progress leads him to fit human beings into a specific mould that would cast away their greed and lust for money. He gives Bhudeb Roy a bath with carbolic acid to kill the germs of money that dwell in his system. Claire Chambers rightly observes: “Carbolic acid becomes a weapon of self-interest in the violent power struggle between the two men.....”

Balram and Gopal are the members of the Rationalists, the science association that comprises young students from the Presidency College in Calcutta. Balram and his friend Gopal had always rationalised the Eastern religious philosophy. Their
obsession with Western scientific theories led them to question the foundation of religious beliefs and rationalise the concept of God, the Brahma. It may be noted that irrationality in matters of religious faith and God constitutes an important element of the religious practices of the East. Balram’s obsession with scientific reason and his hatred for Bhudeb Roy overrides everything as he points out to the crowd at the Saraswati Puja in the school organised by Balram, the error in Saraswati’s image. “This, he said to the electrified crowd is not Saraswati. This is not learning, he said, knocking the clay with his Knuckles. This is vanity.” (CR-31) Even religion becomes a tool in the battle between Balram and Bhudeb Roy. It also highlights the power of the Western political ideologies, which exercise a strong hold on the minds of the people.

Ghosh unravels the history of imperial domination by using the traditional craft of weaving. The cloth trade that once united the world was gradually brought under control by Europeans to serve their self-interest of establishing economic and political dominions in the non-Western World:

Lancashire poured out its water falls of cloth, and the once cloth-hungry and peaceful Englishmen and Dutchmen and Danes of Calcutta and Chandannager, Madras and Bombay turned their trade into a garotte to make every continent safe for the cloth of Lancashire, strangling the very weavers and techniques they had crossed oceans to discover. (CR-57)

It is the cloth trade and the rise in production with the Industrial Revolution that sowed the seeds of European
capitalistic expansion. Robert Dixon has a point to make in this regard. He says,

“As the image of the garrote suggests, the trade routes may cut across national borders, but they are infected by blood and over determined by the asymmetries of economic and military power.”

The most persistent and recurring political event in Ghosh’s fiction is the separation of East Bengal and Dhaka. The creation of Bangladesh led to violence and displacement of the masses. Ghosh highlights the geopolitics of nation-states that is responsible for such serious political conflicts leading to communal hatred, immigration, chaos and dislocation of helpless victims. The major characters in Ghosh’s fiction are immigrants, who are constantly on the move and are connected with the event of separation of Dhaka from India. Balram, his father are immigrants from Dhaka and the presence of rows of refugee shanties in Lalpukur, that Balram disinfects with carbolic acid, highlights the repercussions of Dhaka’s separation in Indian history which was largely manipulated by party politics. Ella Shohat observes,

“And despite the broad patterns of geopolitical hegemony, power relations in the Third World War are also dispersed and contradictory. The First World/ Third World struggle, furthermore, takes place not only between nations (India/ Pakistan, Iraq/ Kuwait), but also within nations, with the constantly changing relations between dominant and subaltern groups, settler and indigenous populations, as well as in a situation marked by waves of post independence immigrations to first world countries (Britain, France, Germany, and the U.S.) and to more prosperous Third World Countries (the Gulf States).”
And in the migration to prosperous Gulf Countries Ghosh traces the sway of global capitalism and its effects that are felt internationally. The trans-nationalisation of production has positioned human beings as commodities or consumers submitting to the demands of capital. The movement of people globally has been unprecedented, largely driven by better economic prospects and the attainment of material comforts and prosperity. It is with such dreams and hopes that the passengers in the ship called ‘Mariamma’ are heading towards Al-Ghazira, a Gulf country. Alu is seeking an escape from the police while the others like Zindi, the prostitutes Chunni and Kulfi, Karthamma, Rakesh and Prof. Samuel are moving to the Gulf to fulfill their materialistic dreams, which they had failed to accomplish back home in India. The plight of Karthamma shows how innocent and helpless individuals are lured to the foreign shores with false promises and dreams of better life. Karthamma is suffering labour but refuses to deliver the baby unless she signs the forms. Poor and ignorant, she believes that after signing the forms, her child will be assured of all luxuries:

“Someone’s brought her on to the boat by making all kinds of promises - your child will be this, it will be that, it will have houses and cars and multi-storied buildings if only you can get across to al-Ghazira. Sign a few forms and the child will be a Ghaziri.” (CR-177)

The woes and anxieties of the passengers in ‘Mariamma’ reflect unfulfilled hopes, dreams, dejection and frustration. It was in 80s the effects of global capitalism became apparent, as huge masses of population, especially in developing countries of Asia,
started moving towards rich foreign countries especially the Gulf. After the end of colonialism, eurocentrism reemerged in a much more modern guise that engulfed the entire globe giving rise to a new global culture. Arif Dirlik comments:

“…. the end of Eurocentrism is an illusion because capitalist culture as it has taken shape has Eurocentrism built into the very structure of its narrative, which may explain why, even as Europe and the United States lose their domination of the capitalist world economy, European and American cultural values retain their domination.”

The flow of capital and labour across the world has given rise to a new homogenised culture that of global capitalism. This has led to fragmentation of societies and cultures, the reconfiguration of previously existing relations of domination and subordination and also of the local and global. The capitalistic system recognises only two categories of human labour, the ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’:

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

Referring to the history of Imperial exploitation and economic domination, Ghosh shows how the British colonisers usurped the powers of the Malik, the traditional ruler of Al-Ghazira. By the dint of their military prowess and the help of Malik’s half brother, they forced the old Malik to sign a treaty
that would allow them to dig oil. The British had their eyes on oil reserves. They gained control of the oil town and brought labour from their colonies, from countries such as India and other Asian countries. European capitalism gave rise to indentured labour:

But those ghosts behind the fence were not men, they were tools – helpless, picked for their poverty.... They were brought as weapons, to divide the Ghaziris from themselves and the world of sanity; to turn them into buffoons for the world to laugh at.  (CR-261)

Even today the workers in the oil companies in the Gulf comprise poor Indians and Asians, poor and marginalised. In the essay “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel,” Ghosh highlights the fact that these sections of population who form a major workforce in the Gulf in oil companies are marginalised from the civil society. None has written about them in literature. Neither the Americans, who control oil reserves nor the Arabs, except a few like Abdelrahman Munif, the Jordanian writer and Ghassan Kanafani, the Palestinian writer:

.... The Gulf serves all too often as a metaphor for corruption and decadence; a surrogate for the expression of the resentment that so many in the Arab World feel towards the regimes that rule the oil kingdoms. 14

When Alu reaches Al-Ghazira, he finds the job of painting a huge building An-Najma or The Star with his friends Rakesh and Abu Fahl. The building collapses and Alu is buried in the colossal wreckage. But he is saved by two sewing machines kept there. ‘The Star’ is symbolic of the stronghold of global capitalism and
its fall the destruction of traditional culture of the Gulf city. Hajj Fahmy gives an apt reason for the falling of the star:

“It fell because no one wanted it. The Malik didn’t want: he hasn’t forgotten one moment of the Battle of the Date Palms and never will… The Mawali didn’t want the Star because of their Sheikh’s grave. The contractors who built it didn’t care whether it stood or fell – They had made their money anyway… No one wanted the Star. That was why the Star fell; a house which nobody wants cannot stand.” (CR-264)

And like thousands of people working in the Gulf, Alu too is a helpless victim of the global economy. Lying buried in the debris of The Star, for four days, Alu comes out, transformed. He had been meditating there on the evils in society that lead to corruption among human beings. He finds money to be the root cause of all evils in society. And like his uncle, Balram, Alu takes upon the task of cleaning the society, of driving away the germs of greed and money. The influence of Pasteur and his discoveries had driven Balram as well as Alu to take up the fight against money. In Hajj Fahmy’s house, Alu addresses the people of the Ras on the evils of money, “We will drive money from the Ras, and without it we shall be happier, richer, more prosperous than ever before.” (CR-281)

The ecstatic crowd gets ready to accept a new system of distribution of wealth that would guarantee freedom from exploitation, a life of respect and dignity and an end of corruption, which all along they had been denied by global capitalism. This new blue print of socialism that Alu conceives is based on the idea of common pooling of money. It is based on the
principles of equality and dignity of labour. But soon Alu realises that desires and wants that the modern consumerist society generates cannot be controlled by the socialist system. When the crowd led by Abu Fahl decides to give a bath of Carbolic acid to the haughty, exploiting labour contractors Adil-al-Azraq and his cousin on the order of Haj Fahmy, Alu senses the portents behind this frenzied act. History was repeating itself. When Balram had done the same thing with Bhudeb Roy, it had brought destruction and death:

Alu wasn’t weaving any longer, but he wasn’t watching either. He was looking in front of him totally bewildered. You had only to look at him to know that the whole thing was beyond him now. He could no longer understand what he’d started. (CR-315)

Ghosh depicts the crises of socialism and the signs of decline of Soviet Communism that became imminent in the 80s. The economic model of socialism was not found suitable for economic growth. Fukuyama remarks,

“For if a country’s goal is economic growth above all other considerations, the truly winning combination would appear to be neither liberal democracy nor socialism of either a Leninist or democratic variety, but the combination of liberal economics and authoritarian politics that some observers have labeled the ‘bureaucratic-authoritarian state,’ or what we might term a market-oriented authoritarianism.”

And the Ras people decide to gift Alu the two sewing machines that had saved his life as a token of their love and gratitude. They all indulge in merriment, drinking and dancing. Before going to the Star on the shopping spree, Abu Fahl invites
Ismail, the son of Hajj Fahmy to dance. But he declines saying, “The germs are out today. They’re around the bed. I can’t get off.” (CR-339)

This depicts the fact that it is not possible to defeat the powerful forces of money, greed and corruption in society. And as the ecstatic crowd goes on a shopping spree, the police open fire killing some, include Karthamma. Some escape while Alu, Zindi, Kulfi and Boss, (Karthamma’s son) flee to Algeria. The failure of Alu’s socialistic economic model shows the triumph of the market-oriented society, that controls the life of each and every individual across the world. Ella Shohat remarks,

“International geopolitics and the global economic system have obliged even socialist regimes to make some kind of peace with transnational capitalism.”

Alu, Zindi and others like Karthamma, Rakesh, Prof. Samuel, etc., are victims of the global market economy. Their hopes, dreams and desires of a peaceful life, of better economic prospects is defeated by the commodified existence that they are forced to live in the new land. Ghosh depicts the crisis of socialism in India at the moment of its birth into a free nation. The doctrine of socialism and its practice was being revived in the 50’s in the III World though it showed a steep decline in the Soviet Union or the West. Ghosh goes back in time to the political scenario in India after it gained freedom and the power politics that led to a split in the socialist party. India being a land of diverse, heterogeneous masses, posed a problem for the nation.
There was a great need to bridge the rural urban divide. While the national elite that belonged mainly to the urban cities came to power, the vast sections of people, living in village suffered from poverty, exploitation by landlords and social and educational backwardness. Leaders like Gandhi and Frantz Fanon too believed in the socialistic pattern of society. In her book ‘Postcolonial Theory’ Leela Gandhi points out how these two leaders were opposed to the idea of centralised polity represented by the nation. Describing the views of these two revolutionary leaders, she writes, “Both remain wary of the national elite and eventually seek, although equally unsuccessfully, the disbanding of nationalist parties in favour of a more decentralised polity closer to the needs and aspirations of the vast and unacknowledged mass of the Indian and Algerian peasantry.”  

The entire generation of Indians represented by Dantu or Hem Narian Mathur who was Mrs. Uma Verma’s father and the movement of rural socialism led by Ram Manohar Lohia inspired Balram’s college mate. Many socialists like Dantu who remained committed to its ideology took upon the task of working for the uplift of the rural masses where exploitation was rampant. Dantu worked for the Kisan sabha Movement in the villages of Bihar. But the lust for power drove many power-hungry socialists to deviate from their cause and join mainstream politics. This elite class, crazy for power, is represented by Murali Charan Mishra, the father of Maithili Sharan Mishra, Mrs. Uma Verma’s
colleague in Al-Oued. He betrayed the Praja Socialist Party and joined the congress, the ruling party.

But certainly, if anyone had a right to point his finger at Murali Charan Mishra, it was old Hem Narain Mathur. For he was a real socialist, as true as the new ploughed earth, and he had died in unsung obscurity while Murali Charan Mishra was still fattening himself on ministership. (CR-377)

The political situation in India in 50’s and the split in the socialists shows the development of 20th century socialism. One section, represented by Dantu remained truly revolutionary in their ideals. The other group represented by Murali Charan Mishra aligned its interests with non-socialist parties to establish constitutional democracy. It reflects the need of socialism to merge its interests with the political and economic interests of the state. Hence the rigidity of socialistic principles practiced by Alu or Dantu end in a failure. Isolated from the large political, national or global framework it was bound to fail.

Ghosh’s stay in Egypt in 1980s to pursue research in social anthropology and his own personal experiences gave him an insight into the issues of history, culture, politics and identity, and their manipulation in the present times. In his marvellously unique style the writer takes us on a journey into the medieval period that was remarkable for its syncretism, cosmopolitanism and social values. He juxtaposes the medieval era with the contemporary times to represent the social, cultural and political degeneration of society and the decadence of its secular values. It
is this quality of Ghosh that lends a voice of credibility, freshness, reality and delight to his writings.

Ghosh focuses on the history of capitalism in the present novel. He traces the beginning of capitalism with the entry of colonisers, who, under the mantle of civilisation set out to fulfill their imperialistic ambitions of gaining knowledge, power and economic domination of the non-Western World. He also traces the effects of modernisation and Westernisation on traditional societies as they are gradually subsumed into the market oriented global economy. Ghosh also brings out the sweeping changes of progress, scientific development and material prosperity and the way they change the collective outlook of individuals in the society.

Ghosh dwells upon medievalism and the significant changes in the present century. His interest in medieval history was stimulated by his reading of S.D. Goitein’s 1973 edition, and translation of Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders. Bomma’s name figures in the written correspondence between Khalaf-ibn-Ishaq a Jewish merchant in Aden, to his friend Abraham Ben Yiju of Fustat (Egypt) living in Manglore in India. The mention of Ben Yiju’s name led to Ghosh’s meticulous research in medieval history. In unraveling the history of the age Ghosh brings forth the tyranny of Western scholars and colonisers who systematically distorted the history and culture of the two non-Western countries, India and Egypt. It is the politics of European
scholars and traders that eclipsed the socio-cultural interaction between these two countries. The search for new markets and raw material and the desire to make Europe a stronghold of knowledge focused the attention of the Europeans towards the rich countries of East:

“The visit that first brought the Geniza to the attention of the scholarly world occurred in 1864, and then, soon enough, events began to unfold quietly around it, in a sly allegory on the intercourse between power and the writing of history.”

The geographical expeditions that were undertaken by the explorers and traders soon revealed their hidden motives of establishing political hegemony and economic control. The most serious violation of Egyptian culture and civilisation was the systematic distortion of the Geniza - a storehouse of all the writings of Jews. The synagogue of Ben Ezra was the depository of all their writings and it was an important hallmark of Egyptian civilisation.

The Geniza merited the attention of European travellers and scholars and very soon with the help of local dealers in antiquities and employers in Egypt the documents changed hands and became part of the Western academy. The collection in St. Petersburg library and the Taylor – Schechter collection at the university library at Cambridge and other European libraries in Paris, Frankfurt, London, Vienna and Budapest contain the important manuscripts of the Geniza. The dispersal of the Geniza amounted to the dismantling of an important dimension of the
Egyptian past that reflected it in all its glory, civilisation and prosperity.

Ghosh’s investigations into history of Bomma, the slave of M.S.H.6, unfolded before him the medieval world that boasted of strong cultural and business links between the two ancient civilisations of the East-India and Egypt. It highlights the impact of Western intervention in these societies that subsequently put an end to the peaceful, warm and cordial relations based on trade links between the people of these two countries. Hence the story of the Indian slave Bomma and his master Ben Yiju becomes an important text documenting the religious, sociopolitical and cultural ethos of the bygone era. The Portuguese landed at Calicut and forced the Indian ruler, Samudraraja to cut off all their trade links with the Arab traders. The rich commercial port of Manglore that had fostered a vast network of business relationships among the traders saw the decline of trade as well as the strong bond of friendship, trust and understanding that prevailed among the people of two countries.

Trade in medieval times was a metaphor for cosmopolitanism, syncretism and cross-cultural assimilation. The concept of trade in the colonial era was based on greed, deceit and usurpation of political power and economy. It was soon revealed that European colonisers masqueraded as traders and harbingers of civilisation to conceal their selfish motives of establishing power. The Europeans gradually succeeded in
manipulating trade in the region. This shows the difference in the principles of trade that were practiced by Ben Yiju and his friends and those dictated by the Europeans.

The relations of Ben Yiju with his Indian slave Bomma speak volumes about the level of trust, affection and understanding that existed between the master and the slave. It is the Europeans who had fixed notions of ‘the other’ who was considered inferior and uncivilised and this idea was extended to the people of all the countries of the East. The practice of indentured labour during colonialism and the present day exploitation of labour that takes place due to transnationalised capital and production show the survival of Eurocentric ideologies.

The European intervention in these two countries has alienated them from each other. Amitav’s experiences in Egypt during his research in Social Anthropology reflect the changes that have come up in the present century. He shows the process of globalisation that brings in its wake the destruction of traditional cultures and uprooting of the masses. It lures them to foreign destinations, which finally results in a painful sense of alienation and exile. In the medieval age travel forged ties and enduring relationships. A feeling of homelessness, of exile and displacement is a peculiar modern phenomenon.

Ghosh highlights the geo-politics of national boundaries that shapes people’s perceptions and makes them view people
across the border with an acute sense of otherness. Busaina, the sister of Khamees, Amitav’s friend in Egypt remarks:

“Everything’s upside down in that country (India). Tell us ya doktor: in your country do you at least have crops and fields and canals like we do?” (AL-171)

This reminds us of the upside-down image of the house that Thamma conceives in The Shadow Lines, which becomes an allegory of difference and otherness associated with the people living across the border. Ghosh describes the transformation of the traditional society of Egypt into a globalised one in the second part of the novel. His second visit shows how the minds of the villagers are fired with Western ideas of progress and scientific development. He grew conscious of the wide gulf that destroyed the close links between the Eastern countries. Both Amitav and the Imam were a part of a process that had indoctrinated them with the ideas of Western superiority in terms of science and development. Both of them find themselves degrading each other’s countries by comparing them to the West. Amitav remarks,

The Imam and I: delegates from two superseded civilisations, vying with each other to establish a prior claim to the technology of modern violence. (AL-236)

The villagers had shunned many traditional practices like the traditional herbal medicines and the celebration of mowlids–fair held to honour a saint’s brithday. Religious sermons delivered at the mosque had lost their appeal for the young men. They were now more interested in talking about politics,
the happenings in Afghanistan, Lebanon and Israel. Their skepticism about religious practices of Islam and their dreams of material prosperity had affected a radical change in their outlook. The prospects of a better life of comforts and money lure them to cities. Nabeel and Ismail, the two young men represent the dreams and aspirations of the young villagers who leave for Iraq.

Iraq is passing through political crises. The Gulf war generates opportunities for employment but the political turmoil makes conditions worse for foreigners like these young men, the poor helpless workers who have migrated to Iraq and become its victims. They are also victims of the global forces of consumerism and market economy. Fukyama has a pertinent remark to make in this regard:

“Consumerism and the science of marketing that caters to it refer to desires that have literally been created by man himself, and which will give way to others in the future. Our present desires are conditioned by our social milieu, which in turn is the product of the entirety of our historical past.”

The Gulf War, according to Ghosh stands as a clear indication of America’s neo-imperialist policy of expanding its economic control in other countries. In the case of Iraq it is the control of its oil reserves, which forms a major source of the Gulf economy. The war in fact dealt a major blow to Iraq’s economy. The Western military forces under America forced President Saddam Hussain to retreat.

The immigrant workers like Nabeel, Ismail and others, are subjected to deploring conditions. Back home, almost every
Egyptian house boasts of a colour T.V., refrigerator and washing machines. Newly constructed houses replace the small mud-walled ones that one finds dotting any city in the world. Tomlinson says, “The nature of multinational capitalism produces a homogenised global culture.”

The local Iraqis vent their fury on the migrant workers. The massacre of Egyptians that follows after their football team wins the match with Algeria shows the frustration of Iraqis. The dreams of Egyptians are exploded. Ismail returns but Nabeel stays back to earn some more money. He is completely overpowered by the illusions of prosperity that money constructs. As Tomlinson observes: “… Capitalism produces a consumer culture within which all cultural action and experience become ‘Commoditised.”

Globalisation and Consumerism have paved the way for material prosperity. But they have at the same time commoditised the world in which people like Nabeel are helpless victims of the history of capitalism. ‘Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of history.’ (AL-353)

Parallel to the political and economic crises in the gulf is the rise of religious fundamentalism. Jabir says, “This is a Muslim country and it isn’t safe to look like a Muslim.” (AL-309) This comment of Jabir highlights the political problems in Egypt and the terror of fundamentalist organisations. Ghosh traces the political ideology of racism in the contemporary times to the rising tide of fundamentalism and religious extremism. In the
essay The Fundamentalist Challenge, Ghosh voices his concern over the issue of religious fundamentalism that has become transnational. He condemns such movements, whose main target is the minority population.

He says Muslim extremist movements are found more in countries with large minority populations such as Egypt, Sudan, Algeria and Pakistan. Taking the political problem in India, he compares the large-scale massacre of Muslims during the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu extremists to the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. He calls the haunting terror of religious extremism, “… an incarnation of a demon that has stalked liberal democracy everywhere throughout this century: an ideology that for want of a better word, I shall call supremacism.” (I&I–276)

Fukuyama comments on the rising tide of fundamentalism: “Part of the reason for the current, fundamentalist revival is the strength of the perceived threat from liberal, western values to traditional Islamic societies.” 22 Religion has become a tool in the hands of the ruling powers to instigate hatred between communities, in order to secure their own political interests. Ghosh expresses his idea of the nation state and also the growing threats that tend to weaken its integrity. He says, “What I would want for the world is a world of secular and equal nation states. And I see that under absolute attack from two sides: from the
empire on the one hand and from religious fundamentalism. To me the imperialistic ideal is absolutely loathsome.”

In a country like India religion serves the vested interests of political parties. Certain groups use it as a political mascot to further their selfish aims. It is a political ideology that has deepened the rift between Hindus and Muslims. This has led to the rise of identity politics. Religious extremism has permeated the Muslim World, whereas in India too it has pervaded the socio-political sphere and led to the erosion of secular and religious values. Ghosh comments, “The remains of those small indistinguishable, intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim had been partitioned long ago.” (AL-339)

In The Glass Palace, political turmoil and instability are the main issues Ghosh has taken up to pinpoint the politics of power that has permeated through varied human actions and institutions. He depicts the changes that were witnessed in South East Asia due to the shift in political power. The spectacular rise of colonialism gave a serious political setback to the traditional forms of authority. It led to a dramatic decline of traditional power structures as the countries of the East were restructured by imperialism politically as well as economically.

Ghosh deals with the various complex dimensions of the process of colonialism as it spread in South East Asia. In Burma, he shows their power of physical conquest and military might
which could not be matched by any of the rulers of South East Asia. In India, Ghosh depicts the movement of resistance to imperialism, and at the same time highlights the strong impact of colonial and cultural ideologies on the Indian psyche.

The British marched into Burma in 1885 and with the help of its military prowess easily led king Thebaw, the reigning Burmese king, to abdicate the throne and live a life of exile in Ratnagiri with his wife, Queen Supayalat, the princesses and their attendants.

King Thebaw is forced to go on a voyage to Ratnagiri. During the course of the voyage, Thebaw speculates on the loss of his own royal glory. While passing through Rangoon, he recalls the manner in which the British held the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, captive in Rangoon. They had also brutally beheaded the two Mughal princes, the sons of the helpless king. It also shocked Thebaw when he noticed several Indians doing menial work in Rangoon and being subjected to hard labour and exploitation by the British.

The takeover of the political and economic power by the Europeans in South East Asia heralded the birth of a new phase in politics of the subcontinent. “This is how power is eclipsed: in a moment of vivid realism, between the waning of one fantasy of governance and its replacement by the next.”

The British exploited the poverty and backwardness of the people of South Asia. They employed Indians in the British Indian Army and used them against their own neighboring countrymen the Burmese to serve their own political interests. And as the political situation worsened in Burma, it is the Indian soldiers again who were deployed by the British to curtail insurgency and unrest. This complex situation led to clashes between the Indians and Burmese. The Indians who were in a minority in Burma became the target of the Burmese hatred.

The British revolutionised the concept of trade in Burma to meet the demands of a newly emerging market and capitalist economy. Timber trade flourished as they started using the elephants to lift heavy logs of wood. This gave rise to many young entrepreneurs who became rich businessmen. Rajkumar becomes a prosperous timber merchant and subsequently a business heavyweight, transporting labour from India to Burma to work on plantations. He becomes a capitalist himself exploiting labour and poverty.

Thus imperialism gave birth to new modernised forms of exploitation to fulfill the growing demand of industrialisation. When Rajkumar defends the empire’s policy of using Indian soldiers in Burma, Uma quickly retorts, “It’s people like you who’re responsible for this tragedy. Did you ever think of the consequences when you were transporting people here? What
you and your kind have done is far worse than the worst deeds of
the Europeans.” (GP-247)

In Ratnagiri, the Royal couple is reduced to the status of
common people. The British systematically ended their power
and glory. While living a life of exile in an alien country, the
Queen gains an insight into the shrewdness and political
machinations of the British. She realises that their own position
was no less than prisoners in outram house. She gains an
understanding of the hollowness of their ideas of justice and
freedom.

The queen reconciles with the loss of their royal glory and
gives consent to her daughter’s marriage with Sawant, their
coachman. She also understands the British politics of
indoctrinating young educated Indians with ideas of the
superiority of English civilisation and culture. She tells collector
Dey when he objects to the marriage of the elder princess with
the Coachman: “Collector – Sahib, Sawant is less a servant than
you. At least he has no delusions about his place in the world.”
(GP-150) People like collector Dey and Arjun Roy who are
serving the British live in illusions. They take pride in the
Empire’s success, power and glory. They are unable to see the
disparity between the British claims of culture, civilisation and
freedom and their brutal exploitation of people in colonised
lands.
The expansion of the British Empire almost throughout the world led to the rise of different political ideologies in Europe in 20th century. The most prominent among them were Nazism and Fascism. These ideologies were purely dictatorial and racist in nature. History is replete with the stories of terror, cruelty and massacre of people that was carried out by Hitler and Mussolini. The growing threat of a Japanese attack on Malaya and its aspirations to become an Empire, according to Dinu, was due to the success of British Empire. Uma too relates the rise of Nazism to the Empire, “How many tens of millions of people have perished in the process of this Empire’s conquest of the world… Worse still the Empire has become the ideal of national success…. Isn’t that what Japan and Germany want today – empires of their own?” (GP-294)

People like Uma and Dinu were sensitive to the plight of their suffering countrymen and the evil motives of the empire, and there were people like Arjun who remained Indians only by colour. Their love for English ideals had europeanised them. Kishan Singh, Arjun’s batman, reveals Arjun’s Europeanisation, “of all the Indians in our battalion, he’s the one who’s the most English. We call him the “Angrez.” (GP-297)

But the British policy of racial segregation soon reveals the truth about the European attitude of degrading non-whites. The British also discriminated between Indians: “For generations, recruitment into the British Indian army had been ruled by racial
policies that excluded most men in the country, including those from Bengal.” (GP-257) Even Tamils were not recruited in the army. Hence the Tamil plantation workers who were exploited by British joined the rebel Indian National Army against the British:

It wasn’t that you were made into an animal, no, for even animals had the autonomy of their instincts. It was being made into a machine: having your mind taken away and replaced by a clockwork mechanism. Anything was better than that. (GP-522)

Imperialism gradually snowballed into serious political and economic crises. The Indians were forced to retreat to India. The ethnic minorities had joined the insurgents. Moreover the rise of totalitarian dictatorship in the post independence phase opened yet another chapter of tyranny and misrule. Gen. Ne Win seized political power that deepened the crises. The rise of totalitarianism has been a crucial and distinct feature of modern politics.

In his travelogue Dancing in Cambodia, Ghosh depicts the political changes in the country spanning almost a century. He discusses the French colonisation of Cambodia, the reign of King Sisowath, his visit to France in 1906, and the rise of the Leftist radical totalitarianism. The emergence of Pol Pot as the dictator in Cambodia owes to the development of radical totalitarianism.

The 20th century is notable for the rise of political ideologies in Europe like Nazism, Fascism and Stalinism. Their philosophies of racism and segregation continued to be imbibed by totalitarian regimes even after the death of Nazism and Stalinism. History is
replete with the example of the genocides that were brought upon by the dictators like Hitler and Stalin.

Taking inspiration from these political ideologies, Saloth Sar, who later came to be called Pol Pot formed his own political party. In 1963, he disappeared and in 1975, the Khmer Rouge seized power in Cambodia, headed by Pol Pot. The terror and atrocities perpetrated by Pol Pot especially against the Vietnamese who formed a minority in Cambodia, speaks of unimaginable horrors. Millions became victims of political torture. Regarding the inhuman exploitation and torture to which the Vietnamese were subjected, a Khmer Rouge defector said,

“As far as the Vietnamese are concerned, whenever we meet them we must kill them, whether they are militaries or civilians, because they are not ordinary civilians but soldiers disguised as civilians. We must kill them, whether they are men, women or children, there is no distinction, they are enemies. Children are not militaries but if they are born or grow up in Cambodia, when they will be adult, they will consider Cambodian land as theirs. So we make no distinction. As to women, they give birth to Vietnamese children.”

Ghosh signifies hope in the emergence of AungSan Suu Kyi as the leader of democratic movement in Myanmar. It is people like Suu Kyi who are capable of giving a new turn to history. Her struggle and power of resistance to unjust power structures holds the promise of a better future and better society.
Suu Kyi’s magnetism and the power she commanded over the hearts of people in Myanmar springs from her understanding of the problem of politics. In the words of Dinu, “Because she’s the only one who seems to understand what the place of politics is ….. that politics has invaded everything, spared nothing… religion, art, family… it has taken over everything … there is no escape from it…..” (GP-542) Suu Kyi’s struggle speaks for the problem of entire humanity.

In The Hungry Tide too the characters are victims of the political crises that hit South East Asia in the 40’s and the decades after that. The Second World War, the problems of Indians in Burma, the separation of East Bengal, the partition of the subcontinent and the creation of Bangladesh are some of the major political events in South East Asia that witnessed an exodus of population. These people who came to be called refugees, brutally uprooted from their land constantly recur in Ghosh’s fiction. Travel and dislocation became their fate as they wandered from place to place. These underprivileged and poor masses were further subject to cruelties and atrocities by the state and its authorities, and had to suffer unbearable odds and adversities.

Ghosh refers to the victims of these political events who are sprinkled in different parts of the world. Piya’s father is a victim of the political turmoil in Burma, which forced Indians to shift back to India. The other events that displaced a vast chunk of the
population were the partition of India in 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in the 70s. It is the dalits, the people of the lower caste, who had to suffer cruelty, oppression and exploitation by the people of the upper caste as well as the Government. These poor people sought shelter in Morichjhapi, one of the islands in Sunderbans, reserved by the Government for Tiger Conservation.

After leaving Bangladesh, these refugees were put in resettlement camps in Central India. Explaining their plight and the cruelty meted out to them by the Government, Nilima tells Kanai, “They called it “resettlement,” said Nilima, but people say it was more like a concentration camp, or a prison. They were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave. Those who tried to get away were hunted down.”

These refugees escaped from the resettlement camp in 1978, and came to Morichjhapi in Sunderbans. These helpless people were forced to undergo suffering for no fault of theirs. They were victims of the political forces, which was much beyond their reckoning, but it is the realisation of this that gives them limitless courage and strength in the face of adversities. They have the power to bring about a revolution. And it is their stern determination and revolutionary spirit that appeals to Nirmal, a leftist Intellectual and writer. Nirmal’s belief in the political ideology of communism, to which he is deeply committed, leads him to support the cause of the settlers at Morichjhapi. This also refers to the appeal that leftist ideas had generated in the Third
World. The 70s is significant for it showed marks of decline of communism in USSR and China but intellectuals in the Third World were reviving it. The crisis of the III World, which led to the decline of communism and led to the rise of global Capitalism, was immediately evident in the following decade of the 80s.

Nirmal’s participation in the conference convened by the Socialist International, in Calcutta had got him into trouble. It had cost Nirmal dearly as he was suspected of knowing about the Communist insurgency in Burma. After that Nirmal lost his fiery spark and he is compelled by circumstances to leave Calcutta and move to Lusibari in the Sunderbans with Nilima.

This also shows the opposition of the Right wing – the ruling Government in power to the leftists and their ideology. Nirmal identifies his own idealism and philosophy with the cause of settlers. Nilima tells Kanai about Nirmal,

“That as a young man Nirmal was in love with the idea of revolution. Men like that, even when they turn their backs on their party and their comrades, can never let go of the idea; it’s the secret god that rules their hearts. It is what makes them come alive; they revel in the danger, the exquisite pain. It is to them what childbirth is to a woman, or war to a mercenary.” (HT-119)

The government or the ruling powers always tamper the spirit of rebellion of the masses and crush their capacity to rise above odds. Their consciousness of egalitarianism poses a threat to the ruling powers hidden motives of amassing wealth and
power. Nirmal’s idealism also stands in sharp contrast to Nilima’s pragmatism. Nilima had long been working hard towards developing the Badabon Trust and the hospital. She, like the Government, believes that the settlers are illegal squatters and sees nothing wrong in its policy to evict them. To Nirmal they are the real heroes, poor and landless and their fight against the government to secure a small piece of land is justified. Nilima’s disapproval is evident in her commitment to the social project of developing the hospital:

“You are not involved in the day-to-day business of running the hospital, so you have no idea of how hard we’ve had to work to stay on the right side of the government. If the politicians turn against us, we’re finished. I can’t take that chance.” (HT-214)

But the settler’s cry had evoked pride, enthusiasm and admiration in Nirmal beyond measure. And all this despite the Government’s warning to them to evacuate. The Government used Section 144 restricting the movement in and out of Morichjhapi under the provisions of the Forest Preservation Act. But nothing shook the settlers firm determination: “Who are we? We are the dispossessed.... We will not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may.” (HT-254)

The pressure from citizens groups supporting the settler’s cause led the government to lift the siege but things did not stop. The police patrolling the island continued to exploit the settlers. The apathy of the government and the police is revealed in the sad plight of the settlers. The food supplies had run out, they