CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION
Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh emerged as a distinguished voice in the postcolonial world of creative writing in the eighties. Since he has been a student of Social Anthropology, Ghosh’s writings show a strong influence of the new trends in the field of anthropology. Traditional anthropology viewed cultures and societies as monolithic and disparate. But the radical shift in the discipline now focuses on cultures and civilisations as syncretic and influencing each other. Ghosh’s fictional and non-fictional writings offer fresh insights into the study of human civilisation, its culture and history. This view of culture and history lends a peculiar charm to his novels as he traverses between different cultures, civilisations and even times. The reader experiences a sense of participation in the events, which unfold in different places and periods in history. History is the main focus of his writings. Ghosh stayed in different parts of the subcontinent like Calcutta, Colombo, Dhaka and Egypt. His own experiences and the political and historical events in the subcontinent shaped his insight into history. His fictional accounts therefore assume the dimensions of authentic historical documentations with varied forms of historiography.

The end of the colonial rule heralded the beginning of a new political phase in Indian politics. The partition of India, the separation of East Bengal, the birth of Bangladesh and other events led to the eruption of communal riots in the entire subcontinent. What disturbed Amitav Ghosh greatly was the
hatred and enmity these riots triggered between the different communities of India. The Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs who earlier lived together as brothers turned bitter enemies of each other. The infant Indian nation failed to homogenise differences. Hence Ghosh’s revulsion for nationalism is an outcome of the bloodly history of the subcontinent. The separation of East Bengal and the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in 1984 affected him deeply. The communal riots that erupted in Dhaka in 1964 and the bloodshed and misery it caused became imprinted on his memory. His family became a direct victim of these riots, forced as it was by circumstances to shift to Colombo. This major outbreak of violence was not mentioned in historical records. Ghosh had seen the plight of a large number of people who were forced to migrate to different cities as refugees. The riots, violence, bloodshed and dislocation thus are the focus of his writings. By highlighting the struggle of the faceless, ordinary individuals seeking a place for themselves in the vast, alien world, Ghosh creates a parallel history of the subaltern. Through his fiction he records the lives, suffering and struggle of these individuals, which the mainstream history tends to overlook. In the fictional rendering of riots and history, Ghosh surpasses many of his predecessors and contemporaries. It may be mentioned that Ghosh is not the first Indian writer to have explored the postcolonial ideas. His predecessors like Sadat Hasan Manto, Qurreit-ul-ain Hyder, Joginder Paul, Rajendra Singh Bedi, Bhism Sahani or many others, writing in Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu have brought to fore the varied shades of human suffering and
exploitation. For instance, writings of Sadat Hasan Manto invariably touched upon the poignant themes, encompassing the devastating effects of social and political exploitation people suffered in wake of bloody events that followed the partition of the country. Ghosh in his own way keeps up the same creative and critical stance in a wider postcolonial perspective.

Ghosh’s writings powerfully depict the manner in which history is ruthlessly tampered by power structures and cruel political regimes. He chooses a broad framework of time and places to unravel the hidden facts of history. Through his fiction Ghosh attempts to recuperate the multiple histories of the subaltern deliberately eclipsed by the grand narrative of history. He places his characters against the broad framework of history. They engage in a perpetual struggle with the larger historical and political forces. Ghosh explores the impact of these powerful forces on their lives and shows their marvellous capacity to rise above them. In their struggle with the forces of history, these victims of history emerge as the creators of history. Ghosh’s concern with history also reveals his sharp intellectual insight into the past. In his novels the past is juxtaposed with the present. His deep understanding of the past and his sense of history lead him to comment on the complex realities of contemporary times. He constantly evokes the past to depict the long forgotten syncretism and cosmopolitanism that prevailed between different cultures in the bygone era. He hints at the distortion of history by vested interests. He discuses medieval history to comment on the
important details that have been missed by historiography. It is this missing dimension of history that he unfolds in his writings. He reveals the distortion of Indian History and the serious implications of vested political interests through his fierce denunciation of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992. The mosque was named after Emperor Babar, who laid the foundation of Mughal Empire in India. He reveals that the Mughal rulers embodied religious tolerance, peace and respect for all religions and cultures. The demolition of the mosque by Hindu zealots clearly reveals an act of frenzy that led to the death of a huge number of people throughout the subcontinent. It can be attributed to the inadequate records of Indian History.

In the capacity of a creative writer Ghosh explores new dimensions of studying and understanding history. By focussing on its missing dimensions he presents before us a picture of human society, which was systematically distorted to suit vested interests. He fills the gaps created by mainstream history to give a complete picture of history and humanity. He challenges the idea of universal history. He shifts his focus to countries like England, America, Egypt, Iraq, etc., to unravel the multiple histories subsumed by the grand narrative of history. He critiques western narratives and highlights the fixed binaries created by western discourse. He refers to the cruel process of colonialism that was mainly responsible for unleashing intense violence, bloodshed and differences between people in human history. He criticises the new pattern of society that emerged with imperialism, which imposed
the idea of homogeneity of culture and marked the end of its traditional texture.

One thing that disturbs Ghosh’s consciousness is the escalation of violence in contemporary society. Ghosh is not simply an artist with strong aesthetic considerations. He is a sensitive and vigilant citizen who is deeply moved by the burgeoning menace of violence, terrorism and religious extremism not just in India or South Asia but also across the world. It shows his concern for a society that is bereft of all religious, secular and moral values. He has written about most of the major political upheavals with all the concern and responsibility of a true global citizen that vehemently portrays and critiques the existing strain of violence throughout the world. He has sharply reacted to America’s growing economic interests in the Middle East and the Gulf War. He has written extensively about the attacks on the World Trade Centre, the eruption of communal riots in South East Asia, the nuclear tests conducted in India and Pakistan, the cruelties perpetrated by the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, the suffering of Indians in Burma etc. He has strongly denounced these major acts of violence of which the common people have been helpless victims. Ghosh’s writings reveal that such acts of violence, the eruption of communal riots are rooted in extremist nationalism in a country like India. He expresses a strong revulsion for nationalism and geographical boundaries because they breed hatred and aggressiveness. Through his writings he dismantles the arbitrary boundaries of nation states and challenges the idea of binaries that are
constructed to implant differences of identity, race, culture and civilisation. He creates a vision of the world without geographical boundaries and hints at the necessity of freeing the mind from all the geographical, historical and ideological constructs that end up manipulating human thinking. He highlights the possibility of creating a world based on the idea of mutual love and respect for all people living in different countries. His fictional world depicts a clustering of people who belong to different countries, cultures, societies and nationalities. Ghosh reinforces his idea of societies being essentially diasporic since ancient times. His characters who belong to the distant past as well as the present are constantly on the move. They are never rooted in a specific location and travel across the globe. Travel in his novels unfolds the multi layered and multidimensional reality. But at the same time he points out the fact that while travel in the past forged new ties, relations and cross cultural interaction, in the present times it is driven by multinational capitalism and global market economy. Today’s multicultural societies reflect the current global reality of transnational production and capital that draws people to destinations, which promise material prosperity. His characters are thrust into a struggle with global market forces. The world that they encounter is largely dominated by consumerism and neocolonialism. They struggle to survive the pressures that modernisation imposes but find their dreams, desires and aspirations being continually thwarted by the powerful forces of the modern world. Consumerism and market economy generate illusions of prosperity before which an individual helplessly
succumbs. Ghosh depicts how it also creates a dichotomy for an individual who finds himself dangling between the pressures of modernity and the demands of tradition. He denounces the contemporary society, which is governed by the profit motive, which has led to social degeneration of sorts, reducing everything to a status of commodity. Ghosh tries to strike a balance between tradition and modernity, between the Orient and Occident, between cultures, races, nations and civilisations that are apparently monolithic. His novels highlight the hybridisation of societies. The picture of society that he conceives reflects the spirit of postcolonial times. He upholds the principles of pluralism, multiplicity and democracy. He dismantles the arbitrary boundaries and binaries to reveal the multiple, intersecting realities and histories.

What emerges from his work is also his growing concern for the rise of totalitarianism and political instability in the world. He denounces the political ideologies of Nazism, Fascism and racism, which have culminated in the birth of totalitarianism. His deep insight into the politics of South Asia and his visits to Myanmar, Cambodia and Pakistan have been largely motivated by the desire to understand the political situation prevailing in these countries. His visits to Pakistan, the Saichen glacier and Burma were motivated by a strong concern for the common, suffering masses whose lives are controlled and manipulated by national politics. He conducted meetings with important political personages like George Fernandes, Ram Vilas Paswan, etc., in India, and Asma
Jahangir and Qazi Hussein Ahmed in Pakistan and the army cadres in Siachen glacier. The narrow escape he had from death at the hands of insurgents in the jungles of Burma shows his unwavering commitment to understanding the root cause of political instability in South Asia and his ardent desire to see the peace in the region. Through the political situation in countries like Burma and Cambodia, Ghosh highlights the struggle for democratic movement spearheaded by charismatic leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi. He has a lot of admiration for a leader like Mahatma Gandhi and his strategy of non-violence as the mode of resistance to the unjust policies of the British. He applauds the efforts of Aung San Suu Kyi, leading the democratic movement in Burma, the indomitable spirit of Asma Jahangir, the human rights lawyer in Pakistan, the courage of Molyka and Chea Samy in Cambodia for their struggle against the tyrannical and totalitarian regimes. Ghosh admires the selfless spirit of resistance of these leaders who had the grit to rise against cruelty and injustice in society. He applauds their efforts directed towards the achievement of peace and harmony and their vision of creating a society based on the principles of secularism, pluralism and peaceful coexistence. It reflects Ghosh’s own egalitarian outlook and his desire for peace throughout the world. Through his writings he asserts an idea of a self, which is creative and has the capacity to rise above all the historical, political and ideological constructs that create artificial borders of hatred, enmity and distrust between peoples and nations.