CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
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Amitav Ghosh is a distinguished voice in the postcolonial writings. His creative and critical writings have drawn attention of the readers and critics from all over the world, especially for their noticeable departure from traditional means and methods of producing literary and intellectual discourses. His acute awareness of the dominant polemics and his insights into anthropology, history, politics and power structures add credibility and authenticity to his literary production. Almost all the Indian immigrant writers in the west are constantly engaged with the central issues of crosscontinental and cross-cultural migrations. It is, however, Amitav Ghosh whose fictional narratives betray a judicious synthesis of history, politics and culture in an era that is essentially postcolonial in its tone and texture.

And this dimension of his creative consciousness has not yet been fully explored.

The study aims at exploring Amitav Ghosh’s treatment of history, politics and culture in the postcolonial context. It proposes to take into account the theoretical and technical dimensions of his fiction.

A study of postcolonial writing implicitly or explicitly involves the issues of colonialism. The fictional treatment of colonialism, in fact, renders a noticeable colour to the creative
The art of story telling has been prevalent in Indian tradition of prose writing since ancient times. But the emergence of the novel in 19th century Europe gave a new direction to literary writing in India. It opened new avenues for writing, as the novel became the most popular and effective medium of creative expression. However, the novel got transformed into an altogether different narrative form only after a great deal of experimentation with the form, techniques, themes and subjects.

The earlier Indian fiction in English shows a limited range of themes, choices and subjects. The early 19th century Indian writers were greatly influenced by the new wave of writing, which had then taken the literary world by storm. The early 19th century Indian society was passing through a phase of transition. During this phase, the creative writers showed a marked awakening to the evil practices that dominated Indian social behaviour. They expressed their religious faith and urge for reform, depicting the status of women, peasants, and the decay of aristocracy.
In this context, the first Indian English novel proper to appear was Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Rajmohan’s Wife* (1964). It was Bankim Chandra who pioneered the movement of social novels in India.

Highlighting the contribution of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee to the development of Novel form in India, Amitav Ghosh, in his essay, “The March of the Novel Through History,” writes, “He (Bankim) was perhaps the first truly Indian writer of modern times in the sense that his literary influence extended throughout the subcontinent, “….the passages of description in the novel are an attempt to lay claim to the rhetoric of location, of place to mount a springboard that would allow him to vault the gap between two entirely different conventions of narrative.”

The 30s and 40s were significant phases in Indian history. The country, during these decades, witnessed a growing discontent with the British rule. The atmosphere was highly charged with protests and demand for political freedom. This crucial phase in the Indian history saw the rise of three major Indian writers whose writings expressed the sentiments of masses – the trio – Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao tried to capture the spirit of protest, freedom and reform in their writings. They focused on the subjects like nationalism, East-West relationship, social problems, morality and spiritualism. There were other writers like A.S.P. Aiyyar who popularised the historical novel and a group of Muslim writers who wrote about
the decline of Muslim culture. Allusion to the writings of Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Attia Hussain, Qurratul-Ain-Hyder, Sadat Hassan Manto and Rajendra Singh Bedi who wrote in Urdu about the general Indian scene can be made here.

But the trio – Anand, Narayan and Rao – continued to dominate the literary scene. Their experimentation with new techniques of writing, exploration of new themes and subjects and the creative rendering of Indian social, ethnic and political ethos accorded their writings a distinct status in the tradition of Indian novel in English.

Mulk Raj Anand’s writings betray a prominent influence of Dickens, Joyce and Russian Novelists. The stream of consciousness technique used by Joyce to capture the thought process of the protagonist through a single day’s happenings influenced Anand and in his novel, Untouchable, he explores the new technique effectively. The use of the setting or locale – so central to the novel – to impart a distinct flavour to the place and to concentrate on more universal issues of serious human concern became a predominant feature in the novels of these writers.

In Kanthapura Raja Rao used the setting of a small South Indian Village to foreground the story of the freedom struggle, which had gained momentum in India. R.K. Narayan’s Swami and Friends and Malgudi Days are a beautiful expression of the local colour.
It is also important to note that the writings of the pre-independence era showed the influence of Gandhian philosophy. Tabish Khair says, “regardless of whether they were written or published before 1947 or whether they were written or published a little later, these novels are often permeated with the spirit of independence movement, which is as often personified by Mahatma Gandhi or a surrogate (as in Kanthapura). Even in the novels in which Gandhi appears to be conspicuously absent, he continues to play a crucial role, indirectly. In Narayan’s Guide, 1959, for instance, Raju’s status as Mahatma in the village Mangala can be understood only in the context of Gandhi’s life. The connection between Gandhi, sainthood and fasting is especially relevant, and it is a connection that the villagers themselves make.” However, there was also a different stream of fiction that mainly reflected the urge for reform and also the East West encounter as in Raja Rao’s The Serpent and the Rope.

While the post independence literary scene in India was decidedly dominated by Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao it also witnessed the emergence of other important writers like Khuswant Singh, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgaonkar, Arun Joshi and women writers like Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Rama Mehta, Attia Hosain, etc. The arrival of freedom shifted the focus of the novel, as the events that followed were predominantly violent and devastating. The partition of the country, the communal riots, the wars with Pakistan and China provided an array of subjects and themes for
creative expression. The freedom struggle was viewed from multiple standpoints. These writers employed the use of irony and satire, even as they sketched the arrival of independence and the serious problems that came along simultaneously. R.K. Narayan’s *Waiting for Mahatma*, Khuswant Singh’s *I shall not hear the Nightingale*, Kamala Markandaya’s *Some Inner Fury* and K.A. Abbas’ *Inquilab* and Nayantara Sahgal’s *A Time to be Happy*, present different perspectives on the newly gained political freedom of India. About G.V. Desani’s *All About H. Hatter*, M.K. Naik says,

“Extremely complex in theme and technique alike, it is at once the comic autobiography of Eurasian eccentric; the story of his serious quest for understanding the meaning of life; a social chronicle revealing aspects of white, Eurasian and Indian character; a meaningful attempt to blend Western and Indian narrative forms and an astonishing exhibition of a seemingly inexhaustible stylistic virtuosity expressing itself in verbal pyrotechnics of several types.”

The partition of India in 1947, the creation of Pakistan, and the large scale violence, hatred and atrocities that were perpetrated by the people of the two communities in India i.e. Hindus and Muslims on each other, their sufferings and trauma, found a brilliant portrayal in the novels by some of the major Indian writers. Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, (1956) Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi* (1975) and Manohar Malgaonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) expressed the tragedy of partition.

The political theme reflected in the novels of Bhattacharya and Nayantara Sahgal. In *The Shadow from Ladakh* 1966,
Bhattacharya records the Chinese invasion and Sahgal’s *This Time of the Morning* (1968) *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977) comment upon some leading political personalities.

The fiction of the late sixties and seventies reflects the predicament of man as fallout of modernism and the complexities of life that it entailed. The sense of alienation that became the predicament of modern man is brilliantly captured in the novels of Arun Joshi, one of the leading novelists of the period. He explores the theme of alienation in modern society in his works like *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) and *The Apprentice* (1974). The novelists of the period also explored the theme of sex unlike the writers of the preceding decades who did not experiment with bold themes and subjects. Saros Cowasjee in *Goodbye to Elsa* (1975), Kamala Das in *Alphabet of Lust* (1976) and Bharati Mukherjee in *Wife* (1976) give an expression to the suppressed sexual desires of the human mind.

The term ‘Common Wealth Literature’ also emerged in the 60’s, which referred to “National Literatures united by a past or present membership of the British Commonwealth.”

For literatures that were written in ex-colonies of the British Empire, the term Commonwealth literature was used. Later ‘Third World Literatures’ and ‘New Literatures in English’ were also used. However recently ‘postcolonial’ is the word used for
literature that is written after the departure of the colonisers from the settler colonies. Consequently postcolonial literary theory has emerged as an important discipline in the recent years. But the word as it is coined has come to be highly debated in literary and academic circles. It conveys a wide range of meanings that leads to a great degree of ambivalence and lack of coherence. Discussing the complexity of the term Ania Loomba in *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism* writes, “To begin with, the prefix ‘post’ complicated matters because it implies an ‘aftermath’ in two senses – temporal, as in coming after, and ideological, as in supplanting. It is the second implication which critics of the term have found contestable: if the inequities of colonial rule have not been erased, it is perhaps premature to proclaim the demise of colonialism. A country may be both postcolonial (in the sense of being formally independent) and neo-colonial (in the sense of remaining economically and/or culturally dependent) at the same time.”

Hence it is inappropriate to say that colonialism has ended. Many ex-colonies of the British Empire, India, Africa and other Asian countries are still subject to the economic control of a superpower like America. The use of the word colonialism shows that postcolonial theory and its study involves the process of colonialism, which has been a recurrent phenomenon in history. But it is with modern i.e. European colonialism that the study is concerned with which not only involved the physical conquest of territory but was also an insidious process which strongly
influenced the culture, modes of thinking and ideologies of the colonised people. The colonisers controlled the minds of the subjects. The European project of building the Empire led to a series of encounters between the colonisers and the colonised. The Europeans systematically altered the colonial psyche by subjecting it to grand narratives of history, progress, culture and rationality etc., which were universalistic in their claims. The colonised internalised the logic of its own depravity and inferiority that was imposed by the Europeans. Edward said’s **Orientalism** has been instrumental in the study of colonialism and how the cultures of the East came to be represented by the West.

In **Colonialism / Postcolonialism**, Ania Loomba writes, “Said argues that representations of the ‘Orient’ in European literary texts, travelogues and other writings contributed to the creation of a dichotomy that was central to the creation of European culture as well as to the maintenance and extension of European hegemony over other lands. Said’s project is to show how ‘knowledge’ about non-European was part of the process of maintaining power over them; thus the status of ‘knowledge’ is demystified, and the lines between the ideological and the objective blurred.”

The postcolonial theory addresses the complex history of the colonial encounter and its ramifications. Leela Gandhi in **Postcolonial theory** writes, “It (Postcolonial theory) is a
disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and crucially, interrogating the colonial past.  

The political freedom gained by the colonies after a long and exhaustive phase of exploitation and political and economic domination led to the emergence of independent nations. Independence, however, did not bring peace and political stability as it was foreseen. The newly independent nations proved incapable of bearing the sudden rupture of power as political power came to be transferred from the European masters into the hands of the rulers of indigenous countries. The achievement of nationhood and the spirit of nationalism, which was integral part of the process of de-colonisation, failed to prove its legitimacy as it proved inadequate in fulfilling the nationalist aspirations. The moment of arrival of freedom was charged with a host of conflicts and challenges. The creation of new political and cultural identities rendered the situation more complex and ambivalent. The postcolonial theory represents the ambivalences that accompany this peculiar condition. Leela Gandhi states,

Post-coloniality is painfully compelled to negotiate the contradictions arising from its indisputable historical belatedness, its post-coloniality, or political and chronological derivation from colonialism, on the one hand, and its cultural obligation to be meaningfully inaugural and inventive on the other. Thus, its actual moment of arrival – into independence – is predicated upon its ability to successfully imagine and execute a decisive departure from the colonial past.”

The colonial aftermath did not yield the desired results in India – one of biggest holocausts that accompanied the gaining of
freedom – was the partition of the country and the establishment of two independent states of India and Pakistan. It culminated in the brutal massacre of people of different communities of India – the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. Gyanendra Pandy describes the horror of partition:

“The singularly violent character of the event stands out. Several hundred thousand people were estimated to have been killed, unaccountable numbers raped and converted; and many millions uprooted and transformed into official ‘refugees’ as a result of what’ve been called the partition riots. Notably it was not a once subject. Now about – to – be liberated population that was pitted against departing colonial rulers in these riots, but Hindu, Muslims and Sikhs ranged against one another even if, as Indian nationalists were quick to point out, a century and more of colonial politics had something to do with this denouement”

The failure of nationalism was once more evident when the partition of the country took place in the province of Punjab, which was divided into two halves consisting of Muslim-majority and Hindu-Sikh majority. The partition of Pakistan gave birth to a new state Bangladesh, when East Pakistanis chose to have a separate state for various reasons. Dhaka became its capital.

The ‘minority’ i.e. the Muslim community felt that their interests were not properly represented, made demands for a separate state. And as India is a country that constitutes a vast majority of people divided by race, caste, faith, religious ethnicity, the demand for separate status by the various sections of minority and ethnic groups intensified the demand for autonomy. In the decades that followed independence, India’s political history has witnessed tremendous instability and crises
that led to communal riots in different parts of the country. Moreover mid-sixties and early seventies also witnessed two political wars — one with China and two with Pakistan. All these events posed a serious threat to India’s integrity, to its democratic and secular character and to the very idea of a nation.

These fissures in India’s socio-political fabric, its fragmented history, the brutality of partition, the wars and the riots found an adequate representation in Salman Rushdie’s ‘Midnights Children.’ The novel incorporates the spirit of the colonial aftermath and India’s political history. It also authenticates the experiences of the Indians born in free India, who were thrust into the quagmire of India’s fragmented history and politics of nationhood. Their fates came to be tied with that of the nation. The protagonist of the novel, Saleem Sinai represents the voice of every Indian in the midst of crisis. Born at the stroke of midnight on 15th August 1947, Saleem’s birth coincides with the birth of India as an independent nation. “For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, and politicos ratified my authenticity.10

The narrative opens with Adam Aziz, the narrator’s father and ends with his son. In the course of time, as the narrative progresses, it is revealed that Saleem is not the real son of Aadam Aziz. He was swapped with another baby in the hospital by the midwife, Mary Pereira. He is actually the son of a Whiteman, the
departing coloniser William Methwold and a poor Indian woman Vanita. And as Leela Gandhi says, “but this accident as the adult Saleem insists, is the allegorical condition of all those who inherit the colonial aftermath.”

Apart from reflecting over India’s fragmented history, the novel also paved the way for the direction that Indian literature was to take in the 80’s. Rushdie’s use of innovative technique, his soaring imaginative heights and the brilliant handling of theme and language raised him to the status of a literary stalwart. The novel set a precedent for the line of successors in Indian fiction who were greatly influenced by Rushdie’s narrative technique. M.K. Naik says about the novel:

“It is a multifaceted narrative, which is at once an autobiographical bildungsroman, a picaresque fiction, a political allegory: a topical satire, a comic extravaganza, a surrealist fantasy and a daring experiment in form and style.”

After more than a century, the novel achieved the status of maturity and flowered into a major literary form and novelists who succeeded Rushdie made their mark, challenging the Western hegemony and the idea of literary canon through their writings.

Among the new galaxy of writers who emerged in the 80’s were Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Seth, Upamanyu Chatterjee and others. The influence of Rushdie on these writers is expressed in the phrase that is assigned to them, ‘Midnight’s
children’s children’ owing to the literary technique, subjects and theme that they commonly deal with in their writings. Postcolonial literature written by novelists in the ex-colonies of the British Empire in different parts of the world also shares certain common features. The African writer Chinua Achebe, Patrick White (Australia) Sinclair Rose (Canada), Wilson Harris (Guyana) and Margaret Atwood (Canada) are some of the prominent postcolonial writers.

In Indian fiction Rushdie’s use of magic realism and fragmented narrative became popular with his successors who started writing in a similar vein. Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chattterjee, Farrukh Dhondy, Rukun Advani, Mukul Kesavan, Tabish Khair etc., have used magic realism in their writings. Ghosh was questioned about Rushdie’s influence on his first novel, The Circle of Reason. He replied,

“You have to remember that when Midnight’s children appeared, it was a certain moment when really we could look away from traditional modes of narration and towards something else. It was global moment when everybody was doing that. I think the important issue in the end must be that writer has to be able to say what he wants to say in the way he wants to say it. That really is the key. For me personally however I must say that Garcia Marquez was much more important to my writing.”

The introduction of English education in the colonies was a part of the colonial enterprise and instrumental to the project of Empire building. It must be noted that the dawn of Enlightenment and the development in modern natural science led the Europeans to assume a place of superiority in terms of all
its claims of language, modernity, civilisation and rationality. And as almost ¾ parts of the world was turned into colonies by the Europeans, the task of creating a separation or difference between them and the colonised became central to their concern. Of the other strategies of exploitation and subjugation to dominate the subject, language i.e. English language became the medium of power through which the Europeans created the logic of difference privileging their authoritarian status in all matters and assigning the status of inferiority to the ‘others.’ In European texts and travel writings stereotype images of indigenous people came to be widely circulated. These representations of the natives as ‘backward, uncivilised, licentious etc were meant to lend exoticism, strangeness and adventure to the Western travellers and explorers who had begun to infiltrate into alien lands to explore them, to conquer territory and to grab new markets. As European rule was firmly established, the study of English literature became an academic discipline in the colonies. English language and literature came to be canonised. Macaulay’s minute of 1835, defended English education in India on the grounds that, “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”

Macaulay’s statement clearly reflects the European assumptions about the superiority of their culture, civilisation and language while at the same time disguising the real motive of suppression and subjugation of the colonised through foregrounding their lack or inadequacy in attributes of literary
merit. It berates the very culture, civilisation, value, milieu, taste and creative abilities that together go into the making of good literature. The Europeans assigned the status of marginality to the non-European. Gauri Viswanathan’s book *Masks of Conquest* deals with the question of ‘English Education in and the purpose behind its introduction in India. She observes,

“The English literary text, functioning as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state, becomes a mask for economic exploitation successfully camouflaging the material activities of the coloniser.”

Postcolonial writers use English to articulate their experiences. They have used it to rewrite many English canonical texts in their own idiom. They have done it with a variance to the ‘standard’ norm of acceptability in terms of grammar, lexicon and syntax to the extent that their variance has become a part of ‘standard’ English.

It is through subversion of colonial textuality and appropriation of the language of the colonisers that postcolonial writers have resisted the domination of the centre. Postcolonial literature has been instrumental in distorting the notions of time, place and history that were imposed by the Europeans.

Regarding the appropriation of English language, to the creative expression of the culture, mannerisms and experiences of people who speak a different language, who inhabit a different space, who have certain features of a shared history, the comment of Raja Rao resolves the postcolonial dilemma of retaining the old
and accepting the new, “to convey in a language that is not one’s own, the spirit that is one’s own.”

This conflict between the old and new, between tradition and modernity, between the desire to break away and accept the new, opens up a new in-between space or hybridity, which is the peculiar condition of all postcolonial nations. It brings us to the concept of nation itself, which originated in the West. The expansion of European dominion in foreign lands carried the seed of nationalism that give birth to the idea of nation state in the foreign soil. “European nationalism itself was motivated by what Europe was doing in its farflung dominions.”

Colonialism was the process, which distorted the idea of spatial reality or place and also that of language. The process brought about a series of dislocations by way of large-scale migration of people to alien lands as indentured labour or for the purpose of slavery. The uprooting of a large number of people from their place and the forced settlement into a new environment gave rise to the crises of identity. This ‘liminality’ or ‘subject split’ the terms that Homi Bhaba uses to describe the ambivalence that characterises the modern nation state and its inhabitants shows that modern nations no longer have specificities of boundaries or cultures. In fact cross-cultural migration has made postcolonial societies multicultural and pluralistic.
As Bill Ashcroft says in *Postcolonial Transformation*, “The boundary of the post independence state remains an arbitrary but inescapable trace of a colonial past.”

The postcolonial literatures attempt to retrieve the sense of ‘place’ that was lost a result of colonisation. Bill Aschroft says there are two possibilities of retrieving the sense of place:

1. To alter these boundaries.
2. To inhabit them in a different way.

Postcolonial theory thus distorts the concept of cultural essentialism. It recognises hybridity, multiculturalism and syncretism as the features of modern life.

“And as so often happens with simple binary systems, this concept of the postcolonial has a marked tendency to blur when it tries to focus upon ambiguously placed or ambivalent material.”

The blurring of boundaries that has emerged as a result of geopolitics of colonialism of the national boundaries and the binary oppositions created by euro-centric discourse is a key feature of postcolonial literatures. When Rushdie uses the phrase, “The Empire writes back to the centre,” he explodes the myth of the nation in *Midnights children* and subverts the European notions of privileging the ‘centre’ over periphery. These literatures challenge the fragmentation that was brought about as a result of imposition of boundaries. As Homi Bhaba says,

“Counter narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalising boundaries – both actual and conceptual –
disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which imagined communities are given essentialist identities.”

While a return to a pre-colonial past is not possible, the postcolonial theory accepts plurality and upholds the idea of ‘composite culture’ where the differences are not totalised but are recognised, respected and accepted.

History as a major discourse was used by the colonisers to validate its assumptions of racial superiority and systematically accord the texts, histories and experiences of the colonised a position of marginality. This was done to render their experiences not worthy of being recognised. The European discourse of history that was based on the dialectics of presenting a universal idea of history was strictly based on the idea of exclusivity and selection of particular events. The postcolonial writers question European claims of presenting history as an objective record by the fragmentation and marginalisation of indigenous histories. They also question the European notion of ‘History’ as a means of envisioning reality. Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Joseph Furphy, Naipaul, Wilson Harris are some of the major postcolonial writers, who challenge the notions of Western history.

“And many others, all deliberately set out to disrupt European notions of history and the ordering of time ———— Received history is tampered with, rewritten and realigned from the point of view of the victims of its destructive progress.”

The grand narrative of history played an important role in suppressing the marginalised voices and in reinforcing the
Western ideological and Eurocentric perspectives of grandeur and totality associated with the Western conception of history. Recent literary writings have shifted the focus of history. By reviewing history from the perspective of the oppressed or the colonised, history becomes a site of contestation between multiple histories that question the metanarrative of history. This opens up new ways of interpreting reality. According to the Guyanese novelist and critic, Wilson Harris, “Cultures must be liberated from the destructive dialectic of history, and imagination is the key to this.”

Hence imagination becomes an important feature of postcolonial consciousness in literary writings that provides an utterly different view of reality and reveals the possibilities of reconstructing the world based on the values of cosmopolitanism and syncretism embracing the differences of caste, race, ethnicity, religion and nationality. The boundaries between nations and cultures are erased and the movement of time as it moves in a series of progression is also dismantled. “It replaces a temporal linearity with a spatial plurality.”

Time is viewed as a continuum where the boundaries between past, present and the future constantly collide revealing the important relation to each other. As Carr says, “History is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.”
This interaction between the past and present in postcolonial literature also creates a vision of the future which becomes significant to our understanding of the complexities of the present, while at the same time giving us an insight into the past. Recently the postcolonial studies have become a site of convergence of various critical theories and cultural practices that borrow insights from the theory. They are feminism, poststructuralism, post-modernism, Marxism etc. Colonialism was essentially a project of perpetrating power in colonised lands through its enduring hierarchies to rule over the subject race. It created power relations based on the idea of domination and subordination. Though there are several shared features of colonial practices in different countries of the world yet the specific cultural, historical and social factors must be taken into consideration in order to understand the contesting claims of power relations that exist in all societies. As the study involves a wide range of cultural practices involving issues of identity, subjectivity, ideology, race, ethnicity, history, politics operating in different societies, it makes the field of postcolonial studies a vast area encompassing the crucial issues that reveal the dynamics of relationships of human beings with each other and also with that of the society. Stephen Slemon rightly points out that, “Few postcolonial theorists will understand their work as operating specifically in the intents of “postcolonialism” itself. Postcolonialism is a portmanteau word – an umbrella thrown up over many heads, against a great deal of rain. Confusion necessarily abounds in the area.”
These theories question the power hierarchies in their different forms and give a voice to the suppressed or the marginalised, ‘the others’ who are categorised as inferior by the prevailing modes of oppression, the agencies of domination and exploitation.

Relation of Postcolonialism with Marxism therefore needs to be understood in proper perspective. The Marxist intellectuals regard colonialism as another form of capitalism. European imperialism was driven by the search for new markets, raw material and global capital. According to Marxist understanding, the economic relations prevailing in society result in the struggle between the classes – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This conflict between classes would culminate in the victory of proletariat and the consequent establishment of a classless and stateless society i.e. communism. Marxist thinkers identified the owners of the means of production with the ruling classes or the state, which became an agency of exploitation. The conflict of interests in Marxist analysis had bearings on the struggle of the colonised people against the colonial masters. Their effort at establishing a society that would be politically free, free from all exploitation and inequality corresponds with the struggle of proletariat against the capitalist system, which in the course of time had assumed a political character. Marx believed that the development of the society into free economy would result as fallout of the high level of progress and advancement of European science and technology. This stage of capitalism would
lead to consumerist societies where human beings would hold little value. Ania Loomba rightly says that,

“Marx emphasised that under capitalism money and commodities begin to stand in for human relations and for human beings, objectifying them and robbing them of their human essence.”

Capitalism and colonialism operate in a similar manner. Colonialism, too, degrades the ‘other’ and robs him of all his sense of worth and dignity, treating the colonised as an object of exploitation and brutality. “Marx and Engels had suggested that ideology is basically a distorted or false consciousness of the world which disguises peoples’ real relationship to their world.”

And it is this false consciousness of things that makes the workers or the exploited accept the state of their oppression. This distortion of reality makes people view things according to appearances, which are false. A capitalist society, which values money above everything else, generates among men a strong desire for material prosperity by disguising the stark realities of suffering, toil and exploitation that people have to undergo. The capitalist ideology creates illusions of prosperity. Ania Loomba says, “Money has the power to distort, even invert reality.”

According to Marx, science has the capacity to break the barriers of illusion and help us view reality in a true light. However, according to Ania Loomba, Marx does not regard all ideas as false or ideological.
The renowned Italian Thinker, Antonio Gramsci gave a different version of ideology that revised the Marxist concept of ideology. He held that the ruling classes have ideologies; the exploited too have their own ideology. His *Prison Notebooks* offers an interesting elaboration his views on ideology. Addressing the question about how the ruling classes succeed in making the exploited submit to their will, Gramsci presented the concept of ‘hegemony’, which according to Ania Loomba means, “Power achieved through a combination of coercion and consent.”\(^{33}\) Hence ideology succeeds in winning the consent of the exploited by making them accept their own inferiority. Gramsci holds the view that, “Ideology is crucial in creating consent, it is the medium through which certain ideas are transmitted and more important held to be true.”\(^{34}\)

Gramsci’s view of ideology illuminates the complex human relations in society and how ideology plays a crucial role in all spheres of human life – social, economic and political. Gramsci’s comprehensive analysis of relationships in society that are influenced by contesting ideologies is analogous to the process of colonisation of peoples in different geographical areas that were different from each other owing to their vast differences of culture, traditions, language, religion, colour, thinking, history etc. The colonisers held control by the power of their ideologies of progress and racial superiority to the colonised. The colonised were indoctrinated with the ideas of their inferiority in terms of their mental faculties, race and civilisation. The colonised psyche
gradually submitted to the will of their white masters. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony has an immediate bearing to the power relations that existed during the colonial rule.

Louis Althusser, The French Leftist thinker, offered new insights into the way ideology operates in society and the formation of subjectivity. Furthering Gramsci’s idea of hegemony, Althusser propagated the view that force is perpetrated in society by “Repressive State Apparatuses” such as the army and the police; and the consent is obtained through ideological State Apparatuses’ such as schools, the church, the family, media and political systems. However Althusser’s views became controversial because they suggested, “ideology and material practices were practically identical.”

Ania Loomba further states that, “The problem is an important one for postcolonial theory, which has been accused of being unable to maintain any distinction between ideas (culture, representation and language) and material realities (economic system).”

Althusser’s ideas gave new insights into the construction of subjectivities in which language and ideas play an important role. It was Michel Foucault who observed that the human psyche is conditioned by language and words. Foucault challenged the concept of ideology and also the conventional ways of thinking of Western philosophy that considered the writer as the possessor of meaning. Foucault’s analysis overhauled the very basis of linguistics as a serious discipline. It influenced the study of the
subject and prominent linguists like Ferdinand de Sassure, Leo Strauss, Jacques Derrida and others whose radical analysis of the role of language in constructing the subject gave rise to the idea of how historical forces work upon the creation of word, idea and image. Thus language came to be viewed as important determiner in creating reality, subjectivity and power. This added a new dimension to the analysis of colonialism as a process that used language as a powerful medium of reinforcing power in colonised lands.

Foucault developed the concept of discourse, which is currently used in critical theory. It means the spoken or written treatment of subject and hence it is rooted in society, its varied institutions and practices. Thus discourse has the power to control human beings. According to Ania Loomba, the historian and the critic are also a part of a discursive order and what they say and can say is determined and shaped by their circumstance. Hence, if every text is a discourse it is brought into being by historical factors, but at the same time these texts, which are representations, create history and culture. These new perspectives of history, representation and culture led to revolt among several groups and oppressed sections of the society who felt that their interests and position is overlooked by all the institutions of society and culture, which produce different forms of knowledge. These forms of knowledge like history or culture reflect the interests and domination of the prevailing idea or ideologies. The challenge posed to the Western ideologies of
history and culture shook the very foundation of western philosophy and its tradition of according totality of meaning through narratives of history and culture and logo-centric theories.

Another equally important paradigm of power structure is exquisitely presented through a corresponding rapport between theoretical gender and colonialism. The female body has always been used to depict the vast geographical lands that shifted the Western gaze towards conquest in the 16th century. European travel writings, literary writings and texts represented geographical land of Asia, America or Africa by using female sexuality which symbolised the rich bounty, mystery, wealth and prosperity that these regions promised, waiting to be explored and possessed by the white Europeans. Stereotype images of the native men and women represented the female as promiscuous and licentious. While the male came to be represented as effeminate, weak and incapable of protecting their women, the Europeans were categorised as strong and masculine.

While woman and her image was widely used in colonial discourse as object of pleasure, possession and control, in a country like India, a woman stood for culture and its purity and the idea came to be extended to the nation. Woman was identified with the nation and the family that demanded self-sacrifice, honour and protection. Thus all the institutions of the society were regulated by male dominated hierarchies and
ideologies in which woman was accorded a subsidiary role of a wife, mother or sister. The male, whether he was a European or an Indian, was the self-proclaimed master. Gender bias was central to all the cultural practices, religious beliefs and traditions that privileged the role of male in all spheres of life. Foucault’s notion of power granted authenticity to the feminists, who questioned their suppression by the prevailing power structures in society. As Foucault says, “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.”

The anticolonial struggle and feminist movements have articulated their resistance to the unjust power hierarchies and political structures that have marginalised their place and position in society by excluding their interests. Patriarchy and colonialism became synonymous for the oppressed as agencies of perpetrating exploitation.

De-colonisation brought hopes of freedom from all shackles of power and hegemony. However the term postcolonial, as already discussed, did not guarantee freedom in the true sense. The end of colonialism did not put an end to the domination of colonial ideologies and patriarchal thought and hegemony. The failure of nation became immediately evident as large sections of the society remained at the receiving end.

The feminists, therefore, question the place that has been assigned to them in literary text, because language has been greatly influenced by patriarchal hegemony. Hence they question
literary canons for the treatment of the female subject, for their projection as weak, secondary, fragile and the male projected as possessing all superior attributes. Feminism like postcolonialism seeks redemption form the epistemy that is born out of the equation between power and knowledge as that had its origin in Western academy.

“The term ‘postcolonial’ does not apply to those at the bottom end of this hierarchy, who are still at the far economic margins of the nation-state, so that nothing is ‘post’ about their colonisation.”

A brief discussion on postmodernism and postcolonialism here will further illustrate the inter-connected dimensions of theoretical designs. Post modernism initially began as a movement in architecture challenging the modernist notions of form, structure and content. Hence it is necessary to understand its decisive departure from modernism in art as well as literature. The postmodern theory questions the modernist sensibility of assigning a totality of meaning and its tendency to universalise grand narratives.

Lyotard in his statement Postmodern Condition discusses postmodernism as a condition of being. This addresses a wide range of activities and issues of being located in culture, a culture dominated by market forces and consumerism. It is basically a culture where identities are fabricated. Postmodernism seeks to recover the cultural traces. It aims at revisiting and rewriting of the conventions of the past. It addresses issues of language, culture, gender and questions Western rationality and epistemy
that used them as a process of positioning human beings in society. It is in this sense that the concerns of postmodernism, feminism, postcolonialism constantly overlap in their strong critique of Eurocentric tendency of validating its claims of language, culture, identity, race etc.

Postcolonialism has articulated resistance to power and imperial ideologies but in the present situation power relations have been configurated by global capitalism. Critics call postcolonialism as a progeny of post modernism, it has also been looked upon as an outcome of the emergence of global capitalism. The reconfiguration of economic relations in the present world order has not proclaimed the death of eurocentrism. In fact the demands of global capitalism have made boundaries flexible and it is basically through cultural hegemony that it can be brought about. As Arif Dirlik says, “What is clear is that global capitalism is (and must be) much more fluid culturally than a Eurocentric capitalism.”

The transnationalisation of capital has led to economic fragmentation and to the evolution of multiculturalism. Dirlik says, “The transnationalisation of production is the source at once of unprecedented global unity and of unprecedented fragmentation in the history of capitalism.”

The restructuring of economic relations in the modern world, with the boundaries constantly shifting, with the capital and people constantly on the move across the globe, have brought into question the modernist categorisation of the world
into first, second and third worlds. The failure of communism in Soviet Russia, the crisis of socialism and the alliance of socialism with transnational capitalism have changed the economic and political order. The struggle and wars are not between First and the Third World, but within the countries of Third World. The boundaries between the global and the local are erased and subsequently also between First, Second and the Third Worlds. Ela Shohat observes, “Echoing ‘Postmodernity,’ ‘Postcoloniality marks a contemporary state, situation, condition or epoch.’”  

According to Arif Dilrik, the Eighties has been significant for it is during this decade that the crises of Third World and the effects of global capitalism became evident.

It may be mentioned that in celebrating multiculturalism, pluralism and diversity, postcolonial theory fails to take into view the powerful forces that are behind the creation of this reality in order to exercise their political and cultural hegemony in the world. It does not resist the universalising narrative of global capitalism and cultural domination through which Eurocentrism makes its presence conspicuously apparent. It does not broaden its purview to include the struggle within the countries, which were considered third world and their geo-political differences. It misses out on understanding of the complexities of hybridity, of reclaiming the precolonial past towards an attempt to draw communities in gaining a collective identity. Ella Shohat aptly remarks,
“The hegemonic structures and conceptual frameworks generated over the last five hundred years cannot be vanquished by waving the magical wand of the postcolonial.”

The Subaltern Studies Group looks at the problems of postcoloniality with certain variations. The group constitutes Indian historians whose main concern is to revise existing theories of nationalism and postcolonial social formations. The term ‘subaltern’ has been borrowed from Gramsci, which means the oppressed. The aim of the project is to study ‘the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way.’

The group of intellectuals that took upon this task was inspired by Gayatri Chakarvorty Spivak’s widely circulated interrogation, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1985). The project questions the nature of historiography, the issue of nationalism and tries to give a voice to the oppressed who are the victims of class, caste or history. Hence the question of domination and subordination is central to the concern of the subaltern studies and the postcolonial theory resonates with the concerns of the group. In an interview with John C. Hawley Ghosh expressed his affinity with the group.

“I am sure at some level I have been deeply influenced by the ideas of ‘Subaltern Studies Group. I think I share some of the concerns of the Subaltern Studies Group because I am from the same milieu as many of the groups members.”
Ghosh also takes up the issues of power structure, cultural dialectics and political intricacies that are essentially governed by market economy and global drive. His novel encompasses a kaleidoscopic view of the complex global reality that has greatly influenced the arena of the novel and authorial choices. In the 80s, the novel blossomed into one of the most powerful, globalised and major literary genres. The decade was significant for the political crisis that was witnessed in the countries of the Third World. The effects of the decline of communism and global capitalism became at once manifest. The novel kept pace with these changes. The greater movement of people across the globe gradually turned the whole world into a global village. The large-scale migration of people into distant lands made a big impact on the native cultures as the diasporic communities exercised a powerful influence on the society and culture of their mother countries. This opened up new avenues of viewing and experiencing the changing realities. This was a new shift in focus as the crises generated by transnational capitalism affected the life of an individual in myriad ways. The novel captures the essence of plurality, multiculturalism and globalisation, while at the same time it probes deep into the emerging conflicts. It is rightly pointed out that:

“The scope of these novels is transnational and transcontinental. The East-West conflict projected in the novel is now a thing of the past. Now cultures mingle as is evident when characters of different nationalities interact with ease. As a result, the whole world is projected as one big home. The new individual is more cosmopolitan and de-regionalised than in the novel of the sixties and seventies.”46
The writers who emerged in the 80s gave a new direction to Indian fiction. Most of these writers, who are a part of Indian diaspora, have played a significant role in giving Indian fiction a status of respect, dignity and popularity not only in India but also in the West. The use of new techniques in fiction coupled with their superb mastery of the English language lends their work a peculiar charm, freshness and vitality. The writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Naipaul, Farrukh Dhondy, Seth etc., greatly contributed to the success of novel throughout the world. Their remarkable handling of English language, their narrative style, and their superb insight into Indian history set them significantly apart from the traditional Indian writings in English. These writers give expression to the deep-seated anxieties, sense of alienation, the frustration and traumas of the postcolonial generation, experienced at home as well as in the world outside. These new novelists surpass their predecessors who travelled widely but had their focus on India, except a few. The difference between the old and the new as M.K. Naik states, “It is (the new novel) far more globalised in many senses.”

Vikram Seth uses America, England, Austria and Italy as the settings for his different novels. Similarly Rushdie, Naipaul, F. Dhondy base their novels in far off countries of the world. These novelists and their works can be easily juxtaposed with their contemporaries in the West. Their stay abroad has fashioned their literary sensibilities in a desired manner and their use of English
diction and idiom can be equated with the native writers of English.

Their works have gained due recognition often winning them a wide readership and prestigious awards. Salman Rushdie won the Booker Prize in 1981 for his celebrated novel The Midnight’s Children. He also received the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for the novel. In fact all the novels of Rushdie have won various coveted awards. Shame won the Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger in Paris, The Satanic Verses received the “Author of the Year” Award in Germany, Haroun and the Sea of Stories received the writers Guild Award in England. The Moor’s Last Sigh got “The Novel of the Year” in 1996 and The Ground beneath her feet was adjudged the best book in the Eurasia region of the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Bharati Mukherjee was given the National Book Critics Circle award in 1988 for her The Middle Man and Other Stories. Rohinton Mistry’s Such a Long Journey bagged the Common Wealth writers Prize for the Best book and so did Vikram Seth’s A Suitable Boy. India has honoured some novelists in recognition of their literary success by conferring the Sahitya Academy Award during the 80s. Some of them are – Arun Joshi’s The Last Labyrinth, Nayantara Sahgal’s Rich Like us, Vikram Seth’s The Golden Gate, Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines and Shashi Deshpande’s That Long Silence. Recently Arundhati Roy won the Booker’s Prize in 1997 for her novel The God of Small Things, while Jhumpa Lahiri, became the first Indian to win the
Pulitzer Prize in the USA for her collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*.

Apart from the flair for English, these writers have created a mark in the literary arena for dealing with subjects like history, syncretism, cosmopolitanism and culture. Their literary writings not only offer a fresh perspective on these subjects but they also subvert the political and literary assumptions of Eurocentricism. History is the major concern of these writers. In earlier Indian writings, the sense of history and the human tragedy it creates is immediately evident. In the 80s, however, history was not viewed simply as a power working on the lives of individuals who are its helpless victims. Rather, it was studied and viewed from the perspective of an individual. This viewpoint puts forth the idea that there is no single history, but multiple histories constantly intersecting and immanent in each other. Viewed from the perspective of the oppressed, history and its interplay with politics renders the individual as the creator of history, endowed with the capacity of changing it. It is aptly stated,

“In the novel of the Eighties, the hitherto peripheral individual is brought into the centre-stage, no longer linked to history as a passive victim but projected as himself an agent of history.”

Since ages man was regarded as victim of history. The European concept of universal history designated a specific movement of progression to history, a specific time that moved in a chronological order. The European concept of history and historiography dealt with the lives of human beings in
abstraction. The long history of colonial rule, and the events that immediately followed freedom in India, left the nation divided, imposing unforeseen suffering. The colonial ideologies fragmented the nation and its history. The cultural values, history and identity had to be reconstructed. Hence the task of regaining and reconstructing history became necessary. By shifting the focus from the oppressor to the oppressed the individual becomes the source of great creative energy and vitality, rising to the status of the creator of history.

For rewriting history these novelists go back to the past, as they believe that a fresh insight into the past, was necessary for a better understanding of the present. The juxtaposition of the past and the present erases the boundaries that divide them. It distorts the chronological order of time, events and movement. The progression of time therefore becomes absolutely non-linear. “So artistically is the new and old synthesised that events of the past come alive, making it a living experience.” Rushdie, Ghosh and others intersperse their narratives with different conceptions of time and fragmented narrative technique.

Most of these novelists, Rushdie and Ghosh in particular, focus the history of the subcontinent and the socio-political and cultural factors that have shaped life in the subcontinent. The entire subcontinent has passed through a crisis of highly violent and turbulent times leading to serious political and economic crisis. And the individual – poor, helpless and suppressed – has
borne the brunt of the major events that have unleashed unbearable adversities and sorrows. The stoicism, courage and fortitude of these helpless multitudes stir the creative consciousness of these novelists. The events from the past like the partition, the emergency figure prominently in their writings, as also the events from the colonial phase. The Quit India Movement, the brutal policies of the colonisers, the bloodshed, the freedom struggle, partition of the country, the war with China, Pakistan, creation of Bangladesh etc., are the subjects that find an echo in their writings.

By highlighting the effect of these incidents on the lives of ordinary people, these novelists blend the public and the private. By highlighting traumas and sufferings in the lives of individuals they question the authenticity and validity of the more powerful and larger forces of history and politics that are closely intertwined with the lives of peoples, and form an inseparable part of their life in society. The protagonist Saleem Sinai’s claim in *Midnights Children* of being “handcuffed to history,” explains clearly the relationship between the individual and history.

The 80s were significant also because of the new global order that emerged with the global capitalism. The relations between the global and the local, the hegemonic, political and economic relations were restructured. The diasporic movement of people across the world redefined the earlier relationships between nations, language and cultures. The boundaries between
the nations had shifted and there was a greater intermingling of cultures and peoples. This experience of cosmopolitanism finds an expression in the novel of the 80s. The hybridisation and cultural syncriticity is the hallmark of all postcolonial societies. Hence the novel of the 80s is replete with characters that belong to different nationalities and try to resolve their dilemma of place, nationality and identity. As the characters traverse the globe with ease, there is a growing sense of alienation and the crisis of identity in distant lands. The shift in geographical location is closely linked to the crisis of identity, which lead the characters into a series of encounters with different peoples and cultures. After undergoing a great deal of toil, exploitation and suffering, these characters are finally able to seek some purpose or meaning in life, and experience the sense of gaining a different identity.

The cosmopolitanism and the new complex realities are expressed by employing new narrative strategies. The new novel is thus postmodern, as it seeks to liberate human consciousness from the tyranny of language and the tyranny of meaning. It is based on the idea of playful engagement with the world, with progress, civilisation and maturity. Hence it combines elements of myth, fantasy and oral narrative from the old Indian tradition to make sense of the complex realities of the contemporary world. It is truly observed: “The novelists of the Eighties combine traditional Indian narrative devices like episodicity, spotlessness and story within story with new post modernist techniques.”
Among the novelists of the 80s, one of the most distinguished and outstanding writers is Amitav Ghosh. Born in Calcutta on 11th July 1956, Ghosh went on to study History (B.A. Honours) from St. Stephens College, Delhi University in 1976 and M.A. in sociology from the university in 1978. As his father was a lieutenant colonel in the army and later became a diplomat, Ghosh spent many years of his life travelling places like East Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Egypt and India. He went to Oxford University in 1982 to pursue his doctoral thesis in Social anthropology. As an anthropologist, Ghosh spent a few years in Egypt to do field work in the village of Latifa. He also worked as a journalist for The Indian Express. At present Ghosh lives in New York with his wife Deborah Baker, an editor at little Brown and company and their two children, Leela and Nayan. Ghosh taught in the Delhi School of Economics and has been a visiting Professor of anthropology to several universities like university of Virginia (88), Pennsylvania, (1989) The American University in Cairo (1984) and Columbia University (94-97). He was also a distinguished Professor of comparative literature at Queen’s College of the city, University of New York (1999-2003). In the spring of 2004, he was a visiting Professor in the Department of English at Harvard University. Ghosh visits India every year and stays mostly in Calcutta.

Amitav Ghosh occupies a prominent place among the Indian writers of English prose. He has truly made a mark by writing some of the best fiction as well as non-fiction. As one of
the most significant writers of the time, Ghosh’s work is a fine blend of fiction, history and anthropology. A writer gifted with superb insights into history and civilisation, combined with his extraordinary capacity to churn out the lives of people, their dilemmas, their stories, cultural beliefs, Ghosh truly assumes the status of a writer, whose fascinating imaginative and creative sensibility make him a true artist. John C. Hawley remarks:

“But first and foremost, and overriding all the many ideas that inform his work are the stories, the Dickinson proliferation of characters who lives engage us and who take us to some richly imagined places and times.”

Ghosh’s stay in different parts of the subcontinent and his extensive travel across the world played a great role in his development as a writer. His training as an anthropologist and his academic interests have in a substantial way contributed to the exuberance and vividness of his writings and many of his books have been critically acclaimed and honoured with prestigious awards. The Circle of Reason (1986) was the first novel of Ghosh, which was followed by The Shadow Lines (1988), In an Antique Land (1992) The Calcutta Chromosome (1996), The Glass Palace (2000) and The Hungry Tide (2004). His non-fiction includes Dancing in Cambodia, at large in Bruma (1998), Countdown (1999) and The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces (2002).

Ghosh received the prestigious Sahitya Akademy Award, the greatest literary honour in India for The Shadow Lines. The Calcutta Chromosome received the Arthur C. Clark Award.
Glass Palace was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2001, but Ghosh withdrew the nomination of this novel from the Commonwealth Prize. In his letter to the commonwealth prize authorities he wrote, “the issue of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of The Glass Palace and I feel that I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialisation of Empire that passes under the rubric of ‘the commonwealth.’”52

Ghosh belongs to ‘the Midnights children’s children’ generation that was greatly influenced by Rushdie’s artistic and innovative craftsmanship. Critics call Rushdie a major postcolonial writer who took the literary world by storm by his remarkable book The Midnight’s Children. Sharing his concerns with writers whose themes and subjects had a striking similarity to Rushdie’s novel and who belong to the ex-colonies of the British Empire, Rushdie’s work to a great extent attacks the notions of received history and other Western assumptions. Ghosh’s first novel The Circle of Reason is influenced by Rushdie in terms of the narrative technique but when he was asked about his categorisation as a postcolonial writer, Ghosh replied, “It completely misrepresents the focus of the work that I do. In some really important ways, colonialism is not what interests me. What is postcolonial? When I look at the work of critics, such as Homi Bhabha, I think they have somehow invented this world, which is just a set of representations of representations. They have retreated into a world of magic
mirrors and I don’t think anyone can write from that lot of position.”

Literary influences on Ghosh are varied. Gabriel Garcia Marquez who uses magic realism as narrative technique influenced Ghosh’s art to a great extent, and so did Ford Madox Ford and Proust. In Indian context, the stories by Satyajit Ray and Tagore also have been a major influence on Ghosh. Ghosh spent a greater part of his childhood in the Subcontinent. The political history of the subcontinent has witnessed a lot of violence and instability during the last few decades or to be more precise after the departure of the colonisers. History is one of the predominant concerns of Ghosh. Whether it is the history of South Asia or the history that was developed in the Western Academy, Ghosh’s widespread focus makes him traverse a vast landscape of time, places and different historical periods which unfold a broad spectrum of events that have cultural and socio-political overtones.

While focusing on the history of South East Asia or the historical events that have shaped the subcontinent, Ghosh’s perspective is not restricted to particular location. He encompasses in his broad sweep cultures and civilisations of ancient Egypt and the Middle East. He portrays the medieval world in In an Antique Land with an equal dexterity, vividness and detail, as he envisions the future far more scientifically
advanced in his science fiction thriller *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

The political history of the subcontinent has been extremely volatile since the 1950’s. The Partition of the country, the creation of Pakistan, the communal riots, the forced migrations, the creation of Bangladesh, the wars with China and Pakistan and the rise of religious fundamentalism are some of the events that have taken their toll and rendered the country victim of the socio-political brutalisation. This has posed a serious threat to the legitimacy of secular and democratic character of India.

These political events have left their imprints on the creative sensibility of Ghosh. But of all these events the birth of Bangladesh and the communal riots that took place in Dhaka in 1964, which Ghosh witnessed as a child, made a huge impact on his psyche. The brutal violence, terror and bloodshed that Ghosh witnessed, the killings and the hatred that he saw between the people of the two communities, which had earlier embodied mutual love and brotherhood, shocked him. This major political event—the communal riots in Dhaka—became the paradigm in Ghosh’s writing and set the tone for the creation of most of his fiction and non-fiction. It also gave him serious insights into issues of more important concern – human relationships, their complexity and the effect of socio political and historical events on the lives of ordinary people. And as always the deprived and underprivileged who are at the receiving end of all atrocity and
suffering are the heroes of Ghosh’s fiction. The partition of India in 1947, the creation of Bangladesh rendered vast multitudes homeless, forsaken, and traumatic. It is these oppressed figures, in search of home and identity, referred to as refugees, who figure prominently in Ghosh fiction. Ghosh’s relates this with modern man’s perpetual search for his roots and identity in the contemporary world. Apart from the riots in Dhaka, Ghosh was also deeply affected by the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in the year 1984 that followed the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. In fact the political events that took place during the decade 80s were alarmingly violent and tragic. Ghosh was in Delhi then, teaching at the Delhi University after completing his doctorate in Oxford. The scale of violence that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi was incredibly shocking. In the essay “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi,” The Imam and the Indian Ghosh records the violence that was instigated against the innocent Sikhs throughout the city and almost all over the country. Their brutal massacre, and the manner in which they were killed was more than shocking: “Yet it was not just grief I felt at that moment. Rather, it was a sense of something slipping loose, of a mooring coming untied somewhere within.” (I & I – 48)

The violence that Ghosh witnessed in Delhi shaped his insight into the problems of contemporary society confronting the entire world, the violence resulting from the spread of religious extremism and of fundamentalism. The gravity of the situation in
a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country like India made him conscious of his own responsibility as a citizen in such circumstances. This violent incident also resolved the dichotomy in Ghosh about his response as an artist and his duty as a human being. It brought to his mind a passage from Naipaul, which had a tremendous impact on him. Naipaul describes a demonstration from his hotel room somewhere in Africa and South America:

“To his surprise, the sight fills him with an obscure longing, a kind of melancholy; he is aware of a wish to go out, to join, to merge his concerns with things. Yet he knows he never will; it is simply not in his nature to join crowds.” (I & I – 56)

But Ghosh did not give a second thought to join the protest march headed for Lajpat Nagar at the risk of his own life. The artist in Ghosh was overtaken by his human concerns and his moral responsibility as the citizen of India.

The remark of the Bosnian writer Dzevad Karahasan in an essay ‘Literature and War’ also made Ghosh aware of his aesthetic considerations. Karahasan makes a connection between modern literary aestheticism and the contemporary world’s indifference to violence.

“The decision to perceive literally everything as an aesthetic phenomenon – completely sidestepping questions about goodness and truth – is an artistic decision. That decision started in the realm of art, and went on to become characteristic of the contemporary world.” (I & I – 60)

The aesthetic considerations override all the others in an artist like Ghosh, yet he could not stop himself from responding to such events. Karahasan only made him conscious of the
responsibility of using language while responding to such incidents in society so as not to hurt sentiments or endorse terrorism. As an artist and also as a human being he could not remain indifferent to what he saw or felt and exercised caution with words. It is a lesson that he learnt from his experiences. Hence **The shadow lines** is resonant with Ghosh’s own experiences of riots and the mutual hatred and love that people manifested for their fellow human beings in times of crisis. Ghosh says,

> “Within a few months I started my novel, which I eventually called **The Shadow Lines** – a book that led me backward in time to earlier memories of riots, ones witnessed in childhood. It became a book not about any one event but about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them.” (I & I – 60)

This throws light on Ghosh’s innate human concerns. The artist and the human being are immanent in each other. They are equally sensitive and have a high sense of their moral responsibilities and a great regard for people, their suffering and misery. It highlights Ghosh’s thorough commitment to his duties, to his art and towards his fellow human beings. The artist in Ghosh is not isolated or indifferent and shares his concerns with his duties as a citizen. It also shows Ghosh’s attitude of denying the specific boundaries that are created to mark a difference. Whether it is the geographical boundaries, the idea of discrete cultures and civilisations, fiction and non-fiction the orient and the occident, Ghosh disregards them and points out their arbitrariness:
“I think these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded.” Relating the pressures that artists constantly have to face in a country like India, Ghosh says:

“I was in the US during the first Gulf War and I was very struck by how no major American writer seemed to have an opinion about it. This would be inconceivable in India, where the lives of writers and artists are highly politicised. But as I see it, it is precisely because the pressures are so great that Indian artists have to be very careful in limiting their role in politics – that is why we have to pick and choose their involvements. But a writer is also a citizen, not just of a country but of the world.” (CIWE – 11)

Ghosh has written with great human and moral concerns about the major political events of India that have universal overtones. He writes about the Gulf War and its effects in In an Antique Land, the nuclear tests conducted by India at Pokhran and similar tests conducted in Pakistan, the animosity of between the two nations, the partition, etc., in his book Countdown. The controversy about Taslima Nasrin’s novel Lajja, the terror attack on the World Trade Centre finds expression in his essay – The Greatest Sorrow: Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness and about the rise of religious fundamentalism in his fiction and as well as the essays in Imam and the Indian.

The boundaries that Ghosh seeks to deconstruct in his writings are in a way connected to his specialisation in Anthropology, which interestingly he does not quite like. But Ghosh has been influenced by the recent developments in the discipline of anthropology, which mark a departure from the
traditional notions of classical anthropology. This new direction in anthropology is mainly concerned with degrading the idea of discrete cultures. It foregrounds the flow of cultures irrespective of geographical or physical boundaries. The American anthropologist James Clifford’s analysis of Ghosh’s work within the framework of this classic shift makes an interesting reading. As Robert Dixon says,

“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.”

Ghosh’s fictional world has characters that are constantly on the move, traversing boundaries and crisscrossing geographical borders. Whether Ghosh is writing about the past or the contemporary world, migration within the country as well as cross cultural migration becomes a metaphor of man’s wanderlust, the search for his roots, and the peculiar predicament of modern life. Hence his fictional world is a meeting place, a converging point for people belonging to different cultures – Egypt, India, England, America, Zanzibar, Iraq etc. Clifford says,

“Ghosh’s writing draws attention to the complex “roots” and ‘routes’ that make up the relations between cultures: Everyone is on the move, and they have been for centuries: dwelling-in-travel.”

Travel, in the form of forced migration is also central to his concern. Taking up the issue of migration Ghosh unravels the history of the subcontinent that forced people to leave their homeland and seek shelter outside their borderlands. The
partition of India in 1947, turned thousands of people into refugees who were forced to move as they became victims of religious persecution and racism. The creation of Bangladesh and the riots rendered people homeless and made them strangers in their own land. Similarly the political changes in Burma and its crippled economy during colonial era, when the Japanese invaded the country led several Indians who were settled there to go back to India. The long march in which the Indians were forced to undertake the laborious journey brought untold misery and suffering on the huge populations headed towards India. Hence Travel for Ghosh is a vast metaphor of syncreticity of cultures and the cruelty meted out by history. Brinda Bose rightly points out that:

“Ghosh’s imagination is as necessarily diasporic as it is postcolonial, being a product of the specific histories of the subcontinent in the twentieth century.”

Ghosh’s training as an anthropologist did contribute to his interest in knowing people, their histories and cultures, but he soon realised that anthropology ends up in dealing with abstractions. His real interest, as he said, lay in the predicament of the individual. Ghosh’s primary concern lies in unfolding the histories of the ‘subaltern, the ordinary, oppressed individual who somehow evades the grasp of the historians. It is this subaltern figure relegated to the margins of civilised society by historical circumstances as well as historiography, which is central to the concern of Ghosh and constitutes the main focus of his writings. The history that Ghosh attempts to recover through
fiction gives a new dimension to the study of history and also points out the irregularities that have gone into the making of history. Ghosh points out the manipulation of history in the Western academy and also the present historical records in India that exclude some of the important historical events that have been crucial to the development of the history in the subcontinent. The novel *The Glass Palace*, which is set in India, Burma and Malaya deals with some of the most significant phases in history. Ghosh did a lot of historical research for this novel, as the Indian records did not document adequately some of the important episodes and issues like the formation of the Indian National army.

*In an Antique Land* shows significant insights into the history of the Jews recorded in the Geniza, which was completely destroyed by the European scholars and consequently some of the important aspects of Jewish history, its culture and religion remained obscured from its own people. Ghosh recovered an entire epoch of history through the study of these vanished records that boasted of the close business and personal links between the people of the two ancient civilisations, India and Egypt. The real story of slave Bomma of Indian origin and his master Abraham Ben yiju, a Jew, as depicted in the novel, is straight out of so-called Geniza Documents.

*The Glass Palace, The Shadow Lines* and *The Circle of Reason* trace the tumultuous course of history. These novels
highlight the peculiar predicament of modern man for whom the meaning of ‘home’ or ‘roots’ does not convey its traditional attributes. The individual in contemporary society inhabits the ‘in-between’ or ‘Third Space’ i.e. diaspora. In the age of globalisation, the realities of national boundaries or geographical borders are being redefined. Ghosh’s characters sooner or later realise their diasporic condition, their identities, which are always in a state of flux, and this is the point of their maturation in the novel when they deny the specificity of the lines that demarcate people, nations, cultures and countries. The realisation of the existence of physical boundaries as political myths unfolds an absolutely new dimension of comprehending reality. Perhaps the most apt metaphor for this used by Ghosh is the title of his most popular novel, The Shadow Lines in which Ghosh deconstructs the idea of ‘nation’ through the institution of the family which is the ‘Central unit’ for, according to Ghosh, “the family is the domain of autonomy. That’s where you locate your individuality and your sovereignty” (WLT – 88)

The family outlines and transcends the national borders in Ghosh’s fiction. The notion of national identity and community thus stands displaced. History in its perpetual flow along with cultures is thus constantly constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing realities. And the links that an individual seeks to hold on to his moorings can be secured only through imagination because imagination holds limitless possibilities and transcends all the barriers of time, place or nationalities. It is free from all
tyrannies exercised by history, politics or culture. These fictive ties release all the pressures that compel man to believe in the differences of caste, race, religion and ethnicity. The unnamed narrator in The Shadow Lines learns to perceive the world through his imagination. It becomes a terrain where he could weave together the strands of stories and events, people, places and cultures that earlier appeared to have no connection at all, that were as distant as the geographical boundaries, that he thinks, existed between nations. When finally he gains the knowledge of these intersecting histories, all the boundaries of time, place and cultures collapse and everything appears to be moving in a continuum and, “Where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror.”

The memories of the past constantly haunt the present. Hence the past assumes a great significance in Ghosh. An insight into the past enables one to understand the realities of the present. In the words of E.H. Carr, “The past which a historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which in some sense is still living in the present.”

And as the past and the present become concurrent, the realities of the past become a living experience. The complexities of the present are to a great extent resolved and this helps in creating a vision of the future. Ghosh’s brilliant ordering of time lends his narrative a peculiar charm and a sense of participation in the events that unfold in different times and periods in history.
In *In an Antique Land*, the medieval world and the 20th century move in unison, presenting the histories of Indians and Egyptians, Hindus, Muslims and Jews, patterning and mutually influencing cultures and histories. In *The Shadow Lines*, it is only when the present establishes a link with the events of the past that the events achieve significance and meaning. The riots that took place in Dhaka in 1964 and similar riots witnessed by the narrator in Calcutta as a child help him establish links between events that happened at the same time but in different places. *The Calcutta Chromosome* moves forth, backward and forward in time, from the 19th century to a time in future in order to trace the Calcutta chromosome. In his first novel *The Circle of Reason* events and time unfold like the raga in Indian classical music and follow a different pattern and span in the three sections into which the novel is divided. His latest novel *The Hungry Tide*, set in the distant Sunderbans, unfolds the history of the formation of the vast archipelago of Sunderbans. It records the hard struggle that the inhabitants undergo in order to survive the hazards of everyday lives and political persecution, which is intertwined with their history.

Like time, places too are of great significance to Ghosh’s concern. His strong faith in the insignificance of geographical boundaries conveys Ghosh’s broad vision of reality as well as humanity. His idea of the entire world as one, as a vast space also berates the notions of caste, creed, religion, nation, and ethnicity that in some form or the other have become a cause of conflict.
and hostility throughout the world. This is evident when the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* says,

“---a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one’s imagination.” (SL–21). Ghosh himself has travelled widely across the world, but his travelogues do not simply present places as exotic or destinations to be sought. Like his fiction, they betray his concern for the problems afflicting humanity at large. He says that he hates politics, but his writings show the role of politics in the life of an individual and the misery and terror it perpetrates. He has responded to the events of the major political significance like the race for nuclear arms in India as well as Pakistan. *Countdown* is a critique of the nuclear tests conducted in India and Pakistan and he shows how the hostility between the two nations is a well-planned power strategy. *Dancing in Cambodia* depicts the cruel Pol Pot regime, its ruthless policies and violence against the people of Cambodia as well as of Vietnam. Ghosh is concerned with highlighting how the totalitarian political regimes place the life of an individual in peril and the political crisis that it creates on the level of a nation. His deep human concerns, his meticulous historical research, and creative rendering of the struggle of the individual against the powerful forces of history and politics, which are beyond his control, make him one of the most outstanding writers of our times.
Ghosh has lived in several places, travelled different countries, which makes his imagination truly diasporic but he remains an Indian with a focus on the events of the subcontinent. It is rightly observed,

“Though a gifted craftsman, the novelist never ceases to be an Indian even in his superb flights of fantasy, which impart to his novels the folktale charm of the Arabian Nights and make him a Don Quixote of another era.”

Ghosh’s consciousness is as much diasporic as it is postcolonial. His creative writings betray a judicious synthesis of history, anthropology, and sociology, transcending the boundaries of categorisation.

References:


6. Ibid, p. 44.


20. Ibid.


