


35. Ibid, p – 33.


50. Ibid, p – 139.


CHAPTER II

REWRITING HISTORY
Rewriting History

The postcolonial phase in Indian National History witnessed a fresh spate of violence in the form of communal riots and political conflicts. Some of the major communal riots that erupted in India were during the partition of the country. A large number of innocent people became victims of the brutal massacre and huge devastation. They became homeless and were forced to migrate to different cities as refugees. The scale of violence, suffering and misery caused by the riots was no less than that could have been caused by a war. But the exhaustive historical records grant a place for war; riots are never given the space and attention they deserve. This missing dimension of historiography seriously occupies the attention of Amitav Ghosh:

“While the riots were under way, they had received extensive and detailed coverage. Yet, once contained, they had vanished instantly, both from public memory and the discourse of history. Why was this so? Why is it that civil violence seems to occur in parallel time, as though it were outside history?”

He witnessed the riots that took place in Dhaka between the Hindus and Muslims in 1964. His family was a direct victim of these riots. It was forced to migrate to Colombo. Amitav Ghosh was also deeply affected by the anti-Sikh riots that erupted in Delhi in 1984. What pained him most was the hatred that he saw between the close-knit communities of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, who were once united by a sense of mutual love and brotherhood. These events had a marked affect on Ghosh’s
insights into history, history that uproots people and puts them on a painful search for meaning of their existence and destiny.

The communal riots in Dhaka rendered thousands of people homeless. They became foreigners in their own land and were forced to flee as refugees to distant lands. These faceless and suffering masses figure prominently in Ghosh’s fiction. Their sorrows, miseries and their disrupted lives fail to find a place in the ‘grand’ historical records. By making these subaltern figures the main focus of his writings, Ghosh creates a parallel history. He questions mainstream history by exposing the gaps in it and accords the victims of history, the status of makers of history. His literary writing makes a brilliant attempt of rewriting history. By shifting the focus to the marginalised, he opens the possibility of reviewing history from an altogether different perspective. He observes that there can be multiple perspectives of viewing history. He subverts the idea of universal history by highlighting the existence of multiple histories. He believes that like history, reality too, is multilayered and multidimensional. The historical and ideological constructs obstruct perception of reality in its true light. Ghosh’s vision of history and the manipulations of history are revealed in The Shadow Lines.

The novel traces the impact of India’s nationalist history and the historical processes that shaped the lives of the people living in the subcontinent. It centres around two families. One is Indian and the other is English. The Indian family is further subdivided into two families. They are Choudharys. The one
comprises the unnamed narrator, his parents and grandmother, Thamma. The other consists of Mayadebi and her husband, the Shaheb. They have three sons. The eldest Jatin is an economist with the U.N. and is settled abroad with his wife and daughter, Ila. The younger son, Tridib, stays in Calcutta, pursuing his Ph.D. in Archeology. The youngest son is Robi who lives with his parents. The English family of the Prices is settled in London. It comprises Mrs. Price, a widow and her two children May and Nick Price. The close family ties between these families had prevailed since the decades. It dates back to the friendship established between Lionel Tresawsen, Mrs. Price’s father and Justice Chandrashekhar Datta Choudhary, Tridib’s grandfather.

The novel is divided into two parts ‘Going away’ and ‘Coming home’ and deals with issues of uprootedness created by the historical processes. The question of nationalism, belonging, identity and the war and communal riots have a direct impact on the lives of common people. The set of characters – Indian, English and anglicised – highlights different versions of reality and history that shape the lives of people in different ways.

Tridib is an important character in the novel. He represents Ghosh’s idea of reconstructing the world on the values of love, truth and universal humanity. Through Tridib Ghosh highlights the possibility of creating a world free from all differences of race, nationality, culture and religion. Tridib, the uncle of the unnamed child narrator trains him to use his imagination to experience and
visit far off places in the world. He stimulates the narrator’s sense of wonder and love for the exotic and the unknown:

“... Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with: she (Ila) who had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in Tridib’s room had meant to me, a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta.” ²

The narrator imbibes Tridib’s sense and consciousness of time and place. He learns to experience the past as a living presence and history as a part of the present as well as the future simultaneously. Tridib represents Ghosh’s vision of experiencing time, people and places as one. He narrates the poignant memories of wartime London to the narrator. Tridib was nine years old when he visited London with his mother. Their visit had coincided with the outbreak of II World War in London in 1939. Living at the Prices House Tridib gained an insight into effects of war and violence on people. Through the lives of Alan Tresawsen, Mrs. Price’s brother, and his friends Dan, Mike and Francesca, Tridib picturises the entire war-torn London and feels the pain, fear, insecurity, joys and sorrows of the English people afflicted by the war. He constructs such a vivid picture of wartime London and its places that years after when the narrator visits London to pursue his research, he reconstructs Tridib’s memories and the entire picture of war-time London comes alive before his eyes. He points out to Ila and Nick the location of English roads and also how they were affected by the blasts and explosions caused during the Second World War:
“Since this is West End lane, I said, that must be Sumatra Road over there. So that corner must be where the air raid shelter was, the same one that Robi’s mother and your mother and your uncle Alan ducked into on their way back from Mill Lane when one of those huge high-caliber bombs exploded on Solent Road, around the corner, blowing up most of the houses there.”(SL- 55)

The political and personal, historical and familial dimensions of occurrences intermingle to the extent of being inseparable. History takes into account the obvious set of events that cause devastations but it is memory that streamlines the history of private and personal destinies. Gyanendra Pandey rightly points out:

“History is concerned with causalities but it is memory that deals with individuals and their private lives. Infact “Memory,” according to Gyanendra Pandey, “has become the discourse that replaces history.” 3

Memory thus becomes an important link with the past. Memories, stories or narratives underscore the written records or documentation of events. It opens up the possibility of viewing reality as multidimensional and multilayered. It authenticates and validates the variegated experiences of each and every individual as the truth. These multiple perspectives coalesce with each other bringing to the fore the hidden facts of history. As Gyanendra Pandey says,

.... The same history may be told from many perspectives and, implicitly, of the possibility of many histories – many kinds of histories – of the same event or object.4

Ghosh explodes the idea of a master narrative or universal idea of history. Through Tridib, Ghosh shows how imagination is
an important alternative reality. It offers numerous possibilities of exploring the received stories and histories. He explodes the modern myths of progress, history and rationality. The reinvention of the past not only gives an insight into the past but also helps to comprehend the present.

The past simpler than the present offers a kind of model from which we can begin to learn the realities of history itself and from its study, we return to the present not with the answers, but with the questions clarified in our minds for the first time.

The characters like Thamma, the narrator’s grandmother, Ila, whom the narrator loves and Nick Price, Ila’s English dream hero show how narratives of history condition people. Thamma is indoctrinated by India’s nationalist historiography. Thamma’s family lived in Dhaka before India was partitioned. As a college girl she had witnessed the nationalist fervour that gripped the entire subcontinent. She saw how in the charged political atmosphere thousands of young men and women were ready to sacrifice their lives for their motherland. Thamma’s mind too was fired by the fervent desire of becoming a part of the freedom movement. In Bengal, the terrorist organisations like ‘Anushilan’ and ‘Jugantar,’ carried out clandestine activities against the British. The tales of heroism of these terrorists immensely enchanted Thamma and she hailed Bagha Jatin and Khudiram Bose, the leaders of the Movement. The idea of rebellion fascinated her.
The British Government took strict measures to curtail rebellion. The police arrested one of Thamma’s classmates, a shy, bearded boy. It was revealed that he was part of a terrorist organisation and was planning to kill the English magistrate in Khulna district. For Thamma he became a hero. Years later while narrating this incident to her grandson, she reveals the important place that the nation occupied for her and her readiness to sacrifice anything for its sake. When the young narrator asks Thamma, “Do you really mean Thamma, I said, that you would have killed him? (The English Magistrate). Thamma replied, “Yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free.” (SL - 39)

But for all Indians like Thamma who had pinned their hopes on the new and independent India, freedom proved to be a sham. The nation was faced with a fresh spate of problems that turned the situation grim. The hopes and dreams of Indians were frustrated as the country was partitioned. Nationalism as well as the nation to their dismay had failed to homogenise differences. Thamma’s motherland Dhaka was separated from India and became a part of a new country, Pakistan. Thousands were rendered homeless and forced to migrate to distant lands as refugees. Ghosh beautifully portrays this in the disintegration of the two families – of Thamma and her uncle Jethamoshai who had since generations lived together in their ancestral house. The mounting resentment had estranged the two families and the
house was finally partitioned into two by a wooden partition wall:

But the building of the wall proved to be far from easy because the two brothers, insisting on their rights with a lawyer-like precision, demanded that the division be exact down to the minutest detail. The brothers even partitioned their father’s old nameplate. It was divided down the middle by a thin white line, and their names were inscribed on the two halves - of necessity in letters so tiny that nobody could read them. (SL – 123)

The symbolic description clearly conveys how the hatred and enmity between the Hindus and Muslims is rooted in the history of India’s partition. As soon as a boundary was sketched between the two nations, it had estranged the relations between the two communities who had lived together since centuries as brothers.

Thamma’s belief in the rhetoric of nationhood builds her faith in the abstract notions of state, nation, community and geographical boundary. She refuses to keep pace with the changing realities and the shifting boundaries of the modern world. For her these abstract ideas are the most prevalent existing realities because this was the only reality she had lived with all these years – the reality of partition and the suffering – the reality of boundaries that had shaped her life, defined her existence and given her a distinct sense of identity. But Ghosh explodes the myth of geographical boundaries and the futility of wars and violence for the preservation of boundaries. Thamma is shocked to learn that there is no physical border between India and Dhaka:
And if there’s no difference both sides will be the same; it will be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn’t something in between? (SL – 151)

By shifting his focus to England, Ghosh prepares a larger framework to pinpoint how the Western narrative of universal history shaped the perceptions about the East and the West. The Western narratives of history, nation and culture, he believes have been responsible for creating a deep chasm between the East and West. Ila’s thinking is shaped by the Western idea of history. She doesn’t like India, its people and culture. Ila’s denigration of the country of her birth reflects the Western attitude of considering the countries of the East and the events that happen there as insignificant. Ila tells the narrator,

“You can’t know what this kind of happiness means: there’s a joy merely in knowing that you are a part of history... We know that in the future political people everywhere will look to us – in Nigeria, India, Malaysia, wherever. It must have been the same for Tresawsen and his crowd. At least they knew they were a part of the most important events of their time – the war, and fascism, all the things you read about today in history books. That’s why there’s a kind of heroism even in their pointless deaths.” (SL – 104)

Ila’s stay in England and her desperation to become a part of its culture is revealed in her admiration for its ‘glorious’ history and also in her love for Nick Price. But in school Nick is ashamed to be seen with Ila because she is an Indian. And the attitude of Ila’s Marxist friends towards her highlights the Western idea of stereotyping the East and its people. Ila for them
represents the Indian, who is ignorant, naïve and has no sense of history:

They (Ila’s friends) were all clearly very fond of her, but they seemed to regard her as a kind of guest, a decoration almost .... They would talk of her as ‘our own upper class Asian Marxist.’ This seemed to please them: they had an acute sense of history and perhaps they saw Ila as a link with the Fabians. (SL–97)

Thamma, Ila and Nick live in a world, which is founded on the constructs of history, culture, civilisation, race and religion. It limits their vision of reality in its totality. They experience only a partial dimension of reality. In fact, this is the perception of reality conceived by a vast majority of people in the world who are conditioned to believe in the differences of race, caste, religion and nationality. And it is, to a great extent, responsible for the present day religious and political conflicts throughout the world.

Ghosh subverts this view through Tridib who believes in the kind of love that transcends all boundaries of categorisation. The love that he has for May hints at erasing of the boundaries that exist between the East and the West. The imaginary love scene that he writes about in his letter to May that is witnessed in wartime London reflects his own idea of love. The two lovers engrossed in their passionate love making in a blasted theater, overcome the fear of firing bullets and the gloom and terror that prevails outside. Their love defies history, war, race, religion and nationality and even death. It is against such a background that Tridib longs to meet May,
But he did know that was how he wanted to meet her, May – as a stranger, in a ruin. He wanted them to meet as the completest of strangers – strangers – across – the seas – all the more strangers because they knew each other already. He wanted them to meet far from their friends and relatives – in a place without a past, without history, free, really free, two people coming together with the utter freedom of strangers. (SL – 144)

He believes in the creation of a self that recognises the other self as equal. He longs for an unimpeded flow of love that erases all the differences that are imposed to create an idea of ‘the other.’ His vision is animated by this idea of love, which can be realised by freeing the mind from all ideological and historical constructs. Tridib tells the narrator:

“... One could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh that carried one beyond the limits of one’s mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror.” (SL – 29)

Tridib, along with May and Thamma, goes to Dhaka. Thamma wants to get her uncle, the old Jethamoshai, to Calcutta. He stays all alone in the care of a Muslim family in the ancestral house. But in the communal riots of 1964 that erupt in Dhaka, Tridib dies. He is killed by a furious mob of Muslims who are on a rampage in the city. And after 15 years, sitting with his friends in Teen Murti House Library during the course of his research in 1979, the narrator could establish a link between the death of Tridib and the communal riots that occurred in three different cities of the subcontinent. His friends deny the occurrence of
communal riots in Calcutta in 1964, which the narrator himself had witnessed as a child. It shows the response that has been instilled in them by history. They remembered the Indo-China war of 1962 but not the riots, “But it must have been a local thing. Terrible or not, its hardly comparable to a war.” (SL – 221)

The narrator could never forgo his childhood memories. The deserted streets, the bus ride to school, the fear and the violence, all lived in his mind. The rumour that Muslims had poisoned Calcutta’s water supply had suddenly estranged his dear friend Mansoor from all his schoolmates. The volatile atmosphere that suddenly turns the two communities of Hindus and Muslims into enemies over religious and political issues has been the history of the subcontinent. The fear of being killed by your own neighbour, friend or brother with whom you’ve shared all joys and sorrows is the most painful one:

That particular fear has a texture you can neither forget nor describe.. .It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world – not language, not food, not music – it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror. (SL – 204)

Juxtaposing the Second World War with communal riots and civil violence in India, Ghosh questions the gaps in history that overlooks important events treating them as ‘Local’ or
insignificant. According to a noted Indian Marxist, political scientist and Activist, Javeed Alam,

“There are large historical forces behind the little events that happen.... The “Little events’ violence and rape, mass murder and the expulsion of whole communities – thus appear irrelevant. They are the product of other forces and other processes, which is what requires study. The ‘Little events’ themselves are, in this view best forgotten.” 6

After surfing through the newspaper, the narrator finds that the theft of the prophet’s relic in the Hazratbal shrine had triggered violence in Dhaka, Khulna and Calcutta. It had roused the ire of Muslim community and it was on a fateful day in 1964 that Tridib became a victim of history. It surprised the narrator that violence arising out of nationalistic feelings cuts across the boundaries of nations, religion, race and cultures:

“I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship. There was no room in it for this other thing. And things which did not fit my vocabulary were merely pushed over the edge into the chasm of that silence.” (SL – 219)

The deaths of thousands of people like Tridib who are killed in riots do not affect the nation. The historical records glorify events like war or the partition, which involves nations. They have no place for individuals. The cricket match that took place on 10th January 1964 – the same day when riots broke out – form the major headlines in newspapers. Budhi Kunderan became a hero overnight by scoring a maiden century. But
nobody remembered the efforts of Maulana Masoodi in Kashmir. In fact he created history by uniting the people of Kashmir in peaceful demonstration against the theft of the relic, which is beyond the power of any nation. Similarly the sacrifices made by ordinary people to protect people of other communities are not recorded in history. “But they were ordinary people, soon forgotten – not for them any Martyr’s Memorials or Eternal Flames.” (SL – 230)

Ghosh, thus, explores a new dimension of history and brings to light the lapses in history. A systematic study of these lapses offers numerous possibilities of understanding reality and the hand of vested interests in distorting history. The picture of history, which Ghosh presents in his fiction, is far more authentic and striking than the one presented by any historian, studying causalities.

**The Circle of Reason** is essentially a postcolonial novel. It discusses the persisting colonial legacies and challenges binaries; it emphasises the necessity of constructing one’s own narrative as opposed to the prevailing ones. Ghosh alludes to the political ideologies of the Europeans that helped sustain the Western myth of progress, rationality and history, to further its claims and expand its empire.

Enlightenment and the developments in modern natural science privileged the West in terms of progress, reason and rationality. The establishment of colonies throughout Asia, Africa
and other parts of the world necessitated the task of legitimising their political rule in these countries. The Europeans privileged their claims of superiority of knowledge, race and civilisation and proclaimed the ‘Orient’ as inferior, uncivilised, irrational and superstitious. Ghosh questions Western History and the validity of its narrative, especially its universalising claims of bequeathing progress, reason and rationality to the colonised world, “Science doesn’t belong to countries. Reason doesn’t belong to any nation. They belong to history – to the world.”

The novel opens in Lalpukur, a small village in East Bengal and portrays the adventures of Balram Bose, a local schoolteacher. Balram is obsessed with the theories of Western science. He strictly adheres to reason and logic prescribed by the dictates of Western science and admires the Western scientists like Madame Irene Joliot Curie, Louis Pasteur and their discoveries that led to a breakthrough in the world of science. He is greatly enamoured of the work of Louis Pasteur and his discovery of the ‘germ.’ But at the same time he is fond of phrenology, a science that studies human personality through an examination of the bumps on the head. Ghosh juxtaposes Western science with a pseudo-science, phrenology, long deemed to be a failure by mainstream science. Ghosh challenges the binaries of East/ West, Science/ pseudo science, modernity/ tradition. Claire Chambers remarks:

Ghosh’s allusions to a vast range of scientific projects encourage the reader to think about how western science drastically alters and yet is itself hybridised by its encounter
with Indian society. In this novel, Ghosh makes the important point that science, technology and medicine were not conveyed to India by the British in a one-way process of transfer, but were in fact involved in a complex series of cross-cultural exchanges, translations and mutations.\(^8\)

The novel is divided into three parts Satwa: reason, Rajas: passion and Tamas: death. The novel centres round the application of scientific reasoning to the practical affairs of life. Ghosh questions the universal claims of Western science and reasoning to expose the dichotomy between the ‘truth’ of Western science and its relevance to the problems of everyday life. Balram uses the antiseptic, the carbolic acid to kill germs, to purify human beings and cure them of their greed for money. Using the carbolic acid to clean the refugee shanties to prevent the outbreak of epidemic, Balram also extends it to Bhudeb Roy, his neighbour and employer. Bhudeb Roy represents the forces of greed, money and power in the society. A man well versed in practical affairs, Balram sees in Bhudeb Roy the germs that could spread corruption and contaminate the whole society. Balram besides being a slave to Western science also believes in phrenology, astrology and criminology. Surprisingly he considers himself an embodiment of reason. His passion for Pasteur, for scientific theories and rationality is revealed in the activities that he and his best friend, Gopal pursue under the rubric of ‘Rationalists.’ The young ‘Rationalists’ are engaged in the disinterested act of teaching people the actual application of scientific principles to practical life. “Their aim was the
application of rational principles to everything around them – to their own lives, to society, to religion, to history.” (CR – 46)

This explodes the myth regarding scientific discoveries that were conducted in the seclusion of laborites. It reinforces the belief that the world is not a laboratory and the people are not scientific creatures to be experimented on. The objectivity and universalism of the grand narrative of science is questioned when Gopal highlights the parallels “between the Hindu sages and modern science.” (CR – 47)

Balram points out the religious politics of the Hindu priests who fragmented the image of The Brahma, the creator of the universe, into innumerable gods to cash in on the religious sentiments of the masses. Gopal Says, “The Brahma is nothing but the Atom … that the universal Egg of Hindu mythology is nothing but a kind of Cosmic Neutron.” (CR – 47) Ghosh here presents a judicious synthesis of Western science and the Eastern philosophy of Hinduism and the way they have influenced each other. The achievements of Pasteur, his major discoveries and the admiration that Balram has for them, spring from the passion that drove Pasteur to solve the problems of everyday life. The discovery of the germ that led beer to rot, the cure for rabies, the restoration of livelihood to the silk farmers who were worried about the disease that struck silkworms:

It wasn’t talk of reason, it wasn’t the universal atom. It was passion; a passion, which sprang from the simple and the everyday. A passion for the future, not the past. (CR – 50)
It is the same passion of Balram, the concern for the everyday life that makes his ideas too far fetched. His love for Western theories starts ruling him. His campaign against the dirty underwear in college, his mission of establishing a clean society with carbolic acid puts into his mind abstract notions of reality. The drive for cleanliness, the fight against money and corruption become an obsession with him.

He tries to fit people into a fixed pattern of logic and reason. He constructs an idea of a world, which is ideal, based on pure scientific principles. And according to Balram, the people who did not fit into his idea of logic and idealism carried the germs of corruption. He assumes the responsibility of eradicating the germ. In his fervent drive to kill the germ, Balram’s thinking becomes rigid and restricted. He embarks on an absurd journey as he tries to locate the germ in human body and society. “But the trouble with people like Balram was that theories came first and the truth afterwards.” (CR – 13)

The entry of his nephew Alu in Balram’s life adds a new dimension to his life and to his faith in phrenology and scientific reason. With his bumpy head Alu becomes an interesting subject of Balram’s phrenological scrutiny and detailed study. And it leads Balram to the conclusion that Alu has all the qualities of a weaver. Alu is apprenticed with Shombu Debnath, Balram’s neighbour and a gifted weaver. With the help of his daughter Maya, who also performs household chores in Balram’s house, Alu masters the art of weaving.
Balram invites the wrath of Bhudeb Roy and his four sons due to his strong dislike of Bhudeb Roy’s practical side of life, his drive to make money and his other materialistic pursuits. After Bhudeb Roy closes the school where Balram works as a teacher, Balram establishes the Pasteur School of Reason with two departments, the Department of Pure Reason and the Department of Practical Reason: “Abstract reason and concrete reason, a meeting of the two great forms of human thought.” (CR – 107)

The department of Practical Reason would deal with weaving to be taught by Alu, Maya and Shombu Debnath. This highlights the importance of the fusion of the concrete and the abstract. It is Balram’s acknowledgement of weaving represented by the loom, his decision of making Alu a weaver that shows Ghosh’s attitude of blurring the boundaries between two antagonistic systems of thought. Claire Chambers rightly suggests that: “Balram’s approach towards science, in a sense evinces a hybridising tendency, and in this respect, he unwittingly challenges Western scientific discourse.”

Ghosh points out how borders have become porous, so that no culture or nation can lay its claim to being pure and discrete. And behind this exodus, the scattering of people is the history of war, of riots and political turmoil. A small village like Lalpukur is home to a number of people who’ve migrated from Burma and its remote district of Noakhali: “They had emigrated to India in a slow steady trickle in the years after East Bengal became East
Pakistan.” (CR–26–27) Ghosh refers to the history of Partition when thousands of refugees from Bengal sought shelter in different parts of India and borders were sketched between India and Pakistan. Even Balram is originally from Dhaka, “Then the capital of East Bengal, now of Bangladesh.” (CR– 40)

His father, from village of Medini Mandol in Bikrompur had settled down in Dhaka. This series of dislocations have a history, a past that is fraught with painful memories. It presents the picture of South East Asia witnessing fissures in its political and social integrity. As Imtiyaz Ahmed points out, “In fact the civil sphere in much of the postcolonial societies has remained highly polarised and violent. The colonial legacy here cannot be denied.”

Migration becomes the fate of Alu also as he is forced to leave Lalpukur due to the tragedy that strikes Balram’s family killing everyone except Alu. In an attempt to give a tough fight to Bhudeb Roy, the carbolic acid and the bomb material that Rakhal, Shombu Debnath’s son had kept in Balram’s house, explodes and the house goes up in flames. All die except Alu who is saved by the sewing machine that Toru Debi, Balram’s wife, had given him to throw out.

Bhudeb Roy declares Alu a terrorist and as the police chase him, he keeps running from place to place, to Calcutta, to Mahe, to Al Ghazira in the Gulf and finally to Al Oeud in Algeria, from where he plans to comeback to India. Ghosh traces the trajectory
of history as it follows a cyclical pattern. He traces the growth and historical development of societies, their course of materialistic progress and finally the coming to terms with a vision of life that is based not just simply on pure reason but also coupled with passion, humanity and goodness. It is through Alu’s adventures, his migrations and his attainment of worldly and spiritual wisdom that Ghosh highlights the significance of multiple histories.

Alu escapes to Al-Ghazira with a host of companions on a ship called ‘Mariamma’ that ferries passengers to the oil rich city. His companions on the ship are Zindi, the huge brothel madam, the prostitutes kulfi, Chunni and Karthamma, Prof. Samuel, Rakesh and others. On reaching Al-Ghazira, tragedy befalls as Alu is buried in the debris of the huge building An-Najma that collapses while Alu, Abu Fahl and others are painting it. But Alu is miraculously saved by two sewing machines kept there. In Al-Ghazira, after Rakesh and Abu Fahl rescue Alu from the rubbles, Alu decides to carry on Balram’s task that was left incomplete in Lalpukur. The past continues to weigh on him in the form of the book, the most priceless possession of Balram, ‘The Life of Pasteur’ and the boils on his body. About the boils Gopal says, “They have nothing to do with you; it’s only Balram trying to come back to the world.” (CR – 155)

Alu embarks on the path shown by Balram. Like his uncle he resolves to drive away the germ from human society, the germ that spreads dirt and breeds corruption. He explains to the people
of the Ras, the legacy of Pasteur. Pasteur had discovered the enemy, the Germ, but he had never been able to find him. “All his life he had tried to launch war but, like a shadow, the enemy had eluded him, and in the end Pasteur had died, defeated and bewildered.” (CR – 280) The book “The Life of Pasteur” in the novel symbolises pure reason while the loom stands for concrete reason, but Alu chooses the path of pure reason. He is trapped into the vicious circle of reason. The euphoric crowd is carried away by Alu’s plan of driving away the evil of money from society. With the help of Prof. Samuel, a new system of distribution of wealth is devised according to which the money earned by each and every person would go into a common pool.

For Balram and Alu, Pasteur is reason incarnate. He is an ideal scientist who knew the cure to the ills of the world. They consider his scientific theories and discoveries absolute and valid in all matters of practical life. Thus both Balram and Alu live in the inventions of Western science believing in its claims, but their beliefs do not correspond with practical reality. When the people of the Ras decide to go on a shopping spree they dance in a jubilant mood, and the remark of Ismail, Hajj Fahmy’s son, becomes a bitter augury of the disaster that is to follow. Abu Fahl invites him for the dance and he replies, “The germs are out today. They are all around the bed. I can’t get off…. They are all over the floor. Can’t you see? (CR – 339)

The ASP Jyoti Das is already on Alu’s trail from India. When the police get the news of Alu and his companions going
on a shopping spree, they suspect their motive. Actually the Ras people were going to the star to the site where Alu lay buried for two days. They wanted to buy for him the two sewing machines that had saved Alu’s life, as a token for all that he had done for them. He had restored them a sense of self-respect and dignity in the rich town of Al-Ghazira. But unfortunately the police open fire. Some are killed and Alu, Zindi and Kulfi, along with Boss (Karthamma’s son) escape to Al Oued in Algeria.

In the last section Tamas: death, Ghosh distorts the rigid line of demarcation set between pure scientific reason and the values of real life, between rigid scientific principles and the goodness of human heart. In this section Ghosh introduces Mrs. Uma Verma, a microbiologist in Al Oued. She is the daughter of Dantu i.e. Hem Narian Mathur, Balram’s college mate. The book “The Life of Pasteur” holds a pride of place in the bookshelf of Mrs. Verma, which belongs to her father.

Ghosh elaborates the history of Indian politics after the departure of the colonisers. The political state of affairs in India was in a shambles. He presents two brands of socialists in India – the one represented by Hem Narian Mathur and the other by Murali Charan Mishra the father of Dr. Maithili Sharan Mishra, Uma’s colleague in Al-Oued. While Hem Narian Mathur spent his life for the upliftment of peasants in the villages of India, Murali Charan Mishra, who had returned from London, pretended to be a socialist and immediately joined the congress,
the ruling party to achieve his political goal. Mrs. Uma Verma reminds Dr. Mishra of the past,

“Who fell over themselves in their hurry to join the congress in 1947 so that they wouldn’t have to waste any time in getting their fingers into all that newly independent money? Who broke the Praja Socialist Party when the real socialists were away, struggling in the villages? Who sabotaged Lohia? Don’t think we’ve forgotten.” (CR – 380).

For Balram, Dantu and Gopal, Pasteur was the supreme hero, a genius. They had lived their lives putting Pasteur’s theories into practice. “The Life of Pasteur” for them encapsulated the essence of life, it gave them a meaning and purpose to live. The three friends lived in theories, and inventions, which their knowledge and their books had constructed for them. Balram’s obsession with Pasteur and carbolic acid had been disastrous. Gopal had never let reason rule him to the point of obsession and Dantu like Balram had tried to apply Pasteur’s theory but failed miserably.

Dantu’s love for Pasteur made him interpret the world in terms of rigid scientific principles and theories and perceive reality within the fixed framework of reason. He had made his daughter embrace microbiology, Pasteur’s legacy, as her profession. But microbiology was the one thing Uma hated, as it stood between her and her perception of human beings. To her, a scientist or a microbiologist studies human body in the seclusion of laboratories, pondering over the ills that it contains.
Uma had learnt from the failures of her father. She knew how her father who had devoted his entire life for the upliftment of rural masses with his knowledge and wisdom of books and scientific theories, had vanished without leaving a trace in Indian history. It is people like Murali Sharan who won the place of honour in history. Like her father she doesn’t approach life with a set of predetermined rules and principles. She does not seek the causes of ills in human body or society. She has a firm belief in the human touch which is necessary to deal with crises or the problems of life:

“…the tyranny of your despotic science forbade you to tell them the one thing that was worth saying; the one thing that was true. And that was: There’s nothing wrong with your body – all you have to do to cure yourself is try to be a better human being.” (CR – 413)

Through her simple logic Uma subverts the claims of Western scientific discourse substituting theories with humanity, reason with emotions and rationality with love and goodness. Unlike her father or Balram she knows the difference between the abstract world of books and theories and the concrete world of practical realities. She does not believe in the fixed principles of different ideologies of science, religion or socialism. That’s why she tells Dr. Mishra, “You worry about rules and I worry about being human.” (CR – 409)

It is this message of a balanced, reasonable and practical approach to life based on the values of faith, love and goodness that Ghosh conveys to us through the character of Uma who
defies all the logic of a fixed, rigid set of rules or scientific principles. All through their lives Pasteur, even Balram and Alu, had desperately tried to eliminate the germ but they were always deluded. In “The Life of Pasteur,” which had been their central motivating force in life, Alu comes across a meaningful line from the book, which he reads out to Uma, “It says that without the germ life would be impossible because death would be incomplete.” (CR – 396)

Kulfi’s dead body, thus, is cleaned with carbolic acid instead of ganga-jal. In today’s modern world tradition and modernity must co-exist. It appears to be quite absurd to take a rigid stance in religious matters. The synthesis of science and tradition/ religion is a proper response to the complicated and multi-layered reality of contemporary times. Dr. Mishra therefore, quickly comments; “The world has come full circle, he groaned carbolic acid has become holy water.” (CR – 411) For Uma Verma, however, the act is more important than the philosophy that dictates it. She tells Dr. Mishra,

“What does it matter whether it’s ganga-jal or carbolic acid? It’s just a question of cleaning the place isn’t it? People thought something was clean once, now they think something else is clean. What difference does it make to the dead, Dr. Mishra?”(CR – 411)

Uma’s plain and human logic transforms Alu. Both of them decide, to give the copy of “The Life of Pasteur” a burial with Kulfi’s corpse. Alu’s atrophied thumbs start working. The decision of Alu to part with his priceless possession, the heritage
bestowed upon him by his uncle marks a great change. Alu gains an insight into life. His journey throughout does not end in Al-Oued. In fact it signifies hope, a new beginning. If there’s one thing people learn from the past, it is that “every consummated death is another beginning.” (CR – 414) Alu’s journey ends in his attainment of freedom, freedom from the past, from its legacies and ideologies. He has his eyes fixed on the future. Amitav Ghosh says, “The circle of Reason could, within the parameters that I have used here, be identified as an exodus novel, a story of migration in the classic sense of having its gaze turned firmly towards the future.” (I & I – 314)

The book centers on the relevance of adhering to fixed scientific principles and logic in real life. It focuses on the absurdity of perceiving life within the strict framework of logic and reason. Ghosh puts forth the view that logic and rationality need to be merged with emotions in the day-to-day affairs of the modern life. He hints at the danger that can result from interpreting life as a set of scientific or logical principles, which can possibly lead us away from human emotions, moral goodness and purity of feelings. Hence it is the vicious circle of reason that needs to be destroyed. The germ that contaminates the human body and the germ of dirt and money that corrupts society cannot be eradicated. The germ is inherently a part of the two. And what needs to be shunned is the perception of establishing an ideal ‘germless’ society that is free from dirt, greed, money and corruption. Through the set of different
characters in the novel Ghosh highlights the multiple versions of reality and the disaster that the visualising of an ideal society based on pure reason and logic can bring in different societies at different times.

The novel **The Calcutta Chromosome** is a biting critique of western science and historiography. The novel centres round the medical history of malaria research carried out by the English scientist Ronald Ross. Ross was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1906 for his successful discovery of the Malarial parasite. Ghosh in this novel questions the universal claims of western science by inserting a parallel history of the Indian ‘Counter-Science’ cult that was far ahead of Ross in the knowledge about the cure for malaria. This secret cult shrouded in mystery is an important element in the novel and sustains the interest of the readers throughout.

The novel begins in New York, in the future, with Antar, an Egyptian employee of the International Water Council working on his Super computer Ava. A remnant of the ID card flashed on the screen leads Antar on the trail of its owner, who finally turns out to be Murugan, an employee of the same organisation where Antar works. Ava reveals that Murugan has been missing and was last seen in Calcutta in 1995.

From New York the novel shifts its location to Calcutta where the real drama unfolds. Ghosh takes us back into the late 19th century when major developments in the discovery of the
malaria parasite were taking place. Most of the action in the novel takes place in Calcutta. Calcutta has always been of special interest to Ghosh. The Ronald Ross memorial in Presidency College Hospital in Calcutta that figures in the novel reminds us of the history of malaria. Murugan’s interest in the history of malaria and his thorough research in the subject had given him the theory of the ‘Other Mind’: “a theory that some person or persons had systematically interfered with Ronald Ross’s experiments to push malaria research in certain directions while leading it away from others.”

Murugan tells Antar about the scientists like Grigson, Farley and Doc Manson who were seriously devoted to scientific research to discover the malarial parasite. A scientist like Julius Von Wagner – Jauregg discovered that artificially induced malaria could cure syphilis in the dementia paralytica stage when it attacks the brain. It won him the Nobel Prize in 1927. But finally it was Ross who achieved a breakthrough in the research.

Ghosh critiques the self-proclaiming attitude of the west as the sole possessor of knowledge, meaning and scientific advancement. He makes ordinary people of society the real heroes who helped Ross carry out the experiment. It is Mangala and Lutchman or Lakshaman, the lab assistants, who surpass the scientists in their knowledge of the disease, its cure and in their knowledge that malarial parasite can be used for curing syphilis. Though they are poor, uneducated rustics yet the brilliant western scientists are no match for their expertise in the field of
medical science. The goals set up by the western scientists are tangible and are capable of being realised in the physical world. But what the secret cult desires is purely transcendental. They want to achieve immortality or a “technology for interpersonal transference.” (CC – 90)

Farley sees the sweeper woman Mangala in a pose that is entirely different from what is usually associated with her job. While searching for the Laveran’s parasite, he notices a macabre performance in the outhouse. In the eerie atmosphere, he sees Mangala in a position of command, sitting on a divan like a goddess with a number of people lying prostrate before her. Some of them are syphilitics, wrapped in blankets. Lutchman, the assistant, fetches her the slides. Finally Farley finds the Laveran’s parasite in the slide, which Lutchman hands him. But Farley watches secretly the blood oozing out from a pigeon Mangala had freshly beheaded. It is the most unlikely source. This uncanny drama performed before Farley’s eyes shows how mystery, faith in reincarnation and immortality are an integral part of Eastern religious faith and cultural beliefs but can in no way be accounted or justified by Western rationality.

And this incident of Mangala as the Goddess, performing a human sacrifice is repeated several times in the novel. The drama spans over centuries and characters involved change with the changing times. It is believed that every year Mangala-bibi, the Goddess, entered a new body, completing the process of reincarnation. Murugan believes that he is the chosen one, tying
the loose threads in the workings of the secret cult. The ‘counter science’ group had chosen Ross to discover the malarial parasite, without getting Ross to know about their secret activity of manipulating his research because,

They believed that to know something is to change it, therefore in knowing something, you’ve already changed what you think you know so you don’t really know it at all: you only know its history. (CC – 88)

This highlights the engagement of ‘counter science’ cult with higher pursuits, surpassing the Western scientist’s worldly aspirations for achievements. This secret group not only creates history but also acknowledges the important fact of constantly transforming it. This shows that there is no ultimate end to history. Infact it is a continuous process constantly being transformed as it is created. Reincarnation and the making of history are juxtaposed and this truly reflects Ghosh’s idea of history.

It is change or mutation that the ‘counter-science’ cult favours. Murugan explains this to Antar, “they’ve taken their work to a certain point and then they’ve run smack into a dead end: they’re stuck, they can’t go any further... they decide that the next big leap in their project will come from a mutation in the parasite... how do they speed up the process? ..... The answer is: they’ve got to find a conventional scientist who’ll give it a push.” (CC 89) However it is these marginalised individuals like Mangala and Lutchman or Laakhan who lead the secret counter science cult and involve different people in their experiment in
transmigration of souls. Phulboni, the poet, Sonali, Urmila, Mrs. Aratounian, Tara, Roman Haldar and Antar and Murugan, belonging to the present and future are all a part of its secret plan. They are all a part of history as it is in the process of being created.

During his youth, Phulboni the writer had closely encountered death in the form of the Ghost, Laakhan, who carries a signal lantern and puts him on the railway tracks. Laakhan is the ghost of a 14-year-old boy whose death was conspired by the stationmaster in Renupur. The boy had his thumb missing from one of his hands. Lutchman, Laakhan, Roman Haldar, the 14 year old boy who is Sonali’s servant, Lucky all these people have a deformed hand and this provides a clue to their involvement in the experiment in reincarnation and its timeless continuity. Similarly Mrs. Aratounian, Urmila, Tara are the chosen bodies to be entered by Mangala-bibi, the Goddess. The British scientists are merely a part of the grand scheme of the counter-science group’s plan. They play a minor role of being the experimented and not experimenters as they thought of themselves:

He thinks he’s doing experiments on the malaria parasite. And all the time it’s he who is the experiment on the malaria parasite. But Ronnie never gets it; not to the end of his life. (CC – 67)

It is Lutchman who suggests Ross that a particular species of female mosquitoes called anopheles were carriers of malaria. And it is proved true. The lab assistants like Lutchman who played a big role in the scientific research were hardly accorded
any credit by the mainstream scientists. Ghosh studied Ross’ ‘Memoirs’ and found that he did not acknowledge the contribution of his servants. So actually the Indian counter science cult leads Ross in the right direction in his research. The indigenous knowledge proved to be significant in the success of his experiment. Thus according to Claire Chambers,

Science, technology and medicine were not conveyed to India by the British in one-way process of transfer, but were in fact involved in a complex series of cross-cultural exchanges, translations and mutations.¹²

By juxtaposing the official history of Ross’ discovery with counter science cult, Ghosh collapses the boundaries between mystery and knowledge, silence and language, spirit and matter and also realism and fantasy.

**In an Antique Land** spans over nearly 800 years of history and places as far flung as India, Egypt, Iraq and the US. The novel resonates with the writer’s sharp historical insight into cultures and civilisations. It portrays the medieval world in all its folklore charm, its adventures, travels and its enduring cosmopolitanism. Ghosh recreates the fantastic world of trade, relations, languages, and cultural exchange and evokes a beautiful metaphor of the past for the present that is fraught with chaos, conflicts, hatred and politics.

Ghosh takes up the role of historical researcher pursuing his doctorate in social anthropology. Ghosh went to Egypt to do fieldwork in a village called Lataifa after he won a scholarship for
research in 1980. Hence the novel is autobiographical in spirit. And as history is of major concern to Ghosh, his stay in Egypt and his acute historical insight led him on a compelling journey into the medieval era. Ghosh’s focus in the novel is to bring to light the entire history of the medieval era. His interest sprung from his reading of S.D. Goitein’s 1973 edition and translation of “Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders.” Bomma’s name figures in the written correspondence between Khalaf-ibn-Ishaq, a Jewish merchant in Aden to his friend, Abraham Ben Yiju of Fustat, living in Manglore in India. The greetings that Khalaf-ibn-Ishaq sends to the Indian slave of Ben Yiju stimulated Ghosh’s research and helped him retrieve the history of the medieval era. He found it striking that the slave’s name is mentioned at all in a document of historical importance. The document was a part of the rich storehouse of Greeks called the Geniza. The reference to Bomma, the Indian slave of Ben Yiju in the letter led Ghosh to uncover an entire epoch of history that had vanished in the vast impasse of history. The novel is divided into six parts. It begins with the Prologue. The other parts like Lataifa, Nashawy, Manglore and Going back are subdivided into chapters. The novel ends with the Epilogue.

The fleeting entry of the slave in the letter and the fact that Ghosh devotes the entire novel to his search, his relations with his master, with his times and with history brings up the crucial issue of the silence of history on matters pertaining to the lives of
ordinary individuals. E.H. Carr writes: “History has been called an enormous jig saw with a lot of missing parts.”

Ghosh refers to the objective documentation of History in the Prologue itself. He expresses his sense of surprise at the survival of Bomma’s name. Bomma does not belong to the category of “The Wazirs and the Sultans, the chroniclers and the priests” (AL – 17) – the important personages accorded prominence in History.

But the slave of Khalaf’s letter was not of that company: in his instance it was a mere accident that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved. It is nothing less than a miracle that anything is known about him at all.

Ghosh resurrects the life of Bomma from the fragmented history of the Jews represented by the Geniza, the storehouse of knowledge of the Jews that was systematically destroyed by the Europeans in the 19th century. A congregation of traders who had poured into Masr (Egypt) from Tunisia were mostly Jews. These traders carried out a flourishing trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. They deposited all their writings in the synagogue and its chambers were called ‘Geniza’ – which became the hallmark of the rich, ancient Jewish culture and history.

Ghosh discusses the important period in European history, which began with the Enlightenment. It launched Europe on to the path of progress and prosperity and instilled an insatiable thirst for knowledge, discovery, power, learning, conquest and superiority. This marked the beginning of Western imperialism in
world history. The Europeans directed their desire of accumulation of wealth, knowledge and establishment of markets towards the rich Eastern countries. In Egypt, the Geniza seized the attention of European scholars for its rich treasure house of legal, historical and religious documents. “Soon enough, events began to unfold quietly around it, in a sly allegory on the intercourse between power and the writing of history.” (AL – 82)

This refers to the sinister activities of the Europeans of usurping knowledge, power and learning under the guise of scholarship or civilisation. Very soon the invaluable treasure house of knowledge found its way into the libraries of European centres of learning. The Jewish civilisation was emptied of its essence of syncretism, mutual trust, faith, communitarian values and the history of ordinary individuals like Ben yiju and Bomma, which was contained in the Geniza.

And it is the recovery of the voice of the subaltern that led to Ghosh’s search for Bomma and to revive the entire history of the trade relations between the traders of India and Egypt, which was pushed into oblivion by Western history. Fiction becomes a medium for Ghosh for recovering the individual history that has been overlooked by the Western narratives and mainstream history. Speaking about the difference between history written by a historian and that written by the writer of fiction, Ghosh points out,

“It’s about finding the human predicament it’s about finding what happens to individuals, characters. I mean that’s what
fiction is … exploring both dimensions, whereas history, the kind of history exploring causes, causality, is of no interest to me.”

Ghosh’s concerns, as is evident in the novel, also coincide with the Subaltern studies group. In fact Ghosh’s article, “The Slave of M.S.H.6,” which was later developed into the present novel, was first published in Subaltern Studies VII (1992). Some of the prominent members of the group like Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakravorty are friends of the writer. The group critiques Indian elite-nationalist historiography and is devoted to the task of recovering the multiple stories or histories of the subalterns or the non-elite whose contribution was equally significant in the development of nationalist history. The group fiercely denounces colonial historiography and deals with the history of the subaltern classes. Bomma represents the voice of the subaltern. Discovered as a footnote, Ghosh accords him centrality in the history that he recreates as he retrieves the traces of his quotidian existence from the Geniza documents. Padmini Mongia says:

“To retrieve him from his status as a footnote and make him one of the primary subjects of the historical narrative is an affirmation of his life and an acknowledgement of the many histories erased by official narratives.”

The Geniza then becomes a metaphor for parallel intertwining histories subsumed by the Enlightenment Western History. Ironically it is through the Geniza documents Ghosh discovers the rich and vibrant past of both India and Egypt, of their close historical and cultural links that had bound the people of these two alien historical civilisations through centuries.
The narrative follows a broken trail as it traverses smoothly between two worlds of the medieval and present times divided by space, time and history. The close cultural and historical links and the cosmopolitanism of the past are juxtaposed with Ghosh’s experiences as a young anthropologist in Egypt.

Ghosh’s deep sense of consciousness of the long forgotten links and cosmopolitanism between the peoples of the two civilisations owes to the onslaught of colonialism in the East. Ghosh points out: “….the intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim had been partitioned long ago.” (AL – 339)

Ghosh brings out the inadequacy of history to include significant details that give a broader and clear picture of humanity, of its touching grace and tenderness, of ties that transcend all boundaries of caste, race and religion as an example to posterity. Ben Yiju’s vast network of peaceful trade relations in India shows the high regard among traders for fair business ethics and peaceful coexistence.

The names that are sprinkled through his papers speak of a startlingly diverse network of associations: entered into a file, the list would yield nothing to the Rolodex of an international businessman today. (AL – 277)

The concept of slavery too had altogether different connotations in the medieval context. It was completely different from the way it is practiced in the modern times. While hard labour and exploitation convey the sense of the master slave
relationship in the modern world, in the past slavery was a means of entering new careers and attaining positions in the government. “The lines of demarcation between apprentice, disciple and bondsman were so thin as to be invisible…” (AL – 260)

The advent of colonialism, their military might and political ideologies put an end to an entire era of peace and communal harmony that prevailed between the two countries of the East. The voyage of the Portuguese traveller Vasco-da-Gama to the new land of India marked a death knell for trade between India and Egypt as Europe came to rule the seas. The European traders who reached the shores of India brought along with them the baggage of their past, their conflicts and hatred:

Within a few years of that day the knell had been struck for the world that had brought Bomma, Ben yiju and Ashu together, and another age had begun in which the crossing of their paths would seem so unlikely that its very possibility would all but disappear from human memory. (AL – 286)

The Portuguese navigators in India compelled the Indian Hindu ruler, Samudra Raja of Calicut, to expel all the Muslim traders on the grounds that they were the enemies of Holy faith. Clearly, the Raja neither knew holy nor faith in the Christian sense but he succumbed before the military might of the Europeans. The Arab traders had to leave. The retreat of the Arabs from India sealed the fates of two Eastern countries and the consequent enmity and hostility between these two civilisations is history. Padmini Mongia suggests that:
“The grand idea that fed the civilisation mission of the Europeans (as constructed through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and inherited by us in the twentieth) is unmasked in In an Antique Land as naked greed.”

Amitav’s dialogue with the Imam and their heated discussion in underscoring each other’s countries in comparison to the West reveal the conditioning of the Eastern psyche with Western narratives of progress and development. “We were both travelling, he and I: We were travelling in the West.” (AL – 236)

The centuries old history of mutual trust, love, faith and friendship, the values of personal and cultural links, the histories that the people of the East had so long cherished had been subsumed by the Western history. What remained were hostility and the lust for progress and modernisation and an obsession for Western standards of material achievements. The people of both the Eastern countries, like the rest of the world had succumbed to the ideas of progress that the West had constructed. The world of Bomma and Ben yiju had long been lost in the throes of imperialism:

I felt myself a conspirator in the betrayal of the history that had led me to Nashawy; a witness to the extermination of a world of accommodations that I had believed to be still alive, and in some tiny measure, still retrievable.” (AL – 237)

Ghosh revisits Egypt after eight years. The historical, cultural and political changes now are entirely different. Ghosh sketches the picture of India as well as Egypt in the 20th century to highlight the politically charged atmosphere of unrest, fundamentalism and the Gulf War. The Egypt that he returns to
has fallen to the emerging forces of urbanisation. His friends in Egypt, the two young men Nabeel and Ismail, had left for Iraq for better prospects. The Gulf war in Iraq offered ready employment opportunities to people like Nabeel and Ismail. Most of the young men had left their village to secure comforts for their families, toiling hard in foreign lands, especially Iraq. All these young men battling with adversity at home and exploitation in the new countries are victims of historical factors. Nirzari Pandit opines,

"History, which is monolithic, does not recognise the local or individual. It defines nations, cultures and people only in terms of totalities." 18

The novel ends with people of Nashawy an Egyptian village, watching television and trying to trace Nabeel in the jostling crowd after the war is over. But, as Ghosh puts it, “there was nothing to be seen (on the television) except crowds: Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History.” (AL – 353) Like thousands of ordinary individuals, whose history is subsumed by canonical history, Nabeel too had vanished without stirring the ‘leaves of grand historical records.’ Like Bomma his status too deserves to stand at least as a footnote, a haunting presence, insignificant but narrating the woeful tale of the powerful forces of 20th century.

In his recent novel, The Hungry Tide Ghosh takes up the remote Sunderban Islands as the setting for his novel. With its thick mangroves, the man eating tigers, snakes, sharks, crocodiles and huge tidal waves, rising in the ebb and flow of water, rocking
the Islands, makes the setting enigmatic, foreboding death. Ghosh brings up the past and simultaneously the colonial history of India. It was Daniel Hamilton, the Englishman who bought a vast area of ten thousand acres in the Sunderbans from the British Government in 1903 and distributed it free to all the Indians who were willing to settle there. Thus a new country, the Bhatir desh or The Tide Country came into being. The Islands were named as “Shobnomoskar,” “Rajat Jubilee” and others were given English names like Jamespur, Annpur, Emilybari, Lusibari, Canning, etc., after the names of the relatives of Hamilton.

The Islands came to be inhabited by a cross section of the society, that was underprivileged, poor and landless. The tide country thus became home to people from different parts of Orissa, East Bengal, Santhal Parganas, etc., people who lived on the margins of civil societies. It represented the marginalised. Hamilton had dreamed of creating history by establishing an egalitarian society. “Here there would be no Brahmins or untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together.”

In most of his novels, Ghosh deals with the major events that have shaped the history of South East Asia. The effect of these historical changes on the individuals is the main focus of his writings. In his widespread focus on the events that have shaped the subcontinent, Ghosh traverses a vast landscape of time and places unfolding a broad spectrum of socio-political, cultural and historical changes that result in the individual’s peculiar
predicament. As the Partition of India in 1947 and its related themes are the major concern of the postcolonial writers Ghosh refers also to the history of the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and the separation of East Bengal, a major event that shaped his insights into history. A large number of people became homeless as a result of these political events. These suffering masses, refugees as they are called, figure prominently in Ghosh’s novels.

The tide country also provided shelter to these refugees who settled there to escape political persecution. Some went there in 1947 and some in 1971, the years unforgettable in human history for the brutal massacre of human beings. They preferred the dangers of the Tide Country to the atrocities that were meted out to them in their respective cities. John C. Hawley suggests that:

Such a setting makes an apt symbol for the ebb and flow of history and the uprooting of populations, both of which have come to be seen as “Ghosh-ian” Themes.20

The arrival of Kanai Dutt, a 42 year old bachelor who runs a flourishing business in translation in Delhi and that of Piyali Roy, a catalogist of Indian origin settled abroad in Seattle, in the Sunderbans provides a necessary link to the chain of events of the past and also determines the course of future. E.H. Carr says: “History acquires meaning and objectivity only when it establishes a coherent relation between past and future.”21 Kanai’s uncle and aunt, Nirmal and Nilima Bose from Calcutta had settled down in Lusibari, a remote island in the Sunderbans in the
year 1950. Nirmal, a Leftist intellectual had got in trouble due to his political involvements hence he had left the job of a college lecturer in Calcutta and become a teacher in the Lusibari School. Nilima popularly known as ‘Mashima’ in Lusibari had founded the Badabon Trust, the Women’s Union, which in the course of time had blossomed into a big organisation.

Nirmal had died after his retirement as a schoolteacher and it is at the behest of his aunt that Kanai goes to Lusibari to retrieve the journal that Nirmal had left behind for him. Piya has come to the Sunderbans to study the rare dolphins unique to the islands. She hires a young man, a local fisherman Fokir, from the island, to help her in her exploration trips for the dolphins.

The past figures prominently in all the novels of Ghosh. His historical insight into past, his deep sense of its understanding helps him focus on the realities and complexities of the present. This becomes a means of revisioning the past, to live its experiences, to question the Western erasure of history and to universalise personal history. E.H. Carr remarks: “The function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them.”

Ghosh’s major concern in this novel is to universalise subaltern history. These subaltern figures therefore are made the real heroes who by their sheer power of resistance to unbearable odds and adversities rise to the status of the real makers of history.
As Kanai reads Nirmal’s journal, he gets an insight into the past. In the journal, Nirmal takes Kanai on a journey to the 70’s – a period that witnessed serious political crises, with the partition of Bengal. The communal riots forced many to leave Bengal. It was in the early 70’s that refugees from Bangladesh, escaping political persecution and atrocities perpetrated by the government in the resettlement camp, started pouring into Morichjhapi – an island reserved for tiger conservation by the government in the Sunderbans.

These setters are forced to suffer exile due to the powerful historical forces. They are underprivileged and marginalised, and are usually at the receiving end of all the violence, injustice and humiliation, inflicted by the government. In the settler’s resistance to the callousness of the government, Nirmal sees the flowering of his own idealistic dreams. His belief in the Leftist ideology always made Nirmal cherish the idea of revolution. The settlers’ resistance and grit fuel his hopes and he sees his dream, his vision materialising before his own eyes:

I felt something changing within me: how astonishing it was that I, an ageing, bookish school master, should live to see this, an experiment, imagined not by those with learning and power, but by those without. (HT – 171)

Kusum, Fokir’s Mother, who once worked for the Badabon trust but has now joined the band of settlers becomes for Nirmal ‘the poetic muse’ that his pragmatic wife Nilima could never be for him and much against her wishes Nirmal firmly resolves to support the settlers cause. The courage and resistance of the poor
settlers that Nirmal admires is not something unique to their struggle. It is a part of the daily struggle of each and every inhabitant of the islands. The misery, suffering and exploitation has been their history, their destiny and since ages they had wandered from place to place in search of shelter. Their spirit of resilience in the face of life’s hazards and challenges is in fact a received heritage from their ancestors. Their past, vibrant and alive in the form of religious myths, ideas of good and evil, lends the inhabitants exceptional strength to face life’s miseries and difficulties, with a vitality and forthrightness that people like Kanai, Piya or Nirmal find lacking in themselves. Stuart Hall speaks:

“The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual past since our relation to it, like the child’s relation to the mother, is always already ‘after the break.’ It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.”

The admiration that the subaltern figures like Fokir, Moyna and Kusum evoke in these cultured, educated and polished people from the cities speaks about some of the important missing dimensions of their own lives. Fokir saves Piya’s life when she falls in the sea during their exploration trips for the dolphins. Piya finds herself being drawn to Fokir. The chequered cloth, a towel that is the ‘Gamcha’ that Fokir uses carries her to the memories of her father who had preserved one in Seattle and valued it above everything. Back in Seattle Piya had been cut off from all ties with her country, India, and its past. She was familiar only with a little Bengali, the language in which her
parents always quarrelled. Fokir embodies the past, the wholeness, freshness, and a touch with life that Piya had never experienced in her highly urbanised city. Rousseau’s statement is appropriate in this regard:

What could potentially make man happy, would be to get off the treadmill of modern technology and the endless cycle of wants it creates, and to recover some of the wholeness of natural man.24

Kanai also represents the typical urban, Indian male who has lost touch with simplicity, innocence and freshness of life that is embodied in Fokir and Moyna, his wife. Kanai develops an admiration for Moyna in whom he sees reflection of his own desires. She lives a hard life and bears pains for her son, Tutul and husband Fokir. She evokes fascination in Kanai. “It was as if her very existence were a validation of the choices he had made in his own life. It was important for him to believe that his values were, at bottom, egalitarian, liberal, meritocratic.” (HT – 219) Nirmal’s life had attained meaning and purpose only after witnessing the revolutionary fervour of the settlers.

All his life Nirmal had lived with a void that was created in him owing to the disparity between the ideas and values he professed and the kind of life he had to live in Lusibari. He identifies the deepest urges of his heart and his philosophy with the indomitable spirit of the settlers. He saw his own dilemmas reflected in the cry of the settlers when they shouted, “We are the dispossessed ….. It was as if I were hearing the deepest uncertainties of my heart being spoken to the rivers and the tides.
Who was I? Where did I belong? In Kolkatta or the tide country? In India or across the border? In prose or in poetry?”(HT - 254)

It is in the wilderness that Nirmal, Kanai and Piya discover their roots and see their uncertainties and insecurities unfolding before their own eyes. Their sustained longing makes them aware of the cruelty of the city people – towards these poor and deprived people living on the periphery. Kanai is a successful interpreter and translator of languages but it is in the Sunderbans that he discovers the unfathomable mystery of life, and also the mystery of the history of the islanders against the tyranny of the power.

He (Kanai) tells Piya, “I am not the kind of person who dwells on the past. I like to look ahead.
Piya: But we’re in the present now, aren’t we? … Even here in Lusibari?
Kanai: Oh, no. For me Lusibari will always be a part of the past.” (HT-198)

The odds that the islanders constantly encounter for their survival, their struggle with hurdles – natural as well as man-made makes Kanai aware of the atrocities committed by civilised people on these poor and deprived masses whose worth for them is less than those of animals. When Piya reacts sharply to the killing of the tiger by the villagers, Kanai quickly responds.

I mean, aren’t we a part of the horror as well? You and me and people like us? …. It happens every week that people are killed by tigers … and yet here it goes almost un-remarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers. (HT – 300)
The present and the past are juxtaposed. Fokir, the poor, uneducated fisherman embodies the spirit of the past. Beside Moyna he may seem unimportant because of her education. But his presence is a reminder of the history of suffering which is the heritage of the Sunderbans:

Piya understood too that this was a looking glass in which a man like Fokir could never be anything other than a figure glimpsed through a rear-view mirror, a rapidly diminishing presence, a ghost from the perpetual past that was Lusibari. (HT – 220)

It is the oppressed people, the subalterns who in their own ways add a new dimension to the lives of Nirmal, Kanai and Piya. They give them a purpose, a meaning to live. The death of Kusum in her fight against injustice or the death of Fokir in his attempt to save Piya from a cyclone may not seem to have any significance. But their lives and deaths determine the future course of action for Piya and Kanai. The short visit of Kanai and Piya to the Sunderbans changes them and they soon return to the islands with plans for the future. Piya manages to attract funds for her project of dolphin conservation in the Sunderbans, a house for Moyna and Tutul’s education. Kanai decides to return to Lusibari with a plan of writing his uncle’s notebook. The lives of people like Kusum and Fokir correspond with the idea of truth, beauty and poetry. This is the message that Ghosh conveys in the words of Rilke, the poet whose poetry formed the crux of Nirmal’s philosophy, “life is lived in transformation.” (HT – 282)
Through the lives of ordinary people like Kusum, Fokir and Moyna and the other islanders, Ghosh highlights the interrelation between the personal and the universal. Their personal lives portray the real picture of humanity. Their lives depict an entire history of the odds and adversities that ordinary individuals have to bear in their struggle for survival. This real history of survival, the pain and misery of suffering masses is overlooked by mainstream history. By focusing the lives of these individuals, Ghosh highlights that missing dimension of history that is needed to present a complete and true picture of humanity and simultaneously of history.

The novel ‘The Glass Palace’ spans centuries and spreads across three nations passing through turmoil. It depicts the manner in which history affects lives through the political changes in the three nations – Burma, India and Malaya. The novel highlights the impact of colonialism in South East Asia. It traces the onset of colonialism in Burma, the rise of anti colonial consciousness in India, the Japanese attack on Malaya during II World War and the postcolonial scenario in Burma.

While writing this book Ghosh carried out meticulous research in the history of South Asia and travelled extensively across Burma, Thailand, India and the Burmese/Thai border. He spoke about the novel in an interview,

The Glass Palace was like an odyssey ------ it was also about the history of the Indian Diaspora in Southeast Asia, which is an epic history, a very extraordinary history.
The novel is the saga of three families spread across three nations. In the interview Ghosh pinpointed his consistent concern with history and his creative strategy that is inextricably based on history. He says, “The book was started as a family memoir, a project in chronicling a family history. In a formal sense, this is where the integrity of the book hinges and where the long interpolations about history come in.” (WLT – 87)

The family thus, is of central concern to his narrative. The saga of their joys, sorrows, tragedies and displacement highlights the role of history, which like flowing water, carries forth the objects along its course as it follows its own trajectory, displacing and uprooting people from their place. It is through families that Ghosh attacks the imaginary idea of the nation. He asserts, “To me, the family is the central unit, because its not about the nation. Families can actually span nations. ‘The Glass Palace’ actually ranges between what are now many different nations, so it’s absolutely not about a nation or one nation or whatever. The fact that it has been structured around the family is absolutely essential to its narration.” (WLT – 89)

Depicting the fragmentation of the three countries of South East Asia and the fictive ties of nationalism, Ghosh highlights how the familial and personal bonds endure despite the socio-political and historical changes. The novel traces the history of South East Asia from the beginning of the process of imperialism to the present. It opens in Burma in the year 1985, as the 11 year old boy, Rajkumar, working in a tea stall of Ma cho, recognises
the sound of the English canon blowing across the Irrawaddy river. It is the signal of British troops marching into Burma and taking charge of Burma’s administration after forcibly usurping power from the centuries long, ruling Burmese Dynasty and sending them into exile. King Thebaw, his pregnant wife, Queen Supayalat and the two small princesses, along with their entourage of servants and attendants, are sent into exile.

Ghosh traces the historical sweep as his characters are compelled to cross boundaries, leaving behind their past, their history and culture and cope with the new place, new people and destiny. Rajkumar is from Chittagong but circumstances have forced him to move to Burma. The Royalty is forced to migrate to Ratnagiri along with Dolly, the beautiful attendant of Queen Supayalat. Brinda Bose rightly points out that,

“The novel is, in some senses, an elegy for the diasporic condition that is a product of history, that leaves behind kingdoms and palaces and moves, in the exilic mode, towards a near hopeless regeneration.”

The pain and trauma of dislocation that Dolly and the Royal family experience in Outram house in Ratnagiri gradually drifts as Ratnagiri becomes home. But a fixed home is something that is constantly denied to Ghosh’s characters. In fact it resonates with the lives of so many people in the world for whom suffering and migration is a reality of their day-to-day life. Dolly is again confronted with the prospect of leaving home as Rajkumar, who has become a business tycoon in Burma, traces her to Ratnagiri
and proposes marriage. Dolly confides her apprehensions to Uma Dey:

“If I went to Burma now I would be foreigner they would call me a Kalaa like they do Indians – a trespasser, an outsider from across the sea. I’d find that very hard I think.”

The decision of Dolly to leave Ratnagiri estranges her from the Royal family and the princesses but it cements the bond of friendship between Dolly and Uma Dey, the wife of collector Beni Prasad Dey, and with her family. It is revealed in the events, which unfold in the future. Rajkumar develops an ever-lasting bond with Saya John, the Malayan merchant and his business mentor. The intermingling of these families across the borders of the three nations reveals the fictionality of the traditional notions of geographical boundaries. Rakhee Moral aptly says,

This criss-cross of history with narrative fuelled by the author’s own remembered images and tabulations of people trapped in the machinations of time serves to bridge the widening psychological gap between nations and geographies.

The marriage of Rajkumar’s son with Manju, Uma’s niece, further establishes an unbreakable bond between the two families. But what is remarkable in the novel is the radical transformation of Rajkumar, Uma and Arjun Roy, Uma’s nephew. The characters, especially Rajkumar and Arjun arouse a great deal of sympathy for the conflict that arises in them. It is because of a sense of displacement in the case of Rajkumar and a sense of displacement of thought in the case of Arjun.
For Rajkumar, Burma has been home since he left Chittagong. With Saya John’s help, Rajkumar rises to the status of a prosperous businessman and becomes the owner of a big business empire of Rubber and Timber. From Luga-lei Rajkumar is transformed into a capitalist. He lives through intense political crises, as he passes through a series of historical upheavals in Burma. Being colonised by Europeans, he finds himself and the Indians living in Burma, becoming foreigners in the country that they had always looked upon as their own. The Indians become the target of Burmese hatred as a result of the political situation that was created mainly by imperialist policies. The growing demand to separate Burma’s administration from British India had put the lives of Indians in jeopardy. Moreover the British were using Indian soldiers to curtail the acts of insurgency in Burma.

With his declining business in the event of the II World War, Rajkumar reluctantly decides to leave Burma and settle down in India. Discussing the prospects, with Dolly Rajkumar speculates on the fleeting nature of human destiny in the wake of the historical resurgence and painful migrations:

“My father was from Chittagong and he ended up in the Arakan; I ended up in Rangoon; you went from Mandalay to Ratnagiri and now you’re here too. Why should we expect that we’re going to spend the rest of our lives here? There are people who have the luck to end their lives where they began them. But this is not something that is owed to us.” (GP-310)

The war inflicts terrible pains on the family of Rajkumar. Dinu, Rajkumar’s younger son, had left for Malaya. Neel, his
elder son, dies in the timber yard leaving behind him his young wife, Manju and daughter, Jaya. The journey that Rajkumar, undertakes along with thousands of Indians, back to India from Burma is full of untold misery, pain and unimaginable sorrows. Manju is surprised by Dolly and Rajkumar’s courage to endure suffering: “What could be better proof of their insanity than that they should refuse to acknowledge the magnitude of their defeat; the absoluteness of their failure, as parents, as human beings?” (GP-469) It is this quality of Rajkumar to brave the personal and historical losses with courage and determination that leads him to create his own history. As Ghosh says,

“For me, at some point it became very important that the book encapsulate in it the ways in which people cope with defeat, because this has really been our history for a long, long time: the absolute fact of defeat and the absolute fact of trying to articulate defeat to yourself and trying to build a culture around the centrality of defeat.” (WLT – 89)

Rajkumar ends up arriving in India with his grandchild Jaya. Manju drowns herself in the sea on her return journey forced by history. Rajkumar leaves behind everything and keeps trying to piece together the fragments of his fractured self. Brinda Bose rightly comments on Ghosh’s engagement with history and diaspora, “Diasporic identity in its inherent fracturedness clearly intrigues him; he analyses this ‘space’ with reference to its histories.” 29

The rise of Uma as an activist in the novel is highly significant. The tour that she undertakes to Europe after the death of her husband, collector Dey, marks the beginning of her
headlong entry into the ongoing freedom struggle in India. Hence she represents the growing consciousness of the nation towards the attainment of freedom. Ghosh created the character of Uma, inspired by the role of Indian women, especially Madame Pikaigi Kama, in the national movement. He says, “She (Madame Kama) became very involved in the nationalist cause and in opposing imperialism.... I’ve really become completely fascinated by the part that Indian émigrés in the US played at the turn of the century in generating a certain anti-imperialism and certain ways of resisting colonialism.” (WLT – 88)

After meeting people like Madame Kama in Europe Uma undergoes a radical transformation. She acquires a new nationalistic fervour and becomes an active supporter of the cause of India’s freedom. The events that take place in Burma – the killings of Indians, rise of insurgency, the failure of Saya San rebellion, the close to death encounter with rioters compel Uma to rethink her ideas of resistance to British rule. She realises the futility of her views of armed rebellion against the British and understands the importance of Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy of Non-violence as the most legitimate strategy of resistance to the ruthless policies adopted by the colonisers. Ghosh asserts the Mahatma’s convictions, his vision and foresight and his deep understanding of the empire’s motives and their meticulously planned strategies of power politics.

Ghosh, as it is evident in his fiction, highlights those aspects of history that are overlooked by official history. In this novel he
brings forth the history of the Indian National Army. He says, “But it is true that anyone who looks into Indian history must necessarily be amazed by how little is actually known about it. And I don’t just mean the history of ‘Subaltern’ groups, but even of dissenting elites (for example the story of the founders of the Indian National Army is unknown to most Indians). As for the history of the Indian presence in Burma, it is completely unknown – there is very little written about it. In this sense I felt I was bearing a double burden when I was writing The Glass Palace.”

Ghosh probes into the process that led to the creation of Indian National Army. He delves deep into the psyche of some of the soldiers of the British Indian Army – through his fictional characters – Arjun Roy and Hardayal Singh. Hardayal is called hardy by his friends. From Arjun’s point of induction into the British Indian Army to his gradual evolution into a sensitive soldier realising the folly of his beliefs, Ghosh portrays the dilemma that Arjun faces in his loyalty towards his white masters and his country, India.

Like most of the Indians of that generation, Arjun’s mind is indoctrinated with the English ideas of freedom, culture and civilisation. He aspires to a modern life, which is represented by his European masters. But Arjun is little aware of the hidden or insidious motives of the British. He doesn’t care for the hatred that most of the Indians and Burmese feel for Indians serving in the British Indian Army. The British were using Indian soldiers to