fight the Burmese. Arjun lives in delusions unlike his friend Hardy who could see through the falsity of the British claims of equality, justice and concern for progress of India. Hardy is aware that by being loyal to the British, the Indian soldiers were betraying themselves and their country:

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

Ghosh’s preoccupation with soldering as a job in the British Indian Army and with the sorrowful journey that Indians were forced to take back from Burma is mostly based upon his personal experience. His father served in the British Indian Army and remained loyal to it and his uncle, Jagat Chandra Dutta was a rich timber merchant in Burma who came back to India as a refugee.

In Malaya, Arjun’s ideas undergo a change. He gains an insight into the real motives of the British. He realises that he had been living in illusions. When his batman Kishan Singh asks him the meaning of the word ‘mercenary’ he sees his own position reflected as he explains its meaning to him. He starts thinking about himself as a hired killer used by the British to kill the people of his own country. Kishan Singh suddenly becomes his conscience, a personified image of all that he had ignored in his love for English values.

Kishan Singh, in his very individuality, had become more than himself – a village, a country, a history, a mirror for Arjun to see refractions of himself? (GP-332)
In Malaya Rajkumar’s younger son Dinu and Saya John’s grand daughter Alison fall in love with each other. While Arjun’s battalion is stationed in Malaya he frequently visits ‘Morningside,’ Alison’s house. It draws them to each other. Alison’s remark after the brief love making that follows between the two compels Arjun to introspect.

“Arjun – you’re not in charge of what you do; you’re a toy, a manufactured thing, a weapon in someone else’s hands, your mind doesn’t inhabit your body.” (GP-376)

And finally he joins Hardy working for the Indian National Army (INA) founded by Capt. Mohan Singh, a rebel soldier who was an officer in the British Indian Army. Arjun’s inner conflict finally ends. He becomes a rebel. “But the Empire was dead now – he knew this because he felt it die within himself, where it had held its strongest dominion - …” (GP-441) Arjun dies in Burma, fighting for the INA, for the country’s freedom. By subverting the authority of the Europeans, who had long been his ideal, his faith and a model of goodness and civilisation, Arjun creates history.

Ghosh refers to the strange bonds that are created out of the historical phenomenon of uprooting and disjunction and the rupturing of old ties. He once again asserts his belief in how everything undergoes transformation and becomes something else and how it sustains one’s faith in life. Jaya’s small son is surprised to find Rajkumar and Uma locked in an embrace, lying in the bed, their dentures locked one upon the other. Brinda Bose observes:
Ghosh once again offers us a glimpse of that ‘redemptive mystery’ that footnotes history with a potentially regenerative humanity. 31

Ghosh rightly sums up the argument, “But around defeat there’s love, there’s laughter, there’s happiness. There are children. There are relationships. There’s betrayal. There’s faithfulness. This is what life is, and I want my book to be true to that.” (WLT – 89)

References:


9. Ibid. p.43.


17. Ibid. p.84


22. Ibid, p.68.


29. Bose Brinda (Ed.) In Introduction to *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives* p.17


31. Bose Brinda (Ed.) In Introduction to *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives* p.17
CHAPTER III

CULTURAL DIALECTICS
Cultural Dialectics

The newly emerging trends in the discipline of anthropology have influenced Ghosh’s idea of viewing cultures and civilisations as syncretic. His insight into culture and history has shaped his understanding of societies of the past as well as the present. Ghosh travelled and spent his childhood and youth in the different countries of South East Asia like India, Bangladesh, Colombo, Calcutta, etc. His deep study of culture, history and extensive travel has made his imagination truly diasporic. Migration thus is an important feature of his novels. Cross cultural migration and forced migration within the country is one of the major concerns of his fiction. He also focuses on the shifting cultural identities and problems associated with migration in its literal and metaphorical sense.

In The Shadow Lines, Ghosh conceives a world formed on the values of goodness and collective humanity. Ghosh’s brilliant conception of time and places in the novel questions the significance of having fixed geographical boundaries especially in the age of transnationalisation and globalisation where the flow of capital and peoples has rendered the borders flexible. Ghosh’s fictional world is an admixture of peoples from different parts of the world, practicing different cultural beliefs and religious practices, constantly assuming new identities and being subject to forces beyond their control. Stuart Hall says,

Cultural identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of being. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not
something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture.¹

Ghosh presents here a very fascinating amalgam of places and cultures. This shows how history and culture shape human life and impart identities. For Ghosh, places and locations have a special significance. Ghosh was influenced by Proust in the writing of this novel. In the interview with John Hawley, he said, “Proust’s influence is evident also in the ways in which time and space are collapsed in the narrative of the shadow lines. I remember that at the time my ambition was to do with space what Proust had done with time: that is to make completely different instances of a continuum immanent in each other.”²

Ghosh’s diasporic imagination is revealed in the ease with which the narrator travels different countries and places experiencing them in his imagination. He is taught by his uncle, the young boy, Tridib to use his ‘imagination with precision.’ Hence imagination assumes a centrality in crossing borders and establishing links hitherto not possible due to constraints of geographical boundaries, nationalities and physical distance. The creation of fictive ties through imagination is the peculiar response of all those who are displaced, for one reason or another and live in a different land, country or community. In the essay “The diaspora in Indian Culture”, Ghosh explains the classic relationship that exists between India and her diaspora:

“The links are not those of language, religion, politics or economics. In a sense the links are those of culture, but again of a kind of culture in which the most important cultural institutions as we usually understand them – for example
language and religion are absent ... The links between India and her diaspora are lived within the imagination. It is therefore an epic relationship.”

An idea of cultural syncretism is created when the narrator expresses his desire to travel the faraway exotic places through his imagination. Tridib stimulates his imagination to invent places in the mind, to travel and experience them. Ila, the narrator’s cousin whom he secretly loves has travelled extensively across the world, being the daughter of a diplomat. She lives in England but she cannot experience places like Tridib or the narrator. Places for Tridib and the narrator are alive because they are the grounds on which the drama of history is enacted, places are points of meeting and departure of a wide variety of people; they impart a sense of belonging, of being uprooted. They evoke feelings of pride, rivalry and community. They contain memories of joy, of inheritance, of the sorrows of departure and woes of displacement. Tridib had always impressed on the narrator that a place should be explored and experienced in order to imbibe the sense of the richness of its past, its culture and history.

“I could not persuade her (Ila) that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in ones imagination; that her practical, bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more nor less true, only very far apart. .... As Tridib often said of her, the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all.”

Ila’s long stay in England has fashioned her into a woman who is Indian by birth but English by her mannerisms, culture and values. For the narrator, sharing Ila’s experiences, especially
her year books is the most exciting part of her annual trips to India and to his house in Calcutta. Ila’s Yearbooks, the strange names of her classmates and the countries they belong convey the changing face of the world in which cross cultural migration has turned societies into multicultural ones. And this is true of all countries and societies of the world so that no society today can claim to be having a pure, distinct culture:

She would show me her friends, standing beside her and I would roll their names around my tongue – Teresa Cassano, Mercedes Aguilar, Merfeth ash – Sharqawi – names of girls mainly at first, and then, as we grew older, boys too – Calouste Malekian, Cetshwayo James, Juin Nagajima – names which imprinted themselves on my memory ….. (SL – 22)

This growing cosmopolitanism of the world signals the death of traditional societies, of the idea of fixed geographical boundaries and nations. This phenomenon is explained by Homi Bhabha, which captures the spirit of the postcolonial times. He speaks of the,

….moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees; gathering on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafes of city centres; gathering in the half life, half light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another’s language.  

But it must be remembered that cosmopolitanism or globalisation are rooted in specific ideologies and in history. Cosmopolitanism has not put an end to long prevailing ideologies of nation and racism, though these notions may not appear to be valid in contemporary times. Ila’s Yearbooks unfold the picture of a new world, an amalgam of alien cultures, peoples
and countries yet somehow it also conveys a sense of isolation and alienation that an Indian feels in an alien society. The narrator gathers the impression of Ila’s isolation among her foreigner friends and classmates.

But somehow, though Ila could tell me everything about those parties and dances, what she said and what she did and what she wore, she herself was always unaccountably absent in the pictures. (SL – 22)

Ila’s fascinating dresses, her audacity in discussing certain matters related to sex that are a taboo in Indian society, are all attempts to impress the narrator, to give him to believe the affinity and love she has won in English society. She despises Indian culture for all its restrictions, rules and regulations. She loves England for the freedom it offers. Even Thamma’s reaction, whose mind is specifically rooted in Indian culture, comes as no surprise to Ila’s English lifestyle and her hatred for Indian culture owing to its restrictive nature. “She wants to be left alone to do what she pleases: that’s all that any whore would want.” (SL - 89)

That is the reason why Thamma, the narrator’s grandmother hates her. The kind of freedom Ila seeks is beyond Thamma’s orbit of comprehension. For Thamma, freedom and culture are rooted in the idea of nation. Thamma could have nothing “but contempt for a freedom that could be bought for the price of an air ticket. For she too had once wanted to be free; she had dreamt of killing for her freedom.” (SL – 89)

Ila takes pride in English glory, the tales of heroism and of England’s superiority in acquiring a pride of place by setting a
precedent for other countries. She expresses her contempt for India because she doesn’t find anything heroic in the happenings and political events.

“Well of course there are famines and riots and disasters. But those are local things after all – not like revolutions or anti fascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that’s really remembered.” (SL - 104)

But Ila’s actual experiences in England had not been very pleasing. The more she had wanted to become a part of England, the more rejected she had felt. Ila actually has lived with a sense of isolation in England right since her childhood. This is evident in her childhood fantasies, the game of Houses that she plays with her cousin, the narrator in the dark underground room at their house in Raibajar. Ila and the narrator enact a drama under the large wooden table where they play the roles of adults. In this game Ila is the wife, the narrator is supposed to be her husband and they have a beautiful, blonde daughter, Magda. Magda is actually the name of Ila’s doll.

The imaginary house that Ila constructs is the reflection of the house of the Prices in London. Her imaginary daughter has all the English attributes. She is beautiful, intelligent and is liked by her teachers and schoolmates except Denise, her ugly looking classmate. When Magda proves herself to be better than Denise in English spellings, Mrs. Tolland, their teacher remarks, “Well Denise, perhaps you ought to take English lessons from her, even though its your language, not hers.” (SL - 74)
After school when Denise attacks her, it is Nick Price, Ila’s dream hero, who rescues Magda. To Ila Nick fulfils her idea of a real brave hero: “He has yellow hair. It always falls over his eyes.” (SL - 49)

The sufferings of Magda are actually an expression of Ila’s sense of loneliness and alienation in the English society. Her fantasies express her repressed desires of being loved, liked and accepted by the English society as well as by Nick, her dream lover. Her fantasy also is an expression of the ugly reality and her problems in England. It is later that the narrator learns from May Price, Nick’s sister, the truth about the entire episode at Ila’s school and comprehends the entire situation that Ila is placed in England. When Ila was attacked by one of her classmates, Nick had actually run away, leaving Ila alone and defenceless. When the truth comes to light, the narrator visualises Ila’s sad plight:

.... Ila the sophisticate, who could tell us stories about smart girls and rich boys in far-away countries whose names we had learnt from maps. Ila walking alone because Nick Price was ashamed to be seen by his friends, walking home with an Indian. (SL - 76)

Ila’s fantasies of her place in England, of her dream hero reflect her attempts to locate herself in the new society. Her story clearly highlights the treatment meted out to Indians who live abroad. It reflects the dreams, the desires and also the anxieties, dejection and disillusionment that people experience in a foreign culture. According to Padmini Mongia,

Initially, the narrator learns to imagine with such precision that his experience reflects that of his ghostly double, Nick, Ila’s supposed knight in shining armour in London. Later,
though, when the contours of the narrator’s knowledge fill out, he realises that there are no knights, that the construction of a scenario of heroism and rescue are in themselves part of the universalising heritage of Western colonial fictions.6

The sense of discrimination in England doesn’t make Ila realise that she would always remain a foreigner in England no matter how hard she tries to fit in. She persists in her endeavour to adopt the English culture. In India, Ila takes the narrator and Robi to a nightclub. There she insists that Robi and the narrator dance with her. With her English dress and English accent Ila seems out of place in the Calcutta club. As Robi and the narrator refuse to dance with her, she gets up to dance with a stranger, a slim businessman. Robi comes to blows with him and angrily shouts at Ila:

“You can do what you like in England. But here there are certain things you cannot do. That’s our culture; that’s how we live.” (SL – 88)

Robi’s reaction is that of a typical Indian; it shows a high sense of the cultural values that are ingrained in him from his birth. Ila’s behaviour is essentially objectionable by the standards of Indian culture. A woman like Ila is bound to be considered a ‘free’ woman, in the Indian context. What is indecent by Indian standards is perfectly normal and acceptable in English society. It is the duality and hypocrisy of Indian culture that Ila dislikes. And that’s the reason why she retorts:

“Do you see now why I’ve chosen to live in London? Do you see? It’s only because I want to be free.” When the narrator asks, “free of what?” Ila replies, “free of you! Free of your bloody culture and free of all of you.” (PP 88 – 89)
The kind of freedom that Ila aspires thus leads her to negate Indian cultural values. Ila has internalised Western culture and its ideologies to such a great extent that she starts perceiving reality in terms of difference based on the superiority of English and the lack or inferiority of the ‘backward’ countries of the East like India. It has rightly been pointed out that,

.... While for the narrator cultural differences can be collectively contained to create not a fragmented self but a self that belongs to many places, which can live freely in its moment accommodating itself to the various pressures placed upon it, for Ila, cultural differences create only a small, quivering self, one incapable of action, and more importantly, even of self respect.7

Ila’s friends with whom she shares her house, Trotskyists, belonging to different countries and cultures are united by a common political ideology. Ila’s friends consisted “of a bearded Irish computer scientist, a girl from Leicester who had dropped out in her second year at the North London Polytechnic to work with the fourth International, and a morose young Ghanaian who was very active in the Anti-Nazi League.” (SL - 97) But still this sensitive intelligentsia, fighting racist policies, supporting other political causes are still not free of the idea of demarcation between the Europeans and Asians:

They seemed to regard her as a kind of guest, a decoration almost. Nor did they seem to resent in her the signs of cosmopolitanism they were always so quick to criticise in themselves and their other comrades. (SL – 97)

Even Ila’s marriage with Nick Price, her dream hero, brings only disillusionment to her. The fact that Nick was ashamed to be seen with Ila shows the general attitude of the English towards
Indians. Though Ila knew this yet she never accepted it. She soon discovers that Nick has relations with several women. And when the narrator tells her, “Oh sad little Ila. Your sins have finally come home to roost.” (SL – 188) The reply Ila gives expresses her anguish, her dilemma. She constantly had to fight a war with herself, to adjust to the English society, which refused to accept her and to maintain the illusion of having been accepted by it. She tells the narrator,

“You see, you’ve never understood, you’ve always been taken in by the way, I used to talk, when we were in college. I only talked like that to shock you, and because you seemed to expect it of me somehow. I never did any of those things: I’m about as chaste, in my own way, as any woman, you’ll ever meet.” (SL - 188)

Somewhere down the core, Ila had not been able to free herself from her indigenous cultural values though overtly she never respected it. Tacitly she abides by the code prescribed for an Indian woman of being chaste and bearing the burden of protecting her marriage in all circumstances. This explains her decision to be with Nick despite his infidelity.

“I wouldn’t leave him if he moved a whole bloody massage parlour from Bangkok into the house. He knows that perfectly well; he knows I love him so much I could never leave him.” (SL-189)

Ila’s anxieties of living in England, the discrimination that she suffers there reflects the predicament of modern life. It highlights the serious problems that are created due to cultural and national differences and the ideologies that obstruct our perception of reality and people by imposing the logic of difference created on the basis of caste, nationality, culture,
religion and gender. When Tridib says, “…. if we didn’t try ourselves we would never be free of other people’s inventions.” (SL-31) This justifies Tridib’s insistence upon the significance of individual experience, of his idea of the creation of a self that transcends the boundaries of nations, religion, race and culture. As Seema Bhaduri rightly points out,

“The major characters here move towards a global humanitarianism, coming to grips with the realisation that freedom cannot be geo politically defined or delimited.” 8

Tridib’s love for May is also based on his vision of global humanity that is free from all barriers of nations, and geographical boundaries. He writes a letter to May, about the love scene between two ordinary individuals that a small boy witnessed in a blasted theatre in London during the II World War. Though imaginary this act of love making that takes place against the backdrop of war highlights Tridib’s ideal of love, which is above all the ideologies of war, and the feelings of hostility, fear and suspicion that usually prevails at the time of war. He wanted to meet,

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 hankers after the creation of a world, “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)
The prevailing political, cultural and national conflicts are due to identities that are assigned to position human beings in society, to assign everyone a fixed identity. But Tridib envisions a reality where identities are constantly in a state of flux and cultures and places are the sites of intersecting identities. Ghosh uses different places and times in the novel to highlight the fluidity of culture and history. The underground spaces, the anteroom at Raibajar or the cellar in Mrs. Price’s house are made replete with the subterranean undercurrents of the past, of how the voices of the past are not dead but continue to manifest themselves in the present and shape the present. Amidst the cacophony of voices in the underground room at Rai Bajar the narrator discovers the amalgam of time and places – at the dark cellar in Mrs. Price’s house in London,

Those empty corners filled up with remembered forms, with the ghosts who had been handed down to me by time: the ghost of the nine-year-old, Tridib, sitting on a camp bed, just as I was, his small face intent listening to the bombs, the ghost of snipe in that far corner, near his medicine chest, worrying about his dentures; the ghost of the eight year old Ila, sitting with me under that vast table in Raibajar. They were all around me, we were together at last, not ghosts at all: the ghostliness was merely the absence of time and distance for that is all a ghost is, a presence displaced in time. (SL-181)

Tridib’s insistence upon invention negates the idea of accepting the world, as it exists. When he expresses his idea of a place, “where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror,” (SL-29) he is highlighting the possibilities of merging all cultures, peoples and countries, of recreating a reality based on sameness rather than difference and of constructing an
identity that cuts across all geographical and national divides. Through Tridib Ghosh puts forth his idea of a transnational citizen who doesn’t have to purchase freedom by buying an air ticket but which can be gained by freeing one’s mind from all constructions that shape our perception of reality. When Tridib says, “Everyone lives in a story … because stories are all there to live in, it was just a question of which one you choose…” (SL-182) Tridib chooses to invent rather than accept what already exists, attempting to privilege the personal experiences to the received ones. Nyla Ali Khan points out,

Ghosh’s characters encounter a new world, a new cultural paradigm, while trying to preserve their own recognisable forms of identity. His agenda is to threaten the safely-guarded domain of privilege and power by demanding equality for human beings of all races, religions, cultures and ethnicities. 9

But Tridib’s favourite story is the one that he had received as a birthday gift from Snipe, on his ninth birthday in England, 25th September 1940.

“…. It was the story of a hero called Tristan, a very sad story, about a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman – across the seas.” (SL-186)

According to Ghosh stories or narratives cut across geographical boundaries. He states in his brilliant essay The March of the Novel through History, “to locate oneself through prose, one must begin with an act of dislocation.” And as the narrative greatly interests Ghosh, this idea of location through dislocation is extended in The Shadow Lines. The narrative of
Tristan and Isolde that Ghosh refers to in the novel was Celtic narrative.

“By the late Middle Ages this Celtic narrative, which appears to have had its origins in Cornwall and Brittany, had been translated and adapted into several major European languages. Everywhere it went the story of Tristan and Isolde was immediately adapted to new locations and new settings.” (II - 296)

This narrative is of great interest to Tridib because it embodies his idea of the world, of the self that is constantly travelling and adapting itself to the local, which is only possible through imagining the creation of a world without borders and countries. Robert Dixon points out, “The Shadow Lines is therefore a fictional critique of classical anthropology’s model of discrete cultures and the associated ideology of nationalism.”

The unnamed narrator is greatly influenced by Tridib. But it is after the death of Tridib, when he grows up, that he actually understands Tridib’s vision. He could establish a link between the riots that took place in Dhaka, Calcutta and Khulna in East Pakistan. The rioters in Dhaka killed Tridib. These riots that took place in three different cities were triggered by the theft of the prophet’s Mu-i-Mubarak in Kashmir.

It was thus sitting in the air-conditioned calm of an exclusive library, that I began on my strangest journey: a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking-glass events. (SL - 224)

During the riots there were instances when the people of two communities had helped each other and saved lives regardless of the fact that whether a person was a Hindu, a Muslim or a Sikh. There were protests in Kashmir against the
theft of the relic. The Muslims in the three cities mentioned above had united, protesting against the Hazratbal incident. This fact of the ties that bound communities despite their geographical boundaries gave a jolt to the idea of distance or separation imposed by borders or national frontiers. And when the narrator performs a simple exercise with a pair of compass and the tattered copy of the Bartholomew’s Atlas he is amazed by the reconfiguration of countries and lines that he had made. By placing the point of the compass on Khulna and the tip of the pencil on Srinagar, the narrator discovered,

The distance between Khulna and Srinagar or so I discovered when I measured the space between the points of my compass, was 1200 miles, nearly 2000 kilometers.... I discovered that Khulna is about as far from Srinagar as Tokyo is from Beijing, or Moscow from Venice, or Washington from Havana, or Cairo from Naples. (SL-231)

This discovery of the narrator dismantles the existing pattern of configuration of countries and nations done by the cartographers with the aim of assigning national identities.

“They had drawn their borders believing that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland.” (SL - 213)

The narrator’s reference to Calcutta and Dhaka is replete with the poignant memories of the partition of India, one of the most brutal examples of geographical division of a nation in the history of the world. It is a living proof of how the sketching of borders perpetuates hostilities, rifts and enmities. But these artificial lines had not been able to contain the communal bonds
of brotherhood and love, as it was evident during the riots of 1964.

.... There had never been a moment in the four thousand year-old history of that map, when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines – so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free – our looking – glass border. (SL - 233)

Ghosh points out the coming together of peoples, places of the East and West, of the present and past. This is a convergence of people who belong to different cultures and religions and times. And it can redeem mankind in this age of violence, from the threat of religious extremism and the evils of transnational capitalism. The narrator discovers a new dimension of reality in the arms of May. It is free from all the constructs of ideas, ideologies and knowledge that the past had imposed. It is the moment of redemption for the narrator and signals the same possibility for collective humanity.

Like Rushdie, Ghosh does not write about the nation. In Circle of Reason he decenters the idea of nation and highlights migrancy, hybridity and Diaspora as the peculiar condition of all societies. Ghosh refutes the arbitrary boundaries between nations; he takes up the ‘in-between’ state, hybridity as a reality that challenges the idea of fixed binaries. Ideas, ideologies and cultures cut across the boundaries of nation states. Ghosh highlights the fact that the modern day nation-states and their boundaries incorporate a different reality where cultural
identities are always shifting due to migrancy. He takes a small village of East Bengal, Lalpukur, which is constituted by people who have emigrated from different parts of South East Asia. Distorting the idea of specificity of cultures, Ghosh shows the mass influx of people even in remote villages of East Bengal. Robert Dixon says: “For Ghosh, even societies that appear to be static and traditional are always already diasporic.”

It is the Noakhalis, people from the Far East of Bengal close to Burma who had started pouring into India after the creation of East Pakistan. Balram, the protagonist of the novel is from Dhaka which was the capital of East Bengal and now of Bangladesh. His father had migrated to Dhaka from the village of Medini-Mandol in Bikrompur. “Lalpukur burst its boundaries and poured out, jostling with the district road a furlong away.” Lalpukur represents a hybridised culture as it is transformed into as Brinda Bose says: “that third space where boundaries are blurred and cultures collide.”

But these diasporic experiences have a history of cultural dislocation, of displacement that people usually suffer in events such as war, political conflicts, riots or genocide. According to Brinda Bose:

“In Ghosh’s fiction, the diasporic entity continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by both time and space – history and geography – and attempts to redefine the present through a nuanced understanding of the past.”

Ghosh also uses the ideas of scientific reason and religious myths to show how they transcend the geographical boundaries
and the way they influence each other. Balram and his friend Gopal apply scientific principles to the study of Hindu religious philosophy. In fact they point out how reason is a corner stone of Hinduism. Gopal says, “The Brahma is nothing but the atom.” (CR - 47) The parallel drawn by Gopal between Hinduism and Western science reflects the hybridisation of ideas, the merging of different forms of thought and disciplines of knowledge. Thus the binaries existing between different disciplines are challenged. Robert Dixon observes, “Ghosh’s novel deconstructs any simple opposition between tradition and modernity, or discrete oriental and occidental cultures.” 15 It was trade that had bound the world into a unity, establishing a network of business and personal relationships that spread across continents, nations and cities:

“The whole of the ancient world hummed with the cloth trade. The Silk Route from China, running through central Asia and Persia to the ports of the Mediterranean and from there to the markets of Africa and Europe, bound continents together for more centuries than we can count.” (CR - 56)

But what destroyed peaceful trade symbolised by the loom was the invention of the machine. The emergence of the machine and new scientific inventions not only put an end to human bonds symbolised by trade but also introduced new trade ethics that were based solely on the profit motive.

“When the history of the world broke, cotton and cloth were behind it; mechanical man in pursuit of his own destruction.” (CR - 57)

It was Europe, with its imperialistic designs, which marked an end to the business relationships based on mutual trust and harmony. The Europeans took control of trade and substituted it
with relations based on exploitation and slavery. “It is a gory history in parts; a story of greed and destruction.” (CR - 57) Trade assumed a new meaning. It simply became a transaction of goods and commodities and gradually led to commodification of human beings, their relationships and society. It led to the death of traditional trade culture and introduced a homogenised culture based on the rules of the global market economy.

Ghosh highlights the hybridity of societies but at the same time he also highlights the anxieties and woes of the diasporic community, their sense of belonging, their loss and separation from their mother country. This is beautifully portrayed among the voyagers in the boat ‘Mariamma’ in which Alu is also travelling to a new destination, the oil rich gulf city, Al-Ghazira. He is escaping from the police who are chasing him after Bhudeb Roy had declared Alu to be a terrorist. Zindi who runs a brothel in Al-Ghazira is taking two prostitutes, Kulfi and Chunni to make money in the Ghaziri society. Karthamma, suffering labour pains wants to give her would be child a house, car and other luxuries which she thinks would be possible in the rich Ghaziri society. Rakesh’s Ayurvedic medicines no longer have a market in India while Prof. Samuel’s theory of Queues doesn’t work back home.

Weaving is an important metaphor in the novel. It stands for tradition, redemption and unity of cultures. Balram explains to his nephew, Alu, the history of the loom.

The Loom recognizes no continents and no countries. It has tied the world together with its bloody ironies from the
beginning of human time. It has never permitted the division of reason. (CR - 55)

Ghosh discusses how cloth trade fostered the values of syncretism and cosmopolitanism that led to business and personal bonds across countries, cultures and nations since ancient times. The loom or weaving has been a conflagration of tradition, reason, creativity and invention.

“In the midnineteenth century when Charles Babbage built his first calculating machine, using the principle of storing information on punched cards, he took his idea not from systems of writing nor form mathematics, but from the draw loom.” (CR - 57)

Ghosh doesn’t simply write about the modern phenomenon of cross-cultural migration that has assumed vogue in the contemporary times. He points out how societies since ancient times were diasporic in nature. He goes back to the past, to the history of colonialism, the infiltration of Europeans into the oil town to gain control of its oil reserves. The oilmen forced the Malik, the ruler of Al-Ghazira to sign a treaty. They brought poor people as indentured labour to work in the oil town. The system of indentured labor led to a huge shift of population from the colonised countries: “Since the beginning of time Al– Ghazira has been home to anyone who chooses to call it such-if he comes as a man.... But those ghosts behind the fence were not men, they were tools-helpless, picked for their poverty.” (CR - 261) Hence dislocation is fraught with pain and anxieties. As Kavita Daiya observes:

Unlike Salman Rushdie, Ghosh refuses to celebrate the hybridity born of migration and the heterogeneity that fails to be contained by national communities.
The travails of Jeevan Bhai Patel, a Gujrati Hindu from Durban in South Africa highlights how religious and cultural differences force a person to look for a home outside one’s country where he seeks to explore new links and relationships. The dreams of fulfillment of his desires in distant lands widen his horizon and fire his hopes. After his marriage to a Bohra Muslim girl Jeevanbhai is estranged from his family. Their disapproval forces him to go places like Mozambique, Dares Salaam, then Zanzibar, Djibouti, Perim and Aden. He finally settles down in Al-Ghazira. Al Ghazira with its huge population of immigrants from different parts of the world becomes a microcosm that embodies unending hopes and dreams, of aspirations and fulfillment of promises. “Persians, Iraqis, Zanzibari Arabs, Omanis and Indians fattened upon it and grew rich….” (CR - 221)

After his wife’s death and losses suffered in business Jeevanbahi is drawn into a new, flourishing business, that of match making. Marriage is an important religious and cultural institution that cuts across all cultures and nations. It forges new links and relationships. Jeevanbhai’s diverse contacts with people in different countries, with tradesmen and friends lead him to establish successful marital bonds that win him name, respect and money in Al-Ghazira. “New Life Marriage Bureau” is set up. He employs Forid Mian, to manage his small shop, The Durban Tailoring House. Forid Mian, a sailor is from Chittagong in East Bengal. Adverse circumstances force a large number of people to be constantly on the move who suffer the pangs of separation and
identity crisis in a new society. This is rightly portrayed through the predicament of the different characters in the novel.

**The Glass Palace** depicts the impact of colonialism and also the gradual onslaught of English culture in the Eastern countries. Ghosh traces out its catalytic role in the decline of the traditional culture of the Burmese society. The downfall of the ruling Burmese dynasty symbolises the destruction of the traditional Burmese culture. The loss of political authority of the Royalty put an end to the traditions of courtly life. Ghosh depicts the change brought about by the colonisers:

“...The Mandalay palace had been refurbished to serve the conqueror’s recondite pleasures: the West wing had been converted into a British club; the Queen’s Hall of Audience had now become a billiard room; the mirrored Walls were lined with months old copies of Punch and the Illustrated London News; the gardens had been dug up to make room for tennis courts and polo grounds; the exquisite little monastery in which Thebaw had spent his novitiate had become a chapel where Anglican priests administered the sacrament to British troops.”

In Ratnagiri, where the Royal couple, the princesses and attendants are sent in Exile, the Royalty is reduced to the status of ordinary human beings. They are left with no option but to adopt the local culture. Ghosh also hints at the rising tide of capitalism in the early twentieth century that transformed the traditional structure of the society. It gave opportunity to many young enthusiastic entrepreneurs to become owners of big business Empires. For this class of people, colonialism or imperialism proved to be a boon. Rajkumar is one of them. He quickly learns the English ways and in this process Saya John, a Malayan
businessman, helps him. Saya John recognises in Rajkumar, “a reinvented being, formidably imposing and of commanding presence.” (GP - 132)

The Europeans led the people of Eastern countries to believe in the superiority of their culture. And this resulted in the anglicization of a vast number of people who looked down upon their indigenous value system as outmoded. They developed faith in English culture, its values and ideals of modernity, progress, civilisation and culture. In India, Ghosh refers to characters like the collector, Beni Prasad Dey and Arjun Roy to depict the strong impact of English culture on the Indian Psyche. People like Dey and Arjun live in delusions.

The Cambridge educated collector represents the class of educated Indians who were indoctrinated with English ideas of power, glory and success. Throughout his life he remains committed to English values and lives under the illusion that he is serving his country while actually he is just serving his white masters. He tries to impress upon King Thebhaw, the glory of the Empire:

“….You may be certain, your Highness, that its influence will persist for centuries more to come. The Empire’s power is such as to be proof against all challenges and will remain so into the foreseeable future.” (GP - 107)

The love for English life and its culture alienates Dey from his own culture. Even the kind of wife he desires is someone, “Who would be willing to step out into society; someone young, who wouldn’t be resistant to learning modern ways.” (GP – 158)
At his wedding, the traditional Indian custom of playing shehnai is replaced with the military band from Fort William. And the tune that he hums to his wife on their wedding night is ‘The Trout’ by Schubert.

The traditional look of the city of Burma was completely overhauled. As the British restructured the economy, gradually the city lost its traditional lustre. Huge buildings, hotels, restaurants, nightclubs and the departmental stores had replaced palm-thatched shanties and the bamboo walled shacks. It was only the Shwe Dagon Pagoda and its gilded hti that preserved the traditional sanctity of Burma. And the collapse of its golden hti marks the end of the already vanishing cultural solidity of the Burmese society.

Ghosh employs army life as a means to highlight the manner in which English cultural beliefs were imposed on the officers in the name of modernisation and equality. This was an attempt by the English to erase the cultural values that the Indians were brought up on since their birth. The food in the army which consisted of bacon, ham, beef, pork, beer, wine was something that was never allowed at home: Ghosh writes in the novel:

“Every mouthful had a meaning - each represented an advance towards the evolution of a new, more complete kind of Indian. All of them had stories to tell about how their stomachs had turned the first time they had chewed upon a piece of beef or pork; they had struggled to keep the morsels down, fighting their revulsion.” (GP - 279)
The impact of English ideas and values is so strong on Indians like Arjun that they were blinded to the plight of their own country reeling under poverty, exploitation, and outmoded customs. They were unaware of the conflict that would soon arise in them. They believed in the British claims of freedom and equality. They did not realise that it was eyewash. The British were actually trying to erase their indigenous cultural values by imposing Western values. They were trying to create a rift between Indians and Burmese as a part of their policy of divide and rule. The remark of a Burmese student to Arjun reveals the British policy:

“Do you know what we say in Burma when we see Indian soldiers? We say: there goes the army of slaves – marching off to catch some more slaves for their masters.” (GP - 288)

The British claims of equality and progress soon proved hollow. The racial segregation of Indians becomes evident in the swimming pool incident in Singapore. When Kumar, Arjun and Hardy jump into the pool, all the Europeans come out. Kumar tells them that non-whites are not allowed to enter some places like pools, restaurants, clubs, and beaches, trains, which are reserved exclusively for the whites. He says, “We’re meant to die for this colony – but we can’t use the pools.” (GP - 345)

In Malaya again the Japanese attack forced people to leave the place. Alison and her grandfather Saya John are instructed by Dinu to leave the place. But the evacuation train headed for Singapore is reserved only for Europeans. It shocks Dinu because
during the critical juncture it should have been meant for all. He falls into a row with the stationmaster. As Ghosh strategically puts it: “….. it’s you who’re the enemy. People like you – just doing their jobs….” (GP - 425) The conditions such as this turned people like Arjun and the Stationmaster insensitive to the British attitude of segregation and degradation of the Asians. They simply did not see anything wrong with the English rule and its values.

The Empire’s strategy of creating a subject race, a class of people-inferior and collectively accepting the European superiority in terms of race, culture and knowledge, is beautifully represented in the novel in the cloning of trees. Matthew’s Rubber Plantation in Malaya demonstrates the process of cultural cloning done by the Empire. Naturally, therefore, the rebellious attitude gains stronger roots in the attitudes and ideas of the enslaved. In a frenzy of petulance Mathew tells Uma:

“This is my little empire, Uma. I made it. I took it from the jungle and moulded it into what I wanted it to be… But it is when you try to make the whole machine work that you discover that every bit of it is fighting back.” (GP- 233)

And in the heavy Bombardment of Japanese air raids, the rubber plantation that Saya John and Matthew had taken years of toil to bring up is destroyed. Alison shoots herself and Saya John is killed by Japanese soldiers when they are on their way to Singapore. The Love of Dinu and Alison thus ends tragically.

And through travel and migration Ghosh highlights how culture breaks through the barriers of nation, boundaries, class
and religion. Migration becomes a means of the forging of new
ties and relationships. The relations and marriages in the three
families depicted in the novel, the strange connections formed on
the basis of love and enduring friendship among the characters
surpass all the boundaries of nations, class and culture. The
friendship of Uma and Dolly, of Rajkumar and Saya John remains
a lifetime bond. The cross cultural marriage of Mathew, Saya
John’s son with Elsa, an American, of Neel and Manju and the
relation of Alison, Mathew’s daughter and Dinu, Rajkumar’s son,
is based on true love only to be tragically hampered by the
powerful forces of history.

The only thing that remains constant in the novel is Dolly’s
faith in spiritualism symbolised by the rich tradition of Buddhism
in Burma. Quoting from the teachings of Buddha Dolly reads out
to her daughter-in-law, Manju, “---- develop a state of mind like
water, for in the water many things are thrown, clean and
unclean, and the water is not troubled or repelled or disgusted.”
(GP - 343) Dolly dies peacefully at the Nunnery in Sagaing after
renouncing worldly life. The scene in the end of the novel where
Jaya’s small son, spots Rajkumar and Uma lying in bed, locked in
a kiss presents Ghosh’s idea of the blurring of our conventional
ideas of love, nations and differences of cultures, ideas and
boundaries.

Cross-cultural interaction is an important feature of
Ghosh’s novels. In The Calcutta Chromosome Ghosh once more
distorts the idea of cultures as distinct and pure. He shows the
hybridisation of cultures as he links the oriental and occidental. He reveals how the logic of Western science merges with the intuitive, mysterious and esoteric cult that forms an important philosophy of the Eastern faith.

Ghosh highlights how the advanced scientific knowledge of the West was not solely responsible for the discovery of the malaria parasite. He fictionalises the Medical history of malaria to unravel the limits of mainstream science. The advanced medical research, undertaken by learned Western scientists, is worked upon by ordinary, marginalised individuals, who are poor Indians. It is their superb gifted capabilities that has an unknown mysterious source, rooted in silence, that helps them achieve a mutation or change through the discovery of the malaria parasite. The Western scientists have no knowledge or understanding of the power of Indian religious faith that is rooted in deep spiritualism and faith in rebirth or reincarnation.

For the Western scientist like Cunningham, Mangala and Lutchman are ordinary servants fulfilling their tasks of the scientists in the laboratory who are engaged in malaria research. But they are no ordinary mortals. They are deities representing the Abyss and the Silence, the one being male and the other female.

For the counter-science cult, effecting a change or mutation in the malarial parasite was a part of their ongoing process of reincarnation and the achievement of immortality. Hence Ross was led by the secret cult in the right direction towards the
discovery of the parasite. All the time Ross was thinking of Lutchman as a guinea pig, but he was little aware of the fact that the tables had already been turned on him. He was not the experimenter but a subject in the experiment, which was being carried out by Mangala and Lakhaan. In the words of Claire Chambers,

“Behind all his fantastical forays into spiritualism, Gnosticism and reincarnation, Ghosh’s main point in this novel is to suggest that Ross was capable of making his name in India only because he drew on the indigenous knowledge he picked up there.”\textsuperscript{18}

Ghosh privileges the Eastern spiritualistic, cultural and religious beliefs to question Western scientific ideologies of reason and rationality. He makes Eastern spiritualism and religious rituals far more advanced and invincible than Western scientific rationalism. Phulboni’s stories that were written after his close to death encounter with Laakhan’s ghost in Renupur have an element of mystery in them. They have a peculiar Indian local colour. They reveal his strong urge to find the Goddess who rules the secret cult. In a public address, Phulboni reveals his desperation to seek the Goddess:

“As a tree spreads its branches to court an invisible source of light, so every word I have ever penned has been written for her. I have sought her in words, I have sought her in deeds, most of all I have sought her in the unspoken keeping of her faith.”\textsuperscript{19}

The human sacrifice performed by the counter-science cult, the goddess Mangala bibi entering the human body are all a part of Indian spiritualistic and cultural beliefs. This aspect of the Eastern religious faith may appear bizarre and irrational to the
Western scientist. But Ghosh subverts Western scientific advancement. Antar working on his supercomputer Ava in the 21st century in New York City is merely a chosen human body by the secret cult. Their experiment spans centuries. Like Murugan, Phulboni and others, he is merely a part of the experiment in the transmigration of souls.

The characters involved in the experiment are spread across the world in countries such as Egypt, India, New York, etc. Most of them are syphilitics like Antar, Murugan and Mangala. They are all involved in the experiment to unfold the mystery of the Calcutta chromosome as Murugan calls it. And it is change or mutation that leads them further in their experiment in the achievement of their goal – of achieving human immortality. The Eastern faith and spiritualism surpass all the bounds of Western science. The secret cult has all the knowledge of the past, present and the future. This is beyond the framework of Western knowledge even in the hi-tech age of 21st century.

Ghosh’s novels portray a world that upholds the values of cosmopolitanism and cross-cultural assimilation. This is beautifully depicted in his recent novel The Hungry Tide. The Tide Country represents an amalgamation of different people and their varied cultures. The Islands of Sunderban are a remote World that has gradually evolved its own culture, its myths and legends. The people from the Tide country derive their sustenance, faith and strength from their peculiar beliefs.
Migration is not a phenomenon that has witnessed a rise only in the present century of modernisation and globalisation. It is rooted in destiny and it has been the fate of human beings since centuries as generations of peoples have been compelled to move, sometimes to seek shelter for better life or due to being victimised by political turmoil and racial conflicts. Hence migration and syncretism are the seminal issues in Ghosh’s fiction.

Through the migration of settlers or the inhabitants of the Sunderban islands Ghosh portrays their simple religious faith, innocent beliefs and peculiar forms of worship, which give them the power to confront the dangers, and perils that haunt them all the time in the remote islands.

The people of the Tide country have a strong faith in the Tiger Goddess Bon bibi and her legend. During his first visit to Lusibari, after he was rusticated from school and sent to the islands Kanai had seen the stage performance of “The Glory of Bon Bibi.” It is through this performance that Kanai learns that Bon bibi and her twin brother Shah Jongoli are the children of Ibrahim, a pious Muslim who was childless. The setting was Medina. And it was archangel Gabriel whose blessings had given him these two children. They were sent to “the country of eighteen tides” on a divine mission.

Bon bibi and Shah Jongoli defeated the evil Dokkhin Rai who controlled the 18 islands. Bon Bibi granted Dokkhin Rai one half of the tide country, which was all wilderness and the other half she kept for herself, which became safe for human
settlement. Dokkhin Rai was believed to take the form of tiger and kill human beings. Hence even naming the animal was a taboo for the villagers for it represented evil. The settlers always invoked Bon bibi whenever they were in trouble. They knew the fixed line of demarcation between the land of Dokkhin Rai and that of human beings.

The settlers’ ideas of good and evil and their idea of worship are different from what is practiced in the rest of the world. Their faith is a confluence of Hindu as well as Muslim forms of worship. The settlers invoke ‘Allah’ and Bon bibi in their prayers. This is peculiar to the religious beliefs of the people of the Tide country and it reflects the very spirit of the people living there. The copy which Horen, Kusum’s relative possesses ‘Bon Bibi Karamoti or that Bon bibi Johurnama (The Miracles of Bon bibi or the Narrative of Her Glory), written by a Muslim Abdur-Rahim is a beautiful amalgam of Arabic and Bangla, prose and poetry. The faith of the settlers shows the hybridity that has resulted owing to the different faiths of the variety of people who inhabit the islands. It is a strange admixture of people and their language.

“The tide country’s faith is something like one of its great Mohonas, a meeting not just of many rivers, but a circular roundabout people can use to pass in ‘many directions – from country to country and even between faiths and religions.”

Through this hybridisation of religion and culture Ghosh hints at his idea of history and culture. In the opinion of Stuart Hall, “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories.
But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.” 21

The migration of Piya’s parents abroad to Seattle highlights the problem of the diaspora, their sense of displacement from their native land and its culture. Piya was cut off from her roots, her history and identity in Seattle. She knew her mother tongue Bengali only because her parents used it as a language of quarreling. Piya’s father’s sense of loss of his cultural heritage is evident in his possession of the chequered cloth. This piece of rectangular cloth, a small towel called ‘gamcha’ in Bangla is the one thing that Piya’s father had refused to part with. Piya is cut-off from all ties with her country India, “And this was that neither her father nor her mother had even thought to tell her about any aspect of her Indian ‘heritage’ that would have held her interest – all they ever spoke of was history, family, duty, language.” (HT - 95)

This also highlights the postcolonial problem of identity crises that results due to cultural dislocation and also speaks about the growing movement of people i.e. diaspora across the world. It is only when Piya comes to India, to the Sunderbans that she gains an awareness of its culture, its myths and legends. In Fokir, she discovers all that she has lost, the value of her past that he embodies, the ‘Gamcha’ that Fokir carries, the food that he prepares on the boat remind her of the few remaining traces of culture that are preserved in her memory. “They were almost lost to her, those images of the past, and nowhere had she less
expected to see them than on this boat.” (HT-96) It is these life-giving myths of the Sunderbans that give a new insight into life to the highly urbanised and civilised characters like Kanai, Piya and Nirmal. It helps them regain a new consciousness of life, which they had never experienced in their civilised world.

Piya develops a liking and fascination for Fokir and his life. His religious beliefs amaze her as much as they evoke wonder for his strong and unwavering faith in Goddess Bon bibi, like all the others on the island. It is in the Sunderbans that she regains touch with her roots. Piya’s journey from Seattle to India becomes a movement of growth for her. It becomes a means of establishing new ties – with Fokir, Moyna, Tutul, Mashima, etc. It also helps her gain the power of myth. It contributes to the gaining of self-knowledge for Piya.

Kusum’s father had built a shrine to Bon bibi in the island of Garjontola. Nirmal had accompanied Kusum, Horen and Fokir to the island. During the course of their small journey Nirmal gains an insight into the pure and simple beliefs of the settlers that guided them in the face of life’s evils. He is awed by the austerity of their faith and their strong faith in goodness and evil. Their firm belief in the strict line of demarcation between the domain of Dokkhin Rai and that of human beings surprises Nirmal. “I realised with a sense of shock, that this chimerical line was to her and to Horen, as real as a barbed wire fence might be to me” (HT - 224). Nirmal gains an insight into the past. In the
wilderness he gains the insight into the nature of how the history is constantly in a state of flux.

“Nothing escapes the maw of the tides; everything is ground to fine silt, becomes something else…. life is lived in transformation.” (HT - 225) On passing through Garjontola years after Nirmal’s death, Kanai gains an awareness of the primordial amid the wilderness that had been concealed by the layers that civilisation had imposed on him. He finds Fokir in a position of authority as he tells him about the place and the power it commands Fokir tells him that only a person who is good at heart had nothing to fear in the place. He points out the marks in mud made by the Tiger’s paw. “It was as though in stepping on the island, the authority of their positions had been suddenly reversed.” (HT - 325)

Fokir’s position and authority had angered Kanai, his faith in what his mother Kusum told him about the power of Garjontola, his boldness and courage in this weird setting, his unfaltering steps in the mud finally hurt Kanai’s self-assumed pride. He abuses Fokir, “He had thought that he had cleansed himself of these sediments of the past, but the violence with which they came spewing out of him now suggested that they had only been compacted into an explosive and highly volatile reserve.” (HT - 326)

And in the wilderness when he catches the glimpse of the tiger sitting at a close distance, eying him, Kanai immediately feels the sensation of the fear that Fokir had talked about. The
naked fear and its consciousness that he experiences in the wilderness erase all the pretences of civilisation that people like Kanai from the cities cherish. It quells the feelings that he had nursed for Fokir. When Piya and others tell him that there was no tiger, Kanai is left wondering about the nature of illusion and reality. It is a reflection of his position and dilemma of life as he lived in highly urbanised Delhi and what he had discovered in the Sunderbans.

It is this mysterious and strange world of the Sunderbans that draws people like Nirmal, Kanai and Piya towards it. The rare Irrawaddy dolphins that Piya is searching for are found in abundance in waters of the islands. The study of these dolphins is the mission of Piya’s life but for the inhabitants of the Sunderbans they are the messengers of Bon bibi who protect people.

The novel clearly hints at the artificiality that has crept into man’s life and relationships due to materialistic advancement. It builds one’s faith in the necessity to establish a touch with one’s roots and culture.

The writer is concerned with pointing out the similarity and continuity between the past and present. He also points out the sharp conflict in the cultures that have developed over the years. These cultural differences have become more prominent and marked due to the structural changes in society as a result of colonialism and imperialism. The sense of ‘otherness’ or difference was implanted when the colonisers used their military prowess to curtail the business and cultural links that prevailed
between the two civilisations of the East, India and Egypt. Ghosh uses trade and travel as a metaphor to highlight the spirit of syncretism and respect for cultures that characterised the medieval times. James Clifford comments,

“The story delivers a sharp critique of a classic quest – exoticist, anthropological, Orientalist – for pure traditions and discrete cultural differences.”

The synagogue of Ben Ezra in the medieval ages embodied cultural syncretism fostered by the influx of traders who came to Egypt from the different parts of the Arab World especially Ifriqiya, what is now Tunisia. Abraham Ben Yiju the Tunisian merchant, who later settled down in Mangalore in India belonged to this category and was part of the congregation of the members of the synagogue who deposited all their writings in the Geniza – the storehouse of Egyptian knowledge. Thus travel was a means of cross-cultural assimilation. According to Padmini Mongia,

“Travel and its conditions migrancy and exile – are recurrent concerns of many postcolonial writers and for Clifford in Routes and Ghosh in In an Antique Land as well as his other works, travel is a compelling metaphor for knowing.”

The Geniza is also an example of the synthesis of Arab and Jewish traditions, of their affinity in the past. The trade that was carried out in the waters of the Indian Ocean between these Egyptian merchants with their counterparts in India is a beautiful example of cultural assimilation, religious tolerance and communal harmony. The relations between the traders of these two ancient civilisations transcended all boundaries of race, culture, religion and history. Ben Yiju stayed in India for
seventeen years and had a very trusted and faithful Indian slave, Bomma, who was no less than a family member. Ben Yiju married an Indian woman, Ashu who belonged to the Nair community and bore him children. The Egyptian traders carried out business transactions with a diverse set of Indian traders spread across different regions of India and more particularly with the Hindu Gujaratis of the ‘Vania’ or trading caste. These relations prevailed across generations. For instance, it was Madmun, Ben Yiju’s friend, in Aden who handed down those connections to Ben Yiju.

The ties forged by trade were so close that ‘Madmun’s Kinsman, the Nakhuda Mahruz (in a letter written for him by Ben Yiju), once remarked of a ship owner called ‘Timbu,’ probably of Tamil extraction, that, between him and me there are bonds of inseparable friendship and brotherhood.24

This religious and cultural affinity, the personal ties between the traders, their association that had endured over centuries was ended by the arrival of European navigators in India. They came with a different set of business rules, mainly with the intention of capturing Indian market and establishing their economic domination. Coupled with their strong military forces they forced the Indian ruler, the Samudraraja of Calicut to compel Arab traders to go back to Egypt.

Ghosh discusses the repercussions of the process of imperialism in the 20th century as he recounts his own experiences in the two visits that he made to Egypt. One in 1980 as a research scholar, pursuing his doctorate in Social Anthropology and another in 1988 to one of its villages, Lataifa.
During his first visit to Lataifa as a tenant with Abu Ali, Ghosh had observed the simple, rustic folk engaged in the strict observance of local customs and religious practices. Every villager young or old sincerely attended to the call of muezzin for prayer and fasted during the entire month of Ramadan. The villagers honoured the celebration of ‘Mowlid’, a fair held in honour of a saint’s birthday.

From the Geniza records Ghosh recollected the cultural bonds and dialogue that the Egyptians and Indians shared in the medieval era. His experiences in Egypt made him increasingly conscious of the wide gulf that now separated the people of the two countries. He is frequently questioned by the rustics about India and its peculiar religious customs and rituals. “What is this ‘Hinduki’ thing?…. If it is not Christianity nor Judaism nor Islam what can it be? Who are its prophets?” (AL-47)

The religious differences and practices surprised them. They constantly asked questions like:

“Is it true what they say about you? That in your country people burn their dead? … Is it true that you worship cows?” (AL-125)

It shocked the Egyptians to learn that Indians/ Hindus did not undergo circumcision. And as the word means ‘impure’ in Arabic, the idea was extended to all the Indians whom they considered impure. In Ben Yiju’s time religious or cultural differences hardly interfered in the forging of bonds of business, friendship or marriage. The marriage of Ben Yiju, a Jew with Ashu, an Indian is a fine example of the level of mutual