CHAPTER - 3

Being and Memory :
Reading Three Novels
of Amitav Ghosh
The present chapter explores the issues of partitioning of the self and its external causes and manifestations along with the subtle transformations of self to its fantastic, magical and often to an imagined world to which it belongs under circumstances of trauma and turbulence. Amitav Ghosh’s three novels, namely, *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Glass Palace* (2002) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004) are descriptions of a complex play of memory, identity and experience that shapes historicity on the one hand and on the other provides an alternative to quotidian ways of looking at reality. All the three novels discuss the displacement and traumas of being an other in the social context of contest over place and identity that situates individuals in time and space of experience. Ghosh produces powerful images and narratives of lived experiences that do not fall into the trappings of a metaphysical determination of what is decided by impersonal events and circumstances. It is rather a participatory structure of narratives that ties up the reader and the narrator to a renewed context of understanding one’s own life and experience.
This chapter aims at developing the thematic of Partition through *Shadow lines* and *Glass Palace*. Shadow Lines recounts the effects of homelessness on Bengali populace in the realm of memory. *Glass Palace* presents a more direct account of a slow process of settlement and displacement that spans over a century, but effects three generations of Bengalis/Indians of Indo-Myanmarese origin. This thematic finds its magic realistic effects in the rapidly changing landscapes and humanscapes of *Hungry Tide*. In all, the three novels brings out the extraordinary human condition that throws up a new understanding of historicity of events in human life. Such historicized and personalized narratives of Ghosh share a strange existential predicament with Kafka’s a little extreme characters. Shorn off their respective peculiarities, the trauma and the persecution of selves are a common denominator to both. It is to be noted here that Ghosh’s travels and travails through distant spaces and transformations of identities of various narrators present a Kafka like in-determination of self-identity that links up Ghosh to the master-text of existential predicament.

**Memory and Identity**

*Shadow Lines*\(^1\) poses the problem of fuzziness of national identities and their territorial limits. Shadows are representational artifacts that mark blurring of
boundaries between reality and imagination, between place and displacement. Ghosh uses the metaphor of 'shadow' as against the ocular and the visible in order to give a psychoanalytic depth to the space of imagination of his characters. One needs to understand the psychoanalytic depth of these characters in order to unravel the myriad experiential contours of post-partition life. Ghosh transforms the chronicle like events of Partition into fictional shadow lines that not only define our human shape but our inner struggles to choose between darkness and light, are an intricate part of all human existence. Shadows, like time, are both tangible and intangible at any given moment or realm of perspective. They are a fleeting, generically depicted, generally distorted representations of ourselves, and they can only be viewed in the proper light. Ghosh portrays that the death of Tridib during the riots of Partition is the dark side of a supposedly exciting life of travel and its associated knowledge of cultures that define an inquisitive and probing self-identity of Tridib. Ghosh utilizes the resources of Tridib's knowledge to portray the political and cultural background of such knowledges that is also experiential and that which grows out of myriad situations of life.

Ghosh investigate the issues of nation and belonging as they ponder the legacies of one of the most violent events
in history: the 1947 Partition of India, which divided the subcontinent into India and Pakistan along arbitrary lines that were to separate Hindu and Muslim communities. Ghosh examines the entrenched emotional boundaries that mirror the political ones constituted by the division.

Ghosh’s novel encourages the reader to side with a nameless male cosmopolitan narrator rather than with the narrator’s cousin and (distorted) mirror image Ila Datta-Chaudhuri, who does not know where she comes from because she spent her childhood in constant movement as a daughter of a U.N. official. Although there is a gap of a whole generation’s experience between the two women and thus both the circumstances and conditions constituting their displacement are radically different, the two female exiles can serve as an appropriate illustration of why the model of disembodied cosmopolitanism does not work for women. Ila is an example fitting the idea that many people find themselves exiles without really having moved very far; she lost her family home because of the redrawing of the national borders which accompanied Partition. Ila chooses to live abroad in hopes of evading the communal, patriarchal expectations that bourgeois women in India are supposed to fulfill, only to find similar patriarchal binaries at work in England. Ila clearly lived in what
can be termed as a “space of displacement,” which is not a comfortable space for them. Although this floating, homeless female character seem to intuit that to find a space of belonging she has to start with defiance of traditional roles ascribed to women by culture, they remain caught in the hierarchical binaries of active/passive, mind/body, on the passive and corporeal side of the binary and thus excluded from the possibility of defining her own positioning. The emptiness of the lives of this woman, her relentless and ineffectual search for a home of her own definition, her inescapable dependence on men and the ways in which men’s perceptions of her bound her to her body and its symbolic meanings raise serious doubt about the status of being global. Doesn’t global bring back all the variables of smallish identity? In an existential sense, the unnamed woman bera the unfair burden of alterity to the displacement of Tridib in the so called consmopolitan global space. The main axis of difference is constructed along the attitudes to travel and home, or rootlessness and belonging, in which it is the narrator and Tridib who stay or return home and are rooted in their nation and history, whereas the woman character is a migrant and she is in search of belonging.

Ghosh provides Tridib and the narrator with an imaginative space of travel, who ‘know few boundaries’. 
In a way, the men become the 'feeling set loose in the world' of Rushdie's vision, because their mobility does not involve their bodies and thus frees them from the restrictive authority of borders, passports, and visas. The narrator cherishes Tridib's influence on his life as the one who "had given me [him] the worlds to travel in and he had given me [him] the eyes to see them with" (SL:20). The imaginative mode of traveling is valued far above the real, corporeal travel of the women. The narrator, in his infatuation with Ila, and Tridib, in the (mainly epistolary) relationship with an Englishwoman, May Price, each prove that desire grows out of the 'mystery of difference', a gap which can be filled with imagination. The gap is portrayed in terms of belonging, 'a man without a country who fell in love with a woman across the seas...' which never matures given Tridib's unfortunate death at the hands of a riotous mob in East Pakistan.

The narrator in The Shadow Lines has an unusual fascination for his second-uncle, Tridib, the eldest son of the Indian diplomat Himangshu Shekhar Dutta-Chaudhuri, abroad. Tridib never 'lives' the story, except through memories of others — the narrator's, his brother Robi's, and lover May's. He is a link that connects them, a shadow line that never materialises. Beginning with the narrator's memories of his early interactions with Tridib, who had 'given me eyes' to see the world with,
the narrative keeps travelling back and forth in time as well as space, moving along with the train of thoughts that shift wildly from Kolata’s Gole Park to Ballygunge, and farther in London’s Brick Lane of the War, or Lymington Road of today and Jindabahar lane in Bangladesh (formerly East-Pakistan).

The outlines of these places are as vivid to the reader as to those who lived in them, or those who did not actually live in them, but could nevertheless invent them through memories of those who did. The lines that divide places and even times are mere shadows, and hence forever trespassed.\(^3\)

Another significant thing to note is that the narrator remains unnamed until the end of the novel and can be, in a way, envisioned as Tridib’s alter ego who vicariously lives time past and all those places that he had never actually visited through Tridib’s eyes. In his intimate and somewhat complicated relationship with his uncle Tridib which the narrator/author explores at length in the novel, he decides that his uncle who was so intricately bound to his life ‘had looked like me’.

Ila is always imagined and depicted by the narrator as the one who initiates sexual play, who offers first awakenings to his boyish desire, and whose sexuality is suspect because it is free from the traditional expectations of his culture. In fact, Ila ends up performing
for him the worldly, sexually unabashed identity that he seems to expect from her: "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). Thus, she proves that indeed they are involved in a power struggle over whose invention of the other person is stronger, and that she realizes that the winners determine the way the losers are seen. One unshakeable memory that Ila fights with, again disproving the narrator's claim about her lack of memory, is of racial discrimination in London. While she is trying to situate herself in the scale of the community of the international schools she attends, she also negates the claim to her lack of imagination or inventiveness. In her stories about the schools, sometimes corroborated by the pictures in her cherished yearbooks, she invents a successful and promiscuous image of herself for the narrator. Sometimes, however, the narrator actually calls her bluff and exposes her position as estranged in the community of a school: absent from party photographs, standing shyly apart from smiling groups. The rejection of her peers originates in her racial difference "at that age [when] children want everyone to be alike" (SL: 76). Probably the most traumatic experience of racism, which Ila reimagines and reformulates into the story of Magda
playing houses with the narrator, takes place in London while she is living with the Prices: on her lonely walk back from school she is assaulted by a girl calling her “bloody wog” (SL:75). In telling the story to the narrator, Ila attempts to compensate for the real moment of rejection and betrayal of her (imaginary?) friend Nick Price with a story of his triumph over her tormentor. Nick, however, who is later to become her untrustworthy husband, hurries home before her and lets Ila down because he is also afraid to be seen “walking home with an Indian” (SL:76). This also assumes an existential meaning of displacement to an other place, where one is simply alienated for no justifiable reason, but because of one’s national and racial identity. Self-identity as an other is susceptible to misrecognition from dominant cultural formations.

On another plank, the narrator’s secret love for his cousin Ila, whom the narrator accuses with ‘lacks’ was forced to remain in the shadows because the feeling itself, was dark in nature. Ila’s enlightenment to her cousin’s feelings for her was good in that it marked a promise of change in her behavior towards him which she hoped would help to dissipate his obsession. From the narrator’s viewpoint, this revelation and his cousin’s subsequent rejection caused him a great deal of emotional distress. Should his feelings have remained
in the shadows, he may not have endured this sharp, heart-stabbing pain, yet he may have been subjected a long, slow torture instead. The answer to whether this truth should have been revealed lies in which kind of pain the narrator finds less troubling. Anything that is considered taboo, such as sexual relations between members of the same family, automatically quivers in the shadows of its own dark truths. Both of the major truths that the grandmother exposed was laden with sexual taboos, which raises the question, should they ever have been exposed at all? In light of the pain they caused, one would think not, but in a world in which truth is the foundation of maturity, how can one claim that any truth should remain \textit{unilluminated}?  

In this manner, Ghosh manages to speak excessively of shadows, darkness and light, weaving them subtly into the context of what he is trying to convey. He uses the terms both realistically and metaphorically to show that the shadow we cast, the one other people can see, is not always an accurate reflection of who we really are. Nick was not the hero he seemed to be and when May reveals this to the boy, they are in the process of moving from light to dark, both in physical environment and knowledge of the truth. In a way, a shadow is like a “fair weather friend” in that it appears to us only when the sun is directly overhead. While every human being casts
a unique shadow, a common theme can be seen in them all, namely that they are just as much a part of us as they are detached from us. This is another realm in which Ghosh metaphorically uses the elements of shadow lines to tell his story.

Ila does not want to agree with Tridib’s conviction that ‘we could not see without inventing what we saw’ because she contends that we can try to ‘just take the world as it is’, the narrator explains that we all have to invent ourselves and the places we are in because otherwise someone else will do it for us: ‘I told her how he had said that we had to try because the alternative was not blankness—it only meant that if we didn’t try ourselves, we would never be free of other people’s inventions’ (SL:31). Ila responds to that with laughter and an assertion that she is free, which again limns her as incapable of understanding her own gendered situation. The narrator makes us aware, however, that at least in the narrative she remains his invention and thus can never free herself of him, exclaiming to her, “If I were to die tomorrow you would not be free of me. You cannot be free of me because I am within you” (italics original, 89). In fact, with the reversal of values, the “active-passive” division is not as definite as it might seem at first, because the mode of travel that the female characters participate in is actually seen as passive, and
imagination is valued as active. That is why, meaningfully, the narrator overlooks or undervalues the effect of the female travelers in the family on his budding interests in the world. This is also why Ila can be described as never having traveled at all, her travels a passive floating orchestrated by her family (SL: 20); and Tha’mma’s travels to Burma are seen by the narrator as travels of a passive companion to her husband. Although the narrator starts the novel with the recollection of his father’s aunt, Mayadebi, who traveled constantly as a diplomat’s wife, he seems to attach the most importance to her role as Tridib’s mother. Still, he idealizes and exoticizes her, treating her as “a well-known stranger, like a filmstar or a politician whose picture I [he] had seen in a paper” (SL:3). As such, she simultaneously becomes somebody alien, whom he does not want to think of as a relative, because that would diminish her exotic value. The narrator’s image of Ila mirrors that of Mayadebi. She “baffles” him repeatedly “with the mystery of difference,” which does not let him see her as either quite “Indian” or quite “Western” (SL:31). When she wears Western clothing, she looks “improbably exotic,” an exoticism he enjoys to such an extent that when she dresses in the traditional Indian clothing he is “disappointed: ever since I [he] could remember, Ila had worn clothes the like of which neither I [he] nor anyone
else I [he] knew in Calcutta had ever seen, and here she was now, dressed in a simple white sari” (SL:18, 81). Consequently, in the narrator’s eyes, the mobility on the global scale and their association with the West endow the women primarily with an exotic sexual allure. *The Shadow Lines* describes no sexual or romantic relationship between two people who share an obvious identity or nationality, race or cultural experience—desire originates, and finds its object, across borders. While the narrator empathizes with Ila, Tha’mma, in the novel located on the opposite to Ila’s pole of alterity as an embodiment of traditional, nationalistic values, is presented as the one who judges her the harshest: “I don’t blame the boy. It was Ila’s fault. It was her own fault, and Maya’s fault, and the fault of that half-witted mother of hers. It was bound to happen: anyone can see that. She has no right to be there. She doesn’t belong there” (SL:77). Clearly, Tha’mma chastises only women in her family for failing to raise Ila to respect tradition. Tha’mma disapproves of Ila because of her Westernization, and thus her flaunting of the “Indian” (or “Bengali”) norms of behavior. She is not alone in such policing of Ila’s conduct. During an outing to a nightclub where Ila asks a stranger to dance, her uncle Robi spells out for Ila the familial and communitarian prohibitive standards of women’s behavior: “You ought
to know that; girls don’t behave like that here. . . . That’s our culture; that’s how we live” (SL:88). Ila notices the patronizing tone of “girls” and the exclusiveness of “we” and “our” culture. Recognizing that staying in India would mean (passive) belonging to her family and community, Ila chooses to live in London to assert her own freedom. Such a form of freedom rouses only Tha’mma’s contempt: “She wants to be left alone to do as she pleases: that’s all that any whore would want” (SL: 89). Ila has no right, in Tha’mma’s nationalist view, to live in England, because to claim belonging to a place, one has to take part in a gory struggle for it: “It took those people a long time to build that country; . . . years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood” (SL:78). Ila betrayed in her own community and then abducted by the West gets betrayed again. In this scenario, her privileged mobility makes their displacement no less poignant and the return home no less impossible. Since the scalar shifts do not free them from containment within abstract, imagined bodies, which carry the meanings and culture of their nation and community, women remain homeless, or exiled in the world of patriarchy. 6 It’s not that Women do not have a territory of our own; but their fatherland, family, home, discourse imprison us in enclosed spaces where we cannot keep
on moving, living, as ourselves. Their properties are our exile.

The *Shadow Lines* is the narrator’s vision of the world that interrogates the viability and relevance of man-made divisions necessitating the various acts of transgressions of these state-codified boundaries through the precise use of imagination as taught by Tridib. The concepts of distance and time are uniquely portrayed in both the physical borders that divide countries and the imaginary borders that divide human beings. From the image-conscious character of the grandmother to the riots that explode in the streets, Ghosh takes the reader on a fascinating journey of exploration, dissecting the characters of the story while simultaneously dissecting the saga of migration across time and space.

**Displacement and Loss of Identity**

Somewhat differently, The *Glass Palace* marks the presentations of rebellions, wars and interwoven relationships, the most striking and provocative feature of *Glass Palace* lies in the thorough, nuanced and unforced discussions and debates on such complex political and ethical subjects as colonialism, servitude, mutiny, societal roles for women and self-rule. One subject especially forceful and well-rendered concerns the dilemma of Indian soldiers in the British army
confronted with the increasing impulses of nationalism. The dizzying array of events, issues and characters in *Glass Palace* reach, of course, epic proportions, but one unifying mainstay is constituted in the overarching, rags-to-riches-to-rags story of Rajkumar, patriarch to some of the characters. As an 11-year-old Indian peasant in Burma, he witnesses the 1885 invasion by British troops and the capture of the fabled Glass Palace, with the subsequent exile of the Burmese royal court, including 10-year-old Dolly, nursemaid to the Second Princess.

The central character of the novel, Rajkumar goes on to make a fortune in the teak trade and to find and marry Dolly. After starting a family and going on to further success in the rubber industry, which collapses in the chaos of World War II, Rajkumar toward the end of his life comes to a conclusion profoundly at odds with his youthful disregard of 'invisible bonds linking people to one another through personifications of their commonality'. In response to the healthy cry of a baby, the opportunistic and self-centered Rajkumar grasps that "At that moment the world held no more beautiful sound than this utterance of rage: this primeval sound of life proclaiming its determination to defend itself." (GP: 478) This has been Rajkumar's existential agony throughout the course of the novel. On the occasion of
his son's death due to Japanese bombings, the description runs like this,
The body was almost unrecognizable, crushed by an immense weight. But despite the terrible disfigurement Rajkumar knew that this was his son and that he was dead. (GP: 463)

Ghosh is also able to generate a surreal and sensuous exchange of love at many places of the novel. But the love is marked by strangeness and starkness that takes the expression of love to its other extreme, that of, laying bare an underside that gets sublimated into ruptures of history. A pertinent plot to mention would be that of Neel's meeting Manju at the Tollygunje studio (GP: sec, 21). The sequence runs in a filmic imperative for recovery—an imaginative project that mobilizes literary resources for its purposes. Hence 'film studios and screen tests' for Manju (GP: 263-8) also act as a space of reclaiming the clothes that she had to undress for the test. In effect, Ghosh uses film studio and the practice of screen test to undo certain discursive limits placed by the history of settlement and migration in the transnational contexts of Burma and India. It is later Jaya's re-discovery of Anglo-Burmese and migrants of indo-Burmese origin migrating to a different locale like Malaysia marks a more redemptive place in his oeuvre. The homology between the story of Rajkumar's thriving
business in Burma and Ilongo Alagappa’s in Malaysia established through observer’s perspectives is a technique of sublimation of the displacement of the self that Ghosh employed at every place. Uma, the collector’s wife, the closest observer in Rajkumar’s life is re-enacted by Jaya, as if events of meeting and lived realities in Burma and Malaysia move in a circle lending the same meanings of life among the Indo-Myanmarese migrants. Through such a circular and yet displaced onto new locales and individuals styles of narration, Ghosh reproduces a reality of the lived experiences that are bygone and yet continuous with the present and the future.

The context of this helplessness and rage is the displacement that follows from Japanese aggression on Burma in 1942. But it had many personal disasters and psychological disorientations attached to it. The psychological disorder is portayed through an account of Manju’s state of mind occasioned by Japanese bombing.

If only she could find some meaning in this, she knew she would be able to restore order to her mind; she would be able to reason in accustomed ways; she would know when and why it was time to feed the baby; she would be able to understand why it was necessary to take shelter, to care for one’s children, to think of the past and the future and
one’s place in the world. She stood with Rajkumar and looked into the sky. There was nothing to be seen but shadows far above and nearer at hand, flames, explosions and noise. (GP:466)

Elsewhere in *Glass Palace*, this kind of yearning for freedom amid the seemingly insurmountable force of despots and dispute finds an echo in another’s realization that ‘while misrule and tyranny must be resisted, so too must politics itself’. It ‘has invaded everything, spared nothing,’ and must not be ‘allowed to cannibalize all of life, all of existence’. There is no escape from politics, but ‘what could be more trivial, in the end’?

Ghosh deconstructs the national premises of identity by focusing our attention on the problem of forgotten histories of migration through which the corpus of specific family histories and their kinship connection unravels a world beyond imaginations of self-identity, that is, to conceive of people at other spaces who bear a strange historical connection with the most resurgent aspect of our own past. That historicity arises from existentially invisible and silent sources of colonial modernity manifest in experiences of characters who find themselves as “subjects” of that history. These “subaltern” characters such as Uma, Dolly, Arjun and Kishan Singh are all subjects of a reconstructive terrain
of 'The Glass Palace-Photo Studio' that spans from early decades of twentieth century to its last decade. Rajkumar's agony of life and death is compounded by his brother Dinu's salient struggle against Junta's censoring regime reveal a structure of deterritorialization.\textsuperscript{8} The way postcolonial states and identities evolve through a struggle for location and national space finds its echoes in Ghosh's deterritorializing narrative agents, especially the exiled and the migrants, who constitute 'rebel consciousness' and longing. If we understand "subaltern" to be a differential relation—are put to instrumental and quantifiable use in the colonial and postcolonial regimes: the knowledge of possible corporeal vulnerability is transformed into both the reality and possibility of human relations. Dinu's struggle for democracy in Myanmar as recounted to Jaya by Illongo reflects back in time and Jaya continues to hold onto the sequential advance of that story by recounting herself her first hand experience of going to Myanmar In Ghosh's landscape of migrants recounting the past, reference to acquaintances and relations acquire the mystical properties of commodity when it enters a chain of "countermemories"\textsuperscript{9},

'Let me see...' Bela paused (...)

'It was Tun-
something. Of course, in Burma, the prefix changes
as you grow older. If you’re a woman it goes from Ma to Daw and if you’re a man, you’re maung and then Ko and then U. So if he were alive today, he would be U Tun...something like that anyway. (GP:496)

This presence of Bela in a moment of Jaya’s reconstruction of her past memory takes her to the present in a counterfactual mode. Jaya goes over to a different locale Malaysia and Illongo sends her a plane ticket, where she will interview him and learn more about Rajkumar’s life. Ghosh uses the existential play of memories that makes one take a flight from reality and reach a destination of one’s desire in both virtual and real sense. The willing displacement from one locale to another follows a trail of history, be it personal or political in order to discover the problematique of contemporary times such as Myanmar Junta and its laws. This reminds us what Agamben has stated about the presumed nexus between life and law,

(...) everything happens as if both law and logos needed an anomic (or alogical) zone of suspension in order to ground their reference to the world of life.¹⁰

Such suspensions flow from the space of memory to the space of life as Jaya’s experience gets mixed up between the past and the present,

Jaya remembered one of Rajkumar’s favourite sayings:”Nowhere do they have such a laughter as
they do in Burma...' Yet it was evident that the laughter here had a special edge, honed upon fears that were never quite absent. (510)
The use of 'nowhere' and 'laughter' in the context of Burma's cultural life brings in a softer irony between perception and reality. This itself is an existential irony that creates every moment of 'suspension' in Glass Palace, such that the occurrence of love necessarily ends in catastrophies. The love between Neel and Manju finds its ultimate in Manju cutting her hair with scythe and cutting her scalp (464-5) and then drowning herself in an unnamed river. Rajkumar's love with Dolly took the form of a caring relationship, but it was torn apart, as Dolly left Rajkumar in an unknown territory to search for Dinu, whose location is not known to his family members. Such was the effect of 'war' in personal lives that Manju on an occasion of air raid experiences this.
The planes were far up in the sky, barely visible, like the shadows of moths. She longed for them to come closer; close enough to see a face. She longed to know what kind of being this was the felt free to unleash this destruction: what was it for? What sort of creature could think of waging war upon herself, her husband, her child-a family such as hers-for what reason? Who were these people who took it upon themselves to remake the history of the world? (GP:466)
In a sense, this reflects the state of being in the locale of Myanmar. Manju’s relation to herself and family members stand shattered in an existential agony that is induced by the war. This shattered life finds its pathological manifestation in displacement of populace from Myanmar to India and South Asia. Ghosh narrates the saga of human displacement,

(...) Everyone was heading in the same direction: towards the northern, landward passage to India—a distance of more than thousand miles. They had their possessions bundled on their heads; they were carrying children on their backs; wheeling elderly people in carts and barrows. Their feet had stirred up a long, snaking cloud of dust that hung above the road like a ribbon, pointing the way to the northern horizon. They were almost all Indians. (GP: 467)

All these were happening before the event of Partition of 1947. But one could say that Partition is in continuity to this saga of human displacement. Jaya, a child during 1942 was traveling with her mother and grand-parents to a safe place in Myanmar. Now a grown up lady, a historian by vocation, is helped by her aunt to reconstruct what was happening then,

In Lankasuka no one ever spoke of Dinu—neither Rajkumar, nor Uma nor Bela. No one knew what had become of him. (GP: 486)
Dinu, being removed from his brother and had to face the tyranny of life in the regime of General Ne Win and he ‘was among many millions who had vanished into the darkness’. Jaya, the surviving next generation researcher also suffered in a personal tragedy, when she lost her husband in an accident in Myanmar. Ghosh mixes up political, historical and personal to figure out the extent of displacement that happened to Myanmarese Indians since the world war II.

Communities and individuals (dis)placed in an alien environment and their efforts to stabilize their lives in that environment has been a recurrent theme in Ghosh’s novels, the two issues mentioned above being the central theme of both the novels *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace* and to certain extent even *The Hungry Tide*. This idea of displacement corresponds to many Indian lives who have been victims of partition, and also to the contemporary situation where displacement / exile has become a common condition – the exile being the involvement with the act of crossing the national border, a phenomenon that Edward Said had defined as an “ascetic mode of willed homelessness.” This could be a reason why his novels are accepted by modern readers as narratives to which the contemporary technological world can relate itself. Another aspect of Ghosh’s narratives is his fascination with forgotten
worlds (not forgotten past) – Burma, Sundarban – and presenting them in a manner so as to suit the contemporary situations. One can surmise that Ghosh’s technique is simply to borrow the war-journalists tripod lenses and so forth and then swivel his view finder so that it alights on families living out their lives in tumultuous times. It just happens that the subjects of The Glass Palace are Burmese citizens, but one can easily imagine Ghosh ‘photographing’ Afghan refugees or Kashmiri Pandits using the same documentary method. Indeed, he has used the strategy with success in several previous works – dealing, for example, with the enigma of a divided Bengal in The Shadow Lines or establishing homely connections with the conventionally ‘poetic’ Egypt in In An Antique Land. As Ghosh says about his mentor Satyajit Ray that one of his greatest strength was his ability to resolve enormously complex plots and themes into deceptively simple narrative structures, the same could be said of Amitav Ghosh.

**Transience of Human Relations**

In Ghosh’s narratives there seems to be a continuous flux between illusion and reality. As Ghosh’s narrator acknowledges that initially he believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that it is a
corporeal substance. The narrator believed in the reality of nations and borders, but later he comes to another understanding sitting in the air-conditioned calm of an exclusive library. Ghosh's narrative journey moves into a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances, as if the whole concept of space / border is an illusion, thus he heightens the dilemma between the illusory and the real. In each of his novels the real locales such as; Calcutta, Dhaka and London in *The Shadow Lines*, Burma in *The Glass Palace* and the Sundarban in *The Hungry Tide* are presented in a manner so as to create an illusion however not allowing the reader to forget the real, thereby displacing the readers attention but not destroying it. It is probably this displacement of attention and the search for the real that prompts the reader to continue reading till the very end. But does a narrative end? It may be mentioned that there is a tendency of closure in narratives, but a narrative never closes and it leaves multiple openings at the end. These openings are created within what Michel Foucault had called 'subject effect', the effect of a discourse, representation and act. Ghosh creates 'subject effect' by way of reproducing a discourse of belonging and knowing a landscape and a humanscape. Sunderban, as a locale is a part of Ghosh's literary landscape having a complex play of elements of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar.
Ghosh describes a fictional “Sunderban” in order to narrate how tides wash off its transient human relations. Ghosh explores this transience of human relations not merely as a natural event, but an event that marks human-animal collaboration and conflict. In a causal sense, nature’s fury and breakdown of human-animal relationship are symptomatic of human displacement in Sunderban. Also it turns out to be a source of having a sense of one’s own particular and self-referential identity in the contours of displacement.\textsuperscript{12}

Ghosh builds on a history of environmental science and love for Nature. He brings back the memory of a British meteorologist, Henry Piddington, who had warned the colonial government of India in 1854 that its plans to build a new port south of Calcutta were doomed. Piddington knew that the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans, an archipelago of tiny, muddy islands at the mouth of the Matla River, protected the Bengal coastline from storms. This unique environment—today, one of the last habitats of the Royal Bengal tiger and the Asian river dolphin—is the setting of \textit{The Hungry Tide}, a contemporary story that adds to Sunderban’s significance by way of mobilizing the history of existential losses and concerns for its well-being certainly with deep historical roots. Piddington appears as a minor character (281-88), writing a frantic letter to the viceroy: “There
would come a day when a great mass of salt water would rise up in the midst of a cyclone and drown the whole settlement.” Piddington was ignored, and five years after its completion, the new port, which was to be a peer of Bombay, Singapore and Hong Kong, was destroyed by a tsunami.

As in his previous novels, especially *The Shadow Lines* and *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh has explored the devastating effects of colonialism in this part of the world, and *The Hungry Tide* continues the project, drawing a brilliant analogy between the unique ecology of the Sundarbans and their violent human history. In the novel as in life, the Sundarbans remain one of the few places on earth where humans and nature are equally matched. His characters are also drawn from a background of sharing ecological knowledge with deep humane concern.

Among the characters, Piya is a marine biologist, raised in the United States, who cannot even speak her mother tongue, Bengali. But with typical American chutzpah, she ventures out into the treacherous rivers that crisscross the Sundarbans to study the elusive river dolphins and promptly ends up in the muddy waters. The man who rescues her from a crocodile is Fokir, a young illiterate fisherman. They have no language in common, but their bond is so powerful Piya decides to
hire him for her research. But this time she takes along an interpreter, Kanai, an entrepreneurial businessman who had befriended her on the train.

What could have been a standard-issue love triangle, shot through with shards of class and cross-cultural confusion, becomes a much bigger story. The Sundarbans had in the '70s seen a bloody confrontation between refugees who had “settled” the uninhabited island of Marichjhapi and the government, which sought to evict them from “reservation land.” As it turns out, Kanai’s idealistic uncle and aunt had been part of that story, and Fokir’s mother had died in that conflagration.

Kusum was Kanai’s childhood sweetheart; later, Saar fell in love with her, too. Saar died trying to lend a hand (and his almost dried-up ideals) to the people’s cooperative set up on the island of Morichjhâpi, where Kusum settled. Eventually, the police evacuated the “squatters” – but Kusum’s son, Fokir, survived. It is he who later rescues Piya when corrupt and officious forest guides knock her into the waters. His knowledge of the river proves invaluable to the cetologist, and together Piya and Fokir discover important facts about Irrawaddy dolphins and fall in love.

Piya and Kanai had met on the train. Kanai has his eye on the pretty, young American and tells her to look him up in Lusibari. His aunt, Mashima, runs a women’s
hospital, which supports the rights of the poor who make their uncertain homes on the flood terrain. Kanai’s uncle (known with mispronounced respect as Saar and dead before the story begins) ran the local schoolhouse. Mashima discovers a manuscript he left behind that is addressed to their nephew, and invites Kanai to look it over.

Kanai’s interest is captured by Nirmal’s journal, especially its telling of the bloody clash in 1979 between the Indian government and the desperate refugees who had illegally occupied and settled the village of Morichjhapi. Ghosh skillfully uses the true story of the siege of the village as a background for an unlikely and poignant romance that develops between the retired schoolteacher Nirmal and the object of his desire. That long-ago romance, now only accessible to Kanai in the pages of his uncle’s journal, lives anew in the nebulous triangle that unexpectedly develops among Kanai, Piya, and Fokir, the mysterious, almost mystical fisherman who saves Piya’s life and becomes her guide through the tiger- and crocodile-infested swamps of the Sundarbans. The story gathers momentum once the three of them set sail in search of the Orcaella dolphins. From this point on, the novel becomes a good, old-fashioned adventure story. The tigers that prowled the Sundarbans and

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dominated the mythology and legends of the islands
suddenly stage an appearance. For example,
Suddenly Fokir lowered himself to a crouch and
touched her knee (Piya's), making a small, barely
perceptible gesture. She saw that he was pointing
across the island, to another thicket of trees:
following his finger, she saw a tiger pulling itself out
of water and into a tree, on the far side of the island.
It seemed to have been following storm's eye, like
the birds, resting whenever it could. (...) Without
blinking, the tiger watched them for several minutes;
during this time it made no movement other than to
twitch its tail.(HT: 389)
Ghosh subtly describes the deep, unspoken bond that
develops between the tiger and the storm, Piya and
Fokir- a bond that echoes the vitality of nature as the
spontaneous life-force In a moment of storm that both
Fokir and Piya were caught in, Ghosh narrates,
(...) The wind was now coming at them from opposite
direction. Where she had had the tree trunk to
shelter her before, now there was only Fokir's body.
Was this why he had been looking for another branch
on another tree? Had he known, right from the start
that his own body would have to become her shield
when the eye had passed? (...) Their bodies were so
close, so finely merged that she could feel the impact
of everything hitting him, she could sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed upon her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one. (HT: 390)

Ghosh produces an image of an existential communion between Fokir and Piya not just in the context of abstract and experiential knowledge of Sunderban, but deepens their mutual and reciprocal relationship in a moment of storm that leave them to each other. It is a return to a shelter seeking subjectivity of the violently displaced individuals, who, being mutually alienated also forge a bond, a bond that gets deepened only by accident. Ghosh could have knotted Piya and Fokir into a conjugal relationship, but the existential import of such a relationship in the context of Sunderban is rather unbecoming of a stable partnership. It is rather a loose and momentary embrace trying to set itself in a calm and steady world of certainty, the world that is always invaded by human and natural disasters.

Ghosh is also adept at convincing us that the gap between the established, settled Kanai and the wandering, gypsy-like Piya is equally unbridgeable, despite their shared middle-class backgrounds. Thus the past and present of various characters are braided together much
like the landscape of the Sundarbans itself, where land and water, river and sea intersect over and over again. In Bengali, the confluence of many rivers with the sea is a mohona. This is a novel of many mohonas, literally many openings.

It’s an apt metaphor — Piya and Fokir might come from the same stock, but couldn’t be more different — like river and sea at the mohona. As Kanai chides Piya, ‘What you see as fauna, he (Fokir) sees as food.’

“The Hungry Tide” offers no pat solution. On one hand, Ghosh deftly demolishes the hubris of man defying nature, as when the British viceroy Lord Canning creates the town of Port Canning in the Sundarbans, only to have a mighty storm flatten it. But Piya’s environmentalism has no easy answers either for the plight of the Fokirs of the world, the poorest of the poor, the dispossessed. When Piya exclaims at the horror of the destruction of a tiger, Kanai wonders, “Isn’t that a horror too — that we can feel the suffering of an animal but not of human beings?”

Ghosh’s description of the cyclone that hits the area — alternating between the fate of Piya and Kanai, who have gone their separate ways rings as an existential predicament of transience of human relations. Piya and Fokir can’t even argue about these issues. Shorn of words, their relationship is urgent, bristling with goose
bumps, but it cannot be labeled. But in the Sundarbans, sometimes something is all the more powerful, even mythic, for not being named. This, after all, is the land where the denizens never speak the name of the tiger, fearing that even uttering it will summon the beast. In fact, everybody falls in love, everybody discovers important facts. Kanai – smug, intelligent and a snob – learns to appreciate the deeper, unspoken sex appeal of a man like Fokir. Piya stumbles upon her life's work and acquires a taste both for high ambition and for the company of the unambitious – for men like Fokir. She is torn between the poetry of his unspoilt life and the attraction of Kanai's prosaic routines. The novel quotes liberally from Rilke. Local legends are frequently retold. The water wins out in the end. The novel ends with an epilogue that narrates the death of Fokir, whom Piya longed for in the thick and thin of their search in Sunderban. Given Ghosh’s minimalist prose and understated emotions, "The Hungry Tide" leaves one — well, hungry, for more of an emotional connection. One sees that in these three narratives ‘travel’ into difficult human situations that metaphorically reconstructs concrete experiences. Almost all the characters of these narratives are involved in a movement, often towards a crash, but narratively
retrieved either in the first person or in the second person. The characters of Ghosh’s novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but ‘dwell in travel’ in cultural spaces that flow across borders – the ‘shadow lines’ drawn around modern nation state. Everyone is on the move and they have been for centuries: dwelling-in-travel and it is this movement that is pivotal not merely in the three narratives under consideration but also his other novels such as *The Circle of Reason* and *In an Antique Land*. It is because of Ghosh’s paramount interest in travel that it gets reflected in his novels and could be suggestive of an autobiographical element in his narratives. For example, the pivotal figure of Rajkumar in *The Glass Palace* seems an in-text metaphor for Ghosh’s own authorial persona, as he perceives himself. Like Ghosh, Rajkumar is a boundary-crosser, who makes several transitions across national frontiers during his life-time but he is also a man so absolutely focused that he creates his own destiny, his own history.

Another issue in almost all his fictions is his use of ‘land’ as a metaphor thus binding his narratives and rendering a commonality to them. In *The Glass Palace* he narrates about the displaced who leave their ‘land’ to settle in another alien ‘land’ and the anarchy and disturbance caused by each change. In a review in *The New York Times*, Pankaj Mishra describes Ghosh as one
of few post colonial writers “to have expressed in his work a developing awareness of the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of colonized people as they figure out their place in the world.” In The Shadow Lines too, Ghosh, through the anonymous narrator seems to pose the question, what is home and whether there is any such thing as a discrete homeland separable from one’s experience elsewhere. Again the idea of home as expressed by Piya in The Hungry Tide, hints at a romantic concept. For her, home is where the Orcaella (a specific variety of dolphin) are, and so a justification of her staying back in the Sundarban. But for Nilima, the committed social worker home is where she can “brew a cup of good tea.”! However, in The Hungry Tide, there is an apparent shift, as Ghosh gives expression to the idea of transition – “Life is lived in transformation” – the line from Rilke reverberates throughout the narrative. The very locale, - the Sundarban – is a symbol of change “.....where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable” (HT: 7)

The unexpected connections forged between cultures, histories, events, world-views, class, mythologies that present many sources of existential dislocation. Ghosh tries to historicize such dislocations by narrating them in a context that imbricates the human saga in all its finer details and complexities. This can be seen as a
narrative hinting at the contemporary phenomenon of globalisation where there is continuous hybridization. Further, Ghosh’s attempt to demonstrate fallibilities of systemic political and social structures gets very well corroborated in what Existentialist during post war Europe had already described as the essential no-thingness of human selves. Such an essential no-thingness constitute a non-categorical connection between Ghosh and Kafka in existential plights of their fictional characters which can be supplemented by Urvashi Butalia’s more real life instantiations.

Endnotes:

1 Amitav Ghosh, The Shadow Lines (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 1988). All other references to this text will appear with page number in parentheses.


Truth grasped in the sense of apperception as in Kant produce an antinomy between reason and belief. This creates a indecision about truth. Kant calls it the 'power' to determine one's self from self. See, Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London, Macmillan, 1933), A 534, B 562.


Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (New Delhi: Harper Collins UK, 2000). All references to this text is in parentheses with abbreviation GP.

Concept of deterritorialization contributes to understanding migrants and denationalized peoples and groups in the globalized world. For its original use, see, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guttari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984): 56-8.


Edward Said, op. cit., p. 132.