Chapter 4
Historiographic Reconstruction

As a record of social life and as a discipline which describes and analyses events and character which figure in it, history has become increasingly unstable and problematic. Debates on its ontological and epistemological status have reached a fevered pitch. Still we admit the possibility that the novelist can and does use history in multiple ways and for various effects. He incorporates, reconstructs, or reinterprets the past in diverse ways. T.N. Dhar observes:

History can be romanticized, sensationalised, interrogated and problematized. The novelist may critique it, satirize it, play with it, even trivialize it. All these different purposes can not only have far-reaching implications for his fiction, but also determine his arrangement of events and characters, his choice of the modes of presentation and narrative strategies (27).

The older conceptions of the historical novel virtually presuppose that the novel deals with the past almost like an epic; that it incorporates it as a pre-formed thing, and treats it almost with reverence. But what is more important is to examine the kind of self-consciousness he brings to his effort, the different strategies he employs to realize his ends, and the manner in which all these impinge on the shape and style of his novels.
Indian novelists like Mulk Raj Anand, Nayantara Sahgal, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and O.V. Vijayan have reworked the historical material in a variety of ways. Anand’s novels provide his understanding of the British rule in India and the modes of resistance which people built to fight it. He dramatizes the dialectical tension between the divine and the humanistic modes of historical change. Nayantara Sahgal deftly combines personal and public history by intertwining the past of individual lives with India’s historical past. In the process she has produced a variety of disguised history of post-independence India. In tune with new developments in the interface of history and fiction in the West, especially in the culture of postmodernism, Salman Rushdie has injected a new dimension into our novelists’ encounter with history. Like most of his Western counterparts, he problematizes historical discourse by employing the historiographic metafictional mode. He consciously broke away from the realistic tradition of novel-writing which is still current and popular in the country, because he thought that his involvement with historical and cultural questions related to the country called for new experimental strategies. Shashi Tharoor and O.V. Vijayan recreate, reinterpret, critique and problematize history indirectly through narrative procedures which are non-mimetic and strategies which operate through contrived mechanisms and schemas.

Rushdie, Tharoor and Vijayan question and problematize the tendency of historians to present totalised views of the past, irrespective
of the motivations behind it. The metafictional historiography, reflects all the significant trends that stress the fluid relationship between fiction and history. By distrusting continuities and recognizing heterogeneous discourses, it also accepts that historical meaning is unstable, contextual, relational and provisional. Amitav Ghosh too employs historiographic reconstruction to promote narrative as an alternative mode of knowledge to the scientific on which has been founded the Western imperial enterprise.

The basic idea that seems to underlie his writings is that history, like culture and knowledge is not an absolute entity, but a construct. So it is possible to reconstruct it with intuition. Ghosh discloses his conviction about the fluidity of history in a letter written to withdraw *The Glass Palace* from the competition for the Commonwealth Writer’s prize. About the writer’s freedom of choice in reconstructing history he writes:

That the past engenders the present is of course undeniable; it is equality undeniable that the reasons why I write in English are ultimately rooted in my country’s history. Yet the ways in which we remember the past are not determined solely by the brute facts of time: they are also open to choice, reflection and judgement (“Commonwealth” 21).
It is implied that history is telling a story about the past, that there is no single unalterable history, but histories constructed in accordance with the prevalent power structure of that time. As an academic discourse, it had shown a tendency to look upon Europe as the sovereign theoretical subject constructed by tales told to the colonized by imperialism. As a result of this, all other histories came to be looked upon as varied manifestations of the European master narrative. In the Indian context, the colonial discourse had remoulded historiography through the discourse and practice of modernity, and a forced homogenisation of the cultural diversity of India. Along with this, European concepts of social formation like the Feudalist, Capitalist, Modern and the like found their way into the Indian ethos. Dipesh Chakrabarty in his essay “Post-coloniality and the Artifice of the History” carves out a beautiful pen picture of this social transformation in colonial India. He writes:

Indian history, even in the most dedicated socialist or nationalist hands remains a mimicry of a certain ‘modern’ subject of ‘European’ history and is bound to represent a sad figure of luck and failure. The transition narrative will always remain ‘grievously incomplete’ (239).

This deficiency of the transition narrative betrays the incapacity of Indian historiography to forge an idiom conforming to the peculiar
cultural condition of India. So the only possible mode of self representation that the Indian can adopt is what Homi K. Bhabha calls ‘mimetic’, relegating itself to a position of subalternity. A study of the issue of Indians representing themselves in history reveal that colonial Indian history abounds in instances where they presumed subject hood themselves by way of anti-historical and antimodern collective memory. *The Glass Palace* provides excellent examples of this self willed subaltern feeling of the Indians as represented in the narration: “Many of them were uneasy about this: their relationship with their British officers was the source of their pride and prestige. To serve under Indians was a dilution of this privilege” (*The Glass Palace* 281). Again, the desolation of inescapability from the colonial baggage stares out through the argument of Arjun with Dinu:

Did we ever have a hope? [...] we rebelled against an Empire that has shaped everything in our lives; coloured everything in the world as we know it. It is a huge indelible stain which has tainted all of us. We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves. And that, I suppose, is where I am [...] (*TGP* 518).

Colonial India had witnessed a variety of struggles in which anti-historical constructions of the past provided very powerful forms of collective memory which in a disciplined and regulated form is nothing
but history. It is in the efforts to represent the originality and the distinction of Indianness that the anti-historical devices of memory and the anti-historical histories of the subaltern classes are appropriated.

A disclosure of the entanglement of history with the nation state in the Indian context involves an insertion of the ambivalences, contradictions coercions and tragedies into the history of modernity. However, the repression and violence that were instrumental in the victory of the modern is played down in histories that celebrate the advent of the modern state. Commenting on this phenomenon, Dipesh Chakrabarty writes:

Histories that aim to displease a hyper real Europe from the centre towards which all historical imagination currently gravitates will have to seek out relentlessly this connection between violence and idealism that lies at the heart of the process by which the narratives of citizenship and modernity come to find a natural home in ‘history’ (243).

The impact of colonialism was such that the subject races were estranged from their traditional way of life founded on love and fellow feeling. Instead, they began to nurture hatred and greed for power, emulating the model held before them by the colonizer. Historicity is Amitav Ghosh’s favourite trope profusely employed to expose this hideous shadow-side of colonialism in his novels. The Glass Palace
presents eloquent instances like this effluent articulation of Uma Dey, the alter ego to Rajkumar the protagonist, that show the sordid side of European colonialism:

Think of the evils you have listed: racialism, rule through aggression and conquest. Is the Empire not guilty of all of this? How many tens of millions of people have perished in the process of this Empire’s conquest of the world—in its appropriation of entire continents? I don’t think there could ever be an accounting of the numbers. Worse still, the Empire has become the ideal of national success—a model for all nations to aspire to. Think of the Belgians, racing off to seize the Congo—they killed ten or eleven million people there. And what was it they wanted other than to create a version of this Empire? (TGP 294).

History can be seem to operate in accordance with a fixed agenda that seek to naturalise and domesticate heterogeneity by way of coercion, both physical and institutional. It is significant in the establishment of meaning, in the creation of truth, and in deciding the master and the slave. This elucidates Europe’s acquisition of the epithet “modern” which ingrained the latent potency of imminent colonial expansion as witnessed by global history. The reciprocal relationship between history and culture has become instrumental in the establishment and continuance of
colonialism. The colonizers took fullest advantage of this history-culture nexus in confining the colonized as inferior and submissive by deliberate devaluation of ethnic cultures and denial of their history. This has resulted in the cultural displacement of the colonized, proving itself as the most persistent colonial aftermath. The intrusion of colonial culture and ideology or the cultural collision has invited “a defence of indigenous culture developed almost simultaneously with the colonial conquest” (B. Chandra 89).

The colonial masters recreated in *The Glass Palace* characteristically reveal their diligence in keeping the natives submissive, away from any possible infestation of decolonisation. This cerebral supremacy that the colonizer West exercised over the natives peep out in Saya John’s words:

> What makes you fight, I would ask them”, “When you should be planting your fields at home?” “Money”, they’d say, and yet all they earned was a few annas a day, not much more than a dockyard coolie. For a few coins they would allow their masters to use them as they wished, to destroy every trace of resistance to the power of the English (*TGP* 29).

The colonial experience had been nightmarish, laden with a sense of pain and suffering for those who were destined to live through those
troubled times. Hence Ghosh suggests that history, which for the colonized had always been dictated by the metanarratives is to be remembered as having a bearing upon the present. Hence the novel *The Glass Palace* employs a collage of fiction, memories and history to re-member the past as pervading into the present multi-ethnic, culturally diverse, pluralist society of the post-colonial situation. Ghosh has made it clear that the issue of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace*. The novel repeatedly employs the metaphor of the glass palace of Mandalay fort to suggest the emergence of an awakened self-consciousness among the different sections of the colonized that gradually attained wider dimensions of a national independence movement. The metamorphosis among the colonized people is induced by their, “struggle to gain a sense of subjectivity, to come to terms with the complex inter-connections between economic, political and cultural developments, in the colonial world” (Gupta 246).

Fiction here proves itself the best in giving identity to those who refuse to be contained within any frame. The multiplicity of the human self is metaphorically unfolded by juxtaposing individuals in similar but historically distanced life situations. Thus historicity is employed here for an uncommon purpose of revealing the plurality of the human self.

The post-colonial temperament of homelessness and nonbelonging or alienation typify the historical condition created by the
ravages of colonialism. *The Glass Palace* has such a pack of protagonists, displaced and buffeted about by the gales of history from Burma to India, Malaya, Singapore and back again, each time repeating the very same pattern of action. Ghosh here exploits the possibilities of fiction in providing identity for those actors marginalised and dropped out in the historical chronicle. The emotive magnification of unrecorded lives and voices personalizes history and makes it plausible. By dwelling on minute details and bestowing keen attention on ordinary lives which the historian’s stricter annals cannot afford, a sort of interior history is created. This internalised record of emotions and explicit factual accounts run parallel, mutually complimenting to reach a point of intersection where story meets history, adding to its comprehensibility. Thus the narrative replenishes those empty frames of history from which the colonial subject is missing. Tackling history within the boundary of contemporary fiction, *The Glass Palace* is a meticulous presentation of one of the lesser known theatres of the Second World War, drawn around the repercussions of the fourteen days’ war between the imperial troop and the Burmese army in 1885.

The colonial myth of historylessness attributed to the colonized operates beneath the post-colonial phenomena of alienation and isolation. Hence the decolonising agenda involves confrontation of this historylessness with a “race retrieval” as Wole Soyinka has termed it
(136). Determined to play a significant role in this retrieval of the lost glory through demythification of the Eurocentric metanarratives, the post-colonial novelists consider the historical and the fictional elements as two sides of the same coin and look forward to the “chutnification of history, the grand hope of the pickling of time” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s 459*). Their writings assert that the understanding of European history with non-European archives opens up possibilities of a politics and scheme of alliance between the dominant metropolitan histories and the subaltern peripheral pasts.

The post-colonial urge to historicize in order to validate experiences seems to materialize through *In An Antique Land*, Ghosh’s inter-generic creation epistolary fiction and traveller’s tale where ordinariness along with anthropology assumes historicity. Focusing on this overlapping of history and anthropology Clifford Geertz writes: “a change in the ecology of learning, like so many migrant geese, has driven anthropologist and historian into one another’s territories” (Quoted in Agarwalla 164). The post-colonial disillusionment, scepticism and selfishness is reflected with only superficial differences in each of the characters whom the anthropological researcher of *In An Antique Land* confronts. Abu Ali the gargantuan personifies cupidity as surfaced in the description:

It had long been a point of pride with Abu Ali that he
possessed more – more gadgets, especially – than anyone else in Latiaifa. It was therefore a matter of bitter chagrin to him that he had not been the first person in the village to buy a television set (IAT 26).

Imam Ibrahim emblematises narrow mindedness and bigotry as revealed in his interrogation of the narrator about the Hindu custom of worshipping cows and burning the dead. Spitting discontent and aversion he says

Can’t you see that it’s a primitive and backward custom? Are you savages that you permit something like that? Look at you: you’ve had some education: you should know better. How will your country progress if you carry on doing these things? (IAT 235).

An excellent contrast to the fanatic Imam is the humane and tolerant Sheik Musa, who feels himself a misfit in the modern world due to his evasive stance towards the double edged gifts of science. A nostalgic dejection peeps out through his equanimity as betrayed in his observation that it was better to live in the olden days when there was peace and fear of God. Zaghloul, the weaver is the crudest sample of folk psyche reluctant to change with the times, who remains “miraculously unaffected by the storm of change that was whirling through the village” (IAT 331). Very fond of stories himself, Zaghloul
“had a manner of telling them that was marvellously faithful to the metaphorical resonance of his chosen craft” (IAL 137). Seemingly eccentric, Zaghloul muses at the marvels of the unknown and is immune to changes, thereby serving an alter ego to the younger generation, swiftly taken over by changes. The all-engrossing sweep of change leaves a feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness in life for the younger generation as seen in Nabeel and Jabeer. The former exhibits himself as a sensitive but quiet young man whose remark “It must make you think of all the people you left at home […] when you put that kettle on stove with just enough water for yourself” (IAL 152) reveals his concern of the people around him. However, his ambition to make money and enhance the material status of his family elbows him to Iraq soon to be eclipsed into the “anonymity of history” dictated by the western powers after the Iran-Iraq war and “Operation Desert Storm”.

Amitav Ghosh dismantles the historical material in most of his fictional creations by promoting polyphony and redefines the past through imagination. Imagination is employed as the agency of the historical and personal affinities which enliven the fragmented narrative sources of In an Antique Land. Ghosh draws from and revives a number of sources and traditions that span a varied range of concerns and historical situations, weaving the tale on characters and records retrieved from the archives of history. The grand narratives of European colonization,
Indian nationalism, and the comparatively recent “Operation Desert Storm” serves as the backdrop of the narrative. The novel exploits the potentiality of imagination in vitalizing the fragmented narrations with living voices like that of Nabeel’s who eventually disappear into the anonymity of history engendered by “Operation Desert Storm”. The multiple narrative stands of the novel, are meticulously manipulated to create a fascinating dialectic between history and life. Fragments are skilfully retrieved from the tangled vortex of Eurocentric metanarratives to give voice to the subalterns. Leela Gandhi appreciates the novel for this aspect of patronizing the subaltern and writes : “In an Antique Land explores the relationship between the grand narratives of history and those barely discernible traces ordinary people leave upon the world” (“In an Antique Land : A View” 192). So reverberations of the voice of Amitav himself are heard frequently from the narrative which scans the fringes of the Middle East and India for solid evidences of subaltern histories.

The historical past is neither redeemed nor annihilated but subjected to reinterpreting, revising and re-appropriating as a concept for articulating the cultural codes. What is aimed at is a history that deliberately reveals within the structures of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategy and practices. The role of history in assimilating human solidarity into the projects of the modern state is also brought to light.
The axiomatic relationship between history and literature of a country is emphasized by Ferdinand Brunetiere when he admits that “literature is a product of historical and sociological realities” (quoted in Perkins 154). Establishment of a similar link between literary texts and the culture which engenders them is the domain of historicism. The very process of historicizing is an enlightening experience for those involved in it. The colonized people are constrained in that they have to rely on subjective sources, personal memories and fragments of information for the recreation of their history. Colonialism has so disfigured and displaced their worlds that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to figure out a systematic, chronological history from the remains. However, Amitav Ghosh asserts that these fragmentary histories are as valid as the standardised Eurocentric metanarratives of the colonizers because they are informed by imagination and intuition which are equally valid modes of perception as scientific reason.

A judicious recreation of history is the means by which In an Antique Land unearths the curious similarity of beliefs, myths and legends, and of the cultural approach of the two antique civilizations of India and Egypt till Western imperialism had disrupted that primordial harmony by their astute strategy to subjugate people. In an Antique Land harbours beautiful descriptive that show up the congruity of the two ancient nations. The following articulation is a case in point:
Our countries [...] had always supported each other in the past: Mahatma Gandhi had come to Egypt to consult Saad Zaghloul Pasha, the leader of the Egyptian nationalist movement, and later Nehru and Nasser had forged a close alliance. No Egyptian could ever forget the support that his country received from India during the Suez crisis of 1956, when Egypt had been subjected to an unprovoked attack by the British and the French (IAL 134).

The similarity of India and Egypt is further surveyed in the spiritual realm which reveals to the narrator that the images employed by the Vachanakara saint poets of South India and the Sufi mystics of ancient Egypt has striking parallels. The idea of the devotee’s bondage as slave to God, “the notion of being held by bonds” (IAL 262) was the central metaphor of religious life though the means of realisation varied with various cults, to the extent of extreme antagonism. For instance, the Vachanakara’s idea of merging with God was regarded blasphemous by the Sufi’s. But both regarded the devotee as the slave of God, the master, and their relationship was often expressed in critic metaphors. Historicity is thus employed to underscore the prevalence of harmony among the precolonial civilizations.

The analogy between the cultures of Egypt and India is once again suggested when the anthropological student finds an echo of the
Egyptian legend in the driver’s recounting of an Indian legend. History, fiction and folklore intersect and interpolate in the recounting of the two legends. The former is about Sidi Abu Kanaka’s grave that lay in the way of a canal being built. When the workers tried to remove the grave, it remained stubborn challenging the modern machinery: “And so it happened that the canal was made to take slight diversion there, and on that plot of land the people of the village built a maqam for the Sidi” (IAL 139). The Indian legend recounts the mysterious freezing of bulldozers in the attempt to demolish the Bhuta Shrine of Mangalore to build a road. These parallel incidents are metaphorical manifestation of a realization that there are enormous similarities amongst different societies which have shared in the past similar Gods and pantheons; similar myths and legends and similar cultural activities. The whole book can be viewed as an endeavour to place the past side by side with the present by way of the twin narrative, demythifying the colonial narratives. This commitment of the book in exposing colonial misrepresentations is echoed in the narrator’s comment:

But then it struck me, suddenly, that there was nothing I could point to within his world that might give credence to my story – the remains of those small, indistinguishable, intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim, had been partitional long ago.
Nothing remained in Egypt now to effectively challenge his disbelief: not a single one, for instance, of the documents of the Geniza. It was then that I began to realize how much success the partitioning of the past had achieved [...] (IAL 339-340).

The most remarkable aspect of the book according to Sengupta is:

The way Ghosh handles the turn narration, advancing and receding, interturning and dissolving through time. And throughout the book there is a suggestion that if it were better for mankind to back track and pick up what had been dumped by the way side on its march to progress (10).

The post-colonial perspective of Amitav Ghosh along with his capabilities as a historical novelist is evinced in presenting two sets of characters, one derived from history and extracted from actual events and the other whom the narrator Amitav as an anthropological researcher encounters to weave the fictional fabric. A unifying thread of historicity goes through the novelist’s interpretation of the events encompassing eight centuries from the twelfth century to ‘Operation Desert Storm’. Looking at history from a post-colonial angle, Ghosh puts his own readings into the characters of the twelfth century and those who are his contemporaries.
History reveals intercrossing and the resultant hybridities showing that cultures are not discrete. *In an Antique Land* is an imaginative exploration into the past revealing that ancient cultures have been more syncretic, more fluid about national boundaries than the present and they facilitated free human movement unhindered by the ‘Shadow – lines’ of discrimination. The contemporary obsession with homogenisation assisted by terrorism and violence are looked upon as the consequences of imperialism and global capitalism. The narrative design of this complex fiction enables an identification of the reader with the individual experience of living through history. It involves adopting the viewpoint of an anthropological researcher living in post-colonial Egypt and the presentation of contrasting pictures of precolonial and post-colonial Egypt. The narrator protagonist’s personal engagement with history in terms of the excavation of a specific episode of Abraham Ben Yiju, the Tunisian Jewish merchant and his Indian slave Bomma is employed to portray the contrasting pictures of the precolonial and post-colonial times. Those were times so pristine and uncontaminated with partisan feelings that:

> to speak of Ben Yiju living in India or to refer to Bomma as an ‘Indian’ is not to anticipate the borders and the political vocabulary of the twentieth century; those words are merely direct translations of the terms used by Ben Yiju and his friends (*IAL* 282).
The anthropological researcher’s diligent tracking of Bomma, the slave and his relationship with his master Ben Yiju reveals contrasting pictures of the concept of slavery in the precolonial and post-colonial situations. In the middle ages, their arrangement was probably that of patron and client than master and slave, as that relationship is now understood. If this seems curious, it is largely because the medieval idea of slavery tends to confound contemporary conceptions, both of servitude and of its mirrored counter-image, individual freedom (IAL 259).

Sharply in contrast with this, the concept of servitude “as it came to be after the European colonial expansion of the sixteenth century” (IAL 259-260) is portrayed thus:

Those were terrible times, he said, before Jamal Abd al-Nasir and the Revolution of 1952, when the Pashas, the King and their ‘kindly uncles’, the British Army, had their way in all things and the fellaheen had been forced to labour at their orders, like flies, working without proper recompense (IAL 194).

Slavery viewed in one level shows slaves being considered as agents eligible to enjoy a share of the profit. In another level, “slavery
was used as a means of fictive ties of kinship between people who were otherwise unrelated" (*IAL* 260).

Ghosh’s reconstruction of the story of Ben Yiju and Bomma adds new dimensions and perspectives to the medieval and Modern cultures and the formative and destructive forces related to them. Bomma, the retrieved subaltern from the forgotten heap of history becomes a fictive trace of the colonized, marginalized people of the Third World. The very choice of an Indian Slave, confined to the periphery of history, as the focal point of the narrative which begins thus:

The slave of MSH6 first stepped upon the stage of modern history in 1942. His was a brief debut, in the obscurest of theatres, and he was scarcely out of wings before he was gone again – more a prompter’s whisper than a recognizable face in the east (*IAL* 13).

Ghosh intends to provide a counter-narrative to the Eurocentric historicity. Tracing the life of this slave, the novel unravels the fascinating history of the cross discrimination of culture, religious and traditions, of India and Egypt. In the olden times, in spite of the natural barriers like vast expenses of sea and insurmountable mountains had brought people together. The correspondence of Ben Yiju with his family, interspersed with Ghosh’s digressions describe the historical events of the past,
highlighting a culture of syncretism. The deft strokes of fictional skill recreates a time when the antique lands of the Middle East and the East were the centres of trade and commerce, of production and of culture. Ghosh’s engrossing pen picture:

It had come to play a pivotal role in the global economy as the entrepot that linked the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean; the merchandise that flowed through its bazaars came from as far a field as East Africa, Southern Europe, the Western Sahara, India, China and Indonesia (IAL 37-38).

evokes the history of a glorious and pristine precolonial world in contrast with the post-colonial wasteland. The contemporary world had turned out to be “a gigantic open refuse-pit, an immense rubbish-dump” (IAL 38), ironically separated by narrow domestic walls, erected by the colonizers to retain the power structure of their option.

The chance discovery of a letter from Khalaf Ibu Ishaq, a merchant of Aden “open a trap door into a vast network of foxholes where the real life continues uninterrupted” (IAL 15-16). Enticed by the prospects of an anthropological study of the letters, the narrator subjects them to religious, cultural, social and linguistic analysis. The glaring images of oriental life gleaned from them articulate the plurality and harmony of oriental culture which had been destroyed by the western
predators on the continents of Egypt and India. Three and a half centuries after en Yiju’s departure from Mangalore, Vasco da Gama lands in India and “within a few years of that day the knell had been struck for the world that had brought Bomma, Ben Yiju and Ashu together” (IAL 286). This concept of the peaceful co-existence of plurality was looked down upon by the European historians as a fatal weakness, since they did not allow the vanquished any “dignity of nuances of choice and preference” (IAL 287).

The Geniza in the synagogue of Ben Ezra in Babylon which was the depository of all Jewish writings, also met with the fate of plundering, starting with Jacob Saphir, a collector of Judaic antiques who took only “a few leaves from various old books and manuscripts” (IAL 83) followed by many like Abraham Firkowitch, till the dispersal ended with the emptying of all the documents by the First World War with not even a single scrap of paper to remind Egypt of her past glory. “It was as though the borders that were to divide Palestine several decades later had already been drawn, through time rather than territory, to allocate a choice of Histories” (IAL 95). The Geniza material is suggestive of the smibereens dispersed by the onslaught of imperialism, which the post-colonial historian puts together. The pursuit of the cross-cultural protagonist of In an Antique Land reveals ancient systems of counter belief, where pluralistic forms of worship
co-existed in harmony. While picturing the Mangalore coast where Ben Yiju gets acquainted with Ashu, there is an account of the Magaviras or the low caste Hindu fisher folk who worshipped a deity known as the Boobariya Bhuta, deemed by legend to be the spirit of a Muslim mariner and trader who died at sea” (IAL 271). However, this age old pluralistic tradition has given way to political passion as manifested in the posters of a fundamentalist Hindu political organisation of professed anti-Muslim rhetoric, hung on the walls of the Boobariya shrine. The conflict between the syncretic tradition and vested political concerns have so transmitted the Magaviras that:

This community, so long relegated to the peripheries of the Hindu order, had now resolved to use a political short-cut to break into the Sanskritic fold. Having transformed its social and economic position it was now laying claim to the future, in the best tradition of liberalism, by discovering a History to replace the past (IAL 273).

This deliberate denial of the sanctity of a shared and inter communal past by the Magaviras is traced in detail as a warning against reinstating of a neo-colonial social order.

The focus given to the interrelationship of the people of India and Egypt to which the west is a potent interventionist, serves as a poignant reminder of the colonial conquerors, who in the guise of an
enlightening objective, determined the history of the world and capsized the lives of the conquered with disjunctive violence. They superimposed the mode of thinking, ideologies and the rhetoric of the West on the histories of the two antique lands India and Egypt. Ghosh illustrates how the intervention of the West had been detrimental to the dialogue, exchange, assimilation and syncretism of the people of the two nations to the extent of replacing it with dominance, violence and racial discriminations.

Another instance of the prevalence of a culture of accommodation in ancient India is provided by viewing the Portuguese invasion of the western Indian coast, as the outcome of the refusal of Hindu ruler of Calicut to comply with their demand to expel Muslim traders from Calicut. Being the inheritor of such an antique civilizations, the narrator is perplexed and pained at the spectacle of the pathetic state of affairs in the contemporary world where man’s relationships are defined only in terms of the ruler and the ruled, the colonizer and the colonized, the ‘babu’ and the ‘cookie’. He depicts the situation:

   It was this that I had my first suspicion of what it might mean to belong to an ‘historical civilization’ and it left me bewildered because, for my own part, it was precisely the absoluteness of time and the discreteness of epochs that I always had trouble in imaging (IAL 201).
Thus he becomes emblematic of the disillusioned post-colonial individual entangled in the labyrinth of history; counterbalanced with Ben Yiju and Bomma epitomizing the precolonial world characterized by harmonious living of people belonging to different races and diverse cultures. This aspect of the portrayal of a bygone world of harmony inspires Sengupta to make a valid statement:

The pages devoted to that world spill over with light and colour – ordinary people bustle around laughing, talking and doing the most ordinary things. The main characters easily relate to this environment. It is a world of happy people, a world with no racial conflict, no feeling of alienation or hopelessness (6).

This universality of the harmony of human existence uncontaminated by the imperialistic devices of greed and power-mongering enables the Tunisian Ben Yiju adapt easily to settle down in Mangalore and many a girl from the matrilineal community of Nairs even when he had options to marry from communities kindred to his faith. The all-conquering love dissolves racial, communal and religious barriers and appeals to Ben Yiju as “a more overriding and important consideration” (*IAL* 278). After twenty years of Indian life he is received in Egypt with open arms where also he does not feel any alienation. His offer to give his daughter in marriage to his nephew in Sicily is positively
responded: "The young Surur for one clearly received his uncle’s proposal of marriage with the greatest warmth: his immediate response was to set off for Egypt to claim his bride" (IAL 325).

But this harmonious existence was doomed to eclipse consequent on the imperial invasion and colonial expansion. This deterioration of the humane aspects of civilization is related in the novel with a glaring note of pessimism:

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

If the main plot involving Ben Yiju and Bomma carves the flourishing of the humane aspects of life, the subplot shows the growth of the Western imperial powers leading to the ruin of the world as suggested by the “Operation Desert Storm” in Iraq. The modern world, as it emerged under the colonizer’s dicta, often compromised with the cherished codes of ethics and drowned commitments to large causes under cupidity. Barriers and schisms are made between Hindus and Muslims based on superficial customs like burning the dead and circumcision Jabir’s words of wonderment: "You mean, there are people
in your country who are not circumcised?” (IAL 62) resound a note of latent chauvinism. Explaining further the convictions of the Middle East Muslim culture of the twelfth century, Ghosh says: “In Arab the word ‘circumcise’ derives from the root that means ‘to purify’ to say of someone that they are ‘uncircumcised’ is more or less to call them impure” (IAL 62). Dejected at such a turn of events where people are separated by chauvinism and racial pride, the author seems to express his deep desire to go back to the idyllic world which existed before imperial invasion.

Ghosh’s historical perspective reflects a post-colonial consciousness of considering narrativisation as a means of achieving meaning in life. Narratives are expressions of the collective consciousness which have traditionally been believed to help in establishing community and group identities. So individuals and societies are exhorted to narrativise their experience to realise their identities. Ghosh’s debut novel *The Circle of Reason* constantly emphasizes the social and historical significance of narration. The characters Alu, Zindi and Hajfahmy frequently resort to story-telling as a method of discovering the underlying reasons for the conditions of their lives.

The social act of narration reflects lived human experience which is obviously more valid than more abstract theorising and living out of other’s stories. Ghosh makes his character Tridib of *The Shadow Lines*
articulate the notion when he tells his nephew that one must create one’s story rather than live out of other people’s stories. Recollecting Tridib’s words, the narrator tells Ila and Robi: “We could not see without inventing that we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly […] if we didn’t try ourselves, we would never be free of other people’s inventions” (*TSL* 31).

Dismantling history to open up the past and subjecting it to imaginative revision seems to be the favourite fictional device that Ghosh consistently employs in his works. Fiction is interpolated between the historical events and the reader, effecting a displacement of the master narratives of history into a secondary level of the text. Consequently, it becomes accessible only through the mediation of the primary fictional level. This valorization of the fictional over the historical is the most celebrated post-colonial stratagem of demythification. The positionality of history as the ‘master narrative’ is contested in the novels of colonial consciousness like *In an Antique Land* and *The Glass Palace* to demythify and dismantle it to situate the historical in the socio-political, cultural and economic life of a community.

Literature and history manifest a common interest in the power structures of society. While the former is interested in tracing how power is sought and exercised by individuals, the latter examines the operation of power by groups. Both the novelist and the historian employ
representative figures in their exploration of power structures as Laurence Lerner writes:

The historian because he can’t do much with lifeless allegory and needs real people, the novelist because the unrepresentative figure is more interesting and is even better way to breathe life into what is representative (Quoted in Juneja 58).

History, of late, has ceased to be monolithic collection of facts and their hegemonic interpretations thereby enabling interpretation in multiple ways like political, economic, social religious, scientific and feminist. Hence, like a literary narrative, history also can be viewed as a “blend of observation, memory and imagination and historical reality is a special case of fiction, as speech is a special case of writing [...] and nature a special case of culture” (Lerner quoted in Juneja 12). This notion of the historical as a special case of the fictional had been employed by Edward Said in the construction of the Orient as Europe’s ‘Other’. Hence the post-colonial novelist, being aware of the ideological distortions of imperialist historiography, reconstitutes the past according to the psychic movements of the present and “incarnates a magnified vision of all ambiguities and impossibilities of the invasions. The new ideas were made acceptable by traditionalists who gave them local habitation. Thus, the delicate dividing line between traditionalism and
modernism gets blurred up as shown in Mangala performing traditional rites to cure syphilitic paresis where the principle is that of modern vaccination.

Amitav Ghosh being heir to that ancient Indian civilization, which refused to be destroyed by centuries of colonization, is never coaxed to ‘discover’ the past. His characters, mostly rooted deep in the Indian tradition, never encounter the West directly and so do not flaunt their Indianness in a proclamatory tone. The technique he employs also is the conventional Indian style of interpreting the present in terms of the mythical past and containing the historical within the metaphysical by dismantling the temporal with events perceived in a cyclical rather than linear time frame. The events are narrated colonized” (Albert Memmi quoted in Juneja 60). This vision enables him to record the anxiety, anguish, agony and anger of his trauma – stricken race, expressing it in the language of the oppressor. His commitment as a responsible post-colonial individual springs from a faith in the traditional view of art which regards it as a communal activity rather than an individual pursuit. Accordingly, the artists in the primitive societies were believed to have been chosen by Gods for the upkeep of mortality and values to help people. The present and the legendary past amalgamate into one and get frozen into eternity for the continuation of the life of the whole clan. The character Mangala in Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* is
emblematic of such an assignee striving to restore the nearly extinct indigenous practices that were sidelined by the onrush of science. Indian tradition had shown a unique capability of adaptation and flexibility for accepting changes whereby it could stand the threat of cultural incursion through the consciousness of the narrators either as a participant in the events or as reconstruction of a narrated past.

The myth of colonial centrality and marginal fragility had encouraged a post-colonial hybridity in the Indian context, a peculiar Euro-Indian nexus of cultural linkages. However, this Bhabhian cultural hybridity is unacceptable for Aijaz Ahmed in that “non-Europeans hardly ever encounter each other and never without a prior European modulation of the very field of that encounter” (“Politics” 290). The logic of this argument is overt in Ghosh’s In an Antique Land where the pre-colonial and the post-colonial Indo-Egyptian cultural exchange and communication is closely traced in an attempt to do away with the colonial baggage. The argument between the Egyptian Mullah and Indian Anthropological researcher for establishing cultural superiority of their respective homelands appeals as a brilliant metaphor to Tabish Khair and he writes: “An argument that enacted in the post-colonial context, ignores centuries of Indian, Egyptian and Indo-Arab commerce and trades in the goods of a colonial and neo-imperial Eurocentric hegemony” (313).
Almost in synchronous with this, the Indo-Egyptian connection is once again illustrated in *The Calcutta Chromosome* through the Egyptian computer professional Antar, his Indian friend Murugan and in their repeatedly stressed sense of community. Antar confesses that he has an inexplicable and irresistible ‘sense of kinship’ with Murugan. A similar liking of him by Urmila is expressed in sexual terms. This sort of subaltern and subversive lines of connection are posited by the novelist for deconstructing and transcending the colonial realities. The novel also foregrounds the ways in which the colonized and the subaltern subvert the power which remains the prerogative of the colonizer in the political and economic sense. There is also a realization that a historicity and incomprehensibility attributed to the colonized were the result of the discursive appropriation of colonialism that had made the subaltern impassive in the colonial discourse and occluded the subaltern actions in other discourses. The colonial subaltern is assigned power by way of restoring history and comprehensibility.

In the form of historical discourse, the novel critiques the grand narratives and the concept of science as the liberator of humanity. It effectively employs the forces of anti-nationality and contingency to subvert history and to undermine the metanarratives refuting the claims of the colonizer as elite and civilized under the spell of science. Rationality which reigns the contemporary spiritless world is deconstructed exploiting
the possibilities of intuition. Mangala and Lutchman epitomize the validity of intuitive knowledge who, by their performances disprove the infallibility of science and suggest the possibility of a realm beyond the reach of science. The novel is a unique blend of fact and fiction contributing to the reinvention of the history of malaria research to re-member the indigenous cults elbowed to the margins and subdued by colonial historiography. The fragmented narratives of tradition are tied together using fictional strategies in an effort to rejuvenate the lost heritage. It irradiates and foregrounds native gem like Mangala who, in spite of her being illiterate seems to outshine Ross, the accredited scientist, asserting the validity of indigenous practices inspired by the Indian virtue of universal well-being. She represents the subaltern consciousness which has been swept to the periphery and trifled by the colonizer West as primitive, unfounded and barbaric. Amitav Ghosh’s thesis that hails the Eastern ways of knowing and being draws acumen from *In an Antique Land* which attributes the cultural retrogression in Modern Egypt to scientific Egypt to scientific progressivism.

The reinventing of nations and their history which Ghosh does exceptionally well in his novels from *The Circle of Reason* to *The Glass Palace* is a post-colonial trope of resisting colonial oppression which continues disrupting the culture, economy and the very identity of colonized nations even after the colonial eclipse in the political sense.
The very act of writing thus becomes an instance of the constructive use of resistance about which Edward Said states that “resistance, far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history” (Culture 260). Lighting up the dark portals and lives missed out in the grand narratives of history, the post-colonial fictional classics underscore what Alexander Solzhenitsyn has pronounced about literature as the memory of irrefutable experiences of people transmitted from one generation to the next. It is this unalterable flame of history which is hidden among the meta-narratives that Ghosh retrieves and preserves in his works.