Chapter 3

Dynamics of Cultural Displacement

The impact of colonization was not restricted to the political domination and economic exploitation of the colonized. The colonizing process aimed at annihilating the cultural life of the natives in diverse ways. The systematic assault on the customs, beliefs and way of living of the natives generated a profound sense of loss among them. So the post-colonial societies that underwent decolonization were driven by the urge to reclaim the lost cultural identity. Their quest for identity is tainted with a deep sense of loss. Through ingeniously manipulated cultural interventions, the colonizers demolished the native culture, branding it as primitive and pre-historical. They sought to recast the mindset of the natives to make cultural conquest and subjugation an effortless exercise. A deliberate undervaluing of native culture established the superiority of the culture and language of the colonizer.

The emergence of a nationalist ideology and its eventual hegemony in the colonies was a by-product of colonization and the popularisation of scientific temper and bourgeois liberal ideology it triggers. The nationalist ideology betrays a sort of ambivalence, when it confronts the colonial political dominance, mainly because of its association with colonial ideology. Both colonialism and nationalism draw inspiration from modernism. The paradoxical situation, defining the post-colonial
period is precipitated by the thin borderline that separates the colonizer and the colonized. This situation gives rise to a cultural fluidity which Homi K. Bhabha aptly calls an “in between” position – a cultural space that is neither inside nor outside the colonial ideology. The ambivalent attitude operating as an inherent contradiction in the nationalist project has its genesis in the colonial discourse itself. Exploring this intrinsic complexity Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write:

In order to maintain authority over the ‘other’ in a colonial situation, imperial discourse strives to delineate self, yet at the same time it must maintain sufficient identity with the ‘other’ to valorize control over it. The ‘other’ can, of course, only be constructed out of the archive of ‘the self’, yet the self must also articulate the other as inescapably different. Otherness can thus only be produced by a continual process of what Bhabha calls ‘repetition and displacement’ and this instigates an ambivalence at the very site of imperial authority and control (Empire 103).

The liberationist agenda of nationalism is based on the process of dismantling of the colonial apparatus and the construction of a new social order. But the emancipatory project and revolutionary fervour in nationalist ideology have lost the cutting edge because of inherent
infirmities which call for compromises. In its anticolonial struggle, the nationalist ideology seeks to put in place a new social order that represents the aspirations of the dominant political group engaged in the anticolonial struggle and in the process formulates its own hegemonic project displacing the existing pluralities of the indigenous society. Thus nationalism, in effect becomes the site for the construction of a new hegemonic discourse, “which replicated the old colonial structures in new terms” (Said Culture 269). Though it assimilated modern rational ideas and tried to modernize the customs and attitudes, it found it difficult to accommodate the orthodox feudal forces or withstand the pressure from dominant structures. The surviving spirit of colonial hegemony caused degeneration in the socio-cultural sphere which along with the tormenting experiences of cultural displacement generates an irredeemable sense of loss and disillusionment among the post-colonial individuals. Ashcroft and his co-authors explain this overwhelming sense of loss thus :

A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation or ‘voluntary’ removal for indentured labour. Or it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model (Empire 9).
The post-colonial subject cannot belong to the indigenous traditional culture consequent on the sense of alienation brought about by the Western impact and at the same time he is incapacitated to identity fully with West due to his racial background. The ambivalence in the colonized subject leading to a search for identity is the outcome of the colonial occupancy. Homi K. Bhabha sees “The colonial presence as always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (*Location* 107). This ambivalence is the driving force behind the quest for identity among the post-colonial subjects. Moreover, the disillusionment is so potent as to put existence at stake where everyone has to become part of the quest to invent one’s real identity.

Amitav Ghosh weaves his fictional patterns around the material conditions of post-colonial societies shaped by the colonial process, the struggle for liberation and the brutalising degenerate socio-political developments that followed independence. New nation states and national boundaries emerged as a result of struggle for freedom in different parts of the world. But the disquieting reality that takes the sheen off the positive result of the historical struggle for liberation is the birth of homeless wanderers. Isolated, unaccommodated and unanchored as they were, these vagrants could not get assimilated to the newly formed structures of institutional power. They did not conform to the requirements of the sociocultural establishment which ultimately rejected
them for their nonconformist disposition, intransigence and defiance. It is, perhaps, one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. These people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, and their condition articulates the tensions, irresolution and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism. Edward Said makes certain relevant observations on this issue:

Yet it is no exaggeration to say that liberation as an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism, has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentred, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages (Culture 403).

The fictional space that Amitav Ghosh constructs, being part of the prevailing discourse, is inhabited by post-colonial vagrants driven
by a quest for identity and migratory instinct. His protagonists are orphans or aliens and perpetual outsiders to the cultural and social milieu to which they struggle to belong. The orphan protagonist’s quest for identity is a major theme of Amitav Ghosh’s debut novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) which is initially located in a refugee village of Lalpukur. Exploring the metaphorical possibilities of journeys, the novelist presents the protagonist Nachiketa Bose as undertaking his quest by moving from Lalpukur in East Bengal to Malabar in Kerala, and then to the East African port of Al-Ghazira, finally to end up in the sand dunes of El-Oued on the Algerian Sahara. Nachiketa Bose, nicknamed Alu, is introduced as an eight year old orphan coming to live with his uncle Balaram Bose in Lalpukur. With an unevenly shaped head, symbolic of *disfigured and degenerate post-colonial society*, Alu finds himself staying on the margins of social life.

It is Bolaida who suggests the same of Alu: “It’s an alu, a potato, a huge, freshly dug, lumpy potato. So Alu he was named and Alu he was to remain” (TCR 3). Cut off from others around him and accepting the truth that he is a misfit in the society, Alu gives up his studies in Bhudeb Roy’s school and learns weaving from the disreputable Shombu Debnath. His search for a new technique on the loom is suggestive of his quest for his cultural moorings.

Dislocation confronts Alu in the form of war when he undertakes his uncle’s plan of clearing the refugees Shanties with carbolic acid.
As a profusely employed metaphor in the novel, Carbolic acid works as a psychological treatment for awakening the villagers’ latent spirit against oppression. After Balaram and his belongings were wiped off by Bhudeb Roy, Alu once again finds himself driven out of Lalpukur with the police hot on his trails since Bhudeb Roy has denounced him as a terrorist. First, he takes refuge in Gopal’s house in Calcutta and before long leaves for Kerala with eight thousand rupees and a few addresses from his friend Rajan. Alu’s next migration is aboard a boat to Al-Ghazira in the company of Professor Samuel, and the Whores Kulfi, Karthamma and Zindi. In Al-Ghazira, Zindi secures him a job in a construction company. The most significant incident in Alu’s life takes place six months later when he is trapped in the collapse of the huge building “the Star”. He is mysteriously saved by two sewing machines holding up a steel girder. After his rescue, Alu turns out to be a totally different personality armed with a new solution for all the evils of the world. After being tear-gassed at Al-Ghazira, Alu flees to El-Oued with Zindi, Kulfi and Boss. It is the meeting with Mrs. Verma in El-Oued that brings solace to his disturbed mind. On regaining his composure he decides to return home, to India.

Jungian psychological insights validate the fictional use of the image of travel representing the unrealised hopes and aspirations of the human psyche. J.E. Cirlot under the influence of Jung, states: “Travel is a quest that starts in darkness of the profane world and gropes towards
light” (157). Journey as a motif becomes a fictional strategy in *The Circle of Reason*. Alu is on the run, having been branded an extremist and Jyoti Das the police officer is close on his heels, though the ornithologist in him is driven by the urge to see birds on the way. Though the motivation is different, he is as much restless and obsessed with travels as others.

The variety of characters in *The Circle of Reason*, travel almost halfway across the globe through diverse environments with what seems “almost the biological necessity if not always with the ease and nonchalance of migratory birds” (Prasad 23). National boundaries seem to make no sense other than increasing the vulnerability and misery of Alu and his companions. Their journey performs the most important function of doing away with borders. The all-pervading journey motif that integrates the parts of the novel, Satva, Rajas and Tamas epitomized the predicament of severe dislocation, common to all post-colonial societies. Pradip Dutta encodes his apprehension of this cultural dislocation: “The history of our subcontinent […] has never been able to take its continuities and culture for granted. A life of constant movement and violence has incessantly serrated our roots” (39).

The post-colonial subject moves on in search of new pastures to explore the belongingness of the traditional old people to their land impelled by the historical predicament of rootlessness and non-belonging.
Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* (1993) presents his urge to rediscover the syncretism and hybridity that prevailed in the precolonial cultures through the fictional exploration of the cultural implications and possibilities in the Egypt-India relationship. Ghosh’s personal voice seems to be reverberating through the scholar-teacher Ustaz Sabry who says:

> Our countries were very similar for India, like Egypt, was largely an agricultural nation, and the majority of its people lived in villages, like the Egyptian Fellaeheen and ploughed their land with cattle. Our countries were poor, for they had both been ransacked by imperialists, and now they were both trying in similar ways, to cope with poverty and all other problems that had been bequeathed to them by their troubled histories. It was a difficult task and our two countries had always supported each other in the past (*IAL* 134).

There is a psychologically validated theoretical concept that travels provide tremendous release from the monotony and morbidity of the angst and anguishes of existential politics. A sort of levity and lightness of being is experienced by the traveller who enjoys “perfect liberty to think, feel, do just as one pleases” (Seth 33). It has got paradigmatic significance as it characterises the unsettled post-colonial subject’s search for congenial cultural patterns. Nachiketa Bose, the protagonist of
The Circle of Reason moves from East Bengal to Africa where as the narrator protagonist in The Shadow Lines (1988) travels from Calcutta to Bangladesh and on to England. The journey motif that runs throughout the fictional fabric is suggestive of man’s quest for wholeness; his incessant attempts to create patterns out of the patternlessness of experiences. The Calcutta Chromosome (1996) has its narrator journeying back and forth in time and space in order to decipher fuller meanings of life and existence. The protagonist, Rajkumar of Ghosh’s recent work The Glass Palace (2000) has travelled extensively as a boy. He had been to Chittagong, Bassein and Mandalay before finding his fortunes in the teak forests of upper Burma. Uma Dey, his alter ego is also shown as tossed between Calcutta, Malaysia and Burma.

In Amitav Ghosh’s fictional world journeys are not represented merely as an impassive movement through space, but rather as an expression of the urgent desire for discovery and change. It is the metaphor of man’s primordial quest to expand his awareness into realisation. This manifestation of the migratory instinct defines the attitude of the characters in The Circle of Reason to great extent. The interminable journeys of the characters represent, in the words of Damodara Rao, “a seemingly endless quest for their significance despite having gone through the trivialities time and again” (33). Ghosh presents himself as a traveller interested in men, places and scenery in In an Antique Land. A strong desire for discovery is overt in Antar and Murugan in The Calcutta Chromosome
as they undergo profound experiences during the course of their researches. The enigmatic character of *The Calcutta Chromosome* is shown as alienated from the scientific community due to his subversive hypothesis. However, he manages to carry on his quest for truth about Ronald Ross’s discovery about the malarial parasite and testify his notion that “some person or persons had systematically interfered with Ross’s experiments to push malaria research in certain directions while leading it away from others” (*The Calcutta Chromosome* 31). Murugan’s research findings about the malarial maze validates ventures of quests and the viability of looking through things. Murugan shows an irresistible urge to know about the ethnic people of Indian origin who had helped Ross from the margins of Counter science. Ronald Ross expands his awareness when he works in Cunningham’s laboratory. Attempts to study, to inquire, to seek or to live with intensity through new and profound experiences are all modes of travel, or spiritual and symbolic equivalents of journey. Rajkumar, the protagonist of *The Glass Palace*, haunted by a vision of the Royal Family of Burma and a maid of their entourage called Dolly, journeys to India, where they have been exiled. Dolly is married to him later and their story is the beginning of a journey through the country. Other characters of the novel like Uma Dey, Arjun, Dinu, Saya John and Alison are all mostly on the move which is paradigmatic of their rootless existence. The novel’s action moves from the vast rubber plantations in Malaya to India, to World War II, and finally reaches culmination in Mandalay.
Journey forms the core of the narrative in *In an Antique Land*, which is essentially a travel story. It is built upon the scholastic search into the life and times of Bomma, the Indian slave who worked as a business representative in Eden for a Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yiju. What turns this travelogue into a colourful and warmly human picture of people and places, both medieval and modern is Ghosh’s basic interest in men and manners, places and history. Driven by inquisitiveness, the narrator turns to the small villages of Lataifa and Nashaury and to the Mangalore Coast in Malabar showing the similarity of sociocultural tradition of India and Egypt. *In an Antique Land* undertakes the exploration of trade relations and sociocultural practices of ancient civilizations, and also exploits the possibilities of the practice of slavery as a spiritual metaphor. It is an emblem of the quest of the devotee for God.

The quest motif in Ghosh’s protagonists manifests a cultural displacement precipitated by colonization. The recurrence of the theme of journey or migration distinguishes his novels from those of many of his contemporaries. The inhabitants of the colonized world are invariably alienated from the indigenous cultural tradition. They become strangers to their own culture and grope in the encircling darkness for their identity. The cultural dislocation results in the alienation of vision and crisis in identity.
When the psychic equilibrium is upset by the domination of the coloniser, the ensuing traumatic experience creates a sense of ‘non-belonging’. Cut off from his roots, the colonised cannot belong to anywhere else. It is this predicament of the post-colonial subject, who exists precariously between the two cultural worlds, without being part of any, that Ghosh’s characters embody through their journeys.

The characters of The Circle of Reason, irrespective of their worthiness or triviality, aim at a definite structuring of their entity in the totality of experience as they are involved in the process that enables them to define their identity. They evince a creative ability as in the case of Zindi:

They crouched on mats around Zindi, listening intently to every word. They had lived through everything Zindi spoke of and had heard her talk of it time and time again; yet it was only in her telling that it took shape, changed from mere incidents to a palpable thing, a block of time which was not hours or minutes or days, but something corporeal with its own malevolent wilfulness. That was Zindi’s power: She could bring together empty air and give it a body just by talking of it (TCR 212-213).

As far as Rajkumar of The Glass Palace is concerned, creative ability is manifest in his resourcefulness:
It is not just the big people who always know everything Saya. If I could find out exactly how much the other companies are going to quote, then I might be able to put in a winning bid [...] It is true that I can't read English, Saya, but I've learnt to speak it. And why do I need to read when you can do it for me? (TGP 130).

The circle is completed with equally potent and counterbalancing odd obsessions. Zindi’s obsession is with the Durban Tailoring House while Balaram is obsessed with phrenology, the science that shows:

the connection between the outside and the inside, between what people think, and how they are and carbolic acid, Toru Debi, his wife with sewing machines, Alu with weaving and Professor Samuel with theories of queues (TCR 17). These well-marked attitudes among the characters save indicate their search for a pattern in life and enable them articulate their ideas effectively.

Amitav Ghosh’s novels are veritable discourses on human quest. They project characters engaged in individual search for identity, reason and truth. The physical and psychic explorations providing promises of alternative worlds and visions invariably compel its characters to traverse diverse geographic locations and points of time. The eventful, explorative, personal journey takes shape through individual memory and recollections
of others. The individual’s search for a meaningful existence is personified in memory as a re-lived experience. Accordingly, Rajkumar undertakes a quest for identity by ransacking his memory, but without a conspicuous finale.

_The Glass Palace_ traces the imperial ingenuity in transforming the natives into people who are docile and passive through the erasure of their identity. Arjun’s realisation that he is like a clay-vessel moulded by an unknown “potter” in becoming a willing tool in the empire’s proclaimed mission of modernising the “uncivilised” East speaks out the loss of his identity. Later, it needed Alison’s retort that she felt only pity for him rather than love, to retrieve his self-awareness. _The Glass Palace_ also interprets the social and political chaos that resulted out of the British take-over of Burma and the Japanese invasion of Malaysia as reflected in the quests of various characters. Disturbed by rootlessness, these characters are always on the move.

Conceived against the backdrop of the civil-strife in post-partition East Bengal and the riot rent Calcutta, the fictive world of _The Shadow Lines_ emanates from a crucial point of intersection in the evolution and growth of the narrator and the nation. Public happenings and personal lives are amalgamated with locales shifting and merging between Calcutta, Dhaka and London. Focusing on the story of three generations of the narrator’s family spread over the Indian and the British subcontinents,
the novel culminates in a search for the vital concerns to keep up the strength and sanity of contemporary society. In the family saga, on the one hand is the narrator’s household consisting of his parents and his grandmother and on the other are the grandmother’s younger sister Mayadebi, her husband who is a diplomat and their three sons Jatin, Tridib and Robi. The narrator’s family is settled in Calcutta while Mayadebi’s except for Tridib keeps on roaming the world. Proximity breeds intimate friendship between Tridib and the narrator, with the latter being benefited by the rich mnemonic fund the former imparts to him. The resourceful and imaginative Tridib spurs the narrator to experience the creative powers of memory and imagination. Thus at a very early age itself the narrator becomes an imaginative traveller of distant locations, beyond the limits of his mind and experience. He is enamoured of Tridib who had propelled him to “imagine the sloping roofs of Colombo” (TSL 31) and had said “we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly” (TSL 31). These imaginative experiences cleanse him of the narrow nationalism fostered and promoted by his grandmother. Having severed off the particularity of his origin, the narrator’s psyche absorbs cross-cultural interactions. He contrasts the cross-cultural perspectives of Ila and Tridib:

I tried to tell her, but neither then nor later did I even succeed in explaining to her that I could not forget because
Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in Tridib’s room had meant to me, a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta. I used to listen to her talking sometimes with her father and grandfather about cafes in the Plaza Mayor in Madrid or the crispness of the air in Cuzco, and I could see that those names, which were to me a set of magical talismans because Tridib had pointed them out to me on his tattered old Bartholomew’s Atlas, had for her familiarity no less dull than the Lake had for me and my friends; the same tired intimacy [...] (TSL 20).

An element of cultural diversity is introduced into the fictional fabric with the friendship between Prices in London and Tridib’s family established by the meeting of Mrs. Price’s father Lionel Tresawsen with Tridib’s grandfather Chandrasekhara Dutta Chaudhury. Tridib’s first meeting with May Price was in London when she was an infant. But later a romantic relationship develops between them through correspondence transcending the shadow-lines of national and cultural boundary. The strong relationship between Tridib and May and the abiding intimacy between their families at a time when their respective
home countries were in an antagonistic relationship, is employed by Ghosh as a quest inherent in human psyche for seeking invisible links ranging across the realities of nationality, cultural segregation and racial discrimination. By celebrating this synthesis of culturally diverse personnel brought together by the all pervasive love and empathy, Amitav Ghosh challenges the validity of geographical boundaries in the contemporary situation.

The span of history between 1962 when the narrator first met May Price in Calcutta on the Price’s visit to Mayadebi’s ancestral home and 1979 when he again met her in London is the effective background of the novel. Against this background, Amitav Ghosh evokes cultural dislocations and anxieties in interpreting the issues of ruptured nationalities in close and telling encounters. The trauma of emotional rupture and stifled human relations is caught alive in the novel along with the damaging potential of the mental blockade instilled by politics. Sensitised by this precarious social and communal set up of the Indian subcontinent, Ghosh seems to be inclined to expose the futility of all forms of quests for meaning in life. The all engrossing fear he witnesses everywhere seems to reduce man to nothingness. Ghosh says:

It is like the fear of the victims of an earthquake, of people who have lost faith in the stillness of the earth. And yet it is not the same. It is without analogy, for it is not comparable
to the fear of nature, which is the most universal of human fears. Nor to the fear of the violence of the State, which is the commonest of the modern fears. It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood (TSL 204).

With these fears and anxieties, deeply ingrained, the fictional world of The Shadow Lines provides a paradigm of the contemporary consciousness in search of self-identity and self-knowledge. The characters of this novel, like the narrator, Tridib, Ila, May and the grandmother who are incessantly being tormented by the stifled thoughts of the past, display a multiplicity of voices involving a variety of discourses and language to recount their experiences which itself is a search for meaning and reason.

For any quest and discovery of the self to be meaningful, a comprehensive exploration of the past and the future beyond one’s immediate experience is imperative. Moreover, the inner and the outer realities partake in the making of identity so much so that the fate of an individual is determined by global forces at work in concrete terms of life. Focusing on these aspects in the quest for identity, Howard Wolf writes:
The field of experience beyond one’s immediate boundaries, both past and future becomes a more demanding standard by which the self discovers and tests itself. In looking inward or outward, the autobiographical writer finds traces of its opposite: self yields history, history yields self (quoted in Singh 138).

So, in order to place the individual self in a history that reveals the full meaning of the present as evolved from the past, and providing an insight into the future, Amitav Ghosh resorts to the fictional device of alternating past and present. Girish Karnad is all praise for this narrative technique while commenting on the episode of the grandmother in *The shadow Lines* being regarded a foreigner to Dhaka, her birthplace, after the partition. In his review “World within World”, Karnad writes:

The grandmother’s visit to the ancestral home along with Tridib and his English girl friend is surely one of the most memorable scenes in Indian fiction. Past and future meet across religions, political and cultural barriers in a confusion of emotions, ideals, intentions and acts leading to shattering climax (3).

The narrator protagonist of the novel remains a vague, undefined, unobtrusive and unassertive presence, even without a name almost to the end of the novel, suggestive of a disillusioned, alienated post-colonial
human specimen, propelled by an unluding search for identity. Present almost always in the story though he is, the narrator, swiftly moving back and forth in time, seems not crucially essential to the action as an animator of it. But resembling the “jester” of the Indian folk theatre, he is always present as a conscience within which everything exists. This anonymous passivity of the protagonist remains till the very end when he emerges from the shadows of Ila and Tridib. Arjya Sircar attributes this to the inherent anonymity in the narrator caused by post-colonial disillusionment. In a study of *The Shadow Lines*, “The Stranger Within”. Sircar writes: “We are never allowed to get fully acquainted with the protagonist because he himself has not fully recognised or understood himself” (144).

The narrator-protagonist turns inwards in search of meaning out of the prevailing human predicament which is irrational and absurd. The whole novel can be looked upon as the narrator’s quest to explore his own consciousness and to identify the moral and intellectual milieu which have generated it. The explorative quest he undertakes is unaffected by preconceptions or predetermined categories and along with his own psyche it surveys those whom he feels as extensions of his own self.

Tridib is no less than the mirror image of the narrator. He is the protagonist’s initiator and guide in the quest for identity. Overtly silent
though he is, Tridib never shirks from action at the proper instant. He insists on the necessity to see the world through one’s own imagination lest one should be forced to accept another’s invention. The protagonist recognizes his influence on him thus: “Tridib has given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with” (TSL 20). The story of the growing up of a boy who lives in the shadow of the man he idolizes is the story of the individual self imbibed into public and private experiences. As the novel progresses, he transcends the rooted and well defined status of an individual to get identified with the depersonalised contemporary consciousness. Ghosh makes the character himself admit: “I knew that a part of my life as a human being had ceased, that I no longer existed but as a chronicle” (TSL 112).

This depersonalised contemporary consciousness is the product of post-colonial disillusionment seen in countries with a colonial history. The confrontation between the oppressor and the oppressed invariably results in a system that inherits the values of both the oppressor and the oppressed. The final victory of the oppressed does not enable them to reclaim their indigenous culture instead, what results is a mongrel system which is “either an exact replica of the old one or a tragicomic version of it” (Nandy, Traditions 34). Thus it reveals a continuity which overrules any antithesis between the oppressed and the oppressor. Nandy further explains: “One part of him collaborates, compromises and adjusts another part defies, “non-cooperates” subverts or destroys, often in
the name of collaboration and under the garb of obsequiousness” (Traditions 43).

The nationalist project put an end to the colonial regime and secured political freedom but it miserably failed to prevent the re-emergence of colonial tendencies in new forms, which alienated the responsible, and the sentient individuals from the prevailing socio-cultural context. Indian nationalism also was not a deviation from the general trend. It was effective as a manifestation of freedom, but failed to preserve the territorial integrity of the country. The partition of Bengal was a veritable shock to the Indian’s sense of nationalism, which Ghosh skilfully utilizes in The Shadow Lines to depict the post-colonial disillusionment. The novel can be seen as a reflection sequence showing “reality itself in the process of its unfolding […] tendencies of a new world still in the making” (Bakhtin, Dialogic 7). By skilfull manipulation of the narrator protagonist’s developing sociological awareness and his interaction with culturally diverse personalities, Ghosh makes his fictional construct an eloquent critique on current realities. Murari Prasad hails the novel as opening up new vistas of insights into realities in a world of multicultural hybridity. Prasad observes:

Although the situations are bound by their historical and geographical coordinates, they enlarge the spatial and temporal axes and offer a melange of insights into a kind
of ‘reality’ that can sustain inter-personal bond across cultural boundaries and contain the threats flowing from the absurdities of borders and frontiers (87).

The uncertainties and horrific apprehensions of the contemporary world generate a psychic trauma that stifles all voices and turn human existence meaningless. Hence the narrator protagonist of _The Shadow Lines_ is seen undertaking a silent quest for meaning in life and to articulate the inner void in him, the quest assuming the form of a search for words to articulate silences “that throws the notions of secularism, nationalism and freedom into disarray” (Rao, “Silence” 65).

An ingenious conflation of reflections involving personal histories, family histories, and national history are restructured in a quest for meaning; a quest for knowledge taking into account the inherent inaccuracies of recollections, the “deceptive weight of remembered detail” (_TSL_ 67). Tridib does not conceal the unreliability of his memory, “he didn’t know whether it had really happened or he had imagined it” (_TSL_ 29). So he employs imagination to make his reminiscences intelligible and suggests the same to the narrator as well: “Use imagination with precision” (TSL 24). In accordance with the suggestion, the narrator employs imagination in his search for meaning in life:

I shook my head violently; something about those lines had begun to disturb me. You are lying, I shouted at her.
That can’t be a staircase because its flat, and staircases go up, they aren’t flat. And that can’t be upstairs because upstairs has to be above and that isn’t above; that’s right beside the drawing room. I dropped to my knees and began to scrabble around in the dust, rubbing out the lines, shouting: You’re lying, you’re mad, this can’t be a house (TSL 70).

The narrator’s journey backwards in time is suggestive of his quest for a fuller meaning in life by imposing a pattern on experiences. So he undertakes every effort with his imagination to validate materiality, about which S.P. Swain comments:

This is nothing but the travesty of quest by the half-knowing young narrator who makes a fancifully naïve approach to validate materiality. But the narrator, despite his imaginative skill, fails to comprehend the real when his childhood hero, Tridib, falls a prey to the “seamless silence”, the meaningless violence in Dhaka (262).

The drive behind the quest for meaning amid the tumble of communal frenzy and political chaos can be located in the protagonist’s urge to disentangle the enigma of silence that permeates his life. About the incessant tussle with silence he articulates:
Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence. It is a struggle that I am destined to lose – have already lost – for even after all these years, I do not know where within me, in which corner of my world, this silence lies. All I know of it is what it is not. It is not for example, the silence of an imperfect memory. Nor is it a silence enforced by a ruthless state – nothing like that, no barbed wire, no checkpoints to tell me where its boundaries lie. I know nothing of this silence except that it lies outside the reach of my intelligence, beyond words – that is why this silence must win, must inevitably defeat me, because it is not a presence at all; it is simply a gap, a hole, an emptiness in which there are no words (TSL 218).

The possibilities and nuances of silence which in turn imply the futility of eloquence and perfection is revealed through the all pervading metaphors employed in the novel. By a consistent juxtaposition of silence with powers of communication, certain seemingly undefined, vague and unreal conditions are thrown into relief. The novelist approaches this incongruous element from different angles, employing references from different areas of human experience. Silence is thus strategically used to probe deep into words and notions for their evaluation. Damodar
Rao considers silence as indicating the actualization of an inner violence when he writes:

The silence that preceded and followed the revelation was a moving statement on the actualisation of internal violence. The search and the revelation together cause a harrowing experience for the narrator ("Silence" 138).

The narrator protagonist’s quest for the self is greatly influenced by Ila in whom the quest for identity is manifest in her personal freedom, her breaking away from her family for a cosmopolitan way of life in London. Her notion of freedom is so perverse that it alters the facts of life to the extent that she is condemned only to "play houses" (TSL 69) with Nick Price in England, not to cherish the bliss of a real home. At a sub-textual level, it is the quest for freedom – personal and political – that imparts a realistic touch to the novel. The narrator acknowledges Ila’s role in his search for identity: “She and I were so alike that I could have been her twin – it was that very Ila who baffled me yet again with the mystery of difference” (TSL 37). Again, his uneasy reply to her immodest use of taboo words only betray his hypocrisy and self-delusion: “I tried to keep my face impassive as though I was accustomed to girls who used words like that” (TSL 19). Though baffled as he is, by her notion of freedom, Ila leads him to the right direction: “You see, you’ve never understood, you’ve always been taken in by the way I used to
talk" (TSL 188). Once again it needed Ila’s desperate exclamation: "Could I ever have imagined that I, Ila Datta Chaudhuri, free woman and free spirit, would ever live in that state of squalor where incidents in one’s life can be foretold like teasers for a bad television serial?" (TSL 187) to expose him the delusion freedom, for which he too had a liking. With the living example of Ila whose degrading quest for freedom that has inescapably dumped her into depths of bondage, the protagonist realizes that the search for freedom is fraught with stifling snares.

The partition of Bengal creates a psychological trauma in the grandmother when she is made to execute certain declarations as a ‘foreigner’ before being permitted to enter Dhaka, her birthplace. She muses: “Yes, I really am a foreigner here – as foreign as May in India or Tagore in Argentina”. Having caught another glimpse of the house she shook her head and said: “But whatever you may say, this isn’t Dhaka” (TSL 195). Driven by the nationalist euphoria she directs her quest realize political freedom. Sharmila Guha Majumdar comments on the aggressive nationalism of this variety:

In her desire to win political freedom, she dreamt of killing English officials. She even considered war as a necessary evil which inspired the idea of nationalism and thus strengthened the foundation of a nation (146).

The relentless quest for political freedom reflected in the belligerent and violent attitudes leads to the awareness that nationalist sentiments
can develop only through war and violence. Her feelings of nationalism are associated with the ideals of self-esteem and national power as revealed in her utterance:

It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother’s blood and their father’s blood and their son’s blood. They know they are a nation because they’ve drawn their borders with blood (*TSL 77-78*).

The source of the terrifying violence that destroys the self is shown as located in the very idea of political freedom in the modern world and the force of nationalism which draws innumerable shadow lines between people and places. So it can be inferred that in violence and hatred, the basic human quest for freedom is surfaced. Expressing the complex relation of violence, Robi speaks to Ila and the narrator:

You know, if you look at the pictures on the front page of the newspapers at home now, all those pictures of dead people — in Assam, the north-east, Punjab, Sri Lanka, Tripura — people shot by terrorists and separatists and the army and the police, you’ll find somewhere behind it all, that single word; everyone’s doing it to be free (*TSL 246*).
Similarly, instances showing violence as emerging from the quest for freedom and assertion of identity can be cited from *The Glass Palace*. Lieutenant Colonel Buckland’s anxiety over the tensions brewing in his army is a case in point. He tells Arjun:

Lieutenant – I think you probably know that I – we – are not unaware of some of the tensions in our Indianised battalions. It’s quite plain that many of our Indian officers feel strongly about public issues – particularly the question of independence (*TSL* 416).

Such psychological situations where diffidence and scepticism dominate, set apart not only individuals but continents as such from the rest of the world. The fear of non-belonging and of imminent disaster further leads to a very complex psychic break-down characterised by a “special quality of loneliness that grow out of the fear of the war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror” (*TSL* 204). In such an absurd situation where irremediable uncertainty defines human predicament, quest for meaning may be reduced to a futile exercise.

Those faced with chaos and disillusionment in the post-colonial social situation, find it imperative to re-discover their identity and construct meaning out of life. Amitav Ghosh tries to capture this disorder and violence that govern contemporary human life in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Adopting the thriller form he explores the inner realities
of human existence through its mysteries and psychic drives that defy rational explanation. The thriller appeals to the instinct and the characters have a precarious existence.

The novelist examines the colonial world and its cultural problems against the post-colonial setting dismantling conventional assumptions about history and science in the process. The novel begins when Antar, an Egyptian computer programmer in New York accidentally finds a dilapidated ID Card of an old colleague L. Murugan flashed on the screen of AVA, his super computer. Impelled by inexplicable curiosity, he begins to search for L. Murugan, who he finds, had enigmatically disappeared from Calcutta on 21 August 1995, one day after his arrival there. His quest is centred around the missing links of malarial research conducted by the Nobel Laureate Ronald Rose. Murugan is also obsessed with the mysterious Calcutta Chromosome, which was believed to be employed by the natives for interpersonal transference of traits. He was sceptical about history, and had “his notions of the so called ‘other mind’, a theory that some person or persons had systematically interfered with Ronald Rose’s experiments to push malarial research in certain directions while leading it away from others” (The Calcutta Chromosome 31). Murugan finds that Ross had never been research oriented, and had started on his quest for the malarial vector only after Dr. Patrick Manson had urged him to do so. Ross’s discoveries were seen to be
always made by a strange coincidence, only when Lutchman, a helpful ‘dhooley bearer’ was present. So Murugan infers that Ross “thinks he’s doing experiments on the malarial parasite. And all the time it’s he who is the experiment” (TCC 67) conducted by poor illiterate natives of a colonised country. Against this background is presented the supernatural power of Mangala, who has found out a so-called cure for syphilis and has acquired the power of transcending life beyond life.

It is the quest motif that writes the motley of characters in novel. Though diverse in temperament, they are entangled through their individual quest and are connected in subterranean ways with one another and with one greater quest for immortality. Urbashi Barat in her insightful analysis regards the novel as a medley of quests and writes:

The apparently climactic moments are not really the turning points in the quest at all, and the various strands or quests really part of the one great quest for life itself, the mystery must continue and there is no final solution (221).

The variety of characters of *The Calcutta Chromosome* are seen alienated from their immediate surroundings, because quests of any kind can succeed only when the pursuer is free from the bondage of conventional social relationship and survives poverty, exploitation, marginalisation and similar burdens that weigh human spirit down. Thus Antar, the initiator of the quests, his very name inhering an echo of the
inner self, is an Egyptian, working alone from home in New York, orphaned early and a childless widower. He leads a solitary life, with shadow-like neighbours and his sole link with others of the scientific world is through his computer. Murugan, a South Indian as the name indicates, born and brought up in Calcutta, is a divorcée and a lonely researcher with ‘Life Watch’. He calls himself ‘Morgan’, in order to jeer at the colonial habit of anglicising Indian names. ‘Morgan’ which means sea dweller is also suggestive of proficiency in probing deep into the mysteries of life. He is the most significant specific presence in the novel as the prime seeker of truth. His efforts allegorise the sceptical, questioning temperament needed for the self-satisfied masses who consume unconsciously everything that has an aura of truth about it. Thus Murugan becomes the paradigm of the postmodern cynicism about binary opposition of truth and falsehood. His finding about the malaria mystery validates the viability of inquisitive mental attitude. Both Antar and Murugan are expatriates in New York, doing different kinds of research for the same organisation. Their countries were both once the same imperial colony, and their present home another imperialist power. Ronald Ross, in spite of having a family, is emotionally estranged from all other co-creatures in the world of research.

Other historical figures like Grigson and Cunningham are also displaced and alienated from the locale in their own way. Phulboni, the Bengali Muslim writer born in Orissa, is a loner seen hanging about
companionless along the streets of Calcutta. Urmila, the reporter is an outsider even at home, searching for the meaning of the Laakhan stories of Phulboni. Sonali, the illegitimate child of Phulboni and an actress by profession lives all by herself. Mrs. Aratounian does not seem to have any family or close friends. Yet the novel closes with a word of consolidation for the lonesome, the frightened and the alienated in the form of a clairvoyance: “We are with you; you’re not alone; you’re not alone; we’ll help you across” (TCC 256).

These characters, alienated as they are, undertake quests intended to add meanings and significance to their otherwise worthless existence. But every step of their bold advancement, leads them back into the past and then into the future, further and further into the abyss of mystery and incomprehension until the stark realisation of having been enmeshed in the great web long before they knew about it. Every quest presented in the novel follows the same pattern of a preordained attempt to read one’s significance in and to a universe where one is but a speck of incertitude and insignificance.

The cyclical pattern of these quests interweaves the apparently incongruous strands to reveal “[…] a frightening vision of a world repeating itself over and over again despite apparent change” (S. Ghosh 7). If Antar hunts for Murugan, Murugan hunts for Antar. As it turns out, the lost ID card that turned up on Antar’s computer screen was no
accident, but a carefully planned operation that brings Antar too into the web. This pattern is seen repeated in every quest which in themselves are interconnected as revealed in the restaurant chat between Antar and Murugan. :

“Tell me Ant’, [...] do you think it’s natural to want to turn the page, to be curious about what happened next?”

“Well”, said Antar, uncomfortably, “I’m not sure if I know what you mean?”

Let me put it like this then”, said Murugan. “Do you think that everything that can be known, should be known?”

“Of course”, said Antar, “don’t see why not”. “Alright”, said Murugan, dipping his spoon in his bowl. “I’ll turn a few pages for you, but remember, it was you who asked. It’s your funeral (TCC 50).

This kind of articulation recurs in many guises throughout the novel, establishing links between the various quests.

Behind all characters and the quests they undertake, is the elusive, unseen presence whom Phulboni acknowledges as his muse and spiritual guide:

The silence of the city, has sustained me through all my years of writing: kept me alive in the hope that it would
claim me too before my ink ran dry. For more years than I can count, I have wandered the darkness of the streets, searching for the unseen presence that reigns over this silence, striving to be taken in, begging to be taken across before my time runs out (TCC 27).

This ‘presence’ is imagined in clay as the goddess Mangala – bibi and worshipped in secret by those who partake her continuing quest for immortality, attainable through the transference of the mysterious ‘Calcutta Chromosome’ transmitted by the malarial parasite.

The primary quest presented in the novel is Mangala’s experiments with counter-science to disentangle the mystery behind the ‘Calcutta Chromosome’ as an agent of interpersonal transference of traits. In spite of her being a mere assistant in Cunningham’s laboratory, Mangala is well informed about ancient cults that had command over the occult and the suprasensible which elude scientific technique of detection. Her advocacy of the teachings of Valentinus, the Alexandrian philosopher of the early Christian era, about the principles of silence and secrecy in counter-science, stands testimony to her authenticity:

She asserted that (in) Valentinian cosmology the ultimate deities are the Abyss and silence, the one being male and the other female, the one representing mind and the other truth […] these beliefs clearly did not merit a prosaic explanation (TCC 177).
Mangala’s mission meticulously manipulates other quests and characters. The mysterious progress of her experiments negates all direct communication of the discovery as revealed in the talk between Murugan and Antar:

The way this game’s set up, there’s no way you’re ever going to know [...] but if I am right, let’s just say even fractionally right, then what these guys were developing was the most revolutionary medical technology of all time. Forget about the Nobel, forget about disease [...] what these guys were after was much bigger; they were after the biggest prize of all, the biggest fucking ballgame ant human being has ever thought of the ultimate transcendence of nature (TCC 90).

Mangala epitomizes the multiple selves that characterize the post-colonial psyche which is dismembered in utter disillusionment. She is portrayed as adopting different personal as she crossed over from one body to another through the years which is the fruitful culmination of her quest for immortality. Thus she is Mrs. Aratounian in Murugan’s Calcutta, becomes Urmila, herself unaware of being chosen to receive Mangala, and in New York she becomes Tara helping Antar to ‘Crossover’. Urmila becomes the chosen person for the transference, because the truth has to be discovered by someone totally unrelated with the
exercise. Murugan reveals her: “Don’t you see? You’re the one she’s chosen” (*TCC* 254). Consequently, Urmila takes on the role of Mangala and Aratounian. This resurrection of Mangala through different female forms implicitly represents the great mother ‘Kali’ of Hindu mythology, the archetypal nurturer and the ‘terrible mother’ figure. However, the search for the figurine by Murugan and Urmila in the Kalighat episode subsumes the manoeuvring by Mangala as the emissary of the great mother. The continuum of reincarnation initiated by Mangala is progressed through Mrs. Aratounian and then through Urmila in an unending manner. The allegory fairly suggests the presence of a secret spirit that acts through different chosen people to unravel the mystery, problems and solutions for man’s betterment. Mangala’s henchman Lutchman also adopts different personae to carry on the quest in various ways through the ages, appearing even in Phulboni’s fiction. He guides Ronald Ross to his discoveries, frightens away Grigson from hindering Mangala’s experiments, and manages to dispose off Farley. Grigson’s exploratory mission to establish the real identity of Lutchman or Laakhan is left out unaccomplished on realizing that it would cost him his very life: “[...] in the last half second he manages to jump: the fenders miss him by a fraction of an inch [...] he’s sure that Lutchman was trying to stage an accident to kill him” (*TCC* 80). Farley’s discovery of Mangala – Lutchman mystery remains buried as he disappears in a “rarely used station, Renupur” (*TCC* 129). He is with Phulboni at Renupur station,
he is Sonali’s servant, Urmila’s fish monger and even appears with Antar in New York. Thus it is the message of Indian Philosophy regarding eternal human quest that Amitav Ghosh weaves into the fabric of *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

The quests presented in the novel, though varied in nature are all intended for the renewal of life itself, not for any panacea for universal benevolence. It furthers man’s advancement towards the non-rational and the ineffable realms which are accessible particularly to the colonised and the marginalised. What survives all the challenges is the belief in the infinite possibility of transcending human limitations and human mortality. So the cult of silence and secrecy pervades and even transcends the realms ruled by word and reason. Western knowledge and science had once conquered and colonised the East and they still have interest in the Indian spiritual quest as evinced by the non-Indian characters of the novel. But it culminates in an inevitable reversal of situation when the empire strikes back with the colonised asserting their superiority of intellect, which is their greatest pride and professed weapon over the colonisers.

The protagonists of Ghosh’s novels, from *The Circle of Reason* to *The Glass Palace* are portrayed to experience their past as discursively separate and opposed to the present. These innocent victims of the social and political unrest created by the whirlwinds of colonialism and
its aftermath, share almost the same emotional phenomenon in spite of changes in their time and milieu. As a result, alienation remains a constant factor throughout their life, incessantly driving them to quests for their real identity. The subversive quests portrayed in the novels celebrate the ultimate triumph of the native spirit, proclaiming the demarginalisation of the subaltern.

Ghosh’s training in historical and anthropological research, his eschewing of grand theoreticist gestures and his links with the “Subaltern Studies” project, make his work an interesting site around which current arguments in post-colonial theory can be conducted. According to Robert Dixon “Ghosh’s writing reflects the recent concern of anthropologists with the porosity of cultural boundaries” (3). In contrast with the classic view, which posits culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns, culture can arguably be conceived as a more porous array of intersections where distinct processes cross from within and beyond its borders. In the geography of human history no culture is an island. The characters in 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 states. They remain bound up in the notion of a universal humanity and postulate a global theory of the colonial subject. The cultural space, Ghosh creates, is a vast, borderless region with its own hybrid language and practices which circulate without
national or religious boundaries. Ghosh seems to be more interested in diaspora cultures that are not oriented towards lost origins or homelands, but are produced by ongoing histories of migration and transnational cultural flows. The notion of separate discrete culture evaporates. An intense awareness of cultural displacement intersects the reality that all cultures have long histories of border crossings, diasporas and migrations. This unique situation problematises all quests for identity.