Chapter V

Heteroglossic Chronotopy of Spaces

In an Antique Land (1992), as the third novel of Amitav Ghosh, is apparently a travelogue, but underneath lies Ghosh's minute discussions of the dislocations in space and time. At a deeper level, he explores the fundamental human feelings and attitudes that persist through the ages despite socio-political upheavals and geographical changes. The novel has been described as an experimental milestone in contemporary Indian Writing in English. There is, in every layer of the book memory and real life experiences, history and imagination indivisibly and is inextricably linked in a spatio-temporal matrix.

The story revolves around the research being conducted by the author in the field of social anthropology. The novel begins in the twentieth century and ends in the year 1991, at the commencement of the Gulf War popularly known as Operation Desert Storm. This research exposes Amitav to the social structure in Egypt. Thus the location is intertwined with events that go back in time.

This novel points out the tragic turn of events in history of Asia and Middle East and particularly India, the unarmed nature of Indian trade and commerce before the advent of Vasco-da-Gama in India. It focuses on a forgotten period of history showing free and liberal India's collaboration with the Arab and Chinese world, an easy flow of warmth and trust which existed between a Tunisian Jewish merchant and his Indian helper Bomma. The book is obviously a testimony to Ghosh's intense urge as a tireless, genuine researcher and uncovers his penchant

for social anthropology over decades. It establishes Amitav Ghosh not just as a writer of fiction, but also a keen traveler, a diligent researcher, a social anthropologist and a social historian.

At one level, it is a contemporary novel, delineating some ordinary characters. The daily encounters of these characters are shown, their religious rites, social customs along with their eccentricities and whims are effectively portrayed. The tale grows into a story: ordinariness becomes history; and anthropology mixes with fiction. Indeed this novel is a change in the ecology of learning. Like his other works, Ghosh's sense of time is not very strict. Time floats and mixes along with the blending of fact and fiction, there is coalescing of different branches of knowledge-history, anthropology, philosophy, sociology and religion. It is an interaction of the author with at least four languages and cultures spread across continents and centuries.

Ghosh chooses to study a civilization, one that was subject to a process of exotericism and estrangement by colonial orientalism that was similar to that of his own. The significance of this is apparent in the way he uses history to bring Egypt close to India by setting up a series of exchanges between different interactive sites located across the two countries-he maps some of the trade routes between India and Egypt via the Mediterranean; he compares the cosmopolitan settlements on the Malabar coast with hybrid Jewish communities in Egypt and shows how names are cross-fertilized when they travel across nations and acquire new forms elsewhere. But something happens to the quality of this interaction when we move from the canvas of history to the present time. Two cultures confront each other across an insurmountable gap created by mutual incomprehension. Cultural symbols

painstakingly decoded by historical analysis suddenly become opaque in the context of fieldwork interaction.

Cultural symbols are presented in two contrasting modes and on two different registers in the book. On the historical register, names and places become symbols of cultural hybridity and exchange. Cultural identities are constituted diachronically, shaped by forces of movement such as war. colonization and trade. In contrast to this, the register of the every day, that is Ghosh's own interactions in the field, are often marked by symbols of cultural difference. These symbols do not open sites of cultural interaction but rather point to its absence. These cultural symbols are attributional and folkloric, that is, they are not anchored in social interaction but serve as markers of differences. The authentic interactions described in the book such as Ghosh's visits to Sheikh Musa's house or the conversations with his friend Nabeel transcend cultural difference. They occur on the plant of the inter-human rather than the plane of the inter-social or inter-cultural. In a passage following the one describing Nabeel's puzzlement at Ghosh's unexpected reaction to questions regarding his own culture that is quoted at the beginning of this section, Ghosh describes the communal riots that took place in Dhaka and Calcutta in 1964. The fact that they are described from the perspective of his childhood self, and are imbued with the qualities of immediacy and incomprehension, gives the statement that ends this passage tremendous emotional force - "I could not have expected them to understand an Indian's terror of symbols."(1992:210)

> The stories of those riots are always the same: tales that grow out of an explosive barrier of symbols - of cities going up in flames because of a cow found dead in a temple or a pig in a mosque; of

> people killed for wearing a lungi or a dhoti, depending on where they find themselves; of women disemboweled for wearing veils or vermilion, of men dismembered for the state of their foreskins. (210)

The manner in which descriptions of his interactions in Lataifa and Nashawy are framed by historical accounts called from Ben Yiju's correspondence show a profound skepticism regarding the anthropological enterprise. The major source of the book's distinction lies in its inherent theme and the origin of this theme can be traced to the deeper layers of history and civilization. The author's perception of the basic character of man and his elemental feelings and emotions has added on extra dimension to it. On the one hand there is a sketch of the antique civilization of the twelfth century, on the other there is an account of the fast changing twentieth century world. But the attitude and the behavioral pattern are identical. They reveal same human relationships that efface the distance between the Middle Ages and the Modern Times, and between antiquity and modernity.

A valuable insight into some abiding aspects of human life and human character is provided and which is never disturbed by the flowing currents of history and civilization and thus a remarkable approach is provided to the whole reading. The book is divided into four sections: Lataifa, Nashawy, Manglore and Going Back. This is almost a circular journey. En route, the past easily infiltrates into the present and vice versa. There is an expansion of time place and persons, but the bonds of inter connections between the varied events is never slackened. The first person narrative, "I" is just not a narrator, but is a witness and a participant tying together all the facts and events in the book. The historical narrative dimension of the book excels all others characters and events are viewed

from the perspective of historical research with a remarkable single mindedness. Amitav Ghosh has unveiled the multiple strata of the interrelationships between the Indian, Egyptians, Jewish and Islamic Culture and their histories.

In *An Antique Land* one discovers a very minute and shrewd observation, of human nature. A unit small enough to manage - a microcosm, whether at Lataifa or Nashawy or Manglore is dealt with. The book had unadulterated, straight forward impression of the people and the circumstances moulding the lives of the people. Amitav Ghosh paints the lively portraits of Abraham Ben Yiju and Bomma on one hand and on the other hand of Abu AH Ustraz Sabry, Sheikh Musa, Nabeel and Zaghloul. These characters not only burgeoned his wander bust, but also present a genuine picture of traditional Egypt. Their aspirations and setbacks, their sense of belongingness to their soil and also the young generation's uprootedness because of their search for new pastures is witnessed and talked at length by Ghosh.

Modern man in the contemporary scenario is facing the ghost of alienation in a different context. Just like the seventieth century, the people of England from the Third World developed countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh etc. have been migrating to the developing countries, but when this success proves to be an illusion, disillusionment descends over. A foreign nation remains a foreign land for them; however hard they try they cannot break away from their roots back home. Thus, they face alienation.

This theme of emigration leading to alienation is elaborated in the character of Ben Yiju who in the very beginning of the novel is described as:

> A Jewish merchant, originally of Tunisia, who had gone to India by the way of Egypt, as a trader and had spent seventeen years there. A man of many accomplishments, a distinguished calligrapher, scholar

> and poet, Ben, Yiju had returned to Egypt having amassed great wealth in India'. (19)

Ben Yiju's marriage to Ashu and also his ability to integrate with the people of India can be understood in this light. He must have decided to marry an Indian girl only because it was impossible for him to return to Egypt in the near future. The sense of being a fugitive had created a huge hurdle for Ben Yiju in accepting India as his home. The guilt of wrong doing had haunted him during his entire stay in India. He remained in India as an 'outsider' because he was actually aware of his own distinct identity that of a Jew who belonged to Egypt Ben Yiju was able to relate to those Muslim Arab traders who like him had settled in Mangalore as they spoke the same language, shared the same dress code and belonged to the same continent.

For years, he lived the life of a fugitive in a faraway land making it difficult for him to keep in touch with his family back home. And one day, on receiving the news from his brother Mushabin he ultimately decides to "Go Back".

> It was probably in the mid 1140's or so that Ben Yiju began to think seriously of returning to the Middle East. At about that time, after many years of silence he finally received news about a member of his family, his younger brother Mubasbin, who as far as he knew was still living in their homeland and Ifiquiya (299)

As soon as Ben Yiju comes to know about the hardships that his family had faced at the hands of natural disaster and due to attacks by the Sicilian army, be immediately decides to return. He had been planning his return for a long time but: "This time Ben Yiju did it: a year later in 1149, he was back in Aden, with all his worldly goods and his two adolescent children" (302)

The extent of Ben Yiju's alienation is evident from his over zealous response at the news of his long lost family. The long separation had only made his longing increased with his family in Egypt. The letter written to his brothers immediately after returning from India illuminates the depth of his anguish at being separated from his family and homeland:

> On 11 September 1149, Ben Yiju wrote his brother a long letter from Aden. His return had stirred many long settled memories, and he was more overcome with a desire to reclaim his family and the remembered landscapes of his childhood: I do not know what to write, the letter beings, so strong is my longing and so ardent my yearning. (302)

Thus, the feeling of alienation and loneliness experienced by Ben Yiju in the twelfth century is continued by Nabeel of the twentieth century. Though the times could have changed, but the feeling of migration and alienation remains the same. Thus time and space are intertwined inextricably.

Nabeel is a contemporary character. He represents the youth of the Third World developing countries, who are hypnotized by the dream of success and are eager to go to any extent to achieve this success. Nabeel and Ismail "are introduced as two young students, whom the narrator meets when he is in Nashawy, Egypt. Both these young men have a burning passion to become officers in the village co-operative, a post which was held in high esteem in their small town of uneducated Fellaheen community.

Nabeel's childhood has been spent in acute poverty and it was Nabeel's dream to free his family from the clutches of poverty. This made him more passionate about achieving success in life. Considering his father responsible for

this poverty of his low paying job of a watchman, he desired to have a white collar well paying job in order to improve his lot along with improving his status amongst his other rich relatives.

> Nabeel, hated his family's poverty and loyal though he was to his father, he considered a watchman's job demeaning, unworthy of his lineage. He had always been treated as a poor relative by his more prosperous Badawy cousins and he had responded by withdrawing into the diffusive stillness of introspection. (150)

Nabeel and Ismail are allured by the prospects of fast money. They are carried away by the promises offered by the developed and economically powerful countries. Both of them leave their homeland and move to Iraq in search of better economic "prospects. And materially speaking they do attain this success. Ismail works as a construction laborer and Nabeel works as an assistant in a photographers store. Though not very respectable jobs, but it was still far better than in Egypt as officers in the cooperative. Nabeel relieved his family from its downtrodden state and was also able to fulfill his family's dreams of acquiring material comforts.

Nabeels' alienation was never understood by his family. Nobody tried to penetrate through the mask of happiness adorned by him. To everyone the money sent by him only mattered. He had become an 'outsider' by 'going out'. His other friends from Nashawy had already left for their homeland. Nabeel wanted to return with him to Egypt but could not do so as he had to earn some more in order to complete his unfinished house in Nashaway: "He wanted to come back. Infact he thought that he would. But then he decided to stay for a few more months, make a

little more money, so that they could finish building this house. Prices have gone up this last year. Everything costs more." (351)

Thus whether it's Ben Yiju, Nabeel or Ismail and whether its twelfth or twentieth century, man is compelled to leave his homeland and move to hunt other avenues and in the bargain invite alienation. As the world progresses one finds it dealing with three major themes i.e.: anthropological, cultural and social development and this is the effect of historical and political changes in the lives and aspirations of a common man.

The section into which the novel is divided is itself an indication of Ghosh's spatio-temporality. The first two sections Lataifa and Nashawy deal with the social and cultural history of Egypt and so does the third section. Mangalore deals with Ben Yiju's stay in India for seventeen years. The last section 'Young Back' is a summing up of the novelists' search for Ben Yiju's life and through him his search for cultural and political changes. The prologue of the novel contains the gist of the novel itself:

> I was a student, twenty two years old, and I had recently won a scholarship awarded by the foundation established by a family of expatriate Indians. It was only a few months since I had left India so I was little more baffled by my situation than students usually are. At that moment the only thing I knew about my future was that I was expected to do research leading towards the doctorate in social anthropology. I had never heard of the Cairo Genira before that day, but within a few months, I was in Tunisia learning Arabic. At about the same time the next year, 1980, I was in Egypt installed in village

> called Lataifa, a couple of house journey to the south east of Alexandria.(19)

This novel not only highlights human relationships, but also focuses on the Arab laws, their food habits and above all a minute and graphic description of their celebrations of Ramadan. Egypt is bought closer to India, Cultural symbols suddenly became opaque as they're painstakingly decoded by historical analysis.

Constantly, a contrast is drawn between various features in the novel sometimes it's cross culture at other times it's between the characters. The initial contrast between the characters was that of Ahmed and Hasan and later the contrast was between Nabeel and Ismail. Ghosh meets them for the first time when they were students of an agricultural training college in Damanhour. Both of them are portrayed as fine young men rational and individual in their thinking therefore wanted to become officers in the Nashaway Co. Op. They had clarity about life and saw life from broader perspective. They both respected Ustaz Sabry, - an intelligent teacher and thinker rather than Imam Ibrahim - an orthodox thinker of religion. Ismail describes an incident of Ustaz Sabry's art of disputation. He narrates an argument he had once with an East German, a communist military expert who was attached to their unit. This incident focuses on Ismail's faith in the rational attitude to life: "Do you believe in God?' the German had asked and when Ustaz Sabry answered 'Yes', the German replied: "So then where is he, show me?' Ustaz Sabry countered by asking him a question in turn Tell me[1], he said, 'Do you believe that people have a spirit the spirit of life itself? 'Yes' the German answered Ustaz Sabry said to him: "Where is the spirit, can you show it to me?' 'It is in no one place: the German said, 'it is everywhere in the body, the head ... 'And that,' Ustaz Sabry said, 'is neatly where God is.' (147)

Being representatives for the new generation, Ismail and Nabeel do not believe in miracles and orthodox religion. Though, they are always in each other's company, yet they are two different young men. The novelist thus describes them:

> Nabeel was the quiet, reflective one, not shy, but serious and earnest, never saying anything or committing himself without a good deal of prior thought. Ismail on the other hand, was like a bird - or so his family said - giving voice to every passing thought and always ready with a joke or a pun. You could see the difference between them from a long way off. Nabeel was stocky, with a square tidy face, while Ismail was short, wiry and aquiline; when Nabeel walked through the village it was with a steady, considered kind of gait, but Ismail in contrast walked with a quick, jaunty steps and always steamed to be in a hurry to get where he was going. (148)

This difference is probably due to the attitude in their upbringing. Their mothers were sisters, but their fathers were quite unlike each other. Ismail's father was from a humble lineage of small tradesmen, but was a hard working, cheerful and optimistic person. On the other hand, Nabeels' father Idris worked as a labourer on other people's land for daily wages.

Nabeel was a sensitive boy who hated his family's poverty and is determined to escape his family and poverty ridden condition. He and Ghosh shared the same emotional upheaval due to childhood which was full of pain and hardships. Like him (Ghosh) his (Nabeel's) childhood was nothing but a "forgotten boredom". Both (Ghosh and Nabeel) were the victims of political and social unrest with some emotional phenomena. This is thus described:

> The stories of those riots are always the same: tales that grow out of an explosive barrier of symbols - of cities going up in flames because of a cow found dead in a temple or a pig in a mosque of people killed for wearing a lungi or dhoti depending on where they find themselves; of women disemboweled for wearing veils or vermilion, or men dismembered for the state of their foreskins. The fact was that despite the occasional storms and turbulence their country had seen, despite even the wars that some of them fought in theirs was a world that was far gentler, far less violent, very much more humane and innocent than mine. (210)

Nabeel and Ghosh, both do not know the causes of invest; yet both are innocent victims of unrest and historical changes. Ghosh is a victim of partition, Nabeel a victim of the Gulf war:

> There was an element of wooing in our living in Dhaka as 'foreigners,' for Dhaka was in fact our ancestral city: both my parents were from families which belonged to the middle class Hindu community that had once flourished there. But long before the Muslim majority, state of Pakistan was created my ancestors had moved west words, and thanks to their wonder lust we were Indians now, and Dhaka was a foreign territory to us although we still spoke its dialect and still had several relatives living in the old Hindu neighborhoods in the heart of the city ... But still he wanted to come back. He's been.there three years. It's more than most, and its aged him. You'd see what I mean if you saw him. He looks much older. Life's is not easy out there..... The Iraq is you know ..... they're

> wild ... they come back from the army for a few days at a time and they go wild, fighting on the streets, drinking. Egyptians never to out on the sheets there at night: if some dickens Iraqis came across you they would kill you, first like that, and nobody would even know, for they'd throw away your papers. It's happened, happens all the time. They blame us, you seem, they say: 'You've taken our jobs and our money and grown rich while we're fighting and dying. (205 / 352)

The third section called Mangalore deals with Ben Yiji's seventeen years stay in India. The section begins with the geographical description of Mangalore and it also focuses on its language and customs:

> The language of Mangalore is called Tulu, and its one of the five siblings of the Dravidian family of the languages, it is rich in folk traditions and oral literature, but it does not possess a script of its own and is usually transcribed in Kannada - it is this language that has given the area around Manglore its name, Tulunad : like so many other parts of the subcontinent, it forms a cultural area which is distinctive and singular, while being at the same: time closely enmeshed with its neighbors in an intricate network of differences.(244)

One finds a successful resuscitation of Medieval Egypt and Manglore. A few disconnected dues, a few scraps of paper including some of Ben Yiju's letters presented as medieval documents in various universities and research centers are all with which Amitav Ghosh has built up the complete story of Yiju's life. The transcriptions of the letters written by a merchant in Aden named Khalaf Ibu Ishaq

to Ben Yiju in Manglore which Amitav as a student of social anthropology at Oxford, came upon in the winter of 1978, provided him with the clues to the story of the slave. This letter was prefaced with a few words about Ben Yiju and it contained a footnote about a slave. Ben Yiju was introduced as:

> A Jewish merchant, originally of Tunisia, who came to India by way of Egypt, as a trader and had spent seventeen years there. A man of many accomplishments, a distinguished calligrapher, scholar and a poet. Ben Yiju had returned to Egypt having amassed great wealth in India. The last years of his life were spent in Egypt and his papers found their way into his synagogue in Cario; they were eventually discovered in a chamber known as the Geviza. (19)

The footnote, very brief, merely described the slave as Ben Yiju's Indian slave and business agent, a respectable member of his household 18) Amitav Ghosh was quite restless after reading the letters because they spoke not only of two merchants but also of a slave. In each of his letters addressed to his friend Ben Yiju, Khalaf ibn Ishaq had singled out the slave, mentioned him by name and sent him "plentiful greetings" (16). This was something unimagined in the Middle Ages:

> That is all: no more than a name and a greeting. But the reference comes to us from a moment in a time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual existences are the literate and the consequential the Nazis and the Sultans, the chroniclers and the priests - the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time. But the slave of Khalaf s letter was not of the .company: in his instance it was a

> mere accident that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved. It is nothing less than a miracle that anything is known about him at all. (16-17)

Thus one finds that the story of Ben Yiju is not an imaginary picture, but an authentic account of the twelfth century and so this chapter 'Manglore' contains plenty of information about the trade relations between India and the Middle East during Ben Yiju's lifetime. Each information is supported by the historical documents.

After revealing the story of Abrabam Ben Yiju, Ghosh returns to Manglore, meets Prof. Vivek Rai, a historian who helps him to decipher the mystery surrounding the second protagonist of his story Bomma; Ghosh now links "the matrilineally descended Tulu and the patriarchal Jew who would otherwise seem to stand on different sides of unbridgeable chasm." In order to break alumni, Ghosh strives to create "effective ties of kinship between people who were otherwise unrelated." He does not try to authenticate just the trade relations of the "antique lands" but also inaugurates the fact that in the medieval world" slaves were sometimes gradually incorporated into their master's households and came to be counted as members of their families:

> Perhaps the most elusive aspect of medieval slavery is its role as spiritual metaphor, as an instrument of religious imagination Slavery was after used as an image to represent the devotee's quest for God ... searching for their master with a passion that dissolved selfhood, wealth, caste and gender. (260-61)

'Going Back' is the section which concentrates on the writer's second visit to Egypt. It registers socio-cultural change, which has occurred in Egypt in recent years under the spell of the Western influence. People in village are no longer ignorant about the city glamour. Popular culture had lunged many young and old alike. It is no "surprise that Cairo absorbs outsiders." But "as a rule people here respect one another and they 're hospitable and "severe to foreigners" Thus, in spite of the fact that like many other developing countries, Egypt too was attracted towards the western world. Except Shaikh Musa's house all the houses have a television set and a refrigerator, but its natives had no developed the mentality of the West.

Because of the Gulf-War and the possibilities of jobs in Iraq, the young people of Egypt had changed the entire external map of Egypt. Their homes now were full of T.V. sets, a food processor, calculators, a transistor radio and so on Abu Ali had been able to fulfill their dreams of remaining poverty from their family but in return had to pay a heavy price with Nabeel's life. The epilogue of the novel depicts the true to its true picture: "We're crowed around the T.V. set, watching carefully, minutely, looking at every face we could see. There was nothing to be seen except crowds: Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History." (353)

The novel ends with questions like: Why wars? Have we learnt any lesson from history? What is the aim of our life? What are we looking for peace, comfort or happiness? What is the meaning of civilization? Apart from these questions, it also draws attention to the antiquated attitude of the partichal society towards women. The mention of the women is never independent, but also in connection to the male - whether father, brother, son or father.

Ashu - Ben Yiju's wife who assumed that she's beautiful is not mentioned anywhere else in the entire corpus of Ben Yiju's documents. He did not even once refer to her in his letters or jottings. Even his daughter's name is also not mentioned whereas his son's name sworn is mentioned thereby indicating women were not considered important enough even to mention their names. Ben Yiju's daughter is mentioned in his letters as "I have left a daughter, his sister."

The wives of Imam are mentioned. They're mentioned as Imam's first wife and Imam's second wife. Sakeria, Shaikh Musa's wife, is portrayed as a shy woman, she was so shy to answer the author that Ahmad had to speak for her. She was very young and her age was a fraction of her husband's age. Most of the women characters perform the duties of a servant. The two women in Shaikh Musa's home came into the room carrying a pair of trays loaded with food, Sakina with three glasses of tea. Abu Ali berates his wife, abuses her. The characters are ready to divorce their wives then to sell the fruits for a laser price in the market. Thereby, indicating women not more than a commodity. Further, *In An Antique Land* opens a floodgate of knowledge about the co-existence of different cultures in India. The trade and commerce between India and Egypt as well as Aden and Middle East countries brought immense wealth to India. Probably this might have made the Europeans, especially the Portuguese, to resort to the use of military force to take control over trade in the Indian Ocean, and a new era had begun in world history. Ghosh as well as the reader feels indignant for:

> ... the remains of the civilization that had brought Ben Yiju to Mangalore were devoured by that unquenchable, demonic thirst that has raged ever since, for almost five hundred years over the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. (288)

Underneath the anger, one feels the author's profound sense of regret as well. Ghosh seems to imply that the "extortion and rapacity of colonialism" put an end to the possibility of the kind of relationship that existed between individuals as different as Ben Yiju and Bomma.

In *An Antique Land* is a unique experiment in fiction writing. It can be read at different levels, a work of history or anthropology, or a travelogue. Amitav Ghosh creates an authentic world; be it an Egyptian village or recreation of Ben Yiju's life in India. It satisfies our longing for the far off lands as well as India's prime achievement in the gone era in the field of navigation.

Indeed Ghosh has a traveler's infallible eye for the quick fact that lands have the soul of people. This work can be read at different levels, a work of history or anthropology or a travelogue. He creates an authentic world; be it an Egyptian village or recreations. *In An Antique Land* has attained "supreme intellectual synthesis." He attempts a new technique, that of story telling through the use of memory, a craft quite simple, and achieves a total effect on the readers. He carefully narrates each story, builds up and holds the attention of the reader, and moves with a steady direction towards his final end. The reader too gets involved and interested in this anthropological research. The novel also offers vivid glimpses of the many small, indistinguishable, intertwined histories - Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim - which prevailed until some centuries ago, but which then become partitioned in several areas where they had once existed. The novel, however, works richly with the task Ghosh suggests. He has created a novel which is beautiful and powerful but also works to record and reclaim history, history which like Ustaz Sabry's name enlightens, and like

Bomma points the way to an understanding of the past, which can lead to a more fruitful reckoning with the present and the future.

Ghosh sustains readers' interest by displaying rich and varied kinds of men and manners. The writer is absorbed by the variety of human types. It seems to him that in Egypt and India the most impressive and the most awe-inspiring monument of antiquity is neither the Citadels, nor the Pyramids, nor the Nile but the man himself. To see human beings closely is Ghosh's chief aim in Visiting Egypt. With a convex lens in his hand he tries to penetrate into the people of contemporary world and also the people of antiquity. Their lives have dramatic situation and their dialogues have dramatic intensity. Each section of the book and each chapter add to the reader's clarity to understand the plot. *In an Antique Land* thus is a travel book for it records people and their manners. Ghosh has an artist's eye, his perceptions are sensitive and observations are acute. He sets out to quench his quest for more interesting facts. His is a travelers' tale." Apart from his perfectly pitched prose for vivid images Ghosh has the travel writer's infallible eye for the quirk that lays bare the soul of a people.

The Glass Palace is an epic story of the three generations of Indo- Burmese and Malaysian families, beginning with the fall of Mandalay to the British and ending with a powerful, but rather a simplistic image of Daw Anug San Sui as a symbol of hope for future Burma.

Like its namesake, *The Glass Palace* reflects different sides of many historical issues through its characters. Ghosh infuses warmth and empathy into the telling, bringing history to life in a way that is both subtle and strong. The characters and their impact lasts longer. It is definitely rich in details, lyrical and profound. Its narrative extends upto three generations, thereby making it a book

about geographical entites, space, distance and time. Many stories have been woven together. There are many characters. It is a saga of many families, their lives and their connections with each other.

Ghosh's evocation of King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat's exile in India and his rendering of intimate relationships among lovers, husbands, wives and family definitely pulls the old heart strings

The Glass Palace is a multi generational saga chronicling the interconnected lives and fortunes of two families - one Indian and the other Burmese set against the backdrop of British colonial rule, and finally, the rise of Indian Independence movement in the midst World War Ii. A vast geographical canvas is woven into a compelling story, with arresting characters and a concise introduction to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century history in an attempt to locate the history of time. Amitav Ghosh weaves into the life of his central protagonist, Rajkumar, the bewildering and often poignant accounts of a family scattered through postimperialist dislocation in various parts of Asian continent, as he charts complex sociological and political repercussions of such disbanding through the experiences of loss, exile and the search for a homeland. The idea of the nation as metaphor of loss, and as being more symbolic of a unitariness than the physical entity which is society finds elaborate figuration in the turbulence of cultural cross-overs and conflicting histories that make up the central concern of Ghosh.

Beginning in 1885, with the British invasion of Mandalay and the capture of the Burmese King and Queen and encompassing over 100 years to modern day India and Burma (Myanmar), Amitav Ghosh has created in *The Glass Palace*, a monument to life in colonial central and South East Asia. The story follows three

generations from three families, spreading its wings across the world, from Malaya to New York.

With each generation, the characters' lives and personalities contrast and intertwine according to the rise and fall of the countries and the world's politics. Rajkumar, the Indian peasant who makes a fortune through teak and his wife Polly, the breathtakingly beautiful maid of the Burmese royal family, contrast with Uma, the Indian widow who becomes a champion for Indian independence after her liberating time in USA and the Americanised Matthew who makes a life in his half-native Malaya as a rubber plantation owner, while Uma's Bengali nieces and nephews contrast to Rajkumar and Dolly's newly wealthy sons. Yet they all suffer in the Second World War, whether as a soldier, refugee discriminated against because of their skin colour. Ghosh's focus on the war in Burma, from the viewpoint of Indian Officers in the British army, who have been imbued through their regimental history to believe in 'their' country (i.e. Britain and not India), reveals a side of both world wars that is rarely told.

The Glass Palace and the full circle it travels from one glass palace in the lush and rich nineteenth century Burma to another glass palace in repressed and impoverished Myanmar. *The Glass Palace* begins in Burma, literally in its last stage of independence before the British finally completely subjugated it in 1885. Ghosh starts off contrasting the story of a young orphaned Indian boy Rajkumar, with that of the imperious, but doomed Burmese royal family. Rajkumar's family come from Akyab: "The principal port of Arkan - that tidewater stretch of coast where Burma and Bengal Collide in a whirlpool of unease."(13) All his family died of a fever that passed through the town, including the last survivor, his

mother, who had tried to ship back to the ancestral home of Chittagong with Rajkumar.

After his mother's death, the boy stayed to work on the boat having nowhere else to go, In Mandalay, the Burmese royal capital, the boat needed extensive repairs, and during the wait Rajkumar went to work and live at a small foodstall in town. Once he lands in Mandalay, his life-long search for people and place begins. He is taken in by the city: "Long straight roads radiated outwards from the walls, forming a neat geometrical grid. So intriguing was the ordered pattern of these sheets that Rajkumar wandered far afield, exploring." (5) He was a complete destitute boy in a destitute city. Finally, he goes to Ma Cho for the job and at the very outset of it, he receives a thorough rebuke and scolding, which he later realizes was not hurled at him but at the dust, the splattering oil and at the price of vegetables.

Soon Rajkumar develops affinity for the place and develops a sense of belonging to the new place. Every barrier poses a new challenge to him like the Fort of Mandalay, the Shining Glass Palace.

> That night, lying flat on his mat, Rajkumar looked through the gap between his feet and caught sight of the gilded light that marked the palace: it glowed like a beacon in the moonlight. No matter what Ma Cho said, he decided, he would cross the moat-before he left Mandalay, he would find the way in. (7)

While working at Ma Cho's tea stall, he meets Saya John who was the man in Ma Cho's life and with whom he shares a long association later. When the British throws down the King of Burma, Rajkumar is told that the British wish to control Burmese territory for wood. This proves to be a turning point in

Rajkumar's life, as he starts shaping his future plans. He senses wealth in teak. When the city is rampaged by the British, it is the Indian soldiers who come on orders of their colonial masters. Suddenly Indians were the targets of mob frenzy. Rajkumar was also attacked but was saved by Saya John.

> A hand flashed out of the shadows. Taking a grip on his hair, a man pulled him off the ground. Rajkumar swung up a leg and dug it back, aiming his heel at his assailants' groin. The man saw the kick coming and blocked it with one hand. Twisting Rajkumar's head around, he struck him across the face with the back of the fist. A spurt of blood shot out of Rajkumar's nose. The shock of the blow slowed the moment to a standstill. The arc of blood seemed to stop in its trajectory, handing suspended in the air. Then the crook of an elbow took Rajkumar in the stomach pumping the breath out of his and throwing him against the wall. He slid down, clutching his stomach. Then suddenly, help arrived. A voice rang through the land... The men backed away slowly. (29)

This was the day Saya perceived something unique in Rajkumar:

> Saya John glanced at him, started. There was something unusual about the boy – a kind of watchful determination. No excess of gratitude here, no gifts or offerings, no talk of honour, with murder in heart. There was no simplicity in his face, no innocence: his eyes were filled with worldliness, curiosity and humber. That was as it should be. If you ever need a job, Saya John said, come and talk to me.(30)

Rajkumar amidst all this begins to represent the human will to survive and thrive even under worst and adverse conditions. Destined for success, he goes to work for his friend and mentor Saya John in the teak industry eventually creating a kind of empire of his own. British soldiers had invaded the royal city of Mandalay and so King Thebaw and haughty Queen Supayalat were forced to leave the glittering Glass Place, looters quickly move into scavenge whatever they could find. The irony was that the King and Queen were respected and were beloved figures in Burma. Ghosh very adeptly strips the veils off human nature, to reveal the crude drive for survival that lives even is seemingly innocent hearts.

> Ma Cho fell to the floor, her hands clasped over her head in a reverential shiko. Rajkumar dropped to his knees, unable to wretch his gaze away...
>
> The Queen tried to snatch away the candle stand. Ma Cho eluded her hands, pushing herself backwards, crab like. The Queen hissed at her: 'Do you know who I am?' Ma Cho offered her yet another respectful genuflection, but she would not part with her candle stand. It was as though her determination to cling to her loot was in no way at odds with her wish to render due homage to the Queen.....
>
> For the first time in her reign, she had become what a sovereign should be- the proxy of the people. Everyone who came through the door fell to the floor in a spontaneous act of homage. Now, when she was powerless to chstise them, they were glad to offer her these tokens of respect; they were glad even to hear her rail at them. It was good that they should shiko and she berate them."(34)

When the palace of King Thebaw is evacuated, Rajkumar also moves in to loot, but has an extraordinary encounter with a young girl, one of Queen Supayalat's attendants:

> She was slender and long limbed, of a complexion that was exactly the tint of the fine thanaka powder she was wearing on her face. She had huge dark eyes and her face was long and perfect in its symmetry. She was by far the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld of a loveliness beyond imagining. (34)

Her name gets branded into his heart: 'What's your name?' Rajkumar said. 'Doh-lee?' 'Dolly.' 'Dolly,' repeated Rajkumar. 'Dolly.' He could think of nothing else to say, or as much worth saying, so he said the name again louder and louder, until he was shouting 'Dolly, Dolly.'(35) Even after years of separation he continues to believe that this still, mysterious creature is his destiny. Inspite of all this Rajkumar's empathy with the general mourning at the loss of the King and the sudden occupation of Burma is quite revealing:

> Rajkumar was at a loss to understand his grief. He was, in a way, a feral creature, unaware that in certain places there exist invisible bonds linking people to one another through personifications of their commonality. In the Bengal of his birth those this had been surrendered by a century of conquest and no longer existed even as a memory..... But that there should exist a universe of loyalties that was unrelated to himself and his own immediate needs - this was very nearly incomprehensible. (47)

Of similar nature is Dolly's reaction to the deporment of the royal family to India and her growing awareness of the now divided house as she 'began to notice

odd little changes,' around her, of the maids' impudence for instance, and their unwillingness to shiko and the ambivalence of her own position. She was 'free' she was told, for she was a slave in the erstwhile kingdom and not a 'prisoner' of the British; King Thebaw and his Queen, but in her heart she knew her life was bound with that of the princesses who she had been enslaved to look after.

In the mazes of history new associations are forged, the past is recast in transformed patterns and unspoken allegiances and 'loyalties' are born where there were only hierarchies of power and position. Dolly in this case and by her peculiar new position of being twice inslaved in the breaking of a nation is the unconscious reminder of the 'national idea' which flourishes, 'as in the soil of foreign conquest.' She, more than anyone else, embodies the sanctity of the Burmese Royal Family, their regal authority that seems increasingly threatened in the wake of exile and, most intensely, the quiet and subliminal aggression of dislocated subjects.

On one hand goes the story of Queen Supayalat who is an expert in cruel court intrigues and palace politics and on the other hand a twelve years old boy offers sweets to a ten year old vulnerable girl. The contrast is too intense to be missed. Queen Supayalat is no ordinary woman. Thebaw is ineffectual and scholarly type of a person. But most unexpectedly Supayalat:

> in defiance of the protocols of palace intrigue, fell headlong in love with her husband, the King. His ineffectual good nature seemed to inspire a maternal ferocity in her. In order to protect him from her family, she stripped her mother of her powers and banished her to a corner of the palace, along with her sisters and co-wives. Then she set about ridding Thebaw of his rivals. She ordered the killing of

> every member of the Royal Family who might ever be considered a threat to her husband. Seventy-nine princes were slaughtered on her orders, some of them newborn infants and some too old to walk. To prevent the spillage of royal blood she had had them wrapped in carpets and bludgeoned to death. The corpses were thrown into the nearest river (38-39).

But the enigma of human nature is such that this most cruel person goes on to live in exile, suffers captivity and humiliation for love, for her husband. 'What could love mean to this woman, this murderer, responsible for the slaughter of scores of her own relatives? And yet it was a fact that she had chosen captivity over freedom for the sake of her husband, condemned her own daughters to twenty years of exile'(152).

Dolly, however is steadfast in her loyalty to the royal family. She remains with them in the most critical circumstances. One by one all the maids and servants leave the royal family and go back to Burma but Dolly does not do so. This may partly be due to the fact that she has nowhere to go to. Yet the sincerity of her nature cannot be denied. Gradually from a child she becomes an attractive young girl. Her body and mind expand. She has nothing to look forward to. She cannot dream for herself. Her life is an appendage, a depending extension of the royal family. Sex comes as a handy rescue for this young girl to maintain her sanity. The novelist chooses to go in detail regarding Dolly's first exposure to the life of the body. Sawant is the local servant of the king. He is the chief servant. He is the natural choice for Dolly and she for him. But soon they are caught by the first Princes.

When Raj Kumar comes to take her, Dolly has run into a dead end. She is in an emotional chaos. She is not interested in Raj Kumar. By some sort of psychological transference, she identifies with the first princess and says that she is awaiting the baby's arrival. She feels the baby to be her own. But Uma knows better, 'the birth of this child will drive you out of your mind [.....]' (163). Dolly's meeting with Raj Kumar is of great value in understanding the kind of a person she is. She is so clear in her perceptions. When Uma coaxes her to marry Raj Kumar and says that he loves her, Dolly's reply is remarkably correct, 'he's in love with what he remembers. That isn't me' (161). She goes on to tell Raj Kumar about her past relationship with Sawant. Finally, Raj Kumar and Dolly are married.

Uma, the wife to the District Collector Dey is restless and intelligent, she strikes up a close, unlikely friendship with Dolly and which lasts a lifetime. Her liberal education in Calcutta and the fact of her being the Collector's wife have little to do with the spontaneity of her response of taking off the picture of Victoria from the wall. She can empathise with Dolly's situation as they both are in the sites of colonial oppression, and displaced by the same, single stroke of imperial authority. Yet Dolly's contradictory love for the exile, her real/imaginary Indian home of twenty hears, is a curious case of mis recognizations, as it were.

Where a less epic novel might have ended, this one gets started. Soon after the wedding of Rajkumar and Dolly, Ghosh's strikes a note of tragedy with the death of Collector. Though Uma developed a close bond and association with Dolly, but could not with all her sophistication, liveliness and charm sort out problems in her life. The Collector does not fit into Indian things as the bond shared by both of them was quite weak.

The novel then covers the next generation genre the children of Rajkumar and Dolly (Neel and Dinu); Saya John's grandchildren (Alisan) and Uma's niece and nephews (Arjun and Manju). The crisscross of history with narrative fuelled by the author's own remembered images and fabulations of people trapped in the machinations of time serves to bridge the widening psychological gap between nations and geographies. Ghosh's account of colonial conflict and his rendering of time past allows sufficient distance, as it were, in which to reconsider some of the issues that racked South Asian history more objectively.

Arjun's entry into the Military Academy at Dehradun prompted by the notion of passionate service to his country receives a rude jolt in his colleague Hardy's ironic reduction of it. In the face of growing insecurity about Indians fighting under the imperial army, the author seems to find the ineffably close and intimate ties between Arjun, an officer and his subordinate, Kishan Singh, the only lasting bond of love in the otherwise emotionless 'mercenary' exercise of war. Arjun undergoes a similar, unlikely transformation, starting out as an colonial Indian soldier then becoming a very dedicated officer in the British Indian Army, but ending as a deeply traumatized revolutionary fighting for the 'other' side - India's own side - as the officer in the Indian National Army.

Amitav Ghosh does a brilliant job of painting the broader states of history and its growth in India, Burma, Malaysia and even among revolutionary young Indian exiles living in New York. The novel becomes an education in that time and focuses most sharply on the tragic reality of the British Indian Army soldiers, who fought bravely for England in so many different countries, only to realize that their elite and loyal fighting force was a tool being used against all Britain's colonized people, including themselves.

The fates of nearly all characters are caught in a similar quest for their points of origin. Rajkumar lives the life of a 'near-destitute refugee' in Uma's Calcutta home and for all his wanderings dies with the conviction that: "The Ganges could never be same like Irrawaddy."(544) Dolly's final mission is Burma, brings her life full circle from her beginning as a slave girl behind the palace walls of Mandalay to her voluntary submission to the cloistered life in the nunnery at sagaing, where she quietly passes away.

The novel finds in abundance the relevant ideas on the process of civilization, wars and their futility, the concept of boundaries, colonisation, journey, hybridity, rootlessness, childhood, process of growing up etc. It is also entangled in a web of journey, chance, uncertainty and orphanhood. They all are interrelated.

The road side food stall is a well recognized symbol of journey. This is also the place of current news, cheap food, cheap sex and temporary connections. The opening scene sets the mood of the novel. It is a novel about many places, war, displacement, exile and rootlessness through and over time.

This saga of human weakness gives birth to concept of hybridity. Saya John is the example of this hybridity. His clothes are Western. He speaks English, Hindustani and Burmese. His face look's like that of Chinese. Saya John himself makes fun of his amalgamated identity:

> I'm like you (Rajkumar) an orphan, a foundling, I was brought up by Catholic Priests,, in a town called Malacca. These men were from everywhere - Portugal, Macao, Goa. They gave me my name - John Martins. They used to call me Joao, but I later changed it to John. They spoke many many languages, those priests and from

> Goans, I learnt few Indian words. When I was old enough to work, I went to Singapore, where I was for a while in a military hospital and they asked me this very question: how is that you who look Chinese and carry a Christian name, can speak our language. When I told them how this had come about they would laugh and say, you're a washerman's dog - you don't belong anywhere either by the water or on land and I'd say yes, that is exactly what I'm. He laughed and Rajkumar joined in. (10)

This was laughter of mutual sharing. Both Rajkumar and Saya John had the same existence. There was no humiliation between the two, but the simple acceptance of fact.

Change, make shift arrangements and temporary homes appear again and again in the novel. They lend a contemporary flavour to it. The sense of shifting makes the novel come close to modern times where movement and uncertainty dominate. The relevant thought component of the novel happens to be the process of colonization and the state of colonized. This novel presents the actual process of aggression, capture and colonisation.

Mental colonisation made the things even worse. For example, Saya does not see the English as usurpers. For him, they are superior. From them, he has learnt the art of using everything for his own benefit. The Europeans for him stand for efficient exploitation. To him, it brings profit. He does not know anything beyond his immediate gain, nor does he want to know. Many decades later we see Arjun boasting of his connection with Westerners. In his mind, he has accepted that the Western style is better and therefore desirable. ʻDinu understood that it was through their association with Europeans that Arjun and his fellow-officers saw

themselves as pioneers'(279). We also see Raj Kumar being convinced that without the British the Burmese economy would collapse. Many stances can be given where the author has shown the cruelty of colonisation and its impact on the lives and mind of the colonised. Decolonisation is not easy, perhaps it is not even possible. This realization comes through Arjun: "We rebelled against 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."(518)

The dominant mood of *The Glass Palace* seems to be one of acceptance of psycho historical and geo political contingencies that led to the emergence of the national idea in India or for that matter the liberation of Burma from British occupation. Some of the lives these events touched and whose stories Ghosh chooses to retell assert in a small but telling way the changing condition of production of academic and intellectual knowledge and their reception in a less divided world. The need for post colonial to converse with that world as it were prevails over the other more blind need to resist the old world.

While barriers and boundaries seem to define the psyches that attend the making of nations and nationalities in *The Glass Palace,* the author seems to collapse these margins and is, metaphorically, at home everywhere. Like Ghosh too, some of the best Indian language writers, words like 'marginality' and 'hybridity' seem quite irrelevant, and segmenting the worlds into Third and First regions a rather absurd activity. His success comes from being an individual who is not conditioned by the pressures of the global market and who remains "unfettered by the burden of otherness". Indeed in the postcolonial project, writers of his tribe are curiously privileged because like the quintessential migrant they float, "upward

from history, from memory, from time". The postcolonial is by virtue of this displaced and mobile location then, freed of gender, class and political affiliations as he moves unhindered and unrestricted in his peregrinations across the vast spaces of the worlds and cultures he understands and internalizes.

Ghosh's fifth novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is geographically more limited and compared to the epic grandeur of *The Glass Palace*, could be seen as "an attempt to write history *en miniature"* (Hoydis, 2011: 293). Unlike the "diasporic peregrinations of his earlier novels, the action is concentrated in one geographical area" (Mondal, 2007: 17) and the narrative time frame is confined within a much shorter period of a little more than forty years. This "almost intimate" narrative "shares Ghosh's concern for the individual against a broader historical—or even, in this case, geographical—backdrop" (Hawley, 2005: 132). The novel consists of two parts: the first part (The Ebb: *Bhata)* is subdivided into 30 chapters and the second part ('The Flood: *Jowar")* in 37 chapters. Each chapter has a brief telling title (e.g. names of people and places, incidents, etc.). Quite interestingly, the title of the first chapter of the narrative is 'The Tide Country' whereas the final chapter is entitled 'Home: An Epilogue", It clearly emphasizes a movement from a rather hostile place for human habitat to a more accommodating home.

There is a unique sense of place as Ghosh sets this novel in the 'tide country', in the watery labyrinth of islets in the Ganges delta called the Sundarbans that lie on the easternmost coast of India: the choice of the location is significant as it is a region whose fishing folk easily traverse the imaginary boundaries of the modern nation-state. This peripheral land of islets covered by mangrove forests and swamps, co-inhabited by impoverished, rural islanders, tigers and other animals of land and water epitomizes subalternity, a politically rich motif in the

narrative. The title of Ghosh's novel points back to the central challenge facing the region. Water is certainly the source of life, but when sea level rises, it is a threat to human survival. In this intermittently half-submerged archipelago, no border could divide "fresh water from salt, river from sea" *(HT,* 7), where lands rise only during *bhata* (ebbtide) thus naming the terrain 'Bhatir Desh' . From the historical period of the Mughal Empire in India this piece of land is known in this name but later changed its identity as the Sundarbans (named after a very common species of mangrove—the *Sundari* tree) in the map of physical geography. As Divya Anand (2007) makes her careful observation, the "Indian part of the Sundarbans was declared a Tiger Reserve in 1973, a national park in 1984, World Heritage Site in 1985 and a Biosphere Reserve in 1989" (158). The 'being' of the place remains the same, only it becomes identified in a different way. The focus amazingly shifts from the tide to the forest.

The sense of place is enriched by Ghosh's meticulous depiction of details in several layers of human existence: the society with its impoverished population, the fishermen and the honey-collectors; the entire tidal ecology—the rivers with the aquatic bio-diversity and the life cycle of the Orcaella, the forest inhabited by the Royal Bengal tigers, even the crocodiles and crabs; the mythical and religious tales of the region—the tale of Bon Bibi and her worship, the folk epics fusing both Hindu and Muslim faith; the history of the port town of Canning, the storms named 'cyclone' that ravage the region time and again; the ambitious vision of Sir Daniel Hamilton, who had dreamt of establishing an ideal community and so bought some ten thousand acres of land in this tide country; the flush of the Hindu refugees from Bangladesh after 1971 and their eviction from the island of Morichjhapi in 1979; the service of some organizations and NGOs working in

public interest in this area, the sacrifice of some dedicated people depicted through the fictional lives of Nilima and also Nirmal. Over the ages, this region has been inhabited by the Hindus, the Muslims and also by some European colonizers. But unlike most of the other places in India, this region epitomizes cultural hybridity, which is evident in the names of places like Annpur, Jamespur, Emilybari or Lusibari (European proper names followed by the common Bengali place-name suffixes like '-pur' or '-bari'); in the names of the local "patent medicines for neuralgia and dyspepsia—concoctions with names like 'Hajmozyne' and 'Dardocytine'" *(*24) sold in the stalls of Canning.

As *The Shadow Lines* begins with a clear note of departure and *The Glass Palace* with that of an arrival, *The Hungry Tide* starts with the two principal characters on travel, on their way to the Sundarbans. The narrative begins with Kanai Dutt standing on a crowded platform of a south Kolkata railway station named Dhakuria and watching Piyali Roy, "a foreigner" *(*3) standing on the same platform and awaiting a local train in the same direction to Canning, "the railhead for the Sundarbans" *(*13). Kanai, being "the one other 'outsider' on the platform" (4), and in his own words "a translator... and an interpreter as well, by profession" *(*10), is heading for Lusibari to meet his aunt Nilima, who runs a charity trust (named as the 'Badabon Trust' in the novel) there. He is invited by his aunt to receive a recently discovered diary left to him by his deceased uncle Nirmal, who was a headmaster in the local school and a Marxist ideologue. Piya's (Piyali Roy) journey to the tide country is part of her research and fieldwork on river dolphins. She is a cetologist. Kanai lives in Delhi and Piya has come from Seattle in the US. As multiple places—Kolkata, Delhi and Seattle intersect spatially for the sake of the plot, so quite interestingly, the novel moves on three temporal strands. The

storyline mainly rests in present time, but traverses through memory and Nirmal's diary entries in two different time periods in the post-Partition India— the 1950s and the 1970s. In *The Hungry Tide,* like his other novels, Ghosh enlivens history with 'newer' significance and all through the narrative, memory plays a vital role in picking up a past which is not quite dead.

However, from the very first chapter of the narrative, both Kanai and Piya accordingly start negotiating with the socio-cultural space *en route* the Sundarbans, as both of them are almost 'outsiders'. Kanai's appearance is marked with his "middle-aged prosperity and metropolitan affluence" *(*5) and Piya's "almost exotic", "neatly composed androgyny" *(*3) are complemented with her inability of conversing in either Bengali or Hindi. Piya's negotiation with her American identity becomes more clearly visible when she calls the tea-seller for a cup of tea: "She had never cared for the kind of *chai* on offer in Seattle, her hometown, but somehow, in the ten days she had spent in India she had developed an unexpected affinity for milky, overboiled tea served in earthenware cups" *(*9; original emphasis). While she tries to manoeuvre the cup through the window of the train, a small trickle splashes over the papers Kanai was reading and this incident sets them in conversation. They become familiar to each other and after knowing about Piya's research on the cetacean population, particularly Gangetic dolphins, in the rivers of the Sundarbans, Kanai invites her to visit Lusibari. Kanai also tells her about the purpose of his own journey to Lusibari and in connection tells her also about his first visit to the tide country in his childhood in 1970. As the train reaches Canning, before they depart, Kanai warns Piya about the hostility of the ecological space of the tide country: "Be careful with the man-eaters" (15). This warning

obliquely alerts the reader about the unfamiliar socio-cultural and ecological space of the place.

Like the earlier ones, in this novel too, Ghosh employs the use of flashback and memory and also the 'double-helix' pattern of alternative narrative strands (Mondal, 2007: 16). As Kanai revisits the place after more than thirty years, some flashbacks take him in the past. Memories of his childhood visit to Lusibari and the event of meeting Nirmal at the College Street in Calcutta come to his mind. He also remembers Horen Naskor and Kusum. Spatial dislocation paves way for temporal dislocation: "As he looked around, taking in the sights, Kanai had a vivid recollection of Nirmal's silhouette, outlined against the sky" (25). The memories of his first visit bring past and present into a symbiotic encounter. On the other hand, Piya's first encounter with the spatial reality of the Sundarbans sends a chaotic note to her: "...in a place where she felt even more a stranger than elsewhere" (34). Despite her Indian descent and an ancestral home in Kolkata, she does not feel at home. Compared to the working situations in Burma or Cambodia—"on the Irrawaddy, as on the Mekong and the Mahakam" (34)—the situation here appears to be more hostile. This becomes clear from the very start of her trip as the ruffian owner of the launch, Mej-da points out the differences between Piya and himself by jocularly performing an obscene gesture: "Bursting into laughter, he gesticulated in the direction of his tongue and his crotch.... It was not till later that she realized that this pairing of the organs of language and sex was intended as a commentary on the twin mysteries of their *difference" (*34; my emphasis). She feels confused that "her unmistakable foreignness" does not work here: "Would these men have adopted the same attitude if she had been, say, a white European, or Japanese?" *(*34) But as she always suffers from a more acute confusion

regarding her own identity, she does not shout defiance: “But as for herself she had no more idea of what her own place was in the great scheme of things” *(*35). She negotiates with the situation with a calm and resolute silence, but stays vigilant after her recognition of the place as more hostile and more foreign than she had thought.

The ‘double-helix’ pattern of alternative narration, like the ebb and flood of the tide country, again takes the reader to Kanai in the next chapter, and this continues through the entire Part One of the narrative. As memory is a repository of the historical events, so it also contains cartographic realities or maps. After reaching Lusibari, Kanai feels “as if his memory had rolled out a map so that the whole island lay spread out before his eyes” *(*36), and he is caught between a temporal awareness and spatial consciousness.

In the next chapter (‘The Fall’) another significant character, quite iconic of the subalternity of the tide country, is introduced. From the launch Piya catches the sight of Fokir, the “skeletal, almost wasted” *(*43) fisherman “of about her own age, in his late twenties” *(*46) and his son Tutul on a small fishing boat. Fokir’s boat appears to be a microcosmic presentation of the socio-cultural space of these impoverished subaltern fishermen community of the Sundarbans: “the nautical equivalent of a shanty, put together out of bits of bamboo thatch, splintered wood and torn sheets of polythene” *(*70). When Fokir makes necessary arrangements to give Piya the privacy to change her wet clothes, by creating an enclosure under the hood of the boat, Piya realizes that she has somehow become part of that space with her specific gender identity and personality:

> It was not just that he had thought to create a space for her; it was as if he had chosen to include her in some simple, practised family

> ritual, found a way to let her know that despite the inescapable muteness of their exchanges, she was a person to him and not, as it were, a representative of a species, a faceless, tongueless foreigner. (71)

While looking through the binoculars on the boat, Piya revisits her own past—the first days of her University life at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in California. This flashback takes Piya to those of her University days, several flashbacks take Kanai to the days of his first visit to Lusibari and relate the plot of the narrative with the history of the place. Kanai recollects how Nirmal explained the history of this tide country as "a frontier territory, where different cultures have interacted for centuries" (Dix, 2009: 128):

> This is, after all, no remote and lonely frontier — this is India's doormat, the threshold of a teeming subcontinent. Everyone who has ever taken the eastern route into the Gangetic heartland has had to pass through it — the Arakanese, the Khmer, the Javanese, the Dutch, the Malays, the Chinese, the Portuguese, the English. It is common knowledge that almost every island in the tide country has been inhabited at some time or another. But to look at them you would never know: the speciality of mangroves is that they do not merely recolonize land; they erase time. Every generation creates its own population of ghosts. *(*50)

In 1950, when Nirmal and Nilima first come to Lusibari from Calcutta "in search of a safe haven" *(*76) and Nirmal takes the job of a teacher in the Lusibari school, they find the social space of island as quite alien to them: "Nothing was familiar; everything was new.... the realities of the tide country were of a

strangeness beyond reckoning .... The settlers were mainly of farming stock ... Hunger drove them to hunting and fishing, and the results were often disastrous.... No day seemed to pass without news of someone being killed by a tiger, a snake or a crocodile.... They had not expected a Utopia, but neither had they expected such destitution" *(*79-80). Both of them start negotiating with this absolutely unfamiliar socio-cultural space in their own ways:

> Nirmal, overwhelmed, read and reread Lenin's pamphlet without being able to find any definite answers. Nilima, ever practical, began to talk to the women who gathered at the wells and the ponds. (*HT,* 80)

With a strong determination to change the life of the widows on the island, Nilima starts engaging them in small scale self-employment and this "tiny seedling of an idea was to lead to the foundation of the island's Mohila Sangothon — the Women's Union — and ultimately to the Badabon Trust" *(*81). Probably for being a believer in Marxist ideology, Nirmal is not "wholly supportive of Nilima's efforts" *(*82) and he finds all these as mere social service or 'shomaj sheba'. It is Nirmal, who as an intellectual only decides upon the Trust's name. Pointing out the fact that the word 'Badabon' has been "derived from the Arabic *badiya,* which means 'desert'", Nirmal says to Nilima: "...our Bangla word joins Arabic to Sanskrit — *bada* to *bon,* or 'forest.' It is as though the word itself were an island, born of the meeting of two great rivers of language —just as the tide country is begotten of the Ganga's union with the Brahmaputra" *(*82). If compared to the transformation of Nilima from an educated housewife to an active social-worker, Nirmal's identity of a dogmatic visionary remains rather static.

It is from Kusum that Kanai learns about the tragic death of her father who was killed by a tiger. She also tells him how at that time all her prayers to Bon Bibi to protect her father did not yield any result. Actually, to the people of the tide country Bon Bibi is omnipresent. For example, when Kusum meets her mother at Dhanbad in Bihar, and Rajen gives the proposal to marry Kusum, her mother says: "Fortunate Kusum, you've been blessed by Bon Bibi" *(*163). Kusum leaves Lusibari just before Kanai's return to Calcutta after his first visit, and during his second visit at present, she is already dead: "'cShe died in the massacre, Kanai', Nilima said. 'The massacre at Morichjhapi'" *(*122). But she stays alive in the memory of other characters like Kanai, Horen, Nilima and Fokir and also in Nirmal's notebook. After reading Nirmal's notebook, Kanai realizes why Kusum was so significant a personality to Nirmal: "To him, what Kusum stood for was the embodiment of Rilke's idea of transformation" *(*282). In that sense, Kusum becomes the spirit of the tide country, as Nirmal notes in his diary:

> But here, in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week, and islands are made and unmade in days.... It was as if the whole tide country was speaking in the voice of the poet: life is lived in transformation' (224-225)

As it seems, the subaltern fictional lives in *The Hungry Tide*, like Fokir, Kusum, Horen or even to some extent Moyna, do not undergo any overt change because in their 'being', their 'positioning' in the cultural space of the tide country, there is the spirit of nature which shapes their identity. As Stuart Hall opines, cultural identity is conditioned by the 'positioning' of the self: "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a

positioning" (Hall, 1990: 237). These people belong to the tide country naturally and so they need no additional effort to negotiate with the cultural space of the Sundarbans. Their subalternity is a part of the cultural space of the tide country. In her article *"Refugees, Settlers and Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide"*, Nishi Pulugurtha (2010) comments: "*The Hungry Tide* privileges the subaltern, Fokir, Kusum and Moyna over the cosmopolitans Piya, Kanai, Nilima and Nirmal" (88). But what seems to me quite interesting that in reality, things are rather different than what she says. Kanai survives the confrontation with a tiger despite the reference to a local saying "that if you see a tiger, the chances are you won't live to tell the tale" *(*242). Nearly at the end of the novel, Fokir is killed in the storm while Piya escapes. From these references, one could draw a conclusion that outsiders like Kanai and Piya appear as more privileged as they remain unaffected and thus they stay otherwise removed from the very locale.

The cosmopolitan characters—Piya, Kanai and Nirmal know their limitation. They do not belong to this place. In negotiating with the spatiality of the tide country, they learn through "re-imagining themselves as they appear in the eyes of others" (Mukherjee, 2011: 183). Each of these three characters reshapes their perceptions and attitudes more or less after the influence of a resident character: Piya by Fokir, Nirmal by Kusum and Kanai partially by Moyna. Though some critics like to see Fokir as "the resident par excellence" (182) or the "local man" who "represents the culture of the place" (Zullo, 2012: 105), the fictional lives of Kusum, Horen and Moyna are not different enough from Fokir in regard to their residential/local nature. One interesting point should be noted: among all these characters who "form the subaltern tiers of the novel's social map" (Mukherjee, 2011: 183), only Fokir was born outside—in the mining town of

Dhanbad in Bihar. Originally, the tide country is not his place of birth, but certainly this is the place of his belonging, his home.

As Kanai's vision of the tiger at the island of Garjontola puts him in awe, so does the cyclone near the end of the narrative. When the cyclone knocks him "sidewise into the water" and he finds Nirmal's "notebook bobbing in the current... before sinking out of sight" *(*376), he realizes that beyond the materiality of words, there is a greater world of ideas. Words are necessary to shape the ideas and ideas are never secondary to words. As Nilima laments the loss of Nirmal's notebook, "And that's gone too now", Kanai replies, 'No,' said Kanai. 'Not in its entirety. A lot of it is in my head, you know. I'm going to try to put it back together' (387).

In the final chapter of the narrative when Nilima tells Piya of Kanai's present situation, Ghosh's narrator casually provides a significant hint: 'The most important thing is that he's *restructured* his company so that he can take some time off. He wants to live in Kolkata for a while" *(*399). In this symbolic 'restructuring' lies an obvious note of negotiation. He negotiates with the identity of a Delhi-resident interpreter and translator and goes for a newer identity of a writer. It becomes clear as Nilima tells Piya: "He told me he was going to write the story of Nirmal's notebook — how it came into his hands, what was in it, and how it was lost" *(*399). The chronicle of Morichjhapi and Kusum, as recorded by Nirmal, becomes the historical base of Kanai's proposed fiction and it seems to throw an oblique focus on Ghosh's own ideas regarding the interrelationship between history and fiction.

Kanai's role as an interpreter is not restricted in mediating between Piya and Fokir but is also extended in mediating between Nirmal's testimony, which is written in Bengali and the reader who would find Kanai's version probably in

English. After the loss of the notebook in the cyclonic tide, when Nilima asks Kanai, "And what was it about?" he replies: 'Many different things [...]. History, poetry, geology — many things. But mainly it was about Morichjhapi.... He must have finished writing just hours before the assault started.'(777, 386)

Kanai tells Nilima that Nirmal's notebook does not describe 'the attack' (the violent attack on 14-16 May, 1979). Rather it recounts the plight of the refugees (mainly Kusum), and shows Nirmal's attempt to amalgamate his own vision with the poetic vision of the German poet Rilke. In the intertextual treatment of Nirmal's notebook in *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh's craftsmanship is beyond any question. In suggesting the need for syncretism in postcolonial societies Ghosh combines "a local legend (the legend of the Bon Bibi) with a Western text *(Duino Elegies* by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke)" (Meyer, 2013: 158). Sandra Meyer's observation seems to be quite significant as she insists on the issue of cultural syncretism: "The fact that, on the one hand, the local legend influences the 'westernized' characters Piya and Kanai, while, on the other hand, the Western text written by Rilke appears to be quite meaningful to Nirmal... shows that hybridity does not threaten contemporary society. Instead, the different cultural achievements can be fruitfully combined into something new" (ibid: 158). Shao-Pin Luo finds the notebook as a 'testimony' which "in every sense Nirmal's own elegies for the sufferings of the tide country that he loves and for the death of Kusum, whom he mourns" (Luo, 2012: 155).

In his notebook Nirmal finds himself "like some misplaced, misgendered Scheherazade ... with a flying, fleeting pen" *(*148) struggling against the erasure, forgetting and silence of the politico-historical event of Morichjhapi. He decides to involve himself in the activities of the refugees in his own way, as he tells one of

their leaders: “I could teach your children about this place that you’ve come to: the tide country” *(*173).

As Nilima informs Piya about Kanai’s impending arrival in near future, Piya replied—“In fact it’ll be good to have him home” (399). To this reply, Nilima expresses her astonishment straightforward: “Did I hear you right? ... Did you say ‘home’?” (*HT*, 400). As Piya has already refused to leave Lusibari, as the tide country is the ‘home’ of the *Orcaella* dolphins, her reply is too convincing: ‘You know, Nilima,’ she said at last, ‘for me, home is where the Orcaella are: so there’s no reason why this couldn’t be it’ (400).

Her identity of a cetologist requires for itself the space of scientific research in this tide country, and so it is the right place of her belonging. In contrast with Piya’s concept of ‘home’, Nilima’s answer seems to be a light-hearted one: “For me home is wherever I can brew a pot of good tea” *(HT*, 400). But with this statement Nilima probably means a secured existence in the face of the storms of life, a comfortable space without any strict border or boundary where one can sit and rest after day’s work and think over the best ways for self-expression. In this context, it is quite coincidental to quote from one of Ghosh’s interviews with Beth Jones:

> For me, home is my desk,” says Amitav Ghosh, pouring himself Earl Grey tea from an elegant silver pot. “I go to my desk at about nine in the morning and I write till mid-afternoon. I mean it’s the only thing I do - I go to my desk and work. Writing is home for me. (Jones: 2011)

‘Home’ is not only a physical place, but a cultural space where one feels comfortable and happy. It is closely interspersed with one’s identity, the right place

for self-expression. To find the right place in the world-order, in the scheme of things, beyond any kind of border—nationality, place of birth, class and caste, language or religion, is one of Ghosh's prime concerns nearly in every novel he has written. To create a reality of one's own is the most charming achievement of life, as Ghosh tells Elleke Boehmer and Anshuman Mondal (2012) in an interview:

> You know, to me what's most interesting about the idea of borders is not just the crossing of nation-state boundaries but also that, underneath the as-it-were dome of empire, there's so much happening once you begin to look at it from this other point of view; there are people who were eluding it, who were eluding borders and creating their own realities. To me that's incredibly empowering, thinking of these people who somehow create their own worlds, their own circumstances, who are self-inventors.

To think trans-culturally, to live with cultural syncretism, is the way "to build new bridges across the world" (Rollason, 2005: 10). To live in the multiplicity of the world, avoiding any simple logic of duality is the way to achieve a more multidimensional life, a more meaningful existence.

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