

Chapter I

Introduction

Among the contemporary Indian writers Amitav Ghosh stands out prominently and distinctively. Through his novels he has tried to analyse the various aspects of national and personal identities especially of the people of India and Southeast Asia. His ambitious novels are known for their complex narrative strategies and a thick layering of intertextuality that take into their stride the colonial past of India conjoining it with its postcolonial dialectics. Ghosh's novels are also unique for their generic transformations that straddle travel writing, autobiography, memoir, journalese besides non-linear narratives thus blurring the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Thematically an avowedly postcolonial writer, his craft is basically postmodernist which voices insecurities, disorientations and fragmentariness of both the individual and society.

What is very striking in his novels is 'movement', both in space and time. His narration captures geographies, traversing continents from Africa to South Asia, and histories ranging from the Victorian to the postmodern. Girish Karnad in an article in *The Indian Express* has rightly said that Ghosh uses to great effect a matrix of multiple points freely interpenetrate. Thus his fiction has a continuously changing, evolving repertoire, a cultural intermix of the residual, the 'dominant and the emerging' in terms of place and time which are predominantly dialogic. Paradoxically, however, there is along with movement also a sense of 'stasis', of being placed, of locatedness alongwith the multiple dislocations. This locatedness

excises a sense of belongingness, of knowing and understanding, a feeling of permanence in the otherwise chaotic upheavels that Ghosh projects. This 'isness' of being is juxtaposed with 'becoming' which makes Ghosh a cartographer of both internal and external mappings of space and time.

History, in a very poignant sense, becomes a major trajectory for Ghosh which he continuously interfaces with the present. Right from his first novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1980) we see the writer transcending the boundaries between space and time. At the end of part one the account it becomes clear that:

Once again the loom reaches through the centuries and across continents to decide the fate of mechanical man. ...

It is a gory history in parts: a story of greed and destruction. Every scrap of cloth is stained by a bloody past. But it is the only history we have and history is hope as well as despair (57-8).

Alu, the protagonist, is a weaver who is used to connect many discursive threads of different times, places and mind sets. Nineteenth century scientific and religious worldviews are pitched against oriental ones in order to relativize concepts of purity naturalness and invention. In his second novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) Ghosh takes up the historic backdrops of the partition of 1947 and then again of 1963-64. Besides going into the problematic of the birth of nations, Ghosh prototypically addresses himself to the emerging consequences that affect the nations and more particularly its citizens who have to bear the brunt of so many dislocations – physical, psychological, cultural and creates binaries of 'us' and 'them' on political, economic, social and personal fronts. The question of how one survives a historical calamity and how the past lies into the present both maligning and benigning is the core round which the novel is constructed.

Ghosh's third novel, *In An Antique Land* (1992) is his attempt, as Gauri Vishwanathan (1996) puts it, to recuperate the syncretic religious and cultural histories in, Egypt and India which has a homogenizing effect that denies the historical reality of religious differences. This is Ghosh's uniquely ethnographic way of remembering the past, archiving the bygone. But, characteristically, again, he does not stop at that but reconstructs it to subvert the grand narrative of History. By posting the medieval Middle-East against the trouble torn Arab World, he created a narrative, that reveals the transition and transgression from the story of the first slave MSH.6 to modern history in 1942, from the "Wazirs Vishwanathan, Gauri" Beyond Orientalism; Syncretism and the Politics of knowledge". *Stanford Electronic 'Humanities Review*, 5, 1996 and sultans, the chroniclers and priests" (*Antique Land*, 16-17) to the subaltern consciousness of today recovering the lost traces of Abraham Ben Yiju, Ghosh unearths the lores of different communities along the journey and revitalizes their historic presence.

In the next mystery thriller, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) Ghosh presents a new-angled history of malaria research combined with a parable on English colonial power. Very skillfully Ghosh weaves the past and the present, New York and Calcutta in beautifully intersecting stories spanning across centuries around the globe. He bases his facts on the bedrock of historical facts and then moves on to link time and space. *The Glass Palace* (2000) is set in Burma during the British invasion of 1885 from where it retells the history of the twentieth century told across three generations examining the truths about individuals in history. The very evidently 'post-colonial' novel dwells largely on the interface of between colonialism and its aftermath. Historically the novel begins with the end

of the Konbaung dynasty in Burma (1885) and ends with the emergence of a democracy movement in Myanmar symbolised by Aung San Suu Kaji in 1988.

Besides delving into the past, presenting a historiography of the regions narrated, the other important trope Ghosh weaves into his fiction is time. This is done through the metaphor of journey which is an inherent part of all his writing and intimately related to history. In his first novel *The Circle of Reason* Alu travels from a small village in India across the Arabian Sea to the oil-rich state of al-Ghazira and then flees the persecuting police to wander over North Africa ending in a small Saharan village.

It is a saga of flight and pursuit where the various landscapes are compelling made alive by the narration of different timescapes. Similarly in *The Shadow Lines* which travels backwards and forwards in time in conjunction with space. A causal chain of interlinked and interlinking events, often disparate and diverse, makes the woof and the wrap of the novel. These are narrated as scraps of memory, memoirs, remembering from an experienced past that intervene into the lived present. The realities of space (Index-Bangladesh/ Calcutta-Dhaka), different geographical/spatial entities are synced by temporal constitutes of migrancy.

Set in the near future, the novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* oscillates between 'then' and 'now' as it does simultaneously between 'there' and 'here', telekinetically. Antar, Murugan and Ross, the three who have contracted Malaria, are involved in their respective quests of re-construction, conspiratorial and poltergeist activities that span over nearly a century from 1894 to 1995 effecting what we may allude to as "interpersonal transferred". Time allows Ghosh to re-narrate and give near-repetitions of the same episode and thus work towards a dismantling of the notion's essentialist versions.

As is characteristics of Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* is a generic composite of spatio-temporality. His own ethnographic fieldwork in the Lataifa and Nashaway villages in Egypt and how these affected trade in the Indian Ocean during the medieval times forms the locale of the book. From that vantage point he moves into seemingly disparate time frames of slave trade and modern technology. The 'Prologue' to the novel situates the text historically and the 'Epilogue' justifies his temporal transitions attesting and contesting the common Arab practices of the past and commenting upon the imitation and distortion of these in today's world. In one sense Ghosh has moved from "oral performance" to "descriptive writing" (Clifford, 116) times where "inscription becomes transcription". But what is especially striking is that both his spatiality and temporality is tangible and not an abstraction as Arjun Appadurai (1988, 16) points out of many ethnographic texts.

Once again *The Glass Palace* is a meticulously imagined historical novel. It deals with the British storming into Burma in 1885 and the travails of the protagonist Raj Kumar. And again the journey motif provides Ghosh with another opportunity to play with different time frames. Just as the novel is sweeping in its setting, raging from Burma to India to Malaya, it is also scooping in its delineation of time. From the changing economic landscape of Burma and India it traces the change in societal attitudes and the incoming of modernity. As the exotic locales of the Burmese timberland fade away into oblivion memory and nostalgia remain to recapitulate the times and Ghosh makes a powerful use of these to dwell on the impermanence of life and relations. The glass' in *The Glass Palace* is a 'reflector' of the various spaces and traces – spaces left behind and lived in, traces of times bygone and ongoing, a virtual epic of southeast Asia.

Geographically, the narrative space of *The Hungry Tide* is comparatively narrow. The Sunderban islands in the Bay of Bengal are the location and it is the plight of displaced people, refugees that play a leading role in the drama that unfolds. So it is the transitoriness of national and ethnic identities that Ghosh is concerned with and how they are constantly in a flux. The very concept of a 'tide' denotes ephemerality, and it is its inconstancy that Ghosh weaves into the novel. History is not only a narration of natural calamities – storms that sweep in with the tidal surges and wash away whole islands – but also about manmade catastrophes which alter the course of times and human livelihood. Ghosh also deals with two other 'scapes' in this novel – that of silence and of language – both of which ebb and flow in space and time.

It is thus clear that Ghosh sets his novels against very fascinating historical backdrops and from there takes us on equally fascinating journeys through these real or imagined territories. The journeys are both exterior and interior where the habitants are pitched to negotiate and assimilate with the rhythms of the diversities of existence. Not only in his fiction but also in his life, Ghosh has himself negotiated with 'times' and 'places'.

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