Chapter I

Transnational Characters

Transnational characters are without moorings and are uprooted from their native lands and implanted elsewhere either because of poverty or because of political oppression. These characters are torn between the pulls of antagonistic cultures and beliefs. During postcolonial times they have become stateless and rootless. However, many have embraced cosmopolitan thinking and have become jet age nomads.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* is one of the most readable and least frivolous of the recent Indian novels in English. An effective fiction, it emanates from a particular historical moment which intersects the narrator and the nation at a crucial point of their evolution. While capturing the high points of the historical moment in credible and efficient narrative action, the novel eventuates into a search for the vibrant concerns essential for the survival of central strength and sanity in society. The novel is rich in signifying transactions that do not depend for their effect on “solid slabs of continuous experience” but on the potentiality of materiality marshalled by the author to anchor his perception of reality. It quickens our conscience and triggers our response to the mingled frenzy of violence, idealism, passion and intrigue that has amputated the narrator’s intimate history and geography. By skilfully manipulating the narrator’s developing sociological consciousness and his interaction with multicultural representatives in a fictional construct, Ghosh makes his novel a supple medium of sophisticated comment on current realities. Although the situations are bound by their historical and geographical co-ordinates, they enlarge the spatial and temporal axes and offer a melange of insights into a kind of reality that can sustain inter-personal bond
across cultural boundaries and contain the threats flowing from the absurdities of borders and frontiers.

The novel tells the story of the three generations of the narrator’s family spread over Dhaka, Calcutta and London and lines up characters from different nationalities, religions and cultures in a close-knit, palpable fictive world. Written against the backdrop of the civil strife in post-partition East Bengal and riot-hit Calcutta, the events revolve around itinerant Mayadebi’s family, their friendship and sojourn with their English friends, the Prices. Tha’mma, the narrator’s great grand mother, ties with Dhaka and the later wrench from her roots, spontaneous communal combustion in 1964 in Dhaka claiming the lives of Jethamoshai, Khalil and Tridip pose the challenge of intercultural understanding and friendship boundaries. The narrator’s mnemonic fund is enriched by his uncle and mentor, Tridip, who lets him in on the creative powers of memory and imagination. On the one hand is the narrator’s family consisting of his grandmother, Mayadebi elder sister, and his parents; on the other hand are Mayadebi, her husband, a diplomat and their three sons, Jatin, an economist with the UN, Tridip and Robi. Jatin's daughter, Ila, is always away with her parents. While the narrator’s family is settled in Calcutta where his grandmother is a school mistress, Mayadebi’s family except Tridip keeps on going around the world. Tridip, who lives in his ancestral house in Ballygunge place, is seen at a loose end at Gole Park among his adda acquaintances. Stay in close vicinity brings the narrator and his uncle Tridip together, although much to the dislike of Thamma, who is a stern middle-class matriarch.

Tridip saw May Price as a little baby when he went to England with his parents in 1939. The friendship between the families began when Mrs. Price’s father, Lionel Tresawsen, and Tridip’s grandfather, Mr. Justice Chandrashekhara Datta – Chaudhury,
met in Calcutta at seances. By the time Tridip meets May in India in 1962, their friendship through correspondence since 1959 has ripened into love. The narrator Ila is drawn to Nick Price, May’s younger brother. It is May-Tridip relationship which is central to the thematic concerns of the novel. The narrator’s close interaction with May who accompanied Thamma Mayadebi and Tridip to bring his grandmother and uncle Jethamoshai from Dhaka to Calcutta and was witness to the killing of Tridip, is the most moving part of the novel. "I met May Price for the first time two years after that incident, when she came to Calcutta on a visit. The next time I met her was seventeen years later, when I went to London myself” (TSL 10). The stretch of history during these seventeen years between 1962 and 1979 is the effective background of the novel against which the author evokes postcolonial situations, cultural dislocations and anxieties, and interprets the issue of fractured nationalities in close and telling encounters.

The historical baggage shouldered by the novel includes the freedom movement in Bengal, the Second World War, the partition of India and the miasma of communal hatred breaking out into riots in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) following the Hazratbal incident in Srinagar in 1964. The novel is not a recapitulation of these historical upheavals; it catches alive the trauma of emotional rupture and choked human relations and also the damaging potential of the siege within people sundered by politics. The materiality of Ghosh’s novel constituted by the web of material relations at a certain time in a certain location binds the narratives and authenticates the nexus between the historical moment and the fictive world. The reconstruction of the past through houses, photographs, maps, road/street names, newspapers, advertisements and other concretizations allow the reader to examine the text with diverse co-texts and
validate the author’s perception of the time and milieu covered by the novel. A close look at the main episodes with reference to their historicity and materiality is significantly revealing in that the author’s insight into the issues troubling the consciousness of characters can be identified and gleaned. Nivedita Bagchi writes, “The Shadow Lines’ s very materiality of objects plays a vital role in validating the narrative. Tridip, we are told, is an archaeologist, and the chief narrator is a history research fellow. The importance of material objects to the archaeological-historian for validation of oral narratives, for dating and establishing chronology in the reconstruction of history, cannot be over stated” (Nivedita 39).

The looping, non-linear progression of the narratives underpinned by the narrator and the historical sweep entail active and alert audience participation. In the opening lines, the narrator refers to his grandmother’s sister visit to England and establishes the narrative framework: "1993, thirteen years before I was born, my father aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridip" (TSL 9). We gather that Mayadebi was born in 1910 and Tridip in 1931. The novel also telescopes the political ferment in Bengal and the upbringing of Thamma in the present century. As soon as we infer the details of Mayadebi’s visit to England, the narrative shifts to 1960 when Tridip first shared his experience of London with the narrator.

Over the years, although I cannot remember when it happened any more than I can remember when I first learnt to tell the time or tie my shoelaces, I have come to believe that I was eight too when Tridip first talked to me about that journey. I remember trying very hard to imagine him back to my age, to reduce his height to mine, and to think away the spectacles that were so much a part of him that I really believed he had been born with them. It wasn't easy, for to me
he looked old, and I could not remember him looking anything other than old – though, in fact, at that time he could not have been much older than twenty-nine. In the end, since I had nothing to go on, I had decided that he had looked like me. \((TSL\ 9)\)

Thus the narrative moves back and forth but all the episodes are held in simultaneous focus nonetheless to illuminate the major burden of the novel. Chronologically, the story begins with a passage of time in colonial India when the narrator was not born. The year 1939 is historically significant for the outbreak of the Second World War and the phenomenal changes caused by that agonizing epochal event. Mayadebi’s visit to London around this time, her warm and consequential contact with the Price family and Tridip-May component of the story is recounted by Tridip to the narrator twentyone years later when the latter is an eight year-old inquisitive child. Although May was a little baby when Tridip saw her in London and they have not met since then - a romantic relationship develops through correspondence between them, transcending the shadow lines of nationality and cultural boundary. Amitav Ghosh explores the mysterious pull between Tridip and May and the abiding intimacy between the two families, when the countries were pitted against each other. This search for invisible link ranging across the realities of nationality, cultural segregation and racial discrimination is the central theme of \(The\ Shadow\ Lines\). The author questions the validity of geographical boundaries and celebrates the union of aliens pulled together by self– propelling empathy and attachment. Tresawsen and Mayadebi, Tridip and May, Jethamoshai and Khalil rise above the prevailing passion of war, hatred and communal bad blood and vindicate the political logic of partition and border demarcation to define national and cultural particularities. Ghosh’s mature view of reality was missed
glaringly by Bruce King in his review of *In an Antique Land* in *World Literature Today*. The reviewer notes:

> Amitav Ghosh’s novels *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines* are somewhat difficult to place on the current literary map; they have an unusual perspective and cover unexpected territory. *In an Antique Land* fills in some of the picture of how Ghosh sees the world and, besides the interest of the book itself as social anthropology and what it tells us about Ghosh, might be a starting place for future discussion of his fiction. (20)

Without questioning the merit of *In an Antique Land*, one can differ with Bruce King’s comments on *The Shadow Lines* in that the latter a seminal piece of fiction does bring out the remarkable talent of Ghosh who passionately searches for strategies for survival in a violent, hate-filled world of narrow divisions and finds in love the enabling and productive action to tide over separatist propensities of communities and nationality groups. The novel addresses the challenge of geographical fluidity and cultural dislocations with a new consciousness and firm grasp of socio-cultural and historical material. The experience of aliens and immigrants in postcolonial setting furnish us with the clue to the novel’s larger project of cultural assimilation, friendship across borders and adjustment. In a conversation with the narrator in London in 1978, May Price shares her growing intimacy with Tridip: Smiling at the memory, she told me how his card had reached her just when she was trying to get over an adolescent crush on a schoolboy trombonist, who had no time for her at all and had not been overly delicate about making that clear. It was nice to feel that someone wanted to befriend her. She had written back, and after that they had written to each other regularly – short, chatty letters, they become pen-friends, they had exchanged photographs. (*TSL* 23)
The narrator recalls that Tridip’s made-up story of his English relatives through marriage recounted to his adda acquaintances at Goal Park around 1960 sprang from his passionate longing for May.

Where have you been all this while Tridip –da! Somebody said. It must be three or four months. . . . I’ve been away, I heard him say, and nodded secretly to myself. Away! Where! I’ve been to London, he said. To visit my relatives. His face was grave, his voice steady. What relatives! I have English relatives through marriage, he said. A family called Price. I through I’d go and visit them. Ignoring their grunts, he told them that he had been to stay with old Mrs. Price who was a widow. Her husband had died recently. She lived in north London, he said on a street called Lymington Road; the number of their house was 44 and the tube station was West Hampstead. Mrs Price had a daughter, who was called May. (TSL 17)

Tridip realizes May concretely and warmly in his imagination with all the attendant excitement stored in his senses. He can visualize her shapes and appearance precisely even without meeting her. Their love has reality; it crosses all borderlines and shadow lines; the narrator also owes his broadened horizons to Tridip’s influence. He has become an imaginative traveller of distant locations beyond the limits of his mind and experience at a fairly young age. He is verily enamoured of the Tridip who had pushed him to "imagine the roofs of Colombo" for himself and "had said that we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly" (TSL 37). The narrator's psyche absorbs cross-cultural interactions and sheds particularity of his origin and narrow nationalism fostered and instilled in him by his grandmother.

Unlike Ila’s pragmatic cosmopolitanism, either lukewarm or lacking in vibrant
reciprocity, the narrator learns the lesson of love and sacrifice untrammelled by exclusionary nationalism and spatial limits, first under the spiritual tutelage of Tridip, and later, in the warm embrace of May towards the close of the novel. He contrasts the cross-cultural perspectives of Tridip and Ila at several places in the novel. For instance:

I tried to tell her, but neither than nor later, though we talked about it often, did I ever succeed in explaining to her that I could not forget because Tridip had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with; she, who had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in Tridip's room had meant to me, a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta. I used to listen to her talking sometimes with her father and grandfather about the cafes in the Plaza Mayor in Madrid, or the crispness of the air in Cuzco, and I could see that those names, which were to me a set of magical talismans because Tridip had pointed them out to me on his tattered old Bartholomew Atlas had for her a familiarity no less dull than the lake had for me and my friends, the same tired intimacy that made us stop on our way back from the park in the evening and unbutton our shorts and aim our piss through the rusty wrought-iron railings. (TSL 26)

Yet the narrator is hooked on to Ila’s exotic appeal. It is her striking foreignness, her western ways and easy informality that attract him. Her liberated gestures and overtly off-beat demeanour arouse Thamma’s contemptuous dislike for her. While the narrator develops a mesmeric fascination for Ila in the flush of adolescence, his grandmother hates her vulgar transgressions. Ila’s preference for Nick Price and her later disappointment exposes her wobbly transplantation in the western culture. Her dislocation stems from her penchant for illusions devoid of any real understanding of the cultural interface. The adult narrator sees through Ila’s hidden anxieties and
discomfiture. Her last words in the novel are aimed at consoling the narrator and her cousin that everything is all right between her and Nick. Commenting on Ila’s role in the novel, Suvir Kaul notes that she is central to the narrator’s coming-of-age and functions "as a narrative scapegoat, a figure who acts as a lightning rod for a great many sexual and cultural anxieties, and the telling of whose unhappy and even sordid itinerary, especially her relationship with Nick, takes on all the cautionary tones of a modern fable. Nick-Ila pairing is a counterpoint to Tridip-May kinship in the thematic frame work of the novel. When the narrator looks at Ila's seductive foreignness with unstinted eye in his mature stage, he notices her snooty ways and cultural contradictions. Significantly, the novel ends with May and the narrator lying in close embrace after the former has recounted Tridip’s tragic killing in Dhaka. May interprets Tridip’s act as sacrifice and defines the manner of his giving up his life while rushing to Jethamoshai for his unsuccessful rescue from the frenzied rioters. Tridip appreciates May’s ideals of humanitarianism and acts like her soul mate. Jean Sundram makes a perceptive comment on the thematic concerns of Amitav Ghosh:

As in his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, where Ghosh pitted rationality against emotion as warring forces within and among people, so here the conflict has been resumed in epistemological terms. “Knowledge can set as free, but only if it is bred of heart as well as head. May's love of the narrator, releases him from the silence which is outside his intelligence into the perhaps equally unspeakable mystery of love. (*Yale Review* 79)

The novel insists on the imperatives that assure empathy and unimpeded flow of friendship, and mock at the conception of militant nationalism, exclusive national pride and identity. The outbreak of communal strife in Dhaka following the disappearance of
the prophet's hair in Srinagar exposes the fragile demarcation of political frontiers. The author’s postcolonial angst for the disrupted subcontinental commonality and snapped cultural bonds is evident in the instant communal reaction to the Hazratbal incident in Calcutta and Dhaka. Tha’mma’s ideals of nationalism nurtured since the Swadeshi Movement do not stand the test of time. Here is a misplaced sense of pride reminiscent of the “tardy late-bourgeois worlds.” Drawing national borders with blood is bound to be undone by the inherent logic of and propensity to separateness and divinations. Her senile old uncle has a grasp of ambiguous and tenuous geographical boundaries:

Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere! What will you do then! Where will you move to! No one will ever have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here. (TSL 216)

The message of the novel underlines the need of friendly ambience for co-existence and humanitarian ties across cultures independent of political managers. The invisible sanity of people beyond borders has the potential to ensure warm and wholesome international amity and exercise divisive streaks and madness. Mayadebi and Tresawsen realize the palpable evidence of this desire among people both in England and Germany even as the Second World War is looming ahead: Well, she said, laughing, the couple of months she had spent in London had been so exciting – the atmosphere had changed so dramatically, even within the last few weeks.

People were becoming friendlier; in the shops, on the streets, she couldn't help noticing.
Everyone was so much nicer now, often when she and Tridip were out walking people would put him on the head and stop to have a little chat with her; the shopkeepers would ask her how her husband was, and when he was to have his operation. But it wasn't just her – everyone was being friendly with everyone; why just that morning his sister, Elisabeth had said that old Mr. Dunbar who lived down the road had actually been civil for the first time in living memory. Yes, said Mr. Dunbar, that's true – there's a kind of exhilaration in the air. Yes, that's the right word, said Mayadebi: exhilaration. I've been lucky, been lucky to watch England coming alive. I wouldn't have seen that if I hadn't been here now. Tresawse laughed. People don't believe me, he said, but it's the same over there – in Germany – though of course in a much more grotesque way. It was odd coming back here – like stepping through a looking glass. (TSL 70-71)

The narrator with his expanded horizons and imaginative understanding of the world caught up in the vortex of violence and murderous rampage stresses on the urgency of preserving the memories of saner and humane transactions for cultural self-determination and inter-personal communication. The media and public memory must keep alive the “invisible sanity” of communities to prevent recurrence of insane frenzy. Ghosh has edged up his novel to confront the memory of traumatic events and shake up our indifference to the gathering potential of tragedy. All in all, the novel is "an eloquent critique of colonial hangover and cultural dislocation in postcolonial situation as also the psychological make-up of the contemporary man who thrives on violence. Amitav Ghosh projects these genuine Indian vibrations with remarkable competence” (Kaul Suvir 125-126).
In Thamma’s class there was a shy young man who was a member of a freedom organisation. One day as the lecture was going on; the police entered the class and arrested the young man as they had learnt that he planned to kill an English magistrate in Khulna district. He was tried and later deported to the cellular jail in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. In her youthful enthusiasm she had dreamt of terrorist like Khudiram Bose and Bagha Jatin who had been betrayed by treacherous villagers who in turn had been bought with English money. “She’d been and there he was all the while, at the back of her class, sitting shyly by himself” (TSL 39). She had wanted to work for the terrorist, to run errands for them, to cook their food, to wash their clothes and to render some help. After all, the terrorists were working for freedom. When the narrator asks her whether she would have killed the English magistrate, she replies: “I and God willing, yes I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have been frightened...But I would have prayed for strength, and God willing, yes, I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free” (TSL 39).

But her romantic notion of terrorism and freedom went like a bubble with her marriage. Her short married life, mostly lived in Burma, was punctuated by the birth of a son in 1925, and the unfortunate death of her husband in 1935 when she was just thirty-two.

A new phase of life began in 1936 when she took up the job of a school teacher in Calcutta. Amitav Ghosh omits this part of the grand mother’s life except dropping hints from which the reader may construct the story. “Starting life in Calcutta in a one room tenement in Bhowanipore, she would dream of “the old house’ her parents, Jethamoshai [her uncle], her childhood” (TSL 125) in Dhaka, but she could never go there. The big political events, the partition in 1947 and Dhaka became the capital of East Pakistan, divided her from her native city. But these public events did not have a
direct impact on her as much as the demands of her personal life. As a school teacher she educated her son on her own, declining the help of her rich sister. The son’s employment in a private company, his marriage, the birth of a grandson in 1952, her own retirement in 1962 as the headmistress of the school she had joined in 1936 are abbreviated and revealed in an oblique manner. The novel focuses on the grandmother from her retirement in 1962 to her death in 1965.

One feature that may be noted is the kind of house in which the grandmother lives: form the large house in Dhaka to a succession of houses in Burma with her husband onto the one-room tenement in Calauta after her husband’s death, then to a cramped little flat on Gole Park (TSL 119) where she spent most of her life. She had grown up with the school where she was a teacher and became the headmistress in the last six years of her service. But the school disappeared from her life with her retirement, and around the same time her son was promoted as the General Manager of his firm. The family moved to a large new house on the Southern Avenue, opposite the lake-with “room upstairs, rooms downstairs, verandas, a garden as well as a roof big enough to play cricket on.”(TSL 119) She was given the best room in the house, but she dreamt of her old house in Dhaka where she was born and had grown up to adulthood.

The grandmother’s younger sister, Mayadebi, is the fortunate girl in the family. Born in 1910, she grew up into a beauty and married Datta Chauduri, the son of the wealthy judge, who became a diplomat in the Indian Foreign Services. She lived mostly abroad, moving from one country to another, wherever her husband had his posting. Mayadebi had three sons. The eldest son Jatin, born in 1929, who had a job as an economist in the U.N, working most of the time in Africa or South East Asia. He lived with his wife and his daughter Ila who was of the age of the narrator. Tridip was the
second son, born in 1931, who lived in the 1960s in the family’s large ancestral house in Ballugunge place in Calcutta with his aging grandmother. He was supposed to be working for his Ph.D. in Archaeology. The youngest son was Robi, born after a long break, almost the age of the narrator. By 1981 Robi is in the Indian Administrative Services and he steps in London to be with the narrator and Ila for a few days. On leave from his job, he is on his way to Harvard where he has a fellowship to study administration and public affairs for six months.

London figures in a prominent way in the life of Mayabedi’s family. She and her husband with their eight year old son, Tridip, had stayed with Mrs. Price, a family friend in London in 1939 for whole years when the war had started. Tridip had told the narrator about their life at 44, Lymington Road and other places. People in London had started living with the terror of German air raids and the Prices suffered when Mrs Price’s brother, Alan Tresawson, and his three friends were killed in an attack. They were young intellectuals whose life had been snuffed out all of a sudden. Thought they were in the photograph that Tridip had shown, ‘nobody can ever know what it was like to be young and intelligent in the summer of 1939 in London or Berlin’ (TSL 68). After more than forty years the narrator explores these places as “I wanted to know England not as I saw her, but in her finest hour every place chooses its own and to me it did not seem an accident that England had chosen hers in a War” (TSL 57). Almost all these transnational characters show pride in their newfound social identity and in their nomadic and sybaritic life style in distant lands. They obviously enjoy their sojourns and wanderings abroad whetting their wanderlust.

But England comes through in a different light in the life of Ila, the narrator’s cousin. After roving round many places with her parents, she had come to London to
school. There was so much racism that one day she was beaten up while returning from school and she had never gone to school again. Later she did B.A in History at the University College in London, took up a job in an office and married Nick Price whom she had known over the years. Of course, the narrator’s grandmother is angry that Ila was living in London.

She said: Ila has no right to live there. She doesn’t belong there. It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned his right to be there with blood: with their brother’s blood and their father’s blood and their son’s blood. They know they are a nation because they’ve drawn their borders with blood. .That’s what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget that they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Panjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don’t you see. (TSL 77-78)

The narrator disagrees with his grandmother when she says that Ila lives in London for the money and the comfort of British life. He had known Ila to live a simple life and spend her spare time going on demonstration and acting in radical plays for Indian immigrants in East London. (79) It is mystery why Ila who can live a princess in Calcutta should live in London like a martyr. Probably it is the romance of freedom in an alien land. Also she seems to be the kind of person who is not attached to any particular place.

The heart of The Shadow Lines is the death of Tridip and it is only near the end of the novel the narrator realizes it. It is a struggle with silence as he has no words to communicate what happened: “It lies outside the reach of my intelligence; beyond
words ...it is simply a gap, a hole, and an emptiness in which there are no words.”(TSL 218) A little later he writes:”I can only describe at second hand the manner of Tridip’s death: I do not have the words to give it meaning. I do not have the words, and I do not have the strength to listen”(TSL 228). The narrator loved and admired Tridip as a hero. So he finds it difficult to accept the fact of Tridip’s death. “So complete is this silence, the narrator declares, “that it actually took me fifteen years to discover that there was a connection between my nightmare bus ride back from school, and the events that befell Tridip and the other in Dhaka” (TSL 218). The narrator’s struggle with the presentation of Tridip’s death makes it all the more agonizing.

The trouble started when the sacred relic known as the Mu-i-Mubarak-believed to be a hair of the Prophet Mohammed himself- disappeared from its place on 27 December 1963 in the Hazratbal mosque near Srinagar, two hundred and sixty three years after it had been installed. “Over the next few days life in the valley seemed to close in upon itself in a spontaneous show of collective grief. There were innumerable black flag demonstrations, every shop and building flew a black flag, and every person on the streets wore a black armband” (TSL 225). But surprisingly there was not a single incident of Hindu-Muslim animosity in the valley. Probably it was the gifted leadership of Maulana Masoodi who “drew the various communities of Kashmir together in a collective display of mourning”(TSL 226). Fortunately the Mu-i-Mubarak was ‘recovered’ on 4 January 1964 by the official of the Central Bureau of Intelligence, and Kashmir heaved a sigh of relief. The narrator is concerned with the impact of this event on life in Calcutta and Dhaka. Novy Kapadia rightly points out: “Amitav Ghosh’s greatest triumph is that the depiction of communal strife in Calcutta and erstwhile East Pakistan, and its continuation in contemporary India, is very controlled and taut. There
are no moralizing or irrelevant digressions. Lucidity and compactness is achieved primarily by his unusual narrative devices” (Viney Kirpal 124).

The narrator remembers how on a certain morning in early January 1964 the school bus, which would normally be overcrowded, came with only a dozen of boys. No sooner he got in than the other boys told him that ‘they’ had poisoned the water in the Tala Tank, which catered to the entire city of Calcutta. Everyone knew who ‘they’ were. At school, the classes were cancelled half-way through. “On their way home the boys saw that the streets were eerily empty now except for squads of patrolling policeman” (TSL 202). At a particular point an unruly mob had thrown stones on their bus and chased it from its normal route. The boys began to sob as they could not go home. It would not be enough to say we were afraid: “we were stupefied with fear” (TSL 204).

This fear grips the thousands of millions people who inhabit the Indian sub-continent and sets them apart from the rest of the world. The narrator comments upon the quality of this fear in the following manner: “It is a fear that comes of the knowledge the normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning, as hostile as a desert in a flash flood ..... it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one’s image in the mirror” (TSL 204). This is a very evocative account of the fear that has rocked the people of our sub-continent since the partition and that threatens to engulf us any moment.

The narrator suffered the worst of fear in Calcutta that his grandmother had gone on a visit to her sister, Mayadebi, who was in Dhaka. Her husband had his posting in East Pakistan, when the idea was mooted that she should visit Dhaka. She had wondered whether the border between India and Pakistan was marked by trenches or
something. What could be the dividing line between the two countries? Then her son explains: “This is the modern world. The border isn’t on the frontier: It’s right inside the airport. You’ll see. You’ll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards and things” (TSL 151-52). She was worried because she had not been able to understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality” (TSL 152). When she flew into Dhaka on 3 January 1964, accompanied by Tridip and May Price, who was on a visit to India to meet her sister, the grandmother’s question was: “Where’s Dhaka? I can’t see Dhaka” (TSL 193). The dream image of her native city had vanished long ago.

One important reason for the grandmother to go to Dhaka was her desire to see her old house and bring her uncle Jetamoshai to India. No sooner she had spent a few days in her sister’s house than the grandmother accompanied by Mayadebi, Tridip, May Price and Robi set out in a car with the driver and security guard of the High Commission. The car had to stop at a particular point in the by lanes of Dhaka, and they had to walk to the old house. They discovered to their dismay an automobile workshop in what was a garden in their house. There house was crumbling and a large number of families were living there. Their uncle Jethamoshai, now called Ukilbabu, was decrepit and bedridden, looked after by Khalil, a cycle-rickshaw driver and his family. The old man failed to recognize them, spoke of his relatives when they were mentioned. As for going to India, he had not believed in that. In fact, he had told his India-bound sons: “. . .but suppose when you get there they decide to draw other lines somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I’ll die here. The old man would have gone on with his talk, but the car driver intervenes to say that they must leave immediately as “there’s going to be
trouble outside” (TSL 215 -216). So the grandmother and Mayadebi and other depart, arranging with Khalil that he should bring their uncle to their house in his cycle-rickshaw telling him that he is taking him out. It is then that “trouble” starts. In a book review Girish Karnad makes the following observation on this episode: “The grandmother’s visit to the ancestral home ... is surely one of the most memorable scene in Indian fiction. Past and future meet across religious, Political and culture barriers in a confusion of emotion, ideals, intension and acts, leading to a shattering climax” (Grish Karnad 21).

The llimax occurs as the grandmother and her sister are returning in their Mercedes from their ancestral home and their uncle is following them in the rickshaw. When they come to the bazaar area, they find that the shops are closed and the street is deserted, but for stray people. It was as if they were waiting for the car. In no time a lot of men surround the car, break the windscreen and the driver suffers a cut across his face. The car lurches and come to a halt with its front wheel in a gutter. Then the security guard jumps out and fires a shot from his revolver and the crowd begins to withdraw from the car. At the same time the eerie silence is broken by a creek, and the attention of the crowd turns to the side of a rickshaw, Khalil’s rickshaw, with their uncle in it, and the people surround the rickshaw. Though the sisters could have driven away, May Price and Tridip leave the car to save the old man and they get lost in the whirl gig of the crowd. The mischief takes less than a moment and the crowd begins to melt away. The dead bodies of Khalil, the old man and Tridip lie on the road. The horror of the act is branded with fire on the memory of May Price and Robi who watch the whole thing.
Amitav Ghosh dramatizes the violence that is at the heart of *The Shadow Lines*. Character in the novel Robi, May and the narrator (Ghosh’s alter-ego) tremble like a leaf to recollect the scene of Tridip’s death,” fifteen years later, thousands of miles away, at the other end of the continent” (*TSL* 247). As in Greek tragedies, the violence comes through in a terrible manner because it is conveyed through choric character. Robi, May and the narrator perform such role of mediation.

More significantly, *The Glass Palace* (2000) dwells on the larger question of the formation of national conscience. This question not only knits the innumerable strands of the story together, but metamorphoses an otherwise melodramatic story into a profound tale of three nations caught in a period of turmoil. It is not only the nations but also the characters who have to identify themselves with one nation or the other.

The novel quite obviously reflects on the situation in the former colonies from the points of view of the colonized. In a sense, it is about the deconstruction of the history of the nations and re-formation of the same. Speaking about his work in a recent interview, Amitav Ghosh said: “My fiction has always been about places that are states in the process of coming unmade or communities coming unmade or remaking themselves in many ways” (*Outlook* 40). *The Glass Palace* holds up to scrutiny people and countries caught up in many a historic crisis. For this purpose, Ghosh needed a big canvas to cover the colonialist discourse in all its structures of thought, ideologies, vocabulary, duplicity, hypocrisy, and self-contradiction. If by the 30s the British colonies and ex-colonies extended over 84.6% of the land surface of the globe, Amitav Ghosh’s choice, then of the three countries with shared colonial practices for his novel was commensurate with the scope of his creative ambitions. The epic sweep provided him the space necessary to unravel the processes of colonization and of revolt against
the colonization across countries. If at micro level he shows the modus operandi of colonization in Mandalay, he skipped that in India to focus on other things like how colonialism unified the country in anti-colonial nationalist embrace or on the evolution and efflorescence of the anti-colonialist psyche. In the third county, he would pan on how an otherwise idyllic place of plantations was transformed into a theatre of the World War II. The three nations he picked up in the novel have a shared destiny of being born out of an anti-imperialist struggle.

The novel is divided into seven parts and each section highlights the important aspects of the novel. The first part is called Mandalay. It is here that the novel begins and it depicts how the British occupied Burma. The second section is entitled ‘Ratnagiri’ where the calamitous effects of imperialism are shown. The third section, ‘The Money Tree’ shows how Rajkumar prospers through timber business. The fourth section deals with the second generation. Rajkumar’s son Neel marries Maniu and people like Arjun and Dinu show fascination for the British. The fifth section ‘Morningside’ depicts the consequences of the Second World War in Malaya. The Penultimate section depicts how characters suffer due to the outbreak of the Second World War. The last section of the novel, also entitled ‘The Glass Palace’ deals with the peak of Indian National Movement and its final achievement of independence.

The novel opens with the Anglo-Burmese war of 1885. Two senior ministers of Burma, Kinwun Mingyi and Taingda Mingyi are too eager to keep the Royal family under guard because they expect to get rich rewards from the English for handing over the royal couple, King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat, along with their family. “As the royal family prepares to surrender, the looters – the Burmese public who had earlier stood far aloof in fear and awe now quickly move in to scavenge what they can find in
Similarly, the British soldiers in charge of shifting that king’s precious jewels and ornaments from the palace to the ship that was waiting to take the royal family into exile also pilfer these things. Ghosh here strips the veils off human nature to reveal the crude and brutal greed that drives people at various levels. This desire to grab and to possess is shown to be equally common to ordinary Asiatic individuals and the British soldiers, even as it forms the leitmotif of the big empire builders. In a single remarkable scene, thus, unscrupulous greed is shown to be the animating force cutting across the financial status, racial differences, caste, creed, individuals, groups and nations. Also, the plunder of the opening scene, in the larger frame of the novel, transcends its literal significance to become a metaphor for the raw and naked greed of the colonizer and sets the tone for the novel.

These incidents reveal the novelist’s approach to the subject on hand. It is never a simple, one track approach guiding the reader to the ideological centre of the novel. Different perspectives flit across the scene as if to maintain authorial neutrality. In the opening scene of rampage, for example, the novelist for the first time mentions how these soldiers marching past with their shouldered rifles looked to the Burmese crowds: “There was no rancour on the soldiers’ faces, no emotion at all. None of them so much as glanced at the crowd” (TGP 26). And the realization dawns on them that the British army consisted not of British but Indians mostly. Now the hostility of the Burmese crowds turns towards the Indians and the eleven-year-old Indian boy, Raj Kumar becomes an easy prey to their wrath. When he was beaten black and blue by the crowd, he had to be rescued by the pistol-wielding Chinese Saya John. While the British lay siege to Mandalay, the Indian community in Mandalay barricade themselves within the Hajji Ismail’s compound fearing reprisal from the Burmese. The crowd notices that
there is no rancour or animosity on the face of the soldiers because it is not their war. This phenomenon specially attracts our attention and would later turn out to be the locus of value for the novel. It is this perspective on the critical moments in society that also lends the novel significance which only classics of literature generally share. What Amitav Ghosh achieves in this novel is probably what he was hinting at when he suggested how a writer would deal with so much violence in our times: “the issue is really how you write about violence with a perspective” (Outlook 41). It would be interesting to see how this perspective, making its appearance at this juncture merely as the ghost of a shadow, gradually concretizes into the real things as we move through the novel. Here Saya John throws some more light on the phenomenon of Indian soldiers constituting the British army. When he was working as an orderly in a hospital in Singapore, Saya John came across several wounded Indian soldiers who were mostly peasants from villages who were in their twenties. It was the money that drew them to this profession. Yet what they earned was a few annas a day, not much more than a dockyard coolie. He is certain that “Chinese peasants would never do this, that is allow themselves to be used to fight other people’s wars with so little profit for themselves” (TGP 29-30). He wonders how “for a few coins they would allow their masters to use them as they wished, to destroy every trace of resistance to the power of English. “He thinks of these men as “innocent evil” (30). Amitav Ghosh is clearly aware of the Eichmann in Jerusalem in which the American Professor Hannah Arendt talks about Hitler’s Generals merely doing their job in all those genocides and extermination camps. For in the Outlook interview Amitav Ghosh refers to the phrase “banality of evil” in the context of soldiers fighting for their British masters from neither enmity nor anger, but in submission to orders from superiors, without protest and without
conscience. This question of conscience introduced on page 30 is played mute until page 248, that is, until half the novel is over, where Arjun Ray is introduced and from this point on this question takes on a centrality that appears to hold good throughout the novel.

The novel shows how the colonial authority clearly rested on the colonizer’s epistemological bases widely accepted by the colonized. Edward Said’s monumental work *Orientalism* also shows how ‘knowledge’ about the subject race was part of the process of maintaining power over them. Both Foucault and Edward Said strove in their work to show the connections between the structures of thought and the workings of power. They have clearly established how power works through language, literature, culture and the institutions which regulate our daily lives. Amitav Ghosh too creates in this novel a discourse that dramatizes the evolution of colonialist antithesis. He explores the anti-colonial consciousness and eventual revolt in Arjun.

Arjun receives a letter from the Indian Military Academy announcing his selection as an officer cadet. His father is happy because there is status and prestige associated with it. Moreover he will have “a ready-made career and promotion and at the end there will be an excellent pension. So long as he makes it through the academy, “he’s taken care of for the rest of his life” (*TGP* 258). Arjun’s father allays his wife’s fears stating that it is “just a job like any other.” However Arjun’s aunt, Uma, who had been into Indian Independence League while in New York and was now working with Gandhi in India in the freedom movement, tells Arjun that “the Mahatma thinks that the country can only benefit from having men of conscience in the army.” She encourages Arjun to join the army because “India needs soldiers who won’t blindly obey their
superiors” (TGP 258). From this point on, the novel’s business is to trace the evolution of national conscience antithetical to the colonial power.

Arjun joins the colonial army as a gentleman cadet and goes on to become a second Lieutenant in the 1st Jat Light Infantry. He is proud to belong to 1/1 Jats because it was honoured with a special title, ‘The Royal Battalion’ for battle honors it won for the British government, such as quelling the mutinies and capturing kings in India, in Burma, in Mesopotamia, in Somme and in China. Arjun’s thoughts at this stage are worth noting:

Sometimes when I wake up in the morning, I still find it hard to believe that I really belong with these men. It makes me so proud, but also humble, to think that one has all this to live up to. What makes me prouder still is the thought that Hardy and I are going to be the first Indian officers in 1/1 Jats it seems like such a huge responsibility – as though we are representing the whole of the country.

(TGP 262)

This was probably how most Indians in his position felt – a ‘huge responsibility’ to prove to the British bosses that Indians could make as good army officers as the British. His induction into the army initiates him into the British way of life and the he becomes intoxicated with it. He takes pride in being assimilated to the (British) military culture, principles and food habits imposed on them by the British government. He boasts:

Every meal at an officers’ mess an adventure, a glorious infringement of taboos. They ate foods that none of them had ever tasted at home: bacon, ham and sausages at breakfast; roast beef and pot chops for dinner. They drank whisky, beer and wine,
smoked cigars, cigarettes and cigarillos. Nor was this just a matter of satisfying appetites: every mouthful had a meaning – each represented an advance towards the evolution of a new, more complete kind of Indian. (TGP 278-9)

Only from this evolved a new complete kind of man who is fit to enter the class of officers. He is not only not ashamed but is also proud to announce that as officers they had to prove to themselves as well as to their superiors that they were eligible to be ruled, to qualify as members of the elite group. For this, they had to have vision enough to rise above the ties of their soil, to overcome the responses instilled in them by their upbringing. Towards this end despite the revulsion they feel for the food they have to take, they struggle to keep the morsels down. At this early stage of his fascination for the military life, he feels nothing but pride in the new life he embraced: “Look at us? We are the first modern Indians, the first Indians to be truly free” (TGP 279). His enthusiasm deludes him into thinking that true freedom consists in breaking the taboos of earlier life, eating what they like, drinking what they like: “. . . . We’re the first Indians who’re not weighed down by the past” (TGP 279). To Arjun ‘modern’ and ‘western’ are synonymous. To become a modern Indian and to be westernized are synonymous. To become a modern Indian he was prepared to erase all traces of being Indian, discard his past and embrace western habits of thought in its totality. At this stage he does not realize the cost he would be paying to be accepted as a member of the elitist class, the rulers’ class. However, this sense of euphoria he was revelling in is partially shattered when he comes to attend his sister’s marriage. The motley crowd of politicians, congressmen, Buddhist monks, Burmese student activists, and all the invitees to the wedding had nothing but sneer for these men in uniform. The congressmen, who had bitter memories of their confrontation with Indian soldiers and
police, berate Arjun for serving in an army of occupation. Arjun retorts: ‘We aren’t occupying the country’ as lightly as he could. ‘We are here defending you’, ‘From whom are you defending us? From ourselves? From other Indians? It’s your masters from whom the country needs to be defended’(TGP 287-288).

This is exactly the reply of an officer who has been indoctrinated in the western ideology. He has meticulously internalised the teaching of the British. The young Indian officer has great respect for his superior in the Army and aping their statements, behaviour and manner has become his habit. Dressed in western clothes, he has become a man with a black skin but white mask mentally. Such is his fascination for the army that he does not even for a moment reflect upon the inscription at the military academy at Dehradun. This inscription in the military academy has actually set Arjun thinking about what he was doing. That he was not serving his country does not occur to him even at that point. This is because the British by that time had managed to create a halo about their goodwill. His nature is transnational in the sense that he fails to distinguish between his state in his native land as the colonized and serves the cause and the interest of his colonizer with loyalty and utmost sincerity.

The first real stirrings of disquiet occur in the transitional figure of Beni Prasad Dey, the district collector responsible for the welfare of the King of Burma, who was exiled to Ratnagiri in India. The collector, as he is known in the Glass Palace, has achieved the ultimate status for an Indian, as an esteemed civil servant in the bureaucratic Raj. And yet the collector is plagued by doubts and haunted by the fear of being thought lacking by his British compeers and superiors.

By the beginning of the 20th Century, the British Empire had evolved from being a powerful trading presence into a huge government apparatus, imposing its hierarchies
and protocols on its colonies. The collector and superintendent of police were instrumental in enforcing its myriad colonial rules, even the most absurd ones, such as treating the King of Burma like a caged animal and controlling his daughters, the princesses who were ready to marry. As the collector’s wife, Uma, reflects, “Did this mean that one day all of India would become a shadow of what it had been? Millions of people trying to live their lives in conformity with incomprehensible rules?”

The collector, a tragic figure, is confronted with an incipient nationalism. A generation later, in the 1930s, Arjun, the nephew of Uma, takes the self questioning to new agonizing heights. Arjun Joins the British Army and becomes one of the first Indian officers to rise in its ranks, at first as a colonized subject, even eating at the officer’s mess hall smashing the barrier. Arjun is venturing where few Indians had ever gone, mingling with Englishmen and talking and behaving like them, too. If the west represented progressive modernism, Arjun throws himself headlong into this frontier in the hope of turning himself into “a new, more complete kind of Indian”. Eventually, though, Arjun is troubled by the slights of the British officers and the rumblings of dissatisfaction among fellow Indian soldiers who question the Crown’s aims when their own cause or freedom has been delayed.

In the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, Arjun is the warrior who pauses in battle to question the purpose of war and the kingdom he is fighting for. So too does this modern Arjun. He begins to doubt his soldier’s training – during World War II, when he encounters those drawn to the aims of the Indian National Army.

As a fellow soldier, “it was strange to be sitting on one side of a battle line, knowing that you had to fight and knowing at the same time that it wasn’t really your fight” (*TGP*138). During the Japanese invasion, Arjun comes to understand what it
means to literally give over his trained body in bloody battle, and he wonders whether he even possesses his own self. Sarika Pradiprao Auradkar says that Arjun sees himself as moulded by “Unseen potter, he had become a thing unto itself, no longer aware of the pressure of the potter’s hand. Worse yet, in surrendering himself so completely to the British army, he realizes that he had never acted of his own volition, never had a moment of true self consciousness” (Sarika Pradiprao Auradkar: 110). Further, she adds that “he had become an unthinking machine, well – oiled and well-trained to fight for the Crown. Everything he has ever assumed about himself was a lie, an illusion.” He was sacrificing his very life, and yet this life was no longer his own.

Amitav Ghosh continues to explore different storytelling forms and to complicate the picture of pre-and postcolonial South Asian identity in his fourth novel - *The Glass Palace*. Ghosh’s ambitious epic tells the stories of a cast of characters, royal, working- class, and bourgeois Indians, Bengalis, and Burmese- as they grapple with their sense of place and self while violent historical events reshape twentieth century Burma and India.

*The Glass Palace* is about geographical entities, 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 connection with each other. It is the story of an Indian orphan Rajkumar who is transported to Burma by accident. Rajkumar the boy who is eleven years old is remarkable for this exploring spirit, keen perception and his ability to take calculated risk. He works in a tea stall of a matronly lady Ma Cho. He loves exaggerating his age because he wants to feel and act like an adult. He is established as bold and remarkable. Once Rajkumar lands in Mandalay, his life long search for places and people begins. He is taken in by the city: When the fort’s full immensity reveals
itself, Rajkumar comes to a halt in the middle of the road. The citadel is a miracle to behold, with its mile-long walls and its immense moat. The crenulated ramparts are almost there storeys high, but of a soaring lightness, red in colour, and topped by ornamented gateways with seven tired roof. Long straight roads radiate outwards from the walls, forming a neat geometrical grid. So intriguing is the ordered pattern of these streets that Rajkumar wanders far away, exploring. He is a complete destitute in an alien city with absolutely no acquaintances. Finally he goes to Ma Cho for job and Ghosh describes the outer appearance of Ma Cho: “She was small and harried looking, with spirals of wiry hair hanging over her forehead, like a fringed awaning. She was in her mid-thirties, more Burmese than Indian in appearance” (TGP:5-6). At Mandalay he helps Ma Cho to run a dhaba just outside the royal palace. He gets curious about the fort, therefore he asks Ma Cho pointed questions about the fort. Ma Cho had seen the fort’s parts inside and she says:

   It’s very large, much larger than it looks. It’s a city in itself, with long roads and canals and gardens: First you come to the house of officials and noblemen. And then you find yourself in front of a stockade, made of huge teakwood posts. Beyond lie the apartments of the Royal Family and their servants hundreds and hundreds of rooms, with gilded pillars and polished floors. And right at the centre there is a vast hall that is like a great shaft of light, with shining crystal walls and mirrored ceiling. People call it “The Glass Palace” (TGP 82)

   In the beginning of the novel the readers are given a brief glimpse of the palace through the awe-struck eyes of an eleven year old Urchin as it was being sacked and plundered by the local people before the British takeover. The Glass Palace is symbolic of power as well as fragility of imperialism. It was the dazzling emblem of the country’s
elegance and self sufficiency until devastated by the British rule. The Glass Palace functions as a metaphor. Glass is brittle and implies transparency. Palace is the symbol of power. Glass Palace is an illusion that is created around power. The people in the glass palace do not have the liberty to throw stones at others. The colonised people are always imprisoned and they have lost the capacity to throw stones at the colonial masters. The colonised attempt to describe the coloniser’s exploitation and violence, the more they reflect on the coloniser’s complicity with the coloniser’s ideology. The colonised have lost the capacity to speak in their own voice.

After the initial description of the palace, a reader again comes across a brief description of the glass palace a little before the end of the novel. It is about a young researcher of Rangoon University writing a dissertation on a famous nineteenth century history of Burma called *The Glass Palace, Chronicles*: The young girl who’d helped to shelter Dinu when he had passed through Rangoon in 1942. She was now in her mid-twenties, a student at Rangoon University. She was doing research in Burmese literature, writing a dissertation on *The Glass Palace Chronicles* a famous nineteenth century history, written in the reign of King Bodawpaya, an ancestor of King Thebaw. (*TGP 532*)

Dolly’s son Dinu, one of the survivors in this vast saga of intertwining families runs a modest photo studio The Glass Palace, where young people stifled by the military dictatorship of present day Burma, gather to open their minds to discuss books, pictures and ideas. Needless to say the symbolism of the title is not laboured. Without making an added effort, Ghosh is able to imbue the title with the images of loss as well as hope. Almost all of Amitav Ghosh’s novels invariably focus on history and its ramification across geography, a theme that has seldom been explored before and which he does so
well with his creative imagination equipped with his own training. His luminous prose matches the inventiveness of his narrative. Here Ghosh makes no attempt to be lyrical or evocative in style as always avoiding the staging of subaltern speech he writes in the unadorned grapholet what comes alive before us is the clear lucid narrative vividly concretized characters, their desires longings and ambition constantly swayed and disrupted by the tide of history But the blending of the public and the personal sphere is seamless and perfect.

As Ghosh tells, “a cloud of dust” tends to hang over the colonial scenario. Whole cities are on the run and it is often impossible to “see far,” given the panicky conditions. Under the circumstances, then, it is not surprising that Ghosh also uses the metaphor of the camera to slow events down to a pace where it is actually possible to focus. The title indicates both the magnificent hall of mirrors which forms the centre piece of the Mandalay residence of Burmese kings and the name of a “small photo studio” where the book’s action appropriately ends:

‘But you have an address for him then?’ Jaya said. Yes; Ilongo reached into his pocket and took out a sheet of paper. ‘He has a small photo studio, does portraits, wedding pictures, group photographs. That sort of thing. The address is for his studio: he lives right above it’. He held the paper out to her and she took it. The sheet was smudged and crumpled. She peered at it closely, deciphering the letters. The first words that met her eyes were: The Glass Palace: Photo Studio. (TGP 502)

Fiction, at its best provides us with “addresses” for the lost actors in the historical chronicle. By dwelling on small details and bestowing on ordinary lives serious attention, a writer creates an interior history. An internalised record of emotions runs parallel to explicit factual accounts and fills them out; a genre like the novel
especially is suited to the task of bringing content back to those empty frames from which the colonial subject is always vanishing. Like Ilongo a novelist reaches into his pocket and holds out his smudged and crumpled sheet of paper so that the recorder can decipher it in a manner that combines facts with photographic accuracy with the uncertainties of memory. “He has a small photo-studio. Does wedding pictures, group photographs. That sort of thing” (TGP 547). It would be quite accurate to say that wedding and group portraits form the bulk of the matter in The Glass Palace. Ghosh’s technique is simply to borrow the war journalist’s tripod, lenses and so forth, and then swivel his viewfinder so that it alights on families living out their lives in tumultuous times. (Auradkar: 94-95)

Saya John sees a father like figure in Rajkumar. He matures fast. Life teaches him its own lessons. At his heart, he is always certain about his success in life. When the British throw down the King of Burma, Rajkumar is told that the British wish to control Burmese territory for wood. And from this point starts his shaping of his future plans. He senses wealth in teak. When the British go on a rampage in the city, it is the Indian soldiers who receive orders from their colonial masters. Suddenly Indians become the target of mob frenzy. Rajkumar is also attacked. He is saved by Saya John. That day, Saya perceives something unique in Rajkumar. There was something unusual about the boy, a kind of watchful determination. No excess of gratitude here, any 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 hunger. That was as it should be.

Saya John is a fine example of this breed of hybridity. His clothes are western. He speaks English, Hindustani and Burmese. His face looks like that of Chinese. Saya
himself makes fun of his amalgamated identity: The soldiers there mainly Indians and they asked me this very question: how is it 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 are *dhobi Ka Kutta*—a washer-man’s dog—*na ghar Ka na Ghat Ka*—you don’t belong anywhere, either by the water or on land, and I’d say, Yes that is exactly what I am. He laughed, with an infectious hilarity, and Rajkumar joined in. (*TGP* 10)

From Rajkumar, the novel expands to a vast array of characters in Burma, India and Malaya, all connected through the broader currents of history and the intimate links of friendship and marriage out of this large cast, the two most searing portraits are of Rajkumar, the unquestionable empire builder, and Arjun, the tormented warrior who tries desperately to break free of the empire that has melded him.

In the 19th century, Britain was expanding its commercial interests, especially in its colonies. India in particular had become not just a continent to exploit and rule, but a source of raw labour and military muscle that bolstered British dominance worldwide and kept the imperial machine humming. With the end of slavery in the empire in 1833, thousands of poor, willing Indians workers were recruited for work in Burma, Fiji, the Caribbean and Africa, on plantation, in docks, mills and railroads, while others were conscripted into the British army, turning India into what one character in *The Glass Place* calls a ‘vast garrison’.

This is the complicated backdrop from Ghosh’s novel, which centres on the fascinating story on Indians in Burma. By the late 19th century, there was a sizable Indian community in Burma; many were recruited to fill the lowly positions; others, such as Rajkumar, came to prosper as merchants in the growing economy. In the 20th
century, as India’s independence movement gained strength, and England and Japan faced off in East Asia, these overseas Indians stood at a particularly agonizing crossroads, which tested their sense of national identity. Tragically, the idyll of Indian families in Burma ended in 1942, during the Japanese invasion, when thousands were forced to flee on foot through the jungle trail and mountains back to India.

Rajkumar is the quintessential opportunist, in the best sense of the word. He makes his first money by recruiting indentured workers from India, and then builds up a teak export business in the hills of Burma. He transforms the subcontinent and the other British colonies into a vast network of trading and exploitation. Undoubtedly, the aim of the novel is to offer a deep critique of the British Empire. Ghosh does not have so narrow an agenda as to simply bash the imperial master; after all, in the new colonial system, someone like Rajkumar is not stuck in his born station in life, but given a greater chance to succeed on his own initiative. Instead, through the novel’s characters, Ghosh shows the subtle questions of allegiance that come to torment them all.

The initial impulse for colonial enterprises, as we all know, is often commercial, leading to the establishment of a trading post or some such outfit. Thus, it is the Burmese teak and the Malayan rubber that spur the British colonial drive. With a prudence beyond his years, the seven year old Mathew reports to his unbelieving friend Rajkumar what his father, Saya John, has told him:

Once the colonial power is firmly established and has a clear military superiority over the hapless and unprepared native rules, it looks for, and often fabricates, a dispute with an inconvenient native rule so as to justify dethroning him, annexing his state, and sending him into exile. A dispute with a British timber company, in which the company was clearly in the wrong, it was used as an excuse for waging a
war against King Thebaw in Mandalay. One of the King’s senior ministers had suggested discreetly that it might be best to accept the terms, that the British might allow the Royal Family to remain in the palace in Mandalay, on terms similar to those of the Indian princes—like farmyard pigs, in other words, to be fed and fattened by their masters, swine, housed in sties that had been tricked out with a few little bits of finery. (*TGP* 21-22)

Ghosh makes a case for the bewildered and cruelly subjected colonial subjects. Their rights were trampled upon. With righteous anger many of these regional kings and queens resisted the colonial rule only to be brutally defeated and exiled at times.

But the fiery queen contemptuously turns down the suggestions. The colonial powers usually win because their cause is just but because of superior power, manipulative skill, and weaponry. The second dimension is the conquest of Burma at the hands of colonized Indians. This conquest took place at various levels: There were some ten thousand soldiers in the British invasion force and of these the great majority—about two thirds were Indian sepoys. (*TGP* 26)

Rajkumar who worked in a Burmese food stall before the conquest, catapults into prosperity. He lures men and women from India and makes a fortune out of indenturing them in Burma. Rajkumar and Saya John, both aliens, settle into teak trade and later into rubber trade while the only glimpse one has of the local populace in the novel. Indians not only make money in the process but also provide the British with an active workforce to systematically rob Burma of its natural resources. The Indians in the administrative services as representatives of the British play their role in humiliating the Burmese royalty.
The third dimension is the exodus of Indians from Burma in 1941-42, the rise of Burmese nationalism with General Aung Sang and its abrupt end with his assassination in 1947. This was followed by independence in 1948, which only led to more confusion; civil war and finally the coup that led General Ne Win to power and Burma to decades of internal oppression and external oblivion. Under the pretext of defending Burma, against neo-colonialism and foreign aggression a decolonization of Burma took place by its own people who had stepped into their colonizer’s shoes.

And the realization dawns on them that the British army consisted not of British but Indians mostly. Now the hostility of Burmese crowds turns towards the Indians and the boy, Rajkumar becomes an easy prey to their wrath. When he was beaten black and blue by the crowd, he had to be rescued by the pistol wielding Chinese Saya John. While the British lay siege to Mandalay, the Indian community in Mandalay barricade themselves within the Hajji-Ismail’s compound fearing reprisal from the Burmese. The Burmese crowd notices that there is no rancour or animosity on the face of the soldiers because it is not their war. This phenomenon specially attracts our attention and would later turn out to be the locus of value for the novel. It is this perspective on the critical moments in society that also lends the novel signification which only classics of literature generally share. What Amitav Ghosh achieves in this novel is probably what he was hinting at when he suggested how a writer would deal with so much violence in our times. It would be interesting to see how this perspective, making its appearance at this juncture merely as the ghost of a shadow, gradually concretizes into the real things as one move through the novel. Here Saya John throws some more light on the phenomenon of Indian soldiers constituting the British army. When he was working as an orderly in a hospital in Singapore, Saya John came across several wounded Indian
soldiers who were in their twenties. It was the money that drew them to this profession. Yet what they earned was a few annas a day, not much more than a dockyard coolie. He is certain that Chinese peasants would never do this to allow themselves to be used to fight other people’s wars with so little profit for themselves.

The narrative progresses in different directions through the different parts of the novel. Each part sprouts its own metanarratives which question the historical circumstance that birthed it, and in doing so each gets inextricably intertwined with the other. As a result the convictions and viewpoints of the major characters get entangled in multiple dilemmas and are seen to alter with the progression in the narrative.

Amitav Ghosh refers to the phrase “banality of evil” in the context of soldiers fighting for their British masters from neither enmity nor anger, but in submission to orders from superiors, without protest and without conscience. The process of colonisation and the state of the colonised are very relevant thought components of this novel. The word used by Rajkumar kaala is objectionable, which is decolonised at least in the actual process of aggression, capture and colonisation. How the Burmese people are robbed of all grace with guns and artillery. The British are only giving commands. The soldiers are fighting among themselves.

Rajkumar is an orphan who has an immigrant’s characteristic that is a knack for carving a niche in an alien world. It is through his eyes that the readers witness the humiliation of King Thebaw and his chief consort queen. Soldiers loot the palace reassured by the ramblings of the queen that her defeat is not complete: “Through all the years of the Queen’s reign the towns’ folk had hated her for her cruelty, feared her for her ruthlessness and courage. Now through the alchemy of defeat she was transformed in their eyes. It was as though a bond had been conjured into existence that had never
existed before. For the first time in her reign she had become what a sovereign should be, the proxy of her people” (TGP 34).

Rajkumar catches a fateful glimpse of Dolly, one of the Queen’s maids. Through the intertwine stories of Dolly and Rajkumar, the history of the twentieth century is told. Wars are fought, rebellions are discussed, and fortunes are made and lost. The writer reports everything like a thoughtful, competent, dispassionate and precise observer and his observations are backed up by a meticulous research. Rajkumar gradually succeeds in becoming with the loyal help of his friends Doh Say, Saya John and others, rich and a respected member of the Indian community in Burma. Thereafter, he tracks down Dolly, a devoted maid of Queen Supalayat, with whom he had fallen in love at first sight as a boy during the British takeover of Mandalay, Dolly lives in the distant India city of Ratanagiri where she has become a lifelong friend of Uma, the unruly wife of the Indian District commissioner assigned to look after King Thebaw and his family. Through Uma’s good offices, Rajkumar finally gets to marry Dolly. All this happens by the end of chapter sixteen. The rest of the chapters of The Glass Palace refer to a period of history which is both harrowing and exciting, the interaction between their families, of Dolly and Rajkumar in Burma, of Uma and her brother in India and of Saya John, Rajkumar’s mentor, and his son Matthew in Malaysia. Rajkumar once told Uma earlier in their lives when they were young and sensible:

Have you ever built anything? Given a single person a Job? Improved anyone’s life in any way? No. All you ever do is stand back, as though you were above all of us, and you criticise and criticise. Your husband was as fine a man as any I’ve ever met, and you hounded him to his death with yourself right cosiness. (TGP 248)
The truth of these lines is self evident. Even with these bitterly true words Uma does not go into any kind of self questioning, well, all that one can say is that this amounts to a flaw to draw a character who is a celebrated international socialite and intellectual and yet who never goes into any kind of introspection. Uma’s characterisation looks unreal. Even to the crudest woman, widowhood drives into bouts of loneliness and depression. The endless vacuum of life pervades their personality. It shows how an educated, sensitive, patriotic and modern lady escape an inevitable thought process.

In the narrative that follows, goes back to Rajkumar and Dolly to Rangoon, where he though scarcely literate, sets up a booming business in the timber, and see one of their sons Neel become a film producer and the other, Dinu a photographer. At the same time we follow Dolly’s best friend Uma, when her civil servant husband dies, takes off to Europe and then in flight from its “ruthless hypocrisies” to New York where she joins a group of Indians who agitate for independence under the tutelage of Irish activists. The novel has many windows virtual and actual but Uma who is independent minded to the end is the strongest of them all. While Rajkumar tries to turn even war into an occasion for profit, she returns to India to spread the word of Burma’s suffering and to join Gandhi in his nonviolent fight for freedom.

In an author’s note at the end of the novel *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh refers to a “near obsessive urge to render the backgrounds of my characters’ lives as closely as I could” and it is this urge that is often most evident throughout the novel. He has consulted “hundreds of books, memories” and gets for example fascinating detailed account of how teak camps worked in the Burmese jungles or how rubber plantation tappers began their day in Malaya. At times the research almost swallows up the story.
The readers are treated to brief excursion on the delight of Nyonya food and learn that the current way of wearing a sari, with blouse and petticoat, was in fact the invention of an Indian official during the British Raj. At one point Ghosh suddenly begins classifying cars, and realizes, perhaps with alarm, that this is a device comparable to the flapping of calendar pages in old movies, to show where we are in time.

The real heart of the novel and its dramatic centrepiece lies in the classical imperial setting of Second World War in Burma and Malaya. Here everything that is powerful in Ghosh’s aerial perspective and everything that is shaky comes to the fore. He takes us into the Southeast Asian theatre of war by going back and forth between a shy romance on rubber plantation in Malaya’s highland, the microcosm of empire and another involving the Indian soldiers who are fighting for the British as the Japanese approach. In the love scenes, the widescreen approach leads to some curious effects. As Dinu, the photographer lies with his beloved, he watches “the horizontal planes of her forehead, her eyebrows and her mouth perfectly balanced by the vertical of her, straight hair and the translucent filaments that hung suspended from her lips” (TGP 358). The man sees life through camera angles, to be sure but still seems odd that closer the bodies get the more abstract the language becomes.

Ghosh conveys the larger picture with particular vividness. We see the Christmas trees in the department stores of Rangoon. As the Japanese move through Malaya, we follow great crowds of people running for evacuation trains only to find that all the cars are reserved for Europeans. The road’s embankment was dotted with parked vehicles. Families could be seen to be sleeping in their cars, snatching little rest before day light. At intervals military trucks weighing one and a half tons came barrelling down the highway, heading south.
Typical of everything than the most affecting in *The Glass Palace* are the passages evoking the panicked exodus of tens of thousands of people, nearly all of them Indians, as the Japanese took over Burma in 1942. Only those lucky enough made it to Calcutta, more than a thousand miles away. In some ways the two themes that have animated Ghosh’s writing from the beginning his interest in the lives of middle class Indian families and his concern for the world’s afflicted, come together stirringly as the very people who once thrived in Burma suddenly turn into dispossessed refugees themselves, struggling across rivers and mountains, wheeling the elderly in carts and often dying along the way. The worlds of his fiction and of his reportage memorably converge.

*In an Antique Land* (1993) is essentially a book by an anthropological historian. With the serious concern of a historian, Amitav Ghosh points out at the tragic turn of events in the history of Asia and Middle East and particularly India. The novel underlines the unarmed nature of Indian trade and commerce before the advent of Vasco-de-Gama in India. The author wants to bring to focus a forgotten period of history, which show how free and liberal India’s collaboration with the Arabs and the Chinese.

Amitav Ghosh’s book also tries to address the Iran-Iraq war and the ‘Operation Desert Storm’ in terms of a global, including pre-colonial and post-colonial, history. The book also does what function it is supremely good at: it provides a special means of access to this history, reducing us by its narrative design into identifying with the individual experience of living through history. The design has a peculiar significance as it involves adopting the unique viewpoint of a researcher in anthropology living in post-colonial Egypt and setting up a contrast between the pre-colonial Egypt to twelfth century-and the post-colonial Egypt of the 1980s. He thus commits himself to a
personal engagement with history: that of Abraham Ben Yuji, a Jewish merchant, originally from Tunisia, who comes to India via Egypt and Aden around 1130 AD and his slave Bomma, “the toddy –loving fisherman from Tulunand” \((IAL\ 123)\).

Amitav Ghosh looks at history from the point of view of a post-colonialist and gives his own reading into the characters of the two periods, i.e. those of the twelfth century the countries of the world separated from each other by barriers of immense stretches of water and insurmountable mountains and yet brought together by a common humanity; and the modern world, which has been reduced to a global village, has been ironically broken up by “narrow domestic walls” erected by the Imperialists.

The point about Ghosh’s book is that we are reading a fiction which has a plot, a theme and characterization and a special complex kind of fiction engaged with a specific history, witnessing to it, yet also offering a critical interpretation of that history today. Vikram Seth believes that traveling “antique lands” is an experience for liberty, “perfect liberty, to think, feel, and do just as one pleases.” \((Vikram Seth \ 59-60)\)

The author’s post-colonial attitude becomes clear in this description of the vandalism of the Geniza by the Western power \((IAL\ 80-95)\). In these pages he talks about the 18\(^{th}\) century Egypt when she was no longer the ‘mother of the world: “Masr has long since to be the mistress of her own detiny; she had become a province of the Ottoman empire, which was itself enfeebled now, allowed to keep its territories only by the consent of the Great Powers” \((IAL\ 80)\).

Ghosh points out the utter callousness of the colonizers to their subject and the abject demoralization of the colonized. The Geniza becomes symbol of the intellectual superiority of the East which is prostituted to Western imperialism in exchange of
power at the level of the elite and a few dinars, a Bakshees at the level of the custodian of the synagogue. The beardless and the petty officials of the synagogue could not have been ignorant of the value of the Geniza documents and yet they were willing to part with the last remaining asset to them by their ancestors because “the balance of power...lay overwhelmingly with England” (IAL 92). This was the time when British administration in Egypt was headed by Sir Evelyn Baring about whom Ghosh makes a tongue-in-check remark that he was better known to his subordinates as over-Baring, who in an essay entitled. 'The Government of the Subject Races' ‘quotes’ “...it is essential that each special issue should be decided mainly with reference to what, by the light of Western knowledge and experience ...we, conscientiously think is best for the subject race”(IAL 91).

It was against this background that Schechter arrived in Cairo “with a letter from the Vice-Chancellor of the Cambridge University”. And the letter was “the back-room equivalent of an imperial edict” (IAL 93). The ‘subject race’ was more than willing to comply in exchange of whatever pittance Schechter condescended to throw down to them. The author quotes extensively from Schechter’s letter describing his experiences of the Jewish community whose achievement he was about to appropriate. Schechter talks about the Rabbi whom he has so charmed with his shilling that “he kisses me on the mouth, which is not pleasant...” (IAL 93). Neither does he find very pleasant “the beardless scoundrel whom I have to Bakesheesh or the amount expected from me for the kind attentions... it being only proper that the Western millionaire should contribute from his fortune to the glory of the next meal”(IAL 93). In a short time Schechter had filled “thirty sacks and boxes with the materials and with the help of the British Embassy in Cairo he shipped them off to Cambridge” (IAL 94). The pitiful irony is that
Schechter, himself a Jew, helped other Europeans in looting his co-religionists so that “.....Masr which had sustained the Geniza for about a millennium...was left with no traces of its riches”: not a single scrap or shred of paper to remind her of that ascept of her past (IAL 95). The author comes out with a scathing attack on the imperialists’ world where ‘...the interest of the powerful defined necessity, while the demands of the poor appeared as greed” (IAL 94).

Thus the vandalism of the Geniza not only highlights the contemptuous indifference of the imperialists to the age-old treasures, the age-old values of the East but also defines the author’s attitude to the two worlds he creates in the book- one historical and the other fictional. Ghosh was a tried and tested novelist by the time he published In an Antique Land. His novel The Shadow Lines already points in the direction of his latter work, by practising a subversion of the realist novel. By highlighting the discrepancy between existing accounts of events and how they “really” occurred, the text invalidates formal realism as a narrative mode, in which the credibility of the representation is predicated upon a firm knowledge of what has happened. One can trace an evolution of his new insight in using narrative fiction to question official historiography through his attempting an even more innovative experiment, that of placing his autobiographical persona at the centre of the account of his field-work experience, which he has previously used as material for his doctoral thesis. In writing the 1981 text, Ghosh the anthropology student was constrained by the boundaries of his discipline and the stylist requirement of a D.Phil thesis; in a way, he was compelled to frame his findings within a scientific and objective setting. By the time he writes In an Antique Land in 1992. Ghosh’s role has changed as well as his
leadership; he is now known as a writer of imaginative fiction and is at liberty to re-orient the experience recounted in *In an Antique Land* in the direction.

The title of the book can be read as an ironic reference to Shelley’s “Ozymandias”, which features “a traveller from an antique land”, namely Egypt. The reference is ironic because the book then completely disregards the Orientalist and Eurocentric versions of Egypt’s past and present, by thematizing the search for an alternative, syncretic, non-nationalistic and non-Eurocentric history. It narrates how an Indian anthropologist’s cultural negotiations with the village community he studied did not revolve around the West, though the West makes several distressing appearances in the story. And perhaps, by seeking to prove, through narratives, how shadowy the boundary lines between countries really are, the text is suggesting a new model of nationhood, which puts forward syncretism as an alternative to a monocultural and most importantly in the case of the countries he considers, Egypt and India-mono-religion nation.

Ghosh’s quest for an alternative history, tied in with the subaltern study project, is accompanied by the quest for an alternative anthropology: these two disciplines can be seen as the diachronic and synchronic settings, respectively, of his chosen representation of Egypt. What is important here is the narrative element of Ghosh, especially his rewriting of an ethnographical and historical account in a style far removed from the traditional academic boundaries set for these two types of writing. The narrative structure, which obviously borrows from novelistic convention, creates a coherent text out of the two separates stories. Indeed, *In an Antique Land* as a braided narrative alternates the story of Ghosh’s fieldwork in an Egyptian village community with the story of a historical reconstruction of *The Slave of MS.H.6*. In this novel Ghosh
seems to be responding to Edward Said’s concepts of culture and imperialism: “The major task is to match the new economic and socio-political dislocation and configuration of our time with the startling realities of human interdependence on the world scale. We need to ground, to situate these in the geography of other identities, peoples, cultures, and then to study how, despite their differences, they have always overlapped one another, through unhierarchical influence, crossing, incorporation, recollection, deliberate forgerfulness, and of course, conflict” (Nilanjana Gupta 195).

Firstly, each of the narrative strands originates from a scholarly composition—Ghosh’s unpublished doctoral thesis in social anthropology at Oxford, entitled “Kinship in relation to the Economic and Social Organization of an Egyptian Village Community”, and secondly from the scholarly article published in *Subaltern Studies*, entitled *The Slave of MS.H.* The ur-text provides in a way the narrative referents for *In an Antique Land*. The two stories in the book recount how the thesis and the article came to be, by telling about Ghosh’s trip to Mangalore to investigate the etymology of the slave’s name, and how he took notes on the village’s cultural and religious practices.

Like a novel, *In an Antique land* begins with a prologue, which starts off with classic novelistic rhetoric, a codified formula for immediately capturing the attention of “every reader”, as opposed to a specialized reader such as a historian or an anthropologist. *The Slave of MS.H* first stepped upon the stage of modern history in 1942. His was a brief debut, in the obscurest of theatres, and he has scarcely out of the wings before he was again more a prompter’s whisper than a recognizable face in the cast.

The script firmly entrenches the text within a narrative framework, immediately inaugurating the use of the past tense which will be employed consistently throughout
the novel. Ghosh first introduced the character of the “historical” narrative thread, the letters if Arab-jewish merchants who traded among various regions looking out on the Indian Ocean, and the first appearance, in one of the letters, of the slave of MS H.6: ...“Ben Yiju’s Indian slave and business agent, a respected member of his household” (*IAL* 262).

The Prologue ends with an autobiographical note that serves multiple purposes. First of all, it introduces the persona of the narrator-historian, protagonist of the search for the identity of a medieval Indian slave as well as the anthropologist we see “at work” later on. Secondly, it ties together the two threads of the book. This Indian slave of the Jewish merchant who ended his life in Egypt provides the connection between the two narratives and the two nationalities the Indian and the Egyptian who engage in cross-cultural dialogue in the book. And thirdly, the next year, 1980, when Ghosh was in Egypt, installed in a village called Lataifa, a couple of hour’s journey to the south-east of Alexandria. He writes, “I knew nothing then about the Slave of MS H.6 except that he had given me a right to be there, a sense of entitlement.”

India and Egypt are found to be culturally connected without the need for a European reference point: “The Third World anthropologist now conceives his research as extending a long history of intercultural relations, contacts not defined by European expansion or the dichotomy of East and West.” Of course, this might be seen as an idealization of this cross-cultural encounter. After all, in Ghosh’s case, the anthropologist’s home institution is Oxford; he is in Egypt doing fieldwork through the mediation of the Western academy.

In *An Antique Land* has been seen as a successful example of an ethnographic fiction seeking to server ties with the “classic” anthropographic traditions. James Clifford
was among those who perceived *In an Antique Land* a type of the “new” cultural account that he and other writers had described, while critiquing the “traditional” style of writing ethnography. In a 1994 review of *In an Antique Land*, Clifford writes:

“In weaving together his modern and medieval histories, Ghosh crosses the borders of ethnographic writing, particularly those shared with the novel and travel literature. The villagers he portrays are not so much informants as characters. As a formal experiment, the book’s spatial and temporal overlays complicate the notion of a “field” (and thus, “fieldwork”) almost beyond recognition. *In An Antique land* recasts the traditional village study as multiple-centred account of transnational relations. (321)

It is technical novelty as well as the unique art of construction that marks the book as a distinctive work. There are three parallel stories in *In an Antique Land*. The first is the story of a Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju, who came from Aden to Mangalore for trade eight hundred years ago, and his Indian slave. He married a slave girl named Ashu, belonging to the matrilineal community of Nairs, and lived in Mangalore for nearly two decades. Secondly, the story of modern Egypt that Amitav Ghosh relates from first-hand experience in two Egyptian villages. The third story is about Amitav Ghosh’s search for a story, that is his search for the antique world of Ben Yiju and his slave and the story he builds up from the disconnected and fragmentary medieval documents including the letter exchanges between Ben Yiju and his friends and correspondent in the twelfth century. It makes the conscious reader alert; one has to pause and ponder which level of the narrative serves as the functional device.

The book is divided into four sections: “Lataifa,” “Nashaway” “Mangalore” and “Going Back” beginning with a prologue and rounded off with an epilogue. It is almost a circular journey, a route in which the past easily infiltrates into the present and vice
versa. There is an expansion of time, place and person, but the bonds of interconnections between the varied events in the book never slacken. In the first person narrative, the “I” is not simply a narrator or a chronicler but a witness and a participant as well; the all-pervasive presence of this “I” has tied together all the facts and events in the book.

But the major source of the book’s distinction lies, perhaps, in its inherent theme, and the origin of this theme can be traced to the deeper layers of history and civilization. The author’s perceptions of the basic character of man and his elemental feelings and emotions have added an extra dimension to the book. 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, and there is a bridgeable gulf between the two. But the accounts of these two completely different, the middle Ages and the Modern times, between antiquity and the old and the modernity, and that remains unchanged in the eternal tension between the old and the new. Indeed, it is the author’s success in conveying to the readers a valuable insight into some abiding aspects of human life and human character which are never carried away by the flowing currents of history and civilization that makes the book a remarkable achievement.

To a large extent, the narratives are based on history. Thus, the historical dimension of the book excels all the others. Characters and events are viewed from the perspective of historical research. Minutely, and with a remarkable single-mindedness, Amitav Ghosh has unveiled the multiple state of the interrelationship between the Indian, Egyptian, Jewish, and Islamic culture and their histories.

The central background is twelfth century, around 1130 A.D. The history centres round Abraham Ben Yiju and his slaves. One finds a successful resuscitation of
medieval Egypt and Mangalore. A few disconnected clues, a few scraps of paper including some of Ben Yiju’s letters preserved as medieval documents in various universities and research centre 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 Khalafa ibn Ishaq to Ben Yiju in Mangalore which Amitav Ghosh, 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 of “MS H.6” (the catalogue number given to one of Khalaf’s letters in the National and University Library in Jerusalem). The first letter, written in the summer of 1148 A.D. when Palestine had turned into a “thoroughfare for European armies” preparing for a crusade against Islam, appeared in an article written by the eminent scholar, E. Strauss. It was published in the 1942 issue of a Hebrew journal, Zion. The second letter of Khalaf ibn Ishaq was included in a collection entitled Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders (1973), translated and edited by professor S.D. Goitein of Princeton University. This letter was prefaced with a few words about Ben Yiju and it contained a footnote about the slave. Ben Yiju was introduced as: “A Jewish merchant, originally of Tunisia, who had gone 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 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 paper found their way into his synagogue in Cairo; they were eventually discovered in a chamber known as the Geniza” (IAL 19).

The letter made Amitav Ghosh restless 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” (*IAL* 16). This was something unimaginable in the middle ages. An amazed Ghosh explains: “That is all no more than a name and a greeting. But the reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin it imagine properly human, individual existences are the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests—the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time. But the slaves of Khalaf’s letter were not of the company: in his instant 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” (*IAL* 16-17).

Amitav Ghosh came to learn from Strauss’s article and Goiten’s book that the letter had been recovered from the Geniza, the biggest Palestinian synagogue in Cairo, known as the Synagogue of Ben Ezra. They were written in an unusual hybrid language. Known today as Judaeo-Arabic, it was, in fact, “a colloquial dialect of medieval Arabic, transcribed in Hebrew script and liberally strewn with Hebrew and Aramaic” (*IAL* 103). Most of the Geniza documents were written in it and there were only a handful of scholars in the world who could decipher this bafflingly esoteric language. But Amitav Ghosh was determined to trace the “antique” world of the Jewish merchant and his slave. Amitav Ghosh had gone to Tunisia and learnt Arabic in 1980; he was in Egypt, “installed in a village called Lataifa, a couple of hour’s journey to the south-east of Alexandria” (*IAL* 19). He returned to Egypt twice again in 1988 and then in 1990. The search continued in Mangalore and culminated in Annenberg Research Institute, Philadelphia where the ‘last testament’ of the slave’s life, a handwritten document stating that Ben Yiju owed a sum of money to a slave for household purchases, was
preserved. Thus, what one finds in the story of Ben Yiju is not an imaginary picture, but an authentic account of the twelfth century life. Hence it is history. In fact, it is the abundance of verified facts that reinforce the historical dimension of Amitav Ghosh’s book. For instance, in the first section of the book *Lataifa* one finds introductions of historical facts about “the Egyptian Babylon” and a description of Ben Ezra’s Synagogue and the Geniza in Cairo, as mentioned by the British historian A.J.Butler. The tenth chapter of this section (that details the loot of the Geniza documents by European Scholar from the eighteenth century onwards) is pure history. Again in the second section entitled “Nashaway,” one finds historical documentations of the author’s childhood in post-partition Dhaka. The third section, “Mangalore,” contains the account of Ibn Batuta, the folk life story of Tulunad, the history of Tulu language and culture, and the life story of the Mogera fisherman in India and the Middle East during Ben Yiju’s lifetime.

Side by side, the stream of the narrative flows on smoothly. The story of Abu Ali and Shaika Musa in Lataifa and that of Ustaz Sabri and the Imam in Nashaway introduce a number of unforgettable characters. It is not mere narration but delightfully presented stories within story. Along with the rise and fall of the larger society, one notices the progression of the major characters. Gradually, the narrative part of the book assumes a self-sufficient form.

At the historical level, as at the temporal, Amitav Ghosh’s narrative runs on parallel lines. There were tremendous political disturbances in the Middle East when Ben Yiju left for India. The European superpowers were uniting for a crusade against Islam. BenYiju’s return to Aden after seventeen years stay in Mangalore coincided with the political turmoil over large area in the Middle East and North Africa. The raids of
Ifriqiya, Yiju’s homeland, by Sicilian armies and the forceful conversion and large scale massacre of the Jews were followed by famine and disease, leading to the exodus of a substantial section of the Jewish population. Then, in the twentieth century, there were the two world wars and the Holocaust. When Amitav Ghosh visited Egypt in 1980 and 1988, when the Iran-Iraq war was going on. His last visit to Egypt took place soon after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The newspapers were talking of vast flood of Egyptian workers pouring out of Iraq and his co-passenger in the taxi from Cairo to Damanhour “talked randomly of disaster, killing and vengeance” (IAL 350) in confused apprehension. It was the greatest army ever assembled in the Persian Gulf since the days of the Crusades. But amidst “this tornado of grand design and historical destines,” (IAL15) the lives of the common people continued uninterrupted. The Indian Ocean trade that brought the Jewish merchant from Tunisia to Aden and then to the Malabar Coast and that gave rise to a unique culture of accommodation, mutual trust and compromise, had flourished amidst these political upheavals. Amitav Ghosh peeps through the foxholes of history to trace that singular tradition that had brought Ben Yiju and his Indian slaves into close contact, and their “small, indistinguishable, interwined histories” (IAL 339) which “prevailed until some centuries ago, but which then became partitioned in several areas where they had once existed” (IAL 339).

The historical narrative of In an Antique Land centres round Abraham Ben Yiju and his Indian Bomma. It is not easy to present facts of history in a narrative vein. But, like a master craftsman Amitav Ghosh has interwoven history and narrative with a rare dexterity in the story of Ben Yiju. The task was stupendous: arranging the varied material in historical sequences and building up the complete account of the twelfth century out of fragmentary documents. Although at a few places Amitav Ghosh had to
have recourses to imagination to fill in certain gaps (for instance, his remark about Bomma cheering the Aedenese soldiers with a flask of wine to fight against the pirates raiding a merchant vessel, in page 259, is not supported by historical document), he remained more or less faithful to the available material. He did not sacrifice historical authenticity to the claim of fiction.

The most intriguing part of Ben Yiju’s story is his relationship with his slave of MS H.6. The slave called Bomma appears frequently in the letter written to and by Ben Yiju. Amitav Ghosh’s search for the origin of the slave provides the readers with a wonderful study in social anthropology and a valuable “insight into the uses of History” (IAL 270). The story takes the reader back to an antiquated world in the Middle Ages when, despite religion, social and geographical divisions, “a culture of accommodation and compromise” (IAL 288) had spread over a wide area in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent that made the crossing of the paths of the Jewish merchant and his Hindu slaves possible.

The name “Bomma,” which had once “had a wide currency within Tuli culture,” (IAL 250) relates the slave to the “Bhuta-cult,” the worship of spirit deities which is still practised in certain areas of Tulunad. The name was derived from the name of a deity of the Tulu myth, “Berme” or “Bermeru,” the “principal figures in the pantheon of Tuluva Bhutadeities” (IAL 254). “Bermeru” was not the same as the Brahma of classical Sanskritic mythology. But in course of time, “with the growth of Brahminical influence, the Tulu deity “Berme” (IAL 254) came to be identified with Brahma. Bomma had been born in one of the several matrilineal communities of Tulunad that played an important role in the Bhuta-cult. The Bhuta-cult was not considered to be religion at all. In fact, “it
felt far beneath the Himalayan gaze of canonical Hindu practice” and it was “dismissed as mere ‘devil worship’ and superstition” (IAL 264).

Although most of the Geniza document, in which Bomma figures, refer to him as Ben Yiju’s salves, the actual terms of his service were completely different from those which the word “slavery” suggests today. The medieval concept of slavery was, as Amitav Ghosh tells us, totally different from the contemporary notion: “In the Middle Ages institution of servitude took many forms, and they all differed from “slavery” as it came to be practiced after the European colonial expansion of the sixteenth century. In the lifetimes of Bomma and Ben Yiju, servitude was a part of a very flexible set of hierarchies and it often followed a logic completely contrary to that which modern expectations suggest”(IAL 259-60).

In the Middle East, as in large parts of North India, “slavery was the principal means of recruitment into some of the most privileged sectors of the army and the bureaucracy” (IAL 260). It was also used by merchants and traders as a means of recruiting apprentices and agents. The “slaves” recruited in this way were often given a share of the firm’s profits and they “could generally be sure of obtaining manumission”(IAL 260). Again, servitude was used over a large part of the medieval world “as a means of creating fictive ties of kinship between people who were otherwise unrelated” (IAL 260). The slaves were often inducted into the household of their master and regarded as their family members. But his most elusive aspect of the medieval concept of slavery was its role as a “spiritual metaphor.” During Bomma’s own lifetime, a group of priests and fiercely egalitarian poets of South India, who were known as “Vanchanakara Saint poets” used slavery as a poetic image” (IAL 260). To represent the devotee’s quest for God through the transforming power of metaphor the
poets became their lord’s servant and lovers, androgynous in their longing; slaves, searching for their master with a passion that dissolve selfhood, wealth, caste and gender, indeed difference itself. “In their poetry it was slavery that was the paradoxical embodiment of perfect freedom; the image that represented the very notion of relationship, of human bonds as well as the possibility of their transcendence” (IAL 260-61).

The Arabic speaking religious world in the Middle East, which Ben Yiju had hailed from, was also being rocked under the tremendous impact of the Sufis, the mystics of Islam. In spite of the wide gulf separating the medieval Sufis from the Saint-poets of Southern India, there was, in fact, “a commonality in the nature of their quest” and “a similarity in their use of poetic imagery.” (IAL 262) To the Sufis, as to the Vachanakaras, the notion of slavery constituted “one of the central metaphors of religious life”- “metaphors of perfect devotion and love strung together in an intensely charged, often erotic, spiritual imagery” (IAL 262).

The poetic imagery and spiritual metaphors might well appear remote from the mundane relation between a merchant and his agent. Bomma was probably not familiar with the teachings of the contemporary saint poets. But since he belonged to a community, which had long been relegated to the fringes of the orthodox and hierarchical Hindu society, he must certainly have been intimately aware of the “great range of popular traditions and folk-beliefs which upturn and invert the categories of Sanskritic Hinduism” (IAL 262). As a well educated person. Ben Yiju, for his part, might well have been acquainted with the teachings of the Sufis. At the same time, he might have “shared in some of the beliefs and practices that have always formed the hidden and subversive counter image of the orthodox religions of the Middle East: the
exorcism cults, the magical rites, the customs of visiting saints’s graves and suchlike” (IAL 263). And it was, in all probability, those “inarticulate counter-beliefs” that formed a common ground between the patriarchal Jew and the matrilineal Tulu, “who would otherwise seem to stand on different sides of an unbridgeable gulf.” (IAL 263)

Nilanjana Gupta points out that Ghosh’s text is a combination of autobiography, history, anthropology, travelogue and fiction. It presents us with a subversive look at his history while suggesting possibilities of an alternative discourse of dialogue, rather than domination” (Nilanjana Gupta 26).

This unique culture, which had been born of the subversion of the categories of Hinduism, Islam and Judaism and was nurtured by the “peaceful traditions of the oceanic trade” and the “pacifist customs and beliefs” (IAL 287) of the merchants, irrespective of their religious faiths in Malabar and the Middle East, collapsed after the appearance of the maritime powers of Europe on the Indian Ocean. The arrival of Vasco da Gama on the Indian Coast on May 17, 1498, about three hundred and fifty years after Ben Yiju left Mangalore, and the consequent political developments sounded the death knell of the strange world of Ben Yiju, Ashu and Bomma and marked the beginning of the European supremacy in the Indian Ocean trade. The Eastern trade, itself the product of a “rare cultural choice” had flourished for centuries.

In a sense, In an Antique Land is the story of two Indians in Egypt. The first one is Bomma, the slave and business agent of the medieval Jewish merchant, Ben Yiju, who followed his master when the latter returned to Aden around 1148 A.D. and remained faithful to him till the end of his life. The other Indian is Amitav Ghosh who, in 1980, about eight hundred and fifty years after Ben Yiju’s voyage to India, travelled to Egypt to trail the story of the slave of MS H 6. Ghosh’s story is a strange, colourful
world, at once medieval and modern, presented in the garb of a traveller’s tale. It is here, in the Egyptian backwater, that Amitav Ghosh sought to retrieve the remnants of the antique civilization of the twelfth century. His guides in both the villages were his neighbours: Abu Ali, his obese, gargantuan landlord; Shaikh Musa, the gentle and good-humoured village elder; Jabir, the son of Ali’s cousin; Amm Taha, Amitav Ghosh’s caretaker in Nashawy, who has a rare skill “in ferreting out... the most jealously guarded of household secrets” (IAL 127); the self-reliant and individualistic Busaina; Zaghloul, the superstitious weaver who was very fond of stories and metaphorical resonances of his chosen craft” (IAL 137); Ustaz Sabri, the well-educated and knowledgeable school teacher, battling, with the other youngmen of his neighbourhood, against ignorance, poverty and exploitation and fashioning post-Revolution Egypt into the path of Islam; the college students Ismail and Nabeet; Khamees the Rat, the beady-eyed local wit; and the village Imam with whom Amitav Ghosh had a serious quarrel. It is almost a pageant of characters carefully observed and faithfully presented.

Amitav Ghosh narrates, from the viewpoint of a social anthropologist, the lives of these people, their dialects, manners, social and religious customs, and points out the commonalities and differences between medieval Masr and the post-Revolution Egypt. One learns about the exploitation of the poor, landless “fella-heen” (the unlettered peasants) by the Pashas and the British, the Revolution of 1952 under the leadership of Jamal Abdul Nasir, the redistribution of land, the massive co-operative movement that sought to organize the land-owning farmers, and the Suez crisis of 1956. Apart from the history of modern, developing Egypt, there is an account of another Egypt, teeming with poverty, superstition, miracles, blood-feuds and exorcism rituals, a world not far removed from the antique world inhabited by Ben Yiju and Bomma. Although Amitav
Ghosh found there men like Ustaz Sasbri who were aware of the age old and intimate ties between India and Egypt and of the similarity of the problems “that had been bequeathed to them by their troubled histories” (IAL 134). Most of the villagers had no clear idea about the country where Ben Yiju spent seventeen valuable years of his life. But it was with these simple and largely unlettered fellaheen, who were devoutly religious but had no interest in politics, that Amitav Ghosh felt at home since they seemed to belong to “a familiar world” (IAL 167). In spite of their ignorance of India and her people and religion- which is evident from the barrage of questions they asked him: questions invariably about cow-worship, the burning of the dead, circumcision of men and clitoridectomy of women that often non-plussed him; they befriended Amitav Ghosh and provided him with the information he needed for his research. Someone like Busaina even earnestly proposed: “You had better not go back. Stay here and become a Muslim and marry a girl from the village” (IAL 172).

When Amitav Ghosh revisited the villages seven years later, he was astonished by the changes that had overtaken them. There was no electricity at Lataifa in 1980. Someone had bought a diesel water pump from a nearby town. Such machines were “generically known as ‘almakana al-Hindi,’ the Indian machines, for they were all manufactured in India” (IAL 72). The whole village had gathered on the courtyard of the owner, waiting expectantly as Amitav Ghosh, the “doctor al-Hindi” who had been invited to give his expert opinion, examined the machine. But in 1988, he found refrigerator in every other house, new brick buildings in place of adobe houses, calculators, TV sets, cassette players, and even food processors. The people owed their prosperity to the Gulf money. Most of the young men of the villages had left Egypt by that time to find jobs in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, but mostly in war-riven
Iraq whose own men had distant war, had worked a silent economic revolution in rural Egypt and changed the lives of the fellaheen. People were sending their children to schools and colleges and were talking about “development.” But ignorance, fanaticism and superstition still prevailed. Amitav Ghosh was asked the same embarrassing question about Hinduism, the burning of the dead and the “purification” of women in India over and over again. It was one such question from the Imam of Nashawy that made Amitav Ghosh flare up and enter into an angry altercation with the religious fanatic who publicly humiliated him for the dead in his country. As they, the delegates from two superstitious civilizations, were locked in a fierce combat, a sad Amitav Ghosh reflected:

It seemed to me that Imam and I had participated in our own final defeat, in the dissolution of the centuries of dialogue that had linked us.... We had acknowledged that it was no longer possible to speak, as Ben Yiju or his slave, or any one of the thousands travellers who had crossed the Indian Ocean in the Middle Ages might have done, of thing that were right, or good, or willed by God; it would have been merely absurd for either of us to use those words, for they belonged to a dismantled rung on the ascending ladder of development. (IAL 236-37)

And Amitav Ghosh felt himself “a conspirator in the betrayal of the history that had led to Nashaway. A witness to the extermination of a world of accommodations that he had believed to be still alive, and, in some tiny measure, till retrievable”(IAL 237).

But his backward journey to Ben Yiju’s world was not altogether unrewarding. Despite ignorance and superstition, religion and politics, and the seemingly unbridgeable gulf of time and culture, Amitav could trace points of contact with the
ancient civilization which Ben Yiju had come from. It was still alive both on Egypt and in India, in the inarticulate beliefs and religious practices of the people.

One major discovery of Amitav Ghosh in Mangalore was a shrine devoted to a spirit-deity known as “Bobbariya-buhta,” deemed by legend to be the spirit of a Muslim mariner and trader who died at sea (IAL 271). The deity was venerated by a small group of fishermen along the Malabar Coast, known by the name of “Magavira” or “Mogera” who had traditionally belonged to the margin of the caste structure of the orthodox Hindu society, and had long been closely linked with the foreign merchant and mariners who came to trade in Malabar. Their links with foreign merchants was “commemorated in the traditional symbol of their distinct identity” (IAL 271). The shrine of Bobbariya-buhta cult that Amitav Ghosh visited was “a large modern building, modelled after a classical Hindu temple” (IAL 273). It was situated in a rapidly developing village of fisherfolk that owed its prosperity to the Gulf money. The temple bore the posters of a “fundamentalist Hindu political organisation, an upper-caste group notorious for its anti-Muslim rhetoric” (IAL 273). But the real surprise awaited him inside the remodelled temple whose main place was reserved for the most Brahminical of Hindu gods, Vishnu. Amitav Ghosh writes:

Once we went inside, however, it turned out that one small aspect of the post had ingeniously escaped reinvention: the spirit of the Bobbariya-bhuta still remained in the temple although in a wholly altered guise...he stood beside the image of Vishnu, but at slightly lower level. The old symbols, the mace and the pillar, had been dispensed with: he was now represented by an image, like a Hindu god. (IAL 274)

And an awe-struck Amitav Ghosh remarks: “I had to struggle with myself to keep from applauding the ironies enshrined in that temple. The past had revenged itself
on the present: it had slipped the spirit of an Arab Muslim trader past the watchful eyes of Hindu zealots and installed it within the Sanskritic pantheon” (IAL 274).

The antique world is not entirely lost. The Bhuta-cult, itself a subversion of the categories of Sanskritic Hinduism, still exists among the fisherfolk of Mangalore. Despite the sincere effort of enlightened people like Ustaz Sabri, exorcism rituals, blood-feuds, beliefs in ghosts and miracles, and the practice of visiting the saints’ s graves (as the tomb of Sidi Abu-Hasira, a Jewish holyman and mystic who later converted to Islam and earned great renown for his miracles - visited by both the Muslims and the Jews at Damanhour, in Egypt) which constitute “the subversive counter image” of the orthodox religions of the Middle East, like Judaism and Islam, are not removed from the minds of the people of Nashaway and Lataifa. The partitioning of the past and of the intertwined histories of the two countries notwithstanding, these “superstitions,” which had given rise to the unique culture of accommodation and co-existence, still linger in the psyche of the people. Development and the all-consuming influences of politics and religion could not totally efface them. In defiance of the enforcers of history, small remnants of Bomma’s world have survived in both Egypt and India, and it is these remains that Amitav Ghosh explores with painstaking thoroughness in his unusual book.

As has been shown, these novels in their depictions of characters and events transcend national and cultural boundaries. The characters, whether they belong to the present or distant past, show certain traits and beliefs which are not typical or unique of a particular place or time. In a globalized world one may be tempted to call them cosmopolitants, but they remain transnational characters given to a mindset which is accommodative and syncretic.