



History As Fiction in The Novels of Amitav Ghosh: A Study

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A historical novel as is evident is an evaluation of a segment of historical reality as projected by the novelist whose techniques of writing fiction enable him to describe his vision or world vision. The fictional framework renders history more readable and lively and he is able to involve and attract the reader more than what history does. For a true artist history is a hand maiden which helps him to achieve several purposes. How deft he is in the art of amalgamating the two must be judged only by the finished product. The historical reality, in terms of time and space, forms an integral part of a work of art and is transmuted in the process of giving it a creative expression; in the process it achieves wider dimensions of universality and at times a state of timelessness. The historical novelist is none but a historian on whom a talent for imaginative fiction has been happily bestowed.

In all his works, Amitav Ghosh's engagement with history is not the same kind as that of a historian, but this does not in any way lessen its significance as historical fiction. His fiction reveals that as a novelist, involvement with history is his prime obsession. Indeed, he interjects a new dimension into his encounter with history. His fiction is imbued with both political and historical consciousness Ghosh is a novelist who virtually bends his novels to the needs of history; they largely derive their purpose and shape from it.

In his novel *The Shadow Lines* Ghosh makes an attempt to visualize the physical trouble as well as the mental agony faced by the people during Partition in 1947. Through the character of *Thamma Ghosh* has projected the human psyche, and the mental turmoil it has undergone. With the incident of the disappearance of the *Mu-i-Mubarak* in *Shrinagar*, which is followed by agitation not only in India but also in Pakistan and Bangladesh which gives rise to rumours and consequence of that is the riot in 1964 and then as soon as the *Mu-i-Mubarak* has been re-installed at *Hazratbal mosque* people of all faiths were overjoyed. Thus, it is evident that Ghosh, through his novel mocks the concept of partition. This partition has been a political issue, the lines are drawn on maps but there are no such lines visible on land, no such borders are evident. People from both the countries are having the same heart full of love and brotherhood and share the pains of parting on political basis but at the core of the heart they are still united. Ghosh wants to say that these border lines are mere shadow lines not prominent, and so are invisible.

It is evident that in his novels Ghosh attempts to redefine the present through a nuanced understanding of the past. The narrator in *The Shadow Lines* embarks upon a journey of discovery of roots and the more he comes to know about it the more he is convinced that knowing the causes and effects of that history which he had not fully comprehended as a child was not an end itself. He comes to realize that the facts recorded in the books of history cannot be accepted as the ultimate truth, since truths vary according to perspectives and locations. He, in his voyage of discovery is trying to search the meaning of violence through memories of migration from one land to the other, from one country to the other separated by the politicians. As a child he had no inkling of the connections between the riots in *Calcutta* and *Dhaka* in 1964 though they both had a shattering effect on his family, it was only as a grown up and mature historian and researcher that he was able to return to those scraps of memory and pieces of information he gathered in the air-conditioned calm of an exclusive library and make sense of the events of history. The legacy of our history is such that its reverberations are felt years, and generations, on. He thus tries to understand the nuances of the historical events of the past in the context of the realities of the present.

Like the journey of the narrator in *The Shadow Lines* into the past to discover the diasporic identity of his family in the novel *In An Antique Land* the author travels to *Egypt* in the pursuit of the story of *Bomma*, an Indian slave from *Tulunad* who had survived literally in the margins of letters written to or by his master *Abraham Ben Yiju*, a Jewish merchant who came to India in the 12th century. Through his story Ghosh has tried to



highlight the relation between India and Egypt in twelfth century, a period in history which has been suppressed by the heap of other political events and various historical periods. Ghosh unveils that period and also India's free and friendly collaboration with the Arab World. It shows the unarmed nature of Indian trade and commerce before the advent of Vasco-de-Gama in India. Through the story of Ben Yiju and Bomma he puts light on the free flow of human warmth and trust that exists between the Egyptians and the Indians.

In this novel Ghosh has also infused in his narrative the Gulf war—how the Iraqis have been to the front and the Egyptians have been working to earn their living, and then depicts the grudge of the Iraqis against the Egyptians and how they were attacked and killed.

The view that Amitav Ghosh has offered through *In An Antique Land* is that history as it has come to us is canonical history and is imperialist in nature. It has created stereotypes about the Orient which are presented in books as objective records of truth. Whereas the fact is that what history offers is a subjective and selected picture of the past. So his attempt at scholarly' research on the lives of Ben Yiju and Bomma is to question the Orientalist History. The references that he has made to historical anecdotes are meant to justify his research. The author does not make any statements about Ben Yiju or Bomma. Thus, Ghosh seems to parody History's claims to objective factuality in order to highlight the personal and individual. He seems to hint at the irony that though the Indian and Egyptian civilizations are of the greatest antiquity and historicity, 'the colonizer's histories have rendered all ancient 'historical civilizations' a historical in their 'documents' and 'proofs'.

The *Glass Palace* is again a fiction where Ghosh has skillfully incorporated the historical facts like the King of Burma, Thebaw, and the Queen Supayalat, the British invasion in 1885, the World Wars, the Japanese invasion, struggle for freedom in Burma, General Aung San's assassination and Aung San Suu Kyi's efforts to establish democracy in Burma, her influence on general people, her rallies and public meetings outside the house and of course the riot in Burma when Indians were attacked.

In this novel Ghosh depicts the process of colonization. The state of colonized appear to be the relevant thought components of this novel. Rajkumar, who is called 'kalaa' is an evidence of this. How the glory and grace of Burma were snatched away with guns and artillery, the British control over Burma, the soldiers invading Burma were Indians—Indians and Burmese instead of fighting their common enemies— British—were fighting among themselves—the whole process of aggression, capture and colonization has been vividly described and enmeshed by Ghosh in his fiction. The author has also projected the mental colonization. As it is evident that to Saya Johns English do not appear to be usurpers; he considers them superior. Arjun, the character of second generation, also boasts of his connections with the westerners. He has an inclination to western style in his psyche and is desirous of that too. Even Rajkumar is convinced that without the British Burma will not prosper. Ghosh through different characters have highlighted the concept of hybridity—no race is pure, no caste is pure even the royal blood is impure. Coupling of the first princess with Marathi coachman, Saya John are examples of this mixing. Ghosh has also projected through the marriage of Rajkumar and Dolly, Neel and Manju that the nation and culture are no barrier for love. Even the two different races do not form obstacle—love affair of Dinu and Alison is an example of that. Another thing on which Ghosh has focused in this novel is the greed of Europe as they wish to exploit every resources—wood, water, mines, people everything and everyone of Burma.

Thus Ghosh through this novel presents the social and political condition of Burma intermingling history with fiction.

According to a critic—

The novel is, in some senses, an elegy for the diasporic condition that is a product of history, that leaves behind kingdoms and palaces and moves, in the exilic mode, toward a near-hopeless regeneration. But it is not the story of kings and queens; they merely provide the backdrop of Ghosh's incisive historical sense—and sensibility. It



is not just the anxiety of diaspora that Ghosh holds up to a sharp cruel light, but almost, it appears, its despair.¹

From the above generalization about the three historical novels of Amitav Ghosh it is quite obvious that his treatment of history is different from other Indian novelists in whose works the historical events and characters are either recreated or employed as a background or used for allegorical purposes. If we compare him with writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Manohar Malgonkar, Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Tharoor, etc., we find that his approach to history of his treatment of the historical events and characters is different from others. It is Salman Rushdie's view of history that he has employed in his novels like *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* which comes closer to that of Ghosh. Through his novels, especially the three chosen for this study, Amitav has laid emphasis on the need to re-look, and re-vision in it in the contexts of the present. He has interlinked the historical facts and events with human life. His novels show how the historical realities intermingle with the private life of individuals. Hence, his employment of history distinguishes him from a historian. In his fiction there is no attempt to organize the historical events in a chronological sequence or to just record facts. He has rather incorporated into the body of the narrative the historical events without violating the facts. The following observation of Brinda Bose is quite revealing in this context:

Ghosh's aesthetics is a fictional embracing of historical/political subtexts, an intellectual exploration of both the major, as well as the marginalized, contexts of modern history: nationalism / internationalism, migrancy, memory / nostalgia, violence, communalism. He is constantly looking for ways in which he can render history into fiction; in a certain sense he is also seeking to pit fiction against history, to challenge the latter's implacability with the former's potentially more human qualities.²

But while giving his own vision of history he is always conscious of his obligations as a writer of fiction. He never allows the historian in him to dominate his creative self which is basically that of a writer of fiction. In an interview, Ghosh defended his choice of fiction over history—

I think fiction has always played that part. If you look at Tolstoy's *War and Peace*... I think, the difference between the history historians write and the history fiction writers write is that fiction writers write about the human history. It's about finding the human predicament, it's about finding what happens to individual characters. I mean that's what fiction is... exploring both dimensions, whereas history, the kind of history exploring causes, casuality, is of no interest to me.³

Now on the basis of above discussion regarding the unique genius and immense creative potential of Amitav Ghosh as evidenced in his fictional writings we may place him without any hesitation at the forefront of those brilliant contemporary writers who have made their mark in the post-Rushdie Indian English fiction. He has emerged with such a distinctive voice that it may be said that it is a voice that may well sustain itself beyond his predecessor, Salman Rushdie's.

References

1. Brinda Bose, 'Introduction', Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives (Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003), p. 24.
2. Ibid., p. 18.
3. Amitav Ghosh in 'Shadow Script,' an interview to First City, New Delhi: September, 2000, p. 30.