Chapter One

Introduction

Every human being is an amphibian — or, to be more accurate, every human being is five or six amphibians rolled into one. Simultaneously or alternately, we inhabit many different and even incommensurable universes. — Aldous Huxley, *Adonis and the Alphabet*

The whole movement of mind in Western culture from the Renaissance to the present — the very movement which spawned the novel and elevated it to the position of the dominant literary form — has been a movement away from dogma, certainty, fixity, and all absolutes in metaphysics, in ethics, and in epistemology. — Robert Scholes and Robert Kellog, *The Nature of Narrative*

In the age of the excessive division of labour, of runaway specialization, the novel is one of the last outposts where man can still maintain connections with life in its entirety. — Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*

Indian writing in English emerged as a recognizable literary phenomenon only in the 1930s. The three prominent trailblazing Indian novelists in English — Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan — foregrounded the idea of a composite nation in their pan-Indian themes: the establishing of an Indian identity, the national movement, the partition of the country, the confrontation between tradition and modernity, faith and reason, etc. If the project of these three pioneers was the construction of a national identity, the novelists of the 1950s and the 1960s aimed at the construction of self-identity. The dominant concern of the novelists like Khushwant Singh and Arun Joshi was with character development and psychological depth, combined with a sense of the alienated individual dissatisfied with modern life. After a brief lull, the 1980s witnessed a second coming of the Indian novel in English, triggered by Salman Rushdie's trendsetting *Midnight's Children* (1981). The postmodern novelists of the 1980s and the 1990s celebrate the plenitude of India, and deconstruct several assumptions about language, nation, history and narrative mode. Interrogating the concept of a totalizing and authentic India, they privilege cultural hybridity, and bring different

languages into a comic collision. The first generation Indian English novelists desired rootedness; in stark contrast, their postmodern successors embrace rootlessness and displacement. Hence the problematization of the issue of Indianness in the novels of I.Allan Sealy, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Rohinton Mistry, to name a few. To explore the new paradigms of Indian identity, contemporary Indian English novelists adopt narrative modes which are fragmented, kaleidoscopic and multidimensional. Celebrating a set of fluid identities, "Indianness", for these new makers of world fiction, "is now a metaphor, a particular way of comprehending the world" (Bharati Mukherjee, cited in Mukherjee, 181).

Amitav Ghosh is perhaps the most distinctive and influential writer to come out of India since Rushdie. The key to understanding Ghosh lies in his double inheritance. On Ghosh's own confession, his mother was a staunch nationalist whereas his father served in the British Indian Army, and fought in the Second World War in Burma and North Africa. He was thus "among those 'loyal' Indians who found themselves across the lines from the 'traitors' of the Indian National Army" (*The Glass Palace*, 552). The young Ghosh grew up on stories, especially patriotic stories of India's freedom struggle, heard from his mother, which he found more appealing than the idyllic stories of his father's life in the British Indian Army. Then one day, towards the end of his life, Ghosh's father told him an altogether different story, that of racial prejudice and humiliation. He confided that "at the siege of Imphal, he had turned away from the main battle to confront a South African officer who had called him a 'dirty nigger'". The dismayed son responds: "Suddenly these stories came pouring out of him: I was presented with a vision of army life that was completely different from that which I had grown up with" (Ghosh's Correspondence with Dipesh Chakrabarty, 4). Evidently, his mother stands for nationalism, his father for imperialism. These two conflicting strands find a confluence in the psyche of the impressionable, adolescent Ghosh, stimulating his quest for his own identity. It is not without significance in this context that when Mary Gray Davidson, the producer of the American radio programme "Common Ground", asked him how he identified himself, he responded: "I must say, I wish I knew. I mean to me, identity is a kind of, it's really an impossible question. And I never feel at all the compulsion to stand up and say, 'I am this and nothing else'" (cited in Hawley, 165). This

aversion to an exclusive Indian identity is Ghosh's point of departure. In a revealing confession to Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ghosh portrays himself as an incurable amphibian, hinting at the elusiveness of his determinate identity. He claims that "to look for agreement is really futile, since — let us face it — much of the time, it's quite a struggle even to agree with oneself" (10). It would, however, be a mistake to think that he is altogether bereft of any sense of self-identity. Thus on another occasion, Ghosh asserts his position as an "Indian" writer. It is just a result of his "being an Indian" (Chambers, "The Absolute Essentialness of Conversations", 34). He thinks of himself "as an Indian writer" for his work has its roots in the experience of the people of the Indian sub-continent, at home and abroad. Accordingly, "'Indian Writing in English' seems to me to be a perfectly acceptable categorisation of my work" (cited in Hawley, 169).

Complexities and contradictions in Ghosh the man go to make up Ghosh the writer. They constitute his intellectual dialectic and his creative dynamic. He seems to betray his predilection for ideas, if not theory, in his interview with Ramya Ramamurthy:

> I write the books that I want to read, about the things that interest me. I am curious about the environment, about history, words and language. The idea of writing a book where you leave those things out seems boring because these are the textures that make life interesting. (1)

Conversely his confession to Claire Chambers that he is "not a theoretically minded person at all" ("The Absolute Essentialness of Conversations", 29) tends to align him with the postmodernists with their strong aversion to the grand narrative of any kind. He repudiates anthropology as "a kind of hegemonic voice", "an authoritative" and "authoritarian voice" (Chambers, "The Absolute Essentialness of Conversations", 29), thus rebelling against any kind of totalizing, over-arching concept or ideology. Nevertheless, he finds it very difficult to read contemporary fiction because the "relationship between writer and public has become, especially in postmodern writing, very, very, distanced". Postmodern writers, Ghosh believes, create hard-edged, self-referential texts, "and the whole effort creates a very glittering crystalline edge which keeps the reader out." Confessing as he does that "I have done that myself", he perhaps adumbrates that he is a quondam postmodernist. Now he craves "that other form of address, that intimacy which writing creates. That form of communion which one used to

discover in novels" (Silva and Tickell, 221). He seems to have achieved what he aims for. Krishna Sen, for instance, applauds Ghosh for the "dramatic immediacy of his scenes that make the reader feel as if she were present at the enactment" (vi). The most effective way to establish intimacy between the novelist and the reader is to portray the characters from within, to present their subjective lives from their points of view. Anyway Ghosh sets enormous store by character. What makes a novel strong and powerful, "what wins readers for it in the end", holds Ghosh, "is the same: story — whether it is a historical novel or whether it is any kind of novel, it is the characters, the emotions" (Vijay Kumar, 101). Like any sensitive, serious artist, Ghosh is more interested in the meaning of an event than in the event itself. He makes this explicit in his comment on *The Shadow Lines*: "It became a book not about any one event but about the meaning of such events and their effects on the individuals who live through them" (*The Imam and the Indian*, 60). History and anthropology can present neither the emotion nor what the individual characters feel as they experience history. Ghosh writes novels because novels can synthesize geology, history, personal relations, and emotion: "Novels can tell us about politics, geology, finance, and about individuals, along with their pain and suffering, and the ways the world has impacted them" (Branagan, 5). That is why the purely psychological novel finds no favour with him. It is an article of faith with him that "[t]he novel is the most ambitious form of creative endeavour and should not flinch from looking at the world in its completeness and diversity" (Branagan, 5). Krishna Sen captures the multidimensionality of Ghosh's novel when she observes that his "endeavour is always to situate a specific incident or experience within a matrix of related experiences which, with every turn of the kaleidoscope, offers fresh ways of assessing identity, whether of the self or the nation"(vi). On the contrary, to think of "female empowerment" as Ghosh's major concern in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, as M. Adhikari ("Female Empowerment", 193-199) does, is to indulge in blatant reductionism, which is altogether alien to Ghosh's temper as a novelist. He is too holistic to be narrowly programmatic; he is too protean to be neatly pigeon-holed.

Postcolonial studies, as postmodernist thinking, has an insistently anti-nationalist and anti-statist leaning. Postmodernists, as Stuart Hall puts it, tend to reject all the "great collective social identities of class, of race, of nation, of

gender, and of the West" ("Old and new identities", 44). They view them as hegemonic identity narratives that suppress marginality, heterogeneity and difference. This applies with equal force to the concepts of "nation" and "state". Hall's contention is an offshoot of Lyotard's famous cry "Let us wage a war on totality" (82). Lyotard defines postmodernism as an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv). "Grand Narratives" like the Enlightenment, Christianity or Marxism are illusions which smother difference, opposition and plurality. Therefore, the best we can hope for, concludes Lyotard, is a series of "mininarratives", which are provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative. They provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances. Postmodernity thus dismantles the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject, the basic aim of the Enlightenment.

The nation is a fundamentally modern concept. For Sudipta Kaviraj, the nation is an "unprecedented" institution which attempts to replace premodern communities, marked by "fuzzy" boundaries and intense emotional ties with an "enumerated" and modern national community. The latter is territorially specific, has clear boundaries and must "enumerate" what belongs to it. Hence, "the endless counting of citizens, territories, resources, majorities, minorities, institutions, activities, import, export, incomes, projects, births, deaths, diseases" (30-31). Benedict Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (15). It is imagined by its people and ideologues, and these imaginings are fraught with incongruities. One of these is that nation-states, although historically "new" entities, "always loom out of an immemorial past" (19) as the same entity of united people sharing the same heritage. Modern India needs to be judged from this perspective.

The Indian nation is "not an object of discovery but of invention" (Kaviraj, 1). For Kaviraj, colonialism in India created a rupture out of which the nation emerged as an entirely new historical institution. Colonial borders were drawn up without any knowledge of the peoples or cultures whose lives they affected. Not only did this sometimes result in people with little historical connection being thrown together, it also often resulted in communities being torn apart, internally divided on the basis of administrative fiat. Pertinent here is Arundhati Roy's observation that "India, as a modern nation state, was marked out with precise

geographical boundaries by a British Act of Parliament in 1899. Our country, as we know it, was forged on the anvil of the British Empire for the entirely unsentimental reasons of commerce and administration." This leads her to question the very Indianness of India: "But even as she was born, she began her struggle against her creators. So is India Indian? It's a tough question. Let's just say that we're an ancient people learning to live in a recent nation." (28) Be that as it may, the borders for a nation become all-important which it protects for its own salvation. Herein lies the difference between the modern nations and the older empires. Twentieth-century state sovereignty is recognized by a "legally demarcated territory. But in the older imaginings, where states were defined by centres, borders were porous and indistinct and sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another" (Anderson, 26).

Ghosh is not exactly an apostle of the nation-state with well-defined boundaries. He concedes that "nations do matter, they matter profoundly and it's a kind of solipsism to pretend otherwise" (Vijay Kumar, 101). Each nation has its own project which marks it out from the other. Yet the classical nineteenth-century ideology of an "essentialized", homogeneous conception of a "nation-state" no longer holds. He believes that it has eroded at two levels. First, it has eroded at the top, where the rich nations have essentially begun to melt into each other e.g. the E.U., or the concept of the G8, or the West in general. Second, it has also melted at the bottom where the borders between Burma, Thailand and India are completely porous: "If you look at the map of Asia, there is this whole sort of grey area, stretching from the Caspian Sea essentially all the way across to Burma, where no one knows who is in power, who is not in power. It's just small warlords who are in power. So it melted away at two levels" (Vijay Kumar, 102). Hence, Ghosh boldly declares, in an interview with Sheela Reddy in 2002, that "I think we are at a point where the ideal of the nation as a way of organizing society is no longer holding" (cited in Hawley, 5). He inveighs against the very idea of ethnicity as the basis of a state with fixed boundaries: "All boundaries are artificial: there is no such thing as a 'natural nation', which has journeyed through history with its boundaries and ethnic composition intact" (*Dancing in Cambodia*, 100).

Both the nation and the novel figure prominently in Ghosh's thought because he posits an intimate relationship between the two:

> Novels almost always implicitly assume a collective subject: this is what usually provides the background, milieu, setting, dialect, etc. Sometimes this collective subject is the nation itself. Sometimes it is a culture or a class or a "generation". All of these are clearly the sub-sets of the nation — since the boundaries of the culture, class or generation are usually assumed to coincide with the boundaries of whatever country the writer happens to be from.

Then he explains why in India the family substitutes for the nation:

> In India, collectivities such as nation, class, generation, culture, etc. do not have the same imaginary concreteness that they do elsewhere [...]. This is one of the reasons why Indian (and African) writers so often look to a different kind of collectivity, the family.

More important of all is his revelation that "[i]n my case, the family narrative has been one way of stepping away from the limitations of 'nation'" (Correspondence with Dipesh Chakrabarty, 10). Ghosh remarks by the way that not only this is his way of "displacing the 'nation'" but this is the "case also with many Indian writers other than myself" (1). In support of his practice, he invokes the precedent of Tolstoy and Proust: "I think there is a long tradition of this, going back at least to Proust — and it's something that Jameson, Anderson (and even Bhabha) never seem to take into account" (Correspondence, 1). No wonder he rejects out of hand Frederick Jameson's thesis that Third World novels are "essentially about nation and nation building. I think that's just a load of rubbish" (Aldama, 89). Actually he turns the tables on Jameson by suggesting that his thesis fits better the First World rather than the Third World novel: "In fact, it is precisely the First World novel that is most commonly about nations and nation building [...]. In countries like India the nation as such is still too young and too tenuous an institution to have acquired this axiomatic status" (Correspondence, 10). For many Indians, the nation is a project rather than a reality. This is why Ghosh uses the family as a surrogate for the nation. For Ghosh, the family, however, is not static but continuously on the move. It cuts across national boundaries, thereby subverting the fixity of this modernist concept. This perfectly accords with his observation that "families can actually span nations" (Aldama, 89).

Nations and nationalism are profoundly important in the formation of colonial practice. As Partha Chatterjee explains in his influential book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, the origins of the nation in the West have much to do with the pursuit of a set of human ideals often identified as the European

"Enlightenment". European nationalism is "part of the same historical process which saw the rise of industrialism and democracy" and "nationalism represents the attempt to actualize in political terms the universal urge for liberty and progress" (2). There is, however, a conflict right at the heart of nationalism which Chatterjee terms the "liberal dilemma": nationalism may promise liberty and universal suffrage to the colonizers but undemocratic forms of government and domination to the colonized. The concept of the Western nations as representing the best of human civilization becomes a way of legitimating colonial expansion. It degenerates into an ideology of racial hatred in the colonies.

In his correspondence with Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ghosh points to a "profound ambiguity in Enlightenment thought", which actually parallels Chatterjee's "liberal dilemma". This ambiguity was often used, sometimes quite deliberately, to dupe the colonial subject. Ghosh equates nationalism or "blatant expansionism cloaked in the language of reform and political progress" with racism. "Racism", as he conceives it, "is not just an exclusivist or supremacist ideology. It is an ideology that is founded on certain ideas that relate to science, nature, biology and evolution — a specifically post-Enlightenment ideology" (Correspondence, 6). The liberal thoughts of "J.S.Mill, or Bentham or any other 19th century British liberal" are grounded on the idea of race. To expose how blatant racism vitiated even the operation of the rule of law in British India, he cites the infamous double standard in this regard. The putative racial superiority of the Britishers and the racial inferiority of the Indians and hence their incorrigibility justify the conquerors' perpetual rule over the conquered for the sake of civilizing them. Tearing to shreds this sophistry, Ghosh unmasks British hypocrisy. He concludes his diatribe against British imperialism thus: "In this discourse Race is the unstated term through which the gradualism of liberalism reconciles itself to the permanence of Empire. Race is the category that accommodates the notion of incorrigibility, hence assuming the failure of all correctional efforts (and thus of tutelage)" (Correspondence, 4).

Cosmopolitanism or multiculturalism militates against narrow, rigid nationalism and supremacism. As Renato Rosaldo argues, "[i]n contrast with the classic view, which posits culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns, culture can arguably be conceived as a more porous array of intersections where distinct processes cross from within and beyond its borders"(20). At the

theoretical level, this constitutes the notion of "hybridity" as a synonym for diversity or multiculturality — the once primeval, separate, and distinct cultural orders are now beginning to meet in the context of global migration. Homi Bhabha believes that culture is never essential or innate:

> Cultures come to be represented by virtue of processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are vicariously addressed to — through — an Other. This erases any essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity of cultures. (59)

From the poststructuralist perspective which foregrounds the "constructedness" of culture, culture is a thing learnt, created and staged. If this be true, then culture is profoundly susceptible to be aped, copied or appropriated, in a fashion that disrupts the claim that it is the specific property or the unique expression of a single community. So "hybridity" is not simply a term for the mixing of once separate and self-contained cultural traditions. It also gives credence to the view that culture is an arena of struggle, where self is played off against the "other". Hence for R.Radhakrishnan, hybridity is "transgressive in more than one direction, de-territorializing [...]. With hybridity, anything is possible for the simple reason that hybridity is about making meaning without the repression of a pre-existing normativity or teleology: in the exhilarating a-nomie between 'having been deterritorialized' and 'awaiting to be reterritorialized' there is all manner of unprecedented 'becoming'" (cited in Smith, 252).

"In the geography of human history", affirms Ghosh, "no culture is an island" (188). He emphatically points to heteroglossia as a fundamental characteristic of Indian culture: "India exported with her population, not a language, as other civilizations have done, but a linguistic process — the process of adaptation to heteroglossia" (*II*, 246). The idea of heteroglossia derives from Mikhail Bakhtin's views on the novel. For Bakhtin, signs do do not have fixed meanings. Meaning is inherently unstable, not the product of a finished or secure language. The dialogic interaction between the various social and historical forces, voices, and idioms present within the novel form best captures the heteroglossia of a given national or cultural sign system. Bakhtin's view of dialogue is conflictual rather than collaborative. With Bakhtin's conception of heteroglossia as a motivating impulse, Ghosh rejects the prescribed anthropological assumptions about cultural coherence and authenticity. It is the statesmen who draw borders,

but people leave the human imprint by creating the melting pot of sub-cultures to subvert these borders. For Ghosh, this dynamic human activity is centuries old: "In the 12th century, people developed a much more sophisticated language of cultural negotiation than we know today. They were able to include different cultures in their lives, while maintaining what was distinct about themselves" (Interview with Amitav Ghosh, "Lessons from the 12th century", 52). In the autobiographical short story "The Imam and the Indian", the narrator discerns a palimpsest of movement and inter-cultural crossings that started in remote antiquity:

> The men of the village had all the busy restlessness of air-line passengers in a transit lounge. Many of them had worked and travelled in the sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf, others had been in Libya and Jordan and Syria, some had been to the (sic) Yemen as soldiers, others to Saudi Arabia as pilgrims, a few had visited Europe. [...] And none of this was new: their grandparents and ancestors and relatives had travelled and migrated too, in much the same way as mine had, in the Indian subcontinent (5).

These interstate travels dismantle the stable boundaries of nationalist discourse and the conception of cultures as fixed and homogeneous systems. A measure of the psychospiritual impact of these foreign travels is, according to the narrator, that one "could read the history of this restlessness in the villagers' surnames. The wanderlust of its founders had been ploughed into the soil of the village: it seemed to me sometimes that every man in it was a traveller" (*II*, 6). For James Clifford, there could be no better image of postmodernity than this conflation of an Egyptian village with an airline transit lounge. As a literary artist, Amitav Ghosh, argues Clifford, draws attention to the complex "roots" and "routes" that constitute inter-cultural relations: "Everyone is on the move, and they have been for centuries: dwelling-in-travel" ("The Transit Lounge of Culture", 8). Kavita Daiya is quite right in her observation that Ghosh's novels "claim a unique position in the postcolonial literature that explores and sometimes uncritically celebrates the hybridity of postcolonial nationality and migration". She further contends that his novels are "interventions that urge us to renarrate national modernity as marked by the persistence of transnational memory and modes of community" (53).

The hybridity of all cultures at all times brings in the idea of migrancy. The migrant individual's refusal to be confined to one place is a radical gesture.

Andrew Smith asserts that "by becoming mobile and by making narratives out of this mobility, people escape the control of states and national borders and the limited, linear ways of understanding themselves which states promote in their citizens"(245). In today's world, clear-cut demarcations or definite horizons are a thing of the past. Migrancy, which is a condition of human beings, celebrates this fluid cultural landscape. Hence for Bhabha, there is "no necessary or eternal belongingness" (179). Suspicious of a search for lost "roots", migrants subvert the "grounded" ways of thinking about identity. Spivak confirms this in an interview: "If there's one thing I distrust, in fact more than distrust, despise and have contempt for, it is people looking for roots" (*The Post-Colonial Critic*, 93). For Bhabha and Rushdie, truth is relative, knowledge is uncertain. The latter has "been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 12). He accentuates the expatriate writer's cultural ambivalence. Because of the co-existence in them of their native cultures and the culture of their adopted countries, they feel self-divided: "Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 15). Rushdie's "migrancy" is identical with Edward Said's "exile". As Rushdie's "migrant", so Said's "exile" enjoys a double vision: "Because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation" (*Representation of the Intellectual*, 60). Nevertheless Rushdie maintains that "it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 15). Physical alienation from India enables the migrant writer to create fictions, "not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary ones, Indias of the mind" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 10). Here Rushdie echoes Ernest Gellner's stand that "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist" (cited in Anderson, 15). Timothy Brennan calls the expatriate writers who leapfrog from one culture to another "cosmopolitans"(38-39).

For Ghosh, the modern Indian diaspora "now represents an important force in world culture. The culture of the diaspora is also increasingly a factor within the culture of the Indian subcontinent" (*II*, 243). Reflecting on the "curious nature" (*II*, 244) of India's cultural relationship with her diaspora, Ghosh feels that the relationship is "a genuine historical anomaly". For "the links are those of

culture, but again of a kind of culture in which the most important cultural institutions as we usually understand them — for example, language and religion — are absent" (*II*, 247). He then provocatively asserts that the links between India and her diaspora are "lived within the imagination. It is therefore an epic relationship: an epic without a text" (*II*, 247). The primacy given to the imagination provides an opportunity to the "specialists of the imagination — writers" to "play so important a part in it" (*II*, 247-248). The diasporic Indians carry with them not so much political or social institutions but conceptual systems or processes. Pointing to heteroglossia as a basic feature of Indian culture, Ghosh contrasts it with the British notion of the "colonial": "To be 'colonial' is to be imperfectly assimilated into the mother culture; it is to practice a second-hand or simplified — if not simple-minded — version of it ... the voice of the 'colonial' is very easily marginalized within the culture of the 'mother country': being imperfectly British, the colonial is simply excluded as a player in the mother culture" (*II*, 249). Indian national culture is, however, constructed "around the proliferation of differences." As he formulates the issue somewhat paradoxically: "To be different in a world of differences is irrevocably to belong. Thus anybody anywhere who has even the most tenuous links with India is Indian; potentially a player within the culture. The mother country simply does not have the cultural means to cut them off" (*II*, 250). Contemplating the cultural representation of space, Ghosh believes that India has always been constituted as much by the notion of the periphery as it has been by the notion of the centre. He further contends that this "notion of the periphery has now expanded to include the diaspora" (*II*, 250). Ghosh assigns as much importance to the "centre" as to the "periphery". He moves away from the "centre", but unlike a typical postmodernist does not reject it. The centre is interrogated by itself to lose its existence to the periphery. For the postmodernist, there is no centre, either to interrogate or to negate. For Ghosh the diaspora is that part of India "which is both hostage and representative in the world outside — it is the mirror in which modern India seeks to know itself" (*II*, 250). Ghosh's diasporic community moves around the world but finally returns "home". As a part of this diaspora himself, he too feels "in some mental and emotional way I'm in a process of returning — which will take me a long, long time — and it is currently underway" (The Chronicle Interview, 3).

Ghosh's subversion of the enlightenment concepts of nation and nationalism would tend to align him with the postmodernists. Still he has fundamental differences with them. Both Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger were proponents of the linguistic turn in philosophy, albeit in different ways. This turn believes that since language is riven with configuration — a "mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms" (Nietzsche, 46) — it cannot represent the world accurately. Words depend on other words for their meanings, not on any extra-linguistic source. From this comes the postmodernist dictum that language constructs human identity, rather than vice versa. Heidegger writes: "Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man" (*Basic Writings*, 348). This linguistic turn is quite explicitly anti-humanist, denying human beings the instrumental command over language. The subject loses its entire metaphysical aura with the structuralist slogan of the "death of the subject". In the anthropology of Levi-Strauss, man is reduced to an empty space. For Lacan, the subject is subsequent to language. And in Louis Althusser's post-Marxist theories, human subjectivity is an effect of ideology. Foucault pushes this anti-humanism to the extreme: "As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end" (Foucault, cited in Eribon, 159). Ghosh is not exactly at home in this anti-humanist ambience.

Ghosh belongs with the modernists. His affiliation with them comes through in his "real interest [...] in the predicament of individuals" (Aldama, 86-87). Despite his training in it, anthropology disenchants him because it reduces people "into abstractions and makes them into [...] statistical irregularities" (Aldama, 86). Ghosh espouses the individuality and freedom of all writers: "Artists are nothing if not individualistic and each must, and ought to, forge their roles according to their own ideas and desires" (Hawley, 11). He firmly declares that every writer is "an individual and every writer has a right to define their own role" (*Calcuttaweb*, 2). Belief in the individual's autonomy, as in art's, is modernism's romantic heritage. Since Ghosh is a proponent of both, he believes very strongly that books should be read on their own terms. No wonder he overturns Derridean deconstruction: "One of the lessons I've learned as a writer is that it is hellishly difficult to say anything at all: to me what a book says is much more important than what it does not say" (Correspondence, 11).

What further strengthens Ghosh's modernist credentials is his belief that literature is essentially the enhancement of life and the propagation of human values. Literature and religion "have been virtually inseparable everywhere" "for most of human history" (*II*, 270). He is shocked at the absolute dominance of the "logic of late capitalism": "Today, for the first time in history, a single ideal commands something close to absolute hegemony in the world: the notion that human existence must be permanently and irredeemably subordinated to the functioning of the impersonal mechanisms of a global marketplace" (*II*, 285). He totally rejects this capitalist dogma of postmodernism in his essay "The Fundamentalist Challenge":

> However, the market ideal as a cultural absolute, untempered by any other ethical, political, or spiritual ideals, is often so inhuman and predatory in its effects that it cannot but generate dissent. It is simply not conceivable that the majority of human beings will ever willingly give their assent to the idea that the search for profit should be the sole or central organizing principle of society. (*II*, 285)

For his spiritual anchorage, he veers towards that brand of modernism which erected "religion as a bulwark against the dehumanization of contemporary life" (*II*, 268). Rushdie too describes the role of literature in terms which explicitly identify it with some form of religious longing:

> The elevation of the quest for the Grail over the Grail itself, the acceptance that all that is solid has melted into air, that reality and morality are not givens but imperfect human constructs, is the point from which fiction begins. This is what J.-F. Lyotard called, in 1979, *La Condition Postmoderne*. The challenge of literature is to start from this point, and still find a way of fulfilling our unaltered spiritual requirements. (*Imaginary Homelands*, 422)

Anyway Ghosh dissociates himself from his postmodernist contemporaries by calling himself "a pre-postmodernist": "Still I, for one, have swum too long in pre-postmodernist currents to accept that some part of the effort that human culture has so long invested in matters of the spirit will not, somehow, survive" (*II*, 285-286).

Ghosh's first commitment is to his art. The question that has engaged him a lot is whether this commitment excludes all other commitments. He has to admit that "a writer is also a citizen, not just of a country but of the world" (Hawley, 11). Whether a writer should be a responsible citizen or an insouciant aesthete is the issue that occupies him in the essay "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi". His point of

departure is Dzevad Karahasan's essay "Literature and War", touching on the relation between modern literary aesthetics and the contemporary world's indifference to violence. Karahasan holds that "The decision to perceive literally everything as an aesthetic phenomenon — completely sidestepping questions about goodness and truth — is an artistic decision. That decision started in the realm of art, and went on to become characteristic of the contemporary world" (cited in *II,* 60). Ghosh abhors Karahasan's brand of aesthetics, and plumps for moral activism:

> Writers don't join crowds — Naipaul and so many others teach us that. But what do you do when the constitutional authority fails to act? You join and in joining bear all the responsibilities and obligations and guilt that joining represents. My experience of the violence was overwhelmingly and memorably of the resistance to it. (*I,* 61)

By advocating resistance to violence and rejecting the "aesthetic of indifference", Ghosh is squarely denouncing the postmodernist dogma of pan-aestheticization as enunciated by Patricia Waugh: "Postmodern theory can be seen and understood as the latest version of a long-standing attempt to address social and political issues through an aestheticised view of the world, though it may be more thoroughly aestheticising than any previous body of thought" (6). For Ghosh, it is "the affirmation of humanity" that is more important, "the risks that perfectly ordinary people are willing to take for one another" (*II,* 61). Ghosh thus straddles the currents of both modernism and postmodernism. Meenakshi Mukherjee underscores Ghosh's refusal to be categorized, but she does so with respect to Ghosh's rebellion against the templates of genre (Hawley, 4). Ghosh is too eclectic to embrace a particular ism and in the process stifle all his innate dynamism. He is rather a typical amphibian, partaking of all ideas and isms that are congenial and pertinent to his artistic pursuit.

The institutionalization of postcolonial studies occurred at a time when the linguistic turn dominated both philosophy and literary theory. This set the stage for theoretical tendencies which Edward Said has deplored for permitting intellectuals "an astonishing sense of weightlessness with regard to the gravity of history" (*Culture and Imperialism*, 366-367). This postcolonialist shift away from the historical processes disrupts the "customary epistemological and ideological divisions between colonizer and colonized" (Parry, 75). As a result colonialism appears as "a mode of authority that is agonistic (rather than antagonistic)"

(Bhabha, 173, 108). "Significantly, 'agonistic' relates to ancient Greek athletic contests, 'agon' being derived from the word for 'a gathering' and denoting '(a) public celebration of games, a contest for the prize at games, whereas 'antagonistic' specifies '(t)he mutual resistance of two opposing forces, physical or mental; active opposition to a force" (Benita Parry, 75-76). The conflict within the colonial encounter is thus occluded. In this re-reading of the colonial archive, the historical project of invasion, expropriation and exploitation is reconfigured as a symbiotic encounter. Simon During suggests that postcolonial thought, which fused postcolonialism with postmodernism in its rejection of resistance along with any form of binarism, hierarchy or telos signified something remote from self-determination and autonomy. By deploying categories such as hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence "all of which laced colonized into colonising cultures, postcolonialism effectively became a reconciliatory rather than a critical anticolonialist category" (31-32). This is what Benita Parry says about the Bhabha-Spivak variety of postcolonialism:

> It is an irony that the story of mutuality now being composed by some postcolonial critics makes an inadvertent return to the narrative of benign colonialism once disseminated by British imperial historiography and which in the metropolis continues to have a purchase on the official and popular memory of empire, especially of the Indian Raj . (77)

Ghosh rejects the suggestion that he is part of the post-colonial writing movement: "I think that's a term critics use, but it's certainly not a term I would use for myself. I think of myself as an Indian Writer" (Branagan, 5). His objection stems from his conviction that "'Postcolonial' is a term that describes you as a negative. I mean, when I think of the world that I grew up to inhabit, my dominant memory of it is not that it was trying to be a successor state to a colony; it was trying to create its own reality, which today is the reality that we do inhabit" (Vijay Kumar, 105). It is because of largely similar reasons that Ghosh spurned the Commonwealth Writers Prize for his novel *The Glass Palace* in 2001:

> I have on many occasions publicly stated my objections to the classification of books such as mine under the term 'Commonwealth Literature'. Principal among these is that this phrase anchors an area of contemporary writing not within the realities of the present day, nor within the possibilities of the future, but rather within a disputed aspect of the past (Letter to the Commonwealth Foundation, 1).

The "postcolonial" that Ghosh has in mind is the one conceptualized by Homi Bhabha. He emphatically declares that "I have no truck with this term at all". He contends that the term has gained immense popularity in the last five or six years, but he does not know a single Indian writer of his acquaintance who does not detest it. More importantly, it completely misrepresents the focus of his work: "What is postcolonial? When I look at the works of critics, such as Homi Bhabha, I think they have somehow invented this world which is just a set of representations of representations. They've retreated into a world of magic mirrors and I don't think anyone can write from that sort of position" (Silva and Tickell, 214-215). He makes his repudiation of the "agonistic" or "reconciliatory" strand in postcolonial studies quite explicit in his letter to Dipesh Chakraborty: "the unintended effect of concentrating solely on the 'persuasive' and discursive aspects of the Raj is that it sometimes makes colonialism itself invisible, as though all that had happened was a consensual exchange of ideas between equals"(11). Despite all his disavowal, Janet de Neefe clubs Ghosh with the postcolonial writers: "A winner of numerous literary awards, it is no wonder that he has been described as 'one of the most sympathetic postcolonial voices' to be heard today" (1). Likewise Rama Kundu believes that Ghosh's novels "represent a fresh trend in today's postcolonial literature" (175). Shubha Tiwari throws to the winds all linguistic and critical precision when she observes in the same breath that "[c]olonisation, recolonisation, neo colonisation and decolonisation are recurring thoughts in Ghosh's work."(3). On the contrary, John C. Hawley holds that "Ghosh seeks to approach the topic (postcoloniality) from a new perspective that does not privilege the colonizer by accepting the manichean definitions of West and East" (17). Widening the perspective further John Skinner thinks that Ghosh's concern is "not only with colonizer and colonized, but with both historical and contemporary relations between different colonized groups. Not so much 'the empire writes back', then, as 'the empire writes home'" (cited in Hawley, 17). All in all, perhaps Ghosh would like to be called an anticolonial rather than a postcolonial.

Colonialism wins its great victories not only because of its military and technological prowess but also because of its cultural appropriation. It creates secular hierarchies incompatible with the traditional order. By passing colonialism off as a civilizing mission, the colonizers dupe the colonized. Carrying a certain

cultural baggage, the colonial system perpetuates itself by inducing the colonized to accept new social norms and cognitive categories. Unnoticed and hence unchallenged, these are instruments of oppression and dominance. Under the cloak of a civilizing mission, the colonial system persuades the colonized to internalize its logic and absorb its values. By responding to the fresh opportunities provided by the colonizer, the colonized actively participates in his own oppression, thereby, corroding his own self. The colonized is thus a participant in a "moral and cognitive venture against oppression" (Nandy, xiv). By making choices, he becomes a self-destructive co-victim. This is "the intimate enemy" position which moulds one's interiority and also corrodes one from within, resulting in the loss of one's self. "This colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies" argues Nandy "and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all"(xi). The inevitable result is the thorough Westernization and modernization of the colonized. Complete surrender to the technological superiority of Western modernity and wholesale rejection of local cultures pain the anthropologist Ghosh in "The Imam and the Indian". The Imam, one of the last repositories of traditional medical lore, is now convinced that his own healing powers are worthless in the face of modern Western knowledge. Such is the unquestioning acceptance of his own inferiority that his medicines are "as discredited in his own eyes as they were in his clients' [...] he bitterly regretted his inherited association with the relics of the past" (*II*, 4). He is now learning "the art of mixing and giving injections" (*II*, 4). The self-abased Imam locates the West's superiority in its destructive power: "'They're not an ignorant people. They're advanced, they're educated, they have science, they have guns and tanks and bombs'" (*II*, 10). The provoked Ghosh retorts: "'We have guns and tanks and bombs [...] we've even had a nuclear explosion. You won't be able to match that in a hundred years'" (*II*, 10-11). Recognizing the irony of the situation, he sees himself and the Imam as "delegates from two superseded civilizations vying with each other to lay claim to the violence of the West." The two between them show in action the ubiquity of the Eurocentrism of the colonized. Such is the universality of the language of power "that even for him, a man of God, and for me, a student of the 'humane' sciences" continues Ghosh, "they had usurped the place of all other languages of argument"(*II*, 11). Ethics and divine sanction have nothing to do with power. While "non-Western" and sometimes "anti-Western"

views "involve an emphatic seeking of independence from colonial dominance" explains Amartya Sen, "they are, in fact, thoroughly foreign-dependent — in a negative and contrary form. The dialectics of the captivated mind can lead to a deeply biased and parasitically reactive self-perception" (*The Argumentative Indian*, 91). Thus the colonial masters of yesterday, concludes Sen, continue to exert an enormous influence on the postcolonial mind today.

The concept of modernity is very important to the emergence of colonial discourse. Modernity is fundamentally about conquest, "the imperial regulation of land, the discipline of the soul, and the creation of truth" (Turner, 4). The emergence of modernity is coterminous with the emergence of imperialism and of Euro-centrism. Europe has constructed itself as "modern", and has conceived the non-West as "pre-historical", "pre-civilized" and "static". Modernity has thus spawned colonialism, supremacism and racism. While the colonizers have denigrated the "native" cultures and silenced the "native" voices, the colonized in response has contested the colonial representations and reclaimed the validity and integrity of "native cultures". The colonizers boast of their all-round progress and of achievements especially in the standard of living and in health care. Conversely Aime Cesaire highlights the depredations they cause:

> I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures, trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out (21-22).

These silencing or subalternizing propensities of colonialist representations are often evident in elite representations within the colonized. Subaltern Studies affirm the notion of resistance to elite domination and re-direct attention to the disenfranchised sectors of society. They insist that the "reclamation of tradition and the (re)construction of national culture after colonialism require a recovery of popular consciousness across the full range of its social articulations" (Lazarus, 8).

Subaltern Studies, with its attention to "the small voice of history", is a corrective to both colonialist and bourgeois-nationalist historiography. The discipline of history is one way of remembering the past. For the mainstream historian, the subaltern past is a genuinely dead object. Moreover, the dialogue between the academic observer and the subaltern, the modern and the nonmodern is never democratic because it is structured against the latter. "Where two beings

are separated by a total gap", believes Wilhelm von Humboldt, "no bridge of understanding extends from one to the other; in order to understand one another, they must have in another sense already understood each other" (cited in Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 109). The endeavour of the modern egalitarian historian is to treat the subaltern past as contemporaneous. And then he is to see that past from its own perspective not as an object but as a subject. That is why subaltern history shapes up as a dialogue between two interlocutors. This dissolves the subject-object relationship between the historian and his archive. In consequence, the nonmodern subaltern becomes the subject of his own history; his dialogue with the modern becomes democratic and open-ended. The writing of history thus implicitly assumes a "plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present with itself. Making visible this disjuncture is what subaltern pasts allow us to do" (Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 109).

Ghosh has been deeply influenced by the ideas of the Subaltern Studies group. Its founder Ranajit Guha is a close friend of his as are many of its other members. He admits that he shares "some of the concerns of the Subaltern Studies group, because I am from the same milieu as many of the group's members" (Hawley, 12). Ghosh firmly believes that history is "never more compelling than when it gives us insights into oneself and the ways in which one's own experience is constituted" (Correspondence, 1). What relates history to the novel is that history "gives us particular predicaments which are unique predicaments, not repeatable in time and place" (Vijay Kumar, 101). Ghosh's conviction that history "is notoriously not about the past" (*II*, 102) is akin to Kierkegaard's: "Why bother to remember a past that cannot be made into a present?"(cited in Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 109). His belief in the organic interrelation between the three segments of time underlies his statement that "one of the paradoxes of history is that it is impossible to draw a chart of the past without imagining a map of the present and the future" (*II*, 317). No wonder Ghosh enters into a democratic dialogue with the past, and treats it not as object but as subject:

> One of the really exciting things for me about writing *The Glass Palace* was trying to enter the minds of the nineteenth century Indians, [with] a real sense of humility, to try and see the world as they saw it, which is not the same as writing history, because history doesn't tell you about the affective [aspect]. (Vijay Kumar, 102)

R.K. Dhawan holds that Ghosh's "fiction is imbued with both political and historical consciousness" (14). Accordingly he reads the novels primarily as historical fictions. The point to note is that Ghosh has no truck with conventional history. With his profound imaginative empathy, he transcends temporal as well as culturally constructed differences. By re-constructing the past, he subverts the grander narrative of History.

The novel, believes Ghosh, has been "vigorously international" from the very beginning. Yet quite paradoxically, the novel as a form is "founded upon a myth of parochiality" (*II*, 294). Location or setting is intrinsic to a novel. Ghosh's contention finds support in Graham Hough's idea that not only is the novel bound by the laws of everyday probability but also is tied "to a particular time and a particular place"(113). Ghosh points to the paradox that the conceptions of location "came into being at exactly the time when the world was beginning to experience the greatest dislocation it has ever known" (*II*, 294). What he conceives by "dislocation" is not merely physical displacement but intellectual detachment. In order to present his immediate surroundings, the novelist has to have a real or imagined experience of abstraction from them. Accordingly the novel eloquently communicates a sense of place. Yet "it is the very loss of a lived sense of place that makes their fictional representation possible" (*II*, 303). Hence, location entails dislocation; the hallmark of great art is detachment.

With his keen interest in the fragile subject, Ghosh's project as a novelist is to achieve self-integration. When questioned on *The Hungry Tide*, he confesses that he is "very much a part of urban India, indeed the urban world." Yet "my mind has always been drawn to the marginal, the remote and the rural. So it came as almost a natural thing for me to want to write about these aspects, to see in what ways I could reconcile them" (The Chronicle Interview, 5). A syncretist in the realm of ideas, Ghosh conceives the novel as an all-inclusive form. As a novelist, he is precisely what D.H. Lawrence claims to be: "being a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive, but never get the whole hog. The novel is the one bright book of life"(289). The novel is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life — history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family, love, sexuality. Ghosh looks up to it as a "meta-form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writing, rendering

meaningless the usual workaday distinctions between historian, journalist, anthropologist, etc."(*Asia Source*,2). There are no limits to the novel as a form. For the eclectic Ghosh, it is not necessarily fictional; rather "it overarches fiction, and non-fiction, and history, the present, the past" (Chambers, "The Absolute Essentialness of Conversations", 32). Thus the hallmark of Amitav Ghosh, both as thinker and as artist, is inclusiveness. He is pre-eminently an intellectual amphibian.