Chapter Nine

Conclusion

After a detailed consideration of his novels, it is now time to undertake the ticklish business of indicating Ghosh's niche in recent Indian English fiction. Ghosh is not certainly obscure; he is as certainly not simple. He is lucid but elusive; he is serious but not portentous. He is accessible to the surface but puzzling in depth. He has won the love of the reading public; he has also won the esteem of the critics. Ghosh's specialty lies in his deft handling of political and philosophical issues without sacrificing the graces of art. Exhibiting a profound sense of history and space, his novels explore the human drama amidst the broad sweep of political and historical events. He has a personal stance on such controversial issues as postcoloniality, postmodernity, subjectivity, subalternity; he interweaves them in a complex pattern in his works which themselves are generic amalgams. Ghosh consistently critiques and displaces Eurocentric discourses of colonialism, migrancy and forms of knowledge production, and situates them within 'cosmopolitan' contexts and histories which are non-Western.

Central to Ghosh's oeuvre is the idea that the nation is a fiction whose boundaries are continuously reimagined and redrawn. Nationalism creates binary divisions, and projects a kind of "false" history which would buttress its own interest. The ideology of modernity and its various avatars like Western geographical and ideological expansionism, modernist knowledge production strategies, racism create a Manichaean dialectic between the self and its other. Ghosh's engagement with the frequency of boundary-crossings within and outside India, challenges the essentialist definitions of nations and societies. The cross-border flows in South Asian countries are an on-going process and not one-off movements as in the West. Through uncovering these on-going histories of migration and transnational flows that began several centuries ago, Ghosh interrogates the idea of the nation and borders. Each of his novels is concerned with migration and displacement which becomes a "mode of being in the world" (Carter, 101). The task that primarily concerns Ghosh then is "not how to arrive, but how to move, how to identify convergent and divergent movements; and the challenge would be how to locate such events, how to give them a social and

historical value" (Carter, 101). By way of questioning the ubiquitous presence of the West in the form of colonial authority, of power, of bureaucracy and of science, Ghosh traces genealogies, histories and routes of travel that question the role of the West as paradigmatically normative. He also revises the discourses of colonialism, of Indian nationalism and Indian colonial and national identity. Ghosh is concerned with the movements of the marginalized who have figured as an absence in bourgeois historiography. The ordinary folk, who are continuously on the move, range from an innocent orphan branded as a wanted "terrorist" by a postcolonial bureaucracy, third world labour en route to the imaginary world of al-Ghazira, unsung medieval traders who braved the stony pathways of medieval Asia, Egyptian immigrants in Arabia in search of the fruits of capitalism to the lascars who are considered the initiators of subaltern cosmopolitanism. European intervention destroyed these pre-colonial, rich cosmopolitan zones produced through trade and oceanic circulations. By recovering the traces of the buried narratives of these subaltern migrants, Ghosh disengages cosmopolitanism from colonialism and nationalism. He also establishes both the continuities and the discontinuities between pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial migrations. This mobile society of migrants is an assorted one because it brings together the Burmese royal family, a wealthy Raja, upper class women like Mayadebi in *The Shadow Lines* and Uma in *The Glass Palace*, and merges them with the ordinary, marginalized beings in a carnivalesque mix. With the erasure of the boundaries of language, of class and caste among them, these migrants replace the notion of authentic, discrete national cultures with a shared openness to the world espousing a utopian belief in a trans-racial, human collectivity. These intertwined histories of Indians and Egyptians, of Indians and Chinese, of Muslims and Jewish, of Hindus and Muslims, torn apart by political forces, are a bulwark against segregationist strategies that promote the cause of religious separatism, disregarding their shared common past.

Ghosh's endorsement of syncretism and humanism that downplay cultural differences explains his antipathy towards nationalism and its divisive epistemology. Despite his celebration of cultural pluralism, an acute sense of the sameness of man across "looking glass borders" and temporal divides underlies his work. Questioning the authoritarian and coercive actions of the postcolonial nation state, Ghosh pines for the Nehruvian utopia of a secularist, democratic

national unity which assimilates Indian diversity in a syncretic whole. Based on an ethically conceived solidarity, this feeling of communitarianism would provide an ideal alternative to religious and ethnic chauvinism and "Majoritarianism" as well as political dispersal and religious/ethnic violence rampant in contemporary Hindu nationalism. Dismantling the rigidity of national boundaries in the larger domain of the continent, Ghosh also calls for the protection of the Indian nation as a whole and its sub-cultures against the separatist forces in order to secure the peaceful co-existence of the heterogeneous Indian mass. Like Gandhi, he prizes pre-existing local identities and traditions as integral parts of a larger Indian whole. This explains the recurrent trope of weaving in his works. It becomes a metaphor not only for interconnections but also for a self-producing community incommensurable with the Western concept of the political nation-state with clear-cut territorial demarcations. As a corollary, Ghosh distrusts the nationalist political and official discourse of faceless and dehumanizing statist machinery which is detached from the actual lives of the people. Ghosh's antipathy towards traditional Western political nationalism and to the idea of the nation springs from his deep-seated ideological affiliations with Tagore and with the mid-nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance. Hence his efforts to carve out a specifically Indian modernity out of the encounter between the indigenous cultures and the Western model. Though recognized as a major postcolonial voice, he himself disavows that rubric. So ingrained is his anticolonialism that he devotes himself to examining the impact of the West on its erstwhile colonies and the universal process of globalization. He thematizes the migrations of people(s), the importance of connections between the past and the present, the changing status of the nation-states, the fluid nature of boundaries, intercultural communication beyond nationalism, the spread of Western modes of production and the encounters between different cultures, all of which are the fallout from globalization.

A recurrent motif in Ghosh's writings is an ethnographer/historian who enters into a democratic dialogue with the past with his profound imaginative empathy to recover the traces of marginal and suppressed stories. Quite often the textured histories that he excavates are external to the paradigm of either colonial conquest or anticolonial resistance and imagine a utopian world preceding the violence of Western imperialism. Intent on "provincializing" the hegemonic position of a Western-originated discourse as also the bourgeois historiography of

a decolonized state, the ethnographer-historian considers his subaltern subjects not as "other histories" or "other knowledges". He rather imagines their discursive-epistemic spaces as forms of openness for a genuine transcultural open-ended dialogue. In meeting the other, he remains open and responsive to them, rather than defining them from his own starting point. Alterity, i.e. the unknowable and unreachable nature of the other, cannot be attained, but can be imagined, and hence activated. The ethnographic, historical subjects are transformed from passive objects of traditional ethnographic representation and knowledge into active agents/characters with a historical trajectory of their own. This mode of knowledge formation is a two-directional act of knowing, a moment of contact between two active participants who meet as pure consciousnesses. To "recover" the history of the subalterns, the historian "translates" discrepant "life-worlds" and experiences through secular explanatory modes. The ethnographer constructs the subjectivity of his historical subject in a two-dimensional narrative process. He imaginatively interprets and interweaves the textual traces from the scraps of manuscripts he has found in archives through his narrative process as well as relates his search for these documents. The exhaustive Notes section at the end of the novels testifies to the empirical and philological research he has also conducted on the documents. The subaltern subject that is put together from textual traces gains in agency in the very process of being narrated into existence. In order to overcome the limitations of historical archives, Ghosh's writings build up a complex series of intersections between material documents like personal diaries, fragments of letters, schedules as well as individual memories to re-construct the past. By taking into account not only the hard facts but also the emotions, thoughts and actions of these seemingly ordinary individuals, Ghosh weaves an inclusive historical narrative, an imaginative micro history which lies embedded in the macro history of the imperial project. History as a palimpsest seems to be one of Ghosh's favourite metaphors. Evidently what Ghosh tries to reconcile are the "analytical" histories based on rational categories and the "affective" histories based on the plural ways of being-in-the-world. By bringing together the fictive reconstructions of the past based on memory and excavating the erased histories from hegemonic official representations, Ghosh's novels highlight imagination as a way of transcending and challenging their neutrality. By stretching the limits of history, they open up new possibilities for the

emergence of different "life-worlds". A proliferation of stories serves to narrate this "truth". The stories lack veracity as the products of imagination. But each tale individualizes the teller by situating him in a particular social and economic background. Moreover, by celebrating the egalitarian spirit of oral tradition and storytelling, the narrative dismantles the notion of a single, determinate authoritative meaning. The possibility of plural interpretations rules out authoritative value-judgments and closures of meaning. To avoid appropriation, Ghosh tries to give these people agency and their own point of view by allowing them to narrate their own stories. The sections narrating the everyday lives of immigrants derive their verve from dialogic stories of the past as well as of the present, stories inspired by historical 'facts' but also by myth, rumour, magic and fantasy. Ghosh does not use anything like the Rushdian chutnified or Sanskritized English to represent the language of the lower class narrators. Everything is translated into English grapholect, with an indication in the text of the kind of variety in question. It is in the *Ibis trilogy* that Ghosh achieves this linguistic virtuosity with his representation of the lascari language and Chinese pidgin.

Ghosh's writings thus explore alternative ways of constructing the world based on connections that dismantle the rigid binaries and empiricism of Western modernity. These fictive constructions interrogate both the grounds and the production of historical knowledge. They read between the lines of the imperial archives and emerge as alternative discourses for expressing the subaltern past. Ghosh seems to endorse the postmodernist conception of the discursive nature of reality and of its relativity. But at the same time, he also explores the abyss, the "silence" that language is unable to bridge. Meaning can only be formed when there is perfect correspondence between the world and the word, between the world of experience and the method of representation. The recurring metaphor of silence stands for those untranslatable experiences as well as for subalternity, the past that historiography fails to explain. Silence also represents a mode of epistemology, an inscrutable experience that cannot be represented or mediated by either language or scientific empiricism. What is questioned is the transparency of language as a means of communication and the equation of language with meaning. This anti-intellectualist stance nudges Ghosh towards the recesses of mysticism.

Beginning his career in the wake of *Midnight's Children* (1981), Ghosh was obviously influenced by the multidimensional, cosmopolitan and richly allusive style of Rushdie. Ghosh, however, does not embrace postmodernism as whole-heartedly as his illustrious predecessor, but uses postmodern literary techniques to examine the birth, development and crisis of the Indian nation and the postcolonial Indian identity. His debut novel *The Circle of Reason*, like many Indian novels written in the 1980s, owes a great stylistic debt to Rushdie's magic realist mode in his *magnum opus*. Ghosh's decision to abandon this literary 'chutnification' in his subsequent novels, especially after the impact of the riots in 1984 following Indira Gandhi's assassination, signals the moment at which he begins to articulate his ideas more effectively. Rejecting the familiar linearity of the conventional Western "realist" novel, he evolves a narrative strategy which disrupts the linearity and locational specificity of time and space, and juxtaposes widely separated historical epochs. True to the phenomenological mode, the narratives from *The Shadow Lines* (1988) onwards explore multiple interpretations of a single event and subvert the official archived versions. By focusing on the slippage or gap in historiography and dismantling the established distinctions between past and present, fact and fiction, by the occasional self-reflexive stance of his writings, Ghosh's narratives approximate to "Historiographic Metafictions". The genesis of many of Ghosh's novels can be traced back to his discursive writings. *In An Antique Land* owes its origins to his Ph.D. thesis, the research article "The Slave of MS. H.6" and the prose piece "The Imam and the Indian". Similarly, *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*, "54 University Avenue, Yangon" and "India's Untold War of Independence" contain the seeds of *The Glass Palace*. Furthermore, *The Calcutta Chromosome* is replete with intertextual references to Ronald Ross's *Memoirs*, Charles Dickens's story "The Signalman", Tagore's short story "Khuditopashan" translated as "The Hungry Stone" and the short stories of the Hindi writer Paneshwarnath Renu. Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* serves as an intertextual background for the animals' intimate association with nature and man's alienation from it. While postmodernist fiction restricts itself to the security of narrative formats like parody, pastiche and play, Ghosh's elastic conception of the novel as the "overarching form" enables him to shape it as he wills. Consequently he soars above fixed categories, generic as well as hermeneutic.

The exposition of Ghosh's evolving philosophy in this study must not create the misleading impression that he is primarily interested in directly propagating his ideas. His keen interest in the predicament of individuals pitted against historical forces enables him to explore the depths of fundamental human experiences and emotions. This emphasis on individuality, one of the cornerstones of humanism, differentiates Ghosh from his postmodern contemporaries like Salman Rushdie who prefers caricatures or two-dimensional "cartoon" characters. In delineating his characters, Ghosh jettisons the conventional postcolonial discourse which ironically promotes racial and ethnic differences. He instead has his characters embody allotropic humanity, and undergo elemental human emotions. Though the stories his characters tell locate each teller in the material domain and promote particularism, their ethnic and racial, religious and communal differences are of no consequence whatsoever. For these characters are not cocooned within their separate and local identities; their emotions and passions are symbiotic and co-extensive as they move towards a narrativistic transcendent unity.

As a novelist delighting in creating vibrant characters rather than in propagating ideas, Ghosh exposes his characters to unusual terrains like the Sahara desert or the Sundarbans, and lets them enjoy the bliss of love or suffer unusual deaths. Quite often, as if in a dialectical interplay, love and death walk hand in hand, and occasion ineffable experience. Sombhu Debnath's passion for Parboti Debi causes the wiping out of Balarm's family in the first section of *The Circle of Reason*. Inspector Jyoti Das's carnal desire so intensifies Kulfi's own passion that she dies of cardiac arrest. Equally inexplicable is Mast Ram's sexual passion and his self-immolation as is Nury's unusual death. Gruesome is the death of an elderly war-victim whose tongue has been cut out, and who falls in the sea and is eaten up by sharks. Tridib's craving for a dreamt of assignation with his beloved May and for a transcendent experience remains unfulfilled as he is slaughtered by a frenzied mob. Grigson and Farley in *The Calcutta Chromosome* are mysteriously killed by a train in colonial India; they are the victims of an elusive subaltern network. *The Glass Palace* is a novel of love and death. Demonic cruelty paradoxically coexists with feminine tenderness in Supayalat. So diabolic is the wickedness that stems from her love of and ambition for her husband that to secure the throne for Thebaw she orders the killing of all potential

rivals in the Royal Family. The gory history of the Burmese Royal Family is surpassed by the brutality of the riots between the Burmese and the Indians. The novel is replete with the deaths of frustrated individuals in despair who cannot withstand the forces of history. An ineffectual pawn in the hands of the British, the Collector Beni Prasad Dey becomes something of a tragic hero as he walks into the waters to drown himself. Rajkumar's son Neel is crushed to death in Rangoon when the Japanese bombs scatter the frightened elephants in his plantation. Frustration compels his wife Manju to drown herself during the Long March to India. Saya John and Alison unfortunately chance upon a group of Japanese soldiers. While the old man is shot immediately, Alison shoots herself after a spirited exchange of fire. Waging a desperate battle for national liberation and also for self-realization, Arjun dies a heroic death in central Burma in the final days of the Second World War. The novel also explores the multifaceted nature of love ranging from Rajkumar's love at first sight for Dolly, Arjun's instinctive desire for Alison, the self-sustaining love of Dinu and Alison in the midst of wartime despair the rather bizarre union of the aged pair — Rajkumar and Uma in bed at the novel's end. *The Hungry Tide* examines the whole gamut of human experiences in the wilderness of the Sundarbans. It presents the spirited resistance of the settlers in Morichjhapi against the terror tactics of the state machinery and their miserable deaths. The subalterns' death however can be seen as that of a martyr. The subaltern's role is both that of a symbol of resistance to the dominant power and of the utopian promise of an alternative life world. This finds its final affirmation and guarantee in death. The novel is a veritable cornucopia of unrequited love across two generations – Nirmal's unreciprocated love for Kusum, Kanai's for Kusum, Kusum's for Horen, Piya's for Fokir. Kusum and Fokir, the 'authentic' subalterns who resist modernity, die. Their stories are recounted and scripted by literate, modern characters like Nirmal, Kanai and Piya. *Sea of Poppies* presents the rise of a native rebel against the combined powers of imperialism and native feudalism – Kalua's rebellion against Subedar Bhyro Singh and Ah Fatt's assertion of his individuality at the end by eliminating the British First Mate Crowle. *River of Smoke* relates the rags-to-riches story of the Parsi Bahram Modi; it chronicles his professional struggles, his personal dilemmas and his unfortunate suicide. The trilogy also celebrates love that transcends racial and cultural differences – the French woman Paulette's love for

the mulatto Zachary Reid, the Parsi Bahram's emotional attachments to the Chinese Chi-mei. This intricate relationship between love and death that recurs throughout Ghosh's oeuvre denotes his humanist vision. Ideas and ideals, theories and philosophies, fettered as they are by time and place, are pretty ephemeral compared with the staying power of man's fundamental experiences and elemental emotions. The great novelists, asserts Maugham, "deal with the subjects of enduring concern to mankind: God, love and hate, death, money, ambition, envy, pride, good and evil; in short, with the passions and instincts common to all from the beginning of time" (304). The chances of Ghosh's going down to posterity lie not so much in the theoretical as in the emotive components of his works.