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The Postcolonial Aesthetics of Beauty, Nature and Form: Reading *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide* and *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh

Nehna Daya Singh

3224200

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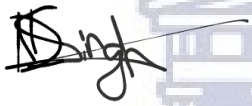

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Abstract:

One can think of an aesthetic as one's artistic mode and purpose. The aesthetic is differently foregrounded in each of Ghosh's three selected novels: in the first novel studied, aesthetic concerns are linked with beauty. Female beauty in particular, is the primary aesthetic focus in *The Glass Palace* since it is beauty that inspires love and appreciation. In the second novel, *The Hungry Tide,* the aesthetic explores techniques of writing that encompass environmental questions. This novel shows nature as its primary aesthetic since it is through the encounter with nature that its aesthetic is realised and an appreciation for all life forms are established. In the third novel studied, *The Shadow Lines,* self-reflexivity is highlighted through the form of the novel, suggesting the idea that individual and collective identities are relational and flexible. But regardless of the nature of the aesthetic brought into relief, aesthetic questions in Ghosh's three novels are always connected with postcolonial social justice.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When I first read Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide,* I experienced a very different world with very familiar stories. Although I had never been to the places mentioned in the novel, nor had I read about them, I felt a deep sense of concern for the issues that plagued the described environment and its people, that compelled me to empathise with the multiple fractures in the world represented. In a number of ways, the world described reminded me of my own world in South Africa, in the South of the global south portrayed in this novel. Beyond this, the stories narrated in the book intrigued me. The endless poetic descriptions of islands, forests, rivers and tidal waves in *The Hungry Tide* became a conduit leading me to be attuned to nature in all its beauty and magnificence. But the novel also shows that the beauty of nature, and the way in which it has been impacted by pollution, global warming and other human activities, is linked with the lives of human and animal communities. This drew me in to realise the dire challenges that many communities all over the world face. This led me to explore the relationship between aesthetics, particularly the aesthetics presented in postcolonial contexts, and social justice. How is it that beauty and the appreciation of beauty can exist in some of the most devastated parts of the world? And, what is it about beauty that compels itself consistently to present itself throughout time and across circumstances?

The enjoyment and sense of revelation experienced in my reading of *The Hungry Tide* led me to read all of Ghosh's other novels and essays. I realised that the concerns I discovered in *The Hungry Tide* were present in slightly different ways in Ghosh's other novels also. The fascination in my reading of Ghosh led me finally to three novels from his oeuvre in which I thought I could explore the link between aesthetics and social justice in

different but related ways. This thesis thus considers aesthetics in the following novels by Amitav Ghosh, namely, *The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide* and *The Shadow Lines*, to each of which a chapter will be dedicated. My reading of these novels will focus on the ways in which aesthetics function in a postcolonial context, and will foreground the very specific techniques employed by Ghosh in each novel. The analysis of *The Glass Palace* will highlight the idea of the aesthetic as beauty, which I think lies at the heart of this novel. The chapter on *The Hungry Tide* will consider nature as an aesthetic since environmental questions are the driving force in this novel. In *The Shadow Lines*, the ways that narrative form itself is brought into relief will be explored as an aesthetic technique. In all of these analyses, the intimate connection between aesthetic concerns and social justice concerns in Ghosh's writing will be tracked.

Each of Ghosh's three novels employs aesthetics in different ways to communicate the social challenges in each of their respective contexts. In *The Glass Palace*, for instance, Ghosh explores the aesthetics of beauty. But it is a beauty that moves beyond individual desire for possession, to more altruistic concerns. It is beauty that inspires love and appreciation. *The Hungry Tide* shows nature as its primary aesthetic since it is through the encounter with nature that its aesthetic is realised, and an appreciation for all life forms is established. The third novel is *The Shadow Lines;* here Ghosh uses the narrative form of the novel as the focus of an aesthetic concern with narrative itself. The style in which the novel is written, together with its content, constitutes the postcolonial aesthetic of *The Shadow Lines.* The postcolonial contexts in which these stories are written and read, contribute to the postcolonial aesthetic of beauty, nature and form in Ghosh's three novels studied.

1.1 Amitav Ghosh: Life and Works

This section briefly introduces Bengali-Indian author, Amitav Ghosh. It highlights his

fields of interest and influence, mentions his major works and the awards he received. I will also touch on the key issues explored by Ghosh in his novels.

Amitav Ghosh was born in 1956 in Calcutta, India. His father named Shailendra Chandra was a diplomat, and his mother, Ansali Ghosh, was a homemaker. Ghosh travelled often in his youth, living in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran, and India where he grew up. He studied at Dehra Dun, New Delhi, and Oxford universities. In 1976 Ghosh received his BA with honours in History from Delhi University where he also received his MA in Sociology in 1978. He began studies towards a PhD in Social Anthropology at Oxford University in 1978 (Anupama Bathak 44). Ghosh studied archives of documents from twelfth-century Egypt while he was at Oxford, and was granted a scholarship that permitted him to further his research by travelling to an Egyptian village located in the delta of the Nile River in 1980 where he lived among the Egyptian peasantry. In 1982, Ghosh graduated with a doctorate in Social Anthropology from Oxford. From 1983 to 1987, he worked at Delhi University in the Department of Sociology.

Ghosh also spent some time as a journalist where he worked as an editor and reporter at the *Indian Express*, a newspaper viewed as a central symbol of earlier opposition to the British Raj. Ghosh's early political activity suggests that he was thinking critically about the multiple facets of his own environment and context from an early age. He has written for many publications including; *The Hindu*, *The New Yorker* and *Granta* magazine, and he is a regular writer for *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*. Ghosh taught at universities in both India and the United States of America (USA) which include: Delhi University, Columbia University (New York), Queens College (New York), and Harvard University. Queens College and the Sorbonne have awarded him honorary doctorates. Ghosh worked as a visiting professor at several universities, including the University of Virginia, Columbia University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the American University in Cairo. He was

also recognised as a Distinguished Professor at City University of New York, in the Department of Comparative Literature at Queens College. Ghosh currently divides his time between Calcutta, Goa and Brooklyn, New York, where he teaches (Tabish Khair, *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion* 18*)*.

According to Ghosh, "the only thing [he] ever wanted to do was write a novel" (Burgess 9). This idea began when Ghosh was in high school and read *Moby Dick*: "Reading Melville's chapter on whales […] I remember thinking, this is something I want to be able to do." (Weisman 6). In *Death of a Discipline,* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asserts that disciplinary boundaries may be moved or changed through the act of attending to what is omitted. Similarly, novel-writing has the potential to cross disciplinary boundaries so that a novel may include in it multiple disciplines ranging from history, anthropology to theology and art. Where academic disciplines enforce strict frameworks of what can and cannot be done, the form of the novel provides the platform to include everything that a single discipline may omit. It is through this line of thinking that Ghosh pursues his childhood dream of writing novels, for which he is most notably recognised. In writing novels, Ghosh pushes the boundaries of all of the disciplines in which he had been trained.

For Ghosh, there is hardly a boundary between Anthropology, his field of scholarly training, and literature, the field in which he seems most comfortable. Ghosh has managed to move between these two fields with fluidity, which creates a kind of dual perspective that is presented in his novels. In an interview with Damien Stankiewics, Ghosh said "[t]he one most important thing [he] learnt from anthropology (especially fieldwork) was the art of observation: how to watch interactions between people, how to listen to conversations, how to look for hidden patterns." (Stankiewicz 541) It is precisely his nuanced observation, developed by his anthropological background that makes his novels intricately interwoven between the disciplines of History, Anthropology and Literature.

In 1986, Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason,* was published and was awarded France's Prix Medici Etrangère in 1990 (Hawley 166). His second novel, *The Shadow Lines,* was published in 1988 and won two prestigious Indian prizes, the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Ananda Puraskar in 1990. In 1992 his third novel, *In an Antique Land* was published. *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) won the Arthur C. Clarke award for Best Science Fiction in 1997, and in 1999 Ghosh was awarded the Pushcart Prize. *The Glass Palace* (2000) won the International e-Book Award at the Frankfurt book fair in 2001**.** In January 2005 *The Hungry Tide* (2004) was awarded the Crossword Book Prize, a major Indian award. In 2007 the Indian Government awarded Ghosh the Padma Shri for his distinguished contribution to literature. He was also awarded the Italian Grinzane Cavour International Prize in 2007. The thirteen international and local prizes that Ghosh has received for his works of fiction suggest his position as a world writer (Brinda Bose, *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Perspective* 221*)*.

More recently, he has won even more prizes. Ghosh's most recent novel is *Gun Island* (2019). His novels prior to *Gun Island* form a trilogy: *Sea of Poppies* (2008), an epic saga set just before the Opium Wars, was shortlisted for the 2008 Man Booker Prize for Fiction and was awarded the Crossword Book Prize and the India Plaza Golden Quill Award. In 2010, Ghosh was awarded the Dan David Prize for innovative and interdisciplinary research that cuts across traditional boundaries and paradigms. The second book in his trilogy, *River of Smoke* (2011) was shortlisted for the 2011 Man Asian Literary Prize and won the Blue Metropolis International Literary Grand Prix in the same year. *Flood of Fire* (2015), concludes the story of the *Ibis* trilogy. *The Economic Times* of India suggests that Ghosh wrote a trilogy to spend more time with characters, also using the length of his trilogies to fully explore his topics ("Wrote Ibis Trilogy" n.pag.). But Ghosh has also used the trilogies to focus on the individual stories of his characters, to show the intergenerational connections

that span people, spaces and places. While Ghosh has made the shortlist for the Man Booker prize, he has never won a major Anglo-American prize, which to me suggests his neglect in Anglo-American literature circles.

Ghosh recently won the Utah Award in Environmental Humanities after publishing *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). This work of non-fiction has received international attention for its environmental consciousness. His other books of non-fiction include three collections of essays: *Dancing in Cambodia and At Large in Burma* (1998); *The Imam and the Indian* (2002), and *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (2005). Amitav Ghosh's work has been translated into more than twenty languages and he has served on the Jury of the Locarno Film Festival (Switzerland) and the Venice Film Festival (2001). His essays have been published by Penguin India (*The Imam and the Indian)* and Houghton Mifflin USA *(Incendiary Circumstances)*. Ghosh has developed a rich and diverse spectrum of writing styles and genres over the many years he has practised as a journalist, lecturer and writer of fiction and non-fiction. The vast array of publications and the awards that he has received attest to his prolific output and his ability to produce texts that are noteworthy regardless of the discipline or form in which they are written.

Ghosh's novels involve themes of travel and diaspora, history and memory, political struggle and communal violence, love and loss. His emphasis on history, memory and the past are among his trademarks where he integrates myth and science, past and present. Ghosh is well known for his fictional writings that integrate historical and transregional connections. His novels are often influenced by his particular observations of regional and cultural politics that are projected through the lives and experiences of the huge cast of characters in many of his novels. Although his first two novels, *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines,* have been critiqued for being overwhelming in their presentation of too many characters, which at

times become distracting (John C Hawley and Claire Chambers), I think that Ghosh very specifically includes so many characters because he wants to allow his stories to embody the many voices of the histories he is commenting on.

There is also a connection between Ghosh's narrative style and traditional Indian and Arabic folk tales and myths that makes his novels accessible to his readers from all parts of the world in a way that speaks to their cultural canon of knowledge. However, what I find most interesting about his novels; in particular *The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide* and *The Shadow Lines* are the aesthetic considerations presented in the novels. Ghosh draws on other forms of literature to build his stories, creating a collage effect. For example, he includes letters and poetry at intervals in some of his novels. His writing is never bound by the traditional parameters of the novel; instead he plays with the novel form in harmony with his ideas and social concerns.

Ghosh has been cautious about the use of the term postcolonial both in his novels and in his description of them in interviews and essays. In an interview titled "Amitav Ghosh in Interview with Neluka Silva and Alex Tickell", published as early as 1997 in *Kunapipi*, Ghosh responds to being asked how he feels about being considered a postcolonial writer and whether he finds the term restrictive: "I have no truck with this term at all. […] It completely misrepresents the focus of the work that I do. In some really important ways, colonialism is not what interests me. What is postcolonial?" (171). Ghosh expresses his misgivings about being categorised as a postcolonial writer because of a narrow interpretation of the word that implies a focus only on colonialism. Ghosh thus rejects a narrow interpretation of the term since he does not want his novels to be classified as only being concerned with historical questions of colonialism, empire and globalisation. His concerns are also broader social, cultural and philosophical questions. Nevertheless, because the impact of colonisation, empire and globalisation are unavoidable dimensions of the stories he tells, for me, the

concept of the postcolonial enriches an understanding of his work, and the term in its wide complexity may easily be applied to a study of his novels.

In each of the selected novels, I identify a particular aesthetic that is dominant, but it would be reductive to say the one aesthetic I discuss is the only aesthetic. There is an overlap of aesthetic concerns across Ghosh's novels, but in particular novels, it is clear that particular aesthetic approaches are overriding. Up to this point I have used the term "aesthetic" as though its meaning is obvious. In fact, the term "aesthetic" is one of the most complicated terms in literary study and it has a very interesting history, as will be outlined in the section below.

1.2 A Very Short History of the Aesthetic

Amitav Ghosh's novels engage aesthetic questions through both their content and form. Generally, his novels seem to present the aesthetic in relation to beauty. The aesthetic comes through in all of Ghosh's novels but in slightly different ways. The aesthetic of beauty is most clearly depicted in *The Glass Palace* through female beauty, an attention to which exists in all cultures and across most historical periods, so it is quite easily recognisable. The aesthetic in *The Hungry Tide* is described through nature and the environment. The first pages of the novel open with eloquent descriptions of nature, which soon appears as agential in the novel. This novel does not neglect female beauty altogether, but it is not a core focus of the story. In *The Shadow Lines* the aesthetic is apparent in the formal techniques applied in the novel. The novel presents a non-linear narrative that moves back and forth in time and geography, which becomes recognisable as a very specific aesthetic approach. In order to explore Ghosh's various aesthetics, I will do a strategic overview of the meanings and history of the term aesthetic.

A single clear definition of the term aesthetic has been difficult to find because its meaning changes across histories and cultures. John Anthony Cuddon explains that aesthetics is "a complex term 'pregnant' with many connotations" (11). Some connotations to aesthetics include: art, beauty, taste and sensibility. Aesthetics is rich with association, crossing many disciplines, including art, literature and philosophy. Daniel Herwitz's chapter "The Birth of Aesthetics" in *Aesthetics: Key Concepts in Philosophy* probes the meanings of aesthetics for different philosophers and artists across a vast period of history. He writes about Plato and poetry, and Aristotle and theatre where the public value of the arts is prominent, and then moves on to the eighteenth-century thinkers, Hegel and Kant, as he discusses their role in celebrating beauty as a "distinct experience of the senses" (15). Herwitz's study highlights the vast differences in the way the term aesthetic has been used and understood throughout the centuries but similar to Ghosh, Herwitz thinks about the aesthetic as beauty. Herwitz explains that the ancient Greek use of aesthetics was linked to beauty enjoyed through the pleasure of the senses. This differed from the eighteenth-century European use of the term aesthetics, which approached beauty largely through reason and taste, which found expression in the work of art. In other cultures, Islam for example, aesthetics are expressed through beauty, which is the imitation of the beauty of God, represented in functional objects such as carpets, tiles and vases, for example.

Herwitz ends his meditation on aesthetics with a series of questions concerning the judgement of taste, or what I will call, the understanding of beauty: "Can one ever provide a convincing reason for finding something beautiful apart from appeal to one's own experience? […] And if it is nothing more than an individual's experience of a thing, how could there ever be a standard of beauty?" (24-5). Taking into consideration some of these questions, I will do a brief overview of the origins and development of the idea of the

aesthetic, selecting judiciously from the extremely wide body of literature that exists in this field.

The term aesthetics originates from the Greeks, but had a different meaning in the ancient Greek context. The Sophists in ancient Greece taught beauty as a concept that relates to being "concerned [with] the pleasures of the eye and ear" (McMohan 3). The ancient Greeks, unlike the ancient Egyptians, showed an interest in the conceptualisation of the aesthetic. Some of the first uses of the *aisthētikos*, now aesthetics, can be traced to ancient Greek philosophy presented by Plato, Aristotle, and Homer. Although Monroe Beardsley notes that it is not possible to say with certainty precisely when the Greeks "became able to think of art as raising philosophical problems", one can see the emergence of the aesthetic in a passage by Homer, "the earth looked dark behind the plough, and like to ground that had been ploughed, *as though it was made of gold: that was a marvellous piece of work!"* [1]. According to Beardsley, in Bosanguet's "History of The Aesthetic", the passage from Homer quoted above is "one of the earliest aesthetic judgements that Western literature contains." (23) Homer's aesthetic attitude is developed towards the nuances of aesthetic appeal that allow us to value the power of the appreciation of "a marvellous piece of work!" as it holds within it the inquiry into reality and representation and the effect of these binaries in probing the aesthetic approach to philosophy (Beardsley 24). Plato and Aristotle consider the aesthetic in slightly different ways, but similar to Homer, they all agree that aesthetics had to do with the public value of arts (Herwitz 15).

The ancient Egyptians, by contrast with the ancient Greeks, admired size, durability and mass of artistic creations such as the pyramids. They did not show a particular interest in the aesthetic (or the beauty of art, in this case, architecture) of the pyramids. Instead, they were interested in the technicalities of art and architecture. According to Beardsley's reading

[1] *Iliad* XVIII 548 and in Odysseus' description of the golden clasp in the *Odyssey* XIX, 227-31. (Beardsley 23)

of E. Baldwin Smith, the ancient Egyptians "did not have an aesthetic attitude towards art". (22) If one were to consider more closely what the Egyptians valued in terms of beauty, then beauty could be used to describe and mean strength, size and durability. One may also find that there are gaps in linking the language of aesthetics to that specific time and space in which the Egyptians thought of their artistic creations.

My research tracks the development of the term aesthetics in European cultural history, since it is European understandings of the term that currently dominate its use. The Middle Ages are not renowned for their development of the aesthetic but this period does look at beauty in a theological sense as opposed to the philosophical one. Questions around the origin of beauty – whether from Satan or God - had troubled philosophers into thinking about the aesthetic as more than beauty, perhaps as art as well. According to *Genesis*, "God created man in His own image" (1:27). Therefore when Isaiah spoke: "He [Christ] hath no form or comeliness", it was sometimes thought to be a reflection on the external beauty of Christ (53). Christian philosophers had some difficulty accepting art in its continental expressions since art was associated with Rome and Greece – the very places from which, and pagan cultures of which, Christianity was trying to rescue the world during the Middle Ages (Beardsley 90).

As was mentioned above, the term aesthetic is identified in the literature more with eighteenth-century European culture than with any other. I will study the specificities of the European Enlightenment understanding of the term through the work of Marxist literary critic, Terry Eagleton, whose study I find persuasive. Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of Aesthetics* introduces the term aesthetics in relation to the concept of interpretation. He argues that aesthetics has little to do with art and is more about the lived human experience. Upon this conclusion, Eagleton suggests that when one finds one cannot turn to a fragmented civil society or a coercive state for unity, one then considers a third realm, the "universal

subjectivity of the aesthetic" which offers the possibility of solidarity (Eagleton 332). The aesthetic comes to represent a possibility for unity, neglecting the disunity of the social and the political. For Eagleton thus, "The Aesthetic" as it is formulated in post-Enlightenment Europe is a concept that creates a sense of universal beauty and harmony that hides the disunities and injustices created by capitalism. He suggests that the aesthetic is a grand ploy that hides the divisions and injustices of capitalism. This interpretation of the aesthetic unsettles my earlier questions: how can devastated parts of the world turn to beauty in all their experience of chaos, and all the injustices created by colonialism and globalisation – what does the aesthetic offer? Although Eagleton's understanding of the aesthetic is persuasive, I think that Ghosh's novels point at a different value of aesthetics, which this thesis will attempt to identify. Ghosh suggests that there are ways in which the aesthetic may be linked with justice.

But Eagleton's analysis is a good point from which to develop an understanding of the dominant ways in which aesthetics operate, from which we can consider the differences presented in Ghosh's novels. Eagleton introduces the development of the aesthetic idea as a science and a philosophical idea in the European eighteenth century. In 1735, Alexander G. Baumgarten introduced the term "aesthetics" as a philosophical discipline that found its origins in his Halle Masters thesis as "*epistêmê aisthetikê"*, which means "the science of what is sensed and imagined" (Baumgarten 86–7). At its roots, the aesthetic was conceived of as a science. Immanuel Kant conceives of the aesthetic differently, namely, as knowledge. For Kant, "the aesthetic is nothing less than… the Imaginary" (Eagleton 331). The aesthetic develops as a philosophical idea for Kant. In *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant explains something he calls the free play of imagination, which he accounts for in the feeling of pleasure gained from beauty. But, in order for art to be beautiful it must show an "aesthetic idea, […] [that] at least strive[s] toward something lying beyond the bounds of experience,

and thus seek[s] to approximate a presentation of the concepts of reason" (Kant 314–15). This means that for Kant, the process of feeling that is stimulated through sensing a work of art, translates back to the process of thinking, therefore using both the intellect and emotions. Unlike Baumgarten, Kant's aesthetic is an aesthetic of knowledge more than sensibility, and it is Kant's conception of the aesthetic that has been more influential.

Georg W.F Hegel on the other hand, suggests that the presentation of beauty is the work of art. He argues that beauty is a matter of content as well as form. Art is not for art's sake but for the sake of beauty. Hegel considers the aesthetic in relation to human self-expression and self-understanding. The aesthetic is "the freedom of intellectual reflection which rescues itself from the *here* and now, called sensuous reality and finitude" (Hegel 8). For both Kant and Hegel, the aesthetic has something to do with freedom. Eagleton comments that Hegel succeeds at "reconciling the conflict between the bourgeoisie's drive for freedom and its desire for an expressive unity with the world – for in a word, the Imaginary" (335).

Enlightenment ideas from Kant and Hegel that argued the significance of knowledge, reason and self-understanding in relation to the aesthetic translated into the artistic ideas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe. These artistic ideas shaped a change in human values by positioning art as a reflective conduit of one's self and society. This resulted in the complete divide between the aesthetic and social concerns. Art represented an idealised realm that was supposed to be kept free of social and political concerns. It was supposed to carry truth in itself and was not affected by its context.

These ideas developed into the school of Aestheticism in the late nineteenth century, which believed in art for art's sake. Instead of focusing on the socio-political meanings of art, this movement argued that art had value in its own form and beauty and that it had nothing to do with morality or social politics. James Whistler, Frederic Leighton, Dante Gabriel

Rossetti, Oscar Wilde and John Keats shared the opinion that art was autonomous, divorced from social politics and other causes. Elizabeth Prettejohn discusses in her 2007 book, *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting*, the similarity between Whistler and Leighton's work, in that both artists seem predominantly preoccupied with beauty for its own sake. Going back to Eagleton, the European Enlightenment conception of art left little room for social ideas since it focused so severely on reason and science as its founding guidelines. It imposed strict boundaries on fact and fiction, which placed limitations on the ability to imagine differently and rebuild societies through creative works. Eagleton, however, does not dismiss the idea of the aesthetic entirely, but he says it needs to be adapted, mainly through being deconstructed.

For Eagleton, paradoxically, one needs to reconstruct a more connected idea of the aesthetic, by means of deconstruction. Eagleton emphasises that "what matters in aesthetics is not art but this whole project of reconstructing the human subject from the in-side, informing its subtlest affections and bodily responses with this law which is not a law" (5). By reconstructing the human subject from the "in-side", Eagleton is suggesting a reconstruction of the ways in which we think about what governs our dominant thought and its impact on our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. According to Eagleton, the realisation that, "this law […] is not a law" is a significant "political unconsciousness" which he calls the aesthetic. Once we deconstruct and reconstruct the absolutist terms that European Enlightenment has established, we can begin to work with ideas that can truly transform and inform social cohesion in a time of postcoloniality. For Eagleton, the aesthetic is two things; "it is a generous utopian glimpse of an alternative to this sorry condition" and at once "an eloquent testimony to the enigmatic origins of morality in a society which everywhere violates it" (338). Eagleton's alternative conception of the aesthetic thus helps me with potential answers to my earlier questions: what is it about beauty (and the aesthetic) that

appeals to some of the most devastated places in this world? And why is it that concerns with the aesthetic continue to be present throughout time and circumstances? It is clear from Eagleton's analysis that the aesthetic can have an important role to play in social justice struggles. However, Ghosh's novels, I believe, go even further than Eagleton's ideas in exploring the value of the aesthetic, especially in a postcolonial context.

Ghosh's alternative understandings of the aesthetic encourage one to think about the concept in the cultures of the global south. The aesthetic in Ghosh's novels often represents or alludes to utopian ideals in African, Chinese, Islamic and Indian cultures. I often wonder why Ghosh should highlight aesthetic questions in his representation of, for example, Burmese culture in *The Glass Palace* where there has been a history of war and conflict, poverty and oppression – why are aesthetic questions important when there is so much trauma and suffering? Then I imagine a world where all one thinks and talks about is one's pain and suffering and I realise the significance of the aesthetic in these societies. The aesthetic offers an alternative perspective within a particular context. It provides a glimpse of hope in a war-torn Burma where children are orphaned and buildings are bombed. The aesthetic, as Ghosh demonstrates in his novels, is a mechanism to reflect on socio-political challenges with light at the end of the tunnel. When one looks at a work of art, for example, an array of emotions and thoughts are invoked. It is a means to understand a spectrum of possibilities.

Ghosh's novels open up the different ways in which the aesthetic has been understood in other cultures, a glimpse of which will be presented here. In China, India and across the Islamic world, artistic tradition ran along side a written philosophical tradition of theory and debate on the aesthetic and other ideologies informing art practices. In Chinese culture the aesthetic has relevance in developing a cultural and psychological understanding of humanity. Li Zehou suggests that nature and words (as an aesthetic) can come together to

inform enlightenment in Chinese culture. The aesthetic in African culture relates very closely to African identity and ranges from artwork, song and dance, to hairstyles, crafts and decorative garments and masks. Decorative carpets and elaborate vases are some examples of the aesthetic in Islamic culture. There is no word in classical Arabic that means aesthetic, for which the contemporary Arabic term *jamâliya* has been coined to refer to aesthetics. *Jamâliya* means "the science of beauty" and very literally defines the conception of Islamic art. Islamic aesthetics is not confined to calligraphy, argues Oliver Leaman in his book *Islamic Aesthetics*. The *Qur'an* can be read as a literary work in terms of its poetics and theology, for example. The role of the *sâni'* or artist, is to create artistic objects or works that are both functional and pleasing to the eye. Most notably, the Islamic artist does not create art for self-expression – this would be considered egotistical. The Islamic artist creates art as part of a spiritual offering to God. According to Wijdan Ali, "[a] beautiful object is so because it is perfect; it is not perfect because it is beautiful" (n. pag.). Beauty in Islamic art is linked to functionality. For example a Persian carpet has a creative design but can also be practically used. Ancient Indian epics such as *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are examples of Indian aesthetics that involve both the senses and the intellect. These texts, although greatly pleasing to the senses, also teach important lessons about moral judgement such as honesty, loyalty, respect and justice. According to Indian aesthetic thought, the beauty achieved in *rasa* such as a play is only truly realised if its audience is able to transcend its physical space and time. To transcend in this case means to be universal and far reaching. Therefore simply reading a play was not truly aesthetic, as it does not engage in performance or a kind of spiritual activism. Lewis Rowell says that *rasa* is "[…] an awareness that rises above the circumstances which awakened it" (20). In other words, aesthetics is only aesthetics if it has the self-consciousness to transcend its external stimulant – the play or work of art - that provokes the specific emotions and rationale gained from observing and participating in the

process of art. In some ways, Ghosh's novels invite his readers to engage in the broader debates of his subject matter, and to transcend the here and now.

Similarly, Ghosh suggests that there is value in the aesthetic that goes beyond the aesthetic object or subject. For Ghosh, the aesthetic has the potential to influence one to care and to develop an interest beyond the first glance that can impact on how we think and respond to the world around us. According to Lewis Rowell *rasa*, which is part of the Indian aesthetic, is "[…] an awareness that rises above the circumstances which awakened it" (20). This means that the aesthetic has the self-consciousness to transcend its external stimulant – the play or work of art - that provokes the specific emotions and rationale gained from observing and participating in the performance of art. This is what we shall see in Ghosh's novels.

In an interview presented in her book *History, Narrative and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction*, Chitra Shankaran asks Ghosh, "I was wondering about this idea of aesthetics - …. Do you feel conscious of using any kind of Eastern or Western aesthetic formulations?" to which Ghosh responds, "I wouldn't put it in terms of Western or Eastern Aesthetics" (11). The aesthetics presented in Ghosh's novels are precisely what the word states: aesthetics. While Ghosh draws on Indian and Islamic aesthetics, as well as, Burmese and British ideas of the aesthetic, his conception of the aesthetic is slightly different and does not fit the divide of either eastern or western. Aesthetics are used to draw attention to other concerns in his novels. Ghosh is less fascinated with the cultural provenance of the aesthetic, and more interested in showing the impact of the aesthetic on people, societies and places.

Western ideas about art have had the tendency to shape global debates about art as a result of the cultural power it gained through colonialism. This has presented a set of challenges when engaging in ideas about the aesthetic in postcolonial literature. For example, colonialism undermined, if not ignored completely, eastern, African and other ideas about art.

When colonialism entrenched its footprint onto literature, it also brought with it western ideas about art which presented themselves as superior. In relation to these ideas, postcolonial literature was seen as being concerned mainly with politics. Deepika Bahri's book, *Native Intelligence, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* argues that postcolonial literature needs to be read as not only postcolonial but also as literature: "Although all literature may be said to bear the watermark of history, the intermeshing of sociopolitics with artistic and intellectual expression is seen as a distinctive and defining attribute to what we recognise as "postcolonial" (Bahri 11). She suggests that beyond postcolonial political questions, lies aesthetic innovation in the literature. This aesthetic innovation is what is very prominent in the three novels by Ghosh I have selected to analyse in the thesis.

Similar to what Bahri expresses, other scholars also argue that postcolonial literature and colonial literature are not separate – they are both literature. "Postcolonial art forms…are products of colonial histories of disruption, forced migration, false imprisonment, and pacification…This "post," as we conceive it, ultimately specifies a co-articulation of colonial and postcolonial histories, not a self-serving separatism and isolationism" (McCarthy and Dimitriadis 233). Although western ideas may preside over debates about art, there is a point where the battered past meets the blurry present and offers the postcolonial. This idea comes through strongly in *The Glass Palace* in the character of the Collector. Beni Prasad Dey, the District Collector, is an Indian colonial official (the district's administrative head responsible for dealing with the Burmese royal family) who sees the value in western music compositions, theatre and paintings but cannot see or understand any value in the local Burmese art around him. It is clearly evident that the British influence on the Collector has shaped his understanding of what is considered as art. The novel brings such attitudes into question and presents an approach to art through female beauty, which may be more universal.

To return to Bahri's ideas in *Native Intelligence*, Bahri suggests that one of the tensions around aesthetics in postcolonial literature has to do with how aesthetic considerations contest the social function of postcolonial literature. Just as Bahri reclaims a place for aesthetic representation in postcolonial literature, aesthetic considerations can also highlight social stresses that are relevant in postcolonial literature. Aesthetic innovation in postcolonial literature shows its potential to contribute novel ideas to social justice. One of the most critical points Bahri highlights in her book is that the aesthetic is "a code in the scheme of utopian thinking" (6). This means that the aesthetic is used in postcolonial literature as a means to show the possibilities for something better; be it hope, love or justice. These utopian aspirations can be realised through aesthetic considerations. Thus in Bahri's understanding, social concerns in postcolonial literature do not detract from their aesthetic value; instead a social aesthetic is presented that in its innovation, and evocative power point at social justice. This is a trend that is very clear in Ghosh's novels also.

Nicholas Brown's book *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth Century Literature* suggests that the goal with literature is to examine, "what is historical about the works themselves" and to "point to another, richer set of connections between both sets of texts and the societies from which they emerge" (Brown 2). While postcolonial literature may unsettle notions of colonial literature, Brown, Bahri and others argue that much contemporary literature can be approached as "modes of approaching problems and possibilities that are endemic to the development of capitalism" (Brown 4). Again, this is what we see in the three novels by Ghosh studied in the thesis, most especially in *The Hungry Tide*.

The final tension with aesthetics in postcolonial literature that I want to raise from Bahri's work, is the relationship of aesthetics to political and moral concerns. Like literature, aesthetics changes over time and so do the political and moral concerns for a particular

society. During the colonial period, aesthetics may have aided political powers and played a role in shaping critical inquiry. If moral concerns were centred around developing European values then the aesthetics of the time may have also reflected this. However, we see in postcolonial texts such as Ghosh's, aesthetics in other cultural contexts. For example, Burmese art and architecture, played a significant role in expanding utopian horizons for many local people, as the photography studio *The Glass Palace* highlights in the novel of the same name. Aesthetics form part of a utopian desire for improvement in the quality of life and status of, as well as hope for better social development in poor communities.

Ghosh's novels thus provide accounts of aesthetic resistance to colonial, postcolonial and globalisation narratives from the global south. Ghosh implicitly engages the concerns raised by scholars like Bahri and Brown that histories of anti-colonial resistance from outside of Europe need to be heard (Bahri 66 and Brown 2). On the one hand, one can quite comfortably see that Ghosh's novels are committed to telling the stories that are the histories of anti-colonial resistance from the global south. Ghosh does this through narratives about his characters who live outside of Europe and by moving between times into memories recollected from the past, allowing one to see the impacts of history. Ghosh demonstrates the potential for aesthetics in postcolonial literature to develop utopian desires for hope, love and freedom. Although Ghosh carefully raises his concerns about western aesthetics; for example, the perceived dominance of western art forms, Ghosh continues to engage such aesthetics in a postcolonial context. I argue that he does this because he sees the possibility that aesthetics has to move an individual towards political and moral concerns. Ghosh thus critiques colonial aesthetics but does not seek entirely to discredit its value. He includes the comparison of colonial art and music in relation to postcolonial aesthetics to highlight the role of colonialism in shaping aesthetic considerations. However, Ghosh also shows postcolonial aesthetics such that Ghosh's narratives rewrite aesthetics as interconnected with politics and

ethics. He demonstrates the compelling need to engage social justice concerns through these debates. Ghosh's aesthetics do not simply redeploy aesthetics in postcolonial contexts; instead he presents a different engagement with aesthetics and its link to social justice, which includes thinking beyond boundaries of culture, religion and states. Ghosh pursues an aesthetic of the global south by engaging postcolonial concerns in his novels. Some social justice concerns relevant to Ghosh's project include freedom, equality and integrity. An aesthetics of the global south is a perspective of art and beauty from the unsettled and unsettling position of postcolonial communities who have and are still suffering social injustices.

As we have seen above, the term aesthetic extends broadly across centuries and has transformed in its meaning accordingly. It has been used to mean art, beauty, and a visual perspective. It has also been used more theoretically to refer to a philosophical consideration based on sensory engagement. Shaped by my engagement with Ghosh's novels, I will be using the term aesthetic in this thesis to refer to the approach to one's art, and one's reflection on the purpose it should serve. My use of the term aesthetic will adopt a critical reflection on art and its contribution to social justice concerns where relevant.

One can think of an aesthetic as one's artistic mode and purpose. The aesthetic is differently foregrounded in each of Ghosh's three selected novels: in the first novel studied, aesthetic concerns are linked with beauty. In the second novel, the aesthetic explores techniques of writing that encompass environmental questions. In the third novel studied, self-reflexivity is highlighted, suggesting the idea that individual and collective identities are relational and flexible. But regardless of the nature of the aesthetic brought into relief, aesthetic questions in Ghosh's three novels are always connected with postcolonial social justice.

The first chapter of my thesis titled, "The Aesthetic of Female Beauty in *The Glass Palace*", discusses and analyses examples of female beauty in *The Glass Palace*. Female beauty is highlighted as the main aesthetic concern in this novel since the beauty of women is foregrounded throughout the novel. Particular appreciations of female beauty are presented as culturally specific in the novel, and not universal. But, what is unique about the appreciation of female beauty in general is that it is an appreciation that is a cultural universal. Every society across time has had an aesthetic of female beauty. Thus it may be used as a point of entry to discuss other aesthetic forms, such as the aesthetics of literature, painting and photography in *The Glass Palace*. Female beauty is often linked to romantic love, which leads to propagation of the species; but beauty and love are also connected with higher ideals like justice. Ghosh highlights female beauty in this novel since it is the one conception of beauty that is universal, even though it is somewhat problematic from a feminist point of view. A culture may not have an aesthetic linked to music, or visual art, or literature, but it will have aesthetic notions of female beauty.

The thread that runs through *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* is the significance of the aesthetic in realising what connects people, places, ideas and cultures, as opposed to highlighting what divides them. In *The Glass Palace* an idea of the social ideal is connected with beauty embodied in female beauty that is shared with different specificities among all cultures. In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh highlights the idea that social utopia in the twenty-first century cannot be thought outside of environmental concerns which threaten human and nonhuman existence. Artistic mode and purpose in this novel try to address how to represent climate change and its implications.

The second chapter of the thesis titled, "Nature as the Aesthetic in *The Hungry Tide*", considers the relationship between aesthetics and nature in *The Hungry Tide*. The aesthetic in *The Hungry Tide* is an aesthetic that shows the connections of nature, animals, the spiritual

and human worlds. The aesthetic of nature is paramount in recognising issues of climate change and its consequences for humans, animals and the environment. The most striking way in which nature is presented as an aesthetic is through its active role in the novel. The chapter uses an aesthetics of nature to foreground the ecological crisis, making it part of postcolonial ethical concerns. Ghosh's nature aesthetics emphasises that ecological changes affect all forms of existence since they are all interconnected. Environmental concern is linked to social justice since Ghosh shows that postcolonial environmentalism has to be differently configured to the environmentalism of the global north, and that "environmentalism" has been built into many local cultures through its mythologies.

While *The Hungry Tide* presents quite clearly the connectedness between humans, nature and animals, in formulating a postcolonial environmental ethics, *The Shadow Lines* shows the porousness and flexibility of dividing lines which colonisation and empire carved between communities. The third chapter titled, "The Aesthetic of Form in *Shadow Lines*", points at the ways in which forms, for example, of narrative and of the nation, impact on how one thinks about the content of the forms. The chapter looks at the ways in which the novel uses "lines" as a trope which mark the shape of forms. Lines are presented through borders and boundaries in the novel. The novel shows a collapse in these lines, for example, time, space and place are not presented in a linear form. Clear boundaries between communities and nations are presented as an outcome of colonisation and the forces of empire, which the self-reflexive techniques of the novel highlight and undermine. The novel is postmodern in some ways, for example it questions absolute truths and presents multiple perspectives. However, Ghosh works with postmodernism in a postcolonial context where pointing at the arbitrariness of the structure or the form is not an end in itself. Instead, personal and national identity are pointed at as constructed through unequal, and often capricious, historical forces that shape the imaginaries of individual people in disastrous ways.

Chapter 2

The Aesthetic of Female Beauty in *The Glass Palace*

"The world is like a mask dancing, if you want to see it well you do not stand in one place" (*Arrow of God,* Chinua Achebe 626).

The Glass Palace (2000)*,* Amitav Ghosh's fifth novel, was well received with many critics celebrating the novel and classifying it as a work of historical fiction. **(**It went on to win the International e-Book Award at the Frankfurt book fair in 2001**.)** *The Glass Palace* presents a number of concerns related to human rights. The novel does this through direct critique of the nation-state, colonialism, and capitalism but more importantly, it also highlights questions of aesthetics with regard to social justice. *The Glass Palace* is the one novel where the aesthetic, understood as beauty, emerges the most clearly. For me, more general ideas about the aesthetic as beauty flow out of the central idea of female beauty in this novel. Beauty is important in identifying the intricacies of cultural differences in the novel. Female beauty in particular, draws the reader into questions of aesthetics gently, and alerts us to the smaller details that contribute to the bigger social justice concerns of the novel. Although female beauty is the biggest aesthetic concern in the novel, *The Glass Palace* engages a variety of other aesthetics such as nuanced aesthetics of art, photography, nature, architecture and music. I am examining this novel first since, in foregrounding beauty, it comes closest to conventional understandings of the aesthetic where the aesthetic is equated with the beautiful.

The Glass Palace is a novel set in Burma, Malaysia and India. It is a story about, a young boy named Rajkumar, whose family is originally from India, and his journey from being orphaned and poor, to becoming a wealthy man of some status. He travels from Burma

to other countries where he works his way up to become a rich man. The most intriguing part of the life journey for me, however, is Rajkumar's love for Dolly, an orphaned Burmese girl. There is a clear link between Rajkumar's journey towards a better life for himself and his love for Dolly, which is provoked by her beauty. *The Glass Palace* is the one novel where the aesthetic, understood as beauty, emerges the most clearly. With this as a basis for discussion, I see more general ideas about aesthetic beauty flowing out of the central idea of female beauty in this novel.

From a broader perspective, *The Glass Palace* is a story that reveals the histories of the evolving regions of Southeast Asia, both in their past and present times. There are three sub-plots that run parallel to one another. First, there is the arrival of the British in Burma, then the colonial history of India and India's role in World War II, then the story of multiple migrations which involve the struggle of the Indian migrant in places such as Malaysia during a time of mass displacement and chaos. Ghosh writes explicitly about colonial displacement among kings and commoners in both India and Burma. Tabish Khair comments that Ghosh "tackle[s] history within the boundaries of contemporary fiction, that duty to create an imaginative grace out of the relatively recent memories of an embittered history of disgrace which [Khair] suggests marks the teleology of the postcolonial novel" (167). When Khair describes the fictive boundaries as having "imaginative grace", he is referring to Ghosh's attempts to weave together common threads from different perspectives. *The Glass Palace* is not only a story about diasporas transcending regional boundaries, but it is also about showing the ways in which these different diasporas interact with one another through the appreciation of beauty and love, to which beauty is often connected, related to the philosophical contemplations of the ancient Greeks.

The Glass Palace has not garnered as much criticism as some of the other novels, for example, *The Hungry Tide*. In the scholarship that exists on *The Glass Palace* the following

trends are identified: P. Pradeep writes of *The Glass Palace* and other Ghosh novels: "human lives spill over national boundaries, refusing to stay contained in neat compartments" (14). For Pradeep, Ghosh pursues political and social issues in his novels without compromising the beauties of art. Binayak Roy highlights that Ghosh does not identify as a postcolonial writer, nor does he consider his novels to be postcolonial. By contrast, Rakhee Moral and others consider Ghosh's novel to be a "postcolonial narrative" because of the novel's reflective focus on the effects of colonialism on local Indian, Burmese and Malaysian people (139). However, Anshuman A. Modal classifies *The Glass Palace* as a "grand historical romance", extending her reading of the novel beyond its glaring politics (15). Janam, Yesapogu and Vijayalakshmi provide feminist critiques of Ghosh's novels. They focus on patriarchy as a system of gender violence that exists to marginalise women. They also consider the structures of family and marriage that reinforce the performance of gender roles that limit women from pursuing other interests or work. However, they also consider the ways in which women characters in Ghosh's novels are presented as powerful agents of change that move beyond gender roles. Thus, we see that scholarship on the novel has focused on questions of colonialism, genre and feminism.

The work, however, that I find most interesting on the novel is the article by John Su titled, "Amitav Ghosh and the Aesthetic Turn in Postcolonial Studies" which highlights many of the questions that I am interested in. Su explores the relationship between aesthetics and utopia in Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*. Su highlights that, "the aesthetic is crucial to utopian thinking" (67). He situates Ghosh's novel in a postcolonial context and suggests the most interesting thing about *The Glass Palace* is the conception of beauty that emerges from the novel. Su argues that the aesthetic turn in postcolonial studies is the relationship between negative and positive utopianism in relation to the postcolonial aesthetic. In Ghosh's novel, Su identifies a spread of both negative and positive utopianisms within which the aesthetic of

beauty becomes central to his discussion. Su refers to Kant's understanding of the aesthetic, which suggests that beauty defies fixed expectations, and has the potential for universality (Su 70). This understanding is critiqued by Theodore Adorno, whom Su suggests criticises Kant's aesthetic insofar as it is simultaneously constituted by capitalism. Su draws on postcolonial scholars, Deepika Bahri, Simon Gikandi and Dipesh Chakrabarty to extend the analysis of the aesthetic. According to Su, the conception of beauty that is apparent in *The Glass Palace,* "seeks to balance the desire for universal norms with the need to respect cultural differences" (65). I agree with Su in this respect. There are very clear links to beauty and how it is a form of aesthetic in the novel. Beauty is also aligned to the novel's utopian aspirations. John Su explores the aesthetic as the beautiful but apart from the one reference to Aung San Suu Kyi, who is alluded to in *The Glass Palace*, he does not foreground the question of female beauty specifically, which I think warrants much deeper analysis. For me, female beauty, in particular, is what stands out in *The Glass Palace*. While there are other examples of beauty in the novel, such as the actual royal abode, the Glass Palace, the Photographic studio, The Glass Palace, nature and art, it is in female beauty that the aesthetic becomes realised and its links to utopian thinking are most clearly highlighted.

One example of female beauty in the novel can be understood through the character Dolly: "She was by far the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld, of a loveliness beyond imagining" (Ghosh 34). Here, the young Rajkumar explains his impression the first time he sees Dolly. Even though both Dolly and Rajkumar are still children at this stage in the novel, Rajkumar is able to recognise Dolly's beauty. He states that she is "of a loveliness beyond imagining". One can infer that on seeing Dolly, Rajkumar could not imagine a more lovely and beautiful person. As we discover later in the novel, Rajkumar holds onto this image of Dolly's beauty throughout his life admitting that it gives him hope for a better life (a utopian

imagining). Through female beauty a particular kind of thinking, utopian if you like, is envisioned by Rajkumar, which helps him in his own self-realisation.

Although Su does not unpack the significance of female beauty as part of the aesthetic in the novel, his article allows an entry into the discussion of the conception of female beauty as related to aesthetics and eventually, utopian thinking in *The Glass Palace*. I draw especially on female beauty in the novel and examine the ways in which it relates to social justice. While Su suggests that beauty in *The Glass Palace* is a beauty that defies assumed categorisations, my reading specifically of female beauty in the novel differs slightly. Female beauty is something that is universally recognised. However, the novel presents different forms of beauty, and ugliness, which are related to cultural preferences. In this way, *The Glass Palace* adopts a particular standard of beauty, namely, Burmese conceptions of female beauty. Although the novel seems to privilege Burmese beauty, it does not fail to include other forms of female beauty. Su argues, "[f]or Ghosh, questions of aesthetics are intimately related to questions of utopia, and he has consistently portrayed in positive terms his notion of a more egalitarian society" (68). Similarly, my work explores the relationship between female beauty and the utopian aspirations towards social justice expressed in *The Glass Palace*. Unlike Su however, I argue that Ghosh insists on prioritising specifically female beauty as a primary aesthetic concern in the novel since it is the beauty that, in one form or another, may be recognised by any person, in any culture, in any historical period, even at the risk of presenting problematic patriarchal representations of female beauty, which I believe Ghosh's novel successfully avoids since female beauty is never linked with female objectification. The universality of the appreciation of female beauty represents a more democratic understanding of the aesthetic unlike the European Enlightenment aesthetic, which is developed out of European modernity and is linked with European colonial

expansion. The beauty of the woman, which can be appreciated by anyone, is the portal to other forms of appreciation of the aesthetic.

To come back to the epigraph to this chapter, taken from Chinua Achebe, one could say that the aesthetic is like the beauty of a woman. To see it well one cannot stand in one place. *The Glass Palace* highlights the beauty of the woman, shows that beauty is in the cultural eye of the beholder, and extends the appreciation of female beauty to the beauty of art forms. Female beauty thus comes to be seen from many vantage points that interact with one another in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

2.1 "A Loveliness Beyond Imagining": The Utopian Potential of Female Beauty in the Postcolony

The first cataclysmic instance of beauty in the novel is when Rajkumar enters the Glass Palace following the British occupation of Burma, and he sees Dolly for the first time. Rajkumar had been working at a food stall as a waiter and cleaner in Mandalay that was owned by an old Burmese women named Ma Cho, when he heard cannons being fired, signalling war between the British and the Burmese. Fourteen days later, the Burmese army surrendered to the British army without the Burmese King's knowledge. Shortly after, the Burmese royal palace was looted and it is during this incident that Rajkumar entered the Glass Palace and saw Dolly, the Queen's maid:

> Rajkumar's eyes fell on a girl – one of the Queen's maids. She was slender and long-limbed, of a complexion that was exactly the tint of the fine *thanaka* powder she was wearing on her face. She had huge dark eyes and her face was long and perfect in its symmetry. She was by far the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld, of a loveliness beyond imagining. (34)

Visuality is foregrounded in this instance when Rajkumar's "eyes fell" on Dolly. He does not notice the beauty of smell or sound but specifically foregrounds visuality, which is significant since, "visuality implies an engagement with the politics of representation in transnational and transcultural form" (Mirzoeff 76). Once again Dolly's "slender, long limbed" body is mentioned. This particular body type is considered beautiful in Burmese culture since it is a physical embodiment of the fragility, desired in women. The representation of the beauty of the body and sexuality seem subordinate to the beauty of the face in this instance, and in *The Glass Palace* generally. Although Dolly's body falls within the Burmese standard of beauty it is her face that is given special importance in the novel. The beauty of the face, instead of the body, seems to be better connected to the ways in which female beauty is employed in *The Glass Palace*.

Burmese conceptions of beauty are also characterised by a fair skin. Fair skin is a measure of Burmese female beauty. Dolly's flawless, fair complexion is compared to the "fine *thanaka* powder she was wearing on her face" (34). "Thanaka" powder is a light pigmented powder that Burmese women wear on their face to enhance their beauty by protecting their skin from the sun and other pollutants that may cause skin imperfections such as pimples. Rajkumar says that Dolly's skin was perfectly fair and that her skin colour was "exactly the tint" of the powder she was wearing. In other words, she is as light-complexioned as the ideal shade of the powder, suggesting that her beauty is intrinsic, not created. Thus she does not actually need the powder to lighten her skin tone since it is already the exact same complexion as the powder. The Burmese understanding of fairness as a standard of beauty seems to be endorsed in the novel. In the Burmese understanding, fairness suggests beauty, good health and moral goodness, as the light-coloured *thanaka* powder is

also supposed to keep out evil. The link between beauty and goodness will be explored further later in a wider cultural context.

Often beauty is also linked with the symmetry of form. Elaine Scarry explores this link in her book *On Beauty and Being Just*, which I will discuss later in the thesis. The relationship between symmetry and beauty is one that exists since ancient Egyptian conceptions of beauty. For this reason, symmetry in the description of Dolly's face is clearly identified. Rajkumar highlights Dolly's face that is "perfect in its symmetry". Dolly's face is described as "perfect" because of its symmetry. However, the understanding that Dolly's face is perfect because of its symmetry signals a more important relationship - the relationship between beauty and justice. Dolly's beautiful face is presented as an imitation of her beautiful personality and values. The novel suggests that Dolly's physical beauty is connected to her virtues of kindness, honesty and justice. The equality represented through the symmetry of her face is mirrored in Dolly's own ideas and practises, which promote social equality and goodness. Dolly's sense of equality is demonstrated in the novel when she offers to share the sweets given to her by Rajkumar with the soldiers who are escorting her away from her home.

Since Rajkumar beholds Dolly's beauty his love for her may be subjective. He calls her a "creature", this word typically refers to an animal or beast but in this case he is referring to her as "the most beautiful" living form he has ever seen. A woman is the most beautiful living being that Rajkumar has ever seen because in this instance the idea of beauty is already "programmed" to lead to love, love at first sight. Rajkumar therefore recognises Dolly's beauty as something beyond her female form, something almost enchanting that is "beyond his imagination". After Rajkumar notices Dolly (because of her beauty), he is encouraged to help her protect the palace jewels that are being stolen by the soldiers and commoners in Burma: "Rajkumar looked down at the floor and saw a jewelled ivory box lying forgotten in

a corner…Rajkumar knew exactly what he had to do. Picking the box off the ground, he ran across the room and offered it to the slender little girl" (35). In this instance it is clear that Dolly's beauty sparks something in Rajkumar that summons him to offer her the jewellery box. Without hesitation or much thought, Rajkumar "knew exactly" that he should give the jewellery to Dolly. This instance is the first feeling of love that Rajkumar experiences for Dolly, which is what triggers him to act in a generous way towards her.

Dolly's beauty also has a physical effect on Rajkumar. While looking at Dolly, his throat is "suddenly swollen and dry" (34-5). Her beauty moves him from imagining to looking and thinking about her, to physically feeling something for her. The sensory impact of Dolly's beauty is related to Rajkumar's imaginative and cognitive engagement with her (beauty). In *Critique of Judgement,* Kant explains the concept of free play of imagination, which he accounts for in the feeling of pleasure gained from beauty. For Kant, the process of feeling, as in the example of Rajkumar's throat becoming dry and swollen, is stimulated through sensing a work of art, or in this case, the beauty of Dolly, which translates back to the process of thinking (Kant 314-5). In other words, Rajkumar's thoughts and feelings for Dolly are connected. We see this idea develop in *The Glass Palace* starting from the moment of beholding Dolly's beauty that charts Rajkumar's destiny.

The love story between Dolly and Rajkumar is narrated throughout the novel. Rajkumar's experience of beauty is what fuels the narrative in the sense that it leads him to strive to be with Dolly and he crosses boundaries to do so. In some ways their love is a symbol of hope for a better life. It is also presented as a love that unites cultures, Indian and Burmese. Dolly's physical beauty is the catalyst for the narrative drive in the novel. The novel is trans-generational and "epic" but it begins and ends with Rajkumar, in particular. Rajkumar is the link among all the parts of the novel. Love seems to be what drives Rajkumar to improve himself. It is what takes him from Burma to India. Love makes him

cross the borders of race, religion and nation. It is Dolly's beauty that sparks this move towards utopian ideas of hybridity, breaking down oppressive boundaries. Therefore, through Dolly's beauty, Rajkumar becomes attracted to her and develops a kind of love for her that motivates him to become more hopeful that he can one day be with her.

The beauty of human beings is something that has been admired through the centuries. In the foreword to their book titled *The Beauty of the Female Form: 48 Photographic Studies*, Bertram Park and Yvonne Gregory write, "From the earliest ages the inspiration of the human figure has been the foundation of all art, the highest form of beauty" (vii). Similarly, female beauty, in particular, is recognised across cultures in its full spectrum of diversity. While the concept of female beauty is universally recognised, its variants differ across cultures. African, Indian, Asian, South American, North American and European cultures each have their relative ideas that present a particular outline of what constitutes female beauty. In his article, "Dynamic beauty: Cultural Influences and changing perceptions – becoming Prettier or erasing one's own culture?", Christopher Frazier discusses the association of beauty with fairness in South East Asian cultures (6). However, the idea that there is beauty in the female form remains consistent for each of these cultures. In all of these cultures female beauty is also linked with love.

Female beauty thus is a symbol recognised by all cultures that is used in the novel to lead to the contemplation of the beauty of art. In *On Beauty and Being Just* Elaine Scarry explains the relationship between beauty and morality as a significant conduit for social justice. This idea is woven through my reading of *The Glass Palace,* which zooms in on the importance of female beauty as an aesthetic concern in the novel. Similar to Plato's idea that there are specific levels of beauty, which will be outlined hereafter, Scarry suggests that there are equal stages or as she puts it "sites" of beauty that one needs to access in order to reach the realm of true absolute beauty, which is linked to goodness and justice (Scarry 53). Scarry

suggests that all forms of beauty are of equal importance in being able to realize the essence of beauty.

Scarry's four sites of beauty are: persons, Gods, gardens and poems. She argues that beauty prompts appreciation, which in turn encourages justice and results in equality that is the ultimate model for human life. Scarry introduces the association of symmetry with beauty – an association of beauty that dates back to Egyptian conceptions of order as beauty (for example in the pyramids), mentioned earlier. Therefore, beauty manifests through symmetry in sound, landscapes and the faces of beautiful people. Beauty reminds us to appreciate (symmetry) justice, which allows for equality and, is thus, essential for "aliveness" (Scarry 76). Or as George Santayana's puts it in, *The Sense of Beauty,* "[b]eauty is pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing… it is a value… it is an emotion, an affection of our volitional and appreciative nature" (33). For Scarry, beauty is an experience that, once activated, has the potential to inspire more beauty, and eventually, justice. Scarry also points to "fairness" as an association with beauty that relates to equality. "Fairness" means both beauty and "justice" which once again, brings us to an idea of equality (Scarry 63).

My reading of female beauty in *The Glass Palace* highlights the bigger ethical ideals to which beauty and love lead. Umberto Eco suggests that beauty is one way of invoking love that further connects to engagement with questions of morality and ethics (Eco 30). Paul Guyer also discusses the relationship between beauty and ideals such as utility, freedom, morality, ethics and art (110-115). We see this in the novel when, for example, the love that Rajkumar has for Dolly that is dependent on her beauty, leads to his own self-improvement so that he may be worthy of her. It also invokes within him finer qualities such as kindness. For instance, when they are children and Dolly is being escorted out of the palace, Rajkumar offers her jewels that he finds laying in the palace, noted above, as well as sweets. Rajkumar is not typically known for his kindness and generosity, so it is clear that

there is a connection between the beauty that he is attracted to in Dolly and his feelings of kindness toward her. In other words, it is through Dolly's beauty that Rajkumar feels love for her, which leads to a goodness within him.

Thinkers from the ancient Greeks, for example Plato and others, to those as recent as Scarry suggest that there is a strong connection between beauty and love. Some eighteenth-century thinkers such as Hutcheson and Hume argue that beauty is linked to pleasure. However, even in pleasure, one can engage a sense of appreciation that leads to love. Amitav Ghosh suggests in *The Glass Palac*e that the concept of beauty and love lead to bigger ethical ideals such as truth and justice. In the extract below from the novel when Dolly, together with the royal family, are escorted out of Burma by British soldiers, Rajkumar is persuaded to discard his feelings of resentment and hate towards the British army by Dolly's actions that are the outward expression of her goodness linked to beauty. Rajkumar gives Dolly sweets as a gesture of his love for her. Dolly offers these sweets to the soldier marching beside her. Dolly teaches him to be kind and develop a sense of goodness instead of hatred:

> Rajkumar was astonished, even angry. What was Dolly doing? Why was she giving these hard-won tidbits [of sweets] to the very men who were leading her into captivity and exile? But then, slowly, his initial sense of betrayal turned to relief, even gratitude. Yes of course, this was what one must do; Dolly was doing exactly what had to be done. What purpose would it serve for these girls to make a futile show of resentment? (46)

At first, Rajkumar does not understand why Dolly shows kindness towards the soldier by offering him her sweets. Rajkumar intended that the sweets be for Dolly's enjoyment, but the first thing that she does when receiving the sweets is to share them with

someone. This angers him at first. Dolly's kindness is reflected in her offering the sweets to someone one would consider to be her enemy. Her kindness is so deeply rooted in her that she treats everyone equally, regardless of their social status or in this case, nationality. Dolly's act of kindness towards the soldier teaches Rajkumar to look beyond anger. He learns to be tolerant and kind even in difficult situations. Rajkumar realises the "futility" in "resentment". He learns this from Dolly's inherently good nature. Thus, through his attraction to Dolly's beauty, Rajkumar falls in love with her. Her beauty radiates beyond her physical appearance and is reflected in her kind personality and her values of equality and forgiveness which result in Rajkumar becoming self aware as he reflects on his own feelings and ideas, and eventually adopts an appreciation for values that are similar to Dolly's. In the same way that Dolly's beauty and actions force a contemplativeness in Rajkumar that prevents him from acting with mindless violence, Dolly's action could also potentially transform the soldier's attitude towards her. Instead of seeing her simply as a captive, he might see the humanity in her elicited by her inner moral beauty reflected in her outer beauty.

One of the most complete expositions of the link between beauty, love and the higher order is found in Plato. For Plato, in *The Symposium*, beauty is objective. It is connected to love and one's experience of absolute beauty is dependent on objective elements of beauty such as the beauty of the woman. Beauty is form for Plato, and perfect form is connected with justice. Beauty "engages" the soul, which is what leads one toward acquiring an understanding of absolute beauty, love, goodness and other higher order values. This is what we see at play in Rajkumar in *The Glass Palace*, and a version of which is presented by Scarry in *On Beauty and Being Just*.

In *The Glass Palace*, Rajkumar's appreciation of the beauty of Dolly is the pathway to openness to other forms of appreciation of beauty. He is first attracted to her for her physical beauty through which he sees the beauty of the Glass Palace. Dolly's beauty can be

read as an image of absolute beauty that allows one to enter into other forms of absolute beauty. In order to reach absolute beauty, one must use one's "objects" of love as images of absolute beauty (Donald Levy 288). "Love" is described as an absolute beauty according to Plato. Therefore, absolute beauty is the highest valued form of aesthetics. According to Plato, there are four main levels of love, or one might say hierarchies of love from lowest to highest; love of physical beauty in an individual, love of all physical beauty, love of beauty in the soul, awareness of the beauty of activities, institutions and sciences. However, love of physical beauty in an individual is seen as an entry to the ideal form of beauty, absolute beauty. Thus, all these kinds of beauties are conduits that lead one to absolute beauty, which is believed to be inherently good and therefore stimulates goodness and justice (Plato 457–500). Through contemplating beauty and love intrinsically in the story itself, Ghosh's novel opens up broader questions of aesthetics and ethics as the discussion later in the chapter will show.

Dolly's beauty invokes love not only in Rajkumar, but in other people also, suggesting an objective rather than subjective quality in the perception of beauty and the love it creates. After the British invasion of Burma, the Burmese royal family and their staff were sent from their palace in Mandalay into exile to Ratnagiri where they were forcibly relocated. While they were living in Ratnigiri they meet the District Collector and his wife Uma Dey. Uma and Dolly become friends. Uma visits the Burmese Royal family at their home in Ratnagiri where she meets the Queen and Dolly for the first time. Uma's captivation by Dolly's beauty and the openness towards her are emphasised:

> Uma turned to the slim upright woman on her left. Her name was Dolly Sein, she recalled…Uma had noticed that there was something unusual about her…Suddenly

> Uma knew what it was that she'd been struck by: this Miss Sein was perhaps the loveliest woman she'd ever set eyes on. (108)

The given extract demonstrates the unconscious recognition of what is called beauty as Uma notices "something unusual" about Dolly but is not quite sure what, until she and Dolly exchange smiles and Uma consciously recognises Dolly's beauty as it "suddenly" strikes her. This instance, I think, shows the workings of the feeling one can experience when confronted with beauty. Uma does not know or realise but is "struck" by Dolly's beauty. The word struck has connotations to discovering the unknown or unrealised. Uma's discovery regarding Dolly's beauty is almost identical to Rajkumar's earlier impression of Dolly. For Uma, Dolly is "the loveliest woman she'd ever set eyes on" and for Rajkumar, Dolly has "a loveliness beyond imagining". Both Uma and Rajkumar are captivated by Dolly's beauty by looking at her. They both use their "eyes" to see her beauty. Both Uma and Rajkumar use a form of the word "lovely" to describe Dolly. The direct link between Dolly's beauty and their "love" for her is expressed in their first sight of her as lovely. It is interesting that both use words with "love" as the root word to describe Dolly's beauty since both Rajkumar and Uma develop a close connection to Dolly although they share different forms of love for her.

Visuality in relation to Dolly's beauty is also highlighted in the following extract where Rajkumar visits Uma in an attempt to reunite with Dolly later in the story. He tells Uma about the girl he saw in the Glass Palace the night it was raided:

> Standing beside the Princess was an attendant, also a child, perhaps a year or two younger than me, perhaps more, I could not be sure, for this was a child like none I had ever seen before – beautiful beyond belief, beyond comparison. She was like the

> palace itself, a thing of glass, inside which you could see everything of which your imagination was capable. (144)

For Rajkumar, Dolly is a child like none he had ever "seen" and her beauty, reflective of the Glass Palace, has the potential to let one "see" whatever one's imagination can reach. Rajkumar's sight of Dolly is significant in his ability to realise her beauty. Once again, Dolly is described as "beautiful" and the expression of her unquantifiable beauty is emphasised. Like Uma, Rajkumar too explains that Dolly's beauty is "beautiful beyond belief". Alliteration of the "b" sound mimics the thumping sound of one's heartbeat. This suggests Dolly's beauty hit Rajkumar to the heart. Such beauty is unbelievable until its existence is proven with one's eyes. This alludes to the idea that seeing is believing and reaffirms the foregrounding of visuality in Dolly's beauty.

Rajkumar recollects the beauty of the Glass Palace, which is represented in much the same terms as Dolly's beauty. He compares her beauty to the beauty of the Glass Palace. She was "like" the palace, "a thing of glass". The Glass Palace is described as a "great shaft of light, with shining crystal walls and mirrored ceilings" (7). The radiance of the Glass Palace is like the radiance of Dolly. The Glass Palace's beauty is a beauty of light and reflection. Dolly's beauty is literally reflected in the Glass Palace "inside which you could see everything of which your imagination was capable." Beauty, therefore, operates almost like a magical talisman that opens up possibilities and potentials that otherwise would not be perceptible.

The beauty of the face of the woman is a universal symbol linked with the radiance and reflection of the Glass Palace leading finally, we shall see, to the sophisticated deliberations on art in the photographic studio, The Glass Palace. Twenty years after the royal family are moved out of Mandalay, Uma meets Dolly and asks her about Burma:

> ‘Do you remember anything of Burma?’ ‘I remember the Mandalay palace. Especially the walls.’ ‘Why the walls?’ ‘Many of them were lined with mirrors. There was a great hall called the Glass Palace. Everything there was of crystal and gold. You could see yourself everywhere if you lay on the floor.’ (112)

The mirrors in the Glass Palace in Mandalay enabled Dolly to see her reflection “everywhere” in the great hall. This literal, physical self-reflection also suggests an inner self-reflection that Dolly may have performed while looking at her own image in the mirrors. If one thinks of the walls of the palace as a metaphor for boundaries or barriers, say of race, religion and nationality, then through Dolly’s reflection of herself on these boundaries she is able to imagine herself on these boundaries too. She later crosses the boundaries when she marries Rajkumar, leaves the royal family and moves back to Burma. However, this required a very intentional sighting of her own beauty as it is only when you “lay on the floor” that you can see yourself everywhere. This suggests that in order to imagine beyond boundaries and cross these boundaries, one needs to have some direction in which to look, that will lead one towards a more hopeful and better position. The novel’s idea of an art that leads to justice is told through the highlighting of radiance and reflection. Thus, through art, one has the opportunity to reflect on one’s own self as well as society more broadly. Then, one has the potential to extend ones reflection into a reality towards social justice.

If the Glass Palace’s beauty is its ability to reflect whatever is put before it, then what exactly is it that Rajkumar finds beautiful about the Glass Palace? Is it perhaps that the palace reflected an image of Rajkumar himself? Is it that for Rajkumar, the beauty of the Glass Palace, with its radiance, reflects the possibility for him to possess or be one with the palace? The Glass Palace literally reflects his own image, which connects him with the beauty of the

palace. Similarly, Dolly's radiant beauty, described also as "like a thing of glass", presents Rajkumar with the opportunity to reflect, perhaps on himself? Rajkumar says that it was a look in Dolly's eyes that captivated him, "an element of her expression, a kind of forlornness in her eyes" (140). It appears that by looking at and experiencing Dolly's beauty Rajkumar has the potential to see reflected, an element of his own self reflected, which leads him to achieve his desire to be united with her.

Furthermore, when describing and comparing the beauty of the Glass Palace to the beauty of Dolly Rajkumar says, "you could see everything of which your imagination was capable". Like Dolly, the Glass Palace is "see[n]". But, just as Dolly's beauty is "beyond belief", the Glass Palace allows you to see things within the limits of your "imagination," which is limitless, which implies that it is also beyond belief. Dolly's beauty holds the potential for Rajkumar to see what he could only imagine. Similarly, the Glass Palace allows Rajkumar to hope for the riches, and most treasured beauty of the world. The Glass Palace and Dolly's beauty becomes something that Rajkumar sees in himself, and as a part of him.

In artistic terms, the Glass Palace's beauty, of light and reflection, offers a perspective on people, things and places of interest. While the perspective that is offered through art may show beauty, it also more importantly shows the potential for good, that beauty holds. Beauty has the potential to make us reflect on ourselves and our desires. It may also invoke particular wants and needs. However, the highest form of value that beauty, through art, holds is to allow one to feel emotions such as love. Love then drives us to achieve certain things that we desire, for example, social justice. Similarly, Dolly's beauty invoked feelings of love within Rajkumar. His love for her and his desire to be with her, motivated him to be a better person. During the process of self-development and winning Dolly's heart, Rajkumar crossed cultural boundaries that lead to social justice. Rajkumar's love for Dolly broke the barriers of nationality and religion. Through their love, Rajkumar and Dolly demonstrate the possibility

to create a more equal and just society, one where Buddhists and Hindus, Burmese and Indians, can love each other and accept one another's differences.

These everyday, ordinary experiences of beauty that may be experienced by, and have been experienced by people all over the world throughout time, are developed into a more rigorous appreciation of the utopian potential of art through photography and the photographic studio. Dolly's beauty is not only reflected in the Glass Palace when she is a child, but it is also presented in other forms such as photography. Rajkumar's granddaughter, Jaya, comes across a photograph of the Collector, his wife Uma, Rajkumar and Dolly when they stayed in Ratnagiri. The photograph was taken on the day that Dolly and Rajkumar got married. The description of Dolly below is focalised through Jaya:

> Her face was long and slender, with a scaffolding of finely moulded bones standing outlined beneath her skin. Her hair was tied back, but a single strand had escaped, curling down from her temple. She was wearing no jewellery, but she had a spray of flowers, white-petalled frangipani, pinned above one of her ears…She's very beautiful, said the guard. (492)

Dolly's cheekbones are described as if they had been handcrafted. Her "finely moulded bones" are framed under her skin in such a way that it is "outlined". The words "scaffolding", "moulded" and "outlined" are architectural terms. By using these words to describe Dolly's face and beauty, there is the suggestion that her beauty is comparable to a structure, like the Glass Palace. Besides Dolly's symmetrical face, which contributes to her beauty, there is also a suggestion that Dolly does not need fancy jewellery or make up to add to her beauty. She instead "had a spray of flowers" in her hair as an accessory. This suggests that Dolly has "natural" beauty that is untouched by artificial accessories. Almost exactly like

all the other descriptions of Dolly, this description suggests: “she’s very beautiful”. The characters do not see Dolly through their own eyes. In this instance, Dolly’s beauty is recognised through its photographic representation. The characters do not see Dolly with their own eyes, but through the image created by the photographic lens. Dolly’s beauty is presented in the reflection of the Glass Palace and through photographs. Not only is her beauty captivating through her female form, but it is represented through other forms such as art and photography, since her beauty in the photograph suggests the beauty of photography, an artistic form which will be considered next.

The Glass Palace of the royal family is linked through its name with the photographic studio, The Glass Palace, where beauty is linked with art in the strict sense. Dinu who is the son of Dolly and Rajkumar, opens a photographic studio in Burma. Dinu’s studio becomes a place of intellectual discourse, which through art, engages political and social issues of the time – something the Burmese military would not tolerate if it were to be discovered. The Glass Place photographic studio is a space of freedom in the context of the Burmese military dictatorship. Dinu names the photographic studio after the palace that his mother Dolly spoke about when he was young. Besides having the same name, the studio shares similar characteristics to the palace. The studio also presents the beauty of light and reflection, but in a slightly different way. The photographs in the studio are reflections of people, places and things. The photographs are developed using light (and darkness). A few philosophies of art emerge in the discussions that take place at The Glass Palace.

The discussions of art in The Glass Palace suggest that art has the possibility to bring about self-reflection for people who live under authoritarianism. Su highlights that characters in *The Glass Palace* often seek out beauty during political crisis. We see this in Dinu’s photography and in his photography studio. One of the discussions in The Glass Palace is between Jaya and her uncle Dinu, when she visits his studio for the first time:

> ‘What were you talking about?’ ‘Pictures…photography…anything that comes to mind. I just start them off – then it’s everyone else’s turn…we talk about why they are good or why they are not. The Glass Palace is the only place in Yangon where you can see things like this…works of contemporary art…because of the censors.’ (507-8)

It is clear that the military government in Burma tries to control what people read, think and talk about which is why The Glass Palace is “the only place in Yangon where you can see things like this”. The “things” that Dinu speaks of, are contemporary art, which suggests that art can challenge perceptions and possibly lead to teach people how to gain social justice in Burma. Dinu opens his studio to all sorts of ideas and art. Dinu says that they talk about “anything that comes to mind” which suggests that there are no boundaries to what they may think, hear or understand. Perhaps, this is the type of education one can receive through the aesthetic. Dinu says that, “Here in the Glass Palace photography too is a secret language” (510). What he means by this is that through looking at and discussing the composition and meaning of the photography in his studio, his students and himself extend their discussion to refer to other issues such as the politics in Myanmar. However, they do not have to say what they mean explicitly in order to communicate their ideas. Thus, photography is a secret language in the context of living in a state of tyranny and censorship that allows one to express liberatory ideas in coded ways.

In another conversation with Jaya, Dinu explains the importance of having a space such as The Glass Palace, where art and freedom of speech are discussed openly and safely:

> … I encourage them to say whatever they like…to speak freely, even of simple things – for them this is an adventure, a discovery…’ ‘You have to understand,’ he said,

> 'that all their lives they've been trained to obey…their parents, their teachers, the military… this is what their education teaches: the habit of obedience.' (508-9)

Dinu suggests that "their" education, which refers to inherited traditional and colonial establishments of education under the military regime, teach "the habit of obedience" that is distinct from the type of education he is endorsing through freedom of speech and self-discovery through art such as photography. Therefore, through the character of Dinu, Ghosh makes a case for the potential of art to help create social justice through the forms of thinking and responding created by the recognition of the beauty of photography as art.

Photography, as a form of contemporary art is particularly dynamic since it is open to multiplicities. The exact nature of photography alerts us to questions of representation and allows us to interrogate multiple perspectives of photography. Su suggests that the beauty highlighted at Dinu's photography studio, The Glass Palace, exemplifies the novel's attempt to break the categorisation of aesthetic taste. It is in examples such as these, that the novel presents aesthetic tastes and cultural perspectives that are different. *The Glass Palace* foregrounds photography as a contemporary form of art that challenges dominant art and its interpretation.

The beauty with which art is identified through the figure of Dolly, the Glass Palace as residence of the Burmese royal family, and The Glass Palace as a photographic studio is contrasted in the novel with the dominant approaches to art as disseminated through colonialism. Dominant ideas of art are presented mainly through the character of the Collector. Discussions explaining why specific art is considered beautiful and good take place at Dinu's photographic studio. Contemporary art such as photography is fluid unlike imperial art that is professed as good or bad by imitators such as the Collector. The Collector is a colonial subject in the novel who has accepted the hierarchy of cultures and thinks only

European cultures have developed the forms of reflection that allow artistic appreciation. The role of these forms of art is not to encourage liberation or social justice – unlike Dinu's contemporary art. The colonial forms of art encourage the idea of a hierarchy and an emulation of particular cultures. These forms encourage cultural sophistication and taste at the neglect of more pressing concerns such as social justice. The critique of European art is expressed through the Collector in *The Glass Palace*. The Collector thinks that the Burmese could not appreciate a painting:

> He had heard it said once that she [Queen Supayalat] had always loved Thebaw. But what could they possibly know of love, of any of the finer sentiments, these bloodthirsty aristocrats, these semi-illiterates who had never read a book in all their lives, never looked with pleasure upon a painting? (152)

The Collector imitates European culture in the colony; for example, he only values paintings, literature and music. The extract above links beauty with love. The beauty of the painting and books that the Collector mentions is what is pleasure-producing, and he believes that it is only through these specific, higher forms of art that one is able to love. He thinks that the Queen cannot know anything of love since the Burmese people do not have "any of the finer sentiment". This finer sentiment is the appreciation for art and the sense to recognise and understand its beauty. The Collector's idea that people from the colonies cannot appreciate art because they lack the knowledge and experience to understand it is representative of what colonisers thought. Ironically, not only do people from the colonies appreciate art, but they are also deeply interested in making art. We see this with Dolly and Dinu. They both take an interest in art. Dolly paints and Dinu takes photographs.

The Collector attempts to adopt the culture of his colonial "superiors" and in so doing, undermines his wife whose cultural framework is Indian. The Collector becomes irritated with Uma, his wife, when she does not recognise "good music". He imposes his taste onto Uma on their first night together as a married couple, shortly before they have sex:

> He'd hummed a tune: it was by his favourite composer, he said. She liked the liveliness of the tune and asked: what is it called? He was pleased that she'd asked. 'It's from "The Trout",' he explained, 'by Schubert.' 'It's nice. Hum it again.' … A month later in a train, the Collector had asked suddenly if she remembered the name of the tune he'd hummed that night… 'I don't remember,' she'd said… He had turned abruptly away, his face lengthening in to a downcurl of disappointment. (159)

The Collector's idea of good music is Schubert's, "The Trout". Once again, his value of art is an imitation of European values of art. It "pleased" him that Uma was interested in the tune he hummed which suggests that he wants her to associate the same value to the art he considers beautiful. He wants his taste to become her taste and tests her a month later to see if she remembers the name of the song. The Collector's disappointment with Uma not remembering the name of the song suggests that he expects her to acquire a specific taste, one that is the same as his – the taste for art associated with European colonial standards. Since he can only ever be a shadow of his colonial superiors, eventually the contradictions of his position lead to his suicide. European beauty is linked with art in the eighteenth century, which is also linked to the good. While *The Glass Palace* is influenced by Romantic ideas, the novel is also critically aware of imperial notions of Romanticism and therefore critiques it.

Ghosh does not "deny cultural difference" in his effort to pursue concerns related to postcolonial literary aesthetics (Su 66). The point of origin of Ghosh's anti-imperial art is female beauty that comes to be fully realised in art conceived as a variation of the eighteenth-century idea of art as a fixed consideration of good and bad paintings, music or literature. Ghosh encourages his reader to consider works of contemporary art such as photography that challenge the conventional forms of art as well as any limitations to subject matter and, that allow for fluidity. Dinu's photographic studio demonstrates the social impact that contemporary art can have in shaping intellectual discourse.

The significance of female beauty as the universal point of departure for the contemplation of the possibilities of art is underscored by the fact that it is returned to at the end of the novel through the figure of Aung Sang Suu Kyi. The figure of Aung Sang Suu Kyi symbolically brings together female beauty, art and social justice in the novel. Although the beauty of art, including contemporary art, is linked to ethical ideals and goodness, *The Glass Palace* circles back to the beauty that inspires love, even though finally the love that Rajkumar has for Dolly fades. Aung San Suu Kyi is the Burmese political leader who fought for democracy in Burma, now Myanmar. She endured house arrest for fifteen years. Dinu and Jaya watch as Aung San Suu Kyi, who is on house arrest, hosts a weekly political meeting outside her house:

> Suddenly there was a great uproar. 'There she is', Dinu said. 'Aung San Suu Kyi.' A slim, fine-featured woman stepped up. Her head was just visible above the gate. Her hair was dark black, and gathered at the neck. She was wearing white flowers above her hair. She was beautiful almost beyond belief. (541)

Both Dolly and Aung San Suu Kyi have slim and slender figures. They both have dark hair that is tied at the back and both wear white flowers in their hair. The beauty of the woman is connected with a social ideal of democracy and freedom that challenges the authoritarianism of the military dictatorship in Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi's beauty is so similar to Dolly's that one cannot help but think of Dolly when Aung San Suu Kyi appears in the novel. All the adjectives used to describe Suu Kyi have been used before to describe Dolly. In the beginning of the novel when Dolly appeared Rajkumar had hope for a better future for himself through Dolly's beauty and his love for her. Dolly is also presented as figure of hope for the Burmese royal family when they lose all their maids and servants except loyal Dolly. Similarly, Aung San Suu Kyi appears as a symbol of hope for Burmese liberation. However, what both women have in common is their outstanding beauty. Jaya thinks that, "it was impossible to behold this woman and not be half in love" (542). The connection between beauty, love and justice is very clearly articulated in this instance as Jaya explains that Aung San Suu Kyi's beauty (which includes her charisma) is so compelling that it is almost impossible not to be in love with a woman like her. Beauty is clearly linked with a conception of justice through Aung San Suu Kyi. Aung San Suu Kyi is described at the end of the novel as almost Dolly's double – beautiful beyond belief. Suu Kyi becomes a mirror image of Dolly's beauty. The beauty is linked to their goodness which inspires love and social justice.

Similarly, Dinu seems to think that beautiful women such as Aung San Suu Kyi (and Dolly by implication), are the hope for the future: "'It's strange… I knew her father… I knew many others who were in politics…many men who are regarded as heroes now…but she is the only leader I've ever been able to believe in'… Because she's the only one who seems to understand what the place of politics is…" (542). This extract suggests that people, and specifically women, like Aung San Suu Kyi, who are beautiful, good people, friendly and

charismatic but also women like her who are willing to show the opposition what her limits are, define their own boundaries and in doing so are better leaders. But, most striking is the relationship between beauty, love and justice. The physical beauty of both Dolly and Suu Kyi is a symbol of the concept of beauty, which holds the promise of social justice.

Even though Rajkumar's relationship with Dolly finally fails, it still serves its purpose in both their lives. They both pursue their interests and become better people towards the end of the novel. Similarly, one may say that the love for Suu Kyi in the present day has failed since her politics are now problematic, for example her silence towards the endless murders of Rohingyas at the hands of Buddhist nationalists in Myanmar. However, Suu Kyi's beauty had inspired many Burmese to fight for democracy. Her beauty coupled with the people's love for her, inspired a more equal and egalitarian society.

Some critics argue that beauty is a distraction from social justice and that it is harmful to the object of beauty, especially if one considers physical beauty. Scarry, referred to in the introduction of this chapter, disagrees with this. Instead she claims that through beauty one is able to connect with a sense of goodness and eventually reach a state of morality that is just (Scarry 39). While Scarry's argument for beauty is culturally specific to Western epistemologies, the broader ideas are not. For example, in Islamic aesthetics, especially in Sufi philosophies, the beauty of the woman is a reflection of the beauty of God, and recollection of the beauty of God is a remembrance of ethical conduct (Keshavarz 1125). Female beauty thus is the universal and democratic touchstone of a nuanced aesthetic of beauty and postcolonial justice in *The Glass Palace.*

The Glass Palace does not present one solution to the world's evils and social inequality. But it does suggest one way that societies can become more equal and socially just. This way is through love, inspired by beauty. Female beauty seems to hold greater

potential than other conceptions of beauty in artistic philosophies since all cultures work with a conception of female beauty.

Despite the risks involved with privileging female beauty, the novel still regards female beauty as an important aesthetic in the global south. Among all forms of beauty, the conception of female beauty is universal. Women are central to all cultures since without them, the reproduction of human beings is impossible. But, in all cultures, women are valued in different ways. A common way in which they are valued is for their beauty. While there are cultural variations of what is considered female beauty, female beauty is something recognised throughout all cultures. There is a universal appreciation that opens up the beauty of other forms of expression, and the potential for social justice contained in an appreciation of beauty. Thus Ghosh uses female beauty as a portal to open up the utopian potentials of art, connected with love and justice, in its many cultural forms. In the next chapter, which considers *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh's most highly ecocritical novel, we see the presentation of an aesthetic of nature that similarly highlights an environmentalism of the global south.

Chapter 3

Global South Nature Aesthetics in *The Hungry Tide*

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the Angelic
Orders? And even if one were to suddenly
take me to its heart, I would vanish into its
stronger existence. For beauty is nothing but
the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear,
and we revere it so, because it calmly disdains
to destroy us. Every angel is terror.
And so I hold myself back and swallow the cry
of a darkened sobbing. Ah, who then can
we make use of? Not Angels: not men,
and the resourceful creatures see clearly
that we are not really at home
in the interpreted world. Perhaps there remains
some tree on a slope, that we can see
again each day: there remains to us yesterday's street,
and the thinned-out loyalty of a habit
that liked us, and so stayed, and never departed.
Oh, and the night, the night, when the wind full of space
wears out our faces – whom would she not stay for,
the longed-for gentle, disappointing on, whom the solitary heart
with difficulty stands before. Is she less heavy for lovers?
Ah, they only hide their fate between themselves.

Do you not know yet? Throw the emptiness out of your arms
to add to the spaces we breathe; maybe the birds
will feel the expansion of air, in more intimate flight.
(Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies 1.1-25)

The epigraph above is from the first verse of the first elegy of *Duino Elegies* by Rainer Maria Rilke, Bohemian-Austrian poet well known for his poetic and mystical approach to nature. This verse is never quoted in *The Hungry Tide* but it is the verse that captures my conception of Ghosh's nature aesthetic. Rilke's post-war poetry begs the question, how do we escape the trauma of time? He writes about nature, life, love, death and time in the *Duino Elegies* that feature prominently in *The Hungry Tide*. Rilke's quote in this chapter's epigraph refers specifically to angels, which could signify that the beauty of nature is one of the cosmic forms of beauty since nature has a dominant presence in his poetry. This beauty however, is so immense that it can destroy us. Ghosh shows this, through the destructive agency of nature, which is like a ghost returning from the dead – the uncanny as it is called in *The Great Derangement* (Ghosh 32). *The Hungry Tide* shows that we are powerless in the face of the forces of nature, but it also shows how human beings have always co-existed with the power of nature. In non-modern communities of the global south for example, they have always coexisted with nature better since people have recognised the agency of nature. We see this in the novel through the stories of Bon Bibi and Fokir's way of existing in the world. While the *The Hungry Tide* reaffirms the idea from Rilke about nature's aesthetic as beauty that invokes terror through its destruction, it also re-inscribes the nature aesthetic in a global south perspective. In the previous chapter, beauty led to love, good actions and justice. Here, beauty, in particular, the beauty of nature, becomes complicated as it invokes terror that in the novel leads to good actions, and justice that is

cognizant of the place of the human in a much wider world. It is only through experiencing the terror of nature that justice becomes possible since it is connected to our understanding of a cohesive relationship with nature.

The Hungry Tide, Amitav Ghosh's fifth novel, was published in 2004 and was awarded a major Indian award, the Crossword Book Prize, in January 2005. The Indian Government awarded Ghosh the Padma Shri in 2007 for his distinguished contribution to literature and he was also awarded the Italian Grinzane Cavour International Prize in the same year. There are many interesting themes in *The Hungry Tide;* however, a nuanced nature aesthetic appears most vividly to me. Nature becomes an active force in the novel, almost as if it is a character on its own, not simply a setting or background. The nature aesthetic I refer to means an aesthetic that recognises the agency of nature. This environmental imagination is expressed in the novel through showing interconnections between environment, people, animals and spirituality. It is shown through demonstrating the power of nature that can destroy human constructs. The nature aesthetic is paramount in recognising issues of climate change and its consequences on humans, as well as other beings. There are some sections of the book that clearly present the nature aesthetic. However, these sections do not dominate the narrative and, for the most part, appear subtly. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh writes about humans, animals, nature, myths, legends, religion and life. He also writes about life, love and death through narratives that cross time. For Ghosh, it is nature that is presented as terrifying beauty. Unlike Rilke, Ghosh's guiding light seems to be nature and not angels. However, for both authors, nature and angels are linked to spirituality.

Literature on Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* concerns questions of language, knowledge systems, intertexuality, and postcolonial and ecological readings of the novel. Although feminist readings of *The Hungry Tide* are not particularly popular, in his paper

titled, "Women as Revolutionaries in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide"*, M. Vijayalakshmi highlights the breaking down of patriarchal codes in the novel through the presentation of women who are independent and active agents of change through characters such as Nilima, Piya and Moyna.

In "Ghosh, Language and *The Hungry Tide*" Ismail S. Talib recognises Ghosh's consistent inclusion of translated work from Rilke's *Duino Elegies* in the novel, where language and translation are crucial. Similarly, in "Silenced worlds: Language and experience in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide"* Gareth Griffiths argues that the novel raises questions about the role of language in prioritising humans over nature and other beings. By contrast, Tuomas Huttunen, in "Language and Ethics in *The Hungry Tide"*, suggests that Ghosh uses analogies and metaphors to bring together different communities. According to Shao-Pin Luo, in "Intertextuality in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*", the novel is rich in intertextuality. It creates a polyphonic discourse through the use of poetry, scientific notebooks, testimonial memoirs and myths and legends. Similarly, in *What is a world? On Postcolonial literature as world literature,* Pheng Cheah discusses how "Ghosh's literature represents multilingual realities of the postcolonial world" (246). The legend of Bon Bibi is one way in which the novel brings together a plurality of languages, voices and narratives from a global south perspective. These engagements with *The Hungry Tide* all foreground questions of language in one way or another.

The more dominant scholarly literature for *The Hungry Tide* however, suggests the novel provides the necessary grounds and tensions to think about the power and value of contemporary postcolonial and ecocritical theories (Pablo Mukherjee). Malcolm Sen, Frederica Zullo, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin all suggest an alliance between postcolonial and ecological studies. Or as Sen puts it, *The Hungry Tide,* "may be read as a literary work in which the ideological force is ecocritical but in which the moral and

philosophical foundation rests on a post-national [and also postcolonial] mindset" (374). Furthermore, Zullo raises the question of nature and how to inhabit it (105). In his book *Environmentality – Ecocriticism and the Event of Postcolonial Fiction*, Roman Bartosch argues that *The Hungry Tide* "harmonises some of the tensions between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism – without, however, bringing it to closure" (18). Bartosch maintains that *The Hungry Tide* presents the necessary tension between the questions of anthropocentrism and ecocriticism. He also suggests that these binary oppositions become undercut "in the process of hermeneutic negotiation" (111). In "The Home, the Tide, and the World: Eco-cosmopolitan Encounters in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide"*, Alexa Weik argues that Ghosh's novel emphasises the interconnectedness between animals, humans and more-than-human species. This, Weik argues, is akin to the term "eco-cosmopolitism" introduced by Ursula Heise (87-88). Heise is the Chair of the English Department at the University of California and a professor at the Institute for Environment and Sustainability. Her book, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global,* published in 2008, proposes the concept "eco-cosmopolitanism", which refers to the connections between ecocriticism, environmentalism, globalisation and cosmopolitanism.

In agreeing with Bartosch, Mukherjee and others, I wish to extend their critique of *The Hungry Tide* as a postcolonial ecocritical text, to thinking about the role of a "nature aesthetic" in raising these nuanced questions. Pramod Nayar discusses the importance of employing both the uncanny and the canny, which compete with one another in the novel in order to allow us to think through the environmental crisis in *The Hungry Tide* through the lens of the postcolonial dispossessed: "In *HT* the uncanny results from the contest (and defeat) of the Westernized-technologized gaze of Kanai-Piya with/by Fokir's indigenous canny" (Nayar 91). This approach is also supported by Cheah, mentioned above. Drawing on this broad literature, my reading of *The Hungry Tide* will focus on the aesthetic of nature in

the novel and how it relates to ethics and social justice from a global south perspective. The nature aesthetic in *The Hungry Tide* and the aesthetic as beauty discussed in chapter one both lead to justice, be it social justice or environmental justice.

3.1 "The Beauties of Nature"

In *Aesthetics and the Environment,* Allen Carlson provides a historical overview of the concept of the nature aesthetic, which I use as the basis of my understanding of Ghosh's nature aesthetic, especially in the ways Ghosh transforms this mainly western nature aesthetic. Studies of nature aesthetics largely are restricted to Euro-American literature and philosophy. However, it is clear that all cultures express understandings of nature through their cultural forms. Raymond Bartosch, referred to earlier, explains: "nature is more than a system outside of cultural systems; it permeates cultures and is in turn constituted by certain epistemological traditions" (54). For example, in Indian culture, the idea of nature is expressed in Hindu mythologies such as the Bhagavad-Gita and Ramayana where nature emerges as meaningful symbols of higher powers. The Indian river, the Ganges, is described in these texts as a holy river with its water having healing powers. This is something worshiped till today. For me, a perspective of nature that shows the agency in nature defines the term nature aesthetic. The beauty in nature is more than a "well-composed" environmental landscape such as Table Mountain in Cape Town, for example. Ghosh's nature aesthetic represents the emergence of various connections: human, animal, environment, spiritual that are realised through the beauty (and terror) of nature.

The western approach to the concept of the nature aesthetic views art as the mirror of nature coming especially from classical Greek and Roman cultures. The idea of the aesthetic appreciation of nature may be traced back to the European Renaissance, and is developed further in eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and Romanticism, which is a response to

Enlightenment. It is mainly the eighteenth-century view of nature and art that becomes the dominant view carried with colonisation and empire. This view challenges the earlier medieval conception of nature as "God's wrath" (Donald Crawford 312). Initially, the appreciation of nature had been restricted by religion. Natural environments such as wilderness regions and mountains were seen as "fearful places for punishment and repentance" (Carlson 1).

Aesthetic appreciation of nature, as has been mentioned, is most widely explored in the eighteenth century, as shaped by Enlightenment and Romanticism. Romantic ideas arose in the second half of the century in response to the Enlightenment, also known as the "Age of Reason". The early eighteenth century explored the "connection between aesthetic appreciation of nature and scientific objectivity" (Carlson 1), a connection which later sometimes gets lost. British philosophers such as Joseph Addison and Francis Hutcheson valued nature instead of art, as the ideal object of aesthetic experience. For the Romantics it was more important to understand and experience the beauty of nature, often the source of their creative power. Poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth suggest that nature and the natural world have power over human beings. Their texts show the connection between human beings and nature. Unlike the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, where primarily God and then man held inspiring power, Romantics believed that man's close connection with nature is most inspiring and powerful. By contrast, German philosopher Georg W.F. Hegel argues that natural beauty is an ideal form for art, but that natural beauty on its own is underdeveloped if compared with art when he says "artistic beauty stands higher than nature" (4). According to aesthetic philosophers who follow Hegel, nature is not a suitable form for aesthetic appreciation on its own, but through man's intervention, through art, natural beauty becomes better realised.

In the later nineteenth century, nature aesthetics was considered differently from the thinkers and observers of the eighteenth century. This is especially clear in the work of nineteeth-century American "nature" poets like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. It was realised that humanity was a major cause of the destruction of nature's beauty (Carlson 2). Ugliness became associated with the intrusion of human beings upon nature. This particular perspective of nature aesthetics, later developed into environmentalism, a major theme in Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide.*

Going back to eighteenth-century nature aesthetics again, however, the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime, landscape and picturesque are prominent in eighteenth-century and subsequent European nature aesthetics. The idea of the sublime developed when nature was viewed from a distance, and its power was exteriorised. Carlson explains, "by means of the sublime even the most threatening of nature's manifestations, such as mountains and wilderness, could be distanced and appreciated, rather than simply feared and despised" (2). With this perspective, the terror and fear of nature as expressed in folk culture and religion began to fade since nature could be appreciated from a distance. Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke both agree that there is a connection between the sublime and fear, which may also be broken. In *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* Burke's concept of sublime, associated with distress, considers beauty and the sublime as mutually exclusive. By contrast, Kant's *Critique of Judgement* argues that the sublime is distinguishable from beauty because it is formless, whereas beauty has form. Similar to the development of the sublime in nature aesthetics, the notion of the picturesque emerged, which came to mean "picture-like" (Carlson 2). This term expresses the connection between the aesthetic appreciation of nature and that of nature in art. The term picturesque was introduced by William Gilpin in 1782. His *Essay on Prints* defined picturesque as "a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture" (Bradbrook 158).

Today this mode of aesthetic appreciation for nature can be considered an aspect of tourism, which divides the natural world into artistic and touristic scenes. Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, does not, however, use these European modes of representing nature through the sublime, landscape and the picturesque, but a full consideration of the nature aesthetic requires that it be considered a little more as a contrast to Ghosh's nature aesthetic.

The concept of landscape is strongly associated with aesthetic order and specific compositions of what is thought of as perfection or harmony. In *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell suggest that there are many definitions of landscape: "Landscape refers ambiguously to parts of nature *and* representations of nature in paintings, photographs, and film" (2). Landscape is the "ideal, panoramic prospect, the analogue of the social and the universal, which is surveyed, organised, and understood by disinterested public man," (Kemal and Gaskell 11). Critics such as Stephanie Ross highlight the efforts at landscaping and gardening as attempts to civilise nature (20). Efforts to "tame" or civilise nature can be destructive to people, animals and the natural environment. Ghosh's novel does not present the Sundarbans as landscape but complicates the idea of landscape by showing that what we may want to take as a well-composed landscape, is always changing and is made up of living, agential parts.

In the late twentieth-century, nature aesthetics has become increasingly environmental as the reality of climate change and global warming appear more devastating globally. In *Against Ecological Sovereignty*, Mick Smith argues for a "more-than-human world" through unsettling the current human-centred world by "… a decentring, weakening, and overturning of the idea/ideology of human exceptionalism" (Smith xii). Smith connects nature aesthetics to ethics and ecology. Drawing on Levinas' definition of ethics, Smith suggests that nature aesthetics provides access to an ecological ethics that is important in facing not only an

environmental crisis, but a crisis of the imagination as well. He argues one needs to first engage with nature aesthetics for the realisation of ecological ethics.

Ghosh's aesthetic is a postcolonial nature aesthetic from a global south perspective that shows how much of contemporary environmental aesthetics exists in the traditional apprehensions of local "subaltern" people of the world. In *The Hungry Tide Ghosh* engages and transforms many of these positions on the nature aesthetic in ways that highlight a global south perspective.

3.2 "The Aesthetics of Nature: Postcolonial Environmentalism in *The Hungry Tide*"

The Hungry Tide is set in the Sundarbans, a landscape of shifting tides and multiple islands. Sundarbans means "beautiful forest" but this forest is different from the forests of the global north that may be appreciated through the sublime, landscape or the picturesque. This particular mangrove forest is listed by UNESCO as one of the largest in the world. Mangrove forests challenge conventional ideas of forests, and the tide country challenges ideas of landscape since it is neither land nor water and is always shifting. Much of the novel is dedicated to showing the natural environment of the islands and its various inhabitants, both human and more-than-human. The Sundarbans are no backdrop to the novel's story but is instead an agent in the novel, together with its primary characters: Nirmal, Piya, Kanai and Fokir. It is described in the novel as both possessing a beauty, but also able to provoke terror, and impacts the lives of the primary characters. The islands are home to the endangered Bengal tiger and fresh-water river dolphins. Piyali Roy is a young American marine biologist of Indian descent who visits the Sundarbans in search of the endangered Irawaddy dolphins that are the focus of her research study. She is determined to save these species through her research. Early in the novel, she meets Kanai Dutt on a train in India. Kanai is a New Delhi businessman and practising translator who visits the Sundarbans to investigate an old

notebook written by his late uncle Nirmal which is addressed to him. Kanai's uncle spent his time as a teacher and school principal in the Sundarbans with his wife, Nilima. Kanai soon discovers that Nirmal's notebook is about the devastating effects of national politics on the lives of the refugees who have settled in the Sundarbans. Nirmal writes about the Morichjaphi massacre of 1979, which is the forceful and violent eviction by the West Bengal Indian state of a group of Bangladeshi refugees who settled in the Sundarbans. The refugees and inhabitants of the Sundarbans continue to be evicted from the island by tidal waves that wash away parts of the island as climate patterns change. The refugees face a further threat by environmentalists and wildlife conservation efforts to protect the Bengal tiger whose natural habitat is the same as the areas where the refugees live. One of the novel's central characters is Fokir, a young local fisherman living in the Sundarbans.

Fokir first came to the area as a refugee with his late mother, Kusum. Although Fokir is illiterate, he has a significant understanding of the Sundarbans, its marine life and natural environment, aided by his cultural and religious knowledge. Fokir experiences and understands the beauty and terror of his natural environment, something that Piya and Kanai fail to see from their western perspectives. For Piya, nature may be scientifically understood and saved, and Kanai cynically disregards environmental concerns, taking for granted his middle-class comforts. A complicated love interest develops between Fokir and Piya shortly after he saves her from a near-drowning incident and then spends most of his time guiding her through the island in search of the freshwater dolphins that are the object of her study. Fokir eventually dies while saving Piya when a storm devastates the Sundarbans.

The following extract from the beginning of *The Hungry Tide* introduces the reader to the Sundarbans by contrasting it to forests conventionally represented in established Anglo-American literature and culture.

> A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles. There are no towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos. Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and air still and fetid. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. (Ghosh 7-8)

The comparison between the mangroves and "other" forests or jungles suggests that unlike other natural landscapes that have "prettiness" – flowers and ferns, all conventionally "beautiful" plants, this forest, the mangrove forest has a different aesthetic altogether as it has leaves that are "tough and leathery" not soft or silky. The mangroves are associated with hardness and strength as opposed to softness and fragility. The natural environment in the mangrove forest is not beautiful, neither is it sublime. Ghosh consciously highlights a different nature aesthetic by contrasting the global south forest with the global north forest. The aesthetic of the global south forest that is represented through the Sundarbans, is not sublime, nor picturesque. It cannot even be considered as a landscape since it is neither land nor water. The novel mentions "the terrain's hostility" which is unique to the nature aesthetic that Ghosh demonstrates in this region. The leaves, branches and foliage of the mangroves appear fierce and protective. Their "tough", "leathery", "gnarled" and "impassably dense" characteristics make the mangroves appear as a shield. The poor visibility and "still, fetid" air suggest that it is also a place that repels humans and which they should avoid since it is unwelcoming to the senses, sight and smell.

Ghosh's novel affirms the nuanced global south nature aesthetic presented in the text by highlighting the irony in the island's name, "' There is no prettiness here to invite the

stranger in: yet, to the world at large this archipelago is known as “the Sundarbans”, which means, “the beautiful forest”” (8). The irony is that while the Sundarbans means beautiful forest, the mangrove forest does not ascribe to the prettiness and tranquillity of forests in the global north. This global south forest confronts its visitors and inhabitants with terror and hostility; yet it is still called the beautiful forest.

The mangrove forest as presented through the novel’s nature aesthetic lies in its being more than just observable, similar to the storm, which will be discussed later. It emerges that the nature aesthetic of the Sundarbans consists in its agency. When the characters in the novel approach the mangrove forest they reveal the duality and ambiguity of the mangrove forest. Once Kanai is in the forest he notes, “[t]he barrier of mangrove, which had looked so tangled and forbidding from the boat, now seemed a refuge, a safe haven” (329). From a distance in the boat, Kanai was unable to imagine anything other than the forest’s hostility, but once he left the water and entered the forest his perspective changed as he experienced a different aspect of it. In almost every instance in the novel, the representation of the Sundarbans reveals a nature aesthetic that is complex, that highlights the power and agency of nature beyond questions of observable beauty, but where beauty is also a part.

In another instance from the novel where Kanai reads his uncles notes that describe the Sundarbans, one is given a sense of the power and agency of nature: “There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every thousand of acres of forest will disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later” (7). In this description of the tide as a hungry force, the text provides an image of the destructiveness of the tide through descriptions of nature. The image of the forest being swallowed by the water and later being regurgitated by the water suggests the power and agency that are present in water. The aesthetic representation of the forest and the water or tides show how nature invokes terror and fear. This image of the tide as a

boundless force that enters and retreats, at the same time as it desires, becomes a way of appreciating not only the typical descriptions of the "beautiful" Sundarban islands, but also its capacity to be consumed by the tide in its vulnerability.

The Sundarbans is presented with a consciousness of the beauty of the environment in the novel, but this beauty is linked with terror. For instance, while on a train in India, Kanai reads Nirmal's notes which momentarily shifts the focus to the natural setting of the Sundarbans. "Until you behold it for yourself, it is almost impossible to believe that here, interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands [the Sundarbans]" (Ghosh 6). The idea of beauty and the imagination emerge in this instance where beauty is a site for the appreciation of natural beauty or the aesthetic of nature. The image of beauty is closely associated with sight. The word "behold" means to see or observe. There is also an indication that the Sundarbans is unimaginable which is why one has to see it to believe its magnificence. The appreciation of nature, the Sundarbans, is linked to the gaze and the ability for the gaze to prompt the imagination. While Kanai, Nirmal and Piya "see" the beauty of the Sundarbans, characters like Fokir and Kusum who live in the environment, experience the natural aesthetic with its full force and effect. On one hand, the beauty of nature is revealed through the perspective of Nirmal's notes and on the other hand, Ghosh exposes the terror linked to this beautiful environment through the daily life experiences of Fokir and Kusum.

Ghosh talks about climate change and shows the agency of the more-than-human through the beauty in nature by first drawing the reader's attention to nature, through beauty, and then showing that beauty linked to terror, which is realised through the devastating effects that climate change has on the environment, people and animals. Terror raises questions about climate change. Climate change is a major concern in Ghosh's work. Scholars Huggan and Tiffin suggest that one of the concerns with the postcolonial-ecocritical

project is the "unproblematized division between people (on the postcolonial side) and nature (on the ecocritical one)" (3). In *The Hungry Tide*, and in Ghosh's theoretical reflections on his practice in *The Great Derangement,* Ghosh implies that postcoloniality and ecocriticism are inextricably linked.

The beginning of *The Hungry Tide* to some extent foreshadows the potential for destruction, which is seen throughout the novel in the terror of nature's beauty. Donald Crawford raises the question about ethics and aesthetics in a section titled "Environmental aesthetics". He asks, "have we moved from an aesthetic to an ethical perspective on nature?" and what are the implications of this shift (309)? It is in recognising the consciousness of beauty linked to terror that I think *The Hungry Tide* highlights the significance of ethics and aesthetics and links the two. The type of nature aesthetic presented in *The Hungry Tide* is not an aesthetic viewed only from a human location. Ghosh's aesthetic suggests a different perspective from which to think about the aesthetic and the ethical by presenting the aesthetic of nature from the point of view of nature itself. Nature almost acts as a character in the novel. Ghosh shows the destructive force of nature and how nature is much more powerful than man. This is shown most explicitly towards the end of the novel with the death of Fokir.

The following extract is from an earlier instance in the novel where the forewarning of nature's forcefulness is presented.

> At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. (Ghosh 8)

The novel's beginning highlights the agency of nature and acts as a warning to humans that "at no moment" should we, "human beings," have any uncertainty about the Sundarbans' hostility towards human life. Ghosh emphasises that human beings should beware of the environment's capability to destroy everything. This implies that the terrors of the Sundarbans extend past the humans who contribute to the destruction of the Sundarbans to its "deadly" inhabitants – the tigers, crocodiles and snakes. Here, it is evident that Ghosh signals his reader to the destruction to be visited upon all that will unfold in the pages that follow, including the death of the central character, Fokir.

The ending of *The Hungry Tide* reveals the devastation suffered by the islands as a natural environment. This is shown in the form of cyclones and tidal waves in the "the tide country", the Sundarbans: "These trees had a skeletal forlorn look; few had any branches remaining and there was scarcely one that had a leaf attached. Many had been snapped in half and reduced to shattered stumps" (388). The trees are personified in this instance and given human or animal attributes as they are described as having a "look", (the "look" is how the observer sees them) almost an expression more than an appearance. This "look" is further described as "skeletal" and "forlorn" which implies a devastated and abject appearance and expression. The power of nature is exemplified by the fact that the trees had been "snapped in half reduced to shattered stumps". The snap implies an instant death, which leaves only the remains of the tree; the "stumps", which also has the connotation of mutilated human limbs. The use of metaphorical diction in this extract is mirrored in the description of Fokir. He is described in the novel as having a "skeletal frame" that "was not wasted but very lean [as he had] long stringy limbs [that] were almost fleshless in their muscularity" (46). In this instance, the description of Fokir's body is similar to the description of the Sundarbans trees towards the end of the novel. Both Fokir and the trees have a "skeletal frame", foreshadowing the way Fokir's life will also be cut short by the power of nature, as the trees have been.

The destructive force of nature is shown through its impact on both human life and on the natural environment. Although the storm kills Fokir, it also kills trees and anything else in its way. The extracts from the novel presented above demonstrate how nature is more powerful than man. It suggests that humans need to respect nature since it is a force on its own that cannot be tamed or controlled.

In *The Hungry Tide* the nature aesthetic foregrounded is the consciousness of the beauty of nature accompanied by the terror of nature. Ghosh explains the significance of employing this particular type of nature aesthetic in *The Great Derangement*:

> This, then, is the first of the many ways in which the age of global warming defies both literary fiction and contemporary common sense: the weather events of this time have a very high degree of improbability. Indeed, it has even been proposed that this era should be named the "catastrophozoic" (others prefer such phrases as "the long emergency" and "the penumbral period"). It is certain in any case that these are not ordinary times… (Ghosh 26).

Ghosh emphasises the fact that weather events such as unpredictable tidal waves are not ordinary and that there is no doubt that these phenomena are linked to global warming. Climate change is a long-term crisis that will not only affect the natural environment, but most certainly has life threatening impact on humans and animals across the planet.

As catastrophe approaches Nirmal, Kanai's uncle, reflects in his notebooks on climate change and death. Nirmal's reflections are closely affiliated with Rilke's idea about the unhomeliness of the world:

Age teaches you to recognize the signs of death…The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea. What would it take, to submerge the tide country? Not much – a minuscule change in the level of the sea would be enough…In what way could I ever do justice to this place?... I had reached the point where, as the Poet says, we tell ourselves:

'Maybe what's left for us
is some tree on a hillside
we can look at day after day,
and the perverse affection of a habit
that liked us so much it never let go.' (215-6)

Nirmal suggests that through his experience and life on earth he has recognised the "signs" of death. He refers to birds and fish disappearing as well as the land disappearing at the cause of rising sea levels as indications of climate change. Although these signs literally signal the loss of life of the Sundarbans ecosystem as birds and fish die, it also alludes to Nirmal's own death that is approaching him as he ages. Rilke, the poet, suggests that there is an emptiness about the world which is what Nirmal is being confronted with. This is exactly the terror in nature, which is linked so closely to the nature aesthetic, which is also the consciousness of beauty. Simply put, we need to acknowledge and respect nature as a force beyond our control, as does Nirmal toward the end of his life, while appreciating its beauty.

The main characters in the novel represent a particular position on their relationship with nature. For subaltern global south characters like Fokir and Kusum, nature, animals and Gods are active agents that are respected and feared. Often, as in the story of the creation of the river Ganges and in the Bon Bibi story, nature and gods are one. Cheah explains, "The refugees successfully created a world through cultural practices and religious beliefs that

helped them to make sense of their constant vulnerability and to establish meaningful relationships with the animal species of their hostile environment" (250). Kusum and Fokir represent the subaltern global south awareness of the more-than-human which is gained through their understanding of the nature aesthetic as the consciousness of beauty linked to terror.

The tale of Bon Bibi in the novel helps reveal the complex coexistence of humans and animal species such as the Bengal tiger in nature. This coexistence of humans and animals with nature offers an alternative perspective to the western desire to protect the tiger by preserving its natural habitat from human population. Kanai recalls a time when he and Kusum where young children and watched a play, *The Glory of Bon Bibi*, that is about Bon Bibi, goddess of the mangrove forest, her twin brother Shah Jongoli and the demon king, Dokkhin Rai who terrorised the mangrove forest. Bon Bibi and her brother were given the task of protecting the Sundarbans from the demon king's evil reign. In order to restore balance to the islands, Bon Bibi created a boundary between the land, giving the demon king one half and she protected the other half of the land: "Thus order was brought to the land of eighteen tides, with its two halves, the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance. All was well until human greed intruded to upset this order" (103). This legend, whose origins do not fit a religious boundary, as it is a mix of Hinduism and Islam, is "…a story that gave land its life" (354); thus, demonstrating the deep connection between nature and life. In other words, this legend, about creating a balance in the world in which they live, is what sustains the life forms on the land. More so, it is the belief and respect for nature and its limitations that allow humans to live in the natural environment.

Fokir's relationship with nature shapes his entire life and informs his survival on the island. Initially, Fokir and his mother Kusum, came to live in the Sundarbans as refugees from Bangladesh. The Sundarbans offered them refuge when they were displaced. While

illiterate, Fokir has memorised the legend of Bon Bibi as a child as it was told to him by his mother. Unlike Nirmal who sees nature through Rilke, Fokir sees and understands nature through the legend of Bon Bibi, which serves to guide and protect his way of life in relation to the natural environment. Fokir's experience of nature is informed by his understanding of nature and the more-than-human as an active agent. Fokir certainly appreciates nature's beauty, but his relationship with nature is far more practical and deeply rooted in religious and cultural notions, unlike Piya, Kanai and Nirmal who see nature from their cosmopolitan and materialist world views.

Nirmal describes the interconnectedness of the Sundarbans when he reflects on the legend of Bon Bibi. He notes that not only are the rivers connected but so are languages, religions and faiths:

> Flowing into one another they create a proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow. And so it dawned on me: the tide country's faith is something like one of its great mohonas, a meeting not just of many rivers, but a round-about people can use to pass in many directions – from country to country and even between faiths and religions. (247)

In this extract it is clear how the Sundarbans had formed into a place of interconnectedness. Nature, people, religion, culture and language are all connected. Since the legend of Bon Bibi allows people on the islands to live in a way that they coexist with nature and its animals, it appears that the myth's power in conveying a message about balance and respect for nature is what allows the connectedness.

Mick Smith suggests that for a long time nature was thought of as merely a resource for the exploitation of humanity and that "…ethics has to struggle against the forgetful

tendencies of a dominant culture that has come to regard all of nature instrumentally, that is, as no more than a resource the meaning and value of which lies only in its potential to be transformed and used in the service of humanity" (Smith 38). Smith's book sets out to highlight the significance of nature, or as he puts it more inclusively, the "more-than-human world" when contrasted with human significance. He argues for the necessity to consider nature beyond its means for human purpose and in doing this, he raises the following question: is our interest in nature self-serving? This prompts the consideration of the environmental crisis.

The novel suggests that if man exploits nature and in doing so destroys it, nature, through rising sea levels and other manifestations of climate change, will eventually destroy man. There is an underlying suggestion that if man takes care of nature, nature will take care of man. Perhaps what is suggested is that there needs to be a balance. Ghosh uses the beauty and terror of nature as an entry into this debate.

According to Ghosh in the first series of Berlin family lectures, the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture and therefore a crisis of the imagination. Thus, cultures that break a sense of the connection of all parts of the world, sentient and non-sentient, inadvertently create and foster the climate crisis. The reason why people impact nature beyond sustainable bounds has to do with a change in cultural values and appreciation. So, by showing the beauty and terror in nature, Ghosh attempts to present a cultural corrective that he at the same time shows has not been lost in subaltern views of the world. The novel's most obvious representatives of the alienation of humans from nature are Piya and Kanai, the two characters who are most influenced by the west.

Characters like Fokir and Kusum have a holistic understanding of nature, for both its beauty and terror. This is because of their cultural and religious upbringing that teaches them to respect nature in order to survive in harmony with nature. Other characters in *The Hungry*

Tide such as Piya and Kanai, however, do not realise the terror of nature, and take it for granted or have no fear of it, and seek to understand nature largely through science and forms of aesthetic appreciation that disregard connections in the world.

Both Kanai and Piya think that they are separate from and can control nature. According to Federica Zullo in her essay "Amitav Ghosh's "Imagined Communities", the question of nature and how to inhabit it arises when Kanai realises that, as a translator, he understands many languages, "but is not able to understand the "language" of the Sundarbans (105). There seems to be a disconnect between Kanai, who has a significantly western upbringing, and the reality of nature. Whereas Fokir seems to represent the nature and culture of the Sundarbans. One example from the novel where Kanai fails to recognize the terror in the beauty of nature is when he chooses to go into the forbidden territory where Fokir refuses to enter based on his cultural understanding of the potential for danger, namely the danger presented by the tiger, in this particular area of the Sundarbans.

When Kanai comes to be stuck on the island he explains, "The mangrove branches were pliable and sinuous; they bent without breaking and snapped back like whips. When they closed around him, it was as if he had passed into the embrace of hundreds of scaly limbs" (329). Kanai experiences terror upon being stuck on the island in the mangrove forest. He underestimates Fokir's understanding of the Sundarbans when Fokir warns him about the danger involved. The branches are compared to "whips" which sting when snapped. The branches of the mangroves are also compared to "scaly limbs". This haunting description of Kanai's encounter in the mangrove forest forces him to fear his natural environment as nature demonstrates its power and authority. His poor understanding of nature and failure to recognise that he cannot control nature, places him in a potentially dangerous situation whereas, had he respected the forbidden territory, he would have been spared nature's show of force.

Similar to Kanai, Piya fails to recognize the terror in the tiger the way that the villagers take seriously and fear the tiger's power. The villagers run when the tiger roars because they are scared of its power and strength over them. Piya however, represents a western conservationist ethics and stands still because she sees the tiger as a vulnerable species to be saved from the terrible villagers. While Piya undermines the agency of the tiger, the villagers, including Fokir, recognise its destructive force and believe "when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it's because it wants to die" (295). The villagers understand the concept of survival of the fittest, but simultaneously respect nature and its force since they have had to adapt to living in an environment where they are in competition for resources with wild animals such as the tiger.

The following extract from the end of the novel demonstrates the interaction between the villagers who understand and fear the tiger, who has now left its own territory and entered "their" territory:

> More than a hundred people had gathered around this little hut. Most of them were men and many were armed with sharpened bamboo poles: these they were plunging into the hut again and again… many of the women and children in the crowd were shrieking, *Maar! Maar!* Kill! Kill! ...The tiger was not new to their village; it had killed two people there and had long been preying on its livestock. (292)

The extract shows the villagers taking revenge on the tiger and fighting to protect their home. To kill the tiger is not in any way a sport for the villagers of the Sundarbans. Killing the tiger is their only means to survival in the threatening circumstances in which they live. For the villagers and Fokir, the tiger is imposing itself on their home, not the other way round. For Piya, however, the tiger has priority, rights and priority, over the land more than

the villagers since she believes that the endangered tiger's survival is more important. This is clear from the description of the tiger focalised through Piya: "She could hear the flames crackling in the distance and she could smell the reek of burning fur and flesh" (295). Piya recognises the value in protecting the tiger but fails to understand the equal value in enabling the survival of the villagers in the Sundarbans. Piya says to Kanai: "We have to do something, Kanai. We can't let this happen…. You can't take revenge on an animal" (293-4). She wants to save the tiger because she sees it as vulnerable but she does not realise the equal vulnerability faced by the villagers since like Kanai, she does not understand the terror of nature.

The villagers on the island regard the tiger as a "man-eating" animal and therefore a threat to their livelihood. This perception of the tiger enables them comfortably to kill the tiger in an attempt to avenge it for their loss of human life and livestock. This scenario highlights the competing human-animal priorities in *The Hungry Tide* but also provides an understanding of the ways in which people with local knowledge of nature adapt to survive in this environment.

So far it is clear that Fokir and Kusum share a different fundamental understanding of nature to Kanai and Piya. The character of Nirmal signals the potential for Kanai's and Piya's view of the world, to grow into a more holistic understanding of nature where they can learn to recognise the terror in the beauty of nature. Through his appreciation of Rilke, Nirmal comes back to a different understanding of nature where he recognises the beauty and terror in nature, but not precisely in the same way that Fokir and Kusum do. Rilke's *Duino Elegies* are important to this conception of nature aesthetic. In the *The Hungry Tide*, Nirmal quotes Rilke on beauty and terror:

'beauty is nothing

but the start of terror we can hardly bear,

and we adore it because of the serene scorn

it could kill us with . . .' (Ghosh 68)

Both Nirmal and Rilke consider the relationship between beauty and terror in nature. For Rilke, angels represent transcendental beauty. In *The Hungry Tide,* Ghosh depicts a form of transcendental beauty through the symbol of nature. Rilke's descriptions of the angels invoke a feeling of terrifying beauty and his descriptions of humans are often presented in relation to chaos. Throughout the novel, Nirmal frequently refers to Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. In his deepest moments of thought and in his most moving experiences Nirmal quotes Rilke, who he refers to as "the Poet" (68). Nirmal's reference to Rilke's elegy about beauty and terror is significant in highlighting the novels nature aesthetic. Rilke suggests that there is a relationship between beauty and terror and that we cannot handle this terror, but we admire it anyway partially because of the thrill we get from knowing it could kill us, but that we could escape it. Nirmal uses this reference to beauty and terror in describing the tides of the Sundarbans. He explicitly describes the combination of the mangroves, water and mudbanks as beautiful, but a beauty that is coupled with terror. The association of beauty with terror is usually more common when thinking of the sublime, however, Ghosh seems to be suggesting a different kind of nature aesthetic from the global south.

Towards the end of the novel, Nirmal's notes reveal his development in understanding nature as a force with beauty and terror. The effect of nature's destruction ultimately transforms both the lives of those living in the Sundarbans but it also transforms the natural environment. The idea that nature has the power to transform people, places and ideas through its agency recurs throughout the novel. Nirmal articulates his understanding of nature's beauty and terror in the following extract:

> To me, a townsman, the tide country's jungle was an emptiness, a place where time stood still…But here, in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life... It was as if the whole tide country were speaking in the voice of the Poet: 'life is lived in transformation'. (224-5)

The Sundarbans, or "tide country" become a metaphor for life. Its very existence exemplifies a particular way of life, one that is lived in transformation. The transformation is not necessarily achieved wilfully, but is unavoidable and forcefully deployed by nature. Nirmal highlights, that to him, "a townsman" the Sundarbans had little meaning, it was "empty". So to others, those living "in" the tide country, "transformation is the rule of life". Nirmal distinguishes between himself and others; perhaps too between city life and natural life, the life of townsmen and villagers. Since life on the tide country is connected to nature, nature becomes a metaphor for life according to both Nirmal and Rilke, who he quotes. It is in nature that they find transformation, but it is through the aesthetic of nature that they are able to recognise nature's beauty, which is entangled with terror.

Fokir and Kusum have a slightly different understanding of the beauty and terror in nature. For them, nature's force is not an unexpected transformation. Their experience of the beauty and terror of nature is enshrined in their cultural and religious understanding of the value of nature as part of their life. Fokir and Kusum understand from their childhood, that nature is a force beyond control and they accept that nature's agency is an uncanny part of life. This is evident in their understanding of nature through Hindu and Islamic mythology. This extract from the novel can be read as a metaphor for their spiritual nature aesthetic:

> In our legends it is said that the goddess Ganga's descent from the heavens would have split the earth had Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by tying it to his ash-smeared locks. To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way: as a heavenly braid, for instance, an immense rope of water, unfurling through a wide and thirsty plain. (6)

The script is based on a Hindu myth that connects the river with God. The beauty of nature in this instance provides a historical account of the significance of nature to the earth and for life. The link between the beauty of nature and God as nature is presented within the first few pages of the *The Hungry Tide*. It is at this early stage in the novel that the text suggests the greater significance of nature. The river, Ganges, becomes personified as "the goddess Ganga". Therefore, nature is closely connected to this Hindu myth. The Ganges river is described as a powerful force of water that could have "split" the earth. The idea of the river's force is compared with the force of the tide that submerges the Sundarbans. There is also a suggestion in the legend, that the river needed to be tamed or it would have destroyed the earth. This is similar to the idea that the thick and durable mangrove forest protects the land by serving as a barrier from the tide. The mangroves therefore tame the tide like Lord Shiva tames the Goddess Ganga's flow. This story allows one to "see" the river "as a heavenly braid". The river becomes tangled with the earth, as Shiva becomes tangled with the Goddess Ganga. The river and the forest are connected. Nature is depicted as interconnected and the one object of nature, the river, is dependent on the other object of nature, the forest, for its survival. However, more importantly, this metaphor of nature's connectedness informs us of the significance of all of nature, not just the river or the forest, but for both as they both play a role in the ecosystem. The river quenches the "thirsty plain" and the mangrove forest protects other parts of the islands. Fokir and Kusum understand that in nature, with beauty

comes terror and that this is required in order to balance the ecosystem. The nature aesthetic in *The Hungry Tide* is of a beauty in nature that is entangled with terror and collectively, these traits of nature allow insight into a consciousness of nature.

This chapter discusses a nature aesthetic that means the agency of nature is importantly recognised. The beauty of nature presented in Rilke's poetry is of a cosmic aesthetic which foregrounds nature as a dominant force that can destroy humans. Similar to Rilke's poetry, Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide,* shows the power of nature to destroy humans. The nature aesthetic in Ghosh's novel explains that even with nature's destructive force, human beings can coexist with other forms of life and nature in a way that harmonises the rhythm of the natural environment. Examples of this already exist in non-modern communities in the global south as shown in *The Hungry Tide*. The experience of the terror of nature is critical in establishing an understanding of the necessary interconnected relationships with nature, which lead to an environmental justice. *The Hungry Tide* demonstrates an environmental imagination through bringing together the interconnections between environment, people, animals and spirituality and highlights their unified vulnerability.

Chapter 4

The Aesthetic of Form in *The Shadow Lines*

In order to my being well understood, let every object under our consideration, be imagined to have its inward contents scooped out so nicely, as to have nothing of it left but a thin shell, exactly corresponding both in its inner and outer surface, to the shape of the object itself: and let us likewise suppose this thin shell to be made up of very fine threads, closely connected together, and equally perceptible, whether the eye is supposed to observe them from without, or within … … Another advantage of considering objects thus merely as shells composed of lines, is, that by these means we obtain the true and full idea of what is called the out-lines of a figure, which has been confined within too narrow limits, …" (Hogarth 35-37)

…the waving line, which is a line more productive of beauty than any of the former, … for which reason we shall call it the line of beauty. (Hogarth 53)

In the context of western aesthetics, the idea of the line has been central to the development of the aesthetics of visual art as first highlighted by William Hogarth. Born in London on 10 November 1697, Hogarth, a painter and engraver, has come to be regarded as a major influence in visual art. He is particularly noteworthy for his unusual methods of the time that involved painting from memory instead of painting while the object was before him. He also went to great effort to advertise and sell his own work, and in 1753, Hogarth published *Analysis of Beauty*, his reflections on art for which he is probably best known. Shortly before his death in October 1764, Hogarth was writing his *Autobiographical Notes* where he reflected on his study of lineal beauty and what he called the six principles which constitute appearances: fitness, variety, uniformity, simplicity, intricacy, and quantity. He

argues that everything in art and nature that "*seem most to please and entertain the eye"* are composed of some or all of these six principles (Hogarth 38, emphasis in original). Hogarth tries to make the appreciation of beauty (taste) "objective" and "universal" using these principles so that true beauty will be evident to anyone's eye because of objective principles represented by the object. For Hogarth however, the serpentine line is privileged as the line of beauty, "that the waiving line, or line of beauty, varying still more, being composed of two curves contrasted, becomes still more ornamental and pleasing, in so much that the hand takes a lively movement in making it with pen or pencil" (53).

In Visual art, William Hogarth considers the "S" line as the most beautiful form of line. He invented the term "Serpentine Line" that he considers the "line of beauty". His book, *The Analysis of Beauty* considers the ideal form of the line through the "S" line. According to Charles Davis, "Hogarth refuses the classic definition of beauty of proportion as a function of the relationships of the parts to the parts and the parts to the whole, and he discusses instead the importance of the fitness of form to purpose and use: "fit proportions". He attempts to show what constitutes the "utmost beauty of proportion", which he finds in the figure in motion – optimally shaped and proportioned for grace and variety of movement" (7). Hogarth's idea has been taken up in minority and diasporic aesthetics through Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, both novels that have won international literary prizes. Hollinghurst picks up on Hogarth's idea saying that the "S" line swings both ways, alluding in this way to homosexuality, which is one of the questions addressed in his novel. Nick Guest, the protagonist in Hollinghurst's novel uses the "S" line in describing his lover, Wani's body as beautiful. Wani and Nick have an affair. Wani is a wealthy black man who is not openly gay since he is engaged to marry a woman, while having his affair with Nick, who is openly gay. Hollinghurst's line of beauty, the "S" curved line is also implied in Keats' poem on the Grecian urn.

John Keats', "Ode on a Grecian Urn" suggests that form speaks for itself outside of content:

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede

Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (40-50)

The form of the urn constitutes beauty on its own, independent of its function or its content. Keats suggests that form is timeless and outlives the content of the objects to which it gives shape. For Keats, the form of the urn is beautiful beyond the stories "narrated" on the urn itself through the painted representations of pastoral scenes. For Keats, "line" is connected to form. The line is "silent" but embodies beauty; therefore art is able to capture beauty in a timeless, universal way that does not "speak" the language of any particular culture or historical period.

Smith's line of beauty is approached through the aesthetic of black women and their beauty. Her approach considers the ways in which society influences perceptions of beauty, which relates to ethics. Smith's novel reveals the bias towards thinness as a consideration of beauty. This is evident from one of the main characters Howard Belsey's, comment to his black wife (Kiki) who was thin when he met her but became bigger as she aged. Howard,

who is a white man, has an affair with his colleague. When asked about his infidelity by his wife, he insinuates that it has to do with her weight gain. While Howard's character advocates for his liberalism, his actions show that he is far from representing his imagined political views. Smith's novel shows the various forms of beauty and how these differ culturally. Hollinghurst's line of beauty takes a sexual approach by exploring sexual identity while Smith's approach differs in her focus on racial and cultural perceptions of beauty. These approaches to beauty differ from Ghosh's consideration of beauty that extends the line of beauty to encompass postcolonial concerns about nationhood and identity.

In foregrounding lines, evident in the novel title, *The Shadow Lines,* Ghosh largely, but not completely, sidesteps the concept of the line of beauty as it is used by the writers above, and develops a postcolonial conception of the line as constitutive, most importantly, of the self and the nation. Ghosh's use of the line interrogates its existence in, for example, geographical borders that instruct entire societies regarding the territories within which they are permitted to live. The lines that determine these borders are politically drawn. National borderlines are the most sustained focus of Ghosh' novel, *The Shadow Lines*.

However, other explorations of the line are also evident in the novel, and I would like to consider these first before going on to the significance of the line in constituting national and personal identity. As in *The Glass Palace,* the idea of beauty is also linked with physical appearances. Hogarth considers the lines that compose the features of a face as the highest beauty. He explains that since the human face is mostly round, "it is therefore apt to receive reflected light on its shadowy side, which not only adds more beauty by another pleasing tender gradation, but also serves to distinguish the roundness of the cheeks…" (Hogarth 89). He speaks about beauty and light in relation to the serpentine line here. While in *The Glass Palace,* the beauty of the woman was foregrounded, in *The Shadow Lines*, beauty comes to reside most significantly in a male character, namely, Nick Price. *The*

Shadow Lines is a novel for the most part narrated by an unnamed protagonist. It is in the unnamed narrator's representation of his cousin, with whom he is in love, and her intimate relationships that questions of physical beauty are questioned. The narrator's cousin named Ila, a dark skinned Indian girl with dark hair and brown eyes who lives in London, considers herself ugly since she does not fit the European aesthetic she sees in her doll Magda, and in her childhood love, Nick Price, who represents ideal European beauty in the novel. Ila comes from a wealthy family and lives at the Price's house in London. This is where she meets Mrs Price's son, Nick. Nick and Ila attend the same school and she falls in love with him. Nick is older than Ila and he is fair skinned with blue eyes and sleek blonde hair. Ila never gets to possess Nick's beauty and in the process of constantly reaching for it, she neglects to see her own beauty. Ila is beautiful but she does not see herself as beautiful when she is young since she is enculturated to regard only white beauty as ideal beauty. Ila is bullied when she is a child at school in London since she does not possess the same European appearance as her classmates. She begins to struggle with her Indian appearance at a young age and starts to value European conceptions of beauty. Ghosh thus expresses an interest in male physical beauty in *The Shadow Lines,* that gets explored further in the context of the female his later novel, *The Glass Palace.* In *The Shadow Lines*, as with Smith's *On Beauty*, Ghosh foregrounds how the idea of physical beauty is most often racially and culturally determined.

The following extract from the novel when Ila is playing houses with the unnamed narrator represents a European aesthetic of physical beauty, which is considered as a "universal" aesthetic of beauty according to Ila: "Magda was Ila's doll…It was a huge doll, almost as big as Ila, with pink cheeks and snow-white arms, bright gold hair, and blue eyes…" (Ghosh 87). Then Ila imagines having a child with Nick Price whom she names Magda, after her doll. Ila describes Magda the imaginary child, "…they'd never seen anyone as beautiful as Magda. They had never seen hair that shone like hers – like a bright, golden

light. They had never seen such deep blue eyes, nor cheeks as pink and healthy and smiling as hers" (90). Ila continually highlights the pinkness of Magda's cheeks, which she recognises as part of her beauty. Nick captures this beauty even though he is male. This instance represents the colonial moment, and is, in part, influenced by general European ideas about beauty. Hogarth also comments on the relationship between whiteness and light in respect of beauty, and blackness and darkness in respect of the ugly. He mentions that the closer to white and light that one is, the more beautiful one may be considered (96). Similarly, Ila makes this distinction in her framing of Magda, her white doll, as beautiful compared with herself and her perceived dark-skinned ugliness.

Towards the end of the novel, the narrative highlights a transformed postcolonial aesthetic of physical beauty where Ila's alternative beauty is recognised. Right to the end, Ila remains unaware of her beauty. However, Ila is presented as a head-spinner to others especially the narrator, who has been in love with her throughout. The recognition of her beauty does not, however, secure the devotion of the very Aryan Nick Price, whose blonde hair is highlighted throughout the novel. The focus on physical beauty though is just an aside in the novel. The real focus falls on an aesthetic of the line as constitutive of the self and the nation.

4.1 Drawing Lines in the Sand: Underlining the (In)significance of Lines in *The Shadow Lines*

Ghosh expands the aesthetic of the line as beauty through his creative exploration of the aesthetic of the line in a postcolonial context. In the case of *The Shadow Lines,* the face represents the aesthetic of the line as beauty. We see this in Ila's descriptions of Nick Price and later her doll Magda. It is implied that both Nick and the doll capture the symmetry, regularity and sharpness of features admired in Western conceptions of facial beauty. These

lines of beauty are refracted furthermore by racial markers of fairness and blondness. However, the aesthetic of form is extended much further through the way in which the line acts as a trope in the novel for ideas about the individual and social identity.

Amitav Ghosh's second novel, *The Shadow Lines***,** was published in 1988 and won two prestigious Indian prizes, the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Ananda Puraskar in 1990. The book addresses the major issue of the 1947 Partition. The Partition was the major historical event that saw the Indian subcontinent divide itself into Pakistan (Dhaka) and India based on political conflict stemming largely from religious differences between Hindus and Muslims. The Partition devastated the Indian population and was responsible for uprooting and displacing more than 12 million people. According to Rituparna Roy in his book, *South Asian Partition Fiction in English: from Khushwant Singh to Amitav Ghosh,* "Partition has actually proved to be a trauma from which the subcontinent has never fully recovered" (18). The separation of families and friends has become an intergenerational loss that spans an unforgettable memory through time. We see this in *The Shadow Lines* through characters, like Tha'mma who suffer great loss as a result of the political lines of separation that were drawn.

Ghosh's novel looks at questions of nation-formation and formation of the subject as citizen through Partition. *The Shadow Lines* has been a standard text in Indian school curricula because of the topicality of its subject matter for which it has also elicited substantial criticism. Because Partition has been such a trauma on the psyche of the subcontinent many people have written about it. Ghosh's treatment of Partition is different from other writers since he chooses to focus on Partition from the side of the Bengali border, that is, East Pakistan or, as it is known today, Bangladesh, whereas most writers have focused on the West Pakistan perspective. Ghosh also extends the discussion of Partition in the novel by focusing on the aftermath of Partition that goes beyond the events of 1947. This focus is significant to Ghosh's conception of the aesthetic of form since the trauma caused by Partition follows lines

of generational legacy that are not easily removed since they are so closely intertwined with families across the subcontinent.

The Shadow Lines has garnered a significant volume of criticism since it addresses the highly important questions of cosmopolitanism, feminism, nationalism, Partition, migration, memory and identity. Because there is so much scholarship of *The Shadow Lines*, I shall only do a brief overview. Some scholars focus broadly on questions of globalisation, nationalism, migration, gender and cosmopolitanism (Padmini Mongia, Shameem Black, Anjelie Multani and R, Malathi). Black considers the problem of gender and imperialism, which appear through the lens of cosmopolitanism in the novel. She also notes that although most of the novel "celebrates the possibility of the domestic", there are parts in the novel that show "how homes can mimic the exclusionary tactics of nationalism and communalism" (48). Her feminist critique of the novel mentions how oppressive regimes of gendered spaces influence domestic spaces. While there is scholarship on the gendered dimensions of the novel and its various links to identity, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, the idea of space and place are thoroughly explored from different points of view in the novel. In her article, "Inventing of Recalling the Contact Zones? Transcultural Spaces in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines",* Nadia Butt considers space in the novel as both a place of contact and of conflict. She traces incidents in *The Shadow Lines* that emerge as spaces of connectedness and separation. This is similar to Black's comments about the domestic space that connects and separates women. Through Butt's examination of the novel and its lines, she argues that the metaphor of "shadow lines" is a trope that not only draws attention to very literal examples of lines in the form of national borders, but it also draws attention to "the grey realms of imagination and memory in narrating historical truths" (Butt 2). The nuance of borders and lines in the novel have been picked up by scholars S. Kokila, Robert Dixon, John Thieme, Nadia Butt, Amit Kumar and Khamar Jahan who also highlight the interconnectedness of people and ideas

through themes of space and place, imagination, history, time and memory. Ghosh's novels have been known to defy strict genre boundaries. Dixon suggests that *The Shadow Lines* shows that culture is not fixed in place, but moves across generational time and political and national boundaries of space. Similarly, Amit Kumar suggests that one of the ways that Ghosh opens up questions about national identity is through the "mirror image" (Kumar 69). This mirror image is the connection between characters and places that are seemingly presented as separate during Partition in the novel. For example, Dhaka, which is stereotypically framed by Islam, and Calcutta which is stereotypically framed by Hinduism, are "mirror images of each other separated by a looking Glass border" (69).

Susmita Roye's paper extends the discussion of lines related to space by considering the impact of lines related to Partition in the novel. Many scholars focus on form, postmodernism and language in *The Shadow Lines*; however, Partition has remained a central theme to the discussions of most scholars (Tangea Tansley, Paul Sharrad, Shameem Black, S.D Sutar, Shaukat Mohammad Ansari, Alok Kumar Singh, Ramesh Kumar, Saravana Suresh and Anshuman A. Mondal, Anjali Roy, Arvind Chowdhary, Manjula Saxena, Premindha Banerjee, Murari Prasad, S. Ramani, P Pradeep, Claire Chambers and R Poli Reddy). In an essay by Claire Chambers titled, " 'Across the border there existed another reality': Nations, Borders and Cartography in *The Shadow Lines*", Chambers maps the history of Partition in India as she argues that the novel critiques fixed "lines", be it national borders or boundaries of caste, religion, gender and class. She suggests that *The Shadow Lines* shows communities, or circles of people, who live in between the fixed limitation of the lines that separate and divide India as a sub-continent, as well as people and their identities. Chambers suggests that *The Shadow Lines* moves away from thinking the nation-state as a bounded realm by opening it up to the Indian Ocean, for example, as a site of belonging that is often far more inclusive than the boundaries of the nation state. The themes of nationalism

and identity recur throughout the novel. Chambers, Burton, Mongia, Asaduddin and Vijayalakshmi consider questions of nationalism in the novel. They suggest that through his narrative Ghosh highlights hybridity and challenges dominant assumptions about the insularity of nationalisms. They argue that *The Shadow Lines* opens up the closed boundaries of the nation and the identities linked to the nation. The scholarship on this novel is extensive and covers a vast range of themes, which are important aspects of reading *The Shadow Lines*. However, the question of the aesthetics of the trope of the line in itself has not been fully explored.

The Shadow Lines is a novel that questions the rise and fall of nationhood in India through a non-linear narrative that spans three generations of families. The criss-crossing of time and space directs the reader's attention to boundaries of reality that introduce the reader to perceptions and perspectives that the novel carefully interweaves. The narrator in the novel, who is nameless, connects people and places throughout the novel through the stories he hears growing up from Tridib, his favourite uncle. The novel is set against the backdrop of traumatic chaos and conflict: World War II, The Blitz, Partition, as well as local riots that happen in Dhaka and Calcutta. These events come to represent an essential part of the novel's form and story as it shapes interesting points of departure throughout, which bring together the various incidents. *The Shadow Lines* is centred on Tridib's murder and the events that take place before and after his murder. His death highlights the volatility surrounding the trauma experienced by people living in the Indian sub-continent. The novel is also intricately woven in and out of cities such as London, Dhaka and Calcutta, which connect people from each of these cities as much as there are national geographical and political borders of separation.

This chapter looks closely at the many ways in which Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines,* uses "lines" as a trope. The dictionary of literary terms explains that a trope is "a term

for figurative language that changes the meaning of words" (Quinn 346). The Oxford English Dictionary explains that in literature a trope is a literary device or theme that is used multiple times throughout the text. The trope can be a common word or image that figuratively has connotation to other ideas. The concept of the line not only appears in the title of the novel, but is also referred to throughout in discussions of borders and maps. This concept is not only used spatially, but is also used temporally in the suggestions of the blurred lines between present and past. The meanings of the line as trope thus proliferate across the novel in the contexts of both space and time.

Most obviously, given the ways that Partition is foregrounded on the novel's canvas, the concept of the line is used to refer to national borders as they appear on maps. There is an imaginary line that is created to divide India into various parts following Partition. I will also look at line as a "holder" giving shape and form, to for example, the nation state, but also individual identity. I will also look at the line temporally, most often where the line teleologically captures progression, showing movement and development, for instance, the growth of the of the nation and of the self. Lastly, I will show how *The Shadow Lines* uses postmodern narrative techniques and form to challenge normative ideas about the line, but presents these through a postcolonial lens. My analysis of some extracts from *The Shadow Lines* shows how the aesthetic of the novel, specifically its form, connects to political ideas and critique in the novel. Questions and commentary about truth, lines and borders are presented throughout the novel.

The most obvious use of the word "line" is as a border dividing things. *The Shadow Lines* foregrounds the lines between nations as its constant thread throughout the novel. Nadia Butt, for example, highlights the nuance of lines and borders in Ghosh's novel. Partition can be read through the lens of the line in the novel since the events around Partition lie at the heart of the novel. The word Partition has connotations of a barrier, a wall and line

of division. It literally means to be divided into parts. Francis Harrison explores the significance of fiction that deals with Partition. His paper titled, "Literary Representation: Partition in Indian and Pakistani Novels in English", tackles the terminology of the subcontinent's trauma by highlighting that "Partition is a term that suggests an easy and peaceful division of territory", which is in no way or form the reality of the subcontinent's divide (Harrison 94). Harrison prefers to consider the historical event as a holocaust in order to expose the trauma of the events from the outset. I will continue to refer to the division of the subcontinent as Partition; however, it is important to acknowledge Harrison's observation.

While the historical Partition took place in reality and has no doubt caused widespread chaos and trauma through its separating of territories, many people who were victims of Partition feel that it was a futile exercise that has no real relevance for them except for its role in separating people and communities that once were united geographically. In his article, "Partition, Pakistan and South Asian History: In Search of a Narrative", David Gilmartin explains that the effect of Partition on the Indian subcontinent has cast a shadow on historical reconstructions of the decades before 1947 as well as the continued impact that Partition has had on subcontinental politics even fifty years later. There are many theories attempting to explain why Partition took place and who was responsible for it. Some Indian nationalist historians blame the British imperialist policy of divide and rule for the split in the Indian subcontinent. According to scholars A. K Banerjee, Sumit Sarkar and Bipan Chandra, the British played off Hindus against Muslims in order to spark Partition. R. Roy explains in his book that British imperialists, however, look at the cause of Partition very differently. They believe that it was the result of the end of British rule in India, which they claim had a uniting effect on the subcontinent, the loss of which prompted the conflict on the

subcontinent. I can see how this theory can be criticised since there have been large periods in history where Hindus and Muslims lived together peacefully.

Ghosh's novel describes examples of the peaceful and interconnected lives of Hindus and Muslims. In the following extract from *The Shadow Lines*, Tha'mma reflects on the pointlessness of the partition as she flies to Dhaka to visit her sister many years later after moving to Calcutta with her family. She highlights the fact that the lines that divide Dhaka and Calcutta are invisible:

> But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know [where the border is]? I mean where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same: it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between? (186)

The tone of astonishment in Tha'mma's voice when she realizes that Dhaka and Calcutta are divided by no true line or border suggests that she expected there to be a physical boundary, perhaps as her family had constructed a wooden wall to divide her house in two when she was young. Tha'mma's question, "what was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything…" signals the pointlessness in borders and lines that are designed to separate people and places. Her question is almost sarcastic since she seems to suggest that if there is not a physical barrier or line dividing the two nations then why was there any conflict about it at all? There is no border or dividing line in reality. It is a concept. The border that separates Dhaka from Calcutta is an imagined line. Tha'mma highlights that it has no true basis other than that.

When Tha'mma reaches Dhaka, she meets her uncle Jethamoshai. After some insistence for him to move to Calcutta with his extended family Jethamoshai says the following regarding borders:

> I know everything, I understand everything. 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 is all very well, you are going away now, but suppose when you get here they decide to draw another line 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 will die here. (264)

Jethamoshai believes that his home is where he is born. He doesn't believe in "India-Shindia" which implies that he does not believe in the construct of nationalism. He believes that the partition is simply about "drawing a line" which is ironic since there is no line drawn, as he and Tha'mma expect. The border is an imagined line.

Despite borderlines, *The Shadow Lines* shows how Hindus and Muslims coexist peacefully, which reflects their historical coexistence outside of political interference. For example, the novel shows how a Muslim family takes care of an elderly Hindu man without the difference in religion being an issue. This is because both cultures value respect and care for the elderly.

By contrast with the disbelief evoked by the two elderly characters at the artificiality of lines that cannot even be clearly discerned, through the young narrator the power of politically constructed lines is explored. Lines that are created through various geopolitical interests in historical time take on a sense of permanence and reality that deceive, and that can have very dangerous consequences. Reflecting back on his immature self towards the end

of the novel, the narrator suggests:

> I grew up believing in the truth of the precepts that were available to me: I believed in the reality of space; I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nations and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality. (Ghosh 268)

The narrator mentions that "truth" is controlled to enforce particular behaviours or thought. Truth is limited to what was "available" to the narrator. This implies that there are other versions of truth that possibly existed, unavailable to the narrator at this time. Through the repetition of the word "believed" the narrator emphasises that he no longer believes that distance separates and that nations and borders truly exist. The form of the word "believed" is in the past tense. This implies that the narrator no longer holds the same belief. Instead, the narrator is indirectly saying that he does not believe that space is a fixed reality. Distance does not separate, nor do borders and nations truly exist.

Years later when the narrator is at college, while looking at the Bartholomew Atlas, the narrator comments:

> I was struck with wonder that there had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people, of good intentions, had thought that all maps were the same, that there was a special enchantment in lines. They had drawn their borders, … hoping perhaps that once they had etched their border upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the ancient Gondwanaland. What had they felt, I wonder, when they discovered that they had created not a separation, but a yet-undiscovered irony – the irony that killed Tridib:

> the simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four-thousand year- old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines. (285-6)

This extract highlights the meaninglessness of borders and the lines that are intended to separate people and places similarly to what Tha'mma says in the earlier extract. The tone of this extract is satirical. The narrator is "struck with wonder" that there was a time when "good people" thought there was a "special enchantment in lines". The narrator highlights the irony in map-making. The irony is that these map-makers "etched their border upon the map" with the intention that it would separate places such as Calcutta in India, and Dhaka in Bangladesh, yet now, "they were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines". Their boundedness includes the result of the India-Pakistan and Bangladesh war that made people and these places bound by their desire for separate land. The irony that killed Tridib is that although he was from Calcutta, his grandmother was born in Dhaka and considered Dhaka as her home. She considered Dhaka as the place where she belonged. Yet Tridib comes to be considered an outsider and an enemy in his ancestral land.

The narrator reflects on the construction of boundaries (lines) that separate nations. He argues that a nation-state needs man-made constructions to define its boundaries. Therefore, nation-states are not natural but man-made. The narrator suggests: "…a ruthless state" has "…barbed wire" and "…check-points to tell me where its boundaries lie" (267). The nation-state is "ruthless" as it has "barbed wire", spikey, sharp wire that is physically meant to hurt people if they attempt to cross the boundary that the wire intends to secure. The narrator ridicules the idea of border boundaries that need "check-points to tell me where its boundaries lie". This questions the reality of boundaries. Are boundaries definite, actual borders? If they truly exist why do they require check-points and barbed wire to define and

validate their existence. These boundaries are man-made to create the nation state. It requires man's instruction and construction, as well as man's suspension of disbelief in order to "exist".

The nation, furthermore, is not a concept that has existed for all time. It is a modern idea that develops in Europe from around the seventeenth century. The modern nation depends for its existence on the idea of clear borders. Borders are lines on maps in *The Shadow Lines*. Similarly, in his seminal work, *Imagining Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* Benedict Anderson points out that the modern nation is an imagined community given reality by the lines represented by borders. Anderson argues that the nation must be "imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Ghosh's novel shows that the lines that map out national borders are problematic. He shows this through the direct comments on Partition made by Tha'mma and the narrator in the novel, which were discussed earlier, but he also shows the problems with borders when Tridib tells the young narrator and May a story, the story of Tristan and Isolde, which he claims is "[t]he best story in Europe…when Europe was a better place, a place without borders and countries" (Ghosh 229). The tragic love story is of a knight (Tristan) and a princess (Isolde) who fall in love but are separated from each other and sent to live in different countries. It is only when Tristan is injured and asks for Isolde to save him, that they are reunited. She travels across seas to save him, but she is too late, and he dies. Isolde also dies and the two are buried next to each other. Their love finally unites them metaphorically when two trees grow over their graves and become tangled with each other. No borders can keep Tristan from his love, Isolde, in the end. Through this love story, which is the precursor of the contemporary love stories narrated, the novel highlights the construction of lines and borders. It also critiques borders, lines and boundaries by saying

that Europe was a better place without borders and countries. Therefore, these lines that divide land into countries are not solid, but are just shadow lines.

The novel also highlights how the constructed lines that give shape to nations also give shape to individuals in nations through a sense of national identity. This sense of national identity creates boundaries between people through fostering a division between "us" and "them". *The Shadow Lines* presents lines as giving form through questions of identity. Towards the end of the novel when the narrator is an adult he stumbles upon "a tattered old Bartholomew's Atlas in which Tridib used to point out places to me [him] when he told me stories in his room" (283). (The incident with the Bartholomew's Atlas is referred to above also.) As the narrator toys with an old compass he begins to draw circles around the places on the map as he "tried to learn the meaning of distance" (284). Through the stories of places and people that Tridib tells the young narrator, the distance between the people and places in the stories, and the distance between them and the narrator are a mere memory away. Through the narrator's imagination he is able to breach the boundaries of time and space as they become interconnected in his mind. Now that the narrator is older, he has to confront the truth about the distance between certain places and what it means to cultural and religious identity in relation to national identity:

> His [Tridib's] atlas showed me, for example, that within the tidy ordering of Euclidean space, Chiang Mai in Thailand was much nearer to Calcutta than Delhi is, that Chengdu in China is nearer than Srinagar is. Yet (…) did the people of Khulna care at all about the fate of the mosques in Vietnam and South China (a mere stone' s throw away)? I doubted it. But in this other direction, it took no more than a week [for a riot to flare up]. (284-5)

The narrator interrogates the significance of cultural and religious identity compared to national identity through examining the distance of countries from each other, for example, if Chiang Mai (in Thailand) was closer to Calcutta (in India) than Delhi in India, why did the people in these places not "care at all" about the effects of violence in their closely situated cities. There were mosques and temples in Thailand and not only in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, yet there was no violent backlash in Thailand. This example suggests that there is greater interest in sustaining a national identity than in uniting in similarities regarding religious and cultural identity. Why do we let our imagined national boundaries and identities dictate our sense of human justice? The novel unsettles the idea of lines that form national and religious identities through pointing out the close proximity of the people to each other. By examining the map and distance, Tridib draws attention to the problems with the lines on maps that not only create the notion of fixed identities, but also highlight the "dizziness" of the circular lines that separate people, with whom one identifies, with those who are othered by us. The second circle the narrator draws is inscribed in a map of Europe.

> I tried to imagine an event, any event that might occur in a city near the periphery of that circle… Stockholm, Dublin, Casablanca, Alexandria, Istanbul, Kiev… which would bring the people of Milan pouring out into the streets. I tried hard, but I could think of none. None, that is, other than war. It seemed to me then that within this circle [unlike the other one] there were only states and citizens; there were no people at all. (285)

The narrator suggests that Europe is governed by strict lines that define geographical borders, boundaries and lines. He claims that nothing "other than war" will bring the people from these cities together. The reason for this is that they are embedded in their national

identity, which divides them into states and citizens, not people. *The Shadow Lines* once again emphasises the tendency for lines to give form to identities, which in itself dismisses the crucial fundamental prior identity of the human race. Earlier in the novel, Tha'mma sinisterly foreshadows a similar sentiment to Tridib when she justifies to the narrator why Ila doesn't belong in London:

> She has no right to be there [London]. She doesn't belong there…What's she doing in that country?...Ila has no right to live 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…They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood…War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what *you* have to achieve for India, don't you see? (95-6).

This extract reflects on national identity and the idea of belonging to a nation. Tha'mma believes that through war, "nations" are built, and that national identity is more progressive than religious identity. The outlining of national territory gives form to national identity. The content in this extract suggests that national identity is necessary to "make a country" as it dissolves religious differences and people "become a family born of the same pool of blood", blood from war, which Tha'mma argues is Europe's religion. Tha'mma insists that the border that confirms a nation's existence is created through a bloody war. However, the novel as a whole defies the boundaries of nation-states through the characters in the novel, who both physically and mentally, occupy places to which they do not "belong".

The novel unsettles lines that divide people by showing the possibility of living between the lines.

Related to the question of identity, the novel can also be considered an autobiography of the development of the self (the narrator) and the biography of the development of the nation. An autobiography is an account of a person's life given by himself or herself. An autobiography is a story about one's self, written by one's self. The word is of Greek origin and the word "graph" in autobiography is a transitive verb indicating the drawing of a line, or to trace a curve from its equation. By using the idea of a graph one can see how lines are drawn to shape the self and the nation in *The Shadow Lines*. The autobiography is similar to the *Bildungsroman*, which conventionally describes the journey of self-development from a point empty of experience, and not fitting in with one's social context; then growing with experience and moving forward into maturity until at last one fits in socially. Dissimilar to the conventional coming of age narrative, Ghosh's novel shows no clear development or growth in the manner of the *Bildungsroman*. *The Shadow Lines* instead unsettles the idea of a line like an arrow moving forward into full self-knowledge and integration. This applies to both the individual self of the narrator and the collective identity of the nation, which moves forward and backward and in various other directions rather than in a simple progression forward like an arrow.

Earlier in this chapter I discuss the character of Tridib whose identity is especially nuanced. Tridib never appears fully to integrate with his social context. This could be partly because he travels so regularly throughout his life, but it could also signal the reality of people like Tridib whose life does not follow a linear progression but is instead interrupted by Partition, war and conflicting national identities. Similarly, Tha'mma's character also reveals much self-doubt and many identity crises. She is an Indian born in what is now known as Bangladesh (Dhaka), who relocates to the Indian state and experiences a set of life events that

unsettle her idea of her identity. Tha'mma becomes committed to adopting the national identity allocated to her during Partition and in doing so she reveals personal flaws and prejudices that she never overcomes in the novel. The characters in this novel do not present a linear progression, they are undeniably flawed from start to end and are constantly shown to take steps backward and forward. At the end of the novel, there is no triumph with any of the characters knowing themselves and their history and fitting in perfectly.

In the same way that lines are not presented as teleological, progressing into a future that is more and more advanced, lines are also complicated through the idea of mirroring. One's mirror image is oneself, but it is also not oneself. Thus the boundary of the self becomes unclear. Lines are shown to be drawn to attempt to shape the self and the nation in *The Shadow Lines*. However, there are significant references to mirroring that break down the idea of the bounded self. The line as boundary seems to contain the self, but if the self is mirrored, that "container" no longer is solid and impermeable. The narrator and Ila are "mirror images" of each other – almost like twins. The narrator represents the insider and subject as citizen and Ila represents the outsider and modern cosmopolitanism in the novel. They are both the same age, the narrator and Ila are also similar in that they have both travelled a lot, however, while Ila has literally travelled the world, the narrator has only done so imaginatively but has never left Calcutta. They differ in terms of their world perspectives. Ila has a global perspective and the narrator has an Indian national perspective, although, somewhat globally influenced. Similarly, Amit Kumar suggests that one of the ways that Ghosh opens up questions about national identity is through the "mirror image" (Kumar 69). This mirror image is the shadow line that although divides land, people and cultures, it also shows the connections between them all. Pakistan and India are also mirror images of each other in the novel. They are located at once in both the same and different areas of land. The culture and religion are also similar and their politics also reflect similarity. However, Hindu

India and Muslim Pakistan chooses a particular aspect of religion, politics and culture to hold onto – this is shown through the imaginary glass border that separates them. Although there is an insistence on drawing lines between individuals and nations, the novel affirms that there are no clear lines, and that borders and lines are compellingly complex. The lines between people are also not clear-cut, but are faint.

The novel demonstrates how the lives of people are intertwined. Similar to how Ila and the narrator's lives are entangled with each other, the novel shows that even though people are considered to be separate individuals, the borderlines between people are porous. The character of Tridib, the protagonist, challenges the idea of a fixed national identity through the fluidity of his identity. The way in which Tridib narrates the story (or stories) in the novel appears layered and complex. His stories are open as they include accounts from the past with reflection on the present. The story of Tridib as a character, for instance, is introduced through the narrator as having different versions of his identity that he tells to different people. Therefore, the characters in the novel have to decide which version of Tridib is the true one. This idea suggests that history is constructed in the novel through both what is given as "facts" and what is chosen to be the true facts. One cannot draw a straight line between who and what Tridib is and says. Everything is always slightly blurred and always interconnected with this character. In essence, Tridib's identity is incomplete and constantly changing, much like the open form of the novel. The character of Tridib is dynamic, as he does not belong to one territory. Tridib was born in India but moved to England with his family when he was eight years old and later, moved back to India – constantly moving into and out of spaces, it is very clear that Tridib as a character, his stories, histories as well as the journeys he has are not territorial. In the character of Tridib we see that it is very difficult to distinguish between particular national identities. One cannot simply categorise or draw a straight line linking Tridib to a fixed identity.

I would like to focus now in a more pointed way on how the novel also deconstructs the line as border, as "container" giving form to differences of identity, and as a kind of arrow moving forward into uncomplicated advancement. The extract below acts as an instance of how the line is simultaneously constructed and deconstructed in the novel. It describes a situation where fixed lines between objects collapse. This extract is from an incident in the novel where the narrator and Ila are in London and sit in the cellar in Mrs Price's house. They think back to the time when they used to play there as children, imagining that they were in a different place - Raibajar, in Calcutta.

> I sat on the hard edge of the camp bed and looked around the cellar – at the piles of old trunks and suitcases, the stacks of paperbacks, at the garden tools that lay rusting in a corner. Slowly, as I looked around me, those scattered objects seemed to lose their definition in the harsh, flat light of the naked bulb; one of their dimensions seemed to dissolve: they flattened themselves against the walls; the trunks seemed to be hanging like paintings on the walls. Those empty corners filled up with remembered forms… (Ghosh 222)

Questions of form, definition, truth and perspective emerge from this extract. The "objects seemed to lose their definition" due to external influences such as light, causing "one of their dimensions" to appear to "dissolve". The objects are the trunks. A trunk is an object that ordinarily has a definite form. It is usually a large box with a lid that is used to store items. However, as a result of the way that the "harsh light" shines onto the trunk it appears to lose its form and appears "to be hanging like paintings on the walls". The lines between the object trunk and the object wall collapses, as the trunks "flattened themselves against the walls". This observation suggests that although the lines that divide objects as their form may

be fixed, one's perception of them may change and that for example, through "light", one can see these objects more closely, as being connected to each other. "Light" can be read as both literal and figurative. It is literally the light, in noun form, which comes from the light bulb, but it can also be a metaphorical light, in verb form, that ignites or sparks. Therefore, through light, one's perception and vision can be ignited to see things that do not truly exist. In this case, the trunks do not truly hang from the wall. Similarly, to the way that nations are not truly separated by borders or lines.

One of the ways in which the novel deconstructs the idea of the line is through strategic juxtaposition. It shows through structure and form that the lines that apparently separate people, places and events are nothing more than shadow lines. For example, Ghosh shows similarity between first world and third world conflicts. The Blitz in London is contrasted with the Partition in India and Pakistan (as well as Bangladesh). In both these instances, the outcomes were the same, namely, death. In London, May's uncle Alan dies when Germany drops bombs on London while in Dhaka, the narrator's uncle, Tridib, is murdered during riots between Calcutta and Dhaka. The first incident in London was about national boundaries while the second incident was about the conflict over religion.

Although the novel never explicitly states this similarity, it provides an indirect critique of colonialism through juxtaposing these seemingly separate devastating historical events. There are many examples in the novel that reference World War II. This is done largely through the London Blitz. The Second World War started in 1939 in Europe and was about redrawing national borderlines so that Germany could collapse its border with European borders in order for Germany to control all of Europe. *The Second World War: A Complete History* by Martin Gilbert documents the events that lead to the biggest global conflict: "Hitler's aim in invading Poland was not only to regain the territories lost in 1918. But he also intended to impose German rule on Poland" (Gilbert 3). Gilbert explains that

Hitler's strategy for war was the "Blitzkrieg", "lightning war" (2). *The Shadow Lines* shows how World War II was aimed at an expansion of national lines. The following extract from the novel provides an account of life during World War II by the narrator:

> Most of all he would despair because he could not imagine what it would be like to confront the most real of their realities: that within two years three of the four of them would be dead. The realities of the bombs and torpedoes and the dying was easy enough to imagine--mere events, after all, recorded in thousands of films and photographs and comic books.
>
> But not that other infinitely more important reality: the fact that they *knew*; that even walking down that street, that evening, they knew what was coming--not the details, nor the timing perhaps, but they knew, all four of them, that their world, and in all probability they themselves, would not survive the war. What is the colour of that knowledge? Nobody knows, nobody can ever know, not even in memory, because there are moments in time that are not knowable: nobody can ever know what it was like to be young and intelligent in the summer of 1939 in London or Berlin" (Ghosh 83).

The reality mentioned in the first sentence of this extract refers to World War II and the London Blitz, in particular, since the characters are in London at the time. The idea of imagination versus reality is contrasted thrice in this extract, which alludes to the blurry line between what one knows and what one can think of in one's imagination. In the first instance, while the narrator knows with certainty that there is a war, which has consequences that can result in loss of human life, he struggles to imagine what this imminent reality will

actually feel like. The fact that "their world…would not survive the war" signals a change in the perception of the world. The lines that demarcate the national border between Britain and Germany almost appear to collapse in this instance when the war's effect is that it destroys them all equally. The narrator acknowledges the effects of the war in both London and Berlin without prejudicing a specific national identity. The idea of national borders, lines on maps, have essentially been cause for conflict throughout history. Be it World War II or Partition, the drawing or attempts to redraw national borders have had a devastating impact on both the environment and the people.

In a postcolonial context, national borders are even more problematic since they were drawn by colonising powers. Tha'mma thinks that national identity and unity are achieved through war and bloodshed. She refers to World War II as an example of establishing a successful national identity. The following extract from the novel explains Tridib's calculation of Tha'mma and what she wanted from life, "All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power…" (Ghosh 96). The reality for Tha'mma in the novel, is that she experienced the hostility and division caused by the nationhood, which develops through Partition. This extract reflects serves as a rhetorical statement that challenges the role of borderlines in bringing about unity of nationhood, as its impact is more akin to abrupt division. Similarly, Amit Kumar suggests that the novel is "an inquiry into the logic of boundaries in the postcolonial context" (Kumar 69).

The Shadow Lines highlights the complexity lived by characters in the novel who find themselves straddling borders, having to cross borders to have the right national identity. Tha'mma for example, was born in Dhaka where she lived with her family till she was married and then moved to Calcutta with her husband. Tha'mma tells the narrator stories of her life with her family living in Dhaka. Tha'mma would visit Dhaka twice a year with her

husband until Partition took place, which restricted her movement from Calcutta where she married, to Dhaka, where she was born. Tha'mma develops a complex national identity as she grows old in Calcutta and makes it her home, but leaps for joy when she meets or hears about family and friends in Dhaka. Tha'mma considers Calcutta as her home since Dhaka becomes a Muslim-ruled country. When she finds out that her uncle is still alive living alone in Dhaka but that his house has been "occupied by refugees", Tha'mma says that, "[t]here's only one worthwhile thing left for me to do in my life now, she said. And that is to bring the old man home… And her eyes grew misty at the thought of rescuing her uncle from his enemies and bringing him back where he belonged, to her invented country" (167-8). The irony, as was discussed above, is that her uncle does not need rescuing. He is living peacefully with the "refugees" who in fact look after him. Her uncle is at home in Dhaka, where he and she were born and raised. The novel emphasises the problem with lines by suggesting that Tha'mma's sense of nationhood linked to Calcutta is based on an "invented country". The lines dividing Calcutta and Dhaka through Partition, are imagined lines.

Similarly, the novel shows imagined lines between Europe and the colonies, such as India for example. *The Shadow Lines* show how the national lines dividing Britain and India into separate nations actually overlap through cultural and political criss-crossing. When Britain colonised India, it left behind a legacy that extended beyond politics. However, as much as the British footprint is a part of India, India is a part of Britain. Material things like jewels and spices were physically taken from India to Britain. The lines separating Britain and India do not physically exist since one cannot completely separate the imperial centre from the colonial periphery. The novel is not suggesting, however, that there are no lines at all, rather that lines are constructed, are often not impermeable, and may be erased in the same way that they were constructed. The novel unsettles the lines between Europe and the colony suggesting that lines are complicated, constituted in stories, for instance, and shifting

– like the narrative lines of the novel. The narrator knows the British house that he has never been in through the story that Ila tells him and through the map of Mrs Price's house that she draws on the floor under a large table when the narrator and her are children playing "Houses" (223).

> …we're not in Raibajar, but in London, in Mrs Prices house in Lymington Road. I show him [Tridib] the way in, through the garden past the cherry tree…he knows exactly where to go. Of course. He knows the house much better than I do; he lived in it as a boy. (223)

This extract demonstrates how space is constitutive of the ideas of the novel. For example, space is more than just background. Place and space inform aesthetics, culture and politics in the novel. Mike Crang and N.J. Thrift argue that Michel Foucault's "geography" expresses the ways in which space and place are "inextricably bound up in history" (205). Britain is in India and India is in Britain through memory and imagination. However, Ghosh's novel shows other possibilities from which space and place can extend beyond history.

One way in which this is demonstrated in the novel is through the mechanism of stories and memories. In the extract the young narrator explains to Tridib through *his story*, "we're not in Raibajar, but in London". The narrator distinguishes between the physical space in which they are in (Raibajar) and the imagined place that they are in (London). The narrator then highlights the difference in "knowing". He argues that Tridib "knows" the house better than he does since Tridib "lived" in it as a boy. The difference between knowing through lived experience and knowing through stories is foregrounded. The house in London is more real to the narrator than to the people who live in the house. The lines separating different spaces are imagined lines that in the instance above, serves not to separate, but to merge

together. We see that borderlines and national lines do not always hold. We also come to appreciate the line as an imagined construct.

Up until this point I have thought of the line spatially, but one can also think of the line temporally in the novel. Although the language that we use to talk about time makes us think about the past as separate from the present, separated by a line, the novel challenges this idea by presenting time as shuttling backwards and forwards all the time. In doing so, the idea of the line between past and present is disrupted in the novel.

By using nonlinear time, *The Shadow Lines* foregrounds incidents that are problematised through its insistent emergence in the text. The novel's stories move back and forth from present time to the past. It spans three generations and moves fluidly across spaces from Calcutta to Dhaka and London. Throughout the novel, these three places are presented through their connectedness as well as their separateness. The narrator tells stories about people from his childhood till his adulthood. His uncle Tridib who incurs a sudden death during riots in Dhaka influences many of the stories that he tells. Khamar Jahan's essay, "Bridging Boundaries: Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*", explores the cultural crossings in the novel through his examination of *The Shadow Lines* as a novel that uses the metaphor of travel to blur the boundaries of time, space and place.

Through the stories, which move between time and space, the novel complicates the notion of fixed lines and boundaries. The lines are shadows that are self-reflective. The lines are also truth, which represent the complexity of knowing, or knowledge and forms of truth. For example, the narrator knows place (London) through stories. "I've known the streets around here for a long time too, I said…I knew already for the map was in my head…" (68-9) He belongs in the place through Tridib's stories. Belonging is created through lines in the stories. When the narrator visits England for the first time, forty years after it was bombed by Germany, he passes by a particular road that was bombed during the Blitz that he remembers

through the stories told to him by Tridib when they were children. The lines between past and present collapse in this moment when an imagined reality comes flashing back in the narrator's memory.

> I still could not believe in the truth of what I did see: the gold-green trees…I could see all of that, and yet, despite the clear testimony of my eyes, it seemed to me still that Tridib had shown me something truer about Solent Road a long time ago in Calcutta…(70-71)

The narrator questions the "truth" of what he "see[s]". There is tension between what the narrator sees with his own eyes and what he believes from his memory of the stories that Tridib told him. The irony in this instance is that for a moment the narrator does not believe what he sees, but rather has more belief in what his mind's eye has shown him. Truth is questioned when the narrator claims that "Tridib has shown me something truer". Why is it that Tridib's story about Solent Road being bombed by Germany holds more truth in the formation of the place than the present reality of the place?

Although this is the first time that the narrator physically visits the road in London, in his imagination and to his memory, he has visited the road "a long time ago in Calcutta". Time and space are interconnected. There is no line between what the narrator remembers about Solent Road during the Blitz and what he sees forty years later. The novel is metatextual as it refers to other texts and events interchangeably. In his book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* Gerard Genette explains the term metatextuality as "the relationship most often labelled "commentary" (4). The narrator's memory of the place and his experience of the place present a nuanced reality of Solent Road. The event is not fixed in

time, but has travelled, through stories and memories to Calcutta through Tridib to the narrator.

Ghosh's approach with writing *The Shadow Lines* is similar to postmodernism. Postmodernism emerged between the mid- to late twentieth century. Postmodernism developed with influences from the arts, philosophy, architecture and criticism. This period is well known for rejecting absolute truths and universalisms. Postmodernists such as Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco distinguished their texts through distancing their writing from absolute truths. Postmodernism is associated with scepticism, irony and schools of thought such as deconstruction and poststructuralism. Some of the major scholars in this period include Jacques Derrida, Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard. This period was especially concerned with form. In architecture, scholars rejected the notion of perfect form. In literature, postmodernism is marked by its rejection of absolute truths and its overarching exposure of multiplicity in perspectives and ideas. Given the earlier discussion of Tridib's stories in this chapter, it is quite clear how Ghosh demonstrates his rejection of absolute truths in the novel through blurring the lines of fact and fiction. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction,* Linda Hutcheon calls postmodernism in fiction "historiographic metafiction". She argues that postmodernism challenges "the notion of authorial originality and authority, to the separation of the aesthetic from the political" (Hutcheson xii). By drawing on Spivak, Derrida and Virginia Woolf, Hutcheson maintains postmodern literature is marked by a shifting perspective that is founded on respect for differences (Hutcheson 67). Although postmodernism is difficult to define, it is known for the rejection of only one narrative.

Many critics have read *The Shadow Lines* as a postmodern text. While *The Shadow Lines* is very strongly a postmodern novel it is important to highlight that Ghosh writes in a period of postcoloniality where his subjects are often in postcolonial settings. Unlike the

purely postmodern approach of erasing all lines, Ghosh's approach stops short of erasing all lines altogether. He unsettles lines, he blurs them, makes them fade so that what are left are "shadow lines". This unsettling of lines without making them disappear completely is Ghosh's postcolonial aesthetic of form. Ghosh's postcolonial approach to the lines that give form to identity is not to erase them completely since identities are an important part of collective ways of life in postcolonial contexts, and an important part of resistance to colonisation and globalisation. Instead, Ghosh, through exploration of the idea of the line, shows how lines and the identities thus constructed are complex: they are shadowy, blurred, permeable, curving, moving backwards and forwards.

One of the ways in which *The Shadow Lines* shows the "perforation" of lines in the novel is through questions of truth and memory. The line between what is considered truth and memory is demonstrated as shadowy as we see in May's recollection of Tridib's death. The novel reinforces the postmodern idea that there is no universal truth through its form. The story of Tridib's death is presented through a number of stories, which in the end, leaves the narrator with the choice of which story to believe. Scholar Marguerite Alexander explains that a postmodern ending withholds information or appears to be "cheating the reader" (3). In the instance of *The Shadow Lines* the details of Tridib's death are only revealed to the narrator and the reader towards the end of the novel. The narrator has dinner with May when she asks him, "Why haven't you ever asked me how Tridib died?" (Ghosh 306). May's question reaffirms the doubt surrounding the multiple stories regarding Tridib's death. At first, her question appears to hold answers and truth. "You should have asked, she said. It was your right and it is my duty to try to find an answer" (306). Although May explains the events that lead up to Tridib's death, "And they'd cut Tridib's throat, from ear to ear", she still sounds uncertain about the truth leaving room for interrogation about the facts of his death (307). She says it is her duty to "try to find an answer". Her tone of hesitation implies that she

is doubtful of her recollection of Tridib's death from her memory or from the "truth" about what she witnessed even though she was present when he was killed. The truth about how Tridib dies is not presented with certainty. There is a definite line of doubt represented through the perforation between memory and truth, but truth and lines are not erased completely.

The ending of *The Shadow Lines* questions the idea of an absolute truth by presenting May's "answer" to Tridib's death doubtfully.

> Do you think I killed him? she said. I stayed silent; I did not want to answer her. I used to think so too, she said. I thought I'd killed him…For years I was arrogant enough to think I owed him his life. But I know I didn't kill him; I couldn't have, if I'd wanted to. He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can't understand it, I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery. (308)

The repetition of the word "think" in the first half of the extract reflects what she "thought" and thinks as opposed to what she later "knows". The contrast between "thought" or an idea compared to "knowledge" or knowing, highlights the difference between different forms of understanding. The irony with this contrast is that there is less truth in the knowledge that May claims to have; "I know I didn't kill him", compared to the presence of truth in what she thinks; "I thought I'd killed him". This extract suggests that the lines between the words and their meaning are not fixed but are blurred. May's claim that, "He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice" contrasted to her statement that "any real sacrifice is a mystery" calls to question the idea of truth. She presents no clear reason why Tridib may have sacrificed himself, which she justifies by saying that sacrifice is a mystery. This still does not attend to the question of how she comes to "know" that she is not the reason why he

sacrificed himself. Bárbara Arizti Martín asserts, "Postmodernist endings, by withholding information from the readers, deny them the possibility of giving meaning to their lives, and reveal the narrative end not as "the moment of absolute truth" but as a convention" (3). Ghosh's ending to the novel is "postmodern" in that it denies the reader, narrator and May a moment of absolute truth at the ending. It instead alerts us to different versions of stories (and possibilities), the story that the narrator knows, the story that May "thinks" and the story that she "knows". But Ghosh does not expose the ending merely as a narrative convention. The truths revealed are more than just linguistic, narrative and genre conventions. They impact individual and collective lives. This implies that there are multiple positions, or lines of thought from which to establish truth and once again we see the "shadow line" presented as the postcolonial aesthetic of form in Ghosh's novel, rather than the complete erasure of lines, and the spaces and identities they form.

By presenting these multiple avenues of truth the novel forces us to question boundaries. Another form from which the novel questions boundaries is through unreliable narrators. For example, Tridib's stories, are questionable and there are no clear lines between what is fact and fiction. The narrator explains that, "Nobody was ever quite sure where they stood with Tridib: there was a casual self-mockery about many of the things he said which left his listeners uncertain about whether they ought to take what he said at face value or believe its opposite" (12). It is ironic that the truth about Tridib's stories are questioned here since the novel's narrator tells his own stories through the eyes of Tridib. Much of the narrator's stories, knowledge and memories are influenced by Tridib's stories and his time with his uncle. In the following extracts from the novel while Ila and the narrator are playing Houses, Ila starts crying because of an imagined incident she believes is real between her doll Magda and Nick Price. The young narrator tells Tridib that Ila is crying for nothing and it is "just a story" (223). Tridib tells the narrator, "everyone lives in a story, he says…because

stories are all there are to live in, it was just a question of which one you choose…" (224). The novel's self-reflexive form suggests that stories and narratives are questionable which indirectly calls to question the validity of the novel's own truths. The boundary outlining the truth about what is said and by who it is said is not fixed but blurry.

Postcolonial novels such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* are fully postmodern since they completely erase borderlines. For example, the character of Askar in *Maps* finally has no identity as a citizen subject since he is Somali and not Somali, adult and not adult, male and not male and Somalia is also shown to have no border. *Maps* presents the postmodern theme of fragmentation throughout the novel, but particularly in Askar who eventually comes to represent the fragmented self and nation. Tridib is unlike Askar in this sense. While he too represents a fragmented self and nation, Tridib shows the possibility of finding comfort and acceptance in a "perforated" identity. While there are similarities to what Ghosh does in *The Shadow Lines* to *Maps,* Ghosh's novel is a more strategic postmodernism which shows how lines are not simple borders, but cross continents and are sometimes looping, sometimes thin or thick, sometimes "perforated" and sometimes bold. Ghosh's novel suggests that almost nothing is as fixed as we imagine it to be and that even the most defined lines such as the geographical lines that make up the continent, are questionable and fluid.

The Shadow Lines does not claim to tell "the" truth, but instead challenges the reader, and narrator to interrogate the many versions of truth and identity within the novel and perhaps consider why and how it is that multiple perspectives can exist all at once. It is exactly through presenting the shadowy lines of truth that the novel's postcolonial aesthetic emerges which is important since one would not be able to stand up to historical, economic, and cultural power unless one had some sense of identity.

This chapter concludes that the aesthetic of form in *The Shadow Lines* is presented as a major concern for the novel. The novel discusses lines, borders and boundaries in many different ways, across space, place, time and identity. However, it is through the novel's self-reflexive critique of lines – not erased but blurred, which is presented consistently through the form of the novel – that *The Shadow Lines* presents the aesthetic of form as the art that is essential to the questions the book raises.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis discusses three novels by Amitav Ghosh: *The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide* and *The Shadow Lines.* Each of these novels reveals an aesthetic focus, which dominates that particular novel. For example, in *The Glass Palace,* it is through the universal appreciation of female beauty that a wider postcolonial aesthetic of beauty is contemplated. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh presents a global south nature aesthetic which shows the agency of nature and the inherent connectedness of all forms of existence in the world. This conception of nature, which has been foregrounded in western environmentalism in the recent period, is shown to be a part of the mythological stories of subaltern communities in the global south. In *The Shadow Lines*, the final novel studied, postmodern deconstruction of the idea of the boundary or border is modulated so that the narrative shows how the lines, which are supposed to separate countries, identities, cultures and religions, are shadowy. Tracing various lines in the novel, we see that lines are sometimes presented as blurred or perforated, moving in multiple directions, moving backwards and forwards and sometimes moving in circles.

Deepika Bahri is a professor of English at Emory University in the United States of America. Her work is focused on inter alia, postcolonial and world literature, political aesthetics and Frankfurt school critical theory. Bahri's book, *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics and Postcolonial Literature* (2003), suggests that there is a lack of engagement with *the crisis of postcolonial literature* in which its value, relevance and existence as a social form is at risk of being lost to our imagination. She explains in the extract below from the introduction of her book:

> This book is about the crisis of postcolonial literature, manifested in anxiety of its relevance, uncertainty about its value, and suspicions of the death of literature as a significant social form. At a stage in the development of capital when all that is solid seems predictably to be melting into air on a worldwide scale, and artistic expression is increasingly neglected by technological expansion and market considerations, the value of the aesthetic sphere as a distinctive activity threatens to dissolve pari passu. Although various and often mutually contradictory impulses characterise postcolonial theory and criticism, making the term *postcolonial* notoriously indefinable and definitive claims virtually impossible, it is nevertheless clear that a direct engagement with this crisis has yet to take shape. (Bahri 1, emphasis in original)

In the extract above, Bahri describes the symptoms of the crisis of postcolonial literature in relation to the crisis of capitalism and artistic expression at large. She suggests that technological expansion and market considerations are taking preference over art and the aesthetic sphere. Most importantly, Bahri suggests that there is no clear direct engagement with the crisis of postcolonial literature. My study on Amitav Ghosh's aesthetic shows how his three novels engage the crisis of postcolonial literature, which according to Bahri, is a lack of engagement with the aesthetic. Ghosh expands on Bahri's argument that the aesthetic in postcolonial literature is a valuable, relevant and important social form from which one can imagine and think about social and political justice.

In raising questions that discuss the multiple facets of postcolonial literature that explore its significance as a social form, Bahri begins her own engagement with the purpose of aesthetics in postcolonial literature. The extract above confronts the controversial existence of the term "postcolonial" by highlighting it as impossibly "indefinable and definitive". Ghosh prefers to not classify his work as postcolonial since he says there is a

dominant tendency to assume that the content of his work has to do with colonialism only, which for him, is restrictive. There is no doubt that Ghosh evades the postcolonial stereotype since his work spans categories involving love, family, travel, art, architecture and much more. The historical, colonial and postcolonial definitely feature in his work but do not consume its entirety. My study on Ghosh's postcolonial aesthetics show how *The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide* and *The Shadow Lines* all reveal aesthetic considerations such as female beauty, the appreciation of nature and the form of the novel and in doing so, push any traditional boundaries of what is conceived as postcolonial.

Ghosh's novels exemplify "the value of the aesthetic sphere", as Bahri puts it. In *The Glass Palace* for instance, the aesthetic comes to mean beauty, specifically female beauty, which is universally recognised across cultures and time. The beauty of Dolly in the novel extends beyond its initial representation when it signifies hope, love and justice in other characters such as Rajkumar and Dinu. Dolly's physical beauty is mirrored in her personality by virtue of her kindness and peaceful nature. These same virtues are highlighted in the Burmese political leader Aung Sang Suu Kyi towards the end of the novel. Suu Kyi comes to represent the possibility of freedom and liberation for the oppressed Burmese people because through her beauty, she inspires hope for a socially just future. Suu Kyi's physical beauty is similar to Dolly's beauty in *The Glass Palace.* Aesthetics forms part of a utopian desire for improvement in quality of life and status as well as for hope towards better social development in poor working class communities. In my view, Ghosh sufficiently lifts the conception of female beauty outside of the sense in which it may be used to objectify women, which allows the novel to rebut feminist critique.

The aesthetic sphere is not only active in *The Glass Palace,* but is of significant value in drawing attention to questions of political and social injustice in communities in the global south. Through his focus on female beauty in *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh engages the crisis in

postcolonial literature by activating the aesthetic and revealing its relevance to questions of social justice in the global south. Aesthetic innovation in postcolonial literature shows its potential to contribute novel ideas to social justice.

Ghosh's nature aesthetic in *The Hungry Tide* shows how subaltern communities from the global south have a historically fundamental understanding of the importance of the appreciation of nature to survival. The appreciation of nature comes from culturally based mythologies that inform local communities about the necessity of all living forms in order to balance the ecosystem. Modern communities fail to recognise the agency of nature in *The Hungry Tide*, which is what activates and sustains the environmental decay of the Sundarbans in the novel. Ghosh foregrounds nature as the aesthetic focus in *The Hungry Tide*. It is the beauty and terror of nature that inspires the appreciation of nature as an independent force in the novel. Ghosh suggests that we go back to basics by recognising local narratives in the global south as a source of aesthetic innovation that can teach us how to manage climate change and ultimately survive the environmental and social collapse that is a reality today. The appreciation of nature as the primary focus of my study in *The Hungry Tide,* shows how Ghosh engages the aesthetic in postcolonial literature by emphasising concerns such as climate change, which is relevant to us all, because as Ghosh demonstrates, it effects everyone, both human and non-human.

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* engages the aesthetic most interestingly through the form of the narrative. The novel has a non-linear narrative style that ultimately shows the collapse in national lines and borders as well as notions of linear identity. Line means the geographical borders but also the individually imagined boundaries of identity and nation that were forged through colonial powers to separate people, places and opportunities from one another. The aesthetic innovation in *The Shadow Lines* is the novel's self-reflexivity which demonstrates how individuals and collective identities are relational and flexible, not bound

by geographical or imagined colonial border lines. Ghosh's novel shows through the intergenerational life stories of his characters, how the lines that define individual and national identity are blurred because they can never be fixed in time. Examples of the separation of families as a result of the Partition, demonstrate the perforations in national and individual identity. A family that traces its origins in one city suddenly gets separated and assigned a fixed national identity during Partition after some members of the family moved to a different city to work. The absurdity of borderlines and boundaries are exposed in *The Shadow Lines* through the narrative non-linear style that continuously interrogate notions of fixed identities. This novel presents an aesthetic innovation that once again contributes to social justice by unveiling misrepresentations of boundaries as immovable fixtures.

Ghosh's three novels engage the crisis of postcolonial literature by employing the aesthetic in the global south context, which also provide the opportunity to address social justice concerns. Bahri's book, argues that postcolonial literature needs to be read as not only postcolonial but also as literature: "Although all literature may be said to bear the watermark of history, the intermeshing of sociopolitics with artistic and intellectual expression is seen as a distinctive and defining attribute to what we recognise as 'postcolonial'" (Bahri 11). She suggests that beyond the postcolonial, lies an aesthetic innovation in literature. My study explores the aesthetic innovation in the postcolonial literary novels: *The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide* and *The Shadow Lines,* by Amitav Ghosh.

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