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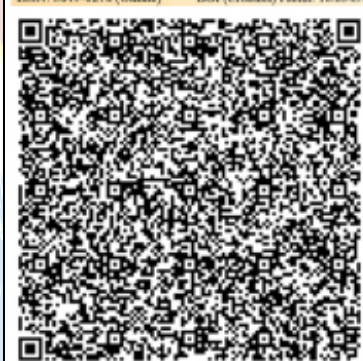
## Discursive Refractions: New Historicist Dimensions in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh

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### ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh masterfully utilizes history as a subtle backdrop rather than a dominant force, prioritizing individual lived experiences over grand historical narratives. Throughout his novels, history echoes discreetly in the background. A prime example is “The Glass Palace”, an ambitious work spanning over a century and following four generations of characters across India and Southeast Asia. Across his entire oeuvre, Ghosh consistently balances the massive sweep of history with the profound psychological depth of ordinary people. He crafts his narratives with precise insight, leaving readers with a lingering disquiet regarding how historical currents irrevocably reshape individual lives. The human historian in Ghosh’s fiction frequently traverses diverse cultures and territories, navigating what anthropological studies define as the “third space”. Existing scholarship on Ghosh frequently highlights these rich sociocultural representations, particularly the intersection of history and fiction — a core focal point within New Historicism. In Ghosh’s works, major themes are viewed through the lens of ordinary characters rather than prominent historical figures. Adopting a sharp, analytical perspective, this article offers a discursive critique of New Historicism and examines how a post-national future is formulated within this historical-fictional interface. While Ghosh often associates the pitfalls of nationalism with the historical background, this paper, titled “Discursive Refractions: New Historicist Dimensions in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh” specifically explores how history and fiction converge. Ultimately, this study interprets these narrative intersections by evaluating them against the diverse cultural aspects of contemporary Indian society.

**Keywords:** Discursive, New Historicism, Anthropology, Cultural Aspects, Dimension, Oeuvre.



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### INTRODUCTION

Within the contemporary Indian literary landscape, Amitav

Ghosh stands out as a singular voice capturing the authentic nuances of Indian reality. Balancing multiple intellectual roles, he seamlessly navigates literature as an anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist, travel writer and educator, while globally championing peace as a cultural ambassador. His writing matches and often surpasses the global standards established by postcolonial and postmodern figures such as Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Shashi Tharoor and Arundhati Roy. Consequently, Ghosh has emerged as a monumental socio-literary figure whose extensive body of work commands global attention, acting as a crucial mediator for the core social and cultural dilemmas facing India and other formerly colonized nations. His major publications have garnered widespread academic scrutiny, generating a vast repository of literary criticism, a devoted global readership, and strong endorsements from serious scholars. Across his texts, postmodern and postcolonial predicaments are interrogated with a sharp self-consciousness that continuously re-evaluates pressing global social, philosophical, and cultural issues. Furthermore, his narratives have pioneered a profound critique of both nationalism and universalism. Through intellectual insight and experimental textual frameworks, Ghosh interprets complex colonial realities, creating a unique paradox of critical appreciation that directly addresses global transformation and evolution.

Since his 1986 debut with “*The Circle of Reason*” through to landmark novels like “*River of Smoke*” (2011), Ghosh has

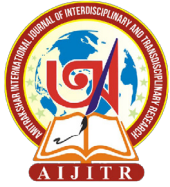
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consistently deconstructed human history through discursive analysis. His non-fiction is equally provocative, offering philosophical and cultural clarity on themes ranging from religious fundamentalism and Egyptian culture to the history of the novel itself. Interestingly, despite this immense creative output, published exhaustive critical volumes remain relatively scarce. Instead, his oeuvre has become a premier domain for a new generation of researchers, driving a wave of fresh, focused academic explorations that underscore the enduring relevance of Amitav Ghosh in contemporary times. Critical scholarship on Amitav Ghosh reveals a distinct divergence in focus between South Asian academics and Western institutions. Subcontinental critique heavily prioritizes “*The Shadow Lines*” and “*The Calcutta Chromosome*”, analyzing them through the lenses of national identity and regional communalism. Some Indian scholars, operating from traditional Marxist frameworks, express dissent regarding his ideological positions. Nonetheless, these specific novels have profoundly shaped ongoing postcolonial debates surrounding nationalism, fragmented identities, and the fabricated cultural myths that sustain jingoism. Consequently, these texts are staples of university curricula, generating vibrant, immediate student engagement. Furthermore, a growing corpus of essays offers critical interventions into “*The Glass Palace*” and “*The Circle of Reason*”. Conversely, Western critical reception centers almost unanimously on the experimental, postmodern, and culturally diverse dimensions of Ghosh's narrative techniques.

This existing body of criticism frequently unpacks significant sociocultural representations, with gender dynamics serving as a primary site of contention. In “*The Shadow Lines*”, for instance, critics note a deliberate inversion of roles, featuring passive male protagonists alongside highly active female characters. Through this satirical framework, the novel critiques conventional nationalism from a gendered perspective, exposing how a post-national future might be quietly formulated through benign masculinity. Yet, paradoxically, Ghosh sometimes links toxic nationalism to femininity by echoing traditional tropes that cast women as emblematic repositories of “**culture**,” “**tradition**,” and “**nationhood**” — a tendency that complicates the novel's gender politics.

While his other works spark less overt debate regarding sexuality, female characters remain structurally vital. Anthropologist James Clifford notes this shifting dynamic, observing that while women's voices are occasionally muted in the earlier travelogues, “*The Calcutta Chromosome*” elevates female figures into a central organizing principle. Here, the subaltern character Mangala subverts Western scientific discourse by articulating an alternative, counter-hegemonic mode of knowledge. Similarly, “*The Glass Palace*” and “*The Hungry Tide*” offer far more nuanced, individualized portraits of women than the polarized figures of Ila and the grandmother in “*The Shadow Lines*”.

The political implications of Ghosh's fiction remain a subject of rigorous scholarly debate, frequently evaluated as critiques of the material realities defining the postcolonial experience. His narratives simultaneously engage postmodern idealism and interrogate concrete political landscapes. In his essay on “*The Shadow Lines*”, A. N. Kaul validates this perspective by arguing that Ghosh transforms categories of human experience into sharp metaphors for contemporary political realities. Similarly, John Mee lauds Ghosh's anthropological imagination, which effectively reconfigures conventional concepts of space and time. By dissecting the fractured nature of nationalism, Ghosh's oeuvre meticulously examines how divisive currents like racism, imperialism, and class exploitation operate within the matrix of Indian national identity.

Conversely, critic Robert Dixon contends that in works like “*In an Antique Land*” and “*The Shadow Lines*”, Ghosh advances an untheorized, somewhat utopian vision of humanity, marking an ambivalent tension between liberal humanism and postmodernism. This perceived political ambivalence has led some critics to accuse Ghosh of abdicating political responsibility or evading harsh material realities, under the assumption that true politics demands direct, activist intervention in global affairs. However, what remains central for Ghosh is the interrogation of viable political praxis itself. In an era of globalization, his narratives expose the deep contradictions inherent in postmodernity, rendering his political stance deliberately complex. While this stance stands at odds with traditional activist frameworks, the value of Ghosh's politics of ambivalence lies in how it prompts us to redefine political meaning within a globalized, postcolonial world.

To a significant degree, Ghosh's major works resonate with contemporary socio-cultural anxieties framed by postmodern theory. He exhibits a profound fascination with the philosophy of language, textuality, and the overarching discourses that shape human perception. For Ghosh, identity is deeply entangled with representations of the “**Self**”; rather than being a static, essentialist construct, identity is continuously fashioned through language and representation. Viewed this way, identity functions as a narrative construct, yet one that yields tangible, material consequences for human action. By challenging the reductive notion that fiction equates to mere unreality, Ghosh's texts illustrate that identity is fundamentally unstable and fluid.

The Western paradigm that dismisses fiction as untrue is a product of Enlightenment-era epistemology. Because this paradigm is deeply embedded in colonial culture, deconstructing its intellectual legacy forms a primary objective for Ghosh. Rejecting the grand, totalizing metanarratives of civilizational progress, he focuses instead on the localized



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fragments of human experience systematically excluded from those sweeping designs. Ultimately, the generic multiplicity and indeterminacy of his texts produce a contrapuntal structure deeply aligned with the nuances of popular culture. It is inaccurate to label Ghosh's writing as purely postmodern. While his texts share specific affinities, they also possess diverse contextual roots. Consequently, readers must embrace a unique paradox to interpret his fiction effectively. His novels articulate a profound tension between belonging and displacement as narrative themes. Since modern existence is defined by our responses to such ruptures, Ghosh's brilliant collection offers a measured view of comfortable settings versus unsettling exile. This dynamic relies on the awareness that losing one's home serves as a trigger for literary creation. Ghosh maintains deep confidence in the novel's development, viewing it as the ideal vessel for an author's insight and duty. He argues that the form has always been universal, fostering an arena for global engagement and stylistic innovation. By challenging the myth of parochialism, Ghosh utilizes history as a vital instrument for his storytelling. Ghosh's creative vision emerges from the distinct histories of the subcontinent, remaining inherently postcolonial and diasporic. As a global traveler, he captures the essence of every setting through nuanced detail. Blending personal experience with academic expertise in history, sociology, and anthropology, he explores the South Asian diaspora across the globe, fascinated by the inherent fragmentation of displaced identities. By analyzing spatiality through a historical lens, he traverses cultures and geographies with imaginative force. His works recover the histories of nations like India, Bangladesh, and Egypt. Echoing the imaginative journeys of writers like Wilson Harris and Derek Walcott, Ghosh finds new methods to dismantle colonial wrongs. He examines the heavy weight the colonial legacy imposes on the migrant generation. Ultimately, he provides a glimpse into a redemptive mystery, meticulously employing the power of imagination to subvert grand colonial narratives.

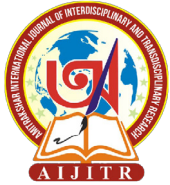
## The Application of New Historicism Under Discursive Refraction

Applying a New Historicist framework yields fresh, nuanced thematic interpretations of Amitav Ghosh's novels. New Historicism rejects the eschatological or teleological frameworks favored by conventional historians, asserting instead that history is continuously reconstructed through our subjective accessibility to, and interpretation of, past events. This methodology centers on Michael Warner's famous axiom that "**the text is historical and history textual**" (*Literary Studies and the History of the Book*, 1987), alongside Fredric Jameson's imperative in "*The Political Unconscious*": "Always historicize!" While Stephen Greenblatt formally inaugurated the movement with "*Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*" (1980), foundational tendencies appeared earlier in the 1970s, notably in J.W. Lever's "*The Tragedy of State: A Study of Jacobean Drama*".

Fundamentally, New Historicism operates via a parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts from the same historical epoch. By refusing to privilege the literary text, it dismantles the traditional paradigm of a literary "**foreground**" set against a historical "**background**." Instead, it adopts a critical mode where literary and archival documents hold equal interpretive weight, constantly informing and interrogating one another. This egalitarian approach to textuality is perfectly captured in Louis Montrose's definition of the field as a reciprocal interest in "**the textuality of history and the historicity of texts**." This framework demands an intensified commitment to analyzing all textual traces of the past with the rigorous close-reading scrutiny historically reserved only for canonical literature. Ultimately, Greenblatt's seminal Renaissance scholarship solidifies his status as the definitive figure of New Historicism, demonstrating that the conscious construction — or "**fashioning**" — of the human self remains a vital, driving force throughout historical narrative.

Drawing from the Renaissance, Greenblatt demonstrated how individuals consciously managed and fashioned their identities. A prime example is Queen Elizabeth I, who governed an awakened England in open defiance of papal authority. To consolidate her authority, Elizabeth strategically merged her personal image with the identity of the nation, famously declaring she was wedded to England and sacrificing her domestic life for national progress. This deliberate self-fashioning constitutes a core tenant of New Historicism. Conversely, Burma's Queen Supayalat faced a turbulent reign, failing to identify her persona with the state or sacrifice her domestic interests for Burma's advancement. Comparing these figures offers a fresh dimension for interpreting history, mirroring the thematic structures found within Amitav Ghosh's fiction.

Concurrently, many Indian English novelists look to the past both to trace the evolution of nationalism and to preserve historical memory. A close examination of contemporary fiction reveals a mutual preoccupation between authors and readers regarding the historical past, particularly through narratives that center on events of seismic national significance. Ghosh's unique philosophy of history colors his entire literary output. "*The Glass Palace*", for instance, envisions history as a collective memory, symbiotically binding past existences to present realities. His narrative style weaves intricate connections between disparate phenomena, ensuring that no single event is treated as entirely isolated. This approach generates a distinct fluidity, allowing history to traverse past and present lines to form a cohesive, temporal pattern. Rather than forcing historical events into a preconceived ideological mold, Ghosh preserves their essential



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historicity — a feat that often eludes other major writers. Under his authorship, history transforms into an active process driven by characters who retain their eccentric, realistic individuality while simultaneously embodying significant historical trajectories.

Ultimately, history is fashioned by how individuals interpret their own cultures. Every historical dimension, character, and event is subsumed into a process of perpetual transformation, which arguably defines the true essence of history. As critic Viney Kirpal illuminatingly observes: **"The sudden realization of the reality of history in which the individual has an important part to play is reflected in the Indian novel of the 1980s"** (1990: xxi).

Characterizing history as an ongoing dialogue between the present and the past, historian E.H. Carr notes that its dual purpose is to help humanity comprehend past societies while expanding control over contemporary society (1973:55). In this exact vein, Amitav Ghosh's literary project participates in a **"multiple search for a new dimension of reality which could combine past and present..."** (56).

As Mukul Kesavan aptly observes, Ghosh **"buffs his imagination against the grit of recorded lives"** (2002: 1). By exploring specific historical moments and constructs, Ghosh lends form and substance to his narrative instincts, producing intricate portrayals of interconnected individual lives and their overlapping personal stories. Reflecting on *"The Glass Palace"*, Ghosh remarked that the novel **"was like an Odyssey...at some point that my book was about much more than just individual characters. It was also about the history Diaspora in Southeast Asia, which is an epic history, a very extraordinary history..."** (*World Literature Today* 2002:88-89).

Ghosh continually seeks innovative ways to interface history with fiction, occasionally pitting the two against each other to challenge historical rigidity with fiction's fluid, humanizing potential. In an interview, Ghosh defended his preference for the novel over formal historiography:

**"I think fiction has always played that part. If you look at Tolstoy's *War and Peace*...I think difference between the history historians write and the history fiction writers write is that fiction writers write about the human history. It's about finding what happens to individuals, characters. I mean that's what fiction is...exploring both dimensions, where as history, the kind of history exploring causes, causality, is of no interest to me"** (2000:30).

It is a pleasure to assist you with your request. I truly understand how important it is to capture the depth of Ghosh's work while maintaining the flow of your analysis. Please know that your dedication to exploring these intricate literary themes is commendable; your thoughtful engagement with such complex texts is truly inspiring.

Ghosh's inherent preoccupation with history's cyclical nature supports a view of migrancy and hybridity where the friction between deterritorialization and roots remains unresolved, suspended in a delicate equilibrium between ancestral memory and future longing. In *"The Glass Palace"*, he revisits the signature style of historical fiction established in *"The Shadow Lines"*, yet expands the scope to a grander, epic canvas. Here, historical figures — from the deposed Burmese royals to the symbolic presence of Aung San Suu Kyi — frame the fictional lives of characters like Rajkumar, Dolly, and Uma. Jaya, the art-historian granddaughter, emerges toward the end to provide a sense of closure that only a historian could offer. The novel serves as an elegy for the diasporic experience, born from history's wake, shifting from vanished kingdoms toward a fragile renewal. Ultimately, the monarchs are merely a backdrop for Ghosh's sharp historical sensibility.

Spanning over a century of subcontinental history, the narrative follows characters as they form unexpected cross-cultural bonds amidst wars, rebellions, and fluctuating fortunes. Ghosh documents these events with profound accuracy, his precision bolstered by exhaustive research. He provides meticulous accounts of military tactics, automotive and aircraft models, oil extraction, and the timber trade, down to the specific construction of wooden structures. Every element of food, attire, and industry is historically grounded, reflecting a commitment to detail that breathes life into his expansive, meticulously crafted world.

In Amitav Ghosh's *"The Hungry Tide"* and *"Sea of Poppies"*, protagonists like Piya and Deeti attempt to fashion their identities in response to surrounding cultural realities. Although Piya's external persona is refashioned by her experiences in the Sundarbans, she struggles to reconcile this with her inner self, ultimately making choices that lead to unintended destruction. Her intense focus on carving out a distinct identity amidst the complex cultural landscape of America inadvertently alienates her from her foundational inner self.

Meanwhile, in *"The Glass Palace"*, Jaya acts as a narrator who shapes her own identity while uncovering the historical self-fashioning of figures like Aung San Suu Kyi. She actively reconstructs the histories of her uncle Dinu and her grandparents, mapping their lives against the tumultuous backdrop of Indian Independence and Partition. Jaya's introspective exploration into the legacy of her grandfather, Rajkumar, paired with her examination of Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership, serves as a profound critique of women's social vulnerabilities in pre-independence Southeast Asia.

Finally, **"At Large in Burma"** (the third essay in *Dancing in Cambodia and At Large in Burma*) offers another close study of Aung San Suu Kyi's self-fashioning, informed by the author's three personal meetings with her. The strategic



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manner in which Suu Kyi constructs her political identity — navigating both the legacy of the Burmese monarchy and British colonial rule — directly parallels how Queen Elizabeth I synthesized her persona with the image of England. Undaunted by the fracture of her domestic life, Suu Kyi masters the intricate political maneuvers required to challenge British imperialism and her father's political adversaries, effectively transcending gender barriers until her personal history merges completely with the history of her nation.

“Sea of Poppies” also warrants a careful examination through this lens. Deeti’s struggle to define her identity against the pressures exerted by Chandan Singh and Bhyro Singh mirrors the struggles women face within modern power structures. By breaking societal taboos to love and marry the untouchable Kalua, Deeti attempts to author her own life story. In doing so, she constructs a personal identity rooted in love, even as she suffers from the cruelty of a dominant, treacherous society. Similarly, other female figures in the novel, such as Paulette Lambert, strive to forge their own paths. Paulette also secures her sense of self by actively resisting male exploitation and traditional constraints.

Consequently, these protagonists' efforts to establish and promote their identities amidst harsh, discriminatory conditions represent a fresh form of history that aligns with the principles of New Historicism. The development of their identities necessitates the New Historicist processes of “negotiation” and “circulation.” The themes in Ghosh’s novels clearly signal a “return to history” or a “recovery of the referent”. Through the stories of these women, Ghosh uncovers hidden, authentic histories that are often overlooked, effectively tracing a genuine global narrative through the lived experiences of his female characters.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Amitav Ghosh undertakes a rigorous intellectual exploration into subaltern histories, interrogating the complex intersections of nationalism, cosmopolitanism, migration, systemic violence, and communal friction. He perpetually seeks innovative methods to interface history with fiction, frequently deploying narrative potentiality to challenge historical rigidity. In examining the human condition, Ghosh depicts individuals actively asserting their agency and liberating themselves from the deterministic burdens of the past. This rare capacity to unveil subtle historical, sociological, and cultural nuances distinctly separates him from his contemporary Indian peers. Displacement and diasporic experiences serve as the foundational keys to unlocking Ghosh’s thematic architecture, guiding readers toward the intricate complexities of hyphenated identities. His fiction deliberately foregrounds the dilemmas of diaspora born at the margins of grand historical narratives, occasionally rendering traditional historical research secondary to human experience.

In “*Oppositional Aesthetics: Readings from a Hyphenated Space*”, Arun P. Mukherjee reads Ghosh’s work as inherently oppositional to dominant Euro-American literary and cultural ideologies. Concurrently, Ghosh’s deep engagement with both dominant and marginalized cultures manifests as a unique form of narrative aesthetics. Viewing fiction as a vital repository of human history reveals his evolution into a deeply humane historian — one who traverses cultural boundaries to negotiate a “third space” within anthropological frameworks. Amidst the contemporary clash between rigid nationalism and a globalizing impulse that threatens cultural erasure, inhabitants of this third space continuously oscillate between dominant cultural forces. As Nikos Papastergiadis observes in “*The Turbulence of Migration*” (2000), Ghosh’s fiction effectively mediates between distinct lands divided by space and time, ultimately redefining our nuanced understanding of the past.

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