UNIT 8: AMITAV GHOSH: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1 Learning Objectives

8.2 Introduction

8.3 Amitav Ghosh: The Author

8.3.1 His Life

8.3.2 His Works

8.4 Let us Sum up

8.5 Further Reading

8.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

8.7 Model Questions

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- familiarise yourself with the expatriate writer from India, Amitav Ghosh
- provide a description of the fictional and nonfictional works by Ghosh
- locate Ghosh and his works in the gamut of Indian English Literature

8.2 INTRODUCTION

You must have heard about the name of Amitav Ghosh—that expatriate Indian author who gave a new visibility to the idea of India in the whole world through his contributions to Contemporary Indian Writing in English (CIWE). Mostly known as a social anthropologist, Amitav Ghosh has so far written many novels, travel narratives and journalistic documents and many essays. His novel *The Shadow Lines* won the Sahitya Akademi award, India's most coveted literary prize. Let us now discuss in details the life and works of Amitav Ghosh.

8.3 AMITAV GHOSH: THE AUTHOR

In the following subsections we will read about the life and works of this famous author of Indian origin.

8.3.1 His Life



Expatriate: an expatriate is a person temporarily or permanently residing in a country and culture other than that of the person's upbringing.

This subsection introduces you to the life history of Amitav Ghosh (1956-) who has by now established himself as one of the best regarded of the ***expatriate*** Indian authors writing in English. Born in 1956 in Kolkata, Amitav Ghosh has been raised and educated at different places like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran, Egypt, India and the United Kingdom. His father was in the Indian army and this enabled Ghosh as a child to come across different cultures in diverse locales. Ghosh completed his schooling from Doon School (Dehra Dun) where he was a younger contemporary of another very famous Indian writer like Vikram Seth. After graduating from St. Stephens College, New Delhi in 1976 with a B.A. degree in History, he obtained an M.A. in Sociology from the University of Delhi in 1978. Then he went to St. Edmund Hall, Oxford and in 1979, obtained a diploma in Social Anthropology. Ghosh also spent some time at Tunis where he learnt Arabic. He was awarded the prestigious Oxford D. Phil in Social Anthropology for his thesis on "Kinship in Relation to the Economic and Social Organization of an Egyptian Village Community" in 1981. In 1999, Ghosh joined the faculty at Queen's College in the City University of New York as distinguished Professor in Comparative Literature. He has also been a visiting professor to the English Department of Harvard University since 2005. It is very difficult to label his works. Basically a social anthropologist, Amitav Ghosh's fame lies in his being a historian, a fiction writer and a journalist. His works are attributed to a number of themes. It needs to be mentioned that his pursuit of Social Anthropology and his subsequent visit to Egypt to do field work for his doctoral thesis had a shaping influence on him as a writer. His experiences would eventually shape into one of his most important works *In An Antique Land* (1992). Amitav Ghosh has received many accolades in the form of many of his books winning different literary prizes in India and abroad and becoming a part of the syllabus at several universities. He was

awarded the Prix Medicis Etranger for *The Circle of Reason* (1986), the Sahitya Akademi Award for *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the Arthur C. Clarke Prize for *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), the Pushcart Prize for his essay, "The March of the Novel through History: My father's Bookcase" and the Grand Prize for Fiction at the Frankfurt International e-book awards for *The Glass Palace*. He was awarded the Padma Shri by the Indian Government in 2007. You should note that as the centre of intellectual and cultural activities Calcutta helped in shaping identities through Bengali cultural imagination. Established by the British as a trading outpost for their operations in India, Calcutta became the richest city in Asia and the second most important city in the British India. With wealth, power and privilege Calcutta soon became the cultural and intellectual hub along with which there developed a vibrant, modern vernacular culture. While reading Amitav Ghosh in detail in your future career, you will get to know how his Calcutta background later shaped him as a world famous writer. He has been a Fellow at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

8.3.2 His Works

In this sub-section, we shall acquaint you briefly with some of the major works of Amitav Ghosh. This will give you a fair idea about his literary output and enable you to identify his major themes and concerns.

If we arrange his novels chronologically by the order of their publication, it will be like this-*The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1990), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *Countdown* (1999), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2010). In addition to these fictional works, Ghosh has also authored a travelogue entitled *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998), and two collections of essays *In an Antique Land* (1992) and *The Imam and the Indian* (2002) which deal with various themes such as cross-cultural

matrix, literature and fundamentalism. Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* displays an innovation at the level of form with a blending of fiction, history, anthropological and travel records.



Migrancy: it is the fact, condition, or phenomenon of habitual movement from one place of residence to another.

Ghosh's first published novel *The Circle of Reason* uses the oral tradition of story-telling as its narrative device. This book is also Ghosh's first attempt at exploring the complications of ***migrancy*** and the displaced identities—a major issue to be discussed in detail in his next novel *The Shadow Lines*. However, Ghosh's first three novels reveal his experimentation with a diversity of forms and genres–for example, Magic Realism and the picaresque in *The Circle of Reason*, impressionistic family history in *The Shadow Lines* and a mélange of detection and science fiction in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. *The Calcutta Chromosome* presents an intriguing plot with a blending of science fiction, medical mystery, an engrossing tale of malaria research. Ghosh's fictions have exhibited a remarkable geographical spread, taking in, India, the Gulf Region and Algeria for *The Circle of Reason*; India, Bangladesh and the UK for *Shadow Lines*; India and the United States for *The Calcutta Chromosome*; and Burma, India and Malaya, for *The Glass Palace*. The scope of *The Hungry Tide*, on the other hand, is much limited compared to Ghosh's other novels, as it homes in on the human and natural ecosystems of a small and highly particular area of India, the Sundarbans, though also taking account of the wider world through characters hailing from Delhi and US. As you have already read in the above paragraph, Ghosh has also penned prose-collections like *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*, *Countdown on India's Nuclear Policy*, and *The Imam and the Indian*– a large collection of essays on different themes such as fundamentalism, history of the novel, Egyptian culture, and literature. Ghosh's latest works of fiction are *Sea of Poppies* and *Rivers of Smoke* the first two books of his supposed IBIS trilogy— an epic saga, set just before the ***Opium Wars*** encapsulating the colonial history of the East. *Sea of Poppies* was shortlisted for the 2008 Booker Prize. Ghosh's fiction is characterised by strong themes that may be somewhat identified with ***Post-colonialism*** but could be labeled as historical novels.



Post-colonialism: an academic discipline responding to the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism.



LET US KNOW

Opium War : The Opium Wars, which is also known as the Anglo-Chinese War was fought between China and the British Empire due to the promotion of opium trade by the British in China. The Opium Wars comprises The First Opium War of 1839-42 and the Second Opium War of 1854-58.

Thought in terms of Ghosh's literary preoccupations, it becomes clear that while writing his fictional and nonfictional works, you will find that he is greatly influenced by the stories of Partition, Independence and the World War II and how the impression of such events on him influenced his writings in later years. Ghosh makes historical consciousness a part of his career as a writer. As Novy Kapadia writes: "The major influences on him were the stories of his father, the World War II (1939-1945), and the Indians in British Indian army fighting against the Germans or the Japanese". From his father, Ghosh learnt that the Indian officers and soldiers had ambivalent feelings about serving the colonial army. Many of them even realised that with the support of the Indians the British would not have been able to rule the subcontinent. This aspect of historical reality fascinated Ghosh, and it helped him construct the concept of freedom and its connotations in the modern world as reflected in a novel like *The Shadow Lines*.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Say True or false:

a. Amitav Ghosh is basically a social anthropologist.

b. Ghosh did not receive any diploma from St. Edmund Hall, Oxford.

c. Ghosh won Sahitya Akademi award for his novel *The Shadow Lines.*

d. Ghosh is presently working on his IBIS trilogy.

e. The novel *Calcutta Chromosome* is based on Maleria Research.

f. Amitav Ghosh has so far written 10 novels.

Q 2: Fill in the blanks:

a. *In an Antique Land* is a book on Ghosh's visit to.....

b. Ghosh received the coveted ..... Prize for *The Calcutta Chromosome*.

c. For his essay..... Amitav Ghosh received the Pushcart Prize.

d. Ghosh uses the oral tradition of story-telling as its narrative device in .....

Q 3: Name some of the important works by Amitav Ghosh.

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Q 4: State the context of Amitav Ghosh's *Hungry Tides.*

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8.4 LET US SUM UP

After reading this unit, you have become aware of the expatriate writer, Amitav Ghosh. Apart from the writer and his life, his major works are also now well known to you.His works reflect mostly his preoccupations with Partition, Independence and the World War II. You have also noted that he has a fascination for historical reality. He has won several coveted awards both in India and abroad and is one of the most widely read writer.



8.5 FURTHER READING

1. Hawley, John C. (2005). *Amitav Ghosh: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Foundation Books.
2. Hind, Wassef Alif.(1998). "Beyond the Divide: History and National Boundaries in the Work of Amitav Ghosh" in *Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 18, Post-Colonial Discourse in South Asia pp. 75-95.

3. Khair, Tabish. (ed.) (2003). *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion*. Delhi: Permanent Black.
4. Khair, Tabish. (2001).*Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
5. Kapadia Novy (Ed). (2001). *Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines.* New Delhi: Asia Book Club.
6. Mondal, Anshuman. (2007). *Amitav Ghosh.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.
7. Rollason, Christopher. (2005) "In our translated world": Transcultural communication in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide"* in *The Atlantic Literary Review* [New Delhi], Vol. 6, No. 1-2. pp. 86-107.

Websites

http://www.indobase.com/indians-abroad/amitav-ghosh.html



8.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: a. True

b. False

c. True

d. True

e. True

f. True

Ans to Q No 2: a. Egypt

b. Arthur C. Clarke Prize

c. "The March of the Novel through History: My father's Bookcase"

d. *The Circle of Reason*

Ans to Q No 3: *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1990), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *Countdown* (1999), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke*, etc.

Ans to Q No 4: It homes in on the human and natural ecosystems of a small and highly particular area of India, the Sundarbans . . . through characters hailing from Delhi and US.



8.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1: Write a short note on Amitav Ghosh.

Q2: To what extent, do you think, has Amitav Ghosh shaped the scenario of the Contemporary Indian Writing in English?

Q3: Discuss the major works of Amitav Ghosh.

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