

CHAPTER FOUR

ESSAYING REAL STORIES:

THE NARRATIVE ESSAYS OF AMITAV GHOSH

To choose fiction is to assert that you know the difference between fiction and fact but who today knows the difference between the real and what is not real? We live in a time much like the 16th century It is a time when the world looks like an unweeded garden and doubt is a condition of consciousness. The essay is uniquely suited to expressing this contemporary mode of being-in-culture.

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In his foreword to *The Best American Essays 1988* Robert Atwan describes his experience of teaching Annie Dillard's essay "Total Eclipse" in a nonfiction writing workshop. A student, after going through the essay, gave a puzzled and surprised response: "I didn't think an essay would be like this", he said. When Atwan asked him to explain he "struggled for a moment, trying to explain his surprise" and then said "it reads just like a short story"; after groping for words for some more time he added "it's got drama . . . and emotional intensity." Finally he questioned his teacher: "I didn't think essays had those things. Are you sure it's really an essay?" Atwan records his own response: "'It's *really* an essay', I answered, almost as satisfied as if I had written it myself" (xi).

The interaction is significant in many ways. Undoubtedly, for the student it was an unexpected challenge at the generic level; the piece he was reading was called an essay but did not "look like" an essay to him, rather it looked like another genre altogether—it

looked and read “just like a short story”. This sense of confusion is the result of a traditionally acquired image of the essay as form and an idea about its generic identity. For the student the most important part of that identity lies in a negative marker: whatever else the essay might be it is *not* a short story, it is not supposed to have “those things” that a story has, like drama and emotional intensity; the presence of these elements creates a confusion as to whether it is an essay at all. On the other, hand the confident assertion of the teacher that the piece being read is “really” an essay is based on another level of awareness regarding the potential of the form: an essay might include, within its fold, things that stories have and might still be an essay. For Atwan, this awareness is accompanied by a sense of satisfaction because being an essayist himself he understands that this manifestation of the essay indicates a level of growth beyond the traditional concept of the form. It points towards a level of maturity for the genre where it becomes capable of posing aesthetic and ideological challenges to its interpreters and demands specific and individual attention rather than partial or casual treatment as a genre essentially secondary to fiction.

To move towards the essays of Amitav Ghosh from the essays of R. K. Narayan is to follow this line of growth in the overall bearing of the genre. As was seen in the previous chapter, Narayan’s contribution to Indian Writing in English centered round a stable concept of the form of the novel coupled with a confident notion about the majority of the genre. It reflected in Narayan’s writing career that was solely devoted to writing fiction and in his image which he himself described as that of “a realist fiction writer in English” (112). Amitav Ghosh’s image as a writer and his field of creativity, on the other hand, are marked by his connections with an intriguing variety of disciplines, practices, and writing forms: anthropology, sociology, academic research, teaching, travel and journalism. His writing, hence, is characterized by an inherent “generic inventiveness” (Mee 325) that blurs the traditional boundaries between the fictional and the nonfictional or the academic and the creative. Since such a subversive “concern with margins” (Mondal 1) forms the conceptual core of Ghosh’s oeuvre, it could be expected that the traditional placing of fictional and nonfictional works on a scale of majority and minority will not affect the reception of Ghosh’s essays. Apparently it has not been so and even in Ghosh’s case his nonfiction—the essays—have suffered academic marginalization in comparison to his

novels. Whereas Narayan's essays were relegated to the status of commercial requirement in Ghosh's case they are seen as a parallel but satellite body of writing of an innovative novelist; in both cases essays are secondary to fiction.

This happens against the background of a writing career in which Ghosh's novels have persistently been paralleled by the visibility of his essays as they are regularly published in famous international journals, magazines, and news papers like *New York Times*, *Observer Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *Granta* etc. and have been collected in three anthologies: *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998), *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces* (2002) and *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (2005). Interestingly, the unique status of Ghosh as an intellectual with ties with various disciplines has been most creatively reflected in his essays where his central interest of blurring formal distinctions is naturally supported by the inherent generic flexibility of the essay's form. Ghosh's essays not only stand on their own as unique and challenging pieces of intellectual creativity but also bring the creative possibilities inherent in the genre to the best possible relief. This chapter tries to illuminate the various ways in which Ghosh's narrative essays represent such a potential of formal and generic innovation of the essay form in general.

4.1 On the Boundary Zone: Essay as *Creative Nonfiction*

The essay has traditionally been recognized as the quintessential nonfictional form of literature. In fact this has remained a rare point of consensus in the otherwise problematic and uncertain definitional scheme of the genre. As has been described in the introductory chapter of this study, identity and image of the essay has always been tied to a negative definitive pattern which serves as a point of reference and as a point of some amount of fixity in the face of the bewildering indefiniteness plaguing the genre. Of all such binaries where the essay is posed as the negative of some other better defined category, the fiction-nonfiction binary is the most persistent:

The old, nagging question remains unanswered, however. What *is* an essay, and what, if anything is it *about*? “Formal” and “informal”, “personal”, “familiar”, “review-essay”, “article-essay”, “critical essay”, essays literary, biographical, polemic and historical---the standard lit-crit lexicon and similar attempts at genre definition and sub-classification in the end simply tell you how like an eel this essay creature is. It wriggles between narcissism and detachment, opinion and fact, the private party and the public meeting, analysis and polemics, confession and reportage, persuasion and provocation. All you can safely say is that it’s not poetry and it’s not fiction.” (Kaplan xiv)

This generally becomes a common pattern wherein essay and nonfiction are often used interchangeably: a collection by Ved Mehta is titled *Craft of the Essay* but the writer introduces it as “eight nonfiction pieces collected in a volume” (Mehta xv), another collection is titled *The Art of the Essay* though in the introduction none other than Phillip Lopate defines the essay as designed “to support a nonfiction prose text” (ix) and Susan Sontag reveals how the famous *Best American Essays* series came to existence to balance the appearance of *The Best American Short Stories* series: a series of short fiction complimented by a series of short nonfiction because, as Sontag says ironically, “the most accurate, as well as least satisfying, definition of the essay is: a short, or shorter, prose text that is *not* a story” (xiv).

This idea of the essay as “non-story” or nonfiction comes from a few characteristics which have traditionally been considered essential to the genre. First of them is the presence of the authorial “I” which, since its use by Montaigne, has remained a defining marker of the form so that it is commonly believed that underlying the variety of the form there always remains a sense of a strong personal presence that identifies it as a genre. Consequently, it has remained one of the most common presuppositions that the form of the essay is primarily distinguished by the expression of personal ideas of the author, that

“an essayist needs to write himself into his essay” (Silberstein and Seldin xv). Though it is obvious that making a parallel between a living human being and a textual persona is problematic, it is commonly accepted that the essay creates a sense of direct address and unmediated expression from the side of the essayist aimed at the reader. In one of the first and rare detailed study of the essay as a form of literature titled “Essay”, included in *Elements of Literature*, renowned essay critic Carl H. Klaus comments that “the essay in its pure form uses words to establish ideas that are addressed directly by the essayist to the reader”. Though Klaus concedes that essay has the capacity to adapt different modes — dramatic, narrative and poetic — to shape the address, he stresses the fact that of all the literary genres it is the essay that most persistently creates the impression that “the author is speaking directly to us” and that even though the essayist does not address the reader directly “yet we still have the sense that we hear someone speaking as we read the words to ourselves”. Though it is only a textual effect created by the use of first person narration, “we usually take it for granted that the speaker we hear is the same person as the essayist” (4-6). This supposition logically leads to the impression that whatever the essayist is saying is true or real because he/she is describing it in his/her true or real person so that the essay is equated with fact and becomes “nonfiction”. Recounting his experience as a young reader of essays, for example, Joyce Carol Oats remembers that “It was the first person voice, the (seemingly) unmediated voice, that struck [him] as *truth-telling*” and that he read the essays “unquestioningly, as *real*” (xvi).

A second supposition, related to the first one, is that in the essay the revelation of the essayist’s personality is the real subject matter. This is taken as explaining the typical absence, in most traditional essays, of the essential constitutive elements of fiction like plot and character. On the other hand, the occasional and experimental inclusion of fictional elements and tropes is considered as subsidiary to the central concern of authorial self-expression. It is commonly believed that even when plot and character are found present in an essay they are “tend to be used as local illustrations for some point or other in the essay, and in the last instance, the essayist will use any such material as an indirect means or pretext to talk about himself (or herself) as a real person: everything will be subordinated to the self-definition of the essayist” (Obaldia15). Consequently the centre of attention in conventional reading and analysis of essays has been the element of

writing style of individual essayists—the mode of self-expression adopted for presentation of personality—and the essay’s distinctiveness as a form is considered marked by “the extent to which personal voice, vision and style are the prime movers and shapers.” (Atwan, Foreword x). This has created another binary which accentuates the essay’s status as nonfiction where the presence of thematic particulars in fiction is set against the (relative) absence of the same elements in the essay. In “The Modern Essay” Virginia Woolf comments:

A novel has a story, a poem rhyme; but what art can the essayist use in these short lengths of prose to sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life . . . He must know --- that is the first essential --- *how to write*. His learning may be as profound as Mark Pattison’s, but in an essay it must be so fused by the magic of *writing* that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of the texture.

(42) (emphasis added)

For Woolf, further, this concern with style in the essay has, for its ground, a characteristic concern with concepts — which she calls “a fierce attachment to an idea” — that binds essayists as diverse as Bacon, Lamb, Beerbohm and Conrad (50). Woolf’s view is clearly echoed by Carl Klaus’s later conclusion that all essays are “after all views” (“Elements”, 5) and Douglas Hesse’s assertion that even if essays might contain narrative portions “conventions for reading essays make us expect the narrative to serve *a point*” (“Boundary Zone”, 92). This concept about the essay’s essentially reflective and conceptual character can be seen as the third factor sealing its status as nonfiction — its identity marked by an element of a thought or concept or idea as against fiction’s identity marked by the presence of narrative. In other words essay is considered to be oriented conceptually whereas fiction is seen as oriented creatively. These ideas about the essay being a form distinguished by an essential element of personal reflection, a concern for style suited for that purpose and an essential preoccupation with ideas and views (mainly of the essayist), then, can be seen as the primary reasons behind the common and

conventional categorization of the form under the umbrella concept of nonfiction— a form in which characteristic elements of fiction are absent.

However, adhering to the traditional concept of the essay as nonfiction has its own challenges because nonfiction, in itself, is a problematic category. The peculiar status of nonfiction becomes obvious in the fact that it is defined through negation and absence: whatever is *not* fiction is nonfiction. This has connected nonfiction to factual referentiality—something that is related to actual objects and incidents existing in the real world. As John D’ Agata points out, “Claims of authenticity in nonfiction have long been the form’s selling point” (71). At the surface level it might look like a positive point of identification but it acquires a negative derivative significance within the wider pedagogical field of Literature where “the very term ‘nonfiction’ discloses the former Romantic bias toward fiction: everything not fiction is nonfiction” (Lounsberry xi). It happens because fiction, in canonical and traditional definitions of Literature, is not only considered a form of creative writing but is turned into an embodiment of the principle of fictionality, non-referentiality, creativity and imagination which are then seen as the identifying traits of Literature itself so that the equation of “Literature equals the fictive equals the nonreferential” becomes a part of the canon (Dodd 7). From here follows the marginalized and secondary position of nonfiction as a category positioned outside the canonical centre of literary studies because of its professed lack of fictionality. Within the “sociology of literary studies”, Danis Rygiel comments, “nonfiction appears inferior in rank to ‘truly literary’ works of poetry drama, and fiction-what we typically call imaginative literature” (394). Within such a line of analysis nonfiction finally gets equated with a “non-imaginative” or “non-creative” category of writing. And when the essay is categorized as nonfiction it automatically partakes the latter’s problematic and negative status within the canonical concept of Literature.

The student who got confused in Atwan’s nonfiction workshop came across an essay that did not fall into this traditional pattern because it incorporated fictional elements like “drama” and “emotional intensity.” It implies another stage or level of nonfiction where it can or may include creative, imaginative — in other words literary — elements besides

its essential factual (nonfictional) core. It is the manifestation that is commonly called “creative” or “literary” or “artistic” nonfiction.¹ Whereas nonfiction is seen as defined by a sense of absence — “a form of discourse named after something it is not” (Lehman 334) — literary or creative nonfiction connotes presence of multiple and disparate elements. As the term itself implies, this is a hybrid form that mingles the imaginative/literary and the factual/nonfictional. Lee Gutkind defines literary nonfiction in the following words:

The words “creative” and “nonfiction” describe the form. The word “creative” refers to the use of literary craft, the techniques fiction writers, playwrights, and poets employ to present nonfiction—factually accurate prose about real people and events—in a compelling, vivid, dramatic manner. The goal is to make nonfiction stories read like fiction so that your readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy. (6)

In other words, the nonfictional aspect functions at the level of subject matter or theme whereas the literary or creative element comes from the treatment.

In her introduction to the *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction*, Barbara Lounsberry offers a neat scheme of the defining traits of creative nonfiction as a distinctive category of writing. She includes four constituents: “documentable subject matter chosen from the real world as opposed to ‘invented’ from the writer’s mind”, “exhaustive research” (necessary for maintaining “credibility”), “scene” (use of narrative form for “recasting” the object/event) and “fine writing: a literary prose style”(xiii-xvii). It is easy to see that Lounsberry maintains a fine balance between the claims of fiction and nonfiction by assigning the first two elements to the sphere of factuality and the next two elements to the sphere of imaginative and literary artistry. Because the very existence of literary nonfiction rests on an innovative bridging of the most basic binary of literary classification — fiction and nonfiction — it becomes capable of incorporating a varied number of writing forms which, in traditional classification, are considered separate entities as well as forms that are born out of experiments with the borders of such classifications. Within literary nonfiction are included memoir and autobiography, nonfiction novel, creative and narrative journalism (most importantly the New

Journalism) and travel narratives etc so that it is justified, Chris Anderson asserts, “to see literary nonfiction as crossing genre and discipline boundaries” and as constituted of texts with “paradoxical, threshold, problematic nature” (Anderson x-xi).

More importantly, Anderson points out that at its root the literary aspect in literary nonfiction is neither a simple matter of stylistic arrangement or aesthetic effect nor a question of disciplinary status. It does not imply “literature in the elitist sense of a set of texts we must admire” rather it involves questions of perspective and cognition so that literary, in this context, connotes “a way of looking at the world, a way of knowing, a form of inquiry—concrete, dramatic, grounded in a self” (xix). It means that the formal logic underlying this challenging category of writing is not simply aesthetic and that the convergence of the fictional and the nonfictional that characterizes literary nonfiction is based on suppositions deeper than simply literary. Daniel W. Lehman, in a way of supporting his thesis of “explicitly rejecting the notion of an essential boundary between fiction and nonfiction” offers a few such assumptions

- 1) any literary text, whether fiction or nonfiction, even one's own memory of events, is arbitrated or "crafted" in important ways, rendering impossible the simple equation of "actuality" with nonfiction;
- (2) even if that equation were possible, a standard based solely on the verifiability of nonfiction's claims would be inadequate because narratives operate in an intertextual world where actuality and its reproduction in story often are difficult to separate;
- (3) the decision by an author or publisher to call a narrative "nonfiction" nonetheless remains an important key to how it is written and read, but is more socially constructed and negotiated by both author and reader than derived from some empirical standard of truth;
- (4) the decision to engage a nonfictional text causes the author to implicate herself as

both the creator of and a character in the text and creates a reader as a consumer of, and potential character in, the text. (336)

The basis of creative nonfiction, then, rests on an epistemological (rather than aesthetic) ground: on questions related to the very concepts of fact, reality and truth and the possibility/impossibility of maintaining a clear compartmentalization of fact and fiction. The hybrid textual effect that creative nonfiction creates has a deeper philosophical conviction regarding the relative rather than absolute value of these categories.

With such a point of view that subverts the traditional concepts regarding reality and textuality on the one hand and fact and fiction on the other is added a kind of historical insight that shows the arbitrary and constructed nature of the hierarchical positioning of nonfiction below fiction. In eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, fiction was considered a category with suspicious respectability and serious writers tried to either avoid the form or disguise it by giving factual titles—Fielding called *Tom Jones* a *History of a Foundling* or Mark Twain initially thought of naming his novel Huck Finn's *Autobiography* [emphases added]. After that, from the second part of twentieth century onwards, fiction came to be the preferred and intellectually respectable form so that works with professed factual orientations were called fictions to earn serious reading and critical attention—Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* were called "fiction" by the writers themselves (Dillard xiii).

Within a creative and critical armature informed by such consciousness forms with potential for hybrid narrative patterns have come to acquire both popularity and critical attention as part of the wider category of creative nonfiction. And of all the different forms included in creative nonfiction the essay has become one of the most prominent. The reason is not difficult to see. The essay, as a form, has an inherent dualism that can include objective subject matter and subjective approach at the same time. Due to this characteristic malleability it is easier for the essay than other nonfictional forms to appropriate fictional techniques and to balance it with nonfictional subject matter and narration. In her introduction to *Best American Essays 1988*, Annie Dillard predicted that in view of the predictable shape and saturated technical elements in other forms of

writing, the narrative essay, with its innovative and challenging mode of connecting the fictional and the nonfictional, “may become the genre of choice for writers devoted to significant literature” because the narrative essay is capable of treating “historical, cultural, or natural events, as well as personal events” (xii). Narrative essay can utilize fictional techniques and narrative modes, keeping its nonfictional core of realistic subject matter intact. Atwan, in his aforementioned foreword, asserts that this new type of essay comes in the form of nonfiction that “lives along the border of fiction and poetry” and creates their effect by moves that “play tricks with narration, shake up expectations of literary form, undermine our confidence that we know the writer through the writing” (x).

It is within such a framework that analysis of Ghosh’s essays might be taken up. As has been stated already, generic and disciplinary hybridity has been the distinguishing feature of Ghosh’s writing as a whole. But his essays represent a more immediate and transparent ground for such modal experiments because here the form itself works as a principle of transgression. Alexander Butrym has called the essay a genre that aims at “respectively, formally and intellectually presenting a more or less subjective view of a more or less objective phenomenon” (2). This is an extremely significant observation on the nature of the essay as a form because it throws light on one of its most important qualities, which is its capacity to bridge apparently contradictory spheres of knowledge and experience. The basic dichotomy between the subjective and the objective, as pointed out by Butrym, when studied in relation to the genre of the essay, can be logically developed into other dichotomies such as between the real and the imaginary, the particular and the universal, the intellectual and the popular, the topical and the eternal and most importantly the fictional and nonfictional — in all such cases the essay comes up as that genre which bridges these dichotomies and holds them into its fold. Ghosh’s oeuvre of essays inhabits such an in-between place where fact and fiction, research and fables, expertise and imagination mingle. His essays are the site where his knowledge as an anthropologist, his experiences as a traveler, his principles as an intellectual, his imagination as a writer and, most importantly, his empathies as a human being come together. The essays thus become a category all by themselves, beyond and besides the familiar neat divisions of the fictional and non-fictional or the personal and the public. To an analysis of the various dimensions of this unique effect of hybridity this study shall now turn.

4.2. Essaying *Stories*: Amitav Ghosh's Narrative Essays in Perspective

In an interview with Frederick Luis Aldama Amitav Ghosh expressed his personal views on the fiction-nonfiction divide in reference to his own work:

I've written novels, and I've written nonfiction — my reportage. And frankly, I don't even think of them as different genres in some way. I know that the institutional structure of our world presses us to think of fiction and nonfiction as absolutely separate. And in some sense they are. I mean with nonfiction there is a domain of fact to which you have to refer and by which you are necessarily constrained. But I think the techniques one brings to bear upon nonfiction, certainly the techniques that I've brought to bear on nonfiction, essentially comes from my fiction. In the end it's about people's lives; it's about people's history; it's about people's destinies. When I write nonfiction, I am really writing about characters and people, and when I'm writing fiction, I'm doing the same thing. (86)

At one level Ghosh's view seems to have a contradiction in so far as he acknowledges the presence of some difference between fiction and nonfiction on the one hand — asserts that he has written both novels and nonfiction — and claims not to think of them “as different genres” on the other. A careful reading will reveal, however, that for Ghosh, this is not a paradox. Though he accepts fiction and nonfiction as separate categories he also hints at possible points of convergence for them. Firstly, both of them can be united on thematic and stylistic level—techniques of fiction can be applied to the referential subject matter of nonfiction — secondly, and more importantly, they can be united by their common function — for Ghosh his fiction and nonfiction are “doing the same thing”, they are dealing with people and their lives and destinies. At the same time, Ghosh asserts that in his nonfiction he is “really” writing about “*characters* and people.” The

question to be asked here is this: If nonfiction is supposed to adhere to some “domain of fact” as Ghosh claims, how does the use of fictional representation fit in that adherence and what kind of formal or generic identity can be applied to such type of writing?

It is here that the significance of “essaying stories” or “stories in essays”²— the form of narrative essay in other words — comes up. It is important to understand the dynamics of this form because Ghosh’s essays, almost entirely, belong to this category and it is through the ways of combining the expositional and narrative elements — the essay elements and the story elements in other words — that the distinctive effect of his essays is created. However, before going into an analysis of this aspect it is important to understand what is meant by “story” within Ghosh’s oeuvre of essays. The most remarkable feature of Ghosh’s essays is their embedding in spatially and temporally specific and historically identifiable locales represented in terms of concrete physical details which are mostly of first hand acquisition. Consequently the raw materials of Ghosh’s essays, generally, are interrelated but individual data about a particular situation, time and place. Out of these he crafts a piece of writing that has to serve his final goal of illuminating an overall understanding of, as he said, people’s *lives*, their *histories* and *destinies*.” “Story” in Ghosh’s system of essays is a narrative structure that bestows a thematic and signifying coherence on the body of material data and maintains the flow of analysis between particular details and general understanding. It is important to note that “story” in Ghosh’s essays does not denote the commonly accepted meaning of fiction for the simple reason that the stories come out from the researched realistic details themselves — they are *real* stories. Here, “story” means a frame of narration created around that data on the semblance of fiction. When Ghosh said that he uses techniques of fiction in writing nonfiction his comment can be seen as implying this dynamics between story and the essay.

The story element is crucial for Ghosh because for him the aim of the essays is to relate to something broader than the immediate material details and at the same time to remain relatable on individual level: it is about life and history but also about *people’s* lives and histories. A story — or to be more specific the narrative form of a story — is capable of maintaining this complex interrelation between the particular and the general; on the one

hand it can carry significance and meaning that can turn particular instances into representative abstractions and on the other hand can exemplify general abstractions on the level of individual instance and occurrence. In his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Narrative* David Herman puts forward a compact definition of “story”:

Rather than focusing on general, abstract situations, or trends, stories are accounts of what happened to particular people—and of what it was like for them to experience what happened—in particular circumstances and with specific consequences. Narrative, in other words, is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time process and change—a strategy that contrasts with, but is in no way inferior to, “scientific” modes of explanation that characterize phenomena as instances of general covering laws. (3)

For Herman the distinguishing mark of story/narrative is its particularizing and experiential dimension that leads up to an appropriation of broader categories of “time, process and change” and that demarcates it from the axiomatic and generalizing moves of scientific discourse. Though Herman’s definition conflates story with narrative, commonly they are considered separate, though closely interrelated categories. For Paul Cobbley story and narrative can be understood as same in a general and functional sense of the terms so that it can be said that “human beings, . . . have constantly told *stories*, presented events and squeezed aspects of the world into *narrative form*” (2) (emphasis added). However, Cobbley asserts, they have to be distinguished on a more specialized level where story will mean “all the events to be depicted” and narrative will mean “the showing or telling of these events” (6). Marie - Laure Ryan on the other hand concedes that “few words have enjoyed so much use and suffered so much abuse as *narrative* and its partial synonym *story* (22), though she presents, at the same time, a scheme of traits marking narrative which echo the ones Herman pointed out as belonging to story, especially the presence of “individual existents” and the conveyance of “something meaningful to the audience” (29).

What, for general purpose, is connoted by both narrative and story is a way of putting order or form on phenomena, on events and data. Consequently, and more importantly, they imply a mode of perceiving and conveying meaning or significance underlying events. At the same time, it has to be remembered that narrative is also very commonly conflated with fiction for the simple reason that the organizing and signifying function of narrative is most clearly visible in fiction writing though narrative fiction³ is a specific manifestation of the general category of narrative which works through diverse media. When Ghosh commented that he applied fictional techniques to nonfictional material, he can be seen as applying narrative strategies specific to fiction on material and concrete data gathered from the real world, can be seen as “storifying” real events as Cobbley calls it (2). However, in Ghosh’s case the most important point in this whole process is the fact that the raw material of realistic data used in the essays is situated within traditions — academic and otherwise — of research and field activity which already have specific types of writing associated with them. Two such areas from which Ghosh’s material comes are History and Journalism. To the first he has been related in the capacity of student and researcher and to the second in the capacity of a practitioner. Because Ghosh’s entire enterprise of writing — fiction and nonfiction alike — is influenced by the knowledge and experience gathered from his involvement with these disciplines, an analysis of the fictional/nonfictional or story/essay dynamic has to be situated within an armature informed by them.

4.2.1. Essaying Stories I: *Historical Imagination*

For Ghosh history of individuals or particular groups of people is of primary interest as he has himself mentioned. A general reading of his essays will indicate that history, for Ghosh, does not denote the simple chronological detailing of public events, rather it implies a broader perspective or orientation towards phenomena that can be termed a historical consciousness — an overall insight into human life which is informed by Ghosh’s exposure to disciplines like Anthropology and Ethnography. Attention has been generally paid to those essays that either give detailed space to historical occurrence or are in some way related to Ghosh’s anthropological research. Consequently essays like

“The Imam and the Indian”, “The Slave of M S. H.6”, “Dancing in Cambodia”, “At Large in Burma” etc. have been reviewed and analyzed. Yet the fact remains that Ghosh’s innovative narrativization of historical and cultural realities is also present in some other essays that have not been analyzed under this kind of critical light due to their surface appearance of simplicity and shortness. The following section will try to highlight the fiction/nonfiction or story/essay dynamics in three such essays: “Stories in Stone”, “Four Corners” and “Tibetan Dinner”. Before going into an analysis of the texts though it is important to outline the major concerns in the scheme of study.

As has been seen at the most basic level narrative implies a mode that invests phenomena with order and significance/meaning. However, there are elements which become essential for narrative in the actual process of doing that. The first element is that of time, or more specifically, “narrative time”. Narrative is seen as putting phenomena into a temporal sequence and thereby placing them into a cognitive frame. Narrative time is distinguished from objective time in so far as objective time conceptualizes temporality in objective units of second/minute/hour/month/year etc whereas narrative time “in contrast relates to events and incidents” (Abbot, *Cambridge Introduction* 5). Because events and incidents essentially imply the involvement of a human perspective, narrative time also, at times, is called “subjective time” (Cobbley17). Narrative’s way of measuring temporality in terms of sequencing of (human) events or incidents is seen as “coordinating an *existence* which would otherwise be scattered over time.” (Kearney 4) (emphasis added). Because of this unique conceptualization of temporality narrative is also seen as “the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time” (Abbot, *Cambridge Introduction* 3). However, temporal sequencing of events is not enough for revealing their meaning or significance unless that sequencing itself is ordered on a principle of causation—a frame establishing a relation of causal connection and explanation amongst the events arranged temporally. This causal frame, at the most basic level, is what is commonly called a “plot” which is defined as “the chain of causation which dictates that these events are somehow linked and that therefore to be depicted in relation to each other” (Cobbley 5). It remains to be seen how narrative elements of this type are manifested in Ghosh’s essays.

“Stories in Stones” first appeared in *The Observer Magazine*, 16 January, 1994 and was subsequently turned into chapter two of the book *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* published in 1998. This transformation of the status of a piece from an independent essay to a chapter in a book is significant in this case because it affects the image of the essay in a very subtle way. In the book “Stories in Stones” serves as the smaller and minor connecting piece that links the two major essays whose names appear in the title of the book. Against the fifty and forty pages length of these two essays “Stories in Stones” runs for a mere ten and half pages. Whereas “Dancing in Cambodia” and “At large in Burma” offer deep insight into broad chunks of ancient and contemporary history of the two countries, “Stories in Stones” simply talks about a famous medieval Cambodian temple called Angkor Wat. The essay is divided into four informal parts separated from each other by textual space. The first part introduces the reader to Angkor Wat, quickly moves over to the description of a person named Kong Sarith who the narrator says had told him an interesting story about the temple and dramatically stops just at the point the story is expected to unfold. The second part consists of a description of the temple’s status in modern Cambodia where it has, as the narrator says, paradoxically come to represent modernity for the country appearing as a symbol in all kinds of material bodies—“flags, uniforms, banks, airlines, beer” (57) and ends with a fleeting mention to a few old Buddhist shrines that still survive within the premises of the temple. The third section starts with the description of the narrator’s visit to one of these shrines and continues with the account of the early history of the temple given by a priest in the shrine which works as an explanation of Angkor Wat’s present status mentioned in the previous section. The fourth and final section goes back to Kong Sarith’s story that gives information about another comparatively more modern phase of the temple’s, and by extension the country’s, history and concludes the essay.

As this outline indicates, folded within the small physical body of “Stories in Stones” are extremely intricate and intertwined strands of historical and personal narratives. What covers this internal complexity at the thematic level is the concrete image of Angkor Wat that surfaces in all the sections and binds all of them together creating an impression — on the surface level — that the essay is about Angkor Wat. To a certain extent it is; “Stories in Stones” is an essay about Angkor Wat in so far as Angkor Wat itself is

unavoidably about Cambodia, about its past and present and most importantly about its people engulfed within that history. In other words, Angkor Wat is a vehicle for familiarizing, particularizing and, most importantly, humanizing the otherwise impersonal and mechanical body of recorded public history. Beneath this primary level there are three other strands of narrative that bring history down to the experiential and individual levels by embodying it in the form of stories.

The first of these comes through the narrator's voice in the second section where he describes his experiences while travelling in Cambodia. It begins with memory: "For the time I'd spent in Cambodia, I had made a discovery about Angkor Wat: I had discovered that its place in the world rests on a kind of paradox . . ." (55). The revelation of this paradox follows in the form of a description of Angkor Wat's representation on material bodies as a sign of modernity: "Angkor Wat is . . . undisputedly a temple, yet it never figures in anything to do with religion . . . Its likeness appears instead on certain factory-produced commodities . . ." and further explanation of this condition comes through description of Cambodia's recent history: "Most of all Angkor Wat belongs on flags . . . no country on earth has witnessed more bitter or more violent political strife. Yet although the country's flag has changed with every new regime . . . it has never ceased to bear an image of Angkor" (56). As can be seen, the passage is marked by a slow shift that takes the focus away from the personal impressions of the narrator towards general descriptions about the conditions of the country and in the process merges particular detail with general observation. The second strand of narration concretizes history even more by giving it the form of a narration of experience—Angkor Wat's history in the period of Khmer Rouge anarchy of 1975-1979 through an account of an old monk, Ven. Luong Chun, who was living in the premises of the temple at that time:

There were about four hundred monks in the monastery at that time: several of them were killed, some right on the threshold of the pagoda. He . . . was taken away to a work-camp. . . . He was stripped of his monk's robes which were cut up and made into trousers and he spent the three years of the 'Pol Pot' regime working in the rice fields. (59)

This way of recording history in the form of lived individual experience is further highlighted in the third narrative strand where Kong Sarith tells his story of survival through the Khmer Rouge years and his subsequent arrival in Angkor Wat. The particularizing and humanizing effect is even sharper here because the narrator records actual interactions between Sarith and his interrogators on the one hand and Sarith's state of mind and feelings on the other, both of which are absent in Luong Chun's account:

They made him get out of bed at half past two in the morning to wash dishes somehow he managed to carry it off, as if he had done nothing else all his life, though there was times when he thought he would die of exhaustion. In 1978, shortly before the regime collapsed, he was forcibly married off Marriage was the last thing on his mind at the time and he did not want to marry her. Yet the marriage lasted and they went on to have four children: 'After suffering through so much together, we could not leave each other.' (62)

What in the long run stands as the core of "Stories in Stone" is the life and destiny of people like Kong Sarith and Luong Chun caught in the web of their country's history — history that, in the essay, manifests in the figure of Angkor Wat. If we remember David Herman's definition of story as an "account of what happened to particular people" in terms of their "experience" of it, that is what we find here: individual, experiential and real stories sliced away from but also giving meaning to the abstract general body of history. The meaning/significance of the occurrences is brought to relief by humanizing the impersonal temporal data, by turning time into narrative time: the actual historical years are invariably referred to in terms of their impact on Sarith's and Luong Chun's life. At the same time the narrative shape is concretized by a causal scheme in which the occurrences described in the different sections explain one another: Luong Chun's story in the third section explains the present status of Angkor Wat described in the second section whereas the first and final sections close off the essay on both ends with a

dramatic description of Kong Sarith's story and Angkor Wat's place in it. The essay starts with the narrator's memory of the temple as a monument "awash in stories" (54) and ends by making a perfect circle with an image of Sarith being absorbed into its "teeming worlds." (64)

Against this internal complexity of plotting in "Stories in Stones" can be placed the evocative, symbolic and yet straightforward narration found in "Four Corners"⁴ that "storyfies" the history of the distant and lost civilization of the Navajo tribe in America. The essay works on a kind of a double narrative scheme where reference to the famous Four Corners monument of America and to the lost aboriginal American tribe of the Navajo people are brought up alternately, the movement from the one to the other being held by the geographical locale that is common to both — Colorado's Montezuma county that was peopled by the Navajos in the past and is identified with the Four Corners monument in the present. On the surface level there are similarities that this essay shares with "Stories in Stone": both the essays are divided into four sections marked by space, talk about the history of a people by talking about a physical monument — Angkor Wat in the former essay and Four Corners monument in this one—and, most importantly, illuminate the lost nuances of a historical stream in terms of particularized and humanized details: like "Stories in Stones" in "Four Corners" also Ghosh's ultimate focus is on the "histories and destinies" of a people. In fact the impression of direct involvement with past history is more acute in this essay than the former one because whereas in "Stories in Stone" Ghosh had used narrators who only remembered a history already past here Ghosh presents personages as situated within the history described: the third section gives a description of the displacement of the Navajo people that includes references to and comments of people like Colonel Kit Carson, General James H. Carleton and General William T. Thomson who were actually involved in the process.

What creates the unique impression and mark of story/narrative in this essay, however, is the way the theme unfolds and its significance is revealed. The essay starts in a most unexpected way with a mention of neither the monument nor the Navajos but the gorgeous Recreational Vehicles (RVs) that flock the way to the spot of the monument. For the whole of the first page and the half of the second there runs a description of the

vehicles that includes a half page long paragraph about the narrator's experience of seeing a wealthy couple creating a little household out of their RV in the midst of a desert. What the narrator visibly emphasizes in this whole stretch of textual description is the unusual enormousness of the vehicles and, by implication, the wealth and luxury associated with them: the fact that "their owner's imaginations are the only limits on the luxuries those R.V.s may be made to contain" (18). For the reader this whole opening section serves to build up suspense and curiosity regarding the significance of the description, about what it is actually driving at. It is only in the last paragraph of the opening section that the theme of the essay is introduced indirectly through association:

Often the RVs have striking names: Winnebago, Itasca...the names of the dispossessed tribes of the Americas hold a peculiar allure for the marketing executives of the automobile companies. Pontiac, Cherokee—so many tribes are commemorated in forms of transport. It is not a mere matter of fashion that so many of the cars that flash past on the highways carry those names, breathing them into the air like the inscriptions on prayer wheels. This tradition of naming has a long provenance: did not Kit Carson himself, the scourge of the Navajo, name his favourite horse Apache? There are many of them on Route 160, those memorials to the first people of the Americas, bearing number-plates from places thousands of miles away—New York, Georgia, Alaska, Ontario. Having come this far, everybody wants to see the only point where four states meet. (19)

The passage creates effects on several levels. At one level it provides hints regarding the possible theme of the essay: "the dispossessed tribes of the Americas" and also the narrator's attitude and approach: it is not going to be a simple description of what happened to the tribes but will possibly be an insight into ironies and tragedies that

underlie their history—a condition where “so many tribes are *commemorated* in forms of transport” (20) (emphasis added). In other words, the passage indirectly builds up expectations regarding what is to follow. At another level it serves to build up further curiosity and suspense: what is the connection between the monument to which the cars are going and the tribes long lost whose name they bear? Who was Kit Carson and what is the significance of his naming the horse Apache? What is the history behind the “long provenance” the narrator is mentioning and what is its significance? In short the passage withholds information and thereby creates certain gaps that hinder any clear or easy understanding on the part of the reader. More importantly, these gaps themselves push the reader into forming more suppositions and expectations regarding what to follow and keep the narration going.

What Ghosh is doing here is building the theme of the essay very gradually into a plot — a causal scheme that links disparate elements into one explicable whole — where each section answers some questions but at the same time raises further ones that are answered only by subsequent sections, the total effect of the essay being achieved by this causal interplay amongst the sections. In doing this he can be seen using a characteristic narrative mode of plotting—the infusion of hindrance, gaps or questions that temporarily obstructs understanding but adds to the effect of final explanation and resolution. This is “art of opening and closing gaps” is, as H. Porter Abbot comments, the way narrative “at one and the same time fills and creates gaps” (Abbot, “Story” 44). The theoretical core of this narrative concept is found in different modes in Wolfgang Iser, who commented in his *The Implied Reader: The Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (1974): “it is only through the inevitable omissions that a story gains its dynamism” (qtd. in Abbot, “Story” 44), in Roland Barthes’ concept of the “hermeneutic code” as a narrative structure that functions dually to take the narrative to closure and to retard its movement⁵, and in Peter Brooks who suggested a concept of “Détours” that marks a “struggle toward the end under the compulsion of imposed delay, as arabesque in the dilatory space of the text” (295) creating an effect of suspense and expectation.⁶ This whole mechanism works on the sphere of what is called “narrative space”— a concept referring to the fact that “a narrative must advance to its end whilst

simultaneously delaying it, and in lingering, as it were, a narrative occupies a ‘space’” (Cobbley12).

However, a keen look will reveal that something more has gone into shaping the narrative space than gaps. It will show that the narrative has a definite structure that supports the dynamics of revelation and retardation built into the plot: the whole essay is shaped on the structure of journey and discovery. Whereas in “Stories in Stones” the different sections were connected by thematic details here the narrative moves by following the pattern of an expedition. The first section starts with a description of the road and the traffic moving towards the Four Corners monument and ends on a point where a sense of anticipation is built: “everybody wants to see the only point where four states meet”. The next section opens with a sense of arrival brought in by direct visual description of the site — the landscape and the geography. The description works in terms of both what is actually visible at present — the monument and its surroundings and what used to be there — the civilization of the Navajos, the site of what they used to call “The Glittering World”. From this mode of arrival and visual perception follows a sense of revelation: the realization of the fact that the famous monument to which everyone is attracted because it is seen as representing the uniqueness of the concept of modern state is actually also a reminder of the destruction of another ancient nation and its people. Through this realization a new perspective is formed about the monument: its “secular disenchantment”, the “absoluteness of its indifference to the landscape” and most importantly the fact that it has “nothing whatever to do with the Glittering World” and that it stands “testimony to a belief in the unpeopledness of this land” (20-21).

This realization that ends the second section turns into a mode of exploration in the next section that takes the narrative back into history, into the land of the Navajos and describes scenically the time and conditions of their loss. The fourth and final section works on a sense of return to the site and describes, in a most matter-of-fact manner, the tourists and their enthusiasm over the monument. But whereas the beginning of the essay marked the importance of the monument, the ending includes a subdued reference to the life of the members of aboriginal tribes who run stalls in and around the spot: the

narration, at this point, turns full circle from anticipation to journey and finally to knowledge:

Men from the reservations lounge about in the shade of the stalls, around the edges of the plaza Others sit behind their stalls, selling ‘Indian’ jewellery and blankets and Navajo Fry Bread. When evening comes and the flow of tourists dwindles, they will pack the contents of their stalls into their cars and go home to their reservations. No one stays the night here; there is nothing to stay for — the attractions of the place are wholly unworldly. (23)

If we have a look at these two essays together we see a pattern emerging. Ghosh is using historical material which are distinguished by their temporal and spatial specificity: the geographical locales in terms of identifiable structures and landscape and time in terms of particular historical years, both of which are highlighted in the essays. To present the meaning and significance of these data is used an indirect and gradual process of unfolding that uses elements of narrative structure like narrative time and narrative space. This whole process of moving amongst these various elements is kept on track by the presence of a familiar and identifiable image that actually exists — Angkor Wat and the Four Corners monument — and that serves as point of both entry into the past and re-entry into the present. Most importantly, there is a process of change in perspective and realization that the essays undergo whereby the initial focus on these material bodies is replaced, towards the end, by attention to human realities hidden by them — suffering of ordinary Cambodians in the Khmer Rouge years and of the Navajos during their displacement from their ancestral land. As a whole the balance between the historical data and the narrative presentation is kept equal.

“Tibetan Dinner”⁷ is a unique manifestation of this same dynamics between history and narrative executed on a different plane. In this mere four and a half pages long essay Ghosh takes up history by suggestion. Whereas the two previous essays provide less known information and knowledge to the readers by using known and famous structures,

“Tibetan Dinner” only hints at the history and present of a people who are seen in our familiar surroundings and are yet not exactly perceived : it talks about the “Tibetan Cause.” Everything used in the narrativization of this theme is brought down to a level of simplicity and direct personal attachment: the channel of entry into history, in this essay, is no public monument but is an extremely plain item of food—the famous Tibetan *mo-mo* and the mode is neither travel nor conversation but personal memory.

The beginning of the essay is most remarkable, not only because it uses the already analyzed technique of slow and indirect unfolding of the actual theme but also because it opens just like a story through a scene described in all possible material details: the narrator describes himself at a celebrity dinner party with friends when he catches “a glimpse of something, a flash of saffron at the other end of the room” and realizes that “it” was a Tibetan monk. Instantly an element of suspense is created through the obvious discrepancy: the narrator is surprised to see the monk there in the midst of “dinner jackets and designer diamonds” and is equally puzzled by the dumplings that had been served because they looked “vaguely familiar” and yet eluded his memory (13). A friend reveals that the whole party was actually organized by the monk himself for the “Tibetan Cause”. And suddenly the narrator remembers that the dumplings were nothing but the Tibetan *mo-mo* that looked like “a historic bit of food” (15) in that American restaurant. It directly takes the narrator, and along with him the reader, back into the memory of the narrator’s university days in Delhi when he used to frequent the food stalls of the Tibetan refugees. This memory makes up the second section of the essay where, very naturally, the description moves from focusing on the food to the people serving it and their condition of living and from there it goes to the description of the lives of the Tibetans in different parts of India—in Trivandrum and near Jama Masjid in Delhi. The third section opens again in the restaurant where now the narrator tries to understand the value of the whole enterprise, of the dinner arranged for the Tibetan Cause, in the light of his memory.

The distinctive character of this short and apparently simple essay lies in the degree of particularization and humanization that is bestowed on a unique historical epoch — the case of Tibet. Whereas in the previous essays Ghosh balanced the human interest with

description of general historical conditions and occurrences in this essay the entire focus is on the people as they face and manage the challenges of history—that is why it can be called history by suggestion. It is only in relation to this central concern that fleeting references to general historical background is included and what gets highlighted against that background is “lives and destinies” of the people:

Try to imagine *the journey they had made: from their chilly, thin aired plateau 15,000 feet above sea-level, across the passes of the high Himalayas, down into that steamy slum, floating on a bog of refuse and oil-slicks on the outskirts of Delhi* it was an unlikely place but Tibetans seem to have talent for surviving on unlikely terrain. *Ever since the Chinese invasion of Tibet dozens of Tibetan refugees have sprung up all over India* Once, going past the Jama Masjid in Delhi in a bus on a scorching June day, I noticed a Tibetan stall tucked in between the sugar-cane juice vendors. Two middle aged women dressed in heavy Tibetan *bakus* were sitting in it, knitting The women were smiling cheerfully as they bargained with their customers in sign language and broken Hindi. A small crowd had gathered around them, as though *in tribute to their courage and resilience.* (16) (emphasis added)

These essays, then, can be seen as turning the general, inanimate and objective data of history into particular, human and subjective experience by reshaping time, place and events as narrative categories. It is important to note and also notice that Ghosh maintains a fine balance between presenting historical details, wherever is necessary, with precision and accuracy on the one hand and engulfing the same within narratives of personal and communal memory, wherever is possible, on the other. This attention to the accuracy of realistic detail, events, time and place is what binds this group of essays to the next: the essays informed by qualities of journalism. The common element in both history and

journalism is their definition by the mode of recording phenomena; the immediate aim being that of information and the final aim being that of knowledge. At the same times both of these hold potentialities of being turned into human stories because of their essentially material character, the only and defining distinction between the two being that of time: history illuminates lives and destinies of the past, journalism focuses on the same in the present. As G. Stuart Adam says:

Michael Oakshott, a British philosopher, once defined “the world of history [is] the real world as a whole comprehended under the category of the past.” The world of journalism, by contrast, may be the real world as a whole comprehended under the category of the present. (348)

4.2.2 Essaying Stories II: *Journalistic Imagination*

Ghosh’s connection with journalism can be seen as even more immediate than his relation with history because here he has a background of professional practice: he worked for *The Indian Express* in Delhi while doing his M. A. and, in a way, it served as his route to his subsequent literary career because he thought journalism “to be the closest approximation to literature then” (“Interview”, 86). The ethos of a journalistic approach is reflected in Ghosh’s work both by a steady and alert responsiveness to various issues of the contemporary world and by a writing style marked by meticulous investigation. Essays like “Countdown” and “The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi” (based on the 1998 nuclear tests and the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 respectively) have been generally seen as a representation of this. This section will try to analyze two of Ghosh’s lesser known journalistic essays: “The Town by the Sea” and “After the World Trade Center”.⁸

In the most basic sense “journalism involves reporting of ideas and events as they occur—the gathering and presentation of information on subjects that may vary each day . . .” (Adam 347). In other words, it is essentially related to what is commonly called “news”. Now such a proposition has some implications. First of all, it implies that journalism is defined by its rootedness in the world of reality, as against that of

imagination or fantasy: it records events “as they occur”. Secondly, it implies true representation of these real events because it unavoidably involves “reporting”; as John Carey says it “must be written by an eye witness [which] makes for authenticity” (119). Thirdly, it acquires, because of these very traits, a quality of extreme transience and provisionality becoming, in the process, “a very perishable commodity” (Park 229). In a way, then, Journalism becomes the quintessential category of nonfictional writing that is defined by and survives on its claims to authenticity and reality. Consequently the negative evaluation by academic literary standards of nonfictional writing as a category, as mentioned in the previous section, has been most consistently been faced by journalism. As Phyllis Frus says “No matter what criteria theorists specify to define the ‘literary’, it appears that journalism in general does not meet them”. The reason, for Frus, is deep rooted in the ancient distinction and hierarchy set between what Aristotle called history, which can only grasp actuality and particularity against the probability and universality of poetry (1); then there are related other prejudices:

Even when the concept of fictionality is stretched to mean “transcendent of its context” or having a value apart from contingent facts journalistic writing hardly qualifies, for it is tied to everyday life and is thus hampered by its pragmatic function, which is to provide information. In contrast to fiction’s imaginative freedom and creativity, journalism is discursive and mundane. It is objective where fiction is subjective, and more like science than literature in its transparent, rather than self-conscious, form. And as a popular form with mass appeal, it is considered inferior to an elitist “Literature . . . (2)

Against this rigid traditional evaluation of journalism as essentially nonfictional and consequently inferior to literature stands the new found dynamic concept of the “literary” as both inherent within nonfictional writing and as potential lying to be appropriated. Following this, there emerges a consciousness that whereas the very idea of news as

event or occurrence imply a dormant human interest, the other characteristic concept of reporting implies a subjectivity always already involved in the process. Consequently, journalism is seen as involving, at a deeper level, as much of “criticism, or editorializing, or the conferral of judgments on the shape of things” (Adam 347) as it involves simple delivery of everyday news. This clearly indicates that there are angles of imagination and creativity that can be exploited within the traditions of journalistic writing. Consequences of such insight manifest in newly theorized categories of hybrid journalistic writing that foreground the blending of realistic and imaginative strands.

Two such concepts are “Literary journalism” by Norman Sims and “Intimate Journalism” by Walt Haring. Sims was introducing a collection titled *The Literary Journalists* that included works of writers like John Mcphee, Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe who had already been subsumed under the category of the “New Journalism” that flourished in America in 1960s and 1970s and also pieces by younger writers like Richard West, Mark Kramer and Sara Davidson who were influenced by these elder New Journalists. In his introduction Sims categorized literary journalism as a form of writing that stands midway between traditional reportage and fiction. He asserted that this is a category of writing marked by a belief that “crucial moments of everyday life contain great drama and substance”, by the presence of the writing voice of “persistent, competent, sympathetic reporters”, and by the fact that the “stories are true” (3-4). In the long run, for Sims, “a sense of responsibility to the subjects and a search for the underlying meaning in the act of writing characterize contemporary literary journalism.” Such an orientation manifests in the four traits of “immersion” (“time spent on the job”), structure, voice and accuracy that mark this type of writing. (8) Walt Haring’s concept of Intimate Journalism, on other hand, includes writers like Gary Smith, Susan Orlean, David Finkel and others and focuses on emotive and narrative qualities:

The simple goal of intimate journalism should be to describe and *evoke how people live and what they value* a kind of story that rises and falls on narrative structure, the reporting of physical detail, the reporting of human emotion, on evocative tone and the pulling of thematic threads

through the course of the story. It's a journalism rooted in descriptive realism. (xx)

Though they are developed separately in relation to different sets of journalists at the root of both these concepts lies the same basic idea: the possibility of incorporating a subjective, creative and human perspective to objective, realist and material data of present events, of incorporating stories/narrative within news.

“The Tsunami of December 2004: The Town by the Sea” is the essay Ghosh wrote after his visit to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands on the first week of January 2005, less than a week after the Tsunami had hit the islands on 26th of December, 2004. At the primary level, it is a truly journalistic essay in the sense that it shows Ghosh working in the capacity of a journalist by visiting the site of the devastation, interviewing people, taking stock of the overall situation and recording all relevant data meticulously. The essay starts with a general but precise description of the islands' geographical and political location which is followed by an account of the writer's visit to a relief camp in Port Blair. He includes the accounts of three people there who narrate their experiences to him and he puts forward analyses of the prevailing conditions in terms of relief operations and the roles played by the army and the government. This is followed, in the final section, by the description of a dramatic visit to the severely affected town of Malacca in Car Nicobar where he accompanies a person (who is simply called “the Director) in the latter's search for his family and belongings in the ruins left by the Tsunami.

It is easy to see that Ghosh, in this essay, is following the trail of his investigations in a manner quite straightforward in comparison to the intricate narrative structures of the previous essays. The whole essay consistently builds its effect on a sense of immediacy and concreteness that comes from the recording and reporting of details and data regarding the cyclone and its occurrence, the subsequent situation and condition of the people:

Stretching through 700 kilometres of the Bay of Bengal [the islands] are held aloft by a range of undersea mountains that stands guard

over the abyssal deep of the Sunda trench. Of the 572 islands, only 36 are inhabited: 'the Andamans' is the name given to the northern part of the archipelago while 'the Nicobars' lie to the south. At their uppermost point, the Andamans are just a few dozen miles from Burma's Coco Islands, infamous for their prisons, while the southernmost edge of the Nicobars is only a couple of hundred kilometers from the ever-restless region of Aceh. This part of the chain is so positioned that the tsunami of December 26, 2004 hit it just minutes after the coastline of northern Sumatra

On January 1 2005, I went to visit the Nirmala School Camp in Port Blair. [...]The refugees had spent the last three days waiting anxiously in the camp, and in that time no one had asked them where they wanted to go or when; none of them had any idea of what was to become of them and the sense of being adrift had brought them to the end of their tether

On the morning of that day Paramjeet Kaur and her family were inside their sea-facing house when the earthquake struck. The ground unfurled under their feet like a sheet waving in the wind and no sooner had the shaking stopped than they heard a noise 'like the sound of a helicopter'. Paramjeet Kaur's husband, Pavitter Singh, looked outside and saw a wall of water speeding towards them. 'The sea has split apart' (*samundar phat gaya*), he shouted, 'run, run.' There was no time to pick up documents or jewellery; everyone who stopped to do so was killed.

Paramjeet Kaur and her family ran for two kilometres, without looking back and were just able to save themselves

Passages like these create a sense of “authenticity”, as John Carey said, because Ghosh is working here as an “eye witness”. However, a keener look will reveal that this primary line of description is subtly but persistently accompanied by two other lines of involvement with the subject. The first is a line of analysis and reflection where Ghosh’s persona explicitly functions in the capacity of a consciousness that is not simply recording but is also evaluating and judging. In fact, it is in this later capacity that Ghosh illuminates the meaning and significance of the recorded and reported details and as a result arrives, at times, at insights wholly different from the commonly available ones. The interaction with the refugees, for example, makes Ghosh realize that the idea of loss—as a general and essential concept related to any natural calamity—has an entirely different connotation in the case of the Tsunami. What the refugees have lost without any possible way of retrieving are not only near and dear ones or property and possessions but their proofs of identity : “identity cards, licences, ration cards, school certificates, cheque books, certificates of life insurance and receipts for fixed deposits” and it was peculiar to this disaster:

An earthquake would have left remnants to rummage through; floods and hurricanes would have allowed time for survivors to safeguard their essential documents on their person. The tsunami, in the suddenness of its onslaught allowed for no preparations: not only did it destroy the survivors' homes and decimate their families; it also robbed them of all the evidentiary traces of their place in the world.

Similarly, the conditions prevailing in the camp leads Ghosh to probe deeper into the problems related to meeting such disasters and helping affected people. He finds that the bureaucratic inefficiency in the present case can be explained by the absence of elected representatives from the Islands (Andaman and Nicobar being Union Territories) to

whom, in the case of other parts of the country, civil servants stand answerable; there is, in other words, “a lack of democracy and popular empowerment” within the biggest democracy of the world.

However, it is the second line of engagement that runs very subtly throughout the first half that distinguishes the piece as a unique journalistic essay: the personal involvement of Ghosh with the people and the situation not simply as a journalist but as a human being. What Ghosh can be seen presenting here is not simple reportage of a natural disaster but a personal appropriation of a human condition. Ghosh describes how, when he met Sylvester Solomon—a retired servicemen whose pension papers and saved money were swept away along with the bank where it all had been kept—he tries to encourage him about possibilities and realizes the futility of his attempt at the same time: “I looked into his eyes, and I knew that in his place, I too would not have the energy or the courage to take on the struggles that would be required to reclaim my life's savings from that bank.” Similarly Ghosh tries to judge the whole situation by appropriating it on personal terms: “How do we quantify the help needed to rebuild these ruined lives? The question is answered easily enough if we pose it not in the abstract, *but in relation to ourselves. To put ourselves in the place of these victims* is to know that all the help in the world would not be enough.” (emphasis added). If we remember Sim’s idea of literary journalism as presentation of true stories by “sympathetic” reporters through immersion in the job and maintenance of accuracy, we find Ghosh doing exactly that.

However, the fullest manifestation of the implications of such an involvement comes to fore in the last part of the essay where Ghosh describes his journey to Car Nicobar with “the Director” in search of the latter’s wife and daughter. From the very beginning the account includes narrative elements like dialogue, scene and surprise revelation that we saw being used in the previous essays. What is highlighted to the fullest is the personality of the “Director” who is introduced like a character: “a short, portly man with thick glasses and well-oiled, curly hair . . . dressed in a stiffly-ironed brown safari suit [with] an air of irascibility that spoke of a surfeit of time spent in filing papers and running offices”. Ghosh took a seat beside him in the plane to Car Nicobar without having any idea who he was. The man kept muttering angrily all along and Ghosh was certain that

the airmen would make him leave but “inexplicably they did not”. And then the revelation is made which, Ghosh says, hit him “with the force of a shock”: the person himself was a victim, though his demeanor did not hint at anything like it. Ghosh, here, is obviously using the characteristic narrative mode of keeping gaps or raising questions: he asks the person what happened and the story unfolds. The entire account of how the director’s wife and daughter were lost in the Tsunami is described in dramatic yet realistic details and then the next episode unfurls where Ghosh goes accompanying him on his search.

The description of this journey maintains a balance between giving a most detailed and vivid account of the town of Malacca as it stood after the disaster and representing the pathos and trauma involved in the Director’s frantic search for his family members. However, as the essay proceeds towards the end the second aspect is brought more and more into relief and the affect is intensified by Ghosh’s own involvement with the situation which is given equal and open representation. The last scene describes Ghosh finding a yellow paint box which the Director identifies as his daughter Vineeta’s who he says loved to paint and Ghosh comments that “the flatness of his voice was harder to listen to than an outburst would have been.” Ghosh tries to give it to him but he refuses and Ghosh is left, at the end, helpless and bewildered:

I stood amazed as he walked off towards the blazing fire, with his slides still folded in his grip: how was it possible that the only memento he had chosen to retrieve were those magnified images? As a husband, a father, a human being, it was impossible not to wonder: what would I have done? what would I have felt? There are times when words seem futile, and to no one more so than a writer. At these moments it seems that nothing is of value other than to act and to intervene in the course of events: to think, to reflect, to write seem trivial and wasteful. But the life of the mind takes many forms and after the day had passed I understood that in the manner

of his choosing, the Director had mounted the most singular, the most powerful defence of it that I would ever witness.

Harring's concept of Intimate Journalism as an account of "how people live and what they value" seems entirely relevant here. What Ghosh is doing here is turning the general and impersonal data of "news" into lived experiences of individuals concerned. In a way it is reaching authenticity through creativity: Ghosh is experimenting with the core traditions of journalistic reportage by involving emotive and experiential angles to his account, but those very elements have contributed towards making it a more authentic piece of journalism.

In "After the World Trade Centre", on the other hand, the narratorial element is given more space than mere reporting. In this small essay, Ghosh describes the attack on the Twin Towers by following the experiences of an eye witness, Nicole De Martini, who happened to be his neighbor and friend and who lost her husband Frank in the accident. Like "The Town by the Sea" this essay is also marked by an intense experiential/emotive engagement with the implications of the disaster on the one hand and the accurate description/reporting of details of the actual occurrence on the other. But what brings the relevance of the story into relief is something more than this: it is a sense of irony and pathos that marks this specific story of loss and that creates an aura of intense human drama around the incident. The irony comes from the fact that Frank and Nicole were architects, involved, in different capacities, with the maintenance and surveillance of the Twin Towers and Frank, who went missing in the accident, had a special passion for the structure of the buildings. On the day of the accident Frank decided to stay back after the towers were hit to escort wounded people out of it because he knew the building inside out; Nicole came out and minutes later the tower collapsed.

Though it is a small piece, Ghosh's technique of creating maximum human effect within a limited narrative space comes to the fore in the best possible way. The essay starts with a matter-of-fact way with the introduction of Frank and Nicole and their connection with the Twin Towers. Throughout the first three paragraphs Ghosh stresses the fact of Frank's unusual passion for the Buildings:

Shortly after the basement bomb explosion of 1993, Frank was hired to do bomb-damage assessment at the World Trade Center. An assignment that he thought would last only a few months quickly turned into a consuming passion. "He fell in love with the buildings," Nicole told me. "For him, they represented an incredible human feat. He was awed by their scale and magnitude, by their design, and by the efficiency of the use of materials. One of his most repeated sayings about the towers is that they were built to take the impact of a light airplane.

It is easy to see what Ghosh is doing here: he is building the story by playing with the reader's knowledge and expectations. The fact that this is an essay on the Twin Towers attacks unavoidably keeps the image of their destruction by the suicidal plane crash at the centre of attention. Ghosh's highlighting of the fact that Frank was awed by "the efficiency of the use of materials" in the buildings and repeatedly talked about how "they were built to take the impact of a light airplane", creates an unavoidable sense of suspense, drama and more importantly of emotional involvement by a hint of tragic irony. The actual description of the fateful morning then follows as described by Nicole to Ghosh. It involves emotionally charged scenes like the moment Frank asked Nicole to leave the building and stayed back himself, calling his sister sometime prior to his death to say that he and Nicole were fine and the time Nicole disclosed the news to her kids who, after hearing it, goes back to play normally. At one level it can be read as a personal account of a family's misfortune but at a deeper level it works as a uniquely true reportage of the millenium's biggest "news": what is believed to be the most horrible and drastic manifestation of world terrorism in the twenty first century is brought down to the level of one human story serving as a the paradigm of the whole tragedy. But far more significant is the way in which the whole status of the incident undergoes a change with its adaptation in the form of an essay: the characteristic transience of "news" that Park talked about is replaced by a story of loss that transcends the specificity of time and place

in its universal human appeal. The story/essay synthesis works here as a channel for turning the whole incident into a signifier of broader and deeper issues.

4.3 Essay and/as Story: Towards a Poetics of the Narrative Essay

This study has tried to assess the essay genre as performing ideological functions through its very form; it has tried to assert that it is more relevant and more fruitful to focus on what the essay does rather than what it is. What implications such a hypothesis will entail in the case of the narrative essay and its form? At the most basic level the question it leads to is this: is the story/essay dynamics found in the narrative essay only an issue of aesthetic and literary relevance or are there deeper categories of significance associated with it? Shedding light on this “story/essay” equation, Douglass Hesse points out that the respective concepts underlying the two categories can be summed up as “Onceness” and “Alwaysness” where “Onceness” implies a “sense of possibly emblematic but unanalyzed incident” and “Alwaysness” implies “the sense of ‘this is how things are’” (“Boundary Zone” 96). In other words, the onceness/story element puts forward the concrete and particular manifestation of phenomena in the form of incidents whereas the alwaysness/essay element brings forward the explanative framework signifying that manifestation in the form of a general idea or thesis. It is more important to notice that the story/particular element attains its significance in relation to the essay/thesis element and the essay/thesis element in turn attains maximum effectiveness by incorporating the story/particular element.

The presence of this symbiotic equation between the particular and the general, between the concrete and the abstract, between the incident and its significance within the form of the narrative essay, indicates a unique potentiality of the genre. For G. Douglas Atkins this is symbolic of essay’s epistemological position as situated between “experience” and “reflection” and generic position as situated between the novel and philosophy: “the essay gives us . . . *reflection upon experience*, and if reflection is the province of philosophy, experience is that of fiction” (*Tracing the Essay* 149). Undoubtedly, maintaining this unique balance is the special quality of the narrative essay but more importantly the whole idea of “meaning” or “significance” underlying phenomena

indicates that the final value of this story/essay dynamics of the narrative essay lies in a deeper sphere of cognition underlying the primary level of aesthetic effect. In other words, the poetics of the form of the narrative essay is concerned with categories of truth and knowledge lying underneath the immediate categories of fact and fiction. In Ghosh's case, for example, such questions unavoidably surface:

. . . for to speak of 'facts' immediately involves some taxing epistemological problems: whose 'facts'? in whose interest are 'facts' deployed? For what purpose? Ghosh does not endorse the view that there are no such things as facts but he does point out that they do not necessarily mean very much by themselves, and certainly they cannot of themselves deliver something called 'truth'. Facts must be interpreted; they must be embedded in discourse; they only speak when placed in narrative. (Mondal 19)

As has been seen, in Ghosh's case the narrative essay turns objective data into human particulars of a story to reach a broader humane significance underlying it. In fact the stories become the route to a deeper general understanding that works as the thesis of the piece. And it is this "thesis", this core "idea" that can be seen as the essay element within which the story finds its meaning. The problematization of truth becomes an unavoidable concern in analyzing this interdependency because as a part of the wider category of creative nonfiction narrative essays take up nonfictional/real subject matters and at the same time shape their representation within fictional/imaginative structures; whereas the essay/thesis element indicates a tie with the "real", the story/narrative element points toward a connection with the "imaginative". Naturally, it raises questions regarding the "truth" or "reality" of the phenomenon—incident, people, words etc.—the essay represents and also regarding its value as information or, more importantly, as "knowledge". As a way of answering this dilemma can be cited another of Douglas Hesse's formulations regarding what he called "creative nonfiction's epistemological trusses":

. . . .that reality is mediated and narrativized; that the particular subjectivities of authors are crucial and should be textually embodied rather than effaced; that language and form must have a surface and texture that remind readers the work is artficed; that even though some readers are considerably more adept and enculturated, the work is not reserved for a narrow specialist audience. (“The Place,” 239)

What creative nonfiction in general and the narrative essay in particular embodies, in other words, is a faith in the possibility of individual, accessible and essentially subjective nature of reality, the existence of concrete and particular “truths” rather than a single, abstract and overarching “truth”. The practice of filtering “real” incidents and people through the constructed apparatus of narrative is, in this sense, an epistemological process of relativizing the absolutist claims of reality, truth and knowledge in concrete and individual terms. As Nancy Mairs declared while trying to assess literary nonfiction: “Even when I was writing in the best of faith, invention might be taking place beneath the surface. The only claim I can make is that *I’m telling the truth as I know it . . .*” (90) (emphasis added).

But more than this epistemological significance there remains a humanitarian and ethical element at the core of the genre. The very idea of turning truth and reality into categories of personal appropriation implies that the value of individual cognition has been prioritized over general or given “knowledge” on the one hand and the a mode of involved and intimate inquiry has replaced detached, objective analysis on the other. It turns the form suitable for bringing to light alternative perspectives on and less known facets of known realities on the one hand and for creating channels for humanitarian communications on the other. In Ghosh these elements appear, as has been seen, in the forms of an inquiry into streams of “life and destiny” (as Ghosh himself called it) hidden under and turned silent by established, visible and authoritative accounts of official history and journalism. The presence of this insight indicates an ethics of involvement that characterizes Ghosh not simply as a writer but also as an intellectual with an aim at

intervening into the official discourses of truth and reality. As he said in his interview with John Hawley: “A writer is a citizen, not just of a country but of the world. When I feel strongly about some issue I think it’s my duty to express my views as cogently and forcefully as possible” (11).

It is very important to explore forms like the narrative essay because it reveals the extent to which the form of the essay can develop and mature and the degree to which it can accommodate textual and formal challenges, tensions and experiments. Developing a consciousness and understanding of such possibilities may prove highly significant within essay criticism because it can pose a challenge to the widely accepted traditional view of the essay as an inherently simple and short piece of nonfiction with very limited literary or creative potential. At the beginning of this chapter we saw an instance where the absence of a simple and straightforward subjective shape led to the confusion regarding the very identity of the form: Atwan’s student came across a complex and hybrid essayistic text that confused him by clashing with his traditionally acquired idea of what an essay is supposed to look like. Analysis of the narrative essay form vis-à-vis the formal and philosophical contours of creative nonfiction is an example of the ways such confusion may be resolved.

What is more important and also interesting to note, however, is the way in which the essay balances its essential and distinctive formal principles with the experimental elements. The principles of the personal and the familiar, for example, can still be seen functioning in narrative essays of Ghosh, though with ramifications different from the traditionally accepted ones. The principle of the familiar, in Ghosh’s essays, manifests itself in the mode of detailed and concrete description. The time and place described in the essays are both distant and unfamiliar for most readers; the epochs analyzed are also wide and deep. However, Ghosh manages to capture the essentials of all these in terms of concrete and particular details creating, in the process, an effect of familiarity in universal human terms. The narrative technique of appropriating large and complicated chunks of human history within the familiar contours of particular human “stories”—what we have called “essaying stories” in this study—is the adaptation of the familiar principle within the formal shape of the narrative essay. This whole process, however, rests on the

involvement of the narrating “self” of Ghosh which selects, confronts and presents the stories that he is essaying. Beneath the surface-level effect of objectivity, it is the subjectivity of the narrator that filters the “real stories” for the readers to see. Though it may seem to be unavoidable in any textual representation of the “real”, in this case, as has been discussed, the principle of the personal also acts as the epistemological tool of subverting and relativizing truth claims of master narratives. It is interesting to remember that such a philosophical basis for the personal was planted, at the very root of the form of the essay, by none other than Montaigne himself.

In the final analysis, then, the essays transcend their own form as a creative or literary mode of writing to reach up to the status of an intellectual pursuit. The essay/story dynamics of the form resolves itself in a mode of reflection or thought that encapsulates the significance carried by the story element within its essayistic thesis or idea. John McCarthy offers a concept of what he calls “boundary literature” which proves relevant here. By way of quoting Gary Saul Morson from whom the idea originally came, by boundary literature McCarthy connotes all those writing forms which are “marked by generic ambivalence” (20) and focuses on “essayistic writing as boundary literature” (21). He notes two important attributes of this type of writings: their lineage lies in a position between what, following Morson, he calls “research” and “story” (21) and they are “specially designed to convert the reading experience into permanent private and social change.” (22) Whereas the first element refers to an attribute of this mode of writing and directly echoes the essay/story dynamics, the second one points towards the more important aspect of the form’s significance in terms of its function. For McCarthy, the way this type of texts turns reading experience into experience of change is by offering an engaged and responsible kind of entertainment “that is more than just ephemeral”: an experience where “instead of taking us away from reality into a fictional world to be charmed, the author of a boundary work takes us deeper into the *real world* . . .” (22) (emphasis added). In other words, the central or core determinant of this type of writing remains in its rootedness or attachment to the real world—the world of “research” as it is called—to which it moves through a channel of entertainment, a channel made by “story”.

In this mode of “boundary literature” the essay turns into a form that retains its reflective, imaginative or creative side but only in conjunction with an intellectual and realistic involvement with the outside world. This is significant because it indicates another level of maturity for the essay as a genre: from the insecure position of being a minor manifestation of nonfiction that is perennially second-class in a literary universe determined and dominated by fiction, the essay grows to be a hybrid and challenging form of writing that problematizes the very boundaries of fiction and fact. More importantly it points towards the possibility of another level of growth where essay might rise above its connections with fictionality altogether to become a form solely rooted in the real—a growth out of imagination and speculation and into realism and action. To such a level the genre will be developed by the activist essays of Arundhati Roy to whom this study shall now turn.