



## The Idea of a Nation: A Post-Colonial study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

Anand Dampella,

English Language Instructor

Technical and Administrative Training Institute,

Barka, Sultanate of Oman

### Abstract

Colonialism had condemned millions to a life of subservience and dispossession. At this dismal situation, the anti-colonial nationalism promised a new dawn of independence and political self-determination for colonized peoples. In the twentieth century, the myth of nation has proved highly potent and productive during several struggles against colonial rule. Through the development of created and structured myths, the nation became highly mobilized as a powerful symbol which anti-colonial movements used to organize against colonial rule. Amitav Ghosh uses his novel, *The Glass Palace*, to unveil how the colonial intrusion had imbued the spirit of nationalism in unifying the people irrespective of caste, creed, class or regional disparities.

### Keywords

Colonialism, Myth of Nation, Anti-Colonial movements, Nationalism.

---

The idea of 'nation' is basically a western construct. This influential statement on the idea of the nation was first delivered in 1882. It emerged with the growth of western capitalism and industrialization and was a fundamental component of imperialist expansion. On the world map, each nation is separated from the other by a border. They are planned by the people and built upon particular foundations. So, a nation is primarily an idea.

The centrality to the idea of the nation lies in the notions of collectiveness and belonging, a mutual sense of community that a group of individuals imagines it shares. This sense of mutual, national belonging-ness is nurtured often by the performance of various national narratives, rituals and symbols that stimulate an individual's sense of being a member of a select group. Symbols like the national flag and national anthem are part of





the invention of the tradition in which all nations participate. The repeated performance of various national rituals takes on an emotive and semi-sacred character for the people. If the invention of the tradition became central to the concept of 'nation', so do the narration of happenings in history. Every nation has its own narrative of history which explains its origins, its individual character and the victories won in its name; which helps to strengthen the people's relationship with their past as also highlights their togetherness in the present by gathering them around one emotive symbol.

Benedict Anderson says in his work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), that Nations are often described through the forms of representations, which promote the unity of time and space. The simultaneities of time and space are exemplified in the form of novel and the newspaper are at the heart of the ways by which individuals consider themselves as a part of national community.

Many Indian English novelists have turned to the past as much to trace the deepening mood of nationalism as to cherish the memories of the bygone days. A close study of the contemporary novels reveals the writers' preoccupation with historic past and the unabated interest of the readers. In the novel that depicts the past are that treat some event of national importance that has had wide repercussion.

Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Glass Palace*, presents history as a collective memory, which gathers, in symbiotic fashion, all that which existed in the past into all that happens in the present. Through this novel, he returns to his own distinctive brand of historical fiction on a canvas more epic and the stories are personal, yet somehow grander than his previous novels. Ghosh uses his novel to unveil how the colonial intrusion had imbued the spirit of nationalism in unifying the people irrespective of caste, creed, class or regional disparities.

Colonialism had condemned millions to a life of subservience and dispossession. At this dismal situation, the anti-colonial nationalism promised a new dawn of independence and political self-determination for colonized peoples. In the twentieth century, the myth of nation has proved highly potent and productive during several struggles against colonial





rule. Through the development of created and structured myths, the nation became highly mobilized as a powerful symbol which anti-colonial movements used to organize against colonial rule.

The colonial rule had dismantled the political structures of many nations and the worst hits were the countries of the South Asian region. Many countries had become British colonies. In the South Asian region it was India, Burma and Malaysia, which suffered the colonial oppression. These countries are known for their rich cultural heritage, rich natural resources and for their abundant wealth.

The British intruded into these lands in the name of business: that was their tactic. But the intrusion into these lands had no way changed the condition of the commoner. In fact the commoner thought that the colonial rule came as a liberating agency from the tyranny of monarchical rule which they were facing. Especially in Burma, the commoner had developed an aversion towards their rulers, King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat. The opening chapters of *The Glass Palace* reveal the aversion of the Burmese crowd towards their superior authority. "Through all the years of the Queen's reign the townsfolk had hated her for her cruelty, feared her for her ruthlessness and courage" (34). The looting of the King's Palace by the Burmese public testifies their aversion. When the British confiscate Thebaw from power, his countrymen, the ordinary folk should have given him support through his difficult phase of time. Instead of that, they turned against him by indulging in looting their own King's Palace. Because in their eyes the King failed as a good ruler that's the reason why they considered the British as a liberating agency. It is here that the question of the State comes into focus. In the countries which are governed by the State, the State itself looks after the well-being of each and every individual of the country. It provides the source of revenue for its people and sets the standards of living. By doing so, the State gain control over its people and the social hierarchy runs with perfectness. But if the State fails in providing livelihood and other necessities to its people, it loses control over them and the hierarchy will be dismantled.

The Burmese King Thebaw failed to gain control over his people. He was a King for name sake but his wife, Queen Supayalat exercised all the powers. But she too failed in gaining





control over the people. Neither she nor the King knew what was going through the minds of their people. The Royal couple's life had been completely shut off from the public life. The conversation between Rajkumar and Ma Cho reveals how the King and the Queen led their lives away from the people. 'Does the King ever leave the fort'? 'No not in the last seven years. But the Queen and her maidens sometimes walk along the walls...' (7).

Queen Supayalat thought that the entire country was 'along the walls' of their mighty Palace. She did not care to realize that the country lie much beyond the palace walls. But she, like a modern day politician, boasts, '...they'd defeated the Emperor of China, conquered Thailand, Assam, Manipur. And she herself, Supayalat, she had risked everything to secure the throne for Thebaw, her husband and step-brother'. (22)

The British intrusion into Burma had changed everything. Thebaw lost his power and so did the Queen. Their own people had looted their Palace. It was an unbearable humiliation for the Royal couple. They never noticed the growing turbulence in the public. The Burmese crowd seized the opportunity to get into the Palace with the invasion of the British. Until then no Burmese commoner ever thought of entering into the palace. They knew that it would result in death penalty. But now everything has changed. The King and the Queen were thrown out of power. The Queen's reaction when she saw the mob inside their Palace shows her helplessness:

The Queen was screaming, shaking her fists. 'Get out of here. Get out.' Her face was red, mottled with rage, her fury caused as much by her own impotence as by the presence of the mob in the Palace. A day before, she could have had a commoner imprisoned for so much as looking her directly in the face. Today all the city scum had come surging into the Palace and she was powerless to act against them (33).

The King and the Queen along with some trusted servants were thrown out of their own country to a remote coastal village in India. No one in the country felt sorry for their expulsion from the country. It was the colonial rulers' ploy in exiling the King's family from their own land. Earlier, the Indian Mughal King, Bahadur Shah Zafar had been exiled in the same manner. The colonial rulers exiled him to Rangoon from India.





The sudden change in the political structure had no effect on the commoner but it had a huge influence on the upper class people in the country. Because of the British intrusion into the land, Thebaw, the head of the country lost his power and many timber businessmen lost their grip on the teak plantations. Although Kinwun Mingyi and Taingda Mingyi, the two senior ministers in Thebaw government had some gains assisting the British in detaining Thebaw and many others had lost their prominence and were thrown out of power.

The colonial rule had a great impact on the members of the elite group in Burma as well as in India. Prior to the British intrusion they had a strong foothold in the country but now they have lost their grip on the soil. Their number is limited and they needed support of all the people to raise their voice against colonial rulers. Until then, they never considered other people, worth anything and even the social hierarchy had created a great abyss between them and the subaltern people. "Many once-colonized nations have struggled with the internal differences that threaten the production of national unity" (Mc leod: 2000). (The term 'subaltern' is used to signify the many different people who did not comprise the colonial elite. The colonial elite includes, the lesser rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and the upper middle class peasants).

The projection of a unified imaginary community became greatest strength for the national movement. The nationalist elite claim that their 'modern' attitudes are coterminous with 'popular consciousness' and enjoy the support of the people, deemed to be a unified singular entity sharing the same political aims. The myth of a nation functions as a valuable resource in uniting people to raise their voice against the colonial rulers. It worked against the differences created out of gender, racial, religious and cultural differences.

It is obvious that the British intrusion into Burma and India had resulted in creating a sense of nationalism. The British invasion has resulted in changing the internal differences among the people. The internal differences were set aside and the idea of nation had been created. In Paul Gilroy's words, nations are created





...through elaborate cultural, ideological and political processes which culminate in feeling of connectedness to the other national subjects and in the idea of a national interest that transcends the supposedly petty divisions of class, region, dialect or caste' (1993: 49)

## References:

1. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal. 2000.
2. Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins of Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso. 1983.
3. Gilroy, Paul. *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*. Serpent's Tail. 1983

