



A NEW HISTORICIST READING OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE GLASS PALACE*

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The term 'new historicism' was first used by the American critic Stephen Greenblatt whose book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (1980) is regarded as its beginning. However, similar tendencies can be seen in works by various critics published during the 1970's, a good example being J.W. Lever's *The Tragedy of State: A Study of Jacobean Drama*. A simple definition of the new historicism is that it is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, generally of the same period. That is to say, new historicism refuses to 'privilege' the literary text, instead of a literary 'foreground' and a historical 'background' it envisages and practices a mode of study in which literary and non-literary works are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other. This 'equal weighting' is proposed in the definition of new historicism offered by the American critics Louis Montrose who defines it as a combined interest in 'the textuality of history, the historicity of texts'. It involves 'an intensified willingness to read all the textual traces of the past with the attention traditionally conferred only on literary texts'.

Many Indian English writers have turned to the past as much to trace the deepening attitude of nationalism so as to cherish the memories of the bygone days. Ghosh's concept of history colours all his writing. *The Glass Palace* presents history as a collective memory, which folds in a symbiotic fashion all that existed in the past into all that happens in the present. His narrative technique combined with his treatment of history weaves delicate connections between different phenomena, so that no incident becomes absolutely autonomous. This generates the mobility with which history traverses past and present, creating a standard fluid pattern of time. There is no attempt on the part of the writer to squeeze history into a preconceived shape. Certainly Ghosh's sense of history retains its historicity, a happy outcome that has eluded many great writers. In his hands, history becomes a process, which hinges on characters





who without losing their 'realistic' eccentricities are still representative of important historical tendencies.

History can be fashioned by the way individuals look at their culture. Each aspect of history, each character and event is gathered into a process of constant change, which after all, is the real meaning of history. Viney Kirpal's comment is illuminating: "The sudden realization of the reality of history in which the individual has an important part to play is reflected in the Indian novel of the 1980's. (xxi)

Describing history as an unending dialogue between the present and the past, the historian E.H. Carr observes that its dual function is to enable man to understand the society of the past and to increase his mastery over the society of the present. (55) It is in this sense, Amitav Ghosh's writing is a part of "the multiple search for a new dimension of reality which could combine past and present..."

In Mukul Kesavan's words, Ghosh "buffs his imagination against the grit of recorded lives. (1) Ghosh thus explores historical moments and constructions in order to give form, and thus content, to his own narrative impulses and gives us complex pictures of interpenetrating lives of individuals, the interaction between their individual narratives. *The Glass Palace* according to Ghosh was like an Odyssey... at some point that my book was about much more than just individual characters. It was also about the history diaspora in Southeast Asia, which is an epic history, a very extraordinary history..." -World Literature Today (88-89)

Ghosh is constantly looking for ways in which he can render history into fiction; in a certain sense he is also seeking to pit fiction against history, to challenge the latter's implacability with the former's potentiality more human qualities. In an interview to *First City*, Ghosh defended his choice of fiction over history:

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

Ghosh inherent fascination with the cyclical patterns of history and its dissemination in society and culture is conducive to the acceptance of such concept about migrancy, hybridity and diaspora in which the tension between the states of de- and re-territorialisation never quite





dissipates, but is held in a constant delicate balance between the memory of a past and for a future. In *The Glass Palace*, he returns to his own distinctive brand of historical fiction that he had first introduced with *The Shadow Lines* but this time the sweep is larger, the canvas epic, and the stories personal still and yet somehow grander. And there are recognisable historical and political figures— the last of the Burmese royalty and of course the chimera hope of nascent Myanmar Aung San Suu Kyi— to etch the realistic borders of the fictional lives of Rajkumar, Dolly, Ma Cho, Saya John, Uma, Dinu, Neel, Manju, Arjun and Kishan Singh. And Jaya, Rajkumar’s art- historian granddaughter, who makes an – expected cameo appearance toward the end of *The Glass Palace*, and ties its loose ends together as best as she can perhaps only a historian can. The novel is, in some senses, a dirge for the diasporic condition that is a product of history, which leaves behind kingdoms and palaces and moves, in the exilic mode, toward a near hopeless regeneration. But it is not the story of kings and queens; they merely provide the backdrop for Ghosh’s incisive historical sense and sensibility.

The story encompasses more than a century in the history of the Sub Continent, people get involved in unexpected relationships across countries and cultures, political and ethical issues are debated wars are fought, rebellion quelled, fortunes are made and lost. Ghosh reports everything accurately, thoughtfully – his precision backed up by his meticulous research. Ghosh gives detail description about military manoeuvres, models of automobile and aircraft, drilling of oil, timber trade, food, clothing, and every detail is historically crafted. He gives vivid details about timber trade so accurately and he mentions about the tais; a small wooden structures:

To Rajkumar’s eyes these tai’s were structures of incomparable elegance: they were built on wooden platforms, raised some six feet off the ground on the teak wood posts. Each was endowed with large rooms, one leading into another...
(71)

The novel begins in Mandalay on the eve of the Anglo-Burmese war in 1885. The British invade Burma, exiling King Thebaw and his family to a remote part of the Indian coast. The British motivation was commercial control of lucrative trade. Burma, at this time was considered a courteous society, which was free from miserable poverty and illiteracy. It was ruled by a revered King and an authoritative Queen, who commanded the respect of her people. Some novelists does give much prominence to history and keep it at the background. But Ghosh’s narrative voice sets high and reflects the historical changes which happened over three generations across three countries: Burma, India and Malaysia, reflecting those times from the end of 19th century to the aftermath of World War II.





Ghosh with remarkable sleight of hand, uses this history, fiction and produces a novel which can be read as a history of Burma. History more than whispers in the background in *The Glass Palace* when the Japanese invade Burma, for example, the characters' lives crumble:

Now Rajkumar saw that Dohsay had been dragging a body through the alley, pulling it away from the fire... The body was almost unrecognisable crushed by an immense weight. But despite the terrible disfigurement Rajkumar knew that this was his son and that he was dead. (463)

The removal of the king and the pregnant queen from Mandalay to distant Ratnagiri in the west coast of India, was a smart move by the conquering British. They were successful in humiliating the Burmese King and the Queen and erasing them from the memories of their own people. The abandoned and forgotten royal couple led a life of dilapidation in an alien territory. During this time, their country was looted and depleted of its natural resources. The Colonial rapacity is seen concentrated in what happened in Burma. Another aspect, is the deployment of Indian Soldiers, for the British enterprise of conquering Burma. Two-thirds of the British army consists of Indian soldiers. These soldiers were also used to suppress, Saya San rebellion which quelled up years later. Ghosh even throws light on some Indian agents who became rich by transporting poor contract labourers from South India, to work in the plantations. The timber and the rubber trade, the woe filled stories of the labourers, take up the plot. Then the, First World War and its violence disrupts every country into a ghoulish dance of death, which brings sweeping changes in the lives of characters and countries alike. Ghosh as a fine historian brings to the fore, the ideology of INA, and unveils the irony of two sets of Indian soldiers, working as mercenaries in the alien territory. The most moving account of the entire novel is the pathetic long march from Burma to India, depicts the miserable situation faced by the refugees of the war, who treads along the muddy paths of Irrawady. Ghosh points out that desperate situation of the refugees in a vivid manner:

The met a nurse who said that it was a 'Naga Sore'; she said that Dolly (a refugee) was lucky that hers had not been invaded by maggots. She had heard of a case when a boy (a refugee) had developed such a sore in his scalp: when it was treated with kerosene, no fewer than three hundred maggots were taken out...(469)

Amitav Ghosh's novels mainly focuses on themes in history. Ghosh carefully choose to chronicle the history across the geography, which was untouched before, and colours it with rich imagination supported by archival research. *The Glass Palace* accounts his narrative





inventiveness, matched by his brilliant prose, the eventful century filled with historical events and his attempts to give value and substance to individual lives, his recuperation of individual histories and narratives. The important element of his works show us Ghosh's abiding interest in the ways in which changes can be and are being fashioned in our understanding of the world. His is the effort to re-read and re-write various kinds of histories and the ways in which these histories have affected our stories. He is the writer who ultimately shows us how narratives structure our lives.

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