



Blurring the Boundaries: An Anthropological study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's novels reflect his commitment with some of the serious and burning issues faced by the people of Asia and Africa. His novel The Glass Palace is rich with several ideas such as displacement or dislocation, blurring of boundaries, colonization, migration, conflict of cultures, clashes of identity and rootlessness. It is an attempt to explore the impact of dislocation on the political, social, psychological and cultural lives of the colonized. The Glass Palace (2000) is a historical novel set in Burma, Bengal, India, and Malaya, spans a century from the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty in Mandalay, through the Second World War to modern times. Focusing mainly on the early 20th Century, it explores a broad range of issues, ranging from the changing economic landscape of Burma and India, to pertinent questions about what constitutes a nation and how these changes as society is swept along by the tide of modernity. My humble attempt in this paper is to highlight the multicultural and anthropological elements in Amitav Ghosh's famous novel, The Glass Palace.

Key words: Colonization, dislocation, displacement, migration, rootlessness.

Introduction

The Glass Palace combines history, fiction, autobiographical, anthropological records and past glories and memories and thereby dislocates various genres. Ghosh has portrayed how the past lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace*. Ghosh seeks an understanding of the past to have a bearing upon the present and the future as well. The past is remembered not as a stagnant log, a remote period, but as a flowing cascade into the transparent present through the postcolonial situations of multi-ethnic, pluralist societies, and complex cultural diversities of a persistent political struggle for egalitarian society.





Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He studied in Delhi, Oxford and Alexandria. A prolific writer who has contributed immensely to the Indian English Literature, and will surely contribute in future as well with a lot of potential in portraying a multicultural milieu with strong historical touch. Amitav Ghosh is the author of *The Circle of Reason* (his 1986 debut novel), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In an Antique Land*, *Dancing in Cambodia*, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first volume of The Ibis trilogy, set in the 1830s, just before the Opium War, which encapsulates the colonial history of the East. Ghosh's *River of Smoke* (2011), is the second volume and the latest novel, *Flood of Fire* (2015) is the third and last volume of the Ibis Trilogy.

The Circle of Reason was awarded France's Prix Médicis in 1990, and *The Shadow Lines* won two prestigious Indian prizes the same year, the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Ananda Puraskar. *The Calcutta Chromosome* won the Arthur C. Clarke award for 1997 and *The Glass Palace* won the International e-Book Award at the Frankfurt book fair in 2001. In January 2005 *The Hungry Tide* was awarded the Crossword Book Prize, a major Indian award. His novel, *Sea of Poppies* (2008) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, 2008 and was awarded the Crossword Book Prize and the India Plaza Golden Quill Award, and *Flood of Fire* (2015) was shortlisted in 2015 for The Hindu Literary Prize.

The Glass Palace: Historical Displacement and Dislocation

The Glass Palace is a voluminous novel of five hundred forty seven pages with seven parts –1. Mandalay, 2. Ratnagiri, 3. The Money Tree, 4. The Wedding, 5. Morningside, 6. The Front and 7. The Glass Palace. The events of the novel take place in Malaya, Burma and India. It is a family saga of three generations which covers the time span of more than one century from 1885 to 1996. Such a novel of epic scale with sweeping historical background is structured efficiently that reveals in spite of its bulkiness the novel is well organized. Rukmini Nair remarks, “The





Glass Palace is not just a thoroughly researched novel, it is a carefully plotted one” (169). Amitav Ghosh being a social anthropologist foregrounds the system of family.

Therefore, in this novel Amitav Ghosh employs family as the connecting aspect, a central unit around which other historical events revolve and weaved through strong attachments. John Theme points out, “In *The Glass Palace* he (Ghosh) employs the form of the family saga to tell an epic story” (269). There are four families in the novel; the major events in the novel take place around these families: firstly, the family of Rajkumar and Dolly and their sons Neeladhri and Dinanath; secondly, the family of the King Thebaw and the Queen Supayalat and their Princesses; thirdly, the family of Saya John, his son Mathew, daughter-in-law Elsa and grand-daughter Alison; fourthly the family of Uma, her husband Bipin Dey, her brother, her nephew Arjun and her nieces Manju and Bela. Most of the events in the novel occur in these families and the unity of the novel is achieved through the interconnection of these families.

The family of the King Thebaw is connected to the family of Rajkumar through Dolly, a maid servant of the Queen. The family of Rajkumar is connected to the family of Saya John through the marriage of Dinu, Rajkumar’s younger son and Alison, grand-daughter of Saya John. Saya John’s remark is worth quoting in this context. When Alison and Dinu seek his blessings, he says: “Rajkumar’s son and Mathew’s daughter what could be better? The two of you have joined the families. Your parents will be delighted” (446). The family of Rajkumar is connected to Uma through the marriage of Neel, Rajkumar’s son and Manju, Uma’s niece. Uma’s family is connected to the King’s family through her husband Bipin Dey, district collector in charge of looking after the well-being of the Royal family in Ratnagiri. Uma’s family is connected to Saya John’s family by way of Uma’s niece and Saya’s grand-daughter are the daughters-in-law of Rajkumar. So also, Uma persuaded Mathew to return from America and to join his father. Thus, through the form of family all the strands of the novel are connected and the unity of the novel is achieved.





The novel starts with an 11-year-old boy called Rajkumar running through the city of Mandalay to find a woman called Ma Cho. He is the last surviving member of his family and comes to Burma from India with a bright entrepreneurial spirit and a hunger for success. After the introduction of Rajkumar, the readers are introduced to the invasion of British army. The novel opens with the echoing sound of canon along the silver curve of the river Irrawaddy. The British cast eyes on the wealth of the golden land, Burma. They started transporting teak wood, oil, and gems illegally. When they were informed to pay the fine, they refused it and put pressure to yield to the British ultimatum. When the Queen Supayalat opposed the British they decided to invade Burma and exploit the wealth of the country. The Queen was witnessing this horrifying scene blindly "A day before, she could have had a commoner imprisoned for so much as looking her directly in the face"(33). Thus, the dethroned King, the Queen, the Princesses and entourage were exiled to Madras, then finally to Ratnagiri.

The King of Burma Thebaw and Queen Supayalat are the residents of the Glass Palace in Mandalay, Capital of Burma. The Indian orphan Rajkumar from Chittagong realizes from Saya John's son Matthew that there would be a war in Burma. Saya John is an orphan and a foundling who has worked as an orderly in a military hospital in Singapore. He is now a widower and a contractor in teak wood profession. One day Saya John reads 'A Royal Proclamation' of King Thebaw about the imperial attack on Burma in which he proclaims:

His Majesty, who is watchful that the interest of our religion and our state shall not suffer, will himself march forth with his generals, captains and lieutenants with large forces of infantry, artillery, elephanteria and cavalry, by land and by water, and with the might of his army will efface these heretics and conquer and annex their country.(16)

The war began as the imperial fleet crossed the border on 14th Nov, 1885. As the Burmese army could not match the British army, without informing the king Thebaw, it surrendered. Consequently, the Mandalay fort with long roads, canals, gardens, rooms with gilded pillars, polished floors, illuminating vast hall, and mirrored ceilings and with all the richness in Burma





was looted by the soldiers and public and the Burmese army surrendered to the British in the war that lasted for only fourteen days. The British declared that the King and Queen under captivity would be sent into exile to India. King Thebaw, Queen Supayalat and their entourage reached Madras via Rangoon and finally exiled to Ratnagiri. Ghosh portrays the picture:

This is how power is eclipsed, in a moment of vivid realism, between the waning of one fantasy of governance and its replacement by the next, in and instant when the world springs free of its mooring of dreams and reveals itself to be girdled in the path ways of survival and self-preservation. (41-42)

The King bewails the loss of kingdom and his present confinement in Outram House in Ratnagiri. After the dethronement the King experienced a lot of humiliation. The King was asked to move in bullockcarts, yet has, the commonest vehicles on Mandalay's streets. When the king was about to step in, he noticed that the canopy set to the carriage "had seven tiers, the number allotted to a nobleman, not the nine due to a king" (43). In Ratnagiri the king and his entourage were accommodated in Outram House, on a hilltop. It was quite away from the centers of population. The Outram house found itself besieged by neglect. "The bungalow had no sewerage and no water supply. The toilets had to be emptied daily of night soil, by sweepers; water had to be carried up in buckets from a nearby stream" (81). In the nineteenth year of his exile, King Thebaw asks a question to Beni Prasad Dey, a new collector of Ratnagiri about the hegemony of the European power. "Did you ever think that we would live to witness the day when an Eastern country would defeat a European power?" (107)

In the course of twenty year exile the King's First Princess marries Sawant, a coachman and the Second Princess elopes with a Burmese commoner. The King sends a note of bringing back his second daughter, when she does not return, "he fell to the floor, clutching his left arm" (205). The doctors arrived diagnosed and announced he had suffered a heart attack. Ten days later the King died in 1916 in India. The colonial rule did not transport the King's body to Burma with the fear that the body might become a rallying point in Burma. The saddest part is that even





Her Majesty flatly refused to attend the King's funeral. The First Princess in a letter written to Dolly writes that "no one could believe that this was the funeral of Burma's last King!" (205). After the death of the King, the Queen returns to Rangoon. She spends last years of her life spending money on charities and feeding monks. The Queen died in 1925 six years after her return from Ratnagiri. Thus, the colonial occupation dislocated the Royal Family from political power never to retrieve it again. The dislocation is not confined to the Royal family and its entourage.

The colonial rule was not solely responsible for all the displacement and exploitation. The greedy native people like Baburao from Guntur and Rajkumar supplied work force to the British. These labourers were contracted for cheap rate. Many of them died on the way itself. On the voyage the women were sexually exploited. For instance, Ilongo's mother was sexually used by Rajakumar on the voyage from Madras to Rangoon. These indentured labours were living in the teak camps, oil camps and rubber plantation with all the hazards. The opinion of Mathew, son of John Saya, exemplifies the hardship faced by the plantation workers. Uma went to meet her friend Dolly at Morningside Estate, in Malaya. When she went with Mathew to have a look at rubber plantation she was struck to see similarity, size, height and branching off at the same height of rubber plants. So she asked Mathew how it was possible. Mathew replied that different people express different opinions. "But the tappers know better. They have a saying you know every rubber tree in Malaya was paid for with an Indian life" (233). This opinion of people throws light on the cruel, exploitative nature of colonizers and neo-colonizers. It seems Ghosh questions here how can the colonizers represent themselves as civilized and rational.

The dislocation which resulted from colonial occupation may help some people to migrate, to form their personality using their skills, and to prosper in their lives. Ghosh doesn't squarely say that dislocation causes only disadvantages. He vividly represents the other side of dislocation. For instance, Rajukumar, the protagonist, lands in Mandalay. He is from Chittagong. He





develops the sense of belonging at the new place. He overcomes the challenging barriers. In fact, barriers cause progress in his case. When he views the fort of Mandalay, instinctively he knows that orphans like him cannot go there. Yet “no matter what Ma Cho said, he decided, he would cross the moat, before he left Mandalay, he would find a way in” (7). This is the spark that sets Rajkumar apart for a life of success, adventure and prosperity. Rajkumar comes in contact with Saya John who shapes his life, a mentor and fatherly figure. Rajkumar matures fast. When the British dispossessed the King of Burma, Rajkumar is told that the British wished to control Burma’s territory for wood. From this point he starts shaping his future plans. He senses wealth in teak. He earns his job at Saya’s company with his integrity and personality. His professional rise is impressive.

Rajkumar has become a successful and respected businessman. At this stage he thinks of meeting and marrying Dolly whom he had seen when the King Thebaw was exiled. Being a practical businessman Rajkumar brings a letter for the collector of Ratnagiri from a relative of Uma Dey, the collector’s wife. Uma who is a good friend of Dolly arranges meeting between Dolly and Rajkumar. Dolly’s meeting with Rajukumar is of great value in understanding the kind of a person she is. She is so clear in her perceptions when Uma coaxes to marry Rajkumar and says that he loves her, Dolly’s reply is remarkably correct. “He is in love with what he remembers. That is not me” (161). She tells Rajkumar about her past relationship with Sawant. Finally Rajkumar and Dolly are married. Dolly returns to Rangoon with Rajkumar. They are blessed with two sons namely Neeladhri and Dinu. Rajkumar gets the share in the Morningside Rubber Estate and offers his children good education in the city’s reputed colleges. Up to this part, dislocation proves to be advantageous to Rajkumar’s family. After this, dislocation proves detrimental to Rajkumar and his family. “Because of racial clash resulted from colonial rule things have changed in Burma, there is a lot of anger, a lot of resentment, much of it aimed at Indians” (240). Dolly tells Uma “it is wrong for Burmese to marry foreigners- that women like me who are married to Indians, are traitors to their own people” (240). Uma also experiences





that everywhere there are signs of a widening rift between Indians and their Burmese neighbours.

In the meanwhile Rajkumar's elder son Neeladhari marries Manju, Umas's niece. They are blessed with a girl by name Jaya. Rajkumar takes the risk of staying back in Burma, though Dolly has insisted upon to return to India. He gets the tender of supplying teakwood for the construction of Burma-China road. Rajkumar has accumulated a lot of teakwood in his yard. Because of Japanese air-raid sound the elephants begin to run in panic. The piles of logs stumble down on Neel. When Rajkumar reaches the yard, tries to find his son's body, "the body was almost unrecognizable, crushed by an immense weight, despite the terrible disfigurement Rajkumar knew that this was his son and that he was dead" (463). Manju, Dolly and Rajkumar become very nervous. Manju, Neel's wife, becomes hysteric, doesn't care for her child Jaya. They leave through jungle for India along with thousands of people. By this time on the other hand Dinu has gone to Malaya to sell off Mormingside Rubber Estate and he has not informed of his whereabouts for several months. When Manju, Dolly and Rajkumar come to river bank there are already some thirty thousand refugees waiting and thousands of people had already gone through wilderness.

On their journey they face many hardships and travel without proper food and water. Rajkumar collects some firewood and sells it for food. "It was their capital, their only asset. At the end of each day it was this wood Rajkumar bartered for food... wood brought food more easily than money or valuables" (470). It was the plight of several thousand refugees. A Nepali woman fell down; her face was caught in mud. No one was there to help her. Therefore "she died where she lay, held fast by the mud with her child tied to her back. The baby had starved to death" (470). A rich woman, who was also going, stripped her silk sari off and tried to get some food, when she didn't get anything she put it in the fire. These are some of the moving incidents. Rajkumar and Dolly ask Manju to breast feed Jaya when she cries but "there was nothing in her body- Manju was certain of this but somehow the baby would find way of squeezing a few





drops from her sore, chafing breasts” (471). One day Manju fell asleep sitting up with the baby in her arms. Dolly heard the buzz of insects, flying around her head. They were vultures they were always seen on people who were too weak to go on or who were near death. In hysteric and frustrated mood Manju tells Rajkumar, “Look at you; you have gone on and on and on and on and what has it brought you?”(472) this remark clearly evokes the consequence of migration caused by dislocation. When Manju heard that still she had to go a long way to reach India she jumped into the river and died. When the air raid planes were flying high up in the sky people “longed for them to come closer” (466).

Conclusion

Thus, though the displacement changed Rajkumar’s life initially and helped him to climb the ladder of social hierarchy, the end result of it is pitiable. Rajkumar’s wife Dolly returns to Burma again and she joins nunnery and dies there. Like Rajukumar his mentor Saya John too prospers because of dislocation but ultimately his life also ends tragically. Saya John is also an orphan brought up by catholic priests in Malacca. As those priests spoke many languages Saya John learnt many languages. He married a Chinese woman in Singapore and has a son by name Mathew.

Saya John with his knowledge and spirit succeeded in teakwood business and later it is who persuaded Rajkumar to have share in the Morningside Rubber Estate. His son Mathew was in America for his study. There he fell in love with Elsa and married her. Due to Uma’s persuasion he came to Malaya. They also got two children Alison, daughter and Tithmy, son. Till the outbreak of Japanese and British war their life was happier and more meaningful. After that Mathew and Elsa died in an accident. Saya John spent his last days with his grand-daughter Alison in the Morningside. Because of Japanese advancement into Burma they were leaving for Singapore, Saya John was caught by the Japanese soldiers. Alison shot herself before she was caught and killed by the soldiers. Thus, the colourful life of Saya John came to a tragic end. Dislocation or displacement has also blurred racial borders.





A prominent theme is the usage of glass and mirrors as separation in *The Glass Palace*. This is especially true if we think about the setting of World War II and how it separates families. Even though the 'glass palace' originally just means a hall in the royal home in Mandalay, it is Dolly who describes the walls and the mirrors and the glass and how they are memorable. Rajkumar even speaks of Dolly in this way: She was like the palace itself, a thing of glass, inside which you could see everything of which your imagination was capable. Further, Dinu only sees live through his camera: a protection from reality.

From the king Thebaw to Aung San Sui, the uncrowned Queen of Burma, symbolizes transition from monarchy to democracy. Through these symbols and images Ghosh achieves the knotting of the loose episodes and conveying the message of retrieving faith, hope and order. Thus, Ghosh brings together various genres and subjects and creates his own discourse to convey his ideas. Saswat Das's opinion exemplifies this, "Ghosh works by a method that can be called deconstructive, but then his ostensible objective is to create an independent discourse" (184). The novel ends with a snapshot of Aung San Suu Kyi in 1996, the sixth year of her house arrest under the generals and revelation of Uma's and Rajkumar's nature of relationship or living arrangement by Jaya, Uma's grand-niece.

Thus, *The Glass Palace* is the post-colonial, anthropological rendering of the histories of Burma, Malaysia and India in the interplay of fact and fiction. The British colonialism and its repercussions with historical changes from the end of 19th Century to the present have been depicted artistically in the novel.

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