



**Distinctive Voices of Women: A Feminist Study of  
Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace***

**Mr. Anand Dampella**

Asst. Professor of English  
SRK Institute of Technology  
Vijayawada

**Ms. Prescilla Palaparathi**

Asst. Professor of English  
SRK Institute of Technology  
Vijayawada

Post-colonial feminist critics have raised a number of conceptual, methodological and political problems involved in the study of representations of gender. These problems are at once specific to feminist concerns, such as the possibility of finding an international, multicultural sisterhood between 'First World' and 'Third World' women as well as the other problems.

Feminism might be categorised into three groups: theories having a essentialist focus, which includes psychoanalytic and French feminism; theories aimed at defining or establishing a feminist literary canon or theories seeking to re-interpret and re-vision literature from less patriarchal slant which includes gyno-criticism and liberal feminism; and theories focusing on sexual differences and sexual politics including gender studies, radical feminism, cultural feminism, lesbian studies and socialist or materialist feminism.

But on a whole feminism is divided into 'First World' feminism, 'Second World' feminism and the 'Third World' feminism. The 'First World' referred to the rich, predominantly western nations in Europe, America and Australia. The 'Second World' denoted the Soviet Union and its





allied communist allies. The 'Third World' consisted in the main of the former colonies such as countries in Africa and South Asia, which were economically under-developed and dependent upon the wealthy nations for their economic fortunes.

The First World feminism concentrates on fighting for their equality against the gender barriers and also for their liberty in the society. In the western nations woman enjoys greater freedom than the eastern woman. In the Third World arena, women are burdened with dependent nature. But the western society gives scope for the woman to gain economic independence. She acquires the status of questioning the society to eradicate the disparities. First world feminism has come in for much criticism due to the lack of attention paid to the problems suffered by the women of Third World.

Kum Kum Sangari argues that the term "Third World" not only designates specific geographical areas, but imaginary spaces. According to her, "Third World is a term that both signifies and blurs the functioning of an economic, political, and imaginary geography able to unite vast and vastly differentiated areas of the world into a single underdeveloped terrain". (217) Sangari is critical of the way "Third World" is used by the West to indiscriminately lump together vastly different places.

Although the nations with the history of colonialism were regarded as the Third World, there is a clear-cut distinction between the problems faced by the African women and South Asian women. Their role in the society has been different. If the African nations are fighting against the racial discrimination, the South Asian countries are against the class, caste and regional





discrimination. So, bringing them under the same umbrella of the 'Third World' and considering the both, as one should be questioned.

Amitav Ghosh in his work, *The Glass Palace*, presents women characters, who represent the readers though not explicitly but rather implicitly the various differences between the ruling class and the sub-altern class. The novel is set in the three South Asian countries India, Burma and Malaysia, which share the history of colonialism. In the novel, Queen Supayalat, the Burmese Queen represents the ruling class and Dolly, represents the sub-altern class. In a way, the Queen could be categorised as the member of the 'First World' which 'referred to the rich' (BP: 174), bourgeois class in the 'Third World' frame.

It would be quite common to think that when a woman rules the country, the empowerment of women will take place. Margaret Thatcher and Indira Gandhi, the two prominent women leaders ruled the great nations, Britain and India. Even in their rule women suffered the problems of inequality, gender discrimination and the male oppression in the society. Queen Supayalat was not far from them. She was the dynamic ruler of Burma. Power politics was everything for her. She did nothing towards raising the standard of living conditions of Burmese women. She recruited many girls in the palace only for servitude. All of these girls were orphans who had neither families nor friends. In one way, it might seem that the Queen was helping the poor orphan girls but as far as the poor orphan girls were concerned, they felt that they were treated like bonded labourers captured in the golden cage, the Glass Palace:

These girls were very young, mostly in their early teens, and they were almost orphans. They'd been purchased by the Queen's agents in small Kachin, Wa and





Shan villages along the Kingdom's northern frontiers...They were reared under the tutelage of palace retainers, under the Queen's personal supervision. (20)

Queen Supayalat was by far the fiercest and the most wilful ruler. In order to secure the throne for her husband, she stripped her own mother of her powers and banished her to a corner of the palace, along with her sisters and co-wives. On her orders, seventy nine princes were slaughtered, who might ever be considered a threat to her husband. 'To prevent the spillage of royal blood. She had had them wrapped in carpets and bludgeoned to death. The corpses were thrown into the nearest river'. (39)

She became kingpin in each and every decision made in the great council. When the British intruded the country, King Thebaw had a mind for appeasement. Kinwun Mingyi, his trusted minister had made an appeal for peace and conciliation with the British troops. Queen Supayalat's response to Kinwun Mingyi projects her strength of will: "Why, grandfather, it is you who should wear a skirt and own a stone for grinding face powder". (39)

But the Burmese crowd hated her for her cruelty and for the negligence towards their problems. As a ruler, she never came out of the palace to see how her people are leading their lives. All the time she was worried to keep her power intact and this made her to lose the good response from her own people. They feared to see the Queen. It was only when the British had changed the terms, people dared to enter the palace as they thought that the tyranny of the Queen was over and they indulged in looting their own Queen's palace. Not only did they loot the palace, 'they were glad to offer her these tokens of respect...' (34), their defiance was out of the hatred towards her. The Queen was powerless to chastise them. Even in her exile, at Ratnagiri, the Queen didn't change her attitude towards the people.





In contrary to the Queen's character, Dolly, the female protagonist of the novel belongs to the sub-altern class. She had been brought to Mandalay at a very tender age from the frontier town of Lashio. Her duty was to look after the Second Princess. She was restricted to serve the Queen and the Queen's child. Though her job was for her necessity it was confining her liberty within the walls of the palace. Despite the fact that British intrusion came as a strong force to offer her freedom from the bondage, where would she go? Who would offer an orphan girl like her, a life security? Although, her decision to accompany the royal family in their exile, fetched her and her associate maids, the grace of the royal family as 'trusted servants'. It was their vulnerability to face the hard world. 'Of course they were going: they alone of the palace retainers had nowhere to go, no families, and no other means of support. What could they do but go with the King and Queen?' (42)

In her exile with the royal family at Ratnagiri, Dolly falls in love with Mohan bai Sawant, the Coachman. Their relationship was out of the same identity they share as the members of the sub-altern class. The identity which unites them becomes the prime reason for their separation. They knew nothing of the world around them, and how to lead and survive life outside the realm of royal family. What they know was just to serve the royal family. Their love turns inconclusive when the First Princess intervenes their affair.

Dolly could have left the royal family for her love, but what restricted was her poverty of Mohan's family. She conveys her heartfelt thoughts to Uma:

But where could we have gone? What would we have done? His family is very poor and they depend on him...even if I begged him he would not have left...and this was the worst part of it, the humiliation. I would think, to myself, have I too became a servant in my heart, as he has? (162)





Dolly met Rajkumar in a fortuitous way in the Glass Palace when she was child. She never expected that her meeting with Rajkumar would someday transform her fortune and give her liberty from the golden cage. Rajkumar, an orphan himself, makes fortune in the timber trade and makes his way to Ratnagiri to find Dolly whom he saw as a child and instantly in love with her from that moment. When he proposes to Dolly to marry him, she accepts after much deliberation. For Dolly, it was not out of love she accepts his proposal but she glimpses her liberty associated with her decision to marry him. For her, he was a liberator. Even Rajkumar in his proposal to Dolly says that her marriage with him will be the sign of freedom. “But it is freedom of a kind, and thus not without value”. (148) Although their love story resembles a classical love story, it could sustain so after their marriage.

The sharp contrast between Dolly and Queen Supayalat is that Dolly prefers leaving the royal family and her proud ‘homeland’, Ratnagiri, in order to pursue the freedom which desperately wanted. On the other hand, Queen Supayalat, ‘...had chosen captivity over freedom for the sake of her husband, condemned her own daughters to twenty years of exile’. (152) Certainly, Amitav Ghosh presents these two characters as the representations of the two classes; the Bourgeois and the Sub-altern.

## References:

1. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace*, Ravi Dayal: New Delhi, 2000. Print





2. Sangari, Kumkum. 1990. "The Politics of the Possible." *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*. Eds. Abdul Jan Mohamed and David Lloyd. New York: Oxford UP, 1990. Print
3. McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2000. Print

