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Quest For Identity in Amitav Ghosh's Novel *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract

Indian writing in English reveals the dialectics of imperialism in its journey from the periphery to the center and echoes a deep core of neo-colonialism based on power politics. Amitav Ghosh, one of the most widely known Indian writers, is a serious novelist and anthropologist writing from a postcolonial consciousness. He belongs to the nation that was once conquered and ruled by Imperial Britain. As a writer, Amitav Ghosh has been immensely influenced by the political and social element of the country. The theoretical argument about identity concerns its nature, process of formation, and its existential questions. Whereas essentialists believe in singularity of individual's identity; the postmodernists prevent from having any such identity. Identity construction has been thus discussed time and again, but one must acknowledge that an individual's identity is to a large extent formed by his or her social location which includes his or her race, class, gender etc. Amitav Ghosh's novels present characters engaged in search for their identity and of reason, and truth. In this sense, they are veritable discourses on human quest.

Keywords: Imperialism, Neo-colonialism, Identity, Postmodernist, Veritable.

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He studied in Delhi, Oxford and Alexandria and is the author of *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In An Antique Land*, *Dancing in Cambodia*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *The Ibis Trilogy*, consisting of *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*. His most recent book, *The Great Derangement; Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, a work of non-fiction, appeared in 2016.

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*

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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.

Amitav Ghosh's work has been translated into more than thirty languages and he has served on the juries of the Locarno and Venice film festivals. His essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic* and *The New York Times*. They have been anthologized under the titles *The Imam* and *The Indian*. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, a work of non-fiction, were published by the University of Chicago Press in 2016 and were given the inaugural Utah Award for the Environmental Humanities in 2018.

Indian writing in English reveals the dialectics of imperialism in its journey from the periphery to the centre and echoes a deep core of neo-colonialism based on power politics. The stalwarts like Salman Rushdie, Khuswant Singh, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh and the like are writing in a postcolonial space, using novel as a means of cultural representation. These writers of the 1980s aimed at enhancing an Indian cultural identity, and projecting Indian cultural and historical heritage to enable an assertion of the Indian self.

Amitav Ghosh, one of the most widely known Indian writers, is a serious novelist and anthropologist writing from a postcolonial consciousness. He belongs to the nation that was once conquered and ruled by Imperial Britain. As a writer, Amitav Ghosh has been immensely influenced by the political and social element of the country. Also, the stories and events he heard from his parents during his childhood made an indelible impression on his mind. His mother grew up in Calcutta and her memories were of Mahatma Gandhi, nonviolence and disobedience and the terrors that accompanied partition in 1947. His father worked in the British colonial army in India and his stories were of the war and of his fellow Indians who fought loyally beside the British. The images of the changing India, politically and socially, cast a deep shadow on Ghosh's mind.

Rajkumar's life-story is a story of the struggle for survival in the colonial turmoil. As a colonized subject from Bengal, he becomes a colonizer in Burma transporting indentured labourers from South India to other parts of the colonial world. He has even sexually exploited a woman worker on his plantations. His post-colonial consciousness represents a conflict.

Rajkumar, Saya John and Matthew are engaged in the task of colonizing land and people for the sake of wealth.

Rajkumar's family comes from Akyab, "the principal port of the Arakan that tidewater stretch of coast where Burma and Bengal collide in a whirlpool of unease." All his family died of a fever that passed through the town, including the last survivor, his mother, who had tried to ship back to the ancestral home of Chittagong with Rajkumar. After his mother died the boy stayed to work on the boat, having nowhere else to go. In Mandalay, the Burmese royal capital, the boat needed extensive repairs, and during the wait Rajkumar went to work and live at a small food stall in town. He is there when the British invade and overthrow the monarchy.

Rajkumar of *The Glass Palace*, the creative ability is manifest in his resourcefulness:

It is not just the big people who always know everything Saya, If I could find out exactly how much the other companies are going to quote, then I might be able to put in a winning bid it is true tit I can't read English, Saya, but I've learnt to speak it. And why do I need to read when you can do it for me? (*The Glass Palace* 130)

Amitav Ghosh's novels present characters engaged in for their identity, and in search of reason, and truth. In this sense, they are veritable discourses on human quest. The physical and psychic explorations providing alternative worlds and visions invariably compel its characters to traverse diverse geographic locations and points of time. The eventful explorative, personal Journey takes shape through individual memory and recollections of others. The individual's search for a meaningful existence is personified in memory as a re-lived experience.

Accordingly, Rajkumar undertakes a quest for identity by ransacking his memory, but without a conspicuous finale.

The novel finds the imperial ingenuity in transforming the natives, docile to the imperial dictates by the erasure of their identity. Arjun's realization that he is like a clay- vessel molded by an unknown "potter" in becoming a willing tool in the empire's proclaimed mission of modernizing the "uncivilized" East speaks out the loss of his identity. Later, it needed Alison's retort that she felt only pity for him rather than love, to retrieve his self-awareness. *The Glass Palace* also interprets the social and political chaos that resulted out of the British takeover of Burma and the Japanese invasion of Malaysia as reflected in the quests of various characters. Obsessed with footlessness, these characters spend most of their lives on the move, reminiscent of the maneuvering of the Indian psyche by British colonialism.

Rajkumar becomes an orphan and seeks his livelihood in the teak forest of Burma. The novel is interlarded into more than a generation in old glory of empire and new ambitions of not only Royal families but also the subject of empire consisting men and women, merchants, rich and poor. Their aspirations are further shattered by the invasion of Japanese on Burma in the Second World War. The theme of homelessness and identity of South Asian families in pre and postcolonial time is explored in the novel. The abuses and devastation of war, arising out of two foreign countries British and Japanese in war against each other the territorial ambition to win Burma are projected in the novel. The Japanese took hold of Burma in 1942 and thousands of people, mostly Indians and refugees, feeling war and devastation, traveled thousands of miles from Burma to Calcutta, in their struggle for existence. About the large-scale migration of people from Burma, Ghosh describes them as:

They began to notice other people a few scattered Handfuls at first, then more and more and still more, until the road become so thickly thronged that they could barely move. Everyone was heading in same direction: towards the northern landward passage to India a distance of more than thousand miles. They had their possessions bundled on their head; they were carrying children on their backs, wheeling elderly people in carts and barrows (*The Glass Palace* 467)

This is the outcome of war. Ghosh narrates the position of large-scale mass people, marooned between two countries Burma and India. They face the feeling of 'outsider' in their own country. Santosh Gupta in his article "Looking into History: Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*" comments:

The 'long march' back to India once again raises important questions about the nature of national identity, the reality of border lines between countries and justification of mass migration. Exiles and migrants who moved from one country to another are displaced and became outcasts within their own country and in the new land (*Indian Writing in English* 248)

Ghosh that he has presented the historical details, and position of men and women, outcome of war, in novel form so that it invariably catches sight of many readers who consider history as dry subject.

Thus, once again Ghosh creates the thinking for the migrated people or people at the fringe of migration. Ghosh here projects the worst situation of war-affected people. They are forced to such position that they face challenges for their very existence apart from the fact of homelessness situation. The focal theme of the novel is the inevitable recognition of the human beings especially at the time of

large-scale dislocation of the people, individuals outraged by war. Through the character of Arjun in *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh projects the faithfulness of people in foreign rulers in their own land country.

Ghosh places his discourse in the context of a family saga, spanning three generations and embracing more than a dozen characters. The spearhead of the action is Rajkumar, who, at the novel's onset, is an impoverished eleven-year-old orphan living in the streets of Mandalay, Burma's capital city. Raised under the patronage of a Chinese businessman and never hesitant to help himself, Rajkumar grows into a wealthy man, eventually becoming patriarch of the sprawling brood who take up Ghosh's narrative. Although Rajkumar is a compelling and central character, he is not the most interesting in the novel. He is too dismissive of politics to carry much weight.

This mixed opinion brings him into conflict with the most political character in the novel, Uma. A widow-turned-independence fighter, Uma's efforts to understand her own status and bring others to a similar understanding stand out as accomplishments in the book. It is Uma who confronts the issue of England's contribution to India, as a ruler. When it is suggested that England has introduced reforms, courts, railways, and effectively modernized India, Uma points out that these benefits are all secondary to England's major intention, which is to exploit India for commercial gain. Through the character Uma, Ghosh argues from an abstracted point of view, placing priority on the theory behind government. If anything, the brutality of the foreign regime is downplayed in the novel, though it could easily be highlighted as an argument against colonialism. Executing this argument requires discipline on Ghosh's part. He refrains from barraging readers with political philosophy, and rather lets the objects which trope through his novel - cars, photographs, umbrellas - slide into an argument against the sacrificing of freedom and culture. The two become linked, and so culture is freedom, and customs are defiance.

The Glass Palace suffers through its love stories, offering visions of romance which are far too much like those found in romance novels; a scruffy but- resourceful orphan woos and engages in a passionate affair with the coachman of the mansion where she works. The lives of the second-generation Rajkumar suffer particularly from this sensation of staleness, and also from an arbitrary quality which makes Ghosh seem at once thoughtless and overly scheming. His character's choices of love don't seem to follow from real emotion; rather, they are made entirely in the name of plot expediency. Two thirds of the way through the novel, everyone is married to one another and the various families are united. Even when the smoothness of this story arc is thoroughly disrupted by the harrowing events of the latter portion of the novel, Ghosh's use of World War II to obliterate his carefully assembled relationships seems just as arbitrary and convenient as his match making. On the whole, the dips and rise are less impressive than what one might imagine.

In reading *The Glass Palace*, one feels privileged to see the politics of empire-building treated in such a sensitive and lyrical way. Ghosh does a wonderful job of tying his characters to moments in history. Where he struggles is in tying his characters to one-another. The readers have to make a conscious effort not to let their doubts about Ghosh's plotting impinge on his authority as a chronicler of history. If the readers allow him this, they can emerge much richer from having read his work.

Rajkumar, the protagonist of *The Glass Palace*, haunted by a vision of the Royal Family of Burma and a maid of their entourage called Dolly, journeys to India, where they have been exiled. Dolly later becomes his wife, and their story is the beginning of a journey through the century. Other characters of the novel like Uma Dey, Arjun, Dinu, Saya John, and Alison are all mostly on the novel paradigmatic of their rootless existence. The story of the novel moves from the vast rubber plantations in Malaya to India, to World War II, finally to culminate in Mandalay.

2. Conclusion

The central protagonists of the novel *The Glass Palace* are portrayed show how these characters experience search for identity and feel their past as discursively separate and opposed to the present. These innocent victims of the social and political unrest created by the whirlwinds of colonialism and its aftermath, share almost the same emotional phenomenon in spite of changes in their times and milieu.

As a result, alienation remains a constant factor throughout their life stories and experiences, incessantly driving them to quest for their real identity. These subversive quests portrayed in the novels celebrate the ultimate triumph of the native spirit proclaiming centrality to the subaltern.

Ghosh describes the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of the dislocated people in India, Burma, China, Malaysia and America such as king Thebaw, Queen Supayalat, Saya John, Rajkumar, Dolly, Uma, Alison, Dinu, Neal, Arjun, Hardayal Krishan Singh, Jaya and Ilango. This novel is about many places, war and displacement, exile and rootlessness, depicting human helplessness. All that a human being can do is to try to adjust, compromise, live and about everything else that form relationships. This forming of new bonds, mixing of races and castes is something that does not stop.

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