



An Analysis Of Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace From A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The novel *The Glass Palace* is about three generations of two families in Burmese, India and Malaya. It is a historical novel about the British colonization of Burma. In this novel, Ghosh reveals the brutal greed of the people at various levels. The plunder of the opening scene shows the greed of the colonizer. The fourth novel by Amitav Ghosh opens on the eve of war in Mandalay, as the British prepare to capture the Burmese throne. An eleven-year-old Indian orphan named Rajkumar informs a crowd at a food stall that the booming sound they hear is British cannon. The year is 1885, and a dispute between a British timber company and King Thebaw of Burma leads to battle. The Burmese army, defeated after only fourteen days by a force of ten thousand British and Indian soldiers, surrendered without informing the king.

Keywords: colonization, trading, rubber plantations, displacement, heretics.

1. Introduction

The *Glass Palace* is the author's attempt to remap the history of three south Asian Countries, Myanmar, India and Malaysia all sites of the British Empire through the late 19th and 20th centuries. The turbulent cultural crossovers, conflicts, histories and nations as a metaphor for loss make up the central concern of Ghosh. Rajkumar, the protagonist of the novel, epitomizes the lost, exiled and homeless native whose family is further scattered in the course of the novel through the post-imperialist dislocation in various parts of the Asian continent. The dramatic conflation of cultures and nationalities is evident at the very outset when the 11 years old Rajkumar witnesses the booming of English cannons and the British invasion of the Burmese Royal Palace in Mandalay.

“English soldiers were Marching towards the city ... Panic struck the market. People began to run and jostle. Rajkumar managed to push his way through the crowd... He could not see far: a cloud of dust hung over the road, drummed up by thousands of racing feet... Rajkumar was swept along in the direction of river. As he ran, he became aware of a ripple in the ground beneath him, a kind

of drumbeat in the earth, a rhythmic tremor that travelled up his spine through the soles of his feet. The people in front of him scattered and parted ... Suddenly he was in the front of rank of the crowd, looking directly at two English soldiers mounted on the horses.” (TGP, P. 4)

It's not just marches and the scared mobs but the fact that most of the British invading forces involve Indian soldiers, which is a surprising presence in the novel. Even the royal proclamation before the surprise invasion of Burma bears testimony to this.

“To all royal subjects and inhabitants of the royal empire those heretics, the barbarization English- Kalaas having most harshly made demands calculated to bring about the impairment and destruction of our religion... the degradation of our race, are making a show and preparation as if about to wage war, have been replied with the usages of great nations and in words which are just and regular” (TGP, P. 15-16)

True to an Amitav Ghosh novel, *The Glass Palace* contains a proliferation of characters which includes the privileged as well as the subaltern. The royal family –Thebaw, Queen Supayalat and the Burmese princesses; and commoners like Dolly, Rajkumar, Saya John and Uma are united ironically by the gales of colonial displacement. These protagonists forced by the rough historical winds are displaced from Burma to India, Malaya, Singapore and back again, each time involving a pattern of panic, crowded mobs and soldiers on the march as already illustrated in the very opening of the novel.

Rajkumar, initially a subaltern comes out as a true transnational post-colonial subject firstly by being a Kalaa, a foreigner in alien territory, then by being subjected to the colonization of a more severe kind in participating in the great national upheaval that the British occupation of Burma entails, followed by another turbulent experience in imperial India and his foray into Malayan forest resources. He inhabits a truly borderless post-colonial space beyond the interstices of race, class and nation in which his life is enmeshed. The hybrid nature of the colonized subaltern who evolves himself into an affluent businessman and comes to resemble the colonizers is revealed through the character of Rajkumar, who graduates from a petty immigrant lad, through his apprenticeship as *luga lei* under Saya John, to a merchant who is revealed in the timber trading circles of Burma. Saya John, his mentor, is another transnational from china that evolves himself into a semblance of Europeans in his garb and manner. Saya John instructs Rajkumar on the life of young Europeans who taught them how.

“To bend the work of nature to your will; to make the trees of the earth useful to human being- what could be more admirable, more exciting than this? That is what I would say to any boy who has his life before him.”(TGP, P. 75)

Saya John's conception that the whole enterprise of logging timber from the forests could not have been possible without Europeans' ingenuity; Saya's knowledge of this and his imitation of the white Sahib's lifestyle, involves a compromise between the complete separation from the empire and complete dependence upon the empire for its existence. Mimicry of the colonizer's language, mannerism and mode of dressing is another marked trait of the postcolonial protagonist. Saya John's deliberate attempt at anglicizing, by his way of dressing and the author's description of Beni Prasad Dey, the ICS officer appointed in Ratnagiri where the Burmese royals are held captive are worth a mention here.

“It was a ritual with Saya John a kind of superstition, always to start these journeys in European clothes: a sola topee, leather boots, khaki trousers” (TGP,67)

“Collector Dey was a slim and aquiline with a nose that extended in a sharp beak like point. He dressed in finely cut savile Row suits and wore gold-rimmed eyeglasses” (TGP, p. 104)

Ghosh’s allusion to Dey’s behaviour, his defense of imperial power before the Burmese King, and his tongue-in-cheek reference to the British as amader gurujon(our teacher) bring our sense of compromise with which such acts of complicity and mimicry are attended in the colonized space. The colonized subjects’ empathy with the fellow colonized, though of separate nationality is apparent when Rajkumar expresses surprise at his own involvement with the general mourning at the sudden occupation of Burma and the loss of the king.

“Rajkumar was at a loss to understand his greed. He was in a way, a feral creature, unaware that there exists invisible bonds linking people to one another through personifications of their commonality. In the Bengal of his birth these ties had been sunders by a century of conquests and no longer existed even as a memory but that, there should exist a universe of loyalties that was unrelated to himself and his own immediate needs, this was very nearly incomprehensible” (TGP, p. 47)

The royal mind Dolly to shares her predicament with Rajkumar. She feels the same incomprehensible loyalty to the royal family’s deportment to India. She began to notice odd little changes around her, of the servant’s impudence, their refusal to shiko and her own ambivalent position. She was free, she was told for she was a slave not a prisoner, but in her heart, she knew she was bound with the princesses, who she had been enslaved to look after. Dolly represents the twice colonized victim of the breaking of a nation. She embodies the quiet and subliminal aggression of dislocated subjects. Dolly’s most haunting concern is that Burma the place of her birth is lost to her forever. Her displacement from her roots and her discomfort with her changed identity is clear when She confides her predicament to Uma, the collector’s wife:

“If I went to Burma now I would be a foreigner – they would call me a kalaa like they do Indians – a trespasser, outsiders from across the sea. I’d find that very hard I think. I’d never be able to rid myself of the idea that I would have to leave again one day, just as I knew what it was like when we left” (TGP, p.113)

Padmini Mongia quotes Gayatri Spivak’s explanation of such dilemma:

“For the post colonial the idea of a nationhood is a metaphor constantly being ‘reclaimed’ as the post-colonial space cannot advance referents that are ‘historically adequate’ in the case of the colonial subject nationhood is perhaps the only real and historically immediate concern” (5)

The colonial subjects suffer from a sense of imaginary homeland having to suffer most of their lives in displaced locations. Dolly and Rajkumar both ironically have an allegiance to the nation of their exile or displacement which they have appropriated as home. For Dolly, life in Outram’s house is the only life she knows surprisingly she is the most assertive, in her place of exile. She asks Uma, “Where would I go, this is home “(TGP, P.119).

Both Dolly and Uma are victims of the same colonial force and share a deep understanding and respect for each other's predicament. Dolly, however, bears the burden of slavery also at the hands of Burmese royalty. However, both are very quick to acknowledge their respective status and any colonial prejudices either may harbour. Ghosh provides a conversation full of typical post-colonial disillusionment:

“One night, plucking up her courage, Uma remarked: ‘One hers some awful things about Queen supayalat’.

What?

‘That she had a lot of people killed ... in Mandalay...’

Dolly was quiet for a moment and Uma began to worry that she had offended her. Then Dolly spoke up. You know Uma ‘she said in her softest voice. Every time I come to your house, I noticed that picture you have hanging by your front door...’

Of Queen Victoria, you mean’

Uma was puzzled. ‘What about it?’

‘Don’t you sometimes wonder how many people have been killed in Queen Victoria’s name? It must be millions wouldn’t say? I think I’d be frightened to live with one of those pictures.’

A few days later Uma put the pictures down and sent it to the catchery, to b hung in the collector’s office” (TGP, P. 114)

This prompt retort by Dolly shows her emotional affinity to the only home and family she knows and loves before her marriage. Her love for the royal family is evident when before leaving with Rajkumar, she takes a “last glimpse of the lane, the leaning coconut palms, the Union Jack, flapping above the goal on its crooked pole”.

The experience of these exiled victims of the breaking of nations is peculiar in the sense that they slide easily into alien cultures, at the same time triggering off the spirit of alienation, national longing and transnationals in their divided identities. Ghosh's characterization of Rajkumar, the petty luga lei turned timber tycoon is a way of voicing the problem of settling and resettling communities and individuals amid the confluences of nations and nationalities. He is a truly multicultural, a reinvented migrant, who, by dint of his enterprise, carves a niche for himself and escapes, landing in underclass ethnic ghettos. Uma, like most of Ghosh's other characters, is a citizen of the world away from delimiting boundaries. Her sojourns to Europe and America after her husband's demise led her to the Indian Nationalist movement and she subsequently brings her struggle to the subcontinent. The hybridist and adaptability of characters like Rajkumar and Uma rob exile of its derogatory connotations like oppression and significantly mellow the colonized colonizer binary.

Another theme which forms an inseparable part of a post-colonial narrative is the resistance to and struggle against imperialism. Apart from the depiction of nationalism through the character of Uma, is the evocative presentation of another more difficult and more consequential struggle of the Indian officers and soldiers serving in the British army. Uma's nephew Arjun is immensely proud to be among the privileged few who can enter the class of the rulers. It is Hardayal Singh, his peer and a third-generation army officer, who makes Arjun conscious of the Britishers' prejudice, distrust and suspicion of Indian officers as well as soldiers. When their long-awaited mobilization orders came, Hardayal remembered the inscription in Chetwode Hall at the Military Academy in Dehradun and expresses skepticism at the idea of ‘country’:

“Where is this country? The fact is that you and I don’t have a country, so where is this place Whose safety , honour and welfare are to come First, always and every time?”(TGP, p. 330).

Though Hardayal had realized this ironic situation quite early in life; Arjun is shocked into admitting it after a few setbacks. When Arjun’s battalion arrives in Singapore on its way up the Malaya Peninsula, he has the sort of experience that another of his fellow officers had predicted:

“it was as though they were examining their Own circumstances for the first time in retrospect; as though the shock of travel displaced an in difference that had been inculcated in them since their earliest childhood” (TGP , p.346)

They are suddenly acknowledging the fact that they have never been accepted as equals by the British. Subsequently, Arjun starts heeding Hardayal’s complaints:

“It’s strange to be sitting in a trench, holding a gun and asking yourself; who is this weapon really aimed at? Am I being tricked into pointing it at myself? ... This is what I ask myself Arjun: In what way do I become human again? How do I connect what I do with what I want in my heart? “ (TGP, p.406).

During the battle of Jitra, Amreek Singh of the Indian National Army airdrops pamphlets to awaken the soldiers to the national cause. They say,

“Brothers ask yourselves what you are fighting for and why you are there: do you really wish to sacrifice your lives for an empire that has kept you country in slavery for two hundred years?” (TGP, p.391).

When Arjun sees Kishan Singh and other soldiers of his company reading the pamphlet, he asks them to be disposed of and warns the soldiers of dire consequences if any of them is found with a pamphlet. Contrary to the firm resolve of Hardayal, Arjun is torn between sympathy revulsion and fear. He later confesses to Dinu about his dilemma:

“We rebelled against an empire that shaped everything in our lives... we cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves” (TGP, p .518).

The wider growing concern amongst the Indians fighting under the imperial army is intricately woven with the other intimate concerns of the protagonists. Arjun’s emotional attachment with his subordinate Kishan Singh is the only lasting bond in the otherwise emotionless mercenary exercise of war. Dinu and Alison both of mixed parentage fall in love, defying divergent geographic and races. This relation of love destined to flower, between Rajkumar’s son and Saya John’s granddaughter is curiously symbolic of a shared compulsion across disputed and disillusion and seems to reiterate here the quiet and unchallenged faith that only such love and desire can sustain. In contrast to Uma’s and Hardayal’s aggressive rebellion is Dinu’s suppressed protest against imperialism. Dinu’s compassionate concern for Burma is not fired by rebellion and he leads a subdued life in post-coup Rangoon under the stern shadow of the junta. But while the rest of the characters, either aggressively or submissively, have found and followed their calling, Arjun comes out as an emotionally distraught, confounded individual who is caught between two worlds belonging to neither.

2. Conclusion

Thus, the quest for identity and origin, a predicament peculiar to colonized individuals is discussed by Ghosh to bring out the alienation and loss of a sense of belonging of the natives. Rajkumar lives the life of a near destitute in Uma's Calcutta home and for all his wanderings, dies with the conviction that the "Ganges could never be the same as the Irrawaddy" While barriers and boundaries seem to define the psyches that attend the making of nations and nationalities in the Glass Palace, the author seems to collapse these margins and is metaphorically at home, everywhere. Menakshi Mukherjee, in her essay on "The Anxiety of Indians", comments:

"For Ghosh as in some of the best Indian language writers, words like 'Marginality' and 'hybridity' seem quite irrelevant and segmenting the words into third and first regions is a rather absurd activity."

The post-colonial by virtue of his displaced and mobile location is free of gender, class and political affiliations as he moves unhindered in his journey across the spaces of worlds and cultures. Ghosh in spite of the vast peregrinations writes with a sense of personal connection with India's colonial history. The work is considerably enriched by autobiographical elements like his class family affiliations with the Indian freedom struggle and his participation in General Slim's Burmese expeditions. Even his imagined characters show an acute consciousness of colonial history and genealogy.

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