

Treatment of Time in Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace is based on the long March of the Indians from Burma due to the political situations that prevailed then. Ghosh highlights that there can be no boundaries in time past, present and future and therefore cannot be marked individually independent of each other. One has to inevitably deal with themes like memory and history when dealing with the concept of time. Time acts upon the psyche of people and shows how it effects a transformation in the personalities of the characters. The paper argues how Ghosh employs time in the novel and dwells at length the different techniques that he uses to show the passage of time so that the voluminous novel encompassing a long span of time brings in the desired effect on the readers

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“Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.” (1-5)

“Only through time time is conquered.” (92).

(T. S. Eliot. “The Four Quartets”)

Literature is a mirror of the society and it reflects the socio, political and economic conditions of the society. The different genres portray the various events and their impacts on the society at different points of time. Therefore time is an important factor in literature. E.M.Forster emphasizing the importance of clock-time in fiction writing says, “...it is never possible for a novelist to deny time inside the fabric of his novel: he must cling, however lightly to the thread of his story, he must touch the interminable tapeworm, otherwise he becomes unintelligible” (44). Time plays a predominant role in the Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace. He employs it as an effective tool to blend the past, present and the future.

The Glass Palace is a blend of history, fiction, autobiographical records and memories. His historical sense involves a perception, to borrow an idea from T. S. Eliot, not only of the 'pastness of the past', but of its presence and its relevance to future. Many instances in The Glass Palace show his profound interest in the concept of 'time'. To quote from his interview for World Literature Today:

Time interests me very much. I think it's the central element in narrative. All narratives are really the unfolding of events in timeIn each of my books you'll see that time as a problem is approached very differently. In Circle of Reason each part follows a different ordering of time. The Shadow Lines deals with time in a completely different way. My idea was to collapse space in the way that Ford Madox Ford collapses time. In In An Antique Land the structure is really that of a double helix, where you have a moment in the twelfth century and a moment in the twentieth century being pulled together solely by a single narrative that has no interactions. (Aldama 90)

Ghosh shows many instances, when the boundary marking its limits is arbitrary and ephemeral as far as time is concerned. Time as matter of fact can never be divided strictly into past, present or future. Inevitably, one blends with the other. Paul Ricouer, in his Time and Narrative explains that when we talk of the present:

Only the current year is present; and in the year, the month; and in the month, the day, and in the day, the hour: 'Even that one hour consists of minutes which are continually passing. The minutes which have gone by are past and any part of the hour which remains is future...In fact the only time (*quid . . . temporis*) that can be called present is an instant ...that cannot be divided even into the most minute fractions.... when it is present it has no duration (*spatium*)' (8).

Hence, if we attempt to define 'present' it has to be narrowed to a point like instant. Augustine clearly demonstrates that "the present cannot possibly have duration" (9). Paul Recouer further

elaborates on the interdependency of time past, present and time future: “The present of past things is the memory; the present of present things is direct perception ... and the present of the future things is expectation” (11). Ghosh presents this concept aptly by showing how past, present cannot be held in water tight compartments and that they have an effect on the future of the characters in the novel.

One finds a Nietzschean echo in Ghosh’s handling of time, where past and present coalesce: for Nietzsche in his *The Use and Abuse of History* says, “You can explain the past only by what is more powerful in the present” (70). In *The Glass Palace*, past is connected with the present as a reference point for understanding the present and present is also equally dependent on the past. Time and memory are inevitably intertwined and it is essential to discuss Ghosh’s handling of memory in the novel.

Rajkumar sees Dolly for the first time in Manadaly, and that too for a very short time. It is dark and there is utter confusion, people moving around in all corners. But when he comes in search of Dolly, he tells Uma that he had come to India with very little hope of finding her:

As long as there existed a place where I could make enquiries, I had to come. I had no choice. I was sure that I’d find the matter settled: she would be married, I thought; or carrying someone else’s child. Or dead, or turned into something unrecognizable. That would be that, the sight of her would wash the memory out of my mind, set me free. (156)

The memory of Dolly haunts him and he wants to be free of it. Ghosh, in this instance underscores that memory is something that should be attended to and treated with so that it does not come in as a barrier in the forward journey of life. Similarly, Timothy disposes Morningside Rubber Estate to Ilango because “the estate was a living reminder of everything that he wished to erase from memory – the death of his parents, his sister, his grandfather; he wanted nothing so much to be rid of it” (499).

Alison feels orphaned in the wide open world after the death of her parents. Loneliness and memories of moments shared with her parents haunt her and she prays that Morningside

should soon be filled with people. Later, “In time her sense of abandonment had yielded to the understanding that she could not look to the past to fill the gaps in her present; that she could not hope for the lingering traces of her parents’ lives to serve as a buffer between herself and the aching isolation of Morningside” (325).

History and time are dependent on and complement each other in many ways. New historicism is employed in post modern texts and this brings in more authentication to the events that occur in the narration. Susan Basnett writes about new historicism as follows:

New historicism . . . involves looking at literary text in such a way as to recover as far as possible the historical circumstances of their original production and reception, and then to analyze the relationship between those circumstances and the circumstances of the critic. (126)

The Glass Palace is a journey through history; history of places and people across a large span of time. It portrays with clarity the history of Burma from monarchy to democratic republic and the unending sufferings that individuals are thrown into due to the political turmoil. It starts with the dethroning of King Thebaw as the consequence of his defeat in the Mandalay war, his exile tour and ends with the contemporary history of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Time is viewed from different angles by Ghosh in The Glass Palace. King Thebaw's final departure to Ratnagiri is a painful moment and we see how he finds time too inadequate to prepare for his exile tour: “He needed more time. The King had told Sladen, a week, a few days. What could it matter now? The British had won and he had lost: What difference could a day or two make?” (40). The king ultimately pushed to an impasse and the resulting departure is a painful journey. When one has no other option, but to leave forever, leaving behind beloved ones and one’s homeland, it is natural that human psychology demands a delay, a delay that would last forever. In another instance, when Dinu calls Alison to remind her to get ready soon, she says, “Don’t say it’s time. Not yet” (445). Here, Ghosh highlights the importance of valuable seconds for those who cannot purchase it in exchange of the costliest treasures in the world.

Time acts upon the mental outlook of a person and brings about a change in his/her attitude. Queen Supayalat who is hungry for power wishes to have a boy. When it is a girl, to the surprise of everyone, she feels happy too because, in her opinion, a girl can bear the pains of exile easily, compared to a boy. She feels it was a blessing as she would not be able to tell a boy that she had given away his patrimony for war over wood. Initially the Queen kills all the rivals of her husband and rolls them in sacks in order to avoid the spillage of the royal blood. She is found to be so fanatic about the 'blue blood.' Later, she accepts Sawant, the coachman as her son-in-law when she learns that the princess is in love with him. She justifies the decision of her daughter in selecting Sawant for her partner and that was not wrong for a girl who had been shut in exile since childhood. Here we also see the growth of Sawant in the eyes of the society.

Time renders events unpredictable and Ghosh portrays this through various incidents in the novel, tracing the history of the royal family. The Queen could have got anyone arrested for just looking directly in her face. However, she is helpless when commoners enter the palace and start looting. Ghosh describes this pathetic situation and the change that it brings about. "Just one day earlier, the crime of entering the palace would have resulted in summary execution. This, they all knew – the Queen and everyone who had joined the mob. But yesterday had passed: the Queen had fought and been defeated" (34). In a day, the commoners had gained the power to deny the Queen's order. In other words, just twenty four hours were more than enough for the transformation of power from the Queen to the commoners.

But this transformation, this alchemy of defeat "had transformed her in their eyes. It was as though a bond had conjured into existence that had never existed before. For the first time in her reign she had become what a sovereign should be, the proxy of her people" (TGP 34). When the exiles reach Madras, Evelyn tells Dolly that it was Min and Meyba who were prisoners and they were free and that they could go back to Burma if they wanted. This transformation of power had won freedom for the slaves and imprisoned their masters. Ghosh also makes the subaltern speak as the girls pronounce with courage that they were free unlike their masters, the King and the Queen.

The Glass Palace demonstrates how time as a powerful agent decides the power players and power structures of a nation. Rohini Mokashi Punekar comments on the repositioning of borders:

The puzzling nature of power between people and communities and nations, the constant flux in the positions of power seems to be the underlying thrust of the novel symbolized by the beautiful title The Glass Palace which suggests an unattainable beauty, fragility and exclusion all together. (7)

The King wonders how power changes hands overnight before he leaves Mandalay He realizes that time is more powerful than power itself: “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....” (42). But he undergoes a process of reassertion of the 'self' he had lost in time in a pitiable defeat. The time spent watching the city of Ratnagiri from the balcony of the Outram House regains his sovereignty, in the sense he becomes the guardian of the city: “(I)t was as though time itself had passed into Thebaw’s keeping. Unseen on his balcony Thebaw became the town’s guardian spirit, a king again” (80). Later, when Jaya visits Ratnagiri, she is enthralled by the love of the people for Thebaw, in his home of exile.

The passage of time is also effected through various transformations in the characters, places and settings and other technological developments throughout the novel. The social upliftment that Rajkumar finds in the society and the rags to riches story of Rajkumar story of his earns him the title of 'Babu' and Mr. Raha from 'Kala '.This transformation is found in almost all major characters in the novel. Arjun, the playboy later grows up into a great figure and dies a martyr fighting for the Indian National Army. Unity of time is an a cardinal quintessence for any literary work. This novel brings in three generations, encompassing a large space. However, there is not an instance in the novel that makes the readers feel that they fall out of time and it does not seem incredible to discuss the history of the Indian independence war, juxtaposing it against the political turmoil that then prevailed in Malaya and Burma.

Technology is another tool that Ghosh employs effectively to denote the change of time and fast sweeping years. In the novel, the time span extends from the Anglo – Burmese war of 1885 to the contemporary age of e-mail and internet. This technological development indicates the movement of time, keeping the readers in tune with the long span of time. When the author mentions a model of a car or a camera the readers come to an understanding of the time that is being discussed in the novel and this adds to the authenticity of the historical details as well.

When there is political unrest in Burma, Manju asks in despair, “Who were these people who took it upon themselves to remake the history of the world?” (466). Ghosh’s aim is to create an alternative history. It is clear that multiculturalism and hybridity have blurred the lines that distinguish between the powered and the public who obey the rules made by the powered; between those who write history and those who are victimized in the process of making history. The society has become a melting pot in which cultures dissolve and mingle with each other to create new cultures. This happens in language also – the discourse of the statesman has consciously and unconsciously been adopted by the oppressed groups and vice-versa.

Another important feature in Ghosh’s handling of time is the technique of ‘time-shift’. According to David Lodge:

Time-shift is a very common effect in modern fiction, but usually it is naturalized, as the operation of memory, either in the representation of character’s stream-of-consciousness [...] or more formally, as the memoir or reminiscence of a character narrator[...]. (77)

Cyclical time is an age-old concept. Ghosh has employed it effectively in The Glass Palace. Leonard Unger talks about the cyclic nature of time: “The lost experience of the past and the desired experience of the future are in no way repetitions, but exist identically in the timeless reality that is possibly available at any actual moment” (79). Ghosh effectively depicts the cycle of time through the characters. Dolly’s life depicts a full circle. The journey of her life starts from her home in Mandalay, to Ratnagiri. She lives it to the full, only to get back to Burma and

attain sainthood and then eternal peace through death, in Sagaing: “The next day, when Dinu went to see her, her head was shaved and she was wearing a saffron robe. She looked radiant” (530). The radiance that glows in Dolly shows her contentment in living a fuller life. In the same way Rajkumar’s life starts in India and his long, industrious journey of life in Burma, ends up in Calcutta, after spending some years in bringing up his granddaughter Jaya. Hence, life starts at some point and the cycle completes with the end culminating in the beginning.

It is clear that Ghosh has deftly handled time in all its dimensions and this feature renders his novel with Proustian richness. Though Ghosh travels years behind in time, his events and characters have a bearing in the contemporary scenario. Time, with its entire multidimensional nature has been handled excellently by Ghosh, bringing to light the contemporaneity of history where the past and present merge to denote the future. Ghosh has aesthetically presented multi-faceted nature of time in his novel, The Glass Palace.

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