

Trauma of Displacement in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract

Displacement and dislocation is never accepted by the people if it brings adverse effect on their lives, but if this change brings prosperity then they appreciate their displacement. But our characters in *The Glass Palace* are not so fortunate to apprise the changes that take place in their lives. Displacement of King Thebaw and his family to India brought disgrace to their status. Dolly, maid servant of the Royal Family spent twenty one golden years of her life in serving them and feeling the pain of exile on behalf of her benefactors. Rajkumar the central figure of the novel, uprooted from Chittagong India, to Burma in search of his livelihood. Saya John facing every ups and downs in his life ended up in Malaya by Japanese soldiers. Uma, wife of collector of Ratnagiri, after her husband's death travelled to different countries understands the greediness of colonizer and feel the plight of her countrymen. Her short dislocation was proved fruitful to her, as this converted her as a strong woman and she jumps into the freedom movement. Sense of alienation ruins Arjun's life. His sense of guilt for being faithful towards British masters and the question raised on his loyalty shakes his whole personality. He died in the forest of Burma anonymously, where there was nobody to shed a tear on his miserable death. He was so unfortunate fellow to feel the touch of his motherland before his death. His twins sister Manju's fate was not different from his. She was married to Neel and travels towards Burma to built her dream house where she could live happily with her husband and in-laws, but her dreams shattered when tragic death of Neel and Second World War dislocates her from her dream house. Unbearable pain takes her to the edge of nervous breakdown and she commits suicide leaving her infant daughter behind, wailing and hungry. *The Glass Palace* is not only the reflection of greediness of colonialism but also it reflects the plight of common men facing the changing conditions of the world.

Key words: Dislocation, Uprooting, Mental trauma, Despair, Pain, Ruin, Destruction

The Glass Palace is the sensational, breathtaking and unmatched masterpiece of Amitav Ghosh. He takes the name *The Glass Palace* from 'Glass Palace' situated in Mandalay Palace that reflects the brutality and greediness of colonialism that ends a glorious reign of *Konbaung Dynasty* and forced King Thebaw to move to India, first to Madras and then to Ratnagiri, where his disgraceful life ended up in exile. His only wish to take his last breath in his 'Golden Burma' ends with his death. *The Glass Palace* is not like history books that brings boredom. It is the true evidence of historical events where common men are affected by the changing events of the world.

Rajkumar, an Indian boy of eleven happened to appear in Mandalay one fine morning in the year, 1885 in search of livelihood. He was an orphan, who lost his whole family in an epidemic. He was on way to his home village with his mother when his mother also died leaving him all alone in this world.

“But his mother was dead and what purpose would it serve to go back to a place that his father had abandoned? No, better instead to strike a bargain with the nakhoda. Rajkumar took the old man aside and asked to join the crew, offering the bangle as a gift of apprenticeship”. (14)

His fighting spirit, shrewd and keen observation is quite appreciable. As a boy eleven, he is the only person who sensed that British Army is going to attack on Mandalay. Everyone scolds him for his proclamation, but they stunned when his assumption proved right. His keen observation and his thirst to become a rich man takes him from one place to another. He started his journey from Mandalay to deep forest of Burma. There he studied the lesson of tolerance. Rajkumar is not only worldly man but also a lover. He falls in love with Dolly when he saw him first time in Mandalay Palace with the Queen and her attendants. He mesmerized, as he never seen such a pretty face ever in his life. He hides his feeling and love until he earns a lot of money and find his way to his beloved. He bears a lot of pain to reach India and convince Dolly to marry him, as she was not ready to leave her benefactor in distress. But, Rajkumar's love wins and she made up her mind to accept his love proposal. She sails towards Burma with Rajkumar, a place from where she was uprooted when she was a child and after spending her golden years in despair with the royal family she was again there to build her home. Her rootlessness is not frequent. She spent twenty one years of her life in India. After marriage she stays in Burma till the outbreak of Second World War. Their coming back to India is also a painful episode. She and Rajkumar have to bear a lot of pain to reach India with their infant grand-daughter Jaya. They lost their home, money, sons and daughter-in-law in Burma and reached India like beggars. Uma gave them shelter and shared

every pain and sorrow with them.

Cunningness and greediness of the British effected many lives in the novel. The King Thebaw, Queen Supayalat and their four princesses were the victim of their cruelty. The main source of interest in the novel is the twists and turns that take place in the lives of these characters. The novel deals with the historical circumstances-the Colonial rule in Burma, Malaya and India that starts from the Anglo-Burmese war in 1885. The mockery of this war is that this ‘war was not a war at all’ as the King surrendered in front of the British Empire almost without a fight, without shedding a drop of blood, to the chaos of the two world wars, up to the age of e-mail and internet. Ghosh narrates the stories of the characters opening in the pre-independence era and ends in post-independence days. Ira Pande describes the novel as-

Spanning centuries and generations and straddling the space of countries India, Burma and Malay, this is a saga that could have exhausted the skills of a lesser writer. But in hands of Ghosh, historian by training, an adventures traveler and a sensitive writer of fiction it becomes a confluence of all three. With remarkable sleight of hand, Ghosh juggles history, fiction and travel writing to produce a story that can be read variously as history of Burma over the last two centuries, an enduring romance between two families and a travelogue about a forgotten Buddhist territory.¹

One thing is quite noting about colonial past that the British not only exploited us economically but also they brought mental slavery for their colonies. Rajkumar, Saya John, Dinu and Arjun are the true representative of Macaulay’s “Minutes on Education”. They show gratitude towards their masters for English education and manners. Rajkumar is a shrewd person, though he is illiterate but he changes his business according to the mood and requirement of the British masters. He becomes partner with Saya John in timber business when the demand of teakwood was at the peak by the British, but when the world scenario changed and the colonial masters requirement changed, they invested their money in rubber plantation in Malaya. Though it proved profitable business for them but outbreak of Second World War and invasion of Japanese in Malaya changed everything, which brought crises in their lives. In one place Dinu forced Alison, grand-daughter of Saya John to leave Malaya with Saya as he sensed that their life is in danger, but he faced bitter truth when they were not allowed to board on the evacuation train-

‘Sir ‘Dinu made an effort to keep his voice even. They are not letting us through They say the train is only for Europeans.’

The station master smiled apologetically. ‘Yes- that is what we have been give to

understand.’

‘But how can that be?..... This is wartime this is an evacuation train.’

.....The station master pulled a face, shrugging dismissively. ‘I do not see what is so wrong with it. After all it is common sense. They are the rulers; they are the ones who stand to lose.’ (424-425)

Racial prejudice was so deep in British in those days that they thought themselves superior to other races. Dinu had to take refuge from one place to another after death of Alison and Saya John. It was painful for him to see his house burnt down to ashes and his family gone. He left no hope to see his family again. He stayed with Raymond in a camp, deep in jungle. In 1946 before independence of Burma he moved to a small town named Loikaw near Thailand border. His excavate is frequent. He moves from one place to another in search of safe haven, as war destroyed everything, many lives were ruined and many people vanished forever. Amitav Ghosh paints the destruction caused by war vividly. His horrible description of the ruins stuns the readers and they could not help to imagine such scene. His description about the dislocated and uprooted people is very shocking. People lost everything, their relatives, their money, jobs etc. due to war. People who were rich having silver spoon in their mouth, now begging for handful of rice to feed themselves and their hungry children. He describes the plight of people in a very heart touching way-

They came across a lady one day, dressed in a beautiful silk sari, a peacock-green Kanjeevaram . She looked to be from a wealthy family but she too had run out of food. She was trying to bargain with a group of people who were sitting by a fire. Suddenly she began to undress and when she’d stripped off her sari they saw that she had others on underneath, beautiful, rich silks, worth hundreds of rupees. She offered up one of these, hoping to exchange it for a handful of food. But no one had any use for it; they asked instead for kindling and wood. They saw her arguing vainly with them – and then, perhaps recognizing finally the worthlessness of her treasured possession, she rolled the sari into a ball and put it on their fire. (470-471)

After Neel’s death Manju was in the grip of mental trauma. She didn’t feel the pain in her body or blood on her scalp. Even her reluctance to feed her wailing child gives us a true condition of her situation. After losing everything in Burma, Rajkumar, Dolly and Manju took their way towards India to take refuge in Uma’s house. Ghosh describes Manju’s condition in a very heart touching way. She lost interest in her life; even she didn’t want to think about her child. She wanted to be left alone on the way to die. Death is beginning of new life but she

wanted to die to soothe her sufferings. Her suicide brings tears in our eyes.

Rajkumar and Dolly, the main characters in *The Glass Palace* suffered through out their life. Sometimes poverty and sometimes uprooting brought disarrayment in their lives but they never lose hope, but catastrophic death of Neel and Manju and departure of Dinu to Malaya brought sheer despair in their lives. They lost every hope in their life. Amitav Ghosh describes clearly the mental condition of Rajkumar when they were on the way to take refuge in India and Manju was out of her mind. He was totally broken man from inside and outside. His family was broken, he was out of money and Manju was at the edge of madness. Only Dolly and infant Jaya was there to console him. After facing many difficulties they reached India, where they got refuge in Uma's house. Their position in her house is like poor relatives. Rajkumar started his journey from rags to riches and ended his life in rags. He used to tell the stories of his 'Golden Burma' to Jaya, his grand-daughter. He always lost in reverie of his past life. His life took a U-turn in his last days of his life, when Dolly returned back to Burma to find Dinu and leading rest of her life in a nunnery leaving him alone with Jaya in India. Dolly is the strongest character in the novel. She keeps herself cool, aware and quick decisive in unfavourable conditions. Her liveliness in character and polished manners attracts every one's attention. The Royal Family depended on her for her capability in handling every adverse circumstances. During exile she was the core of royal family. Even they could not think their house without Dolly. Fleeing with Rajkumar breaks everyone's heart. She began to lead a affluent life in Burma with Rajkumar. She blessed with two sons, Neel and Dinu. Rajkumar's flourishing business provided her every comfort, but she wished to go for sagaing in a monastery. Although she was leading a worldly life, she is withdrawn from the world. She was ready to face every anxiety and distress. When the world scenario was changing rapidly viz. downfall of colonialism and outbreak of Second World War, nations were breaking and forming new nation, effecting everyone's life badly, she prepared herself to face every adversity. She spends her whole life in Burma and India, two colonies of the British and has to face the pain of captivity, but her spirituality soothes her life long suffering and she takes her lost breath peacefully in a monastery.

Amitav Ghosh paints the characters of Neel and Dinu with due care. Although Neel and Dinu are real brothers but they were like North Pole and South Pole, different in appearance and nature. Neel was like his father in appearance and worldly men like him. Dinu was soft spoken, has dreamy eyes like his mother Dolly, slow in making friends and withdrawn from the outer world. His passion was photography. After losing touch with his family and taking refuge in many places, he started photo studio named 'Glass Palace' in Loikaw. After downfall British Empire, Burmese politics was in the hands of dictators. In one place Dinu accepts-

Look at the way in which these thugs use the past to justify the present. And they themselves are much worse than the colonialists; at least in the old days, you could read and write.’(537)

During Second World War like India, Burma was struggling hard to get freedom from the bloody clutches of British. The Burma Independence Army was formed by a small group of Burmese volunteers, lead by a student leader Aung San. As the Japanese army approached, bloody clashes between the Burma Independence Army and a group, loyal to the British took place. In north of Rangoon a fierce fighting between the Japanese forces and the retreating British army took place and the Japanese installed a new government in Rangoon under the leadership of Dr. Ba Maw.

Under the command of General Slim, the allies launched in 1944 and after few months General Aung San reversed his allegiances and in 1945 they pushed the Japanese out of Burma.

The world war has changed the lives of people, occupation, relationships etc. In 1947, Burma’s first elections were held and General Aung San won, but on 19 July Aung San was assassinated before assuming his office and disturbance occurred in the politics of Burma. The army’s Karen units took arms against the Rangoon Government.

After some years when new Dictator Ne Win, took over his office, everything changed overnight –

General Ne Win, the new dictator, began to juggle with the currency. Notes of certain denominations were declared to be valueless; overnight, millions of kyats became waste paper. Thousands of the country’s brightest young people fled into the countryside. Rebellions multiplied and flourished.....

With each year the generals seemed to grow more powerful while the rest of the country grew ever feebler; the military was like an incubus, sucking the life from its host.

..... A new censorship regime developed, growing out of the foundations of the system that had been left behind by the old Imperial Government. Every book and magazine had to be presented to the Press Scrutiny Board, for the perusal of a small army of captains and majors. (535)

Arjun, Manju’s twins and Uma’s nephew, is another victim of the circumstances taking place one by one in the world scenario. Arjun is young man, born in colonial India and working as an officer in British Army, was thankful to is masters for providing them English

education. Being educated in English institution he naturally holds support and respect towards British. The British were succeeded in bringing the entire subcontinent under their control by the end of eighteenth century. They imposed much social and administrative reform to civilize the Indians. These reforms imposed by them are not for the betterment of Indians, but these are introduced only to handle the Indians successfully and comfortably. People like Arjun are the outcome of such education, who are blind supporters of Colonial Empire and Education. Ghosh is against the Colonial consciousness and through Arjun he explores his feeling against imperialism. Arjun joins the British army as a gentleman cadet and become a second Lieutenant in the 1/1 Jat light Infantry. His Battalion is honoured as 'The Royal Battalion' because it helped in capturing the mutineers during 1857 and quelling kings in China, in Mesopotamia, in India and Burma. Arjun feels proud for being a part of Jats infantry-

“Sometimes when I wake up in the morning, I still find it hard to believe that I really belong with these men. It makes one so proud, but also humble, to think that one has all this to live up to.” (262)

Arjun tries hard to be like an Englishman. He wants to eliminate the difference of inferior and superior race, native and 'angrez'. As a young officer in the Colonial army, he is proud to be a part of a battalion, which is honoured for its services. He respects his Colonial masters and adopts European morals. He feels proud in the British military culture, eating habits, manners, dress code and principle imposed on him by his masters. He is intoxicated to adopt British way of life in the army

‘Every meal at an officers’ mess, Arjun said, was an adventure, a glorious infringement of taboos. They ate food that none of them had ever touched at home: bacon, ham and sausages at breakfast; roast beef and pork chops for dinner. They drank whisky, beer and wine, smoked cigars, cigarettes and cigarillos. Nor was this just a matter of satisfying appetites: every mouthful had a meaning – each represented an advance towards the evolution of a new, more complete kind of Indian. (278-279)

He feels proud to embrace all principle and habits to prove himself, as well as his white masters that he is fit as a member of elite. For him being 'modern' is to be 'western'. The British were trying to produce new crop of 'modern India' who are ready to discard their past, erase all traces of being an Indian and embrace western habits. The cost they are paying

is not realized by them to be accepted as a member of the ruler's class. Arjun is pulled down to the earth in his sister Manju's wedding, when he is berated by Congress Party workers and some Burmese students for serving in the British army.

Gouri Vishwanathan truly points out, "Without submission of the individual to moral law or the authority of God, the control they were able to secure over the lower classes in their own country would elude them in India."²

Arjun receives a great shock with the onset of the Second World War, when hundreds of Indian soldiers in the British army changing their loyalty and joining the Indian National Army. He got confused, to whom he should follow? His friend Hardy reminds him-

"Well, didn't you ever think: this country whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time – what is it? Where is the 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? And why was it that when we took our oath it wasn't to a country but to the King Emperor-to defend the Empire? (330)

Arjun is reluctant to join hands with Japanese, as they would prove worst master than the British. Hardy asks him whether they are sheeps or dogs. Why should they have masters to govern them? Arjun also realizes racial discrimination in Singapore where he along with his friends jump into a swimming pool and many Europeans who are already swimming in the pool leaves the club. His friend comments-

"We're ment to die for this colony-but we can't use the pools" (345)

He receives another shock in Malaya, when in civil clothes he is mistaken as rubber plantation labour and is called as 'Kalaa' a derogatory reference for indentured Indian labours who were forcibly brought to Malaya and living in extreme poverty. In Malaya people used word 'Mercenary' for the Indian soldiers because they believed they are hired killers who fight for their masters without thinking about right or wrong. Hardy tells him that they are fighting in a foreign country for their masters and are being used as "a tool, an instrument" (345). For the first time Arjun thinks over it seriously and does self-introspection and he feels the hollowness of loyalty and faith-

The Empire was dead now- he knew this because he had felt it die within himself, where it had held its strongest dominion and with whom was he now to keep faith? (441)

Arjun's loyalty is torn between fear, sympathy and revulsion. He faces the moral and

emotional crisis. Hardayal and Arjun join INA and fights in favour of Japanese. His inner self is split between the British and the Japanese. He tells Dinu-

“We rebelled against an Empire that has shaped everything in our lives
..... We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves” (518)

Arjun realises that till now he is alienated from himself, his identity is a mirage. He suffers from severe psychological breakdown; he wants to destroy himself because he is living in guilt for being blind supporter of Colonial ideology. However Hardy’s ideology his nationalism is different from Arjun’s. His later success as a ‘national figure’, an ambassador and high ranking official in the Indian Government is due to his positive affirmation in Indian Independence League. He is better than Arjun, as he is not blind supporter of the British; he never wanted to be one of them. This is clear from his eating habit-

-and the trouble with Hardy was that he was one of those chaps who, no matter how hard they tried, simply could not get by without his daily dal-roti. (281)

He knows this bitter truth, how hard he may try to be a member of elite, but he can never cross an unseen line between the Indian and the British. In addition he is aware about the condition and circumstances of a common man in India and the harm the British has done to our country, morals, ideologies, cultural heritage and natural resources. Hardy is quick in taking decision and has no conflicts and doubts to join INA. He regards himself as a soldier and he is aware for whom he is fighting. But decision for joining INA is hard for Arjun, for him he thinks himself one of the elite till now. He is filled with negation and self-alienation by the way, the Colonial masters was using the Indian army and result is protest and defiance. Colonial Buckland calls him traitor and wished to be court-martialled as soon as they return back to India. Brief role of Colonel Buckland is enough to show the monolithic paradigms of the Empire. He calls Arjun “a disgrace to the country”, but a question arises where is the country for which Indian army was fighting. They were in the unknown country, fighting against the unknown enemies. T. Vinoda points out-

“have long found expression in Colonialist writers like Macaulay, Kipling, Edward Thomson etc. in whom imperial notions such as mission, purpose, loyalty, modernization, racial superiority, solidarity etc. were the cornerstones of faith.”³

The Glass Palace is basically a novel written on the brutality and greediness of the Colonial masters. Ghosh refused Commonwealth Literature Prize for this novel in 2001 by writing a letter to manager of Commonwealth Literature Prize Committee, Sandra Vince, “the past may not be changed, but the ways in which we remember the past are not determined

solely by the brute facts of time, they are also open to choice, reflection and enjoyment. “He further adds “the issue of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace* and I feel that I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialization of Empire that passes under the rubric of the Commonwealth.”⁴

To conclude changing events and conditions of the world, destroyed everything that comes in its way. Amitav Ghosh recalls the history through his characters. The sense of dislocation and uprooting of the characters are deep. The historical fact of raising and falling of big and small empires across the twentieth century and raises the question of national identity. Ghosh is successful in describing plight, sorrows and fears of the characters under the spell of Colonialism. This is the story of broken heart characters where moments of happiness are very few. Mental trauma and sense of abandonment suffered by his characters bring the same feeling in his readers. Person born after independence can never feel the same pain and misery that our forefathers might have felt. My sincere effort is to find out the major events and its effect on the characters of *The Glass Palace*.

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