

Reflection of Cultural Diversity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract: Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* is the magnificent, poignant, fascinating novel of three generations that starts in Mandalay. It is a historical novel in which he depicts cultural diversity and intercultural connections. The novel is the epitome of cultural diversity and hybridity. It is the product of racial and cultural mix and shows intermingling of multiple cultures. In this paper, I am intent on highlighting this cultural and linguistic diversity and demonstrate how Ghosh manages to create a cultural and linguistic hybrid space. It is a unique cocktail of multiethnic, multiracial and multicultural aspects.

Keywords: Cultural diversity, Multiculturalism, Hybridity, Multilingual, Identity.

Cultural diversity has been one of the most recurrent themes in the modern world. The phrase 'Cultural diversity' means a range of different societies or people of different origins, religions and traditions all living and interacting together. It refers to differences among the people because of their racial or ethnic backgrounds, language dress and traditions. It is also known as multiculturalism as a group of diverse individuals from different cultures or societies. It celebrates the various ways that people live and interact in the world. It means contribution of different ethnic and racial groups to the social, economic and cultural values of our society. It generally refers to a state of racial, cultural and ethnic diversity within the demographics of a specified place. It aims to recognize, celebrate and maintain the different cultures or cultural identities within that society to promote social cohesion. It advocates a society that extends equitable status to distinct cultural and religious groups with no one culture predominates. Here cultural identities should not be discarded, but rather maintained and valued. Cultural diversity is a mainspring for sustainable development for individuals, communities and countries.¹

It encompasses the cultural differences that exist between people, language, dress and tradition. It makes our country stronger, richer and better to live and enable to compete in new global economy. People from diverse cultures bring language skills, new ways of thinking and creative solutions to difficult problems and negotiating skills. We can take an example of America, a more interesting place in which all the inhabitants are going to stay. It has focused

our attention to the promotion of rights for different cultural groups. Indian English like Australian or American English has been universally accepted as a unique style of discourse. It gives expression to Indian multiculturalism in the works of writers in India or in abroad. Like the new Indian writers in the West, expatriate, the second and third generation writers, the classic writers like A.K.Ramanujan, Mulk Raj Anand, Nissim Ezekiel, R.K.Narayan and Babani Bhattacharya are being interpreted the style of multiculturalism. The stalwarts like Salman Rushdie, Khuswant Singh and Shashi Tharoor have expressed their views on postcolonial space and diverse cultures.

Amitav Ghosh, although by birth a Bengali is truly a global author. He has been educated in India and abroad and currently divides his time between New York and Goa where he plans to settle down soon. He is a widely travelled author which helped him to formulate his experiences of cultural diversity. He has interpreted cultural diversity in his various works like *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*. His fiction highlights colonial and postcolonial issues of identity, rootlessness and multiculturalism. By mixing so many languages and dialects, Ghosh is able to paint the full range of diversity on board with differences in class, caste, nationality or religion indicated by the words, dialect or language used to communicate. Robert Dixon remarks in his essay 'Travelling in the West: The Writings of Amitav Ghosh' that "the cultural space that Ghosh re-situates is a vast, borderless region with its own hybrid languages and practices which circulate without national and religious boundaries."²

The plot of *The Glass Palace* is a saga about three generations of two closely linked families in Burma, Malaya and India from 1885 to 1956. It is also a historical novel about the British colonization of Burma. The novel beautifully ushers the reader into a world of sensations, crowds, symbols and boundaries. It is the story of an Indian orphan Rajkumar, who is transported to Burma by accident. He was only eleven years old when he came off from Chittagong with his mother to escape from a killer fever. But on the way he has lost his mother, his only hope and pillar of his life. He is a complete destitute in an alien city with no acquaintances. Finally he approached a half-Indian, half-Burmese matronly lady Ma Cho for job. He accepted apprenticeship under the opportunist and businessman Saya John and he learned the tactics of survival in the colonized space. He has no choice in alienated land so he adapted this culture. Like Saya John, his benefactor, mentor he too becomes a mimic man, dresses like a 'Saheb' and begins speaking the colonizer's language which makes him appear like 'a reinventing being'. He handles English language to reveal the degree of progress. He has communicated his ideas in the language of the colonizer. Rajkumar, from the 'rag-clad kalaa' into a colonized mimic man has been vividly portrayed through this novel. The young Bengali Rajkumar rises from street boy in Mandalay to timber magnate in Rangoon and marries Dolly, a Burmese first glimpsed by him as an attendant to Queen Supayalat. Even Dolly also became habitual of Indian culture. In the

beginning she was uncomfortable with Indians but gradually she follows the Indian rites and rituals. Characters in this novel follows both Burmese and Indian cultures which proved by the naming process of Rajkumar and Dolly's children. Rajkumar accepts Astrologer's advice about his child's name as was the custom among Indians in Burma. The children have been given two names, one Burmese and another Indian: "It was decided that the boy's Burmese name would be Sein Win; his Indian name was to be Neeladhri - Neel for short.... Tun Pe and Dinanath. The later was quickly shortned to Dinu" (*TGP* p.195).

The Burmese King Thebaw and the Queen Supayalat speak Hindustani with great ease and fluency. She speaks in Hindustani to express her displeasure against the Government representative. The British civil servants often speak Hindustani well as well as English to survive in alien land. The Burmese Princesses assimilated with Indian culture in Ratnagiri shows interest in wearing 'sari', a typical Indian dress: "They began to wear their hair braided and oiled like Ratnagiri schoolgirls; they learned to speak Marathi and Hindustani as fluently as any of the townsfolk – it was only with their parents that they now spoke Burmese" (*TGP* p. 77). The Princesses play with Ratnagiri's girls. They make their new friends, "When they were hungry they would run into their friends' shacks and ask for something to eat; in the afternoons, when it was too hot to play outside, they would fall asleep on the mud floors of the palm-thatched shanties" (*TGP* p. 83). The Queen Supayalat tells Uma, the Collector's wife, "As you can see, my daughters wear their saris in the local style. But I prefer this new fashion. It is more elegant - the sari looks more like a htamein" (*TGP* p. 109).

In *The Glass Palace*, Burma depicts as a space of interpenetration of different cultural groups where multilingualism operates as a multicultural encounter. Rajkumar, a Bengali in Burma, meets Ma Cho, a street-seller who is half-Indian; half-Burmese speaks in a typical working class culture language. Saya John, Chinese Christianized (originally as Joao Martins) in Malaya by Portuguese/Goan priests. He is a fine example of breed hybridity. His clothes are western. He speaks English, Hindustani and Burmese. His face looks like that of Chinese. He himself makes fun of his identity:

The soldiers there were mainly Indians and they asked me this very question: how is it that you, who look Chinese and carry a Christian name, can speak our language? When I told them how this had come about, they would laugh and say, you are *dhobi ka kutta*- a washerman's dog - *na ghar ka na ghat ka* - you don't belong anywhere, either by the water or on land and I'd say Yes, that is exactly what I am. He laughed, with an infectious hilarity, and Rajkumar joined in. (*TGP* p.10)

A picture of diverse culture portrays in the novel where a conglomeration of Indians and Burmese has been depicted in Rangoon. So many Indians had been sent to Rangoon to work in the docks and mills to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines. The native, who leave their homelands and stay in another nation, gave a birth to the hybridized culture, diverse culture in the sphere of culture, language, religion, etc. Ghosh depicts people of different culture, race, creed, language lives in Mandalay. He depicts as,

The number of foreigners living in Mandalay was not insubstantial – there were envoys and missionaries from Europe; traders and merchants of Greek, Armenian, Chinese and Indian origin; labourers and boatmen from Bengal, Malaya and the Coromandel Coast; white-clothed astrologers from Manipur; businessman from Gujarat. (*TGP* p. 16)

Arjun is the brother of Manju, Rajkumar and Dolly's daughter-in-law, and is also the nephew of Uma Dey. He is among the first batch of commissioned officers of Indian descent in the British colonial army. He is fascinated by the white culture; he dresses up like the whites and behaves like them. He became the victim of the cultural diversity where he blindly follows the British culture. Arjun believes in the unity of their regiments and culture that's why he says,

Look at us – they would say, - Punjabis, Marathas, Bengalis, Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims. Where else in India would you come across a group such as ours – where region and religion don't matter – where we can drink together and eat beef and pork and think nothing of it (*TGP* p. 278)?

Dinu is the younger brother of Neel and is also Rajkumar and Dolly's younger son. He is Burmese-Indian, who falls in love with Alison, Mathew and Lisa's daughter and is also the grand-daughter of Saya John. Both cannot get married because Alison shoots herself rather than falling in the hands of the Japanese. Dinu has settled down in Rangoon and married a Burmese woman Ma Thin Thin Aye who is a writer and university professor. Dinu runs a photo studio named 'The Glass Palace', where people belong to different cultures attended his lecture, "It consisted of a motley mix of people, old and young, girls and boys, men and women. They were all Burmese but some looked to be of Indian origin, some Chinese. Some were smartly dressed while others were wearing cast-offs" (*TGP* p. 506). All the relationships show how the people of different cultures, like American, Burmese, Indian and Malayan lives in the colonial space.

To sum up, Amitav Ghosh shows us how cultures and nationalities unite mankind. He reveals us the possibility of different cultures trying to understand one another and living in mutual harmony. Ghosh advocates a human centered world devoid of caste, creed, race, sex and religion. He emphasizes the breaking down of the artificial boundaries between nations and people and highlights the need of multiculturalism and universal humanism.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

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