

Epidemics as a Transformer of Human Life: An Overview of Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace

Soumen Chatterjee

(M.A., B.Ed, UGC-NET, PGDELT)

Assistant Teacher in Barabeli Junior High School
Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal

Abstract

Epidemics and pandemics are nothing new to human life as from time immemorial human life has been battered on regular intervals by them that have claimed the life of millions and sometimes even put the very existence of human beings on the brink of annihilation. Literary texts recording the experiences of epidemics can be seen as the exemplary documentation of these moments of crises as they have minutely captured the changes that come upon human life and society in these testing times.

In this paper taking Amitav Ghosh's multilayered historical novel, *The Glass Palace* (2000) as a case study, I shall try to examine how Ghosh here has presented the effects of epidemics on human life and society as a whole. How Ghosh's characters, even when they are dislocated, transform themselves into global citizens in these testing times will also be one of the thrust areas of investigation of this paper. In the present paper, I would also attempt to show the interconnection between economic depreciation and epidemics. How the past experiences of epidemic can modify our present will also be explored in this paper and here lies the principal relevance of this paper in the pandemic-stricken world.

Key Words: Epidemics, Transformation, Identity, Economic depreciation etc.

Epidemics and pandemics are nothing new to human life as from time immemorial human life has been battered on regular intervals by them that have claimed the life of millions and sometimes even put the very existence of human beings on the brink of extinction. Plague, Spanish flu, Ebola, malaria, cholera and other deadly diseases have time and again ravaged human life killing millions throughout the whole world. Though these epidemics, caused by the

killer viruses, have seized the motion and momentum of human life time and again, they still have not been able to destroy human life completely from the earth. Rather human beings by virtue of their resilience and indomitable spirit have been able to move on in life in a reshaped manner and literary texts, from classics to modern, have captured this unmaking and remaking of human life quite succinctly. Indeed, literary texts covering epidemics can be seen as the exemplary documentation of these moments of crises. In this paper taking Amitav Ghosh's multilayered historical novel, *The Glass Palace* (2000) as a case study, I shall try to examine how Ghosh here has presented the effects of epidemics on human life and society as a whole. How Ghosh's characters, even when they are dislocated, transform themselves into global citizens in these testing times will also be one of the thrust areas of investigation of this paper. I would also attempt to show the interconnection between economic depreciation and epidemics, collapse of economy and disease here.

As far as *The Glass Palace* (2000) is concerned, it is a primarily a "family saga"(Thieme 269) that covers the details of a long historical period of one hundred and eleven years in itself: from November 1885 to December 1996. In this grand historical narrative Ghosh has concentrated on a wide array of historical events and occurrences that have shaping impact on human life and history. While developing the plot of this grand historical narrative, Ghosh has made references to different epidemics that have engulfed human life in different time periods. Ghosh, with his keen interest in history and cultural studies, has examined how these epidemics unmake and remake, shape and reshape, form and reform the identity of individuals and leave an indelible mark on the social structure.

In the very opening chapter of the novel, the central character, Rajkumar Raha recollects of an epidemic fever that hits the coastal town, Akyab and killing all his family members, makes him an orphan: "Yes. I was sick, but I lived. In my family I was the only one. I had a father, a sister, brothers..." (GP 12). As per historical records, under the British rule in 1884, Akyab became a municipal town but it was not a healthy place as epidemics like cholera and malaria ravaged this coastal town on regular intervals. To quote from "Imperial Gazetteer", Akyab is "subject to regular epidemics of cholera as well as to malarial fever, which formerly earned for it the not altogether unmerited sobriquet of the 'white man's grave'" (Arnold 397). This unnamed epidemic fever mentioned by Rajkumar also ravages this coastal town and spreading like a terrible bonfire, it engulfs and "emptied so many of the towns and villages of the coast" (GP 13). Rajkumar's father worked as a clerk and translator at a warehouse in Akyab, that was the principal port of the Arakan region, where merchants who may be the carrier of the virus of this killer fever visited for business transactions and freely interacted with the locals. As Rajkumar's father worked for "a succession of merchants along the eastern shore of the Bay of Bengal" (GP 12), he becomes an easy mortal prey to this killer fever. After him Rajkumar is also infected by that unknown fever. The remaining members of that family--one brother and one

sister of Rajkumar—are also infected by this killer disease that claimed their lives. Then Rajkumar’s mother along with ailing and unconscious Rajkumar starts journey towards their family home in the port of Chittagong on a sampan. Actually, losing her husband, son and daughter she wants to start her life anew with her only surviving son in the ancestral place of her husband that has been left by her husband some dozen years back. During the voyage, on the sampan Rajkumar regains his consciousness and recovers from that unknown fever by virtue of his strong immunity power. But by that time his mother has been infected by that fever that snatches her life. Before her death she gives Rajkumar her only surviving asset, her bangle and tells him to give it to the nakhoda (boat master) to pay for his passage back to Chittagong. But after her death, realistically analyzing the situation, Rajkumar realizes that it would be useless for him now to return to his ancestral house which has been abandoned for a long time by his father. So he decides to start his career as an apprentice to that nakhoda and offers him that bangle as a gift of apprenticeship and hereon begins his rags to riches story. In a way, to certain individuals like Rajkumar, epidemic “is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next” (Roy). It is by sheer resilience that Rajkumar ventures to make his own destiny and transforms himself according to the changing circumstances. In fact, his tenacity and indomitable spirit are the outcome of that epidemic that made him an orphan, a rootless individual who does not have any mooring in life and that tenacity enables him to perceive even in the midst of death and decay some blessed hope. Indeed, had there been no epidemic, Rajkumar would not have emerged as a business tycoon; he would have continued his princely life in the usual beaten track. In this way, Ghosh with his in-depth knowledge in history shows how epidemics bring catastrophe to certain families, make several individuals destitute and give new shape to their life. Again, Rajkumar’s displacement propelled by the alarming effects of the epidemic, disrupts “the settled geographies of the self imposed by national traditions and undermine the belief that identity is rooted in a particular place” (Mondal 126).

In this historical novel, Ghosh has also concentrated on the historical episode of the deposition and exile of the last Burmese King, Thebaw, an ineffectual king who had no contact with the subjects of his kingdom. On the other hand, Queen Supayalat appears to be a living monster as after becoming queen the half-brothers of Thebaw have been mercilessly butchered by her order. Besides this she has emphasized on maintaining strict restriction in the royal family. None has been permitted to enter the royal palace without prior appointment. If anyone enters the palace without prior permission, s/he has to face execution. The royal protocols: shikos, crawls and others has been strictly followed by her order. Any breach of royal protocol has not been entertained by this monstrous queen. Due to her ferocious, cruel and monstrous nature, she has been despised by the common people of Mandalay: “Through all the years of the Queen’s reign the townsfolk had hated her for her cruelty, feared her for her ruthlessness and courage.” (GP 34).

When King Thebaw is defeated by the British army in the Third Anglo-Burmese war, Queen Supayalat along with the entourage are sent to exile to India. In India after staying a few months in Madras they are shifted to Ratnagiri, where they stayed at the Outram House, located quite far away from the madding crowd's ignoble strife. In Ratnagiri both King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat, after dethronement and displacement, gradually show signs of alteration in the changing situation.

But their situation becomes gruesome at the outbreak of plague in Ratnagiri. The motion of the city is paralyzed as a result of this terrible outbreak of the plague and many people leave Ratnagiri in order to escape from this deadly contagion:

“The year Dolly turned fifteen there was an outbreak of plague along the coast. Ratnagiri was particularly hard hit. Fires burn night and day in the crematorium. The streets emptied. Many people left town; others locked themselves into their houses” (GP 81).

Though the whole city reels under the tempo of the first wave of epidemic, the Outram House situated “on a bluff above the town” (GP 62), remains safe and free from contagion. But as the terror of the epidemic sweeps over the town, the local servants, sweepers and coolies posted in the Outram House remain absent as they being stilled with fear lock themselves within their home. Actually, self-preservation becomes the first law of living to them at the time of plague's devastating visitation at Ratnagiri. Resultantly, manually operated the drainage system and the water supply system of the Outram House break down:

“Outram House found itself besieged with neglect. The bungalow had no sewerage and no water supply. The toilets had to be emptied daily of nightsoil by sweepers; water had to be carried in buckets from a nearby stream. But with the outbreak of the plague, the sweepers stooped coming and the coolies' water buckets lay upturned beside the kitchen” (GP 81).

As servants remain absent at the Outram House, Dolly, the sole member of the Burmese retinue of servants who accompanied the royal family in India, has to keep up the daily chores with the help of a few servants who still live on the estate. In these testing moments, Dolly with the help of the coachman, Sawant fills up the tanks of Queen's bedroom, but “there was no water for the king and the toilets were very nearly unusable” (GP 82). Then Dolly, at the suggestion of Sawant, humbly proposes the Queen “to allow the household's workers to build temporary shelters around the walls of the compound” (GP 82). Scrutinizing the overall situation the Queen also at once feels the utility of this suggestion. She feels that the stay of the servants around the compound will provide safety to them as they will not come in contact with the plague victims of the town. Resultantly this disease will not spread in them and thereby the royal people living in Outram House will also lead a life of safety and isolation. Again, their temporary stay around the

compound will also facilitate in the smooth, easy and break-free maintenance of the daily chores of the Outram House. Grasping these beneficial aspects, she consents to the suggestion and tells Dolly, 'I have decided. Let them build their shelter on the hill. Tell Sawant to let them know that they can go ahead.' (GP 83).

Resultantly within a few days the household servants come from the town to the hill and build their temporary settlement around the compound. Due to their availability the daily routine of the royal household also goes on in its usual motion. This benevolent action of Queen Supayalat prompted by the then situation sets her image as a patron goddess to the local people who begin to deify her and consider her as their guardian, their protector. Indeed, "overnight she became a guardian goddess, a protector of the unfortunate, an incarnate devi who had rescued hundreds from the ravages of the plague" (GP 83). Due to this deification, her identity as the cruel Burmese queen is destabilized and she becomes a benevolent goddess, a kind mother who is ever ready to rescue the poor plague victims from their miseries. In this way Ghosh rejecting any fixed referent of identity shows that identity is "a matter of becoming as well as of being" (Hall 224). In fact, under the pressing situation of the epidemic, the so called cruel queen displays her humane nature that remains latent in her. In this way epidemic brings about transformation in the queen, bringing out an unknown behavioral aspect from the queen.

Even when the first wave of epidemic subsides, these people do not return to their original old homes located in the claustrophobic lanes of the town. The favorable conditions of living around the compound lure the fifty families to settle there. When Dolly talks this matter with the Queen, she also decides to let the settlers stay there. She also anticipates their harrowing condition in case another wave of epidemic descends in near future: "What if there's another epidemic?' The Queen said" (GP 83). In fact, by now she has moved beyond her selfish needs and feels empathy for the commoners. Just like King Lear, Queen Supayalat also undergoes metamorphosis in these moments of communal crises. Actually, in these testing moments, she rises above her ego and gives utmost importance to her community and in this way she wins the membership of a large transnational family. Even the invisible bar between the royal family and the commoners breaks down as the princesses freely mix with the children of this basti. In fact, under the pressure of situation, the essentialist idea of kinship based on the Universalist assumption that 'blood is thicker than water' gets redefined as new familial bonds across cultural, racial and national boundaries take concrete shapes.

"They spent their days running around the compound with their new friends, discovering new games. 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" (GP 83).

In short, change of situation in the times of epidemic brings about drastic and unbelievable transformation in the ways of living of the royal family and fresh affinities emanate from their cross cultural, cross border mélange. In fact, Ghosh here contests “the concept of the fixity of familial space and focuses on its fluid contours” (Bhattacharjee 145). So, home making and kinship formation goes on even at the time of epidemics and the familiar space is re/created even in the transnational location. Moreover, being a believer in transcultural humanity, Ghosh insists on the warmth and solidarity of human relationships as the only panacea for living in the testing times of communal crises generated by epidemics.

The premonition of the Queen turns into reality as the second wave of plague descends on Ratnagiri after four years. This time more and more people living in the congested areas of town move up the hill and build even “tiled houses” (GP 84) there. This movement of people to the hill turns the basti around the compound into “a little village in its own right with winding lanes and corner shops” (GP 84). But as this newly formed village is unplanned, it lacks sewage clearance and sanitation facilities; naturally heaps of garbage, emitting foul smell, lay dumped here and there. In this way, intertwining the restructuring of society with the outbreak of epidemics, Ghosh has shown how epidemiological upheavals actually produce disarray in the social and demographical structures of a location.

This novel covers the time period of over hundred years and as such it presents the peak, decline as well as the ‘happy’ demise of the British colonialism. During their heyday the British colonialists ruled over the world with the sole objective of “asset stripping” (Huggan and Tiffin 140) of the colonized countries and elephants were considered as one of the prime assets by the imperialists: in African countries as well as in the Asian countries, wild elephants had been mercilessly treated by these imperialists for their own sake. In the African countries, as presented by Conrad in his *Heart of Darkness*, the wild elephants had been trapped and hunted for acquiring ivories. In the similar pattern in the colonized Burma the teak industry marched forward only on the labour of the wild elephants that were domesticated in a cruel and inhuman way. Actually, the British imperialists after colonizing Burma in 1824 realized that the only way of flourishing in the teak industry was to domesticate these wild animals. Consequently these bio-pirates violently trapped and domesticated the wild elephants and hitching an elephant to a two-ton log, they forced that elephant to carry that log to the nearest waterway. In fact, the gigantic labour of these animals cemented the development of teak industry in Burma. Commenting on the interconnection between the elephants and the development of teak industry in Burma, Jonathan Saha observes, “...they (the elephants) were essential, sentient co-workers whose labour enabled the extraction of timber that would have otherwise been either impossible or unprofitable to log. They made possible the export of teak, a wood that due to colony’s dominance of the world market became synonymous with Burma” (172). But these elephants were easily vulnerable to a zoonotic disease called anthrax that could easily take the form of

epidemic. How this epidemic can kill an entire herd of hundred elephants within a few days has been meticulously described here by Ghosh. With the precision of a medical practitioner, Ghosh has also pointed out that this disease can be spread among human beings if they come in contact with these infected animals. Here Rajkumar cannot believe his own eyes when he finds that hsinouq and his men, leaving the infected elephant and the dead oo-sis, are running towards the elephant camp to keep themselves as well as the rest of the herd away from the deadly infection of anthrax. Rajkumar who is totally unknown to the impact of this deadly disease even laughs watching the dreadful flight of others from the site of contagion: “Rajkumar laughed. ‘They ran as if a tiger was after them.’” (94). How the oo-sis even at the cost of their lives tried hard to prevent the spread of this disease among other animals has also been presented here by Ghosh. Actually, in those days without proper vaccination, the safest way to prevent the spread of this zoonotic disease was to isolate the infected animal/s. Moreover, as elephants were seen as lively capital by the imperialists and they substantially contributed to the growth of teak industry, the large scale deaths of the working elephants by this zoonotic disease could even crash the British economy: “Mature tuskers were valued in many thousands of rupees and the cost of an epidemic was such as to make itself felt on the London Stock Exchange” (GP 92). In this way linking the fall of economy with the spread of an epidemic, Ghosh has shown the wider effects of epidemics and pandemics on the global economy and here lies his credit. In fact, Ghosh by the dint of his literary imagination has enlivened the ‘fibula’ of anthrax into an engaging ‘sjuzet’.

In a nutshell, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* (2000) not only records the harrowing effects of different epidemics but also offers necessary means of salvage to tide over the miseries and sufferings caused by them. Carrying a whole baggage of history, occurrences and experiences, this novel teaches us how to grapple with the gripping situation in times of crises. It propagates the lessons of social distancing and isolation necessary for tackling epidemics and pandemics and also puts strong emphasis on the maintenance of communal solidarity in these testing moments. In this way, recording the past *The Glass Palace* (2000) provides us with those transformative sparks that can modify present and direct us to start our lives in a reshaped and renovated pattern in the present pandemic situation.

Abbreviations Used:

GP= *The Glass Palace*

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