

Post-Colonial Concerns in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract

Post colonialism has become an exasperating process when tested on the crucible of critical speculation, inquiry and evaluation. Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace is a quintessential post-colonial work expressed in the literary creations of the colonized, the non- White minorities all over the world. He perceptively highlights how both in manner and matter, this novel epitomizes Indian sense and sensibility. Here, Ghosh asserts his artistic independence shattering all linguistic orthodoxies, denouncing thereby the hegemonies pertaining to caste, creed, nation and gender. In the present paper, an effort has been made to read The Glass Palace in the post-colonial context, focusing on Ghosh's vision of globalization, not only of economic, mercantile but also of culture and human gesture. It attempts to plumb the depths of human experience in this fictionalized historical narrative through the exploration of lives and concerns of different nationalities.

Keywords: *Post colonialism, Colonialism, Gender, Hegemony, Globalization.*

The term 'post-colonial' is applied to the cultures affected by the imperial process or the agenda of western imperialists for cultural domination. It means 'after the beginning of colonialism', not necessarily 'after decolonization'. However, post colonialism is a complex cultural process that represents the general mood of a particular period of history, as shown by ideas, beliefs or the spirit of the times. The post-colonial discourse offers different perspectives of colonialism. The rupture between colonialism and post colonialism is an artificial one and nowadays post colonialism has become a myth. The post-colonial identity of marginal groups, their exploitation and oppression, displacement, nostalgia, and the loss of language and culture are the predominant issues related to post colonialism. The 'centre-periphery dichotomy', resistance and subversion of the imperial centre, the colonizer and the colonized are some broad postulates related to post-colonial literature, which mainly consists of the Third World Literatures in English.

Bill Ashcroft et al use the term "to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (2). This is because "there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European aggression. Russell Jacoby complains that the term 'post-colonial' has become "the latest catchall term to dazzle the academic mind" (30). Some critics like Edward Said and Gayatri C. Spivak regard post-colonial writing as resistance to colonial hegemony. On the other hand, some like Homi K. Bhabha, Arun

P. Mukherjee and Benita Parry are opposed to their ideas and explore that there is no unitary quality to post-colonial writing. Post-colonial writing refers to literary creations of non- White minorities located in Britain, Canada and such other countries. These writers negate the binary of the oppressor and the oppressed or the subject and the object positions and open new possibilities for culture contact. The term is largely used to refer to the body of writing known as 'Commonwealth' in which the colonial experience is the central link that defines and contains the life of the post-colonial subject. Colonialism is an imposition of colonial forms on pre-colonial societies and post colonialism is an outgoing process. It is a continuation of colonialism. The colonial encounter has been a seminal event in the history of both the West and the non-Western world, shaping culture, literature, politics and history. The colonial ambivalence is comprised of materiality and spirituality, that is, the economy and the cultural identity. During the last two decades of the Twentieth Century, the marginals or the peripheral cultures occupy the centre. In fact, the post-colonial literature writes back in order to compete the supremacy of the British literature, and its tastes and values. In today's global context, all cultures are mixed and no one culture can claim for its distinctiveness. Globalization is now on everybody's lips, but some crucial issues related to it are the globalization of human heart beyond the boundaries of the nations and the practice of cross cultural and trans- civilizational dialogue.

Indian Writing in English reveals the dialectics of imperialism in its journey from the periphery to the centre and echoes a deep core of neo- colonialism based on power politics. The stalwarts like Salman Rushdie, Khushwant Singh, Mukul Kesavan, Vikram Chandra, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh and the like are writing in a post- colonial space, using novel as a means of cultural representation. The Indian Novel in English is treated as the 'Third World Novel' and according to Aijaz Ahmad, it refers to "representations of colonialism, nationhood, post-coloniality, the typology of rulers, their powers, corruptions, and so forth" (124). He sees the novel engaged in post- colonial consciousness; but the study of the thematic range indicates that the novel also attempts to universalize humanistic gesture, for human nature and social relationships are as important as the interplay of power and national relationships. Amitav Ghosh is one of the foremost Indian diasporic writers in modern Indian English writing who believes in what Ahmad has said. His reputation rests on *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome: A Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000), the non- fiction *The Imam and the Indian* (2002) and the travelogues *Countdown* (1998) and *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* (1998). As a post-colonial writer, he uses English as an Englishman, stays in America, and frequently visits his hometown Kolkata in India. He is the New York- based serious novelist and anthropologist, writing with a post-colonial consciousness. He is certain of his human and historical insights. He belongs to the nation that was once conquered and ruled by the Imperial Britain.

In his earlier canonical novel *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh deals with the issues of identity vs nationhood, self vs nation, and the representation of history and concludes that all borders are imaginary constraints. He dismantles history, the frontiers of nationality, culture and language in *The Shadow Lines* and *In an Antique Land*. N. Bagchi rightly observes, "Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is a manifestation of the desire to validate the post-colonial experience and to attempt a reconstruction of public history" (187). Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981)

and Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) politicize and make fusion of personal and public history. *The Glass Palace* treats several issues that intersect on the terrain of a post-colonial nation- state through three generations and three nations over a period of two centuries. It renders the enmeshed histories of Burma, Malaysia and India in the British regime. Ghosh debunks the national, political and geographic boundaries and supports his own idea that nationalism is an imaginative construct. While looking at *The Glass Palace* through post-colonial lens, Jayita Sengupta observes, "It offers us a picture of life in the former colonies of the Empire as if it is multi- national cultural bazaar (26). As observed by Ranjita Basu, "History is a brooding presence in Ghosh's books, almost a living entity able to shape the lives of his characters" (160). The novel projects the political and cultural complexities through his concepts of nationalism, imperialism, and the subjugation of gender, class and caste. He believes in transgression of the frontiers of nationality, and for him, nationalism seems to be an illusion and a force of violence and destruction. He has presented a unique rendition of history in fiction from the international perspective and writes imaginatively about the process of colonization in India, Burma and Malaya.

History, fiction and travelogue combine into a unified whole in *The Glass Palace* which is a novel of memory and movement. Here, the historical and personal blend into a perfect harmony. Ghosh himself says, "It's coming together of the many themes of my earlier novels. Writing this novel was like fighting a war" (62). Like the spectacular seven- coloured rainbow, the novel is structured into seven parts displaying various shades of human personality of several nationalities like King Thebaw and his Queen, Rajkumar and Dolly, Beni Prasad Dey and Uma, Saya John, Arjun, Dinu, and many more colonized victims. The novel opens with the distant noise of the 'English cannon' outside the royal palace called the 'Glass Palace' in Mandalay where a coal- black *kaala* Rajkumar, the eleven-year-old orphan from Bengal, is serving in Ma Cho's tea- stall. The Burmese King Thebaw and the pregnant Queen Supayalat, the royal prisoners, are deported into exile in Ratnagiri in Maharashtra and the palace itself is on the brink of defeat after the declaration of King Thebaw's 'Royal Proclamation'. The war began on November 14, 1885 in which the Burmese army surrendered to the British, followed by the captivity and exile of the King. The Burmese King, once a colonizer, bewails the loss of kingdom and his present confinement in Outram House in Ratnagiri. Towards the end, King Thebaw dies of heart attack in exile, and the history of the last Burmese King is lost and forgotten with the passage of time. Ira Pandey says, "What makes the tragedy of human life bearable is a graceful acceptance of the inevitability of pain and suffering" (*Outlook*, 6).

In the middle part, Ghosh has incorporated too much history in the novel. He displays the role of the British Indian Army fighting against the Japanese in Malaysia during the Second World War. He handles the clash of loyalties via Uma Dey's nephew, Arjun Roy, his batman Kishan and Hardayal Singh in 1/1 Jat Light Infantry. Some students and the Congress leaders ask Arjun, "From whom are you defending us? From ourselves? It's your masters from whom the country needs to be defended" (*TGP*, 288). Indeed, these and other remarks reveal the writer's indictment against the position of a colonized subject. Like Beni Prasad Dey, Arjun Roy was also proud of the Empire. He was proud of being recruited in the regiment that had received medals such as the Victoria Cross from the Somme, two Military Crosses for putting down the

Arab rebellion in Mesopotamia. He writes to Manju, “What makes me prouder still is the thought that Hardy and I are going to be the first Indian officers in the 1/1 Jats: it seems like such a huge responsibility- as though we are representing whole of the country” (262). He regards himself as the first modern Indian who actually lives with the Westerners not weighed down by the past.

The central dilemma is the conflict in loyalty of the Indian National Army soldiers. The pamphlet signed by Amreek Singh says, “Brothers, ask yourselves what you are fighting for and why you are here: do you really wish to sacrifice your lives for an Empire that has kept your country in slavery for two hundred years?” (*TGP*, 391). Arjun is torn between sympathy, revulsion and fear. He faces a moral crisis and gets a setback. He is caught between two worlds and tells Dinu, “We rebelled against an Empire that shaped everything in our lives.... We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves” (518). He faces a dilemma about joining the rebels in the Indian National Army while fighting for the British in Burma. Hardayal joins the Indian Independence League and fights for the Japanese. Arjun then realizes that the Empire has been dead, as “he knew this because he had felt it die within himself, where it had held its strongest dominion” (441). Along with Hardy, he joins the Indian Independence League; becomes the voice of resistance against the British Empire and registers a protest against it. What characterize his attitude are a curious blend of loyalty to the British and an awareness of the ills of subjection. He grapples with the question of India’s subjugation. For him, the feeling of patriotism and loyalty to the Empire become antithetical to one another. Arjun felt for a while that hope lay with the British but “finally protests the Empire to guard the interests of the natives” (441). Towards the end, the loyalty conflict in Arjun is over and he seeks his own identity in the signifying process of history.

Ghosh pinpoints the resistance to the dictatorial military rule in the post-colonial Burma through some student activists’ arguments about the atrocities of dictators like Hitler and Mussolini in Dino’s photo studio called ‘The Glass Palace’ in Rangoon. Besides power politics, the Indian diasporic experience in South East Asia is the focal point and Ghosh records its historical depth and its meaning in the novel. Several stories of expatriates and exiles mingle and jostle with the intersection of class, race, gender and religion in it. Rajkumar Raha who is infatuated with Dolly Sein, as beautiful as The Glass Palace itself, marries her and ventures into the rubber plantation industry as Saya John’s partner. Rajkumar’s life story is the story of struggle for survival in the colonial turmoil. As a colonized subject from Bengal, he becomes a colonizer in Burma by transporting indentured labourers from South India to other parts of the colonial world. Even he has sexually exploited a woman worker on his plantations. Thus, a former victim of the British Empire has become the victimizer.

Rajkumar’s post-colonial consciousness represents a conflict within his own self, a conflict through which he tries to step outside his colonial self, the history of the imperial phase and to approach his own past, history and reality from his present position. Rajkumar, Saya John and Matthew are engaged in the task of colonizing land and people for the sake of wealth. Rohini Mokashi Punekar is right when she says, “the line between the colonizers and the colonized is blurred, even erased; colonization is seen as a continuous, ongoing process, and often reversible” (55). Rajkumar is the central character whose personal history is entwined with the colonial history in order to destroy and create new histories. He is projected as a prosperous teak and

rubber merchant and his story of love, romance, war and Empire through three generations of his family takes place in many South Asian cities. But after the Second World War, his expanding economy collapsed and he took shelter in Calcutta. He could no longer see himself as an Indian or Burmese. To quote Meenakshi Mukherjee: “Human lives spill over national boundaries, refusing to stay contained in neat compartments. A person is remembered not as Burmese, Indian Chinese, Malaya or American” (6). She opines that *The Glass Palace* will remain memorable mainly for the most scathing critique of British colonialism, as the building called the ‘Glass Palace’ is heavily burdened with the images of loss and hope. The novel seems to be, in some sense, an elegy for the diasporic condition that is a product of history. Despite several cultures, the Indian immigrants and diasporic workers experience and yearn for global identities. All the characters confront the riddle of human existence.

The notion of unified identity implies ‘unity in diversity’. An ideal writer like Ghosh believes in the co- relation of all cultures. As a cosmopolitan writer without any parochialism, he tries to explore neighboring Asian countries in *The Glass Palace* where the West is a marginal presence. He discards European models and attempts to create his own. He maintains a balance between the memory of the past and the desire for a future by coming back to present. About the epic dimension of the novel, Ghosh said to Rashmee Z. Ahmed in an interview, “It’s just a family story, really, that triggered *The Glass Palace*, my father and my uncle both were in Burma (now Myanmar). But then, the book ended up as something quite different. It showed me a way of living that really had a transforming impact” (*The Times of India*, 10). Ghosh writes about families and nations to highlight the sense of dislocation. The novelist grasps the rise and fall of empires across the twentieth century and raises the question of national identity- cultural and political. Brinda Bose aptly comments that *The Glass Palace* “signals a dislocation in our understanding of the myth of our so- called community” (30). At the same time, Ghosh maps the rival geography of human heart. The human interest is pre- dominant in this novel under the spell of colonialism. The social chaos in Burma during the colonial days is one of its threads. Different strands of history of King Thebaw, Dolly and Rajkumar are woven dexterously in this saga of family matters. Rashmee Z. Ahmed supports the argument against the imperial attitude in these words, “*The Glass Palace* is nothing if not an indictment of imperial and process” (10). It is a story of ‘a people, a fortune, and a family and its fate: in which Ghosh creates “a parallel, wholly fictional world” (549), like Benedict Anderson’s now widely used metaphor of the ‘imagined communities’. Anderson imagines the nation “an imagined political community not uniquely produced by the constellation of certain objective social facts; rather the notion is thought out” (28). He has discussed the idea of the ‘nation’ and the problematic of assigning a fixed historical space and character to nationhood, emphasizing the artificiality of national identity.

Similarly, Eric Hobsbawm upholds the idea that people should “identify themselves emotionally with their nation” (143) and then only nationalism gets validity. It means the idea of nation acquires an imaginative significance as it is “the product of certain historical, regional and psychological conjunctions, and thus bound to vary across diverse communities of people”, avers Moral (140). From the post-colonial cultural perspectives, as observed by Homi K. Bhabha, “the modern nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor” (139). Bhabha emphasizes the point that nations are born of anti-

imperialistic struggles and their identities are necessary ambivalent. In the Indian context, the dispersal and scattering of people is the process of the making of the nation. Rakhee Moral rightly comments, “The idea of the nation as a metaphor of loss, and as being more symbolic of a unitariness than the physical entity which is society, finds elaborate figuration in the turbulence of cultural cross-overs and conflicting histories that makes up the central concern of Ghosh” (143-44). Ghosh believes in Ashish Nandy who points out that colonialism “represents a certain cultural baggage” (2). For him, the novel is the instrument of perception more like a lens than a mirror for the objective representation of reality. It seems that he is more interested in a sort of active moral engagement with human experience.

Ghosh describes the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of dislocated people in India, Burma, China, Malaysia and America. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly points out, “The story spans more than a century in the history of the subcontinent, people get involved in unexpected relationships across countries and culture, wars are fought, rebellions quelled, political and ethical issues are debated, fortunes are made and lost. The writer reports everything accurately, thoughtfully- his precision backed up by meticulous research” (5-6). Cultural hierarchies overlap in entwining of the high and the low classes in spite of race, religion and class, in order to create new societies. The feminine consciousness in the novel recognizes the difference between a woman’s vision and a man’s vision through Rajkumar- Dolly and Beni Prasad Dey and Uma relationships. Beni Prasad Dey’s relations with Uma were just like the oppressor and the oppressed. For emotional relief, he needs consolation from Uma and not the wifely virtues. He felt that “nothing was held in abeyance, to bargain for a woman’s soul with the coin of kindness and patience” (*TGP*, 153). It was Uma’s subjection beyond decency, beyond her imagining. She could do nothing but to submit herself. Rajkumar marries Dolly and has two sons, Neel and Dinu and Ilongo is Dinu’s half- brother. He inhabits in the post-colonial space as a foreigner in Mandalay and is subjected to colonization. Neel marries Uma’s niece Manju in Calcutta and Dinu who loves Saya John’s granddaughter, Alison, marries a Burmese research scholar who wrote her dissertation on ‘The Glass Palace Chronicles’. According to Rakhee Moral, Dinu-Alison love affair is “symbolic of exiles coming together, as it were, of families meeting out of a shared compulsion across disputed and dispossessed territories” (150). Saya John’s son, Matthew, marries Elsa and Alison is their daughter. These family ties come to full circle and the cultural differences are forgotten and the artificial borders are no more. However, on the economic front, after Matthew’s death, a joint venture to resist the capitalist structures and colonization is undertaken by Elsa, Alison and Ilongo in Malaysia and at the political front, Dinu and his comrades in Rangoon have strange ideas of democracy. Ghosh refers to the imprisonment of Burmese political leader Aung San Suu Kyi. He also depicts Aung San Suu Kyi’s struggle for democracy in Burma and its historical context in a travelogue *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*. Dinu regards Kyi much greater than a politician as she succeeded in resisting the imperialist onslaught, the misrule and tyranny in Burma.

Amitav Ghosh, like Salman Rushdie, is not an insider/outsider who talks about cultural displacement through cracked lenses; on the other hand, he is an insider. He makes us think about the relation of culture to economic and political structures in the present days of globalization. As a writer of the Indian Diaspora, Ghosh wants to record its historical depth and

its meaning in the world. Ahdaf Soueif writes, “Ghosh is one of the most sympathetic post-colonial voices to be heard today. He looks love and loyalty, and examines questions of Empire and responsibility, of tradition and modernity” (5). Throughout the novel, the Empire expands and then retracts, fortunes are won and lost. Namrata Mahanta opines, “The novel sees Amitav Ghosh’s recurrent concern with nationalism; boundaries and statehood transform into multi-levelled dilemmas” (54). He presents multiple viewpoints of the dispersed people of different nationalities and makes a plea for internationalism in order to define our contemporary globality. He intends to show how the context of imperialism has changed in globalization. Like George Orwell and many other commentators, Ghosh believes that empires imprison their rulers as well as their subjects. In his hands, *The Glass Palace* becomes a cultural instrument for the hopes of social betterment. He negates the binary of the subject- object positions and attempts to universalize human relationships in the wake of globalization. In fact, it is his civilizing mission that is essential in the turbulent modern world.

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