



Narratives of the Colonized in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) is the story of Rajkumar, an eleven years old Indian orphan. Rajkumar is accidentally transported to Burma. He is an embodiment of remarkable exploring spirit; keen perception and capability to take calculated risks. When the novel begins, Rajkumar is seen watching the British storm in the Burmese royal fortress in 1885. He sneaks into the forbidden place and meets Dolly. Dolly is a beautiful young court maid. Even the chaos of looting and violence can't erase Dolly's face from Rajkumar's memory. Later on, Dolly accompanies the banished king and queen to India. But Rajkumar stays in Burma where he is busy making his fortune in the timber industry. Rajkumar meets Dolly again in India. The novel has different layers of themes and one of them is tracing the love story of Rajkumar and Dolly during the turbulent 20th Century.

The *Glass Palace* is divided into seven parts. The first part, 'Mandalay' portrays how the British occupied Burma. The second section, 'Ratnagiri' depicts the catastrophic effects of imperialism. The third section, 'The Money Tree' shows Rajkumar's prosper through timber business. The fourth section focuses on the second generation. The fifth section 'Morningside' covers the impacts of the Second World War in Malaya. The sixth part deals with the suffering and agonies of the characters caused by the Second World War. The last section depicts the peak of Indian National Movement and its ultimate achievement of independence.

While writing *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh carried out painstaking research in the history of South Asia. That was why he had travelled extensively across Burma, Thailand, India and the Burmese-Thai border. Amitav Ghosh, in an interview, Ghosh explains:

'The Glass Palace was like an odyssey it was also about the history of the Indian Diaspora in Southeast Asia, which is an epic history, a very extraordinary history.'

This novel candidly depicts the influences of colonialism in South-East Asia. It traces the beginning of colonialism in Burma, the rise of anti-colonial consciousness in India, the Japanese attack on Malaya during the Second World War and the postcolonial situations in Burma.

The opening of the novel realistically portrays a world of sensations, crowds, symbols and boundaries, the rest fragile and suspended in the face of global forces. It makes the readers to know that globalization is not a recent invention of late 20th Century capitalism; it is rather a phenomenon with a long and complex history that insinuates itself into other histories, whether national, communal, familiar or perhaps most threateningly personal.

In the very beginning, the novel introduces us the question of authority and in particular, the authority to interpret new signs as they appear on the constantly changing landscape of colonized territory. There is a reflection of problems of economic, artistic, cultural and national authority emerge in the novel by the portrayal of two families over three generations. These families are seen to be pushed apart and pulled together by the forces of capitalism, colonialism and insurgency movement.

If we keep scratching the surface of *The Glass Palace*, we come across one of the layers of the novel which reflects the process of colonization and the state of the colonized. The very word used for Rajkumar – Kaala, seems objectionable to our generation, which is decolonized at least in the political sense of the word. Readers see in this novel the actual process of hostility, incarceration and colonization and how the colonial powers robbed the Burmese people with guns and weaponry. The colonizers know only to command. It is the Indian soldiers who are invading Burma. The Indian soldiers should have known that their common enemy was the British which made the Burmese and the Indians to fight among themselves. The irony is reflected through the episode of expelling of the deposed Burmese king.

In victory the British had decided to be generous [...] the British Government wished to provide them with an escort of attendants and advisors [...]. But now it was time to leave, the guard of honour was waiting. (GP, P.40-43)

The novelist even mentions the pitiable condition of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Indian Emperor who was taken to Rangoon in exile. Bahadur Shah Zafar's own poetic lines reveal his mental and emotional agonies-

Umr-e-Daraaz Mang Kar Laye the Chaar Din

Do Aarzo Mein Kate Gaye Do Intezaar Mein.

Kitna Hai Badnaseeb Zafar! DafanKeLiye

Do GazZameenBhi Na MiliKooye-e-Yaar Mein.

We had borrowed this long life on a four-day lease

Two were spent yearnings vain, two by waiting seized

How unlucky is Zafar, mark for his burial place,

He couldn't find two yards of ground in his love's street.(Translation by K. C. Kanda)

These lines express Bahadur Shah Zafar's feelings of disappointment, mental and emotional turmoil and his sense of soul-pricking alienation caused by losing the empire, glory, grandeur and his offspring in the wake of British colonization of India. Zafar feels himself at complete loss of material and immaterial possession. He was imprisoned by the British in Rangoon following 1857 revolt or First War of Independence.

These lines depict poet's (Bahadur Shah Zafar) remarks in a philosophical manner: the long life was borrowed on four-day lease, out of which two were spent in yearning and the rest in waiting. Bahadur Shah Zafar sensed that the days of life were almost over, and the night began. After it, what was awaited was death. Moreover, the poet found himself unfortunate as even his death could not get him a few yards of land for his burial in his beloved country. Once he ruled India and now in Rangoon, he was victim of ruthless colonial powers. Burmese king and Bahadur Shah Zafar both were deposed by the colonial powers from their respective countries. The colonial powers kept them away from reality, from their own subjects and land to a shocking extent. When King Thibaw is taken out of his palace, it is for the first time he is seeing his land.

The novelist describes the conditions of Indians in Burma who were taken there to work in the docks and molls to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines.' Another shock comes when we learn that those who wait on Queen Supayalat are supposed to do so on all their fours i.e. both hands and legs on floor. When an English midwife comes, she refuses to crawl. Supayalat fails to make her crawl, 'She was an English woman.'

In the process of colonization, what is worse is the mental colonization. For example, Saya asserts English as superior. He thinks that English have taught him the art of using everything for his own benefit. He thinks that the Europeans stand for efficient exploitation. He is seen to be immensely absorbed in his desire of gain. Many decades later we see Arjun boasting of his connection with Westerners. He has convinced himself that the Western style is better and therefore desirable. 'Dinu understood that it was through their association with Europeans that Arjun and his fellow-officers saw themselves as pioneers.' We also see Rajkumar being convinced that 'without the British the Burmese economy would collapse.'

Such stances show the cruelty of colonization and how it influences the lives and minds of the colonized. Decolonization is not easy, perhaps it seems impossible. As Arjun says,

'We rebelled against an Empire that has shaped everything in our lives; coloured everything in the world as we know it. It is a huge, indelible stain, which has tainted all of us. We cannot destroy without destroying ourselves.' (GP, P.518)

Ghosh also touches the material greed of the Europe. Everything becomes a resource to be explained – woods, water, mines, people, just everyone and everything. '.... Resources were being exploited with an energy and efficiency hatched to undreamed of.' Forests are cut on a very mass scale without giving any thought to the hazards of environment that such an unthinking act would cause. Burma becomes the mine of wealth for the British. 'In a few decades the wealth will be gone-all the gems, the timber and the oil – and then they too will leave.'

Arjun aspired to be 'modern', hence, he seemed prepared to erase all traces of being Indian. He seemed ready to discard his past and embrace western habits of thought in its totality. In fact, he was not in a position to realize the cost he had to pay to be accepted as a member of the elitist class, the rulers' class. This sense of euphoria he was reveling in is being partially shattered when he comes to attend his sister's marriage. There were motley crowd of politicians, congressmen, Buddhist monks, Burmese student activists, and all the invitees to the wedding. All of them did nothing but sneered for the men in uniform. The congressmen had bitter memories of their confrontation with Indian soldiers and police. Arjun retorts:

'We aren't occupying the country' as lightly as he could. 'We are here defend you,' 'From whom are you defending us? From ourselves? From other Indians? It's your masters from whom the country needs to be defended.' (GP, P.287-8)

This is the exact reply of an officer who has been indoctrinated in the western ideology. He has thoroughly internalized the teachings of the British. The young Indian officer has great respect for his superiors in the Army. He is habituated to use their statements, behaviour and manner. In western dress, he has become a man who is externally black but white internally. Arjun is so fascinated by the army that he can't even for a moment reflect upon the inscription at the military academy at Dehradun. In fact he should have made an introspection of what he had been doing. He was not really serving his country. This is because the British by that time had managed to create a halo about their goodwill.

The first real stirrings of disquiet occur in the transitional figure of Beni Prasad Dey, the district collector. He is responsible for the welfare of the King of Burma, who was exiled to Ratnagiri in India. The collector has achieved the ultimate status in the Indian bureaucratic Raj. But he is plagued by doubts, "haunted by the fear of being thought lacking by his British collector is confronted with the awkward position of being a willing servant to an alien power."

By the beginning of the 20th Century, the British Empire had evolved from being a powerful trading presence into a huge government apparatus. It started imposing its hierarchies and protocols on its colonies. The colonizers started using the collector as instrumental in enforcing their myriad colonial rules,

even the most absurd ones. For example, they treated the people of Burma like caged animals and tried to control their traditional routine rituals. As the collector's wife, Uma, reflects, "Did this mean that one day all of India would become a shadow of what it had been? Millions of people trying to live their lives in conformity with incomprehensible rules?" The collector, a tragic figure, is seeded with an incipient nationalism one that is thwarted by time and place.

The Glass Palace focuses on the dreams, wishes, and ambitions of the characters. It also deals with their pangs of separation, struggles, and their emotional turmoil. The novelist, here doesn't seem to be influenced by his own personal views. Salman Rushdie too opines-

'Literature has little or nothing to do with a writers' home address.'²

Throughout the novel, the novelist has just candidly portrayed all the issues as they are. Moreover, Ghosh doesn't try to solve the puzzles of human life. He has just presented everything candidly.

Works cited:

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