

## HISTORY & CULTURE IN “THE GLASS PALACE”

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Amitav Ghosh is obviously a new star in the firmament of Indian fiction in English and one of the bright. Born in 1956, Amite Ghosh spent his childhood in Dhaka and Colombo and went to London for higher education. He completed his Ph.D. in Socio-Anthropology from Oxford University. After returning from London, he worked as a lecturer in Delhi University. He made an impressive debut as novelist in 1986 with the publication of his maiden novel “The Circle of Reason”. Thus his long cherished desire to write a novel was fulfilled as he himself admits ‘the only thing, I ever wanted to do was to write a novel’. Two years later in 1988, he came with his second novel “The Shadow Lines”. It has received the Sahitya Academy award way back in 1996. In 2000 his fourth novel ‘The Glass Palace’ came into reader’s hand. It was short listed for the Commonwealth prize but Ghosh withdrew it from the commonwealth prize listing commenting that the spirit of the book is anti- colonial where as Commonwealth is a remnant of colonization.

Many Indian novelists have won fame by giving expression their creative urge the novels dealing with freedom have given vivid pictures of the exploitation and arrogance of the foreign rulers. The young writers keeping up the tradition explored new areas such as communal disturbances, the lower strata of the society, the poor landless working community, the urban unrest and chaos, the middle class life exploitation, immergence of the political leadership and sexual exploitation etc. This trend continued even after independence. Nationalism and partition became major themes of discussion in the novels.

Indian writers in English have certainly looked to the west to articulate social problem and interrogate the cultural paradigms of an Indian energizing from the loss of identity under colonial rule and slowly formulating its new identity as a modern nation state. Indian novel in English has now established in the world as one of the significant genre of world literature. It is Ghosh’s keen interest in research which made him a celebrated novelist. As an academician of a first order, he stands head and shoulder above Shashi Tharoor, Salman Rushdie, and Vikram Seth. He published numerous thought-provoking articles and presented illuminating papers at different places at home and abroad.

History has never been such as it emerged in the twentieth century. With the advent of post colonialism the way history was perceived and how it was later seen changed drastically, having nothing in common. History has been considered synonymous to past in earlier times; that is it was thought to be authentic and remained unchallenged. History was objective no more and therefore it had to prove itself to be true. In the old times, history was never judged to be a form of literature but it was thought to be carrying greater importance and was never critiqued. However, it was realized that after all history is written by human being and no eternal creature.

The newly, revised version of history that has taken a bold step to challenge the so called mainstream history is what is depicted in Amitav Ghosh's famous work 'The Glass Palace'. The author has cleverly presented his point of view that though every society has its own history; the individual (who is the smallest building block of this society) has his own share to contribute towards the greater history.

'The Glass Palace' is a fine example of Amitav Ghosh's writing where he arranges the matter and links it to history. The novel is based on the military career of the writer's father and uncle's life as a trader in Burma. It covers the interrelated experience of three families in Burma, India and British Malaya from 1885 to the present time. Ghosh confesses in his 'Author's notes':

I read hundred of books, memoirs, travelogues, gazetteers, articles and notebooks, published and unpublished; I travelled thousands of miles ,visiting and revisiting ,so far as possible ,all the setting and location that figure in this novel, I sought out scores of people in India Malaysia Myanmar and Thailand. <sup>1</sup>

'The family histories of the individual characters are inextricably linked to larger event in world history' as Caswell pointed out. 'The Glass Palace' is a masterly novel by Amitav Ghosh, the gifted novelist Peter Matthiessen has called "*an exceptional writer*". This superb story of love and war begins with the shattering of the kingdom of Burma and the igniting of a great and passionate love, and it goes on to tell the story of a people, a fortune, and a family and its fate. 'The Glass Palace' tells of Rajkumar, a poor boy lifted on the tides of political and social chaos, who creates an empire in the Burmese teak forest. During the British invasion of 1885, when soldiers force the royal family out of the Glass Palace and into exile, Rajkumar befriends Dolly, the woman whose love will shape his life. He cannot forget her, and years later, as a rich man, he goes in search of her.

When asked about role of his own personal family history in writing this novel, Ghosh replies: 'It is often war that creates a collision between history and individual lives. In circumstances of war, as in such situation as revolution, mass evacuations, and forced population movements and so on, nobody has the choice of stepping away from history'. Ghosh himself has pointed out that history; natural history, rhetoric, politics, belief, religion, family love and sexuality are the elements of everyday life incorporated in the novel. In the novel, Amitav Ghosh portrays the greed of common people. The time comes when Burma went totally in the control of British Army and started looting the palace. The local crowd also joined them and started their action keeping in mind that there is nobody to punish them. In a similar incident, when the mob was taking teakwood frames, chairs, silver and oil lamps etc., Ma Cho also enters there and comes face to face with queen Supayalat who then was a queen for name sake only, without any powers in her hand:

"There was a women inside, standing by the latticed window in the far corner. Ma Cho gasped queen was screaming, shaking her first 'Get out of here. Get out'. Her face was red , mottled with rage, her fury caused as much by her own importance as by the presence of the mob in the palace, a day before ,she could have had a commoner imprisoned for so much as looking her directly in the face . when the palace of king Thebaw is evacuated, everyone rushes into it to loot as much as they can . Rajkumar also goes in. But what he gets there is not an item of loot but his future wife Dolly. Dolly is an orphan, who works as a maid and looks after the

princesses. At that tender age Rajkumar is struck by her beauty”. (TGP PP. 33)

She provides us with ‘addresses’ for the lost factors in the historical chronicle. The novelist dwells on small details and bestowing on ordinary lives his focus that many historians cannot afford to do it. He creates and interior history in the novel, Such an internalized record of emotion are placed parallel to explicit factual accounts.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair rightly comments on Ghosh’s writing;

“Ghosh’s technique is simply to borrow the war journalist’s tripod, lenses and so forth and then swivel his view finder so that it Alights on families living out their in tumultuous times. It just Happens that the subjects of his current book (The Glass Palace) Are Burmese citizens, but one can easily imagine Ghosh ‘Photographic’ Afghan refugees or Kashmiri pandits using the Same documentary method. Indeed, he has used the strategy with The enigma of divided Bangal in the Shadow Lines or establishing Homely connections with a conventionally ‘exotic’ Egypt ‘In an Antique Land.”<sup>2</sup>

‘The Glass Palace’ is a historical novel because it deals with more than one country. The novel starts from the British period to the present age. The story is concerned with more than one country. The novel starts from the British Raj in Mandalay, covers the main events of India freedom movement and ends in the present scenario with a description of Aung Saan suu Kyi.

The history is enlivened with by the author’s own remembered images and lives of people trapped in the machinations of time which series to bridge the widening psychological gap between nations and geographies. Ghosh’s account of colonial conflict and his rendering of time past allow sufficient distance, which helps to reconsider of the issues that racked South Asian history. The question of identity, whether cultural or political, takes into account the collective natural allegiance of the people to their nation.

The novel provides a maze of history in which new associations are established, the past is recast in transformed patterns and unspoken allegiances and ‘loyalties’ are born where there were only hierarchies of power and position. The strange turn of history results in the making of a community constituted of what Ben Anderson calls,

“Characters, author and readers, moving onward through calendrical time thus turns the pages of the novel into agency for the imagined community which is the nation”.<sup>3</sup>

Amitav Ghosh has projected the Gandhian Philosophy very beautifully through the character of Uma who is the widow of the collector of Ratnagiri. Uma follow the Gandhian thought and tries to apply it in solving the day to day problems. Uma deeply absorbs Ghabdhiji’s problems of Indian society very well. In her views imperialism is not a form of reform:

“Let me be the first to admit the horrors of our own society –  
As a woman I assure you that I am even more aware of them  
Than you are. Mahatma Ghandhi has always said that our  
Struggle for reform. But having said this, let me add that we  
must not be deceived by the idea that imperialism is not an  
enterprise of reform.” (TGP, PP.294).

The conflict between cultures may be taken as the ironic conflation of nationalities which is dramatically introduced in the beginning of the novel. The moment of Rajkumar’s ‘chance’ presence in Mandalay, seat of Burmese royalty, amidst the booming of English guns and the imminent imperialist threat, is the first of many indicators of the transfer of power and the

transition in cultural position. The un ambivalent language in which the “Royal Proclamation” of the Burmese King is publicly announced is also not, without the irony of what comes soon after:

“To all Royal subjects and inhabitants of the Royal empire; those Heretics, the barbarian English kallaas having most harshly, made Demands calculated to bring about the impairment and destruction Of our religion the violation of our national traditions and customs The degradation of our race, are making a show and preparation as if about to wage war with our state. They have been replied to in Conformity with the usages of great nations and in words which are Just and regular.” (TGP, PP. 15-16)

While commenting on treatment of history is presented in post-colonial writing Jayita Sengupta says,

“The postmodernistic version of history is always subject to subversion reformulation and interrogation. However natural the presentation of fact are , the element of personalization cannot be ruled out in the process of selection of material and in drawing forth different subjective response through constant interrogation. So history is never objective and historiography metafiction always goes through a process of ontological re-formulation where history and fiction collide to make a sense of the world of representation. Ghosh’s rendering of British colonialism and its aftermath in the three countries is an interplay of the fact and fiction in an illusory place of imagination top create an awareness of the experiential reality of the post-colonial world.”<sup>4</sup>

As a matter of fact many histories are entwined in the plot. It enables the novelist to incorporate several historical changes over the three countries from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the present. The novel begins in 1885, with Rajkumar’s story. His story is not a fact, for the novelist is ‘not an authority to be relied on’. The colonial history twists with personal histories to destroy and recreate new histories and cultures. But before Rajkumar and Dolly meet again and their stories mingle to converge and diverge in the end. The writer shifts his post colonial view to re-vision the deportation of the Burmes royal family to India. The family is transported to Madras and is disassociated from its ancestral roots forever. The stories split between India and Burma as the narrative traces the compulsive adaptation of the royal family to the Indian family to the Indian ways in madras and Rajkumar’s gradual rising to power as teak merchant with the help of his mentor , Saya John in Burma.

The transition from high culture to the low is perceptible in the novel. The high and low classes dissolve to create new societies. In spite of the queen’s desperate attempt to maintain the aristocratic superiority, her daughters choose their partner from the common people. The first princess takes away Dolly’s lover from her and they are later married. So Dolly has to sacrifice her personal happiness for the first princes in her loyalty to the royal family.

Memory and imagination play vital roles in fictionalizing the reality. Colonization and trans cultural issue are the core of novel which bring global world into focus. Power works the public and private lives but the novelist goes further to tame it. Sheela Reddy quotes,

“This is how power is eclipsed in a moment of vivid realism”, Ghosh writes of governance and its placement by the next in an instant when the world springs of its moorings

of dream and reveals itself to be girdled in the pathways of survival and self-preservation.”<sup>5</sup>

It is chiefly through his characters that Ghosh delivers the most powerful message of the novel; the vainness of creating nation states, the absurdity of drawing lines which arbitrarily divide people when their memories remain undivided.

**Work Cited –**

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(All subsequent references in parentheses are from this edition of the novel.)

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