

**THE ELEMENT OF DISSENT IN THE BRITISH INDIAN
ARMY: A STUDY OF AMITAV GHOSH'S
*THE GLASS PALACE***

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Abstract

Well-established is the fact that the avowed object of Ghosh as a writer has been to put to the center stage the hitherto neglected facets of history. He in all his novels evinces his tenacious efforts to delineate such aspects of history as have been relegated to the margins in the traditional historiography. One such institution of the colonial past is the British army formed largely of Indians soldiers and that has always been a little-discussed subject in the conventional history. Ghosh in *The Glass Palace* directs his attention to delineate the history of the British institution of the colonial army. His representation of the Indian British army is distinctive in so far as he seeks to underline the traumas and mental anguish of the Indian soldiers serving in the British army. His focus is on the representation of experiences, reactions and viewpoints of common Indian soldiers in the British Indian army.

The objective of this research paper is to bring to the fore the element of dissent that was ever-present in the psyche of Indian soldiers of the British army and a study of *The Glass Palace* shows that Ghosh has unearthed truth about Indians serving the British army. There is no gainsaying the fact that the constitution and structure of the colonial army was racialized. Indian soldiers had to bear racial discrimination that culminated in a sense of dissatisfaction and discontent amongst them. Ghosh here aims at projecting the inside view of the army and his portrayal of this colonial institution is unique in so far as he seeks to foreground the dilemmas and predicament of Indian soldiers.

There is no denying the fact that most historians of modern India, including those of the Subaltern School, have paid little attention to the histories of Indian soldiers who fought for the British. There was an ever-present sentiment of unrest and dissent lurking in some of the soldiers

that later on resulted in several mutinies after the first war of independence in 1857. Ghosh as an exponent of the lost histories has made a detailed study of the history of the British Indian army. In "India's Untold War of Independence", Ghosh writes:

... even as these Indian soldiers wandered the world in the service of the Empire, many, perhaps most, of them harboured treason in their hearts. Indeed the story of the Raj could well be told as a narrative of failed mutinies, even if most were small scale affairs that were suppressed with a few executions and then were quickly hushed up. (Ghosh, IU 106)

A brief historical survey of the situation after 1857 is important here to understand the military system depicted in *The Glass Palace* as it portrays the lingering aftermath especially on the question of recruitment into the British Indian army. The revolution of 1857 forced the Britishers to make some fundamental changes in the structure and formation of their army. The policy of 'general mixture' favouring recruits from different castes and races came to be recommended by the Peel Commission of 1859 in the interest of colonialism. This policy was adopted due to the example of Madras and Bombay presidencies that had remained loyal to the Raj during the 1857 uprising, whereas Bengal that had an army comprising soldiers from low castes totally excluding upper caste recruits had revolted against the East India Company. However, this system of general mixture too was shelved around about 1883 and the English now began to choose their recruits by indentifying martial races like 'Sikhs' and 'Pathans'. The poor performance of the Indian army during the Second Afghan War (1878-80) and Third Burma War(1885-89) necessitated the reformation of the military as many Indian regiments were not considered physically and psychologically fit to wage battle against powerful European forces. Due to the popularization of the theory of biological determinism, some races such as 'Sikhs', 'Jats, and 'Pathans' were recruited into the army, whereas the inferior races such as 'Tamils' and 'Bengalis' were kept as labourers.

Another significant facet of the history of the British Indian army was its recruitment policy that did not allow natives to be officers till 1930s. Indian Military Academy at Dehra Dun was set up in thirties after the racist bias of the British officials was relaxed a bit. Ghosh states in "India's Untold War of Independence" that the characters of Arjun and Hardy are based upon his own memories of his father and also the memoirs of the important members of INA such as Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon, Prem Kumar Sehgal and Shahnawaz Khan. Ghosh's father was amongst the first few to have passed out of the Indian Military Academy at Dehra Dun in 1941 and by that time many Indians could be seen holding important designations in the British army.

The hierarchical set-up of the army parallels that of the plantation depicted in the novel. At the highest level of the military lie solitary and aloof white officials such as Lt. Col. Buckland, whereas the lowest rung of the edifice is occupied by common sepoy like Kishan Singh. The major part of army sections of the text deals with 'middling figures' like Arjun and Hardy whose mental trauma and predicament catch one's attention. The historical reality about the Indian army men serving the British army is explored through the characters of Arjun, Hardy, and Kishan Singh who offer three distinct viewpoints of Indian soldiers. Arjun is the most important of all as it is on his consciousness that the most powerful impact is laid by the thoughts, views and perceptions of armymen like Hardy, an anti-colonial nationalist and Kishan Singh, his batman. Infact, it is his relationship with Kishan Singh that makes Arjun's experiences haunting, complex and subtle. Not only does Kishan Singh make Arjun see the reality in its true perspective but also makes one see the historical truth about the British military system from the point of view of an ordinary Indian batman.

Ghosh emerges as a past master in having understood the reality and having portrayed it in a truthful and convincing manner. If, on the one hand, he has depicted the peculiar situation of the Indian soldiers as 'tools' or mere 'instruments', on the other hand he too has brought out the element of dissent that had always been lurking beneath the veneer of the British colonial army. The most powerful projection of this theme of dissent has indisputably been done through the disconcerting and heart-rending self-questionings of Arjun. There were innumerable instances of rebellion and desertion by the Indian soldiers from the colonial army. There is no denying the fact that most historians of modern India, including those associated with the Subaltern School, have kept mum over the history of soldiers who sided with the Raj but amongst whom there were many dissatisfied and self-conscious soldiers whose mind-sets need to be brought to the fore to understand the past reality in an equitable manner. Military historian David Omissi makes a very accurate point that simply because certain groups of soldiers sided with the colonial power, it did not mean that they ceased to be "subordinate, or conscious or politically dissident once they had enlisted"(Omissi 20).

The character of Arjun is created by Ghosh to show the awakening of national consciousness amongst armymen, thereby providing an altogether distinct view of the colonialism. Arjun's character undergoes a metamorphosis and passes through three phases. The first stage is that of his assimilation and blind adoration of the western culture introduced by the British colonizers. The second stage evinces Arjun's introspection and self-questioning in the wake of the ill-effects of colonialism resulting in the belief in his own cultural and national roots. In the third and the final stage, Arjun becomes a revolutionary army personnel whose sole objective in life is to liberate himself from the shackles of the colonial rule. It is his war experiences, conversations with Hardy, his relationship with his batman Kishan Singh and his encounters with racism in war-front that make him come face to face with his predicament.

At the outset, Arjun is one of those educated young men who got carried away by the flamboyant and ostentatious life led by the British army officers. He was highly elated when he got selected as an officer in the army. He considers himself truly modern and free. It is his westernized upbringing that makes him adapt himself to the British ways of life. He takes to drinking whisky, eating beef and bacon at the officer's mess and gets a batman to iron his dinner jacket. Infact, he is one of those whom Macaulay in his infamous Minute of 1835 foresaw as belonging to the class "who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect" (The Glass Palace 430. Further references to this novel will appear as page numbers preceded by TGP). The first phase of his career as the officer in the British Indian Army shows his infatuation with the cultural model introduced by the British colonialism. The illusion cast upon him by the colonial life-style gets manifested in his words to Dinu:

Look at us ! We are the first modern Indians to be truly free. We eat what we like, we drink what we like, we're the first Indians who are not weighed down by the past (TGP 279)

These words reflect the overpowering influence exerted upon the educated Indian youth by the British life and manners.

The most important part of the ever-present and ever-gnawing dissent in the British military system has been explored in *The Glass Palace* through Arjun's experiences on the battle-field, his encounters with racism and his conversations with Hardy, Alison (Saya John's grand-daughter and Matthew's daughter), Uma, Dinu and others who make him understand his predicament as an instrument of colonial interests. His interactions with Kishan Singh too play a more significant role in making him realise his precarious situation of being a mere object in the

hands of the colonizers. As a commissioned army official, Arjun has the privilege of being assisted by a batman duly appointed for his service only. In the beginning, Kishan Singh appears to be a simple and submissive person to Arjun but as the narrative moves ahead, Kishan Singh turns out to be a totally different person. Whereas Arjun's subjectivity has been fabricated by the colonizer, Kishan Singh did not lose his cultural roots and made Arjun realise time and again his subordinacy to an exploitative machinery. It is not without any purpose that Arjun and Kishan Singh have been named after mythological figures, Arjun and Krishana, of *The Mahabharata*. Arjun like the Arjun of the great epic finds himself in a dilemma over which course of action to take when his life reaches a critical juncture or rather when he finds himself in an impasse about whether to show his loyalty to the British colonialism or to revolt like other Indians against the exploitation spread by the British colonizers. Arjun of the *Mahabharata* too was in a sort of fix before the critical battle of the Kurukshetra. The most famous warrior in the Pandava camp, Arjun was reluctant to engage in a war with his kinsmen over the question of kingship. In her essay on *The Bhagavada Gita*, Simona Sawhney suggests that Arjun's dilemma can be understood on the basis of the following two questions:

How can he fight his own kinsmen, his elders, teachers and friends for the sake of kingdom ? Would that not be a sin, and would not his victory destroy precisely the community that would make his success meaningful ? (Sawhney 93)

In his discourse, Krishna convinces Arjun that in the battlefield, one's 'karma' is to fight regardless of whom one is fighting against. Arjun's duty as a warrior consists in fighting regardless of the fact that the people he will possibly be killing are related to him by blood. Krishna's response, Sawhney avers, valorizes "the figure of a man unattached to both friends and mortal life itself ; one whose actions are impelled only by duty and not by desire" (Sawhney 95). The Arjun of *The Glass Palace* also faces the similar situation when he sees the idea of the Empire die before his very eyes. Now the discourse is delivered by his own charioteer (batman) Kishan Singh who has rescued Arjun in the rubber plantation. He enlightens Arjun by telling him that many people from his village joined the British Indian army due to fear. Unable to understand this, Arjun enquires : "What are you saying, then, Kishan Singh? Are you saying that the villagers joined the army out of fear? But that can't be: no one forced them - or you for that matter. What is there to be afraid of ?"(TGP 371). Responding to these queries by Arjun, Kishan Singh says:

"Sah'b," Kishan Singh said softly, "all fear is not the same. What is the fear that keeps us hiding here, for instance? Is it a fear of the Japanese, or is it a fear of the British? Or is it a fear of ourselves because we do not know who to fear more? Sah'b a man may fear the shadow of a gun just as much as the gun itself - and who is to say which is more real?"(TGP 371)

Kishan Singh here exhibits a profound insight and awareness of the dilemmas posing the colonized subjects like Arjun who could not see beyond the life-world created by the colonizers. Arjun's predicament becomes clearer when seen from the perspective provided by Kishan Singh, an ordinary batman who was earlier dismissed as an ignoramus by Arjun. Later on, when Arjun comes face to face with the reality, he realises his mistake in having underestimated Kishan Singh who was in many respects a more knowledgeable and wise person, whereas Arjun with all his pride in his worldly knowledge turns out to be a part-colonized subject who worked as a mere tool in the hands of his superior British officials without in the least being aware of his misshapen identity.

Arjun's conscience begins to prick him about his subservience to an alien rule that has

upheld its supremacy, by and large, with the aid of native Indians like Arjun himself who in their blindness to see the other side of picture have acted more or less as mere instruments in the hands of their colonial masters. He comes to realize that the war he is fighting does not belong to him. The truth dawns upon him that he is not doing true service to his country and by serving the British administration, he is working against his own countrymen. As a true son of India, his duty is to defend his motherland. He becomes disillusioned with the Empire's claims of having brought civilization to India. The experience he has on the battlefield further aggravates his desire to be of some service to his country.

The sense of self-realization brings Arjun face to face with reality. He begins to feel that he was not 'employed' but 'used' in the British army that he had revered all his life. Helen Hayward makes a striking comment upon Arjun's feelings as:

He (Arjun) undergoes a journey of self-realization, which ends with his recognizing the falsity of values by which he has lived all his life. He feels that he has been mere a mercenary and tool in the hands of British, self divided and lacking in even an elementary self awareness. (TGP 217)

While talking to Dinu towards the last days of his life, Arjun's perception is totally changed. He now firmly asserts :

'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 it without destroying ourselves. And that, I suppose, is where I am ...' (TGP 518)

Arjun's career as an officer in the British Indian army witnesses a massive upheaval as he gradually comes face to face with the glaring realities behind the policies of the colonial rulers. The change in him starts gradually when he experiences the insuperable barrier of race during the war in the frontier regions. Though on the surface, the British colonizers claimed to be the custodians of the freedom and equality of Indians, the reality was different behind the curtain. Only slavery and inequality prevailed in the army camps. Not only were Indian soldiers paid less than the British soldiers but were also deprived of basic amenities like carrying umbrellas, travelling in the compartments allocated for the white soldiers and bathing in the ponds meant for the whites where by a sense of discontent and dissatisfaction had arisen amongst Indians. Even the English soldiers treated the Indian soldiers with a lot of disrespect and looked down upon them. They were called 'klang' and 'mercenaries' by the whites. It is such racial experiences that make Indian soldiers like Arjun and Hardy rebellious.

Moreover, the Congressmen berated Arjun for serving in an army that spread exploitation everywhere. These experiences jilted Arjun out of his slumber and he began to realize the futility of serving the colonizers. It too dawned upon him that he and his fellow soldiers in the British Indian army were mere tools and instruments working on behalf of the Raj. Arjun began to feel that he was 'used' rather than 'employed' in the British Army. This moment of self-realization in Arjun has been highlighted by Helen Hayward as follows:

He [Arjun] undergoes a journey of self-realization, which ends with his recognizing the falsity of values by which he has lived his life. He feels that he has been merely a mercenary and tool in the hands of British, self-divided and lacking in even an elementary self-awareness. (Hayward 21)

His conscience told him that the war he fought was not his and the real war to be fought was with the masters whom he had served so obediently. He realized that it was high time to shed his artificial self and defend the motherland as a true son of India. His disillusionment with

the colonial rule made him aware of the exploitation and injustices inflicted upon the Indian people by the British government. This psychological awareness made him a different man altogether. Alison, Saya John's granddaughter felt pity towards him rather than love. To her, Arjun was "a toy, a manufactured thing, a weapon in someone else's hands." (TGP 376)

Arjun shot himself to death after killing Kishan Singh who had always been faithful and true to him. He wanted to save Kishan Singh from becoming grotesque and misshapen like himself. Arjun's ever-growing regard for his motherland and his complete dismissal of the colonial legacy can be acclaimed as a post-colonial uprising of the people against their colonisers and a study of the history of those days from the viewpoint of a common soldier like Arjun falls in the category of 'below' which further imparts a distinctive touch to the novel. During an interview that Ghosh gave to Biswarup Sen, marketing consultant in Virginia the U.S.A. and contributing writer for *The Telegraph Calcutta*, Ghosh says about the character of Arjun:

Arjun did become a pivotal character for me. He is so much like people, I went to school and college with, in some sense, I could both sympathize with him and be appalled by him. His character became a very interesting figure for me. And, of course, Arjun reflects the experiences of so many Indians, who served in the British Army. (Sen 63)

The ever-present element of discontent and rebellion amongst the soldiers of the colonized countries undermined the very foundation of the colonial rule and inspired lots of people to raise their voices against the exploitative foreign administration. In *The Glass Palace*, this revolutionary aspect is highlighted through what Giani Amreek Singh, a Sikh ex-armyman and anti-colonial activist who comes to receive Uma at the Rangoon docks, observes:

We never thought that we were being used to conquer people. Not at all: we thought the opposite. We were told we were freeing those people. That is what they said - that we were going to set those people free from their bad kings or their evil customs or some such thing. We believed in it because they believed it too. It took us a long time to understand that in their eyes freedom exists wherever they rule. (TGP 193)

It was the realization of the selfishness, brutality and inhumanity of the colonizers that led soldiers like Amreek Singh to raise their voice against the hypocrisy and shallowness of the European colonial powers. Singh's statement is also indicative of this new-found sense of identity and revolution amongst the soldiers being begotten by the movement of soldiers across Asia and Africa bringing them face to face with the reality and compelling them to interrogate the basis and rationale of colonial rule. Such movements across the world made them realise their own subject status. undeniable is the fact that the history of the colonial army is a complex combination of both collaboration and dissent.

The character of Hardayal Singh, better known as Hardy, an officer in the British army, is created by Ghosh to show the rise of nationalistic fervour in common soldiers of Indian descent. He is an example of a common man who is no longer willing to be a mere puppet in the hands of his masters. Through Hardyal Singh's nationalistic zeal, Ghosh projects the ever-increasing tide of patriotic sentiment amongst ordinary Indian soldiers working for the British army. His conscience is pricked due to the steady and gradual growth of awareness about his inferior position as compared to his British counterparts. He gives expression to his patriotic fervour in clear and definite words:

Well didn't you ever think this country whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time - what is it? Where is the country? The fact is

that you and I don't have a country - so whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time? And why was it that when we took our oath it wasn't to a country but to the King Emperor - to defend the Empire? (TGP 330)

Hardayal Singh alias Hardy is representative of such forgotten historical figures who were stuck between the desire to serve their country as a loyal nationalist and the opposite sense of loyalty towards his office. Apparent is the fact that the sense of patriotism and nationalism far outweighs his sense of loyalty towards his profession as an army man. It is through the character of Hardy that the author successfully conveys the sense of waste, alienation and meaninglessness of life that had made deep inroads into the mind and hearts of Indian soldiers working for the British army. The result of this dissatisfaction and discontent had serious implications for it was soldiers like Hardy who instilled into the minds and hearts of fellow brethren like Arjun the essential need to fight for their country and not for the British. Such anti-British sentiments spread like wildfire and made common soldiers like Arjun realise their duties as Indians. Arjun who was on cloud nine after having successfully made it to the British army feels disillusioned about his preconceived misconceptions and finds himself in a sort of mental vacuum created by the futility of his existence. Hardy's character is an eye-opener for ordinary Indian soldiers like Arjun who had since their childhood nurtured and nourished on the values and ideals of the British colonial regime.

When the Japanese attack the British occupied Burma, some members in Indian Army are split and it has greater effect on common people, especially, middle class families who are faced with a serious question in anguish as to whom to support – British or Japanese. Pico Iyer in his article -“The Road to Mandalaya”-puts up this way:

These characters torn between two kinds of operation – traitors if they support British, traitors if they support Japanese – take Ghosh back to what has always seemed to be his central concern, the consequences of displacements (Pico 29)

To sum up, it can be said that Ghosh has quite successfully projected actual conditions of the pre-independence era and by means of his artistic finesse, he depicted the mental trauma and anguish of Indian soldiers serving the British Empire. He has unearthed almost forgotten historical reality of the British Indian soldiers. All the credit goes to Ghosh for having written a historical novel that is designed to delineate the experiences, pains and predicament of Indian army men.

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