

A Subaltern Perspective in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

U. Vivek, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Thanthai Hans Roever College (Autonomous)
Perambalur-621 220
Tamilnadu, India
drviveking@gmail.com

Abstract

The present paper deals with a subaltern perspective in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*. Ghosh's novels, broadly speaking, reflect the colonial as well as postcolonial society, the patterns of history, subaltern consciousness, and issues of crossing national boundaries, the meaning of political freedom and impacts of globalization and dynamics of displacement in his own distinctive style.

His novel *The Glass Palace* begins with the shattering of the kingdom of Burma, and tells the story of a people's fortune, a family and its fate. It traces the life of Rajkumar, a poor Indian boy, a subaltern, who is lifted on the tides of political and social turmoil to build an empire in the Burmese take over forest. No one is directly indicted in the novel and not a single person is idealised however some of them are casually mentioned. The details get linked across space and time to form haunting patterns. *The Glass Palace* is memorable mainly because of its scathing critique of British colonialism.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace*, Subaltern, colonialism, Globalization, displacement, consciousness

Amitav Ghosh's novels broadly speaking reflect, besides the colonial as well as postcolonial society, patterns of history subaltern consciousness, and issues of crossing national boundaries the meaning of political freedom, impacts of globalization and dynamics of displacement in his own distinctive style. Amitav Ghosh, is at the forefront of this newly acquired fearlessness and freedom of Indian writers. A critical study of the prime thematic concerns of Amitav Ghosh's novels is thus an opportunity not just to peruse a substantial body of work that meditates upon a core set of issues concerning post colonialism in the contemporary fictional writing with special focus on the marginalised subaltern; but also to view history with a novel perspective. Attempt in the proposed research work, would be to make a thematic study of the fictional works by Amitav Ghosh and try to unravel the patterns inherent therein.

The Glass Palace is a perfect manifestation of almost all the major concerns of Ghosh, blended into a wonderful epic narrative. But over riding all the thematic concerns is the theme of post-coloniality. The homeless and displaced migrant native is an inseparable part of a post-colonial novel.

Nation formation is a major tool in the process of colonization, as in journeying from an amorphous nation less state to that of conscious nationhood, the new nation people feel privileged and subsequently relegate their apparently disorganised past to the realms of history. This nation-formation involves a poignant dispersal and scattering of people across man-made borders. The wide movement of people in the recent history of human race in the wake of imperialist and expansionist programmes across Africa and eastward in Asia bear adequate testimony to this. The Glass Palace records and incites the experiences of first such races inhabiting British occupied territories in South East Asia, who are dying to make their own nation.

The Glass Palace contains a proliferation of characters which include the privileged as well as the subaltern. The royal family-Thebaw, Queen Supayalat and the Burmese princesses; and commoners like Dolly, Rajkumar, Saya John and Uma are united ironically by the gales of colonial displacement. These protagonists forced by the rough historical winds are displaced from Burma to India, Malaya, Singapore and back again, each time involving a pattern of panic, crowded mobs and soldiers on the march as already illustrated in the very opening of the novel.

Rajkumar, initially a subaltern comes out as a true transnational post-colonial subject firstly by being a Kalaa, a foreigner in an alien territory, then by being subjected to colonization of a more severe kind in participating in the great national upheaval that the British occupation of Burma entails, followed by another turbulent experience in imperial India and his foray into the Malayan forest resources. He inhabits a truly borderless post-colonial space beyond the interstices of race, class and nation in which his life is enmeshed.

The hybrid nature of the colonized-subaltern who evolves himself into an affluent businessman and comes to resemble the colonizer is revealed through the character of Rajkumar, who graduates from a petty immigrant lad, through his apprenticeship as a luga lei under Saya John, to a merchant who is revered in the timber trading circles of Burma. Saya John, his mentor, is another transnational from China who evolves himself into a semblance of Europeans in his garb and manner. Saya John instructs Rajkumar in the life of young Europeans who taught them how “to bend the work of nature to your will” (TGP, p.75). Saya John’s conception that the whole enterprise of logging timber from the forests could not have been possible without the Europeans’ ingenuity; Saya’s knowledge of this and his imitation of the white Sahib’s lifestyle, involves a compromise between the complete separation from the empire and complete dependence upon the empire for its existence.

The colonized subject’s empathy with the fellow colonized, though of separate nationality is apparent when Rajkumar expresses surprise at his own involvement with the general mourning at the sudden occupation of Burma and the loss of the king.

Rajkumar was at a loss to understand his greed. He was in a way, a feral creature, unaware that there exists an invisible bond linking people to one another through personifications of their commonality. In the Bengal of his birth these ties had been sundered by a century of conquests and no longer existed even as a memory but that, there should exist a universe of loyalties that was unrelated to himself and his own immediate needs, this was very nearly incomprehensible (47).

The colonial subjects suffer from a sense of imaginary homeland having to suffer most of their lives in displaced locations. Dolly and Rajkumar both ironically have an allegiance to the nation of their exile or displacement which they have appropriated as home. For Dolly, her life in Outran House is the only life she knows and surprisingly she is the most assertive, in her place of exile. She asks Uma, “where would I go, this is home” (119).

The experience of these exiled victims of the breaking of nations is peculiar in the sense that they slide easily into alien cultures, at the same time triggering off the spirit of alienation, national longing and transnational’s in their divided identities. Ghosh’s characterization of Rajkumar, the petty luga lei turned timber tycoon is a way of voicing the problematic of settling and resettling of communities and individuals amid the confluence of nations and nationalities. He is a true multicultural, a reinvented migrant, who, by dint of his enterprise, carves a niche for himself and escapes, landing in underclass ethnic ghettos. Uma, like most of Ghosh’s other characters is a citizen of the world away from delimiting boundaries.

Ghosh carries his love for forging connections a little too far when he brings together Uma – Rajkumar in a quite anaesthetic manner at the end of the novel. But despite these stray discordant incidents, the novel is a wholesome treat for those who seek scholarship as well as those who seek melodramatic family sagas. Despite the comprehensive themes, bulk of research matter and a proliferation of characters, the novel is quite well conceived and well plotted. The novel is well rounded with its beginning and end, both involving ‘the glass palace’ although of different implications.

The traveller here is one among the sufferers, belonging to the place, and empathetic with them.

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