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Analytical Study of the agonized souls in *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) is a post colonial novel which can also be read as an allegory of power and fragility of imperialism. It is a compelling historical fiction narrating the story of three families during a time of transition of India and its people, politics, business, love, and war interwine with unforgettable characters. By means of this paper the efforts are made to trace how Amitav Ghosh, in this novel has dealt with the characters' sufferings and agonies caused by the Second World War, and how he has made this novel the saga of families focusing on their joys, sorrows, tragedies and displacement.

The Glass Palace (2000) is the story of an eleven years old Indian orphan, Rajkumar who is transported to Burma by accident. The story begins with Rajkumar watching the British storm in the Burmese royal fortress in 1885. Rajkumar, sneaks into the forbidden place and meets Dolly, a beautiful young court maid. Dolly's face leaves unforgettable impressions on Rajkumar's memory. Soon after, Dolly accompanies the banished king and queen to India, while Rajkumar stays in Burma, where he makes his fortune in the timber industry. Rajkumar meets her again in India. The novel traces the love story of Rajkumar and Dolly during the tumultuous 20th Century. While writing this novel, Ghosh carried out meticulous research in the history of South Asia and travelled extensively across Burma, Thailand, India and the Burmese-Thai border. He spoke about the novel in an interview:

'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.'

The novel is divided into seven parts depicting the different aspects of the novel. The first part, 'Mandalay' depicts how the British occupied Burma. The second section, 'Ratnagiri' shows the calamitous effects of imperialism. The third section, 'The Money Tree' shows Rajkumar's prosper through timber business. The fourth section deals with the second generation. The fifth section 'Morningside' depicts the impacts of the Second World War in Malaya. The penultimate section highlights the characters' sufferings and agonies caused by the Second World War. The last section, 'The Glass Palace' deals with the peak of Indian National Movement and its final achievement of independence.

This novel highlights the impacts of colonialism in South-East Asia. It traces the onset 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 scenario in Burma.

In this novel, the readers witness the crowd of characters and presentation of geographical entities, space, distance and time. Many stories have been woven together. Ghosh loves exaggerating Rajkumar's age just of feel like an adult. Once Rajkumar lands in Mandalay, there starts his life long search for places and people. He is taken in by the city.

When the fort's full immensity revealed itself, Rajkumar came to a halt in the middle of the road. The citadel was a miracle to behold, with its mile-long walls and its immense moat. The crenellated ramparts were almost three storeys high, but of a soaring lightness, red in colour, and topped by ornamented gateways with seven tiered roof. Long straight roads radiated outwards from the walls, forming a neat geometrical grid. So intriguing was the ordered pattern of these streets that Rajkumar wandered far a field, exploring. (GP, P.5)

Rajkumar, a destitute and without acquaintances in an alien city, eventually goes to Ma Cho for job. The novelist describes the external appearance of Ma Cho:

Ma Cho was small and harried looking, with spirals of wiry hair hanging over her forehead, like a fringed awning. She was in her mid-thirties, more Burmese than Indian in appearance. (GP, P.5)

Rajkumar helps Ma Cho to run a dhaba just outside the royal palace. He gets curious about the fort, and asks Ma Cho about it. Ma Cho knows about the fort. She says,

It's very large, much larger than it looks. It's a city in itself, with long roads and canals and gardens. First you come to the house of officials and noblemen. And then you find yourself in front of a stockade, made of huge teakwood posts. Beyond lies the apartments of the Royal Family and their servants, hundred and hundred of rooms, with gilded pillars and polished floors. And right at the centre there is a vast hall that is like a great shaft of light, with shining crystal walls and mirrored ceiling. People call it *The Glass Palace*. (GP, P.7)

The Glass Palace is the saga of families in which Ghosh has realistically depicted the contemporary society, the lives of king, queen, common people, and their longings, sufferings, hardships, problems, humiliation etc. This novel presents the characters' joys, sorrows, tragedies and displacement. It also highlights the role of history, which like flowing water, carries forth the objects along its course as it follows its own trajectory, displacing and uprooting people from their place. By means of families, Ghosh attacks the imaginary idea of the nation. He asserts,

'To me, the family is the central unit, because it's not about the nation. Families can actually span nations. *The Glass Palace* actually ranges between what are now many different nations, so it's absolutely not about a nation or one nation or whatever. The fact that it has been structured around the family is absolutely essential to its narration.' ²

This novel realistically presents the soul of man under colonialism. Hence, this novel is condemned to record the exist-ential dilemma— wherein the subject is necessarily partitioned, a bewildered immigrant never quite in focus nor contained within the frame. Rukmini Bhaya Nair observes:

'Ghosh's characters, in this most capacious of his fictions, literally include both kings (Thibaw, Queen Supalayay, the Burmese princesses) and commoners (Dolly, Rajkumar, Saya John, Uma) but what unites them all is the inescapable narrative of colonial displacement.' ³

Rukmini Nair acknowledges the talent of Ghosh in terms of the contemporary novel. She says,

'The truth is that the contemporary novel-and Ghosh's talent—have both matured to a stage where they can absorb a very rich diet of historical detail without, necessarily running the risk of a bilious reader.' ⁴

There is a candid portrayal the human dreams, desires and aspirations. It also reflects the pangs of separation, struggles, and emotional chaos that the contemporary man faces.

Rajkumar, being a practical businessman, brings with him a letter for the Collector of Ratangiri from a relative of the Collector's wife Uma Dey. Usually no one from Burma is allowed to meet the deposed king of staff lest such a meeting may not create problems of revolt at Burma. Uma, who is a good friend of Dolly, arranges the meeting between Dolly and Rajkumar. But before going to that, the letter of endorsement that Rajkumar brought with him speaks volumes about his character and reputation.

[...] he (Raj Kumar) had several other successes and had risen to eminence within the business community. And all this at the age of thirty before he had even had time to marry [...], Raj Kumar Babu is not the Kind of person to whose society you are accustomed, You may well find him somewhat rough and even uncouth in his manner [...] But here in Burma our standards are a little more lax. Some of the richest people in the city are Indian and most of them began with nothing more than a bundle of clothes and a tin box. (GP, P.135)

Rajkumar is presented as the representative of the whole migrated community. His fate and rise represent a wonderful individual picturisation, besides announcing of an entire group of people in an alien land. Rajkumar's meeting with Dolly is catastrophic. There is no clue, no meeting point, no headway; it is all blocked, clogged. Dolly has her own problems. She has to clear her mental picture. Rajkumar though faultless, receives a cold and hostile response from Dolly. His dreams seem to be on the verge of shattering. However, he marries Dolly at Ratangiri. Uma is their benefactor, protector, everything. From here begins Rajkumar's life as a family man. He gets two sons Neel and Dinu. He celebrates to compensate for all the missed celebrations of his own life. But his life cannot be called 'perfect' as he falls prey to the turbulent times in his old age and his world is torn apart. Dinu moves away from him, Neel dies and Dolly goes to a monastery. In fact, Rajkumar is responsible for what happens to him. Once Dinu as a child develops slight polio in one leg, Dolly consumes herself day and night in Dinu's care. She cuts herself off from the world, including her elder son Neel and husband. Meanwhile, Rajkumar establishes physical relationship with one of the workers forcibly and Ilong, his son is the result of this illegitimate extramarital affair. We can only attribute this act on Rajkumar's part to his free will and the kind of a man that he actually is. Saya, his mentor, was the same and so is he. Our civilized and often hypocritical rules of morality will not be applied here simply because this novel depicts the realistic picture of life. Devoid of the power of reasoning as to why Dolly has withdrawn, Rajkumar succumbs to his physical needs. He remains, despite his achievements, an uneducated orphan.

Dolly is initially Queen Supayalat's maid but comes in contact with Uma Dey and it results into that she grows into her own person. Her life is intertwined with the life of King and Queen. Dolly, herself a child of ten, manages the youngest princess as best as she can. The scene where Dolly is not able to carry the young princess in her lap when the palace is ravaged is particularly touching because one individual's suffering looks so small and yet so poignant. 'I can't, she cried. I can't. She would fall, she knew it. The princess was too heavy for her; the stairs were too high; she would need a free hand to hold on, to keep her balance-

[...] quickly, quickly. There was a soldier behind her; he was prodding her with the cold hilt of his sword. She felt her eyes brimming over, tears flooding down her face. Couldn't they see she would fall, that the Princess would tumble out of her grip? Why would no one help? (GP, P.23)

The beginning pages of the novel juxtapose two aspects of female power so well. On one hand goes the story of queen Supayalat who is an expert in cruel court intrigues and palace politics, and on the other hand a twelve years old boy offers sweets to a ten years old vulnerable girl. The contrast is too intense to be missed. Queen Supayalat is no ordinary woman. Thibaw is ineffectual and scholarly type of a person. But most unexpectedly Supayalat 'in defiance of the protocols of palace intrigue, fell headlong in love with her husband, the king.' His ineffectual good nature seemed to inspire a maternal ferocity in her. In order to protect him from her family she stripped her mother of her powers and banished her to a corner of the palace, along with her sisters and co-wives. She orders the killing of every member of the Royal Family who might ever be considered a threat to her husband. Seventy-nine princes were slaughtered on her orders, some of them newborn infants and some too old to walk. To prevent the spillage of royal blood she had them wrapped in carpets and bludgeoned to death. The corpses were thrown into the nearest river.'

But ironically, this most cruel queen goes on to live in exile, suffers agonies, captivity and humiliation. But all it was only for love of husband:

What could love mean to this woman, this murderer, responsible for the slaughter of scores of her own relatives? And yet it was a fact that she had chosen captivity over freedom for the sake of her husband, condemned her own daughters to twenty years of exile. (GP, P.152)

As the dutiful novelist, Ghosh doesn't try to solve the puzzles of human life. He has just presented everything candidly.

Let's consider Dolly. She is steadfast in her loyalty to the royal family. She remains with them in the most critical circumstances. One by one all the maids and servants leave the royal family and go back to Burma except Dolly. This may be because she has nowhere to go. However her sincerity cannot be denied. Gradually from a child she becomes an attractive young girl. She cannot dream of herself as she is entirely depended on the royal family. Sex comes as a handy rescue for this young girl to maintain her sanity. The novelist chooses to go in detail regarding Dolly's first exposure to the life of the body. Sawant is the local servant of the king. He is the chief servant. He is the natural choice for Dolly, and she for him. But soon they are caught by the first Princess who herself is growing into a woman and is also in need of engagement of the same sort. Eventually the first princess snatches Sawant and her pregnancy is dramatically announced. By this time, Collector Dey and his wife have arrived on the scene. The Collector is responsible for the well being of the royal family. When Rajkumar comes to take her, Dolly has run into a dead end. She is in an emotional chaos. She is not interested in Rajkumar. By some sort of psychological transference, she identifies with the first princess and says that she is awaiting the baby's arrival. She feels the baby to be her own. But Uma knows better, 'the birth of this child will drive you out of your mind [...]. Dolly's meeting with Rajkumar is of great value in understanding the kind of a person she is. She is so clear in her perceptions. When Uma coaxes her to marry Rajkumar and says that he loves her, Dolly remarks, 'He's in love with what he remembers. That isn't me.' She goes on to tell Rajkumar about her past relationship with Sawant. Finally, Raj Kumar and Dolly get married.

Dolly embodies the spirit of endurance and acceptance. That's why she is so much in demand, sought after by Uma, Rajkumar, Princesses, King, Queen, Sawant, just everyone.

Uma is another pillar of this novel. The Collector and Uma go to the house of the King and the Queen. The meeting is awkward and stiff. But Uma makes her mark. The Queen Supayalat is impressed by her.

Self-possession was a quality she'd always admired. There was something attractive about this woman, Uma Dey; the liveliness of her manner was a welcome contrast to her husband's arrogance. (GP, P.103)

Uma develops a close friendship with Dolly. Their friendship lasts for lifetime. But for all her sophistication, liveliness and charm, there are problems in Uma's life that she has not been able to sort out. The bond between Uma and her husband is weak. The Collector has been educated

abroad. He feels himself inconvenient to be fit into Indian scheme of things. The author depicts the peculiarity of Indian marriages,

The wifely virtues she could offer him he had no use for: Cambridge had taught him to want more, to make sure that nothing was held in abeyance to bargain for a woman's soul with the coin of kindness and patience. The thought of this terrified her. This was subject on beyond decency, beyond her imagining. She could not bring herself of it. Anything would be better than to submit. (GP, P.153)

Traditionally in India, marriage is a sacred act that brings two opposite personalities together. Husband and wife are supposed to respect the 'otherness' of each other. It requires mutual love and understanding between husbands and wives, otherwise the very idea of togetherness is polluted. Lack of mutual love and understanding leads the married lives to hopelessness. It also weakens the emotional bond between husbands and wives.

Uma neither loves her husband nor trusts him. Their relationship is void of passions and emotions. The Collector is a different type of a man though intellectually emancipated. Uma is Collector's own choice. He wanted her to be a flexible girl, but in vain. His family opposes Uma.

But he persisted, insisting that he didn't want a conventional marriage. He'd be working with Europeans: it wouldn't do to have a conservative, housebound wife. He needed a girl who would be willing to step out into society; someone young, who wouldn't be resistant to learning modern ways. (GP, P.186)

Uma being connected with Dolly could rescue herself from the chain of boredom and ennui. Her husband does not occupy her psychological space. Things are bound to fall apart. Once Dolly leaves, the Collector is perceptive enough to say to Uma when she approaches him, 'You have come to tell me that you want to go home.' Uma has decided to leave the Collector. The conversation that follows is touching and pathetic. No sorrow is equal to shattering dreams. The Collector recollects:

I used to dream about the kind of marriage I wanted [...]. To live with a woman as an equal, in spirit and intellect: this seemed to me the most wonderful thing life could offer. To discover together the world of literature, art: what could be richer, more fulfilling? But what I dreamt is not yet possible, not here, in India, not for us. (GP, P.173)

Uma leaves and the Collector goes to row out into the sea, never to return. Collector feels much deserted; and knows why to go back home if nobody is there waiting for him. An Urdu poet, Taher Faraaz has beautifully summed up such mental agonies of the contemporary man.

Ab Raat Bheegti hai, chalo Ghar ki Raah le

Lekin Wahan bhi Apne Alaawa Milega Kaun

Listlessness in life makes Collector commit suicide. He proves to be even more vulnerable than Uma. Ghosh has beautifully presented the disintegration of married life.

Ironically, the novel doesn't present 'poetic justice.' For example, with the Collector's death Uma's life takes an upward swing. She becomes a globetrotter, a freedom fighter and a sort of celebrity in her own right. Her little mourning at her husband's death is the exception, otherwise there is hardly any real 'feeling' of her sorrow. Rest of her personality remains as that of a stonehearted widow. The separation of Uma and her husband, and husband's subsequent suicide highlights the disintegration of married lives, especially in the modern Indian scenario. Unbelievably the novel ends leaving disgusting impressions on the minds of readers:

But that morning when I (Rajkumar's granddaughter) ran into Uma's room, I found, to my surprise, that Raj Kumar was in her bed. They were fast asleep, their bodies covered by a thin, cotton sheet. They looked peaceful and very tired, as though they were resting after some great exertion. (GP, P.545)

Here we can witness the unpredictable aspect of 'Indian widow'. Even her mourning seems to be just pretentious. This episode also presents the vulgarization of the sanctity of womanhood and the purity of relationship. These lines even take away the edge from what Rajkumar once told Uma earlier in their lives when they were young and sensible.

Have you ever built anything? Given a single person a job? Improved anyone's life in any way? No. All you ever do is stand back, as though you were above all of us and you criticise and criticise. Your husband was as fine a man as any I've ever met and you hounded him to his death with your self-righteousness. (GP, P.248)

Even these pricking words don't make Uma to do self-introspection, though she is a celebrated international socialite and intellectual. It is really unbelievable in case of 'Indian widow' like Uma, who is an educated, sensitive, patriotic modern lady, then how can she escape an inevitable thought process?

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