

AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE GLASS PALACE*: REVISITING HISTORY AND SILENCED SUBALTERNITY IN TIME OF 'THE BREAKING OF NATIONS'

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Submitted : 17.03.16 Revised : 30.07.16 Accepted : 1.08.16

Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is a pioneering voice and a page setter in the field of Indian English novels in post *Midnight's Children* era. He has emerged in the field of contemporary Indian diasporic novels with enormous promises and innovative narrative techniques. Each of his novels brings into foreground newer and untrodden areas for exploration and narrative enquiry. This paper attempts to deal with Ghosh's concern with history, colonial and imperial aggression in the perspective of South-Asian country and its effect on the lives of ordinary people in general and Subalterns in particular. Its central focus will be on Ghosh's exploration of the perspective of silenced Subalternity against the backdrop of a broader historical context of war, imperial expansion and colonial repression. To substantiate the focal point, the present paper will discuss Amitav Ghosh's fifth novel *The Glass Palace* (2000) in which Ghosh takes into account a vast span of South-Asian history ranging from the British invasion of Burma in 1885 to the Second World War. The objective in this paper is to demonstrate Ghosh's exploration of certain silenced episodes of history and narrativising them along with the stories of common man and repressed subalterns.

Key Words: Subalternity, imperialism, colonialism, diaspora, repression, silencing

Amitav Ghosh is a pioneering voice in the field of Indian English novels in post *Midnight's Children* era. He has emerged in the field of contemporary Indian diasporic novels with enormous promises and innovative narrative techniques. Each of his novels brings into foreground newer and untrodden areas for exploration and narrative enquiry. Ghosh with his immense research on anthropology and concern for humanity explores several issues and perspectives that encompass major branches of academic discourses. History, science fiction, travel

literature and newer discoveries on anthropology and human evolution have been illuminated within the comprehensive frame of his narratives.

This paper seeks to deal with Ghosh's concern with history, colonial and imperial aggression in the perspective of South-Asian country and its effect on the lives of ordinary people in general and subalterns in particular. Its central focus will be on Ghosh's exploration of the perspective of silenced Subalternity against the backdrop of a broader historical context of war, imperial expansion and colonial repression. To substantiate the desired point, the present article will discuss Amitav Ghosh's fifth novel *The Glass Palace* (2000) in which Ghosh takes into account a vast span of South-Asian history ranging from the British invasion of Burma in 1885 to the Second World War. Ghosh deals with these vast historical upheavals in relation to its impact on the lives of disempowered Subalterns. To facilitate the discussion, the present study focuses upon a few moving episodes and analyzes the responses of a few important characters in the novel such as Rajkumar, Dolly, Uma Dey, Arjun and Hardy. The objective in this paper is to demonstrate Ghosh's exploration of certain silenced episodes of history and narrativising them along with the stories of common man and repressed Subalterns.

The European colonizers with their monstrous imperial hunger embarked on invading and occupying the smaller and weaker South-Asian countries like Tibet, Malay and many others since 1860s. In keeping with this vicious greed for power the British invades Burma in 1885 and defeats king The Baw which brings the centuries old Burmese empire to an end. From then on Burma becomes the centre of attraction for the covetous power seekers and fortune hunters who go on exploiting the natural resources and hitherto undisturbed socio-political autonomy of the country. Subsequent battles and the two devastating World Wars have ravished this small South-Asian territory and the iron castle of Burma becomes a vulnerable 'glass palace'. Ghosh's message is unambiguously articulate that devastating wars and military catastrophe not only replace dynasties, but also work havoc on the lives of disempowered subalterns by destroying the peace and harmony of a community, a state or a country.

History is always a living presence in Amitav Ghosh's fictions. In his novels the readers encounter a subtle interplay of history and fiction which adds variety to the text and captivates the readers with immense

dramatic interest. Ghosh frames the pattern of his narratives against great historical upheavals that affect the lives of ordinary individuals who are caught in the complex whirlwind of military catastrophe, colonial expansion or imperial aggression. Ghosh attempts to dismantle the conventional colonial historiography and foregrounds the stories of subaltern individuals whose voices are often lost or strategically repressed in the construct of Eurocentric historical discourse. Unlike other contemporary novelists of Indian Diaspora, Ghosh not only uses history in the backdrop of his novel but also transforms it into a living entity that gives identity and a distinct voice to the voiceless marginal's or subalterns whose role in the complex process of making, unmaking and remaking of history has never been paid adequate attention.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* is a representative postcolonial text in which history, fiction, scholarship, anthropology work hand in hand to create a complex and vibrant mirage. This paper seeks to demonstrate Ghosh's projection of the elemental stories of ordinary individuals whose lives are terribly affected, shaped and reshaped by great historical upheavals and changes in dynasties.

The Glass Palace ranges over a hundred years of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Burmese history. Its narrative revolves around the experiences of a range of multigenerational, Diasporas Indian / Burmese characters during a historical period -- the late nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. It begins with the British invasion of Burma in 1885 and takes one on a journey through the archive of history till the Second World War and restoration of democracy and resurgence of peace and order. In this process, Ghosh recounts and reviews then in eighteenth and twentieth century colonial turmoil in Burma, India and Malaysia. Ghosh's plot becomes complex because of the confluence of several perspectives and ideas of contemporary postcolonial discourses that he incorporates into the text.

The plot in *The Glass Palace* registers the accounts of three generations of Indian and Burmese community and dramatizes the massive rise and fall in fortune of a few subalterns due to an overwhelming impact of colonial advances, military aggression and the two devastating World Wars. The novelists with his humanistic rendering of history brings into foreground the irony that the British and the other European colonizers employed the Indian and South-Asian army in capturing the South-Asian country like Malay and Burma. They

deposed the rightful native rulers like that of King The bawd of Mandalay (Burma). The novel in discussion epitomizes the plight and misery of the rootless people or an overthrown community “In Time of the Breaking of Nations”.

In the present discussion attempts to focus upon the simple, yet powerful annals of a few poor subalterns, a common soldier or a street orphan to explore the terrible effect or sweeping transformation that the war and military exploits have unleashed on common man. Like his other major fictional works, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* destabilizes and dismantles the conventional historical archive and modern academic discourse in order to recast, review and rewrite the forcibly silenced, ignored or repressed currents of history. Rajkumar Raha, Dolly, Uma Dey, Arjun, Hardayal Singh, Dinu, Jaya, Alison are all the terrible victims of war and historical upheavals in some way or Others. The central story of the novel aptly reinforces the three dimensions of an individual’s relation to the political and social history of his country: 1. history suffering 2.history bearing 3.history creating. Ghosh makes the fact unambiguously clear that war and historical upheavals act as a great leveler by blurring the socio economic boundaries and denouncing and destabilizing the hierarchy. It also becomes clear that such terrible upheavals not only inflict endless sufferings to common men, but also, there may be certain individuals who may rise in fortune, taking the advantage of a troubled period in history and community. Rajkumar in the novel starts his journey from a penniless orphan and a child laborer in a Burmese tea stall and becomes a successful and prosperous business tycoon exploiting the natural wealth of Burma during and after the troubled period of British invasion of Rangoon.

Rajkumar is the central character and the protagonist of *The Glass Palace* and the novel epitomizes his lifelong quest for prospect and identity. As a child, Rajkumar is remarkable for his exploring spirit, keen perception and his ability to take calculated risks. Rajkumar works in a tea stall of a matronly Ma Cho. A well-travelled orphan, Rajkumar is worldly-wise. Right at the beginning of the narrative, the author drops enough hints for the legitimacy of his choice of a protagonist. Although a child, an orphan, this boy is established as bold and remarkable. Once Rajkumar lands in Mandalay, his life-long search for places and people begins. He is taken in by the city. “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 afield, exploring” (Ghosh. 5). We must remember that this exploring boy is a complete destitute in an alien city with absolutely no acquaintances. This enterprising spirit and enthusiasm for an upward movement in life enables him to turn the wheel of fortune in his favour. This results in his rising into a successful man in life from an orphan subaltern. Ghosh superbly links the colonial and postcolonial history of Burma with the journey of his protagonist: an artistic harmonization of the private and the public history.

It is during the troubled period in Burma that Rajkumar’s upward journey begins. After the fall of the Burmese dynasty he begins exploiting the local people and resources and becomes a successful timber merchant and subsequently a rubber mogul. It is in the year 1885 when the plunder was going on in the castle of Mandalay; Rajkumar sees the face of a ten year old girl Dolly who leaves an indelible impression in his mind. Later when Rajkumar becomes a leading business tycoon of Burma, he travels to distant Ratnagiri to claim her hand for marriage. Thus the orphan in the beginning of the novel turns himself into a living myth of material success and prosperity by taking advantages of the troubled time of war, colonial aggression and imperial invasion. Rajkumar adopts a utilitarian attitude to life and turns every opportunity to his favour.

The novel by juxtaposing the silenced history of the subalterns and the broader perspective of the colonial and postcolonial history makes the point powerfully articulate. Rajkumar, Saya John, Dinu, Neel, Uma Dey, Alison and Jaya are some of the insignificant individuals who become instrumental for Ghosh to demonstrate the complex relation of history, politics, military aggression, colonialism and the rise and fall of the fortunes of disempowered subalterns. All of them, in some way or other, epitomize the making, unmaking and remaking of a nation or a community in the face of the rise and fall of dynasties. Ghosh’s narrative skillfully brings into foreground the lost history of the ordinary people who sometimes are the sufferers and sometimes are the creators of history of a nation or a community.

The Glass Palace is a superb and a complex mix of historical scholarship, simple narratives of subaltern individuals and humanistic quest for a new voice and identity. The novelist views the events of war,

colonial conquest, devastation and sweeping socio-economic transformation not from a conventional historian's point of view, but from a humanist's way of thinking. For him history is not a mere jumble of events of the past, of annals of war, of the change in dynasties: rather a living construct and a humanistic discourse of a continuous process of evolution in which the disempowered subalterns play the pivotal role. The text makes the point unambiguously clear that war or the time of a national disaster acts as a great leveler by indispensably linking the fate of the ruler and ruled oppressor and the oppressed. King The bawd is no less a victim of the imperial invasion than thousands of poor Burmese.

The Glass Palace is a representative postcolonial text that incorporates all the major debates and issues of postcolonial theory and practice. The novelist is sharply critical of the inhuman intrusion of the colonial power and subsequent capture and unsettling of the South-Asian territories like Burma, Malay and India. He brings into interrogation the diabolic machination of the European masters and the forced silencing of the indigenous history of the native subalterns. Christiana T. Jose in her illuminating article on *The Glass Palace* aptly writes "If post-colonial literature means the interrogation of the subaltern to the 'centre', no other book is representative of the post-colonial theory and practice as Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*"(Jose.135). The novel as a fascinating postcolonial text challenges and subverts the European hegemonic construct of history, and rewrites, reviews and recreates it from the perspective of subaltern representation.

Ghosh with his enormous human and historical insight transforms the past into a living narrative which makes *The Glass Palace* a vibrant postcolonial text. Ghosh's novel demonstrates his skillful blending of past and present to revitalize and restore the submerged episode of history. The British invasion of Burma in 1885, the defeat of the Burmese soldiers and the subsequent fall of the castle of Mandalay like a castle of cards is dramatically narrativised with the novelist's imaginative insight and meticulous studies on history and anthropology. The novelist maintains a dramatic poise and a fine balance between the present and the past, the private and the public and the fiction and history. He achieves this with a complex working and reworking of memory and knowledge in anthropology. Jose's observation in this context is

noteworthy “Ghosh maintains a balance between the memory of the past and the desire for a future by coming back to the present” (137).

The novel as an illuminating postmodern/postcolonial text focuses upon several important issues and perspectives of our contemporary historical and sociopolitical discourses. Brinda Bose, Shubha Tiwari et. al. have identified layers of interpretations of the novel based upon the novelist’s exploration of contemporary debates and issues like dislocation, modern warfare, imperial onslaught, movement and migration. These interlinked issues are embedded in the Diaspora consciousness of the dispossessed third world community. The longings and aspirations of the ordinary individuals like Rajkumar, Saya John, Uma Dey, Dolly, Neel, Dinu, Alison, Jaya, Arjun, Hardy and Kisan Singh is the replica of thousands of third world subalterns trapped in the complex maze of history of war, imperial aggression, colonial advances, dispossession and disempowerment. Their simple desires and elemental ambitions are disrupted by the modern holocaust of war or tragic cleavage among European powers for the power over the third world. The second and the third section of the novel projects the horrifying aspects of the two world wars the fire of which spreads and engulfs the third world countries of Asia and Africa like India, Burma and Malaysia. The ravages of the two world wars and the vicious circle of imperial greed unsettle the third world communities by destroying their age old peace, harmony and order.

Among several important postcolonial perspectives incorporated in *The Glass Palace*, this article intends to focus upon the impact of war, colonial conquest and the author’s projections of the lost voice of the so called Otherwise third world people. The holocaust of modern war, imperial greed and their enormous sociopolitical impact on the disempowered section of the South-Asian countries like Burma and Malay is central to the narrative of *The Glass Palace*. Ghosh loosely structures the narrative in such a way as each section epitomizes a devastating war or colonial invasion which leaves indelible impression in the lives and minds of the leading characters.

When the second generation of characters is introduced, the readers are lost in a complex wave of relationship and ideas. Rajkumar and Dolly’s younger son Dinu, an introvert from his boyhood, his elder brother Neel enterprising as his father and worldly wise, Alison the

granddaughter of Saya John, lively and jovial and Arjun, Uma's nephew are the representatives of this younger generation, who simultaneously create, bear and suffer the cataclysm of history. Among the olds, widowed Uma Dey remains as the detached observer of the changes in the new generations and the complex set of events that engage the colonial history, politics of India, Burma and the rest of the South-East Asia. She is sharply critical of the European masters for their forced repression of the third world countries and the merciless behavior towards the natives. She engages herself in the Indian independence league of Bhikhaji Rustom Cama.

Among these younger people Dinu and Alison need serious attention for they are the direct victims of the troubled period of war and military cruelties. In spite of their temperamental differences, Danu's infatuation for Alison is interesting. This adolescent infatuation leads him to fall in love with her, and their youthful passion for each other anticipates the probability of a constant and lifelong attachment. Here too, the catastrophe of war thwarts and disrupts the budding relationship by separating them forever.

The discussion has emphasized earlier that the narrative has a parallel development as the family saga of the dispossessed Diaspora Indian-Burmese families like that of Rajkumar, Saya John and Uma Dey as well as of a great historical and colonial traversing of South-East Asia in Nineteenth and Twentieth century's. In the development of both the strands, war, civil agitation and military up rise play decisive role in unmaking and remaking the communities of Burma, Singapore, Malaysia and India. As the story of the first generation corresponds to the colonial invasion in Burma and the Anglo-Burma war, so does the story of the second and the third generations. It is greatly affected and terribly shattered by the blow of devastating two World Wars. When the Second World War breaks out in Europe there is a complex shift of power equation and political stability in Asia also. Japan came out firing all the cylinders to achieve political and colonial superiority in Asia. They captured Burma by force and due to the ruthless treatment of the soldiers and rapid fire of war spreading across Burma, Singapore and Malaysia, thousands of people became rootless and dispossessed. The later part of *The Glass Palace* poignantly depicts the horror of the Second World War and its disastrous and tragic effect on the lives of colonized

subalterns. It is the war and similar colonial invasions that play pivotal role in separating as well as reuniting the major characters. Some are killed during the Second World War, while others survive with a haunting nightmare and memory of their lost friends and relations.

One of the terribly shaking and poignant incidents that the novel depicts in its long line of family saga and chronicle of imperialism is the death of old Say a John out of fatigue for traveling long in quest of safety and the tragic death of young Alison by the bullet of the Japanese soldiers. Alison's death and the tragic episode reminds us of young Tridib's agonizing slaughter in the hands of fanatic communalists in Khulna during a riot as his love for ruins echoes in Alison's love for ruin and the lost. Like Tridib in *The Shadow Lines*, Alison in *The Glass Palace* too is hooked by a ruin.

Alison dies leaving her love Dinu behind, as Tridib dies leaving his love for May Price behind. Thus war, communal violence and merciless imperial onslaught bring down disastrous results and unwanted death in the lives of ordinary individuals creating irreparable loss, sufferings and pain in several families and communities and indelible stigma in the history and collective memory of a nation or a society.

The Indian partition (1947), the Anglo-Burma war (1885) and the all encompassing two World Wars are the blackened episodes of history. These devastating cataclysms are at the centre of all Ghosh's humanistic sagas and vibrant narratives to evoke dramatically and poignantly the plight, misery and tragic waste of the third world subalterns. There are nostalgic individuals in each of his major novels to voice the novelist's views on the bitter sweet memories of such historical disasters. Rajkumar, Uma Dey, Dolly and to some extent Dinu are such nostalgic individuals bearing the blow of history of war and disasters both in their personal lives and the lives of the nations. They are the survivors at the tranquil close of the book with the indelible memory of their youth and early days as well as with the remnants of history.

Family is the central unit in most of Ghosh's major fictions such as *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Glass Palace* (2000) and to some extent *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *The Sea of Poppies* (2008). Ghosh uses the family as the effective metaphor for epitomizing the horror of war, partition and similar other socio-historical disasters that brings down series of calamities and sweeping transformation in the lives of

individuals or communities. The families of Rajkumar and Saya John are terribly betrayed, scattered and washed away in the sweeping flood of history and tumult of war. Rajkumar loses his elder son Neel and becomes a homeless refugee during the Second World War and leaves Burma, the source of his fortune, forever. The novel poignantly depicts the bombing, gunfire and other military brutalities during the Second World War making thousands of Burmese Indians rootless and disempowered.

As Brinda Bose and Ranjitha Basu have focused upon the brooding presence of history and postcolonial, Diaspora alienation in *The Glass Palace*, it becomes evident from reading of the text that Ghosh has powerfully explored and projected the ambivalent response of ordinary individuals or marginalized subalterns to the commotions of war, violence and tumult of history. Christina. T. Jose in her above mentioned article points out the opposing responses of Rajkumar and Uma Dey to the colonial aggression and British rule over India and other third world countries. Rajkumar considers the banishment of King The Baw from Burma and subsequent colonization as a positive socio-economic construct, for, the fortune starts smiling on this poor orphan since this troubled period of 1880s and 1890s. "Rajkumar had come to be convinced that in the absence of the British Empire, Burma's economy would collapse". (Ghosh 306) Jose points out that Rajkumar adopts the subtle colonization to exploit the Burmese people and its resources to turn the myth of success in his favour. Uma, on the other hand, strongly opposes the tyranny and misrule of the Britishers and join hands in Indian independence movement after her husband's death. Ghosh's interwoven strands of narrative superbly dramatise these divergent attitudes of the third world natives towards colonial advances. On the one end, there are the fortune hunters like Rajkumar and Saya John and on the other end, the dispossessed victims like king The Baw, Dolly and Uma Dey. Thus Ghosh not only humanizes the construct of history, but also delineates powerfully the central postcolonial debate between loyalty to the Europeans and rebel against the colonizers. The crux of this central postcolonial debate in the novel is evident in the ideological dilemma of Arjun, the brother of Neel's wife Manju and the nephew of Uma. In his early youth he was fascinated by the customs, dresses, habits and charisma of the British and strongly advocates their administration in India. He joined the British Indian army and served as a lieutenant. He

is well assessed by Alison as she remarks “Arjun – you’re not in charge of what you do, you’re a toy, a manufactured thing, a weapon in someone else’s hands. Your mind doesn’t inhabit your body” (Ghosh 376). Later he was in the army during the Second World War, the horrors and tyranny of the white masters towards the Indians thrashed him into a great psychic dilemma and torment. He throws away the spectacle of illusion and comes to term with the terrible reality. A few Indian soldiers burst out into rebellion in the army camp and Arjun join hands with them. Out of guilty conscience he shoots Batman, his superior army officer and finally shoots himself. His words are resonant with the voice of thousands of oppressed natives as he say’s “We rebelled against an Empire that has shaped everything in our lives; colored 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” (Ghosh 518).

This sprawling and uneven historical/political narrative has a complex mix of divergent ideas and perspectives relevant to our times and milieu. Ghosh depicts the moving love stories and family saga against the tumultuous historical and military commotions. Rajkumar has the first sight of Dolly when the fort of Mandalay was being evacuated and plundered. It is during this turbulent phase of Burmese history and dynasties that a poor orphan like Rajkumar has an indelible impression of a ten years old royal attendant girl, and later when he rises to rich and fame in teak trade, he pursues her long way to Ratnagiri where the Burmese king and the royal family were in exile.

In the next wave of relations Dinu’s love for Alison and their permanent separation is depicted against the terrible blow of the Second World War. At the close of the book Jaya discovers Uma and Rajkumar the two old survivors in Uma’s bedroom one morning as if they were tired of a prolonged satisfying love embrace. The novelist writes “...that morning when I (Rajkumar’s granddaughter) ran into Uma’s room, I found, to my surprise, that Rajkumar 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” (Ghosh 545). Thus, in the last page the bedroom scene between Rajkumar and Uma the two mellowed survivors of war and destruction, suggests the redemptive power of sexual love even after the tormenting and terrifying phases of war, violence and unmaking of the communities. It is

as if love and eternal sexual attachment of man and woman is a great healer of the cancerous wounds of history. The same regenerative power of love is hinted at in the last page of Ghosh's earlier masterpiece *The Shadow Lines*. Even the pathos of Arjun's premature death in quest of an unwinnable cause and conflicting values is wonderfully balanced and repaired through this healing and regenerative power of love.

The postcolonial intellectual dilemma of the Indian elites or the well to do middle class section regarding the allegiance to colonial rulers is superbly dramatized in the character of Arjun who becomes a victim of his own nihilistic realization and awakening awareness of his emotional and intellectual infirmity. His anguished cry before committing suicide "We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves" (Ghosh. p.518) is an echo of the agony of third world colonized tormented and oppressed under the cunning design of European colonizers and imperial war mongers.

Anthrax spreads in Burma killing its elephants, plants and other animals as the diabolical virus of war and colonizers intrude the third world to destroy the peace and age old solidarity of the indigenous subalterns. Like Ghosh's earlier novels, this aesthetically accomplished narrative of *The Glass Palace* remains a fascinating historical saga with immense imputes of anthropology and insight of humanity. The novel attests to the novelist's scathing criticism of the process of physical and mental colonization through the device of war, devastating invasions, conquest and oppression, yet there emerges the power of love and elemental desires and aspirations of the insignificant subalterns whose achievements and failures often escape the systematized vigil of historians.

Ghosh's rendition of the history of the subalterns is imbued with his profound human insight, scholarship of history and comprehensive awareness of social anthropology. *The Glass Palace* advocates and asserts the power of 'Love in *The Time of Cholera*' and champions the superiority of the elemental desires and primal activities of common man over the annals of history, tumult of war, rise and fall of dynasties. The discussion may be concluded with the echo of Hardy's famous lines: "War's annals will fade into night/ Ere their story die": a triumphant note on the process of regeneration, remaking and revival of a war-ravaged community out of as hell-shocked wasteland.

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