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Portrayal of colonial consequences in Amitav Ghosh's the Glass Palace

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is a leading literary luminary in the contemporary English literature. He mainly deals the issues like colonial ways of exploitation, immigration, indentured labour, search for identity, longing for home, cross cultural relations in this works. As a diasporic writer of Indian origin, Ghosh presents the colonial past from the post colonial perspective in his award winning literary master piece, *The Glass Palace* (2000). The annexation of Burma by the brutal ways of the British and its consequences are depicted scholarly by Amitav Ghosh in this novel. The article highlights the plight of the displaced people including the royal family of Burma and the cultural trauma that follows in the lives of the displaced people due to the colonization of Burma. Amitav Ghosh reconstructs the colonial past of Burma, India, Thailand and Malaya from the postcolonial view.

Keywords: immigration, displacement, colonization, subjugation, quest for identity, home

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is one of the prominent creative writers of English from the Indian Diaspora. He mainly deals historical incidents of colonial oppressions and subjugations in South East Asia. As a writer of the Indian diaspora, Ghosh wants to narrate the colonial consequences with historical depth and fact through real and fictional characters. His characters are embodiments of oppression, subjugation, homelessness, displacement and immigration. Travel is the recurring theme in his works. His works expose the postcolonial themes of identity and displacement, travel and immigration, history and oppressions, political struggles and subaltern conflicts. Amitav Ghosh prefers to talk about the colonial consequences and cultural displacement in his works through postcolonial perspective.

In his literary masterpiece, *The Glass Palace* (2000) [2, 5], Amitav Ghosh elaborately depicts the quest for identity and home through the reconstruction of Burmese past. Ghosh portrayed the annexation of Burma by the British in nineteenth century and the aftermath troubles that were flooded into the lives of the common folk of Burma and of the Indian immigrants who were living in Burma. In the novel, *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh writes on epic scale depicting the lives of three generations in three countries. *The Glass Palace* covers nearly a hundred years of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period in Burma, India, Thailand and Malaya. The novel is set against the background of the British colonial oppressive rule in Burma and the attempts of the people in independent Burma for democratic rights.

The Glass Palace mainly depicts the seizure of Mandalay fort by the British and the situations that followed in Burma and the exploitation of Burmese invaluable natural treasures leaving the Burmese people in doom. The British attacked Mandalay fort in 1886 and sent the King the baw and his queen Supayalat as prisoners to India in exile. The subsequent vigilance and oppression of the British colonial authorities and Japanese raids in 1941 made the lives of common people in Burma so pathetic and desperate. Especially, the immigrant Indians who had come to work in Burmese fields had to evacuate their dwelling in search for identity and home.

Amitav Ghosh reconstructs the economy of the teak industry and the plight of immigrant Indians working in the plantations during the colonial rule in a striking way through history fiction interaction. The mass migration of people in the recent history in the wake of imperialist and expansionist practices across South East Asia and Africa provoke Brinda Bose to mention:

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Gathering of exiles and émigrés and refugees; "gathering" on the edge of 'foreign' cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gathering in the ghettos or cafes of city centres; gathering in the half-life; half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language ... gathering the past in a ritual of revival, gathering the present (Bose 143).

Ghosh narrates the perplexing and pathetic accounts of immigrants through the family saga of Rajkumar. He depicts the complex political and sociological backlash of post imperialist dislocation through the experience of loss, exile and their quest for a homeland. Rajkumar, an orphan boy bears witness to the decline of Burma through his eyes. He is working in Ma-Cho's food stall, which is located just outside the Mandalay palace and he is very curious to know about the Burmese royal palace, which has, "hundreds and hundreds 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 ceilings. People call it the Glass Palace" (GP 7).

It is through Rajkumar's eyes, that the humiliation of King Thebaw, King of Burma and his chief consort, Queen Supayalat is presented. Dolly is the youngest and most beautiful of her maids. The British authorities force the king to surrender. The palace is under attack and is out of control. Ma Cho and others enter the palace compound to grab the royal possessions. Rajkumar also enters the palace with a curiosity to see the luxuries of royal family. He meets Dolly and falls in love with her. The British authorities send the royal family into exile in India.

King Thebaw and his family had to subsist on low facilities and provisions at the mansion called "Outram House" in Ratnagiri, India. The British were successful in humiliating the royal family and erasing them from public memory in Burma. They were put under the care of Beni-Prasad Dey, the district collector of Ratnagiri. The imprisoned King and the Queen led a life of oblivion and obscurity in an unknown territory while their homeland was plundered and robbed of its precious natural resources – teak, ivory and petroleum. Surprisingly, in Ratnagiri, the King and Queen become guardians of these alien people though they were among their own.

The Burmese Royal family accompanied by few servants lived in Ratnagiri for twenty years. Uma, wife of Beni Prasad Dey quickly made friends with Dolly and began worrying for her and for the princesses about their marriages. That was soon answered, as the first Princess became pregnant by Sawant, the local servant of the king. Dolly, whose natural choice was Sawant was hurt and emotionally confused.

After the death of his parents, as an orphan boy, Rajkumar reached Burma in search of new life. He lost his parents because of the forced migration during the British rule in India and South East Asia. As an eleven-year-old urchin, Rajkumar started his life in Mandalay as a coolie in Ma-Cho's roadside food stall. Rajkumar's story in the novel is the story of struggle, survival and ultimate success in the midst of colonial chaos.

The Indian sepoy under the British service supervise the process of exile of the King Thebaw to India. When Rajkumar witnesses this process, he is moved emotionally and he is perplexed why the Indian sepoy agreed to become part of the British in plundering other free countries. The

narrator says that there "were some ten thousand soldiers in the British invasion force and of these the great majority – about two thirds – were Indian sepoy" (GP 26). Rajkumar and his mentor, Saya John feel puzzled at the loyalty of the Indian sepoy who are losing their lives for the consolidation of the British Empire around the globe.

The King Thebaw wonders when he watches the Indian coolies working in Burma in menial jobs brought by the British. Ghosh writes, "The British had brought them there, to work in the docks and mills, to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines. Apparently they couldn't find local people to do these jobs. And indeed, why would the Burmese do that kind of work?" (GP 49)

King Thebaw is shocked at the ruthless attitude and great power of the empire that could disturb and displace such large numbers of people leaving homeless, moving them around the world. He is upset in understanding this violent blend of political, economic and military powers and wonders:

"What vast, what incomprehensible power, to move people in such huge numbers from one place to another – emperors, kings, farmers, dockworkers, soldiers, coolies, policemen. Why? Why this furious movement?" (GP 50)

The turmoil of cultural confluence and conflicts of histories are the central concern of the novel. The public announcement of the "Royal Proclamation" of the Burmese King Thebaw clearly indicates the defiant attitude towards colonial authority here:

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, and the degradation of our race, are making a show and preparation as if about to wage war with our state (GP 15).

Rajkumar's friendship with Saya John and his ambition to flourish in life attract him to the colonial practices of exploitation of labour and resources. He begins labour trade for the British forms, subsequently acquires a teak form in Burma, succeeds in rubber plantations and finally becomes rich in wealth. He fulfils his dream of marrying Dolly with the help of Uma Dey and new life in Burma.

Ghosh depicts various postcolonial issues through his characters in *The Glass Palace*. Dolly being Burmese adopts the Indian cultures in Ratnagiri and Rajkumar being Indian adopts the European culture of moneymaking and becomes the part of disruption in Burma. Rajkumar's evolution from an orphan to a successful entrepreneur is an example of hybridity of the colonized.

Rajkumar feels sad at the loss of King and the ruthless suppression of Burma. Ghosh states, "Rajkumar was at a loss to understand this grief. He was, in a way, a feral creature, unaware that in certain places there exist invisible bonds linking people to another through personifications of their commonality" (GP 47).

Dolly has undergone a struggle for her true identity. Her dislocation from her native roots and her stiffness with her new identity is evident when she declares to Uma Dey that she could now never return home: "If I went to Burma now I would be a foreigner ... when we left" (GP 113). Transnational elements are depicted by Ghosh through Rajkumar, Dolly and Uma. Dolly's life in Ratnagiri is the only life she has experienced. She questions herself at a moment in exile "And where would I go?" she asks, "This is the only place I know. This is home" (GP 119). Uma empathizes with Dolly, for both are in the sites of colonial oppression and displaced by the imperial authority. The hybridity of the characters reveals the postcolonial conflict of the colonized subjects and the oppression and suppression of colonial powers make their life more complicated. Amitav Ghosh depicts the account of colonial conflict, which makes Arjun think when he joins the Military Academy of Dehradun, "Where is this country? The fact is that you and I don't have a country" (GP 330).

As Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks:

"the story spans more than a century in the history of the subcontinent, people get involved in unexpected relationships across countries and culture, wars are fought, rebellions quelled, political and ethical issues are debated, fortunes are made and lost. The writer reports everything accurately, thoughtfully in order to create new societies" (Mukherjee 151).

Rajkumar is very much upset when his fortunes begin a downfall. He confesses to his wife Dolly about the fluidity of his identity: "My father was from Chittagong and he ended up in the Arakan; I ended up in Rangoon; you went ... began them. But this is not something that owed to us" (GP 310). At the end, Rajkumar has to lead a life of "a near destitute refugee" in Uma's room in desperate condition (GP 544).

As a colonial consequence, due to the oppressions and suppressions, political turmoil and uncertainty, thousands of Indian immigrants had to leave Burma in search of home to India. Sonia in her article mentions the intention and gravity of the situation that Ghosh concerns:

"..... Ghosh wants to publicise the history of Indian fleeing Burma in fear of invasion. It is not a recorded portion of history but Ghosh wants it to make the people know about this surprising incident. Regarding the long March, when Indian fled from Burma, Ghosh told a reporter in his interview with Outlook, "...It's not been written about at all... it's strange –there were over half a million people on the long March over 400000 of them Indian," (Sonia 612)

Conclusion

Thus Amitav Ghosh narrates the colonial consequences, and conditions, aspirations, dreams, disappointments, troubles, and defeats of dislocated people in India, Burma and Malaysia through the characters King Thebaw, Queen Supayalat, Saya John, Rajkumar, Dolly, Uma, Alison, Dinu, Neel, Arjun, Kishan Singh, Jaya and Ilongo from the subaltern and postcolonial perspective.

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