

A Colonial Displacement in Amitav Ghosh's Novel *The Glass Palace*: A Reflection of Human Affliction

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Abstract

According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Life is a succession of lessons which must be lived to be understood." Every human life contains both light and darkness. The human world, like the natural world, is full of both positive and negative energy. As a result, human life is full of ups and downs caused by the constructive and destructive mindsets of those around us. Inhumanity always makes the innocent suffer. The misery of society's displaced sections is revealed in postmodern literature. Amitav Ghosh senses the Asian subcontinent's wisdom. Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace* reveals the dilemma of the royal family and ordinary Burmese natives as a result of Western materialism. The current study aims to reveal the brutal greed of the people at various levels, which demonstrates the greed of the coloniser. It also focuses on Burma's colonisation and the subsequent displacement of young men as soldiers and labourers.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Human Affliction, Colonial Displacement, Marginalization

A new method of blending reality and fiction has been adopted by post-colonial Indian Fiction in English, and this has allowed it to collectively reveal a range of problems experienced by the people of the Indian subcontinent. The need to constructively understand the enormous gap between the two crucial cultures – the first strongly emphasizing the eastern attitude to life and the second decisively dominating the western approach to life – has unquestionably been highlighted by the continuously widening gap between the haves and have-nots in terms of tradition and culture, spirituality and materiality.

As many Indian writers are expats who write in English, there is a lot of nostalgia in this genre. Naturally, the works of these writers all reveal a strong desire for their maternal soil. They expose various layers and levels of Indian ethos, both now and in the past, as a strong reaction to British rule in India. Indian fiction in English is quite authentic in its depiction of the Indian freedom struggle and its numerous and significant influences on the lives of every citizen of the Indian subcontinent.

Without Amitav Ghosh, the author of best-sellers like *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *Sea of Poppies*, the list of modern Indian writers in English is incomplete. Amitav Ghosh is

a groundbreaking novelist, passionate essayist, and nonfiction writer whose reputation in the literary world is truly supreme and unmatched for the variety of narrative strategies in his novels, which explore and in-depth explain the nature of public and personal identities of people from South Asia.

Ghosh writes extensively on his families. His sixth book, *The Glass Palace*, which was released in 2000, traces a fictionalized version of a branch of his own family that once resided in Burma. It is heavily based on the expertise of his uncle Jagat Chandra Dutta, a timber trader. The majority of this book takes place in Burma and India, and it realistically depicts the history of both countries both before and during World War II, as well as the struggle for independence in India. Since it was first released, it has consistently been the best-seller in Germany and India. It also appears on the best-seller lists in Europe and won the 2007 Frankfurt Book Prize.

Literature, as a manifestation of life, reveals every minute detail in real life. Amitav Ghosh's novels strive to capture the wit of the Asian subcontinent's beleaguered people. *The Glass Palace* reveals both the royal and common Burmese families' devastation. It is very sensitive in postmodern fiction. Western colonisers steal the royal family's precious and valuable possessions and destabilize the entire country out of ruthless greed. The Queen, depressed, expresses her rage:

They took our kingdom, promising roads and railways and ports, but mark my words, this is how it will end. In a few decades the wealth will be gone— all the gems, the timber and the oil—and then they too will leave. (*GP* 88)

Members of the royal family become migrants in exile because they have less money to support their servants. Similarly, the western imperialists treat the coolies as slaves. When Uma first visits morning side Estate, she witnesses how Sirdar of Mathew treats the coolies: “You dog of a Coolie, keep your black face up and look at me when I am talking to you...” (*GP* 231). She strongly resents the British Empirical culture due to its “racism, rule through aggression and conquest” (294). Westerners impose war on Burma and shorten its growth in all aspects of living simply to plunder its teakwood wealth in nature. The locals, unaware of their natural wealth and the westerners' hidden agenda, allow them to trade. However, once they realise the impact, they strongly oppose the foreigners, resulting in the British colonising the land. And after their victory, they rearrange things to their liking. Greedy westerners exploit natural resources and undermine the country's sociopolitical autonomy. And the iron castle of Burma becomes a fragile 'glass palace'. They devastate the country's peace and harmony. Their utilitarian outlook on life leads to inhuman intrusion. *The Glass Palace* attacks the western diabolic devices. T. Jose writes eloquently in her illuminating article on *The Glass Palace*:

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 vicious greed of the west destroys the disempowered east's age-old peace, harmony, and order. Many characters in the novel are disturbed by the colonial incursion. Amitav Ghosh, a humanist and the epitome of equilibrium, strongly

opposes Western oppressive tyranny. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee:

The Glass Palace will remain for me memorable mainly as the most scathing critique of British colonialism I have ever come across in fiction. (Mukherjee 2008)

Through various means, the westerners either create or impose their own mentality on the natives. Rajkumar empowers the colonisers as a result of his cunning and crude western mentality. He sells his natives to them as indentured servants. Uma tells Rajkumar during her niece Manju's marriage to Rajkumar's son Neel:

Rajkumar, you are in no position to offer opinions. It's people like you who're responsible for this tragedy. Did you ever think of the consequences when you were transporting people here? What you and your kind have done is far worse than the worst deeds of the Europeans. (GP 247)

Dinu, Dolly's younger son, is also troubled by the westerners' gluttonous greed. He worriedly expresses himself:

Hitler and Mussolini are among the most tyrannical and destructive leaders in all of human history...They're grotesque they're monsters... If they succeed in imposing their will on the world, we'll all be doomed. Look at what they believe in ... their whole ideology is about the superiority of certain races and the inferiority of others. (GP314)

Uma valiantly unveils the worldly west. She affirms the tragedy of the east as we are "caught between two scourges: two sources of absolute evil. The question for us is why should we pick one over the other?" (GP293).

The contemporary New Education Policy designed to produce Indian *babus* with Western psyches aids Western dominance over the orient people. Bill Ashcroft, in his book *The Empire writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*, rightly underscores that "the foundation of colonialist power and consolidates this power through legal and administrative apparatuses" (Ashcroft 2002).

In the swimming pool in Singapore, the Europeans leave when the Indians enter the pool. Kumar stoutly replies: "We're meant to die for this colony - but we can't use the pools" (345). At the hands of the Indian soldiers, the colonizers humiliate the rubber plantation workers in Malaya. Hence, the local workers refer to the soldiers as "Mercenary" meaning "not real soldiers; they were just hired killers, mercenaries" (347). Arjun's leaving the army upsets Colonel Buckland who calls him traitor and threatens him of court-martial as: "I'll see you hang, Roy, I will. You should have not a moment's doubt of that." (450)

Vinoda, in his article "A Tale of Three countries: The Glass palace as a Postcolonial Text" rightly reveals the self-centered judging domination of the west as:

The sense of what is right and what is wrong has "long found expression in colonialist writers like Macaulay, Kipling, Edward Thomson, etc. in whom imperial notions such as mission, purpose, loyalty, modernization, racial superiority, solidarity, etc. were the cornerstones of faith. (Vinoda 7-24)

Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace* depicts the westerners' use of muscle and machine power to acquire and maintain colonies in the east. It calls into question the morality

of the West's policy of grabbing everything while disrespecting both man and nature. Ghosh upholds the book's decorum by declining the Commonwealth Literature Prize in 2001. Suketu Mehta appreciates it as:

It is particularly perverse for a book such as *The Glass Palace* to be honoured by the remnants of the very empire that it so passionately condemns. It would be analogous to 'The Autobiography of Malcom X' being given an award by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. They cannot conquer, rule and despoil us in one century and then attempt to sanitize their reputation by bestowing imperial honour on us in the next for pointing out what's been done to us. These prizes are a means of co-opting dissent, buying our peace. (Mehta 2013)

Western materialism is at odds with eastern spirituality. Shubha Tiwari, in her book *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study* rightly reveals the subject matter of the novel as:

The novel is about "European greed and the cruelty of colonization. It is an intricate novel that covers almost three generations. The royal families in both countries India and Burma suffered the most. The kings and queens were reduced to puppets. With the end of the royal way of life, a whole idea of sumptuousness died; luxury, connoisseurship and abundance ended with exiles, migrations and imprisonments. Thus alluring face of human existence was damaged. (Tiwari 104)

Queen Supayalat questions unethical humanism of the imperialists as:

Look at how we live... we who ruled the richest land In Asia are now reduced

to this. This is what they have done to us; this is what they will do to all of Burma. They took our kingdom, promising roads and railways and ports...in a few decades the wealth will be gone –all the gems... how we will end- as prisoners, in shanty towns born of the plague. A hundred years hence you will read the indictment of Europe's greed in the difference between the kingdom of Siam and the state of our own enslaved realm. (*GP* 88)

During Saya John's visit to his son Mathew's home in America, he and his granddaughter Alison get into a fight with Japanese soldiers, resulting in Saya's death. During the incident, Alison shoots herself. Western greed drives the displacement of a large number of eastern natives. Edward Said, in his book *Narrative, Geography and Interpretation*, opines that the west always wanted "to dispossess, ruin, maim and distort the lives of many, all in the cause of land" (Said 1990).

Imperialists' insatiable material greed destroys the environment, the very essence of the east. John McLeod, in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism*, very aptly quotes views of Elleke Boehmer: "The main intention of the colonizers was to exploit the natural resources and govern the indigenous inhabitants of the colonized land" (McLeod 08). The colonizers' creed and greed cause drastic changes in the lives of the eastern people. Naturally, it bothers them greatly. Western imperialists target eastern culture. They divide Indian soldiers into battalions based on their ethnicity, such as Punjabis, Marathas, Bengalis, Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims. Hence, Arjun comments: "In India region and religion don't matter- where we can all drink together and beef

and pork and think nothing of it?” (278). They force the Indian soldiers to eat bacon, ham, roast beef, pork chops, and drink wine, all of which are offensive to the eastern culture.

Thus, Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace* depicts how young Burmese men are displaced as soldiers and labourers across the Asian continent. In his *Reflection on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, Edward Said identifies an

unavoidable feature of the postmodern era as: Our age with its modern warfare, imperialism and the quasi-theological ambition of totalitarian rulers is indeed the age of the refugees, the displaced person, and mass migration (Said 174). *The Glass Palace* emphasizes Asians' agonising plight at the merciless hands of the material west, compelling us to consider the objective approach to life in which the subject is always suffocated and breathes its last in the end.

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