



AMITAV GHOSH'S POLITICAL STANCE AGAINST THE BRITISH-A STUDY ON "THE GLASS PALACE"

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ABSTRACT

Ghosh is much too serious and responsible a writer to take easy potshots at what he regards as the source of much Asian evil, and his sympathies, movingly, are always with the oppressed. Besides, his interest here is less in the lives of individual Englishmen than in the tortured and divided creatures they left behind them. All he is doing, he might say with justice, is rounding out a picture dominated by British accounts, history in this case having been written mainly by the departing losers. Yet even as he argues, passionately, in writing of the Indian soldiers, that a person's patriotism can be judged only by his compatriots, he seems reluctant to extend the same principle to the British. In the present research paper a brief analysis made on "The Glass Palace", and author acknowledges that Ghosh's body of work draws attention to the oppressed Indian and Burmese people, but argues that Ghosh's political stance against the British is hypocritical in nature. The novel as an illuminating postmodern/postcolonial text focuses upon several important issues and perspectives of our contemporary historical and sociopolitical discourses. The holocaust of modern war, imperial greed and their enormous sociopolitical impact on the disempowered section of the South-Asian countries like Burma and Malaya is central to the narrative of *The Glass Palace*.

Introduction

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.

The Glass Palace (2000)¹ 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. *The Glass Palace* has a range and sweep not easily matched in Indian English fiction. A story of three generations, it is spread over three interlinked parts of the British Empire—Burma, Malaya, and India².

The Glass Palace is structured around the intermeshing relationships among four families: the Burmese King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat (deposed by the British in 1885 and exiled to Ratnagiri in India) and their entourage. *The Glass Palace* begins in Mandalay, in 1885, with Rajkumar, an eleven-year-old orphan from India whose resourcefulness and rootlessness give him

something of the air of a Kim in reverse. During the chaos of the British invasion, he happens to spot a royal maid, Dolly, in the glass palace in Mandalay, “beautiful beyond belief, beyond comprehension,” and comes away bewitched. When the Burmese court moves to a languorous exile in the western Indian town of Ratnagiri—a forgotten historical episode that Ghosh recalls with characteristic warmth—Rajkumar follows to claim Dolly. He asks for her hand in marriage, she says no, and four pages later they are wed.

The slightly startling abruptness with which Ghosh pairs off two of his characters is a sign that, in this book at least, he's less interested in them than in the grand historical forces at play around them. He treats almost everyone with evident affection, and yet it is the affection of a writer with his mind on larger things; rarely does he linger on people and their complexities as he did so searchingly in, for example, his 1988 novel, *Shadow Lines*. This historical novel is often more history lesson than novel, and its people appear like distant relatives at a family get-together whom everyone smiles at but no one really knows. Ghosh describes the powerful conjunction of academic interest and British administrative influence that allowed Schechter to gather the most substantial collection of Geniza documents: “by the time Schechter arrived in Cairo, a beribboned letter from the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University was no mere piece of embossed stationery: it was the backroom equivalent of an imperial edict”³.

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. 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.

Discussion

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.

Although the British formally left India more than half a century ago, their presence still sits at the center of that culture like a picture of Miss Havisham's lost fiancé. It has been tempting—too tempting, perhaps—to place all the Indian writers recently so conspicuous in the West on a spectrum represented at its poles by Salman Rushdie on the left, trying to get back at the Empire by turning its very language and literature into sentences as crowded and noisy as the streets of an Indian city, and, on the right, V. S. Naipaul, perfecting a style more Augustan and austere than even that of his historical masters, and writing with a self-conscious concern for clarity, and for making fastidious discriminations, in an international world ever more without a center.

Amitav Ghosh, though only forty-four, is already an elder statesman in this field, having published his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, in 1986, well before the current vogue for Indian writing began. And he fits into it interestingly because, right after that book, he visibly moved from the phantasmagoric myth-making that in the wake of *Midnight's Children* held so many young Indians in its thrall to a prose of clean restraint. Born to Burmese parents in Calcutta, as his new book tells us, and growing up in a diplomatic family that moved from Sri Lanka to Bangladesh to northern India, he attended universities in Delhi, Oxford, and

Egypt (and has lived for several years now in New York, where he teaches anthropology at Columbia).

What this means in practice is that Ghosh has one foot in the comfortable upper-middle-class Bengali world we know from Satyajit Ray movies and, more recently, the novels of Amit Chaudhuri, and the other among the displaced peoples of the world, whose sufferings and split identities he has chronicled in reportorial works distinguished for their social conscience and compassion. His books tell us not to hew to any of the old categories: the last one, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (subtitled *A Novel of Fevers, Delirium, and Discovery*), cut back and forth between networking exiles at their computer terminals in a Manhattan of the near future, a group of friends in Calcutta in 1995, and an Englishman's researches into malaria in the jungles of Bengal in the late nineteenth century. The one immediately before it, *In an Antique Land* (1993), perhaps his most graceful and suggestive work, explored the themes of homelessness and the dissolution of borders by bringing together his own experiences as an anthropologist in a tiny Egyptian village in 1980 and the letters he found describing a group of cosmopolitan traders moving between India and the Middle East in the twelfth century.

It comes as something of a surprise, therefore, that his latest book, far and away his most ambitious, is of the kind that could be called a "sweeping multigenerational epic." Strikingly formal in tone and procedure—public in both manner and, it seems, intention—it follows the lives of a group of Indians and Burmese from 1885, when the British invaded Mandalay and sent the Burmese King Thebaw into an Indian exile, to the streets of Burma today, and the very different struggle for independence currently haunting that country. Though the form of the novel is highly traditional, the one theme giving the huge saga a sense of shape and direction is its insistent, highly contemporary attack on empire and the lost souls left behind it. It's as if a revisionist wolf were dressed in imperialist clothing.

The real heart of the book, though, and its dramatic centerpiece, lies in the classic imperial setting of World War II, in Burma and Malaya; here everything that is powerful in Ghosh's somewhat aerial perspective, and everything that is shaky, comes to the fore. He takes us into the Southeast

Asian theater of war by cutting back and forth between a shy romance on a rubber plantation in Malaya's highlands—a microcosm of empire—and another involving the Indian soldiers who are fighting for the British as the Japanese approach. In the love scenes, the widescreen approach leads to some curious effects. As Dinu, the photographer, lies with his beloved, he watches "the horizontal planes of her forehead, her eyebrows and her mouth perfectly balanced by the verticals of her black, straight hair and the translucent filaments that hung suspended from her lips." The man sees life through camera angles, to be sure, but still it seems odd that the closer the bodies get, the more abstract the language becomes.

Yet even as he seems somewhat ill at ease here with intimacy, and so squanders the emotional force of the scene, Ghosh conveys the larger picture with particular vividness. We see Christmas trees in the department stores of Rangoon whose branches are "whitened with a frosting of Cuticura talcum powder," and as the Japanese move through Malaya, we follow great crowds of people running for evacuation trains only to find that all the cars are reserved for Europeans. "The road's embankment was dotted with parked vehicles. Families could be seen to be sleeping in their cars, snatching a little rest before daylight. At intervals one-and-a-half-ton military trucks came barreling down the highway, heading south." Filmmakers must be relishing the prospect of working with such scenes.

Typical of everything that is most affecting in *The Glass Palace* are the passages evoking the panicked exodus of tens of thousands of people, nearly all of them Indian, as the Japanese took over Burma in 1942. Even those lucky enough to have made it to Calcutta, more than a thousand miles away, arrived in an already impoverished city in the throes of one of the worst famines in its history. "People were stripping the parks of grass and leaves, sifting through the sewers for grains of rice." In some ways the two themes that have animated Ghosh's writing from the beginning—his interest in the lives of middle-class Indian families and his concern for the world's afflicted—come together stirring as the very people who once thrived in Burma (including, he suggests, his ancestors) suddenly turn into dispossessed refugees themselves, struggling across rivers and mountains,

wheeling the elderly in carts and often dying along the way. The worlds of his fiction and of his reportage memorably converge.

The scene that Ghosh enters most intensely, though, and that seems to nag at him with unusual force, is the one involving Uma's easygoing nephew, Arjun, who prides himself on becoming one of the first Indian officers in the British army, even as the Indians around him begin asking ever more impatiently why they're risking their lives to protect the very people who are holding them down. As the novel (and the war) goes on, more and more of them begin slipping away to join the Indian National Army, the unfortunate group that joined the Japanese only to find that its Eastern masters were no more solicitous of its members' interests than its Western ones had been. ("Asian unity" has always been a notion most persuasive on paper.) Over and over we return to the intense discussions among the soldiers, as Ghosh argues, with great sympathy, that the Indians who might be reflexively written off as "collaborators" were in fact confused idealists, ready to do anything to fight for freedom from British oppression. He also tells us, intriguingly, in his author's note, that his father was one of the "'loyal' Indians" who fought with the British throughout, often against the Indian defectors.

These characters, torn between two kinds of oppression—traitors if they support the British, traitors if they turn toward the Japanese—take Ghosh back to what has always seemed to be his central concern, the consequences of displacement, and his exhaustive research here excavates the many ironies of a British system ready to go through the motions of offering Indians power yet not really willing to change deep down. Indian soldiers were discouraged from carrying umbrellas, he tells us, because they were a traditional sign of sovereignty. Dinner jackets were customarily worn at the mess on Thursdays, "this being the day of the week when the news of Queen Victoria's death had been received in India."

Ghosh treats all but a few of his characters with tenderness, yet it soon becomes clear that the ones he regards as the most treacherous are the ones who collaborated with the British, aping the very people who looked down on them, and in this book at least, nearly always destroyed by the empire they served. (Two of them are actually portrayed, in

separate incidents, as near-rapists.) At one point Arjun, who has grown more and more troubled by his service to the British army, abruptly kills his most loyal attendant to save him from the plight of becoming an Indian with divided loyalties.

In Michael Ondaatje's *English Patient*, this same issue is disposed of, more or less, in two quick paragraphs; here it is what gives life to the narrative, and though Ghosh allows some of his characters (always men, and, to some extent, complicit with the Raj) to speak up for empire, he seldom gives them the last word. Near the end of his life the former Anglophile Arjun acknowledges that the empire "is a huge, indelible stain which has tainted all of us. We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves." One of his companions declares that "in a way, the better the master, the worse the condition of the slave, because it makes him forget what he is." Ghosh's claim is that the empire so thoroughly stripped India of its roots that even today the educated Indian cannot begin to find a sense of "loyalty, commonalty, faith." Such creatures of mixed affiliation, he writes with unusual violence, are "deformed, ... grotesque, misshapen."

Even Burma in this scheme becomes a case study of colonial wrongdoing. India, as Ghosh acknowledges, was rife with divisions and injustices well before the British arrived on the scene; but Burma, he tells us, was peaceful, united under its king, and blessed with universal literacy, equal rights for women, and freedom from the blight of caste before the British invaded. The sad story of how the once "golden land" became a basket case run by eccentric dictators here becomes a tale of imperial perfidy.

Ghosh is much too serious and responsible a writer to take easy potshots at what he regards as the source of much Asian evil, and his sympathies, movingly, are always with the oppressed. Besides, his interest here is less in the lives of individual Englishmen than in the tortured and divided creatures they left behind them. All he is doing, he might say with justice, is rounding out a picture dominated by British accounts, history in this case having been written mainly by the departing losers. Yet even as he argues, passionately, in writing of the Indian soldiers, that a person's patriotism can be judged only by his compatriots, he seems reluctant to extend the same principle to the British.

Returning from her travels, Uma, whose sentiments always seem closest to Ghosh's, says, "That's the thing about politics—once you get involved in it, it pushes everything else out of your life." Much of *The Glass Palace* reads as if it had been written after just such a political conversion. Yet at its conclusion, when the stage is given over to the contemporary figurehead of Burmese independence Aung San Suu Kyi ("beautiful almost beyond belief ..., it was impossible to behold this woman and not be half in love"), the book suddenly turns against politics. Dinu argues that "while misrule and tyranny must be resisted, so too must politics itself ..., it cannot be allowed to cannibalize all of life, all of existence." Of course he is saying this by way of affirming his support for a woman whose political power comes from a force beyond politics, and of lamenting the ways in which Burma's cruel leaders have consigned its people to a prison in which nothing is unpolitical. Yet in the light of everything that's preceded the outburst, it sounds as if Ghosh is not so much against politics as against the politics of those he doesn't like.

Conclusion

The Glass Palace performs an invaluable service in showing us how the events of the last century, and especially the war, looked to many people in Burma and India, whose voices have seldom been heard before in the West; but its narrative is obscured occasionally by an abundance of detail, occasionally by political argument. Ten pages before the end, the only character who is a writer advances its only literary reflection. "In classical writing," she says, "everything happens outside—on streets, in public squares and battlefields, in palaces and gardens—in places that everyone can imagine." Her own writing, she goes on (speaking, perhaps, for Ghosh as he nears the end of his epic task), is of the modern kind, difficult, and even terrifying, because it involves crossing the threshold into private life. I don't know how this distinction applies to Shakespeare or Chaucer or Ovid or Sappho or Jane Austen, but it does tell us that, in his characters' own terms, Ghosh has written a classical novel in which the chief enemies are the very classicists who gave his book its old-fashioned manner—and the settings we recognize from a hundred old British movies⁴.

Work Cited

- 1 Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2000) 132. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited in the text in parentheses.
- 2 R. K. Gupta, "That which a man takes for himself no one can deny him": Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* and the Colonial Experience, *The International Fiction Review* 33 (2006), 18
- 3 Dixon, "'Travelling in the West': The Writing of Amitav Ghosh," in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Spring, 1996, pp. 3–24.
- 4 Iyer "The Road from Mandalay," in *New York Review of Books*, Vol. XLVIII, March 8, 2001, pp. 28–31.