

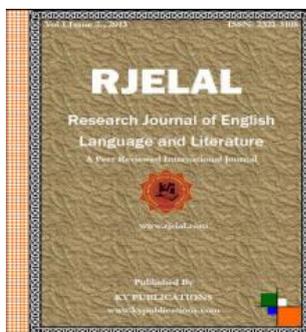
RESEARCH ARTICLE



## COLONIAL HISTORY TRACKED- A NEW HISTORICAL READING OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE GLASS PALACE*

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### ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, the Indian author, Amitav Ghosh has established himself as a writer of uncommon talent who combines literary flair with a rare seriousness of purpose. . For me, he encompasses two interesting elements : history and fiction. In his works, there is always an interplay of fact and fiction. For Ghosh, history is never an “absolute entity” but a “construct”. He passionately observes that the past is open “to choice, reflection and judgment”(quodt. in *The Week*) . And we feel the brooding presence of history in all his major works. When asked how he was much involved in the past, he said that the present lacks narrative. He is unused to the uncertainties and horrific apprehensions of the present. This sincere assertion set me thinking. How can a writer eternally deal with the past ? How is it possible for him to weave brilliant tales from the dead skeletons of the past ? It is intended in this paper to read Ghosh’s novel *The Glass Palace* in the historical context, focusing on the above mentioned objectives. I presume that Ghosh’s training in anthropology and his interest in historical research make his work an interesting site around which current arguments in New Historical theory can be conducted.

Key words: *The Glass Palace*, New Historicism, use of history

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Colonialism trumpeted the cultural superiority and rightness of the White. The European empire is said to have held sway over more than eighty-five percent of the rest of the globe by the time of the First World War, having consolidated power and control over several centuries. One of the ways by which colonialism maintained power was by writing its own histories. These histories were conceived within grand narratives of progress, expansion and enlightenment. Inevitably, they both systematically and accidentally recast, ignored

and silenced other competing histories from the places and cultures with which they came into contact. Post - colonial studies has consequently set itself the task of examining and challenging those narratives, developing other ways of telling histories, and re – evaluating other ways of remembering.

If post- colonial literature means the interrogation of the subaltern to the “center”, no other book is representative of the post-colonial theory and practice as Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace*. The novel won the 2001

Frankfurt e – book Award of fifty thousand dollars Grand Prize for Fiction. Abreast of the contemporary academic debates about colonialism and culture, Ghosh is well-equipped in challenging the institutionalized perspectives of the colonial history. He is certain of his human and historical insights. He belongs to a nation that was once conquered and ruled by Imperial Britain. Ghosh in “The Anglophone Empire” (2003) says: “I am Indian and my history has been shaped as much by the institution of this empire as a long tradition of struggle against them” (Ghosh 4).

This evinces his awareness of the past history of his own country and how the past is to be remembered is at the core of *The Glass Palace*. In the novel, Ghosh invariably focuses on the theme of colonialism, but does so with imagination supported by meticulous research. He has more or less succeeded in remaining unbiased in his rendition of history in fiction. For no one is directly indicted in the novel. *The Glass Palace* unfolds over a hundred years of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Burmese history. Its narrative revolves around the experiences of a range of multigenerational, diasporic Indian/Burmese characters during a historical period - the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It begins with the colonial conquest of Burma in 1885 and takes one on a historical journey down the lane of events. In the middle part of the novel, Ghosh explores the plight of the British Indian Army fighting against the Japanese in Malaysia during the Second World War. And the novel closes on a positive note, depicting Aung Sang Suu Kyi’s struggle for democracy in Burma.

As Namrata Mahanta asserts, the crux of the novel lies in its three dimensional rendition of the process of colonisation in Burma (Mahanta 6). The first dimension is the subjugation of India at the hands of the British. A gloom of slavishness and impotence congeals the Indian psyche with the exile of Indian Emperor Bahadurshah Zafar to Rangoon. The Indian subjects from now on are moved by both fear and awe for their colonial oppressors. This deep seated fear convinces them to “send their

sons to the army of the English Sarkar”. Thus the colonialists succeeds in establishing a mirage of invincibility and ultimate authority.

The second dimension is the annexation of Burma at the hands of the colonised Indians. It was no war at all, especially since Mandalay fell like a castle of cards. This takeover took place at various levels. The invading force was composed largely of Indian recruits. Rajkumar, an Indian orphan, who worked in a Burmese food stall, acquires wealth through exploiting the local populace. His upward mobility from a street urchin to a rubber mogul mirrors the profits acquired by Indians on aiding the British in their material pursuits.

The third dimension is the flight of Indians from Burma in 1942 with the rise of Burmese nationalism. But this was followed by political chaos, civil war and finally the coup led by General Ne Win. Under the pretence of defending Burma against foreign invasion, a recolonisation of Burma took place. Its own people assumed the role of the colonizer.

Even when he encompasses history, Ghosh’s novel is not a bit drab. For his fictional world is a complex mix of history, scholarship and earnest humanism. And in *The Glass Palace*, we find an interplay of fact and fiction. He says that he attempts in it is to humanize history, to make it a part of the existential grammar of the living. As the post – colonial – postmodern writer, Ghosh is one who sees, as said by Brinda Bose, “history as that trajectory of events that causes dislocations, disjunctions, movements and migrations, eventually replacing solid markers with shadow lines, destabilizing our notions of the past in the reverberations of the present” (Bose 15). Without a historian’s bondage of strict adherence to fact, Ghosh creates an interior history to accommodate the voices of the lost people whose plight escapes the vigilant eyes of the historian. In this novel-as-chronicle story meet history and makes it a little more comprehensible. Nonetheless, history is foregrounded from the start of the novel. Unlike some novelists who let history rumble on discreetly in the background, Ghosh sets his

sights high. He aims to reflect the broad sweep of historical change over three generations and three countries : Burma, India and Malaysia. The longings and ambitions of characters like Rajkumar, Dolly, Uma, Saya John, King Thebaw, Queen Supalayay , Neel, Dinu, Matthew, Elsa, Alison, Bela, Arjun, Hardy, Kishen Singh and Jaya are constantly swayed and disrupted by the tide of history. This kind of saga could have exhausted the skills of a lesser writer. But in the hands of Ghosh, a historian by training, an adventurous traveler and a sensitive writer of fiction, it becomes a confluence of all three.

An important feature of this lucid narrative is the seamless blending of the public and the personal spheres. Ghosh's king Thebaw, the dispossessed king of Burma, took his doomed exile in Ratnagiri stoically. There is no allusion to violent outbursts of helplessness or loss. Neither is he shown hesitant in his efforts to come to grip with reality. If anything big happened to the king in body and spirit, it was not evident. Yet there is a mention of him being engrossed in the newspaper reports of king Chulalangkorn of Siam's state visit to Europe. Siam was once invaded by Thebaw's great-grandfather Alaungpaya who crushed her army.

There is no confirmation of the real king Thebaw being acquainted with Chulalankorn's state visit but any dethroned king would have silently wept at the success of his once vanquished adversary. While Thebaw's land was seized by the West, Chulalankorn's contrived plans helped him to stay afloat in the colonial waters. As observed by Ranjita Basu, "History is a brooding presence in Ghosh's books, almost a living entity able to shape the lives of his characters"(160).

Another instance of the blending of the public and the personal spheres is in the case of Uma Dey. Uma, widow of the Ratnagiri collector Beni Prasad Dey, had been initiated into the Indian Independence League by Madam Cama. Uma conducts the essence of the freedom struggle into the plot of the novel. Her indignation about the Empire is due to its "racialism, rule through aggression and conquest"(GP 294) and for being a model of the

Empire for nations like Japan and Germany. When Dinu, Rajkumar's son draws her attention to the evils like caste system, untouchability that were prevalent in India even before the British came, Uma is quick to respond that the Indian struggle for Independence is not separated from their struggle for reform. She explains : "[...]let me add that we must not be deceived by the idea that imperialism is an enterprise of reform"( GP 294)

Here a fictitious character comes to belong to a real and historic movement. To read the novel, one must blur the boundary between the category of fiction and non – fiction, novel and history. There is a maintained equilibrium between the empirically verifiable historical reality and the narrative fiction. For example, Ghosh invents a third – person narrator that relates a story in a helical fashion that simultaneously fictionalizes and makes real historical subject and event. The narrator represents the characters (whether factually based, like the Burmese King Thebaw, or fictionally based like the protagonist, Rajkumar) as "real" according to the terms of the fictional narration.

In his closing notes, Ghosh refers to the imprisonment of the Burmese political leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Dinu is shown taking Jaya, his niece to a public meeting at Suu Kyi's house. The year is 1996 and it marks the sixth of Suu Kyi's house arrest. Dinu is all awe for her and regards her much greater than a politician as she succeeded in resisting the imperialist onslaught, the misruled tyranny in Burma.

Ghosh maintains a balance between the memory of the past and the desire for a future by coming back to the present. To this day Suu Kyi remains an undogged political figure who is persistent in her efforts to bring peace, stability and development to her people.

Focusing upon New Historicism, let us now examine *The Glass Palace* for the key assumptions that constitute New Historicist discourse. New Historicists aim simultaneously to understand the work through its historical context and to understand cultural and

intellectual history through literature. New Historicism is claimed to be a more neutral approach to historical events, and to be sensitive towards different cultures. Ghosh, trained in history and anthropology, has the equanimity to blow life into the annals of colonial history without being too judgmental. Speaking about his works in a recent interview to *Outlook* magazine, Amitav Ghosh said: "My fiction has always been about places that are states in the process of coming unmade or communities coming unmade or remaking themselves in many ways" (40). And T. Vinoda is perhaps right in pointing out that *The Glass Palace* is the best example of the post-modernist post-colonial historiographic metafiction (Vinoda 10). Ghosh's is an international perspective.

Another major factor of New Historicist discourse is the concept of power. Power is means through which the marginalized are controlled and the thing that the marginalized seek to gain. Power, does not necessarily reside "above" with lawyers, politicians, and the police, but rather follows a principle of circulation, whereby everyone participates in the maintenance of existing power structures. Rajkumar, the protagonist is the pivotal fiction of the "other", who sets out to build his fortune with the idea that his acquired wealth will win the hand of Dolly. Rajkumar, a colonized Indian subject in his turn adorns the mask of the colonizer. He becomes a colonizer in Burma by transporting indentured labourers from South India to other parts of the colonial world. He exploits the local Burmese people in order to ensure his legacy. For in colonialism, value is placed on the most efficient means of organizing data and individuals to effect the mass production and dissemination of goods even if at the expense of exploitation or injustice. Roshini Mokashi Punakar comments on repositioning borders of power. She asserts that the puzzling nature of power between people and communities and nations, the constant flux in the positions of power seems to be the underlying thrust of the novel symbolized by the beautiful title *The Glass Palace* which

suggests an unattainable shimmering beauty, fragility and exclusion all together.

New Historicists, again tend to concern themselves with forces of containment. The hegemonic powers do not rely somehow on actual physical enforcement on a day-to-day basis. This force of containment operates implicitly in the text. The process by what dominant culture maintains its dominant position is explored in the character of Arjun Roy, Uma Dey's nephew, a Second Lieutenant in the 1 Jat Light Infantry. The colonizer mobilizes Indian subjects to form military forces to subdue opposition in the colonized Indian subcontinent but the Indian officers were not all into the same social clubs as their white counterparts. In the beginning, Arjun is intoxicated with the British way of life that the army has initiated in him. He is proud to belong to "The Royal Battalion" and is overwhelmed by its glamour. But as the story progresses, a realization sets in Arjun "that it is his masters from whom the country needs to be defended" (GP 288). He is caught between two worlds and tells Dinu, "we rebelled against an Empire that shaped everything in our lives[...] We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves (GP 518). He comprehends that "the greatest danger... is where in resisting the powers that form us, we allow them to gain control of all meaning; this is their moment of victory. It is in this way that they inflict their final and most terrible defeat" (GP 518). Eventually he joins the Indian National Army and attains martyrdom. In this context, Meenakshi Mukherji's statement can be held true that the author does not gloss over the fact that Indians were willing collaborators in the British enterprise of depredation.

Another feature of New Historicist discourse is the employment of bureaucrats. This white-collar labour force is set up for information retrieval and storage. This form of organization encourages a separation from real people since it turns individuals into statistics and paperwork. In the novel, the Collector of Ratnagiri, Beni Prasad Dey, feels that there would be total chaos in India if the British

were to leave. Educated at Oxford, he believes in the smug notions of the empire and submits himself to the hegemony of the Empire. He is an assumed intellectual who believes in his virtual “powers”. He was one of the most successful Indians of his generation and yet he was haunted by the fear of being thought lacking by his British colleagues. Ghosh reveals the imperialist presence in India through him. When the Collector is reluctant to permit the First Princess to marry the Maharashtrian coachman Mohan Sawant, Queen Supalayati rebukes him:

We have heard so many lectures from you and your colleagues on the subject of the barbarity of the Kings of Burma and the humanity of the Angrez; we tyrants you said, enemies of freedom, murderers. English alone understood liberty, we are told; they do not put kings and princes to death; they run through laws. If that is so, why has King Thebaw never brought to trial? Is it a crime to defend your country against an invader? Would the English not do the same?(GP 150).

There are so many events, so many issues and so many people involved that the author rarely ever pauses to heavily underline an idea. For instance, in the very beginning of the novel, Rajkumar gets personally involved in the loot of the Glass Palace that ensued after the defeat of the Royal Forces. He reports the flight of the royal family from the palace in Mandalay with the fidelity of a child reporting a spectacle. The image that stays in his mind is that of Dolly, one of the Queen Supayalat's maids. Years later, he travels from Burma to Ratnagiri, marries Dolly and bears her triumphantly back to the land of her birth. Throughout the book, Ghosh uses one end to signal another beginning so that at one level, nothing changes and yet everything does. This practice is in direct accord with Foucault's argument that one should seek to reconstitute not large “periods” or “centuries” but “phenomenon of rupture, of discontinuity”. New historicists reject the western tendency to write

history from the top down or in grand narrative strokes. They are instead more concerned with “little narratives”.

*The Glass Palace* is the ruthless appraisal of the horrors of colonialism and capitalist exploitation. Against the giant – screen that he erects over the stage of South Asia, Ghosh enacts a shadow play with characters that bring alive the colonial history of the region. Meenakshi Mukherji's evaluation of the novel is notable :

The story spans more than a century in the history of the Subcontinent, people get involved in unexpected relationships across countries and cultures, wars are fought, rebellions quelled, political and ethical issues are debated, fortunes are made and lost. The writer reports everything accurately, thoughtfully – his precision backed up by meticulous research. Military maneuvers, models of automobile and aircraft, drilling of oil, timber trade, food, clothing, every detail is historically specified .

*The Sunday Tribune* went overboard in its praise of the novel. It said that *The Glass Palace* was an instance of novel overtaking history as an authentic and reliable source of understanding the micro – level subtleties of colonial politics. *The Glass Palace* is a historical novel, but the reader has the impression that Ghosh refers to the present too. He talks about the birth of capitalism, and now we see it as a worldwide crisis. Ghosh comments on this similarities between past and present in a recent interview to *L'espresso Magazine*:

There are many curious parallels between the situation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and now. No one who has looked at the history of that period can doubt that some western powers would go to any lengths to preserve their economic supremacy – but of course they cannot today resort to quite the same means that they did in the 1830's and 1840's. What they are doing instead is that they are ratcheting up the rhetoric about ‘free trade’, ‘liberalization’ etc.

Ghosh is claimed to have an inherent fascination with the cyclical patterns of history. History is often cyclical and therefore repetitive. For the West still holds control on the 'third world' psyche. This is evident in the present scenario of globalization and free – trade. When the West was forced to remove its colonial oppressor's mask, it did so gladly, because it had the pretext of globalization to gain back the 'lost states'. Ghosh almost prophesies this state of affairs in *The Glass Palace*. Uma Dey, while reflecting upon the memories of her dead husband, thinks aloud:

He had wielded immense power as a District Collector, yet paradoxically, the position had brought him nothing but unease and uncertainty [...] Did this mean that one day all of India would become a shadow of what he had been? Millions of people trying to live their lives in conformity with incomprehensible rules? (GP 186).

And we are not unlike what she feared we would be. Even from our school days we are taught to imitate the westerner. We endlessly pursue the unattainable 'other'.

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh has dealt with the dislocation, exploitation, oppression and nostalgia of the marginal groups. Brinda Bose refers to the novel as an elegy for the diasporic condition that is a product of history, that leaves behind kingdoms and palaces and moves, in the exilic mode, toward a near – hopeless regeneration. The central dilemma of the text lies in the conflict in loyalty that Arjun Roy suffers as he deliberates upon the option to join the exiled Indian National Army. This dilemma is the signifier for that diasporic condition that Ghosh mourns (Bose 43). According to another review, Ghosh is one of the few post – colonial writers who has expressed in his work 'a developing awareness of the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of colonized peoples as they figure out their place in the world'. The novel makes an attempt to see the East as seen by its own people, described by a writer whose allegiance is simply to the human. Ghosh is one of the

most sympathetic post – colonial voices to be heard today.

The novel's revisiting of historical events like colonialism and capitalism might be read as a symbolic and real restoration of subaltern history and cultural memory. The text accords meaning, purpose, and integrity to a forgotten and/or erased past. Ghosh says that although the (colonial) past cannot be changed, it is our duty to examine it and to interrogate our role in it; and this is exactly what he has done in *The Glass Palace*. Ultimately Ghosh has taught us need to re – look colonial history in the contexts of the present.

It was not unexpected of Ghosh to have declined the nomination for the 2001 Commonwealth Writer's Prize. His explanation sounds quite convincing. He says in his letter to the jury: "I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorization of Empire that passes under the rubric of the Commonwealth "(2). As a literary artist he thinks that "the value of a literary prize should be in the first instance, in celebrating literature – not in valorizing a particular view of the past or present, nor in creating, as it were, a literary block "(4). This should put at rest the criticism that he is an anglophile.

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