

## The Glass Palace : A Critique

Sangita Kumari\*  
Dr. Tapeswar Prasad\*

---

*The Glass Palace* is a novel of epic proportion which deals with the lives of the exiled, alienated and uprooted individuals in the backdrop of European colonialism. This novel develops Ghosh's perspective towards the cruelty of colonization and European greed. Colonialism and its self-serving logic saturate colonial historiography thereby perpetually imprisoning the 'other' rude nations to an imaginary "waiting room of history" (Ghosh, p.8). These pre-modern 'not yet' societies, their histories and cultures overlooked within the western chronicles of capitalist progress as primitive vacuum, have cultivated distinct life orders at once different, yet parallel to it. Hidden within these archival niches, the subaltern grapples in anonymity until literature takes the momentous task of excavating their unspoken past. *The Glass Palace* focuses on such unknown theatre of history.

The novel primarily traces the life of an Indian orphan, Raj Kumar, who is transported to Burma by accident, and his three generations spreading over three different countries forming a part of the British Empire. Raj Kumar has struggled all his life to survive, to belong and to find out his own identity which assimilate and assert his whole character. By dint of his grit he ascended to the prominence in business and established himself as a leading man of the society but finally he had to leave his place and position due to social and political upheaval, leaving behind everything which he achieved through hard work in his life time and returning to India empty handed as he had left it.

The novel uses very wide canvas and includes within itself several sub-plots and characters which are hard to comprehend. Side by side runs the story of British colonialism in India and Burma and of

the exiled and alienated life of the last King of Burma King Thebaw and his queen Supalayyat. This paper concentrates on the way and strategies of the British colonialism which rapaciously exploited the rich resources of Burma and sent its last royals into the life of exile. It discusses and presents in detail the subsequent sense of alienation and frustration, non-belonging, rootlessness and identity crisis that followed the forced exile of the king. Sarika Auradhkar's remark well sums up the theme of the novel:

*'THE GLASS PALACE'* functions as a metaphor, 'glass is brittle and implies transparency. Palace is the symbol of power. Glass Palace is an illusion that is created around power. The people in the glass palace do not have the liberty to throw stones at others. The colonized people are always imprisoned in the glass palace and they have lost the capacity to throw stones at colonial masters. (p.93)

*The Glass Palace* uses magic realism to present a semi-fictional account of the colonial exploitation and expansion that brought about the large scale of geographical and demographical changes in India. Through the story of Raj Kumar, an exiled and helpless Indian orphan in Burma, and his progeny the novel gives a detailed and historical account of the events and incidents that led to the assimilation of Burma into the British Empire and subsequent forced exile of the Royal family of Burma to India. The colonial strategy was to assimilate and merge the large scale of local territory into the British Empire by hook or crook and for that they used all means behind the guise of diplomacy. Their only aim in the colonies was the exploitation of the local resources and make money. As it is presented in the novel:

The English are preparing to send a fleet up the Irrawaddy. There is going to be a war. Father says they want all the teak in Burma. The king won't let them have it so they're going to do away with him. (GP, p.15)

The King of Burma was sovereign, lawful ruler of the country who was dominated by his wife Queen Supayalat who decided even the matters of the state. She was a determinate, courageous and ruthless lady who got most of the royal family killed in order to secure the throne for her husband. The royal couple was a strange mix of determination and uncertainty, pity and cruelty, benevolence and ruthless control. They were lawful heirs to the throne and ruled over the country no worse

---

**\*Research Scholar (Eng.) Head (Retd), Dept of English, V.K.S. University, Ara Veer Kunwar Singh University, Ara.**

than other kings in the other parts of the world. The king promulgated his duties:

..... To uphold the religion, to uphold the national honour, to uphold the country's interests (that) will bring about three fold good, good of our religion, good of our master and good of ourselves and will gain for us the important result of placing us on the celestial regions and to Nirvana (GP, p.16)

The turmoil in the comparatively peaceful state began on a very petty dispute with a British timber company- a technical matter concerning some logs of teak. It was clear that the company was in the wrong; they were sidestepping the kingdom's customs regulations, cutting up logs to avoid paying duties. The royal customs officers had slapped fine on the company demanding payment of arrears for some fifty thousand logs. The Englishmen protested and refused to pay. They carried their complaints to the British Government in Rangoon. Humiliating ultimatums followed. One of the King's senior ministers, the Kinwun Mingyi, suggested discreetly that it might be best to accept the terms; that the British might allow the Royal family to remain in the palace in Mandalay on terms similar to those of the Indian princes- like "farmyard pigs, in other words, to be fed and fattened by their masters; swine, housed in sties that had been tricked out with a few little bits of finery" (GP, p.22). But the queen disagreed. She retorted:

The Kings of Burma were not princes, the queen had told the Kinwun Mingyi; they were Kings, sovereigns, they'd defeated the Emperor of China, conquered Thailand, Assam, Manipur. And, she herself, Supayalat, she had risked everything to secure the throne for Thebaw, her husband and step brother ..... Was it even imaginable to give it all away now? (GP, p.22)

The queen prevailed and the Burmese court refused to yield to the British ultimatum. Consequently, the British forces invaded Burma within days with the help of Indian soldiers and the royal family was forced to compromise on insulting and humiliating terms: finally it was decided that "the royal family was being sent into exile", the colonel told the assembled notables, "they were to go to India, to a location that had yet to be decided on. The British government wished to provide them with an escort of attendants and advisors. The matter was to be settled by asking for volunteers" (GP, p.41). The matter of volunteer settlement exposed the double standard and hypocrisy of the courtiers who once

vied with one another for the king's favours, but were now unwilling to follow him in exile. Now "Feet were shuffled, heads lowered, nails examined" (GP,p.41). Ghosh writes:

This is how power is eclipsed; in a moment of vivid realism, between the waning of one fantasy of governance and its replacement by the next; in an instant when the world springs free of its moorings of dreams and reveals itself to be girdled in the pathways of survival and self-preservation (GP, pp.41-42).

The public, on the other hand, which once hated the royal family for their cruelty and arbitrary and despotic rule was now sympathetic with them and wanted to preserve the memories of their last king and pay their homage to the departing royals.

Through all the years of the queen's reign the townsfolk had hated her for her cruelty, feared her for her ruthlessness and courage. Now through the alchemy of defeat she was transformed in their eyes. It was as though a bond had been conjured into existence that had never existed before. For the first time in her reign she had become what a sovereign should be, the proxy of her people (GP, p.34)

In the mechanism of colonialism the forced exile of kings and queens worked as a weapon to keep the colonized subjects under the colonial control and subservient to the colonial rule. For this object to be met the colonial masters did not hesitate to publicly humiliate the royals in order to let down the morals of the subjects and to demonstrate their own authority. The final exile of King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat also became an insulting and humiliating affair:

Just as he was about to step in, the King noticed that his canopy had seven tiers, the number allotted to a nobleman not the nine, due to a king. He paused to draw a breath. So the well spoken English colonels had their revenge after all, given the knife of victory a final little twist. In his last encounter with his erstwhile subjects he was to be publicly demoted like an errant schoolchild. Sladen had guessed right: this was of all the affronts Thebaw could have imagined, the most hurtful, the most egregious (GP,pp.43-44).

From here begins the King's journey towards uncertainty, futility, rootlessness and homelessness. The royal family which once ruled the richest land in Asia was exiled, reduced and confined to the middle class shanty town of Ratnagiri in India which "was too insignificant to be marked on the map" (GP, p.60). The condition of exile is a state of

being, a mode of existence where one is forced to make daily adjustments and to adopt the conditions which are totally alien to one and to learn to survive on the verge of society. Their struggle to adjust and survive starts from the very first day in exile in Madras where the King wanted to visit the Madras Museum but the major-in-charge bluntly refused to allow him to do so. In protest the King did not step out of his room for several days. The Queen insisted on *Shikho* (the traditional Burmese way of greeting) but the new servants refused to oblige her. These little adjustments and their effects alienated them further from their surroundings. The King developed a way to cope with the situation by confining himself to his own alienated world:

He spent hours on his balcony everyday, gazing out to sea with his gold-rimmed glasses. Fishermen had learnt to recognize the distinctive twin flashes of the King's binoculars. Returning to the bay, of an evening, they would look up in the direction of the hilltop balcony, as though for reassurance. Nothing happened in Ratnagiri, people said, the King was first to know of it. (GP, p.76).

The exile poses serious questions of identity and belonging. The King still imagining himself to be the king could not reconcile with the new circumstances and lived his life in the past glory and the thought of the days gone by. He was still very much optimistic that the day would come when he would regain his position and kingdom. Now he was obsessed with the memory of the past and even wanted to preserve the present moment for the sake of future.

The King tried to mark these things in his memory for he knew they would fade in time and a day would come when he would want to remember them - the vividness of his first encounter with the site of his captivity, the sour mildewed smell of it and the roughness of its texture upon the skin (GP, p.61).

Human beings are the creatures of habits and through time new habits evolve, new ways of living life come through but what is lost remains in the memory like a closed jewel box which is no longer our own. The King could never accept the loss of his jewel box of memories and remained the prisoner of his lost past. His condition was similar to what Salman Rushdie says, "The exiles or immigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim to look back even at the risk of being mutated into the pillars of salt" (Rushdie, p.10).

The King never tried to get mixed up and adopt what was the reality now. In Ratnagiri he was "never seen after that first day when he rode up from the harbour with his family..... The princesses, on the other hand, were around town three or four times every year driving down to the Mandvi Jetty or the Bhagwati temple, or to the houses of those British officials whom they were permitted to visit" (GP, p.76). The princesses being so young and having been not mature enough to feel the pains of exile and homelessness adjusted with the situation and with the passing time lost their Burmese identity and culture and adopted the Indian one:

.....as the years passed their garments changed. One day no one quite remembered when they appeared in saris- not expensive or sumptuous saris, but the simple green or red cottons of the district. They began to wear their hair braided and oiled like Ratnagiri schoolgirls: they learned to speak Marathi and Hindustani as fluently as any of the townsfolk- it was only with their parents that they now spoke Burmese (GP, p.77).

The pains of being extricated from one's roots, tradition, culture and society create hollowness and a vacuum in mind which makes permanent effect on one's personality. This pain can be imagined only by those who have lived life on the brink of society, on the margin of culture and on the periphery of tradition. Forced to live on periphery the King took refuge in his past and the Queen retreated to the world of domestic life, but the princesses tried to understand, relate and adjust with the reality. They had a secret longing to relate themselves with the place and local community:

When they drove through the streets they neither averted their gaze nor looked away. There was a hunger in their eyes, a longing, as though they yearned to know what it was like to walk through the jhinjhinaka bazaar, to dawdle at the shops and bargain for saris. They sat alert and upright, taking everything in, and occasionally asking questions of the coachman: Whose sari shop is that? What sort of mangoes are those on that tree? What kind of fish is that hanging in that stall over there? (GP, p.77).

Though they tried to cope with the situation, the incidents of the past always haunted them and none of them could ever forget what was lost. Their predicament to endure the condition of exile and homelessness is summarized in the following words:

It's like a scribble on a wall- no matter how many times you paint over it, a bit of it always comes through, but not enough to put together the whole (GP, p.113).

The exile of the King and his family was so complete and planned that they were completely lost into the oblivion without even the slightest of hints of their existence to the rest of the world. The colonial authorities feared revolt and insurgency in Burma as "the King was the only person who could bring the country together against them" and for that they wanted to make sure that "the King is forgotten. They don't wish to be cruel, they don't want any martyrs, all they want is that the King should be lost to memory, like an old umbrella in a dusty cupboard" (GP, p.136). For this reason they never allowed the King to have social relations either in Burma or in India, never let him participate in public matters and never permitted him to leave Ratnagiri. The exile and the confinement of the King were so strict and inhuman that "The colonial office won't even allow the King to be photographed for fear that the picture would get back to Burma" (GP, p.136). In such a state of strict vigilance the four princesses grew up and attained womanhood. They also were not allowed to meet anyone outside the home, except the servants and workers. This confinement resulted in the affair of the first princess with her coachman, Savant, and she married him without the consent of the royal family and to the disgrace of her parents while the second princess eloped with a common Burmese which caused much embarrassment to the King and the Queen. The King could not bear the shame and died of a massive heart attack. In this way after twenty years of exile, suffering and homelessness the King's soul found rest in everlasting peace in its final abode. The King's funeral was a very humiliating affair:

It was such a sad and humiliating affair that her majesty flatly refused to attend. The Governor was represented by a mere Deputy Collector. You would have wept to see. No one could believe that this was the funeral of Burma's last King! (GP, p.205).

After the death of the King in 1919 the Queen and the princesses were allowed to return to Burma where they got settled in Rangoon. After some time the first princess returned to Ratnagiri to her husband and lived her life with her husband and children in a small house on the outskirts of town. It was here she died after twenty eight years. The second princess and her husband lived in Calcutta for several years

before moving to the hill station of Kalimpong near Darjeeling where they ran a dairy business. The third and fourth princesses got married in Burma. So it happened that of the four princesses, the two who were born in Burma chose to live in India and the younger ones who were born in India chose to settle in Burma. Both married and had children. Thus all the four princesses lived their lives in perpetual exile. The Queen spent her last days in her house in Rangoon. The money she could extract from the colonial authorities she spent on religious charities and on feeding monks. She never wore anything but white, the Burmese colour of mourning. She died in 1925, six years after her return from Ratnagiri and was buried near the Shew Dagon Pagoda in Rangoon.

One of the most important features of *The Glass Palace* is that Ghosh has outsiders and foreigners, for example, Indians in Burma, taking advantage of the situation the British have created. The Indians themselves are victims of colonization but they also capitalize on it. Rajkumar and Saya John compromise with their situations and owe much of their success to the British while the Burmese are presented entirely as victims.

Ghosh even mentions Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Indian emperor, who was taken to Rangoon in exile. Another shock comes when we learn that those who wait on Queen Supayalat are supposed to crawl on the floor but she fails to make an English midwife do so because she is an English woman. The picture of mental colonization is even worse; for example, Saya John feels that Europeans stand for efficient exploitation. For him they are superior. Arjun also reflects on the fact that howsoever we may revolt against the British who shaped everything in the world, we cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves. According to Frederick Luis Aldama:

*The Glass Palace*, Ghosh's ambitious epic, tells the story of a caste of characters, royal, working-class, and bourgeois Indians, Bengalis and Burmese- as they grapple with their sense of place and self while violent historical events reshape twentieth century Burma and India (pp.132-33).

Apart from these human scenes of colonization, Ghosh also deals with the larger question of European greed. Resources are shown to be exploited with energy and efficiency, undreamed - of woods, water, mines, people, just everyone and everything.

In this novel Ghosh continues to engage directly with colonialism and its aftermath. It attempts to represent the human dimension of living through the violent upheavals brought about by the rise and fall of the British Empire while tracing some of Burma's political problems back to that period of dislocation and defeat. Perhaps Ghosh has tried to develop such a narrative to envision the understanding that develops among subalterns, a forging of new relationships born out of the sacrifice and perseverance of the surviving citizens of the nation. Make-shift arrangements and temporary homes appear again and again in this novel, giving it a contemporary flavour, where movement and uncertainty have become a part of life.

*In The Glass Palace* Ghosh suggests a number of compelling ties between Bengal and the rest of South East Asia; it simultaneously tells the story of Indian National Army and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose during the second World War, thereby bringing out the historical dimension in the novel, the advent of modernity in Burma including especially the role of the rubber and teak trades in British colonization.

*The Glass Palace* sketches the main narrative between 1885 and 1942. In 1885 the British conquered Burma annexed it to the Indian empire and sent its king into exile. However, 1885 also coincides with the formation of the Indian National Congress, which would become one of the principal vehicles of anti-colonial resistance and national liberation. At the other end of the main narrative, 1942 coincides with the Quit India Movement, the final and decisive push towards independence organized by the Congress and the last of the three Civil Disobedience agitations led by Mahatma Gandhi. According to Ghosh, as a response to colonialism, this epic historical novel attempts to represent an enormous multiplicity of experience and of history. For me at some point, it became very important that this book encapsulate in it the ways in which people cope with defeat, because this has really been our history for a long, long time: the absolute fact of defeat and trying to articulate defeat to yourself and trying to build a culture around the centrality of defeat.....But around defeat there's love, there's laughter, there's happiness, you know? There are children. There are relationships. There's betrayal. There's faithfulness. This is what life is and I want my book to be true to that (p.89).

*In The Glass Palace* the novelist has used diverse characterization. In this most capacious of his fictions his characters

literally include the king, the queen, the princesses and commoners but what unites them all is the inescapable narrative of colonial displacement presenting the journey image in the novel. Buffeted about by the gate winds of history, these characters are driven from Burma to India, Malaya, Singapore and back again, repeating each time a model of action that the writer presents in the first few pages of the novel:

English soldiers were marching towards the city. Panic struck the market. People began to run and jostle. Rajkumar managed to push his way through the crowd..... Suddenly he was in the front rank of the crowd, looking directly at two English soldiers mounted on horses (GP, p.27).

Ghosh's attempt in *The Glass Palace* is a critical revisiting of the colonial past, a reinterpretation of the past and not a nostalgic return to it. He feels that in *The Glass Palace* the inscription of the past history of the colonial era is valorisable because "the ways in which we remember the past are not determined solely by the brute facts of time: they are open to choice, reflection and judgement" (Ghosh, letter, 18 March, 2001). *The Glass Palace* thus embodies the genuine attempt by Ghosh to revisit and reframe the colonial past which, in a way, may be prefigurative of the discomfiting deleterious ramifications of neo-colonialism.

### References

- Aldama, Frederick Luis Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, *World Literature Today*, 75. ¾ summer/ Autumn, 2001.
- Auradhkar, Sarika, "The Glass Place", Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study, New Delhi: Creative Books, 2007
- Ghosh Amitav, Interview with Frederick Luis, *World Literature Today*, 76:2, 2002.
- ———— Letter to Administrators of Commonwealth Writer's Prize, 18 March, 2001.
- www.amitavghosh.com.
- ———— *The Glass Palace*, Noida: Harper Collins Publishers, First Impression, 2011.
- Rushdie Salman, *Imaginary Homelands*, London: Penguin Books, 1992.

