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A Journey to the forgotten Past: Transculturalism and the Rise of Indian Nationalism in Colonial Burma: Rereading Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract:

In the sweep of larger historical events, individual histories of struggle and resistance often go into oblivion. In Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace* one can trace an attempt on the part of the author to record 'subaltern history' where Ghosh remembers the past of Burma, India and Malaya not only as an imperial 'game of chess' but as biographies of some groups of people who would otherwise remain unmentioned and unknown in the recorded official history of these regions. To do this the novelist has shown how the culturally divergent people of Burma, a country attached to India's North East territory, acted and reacted against and with the Indians present there under the British rule. In the process it offers a colourful array of a rich cultural exchange which, through numerous conflicts and clashes, absorption and appropriation becomes hybridized and newly morphologized. By narrating the history of three generations of people ranging from 1880s up to 1990s in Burma as also in India, the novelist has presented a complex spectrum of the enmeshed relationship between the Burmese and the Indians for more than hundred years under the colonial rule. My paper is intended to throw light upon the dark areas of human interaction that profoundly altered the way of life of these people and speak profusely of different modes of resistance, cultural assimilation and intellectual hegemonization of certain peoples. At the same time it would show how the encounter went into shaping the 'national' consciousness both in respect of Burma and India.

Keywords: subaltern history, cultural conflict, cultural assimilation and appropriation, hybridism, Colonialism, hegemony, national consciousness.

Introduction:

In the present century as in the last decades of the earlier one, large-scale migration created massive challenges to the ideas of nation-states and civil societies. It has drawn the attention of the scholars to the study of transcultural space and identity. It sheds much light on the re-imagining of communities and the subject's 'multi-locationality' within and without the boundaries of one's culture or territorial region. Cultural purity has become a fluid term, almost a misnomer for it hardly seems to exist in its purest form. What we find instead in the present synchronized world is the practice of mixed cultures that give rise to cosmopolitanism which, in its turn, encourages trans-culturalism. In fact, in the earlier colonial as well as in today's globalised world, the iconography of one's cultural identity becomes plural rather than singular – adapted, shaped and reshaped rather than inherited as one comes in contact with other cultural spaces. The historical event of colonisation, as evidenced in Ghosh's 'The Glass Palace' as in his other novels, has deterritorialized a

number of individuals from their 'original' and familiar cultural spaces across the boundary of the country and paved the way in the formation of transcultural space.

In his novels Ghosh advances the cause of the dispossessed and the oppressed subaltern individuals. He has shown how misery, hardship and unhappiness are caused by communal frenzy and violence generated by some untoward incidents or by some policy-makers acting in the political machinery in power. Ghosh goes on to show how in the modern world violence is created by organized religious or sectarian fundamentalists which exerts exceedingly harmful and fatal effects in the lives of men and women in the society. Efforts are made to solve the problem politically by re-demarcating national boundaries, but it does not turn out to be an effective solution. Forced migration and mass dislocation as an essential tool of colonial aggression were put to use by the ruling power. That is the very reason that a large battalion of Indian Royal force was employed in supplanting the Burmese king Thebaw and the Queen Supayalat.

Transculturalism and Cultural Plurality:

With the increase of migration from one place to another either in search of jobs, better lifestyles, better earning prospects, business opportunities or sudden flow of people for other reasons such as natural calamity or political turmoil or a war there arises greater encounter between peoples of different cultural backgrounds. Sometimes, the new place of settlement is culture-friendly or, on the other way, may be antagonistic to other cultural practices. In most of the cases, the dominant power allows people belonging to other cultural groups to practise their own cultural rites. But, sometimes cultural practices different from the dominant group/s lead to cultural conflicts and in some cases, even violence. As matters stand, the process of tolerance for the cultural practices of those marked as the 'other' goes on unhampered as long as it does not pose a threat to the habits and practices of the dominant group/s. The moment there is a perception of threat to the existence of the dominant culture, conflict arises. However, even when people of different ethnic groups or nationalities try to keep their identities distinct through the performance of their cultures, they are constantly engaged in an encounter with other people's cultures and behavioural practices which, in its turn, keep on shaping and reshaping their 'original' culture. This is where the concept of transculturalism comes to the scenario.

Antje Flüchter and Jivanta Schöttli are of the opinion that like other trans-terms, 'transcultural' has been used loosely and often in a sloppy manner. In some contexts transcultural is used as a similar term for 'intercultural' or 'transnational,' 'for depicting connected or entangled history or for endeavors that compare different cultures'. They like to see it as a process of 'continuous change or transformation of cultures'. In their words, "This concept is, first and foremost, built upon a processual understanding of culture and thus challenges the traditional idea that cultures are internally cohesive, homogenous, self-contained, or hermetically sealed against external influences."¹ Edward Said and Wolfgang Iser, in their interpretations of hybridity and transculturality, have made the suggestion that because of the unavoidable interconnections between past and present societies and cultures nothing so far is free from hybridity or transculturalism. Therefore, Kwame Appiah rightly asserts that 'cultural purity is an oxymoron'.

Now, let us focus our attention to another related aspect which is 'cultural plurality'. It is a widely used term in the academia in a liberal vein. As Peter Brook puts it: "Pluralism

implies the acceptance of difference and diversity across a very broad possible range in a number of disciplines, and areas of cultural and political activity: from the adoption of an open curriculum, the recognition of different intellectual perspectives or combination of different methodological approaches, to the affirmation of sexual and ethnic difference, or arguments for diversity in the composition of the political or public sphere.”² One can argue the case of multiculturalism in this respect. The diversity that it advocates is actually directed in the direction of conformity in a society “where respect for diverse literatures and subcultures becomes the cultural norm”. At the same time it is to be considered whether the rise of nationalism contradicts any account of pluralism as a dominant mode. It implies that at certain points there is no tolerance or negotiation at all.

Idea of the Nation:

Before we go into the detail let us take a look at what constitutes the idea of the nation. In fact, the idea of the nation is a modern one, especially a European one that denotes a country with politically fixed, definite and rigorous borders. Although it refers to its physical existence, Benedict Anderson, the much acclaimed historian points out that, far from being a physical entity, nation is something that can be called ‘imagined communities’. The next point to consider is that nation is a collective, a ‘unity’ that might be more abstract or fantastic than real. Still, its influence is very powerful. At the same time this sense of unity is sustained through the use of symbolic forms and figures – such as the hoisting of national flags, singing the national anthem, large-scale celebration of some rituals or festivals like Dussera, Diwali or Onam, chanting of the slogan ‘unity in diversity’, and the like. The most important of all, we are made aware of our national identity by constant feeding with the official historical information that we belong to a nation which, in our case, is called India.

From the above discussion it emerges that the ‘nation’ is also a myth which has a very real and powerful hold over the emotions of the people. It brings people under one umbrella and asks them to act together in the name of the nation. And it is to be kept in mind in this respect that this ‘national’ identity is freely accepted and assimilated by the people. Once this identity is established and disseminated it puts a thrust for imagining a ‘shared tradition’ in which all have some contribution to make.

***The Glass Palace* in perspective:**

Ghosh’s novel *The Glass Palace* derives its title from the royal palace of Burma with the name ‘Glass Palace’ which was inhabited by King Thebaw and his powerful and cruel wife Queen Supayalat. It was a time when the British were ruling over a large part of the world including India. The greed and martial power of England drove the nation towards expanding territories across other parts of the world. The wealth and richness of dense teak woods aplenty in Burma attracted their attention and the land was invaded. King Thebaw was supplanted and the royal family was sent into exile at Ratnagiri in India. But the striking fact about the invasion was that the imperial army consisted of as many Indians as it could accommodate and there were only a handful of white officers and soldiers executing their plans. As the King was on his way into exile he encountered the army near the waterway:

The King raised his glasses to his eyes and spotted several *Indian* faces along the waterfront. 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—people taken from one place to another, to pull rickshaws, to sit blind in exile?³ (TGP 50. Emphasis mine).

The deposed King was not given a reply, but the answer was not very difficult to get at. It was this that was the nature of expansion of colonialism. And the gravest part of this venture is that it was mostly the Indians who were employed in the war – a people already colonized set against another country for the purpose of further colonization. Herein lies the irony of the situation.

The British takes economic, political and military control of Burma after the removal of King Thebaw from the throne. For some time Mandalay became a ‘city of ghosts’. Back in India, the royal family was given the residence at Outram House in Ratnagiri. They are not allowed to go back to Burma and for twenty years or so they stayed in India adjusting themselves with the changing conditions. When Rajkumar, the little Indian black boy working at the roadside tea-stall of Ma Cho, now turned into a teak tycoon in Burma comes in search of Dolly, the girl he spotted in his childhood as a maid in the royal family at the time of exile and fell in love with, and asks her to go back with him to Burma and marry him, she calmly replies:

If I went to Burma now, I would be a foreigner—they would call me a kalaa like they do Indians—a trespasser, an outsider from across the sea. I’d find that very hard, I think. I’d never be able to rid myself of the idea that I would have to leave again one day, just as I had to before. You would understand if you knew what it was like when we left (TGP 113).

This is the nightmarish vision of a migrant who has somehow lost touch with the culture of her origin. The country, once hers, has acquired some alienating gaps; it seems to be foreign, a place not ready to accept her as its own. This is the dilemma of the diasporic people that Ghosh depicts in a very sensitive and sympathetic way. Once again, the process of transculturalisation continues without one’s being aware of this. The finest proof of this is that when Dolly starts imagining Saya John as her father-in-law and at their first meeting she finds herself “folding her hands together, in the Indian way, unconsciously, through the force of long habit” (TGP 181).

The last part of *The Glass Palace* exposes the fatal condition of thousands of people – mostly Indian migrated from Burma to Calcutta on account of Japanese invasion on Burma in 1942. The invasion created chaotic and critical condition amongst the people, on the face of the Japanese attack against the British. The people in Burma were in a critical and confused state as to which side they should be – the British or the Japanese. In either side people feared extermination. No choice was left over but to flee from their homeland. Such precarious condition is exposed in the novel artfully by Ghosh. In some ways the two themes that have animated Ghosh’s writing from the beginning of his career as a novelist –his interest in the lives of middle class Indian families and his concern for the world’s afflicted – come together as the very people who once went to Burma to try their luck and eventually became successful, both as professional and businesspersons, suddenly become dispossessed of their fortunes. Themselves – once rich and powerful, now turn into refugees, living in utter penury, and struggling across rivers and mountains, wheeling the elderly in carts and often dying along the way.

The theme of alienation and identity crisis of South Asian families in pre and post-colonial time is explored in the novel. The abuses and devastation of war, arising out of two foreign countries – Britain and Japan in war against each other – for their imperial ambition to have control over Burma, Malaya and a major portion of South-East Asia are minutely sketched in the novel. The Japanese took hold of Burma in 1942 and thousands of people mostly Indian emigrants, fleeing from war-ravaged and devastated Burma, travelled thousands of miles, mostly on foot, to reach the northwest frontier border of Burma and India in their struggle for existence. As Ghosh describes:

They began to notice other people – a few scattered, handfuls at first, then more and more and still more, until the road become so thickly thronged that they could barely move. Everyone was heading in same direction: towards the northern landward passage to India – a distance of more than thousand miles. They had their possessions bundled on their heads; they were carrying children on their backs, wheeling elderly people in carts and barrows (TGP 467).

Ghosh narrates the position of large mass of people, marooned between two countries – Burma and India. Indian people who stayed there for a long time became the objects of suspicion in the eyes of the Burmese. They are facing the feeling of an “outsider” in their ‘own country’ or the country which they thought of as their own. The ‘long march’ back to India once again raises important questions about the nature of national identity, the reality of border lines between countries and justification of mass migration and exiles. It is scholarly of Ghosh that he has presented the historical details, and the dilemmas in a fine manner in ‘The Glass Palace’.

When the Japanese drive away the British from Burma, some members in Indian Army get split over the issue and it has greater effect on the common people especially middle class families who are confused over the question as to who to support – the British or the Japanese. Pico Iyer in his article – *The Road to Mandalaya* puts it this way:

These characters torn between two kinds of operation – traitors if they support British, traitors if they support Japanese – take Ghosh back to what has always seemed to be his central concern, the consequences of displacements.⁴

Thus, once again Ghosh shows his concern for the migrated people or people at the fringe of migration. The focal theme of the novel is inevitable recognition of the human being especially at the time of large scale dislocation caused by colonialism.

Through the character of Arjun in *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh articulates the faithfulness of the native people in the power of the foreign rulers on their own land. Ghosh brings further the dilemma of self- realization in Arjun’s life. Arjun feels that he was ‘used’ instead of ‘employed’ in the British army. Arjun has served British Army for major parts of his life but ultimately feels deceived by the British Army. Arjun undergoes a journey of self-realization, which ends with his recognizing the falsity of values by which he has lived his life. He feels that he has been a mere mercenary and tool in the hands of the British, self-divided and lacking even in elementary self- awareness. The nature of his job as well his temperament has been shown by Alison when she says:

Arjun – you are not in charge of what you do; you’re a toy, a manufactured thing, a weapon in someone else’s hands. Your mind doesn’t inhabit your body (TGP 376).

Hardy acts as an eye opener for Arjun. Arjun spent most of his years of service in veneration for the British without ever asking who he was actually working for. It is Hardayal, his colleague in the Indian army who points it out to him:

Well, didn't you ever think: this country whose safety, honor and welfare are to come first, always and every time—what is it? Where is this country? The fact is that you and I don't have a country—so where is this place whose safety, honor and welfare are to come first, always and every time? And why was it that when we took our oath it wasn't to a country but to the King Emperor—to defend the Empire? (TGP 330).

This is the beginning of the mark of nationalism that starts working in Arjun. Some time after he has the realization:

They had always known their country to be poor, yet they had never imagined themselves to be part of that poverty: they were the privileged, the elite. The discovery that they were poor too came as a revelation (TGP 348).

Last words:

The theme of racial and other religious and communal clashes among Indians and Burmese and sections of people in other faith is not prominently portrayed in the novel. Indian and Burmese families and common people of middle class origin mix among themselves freely. Families of Rajkumar, Uma and Saya John move in Burma, India and Malaysia as circumstances demand. However, Ghosh projects the development of Saya and Rajkumar keeping aside the racial, linguistic and religious differences. Thus the theme of creating new societies based on the process of mutual understanding and acculturation is imbued in the novel. Here the customs are invented and absorbed to create new cultures, cultural hierarchies too overlap and there is entwining of high and low classes to create new societies. That is how Ghosh creates better standards of human relationship based on mutual trust and cooperative appreciation.

This paper attempts to show how dislocated people go through the process of transculturalization and hybridization and operate in the 'third space' as propounded by Bhabha in various geographical areas around the world. We can see how the traditional analytical categories such as diasporic migration, acculturation and assimilation fall short in a set up promoted by Empire in countries like Burma and India in the colonial and postcolonial period. It asks for the necessity and adoption of transculturation in the lives of the dislocated, deterritorialized and reterritorialized individuals in different parts of the world.

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