

Thematic Concern in the Glass Palace by Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract – *The present study tries to highlight the core issues related to the British colonization of India, Burma and Malaya. Several issues such as dislocation and displacement, exploitation of the colonized countries, rootlessness, migration and the situation of Indian soldiers in British Army are at the center of this paper. This paper, apart from the historical facts, also bring to the fore the familial relations of the fictional characters. The British attacked Burma in 1885 and forced the king of Burma to move to India with his entourage, so that they could exploit the natural resources of Burma. Soon, The British gained control on all the resources, socio, cultural, economic and political life of Burma. The intention behind sending the Indian king to Burma was also the same. This paper also tries to demonstrate how the the British Army used the Indian soldiers for their unethical deeds. These soldiers were poor farmers, workers, rickshaw-pullers who came from the villages of India to earn money. The Indian Soldiers were never given credit even if they win or lose. They were just called 'mercenary'. These cruel ways of colonizing have been well explained in this paper with the uses of some remarkable quotations from the this novel.*

Key words: *Displacement, Migration, Colonization, Mercenary, Exploitation*

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Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* can be regarded as a key example of the genre of historical fiction. The present paper treats with several issues raised in this novel. Such as the exploitation of the colonized countries, displacement that occurs at a large scale, rootlessness, migration, the situation of Indian soldiers working in the British Army and the effect of Europeans' policies upon people's lives. "The magnificent, poignant and fascinating novel of three generations that starts in Mandalay" written on the novel's cover page, gives the brief information about the novel. In this novel, Ghosh has picturized the history of three countries- India, Burma and Malaya. With the commencement of Anglo-Burmese War of 1885, there began a new era in the history of Burma. Very soon, the British gained control on the economic, social, cultural, and political life of Burma. They started exploiting the natural resources of the countries that they conquered.

Ghosh has beautifully presented the story with a sweeping historical background without letting it to be tedious for readers. The novel is divided into seven major parts entitled: Mandalay, Ratnagiri, The Money Tree, The Wedding, Morningside, The Front and The Glass Palace. Further, these parts have been divided into many chapters highlighting a number of issues Ghosh makes his readers to understand. The novel revolves around four major families that of King Thebaw's, Rajkumar's, Saya

John's and Uma's and spans over three generations. In November 1885, the British took aggressive action against Burma and within the fourteen days the Burmese Army surrendered. The King Thebaw and the Queen Supalayay with their entourage were exiled to India. In first part of the novel, Mandalay, Ghosh sets out the major incidents that form the background of the novel and we become acquainted with the major characters of the novel- Rajkumar, Dolly, Queen Supalayay and Saya John. The last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar's deportation to Rangoon and King Thebaw exile to Madras, is a key example of colonial displacement and the cunning strategy of the British. Ghosh's letter to administrators of Commonwealth Writers Prize states why Ghosh withdrew his name from the list. It reads: "The issue of how the past is to remembered lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace* and I feel that I would be betraying the spirit of the book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialisation of empire that passes under the rubric of 'the commonwealth'".

Most of the soldiers in the British Army were Indians. Ghosh writes: "There were some ten thousand soldiers in the British invasion force and of these great majority-about two-thirds-were Indian sepoys" (26 *The Glass Palace*). Saya John also explains the situation of Indian soldiers in the

British army. He says that Indian soldiers are just tools in their master's hands and their masters use them according to their convenience. They all were peasants from the villages of India and were just paid only a few annas a day. It is Saya John who clarifies Rajkumar's doubts and helps him in establishing his teak business. It was not just the greed of the British that was solely responsible for the exploitation of Burma but also the people like Baburao (labor contractor) and Rajkumar who used to hire workers from India. Many foreign companies in Burma needed workers and they relied upon people like Rajkumar. This incident reminds us of Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale* that states that "Greed is the root of all evil". Many women workers were also sexually abused during these trips. Illongo was the result of Rajkumar's heinous act. Ghosh goes in detail in providing the pathetic picture of these workers. People like Baburao could not find a more easy way to earn money.

'Ratnairi', the second part of the novel, describes the lives of the Royal family and the hardships faced by them in India. This part also illustrates the unconventional and open-minded views of Dolly and Queen Supalayat. The collector's wife Uma Dey soon comes in contact with Dolly and they both develop a strong friendship. When they have conversation regarding the pregnancy of First Princess, Dolly makes a comment: "You're all the same, all obsessed with your castes and your arranged marriages. In Burma when a woman likes a man she is free to do what she wants" (117-18). And the same thing can be seen in the words of Queen Supalayat's discussion with the collector Beny Prasad Dey. Queen Supalayat interrogates the collector about the legitimacy of their staying here.

Uma seems to be really concerned about Dolly's life, her marriage and her future. Uma wonders that Dolly has not been given enough chances to make her own life better and to think of herself as an independent person. Dolly has forgotten everything about Burma. Whenever someone asks her about Burma, she just remembers *The Glass Palace*. Dolly can't even think of going back to Burma. Her deportation to India from her native land and her uneasiness in leaving this place again is visible in her words to Uma: "I'd never be able to rid myself of the idea that I would have to leave again one day just I had to before" (113). But after her marriage with Rajkumar, it becomes mandatory for Dolly to leave for Burma. After second world-War again she is required to go to India with Rajkuamar and several years later again she is prompted to go to Burma to look for Dinu. One can't find the more soothing examples of displacement in this novel.

After the death of the collector, Uma goes to New York and actively starts participating in group named Indian Independence League. Saya John's son Matthew is also in New York who helps her in settling there. When twenty years after Uma returns to India, She is welcomed by the members of her party. Dolly

is very much startled by seeing the huge crowd who have gathered to welcome Uma Dey who looks like a great celebrity now. Very soon Uma explains to Dolly the motives of her league and how she involved in this league. At this time, Rajkumar has two young sons- Neel and Dinu. Neel is married to Manju (Uma's niece) and Dinu is sent to live at Morningside estate in Malaya with Saya John's family. Matthew (Saya's son) and his wife Elsa were blessed with a daughter named Alison. While Dinu's stay at Morningside, there develops a strong bond of love and affection between Dinu and Alison.

The novel simultaneously presents the story of the Indian soldiers serving under their British masters. The study of the characters of Arjun Singh, Kishan Singh and Hardy is sufficient to form an overall impression of the situations of Indian soldiers. When Arjun is recruited in the British Indian army, we can get an idea of how the soldering is taken as a job. His father's delight is evident in his views when he says, "This is a ready-made career...at the end, there'll be an excellent pension" (258). And when Arjun's mother seems worried about this, his father tries to calm her by saying "It's just a job like any other. Besides, think of the status, the prestige..." (258). Amitav Ghosh also shows the influence of Western culture on Indian soldiers and how these soldiers have been psychically controlled by the British. Arjun boasts off his connections with the British masters. He says "we understand the West better than any of you civilians" (279). Ghosh also demonstrates the discrimination between the Indian soldiers and the British soldiers working in same unit. They all have a same work to do and same food to eat but the soldiers who are trained in England, are paid handsome amount of money than their India counterparts. Many instances can be given regarding the cruelty of colonization and its effects on the people's lives.

When Japanese forces attack Burma during Second World War, the British Indian army's units are deployed to fight against them. Indian soldiers in Burma are often interrogated by the local people about their services in the army. Some students and congress party workers ask Arjun, "From whom you are defending us? From ourselves? From other Indians? It's your masters from whom the country needs to be defended" (288). They are often considered slaves by the Burmese people. Alison's remark to Arjun reveals the above idea: "Arjun you are not in charge of what you do; you are a toy, a manufactured thing, a weapon in someone else's hands. Your mind does not inhibit your body"(376). After suffering much humiliating comments, some Indian soldiers form an independent unit called Indian National army and then collaborate with the Japanese forces. Now there are Indian soldiers on both sides fighting with each other, with their own brother and friends. Even if the Indian soldiers win or lose, it doesn't

matter. They are not given credit for what they have done.

The second last part of the novel describes the horrific incidents of Second World War and again focuses on family relations. Dinu and Alison are trying to escape from this bloody war. But there has been written something different. Sayajohn and Alison are soon killed. Jaya, Manju's daughter makes her appearance in the ending chapters of the novel and her search for Dinu reveals some more things about Dinu's life, about Uma and Rajkumar who have already died years ago. Dinu is also married and has established his studio that bears the name: The Glass Palace: Photo Studio.

To conclude, the book exposes the cruel ways of the exploitation of colonized countries. Ghosh confesses in his 'Author's notes': "I read hundred of books, memoirs, travelogues, gazetteers, articles and notebooks, published and unpublished; I travelled thousands of miles, visiting and revisiting, so far as possible, all the setting and location that figure in this novel, I sought out scores of people in India, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand."

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