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SHIFTING PLACES, SHIFTING IDENTITIES: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF
'THE GLASS PALACE'

Md MIZANUR RAHAMAN

Research Scholar
Aligarh Muslim University



Md MIZANUR
RAHAMAN

ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* is a major text in the field of postcolonial literature or New Literature. This novel is suffused with various postcolonial issues ranging from the deconstruction of nationalism, an inkling of hope in cosmopolitanism, exploring the dark legacy of British Imperialism, the predicament of the displaced colonized subjects and the ambivalent nature of the identities of the colonizer and the colonized. This paper seeks to investigate how the author shows a deliberate consciousness in this novel to deconstruct the binary of the colonized and the colonizer and how fragile this dichotomy is, with the evidence of showing various characters assuming different roles with simultaneous shift in power structure. This discourse of 'ambivalent' nature of the colonial subjects has caught the attention of the literary postcolonial theorists. This novel shows testimony to the postmodern and post-structural awareness of the pluralities and multiplicity of subjectivity and how a character becomes a 'text' (a text with language) or a dialogic 'space' where different contrary ideologies collide for dominance. Further, the paper seeks to demonstrate this role of duality(plurality) and ambivalence played by various characters including Rajkumar, Arjun, Saya John, the King and the Queen of Burma and how in their long journey they have performed different roles with the emergence of British rule in Burma. Much of the focus will be given to the character of Rajkumar Raha in whom we find a multiplicity of roles; alienated member of the diaspora, the colonized as well as a colonizer in this part of the British Empire and in his exploitation of ecological resources in the form of teak business.

Key words: ambivalence, mimicry, subjectivity, ecological exploitation, power.

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In his book *The Postmodern Indian English Literature* the critic Bijay Kumar Das has made a demarcation between what he calls the modern and postmodern phases of Indian English Literature and the moment of the beginning of postmodernism is taken to be the publication of the *Midnight's Children* which proposes a radical postmodern notion about identity and nation. Amitav Ghosh may be regarded as one of the best writers of the post- *Midnight's Children* period to reflect upon the emerging new trend in Indian English

literature. His exploration of the imperial legacy of the British rule in Asia, his acute consciousness of modern problems of nationalism and his cosmopolitanism as an antidote to the these problems of boundaries and constraints have garnered him much reputation in the field of world literature.

Beginning with *The Circle of Reason* Amitav Ghosh has written more than eight novels and some non-fictional works and each of his novels has made endeavours to deal with different issues. In *The Circle of Reason* he criticized the Enlightenment project of reason and rationality and its clandestine nexus with colonial violence. In *The Shadow Lines* it was the narrow and parochial construction of nation state which came under his disparagement. *The Glass Palace*, published in 2000 is a novel of epic grandeur with much complexity in its treatment of various postcolonial issues. In this novel Ghosh has sought to unravel with greater details the detrimental effects of British imperialism wrecked upon three South Asian countries- Burma, India and Malaysia, weaving the public history with private lives of people of three different generations.

At the very outset of this article I want to formulate a theoretical framework of post-structural and postmodern notions of subjectivity and how this representation of agency is further problematized by spatial and temporal socio-economic conditions. The 'incredulity' towards the modern grand narrative of fixed and stable identity pushed different postmodern thinkers into search for an alternative(s). Bhaba came out with the idea of 'mimicry', 'hybridity', and the 'third space' which emphasize the fact that the process of the construction of identity is always in a state of flux, a 'movement'. Lacan speaks of the identity of the self as a desire for the other, a kind of recognition by the other. This constructiveness of identity is deeply interrelated with the extant power structure which, as Michael Foucault has pointed out, is not simply a top to bottom phenomena; rather it is ubiquitous and multidimensional in nature. Amitav Ghosh himself is in contact with different postcolonial critics and though he denies any attachment with the nomenclature of postcolonial literature, his novels are full of reflections of postcolonial concerns.

In the novel *The Glass Palace*, Saya John an important character makes a very significant comment while he says that once he was described by the Indian soldiers as "dhobi ka kutta, na gharka na ghatka" (a dog of the washer man which belongs neither to land nor to water) which epitomizes the predicament of the displaced and rootless subalterns. Almost all the characters suffer from this sense of dislocation. Indeed, in most of his novels Ghosh has tried to capture the sense of frustration and alienation of the immigrant people, their longing for the 'imaginary homeland'. Rukmani Bhaya Nair aptly points out about this sense of nostalgia and ensuing existential despair of various fragmented characters in *The Glass Palace*-

"Any writer who seeks to present the soul of man under colonialism, as Amitav Ghosh does in his latest novel, *The Glass Place* is therefore condemned to record the exit-ential dilemma – wherein the subject is necessarily partitioned, a bewildered immigrant never quite in focus nor contained within the frame"

Rajkumar, the protagonist of this novel is a postmodern invention of the author who can be described as a conglomeration of different ideologies. The character of Rajkumar helps the author explore many postcolonial thematic concerns. The writer's intention was to represent Rajkumar as a subaltern, a member of the displaced diaspora, a truly transnational figure who cuts the borders and boundaries and also a despicable money-minded who in implicit with the colonizers exploits the ecological resources in his teak business in Burma and rubber plantation in Malaysia. He arrives in Burma as a destitute after losing his mother in a long voyage from Arakan to Bengal and finds shelter in the stall of Ma Cho, who is half Burmese half Indian. The description of his physical appearance shows nothing extraordinary-

"His name meant Prince, but he was anything but princely in appearance, with his oil-splashed vest, his untidily knotted longyi and his bare feet with their thick slippers of callused skin".

In this novel the writer chose a teleological linear narrative to retell the history of Burma weaving it with the life of Rajkumar and many lower class characters' point of view which is really a radical one and may be interpreted as an attempt to avoid the official narrative of history and an initiative to see the "history from the below". Rajkumar's perils and abysmal condition in Burma is an inevitable consequence of existence of British Imperialism in India and Burma. This flow of human beings from one country to another country, from one

continent to another is because of the maritime enterprise of the European countries to African and Asian and South American countries that were in competition with each other to find new land to expand their territories for new markets. King Thebaw feels agonized to see this new mode of world order where exile and enslavement are common tropes-

“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?”

Because, of his calibre and great potential in business enterprise he is able to transform himself from a mere subaltern to a truly transnational figure who transcends the borders of nation, race and class. And like many other characters in all other novels he is a cosmopolitan to whom all the world is like a little village. He begins his career as a labourer in the teak business in the forest of Burma and later on, he with the help of Saya John starts his own business. He imports indentured labourers from Bengal for this purpose and becomes a business tycoon in the wake of colonialism. Having established himself he appears in Ratnagiri where Dolly is residing with the King and Queen of Burma and gets married with her and returns to Burma.

But the major concern of this article is to shed light on Rajkumar’s active participation in intensifying the shackles of colonialism of Burma and Malaysia. He is, as Naipaul has said ‘a mimic man’ who does not care to resist the exploitation but a collaborator with the colonizers to catch fish in the troubled water. Amitav Ghosh has said about this fact in an interview “‘complicity between Indians and the colonising power’”. The critic Rohini Mokashi Puneekar comments:

“The line between the colonizers and colonized is blurred, even erased; colonization is run as a continuous ongoing process, and often reversible”

Rajkumar resembles a white British colonizer who commodified the ecology and established an undisputed monopoly over them. This role of Rajkumar being a tool was hinted in the very first scene of the novel where the natives watched that most of the soldiers in the British army were the Indians. Rajkumar was attacked by some native Burmans but rescued by Saya John. The king also declares the ‘kaalas’ i.e the Indians to be the invader of their religion, tradition and state. Moreover, before the arrival of western colonialism and capitalism the natural world had its own independent identity which exercised great spiritual influence on the native. But the capitalist merchants started considering ecological resources as means of ‘human development’. This anthropocentric and Eurocentric view to nature ensured a marginalized condition of nature, subordinate to human development. Saya John ruminates over this fact of capitalistic trend of eco-commercialization-

“Yet until the Europeans came none of them had ever thought of using elephants for the purposes of logging. Their elephants were used only in pagodas and palaces, for wars and ceremonies. It was the Europeans who saw that tame elephants could be made work for human profit ...this entire way of life is their creation”

Rajkumar appears to be a great manipulator of the indentured labourers from Bengal. In the long voyage from Bengal to Burma most of the labourers had to face extreme suffering and many died. It reminds us of the great Middle Passage of the Black peoples who were bought or kidnapped from African countries for sugar plantation in Caribbean islands or South America.

“The passage was rough and the floor of the holding area was soon covered with vomit and urine. This foul-smelling layer of slime welled back and forth with the rolling of the ship, rising inches high against the walls. The recruits sat huddled on their tin boxes and cloth bundles. At the first sight of land, off the Arakan coast, several men leapt off the ship. By the third day of the voyage the number of people in the hold had dwindled by a few dozen. The corpses of those who had died on board were carried to the stern and dropped into the ship’s churning wake”

Gradually Burma became a place where the Burmese are deprived of everything and exiled from their own homes. Indeed, Rajkumar is one of those Indians who conspired to marginalize the Burmese-

Indian moneylenders have taken over all the farmland; Indians run most of the shops; people say that the rich Indians live like colonialists, lording it over the Burmese'.⁵²

Rajkumar's role as an oppressor is corroborated by the fact of his exploitation of the women workers in the rubber plantation in Malaysia. A major thrust in postcolonial literature is how the women are sexually exploited and doubly colonized by the patriarchal white colonizers. Rajkumar also misuses this power mechanism to oppress the females. He had sexual relation with the mother of Illongo but did not marry her and deprived her of her due rights by giving some money to her. Rajkumar had everything which he wanted; his beloved, two sons and his own business of teak and rubber plantation and he lived a life of a typical British sahib with all the luxury of the world. But the dark aspects of his character does not go uncriticized. In a confrontation with Uma his imperialistic nature becomes quite apparent to us-

"How dare you?" Uma cried. "How dare you speak to me like that? You—an animal, with your greed, your determination to take whatever you can—at whatever cost. Do you think nobody knows about the things you've done to people in your power—to women and children who couldn't defend themselves? You're no better than a slaver and a rapist, Rajkumar.

But the Second World War turned out to be his nemesis. He lost his son, his daughter in law died during their long journey to India and he himself ends up as a complete destitute in the house of Uma Dey. Now the important question is how to judge the character of Rajkumar. Perhaps the Greek myth of Janus aptly illustrates the character of Rajkumar, a riposte of the opposites and also like the Colonialism itself which was a bundle of contradictions.

My further inquiry in this project of the po(litics)etics is the character of Rajkumar and the Collector. In order to understand the psychology of colonialism it is imperative to dive into the power structures that were built to colonize the natives. Lord Macaulay in his "Minute on Education" articulated how the educational system of India would be. It says-

"we must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect"

According to Macaulay's theory of education the natives will be the blind imitator of their system or to put simply they will be men of no man's land. The postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhaba has also meditated upon this grave issue of the subject-formation. His affiliation with psychology and postmodernism turned this debate complex and enlightening. He delves deep into this phenomena and asserts how complicated this discourse of subjectivity is. He insists upon mimicry and ambivalence as the vital concerns of colonial subjects which are far away from what Macaulay meant to be his object. Mimicry and ambivalence is a unique type of identity where the submission goes hand in hand with resistance; mimicry is not simple imitation but a camouflage and ironical protest against the masters. On this complex issue, we may observe the characters of the Collector Dey and the soldier Arjun. The character of the Collector is meant to be a criticism of prevalent hegemonic 'babu' or 'bhadrolok' culture in Bengal and in India at large. Of course he is an ideal product of Macaulay's education system that is "Indian in blood" but "English in taste". The irony in his character is that in spite of his being an educated ICS fellow from London he fails to understand his true self, he remains just a mirror of foreign culture-

"Collector Dey was slim and aquiline with a nose that extended in a sharp beak – like point. He dressed in finely cut Savile Row suits and wore gold-rimmed eyeglasses" (TGP, p.104).

The Collector Dey was a staunch defender of whatever the Britishers stood for. His *interpellation* of English cultures reaches to such an extent that he does feel ashamed to call them as "amader gurujon" our teachers. When he is sent to Ratnagiri to administer the house of the King and the Queen, he behaves as a Colonizer, a protector of the Great Empire. We can judge that the behaviour of the Collector as a mere copy whose mimicry does not resonate with Bhaba's definition of mimicry which retain a subterranean voice of resistance. But the Collector's wife Uma falls into a different category that imbibes the British education and cultures but turns the table against the masters. She joins a political party and starts national movement for freedom. But

the failure to protect the dignity of the masters he commits suicide. Perhaps the author means to convey a message through the suicide of the Collector. The Collector fails to find meaning in his purposeless life.

The character of Arjun, the soldier reflects the complicated nuances of Indian struggle movement. Arjun was an admirer of the British culture and he joined Indian Military Academy with much enthusiasm. He writes regularly to his sister about his daily activities and his respect for the British masters and unwavering support for the British interest. He thinks that to be with his masters is his real identity. He feels oneness with the army, he feels proud to associate himself with the infantry which helped relinquish the Mutiny and capture the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar.

“Yesterday Hardy and I were looking at the battalion’s battle honors, and I swear to you, Manju, the list was as long as my arm. During the Mutiny our troops stayed loyal—one of our companies was in the column that captured the old Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, at his hidy-hole at Humayun’s tomb.”

Saya John is appalled to observe the submissiveness of the Indian army. He wondered that it was just for some ‘annas’ which catapulted them to such a hazardous profession who fight “from neither enmity nor anger, but in submission to orders from superiors”. He was terrified by the ‘innocent evil’ in their eyes. But this illusion of his hegemonic identity begins to crumble during the war. He fights for the British against Japan and remains loyal to them until Kishan Singh arouses his conscience. He mulls over his past and finds himself to be just ‘lumps of clay, whirling on potters ‘wheels’. This introspection to his ground of being shatters the hollow structure of his self. He comes to discover that it was the acts of power and unconscious fear which has moulded him-

“But if it were true that his life had somehow been moulded by acts of power of which he was unaware – then it would follow that he had never acted of his own volition; never had a moment of true self consciousness. Everything he had ever assumed about himself was a lie, an illusion.”(431)

To compensate his mistake he decides to join INA and becomes a rebel. But the remembrance of his past does not let him go so easily. He understood very well it is only through the destruction of himself that he can destroy his past.

A very pertinent question related to this politics of identities is why these colonial subjects participated in marginalizing themselves and the answer, I think, is not so simple and straightforward. A correspondence of various socio-political and cultural factors inevitably entails into this deliberation. The characters of Rajkumar, Arjun and the Collector are apparent evidences to this fact of complex terrain of colonialism.

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