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MOVING ACROSS THE SPATIAL BOUNDARIES IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE GLASS  
PALACE*

PRITHWA DEB

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Biswanath college, Biswanath chariali, Assam



ABSTRACT

Displacements, interruptions, dislocations and enslavements continued during the colonial times and it is a legacy of European expansion and has distorted the structure of the society. The present paper seeks to explore the constant movement of the natives in the colonial times in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*. Along with it the paper tries to evacuate the colonial empire reinforcing Western education and creating a notion of west to be imitated and east to be despised. The colonial expansion made the people move from one place to another. This shifting culture marked an epoch in the world history and in this paper the Burmese invasion in the year 1885 by the British has been focused. The plight of Indians and the British is represented as that of shifting and in the process the loss of home, loss of relationships, loss of land can be witnessed. The natives also suffer from the burden of otherness. Post colonialism craves to justify such movements though it has layered connotations. The Western culture have encroached the minds of the people and has taken over their lives, culture, and language. But at the same time the traits of Western culture can be seen as carried on by the colonized. The transculturation is evident in the characters of *The Glass Palace*. Ghosh gave privilege to the Indians when we see that Rajkumar, the Indian born orphan transformed into a rich entrepreneur of timber from a coolie and shifting the positions and became a little empire in the jungle. Other characters also praise the British and work for them in due course of the novel. Colonialism as AniaLoomba writes that it "was not an identical process in different parts of the world but everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history." (2) The complexities among the people and the different connotations of the term 'postcolonial' are being highlighted in the paper. The movement creates a psychological condition and in this novel it is a movement within and without. The natives are in constant shift mapping the geographical space and at the same time it is a shift of the mental scape, shift of three generations which has been depicted vividly in the unfolding of the novel.

Keywords: Movement, shifting, transculturation, postcolonialism, layered, loss, history, dislocations, otherness.

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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? (*Glass Palace*, 50)

Shifting becomes an important motif in colonial and post colonial times and Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* is a saga of movement spanning three generations. Ghosh being a contributor to travel writing gives a detailed picture of travelling across geography and travelling inside the recesses of mind. The novel straddles the space of countries like India, Burma, Malay and the characters emerging and growing out of this movement. *The Glass Palace* can be read as contextualizing history of Burma, problematizing the generations of two families, a travelogue and a forgotten Buddhist territory. It encompasses the colonial rule of British in Anglo-Burmese wars of 1885. It is a reconstruction of the recent history. We encounter the political, social and cultural turmoil of the natives of India and Burma.

Literary theory can be traced back to the Anglo- American traditions of the New Critics whose concern was the text itself and the key figure was F.R. Leavis. T.S. Eliot also was another figure who talked about traditions, impersonality, and objectivity in writing. Postcolonial theory provided a distinct category and inclined towards the social and cultural practices. Post colonialism entered into a new agenda of academics and reflected a new consciousness on Indian Independence (1947) and a reorientation to the Third World nations. Postcolonial writings encompass a national matrix and embarked on an anti-colonial movement. It mirrors the national, political and cultural allegiances. Post colonial literature reflects the colonial times and the turmoil occurring at that time. The term colonisation first brings to our mind the image of the British and the term post colonial creates the aftereffect of the British colonization. Postcolonisation shows the relevance of Britishness or rather Englishness. Along with the European imperialism there is an emergence of the English studies. English which grew from the marginalized status of a dialect to a lingua franca under the British and American imperialism and finally it took root in the postcolonial writers. British Empire and English language played a pivotal role in sustaining cultural imperialism. British Empire was not only a territorial empire, it has left its impact in the minds of the people through Western education. It was the language of the Empire which ruled and gave birth to the establishment of universities as a clear indication of the linguistic and cultural empire. Even the rise of Commonwealth literature in 1940s gave impetus to the English language and literature. Ania Loomba writes "Colonialism and imperialism are often used interchangeably" (Loomba, 1: 1998). Imperialism, Eurocentric norms are put into an elevated status and others are regarded as marginalized. One can trace to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) as a pathbreaking work in the field of postcolonialism who talked about finding the voice and reclaim the past. Colonizers implant the structures of capitalism, political institutions thus transforming traditional practices. European imperial dominance had profound impact on the natives. Impositions upon people by other people and foreign territories can be designated as postcolonial. The root of anxiety is steeped into colonial moment and it is carried in the post-colonial times. The world system when seen from a Eurocentric view it represents the South Asian continents as different from the global perspective and fall into the "peripheral" and when discussed in large extent it has been designated as "semi-peripheral" which Anna Klobucka writes in an article (120). Europe stands to be the vantage point and from that point the other parts of the world are observed.

In the South Asian context colonial experience and memories are loaded in the minds of the people of Burma and the Indians and it still continuing. At the same time one can find the differences between the Burmese notions and treatment of the Indians. In the novel *The Glass Palace* the protagonist Rajkumar Raha spoke for the first time when sounds of shooting could be heard from distance.

Frowns appeared on some customers' faces as they noted that it was the serving boy who had spoken and that he was a *kala* from across the sea- an Indian, with teeth as white as his eyes and skin the colour of polished hardwood. (*Glass*, 3)

Rajkumar who was steeped in poverty witnesses the British conquest of Burma. He worked as a supplier of teak in the Burmese rainforests and for the Burmese too he became a subject to be looked down upon. The

voyage of the migrants can be related with the transport of the Africans which is reminiscent of the Middle passage. The migration of Rajkumar led him to a transformed man who became a timber entrepreneur which can be witnessed in Part three of the novel named *The Money Tree*. The ambiguities of the post colonial traits can be seen. Another character who was Rajkumar's romantic ideal Dolly Sien can also be seen as migrating in this imperial expansion period and she is caught between her mental attachments. The Royal Family and the provinces of Burma are seized upon by the British. There is another movement towards Rangoon. The people of the royal court looked down upon the Indians by saying that:

Many Indians lived there: the Prince had claimed that there were more Indians than Burmese in Rangoon. The British had brought them there, to work in the dock and mills, to pull rickshaws, and empty the latrines. Apparently they couldn't find local people to do these jobs. And indeed why would the Burmese do that kind of work? In Burma no one ever starved, everyone knew how to read and write, and land was to be had for the asking: why should they pull rickshaws and carry nightsoil? (*Glass*, 49-50)

The complexities and ambiguities in the postcolonial natives can be witnessed. The people grapple with the sense of self and place with the historical events at the background. The king and the queen are deposed from their position and are displaced. The dualities and the complexities of the colonizers and the colonized are presented. Mandalay, the capital city of Burma encompassed the Royal family, King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat, their banishment and the complexities of their relationship. King Thebaw has his own way of oppression; he reigned over the fisherman of Ratnagiri thus dehumanizing the colonial process. Mandalay also brought in the Bengali orphan Rajkumar "a boy of twelve – not an authority to be relied upon" (*Glass*, 3) The colonisers treat the natives as Edward Said regarding the treatment of Occidents and Orients says that the Orientals are "seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined- as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory-taken over" (207).

Origin and destination becomes a thrust area in *The Glass Palace*. Focusing on origin and destination, Homi Bhaba writes:

the migrant is empowered to intervene actively in the transmission of cultural inheritance or "tradition" (of both the home and the host land) rather than passively accept its venerable customs and pedagogical wisdom (11)

Ghosh shows motley of cultures with Bengalis, Burmese, bourgeois Indians and it plays an important role in creating and breaking boundaries. The novel extends numerous meaning as revisiting the history, reshaping the past visions and the transition physically and mentally from one place to another. The imperial past has shaped the present and the grains of the imperial attitudes lies with us. In Burma, Rajkumar feels as an insider as well as an outsider at the same time. Postcolonial studies show the Western's idea of "otherness" and in Rajkumar we see the "other" in the eyes of the Burmese and these sensations move across borders.

Amidst the migration the ambiguous role of the Indians can be traced in the novel. Rajkumar brought law and order in the jungle and created a little empire, thus failed to recognize the oppressed and knowingly or unknowingly taking the position of the oppressors. The capricious nature of power slipped from one hand to the other. Another Indian born character Arjun joins the British army and got accessed to the British clubs. Arjun molded the power in his hand and thus turning history upside down. Arjun is Uma's nephew and holds great fascination for the British customs and ways of life. He is educated in the British modelled institutions and so naturally holds the British in awe and respect. By the end of eighteenth century, the British were able to bring the entire subcontinent under their control. The impact of western academic disciplines is easily discernible on Arjun in whom the hierarchical constructions of inferiority and superiority, native and "angrez" are so deeply ingrained that all his effort is to be like an Englishman. The supremacy and superiority of the colonizer get so much ingrained in the native's psyche that he becomes thoroughly subservient to the master and the valorization of constructions like nation, national identity, and nationalism become a tangential concern. Arjun have an implacable belief in the superiority of the colonizers. They have aided the colonial expansion and in Stuart Hall's term it "transculturation" (246) Gauri Viswanathan, in her essay "The Beginnings

of English Literary study in British India,” comments that the English literary text functioned as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state.(437)

In *The Glass Palace* we can see the struggle to possess things as Rajkumar sensed wealth in teak. Rajkumar acquired capital through timber business though initially he started with supply of teak and as capital multiplied Rajkumar transformed into a rich businessman and emerged into a changed person which can be found in the third part of the book *The Money Tree*. The imperial conquest has turned around a poverty stricken orphan and succeeded in conquering his natives thus taking him into their bower. In the pursuit of business Rajkumar could also invest in the rubber plantation in Malaya. Saya John another character of the novel conquers an elevated position in the life of Rajkumar and helps in his transformation. Saya John was his mentor in his business. From the beginning Saya John helped him form the attacks from the Burmese. Saya John sees something unique about Rajkumar and was offered a job by him. When the Japanese invaded Burma during the Second World War, Rajkumar’s investment vaporized into the smoke of the explosion. The Japanese bombs destroyed his commodities and lost his wealth. In due course of the novel one can witness the loss of home, relationship, culture, and livelihood. Rajkumar’s relationship with Dolly too proves to be catastrophic. Rajkumar married her and begot two children Neel and Dinu. The family falls under turbulent times as Dinu moves away, Neel dies and Dolly moves away to monastery. Rajkumar is partly responsible for this.

The novel covered the period between 1885 and 1995 and it has encompassed recollection and memory. The imprints of colonization can be traced in the character of Dinu. He condemns the colonisers and was of the opinion that Hitler and Mussolini were the destructive forces but at the same time believes that British gave freedom to the masses. He feels that that the Indian society has been reformed by the British and argues with Uma saying that “you’re always talking about the evils of Empire and what the British have done to India... But do you think that terrible things weren’t happening here before they came? Look at the way women are treated even today, look at the caste system, untouchability, widow-burning...all these terrible, terrible things.” (*Glass*, 294) Here we find the actual nature of the British who could mask the natives and were able to bring the entire South Asia under control. Not only this, the British enterprise succeeded in conquering the minds of the colonizers. Similarly Arjun held British in high esteem and acknowledges the superiority but later meets with a psychological crisis. The character shows the struggle of Indians into adopting English attitudes and at the same preserving their own tradition. These characters have helped sustain the Empire. Ghosh has intelligently woven this in the novel and it also talks about the present attitude of the Indians. The old self wants to give birth to a new one and the abrasions in doing so comes into forefront. Through this the institutionalized ideas are questioned. The canonized rules are interpreted. Ghosh revisited the past, remembered it and then constructed the present and questioned the crisis innate among the colonizers.

The militaristic strategies gaining momentum in the sixth part of the novel creates a sense of horror when Japan invaded Burma and Rajkumar’s business collapsed and also the Burmese economy. The British apparatus has clearly laid out its principle by presenting that the West should be imitated.

The colonial expansion consists of an influx of the people and the economic prowess. The imperial conquest can be best understood in Queen Supayalat’s words when the royal family was taken away to exile:

This is what they have done to us, this is what they will do to all of Burma. They took our kingdom, promising roads and railways and ports, but mark my words, this is how it will end. In a few decades the wealth will be gone – all the gems, timber and the oil – and then they too will leave. In our golden Burma where no one ever went hungry and no one was too poor to write and read, all that will remain is destitution and ignorance, famine and despair. We were the first to be imprisoned in the name of their progress; millions more will follow. (*Glass*, 88)

Dislocation, displacement pervaded in the entire novel. Rajkumar moved to a foreign country, settled down there and then again got expelled by war. In the final section we come to the Glass Palace which was then an empty palace. The submerged Burma can be seen in the reflections of the crystals. The Indian national struggle was at its peak at the final section of the novel and the people got displaced in this motion from one boundary to the other. In this entire process Ghosh has presented that though British conquered both India and Burma,

one can witness that Indians could pave ways and flourish in spite of getting ruled. On the other hand the Burmese remained oppressed throughout the novel and has gained very little. Contradictions remain even in the writings and representation.

The discipline of literary studies spans boundaries in today's scenario. Perspectives have changed and the usage of theory is stretched towards an interdisciplinary subject. The development of theories from 1960s inclined towards colonial, cultural studies and in the present novel we can see Amitav Ghosh dealing with the pre colonial, colonial and post colonial times and reflecting upon culture, language and society. Literary theories expanded the boundaries and postcolonialism is one such area where one can experience the impinging of interdisciplinary studies. The tension of the people who share more than one culture, one language is a result of these movements. The narrative is in constant motion. As the term postcolonial is in constant tension and confusion and the meaning are in motion thus Ghosh too is in constant move in search of the plight and dealing with the ambiguities of the colonizers. The colonized are also infested with such confusion and complexities and by and large they are in constant move from one place to the other.

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