

## Revisiting Colonial Transformations in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

Santosh Gupta

### Abstract

The Paper deals with Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace* as a depiction of the histories of India and Burma of more than a century when the two countries were linked under colonial domination, their shared experience of submission and suffering. It reconstructs some of the drastic social, economic and political changes that were brought about by the colonizers. Ghosh uses the stories he had heard, his own observations and relates them to other histories that occurred in South Asia at that time.

Amitav Ghosh delineates the colonial strategies that divided the people, communities and countries, and controlled them. This was done partly through cultural shifts as well the creation of a deep sense of fear and insecurity among the subject people. The Paper traces in the novel the emergence of anti colonial movements among individuals and groups which recognises the efforts among the marginalised to break out of the forces of oppression.

**Keywords:** Colonial culture; Transformations; Questionings; Resistance.

Amitav Ghosh is among those contemporary writer who delve deep into the colonial Indian history, excavating details of various forms of coercion, manipulation and exploitation that were practiced by the imperial rulers. A history of the subjugation of one's people is not a pleasant walk down memory lane; such walks reveal several occasions of shame, defeat and humiliation. One also questions one's own failure - what happened that a freedom loving, society suddenly went down its knees, to be ruled over by foreign invaders. In the novel *The Glass Palace* (2000) Amitav Ghosh raises some questions about the changes in people's self perceptions, their surrender of the traditional habits of fighting invaders, the factors that made these rulers all powerful, as he reconstructs some aspects of the colonial rule over India, Burma, Malaya and Singapore.

In bringing together the political, economic and cultural histories of India and Burma in this novel Ghosh was inspired, to some extent, by the childhood recollections of stories about the Burmese experience of some of his family's friends, and, his father's trip to Burma in the 1940s. In the essay

'At Large in Burma' (1998) he recounts some of the memories of people talking about Burma as a "golden land, the richest country in Asia" whose people were "the kindest, the most hospitable" (Ghosh 1998: 68). This golden land was left in a devastated condition when the British left it in 1942, and hospitality turned into violent antagonism, bringing about a terrible exodus when thousands of Indians settled there were forced to leave. However those returned from Burma continued to speak only of the happy and wealthy Burma.

*The Glass Palace* is also a tribute to the stories that the writer had heard in childhood. It is a recognition of "heard" history - history as it was being lived and had been experienced. Stories and history have their sources in real people and their experiences. The sequential arrangement made by the narrator creates 'events' out of the happenings, and once a meaning is perceived, a logic is seen, a history takes shape. Ghosh had heard people talk about Burma and praise its people and of their own fortunes in Burma. His father who had gone there in the British Indian army had undergone the doubts and "self-questioning" that a number of Indians had lived through (Ghosh 2000: 552). The novel brings together the transformations that appeared in Indian culture and the people as they lived in colonial regime, their questioning of the power of the rulers and their own acquiescence. There is also a review of the interrelations that developed between the people of these two countries which had so far had a long history of mutual respect for the other's knowledge, religions and cultures. The novel develops the themes of interactions between the different South Asian colonised groups, and the reasons for tensions between them. Brought closer by the British rulers after Burma was conquered in 1885 a large number of Indian labourers, business men, writers travelled to Burma. These juxtaposition became tense as colonial governance pitted one against the others and many social and cultural changes occurred in Burma and India. The emergence of nationalist movements, a new awareness about national identity and the creation of the "other" resulted in breeding new distances between societies.

In *The Glass Palace* the stories of resistance and rise of anti-colonial movements of that period are woven together to form a large flowing narratives that dialogues with history. Indian writers like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay had dealt with the freedom struggle that was located in Burma in the novel *Pather Dabi* (1934), where he depicts Indian businessmen well settled in Burma and their small social circles. Autobiographical writings and diaries which had been kept by Indians who had lived in Burma during the colonial period have recorded their experiences. Ghosh has portrayed the different social levels of the Burmese society, from the

King at the highest level down, to the street tea shop owning poor woman. Several characters tell stories to one another, providing details of the changing economy and society in Burma and India. As he portrays Indians working in Burma Ghosh cleverly comments upon them through the Burmese characters. The changes in the Indians who had been under British control and influence for more than a hundred years by 1885 had become noticeable - the marks of servility and loss of selfhood in the efficient and hard working Indians are noticed by other Asians. The novel explores some of the reasons of the anti-Indian sentiments, the cultural contrasts that had appeared and the impact of a collision of national interests as it dwells upon the lack of self respect and national consciousness among the Indians who collaborated with their imperial rulers to subdue their own society.

Writing on historical subjects interests postcolonial writers as they revisit the past for a deeper insight into their present situations. Fiction based history 'humanises' the history as Ghosh has claimed, for the situations are dramatised through the use of human intentions responses and emotional interactions<sup>1</sup>. The recurring "human historian' in Ghosh's fiction (Bose, 19)<sup>2</sup> tries to tell the truth as "it really was, fact and fiction, event and imagination, hope and despair (Ibid., 19). The hybrid form that emerges from the interweaving of the different emotions with historical data and persons, is built upon a vast array of stories, from many locations of work, travel and experiences. The novel emerges as a "palace" of stories where several streams of little and big narratives come together, acquiring a definite shape, thrust and final image. Looking for reasons, answers and facts that lie submerged under other explanations Ghosh has tried to rewrite history "to look within, to find answers to the questions; What went wrong, ... ?" a question raised by Jasbir Jain in her study *Beyond Postcolonialism* (91).

British colonial imposition led to more frequent travelling between the two colonial spaces as the rulers transported large number of people from India to Burma. New economic opportunities emerged as the British began to exploit Burma's rich natural resources, and many shrewd Indians built up massive fortunes as they utilised the opportunities. Using travelling as a recurrent trope within the novel, the writer shows how the large scale displacements of people, whether rich or poor, voluntary or involuntary, became an integral part of the colonial world. In the deposing and exile of the Burmese King the similar (and worse) fate of many Indian Kings and feudal rulers is also implied. As the colonial habit of displacing people as moveable commodities led to uprooting and disrupting millions across the areas governed by the imperial powers, its effects were suffered by the helpless people. Ghosh, however, as he depicts the intense humiliation and anguish King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat experienced, also brings out the benefits

of travelling reaped by many of the colonial subjects. Raj Kumar Raha, Uma and Dolly are among those who used the facility to travel and the incentive it provided by the opening out of their narrow worlds. Such travels often brought in unprecedented and unexpected results. Arjun's travels into the other South Asian locations brings him face to face with critical, unfriendly gaze of others. But it is only after he travels out of the safety of the Indian society that he is able to be confronted with the harsh reality in which he lived. His moral journey begins only after he ventures out.

Ghosh mentions dates and years to indicate the historical events around which this narrative evolves. '1857' is mentioned twice - once in the context of the removal of King Thebaw, in 1885 (Ghosh 2000: 26) and, then, in the latter part, when Kishan Singh acquaints Arjun with the large scale violence that had occurred in 1857 and the long lasting repercussions of those times. The conversation takes place during the II World War, in the 1940s, when Arjun, an officer and Kishan Singh, a subaltern, are fighting along with other members of the British Indian Army, to protect the colonial British interests in the World War (Ibid., 437). During this conversation, once again the important role the Indian soldiers had played in strengthening and protecting the coloniser are recognised.<sup>3</sup> Keeping the two strands moving together, the novel becomes an important historical and critical narrative.

As Indians travel and work across other South Asian locations such as Burma, Singapore, Malaya, Ghosh shows how they were frequently looked down on by these societies. There are repeated criticism of the Indians' complete submission and loyalty to their colonial masters. Whether it is in 1857, in India's war with the British or in the 1885 when Indian soldiers helped their British masters to conquer Burma or during the two world wars when again the Indians in British Army Service fought all over Asia, Africa and Europe to protect the British interests, their behavior is seen as being "mindlessly" obedient. Raj Kumar Raha, an eleven year old orphan boy, standing as a destitute in the street, the boy who does not have a place of his own, is astonished and questions the Indian soldiers' actions as strange. Saya John, a Chinese migrant to Burma, a petty tradesman talks with the boy about the Indians he had seen in Singapore - "back from fighting for their English masters". Mostly peasants from villages, they told Saya John that they were fighting for "money"; but Saya John says they didn't earn more than a few annas per day for their work. Saya John comments "For a few coins they would allow their masters to use them as they wished, to destroy every trace of resistance to the power of the English" (Ibid., 29). Saya John feels that "Chinese peasants would never do this" (Ibid.,20). A little later, while the two discuss this behavior Rajkumar dismisses these soldiers as "just tools - without a mind of their own" (Ibid.,30). Similarly

King Thebaw, the Burmese King going to India to live for the rest of his life in exile and anonymity also compares the Indians to Burmese labourers and feels that the Burmese would never stoop as low as the Indian did. The King reflects that no Burmese would ever "pull rickshaws and clean night soil" (Ibid., 50) as they were economically far better placed; no one starved in Burma.

Placing these and other different critical observers to bring forth the contempt the Indians earned from other South Asian groups of people, Ghosh creates a wider perspective. The Indian soldiers and labourers who were sent to different locations, the bureaucracy and business class that moved within and outside India are subjected to a critical gaze from the others who too were subjugated. The difference lay in their inner sense of resistance to the power of the invaders.

The novel depicts some aspects of that colonial culture which was formed in India which helped the colonial rulers in becoming successful in controlling the intellectual and psychological make up of the colonised people. Through extreme physical force, political strategies and cultural assaults the native societies were compelled into submissive positions. Unparalleled geographic expansion of the British and other European empires could not have been possible unless the rulers employed some well thought out policies that destroyed the native people's ties with their own past, values and traditions. Colonization became a massive cultural invasion that accompanied the geographic occupation. Many postcolonial thinkers have elaborated upon these processes and show how a new subjectivity was created for the colonial people instilling the colonizers' value system as universal and superior as a means of controlling them. Edward Said emphasizes the use of literature and other forms of cultural and epistemic impositions upon the colonized societies for instilling in them their images as backward "orientals". The concept of "civilizing mission" of the empire kept the minds of the colonised subjects under control, while accompanying brutal force kept the rebellious subdued. Epistemic assault, seen in the forms of education and other cultural processes kept the natives under cultural domination, alienating the entire class of people from their own society. An important difference between physical and epistemic violence is that the "latter keeps the natives unaware of the oppression they face" thereby eliminating the possibility of any resistance from them." (Sreenath, V.S. 25). Creating a vast class of bureaucrats the colonial rulers kept themselves away from the masses, leaving it to the civil services officers and clerks to deal with them. The class conscious, the hegemony constructed among these two groups, the Civil Services and Armed Forces made them feel superior

and more privileged in comparison to the rest of their countrymen, making them complacent and insensitive to the people's sufferings.

The pervasive impact of the colonizer's ideology, David Lloyd argues as he discusses the colonial experience of Ireland, aims to undermine, devalue and disrupt the colonized people's indigenous cultures. While each colony had a different history and diverse strategies were developed in each case, Lloyd points out at some commonalities. Colonialism is, he says, "an integrated process" and it "operates across all the fields that in the West would constitute the public and the private, civil society and the state"; it aims at an "utter transformation of the colonized culture", moulding it to its own purposes. Colonial culture enters the very emotional care of the people as it destroys "structures of feelings", the "notions of legality" through displacement of indigenous forms of religion, labor, patriarchy and rule ...". Lloyd argues that colonial modernity introduced in the native culture leads on to inner tensions, and seeks to control their mind and heart (378).

In his selection of characters from diverse professions, classes and ethnic groups Ghosh has been inclusive as most of these characters are representative of the changes that were taking place in the Indian colonial society. Raj Kumar Raha grows up to live the "rag to riches" story of financially successful Indian businessman settled in Burma. Bipin Behari Dey is a senior civil services officer as he comes to Ratnagiri, in 1904, with his wife Uma. Uma has the benefit of being shaped by the Bengali *bhadrasmaj*, educated, cultured and fairly independent in her thinking. The Indians in the British Army who had played such an important role in protecting the Empire's interests during the 19th and early 20th centuries are depicted undergoing a serious self questioning, debating the issues of national identity and loyalty. The discussions between Arjun and Kishan Singh, their various experiences in India and other Asian locations open up one of the most significant debates of the colonial rule. How a rhetoric of inequality was used to persuade the natives that they were uncivilized and so backward that, to become civilized, they "should simply imitate their metropolitan occupiers" (Ashcroft 2), and adopt their value system is reflected in the behaviour of these men and women.

As the colonized people learnt the mimicry that their master's taught a class of Brown Sahibs emerged, that worked as devoted, obedient and loyal servants, of the Empire. But as Ashcroft argues, the inner resilience and intelligence of many among the same society led several among them to appropriate and adapt these ideas to their own purposes: "colonized cultures have often been so resilient and transformative that they have changed the character of the imperial culture itself" (Ashcroft 2). It is important that the colonized cultures managed to resist, even if in some

partial measures to be begin with, the rulers' moral and intellectual ideas. *The Glass Palace* traces both, the transforming measures used by the ruling powers, and those built up by the ruled people. If the first part of the novel asks questions about the reasons for the loss of self respect and free thinking among the colonized Indians, the middle part depicts various forms of economic and administrative activities under colonisation together in India and Burma. But a time came when the debates between the groups within the British Indian Army gained strength; women and others less privileged groups, also began to voice their resistance to excessive domination. The third part of the novel foregrounds these elements of resistance and independent thinking among these groups that gave birth to new identities as they questioned the colonial thought, its social norms and values.

The displacement that King Thebaw experiences makes him aware of the well-organised and structured functioning of the British Empire. He wonders at its strength : the "vast, incomprehensible power to move people in such huge numbers from one place to another" (Ghosh 2000: 50); he tries to imagine the geospaces where boundaries and borders of nation states were immaterial as a huge international market economy was being operated along with the empire. It is after years of isolation, humiliation and disillusionment that he, his favourite queen and their daughters fully grasp the drastic changes that colonial rule brought into force, changing the political, social and cultural structures of these countries. That the colonized beings were being treated as commodities not as human beings is grasped slowly by these members of the upper elite class, alienated from the poor as they were. The shabby house in which former royal persons are condemned to die a slow death, symbolises these drastic sudden transformations.

Some of the other characters belonging to the colonized societies gradually discover the harsh truths of the system's functioning. If the Burmese royal family remains critical of the Imperial rulers the bureaucratic and Army officers of the empire remain immersed the colonial culture, until hit by some specific incident. Bipin Behari Dey is a thoroughly Anglicized Brown Sahib. Similarly Arjun has internalised the colonial masters' propaganda of their being just, law abiding and modern. Dey treats the King and Queen with an inflated sense of his own superior powers; he can see no fault in the way that family is kept in house arrest even when no legal trial has been held. When the eldest Princess becomes pregnant he is shocked, calling the situation to be a "scandal" (Ibid., 150).

This "scandal" exposes the insensibility of the Collector whose human perceptions lie buried under his awareness of his official position. The Queen hits back by criticising the treatment that they have received from the self proclaimed humanitarian Britishers. She speaks of the "illegality of the

Imperial rulers", their grand claims, the "lectures" they delivered to the King, that the British "rule through law". She asks where is the "humanity of the Angrez" and why King Thebaw has never been brought to trial, "where are these laws that we hear of?" (Ibid., 150). This discussion brings out the contradictions in the Imperial rulers' false claims and actual treatment of colonized societies. The Civil Services however believe implicitly in the claims of their rulers; the Collector cannot make an effort to shift from his position as a civil servant to become a more humane and sensitive person, to be able to realize the predicament of the entire family of the King.

Bipin Dey, Arjun and Rajkumar have lost touch with the real conditions of the masses, the lower classes, the unprivileged, and even a royal family, once it is out of power. Ghosh depicts ironically their self complacency and self approval, satisfaction at their success, as they did not realize that they were being shaped and used for some one else's benefit. The Queen's stinging criticism does not touch Bipin, disturbed as he is by the fear of his Masters' wrath, so much so that he cannot think of facing them, and puts an end to his life.

The Queen's criticism of the 'Angrezi' Sircar was shared at that time by some other sensitive writers as well, one of them being George Orwell, who disapproved of all false grand narratives. His *Burmese Days* (1934) written after Orwell's personal experience in the small towns of colonial Burma makes scathing open criticism of the empire's claims of its "civilizing mission". He exposes the close links between the political and economic gains as being the real concerns of colonisation. Through a small group of white and native characters located in Kyauktada, a small Burmese town, Orwell critiques the White who practice the 'lies' used by the empire to control the native populations. Flory, a white trader, says that these claims of civilizing the natives are all "lies" and that the telling of these lies, living in accordance to them, has had a corrupting influence on all those working for the empire (Orwell 1934:35). This novel and his essay "Shooting an Elephant" show how much the moral fibre of the colonized and the colonizer declined due to the forced occupation of other societies, how the empire worked by imposing a discourse of the racial superiority of the white and the backwardness of the Orientals. The colonial rulers controlled the geospaces and social spaces to create in the upper classes of the colonized society a strong yearning to gain entry into the white man's space and managed to create social division.

Of the several strategies used to divide the people, Ghosh depicts how the colonial rulers set up races and countries against one another to create divisions within people and between neighbouring societies. Indian businessmen flourished in locations across Asia and Africa while the native



populace went on getting poorer, exploited jointly by the British and Indians. The hatred that the Burmese felt for the British was also directed towards the Indians, who were seen as collaborators, devoid of moral and human values. Both nations were slaves but the colonial juxtapositions racialized their relations. Ghosh's novel depicts amply how the Indian Army and Civil services were allotted the duty of protecting the British interest, even at the cost of their own people's freedom struggle. They became "tools", "weapons" in the hands of their Imperial masters, as different characters in this novel comment on the officers, soldiers and workers contained in this text. They were seen with anger, hatred and contempt and thrown out at the first opportunity: their actions invited various responses (from the local natives) such as "exclusion", "expulsion" and secondary citizenship (Koshy and Radhakrishnan 3). Burmese Indians were expelled in 1942-43; the terrible Indian exodus bringing great suffering on thousands. Ghosh portrays these sentiments against the Indians and their suffering (Ibid., 457-474) and the related social tensions which were the outcome of a long period of colonial culture imposed on these people.

Directing his irony towards the self esteem of Bipin Dey and Arjun, Ghosh shows how this class enjoyed privileges that were denied to the ordinary people, only to separate them from their own society. Nehru points to this class that benefited from the carefully constructed social prestige, an 'edifice' the British created deliberately (Nehru, 1947: 359). Fanon calls these officials the "go-betweens" the spokesmen of the colonizers" (Fanon, 1965: 38); he elaborates upon their role in governing the colonized, as the rulers did not deal directly with the masses (even with the deposed Royal families). The loyalty and faith in the "civilizing mission" of the empire are shaken up after being confronted with the ugly truth and the reality of the colonial rule leaving these men so shocked that they could not cope with their knowledge. Both of these men, Bipin and Arjun are extremely disturbed as they recognise their own different forms of subjugation and powerlessness; their capacity to become free is governed and restricted by a new kind of "fear" they discover within themselves: the fear of their masters. Bipin decides to end his life while Arjun, traumatized by the pain of this discovery, wanders in the moral jungle of his self, symbolised by the Burmese forests.

Fear, the most effective weapon in controlling unruly people is recognised as having played an important role in subjugating the once proud and self respecting common people. Arjun had not felt any fear in his protected urban upbringing. It is Kishan Singh, the subaltern, his batman, who acquaints him with the wide spread reign of terror let loose in the post 1857 period upon the rural people in his region, near Delhi.<sup>4</sup> As the spectacle of rebel soldiers punished brutally was made known to the villagers, Kishan

Singh tells him, the village elders decided never to 'see the face of defeat' and to fight for the British, not against them (Ghosh, 2000: 437). Arjun questions Kishan Singh's information. All through their relationship so far Arjun had considered himself to be the smarter and more knowledgeable person. The roles reverse now as he hears the history of the people from one amongst them.<sup>5</sup> These truths were hidden from the upper classes as they were fed upon another kind of cultural information and material.

Revisiting his own country's recent history from the personal memories of another social group is an important epistemic revelation for Arjun. That there had been no willing subordination or cooperation was a surprising aspect of the rule that was so far claimed to be working for the benefit of the people. The novel keeps bringing in many different voices, incorporating experiences of the different sections in the Army, to build up a heteroglossic history of the slow break-down of the grand structure constructed by the rulers.

Kishan Singh's account of the pervasive fear in Indian masses is also recognised by Nehru who has spoken of this psychological factor. The society was weighed down by fear, which Nehru says, was removed by Gandhi. Nehru writes how Gandhi lifted "the black pall of fear that lay over their (peoples') shoulders", how he created a new 'fearlessness' "*abhaya*" (Nehru, 361). This was, to Nehru, Gandhi's greatest gift to the common people, as he spoke to them in his "quiet and determined voice. .... Be not afraid". Nehru also mentions that Gandhi had understood that 'the main props of British rule were fear, prestige, the cooperation, willing or unwilling, of the people and certain classes whose vested interests were centered in British rule' and he decided to attack these (Ibid., 364). That the prevailing fear was one of the major hindrances in resisting the unjust rule is recognised also by Tagore, the poet who could feel the people's inner thoughts. When he imagined a "heaven of freedom", the poem he wrote in 1910, the first condition he asks for is :

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high".

This removal of fear was also aimed at by other revolutionaries fighting against the British in that period. Unless the majority of people in a society, or a country face the world fearlessly it is difficult for them to fight any enemy. When fear undermines their confidence and energy the urge to fight back cannot emerge. Such debilitating effect of fear is recognised a few decades later by Aung Saan Suu Kyi who has guided the Burmese struggle in 1980s onwards. Writing about half a century after Gandhi, Nehru and Tagore spoke about fear, Suu Kyi had led her people's movement for restoration of democracy in Burma, and the role she plays in defining resistance movement is recognised as she appears in *The Glass Palace* in its last section. Writing

about the struggle of her people, she says "It is not power that corrupts but fear!" It is an emotion that damages the intellectual and moral abilities of the power wielders as well as the repressed people (Suu Kyi, 180). Suu Kyi has received part of her education in India and she has studied the modern Indian writers closely. In the essay "Freedom from Fear" she refers to Nehru's *Discovery of India*, the section in which he talks of Gandhi's gift of fearlessness "abhaya" to his people (180-182). Tracing her intellectual lineage back to Buddhist thought and religion Suu Kyi has emerged as one of the modern world's foremost pacifist activist for democracy.

Ghosh's delineation of the colonial period in *The Glass Palace* recognises the emergence of a resisting spirit among the lower social levels, the subalterns and women. The elite, patriarchal movements and their historical accounts have tended to sideline the appearance of the desire for freedom that was seen among these marginalised groups. Women like Uma, coming from the Bengali *bhadrasamaj*, learn to face the male domination within family's private space as a part of the colonial domination, in the public sphere. These men learnt from the western universities, like Cambridge, to exercise their right over the women's soul and body, a manner similar to their colonial rulers. Bipin constantly monitors Uma's housekeeping, instilling in her the "modern" table manners etc. Uma accepts such tutoring (although unpleasant), but when he demands that she keep no secret space of her own, she rebels. She realises "Cambridge had taught him to want more; to make sure that nothing is held in abeyance, to bargain for a woman's soul with the coin of kindness and patience." She cannot live with such a lack of freedom: "This was subjection beyond decency, beyond her imagining" (Ghosh, 2000: 153). Her husband was a good man but lacked finer, warm spontaneous affection; she is also sensitive to his lacking in human compassion. The decision to leave her husband was at that period in India a bold and radical step, one that could have disturbed many of her relatives at that time. But the death of Bipin frees her, and she sets off in search of freedom: personal and the national. Ghosh recognises the role women had played in the freedom movement and the construction of a modern India, reflecting a social reality where women had begun to question patriarchal, colonial bindings and bondages, seeking autonomy and self agency (Aikant, 31; Gopal, 67). Women within colonial states resisted undue patriarchal and colonial dominance; the Queen Supayalat, Dolly and the first Princess fight for their self respect and freedom of choice despite adverse conditions.

Arjun appears almost halfway through the novel but becomes an important character as he slowly emerges out of his colonial hybridity to a serious questioning of his true identity and role in life. Brought up in the urban middle class Bengali *bhadrasamaj* he has internalised, like Bipin, the colonial

concepts of India's modernity and the beneficial role of the empire. Ghosh gives a detailed portrayal of his journey through a colonial smugness and disillusionment. When caught in the onslaught of a rapid intellectual awakening, his vision of himself as "a pot of clay" moulded by some "unseen potter" shocks him (Ibid., 430). There are, within this section of the novel several discussions between different members of the British Indian Army debating the issues of their role in their own country, of their "loyalties" and dignity. When Indian soldiers were treated with contempt, called "Kalaa" and "mercenaries" by shopkeepers in Singapore, Malaya Arjun had shrugged off the unpleasant names, not realising that for most other South Asians the Indian soldiers had lost all dignity and respect.

Many among the Indian Army during the end of the II World war were caught up in severe issues of principles of non/violence. Ghosh raises some of these problems, for, in portraying the Army men he delves into their self debates, doubts and the pain of having given their lives to the colonial rulers' benefit. Arjun who goes through the remaking of his self, cannot fully emerge from these dilemmas as he wanders about in Burma's jungles. The forest symbolises aptly his inner trauma, darkness and utter loneliness he has to live in as he becomes caught in another political dilemma which the members of the Indian National Army faced (treated in pp. 478-479).

The novel employs some spatial images that relate to the different characters' emotional, and mental state of being. King Thebaw's Glass Palace within Mandalay Fort represents the self centered images in which the royal court was trapped. As they are imprisoned in a modest house their dignity may be under assault; yet their own sense of self esteem remains even as they are stripped of all their wealth and trappings of royalty. The King's shabby state reflects the utter disdain with which these former royal persons were treated - a similar neglect experienced by the last Indian Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, in Rangoon. Similarly, the jungles in which Arjun and Kishan Singh fight their moral battles, signifies the darkness and confusion within them.

The polyphonic collection of several voices in the novel create manifold social experiences under colonisation. These stories of submission and resistance are important to those societies whose present day situations somehow continue to reflect, echo and reverberate these parts. While many western thinkers enquire into the nature of power, and its circulation among social relations, for many other societies the themes of surveillance, the impact of fear and violence upon the formation of personality, the need to understand "impossible mourning" are felt deeply. These emotion have been appearing repeatedly in poetry, prose, fiction and non-fiction<sup>6</sup>. The need for forgiveness as a part of life value emerges among the traumatised people as an ambivalent but significant moral need.<sup>7</sup> Amnesia, selective

memory are related to the shame that persists and are being explored to gain insight into the disrupted, disjuncted mass emotions among societies that have undergone severe violence. Many of Ghosh's novels, including *The Glass Palace* recreate these tragic emotional situations and the colonial world's resistance to the transformations they underwent. But unlike Orwell's pessimistic vision in *Burmese Days* Ghosh highlights individual and collective efforts to fight the unjust domination. Resistance is not seen as a monologic unidirectional oppositional activity but as being formed in diverse modes, actions and processes. The most significant one is that of non-violent movement that was expounded by Gandhi - a philosophy at once deeply humanistic, moral and politically practical. The anticolonial resistance movement led by Gandhi was based on a number of his experiments - with truth, courage and tolerance. His ideas prevailed upon the subcontinent and have been hailed by other societies, fighting for social justice, equality and peace.

In the 1980s the Gandhian model of resistance was adopted by Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the Burmese people's movement for restoring democracy in Burma. Including her in this novel towards its end is an important thematic statement of the writer. She is shown at one of her appearances in front of the house where she lived in house-arrest standing behind the gate (she was released in 2010), People in large number gathered regularly to simply see and hear her speak. As she addresses the people her manner is gentle and relaxed; the author says, "She laughed constantly and there was an electric brightness to her manner" (Ibid., 542). "The laughter is her charisma", says Jaya one of the characters. Her laughter indicates her own method of protest. People gathered on the road. In this theatre of power struggle, her laughter is an empowering gesture, taking Gandhi's non-violent resistance into new modes of behaviour. Adopting non-violence and civil disobedience to protest against dictatorship in Burma she stands up for her people's rights. Her fearlessness empowers her people. When Gandhi had decided to adopt non-violent protests his political and psychological understanding of the entire conflict between a heavily armed ruling power on the one hand, and an unarmed weak people on the other had been astute. As Uma reflects (in 1930s) he had "armed" the "unarmed", with a moral courage; the chosen instruments were the weapons of the weaponless, its very weakness its source of strength" (Ibid., 254). In the Burmese struggle of 1990s once again the chosen instruments are different from the traditional ones. A defenseless woman challenges military power; her laughter imparts a new courage to the frightened people. It is a carnivalesque moment subverting and exposing the military dictators, challenging them as well. In bringing the narrative to this hopeful possibility there is an affirmation of the people's assertion of their quest for freedom.

The novel published in 2000 has an epic sweep, as it looks to the new millennium with the hopes of peace and non-violence becoming the basis of relationship between individuals, states and between individuals and states.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Amitav Ghosh, in :Shadow Script", an interview to *First City*, New Delhi : Sept 2000, 30.
- <sup>2</sup> Brinda Bose, "Introduction". *Amitav Ghosh : Critical Perspective*, Ed. Brinda Bose, New Delhi, Pencraft International 2003, pp. 13-35.
- <sup>3</sup> Ghosh refers to some dates and years of the events referred to. This temporal thread in the narrative keeps together the historical and fictional elements in a well-knit form -.14th November 1885 is the date on which King Thebaw was forced to abduct power (26); in 1904 Bipin Behari Dey joins as Collector of Ratnagiri (104). This is the time of Japan's victory over Russia (107). References to Nationalist movements in India and Burma during the 1930s, 1940s are kept within the narrative flow through reference. The trial of the INA in 1945, and the rise and fall of General Aung San are mentioned (GP 570, 514), as the three generations make their appearance. The slowly changing social, cultural and political conditions are presented within a clearly recognisable chronology.
- <sup>4</sup> The research and literature including fiction and films that has emerged since 1947 deals with the various aspects of the events of 1857. Some of the texts regarding the widespread violence that occurred in the conflict, and, the subsequent reign of terror that was created by the avenging British, include Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Spectre of Violence. The 1857 Kanpur Massacre*. Delhi : Penguin Books, 1998, William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughals : The Fall of a Dynasty*. Delhi 1857. Bloomsbury,2006; Dinbandhu Mitra's *NilDarpan* (1860) deals with the violence exercised on the peasants who were revolting against forced indigo farming.
- <sup>5</sup> As Kishan Singh informs Arjun of historical details the roles between the two change. The officer is led towards a new awareness of his duties and identity, similar to the situation in the *Mahabharata* where Lord Krishna guides his friend Arjuna to his moral and quotidian duties. Such mythological references are unusual in Ghosh's writing, who has however used folk legends and beliefs in some of his novels.
- <sup>6</sup> See Vijay Mishra. "Diaspora and the Art of Impossible Mourning". In *Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts*. Ed. Makarand Paranjpe. Delhi : Indialog Publication. 2001. pp. 24-51;

Dinbandhu Mitra's *NilDarpan* (1860) deals with the violence exercised on the peasants who were revolting against forced indigo farming.

<sup>7</sup> See Jasbir Jain, *Forgiveness : Between Memory and History*. Shimla : IIAS, 2016.

### Works Cited

- Aikant, Satish C., "How Progressive ? Modernity at Stake in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*". *Journal of School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, Spring / Autumn 2016, New Series 20, pp. 30-39.
- Bose, Brinda. "Introduction". *Amitav Ghosh : Critical Perspective* Ed. Brinda Bose, New Delhi : Pencraft International, 2003, pp. 8-13.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*, Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1965.
- Ghosh, Amitav. "At Large in Burma", *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*, New Delhi : Ravi Dayal, 1998, pp. 65-114.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace*, New Delhi : Ravi Dayal Publications, 2000.
- Ghosh, Amitav. "Shadow Script", An Interview to *First City*. September 2000, 30.
- Gopal, Priyamvada. *Literary Radicalism in India : Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence*. London and New York : Routledge, 2005.
- Jain, Jasbir. *Beyond Postcolonialism : Dreams and Realities of a Nation*. Jaipur : Rawat Publications 2006, Print.
- Koshy, Susan, and R. Radhakrishnan. *Transnational South Asians : The Making of a Neo-Diaspora*. Delhi : Oxford UP, 2008.
- Lloyd, David. "Ireland After History". *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, Ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray. Victoria : Blackwell, 2000. pp. 377-395.
- Nehru, Jawahar Lal. *Discovery of India*: London : Meridian Books, 1947.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism: Western Construct of the Orient*. London : Penguin Books, 1991.
- Sreenath, V.S. "Nostalgia for the Colonial World : A Reconsideration of Mayyazhi's Colonial Past", *Journal of the School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, Spring/ Autumn 2016, 20-29.
- Suu Kyi, Aung San. "Freedom from Fear". *Freedom From Fear and Other Writings* Ed. With Intro. By Michael Aris. Delhi : Penguin Books, 1995, pp. 180-185.
- Tagore, Rabindra Nath. *A Tagore Reader*. Ed. Amiya Chakravarty (1961) 2003 rept. New Delhi : Rupa Paperbacks. 300.