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Royals into Exile: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's 'The Glass Palace'

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Abstract

*The present study is an endeavor to explore unrevealed history of the colonial discourse in Burma, life in Burma before and after the British invasion and the exile of the Royal family of Burma. Amitav Ghosh is a contemporary Indian-English novelist like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Mukul Kesavan, Shashi Tharoor, Allen Sealy, Gita Mehta etc. Amitav Ghosh combines his professional and social skills with literary writing and creates works of arts, concerned with history, anthropology, Diaspora, nations, and civilization. The perspective of colonialism is always there as a guiding principle. Amitav Ghosh's standing in the realms of literature is truly unparalleled and it seems that his concern with history is to provide an insight into human nature, human emotions, feelings and thoughts etc. In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh attempts to claim the history of certain individuals, groups (families) that were dislocated in the wake of Burmese exodus in the last part of the 19th century as a result of British imperialism. The novel presents the accounts of unnecessary and forceful exile of the royal family of Burma. Amitav Ghosh has masterly recreated and retold the colonial history of India, Burma, and Malaya serving under the colonial regime. Ghosh primarily highlights the histories of teak and the rubber trade in Burma and Malaya, the Burmese Royal Family, the banishment of Burmese royal family, the British Indian army, the Indian National Army, Indian Freedom Struggle, Konbaung Dynasty in Mandalay, the Second World War, Indian colonial and postcolonial history etc.*

Key Words: *History, Colonialism, Exile, Dislocation, Anthropology, Diaspora.*

Introduction: Amitav Ghosh is an Indian-English novelist with an extraordinary sense of history and place. He is a contemporary Indian-English novelist like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Mukul Kesavan, Shashi Tharoor, Allen Sealy, Gita Mehta etc. Amitav Ghosh combines his professional and social skills with literary writing and creates works of arts, concerned with history, anthropology, Diaspora, nations, and civilization. The heroes and heroines of Ghosh's novels are the native people from India, Burma, Malaya, South Africa, the tragedy and triumph of whose lives is narrated against the backdrop of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial history. The perspective of colonialism is always there as a guiding principle. Amitav Ghosh's standing in the realms of literature is truly unparalleled and it seems that his concern with history is to provide an insight into human nature, human emotions, feelings and thoughts etc. In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh attempts to claim the history of certain individuals, groups (families) that were dislocated in the wake of Burmese exodus in the last part of the 19th century as a result of British imperialism. The novel presents the accounts of unnecessary and forceful exile of the royal family of Burma. Amitav Ghosh has masterly recreated and retold the colonial history of India, Burma, and Malaya serving under the colonial regime. Ghosh primarily highlights the histories of teak and the rubber trade in Burma and

Malaya, the Burmese Royal Family, the banishment of Burmese royal family, the British Indian army, the Indian National Army, Indian Freedom Struggle, Konbaung Dynasty in Mandalay, the Second World War, Indian colonial and postcolonial history etc. Amitav Ghosh is master in the narration of history in the nation-state and the novel is a perfect blend of history and storytelling.

The novel also explicates some multivalent issues like- cultural expression in the form of violence in the native, psychology of suppressed native, and the divisive tactics of the colonizer to break up their national movement towards self-determination. The title of the novel 'The Glass Palace' indicates the magnificent hall of mirrors which forms the centre-piece of the Mandalay residence of Burmese Kings and the name of a "small photo studio" where the novel's action appropriately ends. "Ghosh's title also suggests *The Glass Palace Chronicle*, a canonic text of Burmese literature written by a group of scholars at the command of King Ba-gyi-daw and completed in 1832" (Rollanson 11).

Diaspora and Migration: Diasporic discourse foregrounds the states of mind of Diasporas, the exemplary communities of the transnational moment. The terms that once described Jewish, Greek and American dispersion now shares meanings with a large semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community etc. Diaspora involves physical or psychological movement along with a loss of home, moorings and identity. Diaspora is considered as the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions. Robin Cohen describes Diasporas as communities of peoples living in one country who "acknowledge that the old country, a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions" (112). Diasporic literature has added a new dimension to the contemporary literature. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Ruth Jhabvala V. S. Naipaul, A.K. Ramanujan, Vikram Seth and many more have opened up possibilities of a new language and a new way of seeing the world. These writers are giving voice to their multilayered, multifaceted, multicultural, cross-cultural experiences which have become a source of literary and cultural redefinition. In rendition of Diasporic experience, journey is used symbolically and travelling becomes a metaphor for quest "that not only presents the exile as inherent to the human condition but stands as a potent symbol for the physical and mental nomadism of Diasporic life" (Bande 151). The writers try to narrate family sagas through myth, memory and legend creating a fine balance between past and present so as to hope for a bright and better future. The complexities and contradictions faced by immigrants in their colonial and postcolonial societies are delineated in literary expressions through the protagonists who act as literary mouthpieces. In the postcolonial situation, South Asian Diaspora and immigrant literature, hence, acquires an extra edge and poignancy and an air of importance. South Asian Diaspora stands for the immigrants who are either from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Burma or from Africa, Mauritius, Fiji, Guyana etc. The history of Burma finds significant literary reflection in the novel *The Glass Palace* that shed light on English Empire and its aftermath. In the historical record, "Burma (today officially Myanmar) was annexed piecemeal by British across three wars between 1824 to 1885, when Mandalay was captured and Thibaw, the last king, was exiled. The country was directly incorporated into British India until 1937, when it was placed under separate administration, was occupied by Japan from 1942 to 1945, and won independence in 1948, a year after India and Pakistan" (Courtauld 34-40). The novel is basically a book about "European greed and the cruelty of colonization. It is an intricate novel that covers almost three generations. The royal families in both countries India and Burma suffered the most. The kings and queens were reduced to puppets. With

the end of the royal way of life, a whole idea of sumptuousness died; luxury, connoisseurship and abundance ended with exiles, migrations and imprisonments. Thus alluring face of human existence was damaged" (Tiwari 6). It presents a delicate time period when India and Burma were both colonies of the British Empire. "The novel in its more wide ranging narrative, traces the criss-crossing fortunes of two families, across Burma, India and Malaya, and underscores Burma's multicultural aspect while placing its modern history under the sign of both colonialism and world war" (Rollanson 114). Amitav Ghosh is master in depicting displacement and dislocation in colonial and post-colonial Nation-State. In the present novel, Dolly and Rajkumar are in the center and the history of the twentieth century and the story of three generations is affected and completed by them. The story is spread in Burma, India and Malaya, the three interlinked parts of the British Empire. Ghosh's opening, directly recounts, with Saya John's son Mathew informing Rajkumar: "The English are preparing to send a fleet up the Irrawaddy. There's going to be a war. Father says they want all the teak in Burma" (*GP* 15).

Life in the 'Glass Palace': Before and After the British Invasion: Amitav Ghosh describes the life in Burma before and after the British invasion. Before the British invasion, Burma was known for its teak wood industry ruled by King Thibaw. The Mandalay fort looks fascinating. The interior of the fort was a nine-roofed spire and "under the spire lay the throne room of the palace, where Thibaw, the King of Burma, held court with his chief consort, Queen Supayalat" (*GP* 6). The 'Glass Palace' was situated in the fort. The novelist presents the charm of the palace in the words of Ma Cho:

It's very large much larger than it looks...a city in itself, with long roads and canals and gardens... the houses of officials and noblemen...the apartments of the Royal family and their serpents- hundred and hundreds of rooms, with gilded pillars and polished floors...a vast hall... shining crystal walls and mirrored ceilings. People call it the Glass Palace. (*GP* 7)

The fort was constructed as late as 1857, shortly before the arrival of the British, as the palace compound for King Mindon Min (Thibaw's father). Presently, Queen Supayalat associates the palace with the symbol of wealth. In the last seven years, the king has not left the palace. But the Queen and her maids sometimes walk along the walls. The 'Glass Palace' was really glorious but no ordinary man was allowed to enter in the palace. That's why Ma Cho warns Rajkumar to not try to get in the palace. "They'll know you from a mile off and cut off your head" (*GP* 7). The palace lay at the exact centre of Mandalay, deep within the walled city, a sprawling complex of pavilions, gardens and corridors, all grouped around the nine-roofed *hti* of Burma's Kings. The complex palace was walled off from the surrounding streets by a stockade of tall, teak posts. At each of the four corners of the stockade was a guard-post, manned by sentries from the King's personal bodyguards.

Queen Supayalat was always accompanied by some half-dozen maids, carrying her two young daughters, the First and Second Princesses. The First Princess bore a striking resemblance to her father, Thibaw, King of Burma. The Second Princess was two years younger, very much her mother's daughter. These maids are, "Young girls, orphans, many of them just children" (*GP* 7). The worst thing is that these girls have not come willingly to work there: "They'd been purchased by the Queen's agents in small Kachin and Shan villages among the kingdom's northern frontiers" (*GP* 20). This brings the inhuman attitude and behavior of the Queen of Burma. She doesn't even bother to give a thought to the human status of these girls. The way these girls serve the queen and the conditions under which they are kept are considered to be natural and normal by the rulers.

These practices adopted by the rulers lend to dehumanize people. Shubha Tiwari takes Queen Supayalat as “an expert in cruel court intrigues and palace politics” (95). King Thibaw was of medium height, with a plump face, a thin moustache and finely shaped eyes. He was said the handsomest Burman in the land. “He had been crowned at the age of twenty and seven years of his reign had never once left the palace compound” (*GP* 37). Subha Tiwari says that “Thibaw is ineffectual and scholarly type of a person. But most unexpectedly Supayalat is defiance of the protocols of palace intrigue” (95). Thibaw was not interested to sit on the throne of Burma. He had spent several years in the palace monastery. King Mindon, his father, enrolled Thibaw and a few of his step-brothers in an English school in Mandalay. King Mindon was the wisest, most prudent ruler ever to sit on the throne of Burma. Of all the princesses in the palaces, Supayalat was, by far, the fiercest and most willful. Thibaw was bitterly in love with her.

Queen Supayalat was also felt headlong in love with her husband, the king. In order to protect him from her family she “ordered the killing of every member of the Royal Family who might ever be considered a threat to her husband. Seventy-nine princes were slaughtered on her orders, some of them new born infants, and some too old to walk. To prevent the spillage of royal blood she had had them wrapped in carpets and bludgeoned to death. The corpses were thrown into the nearest river” (*GP* 38-39). Mathew informs Rajkumar about the impeding danger of war between British and Burmese:

The English are preparing to send a fleet up the Irrawaddy. There's going to be a war... they want the entire teak in Burma. The king won't let them have it so they're going to do away with him ...'a war over wood? (*GP* 15)

In the meanwhile, British invasion was preceded so smoothly and the imperial fleet crossed the border on 14 November, 1885. The Burmese could not match British firepower. “There were thousands of soldiers in the British invasion force and of these the great majority about two thirds were Indian sepoy... The war lasted just fourteen days” (*GP* 26). A few days later without informing King Thibaw, the Burmese army surrendered. In Mandalay, panic struck in the market when a man went running through the marketplace shouting, “foreign ships had anchored off the shore; English soldiers were marching towards the city” (*GP* 27). After the British invasion, there was chaos in the palace. People were indulging in looting the palace. All the city's scum had come surging into the palace and Queen Supayalat was powerless to act against them. Her face was red, mottled with rage. Bibhash Choudhary elaborates: “When the common public loots the palace, very ceremoniously they shake before the queen, but do not stop looting the wealth in the palace. The loot symbolically suggests the loot of power itself. When the queen loses her power, it is through symbols, that her loss of power is communicated” (122). “The palace was unguarded. The guards and sentries were all gone. The intruders slipped through the gates and vanished into the fort” (*GP* 31). The narrator reminds and compares the past incidents with the present:

Just one day earlier the crime of entering the palace would have resulted in summary execution...But yesterday had passed the Queen had fought and been defeated...none of those things was hers anymore....(*GP* 34)

Through all the years of the Queen's reign the townsfolk had hated her for her cruelty, feared her for her ruthlessness and courage. Here one witnesses the actual process of aggression, capture and colonization. How the Burmese people all robbed of all grace with guns and artillery. It was decided by the British that “the Royal Family was being sent into exile...they were to go India...British Government wished to provide them with an escort of attendants and advisors. The matter was to be

settled by asking for volunteers” (GP 41). Ghosh beautifully sums up the situation “power is eclipsed: in a moment of vivid realism between the waning of one fantasy of governance and replacement by the next; in an instant when the world springs free of its mooring of its dreams and reveals itself to be girdled in the pathways of survival and self-preservation” (GP 41-42). The British soldiers were shifting the King’s precious jewels and ornaments from the palace to the ship that was waiting to take the royal family into exile. The novel here strips the veils off human nature to reveal the crude and brutal greed that drives people at various levels.

Banishment of Royal Family: The victory of the British over Burma through the betrayal and conspiracy (of the king’s so called supporters) was a deathblow to the centuries old monarchy in Burma. “The treacherous defeat and suppression of the *other* at the hands of the colonizer has been tellingly portrayed” (Rafiq 127). The ‘Glass Palace’ which was a proud monument of Burmese history and culture was ransacked and looted and the King, Queen and her retinue were exiled in far off Ratnagiri in India. “The lives of King Thibaw, Queen Supayalat, the young Princesses, and Dolly, one of the maids in waiting, and Rajkumar, are to go on, branch out, intertwine and mingle at various moments in colonial history, to bring in light the rich culture of the orient which the colonizer considered irrational immortal and abhorrent”(Rafiq 128). The British humiliated the Royal Family by ousting the deposed Burmese King from Burma, their motherland land. The scene of ousting of the King is ironically tragic: “Guard of honor for a captive, dethroned King!” (Tiwari 104). A parallel is also drawn here in the novel. The narrator mentions Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Indian Emperor, who was taken to Rangoon in exile. “One thing, apart from the cruel colonization, must be said that these emperors were distanced from reality, from their own subjects and land to a shocking extent. When King Thibaw is taken out of his palace, it is for the first time he is seeing his land” (Tiwari 104-05). Amitav Ghosh has depicted the downfall and subsequent confusion and banishment of the Burmese in a vivid and realistic manner. The above description shows the extent of deliberate cruelty and insult that was dealt out to King Thibaw and his Queen Supayalat:

Just he was about to step in, the King noticed that his canopy had seven tiers, the number allotted to a nobleman, not the nine due to a king In his last encounter with his erstwhile subjects he was to be publically demoted, like an errant schoolchild. Sladen had guessed right: this was, of all the affronts Thibaw could have imagined, the most hurtful, the most egregious. (GP 43-44)

King Thibaw, however, accepts his fate more and less like a philosopher. The royal family was banished to India by British in the steamer *Thooriya*. Ghosh has made a contradiction here. The Steamer’s name is *Thooriya* which means ‘sun’. But the sun of their royal days has been set. There was darkness everywhere. After five days on the Irrawaddy the *Thooriya* slipped into the Rangoon River. Moreover, Thibaw’s ancestors had collected jewellery and gemstones as an afterthought, a kind of amusement. “It was with these trinkets that he would have to provide for himself and his family in exile ... The world’s richest gem mines lay in Burma and many fine stones had passed into the possession of the ruling family... the Nagamauk ring, set with the greatest, most valuable ruby ever mined in Burma” (GP 43). Ghosh presents the grandeur and the nobility of the king, as he overlooks the hypocritical ethical and moral standards of his British captors. Ghosh narrates:

He had asked about the lost things and the officers had stiffened and looked offended and talked off setting up a committee of inquiry. He had realized that for all their naughty ways and grand uniforms, they were ... some common thievery. (GP 50)

The king’s ruby ring was gone. He grieved for the Nagmawk. The Royal Family arrived first to Madras (now Chennai) and then eventually to Ratnagiri, as their permanent abode, the house

allotted to the families was named "Outram House", situated on a hill overlooking the town. In the house, local man named Sawant was at their service. The house was guarded by 'fierce-looking British soldiers' (GP 50) who were standing at the gate. King Thibaw and his entourage were taken to the mansion on arriving in Madras. Those who wait on Queen Supayalat- are supposed to do so on all their four side both hands and legs on floor. When English midwife comes, she refuses to crawl. Supayalat fails to make her crawl, "she was an English woman ... The queen accepted this ruling" (GP 55). Even the attendants did not feel to be treated as slaves. When queen slapped Evelyn and Mary (attendants), Evelyn was very upset. She said to Dolly: "They can't hit us and beat us anymore. We don't have to stay if we don't want to... we were slaves in Mandalay but now we're free... prisoners ... only 'Min and Mebya meaning King and Queen... The princesses are prisoners too" (GP 53). In the meanwhile, Dolly got acquainted with a few words of Tamil and Hindustani as she had to teach the ways of royal household to the new servants, who were local people.

Thibaw still feels that he is the King of Burma. When he read the news of Viceroy's coming to Madras, he got excited to meet him, but he was denied by Mr. Cox. King replied, "But protocol demands it. The Kings of Burma are the peers of such sovereigns as the Kings of Siam and Cambodia and of the Emperors of China and Japan" (GP 59). There is an awkward beginning of a new life for King Thibaw and his family as they try to settle into the port town of Ratnagiri. Events conspire to weave Outram House more firmly than the life of Ratnagiri than had been expected. The King and the Queen and the royal household gradually make a place of respect for themselves in the public eye. King Thibaw is revered by the local community, and in time the family comes to feel secure and even happy in their new surroundings. The King attains an unusual position as guardian and guide: "Thibaw became the town's guardian spirit, acting again...In Ratnagiri there were many who believed that King Thibaw was always first to know when the sea had claimed a victim...king was first to know of it" (GP 76-80). This was the net result of his early trainings of a Monk and he reigns over the fishermen of Ratnagiri, foretelling when there would be a storm, or how many boats returned from the sea. The arrival of a new Collector stirs up feelings of resentment towards the colonial regime, but Uma the collector's headstrong wife, is able to help bridge the gap by befriending Dolly. In the meanwhile, King Thibaw asked Mr. Cox about their return to Burma, Mr. Cox replied: "you must prepare yourself to be in Ratnagiri for some time, a considerable time I fear. Perhaps ... forever..." (GP 60). Queen Supayalat sees the dehumanization process of colonial masters. She brings out the novelist's perspective regarding the deceptive nature of humanism presented by colonialists:

...look at how we live... we who ruled the richest land In Asia are now reduced to this. 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...in a few decades the wealth will be gone –all the gems... how we will end- as prisoners, in shanty towns born of the plague. A hundred years hence you will read the indictment of Europe's greed in the difference between the kingdom of Siam and the state of our own enslaved realm. (GP 88)

In the people's eye, King Thibaw became a prophet at Ratnagiri, "who was always the first to know when the sea had claimed a victim" (GP 76). The first, second, third and fourth princess, in their early days in India, usually dressed in Burmese clothes. But as the year passed, their garments changed. They used to wear saris-not expensive or sumptuous, but the simple green and red cottons of the district. Moreover, they learned to speak Marathi and Hindustani as fluently as any of the townsfolk- "it was only with their parents that they now spoke Burmese" (GP 77). They were prevented by the British authorities from visiting local families, from forming friendship with

Marathi children of good education. They grew to womanhood never knowing any company other than that of their servants. All the maidservants, royal relatives and household officials had drifted slowly away from the Royal Family and Ratnagiri. Only Dolly stayed with them. The King and Queen had sold almost everything they'd brought over from Mandalay: their treasure was gone. Queen Supayalat after the death of King Thibaw in Ratnagiri, wrote her galore asked for permission to move back to Burma. The Queen and her daughters were allowed to return to their homeland. The Royal family of Burma was dispersed by British. The two princesses who'd been born in Burma, both chose to live in India. Their younger sisters, on the other hand, both born in India, chose to settle in Burma.

Amitav Ghosh, here, meditates over the issue of exile, specially the exile of the royal family of Burma, depicted against the backdrop of some larger historical events of India, Burma and Malaya. He also ponders over the fate of powerless people of Burma and India, presented as the victims of colonialism. In the present novel, Amitav Ghosh has strongly mentioned that colonialism led to cultural crisis like displacement, uprooting, fragmentation of identity, dislocation, large-scale migration, drastic changes in administration, and reconfigurations of political boundaries. Ghosh describes the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of the dislocated people in India, Burma, China, Malaysia and America such as King Thibaw, Queen Supayalat, Dolly, Rajkumar, Saya John, Uma, Dinu, Alison, Arjun, Hardayal Krishan Singh, Neal, Ilango and Jaya etc. "This novel is about many places, war and displacement, exile and uprooting, depicting human helplessness. All that a human being can do is to try to adjust, compromise, live and about everything else form relationships. This forming of new bonds, mixing of races and castes is something that does not stop" (Chitra Web). The present text also examines the role of individual self against the forces of history and political reality, the effects of historical events on ordinary people, the dubious nature of national boundaries, and modern man's dilemma of alienation and quest for freedom and identity in the contemporary modern world.

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