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Post Colonial Perspective in Amitav Ghosh's "*The Glass Palace*"

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the colonial perspective in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, a historical novel that presents the colonization of Burma and its impact on the royalty as well as the commoners. Post Colonial Literature is a body of literary writing that deals with the problems and consequences of the European colonization of the Middle East, Asia and Africa. The novel deals with the European greed and the cruelty of colonization as it unfolds over a period of hundred years of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Burmese history from the late 19th century to the end of the 20th century. It describes the effortlessness with which the country is captured by the British and the Burmese royalty deported to India and the aftermath of this incident in the lives of people. Through the life of Rajkumar, the protagonist of the novel, the author unfolds the poignant accounts of people scattered through post-imperialist dislocation in various parts of the Asian Continent. The natives are presented as victims rather than foes of the colonizers. This paper presents the sordid reality of imperialism and its destructive effect on the social, psychological and ecological aspects of human life. The aspirations and disappointments of the colonized people are also brought forth as they try to 'figure out their place in the world'

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Introduction

The term 'post-colonial' is used 'to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.' (Ashcroft, p.1) The British East India Company entered the Indian sub continent as the honourable East India Continent in 1708, took advantage of the in-fighting between the kings of the independent states that made up erstwhile India and by 1757 brought the entire country under their rule. They also overpowered the neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, SriLanka and Burma and drained them of their natural resources. During the imperial rule the native populations were subjected to a range of social, economic, physical, psychological and political subjectivities. Post-colonial literature analyses the political ideologies which legitimated the modern invasion, occupation and exploitation of inhabited lands by colonial powers.

The Glass Palace, by Amitav Ghosh unfolds over a period of hundred years of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Burmese history from the late 19th century beginning with the demise of Konbaung dynasty through the Second World War to the end of the 20th century with the emergence of a democratic movement. With this historical background the novel depicts the mingled fates of three families- that of Rajkumar a Bengali emigrant to Burma, his mentor Saya John and his son Mathew and Uma, the widow of the collector of Ratnagiri and three countries- India, Burma and Malaya.

The story opens in Mandalay in 1885. The protagonist Rajkumar, an 11 year orphan from Chittagong arrives in Mandalay as the British are taking over the country. A distant booming sound is heard but the natives are not perturbed by it. Rajkumar recognises it as 'English canon' and informs that 'A whole English fleet is coming this way.' (18) The boy's words presage the downfall of the Burmese sovereign king Thebaw. Not long after the explosions British soldiers mostly Indian

sepoys force the surrender of the Burmese army, march up to The Glass Palace, capture the king and exile him to India.

Colonial greed is presented as the animating force behind the Anglo Burmese war. '... They want all the teak in Burma. The king won't let them have it so they are going to do away with him.' (15) Once the king was defeated and the city conquered, the palace was looted by British soldiers and people saw them marching out of the fort with sacks of loot. The king was sent to a place of obscurity, Burma was integrated into the empire and forcibly converted into a province of British India which gave them the freedom to freely plunder its natural resources. The queen is right when she says, 'In a few decades the wealth will be gone- all the gems, timber and oil ... 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.'(88)

The novel projects not only the greed of the colonizer but also that of the colonized. As a colonized subject from Bengal, Rajkumar becomes a colonizer in Burma. He makes quick money by transporting indentured labourers from India to the teak forests and oil wells in Burma and the rubber plantations in Malaya. Many foreign companies were busy digging for oil transporting trees from the forests of Burma that they were desperate for labour. Poor Indian peasants were allured to the land of Burma, which was projected to them as the golden land by Rajkumar. Some came forward eagerly while others were sent forcibly by their fathers and brothers. In three years time Rajkumar had made nine trips to India to bring labourers and accumulated savings which amounted to two-thirds of the asking price of a timber yard in Rangoon.

Moreover as a partner in the rubber plantation in Malaya he had been responsible for ensuring a steady supply of workers from India. While he made a lot of money in transporting people to the rubber plantation, the plantation workers were forced to live in squalid conditions. The workers shacks were tiny hovels

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with roofs made of branches and leaves, the squalor in the mud-walled hut where they went to be treated when they fell ill was unimaginable and the floor was covered with filth. These are two sides of the same coin. On one side Indian labourers were made to work in docks and mills, to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines. On the other some of the richest people in the city were Indians and most of them began with nothing more than a bundle of clothes and tin box.

According to Ashcroft, a major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. Young Indian men were dislocated by the colonizers to Burma, Singapore and Malaya as soldiers. Out of the ten thousand soldiers in the British invasion force of Burma, two thirds were Indians- 'seasoned, battle hardened troops ... had proved their worth to the British over decades of warfare, in India and abroad.... had stood steadfastly by their masters, even through the uprising of 1857, when most of northern India had risen against the British.'(26) Narrating his experience as an orderly in a hospital at Singapore, Saya John talks about the plight of Indian soldiers, fighting wars for their English masters- peasants from small countryside villages. He could still remember the smell of gangrenous bandages on amputated limbs; the night screams of twenty-year-old boys. For a few coins, not much more than a dockyard coolie they allowed their masters to use them as they wished, 'to destroy every trace of resistance to the power of English.' (29) They were fighting neither due to enmity nor anger, but in submission to orders from superiors, without protest and without conscience. Years of enslavement has made them just tools in the hands of the British without minds of their own. 'A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, the experience of enslavement, transportation or 'voluntary' removal for indentured labour'. (Ashcroft: 9)

Dolly, Queen Supayalat's hand maid too suffers from a sense of loss and dislocation. As a young girl she is forced to move from home with the royal entourage. Her displacement from her native roots and her discomfort with her own changed identity is clear when she declares to Uma that she could never return home. 'If I went to Burma now I would be a foreigner... I'd never be able to rid myself of the idea that I would have to leave again one day just I had to before'. (113) She is afraid in her own country she would be a trespasser, an outsider from another country. When she feels at home in India her marriage with Rajkumar requires her to go to Burma. After setting up a family in Burma she is compelled to leave the place during the Second World War and comes to India as a refugee. Finally she ends up in a Burmese monastery.

The same sense of loss and displacement is expressed in the following words of Rajkumar when he is forced to leave Burma after the Japanese air raid. "Yes. But it's hard, Dolly – it's hard to think of leaving: Burma has given me everything I have. The boys have grown up here; they've never known any other home... despite everything that's happened recently, I don't think I could ever love another place in the same way. But if there's one thing I've learned in my life Dolly, it is that there is no certainty about these things. My father was from Chittagong and he ended up in the Arakan; I ended up in Rangoon; you went from Mandalay to Ratnagiri and now you're here too" (269).

'Place has always been of great importance to post-colonial theory, but the more material and global issue of environmentalism is an important and growing aspect of post-colonial theory. The destruction of the environment has been one of the damaging effects of industrialization.' (Ashcroft:213) The colonization of Burma turned courtly Mandalay into a

commercial hub and there was a plunder of its material resources, '...resources were being exploited with an energy and efficiency hitherto undreamt of'. The Mandalay palace was refurbished to serve the conqueror's pleasure and the gardens 'dug up to make rooms for tennis courts and polo grounds.'(66)

The callous cutting of jungles through systematised, mechanical ways feels so cruel. Teak trees were killed during the dry season and left to dry sometimes for three years or even more for the density of teak is so high that it would not remain afloat when the heartwood is moist. The killing was achieved with a girdle of incisions, thin slits carved into the wood. When they were judged dry enough to float that they were marked for felling. Ghosh uses words like dead, killing and assassinated to show the ruthless exploitation of the environment. The trees themselves seemed protest against this devastation. 'Dead though they were, the trees would sound great tocsins of protest as they fell, unloosening thunderclap explosions that could be heard miles away.' (69) When a tree was cut it brought down everything in its path, rafts of saplings and thick stands of bamboo were flattened in moments thus destroying the entire surrounding. Such was the colonial greed for teak that Ghosh points it out as 'a tree that had felled dynasties, caused invasions, created fortunes, brought a new way of life into being.

Human greed is the cause for the devastation of environment. Saya John introduces rubber to Rajkumar, as the tree on which money could be said to grow In Malacca rubber saplings replaced spice gardens where pepper plants grew on vine. The dense, towering, tangled, impassable jungle with the tops of trees meeting far above, forming an endless, fan-vaulted ceiling was laid bare. The clearing of the jungle was very dangerous, like a battle-field with the jungle fighting back every inch of the way. Dolly who loved the stillness of the jungle, felt there was something eerie about the orderly rows of rubber trees and its uniformity; about the fact that such sameness could be imposed upon a land of such natural exuberance. 'She was startled when the car crossed from the heady profusion of the jungle into the ordered geometry of the plantation. 'It's like a labyrinth,' she said.'(199)

The novel not only talks about the colonization of human and material resources but also the colonization of mind. For example Saya John feels the English are superior to the natives 'someone you can learn from. To bend the work of nature to your will' (75) The exploitation of natural resources is interpreted by him as an enterprise that makes the trees of the earth useful to human beings. 'Left to ourselves none of us would have been here harvesting the bounty of nature.'(74) Until Europeans came the elephants were used only in pagodas and palaces, for wars and ceremonies. It was they who saw that tame elephants could be made to work for human profit, they who thought of methods of girding trees and the system of floating them downriver and he is indebted to them for the entire way of life which he believes is their creation.

Arjun, an Indian officer in the British army thinks British life is better and hence more desirable. Every meal in the officers' mess with ham, bacon, beef and pork was a glorious infringement of taboos, their stomachs had turned the first time they had chewed upon a piece of beef or pork. They had struggled to keep the morsels down but they persisted, considering it as small battles that tested their manhood and their fitness to enter the class of officers. Through their associations with the Europeans Arjun and his fellow officers saw themselves as pioneers. They considered it a privilege to live in proximity with westerners sharing the same quarters and

eating the same food. Arjun proudly announces, 'we're the first Indians who're not weighed down by the past...we're the ones who actually live with the westerners '(279) and professes 'only when every Indian is like us will the country become truly modern.' Rajkumar is convinced that in the absence of the British empire, Burmese economy would collapse. These instances show the impact of colonization on the minds of the colonized.

Ambivalence and hybridity do not take into account the material status of the power but 'they have continued to be useful among post-colonial critics because they provide a subtler and more nuanced view of colonial subjectivity.' (Ashcroft: 206) Mixing of races and castes becomes inevitable as people move from place to place and from one country to another. Saya John is a fine example of this breed of hybridity. He is an orphan, a foundling, brought up by catholic priests from Portugal, Macao and Goa, carries a Christian name, looks Chinese wears British clothes and speaks English, Hindustani and Burmese. Rajkumar too identifies himself with Saya John as a washer man's dog. He doesn't belong anywhere. He lands in Burma as a Bengali orphan, marries Dolly, the hand maid of the Burmese Queen and has two sons Neel and Dinu. He also fathers the son of an Indian woman working in the rubber plantation in Malaya. Dolly's son Neel half Indian and half Burmese marries Uma's niece, a Hindu from Bengal. Thus we see a mixing of castes and race throughout the novel.

The custom of the ruling dynasties of Burma was to marry within their houses and only a man descended of Konbaung blood in both lines was eligible to marry into the Royal Family. Several Collectors from Ratnagiri tried to find suitable grooms,

eligible Burmese bachelors for the Burmese princesses who were in the prime of their womanhood, but the queen felt that not a single one of them was a fit match for a true-born Konbaung princess. 'She would not allow her daughters to defile their blood by marrying beneath themselves'. (115) Later when it is found that the Burmese princess is pregnant with the coachman's child, Dey the collector of Ratnagiri is disgusted 'was this love then: this coupling in the darkness, a princess of Burma and a Marathi coachman' (152)

As post-colonial literature, the novel discusses experiences of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, race, gender, place, resistance and representation. It also presents the formation of anti-colonial politics and rise of nationalism. Questions are raised about enslavement and individual identity but decolonisation is not possible as 'it is a huge indelible stain that has tainted all of us. We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves.' The collector is right when he says the influence of the British Empire will persist for centuries to come.

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