

The Impact of Imperialism: As Reflected in *The Glass Palace* – Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

Colonization is a system of political, cultural and economic domination of the supreme country over the other countries. The political and cultural existence of the colonized country is marginalized by the colonizer. This attitude of the colonizer not only psychologically disturbs the moral conscience of the colonized but also it establishes a sense of inferiority complex over social, religious, cultural and political system of the colonized. The self-confidence of the colonized is questioned and more than their strength their weakness is targeted. The colonizer gradually starts exploiting the strength & weakness in order to establish their identity.

The majority of the writers claim the major theme of literature as resistance towards the former colonizer and they represented the life of people authentically. As a result the post colonial writer practices to counteract and resists the approach of colonizer in educational, legal, political and social settings. As Amitav Gosh was born in Calcutta, he had ample chance to witness the cultural life of Calcutta, Dhaka (Bangladesh) and Colombo (Sri Lanka). And during Emergency period (1975-77) the author worked as a journalist with the Indian express group of news papers. All these helped the author to fictionalize his theme with the historical background. The novel *The Glass Palace* is about the dissolution of the Kingdom of Burma. Because of colonization the last King of Burma ‘Thebaw’ has been dethroned by the British Government and sent on exile to India.

Keywords: Colonialism, Humiliation, Exploitation, Suppression

The impact of imperialism is seen in the political system of the country and in the cultural changes that defaced the society. The major concern is that the indigenous cultures of the British occupied country are subjected to the foreign rule and it is often sidelined and suppressed. And at some point it has been purposely denigrated in order to elevate the social and cultural standard of the country. This change is preferably for the convenience of the colonizers. Postcolonial literature focuses mainly on the richness of the country.

Amitav Ghosh engages himself in the writings of serious issues faced by the contemporary ex-colonies like Asia and Africa. His writings reflect the impact of colonial encounter on countries like India, Burma, and Bangladesh. It makes major reform in politics and culture. The entire life style has been changed because of the colonialism. Amitav Ghosh’s novels explore the changes undergone by different

countries and the subsequent changes as the impact of colonialism. “The colonial experience and its memories are loaded with a sense of pain and suffering of those phases of history”. (Frank Trager, 243)

The novel *The Glass Palace* is an attempt to trace the history of family that scattered due to Imperialism, through his central protagonist character Rajkumar. The novel encompasses the post imperialist dislocation of the Asian continent. The novel opens with the imminent imperialism threat by booming their gun shots. This is supposed to be the first of many indicators of the British authority to undertake the power which subsequently resulted in the transfer of power and the transition in cultural positions. The English troop marched authoritatively, as if it was their own home town and they send the Burmese King on exile. The English troop encountered the Glass Palace where the King of Burma Thebaw lives with his family. The infiltration of British army into the Glass palace symbolizes the end of monarchy; King Thebaw has become the last king of Burma. Sladen a good old friend of the King Thebaw remarked that: “this was, of all the affronts Thebaw could have imagined, the most hurtful, the most egregious” (46).

The British entered Burma through a British timber company, which involved in side-stepping the rules and regulations of the Kingdom. Though the royal customs officers taxed the timber company, the British company not only failed to heed to the words of the customs office but also humiliated the ultimatum. At this point the senior minister of the King, the Kinwun Mingyi, sensed the upper hand of the British and suggested discreetly to accept to the terms of the British. By doing so, the Royal family may be allowed to remain in their Glass Palace in Mandalay. At this point Kinwun Mingyi refers “On terms similar to those of the Indian princes- like farmyard pigs in other words, to be fed and fattened by their masters” (23).

In matter of no time, the British army’s gun fire could be heard closer and closer, they couldn’t believe that the soldiers are marching towards the palace and Burmese could not match the fire power of the British. “There were some ten thousand soldiers in the British invasion force and of these great majorities – about two thirds – were Indian Sepoys” (27). The British declared themselves as masters and commanded the country that they have colonized.

The Western civilization has slowly penetrated. As a result, people started to imitate the life style of English people in every walk of life. The pride of English man lies in the use of language and dress code. The very description of Beni Prasad Dey, the ICS officer appointed in Ratnagiri where the Burmese King’s family is held under captive, is a symbol of the influence of colonial life style “Collector Dey was slim and aquiline, with a nose that ended in a sharp, beak-like point. He dressed in finely cut Savile Roy suits and wore gold-rimmed eye glasses” (111).

The collector Beni Prasad Dey, takes it as an honor to work for English and he assumed his duty as a privilege to execute the orders of the masters, which gives him the highest satisfaction of his life. The collector being trained by the English man he imitates the dressing style and food habits of English. Round the clock he is conscious about his manners. He is under the wrong impression that English people are more cultured and more efficacious than the Indians. Through this kind of action, he alone feels content, but this life style does not give any happiness to his wife Uma, who leads a very practical life. It has become very difficult for the collector and individuals like him to overcome British influence.

It is his own conscience which breaks him free from the hypocritical life and liberates himself from the clutches of English. But the aftermath is so strong that he could not endure the pain of loss, the dejection and disappointment, not only in his profession but also in his personal life. For the collector: “There seemed never to be a moment when he was not haunted by the fear of being thought looking by his British colleagues” (199).

The racial theory of colonizers have been propounded and propagated carefully in order to make the subjugation appear natural. It is also justified that the colonized people are inferior and incapable of looking after themselves and they need someone strong both mentally and physically to lead them as well to direct them. So the Europeans projected themselves as one who shoulders the responsibility of civilizing the colonized people. In the novel *The Glass Palace* the Burmese army surrendered after a fourteen day of fight without informing the King Thebaw. “The Royal Family spent the night in one of the furthest outbuildings in the Palace grounds, the south Garden Palace, a small pavilion surrounded by pools, canals and rustic gardens” (39). The next day the King was asked to go in an ordinary bullock-cart, a commonest vehicle on Mandalay’s streets.

When the King was exiled from his own country by the British, he was taken to the port in a cart and on his way, he watches the coolies brought from India, to work in the port. “The British had brought them there, to work in the docks and the mills, to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines” (49). The King is surprised by the powerful British Empire that dislocated such large numbers of people and organized the people from India to extract such a huge account of physical work from every individual. The Indian soldiers are the most trusted soldiers of British. They are loyal even when they were ill-treated by their masters.

Ghosh clearly pictures several issues related to the ramification of colonialism. The colonialism not only colonized the people, it also changed the life style of the people both socially and politically. The colonized feels that the life style of their masters (British) is much more refined. It is this aspiration of Rajkumar made him to be a more lucrative timber merchant. He entered Burma as an eleven year old orphan, with sparkling eyes. Through businessman Saya John, Rajkumar visualized a bright future. Saya John, a Chinese teak trader, who settled in Burma looked after teak export business, hailed the British Raj for teaching the values of life. It is from English man he learned to use the available resource, trained people to use elephants to load and unload the logs. Saya John revealed the secrets of working terminology of the British as “to bend the work of nature to your will; to make the trees of the earth useful to human beings- what could be more admirable, more exciting than this?” (80). It is not possible to enterprise the whole of logging timber from the forests without the ingenuity of Europeans. “Saya John’s knowledge of this and his imitation of the white Shahib’s life style involved a compromise between complete separation from the empire and complete dependence upon the empire for his existence” (145).

In spite of being successful in their business the question of identity is at stake in the life of Saya John and Beni Prasad Dey. They both no longer bothered about their lost identity; they were content with their present identity though it is not real.

In the name of liberating people from the cruel rule of Monarch, the British authority sent the King on exile. They also stated that the benefits do not reach the common man and it is only the Royal family enjoying all the benefits. Initially the public could not realize the intention of the English. They believed that colonizer invaded to protect the rights of the common people. So people started to plunder the possessions of the palace this incident still weakened the mental stability of the King and the Queen. When they saw the people who were once afraid at the presence of the Royal family is now neglecting their presence and are even ignoring the orders of the Queen they become dumbfounded. The British proclaimed that English government is to amend new law and order where all will be given equal rights and importance.

It is only in later stage they realized that they are just in the hands of another master, without much change. There were people who take the clues to get the best out of everything and turn the opportunities in favour of them, like Saya John and Rajkumar. Rajkumar had even sexually exploited a woman in his plantation, which reflects the influence of British. Uma asks Rajkumar,

“Do you think nobody knows about the things you’ve done to people in your power- to women and children who couldn’t defend themselves? You’re no better than a slaver and a rapist, Rajkumar” (266).

The imperial authority has oppressed and displaced the people. Even people who live in Burma are not sure about their future. V. Krishanakumar has aptly said that “The quest for identity and meaning in life becomes imperative for everyone destined to live in the chaos and disillusionment of the postcolonial situation where even existence is at stake” (95). But Rajkumar is quite different, he developed a sort of liking towards the English, because it is this colonial rule which taught him to survive at any circumstances. Rakhee Moral describes.

“Rajkumar is then, a true multicultural, a reinvented migrant, who left to himself, and by dint of his enterprise, has been able to find a place in the new society, under the assumption that he will soon be absorbed into and by the established cultural order and thus escapes ending up in underclass or ethnic ghettos” (148).

Through this scene Ghosh exposes the unscrupulous greed of the people. In this the author reinstates that not only the people of Burma is greedy, the hidden fact is that the colonial empire itself is ambitious towards the rich natural resources of Burma. The novel *The Glass Palace* is an excellent reflection of the colonial power and its subjugation. The novel reveals the tactfulness of the colonizer over the colonized countries. They subjugated the whole population and they have sent the ruler on exile and changed the life style of the people and they freely plundered the Burmese natural resource.

The British tactfully appointed Indians as Sepoys in their army. Indians are used as a mere tool to achieve their ultimate target. When the Burmese realized this, it’s too late for them to fight back so the angry mob turns towards the Indians in Burma, and at this juncture, the hero of the novel, an eleven year old boy Rajkumar becomes an easy prey to their wrath, but Saya John, rescues him from the angry mob. Through Saya John, Rajkumar learns more about the role of the Indians in the British army. Saya John

reveals the fact that, once when he was working as an orderly in a hospital in Singapore, he had seen thousands of wounded Indian soldiers, who fought for the British. Most of those men were young poor peasants from villages, with an ambition to earn more money, but never got much more than few annas per day. Saya John shared his experience in Singapore hospital, where he says,

“ “What makes you fight”, I would ask them, “When you should be planting your fields at home?” Money, they’d say, and yet all they earned was a few annas a day, not much more than a dockyard coolie. 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” (32).

The British army effectively used the Indian Sepoys in British Indian army against the Japanese in Malaysia during the Second World War. Many youngsters like Arjun, nephew of Uma, believed that serving in the British army is a social prestige. Even when Arjun tried to impress Alison, she made it very clear to him and commented that, “Arjun – you’re not in charge of what you do; you’re a toy, a manufactured thing, a weapon in someone else’ hands. Your mind doesn’t inhabit your body” (402). Arjun simply executes the orders of his masters he never got an opportunity to use his resourceful knowledge.

The native people have been kept ignorant of their power and potentiality. The English never allow them to be mentally matured and never encourage them to develop their skills. The English created all the rules and regulations and controlled the whole power structure of the colonized. The ill-fed and ill-treated Subaltern doesn’t have any rights to raise their voice. Thrown on the periphery, the native people have been forced to follow the rules and regulations stipulated by the English and these people remain mere spectators of their own downfall.

Ghosh’s works mainly focus on the impact of the post colonialism the way in which the migrated Indians are treated in Burma at the wake of sweeping nationalist agitations to separate Burma’s administration from that of British India is highly horrifying. There are many such traumatic experiences undergone by the colonized subjects. At one circumstance, Dolly and Uma escape narrowly from the riot hit Rangoon.

Uma after a thorough study about Rajkumar she calls him as a selfish man and traitor, who for the sake of his own development betrayed his own countrymen.

“You’re in no position to offer opinions. It’s people like you who’re responsible for this tragedy. Did you ever think of the consequences when you were transporting people here? What you and your kind have done is far worse than the worst deeds of the Europeans.” (265)

Though he had earned fame and money by using the tricks of the colonizer, he lost everything, his son Neel died at the break of II World War and his daughter-in-law Manju committed suicide at the long march by drowning herself in the water during the excavation. He lamented with his granddaughter that he had no roots he can neither go back to Burma, where he made history nor claim himself to be an Indian because he had uprooted himself from Indian origin when he was a eleven year old boy. Because

of the outbreak of II world war his family had been scattered, to various place, like Dhinu having gone to Morning side River to meet Alison, his girl friend, never returned nor communicated with his family members. Dolly who went back to Burma in search of Dhinu never returned back to Rajkumar who shared a house with Uma in India. The end of Rajkumar's life is similar to that of the beginning of his life. He started his life as a lonely orphan, though he enjoyed his life after marriage, he died as a lonely man without any family members beside him. This is the reward that Rajkumar got because of colonialism.

Arjun is another character who had been caught up in the web of Imperialism. Arjun, just like the collector Beni Prasad Dey was carried away by the life style of English people. It was indeed Arjun's ambition to serve in the British army. He felt very proud of his uniform and his position in the army. Arjun's entry into the Military Academy at Dehradun prompted by the notion of passionate service to his country received a rude jolt by his colleague Hardy. He reminded him about the inscription at Chetwode Hall which said: "The safety, honour and welfare of your country come first always and every time. The honour and welfare and comfort of men you command come next..." (353). "Where is this country? The fact is that you and I don't have a country so where is this place whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time?" (330).

The imperial power made use of the Indian sepoy to control the Indians. They also deploy British Indian army against other Nations like Burma, Malaya and Japan. Rakhee moral has aptly commented, "The author seems to find the ineffably close and intimate ties between Arjun, an officer and his subordinate, Kishan Singh, the only lasting bond of love in the otherwise emotionless 'Mercenary' exercise of war" (150). By the time when Arjun realized his grave mistake he felt guilty of serving against his own brother hood kith and kin.

During World War II Dinu along with Alison and Saya John reached the station to board the train, the station guard stopped Indians from boarding the train and informed Dinu that the train is only for English. At this statement Dinu got annoyed and picked up a quarrel with the station guard, but he could not change the situation. They were forced to go to Malaya on the next the day by road, on their way Saya John was shot dead by the Japanese army men and Alison shot herself after shooting and killing those who killed her grandfather.

According to Ghosh, Arjun is blatantly indoctrinated by the colonialist education strategies to repose full faith in the civilizing mission of the empire. Arjun happily proclaims that "We aren't occupying the country... We are here to defend you" (309). The congress party workers and some Burmese student activist quickly responded to this comment of Arjun that "From whom are you defending us? From ourselves? From other Indians? It's your masters from whom the country needs to be defended" (288). Arjun could not react to this statement. Moreover, one of the Burmese students gave him a grim smile: "Do you know what we say in Burma when we see Indian soldiers? We say: there goes the army of slaves – marching off to catch some more slaves for their masters." (309)

Earlier Dinu supported the opinion of Arjun. Dinu believed that whites are civilizing the uncivilized world. The British colonialist took painful effort to rid off all the social evils that persist in India, like

caste system, untouchability, Sati etc. Both Arjun and Dinu understood the other side of the colonizer at the time of Second World War. The author has convincingly articulated the psychological change that changes the attitude of both Arjun and Dinu.

Though Indian soldiers were committed in their duty, they were not given due respect. Further the racial discrimination in Singapore swimming pool is a great insult for the Indian soldiers. The Europeans left the swimming pool as soon as they see the Indians soldiers taking a dip in the same pool. Because of their uniform Arjun and his friends were mistaken for coolies in Malaya and they were ill-treated in markets and bazaars.

Kishan Singh asked Arjun about the word ‘Mercenary’ which is the name used in another tag to refer the Indian soldiers, while they are in Malaya. Because the local civilians had told them “that they are not real soldier, they were just hired killers Mercenaries” (371).

“Once, Arjun got into an argument with a shopkeeper and found himself being called *Klang* – to his puzzlement. Later, enquiring about the meaning of this word, he discovered that it was a derogatory reference to the sound of the chains worn by the earliest Indian workers who were brought to Malaya” (370).

Ghosh’s effort to revisit the past refreshes the memory of the cruelty of the colonial power. The author in *The Glass Palace* has touched upon the cruelty of colonialism and its impact. The English have left their foot print in every touch and aspects of life. They exploited both the natural resources and human resources. Though the present generation is benefitted out of colonial rule, the wound that they caused to our predecessors is perpetual. The reverberation of colonialism is still felt even after centuries. The life style and education of English have become an integral part of Indian standard of living, though our land is freed from the racial and intellectual domination of the English.

From an in-depth study it is evident that the impact of colonialism has uprooted the native rulers, devastated the life of the underprivileged, evacuated thousands of people from their native land. The impact of Colonialism is so strong that it had left no stone unturned. Though miraculous and unbelievable changes had happened it has left behind its everlasting scar in every walk of life.

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