



Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*: A Counter Narrative to Colonialism

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Theories of colonial discourses have been hugely influenced in the development of postcolonialism. In general they explore the ways that representations and modes of perception are used as fundamental weapons of colonial power to keep the colonised peoples subservient to colonial rule. Postcolonial theory addresses the idea that the literary and critical theory is dominated by the Western academy. Reconstruction of literature is experience, politicized based on Eurocentric hegemony. The concept of Orient as defined by Edward Said is a product of the same experience. Postcolonial theory aims at resisting and challenging the assumed superiority of the western thought. A conscious effort is made to present this experience of the colonized culture vis-à-vis the imperial powers has helped the national literatures to develop a postcolonial understanding. The national literatures and the postcolonial literature are a result of the experience of colonization and their resistance towards the imperial power and their counter narratives of the assumptions of the imperial power. This is what makes it distinctively 'postcolonial.' (Ashcroft 1998:2).

Amitav Ghosh is one of the predominant writers from India who has extensively studied and analyzed the experiences of the colonized. His understanding of the postcolonial perspective makes him fall under a different category of postcolonial writers. He not only presents the native experiences of colonization but also expresses touches upon different kinds of imperial power which have impacted the various aspects of life in the erstwhile colonies of the British Empire. He throws light upon the accommodating and adjusting eastern culture juxtaposed to the western culture which always worked toward subversion and control. In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh brings out his study of understanding and analyzing the working of the colonial powers in Eastern countries like India, Burma and Malaysia in such a way that the novel develops into a counter narrative to colonialism.

The fictional discourse being the important feature with individual utterances and dialogical interaction.

The Glass Palace is a powerful narrative which highlights the efforts of the imperial powers to exercise control over their subjects. It shows how these powers create a body of theory and practice to achieve their goal. Edward Said's observations about the working of the imperial powers is extremely significant in understanding the fictional discourse of *Glass Palace*.

The rejection of the colonial practices is the crux of the fictional discourse in 'The Glass Palace.' The author brings out the diversified voices in the form of different characters, their experiences and views to expose the working of the imperial powers. In order to build up his argument the author presents the influence of the colonial practices on the colonized masses. This acceptance of the colonial culture leads to, 'A mimicry of the centre proceeding from a desire not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed. It caused those from the periphery to immerse the selves in the imported culture, denying their origins' (Ashcroft 1998 : 4). Arjun's description of the way of life adopted by Indian soldiers to get recognition from their rulers illustrates the imitation of the dominant culture. He tells how these soldiers ate even the food that they never touched at home: bacon, ham and sausages at breakfast: roast beef and pork chops for dinner. They drank whisky, beer and wine, smoked cigars cigarettes. (p. 278)

Language has a significant role to play in the development of a particular fictional discourse. The dominant nature of the imperialist forces had conditioned the minds of the native soldiers to the extent that they accepted its hierarchical nature as something natural and pre-fixed. Due to their acceptance of these ideas the Indian soldiers take pride in serving under the British officers. Therefore many of them were uneasy about this, this relationship with their British officers was the



source of privilege and pride. Here again the postcolonial perspective is voiced by Dinu. He tries to explain that the views about the superiority of certain races are fictional and constructed, 'It's not what you eat and drink that make you modern: it is a way of looking at things' (p. 279).

Language has a vital role to play in the postcolonial fictional discourse. Language no longer remains an objective and neutral medium rather it turns out to be ideologically saturated. The postcolonial perspective examine the role of language as a tool for establishing colonial supremacy. The Glass Palace presents how the Indian educated people and the elite of Indian society consider the use of English a matter of pride. In this context, Queen Supayalat's observation is extremely significant.

She had found that her use of Hindustani usually put the Government representatives at a disadvantage ---especially the Indians---And unlike their British counterparts they were hesitant about switching languages, it seemed to embarrass them that the Queen of Burma could speak Hindustani better than they.

The use of English by the Indian soldiers and the officers is a result of their attempt to imbibe the alien culture of the colonizers, But the postcolonial perspective in 'The Glass Palace' does not project the view that decolonization means something 'essentially' different in the language of the subjects and the language of their masters. It does not confuse the properties of language with its usage. The use of different words from Hindi and Burmese, therefore is not made here simply to mark the difference in the related cultures. On the other hand, the insertion of the words from different languages is an attempt to build the cultural context. The writer has not attempted to associate different languages to particular cultures. His attempt in this context seems to carry the culture into the fictional discourse with the help of different words from regional languages and by giving their English equivalents. It implies that the understanding of languages should not be associated with hierarchical aspect of life and culture. Instead languages help create meaning. As Ngugi Wa Thiongo says 'Language is an embodiment of culture', the writers uses these words from the regional languages such as, pa-kyekis, specialized in tying of chains, tail, an elongated wooden houes on stilts, are the words which help understand the milieu fictionalized in the novel. Similarly, the hierarchy of men working the jungle camps to handle the elephants has been given—oosi and pe-sis are the handlers of

elephants. Only the cultural context demand the use of specific expression to create meaning.

The most important aspect of the postcolonial discourse developed in 'The Glass Palace' is the abrogation of the reconstitution of pre-colonial reality as a form of 'decolonization'. The central thrust of the novel is not only to reject the British colonialists but also to further the view that colonialism in all its forms is to be challenged and abolished. In the development of the story of the three generations of the families presented in the novel, we find colonial establishment in all its forms challenged and criticized. In this context, the term post colonialism extends far from the conditions under imperialism and colonialism proper to the conditions much after the historical end of colonialism. In "The Glass Palace" what finds more relevance and acceptance in the postcolonial perspective is the realization that "To overemphasize indigeneity is to lapse into a febrile essentialism" (Quason 200 : 49). The novelistic discourse that develops in the presentation of different shades of imperialism, irrespective of its cultural or historical specifications, can be related to the view expressed in these words, 'To speak of post-colonial discourse in Foucault or Said's sense then is to invoke certain ways of thinking about language, about truth, about power, and about the interrelationship between all three. Truth is what counts as true with the system of rules for a particular discourse, power is that which annexes, determines and verifies truth" (Ashcroft 1998 : 167). This working of power relationships is not limited to the British imperialism only. The forces of the dominating powers always remain active to subjugate, subordinate, enslave, marginalize and control the 'other; through various practices. Ghosh highlights and criticizes such practices and succeeds in making the novelistic discourse dialogic and decentralized. It is not only the

British or the Western forces that indulge in colonial enterprise. There are classes of people within the subject races who perpetuate their colonial designs on the weak and powerless. It becomes evident in Uma's outburst against Raj Kumar.

Raj Kumar 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 you kind have done is far worse that the Europeans (p. 247).

The last part of the novel is very significant where manifested undercurrents of the multiple nuances of colonialism and imperial practices are



revealed. Throughout the struggle and experiences of the people of about three generations and in three different countries their awareness of different facets of colonialism provides them with a new realization. This makes their existence positioned in a particular situation in a glass palace. The soldiers fighting against the imperialist forces ultimately think:

“The forces they were fighting against were often mirror-images of what they themselves had been at the start of the war: most were Indians, often from the same regiments, often recruited from the same villages and districts. It was not usual for them to be fighting their younger brothers and nephews (p. 480).

The nefarious effect of the colonial powers that influence the thinking of their subject is evident as they fail to develop any common motive and remain divided. The novelist does not develop the fictional discourse into any monolithic and centralizing perspective that looks at certain national groups as colonialists in essential terms. The imperialist and tyrannical practices that took place in Burma bring out the plurality of views and the presence of multiplicity of voices in a culture. In this context, Burma is seen to have got freedom in 1948, but in 1962 General Ne Win seized power in coup and the country became subject to the bizarre, maniacal whims of its dictator’ (p. 486)

What makes the postcolonial discourse in ‘The Glass Palace’ is an open-ended and decentralized enterprise is the criticism of the view that associates colonial thinking to the western powers only. How the oppressive forces in Myanmar exercise their control and use brutal force to justify their practices has been emphatically exposed by Dinu and his young wife, Daw Thin Thin Aye. The newspapers, controlled by the administrative machinery,” were full of strident denunciations of imperialism. It was because of the imperialist that Burma had to be shut off from the world; the country had to be defended against neocolonialism and foreign aggression” (p. 537). Dinu explains the true nature of these views when he says:

These thugs use the past to justify the present. And they themselves are much worse than the colonialists: at least in the old days, you could read and write (p. 537).

But Daw, his wife rejects this centralizing perspective, ‘To use the past to justify the present is bad enough--but it’s as bad as to use the present to justify the past’ (p. 537). Therefore, what acquires greater significance in the process of ‘decolonization’ is the view expressed in the following words regarding Indian reaction to colonialism, “The movement against colonialism was an uprising of unarmed Indians against those who bore arms --both Indians and British” (p.254). So, the decolonization requires freedom from the native colonialists as well.

The postcolonial perspective that emerges in this novel does not challenge imperial powers through nationalist assertion, making native the central and self-determining, rather it challenges the world-view based on the polarity of ‘governor’ and the ‘governed’, ‘ruler’ and ‘ruled’ as essentialist. This kind of a view envisions a world free from the politics of power.

“While misrule and tyranny must be resisted, so too must politics itself...that it cannot be allowed to cannibalize all of life, all of existence” (p.542).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- [1]. Ashcroft, Bill et al (1998) *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London and New York: Routledge.
- [2]. McLeod, John (2010) *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- [3]. Ghosh, Amitav (1992) *In an Antique Land*. Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher.
- [4]. Ghosh, Amitav (2000) *The Glass Palace*. New Delhi: Harper Collins. All the references to this novel are from this edition and the page numbers are given in parentheses.