

The Glass Palace: Predicament of the Marginalized Society and Quest for Nativity

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Abstract:

Literature plays a very important role in the life of man. It has continuously exhibited its tremendous influence on human society. Fiction is one of the most popular and established forms of literature through which every litterateur tried to express their inner feelings. The Glass Palace is one of the most substantial historical novels of Amitabh Ghosh in which he deals with the painful history not only of Burma and Malaya but also of India. As a postcolonial writer, Amitabh Ghosh is much impressed by the changing image of women not only in India but also in the world. He is regarded as one of the best world literary figures for having made the most significant contribution in the field of fiction. The novel is a painful story with tragic deaths of many characters. It has brought out the pathetic condition not only of Indian soldiers but also the kings and the queens. The families of Rajkumar, Uma and Saya John are described mainly. Arjun and Kishan Singh who are filled with false pride imitate the culture of the whites. It was the British policy to use and throw. Policy of discrimination remained the key to the successful regime of the colonial rulers. Rajkumar, Uma, Arjun, Hardayal Singh, Ilongo, the King Thebaw and queen Supayalat are marginal and exploited characters. The present paper aims to bring out the pathetic condition and helplessness of the disregarded society in the colonial period and their quest for their native place.

Keywords: Predicament, marginalization, nativity, identity, colonial, exploitation.

The Glass Palace (2000) is one of the most substantial historical novels of Amitav Ghosh, in which he deals with the painful history not only of Burma and Malaya but also of India..It is an interesting story of three families, their lives and relations with each other that spread across these three nations. The novel is set in South-Central Asia against the historical background of the twentieth century. Divided into major seven parts it deals with the theme of struggle, marginalization, dislocation, quest for nativity and helplessness not only of Rajkumar Raha's family but also of many other personalities. Rajkumar, an eleven-year boy from India, informed in Burmese tune that it was the firing of English soldiers. Rajkumar an Indian orphan boy who lost his parents at an early age is dislocated from his origin. Sajalkumar Bhattacharya truly points out:

“Rajkumar, the pivotal figure in the novel, is endowed with the single will to live against all odds. When the story opens in Mandalay in 1885, we discover the eleven- year- old orphan, Rajkumar, stranded in a port. He has already been displayed from his roots. Originally from Chittagong, his father moved his family to Akyab, an important port in Burma. [1]

At the age of eleven Rajkumar was taken to various cities like Chittagong, Bassein and many other towns and villages in Burma. Haplessly, he wanders in search of a job in Burma and finally finds his livelihood in a small food stall run by a woman named Ma Cho, a half-Indian and half-Chinese in her thirties. His experiences are bitter, insulting and impertinent to ask for a job. She began to shout at the top of her voice, with her eyes closed: “What do you think-I have jobs under my armpits, to pluck out and hand to you? Last week a boy ran away with two of my pots. Who's to tell me you won't do the same? And so on” [3]. Desperate and jobless boy, Rajkumar succeeds in getting a job to carry bowls of soup and noodles to the customers and wash the basketful utensils in his tender age.

Rajkumar, a helpless and poor boy, is not only economically exploited but also forced to do more work at low wages.He often gets insulted as a servant. In fact, he is insulted for no fault of his own. Thus, he is a victim of poverty,

dislocation and helplessness. He is provided a job on conditions. His exploitation is described in the novel. Ma Cho says, “All right. Get to work but remember you’re not getting much more than three meals and a place to sleep” [3]. Rajkumar’s explorative ability introduces him to different places and people that took him to the city. This talk of overstatement naturally gives him a sense of maturity and power. He is always curious to know everything about the city and the fort of the King, Thebaw. With his perception, he perfectly guesses that Saya John is a Chinese Christian widower contractor by profession who delivers provisions to teak camps. It is not possible to see the grand fort with its decorative walls and its immense dome for the dispossessed people like him. His explorative mind does not allow him to work only. On his ability L. V. Padmarani Rao and Githa Bhojane remark:

“Rajkumar, the boy who is eleven years old, is remarkable for his exploring spirit, keen perception and his ability to take calculated risks. He works in the tea stall of matronly lady Ma Cho. He loves exaggeration his age just to feel like an adult. He is established as bold and remarkable.” [8]

Ma Cho’s coarse language could not dishearten him from thinking and obtaining information from an unknown world. She rebukes him, “Didn’t I tell you to keep quiet, you idiot of a Kalka? Look, you’ve scared my customers away” [3]. ‘Kalaa’ is a word used to tease him. Kalaa means black. This is rude, offensive and humiliating language. A displaced and impoverished boy realizes the fact that he is alone in an alien country with no relatives, friends and acquaintances. This consciousness makes him quite bold to fight with existing painful circumstances. Struggles in the adverse circumstances in foreign countries continuously went on for survival of individuals. Voice for individual liberation in an unacquainted country is raised by him that becomes a sign of revolt against monopoly of the colonial power, English men and monopoly of the colonial business. He raises his voice that speaks against the domination of colonial rulers in business. His consistency, talent and hard work make him successful in creating his identity in an unacquainted climate. He is greatly surprised to hear that the colonizers are fighting war for gemstones, teak wood and making the kings enslaved. The Burmese’ King, queen, officials and soldiers are observed to have been enslaved by the soldiers who were not only Englishmen, but Indian soldiers also. Since the British Indian soldiers fight in war on orders of the colonizers, the British Indian soldiers and Indian migrants become targets of mass anger and insult in Burma. Even Rajkumar was violently attacked by Burmese just because he was an Indian. Their anger was quite natural. Being poor and independent, the condition of the British Indian soldiers was more pathetic. They were helpless, dependent, and dislocated in an alien country. They were taken forcefully by their fate that carried them to an alien country. Almost all of them were poor, ignorant and completely unaware of what they were doing. The pathetic condition of the Indians is revealed in the novel:

“They were peasants, those men, from small countryside villages: their clothe and turbans still smelt of wood smoke and dung fires [...]. Money they’d say and yet all they earned was a few annas a day, not much more than a dockyard colliers”[3].

Thus, it clearly indicates that the unfortunate Indian soldiers, businessmen, employees were exploited not only economically but also, they were deceitfully used for the benefits of their masters. Being ignorant and poor, they were forcefully made to work in alien countries. It is also possible that these poor people had taken much time to realize that they were doing wrong for themselves and their country as well. They were fighting wars for the country which was not theirs. Hence, in this regard, Rajkumar comments that, “They are just tools, without minds of their own. They count for nothing” [3].

After the victory of the British, the King, Thebaw and the queen, Supayalat were made powerless. The royal family along with an escort of attendants and advisors were sent into exile in India. It was a great defeat of Thebaw. Rajkumar falls in love with a beautiful girl named Dolly, one of the king’s maidservants. It was one sided love but platonic. As soon as the king lost the battle, nobody was ready to accompany him in India. The king becomes a helpless and insignificant person with his fall. India was a quite different place for the royal family and their servants too. Hence, they were afraid to cope with a new and hostile environment in an alien place. Other characters were also affected with

dislocation of the kings and the queen. Dolly, an orphan girl, was also forced to accompany the royal family. Though unwilling to go with the King, she was forcefully taken away.

On the way to India, the king recalls one of several events that occurred in his life. It was about a street in Rangoon, a famous city in Burma where several Indians lived. They were forcibly brought to work in docks and mills. They were compelled to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines. It is because the condition of the Burmese was so good both economically and educationally. They were literate. Nobody in Burma suffered from poverty and starvation. Hence, they refused to pull rickshaws and carried nightsoil. So, it is evident that the Meaninglessness of the captivated King and the condition of India is displayed in the novel. The picture in India was more different than in Burma. Man is helpless in the clutches of destiny. In the regime of the British colonization, all emperors, kings, farmers, dockworkers, soldiers, coolies, policemen were the same. The colonizers captured and exiled them into different places of the world. They were forcibly carried away from one place to another. They were made weak by time and fate, and by their masters too. We also came to know that there was a huge migration in the nineteenth and twentieth century. However, it was done with force. In fact, People were dislocated and migrated on orders of the colonials. The arrival of the British in the city affected business and created fears among people. Thus, it is true that the Britishers were greedy, selfish, ruthless and exploited individuals and the kings of the world.

The assault of the English provokes Rajkumar's inner instinct because it was only for valuable articles and the teak industry. However, his struggle teaches him that life's most significant lesson is hard work that helps to win everything as essential. With Baburao, a labor contractor from Guntur, Rajkumar travels to India in search of helpless, poor, illiterate, and landless people who were a great requirement for the colonials. These poor people need jobs to fulfill basic needs in life. Cunningly, Baburao takes advantage of their condition and makes a great deal of money. It clearly indicates that the migration of several Indian laborers in search of bread and butter mainly causes rootlessness and alienation. He enforces the needy and poor with a promise of good fortune in an alien country. Knowing nothing about wages, the poor workers believe and sign the bonds for many years. These workers were forced to change their homeland by offering them a handsome salary. They were given false-promises for high wages. Once they migrated there was no chance to come back to their homelands. It is clearly pointed out that in the process of migration they became homeless and dislocated. Rajkumar returns to Calcutta from Rangoon to find out needy workers in villages near Madras. Gradually, Rajkumar becomes a well-practical man in dealing with the dispossessed workers. He acknowledged that the only poor, landless and ignorant people can be caught in his trap. Dr. Indira Nityanandan writes:

“There was a growing demand in Burma for workers in the oil mines. Rajkumar accompanies Baburao, the contractor, and quickly learns the tricks of the trade” [6]

A pragmatic entrepreneur, Rajkumar deceives the Indian people by giving them false promises. He used to sell men and women workers to local companies in foreign countries and considered it the best way to make a huge amount of money. Rajkumar is more cunning than other businessmen. Here, we come to know Rajkumar's nature and how he could succeed in exploiting his own helpless peasants, and impoverished countrymen. It is a forceful migration done for the benefits of one. It is revealed in the novel, “He succeeded in bringing the whole group intact to Yenangyaung, and there he sold their indenture contracts to a local boss. The money was enough to pay off Saya John.” [3].

Taungzin Minthami's release, one of the maid servants from Burma, reminds all the servants of their native places in Burma. They could no longer want to stay in an alien country and so longing for their native place in Burma. The royal family was left to suffer a lot due to forced migration in an unknown area. Fate plays a cruel role with them. They appear nothing but puppets in the clutch of their destiny. The British rulers betrayed them by imposing their policies of economy and in the name of development. It focuses on their hopes, marginalization, quest for nativity and despair and anger of the exiled characters Tanmoy Kundu rightly points out:

“In this novel several layers of displacement are very much discernable. Here the British occupied Myanmar and sent the king of the land to exile in India and they suffer a lot for their dislocated position.” [5]

It is true that since their arrival in India, they lived a life of loneliness and detached from human society. In the clutch of time and distance they become one, get acquainted with each other in an alien country. The royal family learns Hindustani and speaks Hindustani as fluently as Indian natives. All members of the royal family now get acquainted with new surroundings. Beni Prasad Dey, an Indian eminent scholar joined his duty as a Collector of Ratnagiri in 1905. In Ratnagiri, he who stays with his wife named Uma Dey, was chiefly concerned about the Burmese royal family. He instilled the idea that the British ways are the most excellent. In fact, he served under the impression of the British Raj. In this context N. K. Rajalaxmi states,

“It made him treat the British as the superior and the Indian as the inferior. So he tries hard to prove himself an exceptional Indian who is more close to the British than Indian ways of life.” [7]

Uma, wife of the collector, is simple. Being a woman, she could more understand the feelings of dislocated and dispossessed people. She herself is an outsider and dislocated in Ratnagiri. She connects Dolly's life with that of her own life. Dolly's troubles and miseries now become her pains. Uma herself was childless. The marriage of the first princess and Mohan Sawant was not allowed because they are different in terms of their caste, creed, religion, class and nation. In India, these social issues are major hurdles in the way of union of two souls. Women do not have their own identities and freedom to choose their life-partner. Dolly makes harsh comments on the Indian way of life and tradition. She comes to know that women are not free in India and are treated inferior to men. Men decide women's desires, fate and their career. In Burma, the condition is dissimilar. Men and women are quite educated to decide their future and treated as equal. They have their freedom so far as gender equality is concerned. With the passage of time, Rajkumar proves himself as a successful businessman in the period of colonization by creating his identity as a perfect timber merchant. Consequently, Rajkumar earns a huge amount of money by transporting Indian poverty-stricken peasants in Burma. Rajkumar and Dolly get married in the presence of Uma, her husband, and many others. Dolly is a rootless and alienated character in the novel. Her suffering is caused by dislocation.

After the death of Uma's husband, she suffers a lot of difficulties in her family life. As a widow, she tries to live such a bounded life in India. But she refuses to lead a traditional life of an Indian widow. She feels that it is a good solution for her to go abroad and forget the sorrow of her husband's death. It is evident that in Burmese environment, Uma feels more free and cheerful than in India. She plays an important role in bringing Dolly and Rajkumar together. She brings this displaced and migrated girl to her native country. She is a woman who does not find happiness within the four walls of the house. She has to struggle to release herself from the bondage imposed upon her by the traditional society and patriarchal system in India. Therefore, she would not go ahead to lead a traditional life of an Indian widow. M. Sarathamani reveals her changed attitude:

“And she becomes an active member in Indian independence party. Her involvement in freedom struggle appears to be an extension of her struggle for personal independence and identity.” [10]

In the novel, Uma is shown as a representative of a new era, freedom and equality. Thus, she is presented as a new, bold, and confident personality of a fearless woman. She has been a different kind of woman who wants every woman to be free, safe and confident. The novel notices the exploitation and pathetic condition of the workers. Circumstances made the peasants and workers to change their residential places in order to earn their livelihood. They were given false-promises. Poverty, ignorance, starvation, unemployment and force are some important reasons for migration. The helplessness, exploitation, displacement, dependency of the migrants in an alien country are also visible in the novel.

The British Indian soldiers were mainly poor and illiterate peasants from different Indian villages. Since their helplessness and needs were actually used by the British for their benefits. The condition of Indian soldiers working under their rulers was so tragic that they were being made as the subjects of harsh criticism inside the country. They were transported like cattle from one place to another. Arjun and Hardy represent Indian soldiers working under the British rules. They were weapons and toys in the hands of their masters.

Thus, it is quite clear that the novel, *The Glass Palace* is a very realistic and heart-touching novel. It is basically based on history that depicts the historical events through the eyes of characters. It describes the lives of three families of Rajkumar, Uma Dey and Saya John respectively. Characters move to countries like India, Burma and Malaya. Rajkumar, Uma Dey and Saya John are the members of the first Generation. Neel, Dinu, Manju, Arjun, Matthew, and Elsa belong to the second generation. Jaya and Alison represent the third generation. Quest for nativity are quite visible in the novel. The fall of the King, Thebaw and queen Supayalat is a historical event. Uma, Arjun, Hardayal Singh, Ilongo, the King Thebaw and queen Supayalat are marginal characters. Their voice went unnoticed in the historical perspectives

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