

CONCEPT OF NATION AND PROBLEM OF NATIONAL IDENTIFY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE GLASS PALACE*: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY

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Abstract:

Colonialism had condemned millions to a life of subservience and dispossession. At this dismal situation, the anti-colonial nationalism promised a new dawn of independence and political self-determination for colonized peoples. In the twentieth century, the myth of nation has proved highly potent and productive during several struggles against colonial rule. Through the development of created and structured myths, the nation became highly mobilized as a powerful symbol which anti-colonial movements used to organize against colonial rule. Amitav Ghosh uses his novel, *The Glass Palace*, to unveil how the colonial intrusion had imbued the spirit of nationalism in unifying the people irrespective of caste, creed, class or regional disparities.

Keywords: Colonialism, Myth of Nation, Anti-Colonial movements, Nationalism.

The idea of 'nation' is a western construct. This influential statement on the idea of the nation was first delivered in 1882. It emerged with the growth of western capitalism and industrialization and was a fundamental component of imperialist expansion. On the world map, each nation is separated from the other by a border. They are planned by the people and built upon particular foundations. Therefore, a nation is primarily an idea.

The centrality to the idea of the nation lies in the notions of collectiveness and belonging, a mutual sense of community that a group of individuals imagines it shares. This sense of mutual, national belongingness is nurtured often by the performance of various national narratives, rituals and symbols that stimulate an individual's sense of being a member of a select group. Symbols like the national flag and national anthem are part of the invention of the tradition in which all nations participate. The repeated performance of various national rituals takes on an emotive and semi-sacred character for the people. If the invention of the tradition became central to the concept of 'nation', so do the narration of happenings in history. Every nation has its own narrative of history which explains its origins, its individual

character and the victories won in its name; which helps to strengthen the people's relationship with their past as also highlights their togetherness in the present by gathering them around one emotive symbol.

Benedict Anderson says in his work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), that Nations are often described through the forms of representations, which promote the unity of time and space. The simultaneities of time and space are exemplified in the form of novel and the newspapers are at the heart of the ways by which individuals consider themselves as a part of national community.

Many Indian English novelists have turned to the past as much to trace the deepening mood of nationalism as to cherish the memories of the bygone days. A close study of the contemporary novels reveals the writers' preoccupation with historic past and the unabated interest of the readers. In the novel that depicts the past are that treat some event of national importance that has had wide repercussion.

Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Glass Palace*, presents history as a collective memory, which gathers, in symbiotic fashion, all that which existed in the past into all that happens in the present. Through this novel, he returns to his own distinctive brand of historical fiction on a canvas more epic and the stories are personal, yet somehow grander than his previous novels. Ghosh uses his novel to unveil how the colonial intrusion had imbued the spirit of nationalism in unifying the people irrespective of caste, creed, class or regional disparities.

Colonialism had condemned millions to a life of subservience and dispossession. At this dismal situation, the anti-colonial nationalism promised a new dawn of independence and political self-determination for colonized peoples. In the twentieth century, the myth of nation has proved highly potent and productive during several struggles against colonial rule. Through the development of created and structured myths, the nation became highly mobilized as a powerful symbol, which anti-colonial movements used to organize against colonial rule.

The colonial rule had dismantled the political structures of many nations and the worst hits were the countries of the South Asian region. Many countries had become British colonies. In the South Asian region, it was India, Burma and Malaysia, which suffered the colonial oppression. These countries are known for their rich cultural heritage, rich natural resources and for their abundant wealth.

The British intruded into these lands in the name of business: that was their tactic. But the intrusion into these lands had no way changed the condition of the commoner. In fact the commoner thought that the colonial rule came as a liberating agency from the tyranny of

monarchical rule which they were facing. Especially in Burma, the commoner had developed an aversion towards their rulers, King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat. The opening chapters of The Glass Palace reveal the aversion of the Burmese crowd towards their superior authority.

“Through all the years of the Queen’s reign the townsfolk had hated her for her cruelty, feared her for her ruthlessness and courage” (The Glass Palace 34).

The looting of the King’s Palace by the Burmese public testifies their aversion. When the British confiscate Thebaw from power, his countrymen, the ordinary folk should have given him support through his difficult phase of time. Instead of that, they turned against him by indulging in looting their own King’s Palace. Because in their eyes the King failed as a good ruler that is the reason why they considered the British as a liberating agency. It is here that the question of the State comes into focus. In the countries, which are governed by the State, the State itself looks after the well-being of each and every individual of the country. It provides the source of revenue for its people and sets the standards of living. By doing so, the State gain control over its people and the social hierarchy runs with perfectness. But if the State fails in providing livelihood and other necessities to its people, it loses control over them and the hierarchy will be dismantled.

The Burmese King Thebaw failed to gain control over his people. He was a King for name sake but his wife, Queen Supayalat exercised all the powers. But she too failed in gaining control over the people. Neither she nor the King knew what was going through the minds of their people. The Royal couple’s life had been completely shut off from the public life. The conversation between Rajkumar and Ma Cho reveals how the King and the Queen led their lives away from the people. Queen Supayalat thought that the entire country was ‘along the walls’ of their mighty Palace. She did not care to realize that the country lie much beyond the palace walls. But she, like a modern day politician, boasts, “...they’d defeated the Emperor of China, conquered Thailand, Assam, Manipur. And she herself, Supayalat, she had risked everything to secure the throne for Thebaw, her husband and step-brother”. (The Glass Palace 22)

The British intrusion into Burma had changed everything. Thebaw lost his power and so did the Queen. Their own people had looted their Palace. It was an unbearable humiliation for the Royal couple. They never noticed the growing turbulence in the public. The Burmese crowd seized the opportunity to get into the Palace with the invasion of the British. Until then no Burmese commoner ever thought of entering into the palace. They knew that it would result in death penalty. But now everything has changed. The King and the Queen were thrown out of power. The Queen’s reaction when she saw the mob inside their Palace shows her helplessness:

The Queen was screaming, shaking her fists. 'Get out of here. Get out.' Her face was red, mottled with rage, her fury caused as much by her own impotence as by the presence of the mob in the Palace. A day before, she could have had a commoner imprisoned for so much as looking her directly in the face. Today all the city scum had come surging into the Palace and she was powerless to act against them (Ghosh The Glass Palace 33).

The King and the Queen along with some trusted servants were thrown out of their own country to a remote coastal village in India. No one in the country felt sorry for their expulsion from the country. It was the colonial rulers' ploy in exiling the King's family from their own land. Earlier, the Indian Mughal King, Bahadur Shah Zafar had been exiled in the same manner. The colonial rulers exiled him to Rangoon from India. The sudden change in the political structure had no effect on the commoner but it had a huge influence on the upper class people in the country. Because of the British intrusion into the land, Thebaw, the head of the country lost his power and many timber businessmen lost their grip on the teak plantations. Although Kinwun Mingyi and Taingda Mingyi, the two senior ministers in Thebaw government had some gains assisting the British in detaining Thebaw and many others had lost their prominence and were thrown out of power.

The colonial rule had a great impact on the members of the elite group in Burma as well as in India. Prior to the British intrusion they had a strong foothold in the country but now they have lost their grip on the soil. Their number is limited and they needed support of all the people to raise their voice against colonial rulers. Until then, they never considered other people, worth anything and even the social hierarchy had created a great abyss between them and the subaltern people.

Many once-colonized nations have struggled with the internal differences that threaten the production of national unity" (Mc leod 11).

The projection of a unified imaginary community became greatest strength for the national movement. The nationalist elite claim that their 'modern' attitudes are coterminous with 'popular consciousness' and enjoy the support of the people, deemed to be a unified singular entity sharing the same political aims. The myth of a nation functions as a valuable resource in uniting people to raise their voice against the colonial rulers. It worked against the differences created out of gender, racial, religious and cultural differences.

It is obvious that the British intrusion into Burma and India had resulted in creating a sense of nationalism. The British invasion has resulted in changing the internal differences among the people. The internal differences were set aside and the idea of nation had been created. In Paul Gilroy's words, nations are created:

...through elaborate cultural, ideological and political processes which culminate in feeling of connectedness to the other national subjects and in the idea of a national interest that transcends the supposedly petty divisions of class, region, dialect or caste' (Gilroy 49).

The Glass Palace ranges over a hundred years of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Burmese history. Its narrative revolves around the experiences of a range of multigenerational, Diasporas Indian / Burmese characters during a historical period -- the late nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. It begins with the British invasion of Burma in 1885 and takes one on a journey through the archive of history till the Second World War and restoration of democracy and resurgence of peace and order. In this process, Ghosh recounts and reviews then in eighteenth and twentieth century colonial turmoil in Burma, India and Malaysia. Ghosh's plot becomes complex because of the confluence of several perspectives and ideas of contemporary postcolonial discourses that he incorporates into the text. The plot in The Glass Palace registers the accounts of three generations of Indian and Burmese community and dramatizes the massive rise and fall in fortune of a few subalterns due to an overwhelming impact of colonial advances, military aggression and the two devastating World Wars.

The novelists with his humanistic rendering of history brings into foreground the irony that the British and the other European colonizers employed the Indian and South-Asian army in capturing the South-Asian country like Malay and Burma. They BGC/Aureole/HS/AG/Pg. 63 deposed the rightful native rulers like that of King The bawd of Mandalay (Burma). The novel in discussion epitomizes the plight and misery of the rootless people or an overthrown community "In Time of the Breaking of Nations". In the present discussion attempts to focus upon the simple, yet powerful annals of a few poor subalterns, a common soldier or a street orphan to explore the terrible effect or sweeping transformation that the war and military exploits have unleashed on common man. Like his other major fictional works, Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace destabilizes and dismantles the conventional historical archive and modern academic discourse in order to recast, review and rewrite the forcibly silenced, ignored or repressed currents of history. Rajkumar Raha, Dolly, Uma Dey, Arjun, Hardayal Singh, Dinu, Jaya, Alison are all the terrible victims of war and historical upheavals in some way or Others.

The central story of the novel aptly reinforces the three dimensions of an individual's relation to the political and social history of his country: 1. history suffering 2.history bearing 3.history creating. Ghosh makes the fact unambiguously clear that war and historical upheavals act as a great leveler by blurring the socio economic boundaries and denouncing and destabilizing the hierarchy. It also becomes clear that such terrible upheavals not only inflict endless sufferings to common men, but also, there may be certain individuals who may

rise in fortune, taking the advantage of a troubled period in history and community. Rajkumar in the novel starts his journey from a penniless orphan and a child laborer in a Burmese tea stall and becomes a successful and prosperous business tycoon exploiting the natural wealth of Burma during and after the troubled period of British invasion of Rangoon.

The novel by juxtaposing the silenced history of the subalterns and the broader perspective of the colonial and postcolonial history makes the point powerfully articulate. Rajkumar, Saya John, Dinu, Neel, Uma Dey, Alison and Jaya are some of the insignificant individuals who become instrumental for Ghosh to demonstrate the complex relation of history, politics, military aggression, colonialism and the rise and fall of the fortunes of disempowered subalterns. All of them, in some way or other, epitomize the making, unmaking and remaking of a nation or a community in the face of the rise and fall of dynasties. Ghosh's narrative skillfully brings into foreground the lost history of the ordinary people who sometimes are the sufferers and sometimes are the creators of history of a nation or a community.

The Glass Palace is a superb and a complex mix of historical scholarship, simple narratives of subaltern individuals and humanistic quest for a new voice and identity. The novelist views the events of war, BGC/Aureole/HS/AG/Pg. 65 colonial conquest, devastation and sweeping socio-economic transformation not from a conventional historian's point of view, but from a humanist's way of thinking. For him history is not a mere jumble of events of the past, of annals of war, of the change in dynasties: rather a living construct and a humanistic discourse of a continuous process of evolution in which the disempowered subalterns play the pivotal role. The text makes the point unambiguously clear that war or the time of a national disaster acts as a great leveler by indispensably linking the fate of the ruler and ruled oppressor and the oppressed. King The bawd is no less a victim of the imperial invasion than thousands of poor Burmese.

The Glass Palace is a representative postcolonial text that incorporates all the major debates and issues of postcolonial theory and practice. The novelist is sharply critical of the inhuman intrusion of the colonial power and subsequent capture and unsettling of the South-Asian territories like Burma, Malay and India. He brings into interrogation the diabolic machination of the European masters and the forced silencing of the indigenous history of the native subalterns. Christiana T. Jose in her illuminating article on The Glass Palace aptly writes "If post-colonial literature means the interrogation of the subaltern to the 'centre', no other book is representative of the post-colonial theory and practice as Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace"(Jose.135). The novel as a fascinating postcolonial text challenges and subverts the European hegemonic construct of history, and rewrites, reviews and recreates it from the perspective of subaltern representation.

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