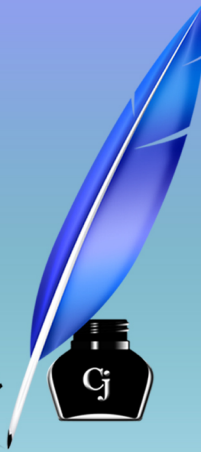


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## Nation in Question in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the validity of the concept of 'nation' in a postcolonial world through the analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*. It brings into light the process of constructing 'an imagined community' in the name of 'nation'. The image of different nations appears as a distinct geographical location with its own national emblem, national anthem, national language etc. and separated from another nation by borders. This article analyses the colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial period as it is represented in *The Glass Palace* from theoretical perspectives. That's why concepts like racism, hybridism, subaltern, colonialism, neocolonialism question the concept of 'nation'. It shows that 'nation' as a concept creates barrier in the mind of the human beings. That's why, one country thinks of itself superior to another country and an intentional competition gets its existence behind the mask of globalization. This article brings into light all these aspects and argues in favour of universal brotherhood.

**[Keywords:** Racism, Subaltern, Diaspora, Cultural essentialism, Neocolonialism, Postcolonialism]

The concept of 'Nation' did not emerge naturally. It has been created as an important mode of social and political organization. During the colonial period, to create a collective response against the colonizers, the elites in the society created anti-colonial nationalism. And the anti-colonial nationalism was based on the discrepancy between the colonizer and the colonized. In the colonial period, the British created a region of the globe known as the 'Orient' by all negative identities to this region and all the positive identities have been attached to the region of the 'occident'. But later, the elites in the society reversed the polarity of the binary opposition of the 'Anglo European White' and 'other' standing on the same side of the colonizers. So a sense of discrepancy always attaches to the concept of 'nation'. From that perspective, it is evident that the concept of 'nation' is western in origin. It raised its head with the growth of the Western Capitalism and industrialization and has been used as an apparatus of imperialist expansion.

A nation is separated from another nation by a border but this border does not have its natural origin. The borders between nations was created and defended mythically sometimes by the bloody contests of groups of people. Ernest Gellner argues:

...nations are not inscribed into the nature of things, they do not constitute a political version of the doctrine of natural kinds (Gellner 49).

So, we can conceive 'nation' as an idea. Benedict Anderson defines the nation "as an imagined political community.... It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6). It can be pointed out that such kind of unity is manufactured by different kinds of narratives, rituals and symbols. But the problem starts when one nation thinks of itself superior to other nations. In *The Glass Palace*, Amitav Ghosh deconstructs the concept of 'nation' and evaluates the validity of this concept in this postmodern world. It covers the period of 1880-1990 and represents colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial aspects of India, Burma and the characters in this novel believe in different ideology and as a result of this, these characters show the fragility of the concept of 'nation'. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* represented how the 'nation' gets its meaning and he represented *Kanthapura*, a small village, as a microcosm of the Indian nation. 'Nation' is a by-product of different narratives, rituals and symbols. In *Kanthapura*, the above mentioned narratives take recourse to Vedantic texts and Puranas and inserts nationalist struggle into them. Jayaramachar, a character in that novel, brings Shiva, Parvati and the nation in a parallel way. The image of nation as a 'devi' can be found in this narrative. The three eyed Siva stands for Swaraj, 'hell' symbolically represents foreign rule. In this way, through the representation of nation mythically, a collected response has been created against the colonizer. But as a result of the emergence of the concept of 'nation', racism also picks up his head. In *Kanthapura*, we find the nation in making, and in *The Glass Palace*, we find nation in question.

*The Glass Palace* is divided into seven parts. The first part entitled 'Mandalay' represents various issues of colonialism. In this part, the conversation between two characters draws our attention – Rajkumar and Ma Cho. Rajkumar, an Indian is always addressed by Ma Cho as a "thick headed Kalaa" (Ghosh 10) in Mandalay. The word 'Kalaa' directs to the concept of racism which is always attached to some signifiers and one's ability to do some work. 'Nation' as a concept gives birth to the sense of superiority in comparison to another nation and in this way, as an inhabitant of a particular nation one person thinks of himself superior to another person belonging to another nation. Thus, a barrier operates among the people of different nations. Saya John, an orphan who has been brought up by catholic priests in Malacca, has been given a name John Martins. But later, he has been ridiculed by some Indian soldiers because he looked like Chinese and carried a Christian name. This incident indicates that the concept of 'nation' influences naming process also. Thus, cultural essentialism in a particular nation demands unique modes of culture, life style, tradition, etc. And these things try to create a relationship between one nations' past and present, and give a unique identity to the member of a particular nation as Indian, Bangladeshi, European, etc. As Jasbir Jain remarks "Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak prefers the word 'nation' and defines it in linguistic terms, because she is of the view that cultural identity always pre-supposes a language" (Jain 81). That's why each and every country has its own national language, national anthem, national emblem, etc. In *The Glass Palace*, the reference to cultural essentialism can be found when the natives of Mandalay felt the necessity of having a defense force mainly for three reasons:

...to uphold the religion, to uphold the national honour, to uphold the country's interest (16).

Here, a unique mode of religion and a separated interest have been pointed out.

But this cultural essentialism cannot be held in this postnational world. Postnationalism as a concept questions 'nation' and it believes in the existence of a global phenomenon. *The Glass Palace* represents the concept of migration and shows the fragile condition of the concept of 'nation'. Homi K. Bhabha attacked cultural diversity as giving the false impression that cultures are holistic, separated, and static with "pre-given cultural contents and customs" (Bhabha 34). In reality, the porous borders between cultures indicate that cultures are always leaking into each other, criss-crossing supposed barrier. In this way culture can be identified as a form hybridized and fluid. A picture of hybridized culture can be found in *The Glass Palace* where a conglomeration of Indians and Burmese has been depicted in Rangoon. So many Indians had been sent to Rangoon to work in the docks and mills, to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines. Economical need bounds man to roam from one place to another, one country to another country. Thus, cultural essentialism as a unique characteristic of nation is inherently deconstructive. Language, which is also a part of cultural essentialism, represents a hybridized phenomenon in Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*. And in these novels, we find the existence of Pidgin, Creole, etc. In the same manner, in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, we can easily find the conglomeration of English, Hindi or Urdu dialects. So, nation as a unique identity can be put into question. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O's novel, *A Grain of Wheat* also represents the process of the formation of national consciousness. Kihika, the freedom fighter in that novel resists the colonial authorities using the past learning for present struggle which draws a similarity between the resistance of Kihika and that resistance organized by people of Mandalay in *The Glass Palace*. So, it is crystal clear that 'nation' as a concept did not get its origin organically. So many other factors raised their heads in *The Glass Palace* to question 'nation' as a concept. Diasporic identity may be cited as such a concept. Diaspora literature involves an idea of homeland, a place from where a displacement occurs and narratives are created as a result of it. Under colonialism, diaspora signifies the temporary or permanent movements of Europeans all over the world living to colonize settlements. A myth of nationalism is simply projected in the minds of British by the capitalists and that's why, young Europeans spent their lives in the colonies thinking about only economical gain without taking much care of their health. The British thought of themselves superior to the natives of their colonial regime. The British, thinking about the 'orient' gets its proper manifestation through the conversation between the British Assistant and Saya John.

Rajkumar tried to see Saya John through the Assistant's eyes where Saya John has been reflected as small, eccentric and erratically dressed in his ill-fitting European clothes. It shows that a pride about the British culture has been depicted in such a way in the mind of the British that they are looking at 'other' not through their eyes but by the murky glass of culture. That's why they were not able to assimilate with their new regime properly and a sense of diaspora comes into existence. Dolly, who has been sent into exile in India, expresses her feelings to Uma, the Collector's wife, that she could never return home:

If I went to Burma now I would be a foreigner – they would call me a kaala like they do Indians – a trespasser, an outsider from across the sea. I'd find that very hard I think. I'd never be able to rid myself of the idea that I would have to leave again one day, just as I had to leave before. You would understand if you knew what it was like when we left (113).

Now, it can be mentioned that a concept of 'nation' creates a barrier not only for the people outside but also for natives who stay outside their traditional homelands. The natives, who

leave their traditional homelands and stay in another nation, give birth to the hybridized culture in the sphere of culture, language, religion, etc. The concept of diasporic nationalism always questions the concept of nationalism as a static one. It states that one's identity cannot be created by borderlands and it is not limited within the territorial region. In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh brings into light the process how Indian soldiers have been utilized by the British. The mind of the Indian soldiers has been tried to mould in accordance with their own way. Arjun's mind became biased by the British way of seeing the 'other'. That's why he comments:

Look at us – 'they would say, ' - Punjabis, Marathas, Bengalis, Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims. Where else in India would you come across a group such as ours- where region and religion don't matter- where we can all drink together and beef and pork and think nothing of it (298)?

Arjun's belief in the unity of their regiment proved to be a foil. Ghosh depicts, in the novel that the Indian soldiers have been put down in a system where they have been bound to imitate Westerners. He says:

They had to prove, to themselves as well as to their superiors, that they were eligible to be rulers, to qualify as members of an elite: that they had vision enough to rise above the ties of their soil, to overcome the responses instilled in them by their upbringing (299).

In the above mentioned lines, it has been stated that the Indian soldiers have been put down in a competition within themselves. They were bound to do that work which was once restricted by their own culture. And that forbidden journey was started with eating bacon, ham, roast beef, pork chops and wine. The word 'elite' in the above mentioned line indicates that the British tried to create a region of loyal Indian soldiers. But the process of making 'elites' for their own use created discrepancy among the Indian soldiers:

Far from being pleased at serving under Hardy, his father's old colleagues were deeply offended by his presence in the battalion. They were of the first generation of Indian soldiers to serve under Indian officers. Many of them were uneasy about this: their relationship with their British officers was the source of their pride and prestige. To serve under Indian was a dilution of this privilege (302).

The Indian soldiers thought that it was a matter of pride and prestige to work under British. That's why Indian soldiers working under senior Indian soldiers created a panic in the mind of old colleagues. All these incidents show that unity among the Indians at that time was not a static one. But later, in the words of Giani Amreek Singh, a picture of disillusioned Indian soldier comes in front of us –

We were told that we were freeing those people. That is what they said-that we were going to set those people free from their bad kings or their evil customs or some such thing. We believed it because they believed it too. It took us a long time to understand that in their eyes freedom exists where ever *they* rule (240).

A misinterpretation of the concept of freedom has been represented in front of the Indian soldiers. That's why they blindly helped British reign. During the uprising in the Irrawaddy district, Insein, Yamthin, and Pyaon, Indian soldiers were used to guard the Empire. This role of Indian soldiers created barriers between Indians and Burmese. Here, it is easy to understand that the concept of 'nation' blinds people to the real phenomenon. That's why the grudge of the Burmese people against the British turned towards the Indians. And the Indian soldiers also started fighting against those people who should be their friends. Ghosh describes the World War in *The Glass Palace* in the following manner:

...this was a competition for supremacy among nations who believed it to be their shared destiny to enslave other peoples- England, France, Germany (341).

Eventually, the two world wars bring into light the darker side of the orthodoxical nationalism. But in this novel, a postnational image has been represented through the naming process of Rajkumar and Dolly's children. The children have been given two names, one Burmese and another Indian- Sein Win and Neeladhri to the elder one, and Tunpe and Dinanath to the younger one. Representing hybridized phenomenon, an image of melted culture has been presented in front of us. Thus 'nation' as a concept is put into question in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*.

'Nation' as a concept demands unity but in the postcolonial period neocolonial phenomenon brings into light the crack in the concept of 'nation'. Neocolonialism is the geopolitical practice of using capitalism, business globalization and cultural imperialism to control a country, in lieu of either direct military control or indirect political control. Neocolonialism gives birth to the concept of 'subaltern group'.

Amitav Ghosh in his non fictional work *The Countdown* represents the subaltern group. The people living in Pokhran and their sufferings have been repressed in front of the world by politics or media politics. Even in *The Glass Palace*, the 1940s' picture of protracted civil conflicts and a large scale of communist uprising in Burma represent neocolonial phenomenon:

In 1962, General Ne Win seized power in a coup and the country became subject to the bizarre, maniacal whimsies of its dictator...(522).

The above mentioned fact indicates that the whole country went to the reign of chaos. Now, the concept of freedom which is associated with the concept of 'nation' asks for the validity of its existence, i.e. the utopian world which had been represented in front of the people in colonial period, converted into dystopia. As a result of this, nation as a concept is put into question. Dinu comments:

To me this is the most terrible indignity of our condition – not just in Burma, but in many other places too....that politics has invaded everything, spared nothing....religion, art, family....it has taken over everything....there is no escape from it (580).

Such notions of 'nation' can also be understood from the point of view of dependency theory. Dependency theory is the theoretic basis of economic neocolonialism, which presupposes that wealthy countries control the economic system and poor countries remain at the periphery. Economic neocolonialism extracts the human and natural resources of a peripheral country.



The same condition can be found in colonial period also. In the colonial period, transportation of labours and natural resources from colonial regime happened simultaneously. And the collective response of freedom has been created during the colonial period with a promise to eradicate all the evils prevalent during the colonial period. What happens after independence is – rulers have been changed but condition remains the same. The Pokhran nuclear test in *The Countdown*, the two riots in *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines* shatter the myth of nationalism. That's why this argument is in favour of universal brotherhood. It is not that the argument denies the concept of 'nation'. It states for a change in national approach where each and every country will extend its help without any kind of evil intention for the organization of any evil country. In this way, the fragile condition of the concept of 'nation' can be pointed out from the theoretical perspectives of racism, hybridism, diasporic nationalism and neocolonialism.

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