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Disquisition of Women Characters in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Amitav Ghosh uses the medium of writing fiction to create and articulate an iconic status for women. He creates several unique, strong, reliable and extraordinary female characters in his novels. He discusses women from every section of Indian society and concludes that the position of upper class women is not very different from women of the lower class. He doesn't portray women as merely puppets struck in the strings of patriarchal society, but delineate them as the leading spirits. Each character is created with an imaginative grace and few characters negotiate with their milieu to conclude at probable resolutions. Some characters break from their traditional pattern of sexuality and sensuality to get rid of their dependency status in the patriarchal society.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh undoubtedly occupies an indisputable position in the gamut of Indian writers in English. He has contributed immensely to make Indian writings acclaimed worldwide. Most of his writing involves the themes of exile, cultural displacement, revolution, emigration, dislocation, loss of identity, uprooting that characterizes into historical novels. He recuperates the irony, disillusionment, dilemma and ambiguity of human condition of a bygone era through his language. He masterfully connects the complex flow of time with his researched narrative. As a writer of historical fiction; he delves deeply in an introspective exploration of self and the society with much eloquence. Ghosh is laudable for handling his highly celebrated stories and exploring characters.

The Glass Palace, an international bestseller, won the Grand Prize for Fiction at the Frankfurt International E-Book Awards. He declined the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Fiction for the book, objecting its classification as part of Commonwealth Literature. *The Glass Palace* opens in Mandalay in 1885 and the story moves between Burma, India and Malaya spread across several generations covering the histories of these countries. In this novel, Ghosh weaves his narrative around the life of his protagonist in the manner of a Bildungsroman. The text narrates the story of an orphan, Raj Kumar Raha, an Indian migrant to Burma, his budding romance and marriage with the Burmese royal maid, Dolly and his rise and then fall as a successful businessman. His plight in the context of the Burmese history of the British invasion into Burma and its subsequent colonial rule, his temporary migration, dislocation and experience of loss, exile and a search for home and return to his country as a destitute. It unfolds the stories of families with the twists and turns in life, having diverse effects on the characters.

The portrayal of the female characters in the most skillfully written novel *The Glass Palace* (2000) is worth discussing. Amitav Ghosh uses the medium of writing fiction to create and articulate an iconic status for women. He doesn't portray women as merely puppets struck in the

strings of patriarchal society, but delineate them as the leading spirits. His female characters are a combination of real life images found in all the layers of the society. On one hand, he brings out the trauma they undergo in their respective domains and on the other, he strengthens and propels them to empower cultural construction. The process of suppression, domination, cultural taboos is prevalent in the novel. Though most of the female characters are inextricably linked to their families, they grow and develop in their own trajectory independently.

Ghosh creates several unique, strong, reliable and extraordinary female characters in his novels. He envisions the characters of Dolly, Uma and Queen Supayalat who makes the reader to travel with them through a century of social upheaval and the political turmoil. Each character tells about the time and place she lives and her range and evolution in search of her identity. He creates them with the same expression and grace equal to their male counterparts who live life to the fullest as complete human beings. They break the stereotyped pattern of typical household women, but move on as the symbol of dignity, growth and progress. According to Simone de Beauvoir, one of the important obstacles to a woman's freedom is not her biology or the political or legal constraints placed upon her, or even her economic situation; rather it is the whole process by which femininity is manufactured in the society. In her most celebrated phrase "One is not born, but rather becomes it, woman".

In the novel *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh represents a proliferation of characters which include the privileged as well as the subaltern. He discusses women from every section of Indian society and concludes that the position of upper class women is not very different from women of the lower class. As the novel spans for three generations, Ghosh presents Queen Supayalat, Dolly, Uma Dey, Ma Choin the first generation and Alison, Manju, Bela in the second generation and Jaya in the third generation. There are few other characters like Ilongo's mother and the four princesses who not directly, but have significance in the novel.

Dolly

Dolly is the central and an outstanding character in *The Glass Palace*. She is a personification of the spirit of endurance and acceptance. Throughout the novel she stands as a symbol of courage, honour, hope, compassion and sacrifice. She always carries the image of a complete woman despite of all the odds she faces. When the English force Burmese King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat in exile, Dolly a nine- year old girl is also transported along with them. In the beginning of the novel, Ghosh introduces Dolly as the only girl who can coddle and pamper the second princess. She feels the same incomprehensible loyalty to the royal family, even after dislocation to India. Dolly is always fulfilling in a loving, harmonious relationship and a deep concern for others.

Dolly remains with the royal family in the most adverse situations and difficult circumstances. She begins to notice many changes around her, of the impudence of the servants, their refusal to *Shiko* and her own ambivalent position. She was free, but equally a slave bound with the princesses, who she had been enslaved to look after. Gradually from a child she grows into an attractive young girl more beautiful than the princesses. When she grows up, unknowingly Sawant, the local servant of the king becomes her natural choice. But she is caught by the first princess who snatches him away. Emotionally hurt Dolly gives up and just becomes an attaché to the royal family. When the first princess becomes pregnant with Sawant's child,

Dolly psychologically identifies herself with the first princess and says she is waiting for the baby's arrival.

Dolly grows into her own person only after she meets Uma Dey. She strikes up a close, unlikely friendship with her. *Uma* coaxes her to marry Raj Kumar and convinces her of love and marriage and the secured life she needs. The royal maid Dolly represents the twice colonized victim of the breaking of a nation. Ironically, she has an allegiance to the nation of her exile or displacement which she has appropriated as home. For Dolly, her life in The Outram House is the only life she knows in her place of exile. She tells Uma, "where would I go, this is home" (p. 119). She embodies the quiet and subliminal aggression of dislocated subjects. Her most haunting concern is that Burma, the place of her birth has been lost to her forever and she is displaced from her roots and her discomfort with her changed identity is clear when she confides her predicament to Uma: "If I went to Burma now I would be a foreigner – they would call me a *Kalaa* 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 knew what it was like when we left"(p. 113).

Finally, she agrees to do so as Raj Kumar loves her and marriage being a sacrament in the Hindu context is the only suitable career open to a woman. She also sees it as a security for her orphan life. Dolly completely fits in the role of a nurturer and homemaker and resembles 'earth mother', capable of bearing and adapting to the vicissitudes of life. She maintains her loyalty by telling Saya John to take care of Rajkumar's illegitimate son, Ilango. Her resilience is a quality to be most cherished in the modern world.

When Dolly's younger son, Dinu develops slight polio in one leg, she devotes all her time in the hospital nursing him. She becomes introspective and grieves with other mothers keening over their dead children. Hence, the interior evolution of Dolly becomes quite significant in the novel. She wants to leave everything and live in a monastery and led a life of meditation. But she couldn't do that as she has the responsibility of taking care of her children at least till they are well settled in their lives. She never gets out of the patriarchal orbit and the traditional norms of the family because she feels that she needs to fulfill her duty towards her husband and her sons, particularly Dinu. While Uma tries to free her from the historical, traditional norms and give her a sense of independence and freedom, it was in vain.

At the juncture of nursing Dinu, Dolly's attitude towards life changes and she feels: I couldn't go back to the life I'd led before (p. 239). After the tragic death of her elder son, Neel a feeling of vacuum and loneliness spreads and she accepts the inevitability of pain and suffering. A visit to a Buddhist nunnery reveals her strong desire for renunciation, which is not possible at the present circumstances as she is deeply committed to her responsibilities. She proves her indomitable spirit and strength of convictions in the end of the novel by entering the monastery and withdrawing from the world. Ghosh presents here a woman of feminine virtues, obedience, patience and dedication.

Queen Supayalat

Amitav Ghosh weaves the character of Queen Supayalat from the history of Burma. She was the daughter of King Mindon Min and Queen of Alenandaw and the last queen of Burma who

reigned in Mandalay (1878–1885). She was married to her half-brother, Thebaw, the last king of the Konbaung dynasty. She was considered as vindictive, unforgiving and an imperious woman. She never regarded herself beholden to the British as she believed that they robbed her of her kingdom with all the wealth and riches therein. She stands against the powerful British Empire even after her exile. She becomes popular for planning and massacring eighty-ninety potential heirs to the throne of Burma. She is vicious and frivolous. Her quest to follow traditions gives her the strength to defy the mighty British.

Despite of her diminished title, she continues to demand that all visitors and foreigners *Shiko* her in the manner prescribed by royal custom. Visitors were expected to walk in and seat themselves on low chairs around Her Highness, with no words of greetings being uttered on either side. This was the Queen's way of preserving the spirit of Mandalay protocol: since the representatives of the British were adamant in their refusal to perform the *Shiko*, she in turn made a point of not acknowledging their entry in her presence (p. 106). She never surrendered to the demands of the British and finally becomes the reason for the fall of the Burmese Empire and the Anglo-Burmese war that follows. "The Queen had prevailed and the Burmese court had fused to yield to the British ultimatum" (p. 22).

Queen Supayalat stands as a strong character throughout *The Glass Palace*. Once or twice a year the Queen would ride out with her daughters, her face a white mask, stem and unmoving, her lips stained a deep, deathly mauve by her cheroots... but she never seemed to notice anyone or anything, sitting as straight as a rod, her face stern and unmoving (p. 77). She displays her superiority by stubbornly not allowing Dolly into The Outram House after she marries Rajkumar. On her orders Sawant closes the main gates. After Sawant impregnates the first princess, she wants to get her daughter married to Sawant, much to the embarrassment of District Collector Dey. She tells "Collector-sahib, you keep yourself so well informed. I'm surprised that none of your spies have ever thought to tell you that children can be born without a license" (p. 149). She lashes back at the entire British rule " 'Scandal?' The Queen's eyes hardened as she repeated the English word. 'You have the insolence to come here and speak to us of *Scandals*? There is no *Scandal* in what my daughter has done. The *Scandal* lies in what you have done to us; in the circumstances to which you have reduced us; in our very presence here. What did my daughters ever do, Collector-sahib, that they should have to spend their lives in a prison? Did they commit a crime? Were they tried or sentenced? We have heard so many lectures from you and your colleagues on the subject of the barbarity of the Kings of Burma and the humanity of the *Angrez*. We were tyrants you said, enemies of freedom, murderers. The English alone understands liberty, we were told; they do not put kings and princes to death; they rule through laws. If that is so, why has King Thebaw never brought to trial? Where are these laws, we hearing about? Is it a crime to defend your country against an invader? Would the English not do the same?" (p. 150).

Uma Dey

Ghosh skillfully sculpts the character of Uma Dey. She is an amalgamation of a traditional woman with modern thoughts. Besides being beautiful, attractive and charming, she is also intelligent, lively and interesting. She is the wife of District Collector Dey, who constantly worries about living up to the standards of her husband. Being the proper *Memsahib*, she follows the traditional domestic etiquette, and becomes an elegant hostess, a mere adjunct to the collector.

She soon understands that her husband's dream was not in accordance with the rules of Indian custom, he longs "to live with a woman as an equal in spirit and intellect" (p. 158). She could never fulfill those expectations. As Ghosh says that woman, irrespective of age, class, borders and culture always face the problem of sexual exploitation and insecurity in the patriarchal world.

Uma feels that she is also denied of being her own self, individuality or an identity in the patriarchal world. She starts to re-assess the real meaning of her unquestioning acceptance. She always wanted a relationship based on love and understanding, but in reality she is unable to cope up with this atmosphere of "constrained enactment". She began to sob, covering her face with her hands. The wifely virtues she could offer him, he had no use for: Cambridge had taught him to want more: to make sure that nothing was held in abeyance, to bargain for a woman's soul with a coin of kindness and patience. The thought of this terrified her. This was subjection beyond decency, beyond her imagining (p. 153). She is desperate to find recognition as the 'independent other'. Even within the narrow confines of her life as the wife of the collector, she manages to assert herself by draping her saree in the newly introduced way. This earns her the appreciation of Queen Supalayat.

After the unfortunate death of her husband unlike a young Hindu widow in an oppressive traditional society, she doesn't become a pessimist. She is left with the financial means to explore the world, travels abroad and equals a respectable and cultured Western woman. When she returns to India there is a huge transformation and a monumental change in her disposition. Ghosh makes use of historical precedents when he mentions the Parsee nationalist, Mme Bhikaiji Cama as Uma's mentor. The existing radical views of Uma are questioned by Raj Kumar. You have so many opinions. Uma - about things of which you know nothing. For weeks now I've heard you criticizing everything you see: the state of Burma, The treatment of women, the condition of India, the atrocities of the Empire. But what have you yourself ever done that qualifies you to hold these opinions? Have you ever built anything? Given a single person a job? Improved anyone's life in any way? (p. 248).

Uma is portrayed as an independent woman breaking the norms of traditional identity and incorporating a sense of freedom into the mechanical life of Dolly. She is like a sister figure to Dolly. She is outraged by Rajkumar's infidelity when she learns about Ilongo and confronts Ilongo's mother as to why she indulged in a relationship with a married man. Then Ilongo's mother explains "He told me that his wife had turned away from the world; that she'd lost interest in her home, her family, in him..." (p.236). The irony is that Dolly aware of the fact asks Saya John to take care of them. She finds herself responsible for this. "Uma, you're very angry with Rajkumar and I suspect I know why, but you should not judge him too harshly, you know, you must remember that I too bear some of the guilt" (p. 248). Even she becomes the victim of Raj Kumar, where Ghosh describes a scene where Uma is found lying in the clutches of Raj Kumar in their sixties at that time.

Ma Cho

Ma Cho is the first woman character Ghosh introduces in *The Glass Palace*. In a world where life of a normal woman was not worth living, economically subordinate to men, Ma Cho stands as a

strong independent woman. Even she struggles very hard to make her own identity and gain status in the male dominated society. She is a half-Indian and half-Burmese more Burmese than Indian in appearance. A simple woman in her mid-thirties owns a small food-stall. She has no family but only loneliness. Ghosh portrays her as a woman of great strength and preserver of culture. She takes Rajkumar under her wings providing him with a job in her tea stall. In a sense, she becomes his caretaker and warns him not to venture into the fort at Mandalay. She abuses him calling half-wit Kaala.

Rajkumar comes to know about female anatomy and sex for the first time in his life through Ma Cho. During the day Ma Cho was a harried and frantic termagant ... But by night... a certain languor entered her movements. She would cup her breasts and air them, fanning herself with her hands: she would run her fingers through the cleft of her chest, past the pout of her belly, down to her legs and thighs. Watching her from below, Rajkumar's hand would snake slowly past the knot of his longyi, down to his groin (p. 8). Through the cracks in the wooden walls, he views her at nights. He even gets his first physical sensations through her. But she resists. "Oh!" She grunted. Then, with a starting deftness, one of her hands flew to the knot of his Longyi... Abruptly she pushed him away with a yelp of disgust. 'What am I doing?' she cried. 'What am I doing with this boy, this child, this half-wit kalaa?' Elbowing him aside, she clambered up her ladder and vanished into her room (p. 57). But the irony is that she is sexually exploited by Saya John. Though she is in love with him, she does not allow this love and physical indulgence give her the false illusion of marriage to him. As she tells Rajkumar "You don't understand you thick-headed kalaa. He's a Christian. Every time he comes to visit me, he has to go to his church the next morning to... ask forgiveness. Do you think I would want to marry a man like that?" (p. 10).

The Four Princesses

Ghosh derives the characters of the four princesses similar to the royal princesses from the history of Burma. The king, the queen and their four daughters lived in exile for nearly 31 years in complete isolation. From a life of riches and resplendence -- the only one they had ever known -- they led a very normal life with no proper education and no connection with the outside world. The first princess Hteiksu Myatpayagyi (1880–1947) married an Indian guard at Thibaw Palace. The second princess Hteiksu Myatpayalat (1882–1956) married a Burmese courtier in Thibaw Palace, without the approval of the royal parents. The third princess Hteiksu Myatpaya aka Madras Supaya (1886–1962) returned to Burma with her mother, and married a grandson of Mindat Min, her great uncle and brother of King Mindon. The fourth princess Hteiksu Myatpayalay (1887–1935), was fluent in English and acted as the royal family's spokesperson airing their grievances in a document called *Sadutta thamidaw ayeidawbon sadan*. She married a Burmese lawyer, and was sent away by the colonial government to live in Moulmein for the rest of her days.

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh clearly gives a compelling account of how the colonial rule exploited the royal dynasty. The reason for keeping the royal family out of sight is that it would become the focus of resistance to colonial rule in Burma. The British administrators in Burma were careful to keep the royal family under wraps as they could serve as a binding thread. During their exile the Queen is heavily pregnant with her third child. Blessed with a daughter instead of a son, as expected from her, the Queen feels that a girl is better than a boy during exile. The four princesses are very closely associated with Dolly, whom they know from their childhood.

Though the Queen is against Dolly's marriage, the four princesses feel rather happy and even send her gifts on the occasion. The irony is that the four princesses marry normal men whom they do not deserve.

Manju- Bela

Ghosh inhabits the qualities of a normal and simple looking image in the characters of Manju and her sister Bela, the nieces of Uma Dey. Manju unlike her twin Arjun wants to achieve something in life. She dreams to become an actress, but can't get out of her traditional tag. She meets Neel, Dolly's elder son by chance in a small studio, falls in love with him. Ghosh here highlights an absolutely typical Indian young girl with higher aspirations who ultimately gives up everything in the name of marriage. Their marriage that follows brings the families of two best friends, Dolly and Uma together. Like every normal girl she dreams of a very happy married life and her home. It was only now, circling above the city that was to be her home, that she acknowledged how completely she was in love. He was her present, her future, the entirety of her existence. Time and being held no meaning without him. She slipped her hand into his and looked down again on the great muddy river and the spire of gold. 'Yes,' she said. 'I'm home' (p.301). Within a short period Neel unfortunately dies in an accident. Though she has her little daughter Jaya to be taken care of, she commits suicide out of depression.

Bela is the younger sister of Manju and Arjun. Ghosh presents her as a very simple girl. She develops an unknown relationship for Arjun's batman, Kishan Singh. On the night of Manju's wedding, she slips into his room and they have a small friendly conversation. When she was about to leave, he stops her, 'Wait.' With a hand under her chin, he kissed her, very briefly, but full on the lips.' (p. 297). She doesn't get married throughout her life as she keeps him in her memory till the end of her life. "But when Bela lit the dhoop sticks, there were always four bunches, not three. Without ever being told, Jaya knew that the extra one was for Kishan Singh: he too was among their dead" (p. 486).

Alison

Alison, Saya John's granddaughter, is also a strong character in the novel. Saya John's dementia aggravates when his son, Matthew and his American wife, Elsa, die in a motor accident leaving their only daughter Alison rudderless. Dinu comes to Malaya at Morningside estate to inquire about their situation. He is instantly attracted to Alison and in fact wants to marry her. Uma realizes Dinu's infatuation for Alison, though there is a great deal of difference in their temperament. These characters of the second generation are etched very well by Ghosh. Their love story captures the reader's imagination in the midst of wartime despair.

Ghosh here gives the message that the sexuality of a woman has its own space in their life. Alison feels that Dinu is too involved in his photography to pay attention to her, but Dinu considers their physical encounter as a symbol that they are in love with each other. Coincidentally, when Arjun's unit is posted in Malaya near to the Morningside plantation, he encounters Alison and Dinu. Their lives come together with Arjun and Alison's brief affair (lust) in contrast to Dinu and Alison's more lasting relationship (love). When her body and Arjun's body came in contact with each other she felt as though they were both absent, two strangers, whose bodies were discharging a function (p. 374). It was only against the contrast of this cohabiting of absences that she could apprehend the meaning of what it meant to be fully present

- eye, mind and touch united in absolute oneness, each beheld by the other, each beholding (p. 374). She drives along with her grandfather to reach Singapore during the Japanese invasion. In order to save her grandfather, she shoots the soldiers then shoots herself and dies with the satisfaction that she was able to retort back. Thus her faith in true love for Dinu remains forever.

Jaya

Jaya is Raj Kumar and Dolly's great granddaughter. She is a middle-aged widow, whose son lives in America. Ghosh depicts the professional and intellectual abilities of a woman through her character. She works as a lecturer and an able researcher. She goes in search of her roots, explores Ratnagiri and Myanmar in order to understand her past better. She finds out Dinu, her uncle and knows about his wife, Daw Thin Thin Aye, the reputed novelist. She is the one who makes the loose ends meet at the end of the novel.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's fiction portrays women of different levels. Each character is created with an imaginative grace and few characters negotiate with their milieu to conclude at probable resolutions. Few characters break from their traditional pattern of sexuality and sensuality to get rid of their dependency status. They live life on their own terms and attain dignity. Ghosh has created many strong women characters with growth, progress and individuality rather than supporting the tradition of patriarchal exploitation.

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