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Narrative Voice: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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The use of the device of the narrator and the narrating stance is termed by Genette as narrative voice. A narrative cannot influence the reader consciously or unconsciously if there is not the fascination of story and story-telling. According to Kenon there are three basic aspects of narrative fiction: story, text and narration. Todorov holds that each different way the fabula is told presents a different *sjuzet*. Thus it becomes clear that the act of narrating is important rather than the story.

There has been extensive experimentation done in this aspect of narrative voice and the novel has witnessed a lot of significant structural changes. Narrative, the element of the story was intact in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It was the narrator/author who played upon the reader, manipulated, and directed the reader's responses. These types of novels were not concerned with "what really happened" but with the meaning of what the narrator of the work believes to have happened. It is through narrator's eyes that the entire action of the novel was presented. All this lead to limit the reader's freedom to interpret.

The craze of story-telling and hearing nearly came to an end in the twentieth century. According to Walter Benjamin: "At the beginning of modern times with the dissemination of information..." (89) and with the "decrease of communicability of experience" (86) "the art of story-telling became rare (Illuminations 89). The authoritarianism of the fully omniscient narrator became untenable due to the 'death of the author'.

At the beginning of twentieth century one of the major current that developed the form of the novel was that summary was replaced by scene. This was emphasized by the dictum, "The novel should not tell but show". Many technical devices were used by the author to extend freedom to the reader. The two major trends that emerged were the multiplications of the narrator and marginalization or effacement of the author/narrator. The extreme case of the effacement of the narrator as a telling voice is the stream of consciousness novel. In these novels the scene is in part "interior monologue".

The marginalization of the authorial/narrative voice had a great impact on the form of the novel. This effacement of the narrator added more dramatic elements and his relativistic fragmentation added irony and ambiguity. The ultimate result of all this was that the narrative gained an extreme complexity of form and structure. There are at the same time other opinions as about author's voice.

But the narratologists like Kenan and others feel that it is a fact that howsoever hard the author may try to efface himself/herself or try to curb the narrator/author's voice, neither can he negate himself, entirely nor can he do away with the narrator. The important issue to discuss here is to what extent the narrator is drawn attention to? What is the position of the narrator? From whose point of view the story is told? To what extent the narrator participate in the narrative: whether he is involved or just an eyewitness? Whether he is authoritative or not? Who is the focalizer in the text-the narrator or the character? All such issues regarding narrator and narrative voice have an important impact on the form of the novel.

In Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace* the dimensions of narratology and concept of narrator and narrative voice are not very much different from that of the Western story tellers. But at the same time Ghosh is influenced by great Indian narrative tradition of story-telling which has always been much stronger and older in India. In the present novel at the very beginning of the novel the reader comes to know about the legendry Glass Palace in Burma. Here the character focalizer is an eleven year old urchin Raj Kumar who looks at it for the first time and completely awestruck by its beauty. The focalization is from within. Though he can not be relied upon being an eleven years old boy, but it is evident that here the omnipresent narrator handles the narration and the readers by giving a glimpse of the palace. The narrator describes how the palace was being looted and plundered by the Burmese localities before the British troops arrived to take possession.

The narrator talks about the people involved in unexpected relationships across countries and cultures. There are wars and rebellions. Political cultural, social and ethical issues are raised. Fortunes and destinies are made and lost. All this is presented through author's meticulous research and craftsmanship. He reports everything thoughtfully and precisely. The authorial presence is felt in every detail like military manoeuvres, models of automobiles and air craft drilling of oil, timber trade, food, clothing, language etc. All these details are historically specified and presented by omnipresent narrator through the eyes of different character focalizers.

The omnipresent narrator narrates how the proud Queen Supayalat was feared and admired blindly by the Burmese, and how unceremoniously the conquering British removed the king and the pregnant queen from Mandalay to distant Rattanagiri in the West East of India. It was a sharp move by the Britishers, who were successful in humiliating the royal couple completely. The king and the queen led a life of utter shabbiness and obscurity in unfamiliar region while their country got plundered and depleted of its precious natural resources-teak, precious gems, petroleum and ivory.

The most important aspect of the novel is, however, that not even a single episode in the whole text represents the British directly. They are always at the background and brought into the story not as characters. They have been treated in the same way as 18th or 19th century British writers used the colonized countries – as background or as references that may affect the narrative style or the story line, but do not have direct association with the characters. It is in fact the history of nation seen and presented through the eyes of subaltern. It is a notable example of giving the voice to the colonized people or the colonizers both but more remarkable is that the voice is given by colonized not by colonizers.

In the early parts of the book the authorial presence is evident and quite visible when the omnipresent narrator throws light on the life of local people and the time when Britishers

were just establishing themselves as colonizers. The historian narrator author has an eye for each small detail for which he gives detailed description.

The king walked out of the pavilion, flanked by Queen Supayalat and her mother. The procession passed slowly through the long corridors for the palace, and across the mirrored walls of the Hall of Audience. Past the shouldered guns of the guard honour and snapped-off solutes of the English officers. Two carriages were waiting by the east gate. Just as he was about to step in the King noticed that the ceremonial canopy had seven tiers, the number allotted to a nobleman, not the nine due to King.(TGP 43)

The Glass Palace is thoroughly researched book. It contains tremendous research the writer must have done for this work which makes him write about Burmese life with greater authority. He is very much precise about the depiction of details which makes the prose highly captivating. The main character focalizer in the novel is Raj Kumar and his being an orphan kind of identifies him with the postcolonial identity of a writer. In her essay, "The Road from Mandalay: Reflections on Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*" Rukmini B. Nair very appropriately comments:

Raj Kumar's symbolic as well as real orphan-hood implies that he has to invent a family where none exists; ... Raj Kumar has in effect to solve the same dilemma that confronts the postcolonial author... he has to make sense of 'existential' conundrum that plagues all individual who cross... the well defined lines of 'national identity' and family genealogy.

Raj Kumar, an orphan, having no family of his own, has to seek out relations to claim his own. He finds a father in Saya John, a brother in Matthew and his soul mate in Dolly. An Indian by birth, Raj Kumar after losing his mother, looks after himself from an early age, becomes a powerful man, builds his fortune in Burma, comes to India to find out and marry Dolly whom he had glimpsed when he was just eleven, goes back to Burma and raises his family and then again returns to India in his twilight years, after his fortune has been destroyed in war and his elder son and daughter-in-law killed. He has to escape from Burma as he is not a native there, a Burmese, and yet, he thinks it to be his home forever.

The cultural space for most of the characters in Ghosh's novel is very huge and so it is with the different voices. The King Thebaw is the symbol of those who, however, accept their fate more or less like a philosopher. But queen Supayalat is one who has quite different point of view. She sees the dehumanization of colonial process. She represents the voices of those who had the fate like her.

We were the first to be imprisoned in the name of progress; millions more will follow. This is what awaits us all; this is what awaits us all: this is how we will all end as prisoners in shanty towns born of the plague. A hundred years hence you will read the indictment of Europe's greed in the difference between the Kingdom of Siam and the state of our own enslaved realm.(TGP 88)

The narrator uses free direct discourse between different character . There is notable conversation between Dolly and her friend Uma who raise question on established beliefs and historical facts. On one occasion Uma, the wife of the Indian Collector asks Dolly about the cruelty of Queen Supayalat and in reply Dolly makes Uma look at the situation from her point of view:

"You know, Uma," she said in her softest voice. "Every time I come to

your house, I notice that picture you have hanging by your front door..."

"Of Queen Victoria, you mean?"(TGP114)

"Don't you sometimes wonder how many people have been killed in Queen Victoria's name? It must be millions wouldn't you say? (TGP 114)

This conversation depicts clearly the author's view about the representational dice in pictures or literature. Later we find in novel that Uma accepts her friend's perspective and removes the picture from her house.

The authorial presence is evident when Ghosh strongly voices the irony of situation. He shows subjugated Burma and the attitude towards India and the Indians is starkly different from the treatment of the Burmese people. Though Raj Kumar, an Indian born, is there at the centre of the novel, but far from being a flawless character. He is the representative of those Indians who amassed wealth and attained power as they benefited through the British colonization. It is a fact that British colonized both India and Burma, but in Burma it were the Burmese who are the oppressed and exploited while the Indians as well as people from other countries were given much chances to flourish. One of such stories is that of Raj Kumar's story of success. Through memories and stream of consciousness of Raj Kumar and other such characters Ghosh depicts how colonialism is a process where people and values are always compromised.

There is another important narrative technique used by Ghosh. It is the manner in which focus shifts between one country and another. All the major characters are distributed by Ghosh over to Burma, Indian and Malaysia and then knitting them together by presenting them as character focalizers. The strand used by him is 'history' not 'love', used as the motif that irradiates the first section. Through the enormous screen that he creates over the stage of South Asia, he enacts a shadow play with characters that focalize and bring alive the colonial history of the region.

Polyphony operates in a many ways in *The Glass Palace*. Ghosh creates a number of strong equally important and distinctive voices in the text that also contribute to the novel's dynamic heteroglossia. The reader finds the "fundamental open-endedness" of the polyphonic novel in *The Glass Palace*. There are many memorable characters in the novel. They are driven by different beliefs and become representatives of important historical tendencies. Every character, each image stand as a full and unmerged voice in their own right. The glasses of the Glass Palace as they mirror a pregnant Supayalat (at the moment the royals are taken captive) ironically present the mute and invincible power of the other and her pregnancy is a sort of hope that challenges and reflects the power of an unseen future in the form of the unborn child.

The novel has polyphonic voices that come alive in the depiction of the characters of the Burmese King and Queen, Raj Kumar, Dolly, Uma, Dinu, Arjun and others. Every character has his own unique world view. In the novel there are many independent individuals whose truth emerges in contact with another's truth. Bakhtin observes quite significantly that "[a] single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence." (252). The reader notices the influence that some of characters have on the other. For example Raj Kumar's adherence to his business is the outcome of his uncle Saya John's influence upon him in his adolescent years when he comes to Mandalay.

The different voices along with authorial voice demonstrate the "multimodality" of the novel. The natives of Mandalay, the migrants, the servants in palace, the people of slums near Queen's place, the people of different countries – India, Burma, Malaysia, Bangladesh and Singapore, are the people who speak different languages and evidently belong to different social

classes and cultural backgrounds. Their different professions, languages, beliefs, cultures, nationalities and worldviews enrich the heteroglossia of novel.

There are character focalizers that expose the reality of British Empire which is barbaric towards not only its subjects but also towards its propagators. These are the young English men who are used in an exploitative way in order to extend the Empire's hold and strengthen its power. In order to exploit the forest wealth under hostile surroundings the British colonialists employ their young English men to work in the forest as long as they can endure the dangerous atmosphere and unhealthy climate. The character focalizer Saya John, is one among those who indirectly conveys the voice of the author exposing these aspects of imperialism:

The company knows this very well; it knows that within a few years these men will be prematurely aged, old at twenty-one; and that they will have to be posted off to city offices. It is only when they are freshly arrived, seventeen or eighteen, that they can lead this life, and during those few years the company must derive such profit from them as it earn. (TGP 74).

Another voice that emerges to be very strong in the novel is depicted through real life persona Anana San Suu Kii's presence- She is a leader, a symbol and voice of struggle to uphold democratize values against the tyrannical rule of the military. Her very presence is the embodiment of a live character focalizer in the given circumstances. Ghosh has used her as a symbol of the voice rising for the cause of the dignity and sovereignty of man as man.

Ghosh is deeply rooted in his indigenous traditions of story-telling as he is greatly influenced by native writers, Tagore and Satyajit Ray, and the Indian tradition of story-telling like that of Panchtantra, Jatak Kathas etc. At the same time we find on him the influence of foreign writers like Proust, Gabriel Gaarica Marquez, Ford Madox Ford. On one hand his narrative techniques are in consonance with Indian oral story telling tradition on the other hand he is influenced by sophisticated Western techniques like that of multiple narrators reflections, stream of consciousness interior monologues, memoirs to name a few. There are different modes of narrative such as realism, fantasy, metaphors, symbols, irony, and magic realism, incorporated in the novel. The novel subsumes different genres and extra literary material such as history, myth, allegory, and picaresque. Here Ghosh tries to focus on the formidable complexity of the real world instead of presenting a simplistic, unified and monologic version of reality.

Polyphony and heteroglossia are a powerful argument against homogenization and monologism. Infact, difference and otherness, multiplicity and fragmentarily can be found to be the major themes of the novel. Ghosh is against all absolutism and monologism and favours to explore different possibilities through dialogism. He celebrates discursive modes that allow evidence of other voices and ideologies. Thus the openendedness of the novel, the variety of genres, the multiplicity of equally valid viewpoints and the indeterminacy and unfinishedness of the narrative structure makes the text-truly polyphonic. The role of different socio-political institutions in stifling and curbing human voice and human rights for their own benefits and development has been exposed by many voices in the novel.

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