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Amitav Ghosh: The Conglomerate: A Study of Multiple Themes in *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract:

Great men ponder more on the refinement of the society by contributing a real picture of the community that they were influenced by hearing from others or witnessing by self. Their ideas and the thoughts that are subjective are brought out in various forms such as writings, paintings, oral outburst etc. Amitav Ghosh, one such renowned anthropologist depicts the social order that prevailed in the past and that prevails in the present scenario in his literary texts. *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh is a historical novel which is set in Burma, Malaya and India. The whole novel showcases a blend of various themes and problems faced by different characters. The three generations of the two families are a picturesque of Humanistic concern, identity quest and women suffering and strength. Amitav Ghosh' precise tone and faultless writing style enables him to weave multiple themes together in his works and this is well appreciated by many critics throughout his literary career.

Keywords: anthropologist, suffering and strength, identity quest and Humanistic concern

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh, one of the most renowned philanthropists who is remarkable to picture meticulously the ground reality the society at various levels. His novel, *The Glass Palace* is a good example for the same. People at various levels, their life, their trauma, and suffering are all mosaic. His portrayal of women in all his novels clearly examines that Amitav Ghosh has a great regard for the women folk. The novel is strengthened by the women characters right from the Queen Supatayal to Ma Cho who has a small food stall for her breadwinning. Humanistic concern is yet another major focus of theme in the novel. Man to man dependency dominates the survival of humanism at all stages. Ma Cho's concern for Rajkumar by offering a job without

knowing who he is itself a proof of survival of humanism in the novel. Man is forced to depend on his fellow being for survival. This force captures humanism to help and to ensure that man is ready to sacrifice many things for the wellbeing of his fellow man. Identity search occupies a unique theme in the novel. The loss of identity of the Konbaung Dynasty clearly states how identity loss is a dominating theme in the novel and Rajkumar's success in creating an identity for self in Mandalay. This paper aims at pronouncing Amitav Ghosh as a conglomerate who has given a mix of genres in a single novel without affecting the crux or the flow of the novel. His writing marks a great impact in the reader's sense and creates an aura of satisfaction.

Women : Strength and Suffering

Women are seen as a source of inspiration in many literary works. Their ambition to win and succeed in the male Chauvinistic society is the cynosure for the counterparts to view life as challenge with appreciations and humiliations. Amitav Ghosh portrays women as leading spirits and also as cultural construction. In brief Ghosh takes the challenge to portray women broadly in two categories as source of strength and sufferers. Ma Cho, the first women character introduced in the novel, resist herself when Rajkumar learns about women anatomy and sex. "What am I doing?" she cried. "What am I doing with this boy, this child, this half-wit kalaa?" (57). Sanity and the strength of women is witnessed.

Dolly, the central women character in the novel, is introduced as nine year old child who attends the princess. When the princess is transported she encounters the initial level of suffering. Without even considering as a nine year old girl, the soldier prodded Dolly with a cold hilt of his sword when she was carrying the little princess "I can't," she cried. "I can't." She would fall, she knew it. The Princess was too heavy for her; ... "Quickly, quickly." There was a soldier behind her; he was prodding her with the cold hilt of his sword." (23). Dolly shall be described as a personification of strength and courage. Though she landed in a partial failure, she was able to shape herself. Dolly is also seen as a source of strength because she was able to release Uma Dey from boredom and dull rota. Also it is seen in the novel that Dolly is in much demand by the King's family, Dinu, Rajkumar, Uma and Sawant. The strength encourages the sufferers and this is witnessed in the character of Dolly. In a nutshell Dolly can be symbolized as the strength.

Uma Dey, the Madam collector who is self-possessed, charming and attractive, experiences disappointments in her married life. Her disappointments are because of the opposite opinion that she has with her husband Benni Prasad Dey. He has the idea that the colonizers a better Indians but Uma is quite opposite to this idea. She becomes no use to her husband in terms of wifely virtues and almost she decides to leave her husband before his death. After the death of her husband, Uma is seen as totally a different character. She takes a swing high in her life. She is recognized as a freedom fighter and a famous personality.

Queen Supayalat is yet another strong women character in the novel. At the time of the reign in Mandalay and the struggles that she faces after the exile prove that she is no ordinary women. Twenty years of exile with her daughters just for the love of the family and husband gives a vivid portrait of queen Supayalat “What could love mean to this woman... And yet it was a fact that she had chosen captivity over freedom for the sake of her husband, condemned her own daughters to twenty years of exile.” (152)

Amitav Ghosh has beautifully woven all the women characters in the novel. Making themselves free from the clutches of hardships given by the community as a whole is a major threshold for the women to taste the success. They were able to justify and prove the identity given and grabbed.

Identity:Lost and Gained

Being oneself is a great identity for a common individual in the community. His attempt to sustain his identity is a great deal of challenge that he encounters throughout his life. Identity can be defined as possession of religion, language, race, location, culture, values etc by individual or a community by the owning spirit and the willingness to be and possessed. It also represents more on how the individual or the community is represented in the social setting and in the geographical location.

Amitav Ghosh in *The Glass Palace* attempted brilliantly to picture the loss of identity and the quest for identity. Major characters lost their identity and they go in search for it. This is all due to the effect of colonizers' dominant role. The quest for identity starts right from the beginning of the novel and the quest is not just with an individual or his possession rather with the Konbaung Dynasty itself. The novel opens with the gloom note of the British encounter to keep the royal family under control. The third Anglo – Burmese put the king Thibaw into disgraceful disposal. Also the situation in Mandalay clearly portrays the downfall of the kingdom. “Strange things began to happen. There was news from Mandalay that the royal elephant had died. The elephant was white and so greatly cherished that it was suckled on breast-milk: nursing mothers would stand before it and slip off their blouses. Everyone had known that the elephant would not long survive the fall of the dynasty. But who could have thought that it would die so soon? It seemed like a portent. The house was sunk in gloom.” (51). The King, Queen and their daughters were experiencing a very strange situation where all their belongings are casted away. The issue of the search for identity in terms of power, joy, the feeling of ownership are the dominating factors in the King Thibaw's family.

Rajkumar, the central character of the novel is seen as a man who has created an identity among the confused and the problematic area. Amidst the tremendous struggle Rajkumar undergoes, is able to build a self-image and break all the barriers. The barriers seems to be the key strength for Rajkumar to establish himself strong. “But the pain lasted only an instant and when it had faded RajKumar felt himself to be very much the stronger, better prepared” (75).

Initially when Rajkumar enters Mandalay, his search for his life begins. From a child, an orphan of eleven years in the middle of the road in Mandalay to successful person, Rajkumar is able to create his own destiny. “When the fort's full immensity revealed itself, Rajkumar came to

a halt in the middle of the road. The citadel was a miracle to behold” (5).Rajkumar’s association with Saya John gave a fruitful career and life. Saya John foresees Rajkumar as successful man who can create an identity of himself. “There was something unusual about the boy – a kind of watchful determination” (30). This view about Rajkumar is seen true when he sees the fruit of success in his business taking few risks that he was prepared. “If I am ever going to make this business grow, I will have to take a few risks” (76)

The quest for the identity of the King Thibaw depicts the idea of loss of identity; on the other hand Rajkumar’s accomplishment to prove the self success portrays the transformation from search to establish one.

Humanism : The existing support

Being one of the most philosophical and systematic novelist among the contemporaries, Ghoshis able to woven The Glass Palace in the most philosophical state. Ghosh himself being one of the humanists has delivered humanism as one of the most fascinating themes in the novel. Generally, he deals with the themes of love and loss, history, Diaspora, communal Violence, travel etc. Amidst the multiple themes, Ghosh is remarkable enough to include humanism and its touch in all his major works. The Glass Palace too has evident events to make the idea great and create a sense of belonging of humanism in every individual at the time of reading the novel.

The best example to be humane is perceived through Ma Cho. Though she has small food stall, she is ready to offer a job to Rajkumar. Offering a job to a known person is something a favour done with or without expectation. The case here is totally different, Rajkumar is a young stranger of eleven years and offering a job for him is something not ideal but Ma Cho does. Ma Cho yells at Rajkumar in the beginning but offers one in the later. 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? ... “All right. Get to work...” (6)

Similar to Ma Cho, Saya John is also helpful to Rajkumar in many ways and many occasions.Saya John is also seen as a teacher and mentor for Rajkumar to take the other side of the life. The first humanitarian act of SayaJohn was identifying something unique in him and offering a job to Rajkumar. Saya John comes to rescue Rajkumar when seven or eight men were around him and attacking. “... Then the crook of anelbow took Rajkumar in the stomach, pumping the breath out of him and throwing him against a wall. He slid down,clutching his stomach, as though he were trying to push his insides back in.Then, suddenly, help arrived. A voice rang through thelane. “Stop.” The men turned around, startled.“Let him be.”It was SayaJohn, ...”(28-29)

Almost all women characters are testimony of humanism right from Ma Cho to Jaya. Jaya becomes the member who links the bond of the family “Jaya, became a bond linking every member of the household.”.Dolly and Uma Dey, the major characters in the novel are also

perfect example for being humane and showing humanism in almost all of their acts. Dolly sacrifices her love for the sake of the princess who is pregnant because of Sawant, the chief servant, who was a choice for Dolly. Similarly Uma has a different view to her husband on the work done by the British and the Indians. She strongly disagrees to the idea. She also answers to Dinu's claim that British rule has reformed the Indian society :“Let me be the first to admit the horrors of our own society – as a woman ... Mahatma Gandhi has always said that our struggle for independence cannot be separated from our struggle for reform”(294).

Ghosh, throughout his novel is able to give a glimpse of humanism in all the sections and all the characters too. In this case, Ghosh is significant to confirm that he is social anthropologist and has more concern towards humanism.

Conclusion

Ghosh' fiction reveals individual and society as a whole at various levels by the way they lead their life, the joy they have, their perseverance, the trauma etc that they undergo. Ghosh skillfully organized the novel to portray the different geographical location and the life and history of the three generation. The author acknowledges that “the seed of this book was brought to India long before my own life time by my father and my uncle”. Ghosh is very much against on the idea of domination of man by man at all level; whatever may be situation or the crisis. Ghosh would have taken utmost care and effort to intertwine the idea of humanism, identity search and gain and also the concern for humanism. Women are proved to be the cultural construction in the novel. Through all the characters and the events in the novel, Ghosh with a vivid view was able to display the complexity of colonization and also the multiple ideas without bothering the core of the idea even spanning over the three generations and various geographical location.

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