

Narrative History in Amitav Ghosh Novel ‘The Glass Palace’

DR. S. V. RAMESH KUMAR

Lecturer in English, Govt. Degree College, Pakala, Tirupati Dt. - A.P.

Abstract— The act of using history in English literature is a good old practice since the times of chronicles. Many English writers have used History as part of their fictional art. Amitav Ghosh frequently uses history in his novels. He freely mixes fact and fiction to cook a new dish called ‘Historical Fiction’. He tries to look into History from a new dimension, which was never looked before by historians. He places public history and private history side by side and discusses the effect of the historical incidents on common people. Amitav Ghosh’s novel ‘The Glass Palace’ is a historical novel set in Burma, India and Malaysia. The narration of the novel spans for about a century from 1885 to 1996. It begins with the British invasion of Burma and the fall of Konbaung Dynasty of Mandalay in 1885. It covers many incidents from Burmese history like the extradition the last Burmese King Thebaw to India, I world war, II world war, Japanese invasion of Malaysia and Burma in 1942, Burma independence in 1948, assassination of General Aung Saan, Dictator rule in Burma, the rise of Ang saan suu kyi as a leader of Democratic movement in Burma etc. Here Amitav Ghosh discusses the Burmese history from the perspective of an Indian Immigrant Raj Kumar. Ghosh focuses mainly on how the lives of common people are affected by these historical incidents. The main objective of this paper is to discuss the historical narrative style of Amitav Ghosh with special focus on his novel ‘The Glass Palace’.

Index Terms— Extradition - Public History - Private History - Revisionist approach- Silenced History – Subaltern- Voiceless.

I. INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh belongs to the canon of Indian Diaspora writers. He is one of the postmodern Indian English novelists who mastered the art of narration with new styles and innovative techniques. He emerged as one of the central figures of the brand of English writers, who are sensitive to the incidents of history, issues of cultural significance and political importance. Thus, Amitav Ghosh is the most contemporary and convincing Indian voice in the present world of English literature.

II. AMITAV GHOSH: BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Amitav Ghosh was born on 11 July, 1956 in Calcutta. His father was a retired Lieutenant Colonel of the British Indian Army. He was brought up in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He completed his graduation in History from Delhi University and post graduation in sociology from Delhi University. Then in 1982 he was awarded D. Phil in social anthropology from Oxford University.

III. AMITAV GHOSH, AS WRITER

Amitav Ghosh is a thought provoking and insightful writer. He is one of the selective and successful writers of the present day in India. His writings include both fiction and non-fiction. His fiction covers mainly novels. Some of his famous novels are *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and the three volumes of the Ibis trilogy; *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015) etc.

Through his works Amitav Ghosh tries to discuss many contemporary issues and tries to give valuable insights to his readers. About the essential insights in the novels of Amitav Ghosh, Tapan Kumar Ghosh observes: “profound historical sense, a strong humanitarian drift, a witty but compassionate insight into man and his society, an attempt at interlacing the time past and the time present in the crucible of memory.” (Beyond *The Shadow Lines*: 151)

Amitav Ghosh is well known world-wide for his novels. His novels have been translated into more than twenty world languages. His novels fetched him worldwide fame and recognition. They also won him many awards and prizes.

IV. AWARDS AND PRIZES

Amitav Ghosh got many Prize for his novels. Apart from that in January 2007 Amitav Ghosh was awarded Padma Shri, one of Indian Civilian Awards by the President of India. In 2018, Ghosh received Jnanpith Award, the highest Indian Literary award from the Government of India.

V. AMITAV GHOSH AS A NARRATOR OF HISTORIES

Amitav Ghosh is a historian by study. History is an important part of his novels. It is his habit to narrate a fictional story around a historical incident. In every novel he deals with the historical incidents that influenced the lives of common people especially Indians. Ranajit Basu observes: "History is a brooding presence in Ghosh's books, almost a living entity able to shape the lives of his characters." (160)

Ghosh's treatment of history is different, because he focuses more on the effect of historical incidents on the lives of individuals rather than on the historical incidents. Amitav's standpoint is more at individual level rather than at national and international level. His focus is more on the private history rather than the public history. He uses the public history as a background to discuss the private history of the helpless individuals. He presents parallel narratives of public history and private history, with more focus on private history.

VI. PUBLIC HISTORY IN 'THE GLASS PALACE'

The Glass Palace covers major historical incidents of the Burmese history from the British invasion of Mandalay in 1895 to the Burmese Independence in 1948. In 1895 the British forces attacked Mandalay and defeated the forces of the last Burmese king Thebaw. Then the King and his family were extradited to Ratnagiri, India. During the Second World War the Indian British Army fought with the allied forces of Japanese army and Indian National Army in Burma. Japanese forces invaded Burma and as a result more than four lakh Indians migrated to India, which is called as Long March-1941. In 1948 Burma got independence from the British rule. About portrayal of

vast history in *The Glass Palace* Meenakshi Mukherjee in her article "Of Love, War and Empire" says:

"The story spans more than a century in the history of the subcontinent, people get involved in unexpected relationships, across countries and cultures. Wars are fought; rebellions quelled, political and ethical issues are debated, fortunes are made and lost. The writer reports everything accurately, thoughtfully-his precision backed up by meticulous research." (5)

VII. PRIVATE HISTORY IN 'THE GLASS PALACE'

In *The Glass Palace* Amitav Ghosh writes about the fate of Rajkumar, an Indian orphan living in Burma during British rule and the Second World War. The private history includes the lives of three generations of people in four families spread in three different countries. It is about Rajkumar, Dolly, their sons Neel and Dinu, granddaughter Jaya; Saya John, his son Mathew, daughter-in-law Elsa, grand children Alison and Timmy; Uma Dey, her nephew Arjun, nieces Manju and Bela. All these families were shattered and lost everything including their lives during the Second World War.

In 1885 Rajkumar, an Indian orphan boy of eleven years arrived in Mandalay in search of a job. He joined as an apprentice with a timber merchant Saya John. After a few years of apprenticeship he started his own timber yard in Rangoon. Then he got a Railway contract for the supply of teakwood. He became a successful, rich and respectable business man.

During the Second World War when the Japanese troops occupied Burma, millions of Indians were forcibly migrated from Burma to India. Rajkumar and his family members lost everything and joined this long march to India. His elder son Neel died and his younger son missed somewhere in Malaya and his daughter-in-law Manju died of malnutrition and finally he reaches in helpless condition to live as a guest in the house of Uma.

VIII. JUXTAPOSING PUBLIC HISTORY WITH PRIVATE HISTORY

Amitav Ghosh juxtaposes public history and private history side by side and discusses the effect of the Public history on private history. He portrays individuals as victims of the historical events and brings out the unhealed wounds and horrifying effect they caused on the minds of the common people.

In *The Glass Palace* through the parallel narratives of the Burmese history and the private story of Rajkumar and Saya John's families, the novelist discusses how the Second World War shattered the lives of common people and made them subalterns. Through the episode of King Thebaw and his family the novelist discusses how the history can bring even Kings into the position of subaltern. Through the episode of Arjun and Hardy the novelist discusses the dilemma in the millions of Indian soldiers in the British army whether to fight for or against the Britishers.

CONCLUSION

In this study of portrayal of history by Amitav Ghosh, three interesting observations can be made. The first one in every novel the story more about Indians and Indian history. The protagonists of his novels are Indians. In *The Glass Palace* Rajkumar, Arjun, Hardy are Indians living in Burma. This shows Amitav Ghosh's attachment for his country and its history.

Second interesting observation is all the protagonists are the victims of the history. In *The Glass Palace* Rajkumar is a victim of British invasion of Burma and World Wars. This shows Amitav Ghosh's revisionist approach towards history.

The third interesting observation is all the protagonists are migrants for different reasons and he writes about their problems. In *The Glass Palace* almost all the characters keep on moving from one country to another country.

Tapan Kumar Ghosh in his article 'Beyond The Shadow Lines' observes: "The essential insights in the novels of Amitav Ghosh lie in his profound historical sense, a strong humanitarian drift, a witty but compassionate insight into man and his society, an

attempt at interlacing the time past and the time present in the crucible of memory." (151)

To sum up this paper, we can come to a conclusion that, In *The Glass Palace*, Amitav Ghosh narrates History from a Common man's perspective. Here he looks back into history with the aim of reconstructing the private history of individuals who are the victims of the public history.

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