Colonial Discourse in Burma: A Study of Amitav Ghosh’s

*The Glass Palace*

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**ABSTRACT**

The paper entitled ‘Colonial Discourse in Burma: A Study of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace*’ intends to study Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace*, probing the ideology of colonization in its various shades. Amitav Ghosh is a great literary artist and the indispensable quality of greatness found in his literary works. His continuous research and unique storytelling brings together the social, cultural and political events of the past, the far-past, the present and the future where ‘history’ or the ‘past’ shapes and re-shapes the traumatic ‘present’ and the ‘future’ of the individuals. Amitav Ghosh concentrates upon following aspects in his fictional works: violence on the people, who were uprooted and disoriented by processes never known before; imposition of Western culture on native population during European imperialism; transportation of convicts and the transplantation of native peoples through slavery and indentured labour; the exploitation of resources; forced exile of native kings, moneylenders, zamindars, wealthy people and the illegal undertaking of their property; the forceful extraction of commodities from the empire, particularly what were seen as “raw materials” for industrial expansion; the culture of consumerism and; implantation of alien values into the lives of the people etc. The article endeavors to narrate the tragedy and triumph of the native people of India and Burma against the backdrop of colonial history, which is highlighted as an authentic and reliable source of: understanding the micro-level subtleties of colonial politics; the history of teak and rubber trade; the Burmese royal family and their sad exile to India from Burma; the British Indian Army and her role in the subjugation of Burma; cultural expression in the form of violence in the narrative; psychology of the suppressed native; indentured migration and the divisive tactics of the colonizers to break up their national movement towards self-determination.

**Key Words:** Colonialism, History, Violence, Uprooting, Imperialism, Suppressed native, Indentured migration.
transportation of convicts and the transplantation of native peoples through slavery and indentured labour; the exploitation of resources; forced exile of native kings, moneylenders, zamindars, wealthy people and the illegal undertaking of their property; the forceful extraction of commodities form the empire, particularly what were seen as “raw materials” for industrial expansion; the culture of consumerism and; implantation of alien values into the lives of the people etc. The ending of the colonial or imperial rule created a short lived hope in many newly independent countries. But the living in those independent lands could not govern according to their own values and rules. However, in many cases the infrastructure established by the western powers remained, as did the language. The present paper entitled ‘Colonial Discourse in Burma: A Study of Amitav Ghosh’s The Glass Palace’ intends to study Amitav Ghosh’s The Glass Palace, probing the ideology of colonization in its various shades. The article endeavors to narrate the tragedy and triumph of the native people of India and Burma against the backdrop of colonial history, which is highlighted as an authentic and reliable source of: understanding the micro-level subtleties of colonial politics; the history of teak and rubber trade; the Burmese royal family and their sad exile to India from Burma; the British Indian Army and her role in the subjugation of Burma; cultural expression in the form of violence in the narrative; psychology of the suppressed native; indentured migration and the divisive tactics of the colonizers to break up their national movement towards self-determination.

The Glass Palace primarily concentrates upon the colonial masters, who constructed their authority through their power on the royal household of Burma. British army conquered the cities of Burma and King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat of Burma were almost made prisoners. In the meanwhile, under the pressure of British army, the King was lifted to surrender in front of colonial powers. Rajkumar, the protagonist of the novel, elaborates colonialism and points out that in the idea of brutality, power and money are the two major instruments of colonialism. After the victory of British and the subjugation of Burma by the colonial powers, royal family was uprooted and was exiled to be located in India. It was not the shift of the location only but the shift of cultural upbringing to be rooted in an alien soil. Amitav Ghosh also reaches to the realization that both Indians and Burmese, being under the impact of British power, were destined to rigorous menial work like- in the docks and hills and to pull rickshaw.

The term ‘colonialism’ has political, economic, psychological and cultural connotations. It concentrates on oppression, domination and cultural and political marginalization of the colonized country. Colonialism affected many societies of the world and it is historical verifiable. “Colonialism only recently attained its pejorative connotation, particularly through the reaction against the exploitation of and imposition of Western culture on native population during European imperialism. While this is certainly a valid point to make, it is equally important to remember that for post colonialism, the term “colonialism” is a matter of political struggle” (Das and Patra 244). The Glass Palace mainly deals with Burma, Malaya and India. The novel is set in the nineteenth century and opens with the British attack on Burma and the exile of the Royal family. The Glass Palace sets an
atmosphere of British attack (presence in) on Burma when Saya John’s son Mathew informs Rajkumar: “The English are preparing to send a fleet up the Irrawaddy. There’s going to be a war. Father says they want all the teak in Burma” (GP 15). The colonial institution of the gentleman’s club, which looms large in George Orwell’s *Burmese Days*, appears in *The Glass Palace*, when the west wing of the palace in Mandalay is converted into a British club. The novel primarily deals with the ravages done by the colonialism. Here, an attempt has been made to depict the history of certain individuals, groups (families) that were dislocated in the wake of Burmese exodus in the last part of the 19th century, as a result of British imperialism. In the beginning of the novel, everybody in Burma was vigorous on hearing ‘A Royal Proclamation issued under the King’s signature’. The royal pronouncement on receiving the threats reads thus (in preparation of war):

To all Royal subjects and inhabitants of the Royal Empire: those heretics, the barbarian English *Kalaas*… impairment and destruction of our religion, the violations of our national traditions and customs, and the degradation of our race, are making a show and preparation as if about to wage war with our state…To uphold the religion, to uphold the national honor…path to the celestial regions and to Nirvana. (GP 15-16)

According to Sami Rafiq, “The booming of the canon and the preparation of war by the Burmese King reflect Fanon’s idea of the oppressed native who prepares to fight back as the colonizer tries to impose his superior culture and identity over the native’s culture” (127). After the initial panic in Burma, the streets of Mandalay quickly quieted. There were many foreigners living in Mandalay. “The number of foreigners living in Mandalay was not insubstantial, there were envoys and missionaries from Europe; traders and merchants of Greek Armenian, Chinese and Indian origin; labourers and boatmen from Bengal, Malay and the Coromandel coast; white-clothed astrologers from Manipur; businessmen form Gujarat” (GP 16). But the foreigners were no longer to be seen on the streets. They suddenly disappeared. There were rumors that they had barricaded themselves in their houses or gone downriver. It was announced that the royal troops had defeated the invaders and the “English troops had been repulsed and sent fleeing across the border” (GP 16-17). “Shoppers and shopkeepers came crowding back and Ma Cho’s stall was busier than ever before” (GP 17). But the shouts of joy on the streets were soon going to be ended. A white-bearded boat owner, Nakhoda informs Rajkumar that the war was not over. He further informs, “What we hear on the waterfront is quite different from what’s said in the city…the English are going to be here in a day or two…they are bringing the biggest fleet that ever sailed on a river. They have canon that can blow away the stone walls of a fort; they have boats so fast that they can outrun a tidal bore; their guns can shoot quicker than you can talk…coming like the tide nothing can stand in their way” (GP 17). The symbolic booming of the British canon evokes the native’s awakening to his identity. In the palace, Queen Supayalat, the King’s chief consort was seen “mounting a steep flight of stairs to listen more closely to the guns” (GP 19). She was pregnant, now in its eighth month. The factually verifiable characters (King
Thibaw, Queen Supayalat etc.) acquire fictional dimensions in the novel and can interact with those of purely invented characters. Ghosh highlights the family as the “central imaginative unit” and concentrates mainly upon the royal family of Burma and the family of Rajkumar. It was Queen Supayalat who was somehow behind the war. She had roused the great council of the land, the Hluttdaw, when the British began to issue their ultimatums from Rangoon. The company has full dominance over teak trade and trade customs:

…a few months ago there’d been a dispute with a British timber company- a technical matter concerning some logs of teak. It was clear that the company was in the wrong; they were side stepping the kingdom’s customs, regulations, cutting up logs to avoid paying duties… a fine on the company…The Englishmen had protested and refused to pay…carried their complaints to the British Governor in Rangoon. Humiliating ultimatums had followed…senior minister…suggest that it might be best to accept the terms; that the British might allow the Royal Family to remain in the palace in Mandalay, on terms similar to those of Indian princes…. (GP 22)

The narrator comments on the colonized peoples. The Royal households and their family members are “like farmyard pigs…to be fed and fattened by their masters, swine housed in sties that had been tricked out with a few little bits of finery” (GP 22). The Queen Supayalat, who was an expert in cruel court intrigues, had prevailed and the Burmese court had refused to yield to the British ultimatum. She proclaimed in the court:

The Kings of Burma were not princes…they were kings, sovereigns, they’d defeated the Emperor of China, conquered Thailand, Assam, Manipur…she herself…risked everything to secure the throne for Thibaw, her husband and step-brother…child in her belly were a boy how would she explain to him that she had surrendered his patrimony because of a quarrel over some logs of wood? (GP 22)

Because of her proclamation in the court, now it was evident that Burma may soon be under the wrath of British. Later, an officer who had arrived from the battlefield informs the Queen that the British had destroyed the fort of Myingan with immaculate precision, using their canon and they had not yet lost a single soldier. Moreover the Burmese army was in a deprived condition. The British were going to imprison them soon. They were soon going to reach Mandalay.

…The Hlethin Atwinwun had surrendered. The army had disintegrated; the soldiers had fled into the mountains with their guns. The Kinwun Mingyi and the Taingda Mingyi had dispatched emissaries to the British. The two ministers were now competing with one another to keep the Royal Family underground. They know that British would be grateful to whoever handed over the royal couple; there would be rich rewards. The foreigners were
expected to come to Mandalay very soon to take the King and Queen into captivity. (GP 25)

British invasion was preceded so smoothly and the imperial fleet crossed the border on 14 November, 1885. The Burmese were not in the position to stand in front of the colonial powers. “There were thousands of soldiers in the British invasion force and of these the great majority about two thirds were Indian sepoys… The war lasted just fourteen days” (GP 26). A few days later without informing King Thibaw, the Burmese army surrendered. In Mandalay, panic struck in the market when a man went running through the marketplace shouting, “foreign ships had anchored off the shore; English soldiers were marching towards the city” (GP 27). And soon people saw two English soldiers mounted on brown horses. “The cavalry men were waving people away with drawn swords, clearing the road. The dust had made patterns on their polished boots. Looming behind them was a solid mass of uniforms, advancing like a tidal wave” (GP 27). The narrator concentrates on the identity of these soldiers. These soldiers were not English- they were Indian. They were peasants from small country-side villages. It was money that makes them fight. They earn a few annas a day. They are crushed by their masters. “For a few coins they would allow their masters to use them as they wished to destroy every trace of resistance to the power of the English…Chinese peasants would never do allowed themselves to be used to fight other people’s wars with so little profit for themselves” (GP 29-30). Ghosh attacks on the British by saying, “How do you fight an enemy who fights from neither enmity nor anger, but in submission to orders from superiors, without protest and without conscience?” (GP 30) These Indians were fighting wars for their English masters.

After the British invasion in Burma, there was chaos in the palace. People were indulging in looting the palace. They were entering into the palace without the permission of royal household and on the other hand, Queen Supayalat was powerless to act against them. Her face was red, mottled with rage. Bibhash Choudhary elaborates: “When the common public loots the palace, very ceremoniously they shake before the queen, but do not stop looting the wealth in the palace. The loot symbolically suggests the loot of power itself. When the queen loses her power, it is through symbols that her loss of power is communicated” (122). “The palace was unguarded. The guards and sentries were all gone. The intruders slipped through the gates and vanished into the fort” (GP 31). The narrator reminds and compares the past incidents with the present:

Just one day earlier the crime of entering the palace would have resulted in … execution…But yesterday had passed the Queen had fought and been defeated…none of those things was hers anymore…..(GP 34)

The queen was hated by the people for her cruelty. In The Glass Palace, with the presence of British, one witnesses the actual process of oppression, domination and colonization. After the complete victory over Burma, it was decided by the British that “the Royal Family was being sent into exile…they were to go India…British Government wished to provide them with an escort of attendants and advisors. The matter was to be settled by asking for volunteers” (GP 41). Ghosh beautifully
sums up the situation “power is eclipsed: in a moment of vivid realism between the waning of one fantasy of governance and replacement by the next; in an instant when the world springs free of its mooring of its dreams and reveals itself to be girdled in the pathways of survival and self preservation” (GP 41-42). In the meanwhile, the British soldiers were shifting the King’s precious jewels and ornaments from the palace to the ship that was waiting to take the royal family into exile. The novel here strips the veils of human nature to reveal the crude and brutal greed that drives people at various levels.

The queen further raises the questions against English brutalities. The English consider themselves superior, lawful and they alone understand liberty, they do not put Kings and princes to death; they rule through laws then the Queen asks, “Where are these laws that we hear of? Is it a crime to defend your country against an invader? Would the English not do the same?” (GP 150). The Queen Supayalat, who had chosen captivity over freedom for the sake of her husband, suffers humiliation for love. Shubha Tiwari Comments, “But the enigma of human nature is such that this most cruel person goes on to live in exile, suffers captivity and humiliation for love, for the husband” (96). The British Imperialists make the people believe that the native kings and rulers are cruel tyrants and only the British are civilized whereas the subject races are uncultured and uncivilized. Hence, the process of providing a proper civilization demands western. According to N. K. Neb, “Such an attitude of learning and the British intervention is required. The essential barbarity of the native rulers is highlighted by them through different practices” (122).

Uma is the wife of an Indian officer working as a representative of British Empire, the politically active character, whose adventures in India opens the reader’s eyes to India’s early 20th Century campaign for independence. She has been made to believe, like other people, the ideas floated by the Empire. Unaware of the subtle working of the so called propagators of human values, she shares her concern with Dolly: “One hears some awful things, about Queen Supayalat…Someone like that?” (GP 113-14). Dolly’s response to her questions challenges the essentialist nature of her views:

Don’t you sometime wonder how many people have been killed in Queen Victoria’s name”? It Must be millions, wouldn’t you Say “I think I would be frightened to live with one of those pictures” (GP 114).

After the banishment of King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat from Burma, the British had reshaped everything in Burma. “Burma had been quickly integrated into the Empire, forcibly converted into a province of British India. Courtly Mandalay was now a bustling commercial hub...Mandalay...would soon become the Chicago of Asia” (GP 66). The British made the people believe that the West can only provide a proper civilization. In Burma, the Europeans started exploiting the resources- human and natural. Forests were cut on a mass scale without giving any thought to the hazards of environment that such an unthinking act would cause. Here, with the colonial policies of oppression, Ghosh highlight’s the larger question of Europe’s greed. For them everything had become a resource to be exploited – woods, water, mines, people, just everyone and everything. “Resources were being exploited with an energy and efficiency
Burma became the mine of wealth for the British. “…in a few decades the wealth will be gone, all the gems, the timber and the oil and then they too will be gone. In golden Burma, where no one ever went hungry and no one was too poor to write and read, all that will remain is destitution and ignorance, famine and despair…” (GP 88). Everything in Burma was shaped by the British. The Mandalay Palace’s “West Wing had been converted into a British club; the Queen’s Hall of audience had now become a billiard room; the mirrored walls were lined with months-old copies of Punch and the Illustrated London News; the gardens had been dug up to make room for tennis courts and polo grounds; the exquisite little Monastery in which Thibaw had spent his novitiate had become a chapel where Anglican priests administered the sacrament to British troops” (GP 66).

The novel also concentrates on the two key institution of colonial rule: the plantation and the colonial army which vividly illustrate the racial technologies of rule employed at the colonial frontiers. Tuomas Huttunen remarks: “The plantation is a “terror formation” where the master literally has absolute power over the life and death of the slave-thing; the colonial army is both a “tool” of colonial sovereignty, and also exists outside the purview of “normal” law and order in the colonial context. Moreover, the recruitment policies for the plantation and the army also employed a racialist logic. Influenced by mid-nineteenth century racial discourse, “races” in India were divided into “martial” or “fallen” categories depending upon their relative physiognomic distance from the “Aryan” norm. It comes as no surprise that most of the recruits for the army were selected from the so-called “martial races,” while the indentured labor for the plantations were recruited, oftentimes forcibly, from the “fallen” races—a fact represented directly in the novel as well” (148).

It is observed that when natives like Rajkumar became owner of plantation still ended up a ‘tool’ of the colonial plantation economy. In the plantations, the coolies are relegated to the status of “tools”. The army too is an ‘exceptional’ institution. Army personnel are crucial “tools” for maintaining law and order in the colonies. This idea finds a direct expression in the novel when Uma tells Dolly after her return to Rangoon from New York – “… the Empire does everything possible to keep these soldiers in hand: only certain castes of men are recruited; they’re completely shut off from politics and the wider society; they’re given land, and their children are given jobs” (GP 193). The British army that subjugated Burma was mainly comprised of Indians. They are presented in the novel as a ‘tool’ of colonial rule. Saya John after saving the young Rajkumar from the furious Burmese mob says:

I used to know soldiers like these…They were peasants, those men, from small countryside villages: their clothes and turbans still smelt of wood-smoke and dung fires. ‘What makes you fight?,’ I would ask them, ‘when you should be planting your fields at home?’ ‘Money,’ they’d say and yet all they earned was a few annas a day, not much more than a dockyard coolie. For a few coins they would allow their masters to use them as they wished, to destroy every trace of resistance to the power of the English…I would look into these faces and I would ask myself: What would it be like if I had
something to defend—a home, a country, a family—and I found myself attacked by these ghostly men, these trusting boys? How do you fight an enemy who fights from neither enmity nor anger but in submission to orders from superiors, without protest and without conscience? (GP 29-30)

This is the actual identity and existence of these British (Indian) soldiers who unthinkingly carrying out the orders of their masters. This is what Rajkumar authenticate in his response: “They’re just tools without minds of their own. They count for nothing” (GP 30). Later in the novel, Uma, Hardy and Alison tell Arjun that he is just a “tool,” a “toy” and a “slave” (GP 281, 326, 381). However there are many instances of revolt in the army. This is the essence of what Giani Amrik Singh proclaims in the novel: “We never thought that we were being used to conquer people. Not at all: we thought the opposite. We were told 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 in it because they believed it too. It took as a long time to understand that in their eyes freedom exists wherever they rule” (GP 193). Bibhash Choudhary opines “The British colonial rule in Burma paradoxically through the British Indian Army, exercised the coercive power over Burma. It is the people of one colonized country to favor the colonial masters. The British Indian Army was fighting the war neither to defend nor to extend the territory of India. The army was helping the British to protect and expand their territory” (121). Instead of fighting their common enemy- the British, the Burmese and Indians were fighting among themselves.

The British imperialism is barbaric and anti human towards not only the local population but also towards its propagators and the one who work for it. The British employ their young men to work in the forest as long as they can endure the dangerous atmosphere and unhealthy climate.

These young Europeans…have at best two or three years in the jungle before malaria or dengue fever weaken them to the point where they cannot afford to be far from doctors and hospitals. (GP 74)

The British are inhuman and hostile towards these fellows. “The company knows…within a few years these men will be prematurely aged, old at twenty-one; and they will have to be posted off- to city offices…the company must derive such points…”(GP 74). The structure of the plantation in Burma stands as a microcosm of the hierarchical system of power relations, predicated on race, which characterized colonial rule in many parts of the world. On the plantations, the value of coolies was lesser than the value of the elephants. They were constantly subject to racist abuse from their white and Eurasian overseers. That’s what Saya John warns to Rajkumar: “The big English companies could destroy you, make you a laughing stock in Rangoon. You could be driven out of business”. Rajkumar replied “if I’m ever going to make this business grow, I’ll have to take a few risks” (GP 130).

Uma exposes the timber merchants and businessmen of Burma like Rajkumar. Power has made them blind. “… an animal, with your greed, your determination to take
whatever you can – at whatever cost. Do you think nobody knows about the things you’ve done to people in your power – to women and children who couldn’t defend themselves? You’re no better than a slaver and a rapist, Rajkumar” (GP 248). During the riots in Burma, the British suppressed and killed many people. “In the city gaol a mutiny erupted among the prisoners and was suppressed at the cost of many lives” (GP 246). In the meanwhile, to check and root out rebellion “villages were occupied, hundreds of Burmese were killed and thousands wounded” (GP 247). The British used Indians to root out the rebellion. Uma comments “I can’t believe what I’ve seen here – the same old story, Indians being made to kill for the Empire, fighting people who should be their friends …” (GP 247). The Empire was so skilful and ruthless in its deployment of its overwhelming power. It became clear that disarmed technologically backward populations such as those of India and Burma could not hope to defeat by force. Beni Prasad Dey, though he works for the British and though he keeps his protest unspoken, also recognizes the racist framework that guides their policies in the colonies. As he puts it,

… the smell of miscegenation has alarmed the British as nothing else could have: they are tolerant in many things, but not this. They like to keep their races tidily separate. The prospect of dealing with a half – caste bastard has set them rampaging among their desks. (GP 149)

Later in the novel, through the character of Dinu, Ghosh severely criticized fascist ideas. He gives a long speech about the nature of the forces that function against human freedom and dignity. He tells Uma, “Don’t imagine for a moment that India and Burma will be better off if the British are defeated…The Germans plan is simply to take over the Empire and rule in their place… and think of what’ll happen in Asia…The Japanese are already aspiring to an Empire, like the Nazis and Fascists” (GP 293). The novel concentrates upon the tendency of the colonists to create a specific model of knowledge and their attempt to define human values in terms of their own standards.

Amitav Ghosh in *The Glass Palace* highlights the colonial discourse within the narrative reconstruction of the history of Burma and also explores the issues ranging from the changing scenario of the landscape of Burma and India because of the colonial hypocritical policies. The novel highlights the account of Burmese Royal Family, their uprooting and migration to India due to the British subjugation of Burma. They loose their quest for identity and homeland in their exiled life in India. The British are always there in their minds. The novel also concentrates upon the two key institutions of colonial rule: the plantation and the colonial army. These two key institutions help the colonialists to maintain and expand the British Empire at the colonial frontiers. The oppressive policies of the colonizers have been highlighted by the ‘plantation’ and the British (Indian) army acts as a ‘tool’ of suppression, and domination of Indian and Burmese people.
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