

Photography and Alternative Historiography in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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The 'Author's Note' at the end of *The Glass Palace* explains the reasons for writing about a place which is not one's own, about a history which has its place only in the memories of a few people of the past. To create a setting for such a place which one is not acquainted with, and to provide a historical background to such a setting, require both vivid imagination and great precision: a precision which is the output of meticulous research and a passion which emanates from the desire inculcated within oneself since childhood, to inscribe in the form of a fiction, the memoirs of one's family members. Burma, Malaysia and Malaya have a shared memory for the Indians, in particular the Bengalis, during the colonial period; but their present practice of political isolation has almost succeeded in erasing the past from our minds. The lives of the individuals, which were so entwined together in the past, are now disrupted and dislocated: they are living now in three separate countries of India Bangladesh and Burma. However, after the colonial encounter, the official histories and narratives of nation have been either dismissive or silent about the relationships of the past. By fictively reconstructing the past and the ways in which it affects the present, Amitav Ghosh is repaying the debts of the memories of his childhood. In this momentous task, he has been inspired by his father and his uncle, who had lived in Rangoon and Moulmein. That it took five years of meticulous research to write this novel reveals the unstinted dedication that is required for writing a novel of such epic proportions. The novel, which is divided in

seven sections, highlights significant historical events: it uses as its backdrop the Anglo-Burmese War of 1885 leading to the removal and deportation of King Thebaw with Burma becoming a part of the British India; it depicts the consequences of the second World War and the Japanese invasion on Burma; the novel also chronicles the historic Long March of the Indians trying to go back to India, and talks about the Indian National Movement leading to the independence of India, thus traversing through a wide range in space and time. To look at how the great events of history unfold themselves and how, in their wake, they affect the lives of the common man, are the main objectives of this novel.

The novel is polysemic in its approach: it dialogically represents several colonial issues, and by addressing them, Ghosh suggests not only their ambivalence, but also that the prioritisation of any particular theoretical position will only lead to the oversimplification of the issue. Issues of loyalty to the British colonial army, issues of slavery like that of Dolly to Queen Supayalat, issues of freedom, migration, displacement and colonial greed are woven together with images of photography and travel.

As in most of his other novels, such as phrenology in *The Circle of Reason*, the history of malaria research in *The Calcutta Chromosome*, and the history of Partition in *The Shadow Lines*, the history of opium trade in the *Ibis* trilogy, Ghosh here takes particular interest in the history of Burma before and after the colonial rule, which he presents through filters of photography, elephants, rubber plantations, cars and furniture. Ghosh, when interviewed by Hasan Ferdous, said:

Not only myself, I think this would be fascinating for most people, to know more about the world around them. ... If I see there is no scope to write about archaeology, history and philosophy, I will not have any interest in the novel (*"The Glass Palace: Amitav Ghosh in his own words"*).

The individual characters—whom I term as ‘research figures’—are obsessed with their own particular interest in specialised subjects to such an extent that their research determines their worldview as well as their emotional makeup. This helps Ghosh to create an alternative historiography which is extremely personal: Alu in *The Circle of Reason* is obsessed with phrenology, Piya with cetology and Fokir with the river in *The Hungry Tide*, Murugan with malaria research in *The Calcutta Chromosome* and Dinu with photography in *The Glass Palace*. It is from behind the lens that Dinu registers his protest against the restrictive military regime of Burma; his

internal struggle gets expressed through the photographic details, and this, in turn, facilitates Ghosh to concentrate meticulously on the minutiae with regard to photography. As Rukmini Bhaya Nair rightly points out:

By dwelling on small details and bestowing on ordinary lives an attention that the historian's stricter annals cannot afford, a writer creates an interior history. Such an internalised record of emotions runs parallel to explicit factual accounts and fills them out. At this elusive juncture, story meets history and makes it a little more comprehensible (163-4).

In Burma, Ghosh meets Aung San Suu Kyi, the woman who has become the symbol of Burma's democratic movement; further, he interviews dissidents and writers who have been imprisoned; and he also travels to border areas, where he spends time with ethnic minority rebels. The Karenni rebel leader, he is astonished to find, is a young man of Indian origin:

I was sure that our relatives had known one another once in Burma: his had chosen to stay and mine hadn't. Except for a few years and a couple of turns of fate, each of us could have been in the other's place (*Dancing in Cambodia* 89).

Like many Bengalis of his generation, Ghosh's family has historical connections to Burma—relatives who had lived there all their lives, or even for generations, who were forced to flee to India when the Japanese invaded the then British colony in 1942. For Ghosh, his travels in Burma are also a part of a personal quest to seek out a lost history of these Burmese Indians, who “returned” to India in an epic “Long March”, which has been all but forgotten by historians. As Ghosh remarked in an interview with Ira Pande:

It's strange— there were over half a million people on the Long March, over 400,000 of them Indian, and there is such a silence about it. ...It illustrates the degree to which we're truly oblivious of our own history (“Coming Under Burmese Fire”).

Of all Ghosh's fictional works, *The Glass Palace* is the least experimental in form, following a fairly linear chronology and drawing on well-established novelistic genres, such as the prose romance and the historical epic. The love story of Rajkumar and Dolly has non-realistic and melodramatic dimensions. Like Leo Tolstoy's *War*

and Peace or Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, which the critic Georg Lukács upholds as examples of pioneering historical novels (88), *The Glass Palace* is concerned with questions of nation formation and historical changes in human terms. In its international sweep, linking Europe, India, Burma and Malaysia, the novel also reflects the increasingly globalised world of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where the displacements of colonialism and wars become, in Lukács' words, "the mass experience of hundreds of thousands, of millions" (24). Though there is no single hero in this epic of colonies and nations, the life stories of different characters can be threaded together to recount the forgotten history of an important part of the subcontinent, whose people are the implicit protagonists of the novel.

The research figure, who is ubiquitously present in Ghosh's other works, is also evident in *The Glass Palace*. The narrator about whom we only come to know at the end of the novel, Jaya's son, carries out extensive research, spanning not less than sixty years, about the colonial history of India, Burma and Malaya, in order to reinscribe the memories of his mother as well as those of his forefathers. The narrator is repaying his childhood debts (as does Ghosh himself) in telling the untold story. At the end of the novel, he makes his presence known:

...and from the day when I sat down to write this book—the book my mother never wrote—I knew that it was this that it would end (547).

It is during significant historical events, as during the times of wars, when private lives of individuals is disrupted, private memories collide with historical narratives; and it is within those greater historical spaces that Ghosh seeks to map the destiny of individual. This individual quest is characterised by a research figure whose research determines his worldview, and he presents to us an interior history which has often been ignored or left out from the greater narratives of history. In *The Glass Palace*, we thus find that in spite of all the turmoil of history, the novel appropriately ends in a love scene.

Jaya, the daughter of Neeladhri and Manju, is pursuing her doctoral thesis on the history of photography. Ma Thin Thin Aye, Dinu's wife, is researching on Burmese literature; she is preparing a dissertation on *The Glass Palace Chronicle*, a famous nineteenth century history written in the reign of King Bodawpaya, an ancestor of King Thebaw. The research interests of characters coincide with that of the author, which makes the description vivid and the details meticulous. Photography plays a

central role in weaving the plot together. The Glass Palace is the central image of the novel: it is the name of King Thebaw's palace, the name of Dinu's studio, and Dinu's wife researches on the Glass Palace Chronicles. In fact, the fall of the fabled Glass Palace leads to the ruin of the golden land called Burma, and the ruin and depravation still persist even after Burma has gained independence. *The Glass Palace* deals with the colonised who is dislocated from his own place and, therefore, doubly hated. It "...suggests the hybrid nature of the colonized whose otherness or alterity from the colonizer subject is, at certain moment in their intertwined histories, hardly distinguishable" (Moral 145). The complicity of the coloniser and the colonised in the process of empire building and the relation between them become highly problematic in the novel and defy simple postcolonial theorisation. *The Glass Palace* deals with the changing opinions and positions of the Indians in the colonial army; it throws light on the present as well as the past of Burma; it speaks volumes about migration, World War, trade, as well as family history, in retrospect to the larger concerns of history; it provides several alternative viewpoints and alternative ways of knowing the world—through camera, through business and through research.

The Glass Palace deals with displacement of people in the wake of the imperial expansionist programmes across South Asia. The central protagonist, Rajkumar, chases his fortune in different parts of Asia, practising the art of survival in the backdrop of historical turbulence: it is the story of the degeneration of a golden land, as the fabled Glass Palace, which once determined the destiny of Burma, but eventually becomes a recreation ground for the Europeans. King Thebaw, who was deposed from the Glass Palace after the fourteen days' war, and Bahadur Shah Jafar who was deposed from Delhi to Rangoon, gradually fades away from the annals of history; but interestingly they live on in the myths and memories of the people. It is a story about a Bengali lady, who could have died in anonymity in being a collector's wife, but transforms herself by becoming the leader of the Indian Independence League. Arjun, Hardy and Buckland present contrary perspectives of the British colonial army, while Dinu provides an alternative way of looking at the whole colonial situation through the lens. With the momentous events of history in the backdrop, all the several strands of the story are woven together by family relationships, through photography and through research, which emanates from the desire to register personal memories. Like *The Shadow Lines* and *The Circle of Reason*, *The Glass Palace* is also predominated by elements of travel, displacement and migration. Rukmini Bhaya Nair points out:

To thus ground one's fiction in the genre of the traveller's tale, the anthropologist's notes, the historian's books, constitutes an almost unavoidable element of the postcolonial novel today—this very situation-ness paradoxically attesting its travel-writings... (164).

The discovery of the camera obscura in the first half of the nineteenth century and that of the photographic camera in and around 1839 generated a great deal of interest in European countries, especially in England and France. Painters were particularly enthralled by the life-likeness of the images created by photography. Be it in literature or in science, photography became immediately associated with a host of other things like memory, physiology, psychology etc. Photography was, in short, an amazing discovery:

Photography captured what was transient, gave permanence to what was fleeting; photography was the invention of a 'mirror with a memory' (Draaisma 119).

What form an important part of the novel are the three basic qualities of photography—those of precision and of depiction, which are its automatic qualities, and a third quality of being able to capture what had been ephemeral:

But even more amazing than the unprecedented sharpness and the semi-automatic character, was the third quality: the ability of photography to bring the fleeting moment to halt and record it. In the first description of contemporaries the astonishment was expressed in terms such as 'wizardry' and 'black magic' (Draaisma 118-9).

This is the quality of photography that informs the narrative technique of Ghosh in *The Glass Palace*. As an anthropologist, Ghosh was aware of the increasing reliance on photography in his discipline and he makes use of the nuances of photography as a principle to structure his novel—as a narrative principle as well as a thematic trope. In many crucial photographic scenes, Ghosh registers those little personal moments and make them permanent. A lot of photographic scenes abound in the novel: for example, when Rajkumar falls in love with Dolly, at a time when all the others are busy looting the palace. His eyes frame his love, Dolly, in the midst of a chaotic backdrop and the individual story is played out in the larger context of history. Another such instance: when Dinu is photographing Alison in the ruins, a language of love finds focus over the historical continuity of the ruins. The grand narrative of history is subverted by Ghosh's subtle hints through the descriptions of these minutiae. Ghosh's

development of such scenes, described in vivid details, seems to follow Edward Weston's conception of capturing a subject through the lens:

The conception must be seen and felt on the camera ground glass complete in every detail: all values, textures, exact dimensions must be considered once and for all, for with the shutter's release the isolated image becomes unalterably fixed (316).

Ghosh's framing of individual life within the meticulously researched historical detail is likewise 'unalterably' visualised with photographic clarity.

Amitav Ghosh, who is a research scholar in anthropology, realises the importance of photography as an increasingly essential tool for depicting and recording, in exact, the behaviour of exotic and primitive people, and the incidents that spark them as well as those that follow:

Anthropology has depended upon the camera since photographing in the field was possible. During the last quarter century there has been rapid progress in developing new uses of photography— as a note-taking tool, as a record of behavior for which there is as yet no vocabulary, for establishing new kinds of reliability by preserving materials intact for subsequent analysis, for the presentation of juxtaposed significances without doing violence to the behavior, and as a teaching device to develop the ability to see in new ways (Mead 166).

The need for photographers with a disciplined knowledge of anthropology and for anthropologists with training in photography is steadily increasing, as visual communication becomes more important. The pictures of Paris taken by Atget at the end of the nineteenth century are illustrative examples of how photography can serve as an extremely useful tool for multiple purposes:

Jean-Eugene- August Atget (1846-1927) ... never showed his photographs in a *salon*. Not one of the hundreds of pictures which he had taken since 1898 of his beloved Paris was reproduced in a photographic magazine. Painters found his street scenes helpful in their work; historians collected his records of old Paris houses; museums bought his pictures as documents (Newhall 1748).

Photographic memory inscribes themselves as testimony of the times they belong to just as Atget's photographic reproduction of Paris does during his times. In Ghosh's novels, therefore, memory is an important trope and in *The Glass Palace*, memory is

associated with and revived further by Dinu's interest in photography and by Jaya's interest in the history of photography. That within fifty years of its discovery photography could generate so much interest even in distant Burma points to its enormous influence. Ghosh sets Dinu's passion for photography in the backdrop of great historical turmoil, involving in its corpus more than three countries. Every individual plays his unique role in the movement of history: an artist may not be able to participate in the war of independence, his opinion and perspective may be forgotten in the narratives of history, but in the memories of individuals, they still live on. Uma is able to take part in political activism; Arjun is able to fight for the colonial army and then change allegiances. Similarly, Dinu wages a silent war behind the lens: he searches for modes of expression in a world where expression is necessarily restricted. Thus the narrator searches for an alternative historiography, an alternative way of looking at the world, of re-inscribing memory behind the mirror.

On the marriage day of Dolly and Rajkumar, when they were desperately in want of a witness, Mrs. Khambatta, the Persian photographer from Bombay, miraculously appeared on the scene and agreed to be a witness. The narrator describes in great detail Mrs. Khambatta's camera, which was a 1901 Graflex single-lens camera. Later on, when Jaya was on her way to the History Conference, she had to stop at Bombay, where she found a magnified photograph on display: it had the picture of Dolly, Rajkumar, Uma and the Collector. This is the picture she has always remembered; yet, to find the picture in an art gallery in Bombay revived her memory:

Suddenly, across the years, she heard Uma's voice explaining the evolution of saree-wearing (489).

Ghosh's attention to minute details and his penchant for uncovering the history of ordinary things are quite evident here:

It had come as a shock to discover that the garment had a history, created by real people, through human volition (489).

Jaya's re-discovery of the portrait eventually led her to the collector's memorial in Ratnagiri, where she found out how myths have developed centring the figure of King Thebaw. Jaya discovers from her old file a magazine which contains the photograph of Aung San Suu Kyi, which had a likeness to the silver-framed photographs that stood on Bela's dresser. The photograph was credited to U Tun Pe/Dinu. This led her to the quest for her uncle, Dinanath Raha in Burma. The narrator uses this photograph

as a link connecting the past and the present of Burma— from Dolly to Suu Kyi:

In this way still photography makes it possible to present, for analysis or comparison, events widely separated in time and place (Mead 172).

Photography is no less an art than is music or poetry or even painting— this fact was recognised as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. Photographers or pictorialists— as they liked to call themselves— were exploring the possibilities of establishing photography as a fine art by ingenious new printing technologies. For them, photography was not simply another mode of expression; it came to represent a way of life:

“... I saw a picture of shapes, and underlying that the feeling I had about life.”

In these words, Stieglitz has told us how the photographer works. He finds, almost instantaneously, a certain moment of time which, frozen on film, will live forever (Newhall 1749).

Dinu's interest in photography started from his very childhood. His physical disability made him somewhat reserved and non-eloquent. Photography soon became for him a mode of existence as well as that of expression. Dinu bargained for a Brownie camera, when Dolly and Rajkumar wanted them to visit Morningside. Dolly encouraged Dinu's interest in photography:

...partly because she believed to encourage his interest in photography; partly because she believed it to have grown out of his childhood habit of looking over her shoulder while she stretched; and partly because she felt that she ought to encourage any activity that would draw him out of himself (215).

Dinu was too self-possessed, reticent and had problems of expression: “When he spoke, it was in odd staccato bursts, swallowing half his words and shooting out the rest” (226). Thus the lens became his only way to commune with the world.

Even Uma perceives the language of photography, when she takes the Brownie camera from Dinu and sees Dinu and his wife Alison “”framed together” (230):

Suddenly she understood why people arranged marriages for their children: it was a way of shaping the future to the past, of cementing one's ties to one's memories and to one's friends (230).

Not only are Uma's views radically modified when she is behind the lens, but

also Dinu's: he appreciates Arjun's power of observation, when he hears the latter reminiscing and describing, in accurate detail, the topographical features of the landscape: "He'd imagined that he knew the worth of observation, yet he'd never conceived that its value might be weighed in lives (227)."

Arjun's military life is in stark contrast to Dinu's life, which is centred around and guided by photography. But, interestingly enough, Arjun's assignments at the army camps require him to have a thorough and minute knowledge of the landscape in which he carries out his military operations; otherwise, his life could be in great danger. Dinu realises that accurate power of observation is not restricted to the artistic necessity of the photographer alone, although the communal nature of the lives of the military men, such as Arjun, is far removed from the artistic solitude of Dinu's life:

This was one of the reasons why he derived so much pleasure from photography. There was no place more solitary than a dark room, with its murky light and fetid closeness (277).

Dinu takes pictures of Alison when he visits Morningside after the death of Alison's parents. In Morningside, he is absorbed in photographing the ruins. To Dinu, the ruins seem more intimate as against the "monochrome underlines" of the plantation as a "temporal decay" (336). The more he visits the mountainside, the more he "can feel his pictures changing. It is as though his eyes were adjusting to unaccustomed lines of sight; as though his body were adapting to new temporal rhythms" (349). He develops a different kind of veneration and respect for the chandis. His view of life and his communion are changing with his photography. The most intimate moments of communication for Dinu must necessarily be from behind the lens. Alison complains: "I feel I have more of your attention when you're looking into your camera than when you're lying here with me (357)." Dinu then goes on to explain that modes and methods of acquiring knowledge and those of making love are unique to every individual, whether it be acknowledged or not: "If I were to talk to you for hours I wouldn't know you better... [and] ...I feel my pictures have helped me know you (357-8)." Uma observes the secret liking of Dinu for Alison and also observes their incompatibility: "...he a creature of shadows, she an animal that craved the spotlight (227)."

In his Glass Palace Studio, Dinu almost launches a silent war against the military regime of Burma. It is surprising that a man who has "always been behind the camera, never in front of it" (505), can be so actively engaged with society. In Yangon, where

free speech is not encouraged, Dinu allows young persons to speak out:

...here they feel free to enjoy themselves... I encourage them to say whatever they like... to speak freely, even of simple things... for them this is an adventure, a discovery...(508).

Dinu lives a life of quiet resistance to repression by offering a space where people can think and talk uninhibitedly. Through photography Dinu promotes a different language, a different mode of acquiring knowledge, a different way of knowing the world: "Here in the Glass Palace photography too is a secret language (570)." Revolutionary art forms engage with life continuously, participate in it and desire to change it. And, without a doubt, photography is one of them:

... new and revolutionary art forms may awaken a people or disturb their complacency or challenge old ideals with constructive prophecies of change (510).

In the novel, the names of revolutionary photographers figure in various connections: apart from Stieglitz, Atget and Weston, whom I have mentioned earlier, we also find Cunningham, Eugene Benson and the famous photograph of the Veiled Woman by Cartier-Brasson, who was one of the first to exploit the aesthetic value of the camera and use it instinctively as "an extension of the eye" (Newhall 1751).

Ghosh shows in this novel how photography, and, in the broader sense, any specialised art, can provide an alternative way of interpreting life. Even his theme and title come close to those of *Annals of My Glass House*, the photography of Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879). The English lady photographer, who made many photographs inspired by the pre-Raphaelite paintings, writes:

...my whole soul was endeavoured to do its duty towards them [the men she had as her subjects] in recording faithfully the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer men. The photograph thus taken has been almost the embodiment of a prayer (Newhall 1742).

The alternative historiography evinced in the novel can further be evidenced in the way Ghosh complexly develops Arjun's story and at the same time provide a contrast to that of Dinu. The transformation of Arjun and the decolonisation of his mind from being very English "Angrez" (297) among the Indian officers to one who can easily sacrifice his life for the natives is a very complex journey of negotiating imperial ideology. One of the most psychologically complex and interesting studies in

the novel is the character of Arjun, a Bengali officer in the British army. Arjun narrates the army life and, thereby, portrays the ambivalence latent in the position of the Indian soldier in the British army. Simultaneously, Indian businessmen— such as Rajkumar— become wealthy by providing indentured labour for mercantile enterprises, like logging and rubber plantations. The dilemma of collaboration is also foregrounded in the case of the Indian officers in the British army who, during the struggle for independence, find themselves in a conflicted position; some choose to stay and fight for the British, while others join the Indian National Army, which puts them in the troubling position of collaborating with the Japanese. The episodes are loosely based on the experiences and doubts of Ghosh's father, who found himself fighting during the liberation of Burma in 1945 against the breakaway Indian National Army, whose troops were the mirror image of the British forces. Arjun's battalion is routed at the first hint of an engagement; in the disorienting maze of the Mandalay rubber plantation, where they are scattered, he undergoes a journey of self-exploration, which ends with his recognition of the falsity of the values by which he has lived his life. He feels that he has been a mere mercenary and tool in the hands of the British; he finds himself self-divided and lacking self-awareness. He has a vision of himself as a lump of clay whirling in a potter's wheel.

We come across the first description of the army in the initial chapters of the novel. The Burmese army is completely vanquished by the English forces within just fourteen days. They conquer Burma with the help of the Indian soldiers and Rajkumar darts out in the street to find “there was no rancour on the soldiers' faces, no emotion at all. None of them so much as glanced at the crowd (27).” As a consequence of this state of affairs, Rajkumar has almost got to answer for these Indian sepoy's with his life, until Saya John comes and saves him. Saya John comments on the strange nature of the enemy:

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? ...they're just tools. Without minds of their own. They count for nothing (30).

The impassive Indian soldiers of the British colonial army actually helped the Britons not only to capture Burma, but also to maintain the empire in India. The narrator answers— or rather problematises— this historical question that Saya John raises by dealing with the likes of Arjun, Hardy, Buckland and Kishan Singh. The novel is

patterned methodically to find out the issues involved in the question, the ideology that makes these soldiers loyal, the type of training they are imparted and the instances of their rebellion. By dealing with individuals, Ghosh approaches and addresses the situation in a way that is different from conventional historiography.

Arjun's letters to his sister Manju reveal he is proud in being a part of the 1st Jat Light Infantry. He is overwhelmed both by the community life of the Army and by the past successes of the 1st Jat Light Infantry. He is quite pleased with the way Lieutenant Colonel Buckland lectures them; simultaneously, he is also delighted by the innocence of his batman Kishan Singh. The irony, however, is evident at the end of the letter, where Arjun says:

...these faujis, despite their moustaches and bloodshot eyes. It's true what the Britishers say: at heart they're very unspoilt; the salt of the earth— you can depend on them to be faithful. Just the kind of man you'd want by your side in a tight spot (263).

The soldiers are so trained that they get enmeshed with the coloniser's ideology and so much so that they do not even question the racial discrimination within the army.

Another pertinent question that is debated throughout the novel and that which perplexes Arjun is— can soldiering be treated as a profession? Are they merely professionals? Do they have a cause to fight for? Or, are they fighting someone else's cause?

Army life is infested with symbols and abstract meanings that they are infused with. The soldiers are made to believe that even the food, which they eat, is different:

...every mouthful had a meaning— each represented an advance towards the revolution of a new, more complete kind of Indian (279).

Even the ordinary Indian soldiers refused to work under Indian officers; they felt it to be a privilege to work under a British officer. The ideology has been ingrained in them so deep inside that "they really believe in what they're doing; they believe that the British stand for freedom and equality" (284).

However, the soldiers rebelled, too. So far as they have been serving at home, the rebellion has not been so stiff; the ideology has been convincing enough. But, in the bigger arena, when the World War breaks out, they are taken to several countries

to fight for a cause that is unknown to them, and their ideology can hardly convince them. Reports of rebellion pour in that “at Singapore Tyersall Park Camp, an Indian soldier had inexplicably shot an officer and then committed suicide (318).” Hardy, who is a seasoned military man and who belongs to a family that has contributed several soldiers in the British forces, started instilling conflicting thoughts in Arjun’s mind:

Well, didn’t you ever think: this country whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time— what is it? Where is this country? The fact is that you and I don’t have a country, so where is this place whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time? (330)

Hardy here questions the ideology behind the inscription. His doubts are further enhanced by racial discriminations—“we’re meant to die for this country— but we can’t use the pool”— and the hatred of the Malaya people, who term the Indian soldiers as “mercenaries”. Arjun now begins to harbour serious doubts about his conviction that “soldiering was a job, a profession, a career ... [and feels]... that to kill without conviction violated some deep and unalterable human impulse (347).” Hardy is disgusted with their profession of being a soldier, when he likens it to the prostitute in Delhi— “dancing to someone else’s tune, taking money. There’s not much of a difference (348).”

Hardy also distinguishes between the first generation of Indian soldiers who helped in the colonial machinery and the educated Indian soldiers. The most important point, that the narrator emphasises throughout the novel, is that people do things not worrying about the grand designs of history, but taking into consideration how those would immediately affect them— their own private and family lives. The first generation Indian soldiers were not much concerned with the consequences or moral bearings of their deeds: “The truth is yaar, they weren’t interested; they didn’t care; the only place that was real to them was the village (349).” Nor do we find Rajkumar much concerned with the problem of hoarding before the World War breaks out: what he is genuinely concerned with, is a secured future for his sons, Neel and Dinu. Even Matthew is not much touched by the question of welfare of his labourers. Most of the people around the world are found addressing their immediate concerns. The blame, therefore, is of a different sort, as Arjun defines it: “...he and his peers had been singled out to pay the price of monumental inwardness (349).”

The word 'traitor' has always been a significant weapon in the colonial ideology; it is also a sensitive one to be used by history. One always fears being labelled a 'traitor'. Dinu is both "shocked and relieved" (386) by the incident that an Englishman has betrayed the British forces, which ultimately leads to the defeat of Arjun's regiment. The distinction between such words as 'traitor' and 'revolutionary', and 'traitor' and 'spy' turns out to be quite baffling, as these words are made to possess too much power and authority.

The Indian Independence League questions the very doubts that haunt the minds of Indian soldiers serving in the British Army. The defeat that stares at Arjun's and Hardy's face makes them realise how they are being a part of a colossal waste— simply wasting themselves. Hardy relates what he has experienced while sitting down in the trench in Jitra:

It was strange to be sitting on one side of a battle line, knowing that you had to fight and knowing at the same time that it wasn't really your fight— knowing that whether you won or lost, neither the blame nor the credit would be yours... It was as if I wasn't really a human being— just a tool, an instrument (406).

The final redemptive act of Arjun is that he becomes a soldier for the Indian National Army (INA) and dies fighting in one of INA's last engagements in Central Burma: "That was all they knew about Arjun's death and they were content that it should be so (481)." The engagements of polysemic voices enable the narrator to portray the doubts and differences involved with the Indian soldiers serving in the British army.

This epic novel is also about the past and the present of Burma, which particularly concern the fate of the Indian communities living there, their trials and tribulations, and, most importantly, the great "Long March" on which they returned to India. The 'civilising' mission and the concept of racial superiority seem mere facades of the colonisers, when applied to the case of Burma. The real situation, which becomes apparent behind the colonial designs, is that the once golden land of Burma is now economically poor and is still suffocating under a military regime. During the reign of King Thebaw, illiteracy and poverty were unknown in Burma; so, the ideology of the 'civilising' mission was proved to be mere pretence. A parallel can be drawn between the famous Lady Macbeth and the fiend-like Queen Supayalat, who finds a bloody way to the throne for King Thebaw, quite in the manner of her counterpart in the Bard

of Avon's great play. She retains her queenly grace in her resilience in accompanying the King, when he is deported, and in putting up a brave front against the English. The way she deals with the collector and other officials suggests her pellucid understanding of the situation:

The English alone understand 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 been brought to trial? 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?
(150)

Ghosh's ethnographic work, *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* can be considered a thematic sequel to this work (though it was published at an earlier date); it depicts the fragmentation of Burma and how different Burmese groups refused to unite themselves and is continuously at war with each other. Ghosh, in this novel, observes the changes in Suu Kyi's policies, as she goes on to democratically fight the military Junta. Burma is a land where Ghosh's father once fought and his uncle once lived— Burma transformed the lives of many Indians. The life in Burma is still embedded in their hearts and they revive their memories every year through several rites, rituals and celebrations. Yet, because of the politics of isolation practised in Burma, all memories and memoirs pertaining to the golden land are gradually passing into oblivion. Not only is the rest of the world slowly losing interest in the country, but Burma, which is so close to the hearts of the Indians, and geographically so near to the country itself, and with which the ancestral lives and lineage of so many Indians are entwined, is slowly getting erased from their minds.

In spite of all the turmoil of historical and political events in the backdrop, the world of hope and redeeming grace is defined in the novel through unspoken loyalties, unbroken friendships and unrivalled imagination. Dolly's allegiance to the royal family redefines the traditional Western ideas about slavery: Dolly's relation with the princesses is quite different from the slave-master relationship practised by the European colonisers. Dolly accompanies the Queen even after knowing that they can leave her, if they want; she feels that the child of the first princess is almost growing in her. She hesitates to marry Rajkumar solely because of her loyalty to Queen Supayalat.

Apart from allegiance, friendship also forms a defining aspect of the relationships in the novel. Rajkumar's friendship with Saya John and Doh Say is evident throughout

the novel. So is Dolly's friendship with the princesses and Uma. Arjun's friendship with Hardy and his loyalty to Captain Buckland, and Kishan Singh's loyalty to Arjun are the only meaningful episodes, while most of the events occurring around us are incomprehensible:

Millions of people trying to live their lives in conformity with incomprehensible rulers? Better to be what Dolly had been; a woman who had no illusions about the nature of her condition; a prisoner who knew the exact dimensions of her cage and could look for contentment within those confines (187).

The history of friendship that constitutes this novel is about what happens to individuals rather than about what happens to empires. Uma rightly perceives that the people she had met and talked with, have passed on to her memory:

Yet now, in their faces, she could see inscribed the history of her friendships and the lives of her friends—the stories and trajectories that had brought Elsa's life into conjunction with Matthew's, Dolly's with Rajkumar's, Malacca with New York, and Burma with India (225).

Certain characters in the novel are described in superlative terms. It seems as if Ghosh deliberately uses the adjective "beautiful" for them, in order to suggest that in spite of all these turmoil and political happenings, there are certain individuals who make the world worth living in. Dolly is praised several times in the novel: she is "as beautiful as a fairytale princess" (77). When Rajkumar first sees Dolly, he describes her as somebody whom human intellect and imagination cannot fathom, as if suggesting that in such a world of disgrace, grace is necessarily beyond all understanding:

... beautiful beyond belief, beyond comprehension. She was like the palace itself, a thing of glass, inside which you could see everything of which your imagination was capable...(144).

This adjective is also repeatedly used to describe Aung San Suu Kyi. Rukmini Bhaya Nair rightly points out:

Now, 'beautiful' is an unexpected adjective in a modern novel: it has about it an air of anachronistic innocence. In a cynical world of makeovers and nose jobs, it seems somehow to require unbearable courage to use this term unselfconsciously, but Ghosh manages to do so without flinching. Dolly, too, is of a loveliness beyond imagination. I cannot help but find it intriguing that the concept of 'beauty' occurs

in conjunction with the phrases 'beyond belief' and 'beyond imagination' in Ghosh's texts (167).

Attributes like beauty, loyalty and friendship, and individual interests like photography, cars, furniture, teak etc. go a long way in personalising the history that Ghosh is fictively reconstructing. Nair opines:

I think, with tackling history within the boundaries of contemporary fiction, that duty to create an imaginative grace out of the relatively recent memories of an embittered history of disgrace which I have suggested, marks the teleology of the postcolonial novel (167).

Ghosh employs a polysemy of voices which projects the complexity of an empathetic representation of history, whereby each character is given his own indelible logic of what he does, thus bringing out his own personal truth pitted against the larger consequences of history. The manner in which Ghosh narrates the past in this novel validates his own words: "...the ways in which we remember the past are not determined solely by the brute facts of time; they are open to choice, reflection and judgement. The issue of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace* ..." (Letter to Sandra Vince) Not only this, but Ghosh also portrays the situations and the individual characters with compassion and consideration. This element of sympathy strewn all over his novel coupled with his method of interpreting history, which constitutes the ways in which the great events affect the individuals, make his alternative approach to history come alive. And, it is this quality of liveliness and commiseration that makes Ghosh's fictional world so endearing.

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