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Unearthing the Feministic Perspective: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract:

South-Asian literature has been distinctive in so far as it has rendered a veritable and truthful portrayal of woman, her sensibilities and predicament. During the past few decades, there has been a spurt of talented Indian writers who have not only preoccupied themselves with the portrayal of the sensibilities of women but also accomplished the daunting task of the truthful and authentic rendering of woman's emotions, her aspirations and experiences. Amitav Ghosh is one of such novelists who have earned worldwide fame for the truthful representation of life and society. His representation of female characters testifies to his earnestness in bringing out the issues pertaining to women. He gives his female characters a platform to voice their views and priorities. Ghosh's re-examination of history also helps restore women to history. Ghosh is particularly earnest in foregrounding the views, opinions and contributions of female characters who despite being ordinary middle class women changed the course of history by their path-breaking actions. His fictional works exhibit his rehabilitation of women characters in the portrayal of past whereby a balanced and just picture of the bygone era comes to the fore. In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh creates several unique, strong, and extraordinary female characters. He formulates a proliferation of female characters which include the privileged as well as the subaltern whereby a comprehensive picture of the status of women in the society of the times comes out. He takes up women from every section of Indian society and concludes that the position of upper class women is not different from women of the lower class. This paper seeks to present the hitherto hidden or rather unearthed truth of the predicament of women in Indian societal setup that Ghosh has undertaken to brought to the fore in his works.

Keywords: feministic viewpoint, subaltern, Indian society, modern perspective, societal set-up, sensibilities, historical fiction, post-colonialism, subaltern.

South-Asian literature has been distinctive in so far as it has rendered a veritable and truthful portrayal of life and society. Amitav Ghosh being one of the most famous writers in the present times has made persistent and consistent efforts to give voice to such people as have been relegated to the periphery in the traditional history. He is one of such novelists who have represented the hitherto hidden realities of life and history. His representation of female characters testifies to his earnestness in bringing out the issues pertaining to women. He gives his female characters a platform to voice their views and priorities. Ghosh's re-examination of history also helps restore women to history. Ghosh is particularly earnest in foregrounding the views, opinions and contributions of female figures who despite being ordinary middle class women changed the course of history by their path-breaking actions. His fictional works exhibit his rehabilitation of women characters in the portrayal of past whereby a balanced and just picture of the bygone era emerges.

Woman has been portrayed as a life-giver by Ghosh in his fictions. He represents his female characters as contributors towards the welfare of others in society. He does not portray women as merely puppets stuck in the strings of patriarchal society but delineate them as leading spirits having their own identity. His female characters are realistic in so far as he delineates them by observing real-life images of women found in all the layers of the society. Thus his representations of women are significant from historical perspective and bring out the truth about their existence and problems. All his historical novels boast of such female characters who have an identity of their own and whose contribution towards the welfare of society is not at all insignificant.

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh creates several unique, strong, and extraordinary female characters. He formulates a proliferation of female characters which include the privileged as well as the subaltern whereby a comprehensive picture of the status of women in the society of the times comes out. He takes up women from every section of Indian society and concludes that the position of upper class women is not different from women of the lower class. Ghosh shows the three generations of women whose viewpoints and actions speak volumes about their well-

meaningness and contribution in the making of history. The first generation is represented through Ma Cho, Dolly and Uma Dey whose personalities undergo a gradual change as their lives move on. In the beginning, they are dependent upon men, but later on they realize that their own identity and existence matter. These women evince progress in both the family and the society. It is through their lives and experiences that the historical truth about the existence of women in general is unearthed by the novelist. Alison, Manju and Bela belong to the second generation and find themselves stuck in more or less such situations in which the women of the first generation are rooted. Jaya represents the women of the third generation. Moreover, there are some other female characters such as Ilongo's mother and the four princess through whom Ghosh too raises a number of problems associated with women.

Ma Cho is the first female character introduced in the novel. Her struggle for survival reveals the hardships faced by single women in their lives. She appears only in the first part of *The Glass Palace* but leaves a lasting impression upon one's mind by virtue of the strength of her character. She is a half-Indian and half-Burmese and more Burmese than Indian in her appearance. She lives all alone without family and runs a small food-stall for earning her livelihood. She lives independently without relying upon others for moral or financial support. Even though she has to put up with society's manacles, she never loses courage and comes out as a strong female character who in many ways is superior to major male characters of the novel. "Ma Cho's stall consisted of a couple of benches, sheltered beneath the stilts of a bamboo-walled hut. She did her cooking sitting by an open fire, perched on a small stool" (TGP 6). Her strength is revealed and it is clear how hardworking and sincere she is towards her work. Despite her poor condition, she gives a job to Raj Kumar who is an eleven-year-old orphan at that time.

The most important female character in *The Glass Palace* is Dolly who in the beginning of the novel is the personal assistant of Queen Supayalat and her three daughters and later on gets married to Raj Kumar after which for the most part of the narrative she raises a number of issues related to women. In the beginning of the narrative, she makes her first appearance as a nine-year-old girl who along with the Burmese king Thebaw and queen Supaylat also gets transported to India due to adverse circumstances caused by the British invasion of Mandalay. She looks after the second princess with utmost devotion and her world revolves around the

royal family. Since childhood, Dolly comes out as a courageous, compassionate and self-less woman.

Dolly's perspective about the incidents she sees around herself is quite important. She notices many changes around her, of the increasing impertinence of the servants towards the royal family and her own ambivalent position about what course to follow. She could not contemplate her life without the princesses and that was the only family she had. As she grows up, she becomes very beautiful and Sawant, the local servant of the king, becomes her choice. But after the first princess gets involved with Sawant, Dolly has to be content with being a mere attaché to the royal family. When the first princess becomes pregnant with Sawant's child, Dolly feels sympathetic towards her.

Dolly comes to terms with her ownself once she meets Uma Dey who makes her realise that her life is not confined to the royal family. Uma readies her to marry Raj Kumar and also convinces her of the need of marriage and love in life. The royal maid Dolly is the twice colonized victim of the breaking of a nation. For her, her life in 'The Outram House' is the only life she has known in the place of her exile and she has come to regard the nation of her exile as her home. Thus hers is a precarious condition with no moorings. She tells Uma, "Where would I go, this is home" (TGP 119). Finally she agrees to get married to Raj Kumar but she is quite uncertain of her life in Burma, the place of her birth. She appears to be haunted by the thought that she would be regarded as a foreigner in Burma, "a Kalaa like they do Indians - a trespasser, an outsider from across the sea" (TGP 113).

After getting married, Dolly proves herself to be an ideal and devoted wife. She becomes a perfect homemaker and stands by her family and husband through thick and thin. She gives birth to two sons, Neel and Dinu. She becomes more attached to Dinu as a mother than to Neel and Raj Kumar. She begins to lead a solitary life and finds it difficult to adapt herself to the life led by her husband. After the death of Neel, she pays a visit to the Buddhist monastery where she realizes that all she needed in life was renunciation. She evinces indomitable spirit and strength of convictions by withdrawing from the world and adopting Buddhism.

No doubt, Dolly serves as a foil to Raj Kumar and on a number of occasions, she makes him realise his precariousness and predicament. Unlike her husband who in his greed stoops to

the level of an animal in the hands of the British colonisers, Dolly exhibits an exemplary strength of character. On the surface, she appears passive but on the contrary she is more active than Raj Kumar. One of the passages alluding to Dolly's more acute sense of history is the one where king Thebaw delivers a discourse in Ratnagiri to the princess and Dolly about the Buddhist concept of Karuna: "the immanence of living things in each-other, for the attraction of life for its likeness"(TGP 182). According to Ira Pande:

The connotations of this are clear to Dolly in a manner that is almost incomprehensible to Raj Kumar, who cannot detach himself from pain that renders Dolly capable to have a foreboding of historical changes ... Her outlook on the surface may seem pure passive, but it actually provides the basis for another kind of subjectivity that reacts distinctly to the rigid boundaries imposed by the colonial system. (Pande Web)

Thus Dolly emerges as a strong character who is far more insightful than her husband of history and her perspective casts another dimension to the place of woman in history.

Uma in *The Glass Palace* emerges as a leading female character after Dolly and in her Ghosh has created a character that is a perfect example of the emancipation and freedom of women. She is instrumental in bringing Dolly and Raj Kumar together in Ratnagiri. She is the wife of Beni Prasad Dey, the Collector of Ratnagiri and is confined to her household like a typical Indian woman. She becomes friends with Dolly when the latter moves to Ratnagiri as the personal attendant of queen Supayalat and her three daughters. She becomes widow quite young but comes out of her grief courageously by becoming self-dependent. After the death of her husband, she travels to Britain and the U.S.A. It is her connection with the foreign countries that changes and converts her into an ardent anticolonial nationalist. She devotes her life to humanitarian cause and speaks against the exploitative colonial system. Returning to Burma in 1929 after twenty years at the time of the first major outbreak of Burmese-Indian riots in Rangoon, Uma is appalled by the plight of the coolies working in the plantations owned by Raj Kumar and Matthew. Her hatred for Raj Kumar increases when she comes to know about the secret of Illongo's parentage. Her quarrel with Raj Kumar just before she leaves Rangoon for Calcutta not only reveals her abhorrence of Raj Kumar's betrayal of Dolly but more importantly illuminates the contrast between Raj Kumar, the crony capitalist and Uma as a figure for the anti-

colonial nationalist. She castigates the British colonialism for having played havoc with the lives of innocent people and criticises Raj Kumar for being a part of that callous system. Raj Kumar responds by saying that all that Uma could do was to 'stand back' and speak against him. Moreover she has not built anything and has not improved life in any way. Speaking in favour of the British colonial system, he asks:

... have you stopped to ask yourself what would happen if these soldiers were not used? ... Don't you see it's not just the Empire those soldiers are protecting, it's also Dolly and me? (TGP 214)

Enraged beyond measure, Uma fulminates against Raj Kumar's enslavery:

How dare you speak to me like that? You - an animal, with your greed, your determination to take whatever you can - at whatever cost. Do you think that nobody knows about the things you have done to people in your power- to women and children who could not defend themselves? You are no better than a slaver and a rapist, Rajkumar. (TGP 214)

These words uttered by Uma reveal not only her outrage against Raj Kumar's inhumanity and callousness but a central point about the dehumanisation of Raj Kumar due to the evil influence of the colonial system. Raj Kumar passively accepts his animal like state of collaborating with the British colonizers owing to his concern with self-preservation. It is through Uma that Ghosh indicts the foreign rule for having played havoc with the lives of innocent Burmese and Indian people. Bourgeois anticolonial nationalism, whatever demerits it might have, was in essence an attempt to attain recognition and a sense of identity by going beyond the limits of the self imposed by the colonial system. Uma represents this revolutionary and new-found urge to claim one's identity and rights.

The character of queen Supayalat has been derived from the history of Burma. She was the daughter of King Mindon Min and Queen of Alenandaw and was the last queen to reign in Mandalay from 1878 to 1885. Married to her half-brother Thebaw, the king of the Konbaung dynasty; she was known for her revengeful, unforgiving and egoistic nature. After the forcible exile of the royal family to Ratnagiri in India, she develops a sense of hatred for the British empire for having robbed her of her kingdom with all wealth and glory. Vicious and vindictive

by disposition, she is said to have killed about ninety potential heirs to the throne of Burma. She continues to be against the powerful British empire all her life and it is her strong belief in the traditions that give her the strength to defy the mighty British.

Another important female character is Alison, Saya John's granddaughter. After the death of Matthew and his American wife Elsa in a motor accident, Saya John becomes mentally depressed and it is Alison who takes care of Saya now. Dinu falls for her and wants to marry her. Alison in the beginning has mixed feelings towards Dinu whom she finds incapable of love for he is too involved in his photography to love someone but on the other hand Dinu considers their physical encounter as a symbol that they are in love with each other. It is the love story between Dinu and Alison during war time that comes as a breeze of fresh air. It is her small affair with Arjun that makes Alison understand the true meaning of love. She realizes that her relationship with Arjun is nothing more than lust, whereas with Dinu she shares a special bonding that is nothing but love in the true sense. When her body and Arjun's body came in contact with each other she felt as though "they were both absent, two strangers, whose bodies were discharging a function" (TGP 374). It was only against the contrast of this cohabiting of absences that she could apprehend the meaning of what it meant to be fully present - eye, mind and touch fully united in absolute oneness, each beheld by the other, each beholding (TGP 374). It goes to the credit of Ghosh that he has shown the emotion of love from the perspective of a lady. Alison's love for Dinu does not reach fruition as she while trying to save her grandfather lays down her own life. Thus her love story has a tragic end though she dies with full faith in true love for Dinu.

Ghosh has presented simple and normal images of woman through the characters of Manju and her sister Bela, the nieces of Uma Dey. Manju and Arjun are twins and unlike her brother who as a boy was quite lethargic and lazy, Manju had dreams of her own. She dreamt of becoming an actress, got an opportunity also but fortune had something else in store for her. In a small studio where she goes for audition, she by chance meets Neel, Raj Kumar's elder son and falls in love with him. Through her, Ghosh has painted the image of a typical Indian young girl who has high aspirations in life but who ultimately gives up everything in the name of marriage. It is her marriage with Neel that brings Uma and Dolly together again after many years. Like every normal girl. Manju wants to be happily married after falling in love. But the unfortunate

death of Neel during the second world war shatters her emotionally and psychologically. Leaving behind her daughter Jaya, she commits suicide out of depression.

Bela is the younger sister of Manju and Arjun. She has been presented as a simple girl who develops a strange relationship with Kishan Singh, Arjun's Batman. She slips into his room on the night of Manju's wedding and has a small lively conversation with him during which he kisses her, "very briefly but full on the lips" (TGP 297). She cherishes the memory of Kishan Singh as long as she lives and does not even get married. Through Bela, Ghosh has delineated the picture of such Indian women who, once emotionally devoted to someone, never thinks of marrying someone else.

Jaya is Raj Kumar and Dolly's great granddaughter. A middle-aged widow, she works as a lecturer and a researcher. Not only does Ghosh present the intellectual abilities of a woman through her character but also joins the various loose ends of the narrative through her character. Provoked by the wish to get at her roots, she goes to Ratnagiri and Myanmar to understand her past and it is through her perspective that the narrative seems to have achieved meaning. She finds out her uncle Dinu whose whereabouts were not known for long and also comes to know about his wife, Daw Thin Thin Aye, the reputed novelist.

Ghosh delineates the characters of the four princesses by founding them on the royal princesses from the history of Burma. The king, queen and their four daughters had to live in exile for a long period of thirty one years in complete isolation. Far from leading a life of affluence and glory, they were compelled by circumstances beyond their control to live lives in complete obscurity with no proper education and no connection with the outside world. The first princess Hteiksu Myatpayagyi (1880-1947) married an Indian guard at Thibaw Palace. The second princess Hteiksu Myatpayalat (1882-1956) married a Burmese courtier quite against the wishes of her parents. The third princess Hteiksu Myatpaya aka Madras Supaya (1886-1962) returned to Burma with her mother and married a grandson of Mindat Min, her great uncle and brother of King Mindon. Married to a Burmese lawyer, the fourth princess Hteiksu Myatpayalay (1887-1935) was well-versed in English and vented the grievances of the royal family against the British administration in a document called *Sadutta thamidaw ayeidawbon sadan*. She was sent away by the colonial government to live in Moulmein for the rest of her life.

Ghosh's artistic skill gets manifested in his portrayal of real historical events, historical personalities and imaginary characters. A very important female character named queen Supayalat has been delineated as very strong and but arrogant woman. In the very beginning of the narrative, she has been shown to go on a killing spree murdering all the possible heirs to the throne. In the narrative is Jaya, the granddaughter of Raj Kumar and Dolly, whose role is crucial in so far as she not only becomes instrumental in bringing Uma and Raj Kumar together but also traces her long-lost uncle Dinu who was given up for dead.

This is a well-established fact now that the avowed object of Ghosh as a writer has been to put to the centre stage the hitherto neglected facets of history. He in all his novels evinces his tenacious efforts to delineate such aspects of history as have been relegated to the margins in the traditional historiography. During the past few decades, there has been a spurt of talented Indian writers who have not only preoccupied themselves with the portrayal of the sensibilities of women but also accomplished the daunting task of the truthful and authentic rendering of woman's emotions, her aspirations and experiences. Amitav Ghosh is one of such novelists who have earned worldwide fame for the truthful representation of life and society. His portrayal of female characters foregrounds his earnestness in bringing out the issues pertaining to women. He gives his female characters a platform to voice their views and priorities. His representation of middle class women is unprecedented in so far as he has fore-grounded such facets of the lives of ordinary women which for long had been cast aside as insignificant. This objective of this paper is to present the hitherto hidden or rather unearthed truth of the predicament of women in Indian societal setup that Ghosh has sought to bring to the fore in one of his monumental works *The Glass Palace*. His preoccupation has been to trace the long-lost glory of women whose contribution in the making of history is by no means less than men and there is no gainsaying the fact that Ghosh has been tremendously successful in accomplishing this daunting objective.

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