

Understanding the Cultural Milieu Both Feminism & Masculine's in Amitav Ghosh's Novel "The Glass Palace" A Post- Modern Perspective

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Abstract: Amitav Ghosh in choosing the title for his novel, *The Glass Palace*, reflexively quotes historical characteristics of the palace and makes ironic use of local context. The modernist architecture omitted Glass structures but the post-modern architecture regenerated the Glass structures. It is observed as deconstructive architecture. Amitav Ghosh observes Derridian deconstruction by making Glass Palace to acquire a symbolic significance. Deconstruction architecture is described by Derrida as a "Socius of Dissociation". Glass is widely used in the corporate world. It brings a separate identity where the people inside the Glass-structured buildings dissociate themselves from the outer world by making themselves invisible and the observer visible. In the novel, *The Glass Palace* becomes an object; where in the individuals or commoners of Burma assimilate themselves their Position by seeing the reflexes on the Glass Palace. The mirrored images not only project their position but also the position of the society in which they live in. The insider's invisibility creates the element of absence, while the observer's reflexivity becomes an element of post-modernism.

However, for my seminar article presentation I have chosen the title called "Understanding the cultural milieu both Feminism & Masculine's in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace*" A Post- modern perspective" which makes an exploration of the impact of post-modern elements in the novel of Ghosh which have faced problems and challenges of contemporary society. However I tried to interpret the nature of the seminar paper by observing it from the various cultural milieus' aspects of feminine and masculine's of post-modern's contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: Embracing, contemporary, aestheticism, reflexive, architecture, mirrored, invisibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary Indian Literary scenario, Amitav Ghosh is the only writer who reflects the truth of Indian reality. He bears numerous responsibilities in the world of literature. He executes with admirable aplomb as an anthropologist, sociologist, novelist, essayist, travel writer, teacher and slips into global responsibility for establishing peace as an ambassador. He has excelled the global literary standards set by the post colonial and post modern writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Sashi Tharoor, Arundhati Roy etc. He has become the colossal central socio literary figure with a substantial body of work drawing the global attention. He has become the only negotiator to mediate the core social and cultural problems of India and other colonized nations. All his major works have enjoyed immense academic attention across the globe and it has invited and produced a great amount of literary criticism. He has created a wide readership and a strong critical endorsement that reflects the attention of serious academicians and scholars. All the post colonial and post modern predicaments are wrestled to demonstrate a high level of self consciousness which continues to interrogate the social, philosophical, cultural issues of the world in all its relevance and freshness. His works have initiated the emergence of critique of nationalism and universalism. His intellectual insights, conceptual, theoretical and textual experiments have engaged and interpreted the complex colonial and post colonial situations. They have established a peculiar paradox of reading and appreciation eloquently responding to the post colonial and post modern issues of evolution and transformation of the world. Making his debut with *The Circle of Reason* in 1986, he has produced the ground breaking novels till today with *River of Smoke* (2011) that interrogate the history of humanity

with discursive discourses. His non-fictional writings are equally challenging and stimulating offering philosophical and cultural elucidation on different themes such as fundamentalism, history of the novel, Egyptian culture and literature. Despite this vast amount of creative and critical output surprisingly there is a small amount of critical reception. But his works have become the most favoured areas of scholarly exploration for many of the young scholars and academicians. These explorations have become part of unpublished research that focused exclusively on the relevance of Amitav Ghosh to the contemporary times.

Post-modernism's elements like feminism and masculinise in *The Glass Palace* have paved the way for significant changes in the systems of representation in the cultural milieu point of view. Initiating viability in the systems of representation, it created discursive systems to decentre the subject. It has inscribed multiple fictive selves. It broke the conventions in narration and encouraged fragmentation and reflexivity. Tim Woods in *Beginning Post-modernism* (1999) observes that Post-modernism interrogates the ontological relationship between narrative and subjectivity (7). Embracing the cultural milieu post-modernism abolished the cultural divide between high and popular forms of culture. The philosophy of post-modernism rests on the propositions of Jean Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Jurgen Habermas. Jean Lyotard in *The Post-modern condition: A Report on knowledge* (1979) presents the demise and incredulity towards 'meta narratives'. He welcomes the emergence of 'Mini' or micro narratives'. He argues that the so-called western narratives do not hold legitimacy for enlightenment. He is suspicious of all claims of truth. He warns that beneath the apparent objectivity there lies the dominant discourse of terror (*Post-modern condition*). These perceptions are further characterized by Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations* (1983). Baudrillard proposed three Principal ideas: simulation, implosion and hyper-reality. The image becomes more real than the real and disguise the reality in simulation. The demarcation between the simulation and image implodes the reality. Hyper-reality is the state where the distinction between objects and representation is dissolved. Habermas in '*modernity – An Incomplete project*' (*Post-modernism: A Reader*, Thomas Docherty ed. 1993) urges for 'universal pragmatics'. *Post-modernism* found its further illustration and consolidation in Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari's proposition of '*Schizoanalysis in Anti Oedipus* (1972), *A thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (1980). This initiated the way for the analysis of 'self' in the light of plural and multiple identities and displaced consciousness.

When we examine all the novels of Amitav Ghosh from the literary and critical prescriptions of post-modernism, pertinent critical perceptions emerge. This novel *The Glass Palace* undoubtedly subscribe to the propositions of post-modernism. 'Mininarrations' of women protagonists in these novels displace the centrality of male representation and subjectivity. Micro level narrations of life in *The Glass Palace* dismantle the so called male centered perspective of life construed as 'universal representation'. The small events that take place in the lives of the women characters become the apt representations of mini narrations of life. *Dancing in Cambodia at Large in Burma* and *The Imam and the Indian* are the best illustration of mini narrations. As the collection of stories, it has portrayed several dimension of life from perspective of women. Every perspective of women's life presented in each story justifies *the post-modern perspective* of mini narrations.

2. THE POST-MODERN ELEMENTS OF FEMININE AND MASCULINE IN THE NOVEL *THE GLASS PALACE*-A CULTURAL MILIEU

In the Post-modern arena, architecture was one of the first areas, which was debated and defined. Because buildings have a highly visible public profile, affecting most peoples' lives. Architecture has become not just a reflection of, but also a decisive agency in the creation of a new society. The modernist architecture omitted Glass structures but the Post-modern architecture regenerated the glass structures. It is observed as deconstructive architecture. The Derridian notion of deconstruction is subscribed by Ghosh in making Glass Palace to acquire a symbolic significance. Deconstructive architecture is described by Derrida as a 'Socius of Dissociation'. Glass is widely used in the corporate world. It brings a separate identity where the people inside the Glass-structured buildings dissociate themselves from the outer world by making themselves invisible and the observer visible. In the novel, *The Glass Palace* becomes an object, where in the individuals or commoners of Burma assimilate their positions by seeing the reflections on the Glass Palace. The mirrored images not only project their position but also the position of the society in which they live in. The insider's invisibility creates the element of absence, which the observer's reflexivity becomes an element of Post-Modernism.

'*The Glass Palace*' succinctly projects the aspects of *Post-modernism*. The title of the novel itself connotes Post-modern element. Ghosh uses this glass as a metaphor, which has an inside meaning. In the post- modern arena, architecture was debated and defined. Because buildings have a highly visible public profile, affecting most peoples' lives. Architecture was to become not just a reflection of, but also a decisive agency in the creation of a new society. One of the principal features of Post-modernist architecture is the historical ambivalence. *Paulo Portoghesi* regards *Post-modern* architecture as the ironic reintroduction of the past and history into spatial constructions.

The Post-Modern in architecture can therefore be read overall as re-emergence of archetype, or as a reintegration of architectonic convention, and thus as a premise to the creation of architecture of communication, architecture of the image for a civilization of the image. (1982:11). Amitav Ghosh in choosing the title for his novel, *The Glass Palace* reflexively quotes historical characteristics of the palace and makes ironic use of local context. The modernist architecture omitted glass structures but the post-modern architecture regenerated the Glass structures.

When we examine the *Post-modern* elements in the novel Amitav Ghosh as a post-modern writer successfully employs the post-modern strategies of narration. *The Glass Palace* succinctly projects the post-modern attitudes. The title of the novel itself connotes post-modern perspectives. In Post-modern architecture, Glass is given a very prominent role. Amitav Ghosh uses this Glass as a metaphor, which has an inside meaning.

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In the novel, *The Glass Palace* becomes an object; where in the individuals or commoners of Burma assimilate themselves their Position by seeing the reflexes on *the Glass Palace*. The mirrored images not only project their position but also the position of the society in which the men and women live in. The insider's invisibility creates the element of absence, while the observer's reflexivity becomes an element of post-modernism.

Frederic Jameson, who perceives post-modern architecture to be an unapologetic celebration of aestheticism point out of hotel, with its huge, reflexive Glass skin, appears to dissociate itself from the city, and that 'this disjunction from the surrounding city, is different from that of monuments of the international style, in which act of disjunction was violent, visible, and had real symbolic significance....' (1991: 41).

In the novel, King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat, the Superior authority of the country made themselves invisible by shutting themselves in *the Glass Palace*. The King hardly came out of the palace and so do the Queen but they gained knowledge of the outside world through the representatives. The royal couple was able to study what was happening around the country at the same time they made themselves dissociate themselves from the city by remaining inside the glass palace.

The Glass palace displays an indifference to the city beyond, seeming content to repel it through aesthetic dissociation and aloofness. Today in the corporate world, the buildings are decorated with glass. The skyscraper gets its additional attraction with presence of glass on it. These glass structures arise the curiosity and barges the way for the observer who observes it. Its aesthetic quality attracts the attention of the people who pass by it. These glass structures create envy for the other business people. The commoner, the economically backward person, or the downtrodden person when he observes these structures hesitates to go inside. Because he feels his social status fails to fit him inside. Also the person inside feels the same. These structures are meant for people who gained some status in the society and for the people who are economically sound.

In the novel, *the Glass Palace* has all the features of the corporate buildings. Rajkumar, the protagonist of the novel feels attracted to the palace, when he learns some details of the Palace from Ma Cho. His curiosity was increased to know and to see what was actually inside the palace. However, his social status restricts his entry. He knew that, “the crime of entering the palace would have resulted in summary execution” (34). He was the not only person who knew this fact but everyone knew this fact. On the other hand, the colonial rulers too feel attracted towards the Glass Palace and they barged their way into the palace.

One of the main features of the glass along with its aesthetic quality is its fragility. Although it acts as an object that dissociates the observer and the other, it is easily broken. When the colonial rulers intruded the country, Rajkumar who was curious about the palace availed a chance to sneak into the palace along with the other people, without facing any hurdle. For the royal couple their mantle of dissociation that kept them shut from the public had been dismantled when the insurgents entered into their palace.

The title of the novel signifies *Loss as well as Hope*. If the opening sections project loss, the novel ends on an optimistic note. The title encapsulates pluralism or hybridity of style. The novel reflects many issues. First, it captures the images of the Royal couple and the intrusion of the colonial rulers into serene land. The colonial intrusion forced Thebaw to lose his power. Then the royal family was shabbily been discarded out of the country. The country’s economy was turned upside down. Burmese lost their grip on their homeland because of the rise of the Indian settlers everywhere in the country. Prior to the British occupation the country was known for its high profitable teak plantation, and for its pleasant society free from poverty. But everything turned out to be a tragedy.

On the personal grounds Rajkumar loses his father when the dreadful fever passed through their town Akyab. Then death conquers his mother’s life too. He became an orphan at a very tender age. He fails to establish himself by doing petty jobs. He becomes an immigrant to Burma. When things started to work for him for his favour, the colonial occupation changes the terms. He loses the job and his future becomes uncertain. And suddenly his future was in a dilemma. The earlier section reveals all these things. However, everything is a reflection of loss. To the most extent, the colonial rulers caused it. Because of their presence, the country was deprived of everything. Not only the royal family suffered it but also the entire country suffered the rampage of the colonial rulers.

Ghosh’s novel diligently projects the colonial antimonies and builds an unassailable anti-colonial argument. Several contexts in the book expose the deception and the worthlessness of the colonizer’s postulation. It clearly dramatizes on how the colonial dominance was expanded first by the steady convulsion, assimilation and inhibition of disparity.

Some critics call *The Glass Palace*, by implication is not purely representation of post-colonial writing. Rakhee Moral a critic on Ghosh believes that

...the author falls into a predictable trap, that of writing with the sense of inheritance of nearly hundred years of colonial history.... from the history of colonial India through its post independent nationhood that determine the personal and psychological identities of the author himself (2003: 151-152).

The Glass Palace brought criticism from some quarters for becoming “too” involved in such issues. The point here is that in *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh, a very prominent Indian Writer in English, has apparently met the test of political engagement.

3. CONCLUSION

In a 17 July 2000 interview with *Outlook*, when asked about his staying away from "the media circus that's accompanied Indian Writing in English, Ghosh's responds; It wouldn't have been possible to write *The Glass Palace* if I was living in India".

The lack of resources would have been a problem, as would have been the lack of distance. Nayantara Sahgal is right when she says Indian authors who live elsewhere miss the everydayness of Indian reality. However, to write a book like *The Glass Palace*, you must have distance. A book like this can't be written exclusively for an Indian or a Burmese audience.

The Glass Palace seem to be one of the acceptance of the psycho-historical and geo-political contingencies that led to the emergence of the national idea in India or for that matter the liberation of Burma from British occupation. Some of these events touched the lives of the individuals and whose stories Ghosh chooses to tell in a small but telling way the changing production of academic and intellectual and their reception in a less divided world.

Ghosh's fiction takes upon itself the responsibility of re-assessing its troubled antecedents, using history as a tool by which we can begin to make sense of or at least come to terms with our troubling present. Corollarily, he provides, through his imaginative rendering of this reassessment in fiction, a vital and energizing footnote to the documentation of South Asian history.

Human historian in Ghosh novels between cultures/ lands and negotiate what has now come to be called the 'third space' in social studies. In *The Shadow Lines*, the human historian travels India, Bangladesh and England. In *an Antique Land*, it is India and Egypt, and in *The Glass Palace*, it is India, Burma and Malaya. The burden of India's colonial past appears to weigh heavily on a migrant postcolonial generation and Ghosh seems to be constantly in search of that elusive epiphanic moment in which individuals may come to terms with their histories. According to P.K. Dutta, "The excitement of this novel lies in the way that it extends the idea of binaries into an almost never-ending continuum of different pairs of thematic and structural concerns" (1990: 67)

Apparently, Ghosh met the test of political engagement. *The Glass Palace* is a fascinating and a striking evocation of a relatively little known episode in the British colonial history. *The Glass Palace* received the Grand Prize for fiction at the Frankfurt international e-Book awards in 2001, and it was named a notable book of the year by the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, and the Chicago Tribune. In 2001, Ghosh learned that *The Glass Palace* had been nominated for the commonwealth writers Prize, and had been named as the Eurasia regional winner this meant that the book would advance to the final stage of the competition.

In her interview with Ghosh, Michelle Caswell reminded Ghosh that Meenakshi Mukherjee, writing in *The Hindu*, had called *The Glass Palace* "the most scathing critique of British colonialism (she had) ever come across in fiction." Ghosh responded that "if this is true, then it would have to be said, surely, that colonialism has had a pretty easy ride." Nonetheless, all sorts of empires come under criticism within the pages of this novel.

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