

Tracing Multicultural Aspects in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* and Observing Reverse Nostalgia and Identity Crisis

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Abstract

This paper tries to trace various multicultural aspects in the novel The Glass Palace written by eminent author Amitav Ghosh. This paper will focus on the themes of multiculturalism like displacement, sense of rootlessness and the search of identity and the feeling of reverse nostalgia and identity crisis. The paper will also focus on the migration of the characters in the novel, from Burma to India and then to the USA. The Glass Palace by Amitav Ghosh was published in the year 2000. The novel covers the geographical locations like Burma, Bengal, India, and Malaya. Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta on July 11, 1956 and raised up in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He studied in Delhi, Oxford and Alexandria. He has written highly acclaimed works like The Circle of Reason, The Shadow Lines, In an Antique Land, Dancing in Cambodia, The Calcutta Chromosome, The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide, and the first two volumes of The Ibis Trilogy; Sea of Poppies, and River of Smoke. Ghosh has won France's Prix Medicis Etranger Award, India's prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the Pushcart Prize and the very recent Jnanpith Award.

Keywords: multiculturalism, displacement, identity, migration, colonization, hybridity, Amitav Ghosh, Burma

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In a multicultural, diverse society there are countless ways in which people negotiate the everyday lived experience and reality of diversity.

-Randa Absel-Fatteh, Palestinian author

Introduction

'Multiculturalism' as a term is used to show cultural amalgamation. The very concept of multiculturalism began with the colonization. The inventions of new technology along with the drastic changes in the methods for transport and advancement of international exchange gave birth to migration and resulted in the new multicultural society. It lays an impact on each life and creates a comfortable space in which two distinct societies collides and add to the procedure of cultural assimilation. Bhikhu Parekh in his book, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, says:

"It is neither a political doctrine nor a philosophical issue but actually a perspective on as a way of viewing human life. Increasing cultural diversity focuses on the promotion of rights for different religions and cultural groups. The rights for cultural groups basis for multiculturalism." (Parekh, 2000)

According to Merriam Webster dictionary, multiculturalism can be defined as "With racial and ethnic diversity increasing across the nation as a result of increased immigration, educational leaders were keen to embrace multiculturalism".

— Diane Ravitch

Multiculturalism means different people belonging from different geographical locations, coming to stay and live together in one geographical setting with individual desires and motives. Similarly, migrants too live and become part of a multicultural society. The best example can be given of is Canada, which has people from different parts of the globe as citizens yet they maintain their own distinct culture and identity, thus forming a multicultural society and being part of the same.

Multiculturalism is a liberal school of thought in which culture and ethnic diversities may be harboured in social, political and economic arrangements. In a multicultural society, particular groups and their cultural forms are assigned as worthy of official recognition, protection and possessions.

In the recent times, terms like plural society or cosmopolitan society have been replaced by multicultural society. Multiculturalism is one manifestation of the post-modernist reaction to the de-legitimization of the state and erosion of the hegemony of the dominant culture in advanced capitalist countries. (Turner, 1993)

Multiculturalism is a late twentieth century literary, academic and socio-political movement. It forms a part of various subjects of study like literature, art, media, education, social and legal policy. In a multicultural society, distinctive identities remain intact and contribute to the greater development. Multiculturalism expresses the respect for diversity and promotes equal status to distinct ethnic and religious groups. It is like a 'bowl of salad' where every piece has its own distinct taste and also adds to the whole.

Diaspora authors and their works have multicultural aspects. With the writings of Amitav Ghosh, Diaspora reached to a different level. The author is well known for knitting together, very intricately the political, historical and social aspects of India. All his works are dug out from history and woven around a plethora of human relationships. His major characters in all his works are travellers, where migration is an important element. His characters experience emotional trauma of displacement and also are nostalgic. However, they finally seek a way of adaptation in the new land, where they live and enjoy their own culture. Thereby, his works prove that it is not the center that has shifted; only the boundaries have expanded to push the home culture further to a new space.

Any work of fiction cannot be understood well without understanding its author. According to Rene Welleck, "The most obvious cause of a work of art is its creator, the author and hence the explanation in terms of the personality and life of the writer has been one of the oldest and established methods of literary study."

About the author

Amitav Ghosh is a very well-known Diaspora author. He is also an anthropologist. He was born in Kolkata, India on 11th July 1956. He was raised up in three different countries, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He received his education in Delhi, Oxford and Alexandria. His works include *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In An Antique Land*, *Dancing in Cambodia*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *The Ibis Trilogy*, consisting of *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire*. *The Glass Palace* won the International e-Book Award at the Frankfurt book fair in 2001. He has won many awards for his works. In 2007, he was awarded the Padma Shri, one of India's highest honors, by the President of India.

The Novel: *The Glass Palace*

The Glass Palace was published in 2000. It portrays globalization and multiculturalism. The novel has diverse settings and has multicultural aspects. It is a work with many stories and characters. It is a historical fiction where Ghosh writes about many places, war and displacement, exile and rootlessness. The narrative in this work is of three generations of a family. Many stories are woven together. It draws a beautiful picture of cultural diversity created by various characters belonging to different cultures running across many countries like Burma, Bengal, Malaya, Britain, America, China, Singapore.

The Glass Palace is a family saga and a work of historical fiction. The story is mainly set in Burma during the British invasion of 1885. This accomplished novel tells the story of Rajkumar, a poor boy who lands in Burma after suffering a lot of political and social chaos, but who goes on to create an empire in the Burmese teak forest. It also tells the story of the Burmese royal family who is taken captive by the British officials after their invasion of Burma in 1885, and is forced into exile in a small place Ratnagiri, in India.

When soldiers force the royal family out of the *Glass Palace* and into exile, Rajkumar encounters Dolly, a young woman in the court of the Burmese queen, with whom he falls in love at the very first sight and this love shapes his future life. He builds a business trading teakwood and eventually becomes the owner of a lumber mill. When he has acquired enough money to search for Dolly, he sets off to find her and once she is found he marries her. He works very hard and is able to accumulate huge wealth and fortune for himself and his family. But he again has to face adversities when Japan invades the country during WWII, Rajkumar loses everything.

Observing, Rajkumar and Queen Supayalat throughout the narrative, we find that both are displaced from their homeland, however one accepts his fate and starts a new life in Burma whereas Queen Supayalat is unable to adjust to the new place in India, the kind of facilities provided to her is very demeaning to her position. She yearns to go back to Burma, to her Glass Palace. In the process of settlement in new locations, the characters try to adapt to the new culture of the new places.

Assimilation

Multicultural aspects can be prominently experienced through the characters and their beliefs, ideas, behaviours and orientations of their cultural practices in the particular social context. The character of Saya John has a multicultural personality. He is a Chinese but has adopted Christianity, lives in Burma and can speak many languages including Burmese and Indian. Similarly, Rajkumar gets influenced by various cultures. He is an Indian but stays in Mandalay, and presents himself in English attires. The Queen has learnt to speak Hindustani and that too better than few Indians. Dolly has learnt to speak in the local language Konkani.

In the king's palace too, we can find multicultural aspects. The Queen has many attendants, most of them are teenagers and they belong to different regions, cultures and religions—"Some of them were from Christian families, some Buddhist—once they came to Mandalay it didn't matter." (Ghosh, 2008, p. 21)

The confrontation of the host culture with that of the foreign one not only affects both sides, it also gives birth to a new cultural form. In the novel, king's family living in Ratnagiri had changed drastically, especially the Princesses.

"In the early years in India, the Princesses usually dressed in Burmese clothes—aingyis and htameins. But as the years passed their garments changed. One day, no one quite remembered when, they appeared in saris—not expensive or sumptuous saris, but the simple green and red cottons of the district. They began to wear their hair braided and oiled like Ratnagiri schoolgirls; they learned to speak Marathi and Hindustani as fluently as any of the townsfolk—it was only with their parents that they now spoke Burmese". (Ghosh, 2008, p. 82)

Further in the novel, when Rajkumar calls two astrologers, one from Burma and another from India to give a Burmese and an Indian name to both his sons, Neel and Dinu, we find the mingling of two cultural beliefs to form one multicultural personality of the family.

In the novel, we also see the characters adopt the culture of the English to fit himself in their society. He learns their language, starts wearing clothes like them and adopts their table manners. He does all this to survive and become successful. When he thinks to get into timber business he is asked by Saya John, "But Rajkumar, you can't even read English: how do you think you are going to make this bid?" Rajkumar grinned. "It's true that I can't read English, Saya, but I've learnt to speak it." (Ghosh, 2008, 139)

The effect of migration is such that the migrants even forget about their own country. They feel totally at home in a foreign land and their own country becomes an alien one for them. Dolly is one such character who displays such feeling. Living in India for many years, she becomes an Indian. “And where would I go? This is the only place I know. This is home.” (127) “If I went to Burma, now I would be a foreigner-they would call me a kalaa like they do Indians-a trespasser, an outsider from across the sea. I’d find that very hard, I think.” (Ghosh, 2008, p.120)

Question of Identity

The question of identity is a major element in *The Glass Palace*. An individual’s identity to a great extent is formed by his or her social location which includes his or her race, class, gender etc. The question of identity is very relevant in the mind of a migrant. A migrant, no doubt finds a place in the host country, amongst new people and a new culture, tries to assimilate in the host culture, and yet finds oneself very alien to it. One is torn between two identities, one the original and the other of the host land. In the process of assimilating oneself in the host culture, one starts losing the original one. In the novel, we see this in Rajkumar. His memory about his past is completely washed off in the process of finding an identity in the present, however failing to establish one towards the end. Even Saya John has a Christian name but speaks English, Hindi and Burmese and looks like a Chinese. For this, he is even ridicules himself. He narrates an incident of his past to Rajkumar that when he was in Singapore military hospital, he was questioned about his identity by the Indian soldiers,

“How is it that you, who look like Chinese and carry a Christian name, can speak our language? When I told them how this had come about, they would laugh and say, you are a Dhobi Ka Kutta- a washerman’s dog- na ghar ka na ghat ka – You do not belong anywhere either by the water or on land and I’d say, yes, that is exactly what I am.” (Ghosh, 2008, p. 11)

Similarly, other characters in the novel, Neel, Dinu, Jaya and Arjun possess a hybrid identity. They are not able to identify themselves with one identity or culture.

Conclusion

Ghosh has very meticulously succeeded in bringing out various aspects of multiculturalism in this work. Assimilation, alienation, question of identity and displacement runs through the whole narrative, however, it is very surprising to see them going through all the feelings for the host land, to which the characters have adopted and adapted so well, instead of their own land from where each belongs to. In this work nostalgia and identity crisis is portrayed in the reverse form.

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