

# The Theme of Dislocation in the Glass Palace and the Hungry Tide



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## ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh shows a keen interest in the construction of the past. Many of his narrative sturn towards historical subjects, bringing out the past in the proper perspective, a kind of global perspective. In Ghosh's writings history and anthropology blend together perfectly. He does not shy away from commenting on politics, wars, economy, and other worldly affairs. His protagonists face a Multi-cultural Society and exhibit a deep awareness of the surrounding them. While portraying the theme of cultural dilemmas and dislocation of the migrants, Ghosh did not remain confined to the dislocations of migrants in foreign lands alone

## I. INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh's novels reflect his engagement with some of the serious issues faced by contemporary ex-colonies in Asia and Africa. His novels *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* are rich with several ideas such as displacement or dislocation, blurring of boundaries, colonization, migration, unhousedness, conflict of cultures and rootlessness. In this chapter an attempt is made to explore of impact of dislocation on the political, social, psychological and cultural lives of colonized.

Dislocation is a critical term that refers to the occasion of displacement that occurs as a result of imperial occupation and the experiences associated with this event. In such context a valid and active sense of self may be eroded. The phenomenon of displacement may be the result of transportation from one country to another by slavery or imprisonment, by invasion and settlement or a consequence of willing or unwilling movement from a known to unknown location. The sense of self may also have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model. The term dislocation is used to describe the experience of those who have willingly moved from 'home' to the colonial margin, but it affects all those who, as a result of colonialism, have been placed in a location that, because of colonial hegemonic practices, needs, in a

sense to be reinvented in language, in narrative and in myth. Dislocation results in hybridity. Heidegger's term *unheimlich* or *unheimlichkeit*, literal meaning being 'unhousedness' or 'not-at-homeness', is also used to describe the experience of dislocation. Dislocation becomes most obvious in the attempt to convert the uncolonized 'space' into colonized 'place'. The alienation of vision and the crisis in self-image which displacement produces are phenomena common to all post-colonial literatures in English.

Dislocation may act as a curse for some and a boon in disguise for others. It may help to exploit one's generative power. Many postcolonial texts acknowledge the psychological and personal dislocations that result from this cultural denigration and it is against this dislocating process that many modern decolonizing struggles are instituted. Dislocation, in the sense of willing movement from one place to another, is not an altogether new phenomenon. The story of Ben Yiju and his slave Bomma in *In an Antique Land* exemplifies this. The dislocation, before the arrival of colonial rule, was progressive, syncretic, and mutual. But the dislocation resulted from the imperial occupation has more devastating impact on the psychological, political and cultural lives of the colonies. This chapter aims at exploring the impact of dislocation on political, social, religious, and cultural life of the individuals, families and nation.

## II. THE THEME OF DISLOCATION IN *THE GLASS PALACE*

The theme of dislocation is one of the major themes in *The Glass Palace*. Rukmini Bhaya Nair says, "The Glass Palace is a narrative of colonial displacement" (162). So also, Shubha Tiwari writes "It is a novel about many places, war and displacement, exile and rootlessness" (103). *The Glass Palace* brings together history, fiction, autobiographical records and memories and thereby dislocates the genres also. In this novel a historical event leads to a series of connected dislocations. Ghosh has stated that the issue of how the

past is to be remembered lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace*. Ghosh seeks an understanding of the past to have a bearing upon the present. The past is remembered not as a dead, remote period, but as flowing on into the present postcolonial situations of multi ethnic, pluralist societies, and complex cultural diversities of a persistent political struggle for democratic and egalitarian system. Therefore study is undertaken to explore in detail, the physical, political, psychological social and cultural dislocations in *The Glass Palace*.

*The Glass Palace* is a saga of many families, their lives and their connection with one another with a sweeping historical background. It begins with the introduction of an Indian orphan who is transported to Burma by accident. The name of this character is Rajkumar. As a child, Rajkumar is remarkable for his exploring spirit, keen perception and his ability to take calculated risks. Rajkumar works in a tea stall of a matronly lady Ma Cho. Once he lands in Mandalay, his lifelong search for places and people begins. He is a complete destitute in an alien city with absolutely no acquaintances. Because of his skill in the art of survival in a difficult world Rajukumar gradually succeeds in becoming, with the loyal help of his friends Doh Say, Saya John and others, a rich and powerful member of the Indian community in Burma. Thereafter, he tracks down Dolly, the devoted maid servant of queen Supalayay, with whom he had fallen in love at first sight as a boy during the British takeover of Mandalay.

The novel opens with the echoing sound of canon along the silver curve of the river Irrawaddy. The British cast eyes on the wealth of the golden land, Burma. They started transporting teak wood, oil, and gems illegally. When they were informed to pay the fine, they refused it and put pressure to yield to the British ultimatum. When the Queen Supayalat opposed the British they decided to invade Burma and exploit the wealth of the country. The imperial fleet crossed the border on 14th Nov, 1885. As the Burmese army could not match the British army, without informing the king Thebaw, it surrendered. The war lasted for just fourteen days. Consequently, the Mandalay fort with long roads, canals, gardens, rooms with gilded pillars, polished floors, illuminating vast hall, and mirrored ceilings and with all the richness in Burmawas looted by the soldiers and public. "Everywhere people were intently at work, men and women, armed with axes and das; they were hacking at gem studded Ook offering boxes; digging

Dislocation resulted from colonial occupation and administration has caused mental colonization of colonized. For instance, Saya does not see the English as usurpers. For him they are superior. From them he has learnt the art of using everything for his own benefit. The

patterned gemstones from the marble floor; using fish hooks to pry the ivory inlays from lacquered sadaik chests" (*The Glass Palace* 33). The Queen was Witnessing this horrifying scene blindly "A day before, she could have had a commoner imprisoned for so much as looking her directly in the face"(33).

The dislocation is not confined to the Royal family and its entourage. People from colonized India were transported to Burma to work in oil camps and other menial works. On the way to the exiled places the King spotted several Indian faces along the water front. He wondered: What vast, what an comprehensible power, to move people in such large numbers from one place to another- emperors, kings, farmers, dock workers, soldiers, coolies, policemen why? Why this furious movement- people taken from one place to another, to pull rickshaws, to sit blind in exile? (50)

The dislocation which resulted from colonial occupation may help some people to migrate, to form their personality using their skills, and to prosper in their lives. Ghosh doesn't squarely say that dislocation causes only disadvantages. He vividly represents the other side of dislocation. "Because of racial clash resulted from colonial rule things have changed in Burma, there is a lot of anger, a lot of resentment, much of it aimed at Indians" (240). Dolly tells Uma "it is wrong for Burmese to marry foreigners- that women like me who are married to Indians, are traitors to their own people" (240).

Dislocation or displacement has also blurred racial borders. For instance, Rajkumar, an Indian married Dolly, a Burmese. So their sons Neel and Dinu are half Indians and half Burmese. Neel married Manju, an Indian, Uma's niece. Their child Jaya half Indian and half Burmese. So also, Saya John a Malaccan married Chinese woman. Their son Mathew is half- Malaccan and half-Chinese. Mathew married Elsa, an American. How their daughter Alison is to be identified in terms of race. Rajkumar's younger son Dinu married a Burmese writer, Ma Thin Thin Aye. Thus, the saga of these families dislocates the concept of racial purity. The race is hybridized and the concept of pure race is deconstructed. Saya John is a fine illustration of this breed of hybridity which blurs the national and racial borders. His (Saya John's) clothes are Western. He speaks English, Hindustani and Burmese. His face looks like that of Chinese. Saya himself makes fun of his amalgamated identity:

Europeans for him stand for efficient exploiters of natural resources. Before the European's arrival, Burmese people had the skills but they never thought of hijacking the natural resources. Until the Europeans came none of them ever thought of using elephants for the purposes of

logging. Their elephants were used only in pagodas and palaces, for wars and ceremonies. “It was the Europeans who saw that tame elephants could be made to work for human profit. It was they who invented everything we see around us in this logging camp. This entire life is their creation” (74). This is what Saya tells Rajkumar about Europeans. As his master, Rajkumar, was also “convinced that in the absence of the British Empire, Burma’s economy would collapse” (306).

Dislocation has fueled communal animosity and clashes in the name of nation. Because of imperial rule the Indians moved to Burma in large number. The Indians became strong, powerful and prosperous. For instance Rajkumar, an orphan boy, becomes a successful businessman in teakwood and rubber plantation. Like Rajkumar many Indians run varied businesses and contributed to the economy of Burma. Dolly says, “Indian moneylenders have taken all ‘farm land; Indians run most of the shops, people say the rich Indians live like colonialists, lording over the Burmese” (GP 240). Consequently the solidarity between Indians and Burmese turns to animosity and the Burmese felt displaced. Inter cultural marriages between the two communities are condemned and women like Dolly are, in her words, seen as “traitors to their own people” (240). Burmese hostility against Indians is reinforced in the macabre image of the Indian who is chased by a mob of blood thirsty Burmese who beheaded him. Riots breakout all over Burma and the unquestioning harmony between Burmese and Indians turns to hatred and bloodshed. The riots last for several days and the casualties numbered in hundreds, “the toll would have been higher still, if it had not been for the many Burmese who had rescued Indians from the mob and sheltered them in their homes” (245). Dolly and her sons become the targets of attack because she has married an Indian. For Rajkumar it is the war being fought by the British. His failure to perceive the situation leads to personal tragedy. In an air-raid on Rangoon, the elephants carrying timber from Rajkumar’s timber yard become panic, as a result of that the logs begin to topple down crushing Neel, Rajkumar’s elder son. Neel’s death crushes the hope of his family. His wife, Manju commits suicide by jumping into the river. Rajkumar leaves for Calcutta. Dolly goes to nunnery in Rangoon and dies there. Dinu lives in Rangoon with his Burmese wife losing his father’s entire property. Jaya, daughter of Manju and Neel, is brought up by grandparents in Calcutta. The religious aversion that Egyptians have for Hindu faith and rituals in an Antique Land has a parallel in the racial animosity between Burmese and Indians in *The Glass Palace*.

Thus the colonial occupation led to the physical, political, psychological, racial and cultural dislocations.

Yet the novel ends with a desire to reestablish a culture of ease and love, comfort and compassion, forgoing the hatred and violence. The real hope among the people is awakened by the figure of Aung San Suu Kyi who has torn the masks from the face of cruel regime and inspires people with her charisma. She holds no political institutional post but she has become an institution in herself. Ghosh shows her popularity, her openness in facing the public and her ability to laugh. Thus the novel which begins with invasion and plunder ends with reconciliation, faith and hope.

### III. THE THEME OF DISLOCATION IN *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

*The Hungry Tide* chronicles the issues of home and homelessness, borders and boundaries, place and displacement, ecology and human development, conflict of cultures and classes. In *The Glass Palace* these issues are unravelled against the historical background. In *The Hungry Tide* these issues are unravelled against the geographical backdrop, through the interlocking stories of Piya, an Indian American marine biologist, Fakir, the illiterate native who becomes her guide, a Delhi professional who acts as her interpreter, eviction of refugees, and Nilima and Nirmal’s efforts to bring change in the lives of people of Lusibari.

The novel opens with forty two year old Kanai Datta who oversees an office of translators and interpreters in New Delhi. He is standing on a railway platform observing Piyali Roy. Both are heading from Calcutta to Canning in the Sundarban. He is going because his aunt Nilima told him that his uncle Nirmal had left a cover with writings specifically for Kanai. He has to go through it and tell her the content.

This novel highlights the dislocation of the refugees caused by nature and the government. First let me examine the dislocation caused by nature. The novel is set in Sundarban, which means ‘the beautiful forest’. People believe that the word is derived from the name of a common species of mangrove the Sundari tree. But in the record books of the Mughal emperors this region is named not in reference to a tree but to a tide-bhati. To the inhabitants of the islands this land is known as bhatir-desh-the tide country. The description of the tide country itself provides a picture of dislocation places. This tide country is an immense archipelago of islands stretching from the Hooghly River in the West Bengal to the shores of the Meghan in Bangladesh. Some of these islands are “immense and some are no larger than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others were washed into being just a year or two ago” (*The Hungry Tide* 7). In this area the river channels spread across the land like a fine mesh net. They have created a terrain

“where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable” (HT 7). Some of these river channels are long that their shores are invisible. Usually these channels meet in clusters of four to six, this confluence is known as a mohona. The mohona creates such a scene that it is very difficult to guess where they flow and where they join the sea:

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and everyday thousands of acres of forest disappear under water only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily- some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it

Natural dislocation has not only effaced the boundaries between islands and rivers and sea in the tide country, but it has also rendered human life pitiable in Lusibari: hunger and catastrophe were a way of life, after decades of settlement the land had still not been wholly leached of its salt. The soil bore poor crops and could not be farmed all year round most families subsisted on a single daily meal (HT 79).

The hunger drove these people to hunting and fishing and the results were disastrous many died of drowning; many more were picked off by crocodiles and sharks. The mangroves also didn't help the people; thousands risked their dives to collect meager quantities of honey, wax, firewood and fruits. No day seemed to pass without news of someone being killed by a tiger, a snake or a crocodile. The school condition in the village was also not good. Nilima found that there were large numbers of widows in the village. In a place where men of marriageable age were very few it was impossible to think of remarriage. Widowhood meant a lifetime of dependence, years of abuse and exploitation. The protagonist of the novel Fokir is also devoured by the hungry tide at the end. The occurrence of cyclone and flood is the common phenomenon in the tide country.

The danger of implementing the Western ideologies is that the western perception of climate change faces challenges. Firstly within the Western territories the debates and implications of climate change have not been exhaustively negotiated in public, despite the consensus that it is good for the whole humanity. However the climatologists of the West and their followers in the guise

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh's novels deal with the most contemporary issues such as a modern man's perennial problems of alienation, the quest for freedom and existential crisis. Restless, rootless and unsettled, he is in search of peace, comfort and shelter. His sense of belonging is shaken. The bliss of freedom has disappeared. Life has become nothing but silence and pauses without

throws up new shelves and sand banks where there were none before (HT 7).

In this place when the tides create new land, mangroves begin to gestate overnight and cover a new island within few short years. Other kinds of trees are not found here, mangrove forest is a universe unto itself. The mangrove is impassably dense. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. By providing the background of mutating, fluctuating, transient islands and boundaries of islands, Ghosh propounds that dislocation is not just human creation it is a natural phenomenon present since the origin of the earth.

of the state elites have established scientific consensus to prevail and conserve nature and its animal species. Secondly when experts and trainees in the field of environmental science like Piya impose the Western ideas like protecting animals on non-Western territories like Sundarban. Those ideas do not suit well with the local situation because these territories have severe land and resource constraints in regards to accommodating the needs and interests of the marginals.

Amitav Ghosh in his interview has said “When we look at writers of the Thirties and Forties we ask them “where did you stand on fascism? In the future they will look at us and say ‘where did you stand on environment’”. I think this is absolutely the fundamental question of our time”. (Amitav Ghosh in Conversation). Thus, the novel goes on to raise larger questions like whether the islands belong to marginalized or the animals.

Ghosh has interwoven the stories of individuals who are dislocated into the story of natural dislocation to make it more relevant. The people of this tide country are being caught in a vicious circle; they lead a very miserable life. Some greedy and rich people take advantage of this. They take poor women promising jobs in the city and they sell them there. Thus, the nature, the government, neocolonial agents; international, national and local have dislocated the people of tide country.

harmony and destination. There is a vast gap between words and the world. The disturbance caused by the gaps and absences and seamless silences forces Ghosh to craft his novels on the victims of history. The undocumented histories of ordinary people and the chronologically ordered histories of historical characters are subtly dovetailed into his novels, making explicit a confluence of history and human insights. The strategy of

subversion, a common feature of postcolonial histories is visible in the novels of Ghosh.

The Glass Palace records the historic events in three countries; Burma, Malaya, and Indian. The novel may earn the distinction of being called an epic, given its scope and sweep of events. A whole century of rule of these centuries is portrayed; from Anglo- Burmese was of 1885, to the world wars, to the age of cyber revolution, and thus bringing together history, fiction, and autobiographical records along with memories. For compilation of this mammoth work, Ghosh used material derived from a variety of sources recollection and remembered accounts of his father, uncle, and several other living persons whom he met; the diaries, notes and official records; history books etc. The Hungry Tide Towards the end of the novel when piya and fokir are trapped by the cyclone, it is the extreme desperation and fight for survival that brings them together. Piya begins with a mistranslation of the people and environment around her and precedes to represents a movement towards equality between elite and subaltern culture. Ghosh wants to suggest if the world is to see the positive change through social anthropology, there is the need to promote such crass culture relations.

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