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THE HUMANISTIC APPROACH OF GHOSH IN “THE GLASS PALACE”

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Abstract

Literally speaking, Human Rights is a vast term in itself whose canvas is very broad. It refers to all those rights and freedoms to which all human beings are entitled. Closely attached to it, Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life based on belief in the dignity of human being which supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity. Not only this but it also advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of open society and aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It is a way of thinking and living that aims to bring out the best in people, so that all may have the best in their life. The term Humanism since the time of its inception has undergone various modifications and transformations. But despite it the major constituents of humanism have always been freedom, equality, dignity and sovereignty of man.

Keywords: Colonization, Recolonization, Neo-colonization, Decolonization, Humanism

Literature, being a part of man’s aesthetic and social experience plays a crucial role in promoting humanism in its multiple forms. Literature and its analysis perform various tasks. For example, it preserves human consciousness, refines sensibilities, provides entertainment and relaxation, and reflects culture of the people of a period of time. This is the reason that in literature humanistic concerns mark a perennial presence in one form or the other. Different writers have included humanistic thoughts in their works on the basis of their understanding and experience. The Glass Palace by Amitav Ghosh is a novel of the similar vein.

Amitav Ghosh occupies a prominent position in the history of Indian writing in English. Anthropologist – turned – writer Amitav Ghosh is a literary talent of the Indian diaspora. He is talented and innovative. He is also an experimentalist. He experiments with the different forms of the book but it is basically his innovative ideas that run his books. One can say that “Ideas are the driving force of his books.”¹The content of his book contains mighty thoughts. Ghosh is a novelist with a

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difference. He is obviously one of the many Indian writers who emerged in the year 1980s after the publication of Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children", but he is among the very few who have expressed in their work a developing awareness of the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of colonized people as they figure out their place in the world.

Colonization, recolonization, neo colonization, and decolonization are the dominant thoughts of Ghosh's works. He seldom or better to say never moves himself out of this paradigm. Whatever he writes, this perspective is always there somewhere in his mind and it always acts as a guiding principle in almost all his works. For example, the Glass Palace in the novel "The Glass Palace" which is under discussion is a symbol of power as well as fragility of imperialism. In the novel Glass Palace functions as a metaphor. Glass is brittle and it stands transparency and Palace for power. Glass Palace is an illusion created in and around power. The people living in the palace do not have the liberty of throwing stones at others. In other words, we can say that the colonized people are imprisoned inside the Glass Palace and they have lost their capacity of throwing stones at the colonial masters. Thus, we find that colonization acts as a constant thought in his novels.

The most sweeping historical novel "The Glass Palace" is basically the story of an Indian orphan who is transported to Burma by accident. It is so compassionately and richly rendered we come to feel as if we are somehow part of its extended family. It is at once historical novel, a family saga, and an adventure story. Set principally in Burma and Malaya, "The Glass Palace" spans several generations. We know that there are very few people in this world who have the capacity to interweave history with travel to make a story and Ghosh is definitely one of them. Nilanjana S. Roy rightly asserts "the five years Amitav Ghosh spent on this book have paid off, spectacularly: this is the mother of all historical epics, set against the backdrop of a country we should know but have eased out of our minds. (...) The first 200 – odd pages of The Glass Palace are a revelation. Seldom has a novelist been able to assemble quite such a cast of characters against quite such a canvas, and having done so, seldom has a novelist had the good sense to step back out of the frame and let them tell their story"²(The Hindustan Times).

Surely enough, after going through the novel we do feel that it is a multigenerational saga and a wonderful satisfying blend of history and storytelling. But 'The Glass Palace' is more storytelling than history. Fiction overwhelms fact as the reader submerges into the story of

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Rajkumar. This is a narrative whose fictional edges bleed more readily than the historical ones. The records of the historical events have been intertwined with struggle for survival of human beings.

The novel primarily deals with the story of three generations of a family living in three different countries. In it many stories have been woven together to render a perfection to the novel. It is set against the background of the political turmoil which was an outcome of the cruelty and oppression of the British imperialists. The book deals about European greed and the cruelty of colonization of these British imperialists. The Britishers came to countries like India and Burma with a ravenous greed and drained them of all their resources. As a result, the royal families suffered most.

The king and Queens were reduced to miseries. Apart from this the attempt of the native rulers to suppress the democratic rights of the people of Burma after its decolonization from the British rule has also been set as a part of the background of the novel. And the chief concern of the novelist here is to reveal the destruction of human rights both under the British rule and the Native. So, the novel without presenting any specific understanding of humanism simply supports multiplicity of ideas. The main motto of the novelist while writing this novel was the projection

of various colonial practices and he has portrayed it well through the storyline. The concept of the equality of all human beings without any discrimination on the basis of nationality, religion, caste, culture or social and political status gains utmost significance in the novelist's humanistic views.

In order to express his anxiety for the masses Ghosh has provided fictional flesh to the practices that block human freedom and tend to suppress man/woman. The inhuman behaviour of the rulers have been presented through the insensitive treatment of the rulers for the ruled. For example, in the very opening section of the novel we come to know that Queen Supayalat, the Queen of Burma, has several maids to attend her. These maids are, "Young girls, orphan, many of them just children." (p-7) But what strikes us most about these girls is the fact that they have not come willingly to work there. "They'd been purchased by the Queen's agents in small Kachin, Wa and Shan villages along the Kingdom's northern frontiers." (p-20) This instance brings forth before us the inhuman attitude and behaviour of the Queen of Burma.

Though belonging to the same community, she does not even once think about the critical human status of these girls. She is unable to feel the pulses of these innocent girls. The way the Queen

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treats the girls, compels them to serve herself, and the pitiable condition in which they are kept are considered quite natural and normal by the rulers. There is nothing unusual in it for the Queen. These rulers possess a different notion for humanism. In their eyes the very concept of humanism has got distinguished meanings for the ruler and the ruled. The repetition of the inhuman condition of the maids under which they work and the way they are forced and compelled to show their regards to the Queen show novelist's criticism of the forces which are hostile to the dignity of the human.

Again, the tricky role of different socio- political institutions towards suffering humanity for their own growth and personal gain also brings out Ghosh's concern for human existence. In the novel we find that the British imperialist is anti – human not only towards its subjects but also towards its propagators and the ones who are working for it. In order to strengthen its power and extend its hold over the people, it uses even his own Englishmen in tricky manner. In order to explore the forest wealth, the British Colonialists employ their young men to work in the forest as long as they can tolerate the dangerous atmosphere and unhealthy climate of Burma. Saya John who indirectly represents the author points out:

“These young Europeans...have at best two or three years in the jungle before malaria or dengue fever weaken them to the point where they can't afford to be far from doctors and hospitals”. (p-74)

The motto of the company to use these men as nothing but tools in its own interests exposes its inhuman attitude:

“The company knows this very well; it knows that within a few years these men will be prematurely aged, old at twenty-one, that they will have to be posted off to city offices. It is only when they are freshly arrived, seventeen or eighteen that they can lead this life, and during those few years the company derive such profit from them as it can”. (p-74)

Thus, we find that through these lines Ghosh highlights the inner workings of the mind of the Britishers. For them the life and happiness of others is not even of least importance. For them the people of Burma are simply a thing which is to be used and thrown into the garbage box.

Ghosh also highlights the tendency of the colonialists for creating a specific model of knowledge and their attempt to define human values in terms of their own standard. It marks the intervention of power politics in which special attention is focused on the understanding of humanistic values. The prime motive of the novel is to highlight these designs of the British

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imperialists concerning the subject – culture.

By subject- culture, we mean a conscious effort on the part of the novelist to challenge the assumed superiority of the Western culture. In their endeavor to establish themselves as the janitor of human values these people often project their subjects as anti- human. By doing so they achieve a false notion of superiority. In the novel the British imperialists try to make the Burmese people realize that the native Kings and rulers are cruel and only they are the civilized ones. Hence, a proper civilization demands Western learning and the British intervention is required. The barbarism of the native rulers has been highlighted by the Britishers through different practices. For example, Uma who is the wife of an Indian officer is made to believe, like other people, in the ideas floated by the empire. Being quite aloof from the subtle working of the propagators of human values she takes the thing at its face value and shares her concern with Dolly:

“One hears some awful things about Queen Supayalat...That she had a lot of people killed...in Mandalay... Doesn't it frighten you she said, to be living in the same house as someone like that?” (p-113-114)

The response of Dolly to her questions challenges the very nature of her views.

Bringing in consideration the picture of Queen Victoria, the symbol of British authority, she unveils the reality and the generosity of British Empire and utters:

Don't you sometime wonder how many people have been killed in Queen Victoria's name? It must be millions, wouldn't you say? I think I would be frightened to live with one of those pictures.” (p-114)

The theory of Ghosh's humanism rejects all forms of oppression. His concern is not confined to the four walls the political freedom as a means of acquiring sovereignty and dignity of human beings. Rather he is also critical to those social and cultural practices that tend to suppress people as human beings. His fight is for all forms of imperialism.

Ghosh also opposes the hierarchical system of society. He opines that such a system even if it is designed by the native rulers is against the spirit of humanism. He strictly criticizes the fascist idea through the character of Dinu. He gives a long speech about the nature of forces which stands against human freedom and dignity. He tells Uma:

“And don't imagine for a moment that India and Burma will be a better off if the British are defeated... The German plan is simply to take over the Empire and rule in their place...And think of what will happen in

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Asia...The Japanese are already aspiring to an Empire, like the Nazis and the Fascists.” (p-293)

Thus, we find that in Ghosh’s concept of humanism the imperialist thinking stands completely rejected in all its forms and shades. Another aspect of humanistic tendencies that holds special significance is related to the rejection of a fixed notion of human identity. It brings forth the clash between the static notion of identity which is the core of cultural thought in imperialism and the democratic perspective which Ghosh adopts in his novels. In order to reject the lifelong stabled and fixed notion of identity Ghosh has presented characters in the novel that do not have their essential national identities. Instead of being treated and thought as Indians, Burmans or Malaya these characters are remembered as Dolly, Uma, Raj Kumar, Saya John, Dinu, Neel. Again, the two different names, one Burman and the other Indian of Raj Kumar’s son destabilize nation-based identities. This fictional device that Ghosh uses liberates the concept of humanism from the set values.

Thus, we find that the approach of Ghosh towards humanism is a distinguished

one. He does not follow the traditional norms of human identity. He has his own reasonable approach towards human rights and humanity. And the way of advocating these norms which vary from the set patterns is superb. He is of the view that power politics threatens humanistic values. It is a great hurdle in the field of human progress. What he feels that the working of politics hinders the social and cultural institutions to work for the dignity of man. Though being a central unit of society, man is treated as merely a man to serve the end of those in powers. So lastly Ghosh concludes that human values can be protected only when politics is made to serve man.

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