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THEME OF DISPLACEMENT IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE GLASS PALACE AND SEA OF POPPIES

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Abstract:

This paper traces post colonial displacement as presented in Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace and Sea of Poppies. Colonialism resulted in the scattering and displacement of the colonized to various colonies. The novels present the poignant accounts of people scattered through colonial dislocation in various parts of the Asian Continent. While The Glass Palace focuses on the colonization of Burma and the consequent dislocation of young men as soldiers and labourers, Sea of Poppies brings to light the history of colonial opium trade and the full impact of British rule in India- how it devastated local industry and agriculture pattern which resulted in the emigration of Indian peasants. The paper presents the profound effects of displacement on the physical, social and psychological aspects of human life.

Pankaj Mishra describes Amitav Ghosh as one of the few postcolonial writers "to have developed in his work a developing awareness of the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of the colonized people as they try to figure out their place in the world" (New York Times Review). The novels of Ghosh address the experience of post colonial migration, alienation and rootlessness and delve deep into the psyche of people caught up in the vortex of dislocation. They communicate the disillusioned spirit of the natives who are presented as victims rather than foes of the colonizers.

Colonialism resulted in the scattering and displacement of the colonized to various colonies. "The most extreme consequences of imperial dominance can be seen in the radical displacement of peoples through slavery, indenture and settlement" (Ashcroft et al. 217). *The Glass Palace* presents a poignant picture of young Indian men being dislocated to Burma, Singapore and Malaya as soldiers. Narrating his experience as an orderly in a hospital at Singapore, Saya John talks about the plight of these Indian soldiers. They were mainly peasants from small countryside villages, fighting wars for their English masters. He could still remember the smell of gangrenous bandages on amputated limbs; the night screams of twenty-year old boys. For a few coins, not much more than a dockyard coolie they allowed their masters to use them as they wished, "to destroy every trace of resistance to the power of English". They were fighting neither due to enmity nor anger, but in submission to orders from superiors, without protest and without conscience. Years of enslavement has made them just tools in the hands of the British without minds of their own.

The royalty was no exception to this colonial displacement. Spotting several Indian faces in the Rangoon waterfront the king was awe struck by the incomprehensible power of the British "to move people in huge numbers from one place to another" and wonders "why this furious movement – people taken from one place to another, to pull rickshaws, to sit blind in exile?" (*TGP* 50). He was also worried where his own people, now a part of British Empire, would go as all this moving about would not suit them. But there was no way out. "They were not a portable people, the Burmese; he knew this very well for himself. He had never wanted to go anywhere. Yet here he was on his way to India" (*TGP* 50). The conversation between the king and the British official reveals his sense of displacement and the agony of his heart. When Mr. Cox informed the king that the royal entourage was to be moved to Ratnagiri from Madras, the king asked naively, "How long are we to remain there? When will we be allowed to return to Burma?" When he came to know that he would have to stay in Ratnagiri forever, "the king rose to his feet abruptly and went to his room. He did not step out again for several days" (*TGP* 60).

Dolly, Queen Supayalat's hand maid too suffered from a sense of loss and dislocation. As a young girl she was forced to move from home with the royal entourage. She was one among a little procession of eighteen brightly dressed orphan girls who followed the royal entourage on foot. Her displacement from her native roots and her discomfort over it is clear when she declares to Uma that she could never think of going back to her country. "I'd never be able to rid myself of the idea that I would have to leave again one day just I had to before. You would understand if you knew what it was like when we left" (*TGP* 113). She said with a shiver that she tried not to even think about it.

When she felt at home in India, her marriage with Rajkumar required her to leave the country. The parting scene is poignantly presented by the novelist. From a window upstairs the four princesses waved her good bye. Dolly tried to wave back but her legs buckled under her and she fell to her knees sobbing. When they were trotting past the police barracks she waved back to the constables' wives and children who had come out to send her off, wiping the trees fiercely from her eyes. "This was home, this narrow lane with its mossy walls of laetrite. She knew she would never see it again" (*TGP* 171). After setting up a family in Burma, she is compelled to leave the country during the Second World War. With Neel's baby wrapped in a shawl she comes

back to India with her husband as a refugee. Finally she ends up in a Burmese monastery. "To be rooted is the most important and least recognised need of human soul" (Weil 183).

The same sense of loss and displacement is expressed in the following words of Rajkumar when he was forced to leave Burma after the Japanese air raid. "Yes. But it's hard, Dolly – it's hard to think of leaving: Burma has given me everything I have. The boys have grown up here; they've never known any other home . . . despite everything that's happened recently, I don't think I could ever love another place in the same way. But if there's one thing I've learned in my life Dolly, it is that there is no certainty about these things. My father was from Chittagong and he ended up in the Arakan; I ended up in Rangoon; you went from Mandalay to Ratnagiri and now you're here too." (*TGP* 269)

"Our age with its modern warfare, imperialism and the quasi theological ambition of totalitarian rulers is indeed the age of the refugees, the displaced person, mass migration" (Said, *Reflection on Exile and other Literary and Cultural essays* 175). Simone Weil distinguishes this displaced lot into four categories: exiles, refugees, expatriates and émigrés. "Exile is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: it's essential sadness can never be surmounted" (ibid 173). In 1857, after the suppression of the mutiny, the British exiled the deposed Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar to Rangoon where he lived in a small house old and blind. In 1885, when Burma was besieged by Britain, the royal entourage was exiled to India and forced into an anomalous and miserable life. Even after twenty years of exile Dolly had a vivid memory of the Mandalay palace, especially their walls. "Many of them were lined with mirrors. There was a great hall called the Glass Palace. Everything there was of crystal and gold" (*TGP* 112). As exiles they were made to live in a worn out bungalow in Ratnagiri.

Expatriates voluntarily live in an alien country for social reasons. When Britain was expanding its commercial interests in its colonies, India became a source of raw labour and military muscle. "Thousands of poor, willing workers were recruited for work in Burma, Fiji, Caribbean and African plantations, in docks, mills and railroads while others were conscripted to the British army" (Auradkar 96). In Mathew's rubber plantation in Malaya, Uma was surprised to see that all the tappers were Indians, mainly Tamils. Out of the ten thousand soldiers in the British invasion force of Burma, about two thirds were Indian sepoys. These Expatriate soldiers were engaged not only in British conquests, but also for the fortification of the empire. When the Saya Sen rebellion broke out in Burma, the colonial authorities sent more Indian reinforcement to root out the rebellion.

While Refugee suggests large herds of innocent and bewildered people forced to move from a place, Emigrant is anyone who immigrates to a new country. During the bombings of Japan over Rangoon in 1942, 30,000 Indians returned to India as refugees. They had to cover a distance of more than a thousand miles on foot with their possessions on their heads, children on their backs, elderly people in carts and barrows. Rajkumar, the Indian emigrant to Burma, the business tycoon who amassed wealth in teak trading and transporting people to rubber plantation was reduced to nothing. He along with his wife Dolly, daughter-in- law Manju and her baby in a shawl that was slung hammock-like over their shoulders was a part of this group. As Alastair points out, "Colonialism has produced and reduced nations, massacred populations, dispossessed people of their land, culture, language and history and shifted vast number of people from one place to another" (*English and the Discourses of Colonialism 19*).

Grimityas and Convicts were another set of people who were subjected to displacement by the colonial government. Grimityas were labourers whose names were entered in 'grimits' - agreements written on pieces of paper in exchange for money. "The silver that was paid for them went to their families and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished as if into the netherworld" (*SOP* 79). After the conquest of Burma by the British, many foreign companies were busy digging for oil in Yenangyaung and they were desperate for labour. It was hard to find workers in Burma as the working condition in the oil wells was very dangerous. Men were lowered into deep oil wells, a hundred feet deep or even more sometimes. A man would be sent down the shaft on a rope and the rope would be attached to his wife, family and livestock by way of a pulley. They would lower him by walking up the slope of the hill and pull him out by walking down. The lips of the wells were slippery and when unwary workers or young children tumbled, it went unnoticed as there were no splashes. Few Burmese were so poor to put up with such dangerous conditions.

Poor Indian peasants were sent as indentured labourers to the land of Burma and Malaya. Some came forward eagerly while others were sent forcibly by their fathers and brothers. The plantation workers in Malaya were forced to live in squalid conditions. The workers shacks were tiny hovels with roofs made of branches and leaves, the squalor in the mud-walled hut where they went to be treated when they fell ill was unimaginable and the floor was covered with filth. Driving along rural roads the Indian officers from the British army discovered that the plantation labourers most of them of Indian origin were the only people who lived in abject, grinding poverty in Malaya. Mathew rightly points out: "every rubber tree in Malaya was paid for with an Indian life" (*TGP* 233)

On one side Indian labourers were made to work in docks and mills, to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines. On the other some of the richest people in the city were Indians and most of them began with nothing

more than a bundle of clothes and tin box. "Indian money lenders have taken over all the farmland; Indians run most of the shops; people say that the rich Indians live like colonialists, lording it over the Burmese" (*TGP* 240).

Sea of Poppies focuses on the emigration of indentured workers from India which started in 1830's just before the first opium war and that was the peak of opium trade. The majority of the immigrants were from the opium-producing countryside, forced by famine to seek a new life elsewhere. In an interview to Biswas, Ghosh has mentioned that "the earliest immigrants were from a part of British India (northern Bihar) which became, under the rule of the East India Company, the single most important opium-growing region of the world" The novel portrays the social, economic and political conditions that led to the exodus of these poor Indian peasants as labourers to Mauritius. "In the good old days people used to say there were only two things to be exported from Calcutta: thugs and drugs- or opium and coolies as some would have it" (*SOP* 76).

Indian trade under the British Empire witnessed a constant process of exploitation which led to a gradual collapse of the Indian economy. The farmers were forced to grow poppy but were given a meagre amount for their labour which led to poverty and starvation. Earlier poppies were grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops such as wheat and the farmers liked to use poppy seeds as luxury items. But now the English agents allowed little else to be planted and went to every home forcing cash advances on the peasants and made them sign 'asami' contracts. At the end their earnings was just about enough to pay off the advance. The economic conditions of the peasants became worse with each advancing year that they indentured themselves as coolies and were transported to the plantations in the British colonies. Every farmer was served with a contract, which left them with no option but cultivate poppies in their lands. When the harvest was over, the farmers found that they were destined to plunge deeper into debt.

On the way to the Ghazipur opium factory, Deeti saw hundred or more people trudging in the direction of the river. Their dhotis and vests were stained with the dust of the road and their very sight evoked pity and fear in the local people. There were a few women and children among them. These grimityas were mostly from the Gangetic plains of Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Northern Bihar. Rai and Pinkey have pointed out how Ghosh draws out the irony, for "farmers in the Bhojpuri-speaking regions nourished by the Ganges River were among the least likely members of the rural Indian populace to embrace migration" (*SOP* 68). The British compulsion to cultivate poppies in their lands left them impoverished and they had no other choice but to move away to distant lands.

The words that Ghosh uses to express the fate of these people depict their mental agony. It was like being rooted out and torn away from their native soil: How it happened that when choosing the men and women who were to be torn from this subjugated plain, the hand of destiny had strayed so far inland, away from the busy coastlines, to alight on the people who were, of all, the most stubbornly rooted in the silt of the Ganga, in a soil that had to be sown with suffering to yield its story and song? It was as if fate had thrust its fist through the living flesh of the land in order to tear away a piece of its stricken heart (*SOP* 399). The migrants negotiating their fate between home and exile sang a heart-wrenching song of exile - "How will it pass/ This night of parting" (*SOP* 398).

Deeti cringed with fear when she learnt that they were to be transported to Mareech, a far away island like Lanka. Ghosh uses words like 'taken away', 'never to be seen again' and 'vanished' to show that it was a place of no return. The sad plight of these people is presented through the thought process that goes on in Deeti's mind. "She tried to imagine what it would be like to be in their place . . . to know that you would never again enter your father's house; that you would never throw your arm around your mother; that you would never eat a meal with your sisters and brothers; never feel the cleansing touch of Ganga. And to know that for the rest of your days you would eke out a living on some wild, demon- plagued island?" (*SOP* 72)

In the Ibis, we are introduced to two sisters, Rama and Champa, married to a pair of brothers whose lands were contracted to the opium factory. As they were not able to support their wives any longer they indentured themselves as a family. After the harvest, Deeti took the opium to the factory by herself, as her husband was in his death bed. She hoped to get a couple of silver rupees but was told that her husband had taken a large advance and the proceeds were barely enough to cover his debts. When she was worried how she would feed her family the clerk answered, "Do what others are doing. Go to the money lender. Sell your sons" (*SOP* 155). The clerk's harsh comment exposes the colonial exploitation and the grinding poverty that impelled the peasants to sell themselves and their children as indentured labourers in return for a few cowries. The demand for labourers in plantation colonies compounded by famine, unemployment and poverty led to the migration of indentured labourers to various colonies.

As a punishment Indian prisoners were shipped to the British Empire's network of island prisons - Penang, Bencoolen, Port Blair and Mauritius. Thousands of dacoits, rebels and hooligans were transported to these island jails where British incarcerated their enemies. Neel Rattan, the Raja of Rashkali was sentenced to seven years of punishment in the penal settlement on the Mauritius Islands and he was transported with the grimityas to Mauritius in *Ibis*. Neel was apprehensive at the thought of being extradited as a convict to an unknown island. He had a nightmare "in which he saw himself as a castaway on the dark void of the ocean, utterly alone, severed from every human mooring" (*SOP* 342). Through a small air duct in the chokey were Neel

was put up with Ah Fatt, Paulette could see one of the convicts weeping while the other one had his arm around his shoulder as if to console him.

The dislocation from the land of her birth brought sorrow and agony to Paulette though it was her adopted homeland. As the *Ibis* moved deep into the watery labyrinth of the Sunderbans, she watched the river's mangrove-cloaked shores. The sight of the familiar foliage slipping by brought tears to her eyes for these plants "were the companions of her earliest childhood . . . no matter where she went or how long, she knew that nothing would tie her to a place as did these childhood roots" (*SOP* 381). The trauma of separation from one's homeland and the sense of longing it brought are vividly captured by Ghosh in the displacement of the grimityas. Nob Kissin envisaged "the migrants standing at (the temple's) threshold, gathering together to say their last prayers on their native soil; it would be their parting memory of sacred Jambudwipa before they were cast upon the Black Water" (*SOP* 197).

Ashcroft et al. have pointed out that "Diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory and home which such displacement produces" (*Empire Writes Back* 218). *The Glass Palace* presents orphan girls brought to the palace from small villages along the northern frontiers of the Burmese kingdom. Some of them were from Christian families, some from Buddhist but once they came to Mandalay they lost their identities and were just the queen's servants. The Indians who lived in Burma too suffered from this identity crisis. Though they had lived all their life in Burma, they were not accepted by the Burmese populace. Burma's national movement formed after the Second World War, turned the Indians into outsiders – hated for their greed and exploitation of raw materials and people. Rajkumar was shocked when he realized that he must leave Burma in the 1940's. Neither his long stay in Burma nor his marriage to Dolly, a Burmese does not give him a Burmese identity. When he returned to Calcutta, he remained an outsider there too- reliving the days in Burma.

Jaya remembered the particular tone of voice in which Rajkumar would say several times each day, "Ah, Burma - now Burma was a golden land . . . ." (*TGP* 494). She also remembered the Burmese temple in North Calcutta where people of Indian origin – Gujaratis, Tamils, Sikhs, Bengalis- people who had left Burma just like Rajkumar in 1942, would gather and talk in Burmese about their golden land. They thirsted for news of Burma and longed to hear about people they had left behind. Memories about Burma could not be erased from Rajkumar's mind but India was home for him though it had nothing good to offer him. When Jaya told Dinu about his father's last days, his death and his ashes scattered in Ganges, Dinu remembered how Rajkumar had always said that for him Ganges could never be the same as Irrawaddy. The reminiscences of their native land, their simple life style and the things they had lost forever haunted the womenfolk in the *Ibis* too as they started their journey to an unknown world.

"Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt" (Rushdie 10). Memories of the land they had left behind linger in the minds of these people even after years of displacement. Living in the teak camp, Saya John and Rajkumar would sit in the huts' balconies talk for long hours in the night. Saya John would reminisce about his life in Malaya and Singapore and his dead wife. Dolly too could not forget her home though she was forced to live as a refugee in India. In January 1948 as soon as Burma got independence, she decided to return to Rangoon and live there for a while. When she found that Rajkumar was not interested to accompany her, she left her husband and granddaughter and booked a single, one-way passage to Rangoon.

It was not just the colonised, but the coloniser too suffered from a sense of displacement. Ghosh gives a picturesque description of the teak camps and the life of the English forest assistants. There was a *tai* at the centre of each campsite occupied by the forest assistant who was the company officer in charge of the teak camp. They were built on wooden platforms six feet above ground level on teakwood posts. It had several large rooms which ended in a veranda, sheltered by a canopy of flowering vines, which had the best possible view of the camp. The assistant would sit there with a glass of whisky in one hand, a pipe in another dreaming of his far away home. Saya John pitied these young Europeans who were made to work in the jungles at the prime of their youth so that the company can derive such profit from them as it can. But in two or three years, they became sick affected by Dengue or Malaria and were left alone, thousands of miles away from home, surrounded by people whom they have never known.Thus colonial displacement affected the physical, social and psychological aspects of human life.

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