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**Sense of Place and Sense of Dislocation in Amitav Ghosh's**  
***The Glass Palace***

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**Amitav Ghosh**

### **Seek and Gain Wealth Anywhere**

While traditional Hindu practices prescribed some purification rituals for those who crossed the seas, millions of Indians presently seek to travel abroad, settle down and earn their livelihood. There is an interesting proverb in Tamil which emphatically asks people that even by crossing seas you should seek and gain wealth. Then there is also another Tamil proverb which declares that the educated always get honor and privileges wherever (whichever country) they go and live in. One notices Indian settlements in several parts

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of the world, especially in Southeast and West Asia even before migrations began during the colonial period under the “patronage” of the colonial rulers.

Poverty and small time business interests encouraged large scale migrations to rubber plantations, sugar plantations, etc. during the colonial period. Communities of Indians formed during this period were less than rich and faced great hardship. Yet these communities always longed to be back in their homeland, and in remembrance of their homeland and its traditional practices established their own temples, rituals, and places of pilgrimages.

### **Yearning for the Homeland**

However, yearning to return to India primarily for pilgrimage to religious places of worship has been always noticed. Modern Indian communities that reached Europe, Persian Gulf, America and many other nations were and are generally an educated lot, with easily marketable skills. Exchange of spouses within their own castes and religions is made possible because of easy access to rapid transportation and adequate wealth they acquired/acquire. Even then gaps between younger and older generations kindle an yearning to return or visit their homeland.

Amitav Ghosh occupies an important place in the landscape of contemporary English-language authors from the Indian subcontinent. He was born and raised in India, but presently he is settled in America. He writes about his homeland, India, and the countries surrounding it. He is focused on writing about the Indian Diaspora.

### **Nature of Diaspora**

The word *Diaspora* is taken from the Greek, meaning ‘to disperse’. The word refers to “movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diaspora>). *Diaspora* is a combination of two words, one of the words meaning “dispersion” and another “to sow” Thus *Diaspora* means not simply migration but a migration, forced or voluntary, that leads to longtime settlement and consequent civilization. Origin of the concept begins with the forced dispersion of Jews around the world. Globalization in this century brings in voluntary building of communities, Diaspora, around the world.

Diasporas live in one country as community but look across time and space to another. The migrant diasporas and their descendents experience displacement, fragmentation, marginalization and discontinuity in the cultural ‘discourse’ of the subject countries.

Brah (1996) describes the status of diasporas in the culture very appropriately by saying “... all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common We.” This living ‘in-between’ condition is

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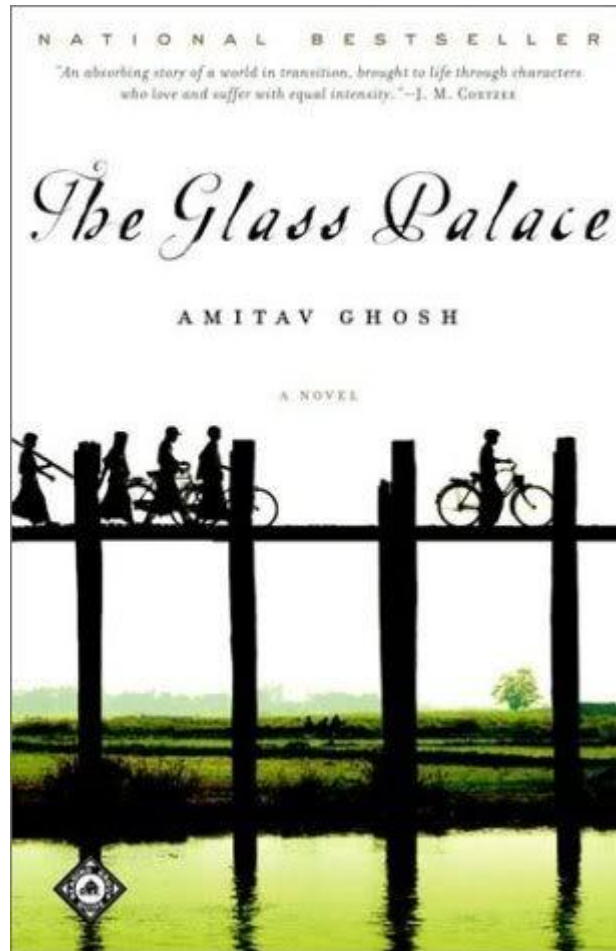
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very painful and marginalizing for the diasporas. There is a yearning for 'home', to go back to the lost origin, and imaginary homelands are created from the fragmentary and partial memories of their homelands. They also face cultural dilemma when their cultural practices are mocked at and there is a threat to their cultural identity. They stand bewildered and confused and show resistance also to ruling power in various forms. In the following generations these confusions, problems and yearnings become less intense as they get influenced by the culture of that country and also adapt themselves to it.

### **Amitav Ghosh's Mirror Reflecting Diaspora**



Amitav Ghosh addresses the sensitive yet crucial dilemmas in the lives of immigrants. The subject matter deals mainly with immigrants' ability to adapt to the differences of living in Burma. Miscarriages and the disconnection between first and second generation immigrants are also presented in his works.

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Amitav Ghosh's stories and novels chronicles the traumas and sufferings of the people settled abroad who fail to find their identity in a world where they cannot have a sense of belonging. He portrays faithfully the trauma of cultural dislocation, disorientation and displacement suffered by the millions of exiled people and they desperately try to balance themselves between home and abroad.

Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* was nominated for the award of Commonwealth Literature Prize for the year 2001, but he withdrew from the competition on the ground that his novel is not a 'nostalgic return' to the past but rather "a critical revisiting of the past, a reinterpretation of the past" (Vinoda 8). The revisiting of the past, Ghosh writes in the letter, lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace* and "I feel I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialization of Empire that passes under the rubric of 'the Commonwealth'".

The existential angst of modernist fiction is replaced in the post-colonial novel by a phenomenon one might call 'exit-ential anxiety'. Diaspora takes the place of doubt, and homelessness and it typifies a historical condition as well a state of mind. His novels convey both a 'sense of place' and a 'sense of dislocation' that make such fictional representations possible.

Ghosh's fiction takes upon itself the responsibility of re-assessing the 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. Ghosh's imagination is as necessarily *diasporic* as it is postcolonial, being a product of specific histories of the subcontinent in the twentieth century. As a corollary, he provides through his imaginative rendering of this reassessment in fiction, a vital and energizing footnote to the documentation of South Asian History. In particular, he is concerned with the Indian/South Asian Diaspora in different regions of the world, and he focuses his novelistic skills in areas that overlap with his research interests.

Ghosh's novels critique both globalization and postcolonial nationalism, by depicting the experiences of those in transition, those in-between nation-states, those going back and forth as travelers and migrants in search of lost homes and better lives.

### **Cultural Dichotomy**

Immigrant condition is now a part of modern life which changes, damages, destroys and in a few cases also rebuilds lives as people adapting to new cultural environments. In Ghosh's work, migrants often experience the sense of place in their host countries and respond by constructing a positive identification with a cultural heritage.

The immigrant experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station fraught with the memories of the original home

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which struggle with and at times militate against the realities of the new world. It is more so in the case of Indian writers in English because most of them share the same cultural dichotomy.

### **Sense of Dislocation**

Dislocation, is the condition of post modernity to which we have all responded with excitement as well as fear, both reactions are perfectly justifiable in the contemporary contexts of our lives. Ghosh's extraordinary fiction and non-fictional essays hang somewhere between the warm security of "located-ness" and the terrifying - if exhilarating - promise of imminent dislocation, sometimes with a foot in each but most often balanced precariously at the moment of disjunction. This moment is predicated upon not just the significance of the loss of "located-ness" but also upon one's consciousness of the process of losing that precious 'lived sense of place', a 'distancing' that Ghosh identifies as the catalyst for the possible birth of the novel. And it is in the apprehension of both these experiences simultaneously – that of the loss of location and that of a consciousness of being caught in these processes of losing one's "located-ness" – lies Ghosh's significance as one of the most important writers of our times.

### **Rootlessness**

Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* is one form of literature most strongly founded upon a myth of parochialism in the sense of a definite located-ness. It embarks upon a journey of discovery of roots and reasons. The more one discovers his or her roots the more one gets away from it. He is forced to conclude that knowing the causes and effects of that history which he had not fully apprehended was not an end in itself. He weaves and winds his way through a succession of once-imaginary homelands – into that third space where boundaries are blurred and cultures collide, creating at once a disabling confusion and an enabling complexity. No story – or history, for that matter – can be acceptable as the ultimate truth, since truths vary according to perspectives and locations. The historical researchers usually play a minor but significant role in Ghosh's novels of Diaspora and displacement.

*The Glass Palace* is a narrative that gravitates around the experiences of a variety of multigenerational, Diasporic Indian/Burmese characters during a historical period filled with battles won and lost over Burma's territories; it is a novel that reflects obliquely upon the great tectonic shifts that took place in changes of rule and national policy that affect the everyday of its character's lives. As such, the characters, plot and events in *The Glass Palace* can open its reader's eyes to acts of forced displacement and even genocides of people that took place historically; it acts as a creative response and a reflection of experience in this world by a process of empathy with the characters and their circumstances and changing fortunes.

Displacement, in Amitav Ghosh, has led to alienation and a search for self. He moves from nostalgia to follow on changing identities and establishing new relationships. His novel *The Glass Palace* deals literally with the sense of place and sense of dislocation of not only the commoners like Rajkumar, Dolly, Saya Jhon, Uma but also the royal captives like King, Queen and their daughters. His protagonists face a multi-cultural society and exhibit a deep awareness of the social reality surrounding them.

The multi-cultural ethos with which they are confronted leads to the struggle for a new life but not a complete break with the past. Ghosh focuses upon sensitive protagonists who lack a stable sense of place and cultural identity and are victimized by other forms of social oppression. Sir Walter Scott writes in his 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel':

Breathes these the man with soul so dead,  
Who never to himself hath said,  
This is my own, my native land!  
Whose heart hath ne'er within him burn'd,  
As home' his footsteps he heath turn'd,  
From Wandering on a foreign strand! [Canto VI (2008)]

*The Glass Palace* is an attempt to locate in the history of time and nations such as a people, a beleaguered group of races inhabiting British occupied territories in South East Asia. Amitav Ghosh weaves into the life of his central protagonist Rajkumar, the bewildering and often poignant accounts of a family scattered through post imperialist dislocation in various parts of the Asian continent, as he charts the complex sociological and political repercussions of such disbanding through the experiences of loss, exile and search for a home land.

### **Culture Shock**

*The Glass Palace* unfolds over a hundred years of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Burmese history as families are formed and individual characters experience loss and joy. Social organizations such as feudalism are destroyed and new ones are formed in the guise of the colonial and postcolonial nation-state. Obviously, *The Glass Palace* is not generally of postcolonial literature. It is a national allegory projecting a subaltern epistemology that is an allegory of the embattled situation in many emerging and developing societies and their culture. The peculiar experiences of the people caught in the moment of the breaking of nations is their relatively easy sliding into alien cultures even as their fissured identities trigger off simultaneously the spirit of alienation, national longing and trans-nationalism.

Ghosh shows that all migrants care for their own roots in the course of time and it is not necessary that they want to settle in the countries of their origin. Rajkumar, who passes through many emotional setbacks because of his bicultural identity, is shown to be

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feeling dejected, distressed, displaced and lonely in the end not knowing what to do after the thwarting of his dreams and his wife's desertion of impending departure to India.

The novel also depicts how lives in exile forcibly change people including the powerful Burmese royal family. For example, the king, Thebaw, can do nothing in his isolation and only spends his time watching fishing boats, thus being referred to as 'the town guardian spirit [of the boats], a king again (p. 80)'. The fates of the queen and three young princesses were no better.

It is the stuff of fiction that shows the brutalities of colonialism-and more-and not a text that can resist, intervene, transform anything, much less the everyday reality of millions of people living within a national space shaped by history and governed by laws. It also includes a recorded history.

The novel as a postcolonial rendering of the enmeshed histories of Burma, Malaysia and India under the British Dominion, provokes the question about the nature of deployment of its historical sources to attain the desirable aesthetic response. The post-modernistic version of history is always subject of subversion, reformulation and interrogation. However neutral the presentation of facts are, the element of personalization cannot be ruled out in the process of selection of materials and in drawing forth different subjective responses through constant interrogation. So, history is never objective and "historiographic meta-fiction" always goes through a process of ontological reformulation where history and fiction collide to make a sense of the world of representation. Ghosh's rendering of British colonialism and its aftermath in the three countries is interplay of fact and fiction in an illusory place of imagination to create an awareness of the experiential reality of the post-colonial worlds.

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. Rather, he projects dislocation as a permanent human condition. Man is dislocated in this world. He may have a home in the native nation. Yet, he is to leave all the homes, as death takes him to the other world/home.

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