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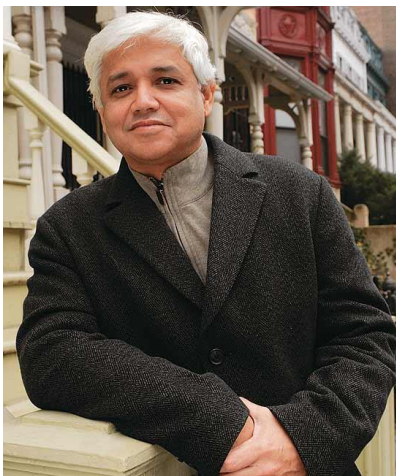
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## Fragmented Identities: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Amitav Ghosh

Courtesy: <http://photogallery.outlookindia.com/images/gallery/20110707/amitavghosh>

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## The Question of Identity

The question of identity which has always been crucial to human existence does increasingly command serious attention in today's fast changing, alienated and volatile world. In this era of globalization where a large number of migrations take place and where there is no pure race and nationality hybrid, fragmented identities come into being. Amitav Ghosh is a postcolonial diasporic writer who reveals the dialectics of imperialism in its journey from the periphery to the centre and whose writings echo a deep core of colonialism based on power politics. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, V.S. Naipaul and Rohinton Mistry are writing in the same space, using novel as a means of cultural representation. These writers of 1980, "aimed at enhancing an Indian cultural identity and projecting Indian cultural and historical heritage to enable an assertion of the Indian self," (Jain 32).

### Amitav Ghosh - Postcolonial Writings

Among all of the writers mentioned above, Amitav Ghosh plays a significant role in the postcolonial writings. For him identity is not given, but constructed and contingent. Ghosh's life manifests in subjectivity, geography and language toward multicultural and fluid identity. In almost all of Ghosh's work, the persistent theme of identity finds a direct reflection. In his novels characters like Ila in *The Shadow Lines*, Reid and Afat Ali in *Sea of Poppies*, Piyali in *The Hungry Tide*, and Arjun in *The Glass Palace* are the products of either racial or cultural mix and show how they struggle to relocate their identity in the multicultural society they live in. They eventually discover that their identity can't be fixed because they are the fruit of the intermingling of multiple cultures. Their identity is unfixed and ever changing.

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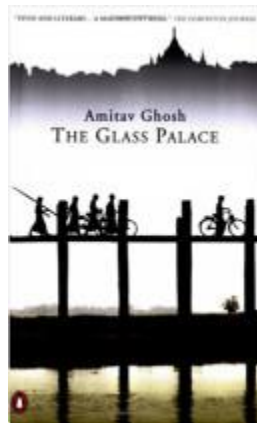
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## The Concept of Identity

Today the question of identity has acquired increasing visibility and salience in recent years in social cultural theory as well as in a number of different fields of research in the social scientific, cultural studies and humanities. The concept of identity deployed in Ghosh's works is not essentialist identity, but a strategic and positional one. It does not signal the stable care of the self unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change. Rather it accepts Hall's idea about identity:

Identities are never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular, but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and position. They are subject to a radical historicization and are constantly in process of change and transformation. (Hall 4)

## Amitav Ghosh's Novels from Various Angles



Amitav Ghosh's novels have been analyzed from different perspectives; as gender studies are made by Meenakshi Malhotra and Anjali Multani, postcolonial studies by Rakhi

Moral and Promila Gurg, anthropological reading by Roma Chatterji, nationalism by Kavita Dahia, Vinita Chandra, Neelam Srivastwa and Alka Kumari, violence by Alpana Neogy and Rudrashish Chakroborty, and the others have thrown light on technical aspects, power relations, diaspora and politics in Amitav's novels. But the identity crisis among Ghosh's protagonists, as members of a particular community, and who underwent suppression or subjugation by the colonial British Empire, has not been sufficiently analyzed and explored.

### **Focus on Conflicting Forces at Work**

The present study is an attempt to bring forth various conflicting forces at work and their inter-relatedness in forming an individual identity. It tries to explore the presentation of identity conflict among the characters of *The Glass Palace*. Of these characters, the one Arjun Roy is the most important character for this study, as the character bears a direct relation to the colonial institution of the army trying to adjust with a system so alien to the native traditions.

### **Fragmented Identities**

In Indian army during the days of colonial rule, the Britishers forced their culture on the Indian soldiers and displaced the native culture. A large number of Indians were drawn towards the white ways of life. They have to follow it, firstly because of its materialistic incentives and secondly to evade the humiliation and pain in a racist society. This dilemma gives rise to fragmented identities. Hardy (an Indian officer) is not able to easily adhere to the eating habits of Britishers like his fellows. It became a matter of fun and anger for others, but a very serious offence for Hardy. He can't eat whatever he likes because it is considered a very contemptuous offence by an officer of the English Army. He has to conceal his appetite for his cultural food so that he may not be treated as a savage, native and below his rank:

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The officer's mess on the other hand served English food and the trouble with Hardy was that he was not one of those chaps who, no matter how hard they tried, simply could not get without his daily Dal Roti. He dutifully ate whatever was served in the mess but at least once a day, he'd find a pretext to leave the cantonment so that he could eat his fill somewhere in town. This was a commonplace enough occurrence among Indian officers. (Ghosh 281)

### **Dual Identity**

These kinds of incidents show the dual identities of Indian soldiers in British army. On the one hand they are showing themselves as advanced and loyal towards their job, but on the other hand their respect and longing for their culture does not allow them to move in that direction. In this to be or not to be situation, their true identities are divided which results in their fragmented existence.

There are other groups of officers also who initially are very comfortable with this army life, but gradually their dream of freedom is shattered when they come to face the racial differences in spite of their loyalty towards their job. Arjun is one of those kinds.

### **Arjun's Preferences**

Arjun is the brother of Manju, Rajkumar and Dolly's daughter-in-law, and is also the nephew of Uma Dey. Arjun also represents a colonized subject whose world is destroyed in the aftermath of defeat. He is among the first batch of commissioned officers of Indian descent in the British colonial army. Natives were admitted as officers in the army only in 1934. Arjun starts out as a loyal British subject, totally in thrall of the idea of modernity espoused by the colonial

regime. However, his experiences with the barriers of race in Malaya and Singapore during the World War II years gradually disenchant him. He deserts the army and joins the rebel Indian National Army (INA) led by the famous Indian nationalist politician, Subhash Chandra Bose. The encounter with the insuperable barrier of race, as Arjun experiences in the battlefield in the East, breaks down any comforting illusions that the colonizer and the colonized can converse as equals.

Having been selected in the army and trained to live his life like the whites, he does not identify with his own culture and people whom he regards as slaves and poor. Fascinated by the white culture, he dresses up like the whites and behaves like them. In the beginning when Arjun first came into the army he was so happy that he just, "can't believe his luck," ( Ghosh 260). He says , "what makes me prouder still is the thought that Hardy and I are going to be that first Indian officers in the 1/1 Jats ; it seems like such a huge responsibility - as though we are representing the whole of the country," ( Ghosh 262) when Dinu meets him in Howrah station for the first time after Arjun's joining the army. He found him to be a completely changed character:

He was a significantly changed person from the boy he had known. Arjun had lost his somnolence, and his patterns of speech were no longer as garbled and indistinct as they had once been. This itself was an interesting paradox, as Arjun's vocabulary seemed now to consist mainly of jargon intermixed with assorted bits of English and Punjabi slang- everyone was now either a 'chap' or a 'yaar'.(Ghosh 276)

### **Job as Mission and Goal in Life**

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Arjun Das is so attached to his job that he considers it a mission or a goal of life. They are to prove, to themselves as well as to their superiors that they are eligible to be rulers, to qualify as members of the elite. They have vision enough to rise above the ties of their soil, “Look at us’ Arjun would say, after a whisky or two, we’re that first Modern Indians the first Indians to be truly free. We eat what we like, we drink what we like, and we are the first Indians who are not weighed down by the past,” (Ghosh 279). Arjun is so much accustomed to the English ways of life that even Kishan Singh his batman tells Bela, “Sometimes of all Indians in our battalion, he is the one who’s the most English. We call him the Angrej,” (Ghosh 297).

### **Ambiguous Concept of *Nation***

The ambiguous concept of Nation also results in identity crises among the characters in the novel, “The question of national identity, whether cultural or political, takes into account the collective natural allegiance of the people to their nation,”(Moral 141). Homi Bhabha in his sensitive reading of postcolonial culture posits that the modern nation, “fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor” (Bhabha 139). Arjun’s entry into the Military Academy at Dehradun prompted by the notion of passionate service to his nation receives a rude jolt in his colleague Hardy’s ironic reduction of it. With the passage of time Arjun comes to realize his mistakes and starts understanding the actual position of his and his fellows. He reminds Hardy of the inscription on Military Academy Dehradun:

The safety, honour and welfare of your country came first always and every time.  
The honour, welfare and comfort of the men you command come next... And  
your own care comfort and safety came last always and every time... well didn't  
you ever think. This country whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first...

What is it where is this country, the fact is that you and I don't have a country so where is the place whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time. And why was it that when we took our oath it wasn't to a country but to the king emperor - to defend the empire. ( Ghosh 330)

### **Whites Only**

This theme is also anticipated in figures like Amreek and Pritam Singh, and also through the various tales of sedition and rebellion that Arjun and Hardy hear both in India and when they join their units in Malaya to fight against the Japanese invasion. But the encounters of these officers with the insuperable barrier of race during the wartime years in the frontier regions make them question the bases of their loyalty, and also make them aware of the way in which much of the subjugated population in the areas they had been sent to view them as “mercenaries” or “slaves.” There are many representations of interpersonal experiences of racism in *The Glass Palace*, such as Hardy being called a “stinking nigger” by Colonel Pearson, and Arjun and Hardy’s humiliating experiences at the “whites only” swimming pool in Singapore. Arjun come to face the actual situation and racial difference when he is posted in Singapore that Indian soldiers are not allowed to use umbrellas ever in rain, for it being sign of sovereignty; and they are treated as inferiors by the Europeans. The picture becomes clearer when Kumar stops him to enjoy bathing in pool when the British are in it. He says:

I should have warned you about this ", Kumar said with a mischievous smile. It's like this everywhere in Malaya. In smaller towns, the clubs actually put up signs on their door saying, 'No Asiatic allowed'. In Singapore they let us use the pool - it's just that everyone leaves. Right now they've had to relax the color bar a little,



because there are so many Indian army units here, but you may as well get used to it because you'll come across it all the time in restaurants, clubs, beaches, trains - he laughed' - we're meant to die for this colony - but we can't use the pools, dolefully shaking his head, he lit a cigarette. (Ghosh 345)

### **Shattering the World of Illusions**

These racial encounters shatter the world of illusions that the Indian officers had created in their minds. To be sure, while Arjun's encounters with racism, his war experiences and his conversations with Hardy, Alison (Saya John's granddaughter and Matthew's daughter), Uma, Dinu, and others gradually make him realize his predicament as a "tool" of colonial interests. He thought back to the past: Lankasuka, Manju, Bela, the hours he had spent sitting on the windowsill, the ecstatic sense of liberation that had come over him on learning that he had been accepted into the Military Academy. He had never experienced the slightest doubt about his personal sovereignty. He never imagined himself to be dealing with anything other than the full range of human choice. But, "if it were true...Then it would follow that he had never acted of his own volition; never had a moment of true self-consciousness. Everything he had ever assumed about himself was a lie, an illusion. And if this were so, how was he to find himself now,"( Ghosh 431)

### **Calling Indian Soldiers as Mercenaries**

Arjun is more shocked when in his way he comes across some Civilians who consider that they the Jats - weren't real soldiers, they were just hired killer's, mercenaries. He is speechless when he listens to his colleague Hardy's assertion of Civilians' ideas about them.

According to him Civilians are right in calling them mercenaries:

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It's because a mercenary's hands obey someone else's head; these two parts of his body have no connection with each other. Because Yaar in other words, a mercenary is a Budhu, a Fool... In fact, why just stop with soldiers. In one way or another we're all a little like that woman you went to in Delhi dancing to someone else's tune, taking money. There's not that much difference. (Ghosh 348)

### **A Manufactured Toy**

Arjun came away from this conversation more disturbed than before. Like other officers he had never imagined himself a part of his country's poverty and his own existence. And he is shattered from within when Alison tells him about her view regarding Arjun's position in the world, "Arjun you are not in charge of what you do; you're a toy, a manufactured thing, a weapon in someone else hands. Your mind doesn't inhabit your body," (376). Hardy's conversation with Arjun pictures the real situation of Indian soldiers in the British army according to which victory and defeat are not related to them, it is related to the empire; they are just the tools - really neither British nor Indians but the fragmented selves to make use of:

You are always talking about soldiering as being just a job, but you know yaar, it isn't just a job - it's when you're sitting in trench that you realize that there's something very primitive about what we do. In the everyday world when would you ever stand up and say - I'm joining to risk my life for this". As a human being it's something you can only do if you know why you're doing it. But when I was sitting in that trench, it was as if my heart and my hand had no connection - each seemed to belong to a different person. It was as if I wasn't really a human being, just a tool, an instrument. This is what I ask myself Arjun; in what way do I

became human again? How do I connect what I do with what I want, in my heart?  
(Ghosh 407)

### **A Scathing Critique of British Colonialism**

In her review of *The Glass Palace*, literary critic Meenakshi Mukherjee, says: “For all its vividness of description and range of human experiences, *The Glass Palace* will remain for me memorable mainly as the most scathing critique of British colonialism I have ever come across in fiction,”(Mukharjee n. p ). The cultural invasion becomes a stark reality for the colonized and affects him more than it does the colonizer, because it is the colonized whose history, culture and the political, social and economic matrix has been ransacked by the ‘superior’ colonizer culture. As Frantz Fanon puts it, “Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s head of all forms and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it,” (Fanon 169). *The Glass Palace* is the true representation of Britisher’s sharp minded policies against the colonized. Indian soldiers like Arjun are just pawn in their political game, part-objects who misrecognize their situations.

Arjun’s lack of consciousness about his real position in the army obviously converts him into a “tool” of the Empire. Being a “tool” of the Empire is a recurrent refrain in *The Glass Palace*. This idea finds a direct expression in the novel when Uma tells Dolly after her return to Rangoon from New York, “the Empire does everything possible to keep these soldiers in hand: only certain castes of men are recruited; they’re completely shut off from politics and the wider society; they’re given land, and their children are given jobs,”(193). While many soldiers remained loyal, many revolted after they saw the brutal aspects of colonial occupation abroad.

This is the essence of what Giani Amreek Singh - a Sikh ex-army man and anti-colonial activist who comes to receive Uma at the Rangoon docs, says:

We never thought that we were being used to conquer people. Not at all: we thought the opposite. We were told we were freeing those people. That is what they said - that we were going to set those people free from their bad kings or their evil customs or some such thing. We believed in it because they believed it too. It took us a long time to understand that in their eyes freedom exists wherever they rule ( Ghosh 193).

### **Hybridization in Fragmented Identities**

Hybridization also plays an important role in the fragmented identities of Ghosh's characters. Hybridity is an important concept in post-colonial theory referring to the mingling of the cultural sign and the practices of the colonizer and the colonized. In the context of emergent multicultural world order 'pure' nationalist identities in any case do not make sense, "Hybridity occurs in the post-colonial societies as a result of suppressions in cultural, political, economic and social arenas, as well as because of the dispossession of indigenous people and their forced assimilation, through racism, into new social order. There are two reasons specifically responsible for the fragmented identities," (Sharma 155). The Collector at one point of the novel is intrigued when he comes to know of the pregnancy of Queen Supayalat's first daughter due to her affair with a Marathi coachman. Tiwari rightly says, "this saga of human weaknesses gives birth to the concept of hybridity. No race is pure; nor is any casts pure. There is no pure royal blood or anything like that. Life is mixing-DNA combinations and permutations," (Tiwari 103-

104). One more character Saya John is a fine example of this breed of hybridity. Saya himself makes fun of his amalgamated identity Saya John tells Rajkumar the history of his life:

I am like you (Rajkumar) an orphan. I was brought up by Catholic priests, in a town called Malacca. These men were from everywhere- Portugal Macao, Goa. They gave me my name John Martine... uses to call me Jaao, but I changed this later to John... (When) I went to Singapore to work in military hospital the soldiers asked me.... How is it that you who look 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 washer man's dog- na ghar ka na ghat ka- you don't belong anywhere, either by the water or and land, and I'd say yes, that is exactly what (*we are*). (Ghosh 10).

### **Empathy for the Emotional Despair**

Ghosh is able to appreciate the emotional despair of people caught between two worlds, belonging to neither. The fates of nearly all the protagonists are caught in a similar quest for their points of origin. Rajkumar Lives the life of a “near destitute refugee” in Uma’s Calcutta home and for all his wanderings dies with the conviction that the “Ganges could never be the same as the Irrawaddy,” ( Ghosh 544). Dolly’s final mission in Burma, brings her life full circle from her beginnings as a slave girl behind the Palace walls of Mandalay to her voluntary submission to the cloistered life in the nunnery at Sagaing, where she quietly passes away.

It is a novel about many places, wars and displacements, exiles, subjugations, identity conflicts and rootlessness. It also depicts human helplessness in such a scenario. All that a human being can do is try to adjust, compromise, live and above everything else, form new

relationships. This forming of new bonds, mixing of races and castes is something that does not stop. After all, this is human life. To sum up Nair has rightly said, “Ghosh is a worthy writer, not a scintillating one; and his *The Glass Palace* is important not because it opens new stylistic or thematic doors, but because it reopens old ones so effectively” ( Nair 174).

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