



## POETIC JUSTICE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *GLASS PALACE*

C. Lovidason

(Ph.D. Research Scholar, 33, St Thomas Nagar, Thoothoor, Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu.)

### ABSTRACT



Poetic Justice, according to M.H. Abrams' Glossary of Literary Terms, is a term used "to signify the need to distribute earthly rewards and punishments at the close of a literary work in proportion to the virtue or vice of the various characters." Again M.H. Abram's Glossary of Literary Terms reads, "Poetry (which can be taken as referring to any work of art presently) is an imitation of human life -- 'a mirror held up to nature'... Not art for art's sake, but art for man's sake was the ideal of neoclassic humanism." In the light of these well-established literary principles, my article entitled "Poetic Justice in Amitav Ghosh's *Glass Palace*" discusses some of the aspects dealt with in Amitav Ghosh's *Glass Palace*.

**Keywords:** *Imitation, Justice, Vice, Virtue, Principle.*



Our journey through life can be representative of a process involving a goal. To put it differently, while journeying through life, the goal is to discover one's true identity. And it is rightly said that in works of literature the metaphor of journey manifests both as a process that the protagonists experience and as an objective that they strive to reach. The Glass Palace, being a historical novel basically, is an account of the saga of three generations of the Rajkumar family that along with countless number of known and unknown people gets swept away on a tidal wave of displacement caused by the exploitative nature of colonialism and World War II. "Each reader of The Glass Palace will pick out a different strand from this weave of many stories." (Mukherjee)

Quite reasonably it seems one is piqued and visibly agitated that with scant regard for Poetic Justice, which refers to an outcome in which vice is punished and virtue rewarded usually in a manner peculiarly or ironically appropriate, Amitav Ghosh sounds to have handled Uma's characterization, especially after her taking leave of her husband, and the portrayal of the Collector's tragic end in unusual ways. One feels there is something strange about it. Not in a serious but in a light-hearted vein the District Collector's tragic end has been reported. The Collector may not be a tragic hero. A tragic hero's rise and fall usually get connected with the fate of his subjects. However, the Collector has got a few of the qualities of a tragic hero's. With a clear-cut philosophical vision of life, optimism, dedication, determination, faithfulness, patience, tolerance and progressive outlook the Collector has lived his life in his own principled way. Having got over the shock of his matrimonial disaster which he has been ill-prepared for, he comes to terms with the fact and continues to live till he is driven to the extreme end of ending his life. Accordingly, his tragic end must be dealt with in all seriousness that it deserves to be dealt with.

Similarly, against the well-established principle of Poetic Justice, Uma seems to be rising to prominence after making her well-mannered husband live a dog's life and thereafter driving him to the extreme end of ending his precious life. Seeing her husband's distress, she has never taken pity on

him. And she has no regrets about leaving her husband at all. What is more, as a penance for her sins she does not do anything. The term repentance itself seems to be alien to her. No one has seen her coming home in floods of tears on hearing her husband's untimely demise. Appreciably, Rajkumar who has had no formal education makes a scathing comment on Uma. It is thought-provoking and shows Uma where her place is.

" 'You have so many opinions, Uma -- about things of which you know nothing.... Your husband was as fine a man as any I've ever met, and you hounded him to his death with your self-righteousness -- ' " (Ghosh 248)

What agitates one is Uma's characterization hardly holds a mirror to reality. A great work of art should hold a mirror to nature, that is to say, if one thing mirrors another, it is very similar to it and may seem to represent it. And there is a great deal of distinction between fantasy and reality. To a great extent the characterization of Uma seems to have lost touch with reality. Without good reason her dealings with her man are dry and icy, that is to say, she appears to be emotionless and unfriendly. Dreams, imagination, emotions, sentiments, longing, expectation and so on distinguish man from animal. She can hardly show any visible sign of emotion. One is at a loss to understand her philosophy of life. She has not lived a meaningful life. She never submits herself to introspection. As you lead a lonely life in the prime of your life when your bureaucrat-husband who has been very kind to you has been tragically cut off in his prime, you are bound to turn nostalgic, and your sense of loneliness perhaps will lead you to depression. Surprisingly, as far as Uma, the Collector's widow, is concerned, nothing of the sort can be talked about. Thereafter, one is left with no option but to say there is a fundamental flaw in the characterization of Uma. "A writer's task is to memorialize psychological space, to correlate invisible inner events with outer experience." (Nair)

In Ghosh's novels "journey is a symbol of hope and discovery at the same time as it is a symbol of displacement and endless drift." (Kumar and Prasad 16) The novel begins with gunshots in a chaotic atmosphere which is rather tense. As one goes a little further up, one gets wondered what the



future holds in store. There have been enough hints that there may be life's uncertainties, rootlessness, displacement, hardships of war and the like. As the story unfolds further, one learns more about man's helplessness in such a nightmare scenario. If caught in such a nightmare scenario, man is left with no option but to come to terms with the recurring nightmare, learn to adjust, cope with it, carry on with his life regardless of what trap he has been made to walk into, and build up relationship.

The relationship that the first Princess of Burma builds up with a Marathi coachman is a perfect example of such a scenario. A Burmese Princess bears a Marathi coachman a child. She is heavily pregnant now, and a child is going to be born to her out of wedlock. The gravity of the situation cannot go unnoticed by anyone. For a moment, the Collector is completely taken aback, and gets crushed by such tragic development. He is at a loss for words. He has not been kept informed of such developments.

"With a few mumbled words of regret the Collector excused himself from the Queen's presence. On his way out, he spotted Swant coming out of the gatehouse. He could hear a woman's voice, calling out from within. .... Was this where they cohabited then, the coachman and the First Princess, in that tiny hutch of a room?.... Was this love then: this coupling in the darkness, a princess of Burma and a Marathi coachman; this heedless mingling of sweat?" (Ghosh 152)

Eventually, what has turned out is Amitav Ghosh has thrown new light on the fact that no one can boast a lineage of pure blue blood. And no race can be inclined to boast of its pure blood. No man, caste, community, or race can be superior or inferior to another. To say or believe that to be born or to have been born in a particular family, caste, community or race itself decides the social or intellectual superiority of one over another is quite absurd. The coinages 'noble birth', 'high social status', 'low social status', and the like themselves are arbitrary and objectionable. These terms seem to have been invented or coined with the sole purpose of exploiting the weaker ones and the have-nots, and of making them still poorer. There is more to it than meets the eye.

To always keep relations at boiling point among members of society, different castes, communities, races, ethnic groups, religious groups, regions, countries, states and so on is to exploit politically, economically and socially by vested interests who continue to covertly or overtly operate locally, regionally, nationally, or internationally for their own political, economic and social gains. Nations are often personified as Marianne, Britannia, Uncle Sam, Bharat Mata, and such like. Personified as a woman, Marianne symbolizes the French Republic while Britannia is a symbolic representation of Great Britain and the British Empire. Likewise, Uncle Sam is a personification of the Government or people of the United States of America while India is personified as Bharat Mata. Bharathiyar, the great Tamil poet, is said to have coined the term 'Bharat Mata.' Bharathiyar might have been very well-meaning while coining the term, but regrettably had he foreseen that it would be used after him in a partisan and narrow-minded manner to instil narrow-minded nationalism into certain sections of the Indian public with the sole purpose of dividing peoples of the very same nation with an eye to vote bank, certainly he should never ever have coined it. The very personification of nations leads to pessimism, radicalism, extremism, sectarianism, stagnation, conflict of interests and militarism instead of optimism, liberalism, cooperation, open-mindedness, mutual respect, progress, the idea of oneness and peaceful coexistence.

The very concepts 'Patriotism', 'Nationalism', 'National boundaries' and 'International boundaries' themselves are irrational, idiotic and absurd. It is highly dangerous for mankind himself to speak of these concepts. They seem to be greatly threatening the very survival of the Planet we live on. Already man's spiritual wasteland, materialism, greed and selfishness have made the world a very poor place to live in for all living beings. These concepts are extensively used by the powers that be worldwide day in day out with the sole purpose of getting enforced the meek submission of the people so that the powers that be can continue to control and rule them perpetually, thereby being at the helm always and satisfying their ego. Of the desires that rule the human psyche, the desire for



power ruthlessly rules the power-hungry rulers who rule the world. People at large fall prey to these vested interests. The idea of 'pure blood' is only a myth or fantasy. Cross breeding came into existence with the inception of the world itself. Ghosh seems to be ruthlessly demolishing the myth that one race, one caste, one man or one nation is superior to another. Ghosh seems to be believing in a casteless, classless, and boundary lines less global humanity though it may sound utopian. "As in other Amitav Ghosh novels, human lives spill over national boundaries, refusing to stay contained in neat compartments. A person is remembered not as Burmese, Indian, Chinese, Malay or American -- but merely as Uma, Dolly, Saya John, Alison, Dinu, Neel or Daw Thin Thin Aye. That Dinu is also called Tun Pe and Neel's other name is Sein Win further destabilizes nation-based identities. Yet, paradoxically, nationalism is a major concern in this novel." (Mukherjee)

Amitav Ghosh's creation of the character, Saya John, is a perfect example of such crossbred human being made part of the global humanity. Saya John has been brought up in Malacca. He looks Chinese and carries a Christian name. He is dressed in modern European style. He speaks many a tongue -- English, Burmese, Hindustani and so on. One wonders what race, tribe, class, nation, or continent he belongs to. Seeing is believing, as the old saying goes. But in the case of the character, Saya John, seeing is not believing, for you will get deceived. You cannot seem very sure of yourself. You cannot tell for sure what nation or race he belongs to.

"A few days later Saya John was back...he greeted Rajkumar in his broken Hindustani: ... 'Saya,' he (Rajkumar) asked at last, in Burmese, 'how did you learn to speak an Indian language?' Saya John looked up at him and smiled. 'I learnt as a child,' he said, 'for I am, like you, an orphan, a foundling. I was brought up by Catholic priests, in a town called Malacca. These men were from everywhere -- Portugal, Macao, Goa.... When I was old enough to work, I went to Singapore....The soldiers there.... mainly Indians.... asked me this very question: 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 washerman's dog--..."(Ghosh 10)

The Glass Palace, while presenting a moving portrayal of the protagonist searching for personal fulfillment and happiness, introduces its main character, Rajkumar, in the opening Chapter with a captivating appeal. Laced with a sarcastic appeal, it is said 'his name means prince, but he is anything but princely in appearance, with his oil-splashed vest, his untidly knotted longyi and his bare feet with thick slippers of callused skin'. And while swiftly chiding him for his strange thoughts, Ma Cho refers to him as 'coal-black kalaa.'

The word 'kalaa' is derived from Sanskrit in which 'kalaa' is said to have got a twofold meaning. First, roughly translated, 'kalaa' means something 'as black as coal,' thus implying the colour of something or someone. And when Ma Cho refers to Rajkumar as 'you coal-black kalaa,' it is quite clear what she really means. Second, denotatively the word 'kalaa' refers to 'time,' 'destiny or fate,' or 'death.' It is said that 'Death' is associated with 'kalaa' -- a manifestation of 'Yama,' the Lord of the underworld and destruction -- who, in Hindu mythology, is said to have been the first to die anywhere in the world, and therefore it is he who has been foreordained to usher those who are to die after him into the underworld. Yet again, in Hinduism Lord Shiva -- the Lord of destruction -- is otherwise referred to as 'Mahakalaa.' And in Tibetan Buddhism it is believed that 'kalaa' is a personification of 'death' which is otherwise referred to as 'Mahakalaa,' meaning 'great death.'

Similarly, in the opening Chapter of the novel the Royal Proclamation issued under the King's signature refers to the British as "the barbarian English kalaas.' Perhaps here in the sense of 'destruction' the word 'kalaa' sounds to have been used to refer to 'the English'. Further, the use of another qualifying word 'barbarian' that precedes the word 'English' seems to have been precisely chosen. In a nutshell, Ghosh's diction is praiseworthy.

"For all its vividness of description and range of human experiences, The Glass Palace will remain memorable for me mainly as the most scathing critique of British colonialism I have ever come across in fiction."(Mukherjee) History makes its presence felt throughout the novel. With colonization within no time, the ghost sounds to have appeared.



Like a gluttonous monster it has started ripping Burma, once a Golden Land, to shreds. It has devoured all of Burma's resources within the space of a few years as it has been doing with its other colonies. History shows that the usual response to a protest is repression, and the British are notorious for human rights abuses, and exploitation. Throughout The Glass Palace the interplay of fiction and history brings to the fore some of the most dramatic events that have happened in the history of the subcontinent, Burma, Malaysia and such like.

And now what is more tragic is one cannot rest assured that colonization has been got rid of somehow or other at last, for what colonization has begotten will stay put there forever in stark contrast to the dictum 'nothing lasts forever,' and the ghost will continue to haunt. The ghost of a smile still flits across many an erstwhile colony's sad features.

" 'Did we ever have a hope?' he (Arjun) said. 'We rebelled against an Empire that has shaped everything in our lives; coloured everything in the world as we know it. It is a huge, indelible stain which has tainted all of us. We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves. And that, I suppose, is where I am...' "(Ghosh 518)

Noticeably, the last part of the remark, "And that, I suppose, where I am," which is an accurate reflection of his state of mind, reminds one of the famous dictum, "I think; therefore I am", coined by the great French Philosopher and father of modern philosophy, Rene Descartes.

Finally, while taking his leave in the end of The Glass Palace, Amitav Ghosh seems to be making a running commentary on what modern politics is all about. Politics has degenerated into a completely amoral thing. Just as few countries are masters of their own economic destinies nowadays, excluding one or two superpowers that decide the economic destinies of other countries, even an individual's right to privacy is not free of political ogling. Perhaps nations may have got rid of colonial imperialism. In fact what seems to have taken place is we have got replaced one evil with another, and accordingly one cannot say which one is the lesser of two evils.

"...that while misrule and tyranny must be resisted, so too must politics itself.... that it cannot be allowed to cannibalize all of life..... not just in Burma,

but in many other places too.... that politics has invaded everything, spared nothing.... religion, art, family.....it has taken over everything.... there is no escape from it..." (Ghosh 542)

Stooping to such an extremely low level, resorting to completely unethical political practices and taking the general public for granted, every politician, with one or two notable exceptions, is found to be shamelessly justifying his unlawful and unethical acts by invoking his amoral theory that in politics it is common for a politician to have the blood, sweat and tear of the general public on his hands. Even creative writers who commit themselves to writing works of literature are not spared the ordeal of haunting nowadays. Shoving their partisan politics down the creative writer's throat, these irrational and spiteful politicians most of whom are semi-literate or illiterate seem to be telling him what he should write about and how he should write it.

#### PRIMARY SOURCE

- [1]. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace*, New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher & Permanent Black, 2000.

#### SECONDARY SOURCE

- [1]. Mukherjee, Meenakshi. "Of Love, War and Empire." Rev. of *The Glass Palace*. *Indians Review of Books*, Vol.10, No.1, Oct.16 -- Nov.15 2000.
- [2]. Nair, Rukmini Bhaya. "A *Palatial Tome*." Rev. of *The Glass Palace*. *Biblio: A Review of Books*, Vol.5, No.7&8, July-Aug.2000.
- [3]. Kumar, Alok and Madhusudan Prasad. "*The Novels of Amitav Ghosh: A Study in the Sociology of the Symbol*." *Symbolism in Indian Fiction in English* by Ramesh Srivastava. Jalandhar: ABS Publication, 1997.