



## Polarity as the Key Characteristic of *The Glass Palace*

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### Abstract

The medium of narration, different in each of Ghosh's novels, varies from omniscient, limited omniscient, objective, first person and so on yet contrast is a device constantly deployed by Ghosh. Although no scathing attacks are made on the evils of traditions, custom or practices of any country or race yet no opportunity to comment obliquely is spared. There is a plethora of the polarity of characters in the novel. In the Noble King Thebaw and Supayalat, the Collector and Madame Collector, Dolly and Rajkumar, Alison and Dinu, in fact almost every relationship in the book is marked with polarity. In some cases these polar ends come together to produce a sparkling magic as in the case of the First Princess and her coachman husband Sawant yet at other places it serves to further increase distance of these disparate poles of which the best representative is the Collector and his wife Uma Dey. This paper is an attempt to trace the plurality inherent in *The Glass Palace*.

**Keywords:** Plurality, contrast, colonizer, war etc.

### Introduction

It is during the plundering of the Glass Palace that Rajkumar beholds Dolly and falls in love with her at first sight. He promises her that they would meet again. The love story of Dolly and Rajkumar starts like a fairy tale with Rajkumar holding on to the memory of his first glimpse of Dolly twenty years back when the last King of Burma was overcome by British and sent to India twenty years ago. Holding on to this memory Rajkumar sets out to search for Dolly. Luckily he meets Dolly in Ratnagiri just as his search begins. They are both happily married for more than a decade when Dinu's illness renders Dolly a changed person. She starts losing interest in life and worldly pleasures. No probing into the psychological aspect of Dolly or any of the characters is done in Ghosh's novels. In his books most simple dialogues cut through penetrating thoughts. There are no monologues to reveal the psychological turmoil of the characters and so the comprehension of the characters psyche is left upon the readers because Ghosh as a writer always suggests and never impels.

Twenty years later we come to know that Rajkumar, who appeared to be a paragon of true love is no different. In his trafficking of people from India to Burma, Rajkumar does not hesitate in taking advantage of the poor needy women coming for work to Burma. Thus even this couple is not different from the common human lot. Dolly in her wifely role is ready to bear the brunt of Rajkumar's acts and attributes his infidelity to her own detachment from the world around her. Though this is far from the ideals of Platonic love, is true love not beyond the momentary carnal pleasures? This also illustrates that a desire can drive a person only as long as he

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has not attained it. A thing is desirable only till the time it is not attained; the moment of attainment steals away the desirability of the possessed. This has a universal implication as the same has been true of human beings of all times and places.

Ratnagiri comes alive for the readers of *The Glass Palace*. The route to the exile of King Thebaw's Ratnagiri is traced to India where the irony of fate and the futility of the human effort to regulate influences from percolating in the open spaces is clearly demonstrated in the transformation of Thebaw from the exiled captive to Thebaw, the guardian spirit and thus King Thebaw again. The Burmese King is held a captive on a lone hill in Ratnagiri cut off from the ordinary people but soon people accept him as their guiding angel, as their King with a benedictory gaze overlooking them.

An epidemic breaks out in Ratnagiri which has the effect of converging the population from the town to the space around the goal of the last descendants of the Konbaung dynasty-the Outram House. The *basti* set up by the inhabitants of Ratnagiri to escape from the epidemics of plague soon acquires the form of a little village:

the *basti* around the compound became a little village in its own right, with winding lanes and corner shop, no longer did the dwellings consist solely of shacks and shanties : tiled houses began to appear, one by one (GP 84).

The Princesses soon shed off all the signs of their Burmese origin until they are wholly inseparable from the Indian children-

In their early years in India, the princesses usually dressed in Burmese clothes-aingyis and htameins. But as the years passed their garments changed. One day no one quite

remembered when, they appeared in saris-not expensive or sumptuous saris but the simple green and red cottons of the district. They began to wear their hair braided and oiled like Ratnagiri schoolgirl; they learned to speak Marathi and Hindustani as fluently as any of the town folk-it was only with their parents that they now spoke Burmese (*GP* 76-77).

While the King and Queen are shrouded in their memories of their grandeur in Burma, for their descendants Burma becomes the foreign land. The single attendant who stays with the Royal family in India is the devoted Miss Dolly for whom, confined within the boundaries of high walls at both places, there is no essential difference between Burma and India yet she cannot even bear the idea of going back to Burma because she is sure that there she would be regarded "a Kalaa like they do Indians-a trespasser an outsider from across the sea" (*GP* 113). In the taking up of countries as homelands also we see the contrast operating. The first two princesses born in Burma choose to settle in India, on the other hand, third and fourth princess born in India settle in Burma.

Similarly, places too assume different shapes depending upon the people inhabiting them. Thus places in Ghosh's novels like sculptures also shape space. In the hospital, lying in bed with her ailing son Dinu listening to the voices of the hospital Dolly "remembered a word he'd (King Thebaw) often used Karuna one of Buddha's words, Pali for compassion, for the immanence of all living things in each other, for the attraction of life for its likeness. A time will come, he had said to the girls, when you too will discover what this word Karuna means, and from that moment on, your lives will never again be the same" (*GP* 211). King Thebaw's words come true when Dolly's life is transformed after she feels compassion for the hospitalized people during Dinu's illness. Her detachment reaches the point that she denounces the worldly life to enter the Buddhist nunnery. She only postpones her decision bound by her sense of duty towards her family.

Twenty-four years later Rajkumar is in the same hospital, same room where Dolly had discovered what "Karuna" compassion, as King Thebaw, had explained meant. The passage of twenty-four years had added up a "carrier air conditioner" and a "7 valve Palliard" radio to the room. Yet this small device filled the room of the hospital with the view of the entire world-London, New Delhi, Chungking, Tokyo, Moscow, Sydney. In this room Rajkumar also decides to leave behind his old world but with a difference, whereas Dolly is evoked to selflessly denounce the world, Rajkumar astutely takes recourse to "hoarding-war profiteering" to retire and so his retirement is just retirement from work and not from his greed to which he clings with both hands. Rajkumar tenaciously clings to the world of this own imagination and shuts his eyes to the world of reality, whereas Dolly who is entirely detached with the world has a more objective vision of the world and has realized long before Rajkumar the impending catastrophe. These contrasts operate to create a sense of the inclusion of individual space, poles apart, though under the same roof. The Klemendine house is an external manifestation of the inward shabbiness in the character of Rajkumar who in his life witnessed many ups and downs.

The cultural impact of the English is not painted in black and white but in various hues. Impartial praise is given where deserved. Through quaint incidences, a scathing portrayal of the hollow shows, hypocrisies and vanities of the English is put before the reader for evaluation yet the west is praised for its notion of equality, liberty and progress. The gamut of this portrayal again has vivid shades. On the one hand are people like the humanitarian Commanding officer of the 1<sup>st</sup> Jats who

firmly believes in the ideals of army and follows them without a fail. On the extreme opposite are people like captain Pearson who in their biases and obsession with the notions of racial superiority are full of condescension for their Indian compatriots.

There is a celebration of human nature in all its plurality. Uma, Dinu and Arjun are advocates of an individual and hence diverse way of thinking. Although the interaction of these disparate ideas is brief and happens only once in the novel yet the importance of the line of thought of each is reflected in the incidences for a long time after the occasion. As the tide of nationalism sweeps over the roads of Kalighat, the markets are flooded with people pouring out to agitate against the British for involving India without its consent into the war. This initiates a debate between Dinu and Uma referring to the danger such as Fascism and Nazism which leads Dinu support imperialism over the two bigger evils. This thought appears again and again in the novel that often people justify an evil by the juxtaposition of a greater evil.

The story in fact operates on two planes. One is the make believe world of individual creation and the second is the world of reality which teaches its lesson silently but thoroughly. This incident makes Uma aware of her superficial understanding regarding the facts of world. She now realizes that the Mahatma had chosen an instrument which was "a weapon of the weaponless, its very weakness its source of strength" (*GP* 254). Uma and her political associates had pinned their hope on an uprising such as the Saya San Rebellion of Burma. Ironically it is the brutality of the empire that makes Uma realize the brutality of her line of thinking which was based on legends and myths. It is now that she realizes that a victory won at the cost of innumerable lives is as undesirable as defeat. The implication of this ruthless technique of management of opinion is demonstrated some two hundred pages later in the story perpetrated in Kishan Singh's village of the "face of defeat" witnessed by his ancestors at the time of mutiny almost seven decades ago and the impact it had on their morale. This on the one hand has the effect of demonstrating the ordinariness of life and on the other hand the notion of 'immanent will'-life is what you make it. The "Kotana" people are representatives of the common man's deepest desire for life as well as the sense of duty. The spectacle of sudden and unnatural death had made them resolve to cling to life by yielding to the torturers. They were in fact "destined to be strangers to themselves, to be directed always by others" (*GP*.430). Kishan Singh is a thorough representative of this class of men.

The sixteen severed heads of the rebels in Burma were put to display in the Prome a venerable site of the Shwesandow Pagoda. The deterioration of moral values has a universal implication which is applicable even beyond the narrative. In the ancient days people fought while observing the basic tenets of humanity. But today no means is considered foul by the power hungry people gripped in a frenzy to annihilate. Places of worship have become an ideal sight for demonstration of power as has been demonstrated in recent acts of terrorism which targeted the holy places. In mid-1950's when general Ne Win seized power in Burma even such a place as the university was used to stamp horror in the minds of the people.

The point that only by transcending the mundane can the ulterior motives can be achieved is stressed variously throughout *The Glass Palace*. Thus Uma absolved of the financial burden post her collector husband's demise can now channelize her energies to the struggle for Indian freedom.

Never having faced the reality of life squarely, a romantic ideal of revolution is nurtured by her as well as political associates of the Indian Independence League. The Mahatma however having lived amidst the common people has a firm grasp of the grim reality and thus aims at educating the people to make them alive and aware about their rights thus exhorting them to hold their ground without deterring the oppressors.

Another contrast is Arjun's romantic conception of war. Before facing the naked horrors of war he craves to be sent to war as essential for his career growth. Even after reaching Malaya he revels in a life of merry making at Morningside House in Alison's company. Years later Arjun's palate is tantalized by the same Nyonya food had satiated his Aunt Uma's almost twenty years ago. These symbols scattered throughout the narrative are also incidental to the changes wrought by the sculpting hands of time. Not much has changed in Malaya in terms of the socio-economic conditions since the time Uma had visited the country to the time just before the onslaught of the Second World War which takes Arjun to the same land. However as Malaya symbolized by Morningside wriggles itself out of the ashes of destruction of the Second World War, Jaya, Arjun's niece and Uma's great-niece, is welcomed with the South Indian cuisine in Morningside house which is at once symbolic of the change over the passage of time and the establishment of a new order ushering a new era of promise.

The very paradox of human existence is reflected in what Arjun goes through after leaving India. The distance that virtually separates Arjun from his motherland ironically brings Arjun closer to his motherland. By way of contrast Arjun and his comrades come to realize the state of destitution of their country.

Driving along rural roads, the officers discovered that in Malaya the only people who lived in abject grinding poverty were plantation labourers almost all of whom were Indians in origin.

The role of the coloniser here is acquired by the Indians who exploit the poverty of their countrymen and bring them to Burma so that they can build an empire out of the sweat and blood of these destitute people. This in turn makes him realise the subtle exploitation of India at the hands of the absent master The British Coloniser. The distance from his homeland thus enables Arjun to see clearly the disparity inherent at the heart of the British Empire who ruled by subtly masquerading themselves as perpetrators of justice and equality. He abandons the British army and clings to his resolution even when he is captured. This is in sharp contrast with the changing attitudes and fortunes of Empires and people toward the end of the book. Uma, during her participation in the activities of the Indian independence league expatiates on the convictions of the league against the ideology of Mahatma Gandhi. She has firm faith in the belief of the league that the independence of India can only be gained by striking at the "iron fist" of the British Government i.e. the Indian soldier in the British army. The incidents in Burma coerce her to alter her opinion and she is conceded to accept the veracity of Gandhian ideology. The failure of the rebellion in Burma coerces her to realise that how impossible it was to crush the British Empire by challenging its might. It is as though the Indian revolt for freedom of 1857 is mirrored years later in the Burmese rebellion of 1929. The "face of defeat" (GP 429) witnessed by Kishan Singh's ancestors after mutiny in the desecration of the corpses of the rebel soldiers is reflected again in the illustration of sixteen decapitated heads of the

Burmese rebels seventy two years later. The brutality of the act almost seven decades later is demonstrated by the article accompanying this illustration in a Bengali newspaper as follows "These are the heads of the Burmese rebels who fell in an encounter with imperial troops in Prome District in Burma. It was believed that they were displayed at the military headquarters at Prome for the purpose of striking horror into the hearts of those who might be rebelliously inclined" (GP 253).

The extraordinary becomes the ordinary (The Burmese Royal Family, Rajkumar) while the ordinary becomes extraordinary (Illengo). World history dictates the individual histories and also subsumes the borders so that the cross nationals come together to create their own world as is evident in Rajkumar, an Indian Orphan, marrying Dolly, a Burmese and the marriage of the Burmese Princess with her Indian coachman Sawant. There is further space generation as the families ties extend to bring people in close relationship akin to kinship. Thus Uma who is childless is never without people who genuinely care for her. The boundaries further dissolve suggesting the possibilities of new beginnings as the opposite represented by Uma and Rajkumar come together. This epic novel which is a heady concoction of strong research and characters pitched deep in history, too ends on a note of hope with the Aung Saan Suu Kyi smiling radiantly at people showing politics its true boundaries.

### Conclusion

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