

HUMANISM VERSUS IMPERIALISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE GLASS PALACE



First Author Details :

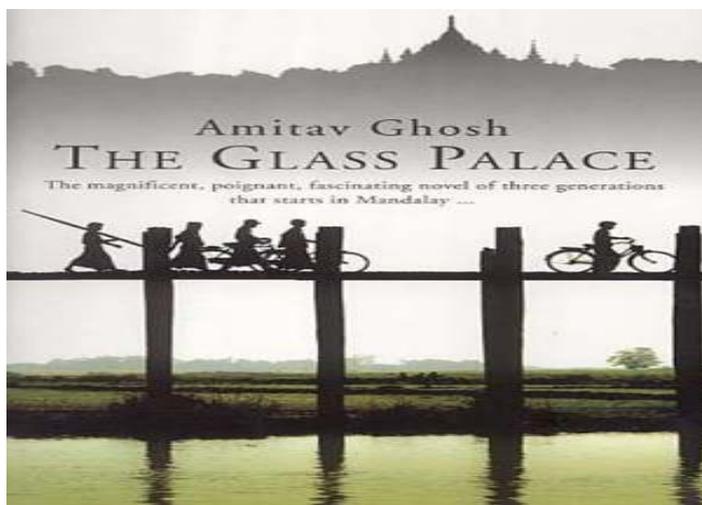
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ABSTRACT

Today, Human Rights and its implementation is a world wide or an international issue. Human Rights are the basic rights of Human Being. But they are being violated in one or another way. This violation and awareness about its importance gave birth to the movement for humanism. Literature too, is not out of its impact. Many writers treated this subject directly or indirectly in their works. Amitav Ghosh, an Indian English novelist is a major contributor in this regard.



Amitav Ghosh is a writer concerned with India's place in larger international cultural networks, whose fiction seems directly informed by contemporary academic debates about colonialism and culture. His style of writing synthesizes imagination with history. He takes up the obscured events in history and transcends the boundaries of fiction by sprinkling over them the colours of his imagination. Same theme is dealt by Amitav Ghosh in his novel 'The Glass Palace'

In this novel Ghosh seems to advocate the humanism in quite different manner. He puts his views on humanism through his characters and their sufferings, against the imperial dehumanizing behavior of the rulers. Through this he shows how the imperial rulers concept of humanism which has different meanings for the rulers and the ruled. The imperialists impose their culture and thinking on their subjects through the self ascribed role of the representatives of humanism and modernization. Ghosh depicts these things to show how the different practices adopted by the rulers tend to dehumanize people.

Ghosh exposes the hollow nature of the humanistic concerns of the colonialists embodied in the protection of rights of human and their education. These ideas reveal the false sense of humanism propagated by the British authorities. Ghosh criticizes the sense of humanism employed to promote the interest of the dominating culture through different practices. Throughout the novel Ghosh juxtaposes the ideal humanism and the anti humanistic attitude of imperialists.

KEYWORDS : *Human Rights, Humanism, Imperialism, Colonialist, modernization.*

INTRODUCTION :

Today, Human Rights and its implementation is a world wide or an international issue. Human Rights are the basic rights of Human Being. They are the most crucial thing for the survival and

development of human being. They are also regarded as the birth right of human being, but they were termed and recognized as Human Rights by Eleanor Roosevelt as a president of the United Nation Commission on human rights. It is called Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was declared on December 10, 1948. Explaining Human Rights, Nowak states,

"Human Rights are universal because they are based on every human being's dignity, irrespective of race, colour, sex, ethnic or social origin, religion, language, nationality, age, sexual orientation, disability or any other distinguished characteristic. Since they are accepted by all states and people, they apply equally and indiscriminately to every person and are the same for everyone everywhere."

They were formed to maintain human dignity, but they are being violated in one or another way. This violation and a need for awareness about its importance gave birth to the movement for humanism. Literature too, is not out of its impact. Many writers treated this subject directly or indirectly in their works. Amitav Ghosh, an Indian English novelist is a major contributor in this regard.

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The concentration on the presentation of human existence under the impact of different forms of politics and power marks Ghosh's understanding of humanism. Author's idea of humanism can be seen at three different level in the novel, firstly when queen Supayalat treats her maids and people in a dehumanizing manner, secondly when Queen Supayalat herself complains about the inhumane behavior of the Britishers and lastly when Britishers treat the people and Indian Sepoys in a quite inhumane manner. All these we can observe and feel at different stages of the novel.

The concept of equality for all is obvious throughout the novel. Ghosh rejects any kind of discrimination whether national, caste, religion, cultural, social or political. According to him any kind of discrimination is inhumane. In order to express his concern Ghosh has given fictional expression to the practices that hinder human freedom and lead to subjugation of man or women. Inhumane behavior of the rulers towards the ruled is presented through the treatment of their subjects by them. Queen Supayalat has several maids to attend her. These maids are, "Young girls, Orphans, many of them just children."

These girls were not recruited or came willingly there: "They'd been purchased by the Queen's agents in small Kachin, Wa and Shan villages along the Kingdom's northern frontiers." This shows the inhuman attitude of the Queen. The condition in which these maids live and work is against the human dignity. Their such life is justified and regarded as appropriate and normal by the Queen. She never think about them and their sufferings. Thus for the rulers the concept of humanism varies from ruler to ruled. The repeated depiction of of the inhuman conditions under which the maids work and the way they are asked to show respect and regards to the Queen shows the novelist's rejection of the practices

which are against human dignity.

Apart from their living and working condition, another practice which is known as Shiko, is also inhumane. In this practice the maids had to prostrate before the Queen in order to show respect to her. It is not less than worshipping the God. They are forced and trained to do so. Ghosh depicts such things to show how the different practices adopted and imposed by the rulers lead to belittle human dignity. Here too Ghosh seems to advocate humanism which is lost in imperialism.

Ghosh makes the Queen feel it in next part of the novel when King Thebaw is dethroned and is exiled from Burma. By the beginning of 20th century, the British empire had evolved from being a powerful trading presence into a huge government apparatus, imposing its hierarchies and protocols on its colonies. Figures such as the collector were instrumental in enforcing its myriad colonial rules. It is the extent of cruelty when King of Burma is treated like caged animal and his daughters and princesses are treated as slaves.

Once the colonial power is firmly established and has a clear military superiority over the hapless and unprepared native rulers, it looks for, and often fabricates, a dispute with an inconvenient native ruler so as to justify dethroning him, annexing his state, and sending him into exile. A dispute with a British timber company, in which the company was clearly in wrong, it was used as an excuse for waging a war against king Thebaw in Mandalay. King's one senior minister,

"had suggested discreetly that it might be best to accept the terms, the British might allow the Royal family to remain in the palace in Mandalay, on terms similar to those of the Indian princes"

From this it is clear that it was a treacherous plan of Britishers to dethrone King Thebaw. Through this plan Britishers brought them in a condition to live according to ruler's condition. In addition to this he was sent to exile without giving chance to defend him. King and his chief consort queen are so humiliated that even the mob that once hated them, looks at them with pity. It is obvious from Rajkumar's statement,

"Through all the years of the Queen's reign the towns folk had hated her for her cruelty, feared her for her ruthlessness and courage. Now through the alchemy of defeat she was transformed in their eyes."

King and Queen had to live in Ratnagiri, secluded from the political upheavals of the time. Here Queen realizes inhumane attitude of the British Imperialism. She retorts that the ill treatment given to the Royal family and their illegal imprisonment, are the real scandals. She speaks out about the discrepancy between the British claims of having a higher civilization run on the basis of "Laws", of justice and fair treatment she says,

"...We have heard so many lectures from you and your colleagues, on the subject of the barbarity of the King of Burma and the humanity of the Angrez....The English alone understood liberty; we were told; they do not put kings and princes to death; they rule through the laws. If that is so, why has king Thebaw never been brought to trial?"

Bipin Beharey understands the truth. At the same time he feels ashamed at his helplessness, perceives the immoral nature of his role as an officer. He has lost his own identity and has to work according to the orders of his British masters. On the other hand, King Thebaw, while he was being brought to India, witnesses the hardships in which Indian coolies were working. On the way to India, he looks through binoculars and watches Indian coolies working on the port in Rangoon and wonders how these people had been compelled to leave their homeland to do menial, dirty jobs in Burma. He says,

"The British had brought them there, to work in the docks and the mills, to pull rikshaws and empty the latrines. Apparently they couldn't find local people to do these jobs and indeed why would the Burmese do that kind of work?"

According to him British imperialists were only responsible for this condition of people. They are forced to do such works that are below the human dignity. Once again, Ghosh puts here the humanism against the imperialism.

Later on in the novel Bipin Beharey and Arjun, come to know about the inhuman attitude of the imperialists.. They realize their loss of self-identity and mental subjugation to the imperialist racist-oppressive ideology sometime after they have been the beneficiaries of its practices that divided the colonized people themselves. At first Dey and Arjun, who has joined the Indian Army, enjoy the sense of their position in upper strata, in the colonial power structure. But gradually the inherent injustices and falsity of the empire claims of humane liberal civilization purposes are revealed to them and they become disillusioned. Arjun begins to gain knowledge of his complete submersion into colonial ideas, as an unthinking, unreflecting person.

Due to the expansion of British commercial interests in their colonies, they required men-power. They saw India as a source of raw labour and military muscle that bolstered British dominance worldwide and kept the imperial machine humming. Thousands of poor workers were recruited for work in Burma, Fiji, the Caribbean and Africa, on plantation, in docks, mills and railroads, while others were conscripted into the British army. In response to Rajkumar's question, Saya John throws light on the phenomenon of Indian soldiers constituting the British army. When he was working as an orderly in a hospital, Saya John came across several wounded Indian soldiers who were in their twenties. They joined army just for monetary gain, but they were exploited. They earned only a few annas a day not much more than a dockyard coolie by endangering their lives for others.

In order to expand and extend their power and trade, imperialists do not hesitate even to use their own English men in an exploitive way. They employ their man in forests to explore and exploit forest wealth under inhumane and hostile surroundings. They work in dangerous and unhealthy atmosphere and are led to diseases. The purpose of the company is just to earn profit by endangering lives of others. As Saya John says,

"The company knows this very well; it knows that within a few years these men will permanently aged, old at twenty-one: and that they will have to be posted off to city offices. It is only when they are freshly arrived, seventeen or eighteen, that they can lead this life, and during those few years the company must derive such profit from them as it can."

The colonialists use the things as an effective ploy to mould the natives according to their own terms of humanism. Ghosh exposes the hollow nature of the humanistic concerns of the colonialists embodied in the protection of rights of human and their education. Uma, brings out the novelist's perspective nature of humanism presented by the colonialists,

"How was it possible to imagine that one could grant freedom by imposing subjugation? that one could open a cage by pushing it inside a bigger cage? How could any section of a people hope to achieve freedom where the entirety of a population was held in subjugation?"

These ideas reveal the false sense of humanism propagated by the British authorities. Ghosh criticizes the sense of humanism employed to promote the interest of the dominating culture through different practices. The imperialism as shown in the novel is barbaric and anti-human towards not only its subjects but also towards the one who work for it. Throughout the novel, Ghosh juxtaposes the ideal humanism with the anti humanistic attitude of imperialists. Due to the imperialism and their hunger for expansion, a huge mass of people is deprived of their human rights. Amitav Ghosh has beautifully placed before the readers the issue that is universal and also burning issue even today.

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