



The Deluded Indian Soldier in British Service in *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh's "The Glass Palace" offers a rich tapestry of historical narratives interwoven with deeply human stories, delving into the complex dynamics of colonialism and its impact on individuals.

Key words: The Glass Palace, Amitav Ghosh, British Service, Indian Soldier

INTRODUCTION

The Indian soldier plays a crucial role in *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh. We meet the Indian soldier for the first time as they march the streets of Burma with a blank face to capture the Burmese king for the British. As the British army (more than half of which are Indians) coerces the Burmese monarch to surrender *The Glass Palace* is brought into view-- "a vast hall that is like a great shaft of light with crystal walls and mirrored ceilings" (GP 84). The narrative derives its title and impetus from this Glass Palace even though it is never visualised after this scene, although we encounter the Indian soldier working in the British army again and again.

The defeated Burmese monarch is exiled to Ratnagiri in India. Here is the most dexterous weaving of history into fiction by Ghosh. Ratnagiri the place where King Thebaw was exiled is at a distance of 373 km. from Mumbai, Maharashtra. The exact place where the king was kept a captive is now known as Thebaw Palace and was completed in 1910 at the cost of Rs. 1,25,000 under the supervision of the King. A part of the palace has now been taken up by the State University. Some of the tears shed by the homesick King have surely seeped into the walls of the Palace giving it a melancholy air not unlike the grave of the last Mughal Emperor of India Bahadur Shah Zafar, exiled by the same British to Thebaw's Rangoon. The brutality of the colonial British does not testify itself merely in forcing a Thebaw and a Zafar to spend their last days yearning for the other's jail. The portrayal of the British as ruthless have led Pico Iyer to acknowledge that Ghosh's body of work draws attention to the oppressed Indian and Burmese people, but argues that Ghosh's political stance is hypocritical.³

The Collector is the first representative in the book of the elite Indian young man so enamoured by the British culture and ideology that he is a champion of the British Empire

The Collector is completely adapted to the British way of life savouring their music, their sports, and their culture in fact everything which makes him a manual of rules and regulations for his wife Uma. Yet one cannot help sympathise the Collector who has a self-possessed lady as a consort. The Collector makes every attempt to keep his wife busy and happy whereas no such effort is visible on the end of Madame Collector. Perhaps it's the Collector's inclination to the British way of thinking that enables the Collector to not be resentful about their being childless. Yet it does not seem

improbable that this space is deliberately left blank to make Uma an itinerant figure. Yet in spite of his kind and patient treatment the collector cannot help his marriage from falling apart. The incompatibility comes out clearly in his last dialogue with his wife:

I used to dream about the kind of marriage I wanted.... To live with a woman as an equal, in spirit and intellect: this seemed to me the most wonderful thing life could offer. To discover together the world of literature, art: what could be richer, more fulfilling? But what I dreamt of is not yet possible, not here, in India, not for us (*GP* 173).

Ghosh also tells how the soldiers were deluded by the English into fighting:

We never thought that we were being used to conquer people. Not at all, we thought the opposite. We were told that we were going to set those people free from their bad kings or their evil customs or some such thing. We believed it because they believed it too. It took us long time to understand that in their eyes freedom exists wherever they rule (*GP* 224).

We first see the blank faces of the Indian soldier working in British forces in 1885 at the time of the British invasion of Burma in 1887. Then we see a brief glimpse of the deluded Indian soldier in Giani Amreek Singh an ex military man who had deserted the British Indian army from the rank of junior NCO and emphasized the need of opening the eyes of the Indian soldiers. This interpretation of the role of the Anglo-British soldier is quite at odds with the version of Kishan Singh's reason for the people of his village to join the British army. The merciless massacre of the rebellious soldiers after the mutiny of 1857 and the hanging of their corpses on poles had made the ancestors of Kishan Singh take the resolution to be faithful to the British forces forever so that they never see the face of defeat. It was a resolution in fact to survive, to escape the horror of a torturous death and captivity after death because even a respectable funeral was denied to the revolutionaries killed by the British. Yet another aspect of the army is painted in languid lavish life of the army as demonstrated in the letter of Arjun, who has taken soldiering as a career, to his sister Manju. The deluded soldier is clearly visible in this letter:

The story is that the battalion fought so well in the Mahratta Wars that when Lord Lake reached the coast, he honoured us with a special title: The Royal Battalion.

Yesterday Hardy and I were looking at the battalion's battle honours, and I swear to you, Manju, the list was as long as my arm. During the Mutiny our troops stayed loyal – one of our companies was in the column that captured the old Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, at his hiding-hole at Humayun's tomb. I noticed something that I bet would interest Dinu and Neel -the Royal was in Burma during General Prendergast's advance on Mandalay and it fought so well that it came to be known as 'Jarnail sahib ki dayni haath ki paltan' – the general's right hand battalion.

To tell you the truth, Manju, it's just a little overwhelming even to think of all this. You should see the list of our medals: a Victoria Cross from the Somme; two Military Crosses for putting down the Arab rebellion in Mesopotamia in 1918, a half dozen DSOs and OBEs from when we fought the Boxer rebels in China. Sometimes when I wake up in the morning, I still find it hard to believe that I really belong with these men ... (*GP* 261-262).

This sense of euphoria does not melt away till this company of soldiers in Burma is faced squarely against the horrors of war. Before this fateful time Arjun is not more than often seen rhapsodizing about the virtues of army life and of the British Indian soldiers. The paradox of captivity misconstrued as freedom is overtly visible here. The Indian soldiers serving their English masters rejoice as they are anointed as bosses over their brethren, not realising that the English have thus subtly dually subjugated them by hegemony, gaslighting them with loyalty and slavery. The gratification in the opportunity to live with the Englishmen enabling the Indian soldiers to share their food and work with the British is so overwhelming that it fills them with a sense of obligation which obliterates them to the fact that this equality is a facade for the inherent disparity wherein they are denied an equal stature and treated as inferior to their English peers. Arjun who is a representative of the entire class of young men employed in Anglo - Indian army boasts proudly of the comradeship of army: "Punjabis, Marathas, Bengalis, Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims where else in India would you come across a group such as ours – where we can all drink together and eat beef and think nothing of it" (*GP* 278)?

Even this sense of comradeship is a superficial one because the differences and the ego clashes are inherent in the Indian soldiers as is evident in the intrigues of Hardy's own kinsmen, taking advantage of the faith he had instilled in them, to hamper his growth. These murky shadows of prejudice, distrust, and suspicion were availed by the British to enslave India. But the teachings of the past are lost on the people who still can't let go of their petty selfish interests and are thus unable to see things more objectively.

The Indian NCOs take pride in serving their British masters. But the idea of taking orders from someone who was their own filled them with indignation. This indignation was not solely out of jealousy but in case of people like Hardy's victimization it stemmed from the inherent corruption of the British institutionalization. The English and Indians though given similar cadre this equality was a farce because even though the Indians were organisationally raised to the peerage of the British the British were paid much more than their Indian counterparts. This was like bartering a person's utmost obedience in exchange of a false promise for equality. The Indians were deluded to join the British army by giving them the illusion that they were contributing to the worthwhile cause of liberating people from their tyrannous rulers thus ushering them into a new epoch of promise. The role of Indian soldiers in the British army was a controversial one and as the cries for independence increased the doubt of Indian soldier about their role in the British army increased. "The Glass Palace is a novel brimming with ideas, exploring the ways we co operate with our own oppression, the nature of exploitation, the dehumanising effect of racism and dispossession and the miraculous way in which a change of consciousness (as with Uma and Arjun) can eventually change history."⁴

Arjun is not only the first one in his family to join army but also one of the first few Bengalis to join the army. Not only Arjun but also Hardayal Singh had joined the army for completely unpatriotic ambitious reason. As the story progresses the flow of events compel them to question and re-question their faith again and again till all the layers of years of illusion are stripped away. The complacency of Indian soldier serving the British had made them take pride in their being the first modern Indians who could identify with their white masters

We've learnt to dance the tango and we know how to eat roast beef with a knife and fork. The truth is that except for the colour of our skin, most people in India wouldn't even recognize us as Indians (GP 23).

When they joined the army India was never in their mind. The kindness of their British masters towards them had made them forget the condition of subjugation that held them and their country in captivity. The Collector, who passes away without any enlightenment, is in some degree a representative of this class. However the debate gets precipitated in the two young representatives of the younger generation of sahibs in the army: Arjun and Hardy.

The inscriptions on the walls of Chetwode Hall at the Military Academy in Dehra Dun pledging the loyalty of the army men to British is memorized by rote by Arjun and his compatriots. But with the passage of time this very inscription coerces them to pause and think of their country. It strikes them like a blow through their face that it is not their country to which they had pledged their honour, welfare and comfort but the King Emperor and his Empire. The incidents in Burma blast away the cocoon of self-preservation of these soldiers Army formed by Captain Mohun Singh. The entire history of the Indian National Army is subsumed in the action of the Second World War. We witness not only its birth and how it gains momentum but also it's being dissolved from its original form only to re-emerge again with a renewed vigour under the leadership of Subhash Chandra Bose. Each event thus oscillates not only back and forth but in every possible plane of imagination reverberating with space in every direction.

In the comfort of the Military Academy the news of soldiers rebelling in faraway places had seemed distant, unusual and unreal to the men of career of the army. But the seclusion of the trenches makes them retrospect their position as regards their job. They are shocked as they gradually realize that what they had taken as just a job is much more primeval and that their condition more abject than even the poorest plantation workers who at least have a connection between their head and hands whereas they have ransomed their life merely for the sake of having their backs patted by

their white masters and have reduced their life to a naught. They are ready to give up their life without even knowing what or who they are fighting for or against whom they are fighting or what is the cause for which they are even ready to give up their life for.

The state of numbness passed on as an inheritance among the real "faujis" because the years of servitude has drowsed their senses completely. The fact that they are no more than weapons for the British slowly dawns on the Indian soldiers serving the British empire. They are for the British no more than tools of fighting, notwithstanding their efficiency and so their role in the victory is not even hinted at in the history of the nations. Their bravery and contribution to the victory of the empire is never acknowledged as the praise is invariably always reserved just for European soldiers. Owing to this attitude of the British, the 1st Jat Infantry is relieved and in fact glad when the Japanese ambush gives them no opportunity to fight back. They are glad that they didn't have to take the front for an army which would have never given them any credit for it.

These emotions nascent and raw take these men totally by surprise leading them to an unending space of self-realisation on the one hand and confining them to their own self on the other. At last the appearance of Gianni Amreek Singh on the scene like a hammer blow shatters away the invisible 'Glass Palace' of every individual connecting these immense individual space enabling the great flux of nationality through these charged spaces. The current flowing through this new field is potent enough to consume the very points through which it is flowing. Arjun, Kishan Singh and many others are all subsumed in this current with a high surge of nationality. They have made themselves the representatives of the sahibs in India. To undo what they have made of themselves they must undo their existence. Thus, Arjun is one of the few diehards of the INA under Subhash Chandra Bose in Central Burma who choose death as their goal, their salvation, the only thing which can wash away the stains of past that soiled their soul.

The story of *The Glass Palace*, spread over a century mixing facts with fiction, yields a heady combination of history and imagination transcending all boundaries of time and space. Ghosh believes that the truths of individuals can be examined more closely in fiction than one can in history. From history point of view, this book can be categorized as a subaltern novel that talks about the downtrodden, the masses and their struggles as history takes its own course.

REFERENCES

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