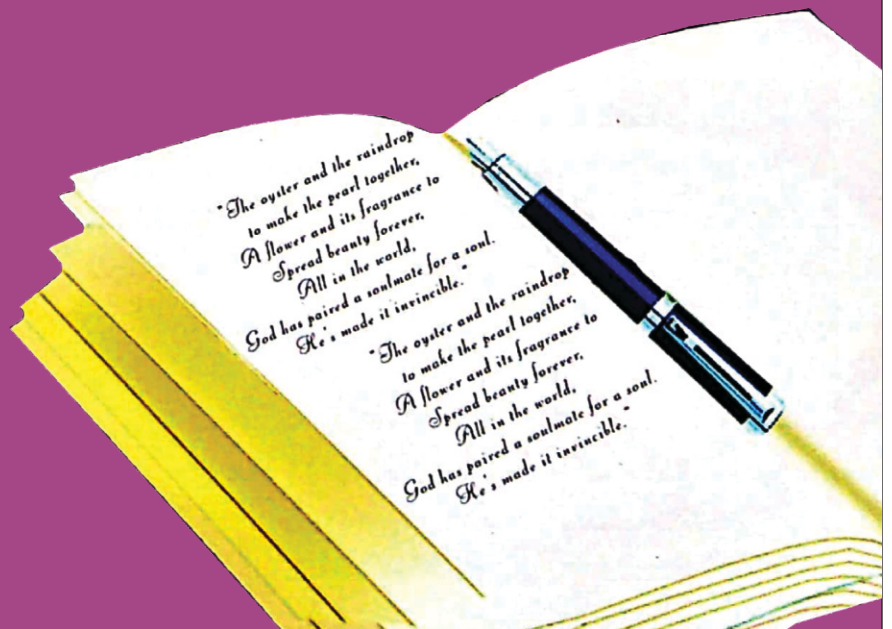


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Ph. : No. 07106-232349, 9423602502, 9422829240

E-mail : vibgyorbmv@yahoo.in

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Identity, Displacement, and Resilience: Amitav Ghosh's Portrayal of the Colonial Experience

□ Dr. Raheel Quraishi

Asst. Professor

Department of English

Bhiwapur Mahavidyalaya, Bhiwapur

Abstract :

Identity is a nuanced and evolving aspect of our lives, shaped gradually over time. Each individual possesses a unique identity that they hold dear and never wish to lose. In the rapidly changing era of globalization and localization, the matter of identity has grown increasingly complex and problematic. In one way or another, people frequently find themselves grappling with conflicts related to their identity. This issue has become so widespread that it occupies a central place in the world of literature. Amitav Ghosh delves deeply into the inner thoughts and emotions of those who experience an identity crisis brought about by diverse socio-political and economic circumstances. With great empathy, he skilfully expresses the struggles and sorrows of these individuals. This paper aims to shed light on the resonance of the identity crisis theme in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace*.

Key Words: Globalization, Identity, identity crisis

Amitav Ghosh is widely recognized as a prominent diasporic writer, displaying a remarkable blend of his anthropological curiosity and the compassionate heart of a novelist throughout his literary works. As an integral part of the diasporic experience, Ghosh authentically portrays the untold stories of people constantly on the move. He delves deep into the inner emotions of those ensnared in the whirlwind of colonization, subversion, and oppression. He articulates the pain and suffering of individuals who endure an enduring sense of losing their identity, feeling rootless, alienated, and homeless. Ghosh's skillful storytelling meticulously uncovers histories that have been overlooked and voices that have intentionally been silenced. All

his works resonate with the psychological struggles of those displaced, yearning for a sense of belonging and identity. T. Kundu aptly notices: The idea of displacement, craving for strong identifications and race-relations, is the staple-stuff of Ghosh's novels. (Kundu 75-82).

Identity is a significant concept with various definitions. In fields like sociology and psychology, it denotes an individual's perception and display of their uniqueness or belonging to particular groups. The term itself stems from the French word *Identite*, which has its origins in the Latin noun *identitas*. It refers to a person's unique characteristics, which develop and change over time through their associations with family and society members. Identity is a nuanced phenomenon, not set in stone, but rather evolving gradually. Hall affirms: Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, with the new cultural practices then represent, we should think instead, of identity as a production, which is never complete, always in the process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (Hall 222).

When individuals voluntarily or involuntarily relocate from their hometown to foreign lands, they carry their unique identities with them. However, in these new environments, they often struggle to preserve their sense of self, eventually leading to an identity crisis. This journey from being to becoming requires them to navigate a hyphenated identity. The term Identity Crisis was originally coined by the theorist Erik Erikson, who believed it to be a crucial conflict individuals face during their developmental stages. In the rapidly changing era of information and

technology, the concept of identity has become even more intricate and challenging. As a result, this pervasive issue of identity crisis has taken center stage in the realm of literature.

Amitav Ghosh's literary works often revolve around the lives of immigrants or individuals forced into exile, who find themselves transplanted into unfamiliar geographical and cultural settings, leading to a profound crisis of identity. His novel, *The Glass Palace*, is divided into seven parts and eloquently portrays the struggles and emotional turmoil experienced by those who have been displaced.

The novel features a rich tapestry of characters originating from diverse socio-political backgrounds. Each of these characters, in one way or another, becomes a victim of the ravages of war, colonization, and forced migration. Rajkumar, the central protagonist of the story, arrives in Mandalay as a result of fate's whims. At the tender age of eleven, he loses his mother, who had been his sole source of support following his father's demise due to a severe illness. This heart-breaking loss occurs during their journey from Akyab back to their hometown of Chittagong. When he has to perform the cremation rites for his mother, Rajkumar's hands tremble as he places the fire in her mouth. Rajkumar, who had been so rich in family, was alone now, with a khalashis apprenticeship for his inheritance (14). Rajkumar, the young survivor of the deadly fever that had devastated his town, deeply lamented the premature departure of his parents. He found employment as a helper and errand runner on a boat. However, the boat needed repairs after its journey up the Irrawaddy River from the Bay of Bengal. The boat owner instructed him to make his way to the city of Mandalay, a few miles inland, in search of work. By sheer chance, Rajkumar arrived in the unfamiliar city of Mandalay as a destitute, without any acquaintances. In this foreign land, he became a Kalaa, starting from scratch.

Through his remarkable ability to adapt and survive, he gradually prospered and eventually

became a wealthy figure in the timber industry, emerging as a timber tycoon. When riots erupted in Burma, triggered by tensions between Indian and Burmese laborers at the docks, numerous Indian and Chinese-owned businesses fell victim to the violence. Sadly, Rajkumar's timber yard was one of the casualties.

Despite the adversity he faced, Rajkumar's attachment to the land was so profound that he resisted the idea of returning to India. He harbored doubts about the prospects of life in India if he were to make that journey. He proclaims:

I have lived here all my life; everything I have is here. I'm not such a coward to give up everything I've worked for for the first sign of trouble. And anyway, what makes you think that we'll be any more welcome in India than we are here?...how do you know that the same thing wouldn't happen to us there?(245).

When Japanese troops invaded Burma, he tragically lost his son. He returned to Calcutta, India, seeking solace in Uma Deys home, where he endured a life he no longer desired, all for the sake of his orphaned granddaughter. In Burma, he had lost everything, and in his homeland of India, nothing held his interest. Throughout his life, he yearned for a sense of his own identity.

Dolly is another pivotal character in the novel who grapples with an identity crisis brought on by displacement. Adopted as a servant by the Royal Burmese family at a very young age, she remains ignorant of her true parentage. At the tender age of ten, when she should have been cared for, she found herself responsible for looking after the princesses. When the Royal family was forced into exile in India, Dolly, as an orphan, had no choice but to accompany them. To quote:

Of course they were going; they were orphans; they alone of the palace retainers had nowhere else to go, no other means of support. What they do but go with the King and Queen?(42).

Having spent over two decades residing in

India, she finds herself reluctant to return to Burma, as her inner thoughts are filled with apprehension about the kind of welcome she might encounter in her homeland. She complains:

If I went to Burma now I would be a foreigner they would call me a Kalaa like they do Indians trespasser, an outsider from across the sea. I'd never be able to rid myself of the idea that I would have to leave again one day, just as I had to before. You would understand if you knew what it was like when we left(113).

King Thebaw, during his seven-year rule, remained within the palace grounds and had to depart with his family when the British colonizers exiled him. It is truly distressing to witness how the British treated the king with great disrespect. Even individuals who were considered loyal, such as ministers, courtiers, and soldiers, abandoned their allegiance and turned against the king. Ghosh, with all eloquence, puts forth:

The two ministers were now competing with one another to keep the Royal Family under guard. They knew the British would be grateful to whoever handed over the royal couple; there would be rich rewards(25).

After the British troops withdrew and left the palace unguarded, there was rampant looting of valuable items. The king lost his status as a royal authority and became a prisoner. Alongside his family, he endured significant humiliation and disgrace. The British soldiers showed little regard for his dignity. The king's situation worsened when none of his ministers, courtiers, or servants offered to accompany him into exile. They are, in no way, bound to the king: The burdens of kingship were Thebaw's alone, solitude not the least among them(41). The king is joined only by orphaned girls, as they lack families. The situation became extremely embarrassing when the Royal family had to travel in basic bullock carts, the most ordinary mode of transportation. His distress deepened when he realized that his canopy had seven tiers instead of the customary nine for a king. This proved to be the most

humiliating ordeal for the ruler: In his last encounter with his erstwhile subjects he was publicly demoted, like an errant schoolchild(43-44).

Saya John, a significant character in the novel, lacks a distinct identity much like Rajkumar and Dolly. Similar to them, he is an orphan who grew up under the care of Catholic priests in Malacca. While employed at a military hospital in Singapore, he faced ridicule from the Indian soldiers stationed there. Saya John speaks to Rajkumar,

they 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 they would laugh and say, you are a dhobi ka kutta a washermans dog na ghar ka na ghat ka you dont belong anywhere, either by water or on land, and I'd say, yes, that is exactly what I am(10).

Saya John, an individual constantly on the move, experiences the life of an immigrant, shifting from one region to another. His profession involves working as a contractor in the teak industry in Burma. Following the era of colonization, John, in partnership with Rajkumar, managed to prosper in this line of work by effectively navigating the prevailing circumstances.

Similar to Saya John, Indian soldiers who served in the British Army during the colonial period grapple with a complex struggle of identity. These soldiers, who themselves were victims of colonization, find themselves wrestling with fragmented senses of self. Take, for instance, the case of Hardayal Singh, who has adopted the nickname Hardy. He represents the first member of his family to attain the rank of commissioned officer in the army. However, in various ways, he is compelled to conform to British cultural norms. This conformity results in his experiencing discrimination within the military mess. His difficulty in adapting to British dining habits even leads to him becoming the subject of ridicule. Consequently, Hardy feels

compelled to conceal his affinity for his native cuisine to avoid being stigmatized as uncivilized. To quote:

The officers mess, on the other hand, served English food and the trouble with Hardy was that he was one of those chaps who, no matter how hard they tried, simply could not get by 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 (281).

He experiences remorse for the nature of his work. He undergoes a painful realization: it was as if my heart and my mind 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 (407). Arjun's consciousness and his yearning for his native culture lead to the fragmentation of his identities. As one of the first commissioned officers of Indian descent, he pays little attention to his own individual identity and becomes a puppet under the influence of the British rulers. The colonizers exert a powerful hold over his mind and heart. He becomes deeply enamoured with British culture, adopting their clothing, speech, and even being referred to as Angreg by his fellow officers.

However, over time, Arjun's perspective begins to change when he experiences racial discrimination despite his loyalty, particularly during World War-II. They face unjust treatment, such as being prohibited from using umbrellas in the rain, which is seen as a symbol of authority. Additionally, Indian officers are denied access to the swimming pool in Singapore. In numerous ways, they are subjected to humiliation and

treated as inferiors by the white colonial authorities, all while being expected to make sacrifices for the colonys benefit.

Conclusion: Colonizers racial discrimination had a profound impact on the colonized individuals, causing them to lose their sense of identity and become powerless pawns in a larger game. Amitav Ghosh skilfully portrays the harsh reality faced by these people who grapple with an identity crisis and the erosion of their individuality. His work also highlights the profound helplessness experienced by these individuals, who find themselves trapped in degrading circumstances with no viable alternatives but to adapt and compromise.

Ultimately, Ghosh's narrative depicts these individuals as resilient, as they cling to a glimmer of hope for a better future. Despite the adversity they endure, they continue to move forward, holding onto the possibility of improvement. Ghosh's storytelling captures the complex interplay of identity, power, and hope in the context of colonial oppression, shedding light on the enduring human spirit in the face of adversity.

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