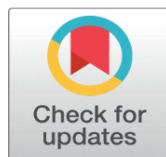


MIGRATION, MEMORIES & MISERY IN THE GLASS PALACE BY AMITAV GHOSH

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ABSTRACT

The history of Indo-Myanmar migration from the late 19th to 20th century has been a subject of great curiosity among many researchers and authors and is quite well-documented and much written about. The Glass Palace by Amitav Ghosh is one of them that narrates the stories of Rajkumar and Dolly in the backdrop of the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885, the rapid influx of indentured laborers to Burma since the early 20th century and the mass emigration of Indians in 1942 from Burma in the wake of the Second World War. On the other hand, the research paper, Indian-Migrants in Myanmar: Emerging Trends and Challenges published under the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs gives a thorough and succinct explanation of facts about the different phases of migration from India to Burma and its social and political repercussions. This research paper attempts to concurrently study the portrayal of these events as essayed in novel to the observation of facts in the paper.

Keywords: Memories, Migration, Misery, India, Myanmar, Fiction, Facts

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the British colonies in Southeast Asia is all too well established and known through traditional sources. However, the stories of the individuals, their approach to the crucial incidents of the past, and life lived and adapted in between these incidents are less talked about and little known. The Glass Palace by Amitav Ghosh is one such fiction work that takes readers through innumerable deeply impacting memories of the characters who witness, experience and build their lives around historically remarkable incidents like the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885, the Independence movement of India and the resurgence of democratic activism in Burma of the late 1990s. For that matter, Indo-Myanmar relations have also been a subject of great curiosity among various researchers. 'Indian-Migrants in Myanmar: Emerging Trends and Challenges' by Medha Chaturvedi is one such research paper that gives a panoramic picture of migration and the resulting changes that shaped the lives of the people on both sides of the border since the late 19th century, precisely 1886. It's worthwhile, thus, to concurrently study both and analyze the above research paper vis-a-vis the novel Glass Palace'. This paper deals with the migration of Indians to Burma, the emigration of South Indian labourers to Southeast Asia and the mass exodus of Indian immigrants from the onset of Second World War as portrayed in the fiction alongside the facts stated in the research paper 'Indian-Migrants in Myanmar: Emerging Trends and Challenges' by Medha Chaturvedi, published under the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs.

2. MIGRATION OF INDIANS TO BURMA

The long-drawn phenomenon of migration of Indians to Burma is described in 4 waves, from 1886 until the present, in the paper Indian-Migrants in Myanmar: Emerging Trends and Challenges¹. Coming to the novel, it unfolds in the year 1885, thrusting mainly on the overthrow of King Thebaw of the Konbaung dynasty, and the arrival of an Indian boy, Rajkumar Raha to Mandalay under his pressing personal conditions and ongoing labour migration happening from Chittagong to Burma's Arakan in the 19th century². The novel brings up the phenomenon of migration, quite subtly, in the process of giving a glimpse into the humble past of Rajkumar, whose father who worked as a translator and clerk also migrated willingly to settle in Akyab port of Burma (in Arakan) after having a rift with his family in Chittagong³. This free-flowing migration to Burma's Arakan in the story is sufficiently elucidated in the research paper which mentions that the movement of Bengali-speaking Indians of undivided Bengal to Burma's Arakan at that time was quite usual due to the easy maritime connectivity of River Naf³. Besides, Arakan being a hub of employment opportunities, drew people from across the border. The physical isolation of Arakan from mainland Burma and its proximity to Chittagong contributed as well to the increased transnational movement, confirms the paper. The novel succeeds however in focusing on the enthusiasm and spirit of 11-year-old Rajkumar who reached Mandalay incidentally after taking an arduous journey and losing his parents to sickness⁴. His migration to the place is portrayed with hope and resilience.

3. EMIGRATION OF SOUTH INDIAN LABOURERS TO SOUTHEAST ASIA

The novel plot unfolds the issue of relentless recruitment of cheap labourers from South India to Burma and Malay, by recruitment agents, labour contractors or maistry and is described as one of the ways to make good income in little time. The protagonist Rajkumar who dreamt of buying a timberyard too takes this task and travels to Madras, 8 to 9 times, the first time with a maistry, Baburao of Guntur of Andhra Pradesh, and transports labourers from India to Burma to foreign oil companies and mints good money⁵. True to the novel's portrayal, the research paper explains that after the British enacted the stringent Labour Act in 1876, to regulate the recruitment methods, transport and welfare of the emigrants to Burma, the outflow of labour was curbed to an extent. This led to the rise of a black market for cheap labour, where the recruitment agents went from village to village, to trap cheap labour and hand them to the contractors in Burma, who provided them with migration documents and admitted them as free independent labourers⁶. Interestingly, the research paper, which is mainly focused on studying the Indian-Myanmar relations and conditions of migrants through the various stages of migration, also reveals that the willingness of the economically-distressed Indian migrant labourers to do difficult jobs at meagre wages also led to unregulated flow of migrants to resource-rich Burma⁷. Usually, the labourers were saddled with huge debts and depended on recruitment agents for getting employment in the land afar⁸. A vivid picture of this fact is also sketched in the novel, where Baburao goes to the villages of Madras, lures the impoverished villagers, to turn their fortunes, becoming self-sufficient and get rid of their debts by going to the 'Golden Land' Burma to work.

4. THE MASS EXODUS OF INDIAN IMMIGRANTS FROM THE ONSET OF 2ND WORLD WAR-

Glass Palace takes forward the story of Rajkumar Raha's wife and children to an unsettling turn, with Dolly experiencing agony and alienation in the late 1920s in her native country as the Burmese population becomes increasingly hostile towards Indian population and at one instance, even call her a traitor for marrying an Indian. She even opens to her friend Uma, about her deep fears of leaving Burma due to this undercurrent of resentment for Indians⁹. The novel sensitively reveals the resentment in the local population against well-settled Indians besides the anarchy raging in Burma at the time. It also reveals the strong hope in Indians like Rajkumar for the conditions to get better till the end¹⁰. The research paper, on the other hand, reasons out succinctly the resentment in Burmese and says that by the 1930s anti-Indian sentiments grew stronger with the Burmese entering the labour market hitherto dominated by Indians, Burmese graduates of the University of Rangoon looking for clerical jobs and the control of Indian Chettiar community over agricultural tracts¹¹. The Burmese wanted to overthrow not just Britishers but Indians too, as was clear from the intermittent violent clashes in the 1930s in Burma. The paper further explains that by the Second World War (1939-45), the Japanese bombings alongside rampant riots, led to a mass exodus of about 500,000 Indians from Burma, with half of them being killed on the way¹². This haplessness of the times is touchingly unraveled in the fiction by the

excruciating journey of Rajkumar, Dolly, Manju and her 1-year-old daughter Jaya to Calcutta who leaves Burma along with thousands of other Indians after the family lost Neel in a Japanese bombing and conditions worsened. The family reached Calcutta in 1942, as the Japanese bombed Rangoon and massive emigration gained momentum northwards towards India¹³. Giving conformity and accuracy to the occurrence, the research paper asserts that the period from 1942-45 was the darkest period for the Indian community in Myanmar, as the wealth and accomplishments of the Indians were destroyed and their social positions withered and suffered as much¹⁴.

While the fiction work *The Glass Palace* is consistent with the facts and is mostly based on the real events of the late 19th century to 1996, it's the novel's effort to focus a great deal on the enormity of personal trials and tribulations that make it unique from other formal historical accounts. As with the entire story, the novel project's migration too with a humane approach and from an insider's or the perspectives of immigrants. However, the fiction when studied in conjunction with the documented facts, helps in getting a complete picture of the past scenario wherein novel illuminates those incidents with a distinctly humane appeal that helps in conjuring those times with the individuals actively engaging with the past and the documented facts help in filling the gaps of certain information, with the chronologically explained relevant facts. This helps in getting a holistic picture of the past that provides discretion to see facts and people's engagement with the past as two different and equally important things and the ability to provide a better understanding of historical incidents. Now, looking at how the depiction of migration can be studied from the fiction, *The Glass Palace* is distinct from any regular historical account of migration.

5. MIGRATION FROM AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE-

At no point does the novel take sides with a particular ideology or condemn it, justify any political stance, or glorify or demean any character for their actions. It mostly portrays the characters dispassionately but intensely in their respective conditions. Even Rajkumar's journey to becoming an affluent person from an orphaned and impoverished Indian immigrant in a foreign land, comes across as a story of persistence and ambitiousness, rather than pity and sympathy, as one may assume from a regular historical account and general observation of wage labourers employed in British colonies. Rajkumar's dogged pursuit of becoming successful through timber plantation, and his high-spiritedness to learn even in unpleasant and difficult tasks like khalasi, and raftsmen beautifully bring a laborious yet eventful side of a struggling vulnerable immigrant like Rajkumar¹⁵.

5.1. MIGRATION WITH AN INDIVIDUALISTIC APPEAL

The novel accounts for the complexity of the sociological transformation, work and social mores and cultural assimilation due to migration, at great lengths, primarily with the lives of the individuals; Dolly and Rajkumar. Rajkumar who arrives as an Indian immigrant labourer in Burma and earns huge wealth over time, becomes strongly attached to the land and refuses to leave the country even in the face of the obvious danger of communal clashes and the Second World War¹⁶. On the other hand, Dolly, who is of Burmese origin, has no longing for her native country once she leaves it after the exile and stays in India for 20 years¹⁷. She is the first in her family to think of leaving Burma, after facing violent encounters from the local population. The fact that each person and each life have been affected uniquely by some or another despite being from the same community or even family disrupts a homogenous perception about collective suffering, ordeals and journeys and gives a more empathetic, mindful and new vision to see the past as incidental and quotidian occurrences rather than seeing them as only politically motivated or historically significant.

5.2. EVERY MIGRATION IS UNIQUE AND LEADS TO UNIQUE CONDITIONS

No two migrations are alike. While some people in the 19th century are depicted in the novel to be migrating willingly, like Rajkumar's father who emigrated from Chittagong to Arakan for better prospects, Rajkumar migrates due to the death of his parents, and desire to struggle and live on¹⁸. Furthermore, these two instances of migration can't be compared to the labour migration from South India to Burma and Malay, happening in the late 19th and early 20th century, where recruitment agents were deceitfully bringing labourers to work in risky and unpleasant conditions. Compared to the above ones, the emigration of Dolly and Konbaung dynasty members in 1886 due to exile was despicable and resisted by its victims, adversely affecting their psyche. Among all these, the mass exodus of 1942 is shown to be the most excruciating of them all, with the Indians compelled to emigrate owing to an outright threat to

their lives and egregious violence because of both war and hostility of Burmese towards Indians. Thus, the social repercussions, adaptation, and cultural assimilation resulting from these migrations and the living conditions of these immigrants also must be distinct and wide-ranging.

The novel depicts an immensely moving picture of the historical past. It gives each character its own pace and space for dealing with their ordeal and dilemmas, where neither of them is judged by any yardstick, of ideology or values. This is where one can understand that even though lakhs of people emigrated at the same time, and many went through acute sickness and death during migration, still the reaction, trauma and decision of every individual was distinct and can't be summarily judged, assumed or dismissed. This is where the work of fiction *The Glass Palace* stands out as a story of struggles, and adaptation of mankind, rather than mere enumeration and recollection of the historical past. Thus, in fiction, the focused approach on the individual portrayals and their choice to deal with their situation in a certain way helps one see myriad unheard and unknown truths or facts about the social conditions and changes of the times, beyond popular discourse. In these ways, this fiction fills the gap by helping the historical facts touch people's hearts and minds, helping them see these conditions as their own story, as more relatable and believable.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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