

Amitav Ghosh's *Glass Palace*: Contemporary Relevance of Buddhist Ideals

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Abstract

This paper attempts to bring out the reworking of Buddhist metaphysics in Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace and uncover the Buddhist framework on which the novel has been built. The paper begins by discussing Buddhism in Burma through the recurrent motif of the Shwe Dagon, a symbol of the glorious era of Buddhism in Burma during the reign of King Mindon and its decline during the reign of his successor King Thebaw. The paper takes up individual characters in the novel and studies how they have been built around the Buddhist ideals, balancing pain and pleasure on the wheel of life. The character of Dolly is discussed as being representative of the Eightfold Path in her compassion, her acceptance of life, her total detachment and her stoic endurance. The paper ends with a discussion of the portrayal of Aung San Suu Kyi as a humanist with a rational ideology through whom Amitav Ghosh has reinterpreted Buddhism and found its contemporary relevance.

Key words: Buddhism; Self perception; Gyana; Moksha; Dukkha; Burma; India

I

Buddhism as a religious movement was a revolt against the regressive doctrines and practices that assailed the ancient Hindu religion in India. Siddhartha Gautama found that the prevailing religious practices were no longer conducive to the progress of humanity and embarked on the quest for a new path. One day, deep in mediation, he discovered an ethical solution to his problems which he called the Middle Path. He also propounded the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path of Conduct and a doctrine known as *Paticca Samuppada* – the Theory of Dependent Origination which explains “the teaching of conditionality and interdependence of all the manifold phenomena of existence” (Nayanatiloka 3)

In the Foreword to *2500 Years of Buddhism* S. Radhakrishnan remarks:

In the life of the Buddha, there are two sides, individual and social. The familiar Buddha-image is of a meditating sage, yogin, absorbed and withdrawn, lost in the joy

of his inner meditation. This is the tradition associated with the Theravada Buddhism and Asoka's missions. For these the Buddha is a man, not God, a teacher and not a saviour. There is the other side of the Buddha's life, when he is concerned with the sorrows of men, eager to enter their lives, heal their troubles and spread his message for the good of the many: *bahu-jana-hitaya*. Based on this compassion for humanity, a second tradition matured in North India under the Kusanas (70-480 A.D.) and the Guptas (320-650 A.D.). It developed the ideal of salvation for all, the discipline of devotion and the way of universal service. While the former tradition prevails in Ceylon, Burma and Thailand, the latter is found in Nepal, Tibet, Korea, China, and Japan. (viii)

Comparing the Upanishadic and Buddhist ideals Radhakrishnan remarks:

It is true that the Upanisads also subordinate the sacrificial piety to the spiritual religion which they formulate, but they did not attack it in the way in which the Buddha did. The Buddha's main object was to bring about a reformation in religious practices and a return to the basic principles. (xiv)

Buddhism brought about a change not only in the day to day life of the people but also marked a defining moment in the Indian history of ideas. The Upanishadic narrative focussed on *moksha* brought about by *gyana* which could be realized through individual effort. Buddhism did not dwell on this individualistic quest for *gyana*. Instead, it addressed the communal, real-life question of *dukkha*. Therefore, as opposed to the Upanishadic quest for *moksha* brought about by *gyana*, the Buddhist quest is for *nirvana* which is attained through *karma*. Thus the salvation of the individual is achieved through interaction with the rest of mankind. Consequently, *nirvana* is linked with *mahakaruna* (universal compassion) and *mahamaitri* (universal brotherhood). In this way Buddhism brought about a major shift in the Indian history of ideas:

- (i) It shifted the focus of man from ritual to reason.
- (ii) It shifted the emphasis on code of conduct from the private domain to the public domain.
- (iii) It prescribed the path of *karma*
- (iv)

II

Amitav Ghosh has finely reworked these Buddhist ideas into the narrative of *The Glass Palace*. The narrative unfolds on the landscape of Buddhist Burma which is in turmoil caused by British colonialism. Faced with British aggression, Thebaw, the king of Burma is shown trying to hold his people together through faith in their ancient religion.

To uphold the religion, to uphold the national honour, to uphold the country's interests will bring about threefold good – good of our religion, good of our master and good of ourselves and will gain for us the important result of placing us on the path to the celestial regions and to Nirvana (*GP* 16).

When the defeated Thebaw is being deported, he sees the Shwe Dagon Pagoda as symbolic of old Buddhist glory:

The towering mass of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, larger even than he had imagined, its *hti* thrusting skywards... He had worked on the *hti* himself, helped with his own hands in the gilding of the spire, layering sheets of gold leaf... (48).

As a glorious era comes to an end and British occupation begins, the narrative itself seems to be in turmoil with characters being propelled by their circumstances in all possible directions. Dolly leaves with the deported royal family, Ma Cho disappears, Saya John and Rajkumar are brought together. At this stage, all characters with the exception of the King and the Queen are shown to be involved in some action for the sake of survival. There are three characters that are prominent at this stage: Saya John, Rajkumar and Dolly. All of them are orphans. While Saya John is an adult, Rajkumar and Dolly are children. Even as a child, Dolly shows single minded devotion to her duty. Rajkumar is pragmatic and being more conscious of the changing world around him, deliberates over going back to work for the boatman who had brought him to Burma. Dolly is in no doubt about what she has to do:

Dolly...had been badly scared herself...then the queen had sent for her and after that...she'd had no time to be frightened (20).

When faced with the choice of staying back or accompanying the deported king, Dolly's thoughts are with her charge, the colicky second Princess:

Has something happened? Was the Princess crying? She jumped to her feet and hurried towards the Pavilion... (42).

While other attendants gradually deserted the royal family during their period in exile, Dolly stayed back, not for some coveted reward but because of her sense of duty:

[T]hat settled the matter as far as Dolly was concerned. Where the Princesses were, she would be too; she couldn't imagine what they would do without her (53).

Dolly is bound by duty whereas Rajkumar and Saya John recognize no duty except towards their own selves. As the narrative progresses, Dolly is seen shouldering ever increasing responsibilities while Rajkumar and Saya John move from one success to another.

The entry of Uma, the collector's wife, ushers in a great change in Dolly. Uma helps her realize that the Princesses are grown up and have no more need of her. Rajkumar, who has come to Ratnagiri in search of Dolly, finally succeeds in evoking some sentiments in her. There is a unique facet to the character of Dolly. Her decisions are not governed by the pressures of her circumstances or practical considerations but flow from her own free will. This is in sharp contrast to her friend Uma who is easily upset by the circumstances of her life. After Dolly leaves for Rangoon, Uma succumbs to the misery of her situation and flees to her parents' house in Calcutta.

Rajkumar and Dolly have two sons Neel and Dinu who are diametrically opposite to each other. In spite of his physical disability, Dinu is sensitive and cannot be shattered easily. He is a survivor. Neel dies in the Burmese uprising and his wife Manju regresses into a state where she embraces death while fleeing from Burma, content to leave her infant daughter Jaya with Dolly and Rajkumar. Rajkumar is often disoriented and is tempted to surrender himself to fate. It is the voice of Dolly that urges him to go on. "You can't stop now, Rajkumar – you have to go on" (472). The character of Manju brings into the narrative her brother Arjun, his batman Kishan Singh and his friend Hardayal Singh or Hardy. Ghosh shows Arjun and Hardy in the same circumstances but with different levels of realization about their place in the universe they inhabit. The character of Kishan Singh is the mirror in which Arjun and Hardy see the reality of their lives and actions. The realization of the ambiguity of their loyalty to the British Army and their mercenary status is revealed and brings about a change in their beliefs and aspirations.

Dinu and Arjun are both in love with Alison. Dinu is physically disabled, while Arjun is the epitome of manliness in the sense that he serves in the army. But Dinu is stronger in terms of his awareness of his self, something which Arjun lacks. Alison compares the characters of Dinu and Arjun:

She saw that despite the largeness and authority of his [Arjun's] presence, he was a man without resources, a man whose awareness of himself was very slight and very fragile; she saw that Dinu was much stronger and more resourceful...(376).

However, as the narrative progresses and Arjun and Hardy change loyalties, Arjun emerges stronger than before and bravely does what he believes in, giving no thought to the mortal danger around him.

While Arjun joins the INA, Dolly reaches Calcutta with Rajkumar and baby Jaya. Somewhere in her heart she knows that her younger son Dinu is alive and she aspires to go back to Burma to look for him. Rajkumar, who is unwilling to go back to Burma, disappears

on the day they are to leave. Dolly waits, gets another ticket booked for herself and goes away quietly. Rajkumar finds her note:

...Rajkumar – in my heart I know that Dinu is still alive and that I shall find him. After that I shall go to Sagaing as I have so long wanted to. Know that nothing in this world will be harder to renounce than the memory of our love (482).

In Burma Dolly finds Dinu and stays with him for a week and then proceeds to join the Sagaing monastery where she dies in peace.

Dinu lives to witness the return of his friend Aung San's daughter Aung San Suu Kyi, and the power she wields over millions of people by dint of her simple determination.

III

An analysis of the characters reveals that they have been constructed around the Buddhist ideal of the Four Great Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

Dolly's character is structured as representative of these ideals. She is aware of the Four Great Truths:

- (1) There is suffering in life (*dukham*).
- (2) The cause of suffering is the grasping desire to live (*trishna*).
- (3) Emancipation from suffering is possible by abandoning selfish cravings (*upadanas*).
- (4) The Noble Eightfold Path (*arya asthanga marga*) is the means by which man can get rid of all selfish cravings and attain perfect freedom from suffering.

All characters are shown to be suffering in one way or the other: King Thebaw, his family, Dolly, Uma, Rajkumar, Ma Cho, Manju, Jaya, Dinu, Alison, Arjun, Hardy and Kishan Singh suffer pain and misery. However, it is Dolly – unselfish and loving – who endures this suffering stoically. She always rises above the painful immediate circumstance and concentrates on the larger task at hand. She realizes that the cause of suffering is *trishna* and often tries to reproach Rajkumar for his simple-minded devotion to earning money.

She has the ability to forget the sensations and demands of her own body. When faced with the difficult task of fleeing Burma on foot, she goes about it bravely. Manju is shocked by the extent of Dolly's detachment:

Despite the pain Dolly called herself lucky...It made Manju wince to watch her: not because of her obvious pain, but because of her

willed imperviousness to it...Dolly...with her maddening detachment, as though all of this were a nightmare of someone else's imagining (469).

Thus Dolly's character emerges as a representative of the Buddhist ideal of the Eightfold Path. Right Belief (*samyag drishti*) lights her way. She is unattached, knows the world to be an illusion and yet is always focussed on action. Right Aspiration (*samyag samkalpa*) is her guide. She aspires to do what duty demands of her. Right Speech (*samyag vak*) keeps her balanced through all the ups and downs of her circumstance. Dolly is forever polite but at the same time she is absolutely fearless in delivering the truth. She speaks her mind to the Collector's wife Uma. Her speech is powerful enough to infuse strength into the old and tired Rajkumar. Right Action (*samyag karma*) keeps her focussed. Right Living (*samyag ajiva*) guides her steps. Right Thought (*samyag smriti*) is her breath force. She is absolutely clear headed and is free from dilemmas and doubts. Right Tranquility (*samyag samadhi*) helps her to step out of the material world. After making arrangements for her husband Rajkumar and grand child Jaya, she leaves them to go in search of her younger son Dinu. Having found him, she moves to the Sagaing monastery to spend the rest of her days. In spite of being an orphan and a slave, in spite of losing her elder son and daughter-in-law, there is no bitterness or regret in the character of Dolly. Although she has lived through terrible experiences, sorrow or despair never tainted her. She dies a quick and painless death. The wheel of life thus reaches a full circle.

Buddhism and Burma are inseparable. Buddhism of the Thervada School was introduced into Burma around fifteen hundred years ago and has been a great social force. Whatever is of any account in Burmese life is derived from Buddhism. It has played an important role in unifying the people of Burma. Buddhism is also the tie that binds Burma with India. In *The Glass Palace* Amitav Ghosh has wrought a reworking of Buddhist metaphysics in a narrative that links Burma and India. Individual characters are shown at various stages of enlightenment, grappling with the ideas of life, death, loyalty, pain and suffering. Aung San Suu Kyi is shown to represent the contemporary equivalent of Buddhist values and ideas. The idea that thus emerges from the *Glass Palace* is that these acts of resistance to the inexorable movement of the individual and the world towards existential miasma are indicative of the solution for contemporary political cannibalism.

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