

## Displacement of Nation in the Glass Palace

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### Abstract

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Nation has been considered as a form of “restrictively imagined collectivities” (Anderson 147) by Amitav Ghosh in “A Correspondence on *Provincializing Europe*” that creates hindrances in writing about the individual identity. This makes several writers deal with family centered novels and their conflicts. They find a way out from discussing the concept of nation by dealing with families in their works. Amitav Ghosh is one such writer who has displaced himself from bringing in the concept of nation in his 2001 Frankfurt International e-Book Award winning novel, *The Glass Palace*. Ghosh has brought in the lives of a few individuals linked in families and their experiences under one umbrella. Moreover, he makes those individuals search for a space that moves them away from the confinement of nation. This historical novel has portrayed the struggles faced by the people during the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty in Mandalay. Through these imaginary characters, Ghosh has displaced the notion of nation and has paved prominence to the family ties that revolve around their own inner conflicts which have a different imaginary concreteness from that of other countries like Europe and America.

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### Introduction

Nation has been considered as an “imagined political community” (Anderson 1991) by Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. It is considered as an “imagined” (Anderson 1991) as it is limited and assumed as a community for which the people “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation” (Anderson 1991) are forced to believe nation to be a deep, horizontal comradeship to kill themselves willingly for this imagined and limited notions. They have been denied the fact that such nationalist myths and communities reject heterogeneities of a nation which lead to suppression and discrimination of various cultures and diversities. This notion is thrust upon the people by the colonisers through their concept of nation that results in domination within the modern society. The concept of nation thus prevents a writer from dealing with the individuals and their psychological perspectives which is an imagined and a limited notion, restricting the writer to locate the individual identity and their family bounds beyond a nationalistic view. This is what Amitav Ghosh clearly calls as “restrictively imagined collectivities” (Ghosh and Chakrabarty 147) in his “A Correspondence on *Provincializing Europe*” that creates hindrances in writing about the individual identity. This has been the reason for several writers to displace themselves from dealing with the nationalistic concepts and to locate themselves in analysing the familial bounds of the individuals.

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### Family vs. Nation

Amitav Ghosh, the author of 2001 Frankfurt International e-Book Award winning novel, *The Glass Palace* has displaced himself from writing about the nation and rather deals with the family ties of his characters that run through three generations. This historical novel starts with the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty in Mandalay, through the Second World War to the modern times. It deals with three families and their ties in different settings like India, Burma and Malaya. Ghosh has brought in his imaginary characters that are more family bound rather than historical. These characters try to find a space for themselves that naturally move them away from the confinement of nation. In their search for a space, some characters attain what they aspire for. Accordingly, the novel opens with the sounds of the British cannons warning the people of their invasion which results in the fall of the last Burmese King Thebaw Min and his dearest Queen Supayalat as witnessed by Rajkumar, an eleven year old Indian orphan immigrated in Burma, the central character of the novel. It has always been the Burmese Queen Supayalat who cleared the paths of her beloved King to rule their country without rivals for his throne. She earns hatred from her people for her atrocious behaviour to kill whoever came her King's way to grab his throne; yet being felt pathetic for present position to be expelled: Through all the years of the Queen's reign the townfolk 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, it was as though a bond had been conjured into existence that had never been existed before. (Ghosh, 34) The Burmese King and Queen have been displaced from their colonising attitude to an exile that changes their lives after reaching Ratnagiri, India. Though the people of Ratnagiri are alien to them, a change of attitude in Thebaw Min and Supayalat have made them live again as the King and Queen to the people of Ratnagiri and act more importantly as the guardian spirits of those people in many aspects like warning them of crucial storms and providing place for them to survive when a plague occurs. This becomes clear when the narrator says, "In Ratnagiri there were many who believed that King was the first to know when the sea has claimed a victim" (Ghosh, 76). Though these Royal people appear strong, they are denied the role of protagonists. Rather, it is the common people like Rajkumar, Dolly, a servant of Queen Supayalat, Uma, the widow of Ratnagiri District Collector, Saya John, the mentor of Rajkumar who rule the plot as central characters trying to locate themselves in family ties and search for their identities with different perspectives.

Among them, Rajkumar has an immigrant characteristic craving to become a notable person in an alien land which he achieves with the help of his mentor Saya John. At the age of eleven, he finds the girl of his dream, Dolly who is a servant of Queen Supayalat. After several years of hardships and learning the business tactics from Saya John, he becomes the 'Rajkumar' that he aspired to become. He builds his own kingdom in Burma and comes to India in search of his dream girl, Dolly who hardly remembers him since her expel from Burma with the King and Queen. She could not find the traces of her days in Burma and struggles a lot to accept his proposal of marriage and her new life in Burma. It is Uma, a mutual friend of Dolly, who pacifies her to accept the new life that has come in her way as an escape from her barriers of living a peaceful life. But it is not the life that either Dolly or Uma has imagined to be. Rather it was the other way round. Despite her comfort in her home and with her two children, Dolly feels dissatisfied and keeps longing for something that would give her contentment. In the later part of the novel, Dolly leaves Rajkumar under the protection of Uma in India and goes in search of her missing son. She finally finds him and becomes spiritual through which she attains contentment. She writes a letter to Rajkumar: *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 do. Know that nothing in this world will be harder to renounce than you and the memory of our love. Dolly.*

He never saw her again. (Ghosh, 482)

Rajkumar has always been independent in his decisions as he happened to be an orphan and hence he dissatisfies Dolly in several aspects like having an illegitimate child named Ilongo, developing a misunderstanding with Uma and craving for much more in business. He has an illegal affair with a woman working in his land, when Dolly was busy taking extra care of their second son Dinu, who is crippled. Such behaviours of his are realized by him through his daughter-in-law Manju, the widow of his first son Neel, when she is enraged at her husband's death and suffers hunger and tiredness while escaping from Burma during the invasion of Japanese army. She yells at him: 'Why, old man, why?' she shouted at him... she no longer cared that he was Neel's father and that she'd always been in awe of him: ... 'Why do I have to go on? Look at you: you've gone on – and on and on and on. And what has it brought you?' (Ghosh, 472) As an outcome of it he feels like a stricken child.

Furthermore the drowning of Manju by leaving her child parentless, hits him through his heart. Dolly comes to his recovery and pushes him forward to precede their long travel with their grandchild back to India where they reach Uma's house. Uma is a mutual friend of Dolly who dislikes her husband's westernised attitudes in treating the guests formally and to make her act as the host for all such parties. It is for this reason he had married a woman who is educated and well mannered. At one point, they agree to the fact that they dislike each other and her husband, the District Collector of Ratnagiri, commits suicide. After her husband's death, Uma takes some time to mould herself and starts to explore the world by travelling. As time passes she becomes Dr. Uma, a patriot working for the independence of India. When the families gather for the marriage of Neel and Manju, the first son of Rajkumar and the niece of Uma, they happen to share various perspectives. Uma blames Rajkumar that men like him sell his own native people as indentured labours to the colonizers, and that they are in no way different from them. She says, "Rajkumar, you're in no position to offer opinions. It's people like you who're responsible for this tragedy. Did you ever think of the consequences when you were transporting people here? What you and your kind have done is far worse than the worst deeds of the Europeans." (Ghosh, 247) She stands on her own opinions about people and fights for the cause of independence. She has always been with Dolly and till the end they retain their friendship and at one point, Uma is ready to forget the misunderstandings between herself and Rajkumar for Dolly's sake and takes good care of him. At the end of the novel, Uma and Rajkumar are seen dead in the same bed with some sort of contentment that they have attained. Rajkumar places Saya John as a mentor in his life and always treats him with respect. He is more like a father to him who has given him a new life that he aspired for. Although Saya John's son Mathew is in United States, he finds it comfortable to be with Rajkumar and he guides him with the business tactics and provides all that are essential for Rajkumar's growth. When Rajkumar comes to meet him with his newly married wife Dolly, Saya John presents him a gift which makes the kingdom of Rajkumar sparkle. He presents him a piece of rubber that would yield him a lot of money in business. It is a pity that Saya John meets a tragic death during his visit to his son Mathew's home in America. When the old Saya John and his granddaughter Alison attempt to escape from their place, he is humiliated by a Japanese soldier that results in his death while Alison shoots herself.

### Individuals as Families

All these characters revolve around the life of Rajkumar who knowingly or unknowingly creates a bond among the families of his, Uma's and Saya John's. Thus, a family tie has been created that binds them together who are capable of looking at themselves as individuals rather than representing their nations. The characters in the novel are not representatives of a particular nation, but as individuals. Their identities are seen not with their nationalistic approach but as individuals who are in search of their own identities, locating themselves in a space where they feel contented by displacing themselves away from the nationalistic myths and its notions. As put forth by several writers, the concept of nation has been separated from that of family ties. Amitav Ghosh is one such writer who finds himself comfortable in displacing his novel from the conceptions of nation. This notion of Ghosh gets reflected in the novel wherein characters distance away from the limited and the imagined communities that restrict their attempts to move further in search of their space in this world. In this connection, it is worthy to quote from Bill Ashcroft's *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*: In practice it is hard to see how the nation can cease to be employed as a definitive political entity within which these internal heterogeneities and differences can be resolved. Perhaps the issue is not whether we have nations but what kinds of nations we have, whether, that is, they insist on an exclusionary myth of national unity based in some abstraction such as race, religion or ethnic exclusionary or they embrace plurality and multiculturalism. (Ashcroft, 155)

### Conclusion

Thus, *The Glass Palace* finds multicultural and multiethnic aspects through its characters. They find themselves beyond their nation and focus on their cultural identities that gradually lead to their inner self. This brings in the heterogeneous concepts of a nation rather than homogeneous that dislocates people from identifying themselves. Through these imaginary characters, Ghosh has displaced the notion of nation and has given prominence to the family ties that revolve around their own inner conflicts which have a different imaginary concreteness from that of other countries like Europe and America.

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