



## *Overtones Ege Journal of English Studies* Vol. 2 (2023)

---

### **Elusive Idea of Nationhood and Bifurcated Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace***

**Khandakar Ashraful Islam**

[ORCID](#)

**Abstract:** The question of nation has always been a problematic one. For the people of the postcolonial countries, the notion of nationhood is more intricate because the colonized mass had continuously been persuaded by the manipulative colonial discourses and colonial hegemony to accept the supremacy of the colonial masters and to abnegate their indigenous culture. This colonial interference has not only troubled the notion of nationhood but also jeopardized the identity formation of the colonized subjects. In *The Glass Palace* (2000), Amitav Ghosh taking the backdrop of the third Anglo-Burmese war and India's freedom struggle sheds light on the problematization of the formation of nationhood of Indian soldiers and portrays the psychological dilemma and struggle those Indian soldiers and officers went through in response to the call of duty to rescue their own nation from the grip of the colonizers. Focusing on the major characters of *The Glass Palace* this article is an attempt to enquire into the causes how for the colonized mass the concept of nationalism since its inception—being marred by the conflicting ideologies—has turned into an elusive idea and how the identity formation of the postcolonial subjects is always entangled and bifurcated due to the influences of the legacy of colonization.

**Keywords:** Nation, Elusiveness of Nationhood, Colonial Discourse, Mimicry, Bifurcated Identity, Amitav Ghosh

The spirit of nationalism dominated Europe throughout the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. However, for the colonies, the twentieth century is the focal point for the rise of the nationalist spirit when “the native elites fought to overthrow foreign imperial and colonial administrations” (Smith 1). In the context of India, the idea of nationalism was used as a reactive tool to fight against colonial oppression. In India since the beginning, the ideas of nation and nationalism acquired a sort of double meaning because “[s]ome members of that nation have a narrow, intolerant view of their country by insisting that it should have only one religion, Hinduism; while others think that there should be freedom of religion such that Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians are rightly members of the nation” (Grosby 5). In *Imagined Communities* (1983) Benedict Anderson emphasized that “nationalism has to be understood by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being” (12). From this perspective, nationalism's use of pre-existing inherited cultures or cultural wealth is evident. Nonetheless, to create specific political ideology, most often nationalist discourses use the historically inherited cultures selectively and transform them radically. In *Nations and Nationalism* (1983) Ernest Gellner expresses his concern on nationalism saying, “[n]ationalism is not what it seems [...]. The cultures it claims to defend and revive are often its own inventions, or are modified out of all recognition” (56). Therefore, the ideological signs of nationalism are always elusive, ambivalent, and multi-accentual. Amitav Ghosh, a renowned novelist and activist, in *The Glass Palace* (2000) through the characters of Arjun, Hardy, Rajkumar, and Beni Prasad problematizes the idea of nation, and aptly depicts the problems of identity formation of the colonized as well as the postcolonial subjects. Moreover, against the backdrop of colonial entanglement, *The Glass Palace* reflects

---

Islam, Khandakar Ashraful. “Elusive Idea of Nationhood and Bifurcated Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*.” *Overtones Ege Journal of English Studies* 2 (2023): 15-24.



---

“the unmaking and remaking of individual and collective identities and examines the self-fashioning and self-alienation” (Mondal 113)—which as a by-product of colonial experience has not only troubled the notion of nationhood but also jeopardized the identity formation of the colonized subjects. This article is an attempt to shed light on the causes how the concept of nationalism since its inception—being marred by the conflicting ideologies—has turned into an elusive idea and how the identity formation of the postcolonial subjects is always entangled and bifurcated due to the influences of the legacy of colonization.

The *Glass Palace* exposes how the training of the Indian officers of the British Indian army manipulated their notion of nation and obliged them to stay obedient to the commands of the colonial master. Arjun’s selection as an officer in the British Indian Army brings to light the colonial mechanism of exploitation lurking behind the manipulative discourses of colonialism. Arjun, Hardy, and their fellow mates are the first group of Indians to be recruited as officers in the British Indian Army. Since the inception of military training, in a manipulative way, a wrong notion of nation is inscribed in their psyche. The inscription at the Military Academy in Dehra Dun, which mentions “[t]he safety, honor and welfare of your country come first, always and every time. The honor, welfare, and comfort of the men you command come next” (GP 330)(emphasis original) puts Arjun in a perplexing situation when Hardy asks Arjun to answer “whose country whose safety, honor and welfare are to come first, always and every time—what is it? Where is this country?” (330). Practically India is a colony, and thus Arjun and Hardy have no country—so it is the Empire’s safety, honour and welfare that always and every time come first. Moreover, their oath is directive not to protect their country “but to the King-Emperor—to defend the Empire” (GP 330). The inscription was a source of inspiration for Arjun. He never thought in the way that this inscription does not include him or the other Indian officers. On the other hand, as the officers of the British Indian Army were seen as a “source of pride and prestige”, like Arjun and Hardy many Indians getting the opportunity to be the part of the glorious empire without a second thought “[g]iving up Indian food, villages, and families [...] moves up [to attain] the false ranks of superiority” (Gandhi 112).

Pankaj Mishra remarks, “[t]here is much melancholy truth in the confession. The English-speaking Indian elite Arjun belongs to was a carefully thought-out creation of the British, and was well protected from ideas of personal and political freedom” (n.p.). Their ideas are controlled by the British manipulative discourses, which authenticate the inevitability of colonial intervention for the socio-political progress of the colonized mass. Thus, like Arjun, all other recruited officers of Indian origin always thought highly of the British Empire. They were fascinated by the colonial discourse that “the British stand for freedom and equality” (GP 284). Being enthralled by the charm and promise of those delusive discourses, they remained loyal to the British at any cost to ensure the same for the people they represented. However, the colonial discourse of equality is a mirage per se. In fact, under the British tutelage, the Indian army officers—who are trained to be “almost the same but not quite” and in effect expected to act “[a]lmost the same but not white” (Bhabha 89)(emphasis original). Ghosh, in this novel, depicts how the first recruited Indian officers in the British Indian army naively believed that being exposed to Western thoughts and getting training from the British masters, they have ascended themselves to the same statute of the British and thus could evade the stigma of their colonial inferiority. However, it is evident that their sense of superiority is a delusion.

Being part of the British Empire, while the Indian soldiers believe themselves to be a “part of the privileged, the elite” group, their experience of racial discrimination in Singapore reveals that they “were impoverished by the circumstances of their country” (GP 302). The status of an officer does not exempt them from any humiliation. In Singapore, the Indian soldiers experience how the Europeans carefully maintain a distance from the Asians in every place. With the sight of the Asians, the Europeans immediately vacate the places to avoid any confrontation with the Asians. Moreover, many places of public gathering like pools and bars also restrict the entry of the Asians. In Singapore, Hardy and Arjun come across the contradiction of European values that the Europeans want their colonies to be guarded and defended by the non-European soldiers but refuse to accept them beyond the boundary of the racial identity. Amitav Ghosh, in “India’s Untold war of Independence”, remarks that neither the call of the struggle for independence nor any core nationalist feeling

---

motivated the soldiers of the British Indian army to join the “forgotten” Indian National Army, rather it is their personal experience of racial discrimination, that brought to light the contradiction of British army, and made them rethink of their support to the Empire. The discovery of this “internalized racism toward the Indian soldier creates a dynamic where the meaning of colonial life destroys the soldier’s character” (Gandhi 112). Hardy begins to see his job of working as a soldier in British Indian Army as internally conflicting and psychologically suicidal. He could realize that the delusion of the army soldiers is making the Empire solidify its strength to assert its political and administrative control over the colonies, and due to such intensive colonial interference, the colonies became economically and politically devastated.

Like Arjun and Hardy, the first generation Indian soldiers serving in the British army were also in delusion. Amreek Singh’s—a veteran soldier of the Indian army—accusation affirms that how technically the Indian soldiers were kept unaware of the fact that they were being used by the British army to conquer other people for the sake of colonial interest of expansion and economic exploitation. The Indian soldiers were used directly to colonize the people of independent countries. As Saya John describes, in his brief stay in Singapore, when he worked as a hospital orderly, he had a direct experience to observe the dilapidated condition of the Indian Sepoys battling for the Empire. In the hospitals, he was surprised to find that the majority of the patients there were Indian Sepoys “back from fighting wars for their English masters” (GP 29). Working for those soldiers, he got paranoid at “the smell of gangrenous bandages on amputated limbs; the night-time screams of twenty-year-old boys, sitting upright in their beds” (GP 66). Thus, the Indian soldiers sacrificed their youth, vigour, and life for the British Empire, however, the Empire does not acknowledge their sacrifice in any way. The soldiers were having a false belief that by serving the British Empire, they might be able to redeem their plights and poverty. However, in reality, they could earn only a small amount for their survival. They were paid only “annas a day, not much more than a dockyard coolie” (GP 87). Practically they have no connection to the British Empire. The Empire, too, had no liability for them.

As depicted by Ghosh, in the British invading army, “the great majority—about two-thirds—were Indian sepoy” (GP 98). Under British command, these sepoy fought mercilessly, and the Burmese defenders got little chance to stand against these sepoy. As a consequence, Burma was easily conquered with the service of the Indian soldiers, and it was subsequently annexed to the British Empire. During the colonial period, thus, in the British army, Indian soldiers were used either for the expansion of the territory of the Empire or for retaining control over a turbulent colony. Ironically, these Indian soldiers, under British command, were motivated by the discourses that they were freeing those people “from their bad kings or their evil customs or such thing” (GP 87). In *The Glass Palace*, Arjun is also depicted as deluded as the first generation Indian sepoy. As a soldier in the British Indian Army, Arjun considers himself “the first modern Indians; the first Indians to be truly free” (GP 231). Practically, he is not free. Arjun and his colleagues were bound to follow the orders from the British officers blindly. These Indian officers are not endowed with the power of decision-making. They are only obliged to execute orders from their British officers. Thus, these Indian soldiers are treated as nothing rather than a “mercenary—a *buddhu*, whose hands are not in his control” (GP 347)(emphasis original). Sitting in the trenches, Hardy expresses his eerie feelings saying, “[i]t was strange to be sitting on one side of a battle line, knowing [...] that you’re risking everything to defend a way of life that pushes you to the sidelines. It’s almost as if you’re fighting against yourself” (GP 406).

Hardy’s conversation with Arjun brings to light the ideological dilemma of the Indian soldiers in the British army. While Arjun was claiming himself to be the first generation of modern Indians, Hardy digs out the truth that their condition is nothing better than the dogs or sheep who have to follow the direction and command of their masters. Hardy taunts Arjun saying, “Yaar Arjun, think of where we’ve fallen when we start talking of good masters and bad masters. What are we? Dogs? Sheep?” (GP 438); “a manufactured thing, a weapon in someone else’s hands”; “a mercenary”, “a *buddhu*?” always to be commanded by British masters. Arjun, too, realizes that he “wasn’t really a human being – just a tool, an instrument” (GP 407). The revelation of such

reversal of identity is self-abnegatory because “it contradicts that other side of colonial ideology through which the colonial subject comes to see him- or herself as a modern ‘individual’” (Mondal 122).

For the ease of their administration imparting colonial education, although the colonizers created a group of Anglophiles to be their accomplice, in practice, the colonizers did not want them to be their alter ego; instead, their psyche was formulated to be a subversion of the colonial master. The execution of this policy of maintaining hierarchy “generated a great deal of ambivalence and anxiety on the part of the coloniser as well as the colonised for it needed to be constantly contained by strategies that would maintain the distance of the Other” (Mondal 120). The reversal of relation makes Hegel’s master-slave dialectic profound because the master is shown not as an independent but entirely dependent upon the slave not merely for work and the satisfaction of his desires, but for recognition as well (Hegel 109-10).

Although Arjun and Hardy were recruited as officers in the British army, the Indian soldiers who accepted the master role of the colonizers were reluctant to follow the command of the Indian officers. They were despondent to accept the people of their same origin as their commanding officers, even though these soldiers were in a delusion that their relationship with their British officers was the source of their pride and prestige. For them to serve under Indian officers was a dilution of that privilege. This attitude of the soldiers reflects the self-abnegation of their own identity, where they cannot accept the people of their origin in the commanding position. In this connection, Sigmund Freud’s comment is pertinent to understand the perception of the Indian soldiers about the Indian officers. Freud argues “[w]e may compare them [the Indian officers] with the individual of mixed race, who [...] all round, resemble white men, but who betray their Colored descent [ordinary Indian people] by some striking feature or other, and on that account are excluded” (191) and denigrated by the common people of India. Here lies the success of the colonial discourse, which could instil a sense of inferiority in the psyche of the colonized mass. Thus, these new generation officers, although they could ascend to the role of a master, their position was not recognized by their fellow soldiers who happened to be their country people. This reluctance brings forward the fissure of the hybrid identity of the Indian officers pointing out the vital question:

Where does ‘Englishness’ reside? In ‘blood and colour’ or in ‘tastes, in morals, and in intellect’? In acquiring English ‘culture’, have these Indian mimics become English? If so, what has happened to their Indianness? And what gives the English their identity if *anyone* can become English? (Mondal 116)(emphasis original)

The concept of “Mimic men”, in this context, thus, brings to light the problematics of hybrid identity, emphasizing that “[t]he colonial ‘mimic men’ occupy a hybrid cultural space that is indefinable in static or essentialised terms because they are neither one thing nor the other but something else besides, an excess that cannot be contained within the terms ‘English’ or ‘Indian’” (Mondal 116).

Shashi Tharoor in *An Era of Darkness* (2016) exerts that “the British had a particular talent for creating and exaggerating particularist identities and drawing ethnically-based administrative lines in all their colonies” (121). With the application of the race theory, the British could easily divide the Indian polity into antagonistic groups. In the British Indian army, only the people of the Martial race are recruited, and technically “they’re completely shut off from politics and the wider society” (GP 236). Indeed, this practice of exclusion, subversion, and manipulation “was apparent in British attitudes from the start” (GP 121). In fact, propagating the idea of the Martial race, the British adopted the policy to give priority to people of certain races or caste and thus institutionalizing division to “promote a culture of sycophancy” (GP 433). Therefore, in India, due to the colonial intervention, there is a pervasive loss of self-respect among the Indians. In order to win British approbation those who tried to model their lives in “conformity with incomprehensible rules” (GP 433), intentionally or unintentionally indulged in the mimicry of colonial culture and servitude to colonial hegemony.

In response to the call of the Indian National Army, when most of the Indian officers and soldiers were persuaded to fight against the Empire, Arjun—whose ethical dilemmas “as a soldier echo his mythical namesake from *The Mahabharata*, who pauses in battle to question the purpose of war and the kingdom he is fighting for”

(Budhos n.p.), “hesitates, and with good reasons” (Mishra n.p.) not to fight against the British. He clarifies his standing accentuating that, “with the intention of the joining British Indian army, the aspirant Indian officers “didn’t have India on our minds” (GP 321). Being fascinated with the glorious history of the Empire, they wanted to be associated with its glory and live a life of honour that the history of Empire entails. Literally, all these aspirant officers wanted to be like the English Sahibs, and eventually, after the army training in manners and ideology, they resembled the English officers. In a point of his argumentation with Hardy, Arjun makes Hardy acknowledge the visible transformation they went through the training of academy saying:

Just look at us, Hardy—just look at us. What are we? 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 color of our skin, most people in India wouldn’t even recognize us as Indians. (GP 439)

Apart from their appearance, it is hard to recognize that they are Indians. In mentality, they also transformed themselves like the British. Therefore, according to Arjun, the changing of sides—to fight against the British in favour of the Japanese is not going to help them in any way because “[d]ecolonization is not easy, perhaps it is not even possible” (Tiwari 106). Arjun authenticates his doubts saying if we rebel “against an Empire that has shaped everything in our lives; colored everything in the world as we know it [...]. We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves” (GP 518).

For many soldiers like Arjun, the faith in the colonial discourse was so strong that even being victims of humiliation and deprivation, these soldiers did not lose their faith from the Western institutions. In “India’s Untold war of Independence” Ghosh remarks that the disillusionment of their position “did not make them hostile to Western institutions” (n.p.). Arjun assisted Colonel Buckland to find a way out of his captivity and handed over food to him for his safe return to the British camp. In letting Colonel Buckland escape, Arjun reveals his bifurcated identity that is torn between loyalty and consciousness. Arjun could realize the bifurcation of his identity that is plagued with the contradictions of colonial discourses. Focusing on the contradictions of colonial ideology Ghosh, in this novel, thus exposes the effects of colonial hegemony on colonized subjects and illustrates how being beleaguered by colonial ideology Arjun’s “sense of the world, its structure, its ways of operating, and his place within it have been shown to be nothing more than an illusion” (Mondal 122).

The analysis of the characters of Arjun Singh and Hardy discloses the moral contradictions and psychological conflict of the Indian soldiers in the British Indian Army. From his ardent faith in the colonial regime, Arjun doubted that the decision to fight on the Japanese side might not assure India’s independence. Arjun claims that pushing the British colonizers out the Japanese troops want to use the Indian soldiers. He accentuates that the Japanese domination would not be less violent than the British Empire because:

The Japanese are already aspiring to an Empire, like the Nazis and Fascists...Last year, in Nanking, they murdered hundreds of thousands of innocent people...[...] Lined up against walls and shot...Men, women, children...[...][no one can ensure that] if the Japanese army reached India they wouldn’t do the same thing here. [...] They’re imperialists and racialists of the worst order...If they succeed, it’ll be the worst catastrophe in all of human history. (GP 293)

Hardy had no such strong logic to defy Arjun’s claim. Still, it was also true that the call for standing against the British made the Indians strong enough to execute their own decisions instead of being slaves under British officers. Contrary to the blind execution of the orders of the British officers, on this occasion, for the first time, the Indian soldiers could assert and implement the ideas according to their conscience. This opportunity gives them a notion of nationality that the Indian soldiers lacked and a sense of freedom that they had been denied under the dominion of the British Empire.

While Arjun’s concept of nationhood oscillates between the indeterminacy of who to fight for or fight against, the plantation soldiers were seen determinant in their ambition to fight against the British to end the

brutal phase of colonization, which might open the gateway for them to go to their dream country India. In Malaya, the newly recruited plantation soldiers proved loyal to the cause of the nation (India) that they have no idea about. These people were treated as slaves in the plantation. Having their mind taken away, they were “being made into a machine” (GP 348). To escape the torture of the plantation work, they joined Indian National Army to fight against British exploitation. From Ranjan, a plantation worker, Arjun came to know that having been born in Malaya, “his knowledge of India came solely from stories told by his parents. The same was true of all the plantation recruits” (GP 521). From this perspective, it is evident that they were fighting for an “imaginary homeland”—a country they had never seen. The dedication and patriotism of these plantation workers made Arjun inquire “what was India to them? This land whose freedom they were fighting for, this land they’d never seen but for which they were willing to die?” (GP 522). India, in their imagination, is an abode free from all the evils they endure in Malaya: “A shining mountain beyond the horizon, a sacrament of redemption—a metaphor for freedom” (GP 522). However, these people are not aware of “the poverty, of the hunger their parents and grandparents had left behind” (GP 522). They do not know about “the customs that would prevent them from drinking at high-caste wells” (GP 522). That poverty-stricken and caste-ridden India is beyond their imagination. Thus, their imaginary homeland is an illusion per se.

*The Glass Palace* depicts no formation of any democratic nationalism in Burma. For the Burmese, the King and his kingdom symbolized the nation. Ghosh depicts that before the colonial invasion, the Burmese people had been living in peace and amity under the crown. The British were on the wrong side to wage war on the trivial issue of evading the customs levied on the British merchants. On a trivial matter, the British timber company made the invasion of Burma inevitable. The Royal proclamation issued under the King’s signature to alert the inhabitants of Burma depicts the strong thread of religion, national tradition, and custom, which have kept the people of Burma united under the leadership of the King. The royal proclamation entails:

[T]he barbarian English kallaas having most harshly made demands calculated to bring about the impairment and destruction of our religion, the violation of our national traditions and customs, and the degradation of our race, are making a show and preparation as if about to wage war with our state. [...] His Majesty, who is watchful that the interest of our religion and our state shall not suffer, will himself march forth with his generals, captains and lieutenants with large forces of infantry, artillery, elephanterie and cavalry, by land and by water, and with the might of his army will efface these heretics [...]. To uphold the religion, to uphold the national honor, to uphold the countries interests. (GP 16)

The rule of the king might not have any direct resemblance to the theoretical definition of a nation. Still, it is evident that the Burmese people were united under the king, and there was economic prosperity and political stability. The cosmopolitan and vibrant environment of pre-colonial Burma is depicted by the number of foreigners living in the cities of Burma. In Mandalay, “there were envoys and missionaries from Europe; traders and merchants of Greek, Armenian, Chinese and Indian origin; laborers and boatmen from Bengal, Malaya and the Coromandel coast; white-clothed astrologers from Manipur; businessmen from Gujarat” (GP 16). The struggle for the throne was always there. It was indeed a bloody one. The hands of King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat were stained with the blood of their kith and kin, who were eliminated to keep the reign of King Thebaw unchallenged. To justify the colonizers’ mission of rescuing the oppressed people from their despotic king is, in fact, a fallacy. Beneath the discourses of benevolence and “white men’s burden” lie the evil intentions of the capitalist and bourgeoisie interest.

In Burma, there were countless different tribes and peoples. Among them, only the king was the common thread to unite them. Even though there was no sense of nationalism for the Burmese people, they were united under the leadership of the King. Hence, after dethroning the King, the British strategically and forcefully destroyed all the possible scope of the formation of any sense of national identity or sense of nationhood among the Burmese polity. Consequently, to avoid any political trouble in Burma, which used to be the wealthiest colony of the British Empire, the British adopted the strategy of making people forget their king because they

assumed that “[t]he King is the one person who could bring the country together against them” (GP 136). Therefore, the British carefully handled the public sentiment to ensure that “the King is forgotten” (GP 136) and the thread of connection that works as pseudo nationalism be shattered.

After the death of the King, when the Queen Supayalat returned to Burma, violent anti-colonial resistance started. Dolly got surprised to know from a stranger that a prince had been found from King Thebaw’s royal lineage, and soon through formal coronation, he would be crowned as the new king of Burma. It was also on-air that this king had already formed his army to avenge the last king and to drive the British away from Burma. In a few days, Burma became politically unstable. The uprising started in Tharawaddy district. In the Saya San rebellion, to revolt against the colonial force, the Burmese people ignited their nationalist feelings by their local legends and myth. The Burmese rebels brutally killed a forest official and two village headmen to spread terror. Soon the rebellion spread everywhere. They fought vigorously and ruthlessly. They appeared like “shadows from the forest, with magical designs painted on their bodies. They fought like men possessed” (GP 296). During the insurgency, thousands of villagers declared allegiance with their cause of the new King, Saya San, whom they assumed as the inheritor of King Thebaw.

Once again, Indian troops were deployed to hunt down the insurgency and the Indian soldiers followed the order to be ruthless in defeating the rebels. As a consequence, “hundreds of Burmese were killed and thousands wounded” (GP 247). The ruthlessness of the Indian soldiers infuriated the local Burmese people against the Indians, but the British people remained immaculate. Thus, technically, the animosity and wrath of the Burmese was driven against the Indians. Under the machination of the British chicanery, thus, the colonized people fought with each other and their lives were lost, while the Empire exploited each of them to the utmost. Uma got furious to observe that “once again, Indian soldiers were being used to fortify the Empire. [...] Indians being made to kill for the Empire, fighting people who should be their friends” (GP 247). The lack of the sense of nationalism provided the scope to the British to use the people of one colony against the other to secure the colonial interest of loot.

Commenting on *The Glass Palace* Rajalakshmi remarks, “[t]he ideology of the British Raj seeping through the lives of the colonized people takes life at varying points in the novel” (116). In this novel, through the character of Beni Prasad, Ghosh has revealed the contradictions of colonial identity that troubles one’s psyche both on a personal and political level. In 1905, the nineteenth year of the King’s exile, Beni Prasad was appointed as the new District Collector of Ratnagiri. He was officially “responsible for dealing with the Burmese Royal family” (GP 104). His interaction with the King and the Queen reveals the ideology he champions. Beni Prasad as a representative of the colonial masters assumes himself as part of the vast Empire, and their so-called civilizing mission and the bifurcation of his identity gets exposed at the very moment when he engages in a conversation with the deposed King.

It was a time of turmoil when Collector Beni Prasad and his wife came to Ratnagiri. In the first half of the twentieth-century, people in India became much reactive to colonial exploitation. The Japanese invasion in Burma and Malaya and the subsequent victory of the Japanese army against the British force “resulted in widespread rejoicing among nationalists in India and no doubt in Burma too” (GP 107). When the King enquired Beni Prasad regarding “what people thought of it” (GP 105), being a self-righteous servant of the British Empire, Beni Prasad disregards the threat of the Japanese army and takes pride in conveying it to the King Thebaw that “[t]he Empire is today stronger than it has ever been [...] its influence will persist for centuries to come. The Empire’s power is such as to be proof against all challenges and will remain so into the foreseeable future” (GP 107). The collector’s insistence on a quick glance at the world map is sufficient to understand the dominion of Britain over the rest of the world.

Regarding the Empire, Prasad’s claims are authentic, but it is also undeniably true that to gain undefeatable strength and power, the British have severely exploited the resources of the colonies and brutally dehumanized the colonized masses. To the dethroned King Thebaw, Beni Prasad verbally defends the strength and power of the British Empire and tries to associate himself with the glory of the Empire but remains oblivious

---

of the fact that his motherland, India, was enslaved by the colonial power and was losing all its assets to enrich Britain and its economy. As Sashi Tharoor in *An Era of Darkness* (2016) argues, “Britain’s rise for two hundred years was financed by its depredations in India” (4). The draining of valuable sources was the cornerstone of British policy in India. The British economic historian Angus Maddison asserts that at the beginning of the eighteenth century, “India’s share of the world economy was 23 per cent, as large as all of Europe put together” (in Tharoor 4). However, when the British departed India, it had dropped down to only three percent. The reason was simple: India was governed for the economic benefit of Britain. Tharoor denotes,

Britain’s Industrial Revolution was built on the destruction of India’s thriving manufacturing industries. Textiles were an emblematic case in point: the British systematically set about destroying India’s textile manufacturing and exports, substituting Indian textiles by British ones manufactured in England. Ironically, the British used Indian raw material and exported the finished products back to India and the rest of the world [...]. [Thus] from the great manufacturing nation described by Sunderland, India became a mere exporter of raw materials and foodstuffs, raw cotton, as well as jute, silk, coal, opium, rice, spices and tea. With the collapse of its manufacturing and the elimination of manufactured goods from its export rosters, India’s share of world manufacturing exports fell from 27 per cent to 2 per cent under British rule. (7)

Such plundering of Indian resources affected every sociopolitical structure of Indian society. In the light of the mass colonial exploitation, undoubtedly, it can be argued that the present-day economic backwardness and depredation of India resulted from the colonial exploitation and loot which made the colonizers rich and the colonized poor forever.

Queen Supayalat debunked the hypocrisy of the Empire instantaneously. She asserts her anguish saying

[t]hey took our kingdom, promising roads and railways and ports, but mark my words, this is how it will end. In a few decades the wealth will be gone—all the gems, the timber and the oil—and then they too will leave. In our golden Burma, where no one ever went hungry and no one was too poor to write and read, all that will remain is destitution and ignorance, famine and despair. (*GP* 88)

The Collector is oblivious of the fact that the resources from his own country is being plundered in the same way Queen Supayalat is claiming. His ignorance or indifference to this issue raises question about the identity and nationality of the Collector. Practically Queen Supayalat’s premonition became the hard reality for Burma. Soon after being occupied, Burma was “converted into a province of British India” (*GP* 66). Moreover, its resources were gradually transported to England and the rich land of resources was transformed into a land of poverty.

It is evident that the colonial education had not only made Beni Prasad acquire colonial “knowledge but also had made him acquire an ideology, the ideology of the ruler [that] made him treat the British as the superior and the Indian as the inferior” (Rajalakshmi 117). The creation of such a comprador class turned extremely beneficial for the colonial masters to continue their hold on the people of the colony with assistance of their enslaved people. Beni Prasad is a genuine example of Macaulay’s interpreter: “[A] class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (Macaulay 729). Beni Prasad, an educated Indian—learned in colonial education—could not see how the Indian economy was becoming destitute and fragile; all her assets were being transported to England. His sense of nationhood was dedicated to the interest of the Empire. His notion of nation was troubled with bifurcation; hence, he failed to decide who to serve and who to fight against. Thus, Prasad’s bifurcated identity makes him an alien in his land and people. Queen Supayalat disclosing the contradictory position and the “illusions” of Beni Prasad makes him confront the real face of his colonial master who has crippled his personality and way of thinking. The Queen’s remark, “Collector-Sahib, Sawant is less a servant than you. At least he has no delusions about his place in the world” (*GP* 150), robs of his individuality and situates him only as a slave of the Raj.

---



As an educated person, he was not moved by the emerging ideas of Indian nationalism and its demands for political independence. He was content to remain a slave to the Empire. Beni Prasad is self-centered and power-hungry. For people like Beni Prasad, their personal gratification is more important than any interest in the world. He holds a parochial view of the nationalist movement in progress at that time. By serving the colonial masters, he wanted to secure a quiet life. He also wanted to “prove himself an exceptional Indian who is more close to the British than Indian ways of life” (Rajalakshmi 117). In his paradigmatic scheme of servitude, the collector failed to meet the expectation of his Masters. The miscegenation, the Princess’s marriage with the couch driver, stands as a stark failure of the Collector to preserve the familial pride of the King. Thus, he fails to fulfil the expectation of the British government. The Collector’s suicide is a result of his sense of failure to serve his colonial master properly. He was in a false hope to assume himself a part of the Empire. Hence failing to satiate his master, he commits suicide. Thus, the practical and the psychological conflict of Beni Prasad reflect the chasm of his bifurcated identity which is fragile and always tenuous.

In the *Glass Palace*, the analysis of the characters of Arjun Singh, Hardy and Beni Prasad discloses how the machination of the colonial discourses and blind acceptance to the colonial supremacy problematize the notion of the nationhood of the privileged and educated Indians who being enthralled by the desire of the attainment of the same superior statute of the colonial master suffer from moral contradictions and psychological conflict. Arjun’s oscillation between his Indian and the colonial identity creates bifurcation in his identity that is similar to the psychological breakdown resulting from indeterminacy and ambivalence that culminates into “constellation of delirium, frequently bordering on the region of the pathological” (Fanon 60). Beni Prasad’s wrong notion of nationhood makes him dedicate himself to the servitude and the interest of the Empire. His sense of nationhood is troubled with bifurcation; hence, he fails to decide who to serve and who to fight against. His state of oblivion about the plundering of Indian resources by the colonizing power not only exhibits the elusiveness of nationhood but also exposes the bifurcation of his identity which made him a prisoner “trapped within himself as much as by the circumstances of colonial dependency” (Mondal 119).

#### Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, (1983) 2006.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Budhos, Maria. “Questions of Allegiance.” *Los Angeles Times Book Review* 11 February 2001. <<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-feb-11-bk-23820-story.html>>.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
- Freud, Sigmund. “The Unconscious.” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. 14*. Ed. And Trans. J. Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, (1915) 1957. 166-215.
- Gandhi, Ashni, “The Glass Palace: A South Asian Memoir of Cultural Cannibalism.” *Re:Search: The Undergraduate Literary Criticism Journal* 6.1 (2019): 88-117.
- Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000.
- . *The Shadow Lines*. London: John Murray Publishers, 2011.
- . “India’s Untold War of Independence.” *The New Yorker* 23 June 1997.
- Grosby, Steven. *Nationalism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford UP, (1807) 2004.
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington. “Minute of 2 February 1835 on Indian Education.” *Macaulay, Prose and Poetry*. Ed. G. M. Young. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1957.

- 
- Mishra, Pankaj. "There'll Always Be an England in India." *The New York Times Company* 11 February 2001. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/11/books/there-ll-always-be-an-england-in-india.html>>.
- Mondal, Anshuman, A. *Amitav Ghosh*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007.
- Rajalakshmi, N.K. "Mapping the Power of Discourse in *The Glass Palace*." in *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Essays Second Edition*. Ed. Bibhash Choudhury. Delhi: PHI Learning Private Limited, 2016. 115-25.
- Smith, Anthony D. *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Tharoor, Shashi. *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*. New Delhi: Alpha Book Company, 2016.
- Tiwari, Shubha. *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study*. Delhi: Atlantic Publisher, 2003.
-