
AMITAV GHOSH'UN SIRÇA SARAY 'INDA SÜRGÜN VE YERİNDEN EDİLME

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Özet

Yerinden edilme ve sürgün Amitav Ghosh'un *Sırça Saray*¹ adlı romanında göze çarpan ve ele alınan en önemli konulardandır. İyi bir araştırma ve gözlem sürecinden sonra, Amitav Ghosh Burma kralı ve kraliçesinin İngiliz işgalciler tarafından Hindistan'ın dışına sürgün edilmesinin tarihini *Sırça Saray* adlı romanında kaleme almıştır. Bu çalışmada, Ghosh'un birçok ödül de alan *Sırça Saray* romanı ve roman karakterleri esas alınarak, yerinden edilme ve sürgünün sosyo-politik ve psikolojik etkileri incelenecektir. Bu çalışmada, zorunlu göç döneminde hem İngilizler hem de Hint roman karakterlerinin karşılaştığı sorunlar ve tramvolar Anglo-Hint tarihine ve insan haklarına değinilerek ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Amitav Ghosh, *Sırça Saray*, Yerinden Edilme, Sürgün, İnsan Hakları.

DISPLACEMENT AND EXILE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE GLASS PALACE*²

Summary

Displacement and exile are the prominent issues in Amitav Ghosh's novel, *the Glass Palace*³. Hence, after having done a good amount of

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¹Bir seferinde, Ghosh "Sırça Saray'ı yazdığı beş yıl süresince yüzlerce kitap, gezi yazısı, atlas, makale ve (basılan ve basılmayan) not okuduğunu, romanda tasvir edilen yerleri mümkün olduğunca ziyaret ederek, binlerce mil yol aldığını, Hindistan, Malezya, Myanmar ve Tayland'da birçok insanı arayıp bulduğunu" (Minna Proctor'un kitap tanıtımından alıntı yapılmıştır) ifade etmiştir.

² This study is an extended version of the paper presented in 2013-ANTEP BAKEA Conference.

³Once, he expresses that "[i]n the five years, it took me to write *The Glass Palace*, I read hundreds of books, memoirs, travelogues, gazetteers, articles and notebooks, published and unpublished; I travelled thousands of miles, visiting and re-visiting,

observation and research⁴, Ghosh depicts the times in Indian history, when Burma's King and Queen were sent into exile to the outskirts of India by the British invaders. Therefore, this paper mainly concerns the sociological, political and psychological effects of displacement and exile in relation to Ghosh's, many award-winning novel *The Glass Palace*. The problems, traumas and difficulties faced by Indian and English people during the times of historical turning points such as enforced exiles will be uncovered under the light of the history of Anglo-Indian relations and human rights issues as reflected in *The Glass Palace*.

Key Words:

Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace*, Displacement, Exile, Human Rights.

Ghosh's novel, *The Glass Palace* is set primarily in Burma, Malaya, and India and spans from 1885, when the British sent the King of Burma into exile, to the [millennium], nearly over a [hundred] years. While it does offer brief glimpses into the history of the region, it is more the tale of a family and how historical events influenced real lives. (Book Review, *Library Journal*, Feb 1, 2001). The year is 1885, and the British have used a trade dispute to justify the invasion and seizure of Burma's capital. As a crowd of looters pours into the fabled *Glass Palace*... Rajkumar catches sight of Dolly, then only 10, nursemaid to the Second Princess. Rajkumar carries the memory of their brief meeting through the years to come, while he rises to fame and riches in the teak trade and Dolly travels into exile to India with King Thebaw, Burma's last king; Queen Supayalat; and their three daughters. The story of the exiled king and his family in Ratnagiri, a sleepy port town south of Bombay... (Feb. 6). In this novel, through the personal histories of these characters, we catch glimpses of the political histories of Burma, Malaya, and India.

[A]ll the major characters in the novel, *The Glass Palace* are either forced to leave their 'homes', whether natives or non-natives, and gradually pass through the process of traversing, assimilation and change, in order to

so far as possible, all the settings and locations that figure in this novel; I sought out scores of people in India, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand" (qtd.in Minna Proctor's Review).

⁴Inspired by tales handed down to him by his father and uncle, Ghosh vividly brings to life the history of Burma and Malaya over a century of momentous change in this teeming, multigenerational saga [entitled *The Glass Palace*](Feb. 6) (Riemer, Andrew "Novelists in Glass Houses").

evolve new... identities, or they migrate due to a desire for upward mobility, an increased awareness of better prospects and a sense of ambition. However, ... travelling or journey does not result in acquisition of greater power, but becomes an essential strategy for survival... [In other words] ... an immigrant has to start afresh, and establish himself in the new socio-politico-cultural context...

Characters witness “unprecedented historical events”... and “are unable to carry their haughty selves across the transition period, that is to say, from pre-independence to post-independence period, and from a united India into a divided one”. Their present is tinged with a sense of loss and is tormenting. This “sense of loss, torment, and exile pervades the fictional world of *The Glass Palace*. The characters of this novel, be it for Queen Supayalat or Uma, yearn for the familiarity of the lost world, because it was where, they could invest their life with meaning and identity. It was a world that nurtured and nourished them from within and with which a sense of identification was possible” (Surti, “*The Glass Palace*”). Yet, the experience of displacement made these people uprooted and created a big hole in their hearts, which caused them suffer from sense of belonging to nowhere. Considering all the above mentioned issues and more, some critics argue that Ghosh’s novel

“function[s] as [a] 'counter-histor[y]' or provide[s] 'alternative points of view' against the officially documented versions of history. The subject positions range from an individual to a community, from being the perpetrators of violence to being the victims, from being powerful landed gentries and accomplice of colonial masters to being the subalterns in these literary narratives. These literary narratives embody 'distinctive, authentic, marginalized, subaltern voices' that claim prominence, or at least equivalence against the mainstream historical narratives” (Surti, “*The Glass Palace*”).

By giving a voice to the subalterns and narrating the adventures of exiled Queen⁵, a Bengali soldier (Arjun), an opportunist (Rajkumar) and

⁵ Furthermore, the novel “question[s] 'the top-down approach' of reading the South Asian history, and replace[s] it with the study of the culture of the people. There is a commitment to represent people's history. Also there is an “attempt to re-write history from the grounds of ambivalence and contradictions and the subaltern remains the vantage point of their critique(Surti, “*The Glass Palace*”).

many other displaced Indians, Ghosh tries to give place to as many voices as possible in his novel. Moreover, he “also show[s] how individuals and collective groups in South Asia resisted ‘the penetration of colonialism into their cultural ethos’” (Surti, “*The Glass Palace*”).

In addition to these, the wide coverage of themes such as “dislocation, fragmented identity, void, alienation, nationality, culture, language, migration, loyalty, violence, exile, marginalization, colonialism and post-colonialism, hierarchical relations, gender, social issues like marriage, illicit and extra-marital affairs, subalternity, complex web of relationships, hybridity, changing power equations” are noteworthy. Not surprisingly, “to cover such a wide range of issues, he makes his novel overcrowded with characters... [and]... [he] offer[s] a bewildering web of family relationships extended to two or three generations...” (Surti, “*The Glass Palace*”).

In order to see the influences of displacement and exile and to see the big picture at those times, to have a look at the main characters one by one might be helpful. Most of the characters in *the Glass Palace* “are forced by the whirlpool of history to be driven from Burma to India, Malaya, Singapore, and back again. Almost all of them make several transitions across national frontiers during their life-time, yet are their own destiny-makers; the creators of their own history” (Surti, “*The Glass Palace*”). Despite many difficulties and obstacles faced during and after the exile, most of these characters manage to survive and assert themselves:

Despite [...] the disintegration of [their] families, women of this novel,... assert themselves. Though they are forced to live a life of subordination due to the ruthless colonial rule, they gradually emerge as women of some substance. Though uprooted, dislocated, and marginalized, the women characters of this novel, especially Uma and Queen Supayalat, criticizes their colonial masters with a Caliban-like spirit. They are extremely critical of the monstrous expansionist policies of their colonial masters. However, all the characters of this novel suffer a common fate, that is to say, all of them are “the victims of the inevitable discourse of colonial displacement” (Surti, “*The Glass Palace*”).

Interestingly enough, as it is stated above, throughout the novel, women characters seem to be stronger and more conscious about national issues. Therefore, women characters and their ways of coping with exile will be studied first. In relation to this, Tamar Mayer expresses that “sexuality plays a key role in nation-building and in sustaining national identity” (2). Likewise, in the *The Glass Palace*, we have strong female characters like Queen Supalayal, Uma and Dolly, who suffers from displacement, but who honourably tries to hold onto life. Being part of the royal family, Queen Supayalat is sent into exile as a punishment and she endures many difficulties such as lack of water and hygiene without showing any signs of hopelessness (Ghosh 81). Furthermore, she is aware of all the facts and the rules of colonial game. In one of the scenes in the novel, she says that they are imprisoned in the name of progress (Ghosh 88), the so called “civilization mission” of colonialism or “the white man’s burden” in Kipling’s own words (see Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden”). Also, we observe that Queen of Burma does not yield to the British ultimatum, but King of Burma yields to the wishes of British officers without resistance. In addition, she insists on speaking Hindustani (Ghosh 109), which shows that she has a strong sense of national consciousness (Ghosh 150). Like the Queen herself, the servant in the novel, called Dolly has also a strong personality and she accompanies the queen to the end and remains with her even at the toughest times of the exile. “[S]trength and sanity of the woman... seems to be a regular pattern, in Ghosh” (Shailaja 8).

However, among the male characters, we see that some of them have very complicated feelings and become more English than the English themselves. For example, Arjun joined the Indian Military Army to have a career (Ghosh 257). His mother and Uma do not approve of it, but his father does (Ghosh 258). He served as a soldier in the British Army against his own country/India. Moreover, Arjun does not let the Indian soldiers read the nationalistic pamphlets (Ghosh 391) to prevent the spread of Indian nationalism. He cannot even believe that British Empire can fall one day. Besides, he thinks that Indians would destroy the army if they became officers (Ghosh 397). And when the Indian soldiers begin to collaborate with Japanese Army⁶, he is the one who let the English commander go so

⁶ And the moments of Arjun’s hesitation is defined in the following sentence:

that he would not be a captive in the hands of Japanese soldiers (Ghosh 441). It may be claimed that the experience of being a colonized or being displaced implemented a kind of “inferiority complex” in the mind of Arjun unconsciously and thus, he becomes an Anglophile.

Historically speaking, about two-thirds of the British invasion force consist mainly of Indian *sepoys*, (Ghosh 26, 29). Thus, Arjun represents these Indians, who have to serve in the British Army at the expense of their country’s independence and their own souls and hearts, and people who eventually have “fragmented identities”.

Another male character, who decides to make the most out of war is Rajkumar, who is a Hindu Bengali and who becomes a loyal servant to the English and a traitor to his own country. Looking at his social background, we see that he is an orphan and his family name was Raha and Rahas were Hindus from Chittagong. Thus, the victim becomes the victimizer, when he gets the first opportunity. In Rajkumar’s case, the tough life conditions during the exile caused him to lose his humanitarian and moral values and he ends up being an opportunist rich man, who sold his soul to the devil.

In *the Glass Palace*, parallel to the war in the world, there is a concomitant war over wood or teak in India due to the fact that the English want to possess all the teak in Burma. In order to get rid of poverty, Rajkumar gets involved in the teak-trade and begins to abuse his very own people in India. Psychological researches reveal that “displacement and disorientation... result in... a kind of survivor’s guilt” (Matthess 28; see also Frankl and Borowski), yet we do not see the slightest twinklings of guilt in Rajkumar. Still the death of his son, Neel (Ghosh 463) at the end of the novel might be taken as a divine intervention and as a punishment for his war-profiteering done out of teak-trade. Rajkumar’s betrayal of his own country may also be taken as a cultural crisis; not knowing to where his loyalties belong. In Surti’s words, colonial policies,

led to cultural crisis like uprootedness, fragmentation of identity, dislocation, large-scale migration, drastic changes in administration, and

So Arjun, one of the first Indian career officers in the British Army in India, finds his allegiances torn in opposite directions during World War II when encountering the invading Japanese forces in the jungles of Malaya (Riemer, Andrew. “Novelists in Glass Houses”).

reconfigurations of political boundaries. In the process, the native becomes the 'lost soul', and faces the existential dilemma of being a partitioned subject [says some critics]. *The Glass Palace*, as a historical novel records this existential dilemma of the 'lost souls', who suffered an imposed exile, and whose voice got lost underneath the burden of larger historical forces with the passage of time. Amitav Ghosh has attempted to excavate either this deliberately subdued or lost or forgotten history, and thereby to foreground the voice of the bewildered immigrants, the subalterns to present their version of history. (Surti, "The Glass Palace")

The forced exile and the displacement caused much harm as it had been illustrated so far. Most of the characters in *The Glass Palace* had "an endless series of loss - the complete loss of their power, their landlordism, the disintegration of their families, the heterogeneousness of Gangauli, their sense of belongingness and identity, loss of self-respect, loss of 'that' time which has now become a distant past, and above all the loss of Bhojpuri Urdu as the language of their expression" (Surti, "The Glass Palace").

In other words, displacement and exile have created a "lost generation", who is deprived of their human rights such as to have their own language, identity, home and dignity. Therefore, displacement and exile cannot be evaluated simply as a change of somebody's place, but one's "whole way of life", and when it is a forced-exile, despite all the genuine efforts of the victims to adapt to their new surroundings, then it mostly results in the creation of a lost generation, as it is already illustrated in *the Glass Palace*. What is also noteworthy is that in the case of India's partition, the borders are drawn by English authorities concerning the benefits of English people, not by Indians themselves. As Ghosh always states in his interviews and works, therefore, "boundaries are artificial" (see Barras). These imposed decisions, including dislocations and re-territorialisations, made by outside authorities ignore cultural and historical bounds and force indigenous people to settle down according to these artificial borders inevitably cause traumas and eventually result in a "lost generation", which was depicted realistically in Ghosh's above-mentioned work. Looking far back, it may be concluded that "displacement and forced exiles" are prominent problems in terms of violation of human rights in regard to Ghosh's many award-winning novel, *the Glass Palace*.

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