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There'll Always Be an England in India

By Pankaj Mishra

The Glass Palace

By Amitav Ghosh.

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Random House. \$25.95.

ONE of the leading characters in "The Glass Palace," Amitav Ghosh's fourth and most ambitious novel, is Arjun, a middle-class Bengali, who as an officer in the British Indian Army has learned to dance the tango and to eat roast beef with a knife and fork. He is in Malaya during World War II when he is asked by a much less Anglicized colleague, nicknamed Hardy, to desert and join a group of renegade Indians who plan to help the Japanese defeat the British and liberate India.

Arjun hesitates, and with good reasons. He is aware that "except for the color of our skin, most people in India wouldn't even recognize us as Indians. . . . We wanted to be sahibs and that's what we've become." He is not sure that "we can undo all of that just by putting up a new flag."

There is much melancholy truth in this 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. In fact, the original British intention behind setting up Western-style schools and universities in India, as very pragmatically specified by Macaulay, was to have a class of Indians "who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect."

Half a century after the British left India, this middle-class elite appears to be their most enduring legacy. It is now fully in charge of the once British-dominated areas in hundreds of Indian cities and towns, the cantonments and district courts, the exclusive polo grounds and clubs, where it maintains the style, and often the substance, of that British romance called the Raj: a romance that depended on a real distance, both physical and psychological, between the ruler and the ruled.

Almost all of the Indian writing in English has been produced by members of this still relatively new and raw elite. It is why to know oneself and one's subject -- always a difficult task for a writer -- is an especially fraught project for the Indian writer in English. For not only does he have to take into account, in both his life and his work, his exalted secure position within a wretchedly poor and unstable country, but there is also his dependence on the West for almost every aspect of his identity -- even the Indian classical past that was discovered in the 19th century by British archaeologists and scholars. This cannot but make for a profound, often tormenting, ambivalence in his relationship to the larger West-dominated world he lives and works in.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the many Indian writers to have emerged in the 1980's, after the publication of Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children"; but he is among the very few to have expressed in his work a developing awareness of the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of colonized peoples as they figure out their place in the world. There isn't much easy politics or sermonizing in his work; there is, instead, a concern for the individual, a curiosity about the workings of alien societies and, often, an honest examination of colonial neuroses. In this, as in his preference for a plain ungimmicky prose, Ghosh follows the example of V. S. Naipaul, although his instinct for storytelling on a grand scale owes much more to Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Certainly it is the flamboyant storyteller who dominates the intellectual novelist in the first third of "The Glass Palace," as the British invade Burma (now Myanmar) in the late 19th century and exile its king and queen to the distant west coast of India, and an Indian orphan boy, Rajkumar, falls in love with one of the queen's attendants, Dolly. Years swiftly pass; Rajkumar becomes one of the many exploitative Indian businessmen in Burma, grown rich on the teak trade. He travels to India to marry Dolly, who in the meantime has become great friends with Uma, the lonely wife of an Indian district official.

The somewhat complicated network of family and friends becomes more dense as the story expands to include historical events in places as far apart as Malaya and New York. More people fall in love at first sight and then marry and reproduce within a few pages. Things happen here with an abruptness that does away with the need for novelistic development and

explanation ("After this, in what seemed like an impossibly short time, Dolly and Uma became close friends").

But then any explanation may seem redundant here, since both king and peasant alike in "The Glass Palace" lack a complex inner life. There is a childish quality to what seems to be a story about children, about a people without self-knowledge, with only some simple longings and frustrations. The pages fill up with information about logging, anthrax, elephants, rubber, photography and cars. These sections are not without interest, except where Ghosh displays a preference for the merely technical, as opposed to the telling, detail ("The coachwork was by Castagna, and the upholstery was of Florentine leather").

A degree of moral and psychological complication is finally introduced by Uma as she returns from New York. Like many Indians abroad, Uma has had a painful political awakening to the degraded state of India and Indians under British rule. She is the first truly modern individual in Ghosh's narrative, in contrast to Rajkumar, who has "simply lost sight of what he was doing, and why." Arjun, the army officer with his self-doubts, is only a few pages away. The unexamined life that preceding generations have known is not available to him; it is his task to deal with a "monumental inwardness," and from the point where he arrives, the novel becomes partly an analysis, conducted through dialogue and inner musings, of the ways in which British colonialism made, or unmade, an Indian elite.

Much of this analysis is grippingly subtle, although Arjun, who thinks and talks with a fluency he cannot possibly have, hardly lives as a character. Among other things, Ghosh dramatizes through Arjun how the English language in India has retarded self-awareness and imprisoned even many educated Indians in a kind of permanent childhood.

Ghosh's inquiry loses its focus, however, as he alternates accounts of passionate sex on beaches and in forests with set pieces about battles and migrations. The narrative goes into the epic mode too often, and the prose, while lazily reaching out for the ready-made phrase ("fog of anxiety," "cloud of disquiet"), often comes dangerously close to kitsch. Ghosh keeps introducing fresh settings and characters, without giving them enough time and space to grow.

It is as if Ghosh's very Naipaulean urge to examine the deceptions and self-deceptions of the colonized mind had been held in check by his ambition to write a big historical novel with a multiplicity of characters and settings and themes. The novelist scrambles to cover too many bases at once; the result is that ideas as well as dramatic situations often feel hastily imposed from above.

When, toward the end, Ghosh abruptly provides a primer on contemporary Burmese politics, and has one of his hastily improvised characters meet Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the most famous opponent of Myanmar's military regime, and declare that it is "impossible to behold this woman and not be half in love," it becomes impossible not to behold the author himself in transparent disguise -- indeed, Ghosh has written admiringly about Aung San Suu Kyi in *The New Yorker*. On the last page, the bedroom scene between Rajkumar and Uma, the two aged survivors of war and destruction, feels equally rushed in dramatizing the overused idea of sexual love as redemption from history -- an idea also present on the last page of Ghosh's aesthetically more satisfying novel "Shadow Lines." Even the pathos of Arjun's death is somewhat muffled in the din of murders and suicides and historical events Ghosh has to create in order to achieve resolution. Arjun dies fighting for an unwinnable cause, condemned to nihilism by his self-awareness, his quickening sense of his intellectual and emotional infirmities. Just before his death, he has a vision of the empire as "a huge, indelible stain which has tainted all of us," and which "we cannot destroy . . . without destroying ourselves." The vision stays with the reader. "In what way do I become human again?" Hardy asks Arjun. It is this cry of anguish, still so urgent in parts of the world worked upon by the empires of our time, that "The Glass Palace," despite its conflicting inspirations, is able to amplify. It does so more through the vigor of the debates it conducts than the elegance of a literary art that Ghosh tries only halfheartedly to create. At any rate, it stays away at all times -- and this is no mean achievement in a novel -- from the vulgarity of glib consolations.

Drawing (Boris Kulikov)