

Humanistic Concerns in Amitav Ghosh's "The Glass Palace"

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Abstract:

The term humanism has undergone various modifications and transformations since the time of its inception. Different socio-cultural, political and philosophical developments have impacted this change. In spite of defying an all pervasive unified meaning and understanding the major constituents of humanism have always been freedom, equality, dignity and sovereignty of man. Literature being a part of man's social and aesthetic experience has shown its concern for humanism in its multiple forms. Therefore, humanistic concerns in literature mark a perennial presence in one form or the other. Different writers have included humanistic thoughts in their works on the basis of their understanding and experience.

Key Words: Humanism, Socio-cultural, Political, Philosophical.

Humanistic Concerns:

The Glass palace is primarily the story of three generations of a family spreading over three different countries forming a part of the British Empire. The novel is set against the background of political turmoil resulting from the cruelty and oppression exercised by the British imperialists and the attempt by the native rulers to suppress the decolonization from the British rule. The novelist's major concern here is to exhibit the obliteration of human rights under the rulers both the British and the native. In the process, the inhuman treatment meted to the subjects of the British Empire and the subjection of human values in the name of order national self-assertion by the native rulers brings out the novelists view of humanism. It shows the postcolonial on the presentation of human existence under the impact of different forms of politics and power marks Ghosh understands of humanism. Instead of presenting any specific understanding of humanism Ghosh's The Glass Palace supports multiplicity of ideas. In the process of the fictionalizations of human experience, the provisional and contextual nature of the views concerning human life gain priority over essentialist,

transcendental or centralizing perspective that ascribes a set of pre-fixed ideas forming the core of humanist thought.

A specific concern for human freedom and dignity in Ghosh's understanding of humanism emerges from his rejection of colonial practices. The concept of the equality of all human beings irrespective of their nationality, religion, caste, culture or social and political status gains supreme significance in Ghosh's humanistic views. In order to express his concern Ghosh has given fictional expression to the practices that block human freedom and tend to subjugate man/women. The dehumanizing behavior of the rulers has been presented through the treatment of their subjects by them. Queen Suplayatt has several maids to attend to her. This brings out the inhuman attitude and behavior of the Queen of Burma. She doesn't ever bother to give a thought to the human status of these girls. The way these girls serve the queen and the conditions under which they are kept are considered to be natural and normal by the rulers. For these rulers they very concept of humanism has different meanings for the rulers and the ruled. The repeated depiction of the inhuman conditions under which the maids work and the way they are asked to show respect and regards to the queen shows the novelists criticism of the forces hostile to human dignity. Apart from the practice of employing the girls to serve the queen and her family another practice that shows the lack of concern for human values among the rulers is the practice of shiko. According to this practice the attendants have to prostrate before the queen to show their respect for her. Ghosh depicts these things to show how the different practices adopted by the rulers tend to dehumanize people.

The postcolonial perspective informing Ghosh's understanding of human values can be traced from the rejection of the authority of the imperial powers to set the standard for others. The imperialists impose their culture and thinking on their subjects through the self-ascribed role of the representatives of humanism and modernization. It is a typical styles of the colonialists that perpetuation of their hold on their subject races is introduced through the presentation of humanistic concerns as synonymous with the promotion of the cultural values of the colonizers. One such example in *The Glass Palace* can be observed in the propagation of modernization and women's education with a view to abrogate and appropriate the native culture. The propagation of such ideas is in fact to insert the real ulterior motives of the imperialists in the guise of an apparent concern for their subjects.

The humanistic tendencies in *The Glass Palace* are related to the rejection of a fixed notion of human identity. It brings out the clash between the static notion of identity that forms the core of cultural thought in imperialism and the democratic perspective adopted by Amitav Ghosh in this novel. In order to reject the stable and fixed concept of identity Ghosh presents his characters that do not carry essential national identities.

Similarly, the two different names, one Burman and the other Indian of Raj Kumar's sons destabilize nation based identities. This fictional device used by Ghosh liberates the concept of humanism from set values ascribed in transcendental terms. Ghosh's perspective here comes closer to an understanding of multiple possibilities of human existence that tends to make his humanistic concerns multidimensional informing plurality of views defining human values.

The most significant aspect of Ghosh's fictional discourse is the presentation of a dialogical perspective about humanism meaning in this discourse lies not in individual utterances, but in their dialogical negotiations. It can be understood in the understanding of most of the major characters that gets modified during the course of the novel through dialogical interaction. Uma, the wife of an Indian officer serving the Empire considered the strategies employed by the Empire as something humane and a result of their concern for bringing light of civilization to the people suffering under the darkness of the cruelty unleashed by the native rulers. But at a later stage when a popular insurgent movement is ruthlessly crushed by the British rulers she realizes the hollow claims of their humanism and realizes that the Empire was, so skilful and ruthless in its deployment of its overwhelming power, so expert in the management of opinion. An awareness of true humanistic concerns makes it clear to Uma that only the British imperialism is not the only power working against the spirit of humanity. Even the natives are in no way different when they indulged in oppressive activities.

In Ghosh's understanding the major element threatening values is power politics. The intrusion of politics in different fields of life tends to marginalize humanistic concerns. The working of politics does not allow the social and cultural institutions to work for the dignity of man. Instead of being the center man is subordinated to the level of a means to serve the ends of those powers that control different institutions. In the novel *Aung San Suu Kii*, the leader who struggles to uphold democratic values against the tyrannical rule of the military Junta is presented as the embodiment of true humanism in the given circumstances. Upholding the dignity and sovereignty of man as man she resists the involvement of politics that blocks the way to human independence. In the words of Dinu, she is the only one who seems to understand what the place of politics is what it to be that it ought cannot be allowed to cannibalize all of life, all of experience. It is treated to be the most terrible indignity of our conditions as politics has invaded everything spared nothing, religion, art, family.

Conclusion:

In spite of the contextual and provisional meaning of humanism presented through the conflict between the British Empire and its colonies, a common thread providing Ghosh's understanding can be observed in his concerns for complete freedom of man, his/her sovereignty and dignity. It doesn't reject the imperialists

through nationalist self-assertion, making native the central and self-determining, rather it challenges the world view based on the polarity of Governor and Governed, ruler and ruled as essentialist. It envisions a world free from the practices of subjugating others in any form.

Reference:

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