

Last Queen of Burma in *The Glass Palace* : Political Empowerment of Women

Abstract

Women who are strong are capable to swim against the current in spite of the hurdles on their path towards achievement and success. Women who are assertive in living their own life are heralding the empowerment of total women population by their hands. Queen Supayalat, the last queen of Burma, now Myanmar was an extraordinary woman in courage and inner strength who could control the country instead of the king. She stands as an epitome of women's political empowerment.

Keywords: Women, Politics, Empowerment, Assertive, Burma.

Introduction

"The education and empowerment of women throughout the world cannot fail to result in a caring, tolerant, just and peaceful life for all" (Aung San Suu Kyi).

The history of Burma is great with a valiant woman as the last queen of Burma who depicted extraordinary prowess at the face of adversity and it is narrated superbly in the novel *The Glass Palace*. For Amitav Ghosh, writing *The Glass Palace* was a sum total of immense work. The huge research of recorded history as well as of the people and events made his novel praiseworthy. The details he narrates have skipped the attention of historians. In the reviews by Minna Proctor, Ghosh says:

In the five years that took me to write *The Glass Palace*, recounts Ghosh, "I read hundreds of books, memoirs, travelogues, gazetteers, articles and notebooks, published and unpublished; I travelled thousands of miles, visiting and re-visiting, so far as possible, all the settings and locations that figure in this novel; I sought out scores of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 (Ghosh).

There had been Three Anglo-Burmese war in the history. The first Anglo-Burmese war was in 1824-26 caused by a dispute regarding Arakan in western Burma and British-held Chittagong. The second Anglo-Burmese war was in 1852 in which British blocked the port of Rangoon and seized the King Pagan's royal ship provoking into war. The third Anglo-Burmese war was in 1885 in which Burma totally lost its independence.

The Glass Palace begins its story in Mandalay, Burma 14 November 1885 and the third Anglo-Burmese war lasted just fourteen days with British. The British timber company has a dispute with Burma regarding fifty thousand logs of teak that had been cut without duties being paid to the kingdom. A fine is slapped on the company by the royal customs officers which tilt the life of the royal family upside down, leading to war. Exploitation of environment is a symbol of power control exercised in the name of patriarchal system. Reema Mukherjee observes that men in control of nature always tend to exploit it for their personal benefits and that is the significant aspect of the patriarchy: "Patriarchal systems, where men own and control the land, are seen as responsible for the...destruction of the natural environment. Since the men in power control the land, they are able to exploit it for their own profit and success" (Mukherjee 241).

Amitav Ghosh has created a line of women characters in this novel, who display immense courage. Supayalat, the queen of Burma is exceptionally powerful in the political administration of the country. She plays a significant role in the affairs of the kingdom and its politics. When there is a war between Burma and Britain, she becomes apprehensive of the results. She enquires about the developments of war, and takes an upper hand in ruling her country while her husband, Thebaw is passive.

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Queen Supayalat is the King's chief consort and her determination to achieve the goal dares her to remove all the hurdles from the path of her achievement. King Thebaw has no ambition to sit on the throne of Burma but she is certain to attain what she wants in her life. She senses that there is a threat to her husband and orders to kill all the members of royal family, a gruesome act of course: "Seventy-nine princes were slaughtered on her orders, some of them new-born infants, and some too old to walk. To prevent the spillage of royal blood she had them wrapped in carpets and bludgeoned to death. The corpses were thrown into the nearest river" (GP 38). The Queen's desire to retain power forces her to act in an extreme way thus she made sure that her husband is secure on the throne.

The Queen is aggressively active into politics, and she herself meets the senior-most officials everyday updating regarding the war front. She is woken up to the truth of the treacherous dealing of her own people with the royal throne joining the hands with British. Being pregnant with the third child and the discomfort due to does not deter her from her responsibility towards her country. The victory of British over Burma sends signals to common people and the intrusion to palace otherwise a crime became their opportunity to loot but the Queen is not in a position to subdue to the circumstances; "... the Queen was neither cowed nor afraid, not in the least" (GP 33).

The King Thebaw and the Queen Supayalat are given an ultimatum to make a choice between to accept the terms like Indian princes, either to accept the British permission to stay in Mandalay or, to move out on exile. The queen asserts her power to decide and takes pride in the superiority of the kings of Burma. "The Kings of Burma were not princes, the queen had told the Kinwun Mingyi; they were kings, sovereigns, they'd defeated the Emperor of China, conquered Thailand, Assam, Manipur. And she herself, Supayalat, she had risked everything to secure the throne for Thebaw, her husband and step-brother" (GP 22).

The Queen never loses her composure when the British gives the ultimatum to choose between exile and British domination. She uses strong and sharp language to exert her power as a queen while meeting her army officials and the army officials could not look at her eyes that are firm and piercing. She realizes the conspiracy of the Burmese army which had surrendered and she overhears the conversation between ministers, "The two ministers were now competing with one another to keep the Royal Family under guard. They knew the British would be grateful to whoever handed over the royal couple; there would be rich rewards" (GP 25). The most loyal, trustworthy soldiers and officials became the betrayers of the country.

The Queen accepts exile with the knowledge that her country is not equal in the military power with British and the British patriarchy is exploiting the vulnerability of Burma. But the Queen asserts herself to face the pain knowing well the exile in another country has its wounds and scars, as Agate Nesaule

narrates in "How Long Does Exile Last?" the inner turmoil of people who belong nowhere: "Beneath their facades, the exiles have deep wounds. They are filled with a sense of being forced into pain, haunted by what they have seen and experienced. The exile strives to show a positive attitude while mourning for the lost loved ones, destroyed homes, and devastated countries. In the unlikely event of an exile's return, it is only to discover she no longer belongs there, just as she does not really belong here" (Nesaule 9).

History has proved the strength of a woman to risk even the royal throne at the face of losing her freedom in exchange with British slavery. The royal family gets transported from Rangoon to their exile residence in Ratnagiri, a place between Bombay and Goa in India. The visitors who come to meet the King and the Queen have a surprise seeing the condition of Burma's last King. In spite of losing the political power, the Queen could never subjugate her internal power to the British though their living surroundings had deteriorated to a slum and she criticises them point blank to the visitors for reducing them to dismal status. "Yes, we who ruled the richest land in Asia are now reduced to this. This is what they have done to us, this is what they will do to all of Burma" (GP 88). British name the reason for war as a means to make progress in Burma and imprisoned the royal family, thus plundered the wealth of Burma turning it into a destitute nation.

She has the courage to voice out against the atrocities, injustice and subjugation in the name of progress. One country's progress need not be necessarily at the expense of another nation, and in the same way the woman need not to be subjugated and controlled so that a man's position and power could be established. The patriarchal society has invented a system of oppression and suppression over the centuries, in order to prove superiority and power over the other. But today an alternative is necessary for the development of the society and wellbeing of the humanity - a society of equal status and opportunity for every human being irrespective of gender.

The Queen asserted her determination even in exile and continued her being a royal and expected to be treated with respect. She was not in a position to make changes in the observation of rules honouring her Queenship. She was a person of self respect, dignity and esteem and outer circumstances could not make an impact on her or alter her ways. "...but she wouldn't hear of any changes. She was the Queen of Burma, she said, and if she didn't insist on being treated properly how could she expect anyone else to give her due?" (GP 55)

The new collector Beni Prasad Dey and his wife, Uma Dey offers respect to the King and Queen by visiting the Outram House. The Queen expresses her rebellious attitude to the British representatives who are the supporters of the imperialism by breaking the protocol, "...visitors were expected to walk in and seat themselves on low chairs around Her Highness, with no words of greeting being uttered on either side. This was the Queen's way of preserving the spirit of Mandalay protocol: ... she in turn made a point of not

acknowledging their entry into her presence" (GP 106). The Queen is also sceptic questioning the existing political dogmas related to patriarchy. The intervention of collector and his insistence for patterned behaviour in the name of protocol is not approved by the Queen. In her personal and professional identities not only as a queen, even as a woman, she questions the insignificant British policies of the patriarchy.

The King's discussion on war and Japanese victory over Russia with the collector comes to an abrupt end as the collector supports the British and points out that the King's lack of understanding of this mighty power has brought them into exile. The Queen is displeased and asks the collector not to proceed any further with a sudden stillness in the room. The embarrassing situation is saved by Uma as she begins to enquire about a picture on the wall painted by Dolly, the maid with unusual beauty and expresses her great appreciation. The Queen is impressed by Uma's intervention in the right moment with liveliness in contrast to her husband's arrogance and reckless speech.

The Queen becomes interested in Uma and reveals her desire to know her real name as they do not practice in Burma naming women after their fathers or husbands. The patriarchal system maintains a male tag with the names of women in the society for their identity; before marriage it is father's name and after marriage it is husband's name. The Queen challenges this aspect of patriarchy and expresses her curiosity to Uma, "We would like to ask you, Madame Collector . . . what is your real name? We have never been able to accustom ourselves to your way of naming women after their fathers and husbands. We do not do this in Burma. Perhaps you would not object to telling us your own given name?" (GP 108) This custom of Burma is catching up with other countries where women do not want to change their surnames after marriage.

In India, a survey was conducted by the Matchmaking Service to know the mindset of women and surprisingly the women came out with their conditions before marriage. The young women expressed their desire to retain their maiden name as well as to maintain their independence. The women said that they did not like "to change their surname post marriage, would like to stay independent post marriage, would like men to take up responsibility of the family" (IANS). These conditions are the proof of changing mindset of women and they are evolving to be confident in making their choices like their counterparts in other countries.

The feminists argue that maintaining one's own name would mean retaining our own personal and professional identity. Many feminists in the US, UK, Australia and in many other western countries have discussed and pondered over surname change after marriage. Greece enacted a law in 1983 that all women must keep their birth surname and it was part of a major set of reforms. Maria Karamessini, director of the Centre for Gender Studies at Panteion University in Athens says "For women, it was emancipation to keep our own name after marriage.

Greece had the most progressive laws in Europe in 1983, and not only for the last names of women. Our feminist movement changed mentalities, but it was gradual. We went from a very traditional society with traditional gender roles." (Long) Greece is progressive and this change set a dramatically different tone in a country known for tradition and patriarchy.

The Queen in the novel uses myriads of ways to express her rebellious attitude to anyone who stands for British imperialism. India having many languages spoken in the country makes it difficult for Indians to know all the languages. Though Hindi being the language of Ratnagiri, the King and the Queen spoke Hindi fluently and the government officials from different states are at a disadvantage not familiar with the language of the place. The Queen prefers to converse in Hindi to embarrass the officials and to make the conversation impossible to be elongated.

The Indians, on the other hand, were frequently Parsis or Bengalis, Mr Chatterjee this or Mr Dorabjee that, and they were rarely fluent in Hindustani. And unlike their British counterparts they were hesitant about switching languages; it seemed to embarrass them that the Queen of Burma could speak Hindustani better than they. They would stumble and stutter and within minutes she would have their tongues tied in knots. (GP 109)

Amitav Ghosh utilises the character of Queen and her maid Dolly to dissect the Indian custom and habits that stand as barricades for women emancipation and empowerment. Dolly, the maid in the royal family speaks to Uma about the pregnancy of the first Princess and Uma is worried about the background of the man who is responsible for it. Dolly comes out vehemently on the patriarchal attitude of Indian society, "You're all the same, all obsessed with your castes and your arranged marriages. In Burma when a woman likes a man, she is free to do what she wants" (GP 118). In the royal family no one seems to be worried about the details of the man who has impregnated her daughter.

The collector gets summoned by the Queen and she informs him about their eldest daughter's pregnancy, princess Ashin Hteik Su Myat Phaya Lat and the collector is perturbed for not having issued licence for the Princess's marriage. The Queen's reply is ironic as she says children can be born without a licence. She is able to deal with the reality with much ease and determination, than the collector, who is totally perturbed about princess's reputation who is impregnated by the coachman Sawant. He attempts to convince the Queen about the scandal and she explains what had been truly scandalous in her view, "Scandal? There is no scandal in what my daughter has done. The scandal lies in what you have done to us; in the circumstances to which you have reduced us; in our very presence here" (GP 150).

The patriarchal society is eager to distort the truth in order to maintain order so that reputation and honour is established in the society but the Queen has a different outlook and she never sees it as a scandal. Further she is furious at the Collector who

refers to Sawant as a household employee. She sarcastically retorts, "Sawant is less a servant than you. At least he has no delusions about his place in the world" (GP 150).

The Collector attempts to hush up the issue without bringing it to anyone's knowledge and also plans to get rid of the coachman, Sawant who is responsible for the princess' pregnancy using his political power. He suggests that the Queen must rethink of her decision to accept the coachman as his son-in-law, "...the matter could be handled discreetly, without any inkling of it reaching the public. The young man could be persuaded to go quietly back to his village and family. If he made trouble, Mr Wright and his policemen would deal with him" (GP 150).

Ethics and moral values play a crucial role in an enlightened political system and the feminists maintain that the representation of men and women on equal number will ensure the balance in the system. Critiquing the political logic of the system in the speeches part three, titled Freedom or Death, Emmeline Pankhurst, a political activist and leader of the British women Suffragette movement claims that "You must make women count as much as men; you must have an equal standard of morals; and the only way to enforce that is through giving women political power so that you can get that equal moral standard registered in the laws of the country. It is the only way" (Pankhurst).

The Queen questions the justice practiced by the British who claim that they rule by the laws and are human in their dealing with the people. She finds disparity in their words and deeds. She as a politician unveils the double standard played by the British in a polished manner while attacking their greed and exploitation. "The English alone understand liberty, we were told; ... they rule through laws. If that is so, why has King Thebaw never been brought to trial? Where are these laws that we hear of? Is it a crime to defend your country against an invader? Would the English not do the same? (GP 150)

As per the British rule, the Collector must issue the licence for the princess' wedding because family is a political institution. The feminists say that a state has a responsibility in the formation of family and future citizens. The family inculcates ethical and moral values in a person to practice it in every sphere one enters into make his/her survival. Family is considered to be a political institution. Respect and equality to everyone irrespective of gender has to begin at home, as "The family has, in fact, always been heavily regulated by the State, often in ways detrimental to women's equality" (Fineman 1995). The private realm of family and the public realm of politics must be interconnected to create an integrated society.

The Queen is not an ordinary person to take everything lightly according to patriarchal expectation

but she has her own views, outlook and convictions. Even in exile, the royal household observe the rules of Burma and the Queen retains her Burmese clothing as a refusal to accept Indian circumstances. She is very domineering and determined from the very beginning of her reign as a queen. After the death of King Thebaw, she returns to Burma in 1919. As the last queen of Burma, she lives the rest of her life in Burma and dies in 1925 and is buried in Rangoon. For Queen Supayalat politics is on her finger tips and it is she, not King Thebaw who reigns the Kingdom.

Aim of the Study

To create awareness in women towards political empowerment.

Conclusion

To conclude, Amitav Ghosh's narration of the last queen of Burma is magnificent and she stands tall as a woman with her inner strength, courage and efficiency. The capabilities of women must find place in today's political world. Aung San Suu Kyi, the present leader of Burma, now Myanmar holds the view that men and women must work together for the welfare of the society. She says that "In societies where men are truly confident of their own worth women are not merely "tolerated" they are valued. Their opinions are listened to with respect, they are given their rightful place in shaping the society in which they live" (Suu Kyi).

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