



# ON A RHIZOMATIC PLANE: DELEUZO-GUATTARIAN ANALYSIS OF FLUID HOMES AND IDENTITIES IN AMITAV GHOSH'S THE GLASS PALACE

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## **Abstract:**

Home or homeland has long been considered a prerequisite for developing a sense of identity and belonging and enjoying ontological security. Though dependent on the mere accident of birth, this home has been imagined as a spatially rooted, homogeneous entity. But, this turns problematic when migration becomes the inevitable norm for survival. The paper views Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace* which is peopled with characters who share the inexorable experience of displacement, in the light of Deleuzo- Guattarian concept of rhizome . It argues for the reconceptualisation of existence as rhizomatic in order to grapple with the intricacies of dislocations and relocations which dominate the game of survival.

**Key words:** Displacement, Home, Identity, Rhizome

## **Full Paper**

Home or homeland has long been considered a prerequisite for developing a sense of identity and belonging and for enjoying ontological security. The narratives on migration and displacement have, till recently, spun around the feelings of rootlessness and nostalgia experienced by the migrants since home or homeland is thought to be linked to a person's sense of identity and belonging. The conception of home as a spatially rooted entity and the consequent building up of identity turn problematic when dislocation becomes inevitable for survival. The paper assays the rhizomatic potential of existence as evinced in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace* which is peopled with characters who share the inexorable experience of displacement.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the prominent literary figures of the Indian diaspora, whose works penetrate and obliterate boundaries of the self and nationhood. His *The Glass Palace* (2000) is a yarn of many families told within the background of momentous historical events. The seven parts of the novel cover the time span of more than one century from 1885 to 1996. The major events of the novel are scattered over Malaya, Burma and India. It is a family saga of three generations which begins with the arrival of Rajkumar, an Indian orphan in Mandalay, Burma. Rajkumar works in a tea stall of a matronly lady Ma Cho. The British conquest of Mandalay brings about a change in the serene life of the place. The Burmese King Thebaw and the royal family are transported to India. With the loyal help of his friends Doh Say, Saya John and others, Rajkumar gradually succeeds in becoming a rich teak trader and a powerful member of the Indian community in Burma. Thereafter, he goes in search of Dolly, the devoted maid servant of queen Supayalat, with whom he had fallen in love at first sight as a boy during the British occupation of Mandalay. Dolly lives in the distant Indian city of Ratnagiri with the exiled king Thebaw, queen Supayalat and the princesses. There Dolly befriends Uma, the wife of an Indian District Commissioner assigned to look after the King and his family. Through Uma's contact, Rajkumar finally marries Dolly. The rest of the novel accounts the interaction between three families: of Dolly and Rajkumar in Burma, of Uma and her brother in India and of Saya John - Rajkumar's mentor and his son Matthew in Malaysia. Interspersed in the story is the harrowing experience of war between Japan and Britain with its implications. The major characters are King Thebaw, Rajkumar, Saya John, Bipin Dey, Arjun, Neel, Dinu and Matthew; the Queen Supayalat, Dolly, Uma, Alison, Manju, Jaya and the Princesses. The form of the novel is deliberately episodic to cover massive social, historical and geographic landscapes. Besides, the major stories of the four families, there are many little narratives in this novel, for instance, the stories of Ilongo Alagappan, Doh Say, Mohan Sawant, Co Buckland, Ma Cho, Jaya, etc.

The multiple dislocations and constant reshaping of identity of the characters in the novel lend themselves to a perusal in the light of the rhizomatic model expounded by the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. A concept from biology, rhizome implies a modified subterranean stem of a plant that sends out roots and shoots from its nodes. Deleuze places "the rhizome in opposition to the tree, a rhizome-thought instead of an arborescent thought" (xvii). As a model for culture, the rhizome resists the organisational structure of the root-tree system which charts causality along chronological lines and looks for the source of things and looks towards the pinnacle or conclusion of those things:

A rhizome has no beginning or end: it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb “to be”, but the fabric of rhizome is the conjunction, “and ...and...and”. This conjunction carries enough the force to shake and uproot the verb “to be”. Where are you going? Where are you coming from? Where are you heading for? These are all totally useless questions. (Deleuze and Guattari 25)

The principles of rhizome elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* are also worth considering in the discussion of migrant identity. These include: (i) and (ii) connection and heterogeneity - As opposed to the fixed nature of a tree, rhizome establishes any number of connections from any point to another. The connections established by rhizomes do not confine to any particular sphere, but extend to diverse domains; (iii) multiplicity - In the case of rhizome, multiplicity implies different dimensions which change in nature and refuse to be defined by an overarching unity; (iv) asignifying rupture - Breaking does not mean the end of rhizome. The shattered rhizome emerges again from an old spot or new spot; (v) and (vi) cartography and decalomania - The structure of a rhizome cannot be traced. Instead, a rhizome can only be mapped since it is subject to continual modification.

In *The Glass Palace*, characters are not spatially rooted like arbors or trees, instead they are on the horizontal plane of existence like a rhizome. Commenting on Rajkumar’s arrival in Mandalay, the novel says: “It was chance alone that was responsible for Rajkumar’s presence in Mandalay that November morning.” (Ghosh 4). Saya John, Rajkumar’s mentor is introduced thus: “His clothes were those of a European and he seemed to know Hindustani – and yet the cast of his face was neither that of a white man nor an Indian. He looked, in fact, to be Chinese.” (8). At Singapore where Saya John worked as an orderly in a military hospital, soldiers used to tell him: “... you are a dhobi ka kutta – a washerman’s dog – na ghar ka nag hat ka- you don’t belong anywhere, either by the water or on land, and I’d say, yes, that is exactly what I am” (10). Rajkumar is also a person who belongs to nowhere and is at a loss to understand the grief of the Burmese people at the deposition of their king by the British because “beyond the ties of blood, friendship and immediate reciprocity, Rajkumar recognised no loyalties, no obligations and no limits on the compass of his right to provide for himself” (47). The lives of these characters proceeds on swirls of connection, disconnection and reconnection: “This constant alteration means that it is a mistake to want to hold on to everything. Individuals must find ways of connecting well but the only way of doing this is by forgetting” (Williams 5).

The reality of dislocation is not confined to the commoners alone. The British occupation of Burma leads to the dethronement of the Burmese king Thebaw. The King, the Queen, the Princesses and servants are exiled to Madras, then finally to Ratnagiri. On the way to the exiled places the King wonders: “What vast, what an comprehensible power, to move people in such large numbers from one place to another- emperors, kings, farmers, dock workers, soldiers, coolies, policemen why? Why this furious movement - people taken from one place to another, to pull rickshaws, to sit blind in exile?” (Ghosh 50). In Ratnagiri the king and his entourage were accommodated in Outram House, a remote, neglected residence on a hilltop. When King Thebaw and his family are exiled to Ratnagiri, initially the family could retain Burmese culture. But because of long stay, their home and identity change:

In their early years in India the Princesses usually dressed in Burmese clothes- aingyis and htameins. But as the years passed, their garments changed. One day, they appeared in saris- not expensive or sumptuous saris but the simple green and red cottons of the district. They began to wear their hair braided and oiled like Ratnagiri school girls; they learned to speak Marathi and Hindustani as fluently as any of the townsfolk (76-77).

While they were in Burma the royal family members rarely came out and mixed with common people but in Ratnagiri the princesses play, eat and sleep in servants’ huts.

Displacement causes many challenges all that human beings can do is try to adjust, compromise, live and above everything else form connections. When Uma discusses with Dolly about the marriage of the princesses, Dolly told that in the entire Burma there were only sixteen eligible grooms. Only a man descending of Konbaung blood in both lines is eligible to marry them. Further Dolly told Uma that “the queen would not allow her daughters to defile their blood by marrying beneath themselves” (Ghosh 115). But the dislocation brings unexpected changes in their life. Both the first Princess and the second princess who were born in Burma remain in India. In the course of twenty years of exile the First Princess marries Mohan Sawant, a coachman and the Second Princess elopes with a Burmese commoner. The shocked King dies of heart attack and his burial is unbelievably plain. The colonial rule did not transport the King’s body to Burma because of the fear that the body might become a rallying point in Burma. The First Princess in a letter written to Dolly writes that “no one could believe that this was the funeral of Burma’s last King!” (205). After the death of the King, the Queen returns to Rangoon and stay there till her death six years. Thus the colonial occupation dislocates the royal

family from home and they were forced to accept new homes and identities. The formation of new bonds and the mixing of races continue and there is no point in turning averse to these processes. The king and queen are not ready to accept new homes and their life turns miserable. But the princesses adapt to the change of their homes and identities, hence their survival is easier.

Dolly herself is a fine embodiment of the notion of rhizomatic existence. She is born in Burma, but she moves to India with the royal family. She tells Uma about Ratnagiri: "I've lived here nearly twenty years, and this is home to me now" (Ghosh 112). But again she moves to Burma after marrying Rajkumar. Later when circumstances turn unfavourable, she persuades Rajkumar to shift the place. In the end she joins a Buddhist nunnery, thus symbolically rejecting all homes.

In a world where morrow is unpredictable, one has to look for routes, not roots. Mobility becomes the norm for survival, rather than settlement. When Rajkumar begins to feel that he is almost settled, the circumstances change. When the Indians in Burma became powerful and prosperous, the Burmese feel displaced. Riots break out all over Burma and Dolly and her sons become the targets of attack because she has married an Indian. Rajkumar's failure to be on the move leads to personal tragedy. His wife, Dolly suggests him to go to India. But he says, "It is hard to think of leaving: Burma has given me everything I have" (Ghosh 309). This sense of belonging proves detrimental. In a Japanese air-raid on Rangoon, the elephants in Rajkumar's timber yard panic, causing the logs to topple down killing Neel, Rajkumar's elder son. Rajkumar leaves for Calcutta. On the way Neel's wife, Manju commits suicide by jumping into the river. They travel along jungle with thousands of people and reach India. Rajkumar's younger son Dinu who had gone to sell off Morningside Rubber Estate in Malaysia does not go to India. He stays in Rangoon with his Burmese wife. Jaya, daughter of Manju and Neel, is brought up by grandparents in Calcutta. Saya John spends his days with his granddaughter Alison in the Morningside Estate in Malaysia after his son Matthew's death in an accident. Because of Japanese advancement into Malaya they plan to leave for Singapore, but Saya John is caught by the Japanese soldiers. Alison shoots herself before she is caught by the soldiers. After the death of her husband, Uma also moves along places in Europe and America. Arjun, Uma's nephew enlists in the army and is always on the move. The characters emerge as "rhizomes", rather than the traditional "arbors", longing for roots. For them, life is open, borderless, and is created out of proliferating connections, rather than fixed roots. As the Somali writer Nuruddin Farah puts it: "One of the pleasures of living away from home is that you become the master of your destiny, you avoid the constraints and limitations of your past and if need be create an alternative life for yourself" (65)

The novel reiterates the rhizomatic nature of existence which necessitates continuous remoulding of homes and identities. On the one hand, there are commoners like the central character Rajkumar and his mentor, Saya John, who appropriate colonial strategies and transit national frontiers and their prospects depend on the ability to rediscover homes and adapt to the ongoing process of migration. On the other hand, there are Thebaw, the deposed King of Burma and his Queen Supayalat who cannot be at ease anywhere except in the palace. And, there are a horde of other characters from varied milieus, whose lives spill over boundaries. Stuart Hall observes: “Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference” (235).

In *The Glass Palace*, the king, the queen, the princesses and common men and women, add their own shades to the theme of dislocation. These characters drift across the globe, realise the necessity of continual transformation in the ethic of survival, reconstruct their lives and resist all fixed notions of belonging. Horizontal movement of the rhizome is the reality of existence for them, not the vertical rooting of a tree. They are on the move and their homes and identities are created and recreated, from time to time, at some unstable points where the personal, political, historical, economic and numerous other forces intersect and interact.

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