

**EMPIRE, SENSE OF PLACE AND CULTURES IN CONTACT -
GEORGE ORWELL'S *BURMESE DAYS*
AND AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE GLASS PALACE***

Christopher Rollason, Ph.D - rollason@9online.fr

NOTE: This text was given as a guest contribution to a postgraduate seminar at the University of Manchester, England, in July 2008

**

Criticism does not, to date, appear to have done more than note briefly the significant literary, historical and cultural issues that are generated by the intertextual relationship between George Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000), two novels which have in common the rather obvious point that both deal with Burma¹ and the impact of empire on that country. Burma (today officially Myanmar) was annexed piecemeal by the British across three wars between 1824 and 1885, when Mandalay was captured and Thibaw, the last king, was exiled². The country was directly incorporated into British India until 1937, when it was placed under separate administration, was occupied by Japan from 1942 to 1945, and won independence in 1948, a year after India and Pakistan. This history finds significant literary reflection in the 'Burmese' novels of Orwell and Ghosh. The two texts manifest clear intertextual links and parallels, while, furthermore, the work of both writers exhibits other more general similarities of an arresting nature. To juxtapose their respective fictional and discursive universes - one colonial (or pre-independence), the other postcolonial - may shed significant light on empire and its aftermath.

The biographical similarities are curious, linking the two via both Bengal and Burma. Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair in Motihari, Bengal, in 1903, to a father employed in the Indian civil service, in the Opium Department³, Orwell had relatives on his half-French mother's side, including his grandfather, in Burma, established in the teak and shipbuilding businesses: to quote his biographer, D.J. Taylor, 'the Limouzins, whose family base lay at the port of Moulmein, south of Rangoon, were long established in Burma'⁴. This connection explains Orwell's period of service, from 1922 to 1927, in the India Police in that country, then still part of British India: to quote Taylor again, 'asked to state his preferred choice of posting he placed Burma first, (...) on the grounds that he had relatives [there]'⁵. Ghosh, born in Calcutta in 1956, also had family members in Burma. He has explained: 'Most middle-class Bengali families of pre-independence days had some kind of a Burma connection. So did my grandfather and father.'⁶ Specifically, he had 'an aunt who had married into a wealthy Bengali family that had settled in Burma. My aunt's husband ran a prosperous timber business'⁷. Both

¹ In both Burmese and Indian contexts, I use throughout the familiar or conventional toponyms - Burma, Rangoon, Calcutta, etc - rather than the more recent official names.

² See Courtauld, 34-40.

³ This forms a curious connection with Ghosh's historical novel, set in the nineteenth century, *Sea of Poppies* (2008), where production and trade in the then-legal drug loom large.

⁴ Taylor, 16.

⁵ Taylor, 63.

⁶ Ghosh, interview with Chandan Mitra (2005), 2.

⁷ Ghosh, 'At Large in Burma', in *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*, 65-114 (66).

were, then, connected to Burma by transcultural kinship links, Orwell's family participating in the trans-European colonial enterprise and Ghosh's in an established Indian diaspora.

The Burmeseness of Orwell's book is indicated clearly enough in the title, while in Ghosh's case the Glass Palace, a chamber covered with mosaics of coloured glass [destroyed in 1945, now reconstructed] in the royal residence in Mandalay, appears at the beginning, and is replicated at the end in the name of a photographic studio in Rangoon. Ghosh's title also suggests *The Glass Palace Chronicle*, a canonic text of Burmese literature written by a group of scholars at the command of King Ba-gyi-daw and completed in 1832. Nor is it surprising that Burma should appear in the work of both, not only in these two novels but also elsewhere. One of Orwell's earliest published essays, 'How a Nation Is Exploited' (which appeared in 1929 - interestingly, in French, thus reflecting his family's Franco-Burmese connections), denounced British colonial exploitation in Burma⁸, while among his most famous short pieces are two quasi-autobiographical texts with a Burmese setting, 'A Hanging' and 'Shooting An Elephant', which may be read as either short stories or essays. For Ghosh, we may note, in his non-fiction, the political travel essay 'At Large in Burma' (1996), which is mainly concerned with the present-day dictatorship; and, in *Countdown*, his monograph of 1999 on the India-Pakistan nuclear showdown, a significant mention of the 'Forgotten Long March' of Indians out of Burma following Japan's invasion in 1941, an event which he was to evoke in graphic detail in *The Glass Palace*⁹. Burma also makes cameo appearances, in references that are no doubt semi-autobiographical, in Ghosh's novels *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004). In the former, the narrator states: 'My grandfather was an engineer with the railways, in Burma ... My father was born in Mandalay, in 1925'¹⁰ (124); in the latter, the Bengali character Piya says of her family: "'My parents were Bengalis who'd settled in Burma - they came to India as refugees'" (250)¹¹.

Burmese Days, though located almost entirely in Burma, presents the country throughout as an outpost of the greater British Raj, and highlights the presence of Indian and Chinese communities as well as European colonists. On the lexical plane, Burma's ambiguous situation - administratively part of the Raj yet historically and culturally clearly not part of India - generates a degree of nomenclatural ambiguity in the text of *Burmese Days*: the British expatriates are said, if most of the time to be in 'Burma', at some moments nonetheless to be in 'India' (as in the narratorial comment: 'No Anglo-Indian will ever deny that India is going to the dogs'¹²). *The Glass Palace*, in its more wide-ranging narrative, traces the criss-crossing fortunes of two families across Burma, India and Malaya, and underscores Burma's multicultural aspect while placing its modern history under the sign of both colonialism and world war. Nomenclaturally, Ghosh uses "Burma" throughout, other than right at the end where the text evokes 'Myanmar, as it was now called'¹³. Orwell's novel centres on the misfortunes of the misfit expatriate Flory, who, marooned in a Burmese provincial town, loses

⁸ Orwell, 'How a Nation Is Exploited: The British Empire in Burma', *Le Progrès Civique*, 4 May 1929, in *Orwell and Politics*, 1-9. The article was signed Eric A. Blair; the French title was: 'Comme on exploite un peuple: L'Empire britannique en Birmanie'. Peter Davison explains in his editorial notes to *Orwell and Politics* (2) that the French text was a translation, by Raoul Nicole, and that Orwell's English original has not survived; the available English text is, therefore, a re-translation.

⁹ Ghosh, *Countdown*, 103-104: 'This summer [1998], in Calcutta, I interviewed several survivors of the Rangoon bombing'. (103). Cf: *The Glass Palace*, 465-474.

¹⁰ Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, 124.

¹¹ Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 250. In addition, in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) the character Hukam Singh, an opium factory employee and former sepoy, is said to have served in Burma (*Sea of Poppies*, 90),

¹² Orwell, *Burmese Days*, 27.

¹³ Ghosh, *The Glass Palace*, 501.

faith in the Raj and befriends Veraswami, an Indian doctor, but fails to get him admitted as the white men's Club's token native. Disastrously, Flory falls for Elizabeth Lackersteen, a new arrival marked by the usual baggage of imperial prejudice, whose rejection hastens his suicide. In Ghosh's narrative, the young Bengali Rajkumar rises from street boy in Mandalay to timber magnate in Rangoon and marries Dolly, a Burmese first glimpsed by him as an attendant to Queen Supayalat whom he tracks down via the queen's exile in India. One of their sons, Dinu, enters a relationship tragically cut short by World War II, with Alison, owner of a plantation in Malaya and part-European grandchild of a Chinese Christian, Saya John, who befriended the young Rajkumar; he ends up as a semi-clandestine photographer under the Myanmar dictatorship. Both plots place Burmese realities in a wider geopolitical context, Asian and, beyond that, global.

Orwell did not live to see Burma's post-independence fall into totalitarianism, but that theme is a key concern for Ghosh, both in 'At Large in Burma' and in the final section of *The Glass Palace*, which even introduces the democratic forces' icon Aung San Suu Kyi, albeit in the background, as a 'real' character. A recent study following Orwell's traces in Burma - which, though, strangely does not mention Ghosh - *Secret Histories* (2004), by Emma Larkin (herself a Burmese speaker), reads *Burmese Days* as in many ways sadly prefiguring the country's latter-day authoritarian regime: 'In Burma there is a joke that Orwell wrote not just one novel about the country, but three: a trilogy composed of *Burmese Days*, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'¹⁴. In fact, *Burmese Days* is itself linked intertextually to Orwell's own fictionalising of the totalitarian, in the passages on expatriate life that highlight the pressure to conform in terms that anticipate *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Flory's Burmese manservant actively disapproves of his master staying at home reading rather than socialising at the Club: 'He hated to see his master behaving differently from other white men'; British Burma is 'a world where every word and every thought is censored ... you are not free to think for yourself'¹⁵. The parallels with Orwell's Oceania are evident, down to the disturbing likeness between the Club and the later novel's Community Centre (Winston Smith's neighbour 'would inform you with quiet pride ... that he had put in an appearance at the Community Centre every evening for the past four years')¹⁶. The soul-killing conformism of Oceania thus has its antecedents in Britain's empire, as, indeed, Orwell's critics have noted: Christopher Hitchens sees the stifling environment of *Burmese Days* as 'a strong prefiguration' of Winston's world¹⁷, while Larkin reads Flory's perceptions of the 'constraints of colonial society' as anticipating Winston's 'musings on Oceania', arguing that Orwell's 'work as an imperial policeman ... greatly contributed to his ability to write about oppression'¹⁸. This suggests further parallels with Ghosh, who has explored the fallout from autocratic regimes not only for Burma but also in his essays on Cambodia, 'Dancing in Cambodia' (1993) and 'Stories in Stones' (1994)¹⁹, as well as speculating in his quasi-science-fictional novel *The Calcutta Chromosome*, if somewhat more ambivalently than Orwell, on a disturbing future and its technologies.

Orwell's Asian connections, too, extend beyond Burma to India proper. He never returned to Asia after his time in Burma, but Indian and/or Burmese references appear right across his essays and, indeed, in several of his apparently unconnected longer works - *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *Coming Up For Air*, and, notably, an important passage of *The Road to*

¹⁴ Larkin, 3.

¹⁵ *Burmese Days*, 60, 69.

¹⁶ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 24.

¹⁷ Hitchens, 17.

¹⁸ Larkin, 216, 107.

¹⁹ Ghosh, in *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*, 1-53, 54-64.

Wigan Pier in which Orwell both denounces colonialism and locates the imperial experience within his own personal history²⁰. *Burmese Days* was actually banned in British India²¹, but despite or because of this Orwell was regarded as an expert on the Raj, and was regularly sent books for review on India and Burma. Above all, he was employed from August 1941 to November 1943 as a broadcaster for the Indian Section of the BBC's Eastern Service - first as a Talks Assistant, then as a Talks Producer²².

Orwell might not be an obvious name to brandish in relation to Indian Writing in English (IWE), but he was in fact connected to that emerging phenomenon by his friendship and professional relationship with Mulk Raj Anand, one of the pioneers of IWE. Anand contributed to Orwell's radio broadcasts, and Orwell published two reviews of Anand's books in the early 1940s, stating in one that 'the best bridge between Europe and Asia ... is the English language',²³ and in the other, prophetically: 'The growth, especially during the last few years, of an English-language Indian literature is a strange phenomenon, and it will have its effect on the post-war world'²⁴. This prescient awareness of the potential of IWE forms a diachronic link between Orwell and Ghosh. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, however, Orwell, in keeping with that book's pessimism, placed India, or at least 'Southern India', unlike the white heartlands of the ex-British Empire, not inside the Anglo-American-dominated Oceania but in the disputed zone, that lowest circle of dystopian hell where slave populations were shunted to and fro between three indistinguishable imperial powers²⁵. Here one might compare Orwell's wartime predictions that an India abandoned by the British would be swallowed up by Russia or Japan²⁶ (cf. Kerr, 49). The notion of South India as a basket-case region has, of course, been proved spectacularly wrong by the technology boom in Bangalore and Hyderabad. Nonetheless, Orwell did of course live, if only briefly, to see the independence of India (and Pakistan), and of Burma too.

Further parallels may be traced between Orwell and Ghosh, biographically, thematically and formally. Orwell, a gifted linguist, became fluent during his time in Burma in Burmese, Hindustani, and even the Shaw-Karen tongue spoken in the Burmese hills²⁷; Ghosh has a detailed knowledge of, at least, Bengali, Hindi, English and Arabic. All of Ghosh's novels (he is, after all, an anthropologist by training) are the product of sustained and meticulous research, a factor paralleled in the strong documentary character of Orwell's writing. The material work of others, too, is a theme meriting detailed treatment in both: in Orwell, as hard or sweated labour - restaurant workers in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, miners in *The Road to Wigan Pier*; in Ghosh, as skilled human activity - weaving in *The Circle of Reason*, lumbering, oil extraction and photography in *The Glass Palace*, marine ecology in *The Hungry Tide*. In formal terms, the *oeuvre* of both, taken as a whole, calls in question the dividing-lines between fiction and non-fiction, narrative and essay, encompassing fictional, documentary and mixed-status texts. Orwell offers fictionalised autobiography in *Down and Out* and a narrative-plus-essay hybrid in *Wigan Pier*, and complicates the narrative of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with essayistic elements (Goldstein's book, the appendix on Newspeak); Ghosh's *In An Antique Land* combines anthropology, historical reconstruction

²⁰ Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, 118-119 (Indian rickshaw pullers); *Coming Up For Air* (the narrator's 'Anglo-Indian' in-laws), 138-139; *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 132-138.

²¹ See Kerr, 46.

²² See Douglas Kerr, 'In the Picture: Orwell, India and the BBC' (2004).

²³ Orwell, review of Anand, *Letters on India*, *Tribune*, 19 March 1941, in *Orwell on Politics*, 173-177 (175).

²⁴ Orwell, review of Anand, *The Sword and the Sickle*, *Horizon*, July 1942: quoted in Hitchens, 32.

²⁵ See *Nineteen-Eighty Four*, 195-196.

²⁶ Cf. Kerr, 49.

²⁷ See Hitchens, 31.

and autobiography, resulting in a genre-problematic text that, if logically best considered non-fiction, has been claimed by some (though not its author) as a novel.

The central theme of the two novels under focus, is, however, beyond all doubt European colonialism in Asia, and a powerful anti-colonial dynamic is evident in both, as elsewhere in Orwell and Ghosh, albeit from different historical and, to an extent, ideological perspectives. Orwell gradually shifted position on the Raj, evolving from an initial ambivalence to downright hostility; Ghosh, a child of independent India, critically dissects the colonial inheritance in his postcolonial *oeuvre*. Douglas Kerr defines Orwell's end-position on India as a 'commitment to the anti-imperial cause and specifically to the object of ending the British occupation of India'. On the evolution of his stance, Kerr comments: 'It is not an easy matter to say just when this commitment solidified', reading *Burmese Days* as ambiguous over empire but concluding: 'by the end of the [1930s] ... Orwell's position had clarified to the extent that he can be described as unambiguously anti-imperialist'²⁸. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), Orwell stated bluntly: 'I was in the Indian Police five years, and by the end of that time I hated the imperialism I was serving ... it is not possible to be part of such a system without recognising it as an unjustifiable tyranny'²⁹. The process by which his views evolved was complex, and complicated by the Second World War, but its essence may be gleaned if we compare two texts twenty years apart. In his 1929 essay on Burma, 'How a Nation Is Exploited', Orwell declared: 'the British are robbing and pilfering Burma quite shamelessly', and saw India itself as 'deliberately kept in ignorance', its productive potential denied: 'Care is taken to avoid technical and industrial training. This rule ... aims to stop India from becoming an industrial country capable of competing with England', but nonetheless saw independence as a pipe-dream: 'as things now stand, if the English were to give up India, it would result only in a change of master. The country would simply be invaded and exploited by some other Power'³⁰. By 1949, however, Orwell was able to write, in an essay entitled 'Reflections on Gandhi', with evident relief and approval: 'The British did get out of India without fighting, an event which very few observers indeed would have predicted', adding that 'by 1945, there had grown up in Britain a large body of opinion sympathetic to Indian independence'³¹. The odyssey of Orwell's views on empire is ably summarised by Douglas Kerr as manifesting 'the transition from a colonial to a postcolonial world'³².

On Ghosh's side, *The Glass Palace* has tended to be read as a firm, if not necessarily programmatic or one-dimensional, indictment of colonialism. Thus, John Laxmi (2001) declares that in researching and writing this novel Ghosh 'came face to face with the scars of deep colonial wounds left behind by the British on Indians'³³, while Federica Zullo (2004) argues that *The Glass Palace* rejects 'colonial binaries and essentialist notions of culture, history and politics' and offers 'an original counter-narrative of nation and coloniality'³⁴. Ghosh himself has said, in a 2005 interview (with the 'club' metaphor interestingly paralleling *Burmese Days*): 'No matter how hard Indians tried to be like the British, they were never admitted into the elite club of white colonialists beyond a point ... This left Indians with an immense sense of hurt ... sometimes I think we don't realise what it was like to live in a

²⁸ Kerr, 43.

²⁹ *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 134.

³⁰ Orwell, 'How a Nation Is Exploited', 6, 5, 8.

³¹ Orwell, 'Reflections on Gandhi' (*Partisan Review*, January 1949), in *Orwell and Politics*, 491-499 (498).

³² Kerr, 48.

³³ Laxmi (Internet reference).

³⁴ Zullo, 66. Comparable views on *The Glass Palace* as anti-colonial novel are expressed by Shanthini Pillai (2002) and T. Vinoda (2002).

colonial society ... The rulers controlled all access to knowledge. That's why India could not prosper despite all the talent'³⁵.

The two novels are linked not only thematically but intertextually, through Ghosh's implicit back-references to Orwell and, besides, a shared external intertextuality with Kipling. Orwell's novel recalls, on its very first page, the episode - 'the British troops march[ing] victorious into Mandalay'³⁶ - which Ghosh's opening directly recounts, with Saya John's son Matthew informing Rajkumar: "'The English are preparing to send a fleet up the Irrawaddy. There's going to be a war. Father says they want all the teak in Burma.'³⁷" If Orwell early evokes Kipling's celebrated poem 'The White Man's Burden'³⁸, with Flory twice ironically quoting the title phrase³⁹, Ghosh effectively quotes the no less famous 'Mandalay', with Rajkumar, on the second page, quite literally walking down Kipling's 'road to Mandalay',⁴⁰ entering the capital just before the British capture it: 'And so it happened that at the age of eleven, walking into the city of Mandalay, Rajkumar saw, for the first time, a straight road'⁴¹. Kipling himself was never actually in Mandalay, but his poem does mention 'Supi-yaw-lat ... Theebaw's Queen'.⁴² At all events, Ghosh's streetwise protagonist seems to start out as a native equivalent of Kipling's Kim, introduced in a posture that almost blatantly draws attention to Kipling's novel's imperial legacy: if Kim first appears outside the Lahore museum sitting 'astride the gun Zam-Zammah ... the great bronze piece ... always first of the conqueror's loot'⁴³, Rajkumar is unveiled to the reader at a Mandalay food-stall listening intently to the 'distant booming' of another kind of gun: 'English cannon. ... Heading in this direction'⁴⁴.

Both Orwell and Ghosh, then, textually acknowledge, through Kipling, the colonial inheritance they critique. Equally, Ghosh's novel has textual details visibly referring back to Orwell's. Early on, Rajkumar and Matthew visit a *pwe*, the traditional Burmese entertainment which also features in a key episode of *Burmese Days* when Elizabeth, dragged unwillingly to such a festivity by Flory, reveals her contempt for the local culture⁴⁵. The colonial institution of the gentlemen's Club, which looms large in Orwell's plot, appears in *The Glass Palace* when the west wing of the palace in Mandalay is 'converted into a British Club'⁴⁶. The negative perception of Asian food which appears in Orwell ('what is almost the worst thing in Burma, the filthy, monotonous food'⁴⁷) is tellingly reversed in Ghosh's novel in a passage that lingeringly praises the refinement of Malay cuisine: 'fish cooked with pink ginger buds ... chicken with blue flowers ... new tastes, flavours that were as unfamiliar as they were delicious'⁴⁸. In a further intertextuality moving out into Orwell's other work, Ghosh's episode

³⁵ Ghosh, interview with Mitra, 2.

³⁶ *Burmese Days*, 1.

³⁷ *The Glass Palace*, 15.

³⁸ Kipling, 'The White Man's Burden', in *The Complete Verse*. Orwell's reference is especially significant if we recall that Kipling's poem is actually a call to the US to take over the imperial vanguard role from the British, thus anticipating not only subsequent history but the absorption of the British Empire by the US that, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, creates the fictional Oceania.

³⁹ *Burmese Days*, 36, 37

⁴⁰ Kipling, 'Mandalay', in *The Complete Verse*, line 18.

⁴¹ *The Glass Palace*, 4.

⁴² Kipling, 'Mandalay', line 12.

⁴³ Kipling, *Kim*, 7.

⁴⁴ *The Glass Palace*, 3.

⁴⁵ *The Glass Palace*, 11; *Burmese Days*, 103-111.

⁴⁶ *The Glass Palace*, 66.

⁴⁷ *Burmese Days*, 65.

⁴⁸ *The Glass Palace*, 219-220.

recounting, as a graphic case of poetic justice, the she-elephant Shwe Doke's elimination of her oppressive taskmaster McKay⁴⁹ may be read as both rewriting of and riposte to another 'elephant story', namely Orwell's 'Shooting an Elephant' - an episode, in fact, alluded to by Orwell himself in *Burmese Days*: 'She was quite thrilled when he described the murder of an elephant which he had perpetrated some years earlier'.⁵⁰

Both Orwell and Ghosh portray a Burma (and Ghosh an Asia) that is objectively multicultural - a mosaic of interlocking peoples and languages. In *Burmese Days*, however, the limits of the colonial mentality (in the end shared by Flory) are such that the text cannot resolve the pieces into a broader pattern. This is clear from the *pwe* episode and from another in which Flory and Elizabeth visit a Chinese household. Flory, wrongly supposing Elizabeth is 'different from that herd of fools at the Club', hopes the *pwe* will stimulate an interest in her in Burmese culture ('She would love it; she must'): but all that happens is that, ignoring Flory's attempt to instruct her and link up the *pwe* with 'the priests in their yellow robes, the buffaloes swimming the rivers in the early morning, Thibaw's palace' (this last detail prefiguring Ghosh), 'Elizabeth watched the dance with a mixture of amazement, boredom and something approaching horror'⁵¹. Flory fares no better in the encounter with the Chinese family: while he tries to explain customs of which he disapproves, like footbinding, her reaction stays on the level of "'This tea looks absolutely beastly. It's quite green'": she refuses to thank the Chinese for their hospitality, and is vexed by Flory's 'constant striving to interest her in Oriental things', which she finds 'perverse' and 'ungentlemanly'⁵². Flory could nonetheless, at least arguably, be charged with 'Orientalism' in Edward Said's sense of a condescending and ultimately colonialist desire to study the culture of the Other - the 'assumption ... that the Orient and everything in it was, if not patently inferior to, then in need of corrective study by the West'⁵³. This said, Elizabeth, and the regulars at the Club who reduce all Asians to 'natives' and 'black hides'⁵⁴, cannot even be called Orientalists: such is the cultural gulf that debate cannot so much as begin⁵⁵. Flory's fixation on Elizabeth nonetheless implies that, viscerally rather than intellectually, he cannot completely break out of his imperial conditioning, and his suicide may be read as symbolising the total impasse arising from what seems the near-impossibility of intercultural communication.

In *The Glass Palace*, by contrast, Burma appears as a space of interpenetration of different cultural groups, in a pan-Asian process that precedes colonialism while interacting with it. Within this process, multilingualism operates as a metonym for the multicultural encounter. This dimension is pointed up right from the beginning. Rajkumar, a Bengali in Burma, meets Ma Cho, a street-seller who is (in a significant hybridation) 'half-Indian'⁵⁶, and, through her, Saya John, a Chinese Christianised (originally as João Martins) in Malaya by Portuguese/Goan priests. When Saya John addresses Rajkumar in 'broken Hindustani', the boy asks him 'in Burmese, "how did you learn to speak an Indian language?'. Saya John replies: "'They spoke many languages, these priests, and from the Goans I learnt a few Indian words'",

⁴⁹ *The Glass Palace*, 96-103.

⁵⁰ *Burmese Days*, 87.

⁵¹ *Burmese Days*, 103, 108, 107.

⁵² *Burmese Days*, 134, 137.

⁵³ Said, *Orientalism*, 40-41.

⁵⁴ *Burmese Days*, 28.

⁵⁵ These *not-even-Orientalists* of Orwell's novel are in total contrast to what might be called a 'positive-Orientalist' European figure in Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, the deceased father of the character Paulette, Pierre Lambert, who, a French botanist resident in Calcutta, learnt Bengali and devoted himself to compiling a 'Materia medica of the plants of Bengal' (*Sea of Poppies*, 118).

⁵⁶ *The Glass Palace*, 5.

and then recalls how when he worked in Singapore the Indian soldiers stationed there asked him: "how is it that you, who look Chinese and carry a Christian name, can speak our language?", and when he explained they declared: "you are a *dhobi ka kutta* - a washerman's dog ... you don't belong anywhere, either by the water on the land, and I'd say, yes"⁵⁷. The main characters of *The Glass Palace* are, indeed, people who 'don't belong anywhere'. Rajkumar brings Dolly back to Burma from India, but the family end up in Calcutta; Dinu re-encounters Alison on her Malay plantation. Colonialism seeks to homogenise the complex Asian realities, making Hindu and Muslim cadets alike eat English food and, in wartime, denying all non-whites the right to flee Malaya; but against this standardising pressure, the narrated lives of Ghosh's characters affirm the multilingual and the pluricultural as signifiers of human interconnectedness⁵⁸.

This interconnectedness becomes, in Ghosh's pages, an implicit source of hope in a postcolonial universe, arising as an alternative perspective to the seemingly ineluctable separation and fragmentation of the colonial world of *Burmese Days*. Such a perspective is graphically embodied in an especially powerful image from the episode of Dinu's plantation idyll with Alison. It occurs while Malaya is still a British possession and soon before the Japanese invasion, and yet operates in a utopian sense as a pointer to a better future, synthesising opposites of time and place. At the height of their relationship, the Indo-Burmese Dinu photographs the Chinese-German-American Alison daily, against the backdrop of the ruined temple within her estate:

He would spend long stretches of time thinking of where to place her, against which wall, or which part of the plinth; he'd imagine her seated upright, leaning against a lintel, one leg stretched in front of her and another leg bent at the knee. In the gap between her legs he would glimpse a striation in the pitted surface of the laterite, or a soft mound of moss, as visual echoes of her body's fissures and curves. But the materiality of her presence would quickly disarrange these carefully imagined schemes. Once her body was placed where he wanted it, something would prove to be not right; he would frown into his square canvas of ground glass and go back to kneel beside her, sinking his fingertips softly into the tensile firmness of her thighs, teasing out minute changes in the angles of her limbs⁵⁹.

This act of placing epitomises, precisely, the sense of place that characterises *The Glass Palace*, which locates its characters in a richly complex Asian reality that transcends narrow nationalisms and achieves mediation between the ancient heritage embodied in the ruins and the modernity of the camera. At moments like this, Ghosh's remarkable novel gives life to Edward Said's anti-particularist postcolonial perception that 'no one today is purely *one thing*'⁶⁰, while offering an alternative world-view to Orwell's fractured imperial universe in the very act of constituting itself as a triumphant instance of the Indian Writing in English whose future success Orwell himself was prescient enough to foresee.

⁵⁷ *The Glass Palace*, 10.

⁵⁸ The importance of multilingualism (and of translation) in the Asian context becomes a major theme in *The Hungry Tide* (cf. Rollason, 2004).

⁵⁹ *The Glass Palace*, 356.

⁶⁰ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 407.

WORKS CITED

- COURTAULD, Caroline. *Burma (Myanmar)*. Hong Kong: Odyssey Publications, 1999.
- GHOSH, Amitav. *Countdown*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1999.
- ___, *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1998.
- ___, *In An Antique Land*. 1992. New York: Vintage, 1994.
- ___, Interview with Chandan Mitra, Sunday Pioneer, Agenda section, 6 March 2005, 2.
- ___, *Sea of Poppies*. London: John Murray, 2008.
- ___, *The Calcutta Chromosome*. 1996. London: Picador, 1997.
- ___, *The Circle of Reason*. 1986. London: Granta Books, 1998.
- ___, *The Glass Palace*. London: Harper Collins, 2000.
- ___, *The Hungry Tide*. London: Harper Collins, 2004.
- ___, *The Shadow Lines*. 1988. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2001.
- ___, *The Circle of Reason*. 1986. London: Granta Books, 1998.
- HITCHENS, Christopher. *Why Orwell Matters*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.
- KERR, Douglas. 'In the Picture: Orwell, India and the BBC'. Literature & History, Third Series, 13/1, Spring 2004, 43-57.
- <www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/information_areas/journals/lit_history/130043.pdf>
- KIPLING, Rudyard. *Kim*. 1901. Harmondsworth: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994.
- ___, *The Complete Verse*. London: Kyle Cathie, 1996.
- LARKIN, Emma. *Secret Histories: Finding George Orwell in a Burmese Teashop*. London: John Murray, 2004.
- LAXMI, John. 'Mutiny of a Muse'. Rediff.com site, 21 March 2001.
- <www.rediff.com/news/2001/mar/20us2.htm>.
- ORWELL, George. *Animal Farm*. 1945. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989.
- ___, *Burmese Days*. 1934. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989.
- ___, *Coming Up For Air*. 1939. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990.
- ___, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. 1933. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940.
- ___, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. 1949. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989.
- ___, *Orwell and Politics*. Ed. Peter Davison. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001.
- ___, *The Road to Wigan Pier*. 1937. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989.
- PILLAI, Shanthini. 'The Gaze of a Diasporic, the Voice of a Subaltern: Amitav Ghosh's Articulation of the Indian Immigrant Labour Experience in *The Glass Palace*'. The Atlantic Literary Review, Vol. 3, No. 4, October-December 2002, 128-144.
- ROLLASON, Christopher. "'In Our Translated World": Transcultural Communication in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*'. <www.seikilos.com.ar/ghosh.pdf>, 2004.
- SAID, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. 1993. London: Vintage, 1994.
- ___, *Orientalism*. 1978. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995.
- TAYLOR, D.J. *Orwell: The Life*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2003.
- VINODA, T. 'Reflections on the Crystal Palace: *The Glass Palace* as a Postcolonialist Text'. Kakatiya Journal of English Studies, Vol. 22, December 2002, 77-95.
- ZULLO, Federica. 'Across Time and Space: Amitav Ghosh's Dislocated Storm'. In *Indias Abroad: the Diaspora Writes Back*, ed. Rajendra Chetty and Pier Paolo Piciuccio, Johannesburg STE Publishers, 2004, 60-69.