

## **Aesthetics in Political Activism: Insights from Amitav Ghosh's Chronicles of Burma and Cambodia in his Selected Writings**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Amitav Ghosh, in some of his fictional and nonfictional pieces, investigates with the eye of an anthropologist-journalist how art and personality symbols in diverse ways can play inspirational role in political culture. When a nation on the verge of disintegration demands an iconic personality to be at the helm and cultivates love for artistic heritage, its chance of drifting into anarchy can be minimised. In times of deep crises of a country, artistic representations can be utilised to provide constructive energy to people involved in conflict. However, art alone is not potent enough to fight anarchy but is useful when it combines with political activism. Often people are reminded of the golden past when the nation was steered by leaders who could strategically bring art into the service of politics. Amitav Ghosh in his novel *The Glass Palace* and the travelogue *Dancing in Cambodia and Other Essays* has articulated this issue in the contexts of Burma and Cambodia, two conflict-ridden nations having a long history of traumatic dictatorial regimes. The insights gathered from these two nations may contribute to understanding the realities of any country beset by political disorder, negotiating for durable peace. The history and current condition of Bangladesh also support the observation of Amitav Ghosh on politics. Adding to the discourse of art-politics relation, he illustrates the complimentary impact of art in the sphere of politics as their common goal is to bring order out of chaos.

### **Introduction**

The world at present has many conflict zones which require us to employ the full register of human insight, creativity and intelligence to understand and address the nature of their political challenges. While many issues in politics may best be understood through the application of specific research methods in social science, some political puzzles may become clearer if scrutinized through the application of literary insights and observation of aesthetic practices, giving political study an aesthetic turn with emphasis on interdisciplinary approach to investigate human society.<sup>1</sup> Amitav Ghosh, a compelling chronicler of the turmoil of our times, in his writing project displays an abiding interest in history and politics, art and activism, often blurring the boundary of fiction and nonfiction, literature and journalistic reports. He “grew up on stories of other countries; [and] the most intriguing of these stories were those that [his] family carried out of Burma” (*Dancing in Cambodia and Other Essays* 57; cited hereafter as *Dancing*). Many of his texts are based on his actual visits to settings of his narratives and relevant archival studies, when it is deemed necessary, to view in depth the events to be narrated, applying a research mind and a journalistic eye. Southeast Asian region constitutes the locus of his deliberations on history, politics and violence. His distinctive voice in this regard is evident in the novel *The Glass Palace* and the nonfictional piece *Dancing in Cambodia and Other Essays*. Burma<sup>2</sup> and Cambodia portrayed in these texts have a long history of colonialism, dictatorship, and political turmoil; the insights from these countries can help one observe the nature of conflict in other neighbouring lands with informed mind. Comparative politics scholar Sorpong Peou aptly says: “Country cases help us assess the structural perspectives, particularly cultural, ideological, and historical ones, as these variables defy quantification.”<sup>3</sup> Having ancestral roots and childhood

memories in Bangladesh Amitav Ghosh has also eagerness to see what is going on there. Coming to Dhaka Lit Fest in 2023 he said: “I grew up hearing stories in Dhaka” and, in his opinion, through his attending the Fest the connection was restored once again. A good number of characters of his novel *Gun Island* are from Bangladesh. During the July-August students uprising of 2024 Ghosh was one of the luminaries from across the globe writing a joint open letter to the United Nations Human Rights Commission about the political situation in Bangladesh. On his social media platform X, he shared a copy of the letter which said: “Please find a petition on behalf of more than 140 scholars, writers, and public intellectuals to request immediate action in the continuing violence, intimidation, and repression in Bangladesh... against students, teachers, journalists, exercising their right to protest.”<sup>4</sup>

While scholarly research works are available on themes of history, imperialism, and violence presented in *The Glass Palace*, studies on the contemporary political issues delineated in the novel and its sequel essays are hardly seen. Using relevant theoretical ideas on the relation of art and politics this paper is an attempt to critique Ghosh’s portrayal of Burma and Cambodia and apply his insights from those countries to understanding the context of Bangladesh. This is an endeavour to capture the contemporary echoes of Ghosh’s distinctive voice in rendering political themes through literary enterprises and to read his writing from contemporary lens. Aesthetic representation has been an important focus in political discourses for a long time. There is a lot of debate regarding the place of art in politics, to decide whether these two areas of human engagement are mutually exclusive or complementary. Since art acts like the mirror of life at all levels, politics has an underlying connection with creativity at macro level in diverse forms. As a matter of fact, politics, having control over all aspects of human society, is not an autonomous domain. Sharing important grounds with art, it deals with intertwined human concerns like hopes and frustrations, peace and terror, prosperity and destruction.

Rather than supporting the popular perception of art and politics as mutually opposite subjects some writers explore in politics certain scope for creative practices. They intend to focus on the utility of art in politics to promote feelings of affinity, empathy and identification at all levels of human society. When the instruments of power fail to hold national integrity, the universal instrument of art may work in galvanizing individuals into forming strong basis for social and political identity, protecting common interest and wellbeing. Writers narrating democratically fragile nations on the verge of disintegration often focus on art as a means of bringing unity into diversity among individuals with strong political consciousness and orientations, unity being the express end of art as well as politics. In the same line of argument Amitav Ghosh portraying the trouble-torn areas of the world in some of his fictional and non-fictional writings focuses on the impact of visual art, music, performance, heritage, and personal charisma of leaders in holding people together. In his project of political study through writing he started with the South-East Asian nations like Burma and Cambodia for their iron curtain policy in recent past, long history of dictatorship, intranational quotidian conflict and above all his personal attachment with the region.

### **Aung San Suu Kyi and Mending the Broken Burmese Society**

Amitav Ghosh towards the end of his historical novel *The Glass Palace* has chronicled a sensitive political era related to the rhetorical platform of Suu Kyi in Burma showing “the power of the powerless”. He portrays a country where this “pretty little thing,” as she was once lovingly called by an old lady in a Burmese village, radiates the beauty of love and compassion to mend the soul of a country. Many people discover an embodiment of art in the frail figure of their ever-smiling non-violent leader for democracy who preaches “the revolution of the spirit” for social transformation. Since her spectacular emergence from obscurity through addressing a mass rally in front of the Shwedagon Pagoda on August 26, 1988, when Burma witnessed an unprecedented mass uprising, she has been turned into the personification of Burma’s decades of sustained resistance to military rule and through her image people “bearing the pure light of hope in their eyes” have recourse to the space provided by art and its equivalent categories to resolve the crisis in the political sphere. Through the character of Dinu the novelist initiates his discourse on the

interface between art and politics. At one point of the narrative Dinu becomes passionately engaged with capturing the countryside beauty with his camera while the Japanese tanks move across Southeast Asia. He establishes a studio with a name identical with the novel's title where weekly discussion sessions on art are held among students, enthusiasts, artists, and dissidents to find a way out of the existing political impasse by applying the disciplining impact of art. When some young revolutionaries insist that "aesthetic matters have no relevance to [their political] situation," Dinu replies with ready reference: "I quoted Weston...Weston reflecting on Trotsky...that new and revolutionary art forms may awaken people or disturb their complacency or challenge old ideals with constructive prophecies of change...It does not matter...every week this comes up...every week I say the same thing" (*The Glass Palace* 510, cited hereinafter as *Palace*; ellipses in original). The participants in the discussion at Dinu's studio may have divided political opinions and ideological differences which they can suspend temporarily while going through the passionate discussion of art towards solving the pressing problems of life. Using aesthetic means as a political instrument, heterogeneous groups here gather to form a political platform for forging unity.

Through the discourse of art, they develop a sense of freedom, adventure, and discovery to counter the stunting effect of their restrictive environment: "that all their lives they've been trained to obey...their parents, their teachers, the military...this is what their education teaches: the habit of obedience..." (*Palace* 509; ellipses in original). Their sense of liberty, coming out of their artistic engagement, has the potential to lead to the emergence of a common identity that can smooth society's political conflicts over. In this connection Simon Gikandi's view of the role of aesthetic in building an integrated sense of identity can be worth mentioning: "[people] burdened with the stigma of difference turned to art (and other modern categories of it) to affirm their universal identity as human beings."<sup>5</sup> Art as the powerful agency engaged with the portrayal of the essence of universal humanity can make people shed their petty narrowness and sense of differentiation towards building an integrated society.

Beauty of personality as manifestation of art supplies energy for positive change in a place like Burma which is beset on every side by quotidian strife. Towards the end of *The Glass Palace* Aung San Suu Kyi, the synonym of Burma's democratic struggle is projected as a manifestation of beauty on a messianic mission to help her nation get rid of the repressive social order created by the long-standing junta regime. When she comes to address huge meetings attended by people who consider the occasions as pilgrimages twice a week at the gate of her house of confinement, she is thus idolized by the narrator: "A slim, fine-featured woman stepped up. Her head was just visible above the gate. Her hair was dark black, and gathered at the neck. She was wearing white flowers above her hair. She was beautiful almost beyond belief" (*Palace* 541). She appears as a stellar figure haloed in an aura of whiteness. The aura, as Walter Benjamin has analysed the socio-political function of art, instigating a sense of awe and reverence, provides her with legitimacy to represent the collective nationalist spirit.<sup>6</sup> Of course, when she takes part in governance the halo is lifted. To the global observers, she regresses to the status of a typical politician when she fails to ensure the right of her country's ethnic minorities. Her tragic failure as State Counsellor to support the Rohingya right marks her sudden fall from grace. Many institutions worldwide take steps to withdraw their certificates of recognition and rewards for the once idolised democratic icon of the oppressed. Once a star of the oppressed mass, she loses much of her glory in the institutional set up of power game. Thus, the spark of unity brought by the aesthetic instrument of politics is extinguished because "[m]odern anti-democratic politics seems to signal a new functional relation between the aesthetic and the political."<sup>7</sup>

Whatever may be her current position in the vicissitudes of her recent political career, in literary representation she is still the iconic figure to work as an ideal of pro-democratic politics of all time. She becomes at once a product and a necessity of the age she finds herself in. Her meek, conciliatory, and patient approach is amazing. In *The Glass Palace* none but such a figure becomes a source of inspiration for Dinu's art studio named "The Glass Palace." She points to a healing space for derailed political culture, offering a creative alternative to military regime

based on wide and deep surveillance system, as Jaya, a character of the novel, considers that “it is impossible to behold this woman and not be half in love” with her (*Palace* 542). Although Jaya, like many Indians living in Burma, coming to the meetings of Suu Kyi, “could not understand what she was saying...[Jaya thought] the delivery was completely unlike anything she’d ever heard” (*Palace* 542).

Her laughter being an attraction for audience and everyone hearing the echoes of her laughter around them, her manner of delivery creates an impression of audio-visual art that has something magnetic about it. The writer thus expresses his wonder: “I was startled by how much she laughed. At times, she would break up in giggles, with a hand over her mouth; at other times, she would laugh full-throatedly, throwing her head back” (*Dancing* 69). Her laughter in the atmosphere of intimidation originates from a kind of poetic introspection that transforms the stuff of misery into the stuff of strength, laughter leading to restoration of mental power and creation of resilience. Her position proves the idea that the best way to fight adverse circumstances is to laugh at them. American talented comedian Amy Schumer explains such situation beautifully: “The moments that make life worth living are when things are at their worst and you find a way to laugh.”<sup>8</sup> Laughter having a healing effect in times of darkness makes speech delivery get across the linguistic barrier like an extraordinary piece of music enthralling the listener’s mind, making one consider the meaning only subsidiary. This reminds one of the powers of art for social reconstruction Shelley envisions towards the end of “To a Skylark.” To inject positive change into the society the poet would like to share the pure joy of the bird and as result “Such harmonious madness/From [his] lips would flow/The world should listen then” as Joya has felt compelled to listen to Suu Kyi. Jaya is all excitement and enthusiasm after her experience with the living art of a legendary leader who grows at times, in her opinion, “much greater than a politician” (*Palace* 542).

The potentiality of the aesthetic representation of any political vision lies in the capacity of creating empathy that leads to resolving any kind of conflict, be it mental or political. Again, Suu Kyi’s art with her innocent smile, personal charisma, has the capacity for creating that empathy which animates “the millions coming all the way” to see her defying the eyes of “the swarming intelligence agents” and the possible revenge of the military authority. The visionary character Dinu discovers in her a saviour assigned to take the oppressed people from the land of chaos to a land of order. To the idealist Dinu politics is an art which only a chosen few can practice. Suu Kyi may be considered as a practitioner of this art:

She’s the only one who seems to understand what the place of politics is...what it ought to be...that while misrule and tyranny must be resisted, so too must politics itself...that it cannot be allowed to cannibalise all of life, all of existence. To me this is the most terrible indignity of our condition—not just in Burma but in many other places too...that politics had invaded everything, spared nothing...religion, art, family...it has taken over everything...there is no escape from it....” (*Palace* 542; ellipses in original)

In the ideal situation art should absorb politics, not politics invading art. Though art and politics have common goals in bringing the best for people, political power tends to serve people negatively if it is not exercised with the empathy generated by art. Any leader having the potential to combine both has the fair chance to lead people with diverse orientations to a common destination. As Suu Kyi, in Ghosh’s representation, combines the purposes of politics and art, different fighting camps in Burma are found to have full confidence in her potential.

Her continuous relevance is further projected in the essay titled “At Large in Burma,” which is thematically related to the plot of *The Glass Palace*. It is based on the writer’s experience of witnessing the turmoil of the post-independent Burma through his journalistic visits to the Karenni insurgent camps in the forest. Ghosh the writer has registered one fighting group’s very positive view of Suu Kyi though she has no connection with their ethnicity. Talking to the Karenni insurgents he comes to know that they are determined not to form a single nationhood with the Burmese. Ghosh asks Mr Htoo, one of the leaders of the insurgents: “If Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy came to power would you be willing to end the war

and join a federal union of Burma?" The answer comes thus: "With Aung San Suu Kyi maybe peace can come to Burma" (*Dancing* 85). Ghosh concludes that the Karenni camps, otherwise determined to establish a tiny independent nation in the south, "would vote overwhelmingly for Aung San Suu Kyi" in a free fair election for the sake of establishing a "Greater Burma" and it may be taken as a typical stance of all the active rebel groups in the country (*Dancing* 86).

In underdeveloped democracies politicians turning into symbols play an important role in inspiring and organizing common masses. Ghosh thinks: "In the postmodern world, politics is everywhere a matter of symbols." Transformed into a symbol Suu Kyi has become "her own greatest political asset" (*Dancing* 72). Burma's democratic movement has exploited a symbol personified in her. While many countries are drifting into anarchy the world has remembered Burma particularly for Suu Kyi and is putting pressure on the military regime. Ghosh says but for her, "the world would almost certainly have forgotten Burma's slain and dispersed democrats just as quickly as it has forgotten many others like them in the past" (*Dancing* 72). This powerful entity in politics was not destroyed by Junta regime as it would turn into a great bar for foreign investors on a large scale. Thus, such personalities are kept alive for practical reasons by the anti-democratic forces. The case of Suu Kyi brings in mind the story of Nelson Mandela, the symbol of Africa in its anti-apartheid movement, in long island imprisonment given as an alternative to death. Such figures are sometimes given some protection and concessions to gain from media propaganda worldwide.

Amitav Ghosh has gone all the way long "on pilgrimage of sorts" to search the source of Suu Kyi's strength, to ask "where [do] you find the courage to do what you have done?" (*Dancing* 71). He intends to project through her anecdotes the art of dealing with the threat to greater national identity in multi-ethnic societies. Under such threat many countries are passing through quotidian violence nowadays due partly to the lack of the capacity in the leaders to combine politics with aesthetic representation. By presenting the iconic inspirational figure of Suu Kyi in fictional narrative, Ghosh seems to argue that art can have control over politics and galvanize the diversely oriented people into forming an inclusive subjecthood. In his final assessment, "it would take a poet or a novelist years of labour to find a way of understanding what she had done" (*Dancing* 71). Audio-visual art symbolized by a leader's captivating face, personal charisma and right manner of managing dissent in the light of the philosophy of inclusivism quickly inspires man's imagination to be linked with the "other" in fellow feeling. Some universally accepted voice must master the art of giving non-violent expression to the collective anguish. Such inclusion of the elements of art into politics is deemed necessary to control anarchy in a country like Burma which has become a "byword for repression, xenophobia, and civil abuse" (*Dancing* 60).

### **Saga of Cambodian Cultural Courage**

Amitav Ghosh as a political chronicler goes beyond Burma to Cambodia and finds social bedrock in artistic heritage. In the opinion of some political scientists "Cambodia remains an excellent example for the study of democratic consolidation in post-war societies within the developing world."<sup>9</sup> Ghosh narrates how in Cambodia artistic heritage significantly contributes to the formation of the basis for the identity of a nation as art creates and nurtures the underlying bond of the people. His historical essay "Dancing in Cambodia" explains how the Cambodians, while enjoying the performance of their dancers and musicians, are arrested in a phase of undergoing "a kind of rebirth: a moment when the grief of survival became indistinguishable from the joy of living" (*Dancing* 45). The traditional Cambodian dance is celebrated as a marker of the entire nation's root of cultural identity. It provides them with a sense of empathetic understanding of each other. They flock to the theatre and fail to hold their tears through the entire period of performance. The situation can be understood through the words of Tolstoy: "Art ... is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and humanity."<sup>10</sup> While engrossed in enjoying art they forget differences temporarily.

Art thus can be brought to the service of politics to work as a catalyst for generating unity, unity in diversity being the obvious end of politics. “Works of art,” Freud writes, “promote the feelings of identification.”<sup>11</sup> Elasticity of identity or growing a sense of plural identity, as Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen talks about, can be promoted by art as it subsumes differences.<sup>12</sup> Ghosh shares the astonishment of an Italian relief worker named Onesta Carpena, then working in Cambodia, over people’s relying on their traditional music and dance in a difficult political climate when “the city (Phnom Penh) was in a shambles; there was debris everywhere, spilling out of the houses, on to the pavements, the streets were jammed with pillaged cars, there was no money and very little food” (*Dancing* 45). When there was arrangement for music and performance related to their rich tradition, there was momentary forgetting of conflict. The abiding interest in cultural heritage could not be destroyed by the ongoing modernizing project of the Cambodian King and the ruthless social re-structuring of the revolutionary leader Pol Pot and his ultra-radical clique. Ghosh comparatively assesses the impact of Pol Pot’s brutal regime on Cambodian consciousness and the vital force of traditional arts operating upon the Cambodian collective psyche. What is found striking is the power of dance and music. These art forms cultivating the tenacity of people quite surprisingly keep Cambodia intact after the years of trauma and destitution. This survival of traditional culture stands against the challenge of the Eurocentric paradigm of identity formation where ‘progressive’ ideas are given priority over the traditional ones.

Ghosh has focused on another instance of art’s political impact by projecting the iconic significance of the reputedly largest religious edifice of Cambodia named Angkor Wat in the sequel essay titled “stories in stone.” A twelfth century Cambodian temple and a passionately embraced symbol of Cambodian identity, this historic monument is an omnipresent image pervading virtually all aspects of the nation’s life. For Cambodia it has turned at once into a unique emblem of “the romance of lost civilizations; of ancient glory...and a no less vivid symbol of modernity” (*Dancing* 49). Although the country’s flag has changed with the change of regime, the image of Angkor Wat has remained a constant element in the design of every flag. Transcending its original purpose of housing the Buddhist worshippers it has been transformed into a living history in art form like, say, Keats’s Urn, commanding respect of the people and politicians of diverse affiliations. As ideologically opposite politicians find a common platform for identity negotiation in Angkor Wat, the artistic architectural site signifies a popular means of showing unity in diversity which “the modernizing nation-state” often fails to achieve and, consequently, falls on the verge of disintegration. The site like a timeless piece of art is representing “a token of the country’s belonging” not only in the medieval past but also in the contemporary world of progressive ideas.

### **Looking at Bangladesh Using the Insights from Amitav Ghosh**

Right from the colonial time to date we have seen the influence and relevance of art in the politics of Bengal. Poetry, musical composition, and dramatic performance played a significant role in mobilising forces during the anti-British movement of the land. Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam’s dissemination of revolutionary spirit through his different literary works against the British rule and the poetic protest of Rabindranath Tagore addressed to Lord Curzon, the architect of the 1905 partition of Bengal: “Will you cut the bond decreed by Providence? / You are so powerful, are you!” can be cited as great examples of art influencing political activism.<sup>13</sup> In the anti-Pakistani movement art in diverse categories inspired people to stand against discrimination and oppression contributing to foundation of the new state of Bangladesh. Songs from *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* during the nine-month liberation war inspired the freedom fighters amid all odds and struggles. During the mass uprising of 1990 the famous painter Kamrul Hasan’s satirical sketch of the military ruler displayed in the national poetry festival of 1988 worked as a source of inspiration for the protesters.

Very recently, in the July-August students and mass uprising of 2024, we witnessed how protest turned into art in the form of graffiti, musical rendition, and performances to boost the morale of the people in their struggles to get out of the shackles of a long-standing unpopular government based on coercive forces. During and after the movement the walls of public places and

institutions across the country, with writings and illustrations, were transformed into a visual platform of art, remembering the spirit of resistance and sacrifice and envisioning a future of reconstruction free from discrimination. But the spirit induced by art could not go very far to engage people in repairing and rebuilding the state, by fighting unitedly against corruption and mismanagement after getting the metaphoric 'second emancipation.' Even the vanguard of the movement got involved in fierce debate on the fundamental areas like flag, national anthem, administrative reforms and the fundamental principles of the Constitution. It has been repeatedly found in the history of the land that in times of deep crises people of diverse ideological orientations could come under a common umbrella where art could play a contributory role. But it could not bring the desired result when the issues of sharing power, enjoying credit, and implementing plans for reformation come to the front. The anti-colonial or anti-repressive movement can create a suitable climate for the rise of poets and painters with nationalistic and patriotic fervour, but their influence becomes limited in the time of nation building. In different countries history shows the role of circumstances and the times in producing great figures of influence. Though the crisis of nation building faced by Bangladeshi people is not as deep as that of the Burmese or the Cambodians, a sort of comparison, if not in degree at least in kind, can be drawn to see the interface between the aesthetic and the politic from a wider perspective.

Like Burma, Bangladesh at a critical juncture brought its internationally acclaimed Nobel Peace Laureate Professor Yunus in the political scene and placed him at the helm. His personality has some cult value and charisma which, in the opinion of the millions, can be utilised in bringing order when the country is on the verge of total derangement. As head of the interim government, he initially commanded considerable respect within the country and the global observers also fixed their eyes on his reconstructive activities. He has single-handedly influenced foreign aid and investment after the great changeover. Once a civil society icon turned into a politician has attracted a huge burden of hope from home and abroad. But one year into his tenure starts witnessing the gradual erosion of popular support. Hope turns into frustration for conflicting demands of various interest groups and his inability to satisfy all, and his art of impressing people with visionary and inspiring words gradually loses its universal appeal. So, the past role of the public hero does not guarantee that the present role will be equally appreciated, considering the dimension of disintegration and unusual demands of diverse interest groups. Equation changes with the changing political culture and unpredictable scenarios also come to notice. In broken democracies personal charisma of a leader can influence people to some extent but cannot hold people together with the start of reconstruction process in every sphere of life. Here cultural awareness can be an important factor in making people cling to their roots and stay away from destructive activities. As failure is seen in the case of Suu Kyi during her short-term participation in steering state power, an identical situation, in the opinion of a significant portion of the citizens, arises in the case of Bangladesh. The great heroes in public opinion fall from grace when they start tackling problems of the state in real situations. The tales of two South Asian Nobel laureates thus converge in a tragic point though in the case of Bangladesh it may be too early to draw a conclusion. The ending of the career of other iconic leaders in the history of the country was not in line with the beginning. Any assessment and projection of the leader's performance in art and literature can be comprehensive only when it is done after the end of his or her career. Though in the case of Suu Kyi Amitav Ghosh has taken the prime time of her political career for assessment still there is hope as she tells Ghosh at the end of their meeting: "I have always told you [...] that we will win [...] that we will establish a democracy in Burma and I stand by that, but as to when I cannot predict. I've always said that to you" (*Dancing* 98). The same conviction and hope can apply for other regions if people draw inspiration from aesthetic sources.

## **Conclusion**

Politics, concentrating on the common good of people and cultivating the culture of finding commonalities in divergence, can become a category of art in projection and promotion though Plato in *The Republic* famously excludes artists from his ideal state. Amitav Ghosh's portrayal of the conflict zones brings into focus the idea of a confluence of the political and the aesthetic

towards a direction for an alternative dialogue breaking the political impasse. Some leaders of these lands portrayed by Ghosh envision a new model of politics where aesthetic and spectacular effects of political activism get priority to cover up the fault lines in the process of community and identity formation. They use the apparatuses of ceremonial public speeches, charismatic images of the leader or cult worship, traditional art, and artistic image of historical architectural sites to reach the widest possible audience. While fighting against the foreign enemy or living under the dictatorial regime political activism derives inspiration and power from the aesthetic representation attached to the political. Therefore, the idea of divorcing art from politics, be it in times of crisis or in normalcy, and placing it in museum galleries, academia, and entertainment houses, results in uncontrolled chaos, affecting individual safety and a nation's natural growth. As the success of politics depends on the constant process of communicating and negotiating, art adds to the means of public engagement towards ensuring art's greater utility to people. Considered from the perspective of common purpose of ensuring collective good, the aesthetic devices applied in politics are likely to bring heterogeneous groups and individuals to a common platform overlooking differences.

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### Note & References

- <sup>1</sup> Roland Bleiker. *Aesthetics and World Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p.174.
- <sup>2</sup> This paper, for convenience and consistence, retains the old name of Burma as used by Amitav Ghosh in the books concerned. The writer in his interview with Suu Kyi learns that the change of name is purely strategic and politically motivated as the meaning remains mostly unchanged and she does not mind if the former name is used. This culture of changing geographical names is rooted in the history of politics of this region.
- <sup>3</sup> Sorpong Peou, *International Democracy Assistance for Peacebuilding: Cambodia and Beyond*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p.33.
- <sup>4</sup> @ghoshamitav I X
- <sup>5</sup> Simon Gikandi, "Race and the Idea of the Aesthetic," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 42.2 (2001): 318-350; 347.
- <sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Ed. Hannah Arendt, Trans. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, 2007.
- <sup>7</sup> Philip Rieff, "Aesthetic Functions in Modern Politics," *World Politics*, 5.4 (Jul 1953): 478-502; 480.
- <sup>8</sup> <https://thoughtcatalog.com/kim-quindlen/2015/04/26-amy-schumer-quotes>
- <sup>9</sup> Sorpong Peou, op. cit. p.34.
- <sup>10</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, Trans. Alymer Maude, Funk & Wagnall, 1904, chapter v.
- <sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, Trans. James Strachey (Norton, 1928):23.
- <sup>12</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, Penguin, 2006.
- <sup>13</sup> Qtd. in Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (Routledge, 2002): 118.