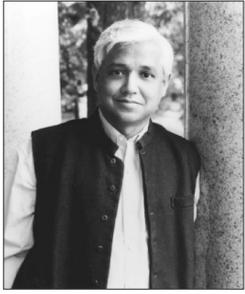


## Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace



HASAN FERDOUS  
(translated by Asrar Chowdhury)

**1. Preface**  
Amitav Ghosh's latest novel *The Glass Palace* came out two years ago. For various reasons I didn't get the chance to read it. Finally when I sat down, it took about a week to finish the nearly five-hundred-fifty-page book. One could say I read it in one sitting. I can't say I've read any other book of Amitav. I read all his novels. It took time to read his other novels. Amitav is a storyteller, but he likes to add history, philosophy, politics and sometimes aesthetics. He doesn't write a book that can be read in one sitting. I would not say that *The Glass Palace* is different from his other novels, but it does have a unique romanticism attached to it. The plot will haunt you.

The novel is a story of the life of Bengalis in Burma. It is of epic proportions, spanning three generations and one hundred and twenty-five years. The story starts in Chittagong, and then gradually spreads over Burma, India and Malaya. Amitav explores various dimensions of the skepticism of the Indian middle class regarding British colonialism, the independence movements of India and Burma, and political loyalty.

The center of the story is Rajkumar Raha from Chittagong. At the age of ten this little orphan boy came by sampan to Mandalaya, today's Burma. He finds shelter in the shop of a Burmese lady. Within two decades this penniless little boy becomes a very wealthy timber merchant with the aid of a Chinese merchant. This wealth was made by exploiting Indian and Burmese workers, bribing English administrators and by driving himself. But Rajkumar cannot hold on to his wealth till the end. Along with the English, Indian merchants too bore the brunt of the anticolonial movement that grew before and during World War II. His own son is burned alive; his beautiful house transformed to ashes in front of his own eyes. He has to flee to India with his family, and in the end Rajkumar returns to India the way he came to Burma empty-handed!

Although the central character of the plot is a refugee Bengali, Amitav's story is not centered solely on Rajkumar. It is not a narration of the rule and exploitation of Indians in Burma. Furthermore, it is also not a dissection of English colonialism. All these issues are found in the novel, but the writer's emphasis is somewhere else. Amitav likes

to view people outside and above the boundaries of their geographical location. Inside human mind and memory time has no direction; there is no distinction of nations. The history of mankind also has a boundary-less appearance. Amitav's focus is with this appearance, this province-less geography. I don't know another contemporary novelist who narrates the human dimensions of globalisation with such sharp enthusiasm. Amitav started considering these questions fourteen years ago in his novel *Shadow Lines*. Even in that novel, Dhaka, Kolkata and London seem to rest on the same plane. His first novel *The Circle of Reason* spread across Lalpukur of East Bengal to the Sahara Desert in Africa. Even in this novel, one sees how people move easily from one place to another, settle down, dream and become a part of local history. I don't think there is another writer in World Literature who can present his characters outside their own geographical location, within an transnational setting, with such ease.

History is therefore a natural element of *The Glass Palace*. Frederick Louis Aldamo of Colorado University said "history continuously talks in this novel." However, if one classifies this purely as a historical novel, one will overlook the comprehensiveness of its humanistic dimensions. History is not only narration of the past, but also the present.

The contemporary nature of the characters of *The Glass Palace* amazes us and also helps us to understand them. The two central characters are Rajkumar and his wife Dolly. Both are on opposite poles from each other. One strives to make his wealth flow over the edges; the other searches for self-purification to free herself of the emptiness of her heart. Their elder son, Neel, follows his father. He wants the world at his feet. The younger son, Dinu, is an artist, who chases love. Uma is probably the most modern Bengali character. She is vehemently against colonialism, whereas her husband is a Bengali District Magistrate who serves the British Raj, Thibo, the expelled king of Burma, is a silent character in the novel. He has lost all interest in life with the loss of power whereas his wife, Queen Supalata, is overwhelmed by greed and lust for power.

The second set of characters comprise two members of the British Indian colonial army Arjuna and Hardy. Arjuna comes from a middle-class Bengali family. He is the first army officer in his clan. Hardy is the third-generation British Army officer. Being members of the colonial army, both are opportunists and tend to exploit their social status to the full. At the start they see no contradiction in their loyalty towards both their nations and the British Army. The problem, however, starts after the outbreak of World War II when the Hindu Freedom Army is created using the pretext of the Japanese invasion of Burma. Arjuna and Hardy both confront

the same question—towards which country do their loyalties lie? Are they defending their country or are they simply mercenary soldiers of the Raj?

This play of contrasts is seen throughout the entirety of *The Glass Palace*. The core of the novel is the twenties—the era of an unending war, devastation and deaths. Every chapter describes this continuously and incessantly. In spite of this continual theme Amitav's main message is that of hope and resurrection of life. This resurrection becomes clear with the life and times of the generations of Rajkumar. Neel is killed in a Japanese bombing attack. His daughter Joya survives. The responsibility for searching out Rajkumar's other son, Dinu, falls on her shoulders. The life cycle does not become complete before this search is over. The resurrection is further established with the political scenario of erstwhile Burma. The country frees itself from the yoke of colonialism, but within a very short time martial law is established. Aun San Suu Kyi emerges at the end of the novel. Dinu emerges as a nameless infantry of the freedom struggle of Burma that Amitav portrays. He cannot return to Bangladesh or India even after the end of colonial rule. He remains in his childhood Burma, and now it is his job to preserve its past through the pictures from the studio that he opened in Rangoon named after Emperor Thibo's palace, *The Glass Palace*.

Amitav filled the novel with many dramatic events, but has left vast areas for polemical disputes. Although Amitav is clear about which side of the divide his sympathies lie, one does not get the impression that he is trying to impose his thoughts on the reader. Though the entire novel is fiction, a work of imagination, Amitav's book remains true to historical facts. But it is also true that historical events in this region have traveled faster than fiction. For this reason, the plot sometimes does a double turn and at times the story therefore loses its texture and weaving. As the curtains start to drop, we see the author in a bit of a hurry. The finishing of the tapestry seems to be a bit synthetic. This, however, is not unnatural for a 500-page-plus book—even Tolstoy had to hear such allegations with his *War and Peace*.

### 2. The Glass Palace: Amitav Ghosh in his own words

Amitav Ghosh was born in Kolkata in 1956. He spent a brief period in Dhaka with his father, who was a diplomat. His education was first in Kolkata, then Oxford and finally in Cairo. His first novel *The Circle of Reason*, was published in 1986 when he was only 30 years old. *The Shadow Lines* (1988) was received with acclaim among readers and critics. Besides his prose pieces his other novels are *In An Antique Land* (1993), and *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996). Currently he is Professor of comparative Literature at Queen's College in New York, USA. He took a year's sabbatical

to write *The Glass Palace*.

(This interview was taken over telephone last year. It was conducted in Bangla, and where the author spoke in English the lines are given in italics.)

**HF:** *The Glass Palace* is the story of an orphan boy, Rajkumar. It starts in Chittagong. How did you collect historical information for this part of the then East Pakistan?  
**AG:** I talked with many people and also interviewed them while writing the book. Shawkat Ali

## So is the Commonwealth Writers Prize a consolation prize for the ex-natives?

On March 12, 2001, The Glass Palace by Amitav Ghosh was named the Eurasia regional winner for the 2001 Commonwealth Writers Prize—and a finalist for the overall contest to be chosen in April (this was for the category of 'Best Book'; the Eurasia winner for 'Best First Book' was Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*).

On March 18, Ghosh, who has a doctorate in social anthropology, wrote an open letter to the contest administrators, withdrawing his novel from the competition and forfeiting the £1,000 finalists' money (and a chance at the £10,000 overall winner's cheque). On March 20, the administrators took the novel out of the competition.

Below is Ghosh's letter to the Administrators of Commonwealth Writers Prize

To: Sandra Vince,  
Prizes Manager,  
Commonwealth Foundation

Dear Sandra Vince:

I have recently learned that my novel *The Glass Palace* has been named the Eurasia regional winner for the 2001 Commonwealth Writers Prize. I gather that this means that it is also a finalist for the overall contest to be held in April. I am, of course, gratified to know that the jury liked my book. Yet, I must admit that this particular announcement took me by surprise for I was not aware that my book had been submitted for the Commonwealth Prize. I have since discovered that publishers routinely submit books for prizes without expressly consulting their authors.

I have on many occasions publicly stated my objections to the classification of books such as mine under the term "Commonwealth Literature". Principal among these is that this phrase anchors an area of contemporary writing not within the realities of the present day, nor within the possibilities of the future, but rather within a disputed aspect of the past. In this it is completely unlike any other literary term (would it not surprise us, for instance, if that familiar category "English literature" were to be renamed "the literature of the Norman Conquest"?)

As a grouping of nations collected from the remains of the British Empire, the Commonwealth serves as an umbrella forum in global politics. As a literary or cultural grouping however, it seems to me that "the Commonwealth" can only be a misnomer so long as it excludes the many languages that sustain the cultural and literary lives of these countries (it is surely inconceivable, for example, that athletes would have to be fluent in English in order to qualify for the Commonwealth Games).

So far as I can determine, *The Glass Palace* is eligible for the Commonwealth Prize partly because it was written in English and partly because I happen to belong to a region that was once conquered and ruled by Imperial Britain. Of the many reasons why a book's merits may be recognized these seem to me to be the least persuasive. That the past engenders the present is of course undeniable; it is equally undeniable that the reasons why I write in English are ultimately rooted in my country's history. Yet, the ways in which we remember the past are not determined solely by the brute facts of time: they are also open to choice, reflection and judgment. The issue of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace* and I feel that I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialization of Empire that passes under the rubric of "the Commonwealth". I therefore ask that I be permitted to withdraw *The Glass Palace* from your competition.

I would like to add that I mean no disrespect either to the competition's judges or to previous winners of the Commonwealth Foundation's prizes, many of whom are writers I greatly admire. I recognize also that the Commonwealth Foundation supports a number of noteworthy social causes and undertakes many invaluable development initiatives in its member countries. My objections to the term "Commonwealth Literature" are mine alone, and I trust you will understand that I could hardly expect to sustain them if I allowed one of my books to gain an eponymous prize.

Finally, on a note of apology I would like to reiterate that this situation would not have arisen if I had known that my publishers were intending to submit *The Glass Palace* for the Commonwealth Prize. It is too late unfortunately to amend that oversight; fortunately, it is not too late for you to make other arrangements for the final competition.

Sincerely,  
Amitav Ghosh

Khan is a very close friend of mine in Dhaka. They were in Rangoon at one time. They have the Royal Stationery Shop in Dhaka, and this business was first started in Rangoon. They also have many connections in Kolkata. I talked with him about many issues regarding the novel. Other than him, I managed to write the novel after talking and interviewing as many family friends as I could.  
**HF:** You mentioned it took you five years to write this novel. How much of this did you spend

on research and writing?  
**AG:** Research and writing can't be separated from each other distinctively. In 1995 I received an invitation from a magazine in Burma for an assignment. This was the beginning of the research. It was also the first time I had the privilege to meet Aun San Suu Kyi. I did a lot of research the following two years. I had to travel to neighbouring countries, especially Malaysia and Thailand. Research and writing both moved simultaneously.

**HF:** Your father and uncles lived in Burma. The novel must have their stories. The story of Indians you have portrayed is not that charitable. Does any portion of your plot or your characters identify with reality?  
**AG:** Yes, it does. For instance, at the end of the story the burning of the godown really happened to an uncle of mine. His whole life's savings was turned into ashes from a Japanese bomb attack. But that is not a big deal. Did you know that the story of the Indian business community in Burma was not a happy one? Wherever South Asians traveled in colonial times, they found themselves as 'the most oppressed wing of colonialism.' We saw that in East Africa and also in Burma. The Indians who returned from Burma have borne testimony to this. They were therefore xenophobic towards the natives. It is also true that the Burmese freedom movement was crushed by the hands of Indian soldiers.

**HF:** I am certain you had it in your mind to write this novel for a long time. You heard stories from your father and uncles. You were inspired by these stories. How much similarity did you find between the stories you heard and the fiction you created?  
**AG:** You can say that the whole story changed. At the beginning of a novel I have at best one direction, one shape. Then when I start filling in the bits and pieces, it totally changes. The same thing happened this time too. I heard these stories many times in my childhood. In the beginning I started out writing a family story memoir. In the end it all changes. *'There comes a moment when a novel acquires a life of its own.'*

**HF:** *The Glass Palace* is a book of epic proportion. It has many stories, a lot of history. Organisation, arrangement and research of the novel are not an easy task at all. What advice do you have for somebody who would start a novel of this proportion today?  
**AG:** There is no doubt I had to work very hard for this novel. I was going through the manuscript a few days ago on my computer. I get tired just looking at it these days. A work of so many years! You have to write at least ten times more than what you end up printing. I have one piece of advice for new writers of this generation. Our South Asia is full of 'grand themes', it has a very rich history, *'it's an enormously rich subject'*. Unfortunately when I read their works, I find them very unambitious, very uninteresting. I think the writer should decide how much ambitious a project

he/she will take up.

**HF:** You mentioned in an interview that the task of a writer is to bring out 'moralistic truth'. I am not clear on what you wanted to say. I know literature as the narration of humanistic experience, its interpretation. When you raise the issue of morality, the issue of value judgement arises. Do you think that is the correct path for the writer?  
**AG:** I don't think the phrase has been quoted correctly. What I meant to say is that moral and ethical problems are urgent for literature, absolutely fundamental. It is not true that the writer will have to take one point of view. But how can one not think that a good writer, an honest writer, will not explore, and address the moral and ethical issues of the time framework he is working on? Fiction acquires its fundamental character from this addressing. As a fiction writer my goal is not to explore principles; rather the lives of people, to explore and extract how moral and ethical issues express themselves. I have attempted to do this in *The Glass Palace*. The characters of this novel are especially distinguished on the basis of moral and ethical issues.

**HF:** All right. Do you agree that when a writer follows a certain idea alongside the plot, there is a possibility it may turn the whole story false if he is not virtuous enough?  
**AG:** In the world of art and literature *'all judgement is contingent on the performance of it.'* I don't think it is possible to neglect ethical and moral issues, *'they are omnipresent.'* For example, take 1971 and Bangladesh. Tell me, how does a writer depict the times by bypassing the social morality, history and politics of the time?  
**HF:** If morality dominates there is the possibility of bias. Is this not also true?  
**AG:** I don't agree that the writer has to be totally objective. Don't you think that the writer will try to explore and examine the time and people and issues that he thinks are of interest? I agree that in the context of a novel, the most important aspect is its characters. When we consider the characters, how can we not consider their moral and ethical dimensions? The moot point to keep in mind is if your plot has been honest and faithful.

**HF:** Many have commented that your book is full of details. In this book also you have laboured in descriptions of photography, models of cars and designs of furniture. How much of this is research, and how much of it comes from your personal knowledge?  
**AG:** I guess you can say both. The great disparity and wonders of this world attract me tremendously. Not only myself, I think this would be fascinating for most people, to know more about the world around them. When I read a book. I also want to know what the design, colour and shape of the world the writer is trying to construct. These issues naturally attract me when

I research a book. It is therefore not strange that these things will enter my enthusiasm. For me, a novel is not a journey following a particular path. A novel *'is an overarching form that can include everything'*. If I see there is no scope to write about archaeology, history and philosophy, I will not have any interest in the novel. Maybe I will not write another novel. If the objective of a novel is to describe only events, then I won't have interest in such a narrow perspective. People may hold different views, but this is my philosophy about novels.

**HF:** Many have already started to compare your work with Doctor Zhivago. Some have said it is an epic. In my eyes, the novel is reminiscent of Tolstoy. I have seen images of Tolstoy not only through the plot of the novel but also the contrasting nature of the characters. The way the characters first approach each other and then become separated, it seems a kind of fate controls them. What is your own view?  
**AG:** You are spot on! Tolstoy has influenced me more than Pasternak. I am not that much eager on Doctor Zhivago. In my eyes Tolstoy is a writer par excellence. Similar issues excite me too. For instance, Tolstoy has tried to explore how history works, especially in *War and Peace*. The other writer that has inspired me to take up this work is Solzhenitsyn, especially his *August 1914*.

**HF:** Your stories are all unique. Your characters are different from each other. It seems they are travelling the world around, moving easily from one country to another. I think you also have nomadic features like the characters in your novels although you come from an urban middle class background. How did this nomadic tendency arise?  
**AG:** I guess you can say my life is like a compass. I have one fixed point Kolkata, the rest moves. This book also characterizes this notion, the whole book *'is centered on Bengal'*. All my books are constructed in this fashion. You can say Kolkata, or South Asia, is the center. This is not deliberate. It has happened gradually.

**HF:** How much connection do you have with home?  
**AG:** I go back home every summer with my family. I have a house in Kolkata. Sometimes I also go back in winter.  
**HF:** Do you plan to visit Dhaka?  
**AG:** I always want to go, but just can't seem to organize it. I don't want to go for a few days but for a whole month so that I can see and explore properly.

**HF:** Can I inform the people of Dhaka of this desire?  
**AG:** Of course! I very much want to go to Dhaka, very much!

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## Letter from NEW YORK

Upper West Side, overlooking the Central Park, on a spring evening, fans of Gore Vidal stand in front of an imposing building, waiting for the doors to open. The most charming thing about the crowd? It's an eclectic mix of men and women, almost all beyond their prime, yet with glimmer in the eye and sparkle in their step, they quickly fill up the hall, waiting like chattering school kids sitting on wooden benches around 18th century chandeliers igniting warmth and cheer.

Too excited to sit still, I race outside to ask the organizers if I can grab a "nanosecond" with the great man just for a snap.  
"Mr Vidal is not feeling well, he'll leave immediately after his talk," is the response I receive. The next best thing then, I console myself, is buying his latest book *Dreaming War: Blood for Oil and the Cheney-Bush Junta* lying invitingly on a table nearby, when suddenly a lone figure shows up, striking in appearance, sardonic in demeanour - somewhat tense and noisier. He throws a bored glance around, clenches his jaw and with his stick ambles towards an ancient elevator. Here's my moment to close in on him. I smile and he returns a very smile, I shove the book for his signature and take his picture just in time for the lift door to close shut.

"Bravo, Bravo," the hall echoes with thunderous claps as he appears on the stage, wearing an ink black polo neck (his hallmark), making his way mane of grey all the more dashing and his visage more brooding. Why is Gore Vidal, 77, adored by some and hated by others? He's been critiquing America in his novels, hundreds of essays and pamphlets for 56 years. Yes 56! He has people frowning and nodding and smiling and smirking - with admiration, with exasperation, with scandalized dissent. He's a scourge of received opinion and political correctness. Newsweek sums it best: "Vidal is a kind of contemporary Byron: patrician, major writer, glamour-boy, flouter of norms... role player in public events."

"Weep at what's happening - the old Republic is a shadow of itself, it's become the US of Amnesia...the despot (Bush) is firmly in the saddle because of the corrupt Supreme Court who allowed a terrible manipulation to take place (by voting in his favour), and we the people were deprived of our electoral right... America is no longer the ruler of her own soul and spirit!" is the opening salvo fired by Vidal.  
"I don't like to give my opinions as facts and that's why I didn't become

**Gore Vidal, the gray eminence of American letters, cousin to Al Gore and brother-in-law of John F. Kennedy, has long been assaulting the idea and practice of the American Imperium in his essays, columns and books. This time this prolific preacher against American imperialism has trained his quill on the Bush regime (writing that corporate greed and imperial logic is behind their 'war on terror', on the oil connections that Osama bin Laden's family established with Bush during his tenure as an oil magnate in Texas, the role of the American media elite in spreading government disinformation, and much more) in his newest book Dreaming War: Blood for Oil and the Cheney-Bush Junta.**

a journalist," says Vidal archly when asked about 9/11. Instead, the nerd connects the dots daily by strident scanning of newspapers... "my eyes have gone."

Pakistan gets a mention by Vidal, but for all the wrong reasons! Citing a Guardian report on how Bush had planned attacking Afghanistan three months before 9/11, he tells us importantly that in July 2001 a group of interested parties met in a Berlin hotel to listen to a former State Department official, Lee Coldren, who said that Bush was disgusted with the Taliban and was considering military action. "The chilling quality of this private warning was that it came - according to one of those present, the Pakistani diplomat Niaz Naik - accompanied by specific details of how Bush would succeed."

This raises the possibility that Osama bin Laden "was launching a pre-emptive strike in response to what he saw as US threats."  
Gore Vidal says that the Cheney-Bush junta had been warned about the 9/11 attack: "Mayday warnings from Presidents Putin, Mubarak, from Mossad... even warnings as early as 1996 when a Pakistani terrorist Abdul Hakim Murad confessed to federal agents that he was learning to fly an aircraft in order to crash a plane into CIAHQ."

Quoting Niaz Naik's interview to BBC, Gore Vidal tells us that it was Naik's view that Washington would not drop its war plans with Afghanistan even if bin Laden were to be surrendered immediately by the Taliban. America for long has wanted a pipeline built from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan to Pakistan - "from Krasnovodsk on the Caspian Sea to Karachi on the Indian Ocean coast."

Condoleezza Rice, Bush's National Security Advisor "stole" her predecessor Sandy Berger's plan to attack the "unlovely Osama" during Clinton era. But now she "denies" doing it, while Sandy "insists" she cribbed his plan.

Americans have been scared into cravenly believing that they have "many, many, many enemies" and are unable to sleep with "so much danger around". Madeline Albright, Clinton's secretary of state, "wanted Gen. Powell to pick up fights with everyone - 'what's the point of having all this military and not using it?' but the general refused, saying "his army were not toy soldiers."

Pouring scorn on American media, Vidal frowns, "We have a pretty lousy press," and then takes a stab at newspapers that have ignored his comments on war with Afghanistan and Iraq. "The New York Times won't cover what I have to say - they like to bury the truth and prefer silence."

"Bravo! Bravo!" the contempt against NYT sends the crowd into raptures.

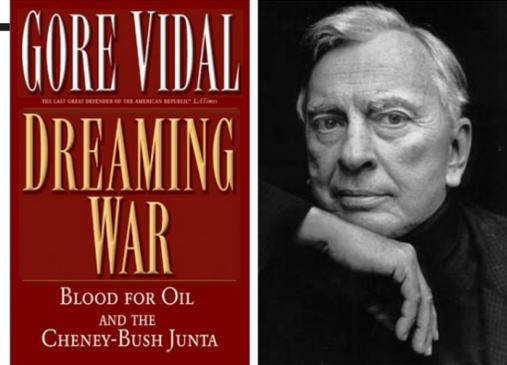
Months ago, he watched on TV how the police helicopters disrupted a crowd of tens of thousands at a rally against war in Los Angeles, "they flew so low and made such a racket" but "The Los Angeles Times (LAT) didn't report a word of it!" Recently, he talked to a crowd of 100,000 at LA and guess what? "The LAT reported that only 30,000 had attended! Luckily, a photographer from LAT took shots of the crowds to belie his paper's claims."

Aaron Brown, the anchor at CNN "was brought to a full stop" by Gore Vidal when the latter was asked an inane question: "I don't do 19th century behind!" "Today facts get turned into fiction," therefore Vidal dislikes appearing on TV, "I seem to be talking to the set!"

With lapidary dismissal of Fox News - "the Bush administration's mouthpiece" - Vidal has a one liner: "Fox deserves to go - it's too euphoric, it has no shelf life and cannot force its voice down our throats."  
On Chris Matthews, the screaming, screeching host of MSNBC Hardball, Vidal tells us that he met him during one of Matthews' book signing events because "every TV star ends up writing a book!"

"You don't remember me?" asked Matthews, "You think I am an ass\*\*\*\*, you should have heard me in the 60's when you came to Holy Cross". Vidal chortled and said, "you were always ahead of the curve in fiction."

Christopher Hitchens columnist and another literary snob - had "appointed himself my heir - he was a bright lad then, but now there's a sea of change in him and I disown him as my heir," pronounces the great master of Hitchens because he's ingratiated himself with Bush and supported the war. "Money is on the Right side - if you need money and attention, like our think tanks do, as the flotsam and jetsam of the intellectual world has done."



He's certain that George Bush will not win another term: "The economy is going to crash - you can't go on with 6% unemployment, it's unheard of - when we had a genuine surplus of trillions of dollars. In the name of conquest, you roll up your sleeves and give freedom and liberty to the world and Patriot Act II at home where a native-born American deprived of citizenship would be deported, just as today, a foreign-born person can be deported. Deported to any country or region regardless of whether the country or region has a government!"  
The exposition of this writer-luminary and committed agent provocateur simply brings the house down.

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