



## THE GLASS PALACE – A MULTIGENERATIONAL SAGA

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**Abstract:** Amitav Ghosh is one of the well-known Indian novelists who has attempted to write a history of their times through the imaginative form of fiction. His novel *The Glass Palace* has a range and sweep not easily matched in Indian English fiction. It is a story of three generations. *The Glass Palace* educates its reader to interpret its narrative as a historical narrative. Before entering the story world proper, history is foregrounded.

**Key words:** *Glass Palace, Character, Quit India movement*

### Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is one of the well-known Indian novelists who has attempted to write a history of their times through the imaginative form of fiction. His novel *The Glass Palace* has a range and sweep not easily matched in Indian English fiction. It is a story of three generations. It is structured around the intermeshing relationships among four families: the Burmese King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat who were deposed by the British in 1885 and were exiled to Ratnagiri in India and their entourage; Rajkumar Raha, a Bengali orphan emigrant to Burma, and his descendants; Saya John, a foundling brought up by Catholic priests, and his son Matthew and his family; and Uma, the wife of the Collector of Ratnagiri. Their fortunes are set against a backdrop of stirring historical events—the British conquest of Burma, the consolidation of the Empire in India and Malaya, the First and Second World Wars—conceived and executed on an epic scale, in a time frame ranging from 1885 to 1996.

### *The Glass Palace* narrative

*The Glass Palace* is a narrative that gravitates around the experiences of a variety of multigenerational, diasporic Indian/Burmese characters during a historical period (the late 19th century to the end of the 20th) filled with battles won and lost over Burma's territories; it is a novel that reflects obliquely the great tectonic shifts that took place in changes of rule and national policy that effect the everyday of its character's lives. As such, *The Glass Palace*'s characters, plot, and events can open its reader's eyes to acts of forced displacement and even genocides of peoples that took place historically; it can re-visit grand historical events from different perspectives, such as that of Ghandi's attempt at a social revolution seen from the angle of vision of the female character, Uma. It can act as a creative response to and a reflection of experience in this world by a process of empathy with the characters and their circumstances and changing fortunes. But, of course, *The Glass Palace* is not a symbolic representation of nation nor is it an expression of the "real" experiences of real people (rich and poor) during such a tempestuous historical period in Burma.



*The Glass Palace* is chock full of hyphenated (Burmese-Indian, Anglo-Indian, for example) characters who seek a sense of place and belonging--a home--within homelands torn apart by colonialist and imperialist invasions and civil wars. It is a novel whose story stretches out from and around the experiences of South Asian hybrid characters as grand historical events of nation unfold. In a review of *The Glass Palace* Chris Higashi calls the novel "a multigenerational saga" that "is a wonderful, satisfying blend of history and storytelling".

***Glass Palace* historically verifiable details**

*The Glass Palace* packed with historically verifiable details, such as colonial India's invasion of Burma, and announces dates in chapter headings to remind of the plot's imbrication with historical chronology. However, its thematic material is carefully organized according to the principles that govern the crafting of fiction: language, narrative technique, and genre. Contrary to what many poststructuralist post colonialists venture to say, even at the most basic understanding, the biographically verifiable author Amitav Ghosh does not correspond one-to-one with the fictional characters he invents nor the narrator he employs to shape the narrative. Nor, for that matter, do his characters represent real people. Characters are not, as Dorit Cohn comments, "free subjects who can potentially escape their graphic prison and make fictional subjects of--or even talk back to--their author or narrator".

They are, as Dorit Cohn remarks, "equally inhabitants of the same conflicted fictional world". And those disciplinary spaces--colonialism, capitalism and otherwise--in *The Glass Palace* are only representations and not the real disciplinary spaces where the powerful rule over the powerless in the real world. Finally, language--the very substance of *The Glass Palace*--has, as Lubomír Doležel aptly reminds, "weak per formative power". Namely, while it can help solidify a group and communicate its needs to bring about changes in everyday social relations and affairs, as Doležel continues, "it cannot create the actual world that exists and goes on independently of language and any other representation. The only kind of worlds that human language is capable of creating or producing is possible worlds". That is, *The Glass Palace* is the stuff of fiction that can open eyes to the brutalities of (neo) colonialism--and more--and not a text that can resist, intervene, and/or fundamentally transform anything, much less the everyday reality of millions of people living within a national space shaped by history and governed by laws.

The fictional Rajkumar can fall in love with the invented handmaiden pointing to the real historical figure Queen Supayalat. And, as the narrative unfolds, the reader witnesses such a "real" figure as the Queen increasingly migrate over into, as Doležel identifies, the "semantic and pragmatic conditions of the fictional environment". The force of fictional narrative is such that it pulls the factual characters into its world without asking its readers to question such a move; without asking its readers to look beyond its pages for



a one-to-one verification between textual representation and an ontologically independent and temporally prior set of events--archived data--that existed prior to the act of writing.

*The Glass Palace* educates its reader to interpret its narrative as a historical narrative. Before entering the storyworld proper, history is foregrounded. The following titles appear as paratextual preface material: W.S. Desai's *Deposed King Thebaw of Burma in India, 1885-1916*, Patricia Herbert's *The Hsaya San rebellion Reappraised*, and Majjhima Nikaya and Amyutta Nikaya collection, *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan*. Verifiable historical figures and events as well as dates and cultural document begin to condition the reader's approach to the text--a text situated within the historically and culturally verifiable. The list of texts identifiable as historical and cultural document is far from exhaustive, however. And given the discrepancy between the length of *The Glass Palace* and this short list of archival material, the reader quickly grasps that narrative fiction is central and that the narrative which has a one-to-one correspondence with historical record is subordinate to the purposes of the fictional story-telling. This paratextual frame helps pave the way for a reader's first encounter with the text itself. The narrative begins: "There was only one person in the food-stall who knew exactly what that sound was that was rolling across the plain, along the silver curve of the Irrawaddy, to the western wall of Mandalay's fort. His name was Rajkumar and he was an Indian, a boy of eleven--not an authority to be relied upon" (3). Unlike the narrative

conventions found in historical narratives, here the third-person announces its omniscience--commenting on a character's knowing what the sound was that rolled across the plain and also having a knowledge of this character's unreliability--and quickly shows its deft control over media, flow of information.

### Ghosh and the character, Rajkumar

To solidify the privileging of fiction over fact in the reader's mind, Ghosh's narrator spends the first three pages of the novel breathing life into the invented character, Rajkumar. The narrator does not introduce the "real" historical figures King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat until after he has introduced Rajkumar. Once this is done, the story of the historical figures (whom, after the British invasion of Burma, experience life as dispossessed exiles in India) becomes increasingly fictionalised as it becomes interwoven into the lives of the fictional characters and their stories. Fiction overwhelms fact as the reader submerges into the story of Rajkumar's Horatio Alger rise to monetary glory, his romancing of the queen's handmaiden, Dolly, and the subsequent adventures and romances of their sons: the naive photographer Dinu and the pragmatic materialist Neele. Within this world the reader also meets the character Arjun, an Indian soldier fighting for the British army, but who realises that his use of British-isms like "yaar" and "spiffing" simply mask his own complicity in the oppression of South Asian people. And the reader encounters the politically



active character, Uma, whose adventures in India opens the reader's eyes to India's early 20th-century campaigns for independence.

The verifiable historical event that percolates through the fictional narrative functions not just to open reader's eyes to, say, Ghandi's 1942 Quit India movement, but as part of Ghosh's tool box for creating a dramatic narrative that engages the reader. For example, when the Japanese invade Burma, it cuts short the deeply moving romance between sympathetic characters Dinu and Alice, causing the reader's emotions to surge. Historical event also acts as a springboard for a creative reinterpretation of history. While the real British invasion of Burma was the violent act of imposing a brutally oppressive colonial regime through much shedding of innocent blood, in the world of the novel it can be this and also the seed-event that later leads to the love story that follows the Burmese princesses and their love affairs with those of a lower caste: The First Princess falls in love with the Royal family's former coachman, Sawant, and the Second Princesses elopes with " a Burmese commoner" (204) so that the historically verifiable events such as the mention of the British imperial fleet crossing the Indian/Burma border "on 14 November, 1885" (25) or the mention of the 1942 Japanese bombing of Rangoon become kernel-events that seed new plots or turn stories into different directions.

Historical event can give cause for deep psychological probing of a

character's interiority. For example, it is not until the Japanese Inspired Fifth Columnists (JIF) defeat the British army in Burma (historically verifiable) that the character Arjun has his epiphany, realising his own complicity with colonialism. And, on other occasions, historical event clears the space for a character to speak critically about the world. For example, when the character Uma talks to Dinu about Hitler and Mussolini, the reader learns that such fascist dictatorships have already been a lived reality for Indians since the British conquest: "How many tens of millions of people have perished in the process of the Empire's conquest of the world--in its appropriation of entire continents?" (294). Finally, the presence of History as discipline gives shape to a third-generation character, Jaya, who studies history and "the huge collection of the documents and papers that Uma had left her, in her will" (494) to make her life and the world better.

### Conclusion

Thus Amitav Ghosh weaves the story *The Glass Palace* with multigenerational characters of three interlinked parts of the British Empire – Burma, Malaya and India.

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