CHAPTER V
THE GLASS PALACE
Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* is concerned with the impact of the colonial encounter on the political, social, and cultural lives of now independent countries, like India, Bangladesh, and Burma. The narrative in this novel is extended up to three generations. This novel is also a book about geographical entities – space, distance and time. Many stories have been woven together. There are many characters, with sagas of families, their lives and connections with each other. Ghosh, a great humanist, raises his powerful voice against oppression and tyranny through this novel. He is against the domination of man by man at all levels – political, military, and economic. *The Glass Palace* exposes how imperialism has done immense harm to the conquered nations.

The *Glass Palace* is divided into seven parts and each section highlights the various important aspects of the novel. The novel opens with the Anglo-Burmese war of 1885. Two senior ministers of Burma, Kinwun Mingyi and Taingda, are very eager to keep the Royal family under guard because they expect rich rewards from the English for handing over the royal couple, King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat, along with their family. This part is called “Mandalay.” This section depicts how the British occupied Burma. As the royal family prepares to surrender, the looters – the Burmese public who had earlier stood far aloof in fear and awe – now quickly move into scavenge what they can find in the palace. Similarly, the British soldiers in charge of shifting the king’s precious jewels and ornaments from the palace to the ship that is waiting to take the royal family into exile also pilfer the precious articles. Ghosh here strips veils off human nature to reveal the crude and brutal greed that drives people at various levels. This desire to grab and to possess is shown to be equally common to ordinary Asiatic individuals and the British soldiers, even as it forms the leitmotif of the big empire builders. In a single remarkable scene, thus, unscrupulous greed is
shown to be the animating force cutting across financial status, racial differences, caste, creed, individuals, groups, and nations. Also, the plunder described in the opening scene in the large frame of the novel transcends its literal significance to become a metaphor for the raw and naked greed of the colonizer and sets the tone of the novel.

The second section is entitled “Ratnagiri,” in which the calamitous effects of imperialism are shown. With the removal of King Thibaw, monarchy came to an abrupt end, and Burma became a part of the British Empire in India. Bound together in colonial subjugation the two countries and their peoples could never come together. As Amitav Ghosh narrates the stories of the Burmese’ reactions to these momentous historical events and changes, he presents the discontent and disapproval of the masses and how they began to see the image of themselves reflected in the “other,” the Indians. The servility and surrender of the Indians to the British – the Burmese felt – was a warning to them to prevent them from going to such extents of surrender to the power of the British colonial masters. The third section, “The Money Tree,” shows how Rajkumar, an orphan, prospers through timber business. The fourth section, called “The Wedding,” deals with the second generation. Rajkumar’s son Neel marries Manju, and people like Arjun and Dinu show fascination for the British. The fifth section, “Morning Side” depicts the consequence of the Second World War in Malaya. The penultimate section, “The Front,” depicts how characters suffer due to the outbreak of the Second World War. The last section of the novel entitled “The Glass Palace,” deals with the Indian National Movement at its peak and India’s final achievement of independence.

Three stories run concurrently in the novel. There are two stories of the first generation, that of Rajkumar and Dolly and of B.P. Dey and Uma. The story of the
second generation revolves around Neel and Manju. The twists and turns in the lives of these characters are the main sources of interest in the novel. The address of the novel is evidently to certain specific historical circumstances – the colonial past – and it seeks to “interrogate our role” in looking at our colonial past. Thus it encompasses the colonial rule of nearly a whole century in Burma, Malay, and India, starting from the Anglo-Burmese War of 1885 – in fact the “war” was no war at all as the Mandalay surrendered to the British almost without a fight – through the chaos of the two world wars right up to the age of e-mail and internet. It is a cusp narrative opening out on the pre-independence era and ending in post-independence days. Ira Pande appropriately describes the novel as follows:

Spanning centuries and generations and straddling the space of countries, India, Burma and Malay, this is a saga that could have exhausted the skills of a lesser writer. But in the hands of Ghosh, historian by training, an adventures traveler and a sensitive writer of fiction it becomes a confluence of all three. With remarkable sleight of hand, Ghosh juggles history, fiction and travel writing to produce a story that can be read variously as history of Burma over the last two centuries, an enduring romance between two families and a travelogue about a forgotten Buddhist territory.  

Indeed Amitav Ghosh’s prodigious effort in the novel is to offer an imaginative reconstruction of the most troubled times of our recent history. What impresses us most about the novel is the way Ghosh sets down things accurately, thoughtfully, with precision backed by meticulous research, whether it is the description of the Royal Palace in Mandalay, coolies’ lives, oil wells, laying of rubber plantations, the complex of activities involved in the timber trade, military maneuvers, minutiae like cameras, automobiles, aircrafts, clothing, or food – every detail is faultlessly period specific. But in the tradition of postmodern fiction, The Glass
*Palace* also challenges the separation of the historical and the literary. However, it should be remembered that *The Glass Palace* is not a historical novel as many a reader tends to mistake it as such. The novel attempts to alter the received historical opinions without evading notions of historicity or historical determination. But much of this historiographic metafiction works within the conventions of both history and fiction and also subverts both. It is not just metafiction, nor is it just another version of the historical novel or non-fictional novel. *The Glass Palace* perhaps is the best example of the postmodernist, postcolonial, historiographic fiction.

If one reads *The Glass Palace* critically, the novel would reveal the “spirit, the spirit that indicts the colonial rule. *The Glass Palace* brings together history, fiction, autobiographical records, and memories. Ghosh states, in his letter to the Commonwealth Foundation, wherein he withdrew the novel from being considered for an award, that the “issue of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace.*” The letter expresses the author’s feeling that “I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialization of the Empire that poses under the rubric of ‘the Commonwealth.’”² Ghosh’s letter indicates one of the directions in which history is to be remembered. The colonial experience and its memories are loaded with a sense of pain and suffering of the large numbers of people who lived through those phases of history. Meenakshi Mukherji points to this when she writes:

No one is directly indicted in this novel, not a single person idealized. Yet casually mentioned details get linked across space and time to form haunting patterns, their cumulative effect staying with the reader long after the novel is over. For all its vividness of description and range of human experience, *The Glass Palace* will remain for me
memorable mainly as the most scathing critique of British colonialism I have ever come across in fiction.\(^3\)

If the title of the novel can be regarded as an indication of its central theme, this book is a case point. An unwary glance at the title might point to nothing more than *The Glass Palace* of the Burmese king mentioned only twice in the novel after its fleeting appearance in the opening section. At best, the title might represent the destruction, depredation, and exploitation by the British. But going a little beyond the denotative reference, one will hit upon the resonance and recollect the unmistakable allusion to the Crystal Palace built in England during Queen Victoria’s reign to commemorate and reflect power, glory, and wealth of the vast British Empire, as fragile and brittle as the glass that was used for its construction, even as it was meant to mirror the remarkable achievement of the British in the colonies. But, ironically, the Crystal Palace is as much an emblem of the British prowess as it is of the exploitation of the colonized. The British palace was erected, in a sense, on the ruins of the likes of the Glass Palace. The title would not justify itself had it not been for this resonance; for the novel goes beyond showing the plunder of the Burmese Palace; it points to the exploitation in other British colonies as well.

In reconstructing the history of Burma’s transition from a kingdom to a republic—between 1885 to 1995— the period covered by *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh has used material derived from a variety of sources: recollections and remembered accounts of his father, uncle, and several other living persons who he met; the diaries, notes, and official records; history books, etc. However, Ghosh calls *The Glass Palace* “unqualifiedly a novel” and “a wholly fictional world” (549). History is woven into fiction and an epic saga of the colonial regime in Burma and India is created. Bound in the shared colonial situation the two peoples look at each other,
relate and mix, and then separate, constructing images of the “self” and the “other.” Localized contexts of India and Burma become the sites of self-consciousness, self-enquiry, and a process of recovering the lost self hood. Ghosh seeks an understanding of the past to have a bearing upon the present. The past is remembered not as a dead, remote period, but as flowing on–into the present, postcolonial situations of multi-ethnic, pluralist societies– of boundaries and mutations of nations imposed by the colonial rulers and complex cultural diversities of a persistent political struggle for democratic and egalitarian system.

*The Glass Palace* is the story of an Indian orphan who is transported to Burma by accident. The name of this character is Rajkumar. As a child, Rajkumar is remarkable for his exploring spirit, keen perception, and his ability to take calculated risks. Rajkumar works in a tea stall of a matronly lady, Ma Cho. He loves exaggerating his age just to feel like an adult. A well-travelled orphan, RajKumar is worldly-wise. Right at the beginning of the narrative, the author drops enough hints for the legitimacy of his choice of a protagonist. Although a child, an orphan, this boy is established as bold and remarkable. Once RajKumar lands in Mandalay, his life-long search for places and people begins. He is taken in by the city: “When the fort’s full immensity revealed itself, Rajkumar came to a halt in the middle of the road. The citadel was a miracle to behold” (5).

This exploring boy is a complete destitute in an alien city with absolutely no acquaintances. Finally he goes to Ma Cho for job and receives a thorough rebuke and scolding at the very outset: “What do you think – I have jobs under my armpits, to pluck out and hand to you?” (5). But his keen perception helps him know that Ma Cho is willing to take him to work under her. Soon, the boy develops a sense of belonging at the new place. Barriers are challenging to him. In fact, barriers cause progress. If
there would be no hurdles, who would think of ascending and getting beyond? He has the spark, the nature of adventure that sets him on the path of success. Despite Ma Cho’s warning not to venture into fort at Mandalay, he enters the fort. Rajkumar goes where his fancy takes him as he has none to guide or take care of him. Through the creaks in the wooden walls, he starts viewing Ma Cho at nights. He gets to know about female anatomy and sex this way. On one occasion Ma Cho nearly prompts him for coitus. But she does not trespass her limits. “Oh! She grunted. Then, with a starting deftness, one of her hands flew to the knot of his Longley…. Abruptly she pushed him away with a yelp of disgust. ‘What am I doing?’ she cried. ‘What am I doing with this boy, this child, this half-wit kalaa?’ (57). In many of Ghosh’s works, bestiality is more or less left to men and women save the grace of human existence.

It is at this road side stall that Rajkumar meets Saya John, who had been Macho’s husband. Rajkumar’s association with Saya John is very fruitful to Raj Kumar, because it is Saya John who saves RajKumar from attackers and shows him a way in his life. When the British throw down the king by Burma, Rajkumar is told that the British wish to control Burmese territory for wood. And from this point starts his shaping of his future plans. He senses wealth in teak. Rajkumar is attacked by the Burmese – as Indians are perceived as enemies, supporters of the British – but is saved by Saya John. Saya John notices sometimes unique in Rajkumar that sets him apart from others: “There was something unusual about the boy – a kind of watchful determination” (30). Rajkumar is offered a job at Saya John’s company. But he soon realizes that it is full of challenges. When king Thebaw evacuates the palace; everyone rushes into loot as much as they can. Rajkumar also joins the looters, but encounters his future wife Dolly, who is also an orphan like RajKumar. Dolly looks after the princess.
Rajkumar forms friends; he is receptive and learns to see the world even from others’ point of view. Saya John can be described as the mentor and teacher of Rajkumar. It is he who teaches him the practicalities of life and inspires him to see the other side of the picture. When Saya John earnestly tells Rajkumar how to live, how to deal with people and situations, at once his orphanhood strikes him right a heart: “RajKumar could tell that…. But the pain lasted only an instant and when it had faded RajKumar felt himself to be very much the stronger, better prepared” (75). Rajkumar’s professional rise is impressive. He clarifies the doubt of Saya John, “If I am ever going to make this business grow, I will have to take a few risks” (76).

With risks he grows and grows very well. By the time Rajkumar decides to go to India to meet Dolly, he is already a successful and respected businessman. He traces Dolly, who has been living in Ratnagiri with the deposed King and Queen of Burma. Dolly is at first Queen Supayalat’s maid and later grows into her own person. It is her contact with Uma Dey that gives Dolly a personality. She is more beautiful than the princess that she attends. Beauty demands many things – protection, graceful behaviour, dignity, etc. Dolly is able to meet many of these except a few. Dolly is introduced just as an attaché to the royal family. Dolly manages to calm down the youngest princess, who for every trivial reasons, shouts on every one.

However, Rajkumar’s meeting with Dolly proves catastrophic. Dolly suffers from her own problems. Uma Dey, wife of the District Collector, comes to his rescue and Rajkumar marries Dolly in Ratnagiri. From here onwards Rajkumar’s life as a family man begins. He fathers two sons, Neel and Dinu. But as fate would have it, he falls prey to the turbulent times in his old age. Dinu moves away from him, Neel dies, and Dolly moves to a monastery. Though one can blame fate for all these, the flaw in Rajkumar is also partially responsible for his downfall. When Dolly devotes all her
time to taking care of her son Dinu, who develops slight polio in one leg, Rajkumar forces one of the women workers for sexual relationship. An illegitimate son, Ilongo, is the result of this extramarital relationship. Perhaps, the civilized rules of morality do not seem to work here as this novel is the true depiction of life. It is only quite natural for Rajkumar to succumb to his physical needs, with Dolly withdrawing into a world of her own. These events show that he continues to be an uneducated orphan.

_The Glass Palace_ juxtaposes two aspects of female power. On one hand there is Supayalat, the queen who is an expert in court intrigues and palace politics. On the other hand there is a ten-year-old girl most vulnerable. Supayalat is an extraordinary woman, seasoned in royal atmosphere. While in Burma, she banishes the king’s mother to a corner of the palace, and also her sisters and the other wives of the king. She then systematically purges every member of the royal family who might ever be considered a threat to her husband. Thus seventy-nine princesses are slaughtered, some new born some too old to walk. They are bludgeoned to death lest royal blood be spilled. The corpses are thrown into the nearest river. But the enigma of human nature is such that this horrible lady goes on to live in exile, suffers captivity and humiliation for love for her husband:

What could love mean to this woman, this murderer, responsible for the slaughter of scores of her own relatives? And yet it was fact that she had chosen captivity over freedom for the sake of her husband, condemned her own daughters to twenty years of exile. (152)

Dolly remains with the royal family in the most critical circumstances. All servants desert the royal family and go back to Burma, but not Dolly. Sex comes as a handy rescue for her to maintain her sanity. Sawant, who is the local servant and also the chief servant, is the natural choice for her. Even the princess engages in sexual
relationship with Sawant and becomes pregnant. The Queen wants to get her daughter married to Sawant, much to the embarrassment of District Collector Dey.

When Rajkumar comes to take Dolly, her life seems to have no future. She is an emotional chaos. She is not interested in Rajkumar. But Uma Knows better; she says that “the birth of this child will drive you out of your mind if you stay on at Outram House” (163). Dolly’s meeting with Rajkumar is of great value in understanding the kind of person she is. When Uma coaxes her to marry RajKumar, Dolly’s reply is remarkably correct: “He is in love with what he remembers. That isn’t me” (161). Rajkumar marries her despite knowing her past. Dolly may be said to be the personification of the spirit of endurance and acceptance. Her very weakness is her source of strength. Dolly yields, she gives in. That is why she is so much in demand, sought after by Uma, Rajkumar, princesses, King, Queen, Sawant, just everyone. She reminds us of servant characters in the novels of Pearls. Buck.

Another Significant character of the novel is Uma. She is the wife of Beni Prasad Dey, who is posted as new District collector in Ratnigiri. She is described as a tall, good looking and graceful lady. In the very first meeting with Queen Supayalat, Uma impresses the queen very much. But despite all her charm and grace, there are problems in Uma’s life that she has not been able to sort out. The bond between her and her husband is weak. The collector has been educated abroad; he doesn’t fit into Indian scheme of things. There is a subtle reference to Indian marriages in the novel.

The Collector wants mental connection with Uma. Her resources prove to be inadequate on this account. She neither loves her husband nor trusts him. She may have “wife virtues,” namely, timely supply of needs, patience, passivity, etc. but a bond with her husband is something she dreads. The collector selected her after he had seen her at a puja when she was just sixteen. He wanted a girl who is somewhat
submissive, and not very much independent. His family opposed Uma, “But he persisted, insisting that he didn’t want a conventional marriage” (158).

But things turned out to be different. “Disappointment” is the word that settled too soon in their relationship. Uma starts leading a mechanical, lonely life, playing the part of elegant hostess in all the social gatherings of the Collector. It is Dolly who releases her from this chain of boredom and dull schedule. With Uma’s husband things are bound to fall apart. Finally, when Uma approaches her husband after Dolly’s departure, he guesses quite correctly that Uma is going to leave him: “You have come to tell me that you want to go home” (172). The dialogue that follows is quite touching and also tragic.

‘I used to dream about the kind of marriage I wanted.’ He was speaking more to himself now than to her. ‘To live with a woman as an equal, in spirit and intellect: this seemed to me the most wonderful thing life could offer. To discover together the world of literature, art: what could be richer, more fulfilling? But what I dreamt of is not yet possible, not here, in India, not for us.’ (172-173)

There can be nothing sadder in this world than the talk of broken dreams. It also happens that the Collector’s tenure is terminated and he is to return to Bombay. After separation from his wife, Dey goes to row out into sea, never to return. He is dejected after he is rejected by Uma. The world seems a bad place for him to live now. Thus a sensitive life goes away. With the Collector’s death, Uma’s life takes an upward swing. She becomes a freedom fighter, a celebrity in her own way. Uma is only twenty-eight when she becomes a widow. She remembers her husband mostly as a mimic man, a lackey of the colonizer: “There seemed never to be a moment when he was not haunted by the fear of being thought lacking by his British colleagues” (186).
V.S. Naipaul is one of the important novelists who inspired Ghosh to take up fiction writing. In Naipaul’s masterpiece, *The Mimic Men*, the central character speaks of being a “prisoner of his role,” “we learned about power,” he writes, “we learned about our poverty. The two went together, but it was our poverty which made the understanding of power more urgent.”

Uma makes the challenges but does not offer a clear response. Infact, in her own life it still takes her sometime after her husband’s death to find her new role in life. But when she awakens from these years of relative slumber, she becomes a revolutionary. Like her contemporary Lala Haradayal, Uma recognizes that “The conditions being created in their homeland were such as to ensure that their descendants would enter the new epoch as cripples” (222). Among the principal tasks she sets herself is “to open the soldiers’ eyes” (223). Uma is quick to see the wily nature by the British rule pitting Indians against the Burmese in order to safeguard their interests, to fortify the empire. But people like Rajkumar, blinded by their pursuit of wealth, indulge in self-serving rationalization: “Don’t you see that it’s not just the Empire those soldiers are protecting, it’s also Dolly and me?” (247). Uma retorts, “Its people like you who’re responsible for this tragedy. Did you ever think of the consequences when you were transporting people here?” (247). Uma Dey’s indignation about the empire is due to its “racialism, rule through aggression and conquest” (294) and for being a model of the Empire for nations like Japan and Germany. Uma goes on a Continental tour, yet the Indian nationalist cause gives her what Edward Said terms an almost “aggressive sense of nation, home, community and belonging.” She joins the non-violent movement against colonialism and goes to Mahatma Gandhi’s Ashram at Wardha. Her work is akin to that of Aung San Suu Kyi in establishing democracy in Burma or Myanmar as it is called today. Ghosh's
observations on the politics of isolation and resurgence are, as Novy Kapadia remarks, “a sensitive insight into the postcolonial experiences and politics of isolation, violence and hatred.”

However, we also find Uma susceptible to the needs of the body. Rajkumar stays with her during his last days, and they both establish body relations:

But that morning when I (Rajkumar’s granddaughter) ran into Uma’s room, I found, to my surprise, that Rajkumar was in her bed. They were fast asleep, their bodies covered by a thin, cotton sheet. They looked peaceful and very tired, as though they were resting after some great exertion. (545)

The lines tell that Uma’s image “as a woman of icy self-containment, a widow who had mourned her dead husband, for more than half a century” is false. Rajkumar even questions her about her achievements: “Have you ever built anything? Given a single person a job? Improved anyone’s life in any way? No. All you ever do is stand back, as though you were above all of us” (248). The reason for Uma Dey’s behavior may be her early widowhood. This leads her to bouts of loneliness or depression.

Dinu, Dolly’s younger son, is another important character in the novel. He possesses a unique keenness. He is sharp. He can be considered the hero of the later part of the novel. He is not an extrovert. His profession is photography. Dinu’s behaviour as an adolescent says a lot about his personality in general. He is an expert at speaking bitter truths. Uma realizes Dinu’s infatuation for Saya Johns’s granddaughter Alison. There is also a great deal of difference in their temperament. Dinu is a boy of shadows, Alison craves for spotlight. But the infatuation continues till Alison’s death in the World War. The reader is reminded of Tridib’s love for ruins in *The Shadow Lines* when Alison is also shown hooked by ruins. The older the ruin, the better it is. We also come to know about the psychology behind arranged
marriages in India: “… it was a way of shaping the future to the past, of cementing one’s ties to one’s memories and to one’s friends” (230). Dinu’s character is further delineated when his relationship with Alison is described. His attitude to the British rule is no different from that of many of the educated Indians of the time. He condemns Hitler and Mussolini for spreading violence across Europe. He says, “Hitler and Mussolini are among the most tyrannical and destructive leaders in all of human history …. They’re grotesque they’re monsters” (293). Dinu is right in pointing out that they have destructive intentions. Guided by vindictive motives and purposes, they are two extremely violent forces out to ruin the world. But what Dinu sadly misses out is the fact that the British too are guilty of “racialism, rule through aggression and conquest” (294). Uma points out that the Indian nationalists also do not sympathize with the Nazis and the Fascists. But she says that we are “caught between two scourges: two sources of absolute evil. The question for us is, why should we pick one over the other?” (293). But this question does not occur in Dinu’s mind. This is because in the words of Fanon, “The Western bourgeoisie has prepared enough fences and railings to have no fear of competition of those whom it exploits and holds in contempt.” 7 They achieved this through education. When Macaulay introduced western education in India, he clearly stated, “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” 8

From Dinu’s statements the success of the British in creating this class of people is evident. He spouts out faithfully whatever he has been taught in schools and colleges, and now as an intellectual condemns the Nazis and the Fascists as British would want him to do. Even when Burma and India achieve independence, his
gratitude towards the British remains. This is evident from his conversation with Jaya after the rise of dictatorship in Burma. He feels extremely upset at the loss of democracy due to the rise of military regime, which is understandable because the purpose of driving out the British was to create a society based on equality and fraternity. At the same time, he eulogizes the British by saying that they gave more freedom to masses. At least the common man had greater freedom and was not so much put to trouble to be watched by the “man in the pharmacy next door” (511).

Dinu also thinks that the British regime has successfully “reformed” the Indian society and “purged” it of all the evils. This is a great mistake. Dinu has been completely taken in by the pose of the British which is of a social reformist, and so he is grateful to them. He argues with Uma: “Look at the way women (are) treated even today, look at the caste system, untouchability, widow-burning …..all these terrible, terrible things” (294). Amitav Ghosh clearly brings out the true nature of the colonial rule through Uma, who answers to Dinu’s allegation: “Let me be the first to admit the horrors of our own society – as a woman …. Mahatma Gandhi has always said that our struggle for independence cannot be separated from our struggle for reform” (294). Dinu has put blinkers over his eyes and is not able to see through the real colonialist intentions of the British. This is where we find that the British have succeeded in creating a class of people having “black skin in white masks.”

Arjun is Uma’s nephew and holds great fascination for the British customs and ways of life. He is educated in the British modelled institutions and so naturally holds the British in awe and respect. By the end of eighteenth century, the British were able to bring the entire subcontinent under their control. Many administrative and social reforms were imposed to civilize the “ignorant and apathetic” Hindus. These
annexations, social reforms, educational reforms, and scientific innovations introduced from the west had their repercussions.

On one hand, the use of English in India brought a different kind of awareness to the minds of urban Indians. The British Empire established itself not only as a territorial empire, but also in the minds of men as a result of western education and the English language. It was the Empire of the language through education. The establishment of universities was a clear indication of this “linguistic and cultural empire.” Though there was a lurking fear among some of the Britishers that the English education might instil self-respect and make Indians challenge the alien rule, English as the medium of instruction stuck on.

Lord Macaulay, who came to India in 1834, was the chief advocate of introducing English as the medium of instruction in India. Macaulay was too much of an enthusiast, and used a rhetorical style full of superlatives in spite of the timely warning by his father, Zachary Macaulay, against the loudness and vehemence of his tones and his superficial gibes: “His pronouncements are too glib, too confident, too unqualified and sometimes are against good taste.”  

Macaulay was the secretary of the Board of Control in 1832 when Charles Grant Jr (later Lord Glenely) was chairman of the Board. James Mill, a noted British historian, wrote the history of British India – a three volume history – without ever visiting India and it was published in 1817. This book played a major role in introducing a particular image of India to the British rulers of India such as Bentinck and Macaulay. Mill, in this book, rejected every claim ever made on behalf of Indian intellectual and cultural traditions; he disputed and dismissed even the scientific and mathematical works in India and their contributions. In addition Charles Grant Sr’s observations and the zeal of evangelism had their own impact on the thinking of Macaulay. For Macaulay, education was only
a prelude to proselytization and he wrote in 1836, “No Hindu, who has received an English education, ever remains sincerely attached to his religion. Some continue to profess it as a matter of policy, but many profess themselves pure deists and some embrace Christianity.”

Macaulay was a trusted soldier of an imperialist regime that was interested in trade and power. The famous (or infamous) *Minute on Education* became the Manifesto of English Education in India. Macaulay’s attitude was that of a typical colonial administrator – a ruling master. The rulers were in need of a class of English knowing urban baboos, western-educated bureaucrats who would be loyal to their masters. Educating that class and allowing them to “educate” the masses was the British policy. Macaulay visualized India “to be a dependency of England, to be at war with our enemies, to be at peace with our allies, to be protected by the English navy from maritime aggression, to have a portion of the English army mixed with its sepoys,” since he felt “India cannot have a free government, but she may have the next best thing, a firm and impartial despotism.” Macaulay makes sweeping generalizations in this minute:

I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value.... I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in Eastern languages ... I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is, indeed, fully admitted by those members of the Committee who support the oriental plan of education.

With this kind of background to the education system, it is but quite natural that people like Arjun hold the British in high esteem. Amitav Ghosh, through Arjun, creates a discourse in this novel that dramatizes the evolution of colonialist antithesis.
He explores the anti-colonial consciousness and eventual revolt in Arjun. Arjun receives a letter from the Indian Military Academy announcing his selection as an officer cadet. However, Uma tells Arjun that “the Mahatma thinks that the country can only benefit from having men of conscience in the army.” She encourages Arjun to join the army because “India needs soldiers who won’t blindly obey their superiors” (258). From here onwards the novel traces the evolution of national conscience antithetical to the colonial power.

Arjun joins the colonial army as a gentleman cadet and goes on to become a Second Lieutenant in the 1st Jat Light Infantry. He is proud to belong to 1/1 Jats because it is honoured with a special title, “The Royal Battalion,” for the battle honours it won for the British Government, such as quelling the mutinies and capturing kings in India, in Burma, in Mesopotamia, in Somme, and in China. Arjun’s thoughts at this stage are worth noting: “Sometimes when I wake up in the morning, I still find it hard to believe that I really belong with these men…… 1/1 Jats; it seems like such a huge responsibility –as though we’re representing the whole of the country!” (262).

The impact of western academic disciplines is easily discernible on Arjun in whom the hierarchical constructions of inferiority and superiority, native and “angrez” are so deeply ingrained that all his effort is to be like an Englishman. He, as a young army officer in the colonial army, is puffed with pride that he belongs to a battalion which is honoured. His obtrusive acknowledgement of the superiority of the colonial masters, and his awe and respect for them, orient him to internalize the European morals, manners, dress code, and eating habits by aping them. His induction into the army initiates him into the British way of life and he becomes intoxicated with it. He takes pride in being assimilated to the British military culture, principles,
and food habits imposed on them by the British government. He boasts, “Every meal at an officers mess, Arjun said, was an adventure…. bacon, ham and sausages at breakfast; roast beef and pork chops for dinner. They drank whisky, beer and wine, smoked cigars, cigarettes and cigarillos” (278). Arjun is of the view that only from this evolves a new and more complete kind of man who is fit to enter the class of officers. He is not only not ashamed but is also proud to announce that as officers they had to prove to themselves as well as to their superiors that they were eligible to be rulers, to qualify as members of an elite. In the early stages of his fascination for military life, he feels nothing but pride in the new life he embraced. To Arjun “modern” and “western” are synonymous. To be a “modern Indian” he is prepared to erase all traces of being Indian: discard his past and embrace western habits of thought in its totality. At this stage, he does not realize the cost he would be paying to be accepted as a member of the elitist class, the rulers’ class. When Bela, his sister, wants to know people’s perceptions of him, Kishan Singh, an NCO says, “He’s a good officer…. Of all the Indians in our battalion, he’s the one who’s the most English. We call him the ‘Angrez’”(297).

Arjun receives the first shock of his life when he attends his sister’s wedding. Some Burmese student activists and Congress party workers berate him for serving in an army of occupation. On this auspicious occasion he manages to keep his temper and replies, “We aren’t occupying the country ….We are here to defend you” (287). The rejoinder of the activists is quick: “From whom are you defending us? From ourselves? From other Indians? It’s your masters from whom the country needs to be defended” (288). Arjun, however, is not shaken by these arguments. One of the demonstrators of anti-war march drops a pamphlet through his car window. Arjun reads some quotations from Mahatma Gandhi and a passage that says, “Why should
India, in the name of freedom, come to the defence of this Satanic Empire which is itself the greatest menace to liberty that the world had ever known?” Arjun is extremely irritated by this time, and cannot control his anger: “Idiots …. I wish I could stuff this down their throats. You’d think they’d have better things to do than march about in the hot sun” (292). Obviously, Arjun has become totally servile at this point. He does not question even once why the British Empire should hold India. As Gouri Viswanathan points out, “Without submission of the individual to moral law or the authority or God, the control they were able to secure over the lower classes in their own country would elude them in India.” The education machinery was geared up to make the people of India believe that the British were there “rightful” masters; by following them, they would elevate and uplift their manner, morals, and behaviour. This would ensure eternal maintenance of the colonial hegemony. The behavior of Arjun shows success achieved in this direction.

The decolonization of the mind of Arjun becomes discernible with the onset of the Second World War, which witnessed several hundred Indian troops of the British army changing their loyalty and enrolling themselves as fighters in the Indian National army. Ghosh convincingly articulates the psychological crisis and traces the change in the mind of Arjun, a man whom his colleagues call “Angrez.” Hardy (Hardayal), his friend and colleague, reminds him of the inscription at the Military Academy in Dehra Dun which says, “The safety, honour and welfare of your country come first, always and every time. The honour, welfare and comfort of the men you command come next …. And your own ease, comfort and safety come last, always and every time,” and adds:

‘Well, didn’t you ever think: this country whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time – what is it? Where is
this country? The fact is that you and I don’t have a country – so where is this place whose safety, honour and welfare are to come first, always and every time? And why was it that when we took our oath it wasn’t to a country but to the King Emperor – to defend the Empire?’ (330)

Arjun tells Hardy that he does not want to join hands with the Japanese because the Japanese would conquer India and would turn out to be worse masters than the British. To this Hardy replies:

‘Yaar Arjun, think of where we’ve fallen when we start talking of good masters and bad masters. What are we? Dogs? Sheep? There are no good masters and bad masters, Arjun – in a way the better the master, the worse the condition of the slave, because it makes him forget what he is …’ (438)

Hardy is right in pointing out that Indians demeaned themselves to the extent of being imprisoned by the idea of having masters to govern them. The British have, as Hardy rightly points out, made sheep out of their “pet dogs,” which would always be ready to be led, not lead themselves. Indians constantly looked towards their masters and thus demeaned themselves.

Hardayal, who is referred to as Hardy by his British colleagues, does not mind being addressed thus in the beginning. He considers being addressed as “Hardy” a great privilege. An Indian officer to have an Anglicized name! But later, it occurs to him that the distortion of his name is a way of robbing his identity and he is hurt by it. Arjun is also made to witness an incident of racial discrimination when he along with his Indian friends jumps into a swimming pool in Singapore, during the wartime, where many Europeans are taking a dip. They leave as soon as they see the Indians entering the pool. Arjun’s friend Kumar cannot restrain himself from commenting, “We’re meant to die for this colony – but we can’t use the pools” (345). While in Malaya, Arjun is shocked to see the rubber plantation workers, mostly Indians, living
in abject, grinding poverty. In civilian clothes, he is mistaken for a coolie and is called “Klang,” which is a derogatory reference to the sound of the chains worn by the earliest indentured Indian workers who were forcibly brought to Malaya. “Mercenary “was another tag used for Indian soldiers when they reached Malaya because the local Indians believed that they were “not real soldiers, they were just hired killers, mercenaries” (347).

While taking position in the trenches at Jitra in Malaya, Hardy understands that they, the Indian soldiers, are risking their lives for a cause which is not theirs and that they are being used as “a tool, an instrument” (345). He shares all this with Arjun. For the first time Arjun does self- introspection. He joins a gathering where Hardy is addressing many soldiers. Suddenly he thinks that “loyalty” and “faith” are hollow words. He also feels that the British “Empire was dead now – he knew this because he had felt it die within himself…” (441).

The central dilemma is the conflict in loyalty of the soldiers of the Indian National Army. The pamphlet singed by NCO Amreek Singh asks, “Brothers, ask your- selves to what you are fighting for and why you are here: do you really wish to sacrifice your lives for an Empire that has kept your country in slavery for two hundred years?” (391). Arjun is torn between sympathy, revulsion, and fear. He faces a moral crisis and gets a setback. He is caught between two worlds and tells Dinu, “We rebelled against an Empire that has shaped everything in our lives ….We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves” (518). Hardayal joins the INA and fights for the Japanese. Arjun also joins the INA and becomes the voice of resistance against the British Empire. What characterizes his attitude is a curious blend of loyalty to the British and an awareness of the ills of subjugation. He grapples with the question of India’s subjugation. For him, the feeling of patriotism and loyalty to the Empire
become antithetical to one another. Arjun feels for a while that hope lies with the British but finally protests against the Empire to guard the interests of the natives. Towards the end, the loyalty conflict in Arjun is over; he dies and seeks his own identity in the signifying process of history.

In Arjun the novel shows how the Indian consciousness and psyche struggled into awakening from the euphoric adoption of the English attitudes and came into the authentic Indian selves. The true crisis in the novel is when the old self breaks open giving birth to the new. For Hardy, who is always drawn to Indian food in the army mess and makes no bones about his preference, the decision making becomes relatively easy and he is the first one to quit the British army. But it is hard on Arjun. Hardy says he is a simple soldier and for him it is a question of right and wrong – what is worth fighting for and what is not. A spectator to the shifting allegiance from the British to the Japanese by the Indian soldiers under the impassioned speech of Hardy, Arjun wonders:

Was this how a mutiny was sparked? In a moment of heedlessness, so that one became a stranger to the person one had been a moment before? Or was it the other way round? That this was when one recognised the stranger that one had always been to oneself; that all one’s loyalties and beliefs had been misplaced?(440)

This is the crucial question for Arjun. The colonialist use of the Indian army produced in him a negation and self-alienation which gradually results in remonstrance, protest, and finally defiance.

Colonel Buckland is shocked by Arjun’s decision to desert the army: “You, I never took for a turncoat” and “…you don’t have the look of a traitor”(448). Arjun reminds him of General Munro’s observation which he quoted during the teaching sessions at the academy: “The spirit of independence will spring up in this army long
before it is even thought of among the people” (449). Colonel Buckland is steadfast in declaring him a traitor and a disgrace to the regiment and to the country. He warns him that if the time comes he will be court-martialed: “I’ll see you hang, Roy, I will. You should have not a moment’s doubt of that” (450).

The role of Colonel Buckland, although brief, is significant of the normative values and monolithic paradigms of the Empire. His calling Arjun “a disgrace to the country” immediately brings to mind the earlier comment of Hardy about the safety and welfare of the country: “Where is this country?” Arjun’s mind is antithetical to the imperial project avidly defended by Colonel Buckland. The Colonel’s ideological predilections for right or wrong “have long found expression in colonialist writers like Macaulay, Kipling, Edward Thomson, etc. in whom imperial notions such as mission, purpose, loyalty, modernization, racial superiority, solidarity, etc. were the cornerstones of faith.”

The imperial project, as Ghosh believes, was basically underpinned by “an enormously energetic apparatus of persuasion, which included educational institutions, workshops, media outlets, printing houses and so on” and it was simply not left to the militaristic strategies.

*The Glass Palace* interrogates the imperialistic epistemology that works exclusively through the central western consciousness. It is animated throughout by a strong postcolonial impulse to create an epistemology counter to the Eurocentric constructions. It challenges the institutionalized perspectives of the colonial history – the perspectives that subtly forbid consideration of any other one especially if it goes against the received, canonized opinion of the colonial rule. The commitment to countering the Eurocentric discourse can clearly be seen in Ghosh’s reasons for forfeiting the preferred Commonwealth Literature prize for his novel in 2001. In his letter to Sandra Vince, Manager of Commonwealth Literature Prize Committee,
Ghosh said the past may not be changed, but 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 enjoyment.”

Viewed from this point, Ghosh’s attempt in *The Glass Palace* is a critical revisiting of the colonial past, a reinterpretation of the past and not a nostalgic return to it. In his letter to the Prize Committee, he asserts that “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.” By refusing to compromise on the integrity of the spirit of the book, Ghosh reaches soaring heights as a writer – an achievement far greater than the Common Wealth Literature Prize. Indeed, as Suketu Mehta wrote to Amitav Ghosh:

… it is particularly perverse for a book such as *The Glass Palace* to be honoured by the remnants of the very empire that it is so passionately condemns. It would be analogous to ‘The Autobiography of Malcom X’ being given an award by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. They cannot conquer, rule and despoil us in one century and then attempt to sanitize their reputation by bestowing imperial honour on us in the next for pointing out what’s been done to us. These prizes are a means of co-opting dissent, buying our peace.

Ghosh’s refusal to accept the prize is all important to the spirit of the book.

The novel quite obviously reflects on the situation in the former colonies from the point of view of the colonized. In a sense, it is about the deconstruction of the history of the nations and re-formation of the same. Speaking about his works, Ghosh said, “My fiction has always been about places that are states in the process of coming unmade or communities coming unmade or remaking themselves in many ways.”
The Glass Palace holds up to scrutiny people and countries caught up in many a historic crisis. For this purpose Ghosh needed a big canvas to cover the colonialist discourse in all its structures of thought, ideologies, vocabulary, duplicity hypocrisy, and self-contradiction. At a micro-level Ghosh shows the modus operandi of the colonization in Mandalay, he skipped that in India to focus on other things like how colonialism unified the country in anti-colonial nationalist embrace or on the evolution and efflorescence of the anti-colonist psyche in the third country. The three nations he picked up in the novel have a shared destiny of being born out of an anti-imperialist struggle.

The supremacy and superiority of the colonizer get so much ingrained in the native’s psyche that he becomes thoroughly subservient to the master and the valourization of constructions like nation, national identity, and nationalism become a tangential concern. Rajkumar, Beniprasad, and Arjun have an implacable belief in the superiority of the colonizers. Rajkumar, whose is a rags-to-riches story, is also a staunch supporter of the British. From an orphan boy, he reaches great heights with the help of Saya John. He believes that the Burmese economy would collapse without the patronage of the British. Actually, during the process of exploitation of the natural resources of the colony by the colonizers, he and some others have benefited, whereas, to use Fanon’s words, “… the rest of the colony follows its path of under-development and poverty.”

The hegemonic process through the militaristic strategies for colonialist subjectification achieved enduring stability with the help of civilizational imperialism that worked mainly under the rubric of western education. Some critics maintain that education is “the foundation of colonialist power and consolidates this power through legal and administrative apparatuses.”
Gauri Viswanathan, in her essay “The Beginnings of English Literary study in British India,” comments that the English literary text functioned as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state. She quotes from C.E. Trevelyan’s book, On the Education of the people of India, published in 1838: “[The Indians] daily converse with the best and wisest Englishmen through the medium of their works and form ideas, perhaps higher ideas of our nation than if their intercourse with it were of more personal kind.” Thus English studies became instrumental in confirming the “hegemony” or “rule by consent” of imperialist forces as the natives came to “internalize the ideological procedures of the colonial civilizing mission.”

K.M. Munshi, in his “The Ruin that Britain wrought,” aptly describes the catastrophic effects of colonial rule:

The claim is made that Britain has given peace to India. Has she? If she disarmed us, it was to see that exploitation was not resisted by us. If she introduced law and order it was to train up a large police force under British officers whose principal function was to keep India safe for Britain; their protection had, more often than not, to be purchased by people by bribery on an almost universal scale. Our will to resist, even in self-defence or in defence of our property – which is considered sacred – has been destroyed.

He also writes on the education policy of the colonizers:

It is further claimed that British gave us modern education. ... broadly speaking in pre-British days, the leaders of society consisted of men devoted to learning, teaching and religious instruction; of men who formed the military aristocracy, small and big; of men who traded or formed the artisan class. The British destroyed the social organization completely and created by their support only two classes of instruments.

The British succeeded in instilling into the minds of the people, the notion “west to be imitated, east to be despised.”
About the epic dimension of the novel, Ghosh says to the reporter of The Times of India in an interview, “It is just a family story, really, that triggered The Glass Palace. My father and my uncle, both were in Burma (now Myanmar). But then, the book ended up as something quite different. It showed me a way of living that really had a transforming impact.”

Ghosh writes about families and nations to highlight the sense of dislocation. The novelist grasps the rise and fall of empires across the twentieth century and raises the question of national identity – cultural and political. Brinda Bose aptly comments that The Glass Palace “signals a dislocation in our understanding of the myth of our so-called community.”

At the same time, Ghosh maps the rival geography of human heart. The human interest is predominant in this novel, under the spell of colonialism. Ghosh conforms to Ashish Nandy’s view that colonialism “represents a certain cultural baggage.” For him, the novel is an instrument of perception more like a lens than a mirror for the objective representation of reality. It seems that he is more interested in a sort of active moral engagement with human experience.

Ghosh feels that in The Glass Palace the re-inscription of the past history of the colonial era is valourizable because “the ways in which we remember the past are not determined solely by the brute facts of time; they are open to choice, reflection and judgment.” Consequently, the unobtrusive articulation of the so-called civilizing mission and the ideological, epistemological, and ontological assumptions of the binary constructions of the imperial powers informed by the psychological domination and subjectification of the colonized in The Glass Palace embodies the genuine attempt by Ghosh to revisit and reframe the colonial past which may be, in a way, prefigurative of the discomfitting the deleterious ramifications of neocolonialism.
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