Chapter V

EXPLOITATION AND COLONIZATION IN

THE GLASS PALACE

The Indian Novel in English, as the “Third World Novel,” refers to “representations of colonialism, nationhood, post colony, the typology of rulers, their powers, corruptions and so forth” (Ahmad 124). Ahmad sees the novel a literary form engaged in postcolonial consciousness; a study of its thematic range indicates that the novel also attempts to universalize humanistic gesture, for human nature and social relationships are as important as interplay of power and national relationships. Amitav Ghosh is
one of the foremost Indian diasporic novelists who believe in Ahmad’s statement. He is a serious novelist writing with a postcolonial consciousness.

Ghosh offers in this novel plenty of scope to read it as a counter discourse/construction of national identity that would disrupt and alter the Eurocentric projections. *The Glass Palace* interrogates the imperialist 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, especially if it goes against the received, canonized opinion of the colonial rule. The empire developed its own discourse of self-validation which makes it tough to unseat it from its deeply entrenched position. Terry Eagleton, as Boehmer has noted, complained that within the postcolonial thought one is allowed to talk about cultural differences but not - or not much - about economic exploitation. Eagleton’s accusation is aimed at the Eurocentric, institutionalized perspectives of the postcolonial studies.

The commitment to counter the Eurocentric discourse can clearly be seen in Ghosh’s reasons for forfeiting the proffered Commonwealth Literature Prize for his novel in 2001. In his letter to Sandra Vince, the Manager of Commonwealth Prize, he 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 judgment” (TGP 67). 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 it.

In his famous letter to the Commonwealth Prize Committee, Ghosh 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’”(qtd. in Vinoda 8). Ghosh refused to compromise the integrity of the spirit of the book when he withdrew the book from the Prize competition; he was firm about withholding his book from being appropriated into the canonical perspective on the history of the Empire. With this assertion Amitav Ghosh reaches soaring heights as a writer - an achievement far greater than the Commonwealth Literature Prize itself. Indeed, as Suketu Mehta wrote to Amitav Ghosh,

… it is particularly perverse for a book such as *The Glass Palace* to be honored by the remnants of the very Empire that it so passionately condemns. It would be analogous to “The Autobiography of Malcolm 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 honor 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. (qtd. in Vinoda 9)

Ghosh’s refusal to accept the Prize, then is all important to the spirit of the book. The address of the novel is evident in certain specific historical
circumstances-the colonial past - and he sought to “interrogate our role” (qtd. in Vinoda 9) in looking at our colonial past. The novel treats several issues that intersect on the terrain of a postcolonial nation-state, spanning three generations and three nations over a period of two centuries. It narrates the enmeshed histories of Burma, Malaysia and India. Ghosh debunks the national, political and geographic boundaries and supports his own idea that nationalism is an imaginative construct. While looking at this novel through the postcolonial lens, Jayita Sengupta says, “Ghosh’s rendering of British colonialism and its aftermath in the three countries is an interplay of fact and fiction in an illusory place of imagination to create an awareness of the experiential reality of the post colonial worlds” (Sengupta 26). If offers us a picture of life in the former colonies of the Empire as if it is a multinational cultural bazaar. Ranjita Basu says, “History is a brooding presence in Ghosh’s books, almost a living entity able to shape the lives of his characters” (Basu 159).

The novel portrays political and cultural complexities through the author’s concepts of nationalism, imperialism and the subjugation of gender, class and caste. He believes in transgression of the frontiers of nationality; for him, nationalism seems to be an illusion and a force of violence and destruction. He has presented a unique rendition of history in fiction from the international perspective and writes imaginatively about the process of colonization in India, Burma and Malaya. The novel encompasses the colonial rule of nearly a whole century in Burma, Malaya and India, starting from the Anglo-Burmese war of 1885 through the chaos of the two World
Wars right up to the age of e-mail and internet. It is a crisp narrative opening out on the pre-independence era and ending in post-independence days.

Amitav Ghosh’s prodigious effort in this novel has been 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, coolie lines, oil well, laying of rubber plantations, the complex of activities involved in the timber trade, military maneuvers, minutiae like cameras, automobiles, aircraft, clothing, or food every detail is faultlessly period-specific. But in the tradition of the postmodern fiction, The Glass Place also challenges the separation of the historical and the literary. The preponderance of the verifiable historical elements in the novel nevertheless does not make it a historical novel.

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 post-modernist postcolonial historiographic metafiction.

If the title of a novel can be regarded as an indication of its central theme, this book is a case in 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 sections. 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 Place built in England during Queen Victoria’s reign to commemorate and reflect the 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 is meant to mirror the remarkable achievement of the British in the colonies. But ironically, the Crystal Palace is a much an emblem of 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.

This novel 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. If by 1930s the British colonies and ex-colonies extended over 84.6% of the land surface of the globe, Amitav Ghosh’s choice, then, of the three countries with shared colonial practices for his novel was commensurate with the scope of his creative ambitions. The epic sweep provided him the space necessary to unravel the processes of colonization and of revolt against the colonizer across countries. If at micro level he shows the modus operandi of 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-colonialist psyche. In the third country, he would pan on how an otherwise idyllic place of plantations was transformed into a theatre of the World War II. The three nations he picked up in the novel have a shared destiny of being born out of an anti-imperialist struggle.

The novel opens with the Anglo-Burmese war of 1865. Two senior ministers of Burma, Kinwun Mingyi and Taingda Mingyi are too eager to keep the Royal family under guard because they expected to get rich rewards from the English for handing over the royal couple, King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat, along with their family. As the royal family prepares to surrender the looters, the Burmese public who had earlier stood aloof in fear and awe now quickly move into the palace. Similarly, the British soldiers in charge of shifting the king’s precious jewels and ornaments from the balance to the ship, that was waiting to take the royal family into exile, also pilfer these things. Ghosh here strips the veils off human nature to reveal the crude and brutal greed that drives people at various levels. In a single remarkable scene, unscrupulous greed is shown to be the animating force cutting across the financial status, racial differences, caste, creed, individuals, groups and nations.

The plunder of the opening scene 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 novel reveals how tactfully the British conquered countries and subjugated whole populations, exiling kings to erase them completely from public memory at home. The last of the Mughal King,
Bahadur Shah Zafar, deportation to Rangoon, a generation ago, after killing the two princes right in front of the public, and the Burmese king Thebaw and Queen Supayalat’s exile to Ratnagiri in India were such astute moves by the conquering Britain. Having forced the rulers into a life of obscurity, they freely plundered the Burmese natural resources the teak, ivory and petroleum. The reason that the English chose to go on a rampage in Burma was made clear at the beginning of the novel. The British had sent troops and conquered Burma over a trivial quarrel about tax levied for logs on the British timber companies:

...... a few months ago there’d been a dispute with a British timber company – a technical matter concerning some logs of teak. It was clear that the company was in the wrong; there were side-stepping the kingdom’s customs regulations, cutting up logs to avoid paying duties. The royal customs officers had slapped a fine on the company, demanding arrears of payment for some fifty thousand logs. The Englishmen had protested and refused to pay. They had carried their complaints to the British Governor in Rangoon. One of the king’s senior ministers, the Kinwun Mingye, had suggested that it might be best to accept the terms, that the British might allow the Royal Family to remain in the palace in Mandalay, on terms similar to those of the Indian princes – like farmyard pigs, in other words to be fed and fattened and eaten by their masters. (TGP 78)
This brief description of the process of British occupation of Burma suggests the pattern of their colonization and exploitation. The rapacity and greed in the colonial process are represented here.

The Burmese king, once a colonizer, bewails the loss of his kingdom and his present confinement on Outram House in Ratnagiri. The reference to the Indian Mutiny of 1857 is a fleeting glimpse of the subjugation of India in the past. The mutiny of 1857 was a landmark for the Indian psyche. It centres on the Ghadar party. India had tried to resist the colonial yoke but it was a moment of utter defeat for the nation. The Indian Imperial Army had to surrender and the heads of several soldiers were cut off after the mutiny. Beni Prasad Dey, the new Collector of Ratnagiri, educated at Cambridge, believes in the smug notions of the Empire and the white man’s burden and submits himself to the hegemony of the Empire. Ghosh reveals through him the imperialist presence in India.

In the opening scene of rampage, for instance, the novelist for the first time mentions how the British soldiers marching past with their shouldered rifles looked to the Burmese crowds; “There was no rancor on the soldiers faces, no emotion at all. None of them so much glanced at the crowd” (TGP 26). And the realization dawns on them that the British army consisted not of British but Indians mostly. Now the hostility of the Burmese crowd turns towards the Indians and the eleven year old Indian boy, Rajkumar becomes an easy prey to their wrath. When he was beaten black and blue by the crowd, he had to be rescued by the Chinese Saya John. While the British lay
siege to Mandalay, the Indian community in Mandalay barricade themselves within the Haiji Ismail’s compound, fearing reprisal from the Burmese. The Burmese crowd notices that there was no hatred or enmity on the face of the soldiers because it is not their war.

Saya John throws more light on the phenomenon of Indian soldiers constituting the British army. When he was working as an orderly in a hospital in Singapore, Saya John came across several wounded Indian soldiers who were mostly peasants from villages, in their twenties. It was the money that drew them to this profession. Yet what they earned was a few annas a day, not much more than a dockyard coolie. He is certain that “Chinese peasants would never allow themselves to be used to fight other people’s war with so little profit for themselves” (TGP 29). He wonders how “for a few coins they would allow their masters to use them as they wished, to destroy every trace of resistance to the power of English” (TGP 35). Amitav Ghosh refers to the phrase “banality of evil” (TGP 35) in the context of soldiers fighting for their British masters from neither enmity nor anger, but in submission to orders from superiors, without protest or conscience.

The novel shows how the colonial authority clearly rested on the colonizer’s epistemological bases widely accepted by the colonized. Amitav Ghosh creates in this novel a discourse 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. His father is happy
because he finds status and prestige associated with it. Moreover, he will have a ready-made career and promotion and at the end there will be an excellent pension. Arjun’s aunt, Uma, who had been into Indian Independence League while in New York and is now working with Gandhi in India in the freedom movement tells Arjun that “the Mahatma thinks that the country can only benefit from having men of conscience in the army” (TGP 40). She encourages Arjun to join the army because “India needs soldiers who won’t blindly obey their superiors” (TGP 258). From this point on, the novel’s business is to trace the evolution of national conscience antithetical to the colonial power.

Ghosh explores the plight of the British Indian Army fighting against the Japanese in Malaysia during the Second World War. Some students and the Congress leader ask Arjun, “From whom are you defending us? From ourselves? From other Indians? It’s your masters from whom the country needs to be defended” (TGP 288). Indeed, these and other remarks reveal the writer’s indictment against the position of a colonized subject.

Arjun was proud to belong to 1/1 jats because it was honoured with a special title, ‘The Royal Battalion’ for battle honours. It won the British government, such as quelling the mutinies and capturing kings in India, in Burma, in Mesopotamia in Somme and in China. He wrote to Manju, “What makes me prouder still is the thought that Hardy and I are going to be the first Indian officer in the 1/1 Jats: it seems like such a huge responsibility – as though we’re representing the whole of the country” (TGP 262). He regards
himself as the first modern Indian who actually issues with the Westerners, not weighed down by the past.

Another theme that emerges as equally important is that of resistance to imperialism. Some of the Indians involved in the rebellion were erstwhile soldiers of the Empire who had been seized by nihilistic ideas. It is Hardayal Singh who makes Arjun conscious of the Britishers’ prejudices, distrust and suspicion about Indians and their notion of sovereignty. When their long-awaited mobilization orders come, Hardayal remembers the inscription in Chetwode Hall at the Military Academy in Dehra Dun and resists the idea of the country in these words: “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” (TGP 330).

The central dilemma is the conflict in the loyalty of the Indian National Army soldiers. The pamphlet signed by Amreet Singh says, “Brothers, ask yourselves 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” (TGP 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 shaped everything in our lives…We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves” (TGP 518). He faces a dilemma about joining the rebels in the Indian National Army while fighting for the British in Burma. Hardayal joins the Indian Independence League and fights for the Japanese.
Arjun, then, realizes that the Empire has been dead, as “he knew this because he had felt it die within himself, where it had held its strongest dominion” (TGP 441). Along with Hardy, he joins the Indian Independence League 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 subjection. He grapples with the question of India’s subjugation. For him, the feeling of patriotism and the loyalty to the Empire become antithetical to each other. Arjun felt for a while that hope lay with the British but finally protests against the Empire to guard the interest 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.

Indians settled in Burma have an altogether different view of things. At first, Arjun takes cover under the belief that soldiering is a job and he was trying to do it as best as he could. A series of disturbing events burst into action on the part of Arjun. The anti-war protest march taken out by the Congress men initiates a debate among Dinu, Arjun and Uma when they were on their way home from shopping in Calcutta. The imperialist British is one evil and Germany and Japan on the other. Dinu feels that Hitler and Mussolini are among the most tyrannical and destructive leaders in all of human history. India and Burma will not be better off if the British are defeated because the German rule will be more violent than that of the British. He mentions the massacre of Jews by the Germans.

Uma counters this argument stating that the expansionist aspirations of Germany and Japan can be traced to the successful imperialist, British model.
She says the British Empire is equally guilty of killing tens of millions of people. Dinu draws Uma’s attention to the evils like caste system, untouchability, widow burning, etc, that were prevalent in India even before the British came and he asks why he talks about the evils of the Empire. Uma states that the Indian struggle for independence is not separated from their struggle for reform. She tells Dinu that colonialists would like us to believe this, but that is an absolute lie:

It is true that India is rich with evils like caste system, untouchability, widow burning etc. But take the example of our own country, Burma they had no caste system. On the contrary, the Burmese were very egalitarian. Women had high standing—probably more so than in the West. There was universal literacy. But Burma was conquered too, and subjugated... It is simply mistaken to imagine that colonialists sit down and ponder the rights and wrongs of the societies they want to conquer: that is not why empires are built. (TGP 294-295)

Indians serving under the British rule in the British Indian army are weapons in the ruler’s hands. They were mere tools without a head or heart. Arjun is addressed ‘Klang’ (a slave) by a shopkeeper in Malaya because earlier Indians were forcibly brought to Malaya in chains as slaves to work on the plantations, to clean the toilets and to do such menial jobs for their masters. Kishan Singh is called a ‘mercenary’ by the people in Malaya, which means paid servants. The novel presents a range of colonized individuals. At one extreme, we have individuals like collector Beni Prasad Dey and at the other extreme, people like Uma. In between, there are individuals belonging
to different degrees. The problem for these individuals is to come out of the shell of British influence and see through the hypocrisy of their masters’ intentions towards the colonized people.

Indians were equal collaborators in the exploitation and depredation the British perpetrated on the Burmese. The British army attacking Burma consisted mainly of Indians. And then the British had brought Indians to Burma to work in the docks and mills, to pull rickshaws and to empty the latrines. In short, they had used the Indians in Burma throughout this process of colonization.

People like Uma were quick to see the wily nature of the British rule, pitting Indians against the Burmese in order to safeguard their interests, to fortify the Empire. But others like Rajkumar, blinded by their pursuit of wealth, indulge in self-serving rationalizations. He asks, “Don’t you see that its not just the Empire those soldiers are protecting, its also Dolly and me?” (TGP 247) Rajkumar felt that the Burmese economy would collapse if the British were to leave. Similarly, the Collector of Ratnagiri, Beni Prasad Dey, felt that there would be chaos in India if the British were to leave. Further, the Collector Dey thought that Indians like Rajkumar would not have flourished in Burma but for the British rule; he owes his prosperity to the British.

After Beni Prasad Dey’s death, Uma goes on a continental tour; she joins the non-violent involvement movement against colonialism and goes visits Mahatma Gandhi’s Ashram at Wardha. Rajkumar’s granddaughter Jaya, in 1996, realized the role of Aung San Sun Kyi in establishing democracy in
Burma, or Myanmar as it is now called. Novy Kapadia remarks, “it is a sensitive insight into the post colonial experiences and politics of isolation, violence and hatred” (Kapadia  220). Ghosh brings to light the crises of shifting identities and blurred nationalities through the interaction of his characters. He pinpoints the resistance to the dictatorial military rule in the post colonial Burma through some student activists’ arguments about the atrocities of dictators like Hitler and Mussolini in Dinu’s photo studio called The Glass Palace in Rangoon. Besides power politics, the Indian diasporic experience in South East Asia is the focal point and Ghosh records its historical depth and meaning in the novel.

Rajkumar Raha who is infatuated with Dolly Sein, marries her. Rajkumar’s life-story is a story of the struggle for survival in the colonial turmoil. As a colonized subject from Bengal, he becomes a colonizer in Burma transporting indentured labourers from South India to other parts of the colonial world. He has even sexually exploited a woman worker on his plantations. His post colonial consciousness represents a conflict. Rajkumar, Saya John and Matthew are engaged in the task of colonizing land and people for the sake of wealth. Rohini Makesh Punekar says that “the line between the colonizers and colonized is blurred, ever erased; colonization is seen as a continuous, ongoing process and often reversible (Puneka  53).

Rajkumar is the central character whose personal history is entwined with the colonial history in order to destroy and create new histories. He is projected as a prosperous teak and rubber merchant and his story of love,
romance, war and Empire, through three generations of his family, takes place in many South Asian cities. But after the Second World War, his expanding economy collapsed, and he took shelter in Calcutta. He could no longer see himself as an Indian or Burmese, as his is a fractured or fragmented consciousness.

The notion of unified identity implies unity in diversity. An ideal writer like Ghosh believes in the correlation of all cultures. As a cosmopolitan writer, he tries to explore neighbouring Asian countries in this novel where the West is a marginal presence. He discards European models and attempts to create his own. He maintains a balance between the memory of the past and the desire for a future by coming back to the present. In his e-mail correspondence with Dipesh Chakrabarty who has a project on Provincializing Europe (1998), Ghosh on December 14, 2000 wrote:

Two of my novels (The Shadow Lines and my most recent novel The Glass Palace) are centered on families. I know that for myself this is a way of displacing the nation. In other words, I’d like to suggest that writing about families is one way of not writing about the nation.

(December 14, 2000)

About the epic dimension of the novel, Ghosh tells the reporter of “The Times of India” in an interview that it is just a family story, really that triggered The Glass Palace: “my father and my uncle, both were in Burma. But then, the book ended up as something quite different. It showed me a way of living that really had a transforming impact”. (TGP 251)
Ghosh writes about families and nations to highlight the sense of dislocation. He asks questions of national identity-cultural and political in right contexts. Brinda Bose comments that “The Glass Palace signals a dislocation in our understanding of the myth of our so-called community” (Bose 30). The human interest is predominant in this novel, under the spell of colonialism. The social chaos in Burma during the colonial days is one of its threads. Different strands of history of King Thebaw, Dolly and Rajkumar are woven in this saga of family matters. Rashmee Z., Ahmed supports the argument against the imperial attitude by remarking that “The Glass Palace is nothing if not an indictment of imperial due process” (Rashmee 10).

Amitav Ghosh weaves into the life of his central protagonist, Rajkumar, the bewildering and often poignant accounts of a family scattered through post imperialist dislocation in various parts of the Asian continent. He charts the complex sociological and political repercussion of such disbanding through the experiences of loss, exile and the search for a homeland. The idea of the nation as metaphor of loss, and as being symbol of unitariness than physical entity (society) finds elaborate figuration in the turbulence of cultural cross-overs and conflicting histories that make up the central concern of Ghosh.

The clash of cultures may be viewed as the ironic conflation of nationalities. The moment of Rajkumar, the eleven year old Indian’s chance presence in Mandalay, the ancient walled city by the Irrawady river and the seat of Burmese royalty, amidst the booming of English guns and the imminent imperialist threat, is the first of many indicators of the transfer of
power and the transmission in cultural positions. The unambivalent language in which the Royal Proclamation’ of the Burmese king is publicly announced:

To all Royal subjects and inhabitants of the Royal empire, those heretics, the barbarian English Kalaas having most harshly made demands calculated to bring about the impairment and destruction of our religion. ...The degradation of our race, are making a show and preparation as if about to wage war with our state. They have been replied to in conformity with the usage of great nations and in words which are just and regular. (TGP 15)

This postcolonial space Rajkumar inherits, first by virtue of being a Kalaa, a foreigner in an alien territory, then by being subjected to colonization of another kind in participation in the great national upheaval that the British occupation of Burma entails. Yet another turbulent experience on imperial India and his forays into the Malayan forest resource made him a true transnational. Out of the interstices of race, class and nation in which his life is enmeshed emerges the in-between space that his culture and identity circumambulate. Rajkumar’s graduation from a petty immigrant led through his apprenticeship as a lugalei under Saya John to a business man who is revered in the timber trading circles of Burma suggests the hybrid nature of the colonized whose otherness or alterity from the colonizer subject, at a certain moment on these interwined histories, is hardly distinguishable.
Saya John, the Chinese teak trader decides to take Rajkumar under his wing. The whole enterprise of logging timber from the forests could not have been possible without the Europeans’ ingenuity. Saya’s knowledge of this and his imitation of the whole Sahib’s life-style involve a compromise between absolute separation from the empire and complete dependence upon the empires for his existence.

If the language of the postcolonial is assumed to be one of resistance then it must necessarily engage on mimicry, which is both ambivalent and multilayered. Bhabha’s explanation of this complex process underscores the element of compromise, a diachronic response in which ‘mimicman’ Saya John is engaged, for he is like so many other colonial subjects the “effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicised is emphatically not to be English (Bhabha 87). This is echoed by the author’s brief telling descriptions of Beni Prasad Dey, the ICS officer appointed in Ratnagiri where the Burmese Royals are held captive:

Collector Dey was slim and aquiline, with a nose that ended in a sharp beak like point. He dressed in finely cut Savile Row suits and wore gold-rimmed eyeglasses (TGP 104).

A deliberate parody of the while colonialist, Dey’s equanimity is nearly threatening to both his wife and to his English superiors. His easy defence of imperial power before the king along with his endorsement of its capacity to persist and influence is an act in which he is at once, and perhaps unwittingly, mimic man and comprador. Ghosh’s ready understanding of Dey’s behaviour
and his tongue-in-check reference to the British as amader gurujon (our teachers) smacks of the same ambivalence and sense of compromise with which such acts of complicity and mimicry are attended in the colonized space.

This tendency to repeat and mock is apparent in the reversal of roles witnessed in the palace during the mad scramble for possessions, as the British troops raid the royal wealth. Macho, the food-stall-owner for whom the young Rajkumar works in Mandalay demonstrates through her defiance of queen Supalayat this exchange of positions, as the boots is plundered by the same people who earlier venerated the royals as their sovereign. Still more revealing are Rajkumar’s empathy with the general mourning at the loss of the king and the sudden occupation of Burma.

Rajkumar was at a loss to understand his grief. He was, in a way, a feral creature, unaware that in certain places there exist invisible bonds linking people to one another through personifications of their commonality. But that there should exist a universe of loyalties that was unrelated to himself and his own immediate needs this was very nearly incomprehensible. (TGP 47)

Of similar nature is royal maid Dolly’s reaction to the department of the royal family to India and her growing awareness of the now divided house, as she began to notice odd little changes around her maids, for instance, their unwillingness to Shiko, and the ambivalence of her own position. She was
free she was told, for she was a slave in the erstwhile kingdom and not a prisoner of the British king Thebaw and his Queen; who but in her heart she knew her life was bound with that of the princesses who had been enslaved to look after.

In the mazes of history new associations are forged; the past is recast in transformed patterns and unspoken allegiance and loyalties are born where there were only hierarchies of power and position. The curious turn of history resulted in the making of a community which Ben Anerson calls as “...characters, author and readers, moving onward through calendrical time” (Anderson 27) and thus turning the pages of the novel into agency for the imagined community which is the nation. Dolly, by her peculiar new position of being twice enslaved in the breaking of a nation, is the unconscious reminder of the national idea. Dolly, more than any one else, embodies the sanctity of the Burmese Royal family, their regal authority that seems increasingly threatened in the wake of exile and, most intensely, the quiet and subliminal aggression of dislocated subjects.

The question of identity, whether cultural or political, takes into account the collective natural allegiance of the people to their nation. Gayatri Spivak explains the idea of nationhood as a metaphor constantly being reclaimed as the postcolonial space which cannot advance referents that are historically adequate. In the case of the colonial subject nationhood is perhaps the only real and historically immediate concern. It is Dolly’s most haunting obsession that the Burma the she has left behind is lost to her forever. Her displacement from her native roots and her discomfort with her own changed identity are
clear when she vehemently declares to Uma, the Collector’s wife that she would now never return home:

If I went to Burma now I would be a foreigner – they would call me a Kalaa like they do Indians a trespasser, an outsider from across the sea. I’d find that very hard I think. I’d never be able to rid myself of the idea that I would have to leave again one day, just as I had to leave before. You would understand if you knew what it was like when we left. (TGP 113)

The phenomenon of displaced location triggers off what seems like a self-inflicted act of dispossession in Dolly, reiterating the thesis that colonized subjects suffer from a sense of unreal and imaginary homeland. This is valid in the case of Dolly and Rajkumar, both of whom seek to reascertain their rights over Indian and Burmese territories. For Dolly, her life on outram House at Ratnagiri, is the only life she knows: her moment on exile is also ironically her moment of greatest assertion. “Where would I go”, she asks” …this is home” (TGP 119). She also does not hesitate to voice her instinctive resistance to the idea of the portrait of Victoria hanging by the front door at the Residency, where Uma lives with her husband.

Uma herself a native, though privileged, promptly takes the picture off the wall. Her liberal education in Calcutta and the fact of her being the Collector’s wife have little to do with the spontaneity of her response. She can empathise with Dolly’s situation bound as they both are in the sites of colonial oppression, and displaced by the same, single stroke of imperial authority. Yet Dolly’s contradictory love for the place of exile, her real / imaginary Indian
home of twenty years, is a curious case of mis-recognition, were, as she bakes a “last glimpse of the lane, the learning coconut palms, the Union Jack, flapping above the gaol on its crooked pole… clutching her cloth bundle to her and wiping away her tears, even as she embarks on a new life of freedom with Rajkumar away from slavery within the protected walls of outram House on Ratnagiri hill” (TGP 171).

Bhabha emphasizes the point that nations are born of anti-imperialistic struggle and their identities are ambivalent. In the Indian context, the dispersal and scattering of people is the process of making of the nation. Rakhee Moral comments,

The idea of the nation as metaphor of loss and as being more symbolic of a unitariness than the physical entity which is society, finds elaborate figuration in the turbulence of cultural cross-overs and conflicting histories that makes up the central concern of Ghosh. (Moral 144)

For Ghosh, the novel is as instrument of perception more like a lens than a mirror for the objective representation of reality.

Ghosh describes the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of the dislocated people in India, Burma, China, Malaysia and America such as King Thebaw, Queen Supayalat, Saya John, Rajkumar, Dolly, Uma, Alison, Dinu, Neel, Arjun, Hardayal, Kishan Singh, Jaya and Ilango. As observed by Meenakshi Mukherjee,
The story spans more than a century in the history of the subcontinent. People get involved in unexpected relationships across countries and culture; wars are fought, rebellions quelled, political and ethical issues are debated, fortunes are made and lost. The writer reports everything accurately, thoughtfully his precision backed up by meticulous research. (Mukherjee 6)

Cultural hierarchies overlap in entwining the high and low class, in spite of race, religion and class, in order to create new societies. The novel analyzes the feminine consciousness in the portrayal of Raj Kumar, Dolly and Beni Prasad Dey – Uma relationships. Beni Prasad Dey’s relationship with Uma is the one between the oppressor and the oppressed. For emotional relief, he needs consolation from Uma and not wifely virtues. He demands Uma’s subjection beyond decency, beyond imagination.

Raj Kumar marries Dolly and has two sons, Neel and Dinu and Ilango is Dinu’s half-brother. He inhabits the post colonial space as a foreigner in Mandalay and is subjected to colonization. Neel marries Uma’s niece, Manju in Calcutta and Dinu who loves Saya John’s grand-daughter. Alison marries a Burmese research scholar who wrote her dissertation on “The Glass Palace Chronicles.” Rakhee Moral, observes that the love affair of Dinu Alison is symbolic of exiles coming together, as it were, of families meeting out of a shared compulsion across disputed and dispossessed territories.

Saya John’s son, Matthew marries Elsa and they beget Alison, their daughter. These family ties come to full circle and the cultural differences are
forgotten, the artificial borders are no longer prevalent. However, on the economic front, after Matthew's death, a joint venture to resist the capitalist structures and colonization is undertaken by Elsa, Alison and Ilango in Malaysia. On the political front, Dinu and his comrades in Rangoon have strange ideas of democracy. Ghosh refers to the imprisonment of the Burmese political leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Dinu regards Suu Kyi as one much greater than a politician, as she succeeds in resisting the imperialist onslaught, the misrule and tyranny in Burma. He tells Jaya about the imperialists in Burma.

They have no defence against her but to call her an imperialist when in fact, it is they who invoke the old imperial laws and statues to keep themselves in power. The truth is that they've lost and they know this... this is what makes them so desperate... that is just a matter of time before they are made to answer for all what they have done. (TGP 243)

For Dolly Sein, past is recast in transformed patterns in Ratnagiri. Formerly, she was a slave in the kingdom, loyal to the Burmese King Thebaw, Queen Supayalat, and the princesses who were real historical figures like Aung San Suu Kyi. She feels that the Burma she has left behind is lost to her forever and this displacement from her own native roots creates in her a crisis of identity. She confesses to Uma Dey that she would be foreigner.
As a colonized subject like Rajkumar, Dolly suffers from a sense of imaginary homeland in India. After spending twenty years in exile in Indian, she leaves for Burma with Rajkumar.

The novel begins in a web journey, chance, uncertainly and orphanhood which are inextricably related. The roadside food stall (dhaba) is a well-recognized symbol of journey. The stall is also a place of current news, cheap food, cheap sex and temporary connections. The opening scene sets the mood of the novel. It is a novel about many places, war and displacement, exile and rootlessness, depicting human helplessness. All that a human being can do is to try to adjust, compromise, live and above everything else form relationships. This forming of new bonds, mixing of races and castes is something that does not stop. After all, this is human life. The collector at one point of the novel is intrigued when he comes to know of the pregnancy of Supayalat’s first daughter. He is disgusted. He is at a loss. His sense of class and decency is deeply violated: ‘was this love then: this coupling in the darkness, a princess of Burma and a Marathi coachman; this headless mingling of sweat?’ (TGP 152).

Such saga of human weaknesses gives birth to the concept of hybridity. No race is pure; there is no pure royal blood of anything like that. Life is mixing -DNA combinations and permutations. Saya John is a fine example of this breed of hybridity. His clothes are Western. He speaks English, Hindustani and Burmese. His face looks like that of Chinese. Saya himself makes fun of his amalgamated identity. “They (the Indian soldiers)
asked me this very question: how is it that you who look Chinese and carry a Christian name, can speak our language? When I told them how this had come about, they would laugh and say, “you are a Dhobi Ka Kutta – a washerman’s dog-Na Ghar Ka Na Ghat Ka-you don’t belong anywhere, either by the water or on land, and I’d say, yes that is exactly what I am.’ He laughed, with an infectious hilarity and Raj Kumar joined in (TGP 10). This is a laughter of mutual sharing. Raj Kumar is as much a washerman’s dog as Saya John. There is no humiliation between the two. This is simple acceptance of fact.

Change, make-shift arrangements and temporary homes appear again and again in this novel, which give this novel its contemporary flavour. Only through this sense of shifting the novel comes close to the reader of the present times where movement and uncertainly have become the order of the day.

The process of colonization and the state of the colonized are very relevant components of this novel. The very word used for Raj Kumar – Kaala – is objectionable to our generation which is decolonized at least in the political sense of the word. What we witness in this text is the actual process of aggression, capture and colonization. The soldiers who are invading Burma are Indians. Instead of fighting their common enemy the British – the Burmese and the Indians are fighting among themselves. The scene of ousting of the deposed Burmese king is ironically tragic: “In victory the British had decided to be generous the British Government wished to provide them with an escort of
attendants and advisors. But now it was time to leave, the guard of honour was waiting” (TGP 43).

Ghosh even mentions Bhadur Shah Zafar, the last Indian Emperor who was taken to Rangoon in exile. A parallel is drawn here. What must be said, apart from the cruel colonization, is that these emperors were distanced from reality, from their own subjects and land to a shocking extent. When King Thebaw is taken out of his palace, it is for the first time he is seeing his land. Ghosh goes on ruthlessly describing the conditions of the Indians in Burma who were taken there to work in the docks and mills, to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines’ (TGP 49). Another shock comes when we learn that those who wait on Queen Supayalat are supposed to do so on all their fours i.e., both bands and legs on floor. When an English midwife comes, she refuses to crawl. Supayalat fails to make her crawl; “she was an English woman”. (TGP 55).

Apart from these human scenes of colonization, Ghosh also deals with the larger question of Europe’s greed. Everything becomes a resource to be exploited - woods, water, mines, people, just everyone and everything. “Resources were being exploited with an energy and efficiency hitherto undreamed of” (TGP 66). Forests are cut on a very mass-scale without giving any thought to the hazards of environment that such an unthinking act would cause. Burma becomes the mine of wealth for the British. “In a few decades the wealth will be gone - all the gems, the timber and the oil – and then they too will leave” (TGP 88).
Mental colonization is even worse. For example, Saya does not see the English as usurpers. For him, they are superiors. From them, he has learnt the art of using everything for his own benefit. The Europeans for him stand for efficient exploitation. To him, it brings profit. He does not know anything beyond his immediate gain, nor does he want to know. Many decades later we see Arjun boasting of his connection with westerners. In his mind, he has accepted that the Western style is better and therefore desirable. “Dinu understood that it was through their association with Europeans that Arjun and his fellow- officers saw themselves as pioneers” (TGP 279). We also see Raj Kumar being convinced that without the British the Burmese economy would collapse (306). Many instances can be given where the author has shown the cruelty of colonization and its impact on the lives and mind of the colonized. Decolonization is not easy, perhaps it is not even possible. As Arjun says, “We rebelled against an Empire that has shaped everything in our lives; coloured everything in the world as we know it. It is a huge, indelible stain, which has tainted all of us. We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves” (TGP 518).

Amitav Ghosh, like Salman Rushdie, is not an insider/outsider who talks about cultural displacement through cracked lenses; he is an insider. He makes us think about the relation of culture to economic and political structures in the present days of globalization. As a writer of the Indian diaspora, Ghosh wants to record its historical depth and its meaning in the world. Soueif writes, “Ghosh is one of the most sympathetic post-colonial
voices to be heard today. He looks at love and loyalty, and examines questions of Empire and responsibility, of tradition and modernity” (Soueif 6-5).

Throughout the novel, the Empire expands and then retracts, fortunes are won and lost. Mahanta opines, “The novel sees Amitav Ghosh’s recurrent concern with nationalism; boundaries and statehood transform into multi-leveled dilemmas” (Mahanta 54). He presents multiple viewpoints of the dispersed people of different nationalities and makes a plea for internationalism in order to define our contemporary globality. He intends to show how the context of imperialism has changed in globalization. Like George Orwell, Ghosh believes that empires imprison their rulers as well as their subjects. In his hands, the novel becomes a cultural instrument for the hopes of social betterment. He negates the binary of the subject-object positions and attempts to universalize human relationships in the wake of globalization. In fact, it is this civilizing mission that is essential in the turbulent world.

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A major feature of post-colonial literature is the concern with place and displacement. The special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being, with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place. The dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of postcolonial societies whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention or a mixture of the two. Beyond their historical and cultural differences, place, displacement and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity