CHAPTER 6
POST-COLONIAL MIGRATIONS:
THE DISPLACED GENERATIONS IN THE GLASS PALACE

In a story entitled Tibetan Dinner (1988) by Ghosh, he reflects on the life of a Tibetan serving woman during the course of having dinner with his friends:

“As we drank our jugs of Chhang a fog of mystery would descend on the windy, lamp-lit interiors of the shacks. We would look at the ruddy, weathered faces of the women as they filled our jugs out of the rusty oil-drum in which they brewed the beer, and try to imagine the journey they had made: from their chilly, thin-aired plateau 15,000 feet above sea-level, across the passes of the high Himalayas, down into that steamy slum, floating on a bog of refuse and oil-slicks on the outskirts of Delhi. Everyone who went there got drunk. You couldn’t help doing so—it was hard to be in the presence of so terrible a displacement.”¹

This episode tells us a great deal about the fate of the migrant in today’s world, a theme which recurs in Ghosh’s subsequent works with much eloquence. Besides this, the themes which recur in Ghosh’s works are: the individual’s predicament and involvement in the broad sweep of political events; the dubious nature of borders, whether between nations and peoples or between one literary genre and another; the role of memory and consciousness in one’s search for self in the march of time; the role of the artist in society and the importance of narrative in shaping history. But above all these major serious literary concerns we must
give due credit to Ghosh the wonderful story teller and delineator of characters. John Hawley rightly comments:

“Ghosh’s roots are in journalism and academic writing-investigation and analysis, a revelation of subterranean connections and patterns – but first and foremost, and overriding all the many ideas that inform his work are the stories, the Dickensian proliferation of characters whose lives engage us and who take us to some richly imagined places and times.”

*The Glass Place* is a perfect manifestation of almost all the major concerns of Ghosh, blended into a wonderful epic narrative. But over riding all the thematic concerns is the theme of post-coloniality. The homeless and displaced migrant native is an inseparable part of a post-colonial novel. The predicament of the lost and shattered migrant has been termed as ‘exit-ential anxiety’ by Rukmini Bhaya Nair:

“Any writer who seeks to present the soul of man under colonialism, as Amitav Ghosh does in his latest novel, *The Glass Place* is therefore condemned to record the exit-ential dilemma – wherein the subject is necessarily partitioned, a bewildered immigrant never quite in focus nor contained within the frame.”

Besides rejecting universalism in literature (that all great literature has a timeless and universal appeal), the post-colonial critics and authors try to reclaim the nation’s past which has been devalued by the colonizer so much so that the natives see history, culture and progress as beginning with the arrival of Europeans.

Amitav Ghosh is prominently a writer of histories and indulges in an introspective exploration of self and society
primarily a post-colonial trait. He celebrates and explores diversity, hybridity and difference apart from diminishing all divisions, physical or psychological.

Nation formation is a major tool in the process of colonization, as in journeying from an amorphous nation less state to that of conscious nationhood, the new nation people feel privileged and subsequently relegate their apparently disorganised past to the realms of history. This nation-formation involves a poignant dispersal and scattering of people across man-made borders. The wide movement of people in the recent history of human race in the wake of imperialist and expansionist programmes across Africa and eastward in Asia bear adequate testimony to this. *The Glass Palace* records and indites the experiences of first such races inhabiting British occupied territories in South East Asia, who are dying to make their own nation.

*The Glass Place* is the author’s attempt to remap the history of three South Asian countries, Myanmar, India and Malaysia all sites of the British Empire through the late 19th and 20th centuries. The turbulent cultural crossovers, conflicts, histories and nations as a metaphor of loss make up the central concern of Ghosh. Rajkumar, the chief protagonist of the novel, epitomizes the lost, exiled and homeless native whose family is further scattered in the course of the novel through post imperialist dislocation in various parts of the Asian continent. The dramatic conflation of cultures and nationalities is evident at the very outset when the eleven year old Rajkumar witnesses the booming of English cannons and British invasion of Burmese Royal Palace in Mandalay.
“English soldiers were marching towards the city… Panic struck the market. People began to run and jostle. Rajkumar managed to push his way through the crowd… He could not see far: a cloud of dust hung over the road, drummed up by thousands of racing feet… Rajkumar was swept along in the direction of the river. As he ran, he became aware of a ripple in the ground beneath him, a kind of drumbeat in the earth, a rhythmic tremor that travelled up his spine through the soles of his feet. The people in front of him scattered and parted… Suddenly he was in the front rank of the crowd, looking directly at two English soldiers mounted on horses.”

It’s not just the marches and the scared mobs but the fact that most of the British invading forces involve Indian soldiers, which is a surprising presence in the novel. Even the royal proclamation before the surprise invasion of Burma bears testimony to this:

“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, have been replied with the usages of great nations and in words which are just and regular” (TGP,p.15-16).

True to an Amitav Ghosh novel, The Glass Place contains a proliferation of characters which include the privileged as well as the subaltern. The royal family-Thebaw, Queen Supayalat and the Burmese princesses; and commoners like Dolly, Rajkumar, Saya John and Uma are united ironically by the gales of colonial displacement. These protagonists forced by the rough historical winds are displaced from Burma to India, Malaya, Singapore and
back again, each time involving a pattern of panic, crowded mobs and soldiers on the march as already illustrated in the very opening of the novel.

Rajkumar, initially a subaltern comes out as a true transnational post-colonial subject firstly by being a *Kalaa*, a foreigner in an alien territory, then by being subjected to colonization of a more severe kind in participating in the great national upheaval that the British occupation of Burma entails, followed by another turbulent experience in imperial India and his foray into the Malayan forest resources. He inhabits a truly borderless post-colonial space beyond the interstices of race, class and nation in which his life is enmeshed. The hybrid nature of the colonized-subaltern who evolves himself into an affluent businessman and comes to resemble the colonizer is revealed through the character of Rajkumar, who graduates from a petty immigrant lad, through his apprenticeship as a *lu ga lei* under Saya John, to a merchant who is revered in the timber trading circles of Burma. Saya John, his mentor, is another transnational from China who evolves himself into a semblance of Europeans in his garb and manner. Saya John instructs Rajkumar in the life of young Europeans who taught them how “to bend the work of nature to your will” (TGP, p.75). Saya John’s conception that 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 white Sahib’s lifestyle, involves a compromise between the complete separation from the empire and complete dependence upon the empire for its existence.
Mimicry of the colonizer’s language, mannerism and mode of dressing is another marked trait of a postcolonial protagonist. Saya John’s deliberate attempts at anglicizing, by his way of dressing and the author’s description of Beni Prasad Dey, the ICS officer appointed in Ratnagiri where the Burmese royals are held captive are worth a mention here.

“It was a ritual with Saya John, a kind of superstition, always to start these journeys in European clothes: a sola topee, leather boots, khaki trousers” (TGP, p.67).

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

Ghosh’s allusion to Dey’s behaviour, his defence of imperial power before the Burmese King, and his tongue-in-cheek reference to the British as amader gurujon (our teacher) brings out the sense of compromise with which such acts of complicity and mimicry are attended in the colonized space.

The colonized subject’s empathy with the fellow colonized, though of separate nationality is apparent when Rajkumar expresses surprise at his own involvement with the general mourning at the sudden occupation of Burma and the loss of the king.

“Rajkumar was at a loss to understand his greed. He was in a way, a feral creature, unaware that there exists invisible bonds linking people to one another through personifications of their commonality. In the Bengal of his birth these ties had been sundered by a century of conquests and no longer existed even as a memory 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,p.47).

The royal maid Dolly too shares her predicament with Rajkumar. She feels the same incomprehensible loyalty to the royal family’s deportment to India. She began to notice odd little changes around her, of the servants’ impudence, their refusal to shiko and her own ambivalent position. She was free, she was told for she was a slave not a prisoner, but in her heart she knew she was bound with the princesses, who she had been enslaved to look after. Dolly represents the twice colonized victim of the breaking of a nation. She embodies the quiet and subliminal aggression of dislocated subjects. Dolly’s most haunting concern is that Burma the place of her birth is lost to her forever. Her displacement from her roots and her discomfort with her changed identity is clear when she confides her predicament to Uma, the collector’s wife:

“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 knew what it was like when we left”(TGP,p.113).

Padmini Mongia quotes Gayatri Spivak’s explanation of such dilemma:

“For the post colonial the idea of a nationhood is a metaphor constantly being ‘reclaimed’, as the post-colonial space cannot advance referents that are ‘historically adequate’ in the case of the
colonial subject nationhood is perhaps the only real and historically immediate concern.”

The colonial subjects suffer from a sense of imaginary homeland having to suffer most of their lives in displaced locations. Dolly and Rajkumar both ironically have an allegiance to the nation of their exile or displacement which they have appropriated as home. For Dolly, her life in Outram House is the only life she knows and surprisingly she is the most assertive, in her place of exile. She asks Uma, “where would I go, this is home” (TGP, p.119).

Both Dolly and Uma are victims of the same colonial force and share a deep understanding and respect for each other’s predicament. Dolly however, bears the burden of slavery also at the hands of the Burmese royalty. However, both are very quick to acknowledge their respective status and any colonial prejudices, either may harbour. Ghosh provides a conversation full of typical post-colonial disillusionment:

“One night, plucking up her courage, Uma remarked: ‘One hears some awful things about Queen Supayalat.’

‘What?’

‘That she had a lot of people killed... in Mandalay...’

Dolly was quiet for a moment and Uma began to worry that she had offended her. Then Dolly spoke up. ‘You know Uma’ she said in her softest voice. ‘Every time I come to your house, I notice that picture you have hanging by your front door...’

‘Of Queen Victoria, you mean’
‘Yes’

Uma was puzzled. ‘What about it?’

‘Don’t you sometimes wonder how many people have been killed in Queen Victoria’s name? It must be millions wouldn’t you say? I think I’d be frightened to live with one of those pictures.’

A few days later Uma put the picture down and sent it to the Cutchery, to be hung in the Collector’s office’ (TGP, p.114).

This prompt retort by Dolly shows her emotional affinity to the only home and family she knows and loves before her marriage. Her love for the royal family is evident when before leaving with Rajkumar, she takes a “last glimpse of the lane, the leaning coconut palms, the Union Jack, flapping above the gaol on its crooked pole…” (TGP,p.171).

The experience of these exiled victims of the breaking of nations is peculiar in the sense that they slide easily into alien cultures, at the same time triggering off the spirit of alienation, national longing and transnationalism in their divided identities. Ghosh’s characterization of Rajkumar, the petty luga lei turned timber tycoon is a way of voicing the problematic of settling and resettling of communities and individuals amid the confluence of nations and nationalities. He is a true multicultural, a reinvented migrant, who, by dint of his enterprise, carves a niche for himself and escapes, landing in underclass ethnic ghettos. Uma, like most of Ghosh’s other characters is a citizen of the world away from delimiting boundaries. Her sojourns to Europe and America after her husband’s demise lead her to the Indian Nationalist movement and she subsequently brings her struggle to the subcontinent. The
hybridity and adaptability of characters like Rajkumar and Uma robs exile of its derogatory connotations like oppression and significantly mellow the colonized-colonizer binary.

Another theme which forms an inseparable part of a post-colonial narrative is the resistance to and struggle against imperialism. Apart from depiction of nationalism through the character of Uma, is the evocative presentation of another more difficult and more consequential struggle of the Indian officers and soldiers serving in the British army. Uma’s nephew Arjun is immensely proud to be among the privileged few who are able to enter the class of the rulers. It is Hardayal Singh, his peer and a third generation army officer, who makes Arjun conscious about the Britishers’ prejudice, distrust and suspicion of Indian officers as well as soldiers. When their long awaited mobilisation orders came, Hardayal remembered the inscription in Chetwode Hall at the Military Academy in Dehradun and expresses scepticism at the idea of ‘country’:

“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, p.330).

Though Hardayal had realized this ironical situation quite early in life; Arjun is shocked into admitting it after a few setbacks. When Arjun’s battalion arrives in Singapore on its way up the Malay peninsula, he has the sort of experience that another of his fellow officers had predicted:

“...it was as though they were examining their own circumstances for the first time in
retrospect; as though the shock of travel had displaced an indifference that had been inculcated in them since their earliest childhood” (TGP, p.346).

They are suddenly acknowledging the fact that they have never been accepted as equals by the British. Subsequently Arjun starts heeding to Hardayal’s complaints:

“It’s strange to be sitting in a trench, holding a gun and asking yourself; who is this weapon really aimed at? Am I being tricked into pointing it at myself? ... This is what I ask myself Arjun: In what way do I become human again? How do I connect what I do with what I want in my heart?” (TGP, p.406)

During the battle of Jitra, Amreek Singh of Indian National Army airdrops pamphlets to awaken the soldiers to the national cause. They say,

“Brothers ask yourselves what you are fighting for and why you are there: do you really wish to sacrifice your lives for an empire that has kept your country in slavery for two hundred years?” (TGP, p.391)

When Arjun sees Kishan Singh and other soldiers of his company reading the pamphlet, he asks them to be disposed off and warns the soldiers of dire consequences if any of them is found with a pamphlet. Contrary to the firm resolve of Hardayal, Arjun is torn between sympathy revulsion and fear. He later confesses to Dinu about his dilemma:

“We rebelled against an empire that shaped everything in our lives...We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves” (TGP, p.518).
The wider growing concern amongst the Indians fighting under the imperial army is intricately woven with the other intimate concerns of the protagonists. Arjun’s emotional attachment with his subordinate Kishan Singh is the only lasting bond in the otherwise emotionless mercenary exercise of war. Dinu and Alison both of mixed parentage fall in love, defying divergent geographies and races. This relation of love destined to flower, between Rajkumar’s son and Saya John’s granddaughter is curiously symbolic of a shared compulsion across disputed and dispossessed territories. Ghosh, in the midst of wartime despair and disillusion seems to reiterate here the quiet and unchallenged faith that only such love and desire can sustain. In contrast to Uma’s and Hardayal’s aggressive rebellion is Dinu’s suppressed protest against imperialism. Dinu’s compassionate concern for Burma is not fired by rebellion and he leads a subdued life in post-coup Rangoon under the stern shadow of the junta. But while the rest of the characters, either aggressively or submissively, have found and followed their calling, Arjun comes out as an emotionally distraught, confounded individual who is caught between two worlds belonging to neither.

This quest for identity and origin, a predicament peculiar to colonized individuals is discussed by Ghosh to bring out the alienation and loss of a sense of belonging of the natives. Rajkumar lives the life of a near destitute in Uma’s Calcutta home and for all his wanderings, dies with the conviction that the “Ganges could never be the same as the Irrawaddy” (TGP, p.544). While barriers and boundaries seem to define the psyches that attend the making
of nations and nationalities in *The Glass Place*, the author seems to collapse these margins and is metaphorically at home, everywhere. Menakshi Mukherjee in her essay on *The Anxiety of Indianness* comments:

“For Ghosh as in some of the best Indian language writers, words like ‘Marginality’ and ‘hybridity’ seem quite irrelevant and segmenting the worlds into third and first regions is a rather absurd activity.”

The post colonial by virtue of his displaced and mobile location is free of gender, class and political affiliations as he moves unhindered in his journey across the spaces of worlds and cultures. Ghosh in spite of the vast peregrinations, writes with a sense of personal connect with India’s colonial history. The work is considerably enriched by autobiographical elements like his class family affiliations with the Indian freedom struggle and his participation in General Slim’s Burmese expeditions. Even his imagined characters show an acute consciousness of colonial history and genealogy. Rakhee Moral throws light on this aspect of Ghosh’s work:

“If *The Glass Place* is a rather loose, sprawling *Bildungsroman* constructed around the life of Rajkumar Raha in Burma, Malaysia and India, it is also on a more subterranean level the acknowledgement of those changing parameters from the history of colonial India through the post independent nationhood that determines the personal and psychological identities of the author himself.”

Ghosh comes out as an amalgam of a post-colonial whose sense of time and history is inseparable from the long years of
dominion and the multi-national, multicultural hybrid who identifies effortlessly with the world of the colonizer. Ghosh here gives in to the desire to yield to the world and address it without a consciousness of the burden of the past hundred years.

The freedom to express and indicate that fiction affords, makes it the first choice as genre by any post colonial writer. A writer of histories, Ghosh finds addresses for his protagonists lost in history, through the metier of fiction. Rukmini Bhaya Nair defends the use of fiction for depicting history:

“By dwelling on small details and bestowing on ordinary lives, an attention that the historian’s stricter annals cannot afford, a writer creates an interior history.”

Fiction as a genre essentially involves a plot and a story, which makes history more comprehensible. The genre of novel is especially suited to bring substance to the empty frames of colonial subjects. Rukmini Bhaya Nair comments on the proliferation of characters in *The Glass Palace*:

“That is why I cannot think of a clutch of sentences which better describe this massive 547-page book than these: ‘He has a small photo studio. Does wedding – pictures, group photographs - that sort of thing’” (TGP,p.502).

Ghosh’s subject of concern in this novel is Burma, but we can easily imagine or rather see him portraying refugees from any nation or culture in the same manner. All his works of fiction especially *The Shadow Lines* and *In an Antique Land* bear testimony to this. Ghosh’s melding of fiction with other genres like travelogue, anthropological research thesis and the historians’
books, is a prominent characteristic of the postcolonial novel today. Post-colonial works especially those of Amitav Ghosh are marked by a mobility, an ability to shift perspective and move between genres and cultures crossing over boundaries. Rukmini Bhaya Nair goes to the extent of making it the reason of their feeling at home in the world:

“For the only way to make one’s presence felt on a world stage, be visible and at home in the world, ironically, is to hark back, preferably in English, to a forgotten history in which the colonizer participated as vigorously as the colonized.”9

Ghosh’s main protagonist in *The Glass Palace* is suffering from the same dilemma. He is a boundary crosser who goes beyond well defined lines of nations and family history to find a home for himself in an alien land. He confesses to Dolly:

“My father was from Chittagong and he ended up in Arakan; I ended up in Rangoon; you went from Mandalay to Ratnagiri and now you’re here too. There are people who have the luck to end their lives where they began them. But this is not something that is owed to us”(TGP,p.310).

The post colonial dilemma of exile is evident when the king ponders over his fate on his way to exile in India:

“The king raised his eyes and spotted several Indian faces along the waterfront. What vast, what incomprehensible power to move people in such numbers from one place to another: emperors, kings, farmers, dockworkers, soldiers, coolies, policemen. Why? Why this furious movement – people taken from one
place to another to pull rickshaws, to sit behind in exile?” (TGP, p.50)

This displacement and movement on an epic scale leads us to another major concern of Ghosh in most of his fictional and even non-fictional works, which is the blurring and a subsequent obliteration of borders whether geographical, cultural, racial or even psychological. In an interview with John Hawley, Ghosh comments:

“What interested me first about borders was their arbitrariness their constructedness – the ways in which they are ‘naturalised’ by modern political myth making. I think this interest arose because of some kind of inborn distrust of anything that appears to be given or taken for granted. This is why I distrust also the lines that people draw between fiction and non fiction. I think these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded.”

Colonialism in itself inculcates movement and displacement: troops marching, administration changing, large scale transfer of masses and redefining of political boundaries. Any attempt at depiction of colonialism involves a delineation of what Rukmini Bhaya Nair terms as the exit-entia dilemma – where the turmoiled individual is partitioned not just physically but psychologically as well.

Rajkumar manifests these transitions across frontiers in his life having been left homeless and destitute in childhood. He is a survivor of the circumstances created by colonialism where a weaker individual would have succumbed. As has already been discussed Hardayal and other Indians in the British army, begin to
question borders that no one had dared question, which during Japanese invasion seem arbitrary and inconsequential.

The insignificance of these divisions is seen when the narrator informs us;

“...when Singapore fell, there were some fifty five thousand Indian troops on the island. Of these more than half joined the Indian National Army” (TGP, p.520).

The interior evolution of Dolly is quite significant in the novel. When her son Dinu was recovering in the hospital, Dolly became introspective and grieved with other mothers keening over their dead children.

“... She’d found herself listening to voices that were inaudible during the day: the murmurs of anxious relatives; distant screams of pain, women keening in bereavement. It was as though the walls turned porous in the stillness of the night, flooding her room with an unseen tide of defeat and suffering... She’d begun to cry – it was as though her voice had merged with that of the unknown woman: as though an invisible link had arisen between all of them – her, Dinu, the dead child, his mother” (TGP, p.210).

Her empathy dissolves all mental barriers and joins her with the other women in greed. John Hawley comments:

“The compassion breaks borders, real and imagined, and she is one with the living and the dead. The glass palace has been shattered.”\textsuperscript{11}

The genre of fiction being the most flexible and eloquent is perfectly suited for the expression of displacement and rootlessness. Amitav Ghosh himself opines:
“This then is the peculiar paradox of the novel, those of us who love novels often read them because of the eloquence with which they communicate a ‘sense of place’ that makes their fictional representation possible.”

Ghosh essentially a writer of histories chose the metier of fiction over history. He defends the use of fiction in an interview:

“I think fiction has always played that part. If you look at Tolstoy’s War and Peace… I think the difference between the history historians write and the history fiction writers write is that fiction writers write about the human history. It’s about finding the human predicament; it’s about finding what happens to individuals, characters. I mean that’s what fiction is… exploring both dimensions, whereas history, the kind of history, exploring causes, causality is of no interest to me.”

If, as implied by Ghosh, we accept the genre of fiction as a humane history, we would find in all of Ghosh’s work just such a humane historian whose sole idea is to present history as it really was, but mellowed down by feelings and emotions.

This humane historian of Ghosh’s defies all cultural and cartographical divisions and travels freely in space. As Brinda Bose very aptly comments:

“In Ghosh’s fiction, the diasporic entity continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by both time and space history and geography – and attempts to redefine the present through a nuanced understanding of the past.”

The notions of migrancy, hybridity and diaspora, are mingled in a cyclical pattern of history. This peculiar historical style was
introduced by Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* and with *The Glass Palace* he once again reverts to it. But this time it is on a larger canvas, the stories are intimate, personal and yet bear a larger significance. The fictional lives of Rajkumar and Dolly, Saya John, Ma Cho, Uma, Dinu, Neel and Manju, Arjun and Kishan Singh are merged with historical and political figures like the last of the Burmese royalty and Aung San Suu Kyi. Rajkumar’s grand daughter Jaya is an art historian who ties up the loose ends of the novel. Although the royal family provides the backdrop for the novel still it is a story of common man and even subalterns. The diasporic condition is portrayed by Ghosh through the central dilemma of the novel which is the conflict in loyalty that the Indian soldier in the British Indian Army suffers. It’s a very painful dilemma that pits unequal forces together and makes one choose. Ghosh in this manner brings out the internal despair of diaspora. Ghosh says to Dipesh Chakrabarty with reference to the latter’s provincializing Europe.

“I was much struck also by your reconfiguration of the role of the family in Indian fiction. I agree substantially with your observation that this should not be read as a ‘compensatory move’. But as a writer myself I would like to take this a step further. Two of my novels (*The Shadow Lines*, and my most recent *The Glass Palace*) are centered on families. I know that, for myself, this is the 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 (or other restrictively imagined collectivities). I think there is a long tradition of this, going back at least to Proust and its something that Jameson, Anderson (and
A shared historical predicament goes a long way to bridge the gap between people of diverse national and cultural backgrounds and *The Glass Palace* is a perfect embodiment of first such historical citation. To quote Rakhee Moral:

“This crisscross of history with narrative fuelled by the author’s own remembered images and fabulations of people trapped in the machinations of time serve to bridge the widening psychological gap between nations and geographies. Ghosh’s account of colonial conflict and his rendering of time past allow sufficient distance, as it were, in which to reconsider some of the issues that racked South Asian history more objectively.”

The enmeshed histories of Burma, Malaysia and India in the British regime without any allusion to national, political and geographical boundaries, offers a picture of colonial history as if it’s a multinational cultural festival. According to Ranajit Basu: “History is a brooding presence in Ghosh’s books, almost a living entity able to shape the lives of his characters.”

He has rendered history in fiction from a global perspective, at the same time rendering the voice of the lost subaltern, in depicting the colonization of India, Burma and Malaysia. In an interview with tehelka.com (7th August 2000) Ghosh speaks about his experience of writing *The Glass Palace*:

“Writing this book has completely transformed me as a person and as a novelist. Very few novelists get that experience. It is not just the vastness of the material or the hundreds of
different voices, or that, for me writing this book was unlike anything I, or other writers I know, had written before. It was what I saw and what I began to recognize while writing this... you know it changed my understanding of history.”

The novel is a unique amalgam of history, fiction and travelogue which blends personal and historical elements into a perfect literary accompaniment. Ghosh himself says. “It’s coming together of many themes of my earlier novels. Writing this novel was like fighting a war.” He further says that he attempts “to humanise history to make it a part of the existential grammar of the living.”

The middle part of the novel incorporates too much of history especially the parts where the British Indian army fighting against the Japanese in Malaysia during the Second World War is shown. The clash of loyalties is brought forward through Uma Dey’s nephew Arjun Roy, his batman Kishan Singh and, Hardayal Singh – his fellow officer in 1/1 Jat Light Infantry. Some students and congress leaders 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, p.288).

Like Beni Prasad Dey, Arjun Roy was also proud of the empire. He was proud to be associated with a regiment that had received medals such as the Victoria Cross from the Somme, two military crosses for putting down the Arab rebellion in Mesopotamia. The inclusion of these details shows Ghosh the historian researcher at work. Arjun writes to his twin sister Manju,
“...what makes me prouder still is the thought that Hardy and I are going to be the first Indian Officers in the 1/1 Jat: It seems like such a huge responsibility – as though we’re representing the whole of the country!” (TGP, p.262)

The subsequent resistance to imperialism can be seen as a separate theme or a part of the research work of Ghosh the historian. Ghosh confesses in *The Anglophone Empire* (2003):

“I am Indian and my history has been shaped as much by the institutions of this empire as a long tradition of struggle against them.”

Besides India, Ghosh also portrays the resistance to military dictatorial rule in the post-colonial Burma, through some student activities, arguments about the atrocities of dictators like Hitler and Mussolini in Dinu’s photo studio called ‘The Glass Palace’ in Rangoon. Apart from this the focus is on the experience of Indian Diaspora in South East Asia. But the blurring of lines is visible not just through colonial displacements but even the colonized–colonizer binary is under scanner. Rajkumar is a struggling victim of colonization from Bengal, but he becomes a colonizer in Burma by transporting indentured labourers from South India to other parts of the colonial world. He becomes a victimiser when he sexually exploits woman workers on his plantations. Rajkumar, Saya John and Matthew are engaged in the task of colonizing land and people for the sake of money. Rohini Mokashi Punekar comments:

“The line between the colonizers and colonized is blurred, even erased; colonization is run as a continuous ongoing process, and often reversible.”
Rajkumar’s personal history is entwined with the colonial history in order to destroy and create new histories in many South Asian cities. In the end he takes refuge in Calcutta away from Burma and not identifying with India. To quote Meenakshi Mukherjee: “Human lives spill over national boundaries, refusing to stay contained in neat compartments. A person is remembered not as Burmese, Indian, Chinese, Malaya or American.” But far from celebrating this multicultural identity, Ghosh expresses despair over the diasporic condition of the characters. Throughout the novel, the empire expands and then retreats, fortunes are won and lost. Namrata Mahanta opines, “the novel sees Amitav Ghosh’s recurrent concern with nationalism: boundaries and statehood transform into multi-levelled dilemmas.”

The novel is a cultural fair in that it delves deep into history and crosses all borders of nation, races, cultures in his portrayal of characters. He describes the aspirations, defeats and disappointments of 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 Bongo.

Meenakshi Mukherjee says, 

“The story spans more than a century in the history of the subcontinent, people get involved in unexpected relationships, across countries and cultures. 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.”
But though in exile the various characters and their families strewn around the world are; some naturally and some painstakingly brought together. Rakhee Moral writes, *The Glass Palace* is “...symbolic of exiles coming together, as it were of families meeting out of a shared compulsion across disputed and dispossessed territories.”

*The Glass Palace* based on diligent research work and an erudite creative mind behind it, comes out as a lovable piece of historical fiction. It naturally invites comparison with established historical romances, even though Ghosh’s thematic concerns are much wider in scope. Rukmini Bhaya Nair compares the novel to Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* and comments on the phrases where Ghosh describes Dolly’s and Aung San Suu Kyi’s beauty as being ‘beyond belief’, ‘beyond imagination’. According to her it is, “tackling history within the boundaries of contemporary fiction, that duty to create an imaginative grace out of the relatively recent memories of an embittered history of disgrace which I have suggested marks the teleology of the post-colonial novel.” But it would be unjust to make comparisons based on a bird’s eye view of the two works. While *Ivanhoe* was first a representation of Europe’s popular history; Ghosh according to Rukmini Bhaya Nair, painstakingly does research work himself and his historical research is combined with the spirit of postcolonialism and even his anthropological training.

“*The Glass Palace* is a formidably researched presentation of one of the less-known theatres of World War II, yet no less horrific than Dunkirk or Stalingrad. Ghosh confesses in his
author’s notes: ‘I read hundreds of books, memoirs, travelogues, gazetteers, articles and notebooks, published and unpublished; I travelled thousands of miles, visiting and revisiting, so far as possible, all the settings and locations that figure in the novel; and I sought out scores of people in India, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand’.”

Ghosh’s immense scholarship and talent combined with the maturity attained by contemporary novel result in a work rich in historical detail, and entertaining at the same time. Rukmini Bhaya Nair gives due credit to Ghosh’s scholarly and effortless approach: “Some post-colonial authors achieve this through exuberant wordplay or fantasy – one need hardly mention Marquez or Rushdie’s ‘magic’ approach to ‘real’ history. But Ghosh cannot be accused of stylistic excess or of pandering to a sheer love of language; he is one of the few authors I know who does not balk at using words like ‘governance’ in a novel!”

Ghosh is committed to researching and presenting stark faces of history and displacement therein... so he needs to balance the resultant starkness with some sublime aspects and these he seeks in the perfect human beauty of Dolly and Suu Kyi; the new and fresh beginnings after great upheavals like the resettlement of Burmese royal family in Ratnagiri, Saya John and Matthew’s creation of the beautiful ‘Morningside’ plantation in Malaysia and numerous coincidences which we come across during the course of this epic.

Coincidence is the *deus ex-machina* sometimes reverted to, by Ghosh the historical researcher, not just to tie loose ends together, but also to add a little pulchritude to an apparently drab historical research treatise. When Ghosh makes Neel, Rajkumar’s son meet
Manju, Uma’s niece, there is a dire need in the novel to bring together the vast networks of families strewn across the South Asian countries under scanner. So Neel and Manju meet by chance in a small studio, fall in love and marriage follows bringing the families of two best friends, Dolly and Uma together. Another coincidence comes up when Arjun’s unit is posted in Malaysia very close to Morningside plantation and he encounters not just Alison but even Dolly and Rajkumar’s younger son Dinu. Their lives come together with Arjun and Alison’s brief affair in contrast to Dinu and Alison’s more lasting relationship. Subsequently, when after Arjun had joined the rebels of the Indian National Army and has been wandering in forests for days in a pathetically emaciated condition, he comes across Dinu who has been asked by the villagers to talk to Indian soldiers because of his Indian connections. Although the coincidences are too unexpected and voluntary, yet Ghosh’s dexterous approach to history and weaving an epic story into it, makes the reader forget his doubts or voluntarily make a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ for a wholesome, entertaining work. Rukmini Bhaya Nair comments on his use of coincidence:

“The Glass Palace is not just a thoroughly researched novel, it is a carefully plotted one. This means that Ghosh goes out of his way to tie up loose ends. Stylistically, he is always measured, correct, objective – in the manner of the historian but managerially he isn’t altogether able to resist the temptation to play God in the mode of the novelist.”

*The Glass Palace* can be listed among wonderful epic family sagas which bear the tag of post-colonial historical treatise
involving a lot of travel across boundaries, but which differs vastly from travelogues written by authors of other countries. The traveller here is one among the sufferers, belonging to the place, and empathetic with them. To quote Rukmini Bhaya Nair:

“Family sagas with a sweeping historical backdrop were always a failsafe item in the publishing world from *The Forsyte Saga* to *Gone With the Wind*. The only crucial change to have come about in the past decade or two is that ‘the Orient’ is now increasingly represented not so much by Paul Scott or a Pearl S. Buck as by best selling writers like Jung Chang or Vikram Seth speaking in their own voices...This is because travel writing is logically the province of the ‘outsider’ and there is thus a certain legitimacy that a writer can claim when he traipeles off to say, Ladakh or Somalia or Kandahar, and records his own misadventure there. In contrast, considerably less sympathy exists in today’s politically correct climate, for the fiction writer who ‘appropriates,’ the perspective of the ‘third worlder’.”

When we peruse Ghosh’s rich literary harvest we realize the various literary genres he melds to create a fictional work. *In An Antique Land* (part fiction, part autobiography, anthropological research work and sociological history of Egypt) and travelogues like *Dancing in Cambodia At Large in Burma* are perfect illustrations besides other significant works. This melding of genres for a work that defies nomenclature is another way of expressing his major concern which is the obliteration of all concrete and abstract divisions. Rukmini Bhaya Nair defends Ghosh’s defying classification: “...an Indian writer like Ghosh, who lives in ‘the West’ but writes about ‘elsewhere’ is almost forced today to occupy
an intergeneric cusp; between travel-writing, autobiography, informed journalism and fiction.”

Ghosh carries his love for forging connections a little too far when he brings together Uma – Rajkumar in a quite anaesthetic manner at the end of the novel. But despite these stray discordant incidents, the novel is a wholesome treat for those who seek scholarship as well as those who seek melodramatic family sagas. Despite the comprehensive themes, bulk of research matter and a proliferation of characters, the novel is quite well conceived and well plotted. Neatly divided into seven parts, each named after the place or event of highest significance, the novel renders order to a project of epic proportions. The parts or chapters are entitled as follows in sequence ‘Mandalay’, ‘Ratnagiri’, ‘The Money Tree’, ‘The Wedding’, ‘Morningside’, ‘The Front’ and ‘The Glass Palace’. The novel is well rounded with its beginning and end, both involving ‘the glass palace’ although of different implications. It begins with an allusion to the hall full of mirrors in the Royal Palace in Mandalay and culminates in a small photo-studio of the same name run by an aged Dinu, in Rangoon, where revolutionary ideas take birth everyday. To sum up with Rukmini Bhaya Nair’s remarks:

“Ghosh is a worthy writer not a scintillating one, and his *The Glass Palace* is important not because it opens new stylistic or thematic doors, but because it reopens old ones so effectively. Burma at the present time, is near inaccessible territory; yet Ghosh’s book manages to hold up before a global community of readers a historically authentic “golden” Burma as it was and could be again. At a time of millennial
doom, when we are having to radically reconfigure our dimly remembered pasts in order to understand their effects on our chaotically disturbed present, that is, the novel’s signal post-colonial virtue-elephants, teak, pagodas and all.”³²
NOTES AND REFERENCES


*All the subsequent references are from the same edition here after referred to with page numbers in parentheses within the chapter itself.

9. Rukmini Bhaya Nair, 165.


11. John C Hawley, 125.


27. Rukmini Bhaya Nair, 168.


29. Rukmini Bhaya Nair, 169.

30. Rukmini Bhaya Nair, 170

31. Rukmini Bhaya Nair, 171.

32. Rukmini Bhaya Nair, 174.