CHAPTER II

SOCIAL AND THEMATIC CONCERNS

Literature as a reflection of society mirrors the social life and the spirit of the age it represents. It also reflects the tendencies and concerns of the age. Social conventions, historical events, religious and political ideals make up a writer’s background and are reflected in the themes he chooses. The novels of Ghosh are marked by themes that go side by side with colonialism. “His work is characterised by a thematic concern with modernity, globalization and the violent production of the modern state” (Sanga78).

*The Glass Palace* is basically a novel about European greed and the horrors of colonialism and capital exploitation. The story begins with the termination of Konbaung Dynasty of Burma by the colonial power and presents the political and social turmoil in Burma, India and Malaya during a tumultuous century. As a novel with epic dimensions it simultaneously tells the story of the Indian National Army during the Second World War, the advent of modernity in Burma, the role of the rubber and teak trades in British colonialism and the plight of Indian migrant workers in Burma and Malaysia at a time of widespread displacement and general chaos.

The story opens in Mandalay in 1885. Rajkumar Raha, the protagonist of the novel landed up in Mandalay as an eleven year boy just as the British were taking over the country. He was from Chittagong but his father had moved to Akyab, a Burmese port. On a November morning, sailing up the Irrawaddy from the Bay of Bengal to Chittagong with his family, he was orphaned as all his family members succumbed to a mysterious fever. There was no one to take care of him in Chittagong and he started working as a serving boy in the sampan he was travelling. But the sampan in which he was working
had to be put into port for repairs and he found himself stranded. At this juncture he was
told to walk to the city, a couple of miles inland and he entered Mandalay, the capital
city of Burma and started working as an errand boy in the food stall run by Ma Cho, a
half-Indian and half-Chinese. It is through the eyes of this young boy, that the novelist
presents the splendour of pre-colonial Mandalay, the war between the Burmese and the
British, the onslaught of the royalty by the colonizers and their subsequent exile.

The reason behind the Burmese war was the British demanding hold on the teak
forests of Burma. Once the king was defeated, his palace was ransacked by the soldiers
and natives. During the looting of the palace, Rajkumar saw Dolly Sein, the most
beautiful and the youngest of the Queen’s maids, trying in vain to salvage the Queen’s
possessions. He was infatuated by her beauty and decided to marry her when he grew up.
The royal family accompanied by a few palace maids was exiled to Ratnagiri, an isolated
village situated south of Bombay in India where they had to live in squalid conditions till
their death. Beni Prasad Dey, the District Collector was given the responsibility of taking
care of the royal family in Ratnagiri. A lifelong friendship bloomed between Dolly and
Uma Dey the wife of the collector. Due to the continual arrogance of the queen, the hand
maidens left one by one except Dolly. The family of four princesses disintegrated step by
step.

In Mandalay, Ma Cho introduced Rajkumar to her lover Saya John Martins, a
Chinese contractor who ferried supplies and provisions to the remote camps in Burmese
tek forests. Saya John became a mentor to Rajkumar and in the teak camps of Burma he
learnt the nuances of trading in teak. Meanwhile Rajkumar made friends with Doh Say
from Huay Zedi, an elephant herder working in the teak forest. Determined to become
wealthy, he hatched a plan to make money by importing workers from India to the British
oilfields in Burma. With this money and a sum borrowed from Saya John, he bought a timber yard and also succeeded in getting a contract to supply timber for a railway company. After making a fortune, he went to India to seek Dolly with the help of Uma’s uncle, D.P. Roy who was a banker in Rangoon.

Uma acted as a mediator between Rajkumar and Dolly and helped Rajkumar to meet Dolly and marry her. After Dolly left Ratnagiri, Uma feeling lonely and bored with the monotonous bureaucratic life of her husband, decided to go back to her parents’ house in Bengal. Her husband was blamed by the Imperial authorities for the scandal of the princess with the coachman. In remorse he killed himself by adventuring in a boat in the rough sea. After her husband’s death, Uma returned to Calcutta and stayed in Lankasuka with her parents for a while. Then she decided to visit Rajkumar and Dolly in Rangoon and from there departed to Europe and America where she involved in active politics.

Rajkumar began his life as a family man and had two sons, Neel and Dinu. Saya John in partnership with Rajkumar bought land in Malaya. His son Mathew along with his American wife Elsa returned from America and started a rubber plantation, Morning Side in Malaya. In 1929, after a gap of several years, Uma decided to go home and settle down in Calcutta. On the way she visited her friends in Morning Side where she found that Rajkumar had an illegitimate son with a plantation worker. This revelation strained her relationship with Rajkumar. Then she came to Lankasuka, her ancestral home, followed the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi and joined his peaceful protest. She had two nieces Manju and Bela and a nephew Arjun, an Indian officer in the British army. Manju by chance met Neel Raha, Rajkumar’s son who had come to India to invest his money in films. Manju married Neel and accompanied him to Burma. They lived in Kemendine, the house of the Rahas in Rangoon and Manju gave birth to a baby girl Jaya.
The next setting is World War II and the invasion of Burma in 1942. Rajkumar faced decline in his business. In a bid to regain his losses, he disposed all his possessions and hoarded large quantities of teak. But as fate would have it, at the verge of a business deal the Japanese attacked Burma. In the commotion that followed the Japanese air raids of Rangoon, Neel was killed by elephant trampling in his own timber yard. Rajkumar was forced to flee the country with his wife, widowed daughter-in-law and his little granddaughter. Manju who became mentally deranged committed suicide on the way. After immense hardships they reached Bengal where they were mistaken to be destitutes.

By this time Morningside was also caught up in the war. Mathew and his wife Elsa died in a car accident and Saya John was attacked by Dimentia. Dinu went to Malaya to inquire about Saya John and Alison and stayed for a while at their estate in Sungai Patteni. Dinu fell in love with Alison and in fact wanted to marry her. Arjun’s regiment was stationed in Malaya at about the same time. Arjun visited Alison with his friends and enjoyed dining and dancing at her home. Alison was infatuated by him and the flamboyant character that he was. Arjun betrayed his friend Dinu and seduced Alison before going to the war. Dinu was ready to forgive and forget and promised to marry Alison. But the Japanese raided Malaya and in an attempt to flee to Singapore, Saya John and Alison were killed by the Japanese.

The Indian soldiers routed by the Japanese army in Singapore began to question their role in following the British. In the forest hide out where the soldiers lay after a Japanese attack, Hardayal confessed that he could no longer carry on with this life – “sitting on one side of a battle line, knowing that you had to fight a battle which is not yours, knowing that you are risking everything to defend a way of life that pushes you to the sidelines, holding a gun without knowing at whom the weapon is really aimed at”
(TGP 406). Many Indians deserted the British force to join the Indian National Army. They were joined by thousands of labourers of Indian origin from the plantations in Northern Malaya. Arjun too decided to deflect from the British army and ultimately died fighting in one of Indian National Army’s last engagements in Central Burma in the final days of the war.

On his return from Morningside after Alison’s death in June 1942, Dinu went to Kemendine and found his house gutted. Coming to know from his friends that his family had moved to Huay Zedi, he went there only to find his family gone and the village almost deserted. In 1946 Dinu moved with Doh Say to Loikaw. In 1948, when Burma gained her independence, Dolly decided to go to Rangoon with Rajkumar and stay there for a while. When she realized that Rajkumar was so attached to his grand daughter Jaya, she left alone for good to Burma. To her despair she found much of Rangoon in ruins and her own Kemendine house burnt to the ground. She met Dinu in Loikaw and spent days talking about the past, about Neel and Manju’s death, their journey across the mountains and so on. Then she left to Sagaing and joined as a nun in the Buddhist monastery.

Doh Say’s death in 1955 was a great blow to Dinu and he decided to move to Rangoon after his death. On arriving in Rangoon he met his old friend U Thiha Saw who was the editor of a leading Burmese newspaper. Dinu joined as a photographer at his newspaper and later with the help of his friend, started his own studio and named it The Glass Palace. Ma Thin Thin Aye, a distant relative of U Thiha Saw and a writer and a student in Rangoon University joined him as his assistant. A few months later he married her. In the coup that followed General Ne Win seized power and a new censorship regime developed. Dinu and his wife who actively involved themselves in the rebellion against the new regime were arrested and Ma Thin Thin Aye died of tuberculosis.
Working on a Ph.D thesis on the history of photography in India, Jaya came to know about her uncle Dinu who had a passion for photography. After much searching, she learnt through Ilango that he lived in Yangon in Myanmar. In 1996, Jaya managed to get a visa to Myanmar and met him in his studio ‘Glass Palace’ where students and artists came together every week and shared their ideas on politics, pictures, photography and contemporary art. On Jaya’s last day in Yangon, Dinu took her to a public meeting addressed by Aung San Suu Kyi in her house. The year marked the sixth of her house arrest but the military was not able to stop thousands of people gathering for her weekend meetings. The people both Burmese and the Indians had pinned their hope in her. Suu Kyi was recognised as a true leader for she did not allow politics to rule over her. Though politics had invaded and taken over everything in the society, viz., religion, art and family, she was of the firm belief that politics must be resisted just as misrule and tyranny are. This activist had exposed the government and the military and torn the mask from the Generals’ faces that “it is just a matter of time before they are made to answer for all that they have done” (TGP 543).

The novel takes its name from The Glass Palace Chronicles, a famed nineteenth century history written during the reign of King Bodawpaya, an ancestor of King Thebaw. It also refers to the vast hall in the royal residence in Mandalay. Rajkumar saw the fort of Mandalay from a distance and all that could be seen was a nine-roofed spire that ended in a glittering gilded umbrella- the great golden hiti of the Burmese kings. Curious to know more about the fort, he enquired Ma Cho about it. He learnt from her that it was a city in itself with roads, canals and gardens and it housed the officials, noblemen, the Royal family and their servants. The apartments of the Royal family had “hundreds of rooms with gilded pillars and polished floors and right at the centre was a
vast hall that was like a great shaft of light, with shining crystal walls and mirrored ceilings.” People called it the “Glass Palace” (TGP 7). Twenty years later Dolly did not remember much of Burma, but the Mandalay palace and the vast hall with its mirrored walls was one of her vivid memories. “There was a great hall called the Glass Palace. Everything there was crystal and gold. You could see yourself if you lay on the floor” (TGP 112).

It is in this Glass Palace that Rajkumar met Dolly as a young girl of nine. She was slender and long-limbed, fair complexioned with huge dark eyes and she seemed to be the most beautiful lady he had beheld, beautiful beyond imagination. “She was like the palace itself, a thing of glass, inside which you could see everything of which your imagination was capable. . . . I knew I was watching something I would never forget” (TGP 144). Hundred years later we see their son Dinu naming his studio, ‘The Glass Palace’ for he says it was a favorite phrase of his mother’s. As a young student writing her dissertation on The Glass Palace Chronicles Ma Thin Thin Aye, Dinu’s wife was stuck by the name of his studio and joined him as his assistant.

The Glass Palace presents a vivid picture of pre colonial, colonial and post colonial Burma. Pre-colonial Burma under monarchy was a thriving country with rich natural resources where “no one ever starved, everyone knew how to read and write and land was to be had for the asking” (TGP 50). On the way to India, King Thebaw watched Indian coolies working on the port in Rangoon. They were brought by the British to do menial jobs; to work in the docks and mills, to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines. The king with a sense of pride thinks, “Apparently they couldn’t find local people to do these jobs and why would the Burmese do that kind of job” (TGP 49).
The picture of Colonial Burma is one of callous exploitation of the natural resources—oil and timber. Through the exploitation of natural resources and workforce by the protagonist Rajkumar and his mentor Saya John, the dark and ruthless world of timber trade is laid bare. Presenting a detailed description of the felling and transport of mighty teak trees, the novel brings out the loneliness, sickness, depression and hardships of the men working in the teak camps. Though the working condition in the oil wells was dangerous and dreadful, Rajkumar absorbed in the capitalistic love for money became a steady supplier of labourers to the oil wells and teak camps of Burma. The ‘rags to riches’ story of Rajkumar reflects the real life stories of several Indians who made it big in colonial Burma. Post colonial Burma is presented as a poor country under military dictatorship with spies everywhere, where people do not have the liberty to express their views and where they live in constant fear.

The story of Rajkumar is all about human characteristics—ambition, craving, determination and perseverance. Rajkumar was orphaned at the tender age of eleven. When his mother the last survivor too died in the sampan, the crew members built a pyre for his mother’s cremation. Rajkumar’s hands began to shake when he put the fire in her mouth. But he was not afraid for “his was the sadness of regret - that they had left him so early without tasting the wealth or the rewards that he knew with utter certainty would one day be his” (TGP 14).

As an errand boy in Ma Cho’s tea stall, Rajkumar was curious to know about the Mandalay palace and about the girls who were working there. When he expressed his desire to see them Ma Cho rebuked him telling that if he tried to get in, his head would be cut off. That very night Rajkumar decided that no matter what Ma Cho said, he would find a way in. Saya John too observed that “there was something unusual about the boy- a
kind of watchful determination. His eyes were filled with worldliness, curiosity and hunger” (TGP 30).

Rajkumar entered Mandalay seeking a temporary job. He had assumed all along that he would join his shipmates once the sampan was fit for sailing. But the events that happened in Mandalay during his stay made him change his mind. Mathew’s statement about the invasion of the British being provoked by teak, lodged in his predatory mind. He knew for sure that there must be some hidden wealth in teak if the British had to go for war over it. Though he did not know what exactly those riches were, he was curious to find out for himself the hidden wealth in the trees. It is this determination and curiosity that made him the business magnate that he became later.

The novel also deals with uncertainty and futility of wars. It presents a poignant picture of the bombing of Rangoon and its aftermath. During the invasion of Burma in 1942, the Japanese targeted the city’s mills, warehouses, tanks and railway lines. When the first bombs fell Rajkumar heard a woman howling in pain. He saw the vendor’s cart toppled over; spattering her with boiling oil. “She was running down the road, shrieking, clawing at her clothes with both hands” (TGP 460). In the market place he noticed with nostalgia that his favourite tandoori chicken shop was completely burnt out. Many lay dead and dismembered limbs could be seen- there was a child’s arm and a leg. No one could help anyone. Rajkumar warded off the sight and walked on, only to see flames leaping from the well-stacked wood of his timber yard and the unrecognizable body of his son Neel, crushed by an immense weight. The bombs had claimed all that he had ever worked for, a life time’s accumulation of labor.

On Christmas Eve, the second day of bombing Manju’s child was woken up by the siren. The child’s cry was louder than the sirens, the bombs and the distant
explosions. There was nothing she could do; picking up the child was pointless as her breast had run dry. Unable to bear the child’s crying, Manju went to the garden and watched the night sky. Seeing the planes that had killed her husband and devastated her life high up in the sky, she wondered “what sort of creature could think of waging war upon her, her husband, her child . . . for what reason? Who were these people who took it upon themselves to remake the history of the world?” (TGP 466) She longed to know what this is for and what kind of person it could be who unleashed it. There were no answers that could restore order to her mind; all she could see was flames, explosions and noise.

Successive air raids paralyzed the city. As the Japanese advance accelerated, tens of thousands of Indians began to evacuate the country. It was stupefying to see thousands of refugees sitting crouched along the river bank waiting to move on towards the densely forested mountain ranges. Ahead there were no roads, only rivers of mud and behind the Japanese were advancing. The Indian exodus exposes human helplessness and inadequacy, for the sufferings that the refugees had to undergo was immense and unfathomable. Dolly had a blister in her foot that grew into a huge inflammation as wide as her feet and steadily ate through her skin and muscle. They met people whose feet had completely rotted away eaten by such inflammations. A boy had developed a sore in his scalp that was invaded by maggots: when it was treated with kerosene about three hundred and fifty maggots were taken out. The mud had a strange consistency that when someone stumbled, it would immobilize their legs and arms. Death seemed to be imminent as they moved on. A Nepali woman, who had fallen on her face down, lay dead held fast by the mud. The child tied to her back was also starved to death.
Vanity of riches is also brought out in a distressing manner. Rich merchants were willing to part with fistfuls of notes in exchange for a few packets of medicine. Money had no value and valuables were just an extra weight. A rich lady was ready to offer her silk saris worth hundreds of rupees in exchange for a handful of rice but they asked for wood instead of it. After a vain argument, she realized the triviality of her possession, rolled it into a ball and threw it into the fire. At the end it seemed that only strong willed, tenacious people who were greedy for life like Dolly and Rajkumar were able to survive the trek. Manju who had no reason to go on in life felt the water urging her to come and was thrilled to the water’s touch.

Shwe Dagon Pagoda is a recurrent symbol in the novel. After the suppression of the mutiny of 1857, the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar was banished to Rangoon where he lived in a small house near the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. Exiled to India after the British conquest of Burma, the barge that carried King Thebaw and the royal entourage sailed into the Rangoon River after five days on the Irawaddy. The king was elated to see the towering mass of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda shining in the light of the dawn. It was a sight that he had longed to see all his life for as a novice in the monastery in Mandalay, he had worked on the hti himself, helped in the gilding of the spire, layering sheets of gold leaf upon each other. When Rajkumar returned to Burma with his bride Dolly, he watched the golden finial of the Shwe Dagon in distance and was impatient to show her this view of Rangoon from the river, the whole of Rangoon waterfront.

Down with a polio attack, Dinu had to stay in the hospital for a month. From the hospital window Dolly was also happy to see the shining hti of the Shwe Dagon. Queen Supayalat returned to Burma after the king’s demise and died in 1925. She was buried near the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Rangoon. On her return from America Uma found
everything changed in Burma. Rangoon was transformed beyond recognition except the Shwe Pagoda which seemed to be proof against these changes. It looked exactly as Uma remembered, “its graceful, gilded hti rising above the city like a benediction” (TGP 241). But that very evening there was an earthquake and Uma was shocked to see the golden hti of the Shwe Dagon toppling over. With the tumbling of the golden hti, not just Rajkumar’s fortune but the whole country is brought down.

*Sea of Poppies* is a historical novel that opens in 1838, at the outset of the opium wars. The narrative is mainly dictated by two great events- the incidents leading to the first Opium War and the Golden Triangle Trade between India, China and Britain that led to the migration of peasants to the British plantations. With the opium trade as background, Ghosh has chronicled the ambitions and avarice of the Western world and the effect of their actions on ordinary people. The novel also brings to light the social scenario of nineteenth century India: the predicament of women in a male dominated society, the injustice meted out to the marginalized and the insult faced by the downtrodden.

Set in Eastern India, on the banks of Ganges and in Calcutta, the story begins with the arrival of a former slave ship Ibis at Ganga-Sagar Island, a few miles from Calcutta. Discontinued as a ‘black birder’ with the abolition of slave trade, the vessel was refitted to transport grimityas or indentured labourers from Calcutta to the sugar estates in the British colony of Mauritius. The novel unfolds with the events that bring together these ‘ship-siblings, jahaz bhais and jahaz bahens’ (SOP 356) with no difference of caste, colour or creed as they move towards a similar fate.
The story is divided into three parts- land, river and sea. The first part presents the circumstances that bring the characters to the ship. The people aboard were Deeti, an upper caste widow of an opium addict saved from self immolation on her husband’s funeral pyre; her savior Kalua, an outcast who signed up as a worker in Mauritius to escape from the anger of Deeti’s relatives; Mr. Chillingworth, the captain of the ship; Mr. Crowle the first mate; Ibis second mate Zachary Reid; Paulette, the orphaned daughter of a French botanist; Jodu the Muslim boatman and Paulette’s childhood friend; Bob Kissin, a clerk in Mr. Burnham’s firm; Serang Ali, a lascar who had been a pirate in the past; Neel, a bankrupt Raja who has been sentenced to a penal settlement in Mauritius on a case of forgery; the lascars and poor Indian peasants who had indentured themselves as coolies due to poverty. There were also a few women folk, Sarju, Heera, Munia, Ratna, Champa and Dookhanee.

In the second part, all these characters get into the ship by some stroke of destiny or other. In the third and last part they set sail to a new life that awaits them in Mauritius. Deeti the first character to be introduced is a young mother from a small village, fifty miles east of Benares, in the northern province of Bihar. Her husband Hukam Singh was working in the Ghazipur opium factory. Wounded in the leg, while serving as a sepoy in the British army, he started consuming opium to relieve him off the pain that was caused by the battle wounds but it ended up in an addiction to the drug. This addiction slowly killed him and Deeti was compelled by the social custom and her relatives to immolate herself in her husband’s funeral pyre, for a sati in the family would make them famous. She was saved by Kalua the ox-cart driver, an untouchable from the leather-worker’s caste who took her husband to the factory every day. They ran away from their village but to their horror they found that the fury of her relatives had not subsided. They were in
search of Deeti and Kalua who had brought disgrace to the family. The couple had no other option but to flee the country and they ended up in Ibis which was on its way to Mauritius.

The second mate on the Ibis Zachary Reid, a Mulatto American freedman was a twenty year old sturdy young man with lacquer-black hair and ivory skin. He boarded the ship as a carpenter, but as luck would have it most of the crew was lost by the time the ship reached India and out of necessity, he was promoted to second mate. Serang Ali, the head of the lascars was a person with a thin, long and narrow face and darting black eyes. He had a frightening appearance with two feathery strand of moustache drooping down to his chin. He was well versed in sea faring and it was with the assistance of Serang Ali that Zachary steered the ship when the captain was sick. The lascars were a group of sailors from East Africa, Arabia, Malaya, Bengal, Goa, Arakan and China who “had nothing in common except the Indian Ocean” (SOP 13). With the spreading out of the British Empire and the discovery of new trading routes these lascars were employed on British merchant ships. The serangs were responsible for the discipline of these sailors in the ship, and for communication with the Europeans in the ship.

Paulette, the daughter of Mr. Pierre Lambert, a French botanist was born in a boat as her mother went into the throes of a premature labour on the way to visit an English doctor. She was brought up by a Muslim wet nurse, the wife of the boat owner as her mother passed away at the time of her birth. Paulette grew with her son Jodu and was more Indian then French. After her father’s death, she was taken in by the opium merchant, Mr.Burnham to be domesticated in the European way. But her life with Burnhams became intolerable as Mr.Burnham in the name of religious instruction made her read harsh sermons and showed an unseemly enthusiasm for being beaten which
Paulette recognized as something other than a religious zest. With the help of Nob Kissin, she travelled in Ibis disguising herself as a coolie. After his mother’s death, Jodu signed as a lascar in the same ship to realize his lifetime ambition to find work aboard a ship.

Neel Rattan Halder, the wealthy rajah of the zemindary of Rashkali, found himself the victim of a conspiracy by Benjamin Burnham to rid him of his properties and brand him as a criminal. In the Alipore prison, he struck up a friendship with his fellow convict Lei Leong Fatt, a half-Chinese opium addict from Canton as they awaited transportation to Mauritius across the Black Waters. They joined the *Ibis* crew from which an unlikely dynasty was to be born, which would span continents, races and generations.

The first part exposes the economic and social exploitation of the rural folk, injustice meted out to the colonized and the plight of suppressed classes and castes in India. Deeti and Kalua are presented as victims of the prevalent social practices and beliefs. There was a belief that the stars under which they were born had a great influence on one’s life. Deeti’s fate was ruled by her star, Saturn or Shani which was believed to bring dissension and unhappiness. With this influence of Shani darkening her future, Deeti did not have high expectations about her married life and the prospect of marrying a disabled man did not bother her. But as she feared her marriage brought only unhappiness as her husband was not only invalid but also impotent. He was always in a “state of torpid, opium induced somnolence” (*SOP* 36) and showed no interest in her. Deeti was shocked to find that she had been impregnated in an opium induced state by her brother-in-law on her wedding night and this disgraceful act was done with the help of her mother-in-law. Family honor was considered more important than the honour due to a woman. In a state of trance, she even referred to Deeti as Draupadi, wife to five
brothers and said, “It’s a fortunate woman, who bears the children of brothers for each other” (*SOP* 39).

The status of women in the pre-independent Indian society is portrayed through the life of Deeti and that of the other women characters. Women in ancient India were held in high respect. During the Vedic period, they enjoyed equal status and rights with men. The practices of polygamy, purdha system, dowry and sati which came into being during the medieval period deteriorated the status of women in the society. Women were excluded from the formal education system. When Paulette tells the migrants that she had read from a book that there are no snakes in Mareech, Jhugroo satirically retorts, “How would a woman know what’s written in a book?” (*SOP* 390) Child marriage was the norm of the day. *Sea of Poppies* records that Neel was betrothed at the time of his birth and was married at the age of twelve.

Home was considered the right place for a woman but a man was free to live a life he wished for. The Raja had as many mistresses “as there were days in the week, so as to be able to spend each night in a different bed” (*SOP* 86). A girl child was considered to be a liability while a male child was an asset to the family. The girls’ parents were expected to offer money and gifts to the groom to get their daughters married off. Deeti’s father had to thatch the roof of her groom’s house as a part of her dowry. He did not begrudge the expense though he could ill afford it.

Marriage and motherhood, begetting sons in particular were considered to be the purpose of a woman. Deeti was impregnated by her brother-in-law on her wedding night as the task of the new bride was assumed to beget an heir for the family. The property of a man who does not have a male heir would automatically be inherited by his brother. As the mother of a girl child, Deeti had no chance of inheriting her husband’s land after his
death. She decided to sacrifice her body in the funeral pyre of her husband for fear of forceful accumulation of her property by her brother-in-law. Women were married to men, much older to them to beget a male heir. Such is the case with Taramony, Nob Kissin’s widowed aunt. Her husband had married her only six years before his death in a final attempt to beget an heir and “it was his wish that his young wife be sent to an ashram in the holy city of Brindavan” (SOP 161).

It was a patriarchal society in which women did not have an identity of their own. They were identified either with their father, husband or children. Deeti was recognized only as Kabutri-ki-ma. Heeru’s real name is not mentioned anywhere in the novel. She was called Heeru-ki-ma and when her son died; his name lived on in his mother. On the contrary women had a high standing in Burmese society. Addressing Uma as Madame Collector, Queen Supayalat tells her, “We have never been able to accustom ourselves to your way of naming women after their fathers and husbands. We do not do this in Burma. Perhaps you would not object to telling us your own given name” (TGP 108).

Exploitation of women was multifaceted. They were subjected to physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Not only was Deeti raped on her wedding night by her brother-in-law, but with her husband in his death bed, she was also subjected to sexual harassment by him. His advances were so aggressive that she feared, he might attack her, right on her husband’s bed. Malati, the wife of Neel was a passive sufferer who performed her duties as a wife and mother without any expectations. Her suffering was mental but as a typical Indian wife, she never complained or questioned her husband’s relationship with his mistress Elokeshi. Neel’s mother was also neglected by her husband and she lived a secluded life in a gloomy wing of the palace while he enjoyed with his mistresses, giving in to their demands which resulted in the mounting up of his debts.
Heeru was berated and beaten up by her husband. When she lost her only child she was persuaded by him to do a puja at the temple of Hariharnath during the mela, to beget a son. When she got lost he abandoned her and after a few months, she came to know that her husband had married again. Dookhanee an inmate of the ship signed as a labourer unable to endure the oppressions of her violently abusive mother-in-law. Munia was cheated by an agent from the opium factory and when he learnt that she had given birth to a baby, he set fire to her house that killed her father, mother and child.

Concerning the oppression imposed on women by both patriarchal system and imperial power, Spivak states, “Between patriarchy and imperialism . . . the figure of the woman disappears . . . into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development” (A Critique of Postcolonial Reason 304). Paulette who was under the custody of the Burnhams after her father’s demise was forced to sexual harassment by the respectable Mr. Burnham in the name of religious instruction. When Paulette told Zachary the way she was treated by Mr.Burnham, Zachary was reminded of his mother, the slave woman who was sexually exploited by his father, the white plantation owner. She had told him, how as a young girl of fourteen she had stood trembling at the entrance to his cabin in the woods that he kept for bedding his slaves. Her feet were unwilling to move when old Mr.Reid told her to quit her weeping and get over to the bed. “It had still twisted him in a knot to hear his mother speak of that first time in Mr.Reid’s cabin in the woods” (SOP 305).

Rajkumar fathered an illegitimate son Ilongo in the rubber plantations in Malacca. When Uma questioned Ilongo’s mother about her relationship with Rajkumar she confided that she was sent to him on the ship when she was coming to Malaya. “They
called me out of the hold and took me up to his cabin. There was nothing I could do” 
(TGP 236). Uma also came to know that for years whenever he was in Malaya he would send for her but when she disclosed to him that she was pregnant he abandoned her. At this Uma was furious and wanted to see Rajkumar punished but Illongo’s mother silenced her telling that it would not benefit anyone but only make things worse for everyone. These incidents not only depict the callous exploitation of women but also the ‘muteness’ of women in the society. Gayatri Spivak pointedly observes,

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. . . . Both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (The Post-Colonial Studies Reader 32)

The plight of an Indian widow was deplorable as the patriarchal ideology cherished the sentiment that women’s existence should lose “its rationale once the husband was dead” (Sakunthala Narasimhan 51). The Hindu widow had to immolate herself upon the pyre of her dead husband. Spivak uses this ‘psychobiography of widow immolation’ to track the double silencing of women. The ascension of a Hindu widow on the funeral pyre of her husband and her immolation upon it were termed as ‘women sacrifice’. She further points out that the rite was legitimized by the native statement that ‘the women wanted to die’ (33). Sea of Poppies presents a poignant picture of Deeti in a resplendent white sari being carried to her husband’s pyre to be burnt alive with him. “She was slumped over, barely upright: she would not have been able to stand on her own
feet, much less walk. . . . Half dragged and half carried, she was brought to the pyre and made to sit cross-legged on it, beside her husband’s corpse” (*SOP* 177). “The gravity of *sati* was that it was ideologically cathected as ‘reward’ just as the gravity of imperialism was that it was ideologically cathected as ‘social mission’” (Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 296).

Remarriage for widows of high castes was forbidden since it was supposed to defile the purity of their social status. Taramoni, a young widow had to spend her widowhood in loneliness and penance as per the wish of her husband. Uma’s father was an archaeologist and scholar who did not insist on the customary observances of widowhood but he was not so progressive to resist the strictures of his neighbors. As a young widow at home Uma’s life was deprived of all happiness. Her hair was shaved off and she was allowed to wear only white. She had to restrain from meat and fish. “She was twenty-eight and had a lifetime ahead of her” (*TGP* 184). Manju, as a young girl had watched the shaving of a widow’s head at a neighbor’s house in Calcutta. She tried to do the same as soon as she lost her husband Neel. The novelist portrays this act of Manju in a moving manner. She came upon a pair of scissors in her sewing box and tried it on her hair but it was useless on her strong, thick hair. She went to the kitchen and found a long straight-bladed knife and tried to cut her hair but it was no more use than the scissors. Looking for a better instrument she remembered the scythes that had been once used to cut grass. She raised the scythe and hacked at it blindly and saw a lock of hair falling down. She sawed at another handful and then another but she could not understand why it should hurt so much to cut one’s hair. Only when Raymond took off the scythe from her grasp and kicked it away did she realize that she had cut her scalp. The colour of
widowhood is white both in India and Burma. After the king’s death Queen Supayalat “wore anything but white, the Burmese colour of mourning” (*TGP* 213).

The novel also records the caste discrimination practiced in Indian society. The caste system was a brutal oppressive mechanism that branded an unfortunate section of the society as untouchables and thrust them to the periphery. Caste constituted the core of social life in India and dictated the occupation and the social interaction of a person. Thomas Keightley in his historical record of India points out that the code of Manu was the great authority for the political condition of ancient India. Manu’s writings contain laws, rules and codes of conduct to be applied by individuals, communities and nations.

Laws of Manu divided the people into varnas or castes- the Brahmins which proceeded from the mouth, the Kshatriyas that proceeded from the arm, the Vaisyas that proceeded from the thigh and the Sudras from the foot of Brahma. The Brahmins were “a people of philosophers, who were to be the instructors of the other classes in their public and private duties; the king was to have a Brahmin for his counsellor and justice was to be administered by Brahmins” (4). The Kshatriyas were the military caste, the administrators and royal dignity belonged to them. The Vaisyas were the farmers, herdsmen and traders. The Sudras were the bondsman and artisan. The colonial rulers quoted Manusmriti as the law book of Hindus as the caste system prescribed in it developed a society that was easy to subjugate and rule.

After the conquest of the Northern India by the Aryans, the aboriginal population was either driven to the south or enslaved. The enslaved were kept outside the village limits and they formed the outcaste class. They were also thrown out of the four varnas and were called Avarnas meaning casteless people. They were made to do menial jobs
and were degraded to the position of untouchables. Entry into the temples was forbidden to its members and any physical contact with a caste Hindu was severely punishable. Nicholas Dirks in his introduction to *Colonialism and culture* remarks, “Culture in India seems to have been principally defined by caste. Caste has always been seen as central in Indian history and as one of the major reasons why India has no history, no sense of history. Caste defines the core of Indian tradition, and caste is today—as it was throughout the colonial era—the major threat to Indian modernity” (8).

Making a comparison of slavery and untouchability in *Slaves and Untouchables* Ambedkar remarks that untouchability is an indirect form of slavery. The difference he points out is while slavery was never obligatory, untouchability is obligatory and in untouchability there is no escape but the law of slavery permitted emancipation. Moreover he says, a depreciation of a man’s freedom by an open and direct way makes him conscious of his enslavement. “But if a man is deprived of his liberty indirectly he has no consciousness of his enslavement. To tell an untouchable you are free, you are a citizen; you have all the rights of a citizen and to tighten the rope in such a way as to leave him no opportunity to realize the ideal is a cruel deception. It is enslavement without making the untouchable’s conscious of their enslavement” (Quoted Kamala Visweswaran 157).

Ambedkar is also of the view that as an economic system, untouchability permits exploitation without commitment. In slavery, the master had the responsibility for the maintenance of the slaves, but in the system of untouchability the master takes no responsibility for the maintenance of the servant. Further describing the caste system in India Ambedkar remarks:
In India castes are not merely non-social but anti-social. The Hindus will not allow the Untouchables to take water from a well. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables entry in schools. The Hindus will not allow the Untouchables to travel in buses. The Hindus will not allow the Untouchables to travel in the same railway compartment. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables to wear clean clothes. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables to wear jewelry. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables to put tiles on their houses. The Hindus will not tolerate Untouchables to own land. The Hindus will not allow Untouchables to keep cattle. The Hindus will not allow an Untouchable to sit when a Hindu is standing. (Quoted Kamala Visweswaran, 158)

The record of the afflictions and humiliations to which Kalua was subjected speaks of the pathos of an untouchable’s existence in pre-independent India. Kalua the ox-cart driver was of the leather-workers’ caste and so was considered an untouchable. Hukam Singh as a high-caste Rajput believed that the very sight of a person of low-caste would augur bad tidings. “Climbing on to the back of the cart, the former sepoy sat facing to the rear with his bundle balanced on his lap, to prevent its coming into direct contact with any of the driver’s belongings” (SOP 4). They travelled conversing amicably but were careful not to exchange glances.

For Neel’s mother, “the usages of her caste and class were not just a set of rules and observances but the very core of her being” (SOP 199). She regarded the sweepers and cleaners of the palace with such disgust that she stayed out of their sight. The very sight of their objects like jharus would haunt her for days. Neel, had always proposed that he did not believe in caste for he adhered to the principles of Buddha, Mahavira and the
like who battled against the boundaries of caste. But when he had to eat the food served to the convicts, ‘prepared by hands of unknown caste’ he was “assailed by a nausea so powerful that he could not bring his fingers to his mouth” (*SOP* 267). Amazed by the intensity of his body’s resistance, he realized that he had got used to the demands of a social existence that expected certain things from him as the Raja of Rashkali, a person of high caste.

The wretched living conditions of the out-castes and the sub human treatment they were subjected to are depicted through the life of Kalua. The untouchables were not allowed to have their dwelling in the precincts of the village. Kalua lived in the chamar-basti a group of huts occupied only by the chamars. It was a social taboo for the high-caste people to enter the hamlet occupied by these out-castes. His dwelling place had no door and it looked more like a cattle-pen than a hut. The door way was so dark and low that Kalua had to stoop low to make his way out. As if to confirm that he lived in a cattle-pen, his oxen also lived with him in the hut.

The sub-standard treatment meted to these under-privileged is recorded in the sexual humiliation of Kalua by the wealthy land lords of the village. As a child Kalua had such a craving for meat that his parents fed him with the meat of dead cows and oxen. He had a gigantic frame but was slow of mind that his brothers and relatives cheated him of the little that was his rightful due and evicted him from his family house. The scions from the landowning families of Ghazipur earned a huge profit by betting on wrestling matches which Kalua won for them.

His fame reached The Maharaja of Benares that he wanted to see the strong man of Ghazipur pitted against the champion of his court. In Benares, to satisfy their licentious desire, the thakurs invited some friends and took bets to find out a woman who would bed
this giant of man. A well known prostitute was hired and a select audience was invited to watch it. But when Kalua approached her with nothing but a langot, she screamed that he should be mated with a horse and not a woman. Kalua was so humiliated that he suffered a defeat at the court of the king.

The sport-loving land owners were so infuriated that they made him mate with a horse. The cry of poor Kalua amused them and when the mare defecated on his belly and thighs, it excited more laughter from them. Deeti, a victim of sexual violation was watching this from the shelter of the poppy fields and shuddered at this inhuman treatment. She wondered if such abuse could happen to a man also. “The native elitist groups- Maharajas, Rajas, Nawabs, Zamindars and the wealthy Indian business class joined hands with the Imperial power structure to create subalterns who would not speak” (Verma 26).

Disgraceful behaviour by a caste Hindu meant degradation to the position of an outcaste. When Neel’s forgery case was on trial, a petition was submitted on his behalf to mitigate his sentence as the penalty would cause himself, his wife and innocent child to lose caste and be rejected by their kinsmen. As the Raja of Rashkali Neel enjoyed the privileges of a caste Hindu but once he was convicted, he lost caste and was made to clean the cell that he shared with Ah Fatt. When he had to take hold of the jharu, “he could not prevail upon his hand to make contact: the risk involved seemed unimaginably great for he knew that he would cease to be the man he had been a short while before” (SOP 323). Crossing the sea also meant losing one’s caste. Seeing the grimityas marching towards the river, Deeti reflects on the implications of losing one’s caste. “She tried to imagine what it would be like to be in their place, to know that you were forever an outcaste” (SOP 72).
Inter-caste marriages and inter-religious marriages were considered as social taboos. Lascar Jodu a Muslim was beaten to the point of death when he was found with a Hindu girl. An outcaste marrying a woman of high caste was considered to be a serious crime than murder. Captain Chillingworth informed Zachary that Kalua had to be flogged the next day for murdering the silahdar and later the case would be heard by a judge in Port Louis. Zachary wondered why he had to be punished twice for the same offence. The captain replied that in the eyes of the subedar, murder was the least of his crimes and for the heinous crime he had committed he would be cut and fed to the dogs at home – “he’s a pariah who has run off with a woman of high caste” (*SOP* 481). Kalua was mercilessly flogged for his crime before he disappeared from the scene for ever.

Caste system was so deeply engraved in the consciousness of the people that Deeti was not able to reconcile with the idea that crossing the sea meant the loss of caste. She was filled with a sense of regret and shame for marrying Kalua, a person from a low caste: “If the Black Water could really down the past, then why should she, Deeti, still be hearing voices in the recesses of her head, condemning her for running away with Kalua? Why should she know that no matter how hard she tried, she would never be able to silence the whispers that told her she would suffer for what she had done - not just today or tomorrow, but for kalpas and yugas through lifetime after lifetime, into eternity?” (*SOP* 431)

As Uma tells Dinu India was driven with evils such as “caste, the mistreatment of women, ignorance and illiteracy” (*TGP* 294). On the other hand there were no such divisions in Burma and Malaysia where *The Glass Palace* is set. Plantation recruits in Malaya were not aware of this caste discrimination in their home country. Their knowledge of India came solely from stories told by their parents and they were fighting
for the freedom of a land they had never seen. Arjun was moved by their patriotic fervor and wondered if they knew of the hunger and poverty their parents and grandparents had left behind. “Did they know about the customs that would prevent them from drinking at high caste wells? None of that was real to them; they had never experienced it and could not imagine it” (TGP 522). Dolly who was disgusted with the caste discrimination in India told Uma, “you are all the same; all obsessed with castes and arranged marriages, in Burma when a woman likes a man she is free to do what she wants” (TGP 117).

While a section of populace was oppressed, landlords like Neel Rattan Halder enjoyed unimaginable sumptuousness that the upper class Brahmins assumed was their right by birth. The estate of Rashkali during the reign of the Halders reflects the zamindari system of the times. They were rich in land and property who built their fortunes by adapting themselves to their circumstances. “In the era of the Mughals, they had ingratiated themselves with the dynasty’s representatives; at the time of the East India Company’s arrival they had extended a wary welcome to the newcomers; when the British went to war against the Muslim rulers of Bengal, they had lent money to one side and sepoys to other to see which would prevail” (SOP 84). The old zamindar’s investment in Burnham’s business fetched him large amounts of money which he referred to as his tribute from the “Faghoor of Maha-Chin” the emperor of Great China. His partnership with Mr. Burnham encouraged his friends and creditors to beg for a share in the consignment. For this privilege they were prepared to pay the Halders a ten percent dasturi on the profits. “Little did they know the perils of the consignment trade and how the risks were borne by those who provided the capital” (SOP 85).

The concept of using money to earn more was outside the experience of the zamindars like Neel Rattan. They were adept in managing kings and courts, peasants and
dependents but not in silver. The coinage was entrusted with the agents and gomustas. Lost in luxury the old zamindar cared little for his zamindary. The Raja made handsome profits on his investments in Burnham’s business in land, houses, elephants, carriages and a splendid budgerow. His luxurious lifestyle depleted all the money he had earned by investing in Mr. Burnham’s business. As was the custom, the heir to the title was excluded from the financial dealings and Neel Rattan had not questioned his father about the running of the zamindary. After his father’s demise things began to change and when Neel was informed that the opium trade in China had been severely affected, he was startled to note that his debts to Burnham Bros. far exceeded the worth of the entire Zamindary. Later in life, he realized that the very system he was upholding had pushed him to the harsh realities of life. His status-conscious orientation and luxurious life style led to his downfall.

There was no discrimination of caste or class in Burma, the king was the supreme authority and his subjects were treated like slaves. The commoners had no access to the palace even the precincts. “Rajkumar was curious about the fort but he knew that for those such as him its precincts were forbidden ground” (TGP 6). When the king was defeated and the city conquered, people broke through a breached gateway and began to loot the palace. But when the queen appeared suddenly and threatened them such was their fear for the queen that they went down their knees to pay homage to the queen; “everyone who came into the room fell instantly to the floor to shiko to the queen” (TGP 143).

Young girls in the queen’s service were also subjected to various kinds of physical and mental persecution. These young orphan girls mostly in their teens were purchased by the queen’s agents from the villages in the northern frontiers. Though they
were from different religious and social backgrounds once they came to Mandalay, they
had no identity of their own. They were raised under the auspices of the palace retainers
under the queen’s personal supervision. They were made to shiko and stand on their
hands and knees while waiting on the queen. The queen had no kind words for them. One
day she woke up thirsty to find all her maids asleep beside her bed. Fuming with anger
she threw a lamp at the wall and slapped two of them. Once when they made sarcastic
comments within the queen’s hearing they were taken to a locked room. They were
beaten up and their hair was pulled.

Belief in visions, dreams, premonition, portents and signs is revealed through
many episodes in the novel. The death of the royal elephant soon after the dethroning of
the king is envisaged as a premonition. As soon as the royal entourage reached Madras,
there was news from Mandalay that the royal elephant had died. The elephant was white
and so greatly cherished by the people that it was suckled on breast milk. Though the
people knew that it would not long survive the fall of the dynasty no one expected it
would happen so soon. “It seemed like a portent” (TGP 51).

King Thebaw’s insatiable craving for pork is also predicted as an ill omen. The
exiled King developed an irresistible craving for pork that consignments of bacon and
ham were shipped to Ratnagiri from Bombay. Despite the doctor’s warnings, he was not
able to restrain his craving. He thought of his predecessor King Narathihapatti who
abandoned his capital to the armies of Kublai Khan. For this infamous act of his he was
given the shameful title, ‘The king who ran away from the Chinese’ and he was poisoned
to death by his own wife and son. This king too was a glutton for pork. The king tried his
best to battle his longing for pork for “A love of pork was not a good portent in a king”
(TGP 80).
Dolly foresees her union with Rajkumar in a dream. Dolly’s love for her coachman Mohanbhai could not materialize as the first princess was also in love with him. But Dolly could not forget him and every night she would dream of him. One night sleeping in the collector’s house, The Residency, she dreamt of her climbing down the mango tree that stood beside her room in Outram house. With her things slung over her back she went running to the gate house. The room was dark and she could not fathom who was lying there. He was woken up by her touch and looking at her he asked if they can go. When both of them were out in the moonlight she was shocked to see that it was not Mohanbhai but Rajkumar.

In another instance the king appeared in a dream and forewarned Dolly about the impending danger. While Rajkumar was on a visit to Huay Zedi with his family, Dinu had a bout of fever. Certain that he would recover quickly, Rajkumar and Dolly decided to remain there. That night in a dream Dolly heard someone speaking to her in a familiar voice. It was King Thebaw telling her something with great urgency. Though she could not tell the words apart, she understood clearly what he wanted to communicate. Alarmed she informed Rajkumar that Dinu must be taken to a hospital in Rangoon. They left the place while it was still dark and reached Rangoon late the next night. The doctors in the Rangoon hospital diagnosed it as polio and said if not for Dolly’s promptness they might have lost the child. Next morning the nurse came with the news that the king was dead and Dolly found from the nurse that he had died the same night he spoke to her in the dream.

Deeti in Sea of Poppies had a vision of a tall-masted ship at sail while splashing in the Ganges with her six year old daughter Kabutri. The image of the ship found a place in Deeti’s shrine as “she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny” (SOP 1).
But she could not understand why the apparition had visited upon her. Later when she learnt from Ramsaran that the grimityas would be transported in a ship, a *jahaz* with many masts and sails, she recalled the ship that she had seen in the vision. At last when Deeti saw Ibis with her double masts and bow spirit that was like the beak of a bird she realized that the image had been revealed to her because her new life was to begin in the belly of this great wooden creature.

The Rajas of Rashkali too put great trust in omens. Flying kites was a beloved sport for the Halder men folk who were very keen about the pattern of a kite’s flight and whether it matched the particular shade or mood of the wind. “In their vocabulary, a steady strong breeze was ‘neel’, blue, a violent breeze was purple, and a listless puff was yellow” (SOP40). Neel was an upholder of tradition and when he noted that the gust of wind that brought Ibis to Hooghly was suqlat, a shade of scarlet that was associated with sudden reversal of fortune, it seemed to him to be a sure indication of turn in his luck.

The novel also presents the superstitious beliefs and practices in the society. People were steeped in superstitious beliefs. Dolly was so superstitious that she did not disclose the news of her pregnancy even to her friend Uma. Deeti believed it bad luck to draw realistic pictures of people who were alive. The walls of her shrine had portraits of her siblings who had died in their childhood but her relatives who were alive were represented by diagrammatic images. Her beloved brother, Kesri Singh was depicted by few strokes that represented his rifle and moustache.

To leave the dishes unwashed overnight was believed to invite an invasion of ghosts and hungry pisaches and so Deeti went to fetch water from the river at night to clean the vessels. It was then she saw Kalua being humiliated by the zamidars. Deeti’s childhood home overlooked a confluence of two rivers, Ganga and Karamnasa meaning
destroyer of karma. It was believed by the village folk that the waters of Ganges was auspicious while the touch of the water of the ‘karma-negating tributary’ would erase a lifetime of merit and so women from the household preferred to go to the auspicious river to bathe or fetch water. Looking at the parched land around, Deeti felt that “Karamnasa’s influence has spilled over its banks, spreading its blight far beyond the land that drew upon its waters” (SOP 192).

Superstition had such a sway over the people that at times it had a rein over their lives. When Mr. Burnham approached the old Raja, to lease one of his properties as an office for his trading house, a white mouse had appeared under his chair. The old Raja took it to be a visitation of divine will as a mouse was associated with Ganesh, the god of opportunities and remover of obstacles. He not only allowed Mr. Burnham to defer the rent for a year but also became his partner by investing in his fledgling agency. “On the day of Neel’s first appearance in court, the monsoons came crashing down which was regarded as a good sign by all his well wishers” (SOP 216).

The sailors were also not free from such beliefs. As Ibis was set to sail, Zachary and Serang Ali were standing in the deck when suddenly the ship’s cat, raced along the deck’s rail as if she were fleeing from an unseen predator and jumped into a boat that was moored alongside the schooner. The lascars, migrants stared horror-struck at the vanished animal and even Zachary experienced a touch of dread as it was considered a bad sign for a cat to jump ship.

Certain things and food items were considered to be auspicious while unclean things were considered to be inauspicious. At the end of the trading season, when the ships returned from China, Mr. Burnham visited the Raskhali Rajbari with money, gold and auspicious gifts like saffron and areca nuts. As Neel was prepared to be taken to the
court, “he was made to eat a meal composed of various kinds of auspicious foods-vegetables and puris fried in the purest ghee and sweets” (SOP 218). The path in which he had to tread was cleared off impure objects as jharus and toilet buckets. Sweepers and porters of night soil who were considered to be carriers of ill-omen were ushered away. Parimal even made sure that the constables who accompanied Neel were Hindus of high caste.

Religious beliefs of the people are also brought forth. Nature was treated with respect and piety. Going down the river side to take a bath before performing the noon time pooja, Deeti and Kabutri “shouted an invocation to the river- Jai Ganga Mayya Ki” (SOP 7). Children were made to learn the mantras at an early age. Neel had learnt the words of Gayatri mantra almost as soon as he began to speak. Pujas and prayers were offered to get the favour of Gods. When Neel was arrested on a case of forgery, his wife spent the days in prayer and visited all the temples and holy men in town. As Neel was about to be taken to the court the purohits came with a gold-encrusted statue of Durga and a puja was performed for an hour. They also “smeared his brow with sandalwood paste and sprinkled him with holy water and sacred durba grass” (SOP 218). As the people in the migrants camp were getting ready to board the ship, Deeti looked at the temple at the edge of the camp and was lost in prayer for she believed “no good could come upon a journey embarked upon without a puja” (SOP 354).

Whatever be their religious inclinations, people believed in a supernatural power that ruled their destiny. As the schooner’s cables were loosened, Mamdoo-tindal closed his eyes and his lips began to murmur the ‘first words of the Fatiha’ for it was almost time for them to be pulling away. Jodu and Sunker too joined in. As the vessel began to move Neel could hear a voice somewhere in the dark uttering the first syllables of the
Gayatri Mantra. He found himself saying the words, “Om, bhur bhuwah swah, ta savitur varenyam . . . O giver of life, remover of pain and sorrow. . . .” (SOP 372). When the ship was set to sail, the migrants began to sing that God’s mercy was their only refuge as the raft was adrift in the current.

Astrologers were consulted on important matters. When Neel’s case was up for trial, the Raskhali estate’s astrologer determined that the date was extremely auspicious as all the stars were aligned in the Raja’s favour. When Neel was born, Rajkumar and Dolly called an astrologer to advise them on the child’s names. The custom among Indians in Burma was to have two names a Burmese and an Indian name. Neel’s Burmese name was Sein Win and his Indian name was decided to be Neeladhri. Dinu was named Tun Pe and Dinanath. With regard to names, the Burmese custom was to change the prefix as they grew older. For a woman it changed from Ma to Daw and for a man it changed from Maung to Ko and then U.

Concerning the theme, both the novels talk about life’s impermanence- the reality of power and powerlessness and the vanity of life and riches. Once the Burmese army was defeated by the British, the king was dethroned and they were informed that the royal family was to be transported from Mandalay the next day. The palace functionaries including the queen’s maids and servants were summoned and were informed that the royal family was being sent into exile. They were to go to India and the British Government wished to provide them with attendants and advisors and the matter was to be settled by asking for volunteers. The courtiers were trained in the service of their master and most of them never had a home other than the palace, nor did they know a world that was not centred on the royal residence. But their training bound them to the king only as long as he embodied Burma and now that he was no more their king there
were no volunteers to accompany him. His most trusted servants who once sought the king’s gaze as a mark of favour averted it now. “This is how power is eclipsed in a moment of vivid realism, between the waning of one fantasy of governance and its replacement by the next” (TGP 41). The king’s counsels and servants were reluctant to join the royal entourage as they were no more bound to the king, dethroned and exiled. No one except the girls who attended on the queen and princesses came up to accompany the royal family to India.

Just ten minutes was left and the king looked at his treasury and realized that he would have to provide for himself and his family in exile with the trinkets his ancestors had collected as a kind of amusement. Colonel Sladen assured him that everything would be transported safely but later he found that most of his valuables including his Ngamauk ring, set with the greatest, most valuable ruby ever mined in Burma had disappeared. Two bullock-carts, the commonest vehicles on Mandalay’s streets were waiting for them to take them to the river banks of Irawaddy. The royal procession was followed by eighteen brightly- dressed orphans, the queen’s attendants. They had nowhere else to go, no families, no other means of support and so had no other choice but to follow the king and the queen. The king was publicly demoted like an errant school child in front of his citizens, “this was, of all the affronts Thebaw could have imagined the most hurtful, the most egregious” (TGP 44).

The palace in Mandalay was situated in the centre of the city in a sprawling complex of pavilions, gardens and corridors. The complex was walled off from the surrounding streets by a stockade made of huge teak wood posts. The palace had a nine-roofed spire with a gilded hti, hundreds of rooms with polished marble floor and its walls and columns were tiled with mirrors. Stripped of his power, King Thebaw was made to
live in a two-storeyed bungalow, Outram House. Around the compound there was a settlement of shacks and shanties and the princesses’ playmates were from these shacks. In the afternoons when it was hot outside, they would sleep in the mud floor of these palm-thatched shanties. The visitors who called on the king were shocked by the smell of waste and excrement and by the covering of wood smoke that hung in the air. “They were unable to believe that the residence of Burma’s last king had become the nucleus of a shanty town” (TGP 88). Juxtaposing the splendor of Mandalay and the condition in Ratnagiri the novel brings to light the reality of power and powerlessness.

The same theme is depicted in *Sea of Poppies* through the life of Neel Rattan Halder. The Halders were among the wealthiest families in Bengal and their boat was one of the most luxurious, “splendid than any other craft sailing on the river” (SOP 85). As the Raja of Rashkali, Neel enjoyed both the luxurious and licentious pleasures of the world. Convicted in a forgery case, Neel was humiliated, beaten and mocked at by the jailers. He was stripped off his clothes and his naked body was exposed to the jailers’ scrutiny. He was given a dhoti which looked more like a jute sacking. It was just half the size of the six yard soft fabric he was used to and looked like a langot. It was also said of Neel “that he would choke on anything other than the most delicate food”, but in the jail he was fed with the “cheapest dal and coarsest rice” (SOP 326).

Moreover, the Halders were zealous in the observance of upper caste taboos. While sailing, the luxurious budgerow always towed a small boat that served both as the kitchen-tender and also the residence for the workers who were in attendance on the zemindar. Rashkali household also enforced strict rules in regard to what the Raja could eat and whom he could eat with. He was neither supposed to eat the food prepared by people of unknown caste nor could he dine with unclean people. Even the beef-eating
British were considered as unclean. But in Alipore jail Neel was put up with Ah Fatt, who looked more like an animal with matted hair and a body mired in mud, dirt and his own faces and vomit. He was also told that he had to travel with him in the ship to the prison across the Black Waters. “He is all you have, your caste, your family, your friend; neither brother nor wife nor son will ever be as close to you as he will. He is your fate” (*SOP* 316).

For a man of Neel’s delicacy, to live with a grown man dribbling helplessly was something beyond his forbearance. Closing his eyes, he took the jharu, an object of abhorrence for his former self and began to clean his cell-mate’s shit, scrubbing the walls and scouring the floors. Dragging his cell mate to the well, he sluiced water between the man’s legs and cleaned his sore skin with a pumice stone. Neel Rattan Halder was used to the warmth and affection lavished on him by his care givers but he had never in his lifetime thought of fostering another human being with such love and care. Neel’s life of pomp and splendour was reduced to nothing but in that process he brought back to existence, the opium wasted body and spirit of AhFatt.

This chapter has captured the manners of the people and the social conditions of the period presented. The detailed depiction of the traditions, customs, taboos and superstitions prevalent at that time helps us to know more about the social set-up of nineteenth century India and Burma. The thematic concerns of the novels: emigration, exile, rootlessness, futility of wars, cultural displacement and impermanence of life are also brought forth. Next chapter presents the interweaving of history and imagination in the novels selected.