

---

## DIASPORIC CRISIS IN AMITAVGHOSH'S THE GLASS PALACE

---

**Amal Suresh,**

Diasporic Crisis in Amitavghosh's The Glass Palace  
Edathara Puthen Veedu, Edayaranmula po, India

---



**Abstract:**

Amitav Ghosh is one of the widely known and respected Indian writers today. Apart from realistic fiction, he has also written travelogues, political essays, and science fiction. In his writing, Ghosh demonstrates the mixture and interstitial nature of cultures through his language. The second section is entitled "Ratnagiri", in which the calamitous effects of imperialism are shown. With the removal of King Thebaw, monarchy came to an abrupt end, and Burma became a part of the British Empire in India. Bound together in colonial subjugation the two countries and their peoples could never come together. And indeed, we can see within the parameters of the novel one of the most thoroughly researched fictional publications which have come out of the new global voice of the Indian diaspora. Whether we call it the post Rushdie effect or not, it is clear that since the early 1990s a combination of factors due to the facilities of international publication, an increasingly prolific Indian middle-class readership, both in India and among the migrant diasporas in the West, has helped uncover a host of new global Indian and among the migrant diasporas in the west, have helped uncover a host of new global Indian Fiction writers of the ilk of Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and others. As a trained anthropologist, Amitav Ghosh has perpetually been preoccupied with the movement of people and with the movement of people and with the story of the subaltern (Gandhi 1998). In the novel under study here- *The Glass Palace*- the full extent of the exploration of multiplicity and change in the destinies of individuals transcends the demarcation or boundaries of the nation as Ghosh weaves a family narrative which goes beyond nations and continents and which in its very power comes to stand for the dramatic forces shaping the nation's history. Amitav Ghosh shows a class of people having "black skin white masks"- that enabled the Empire to exploit countries like India and Burma. The postcolonial minds later realized this and have always tried to break the curse. Massing G Kadam in his essay, "Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* – A Postcolonial Novel in English as 'third world Novel'".

Keywords: travelogues, political essays, and science fiction, Indian diaspora, A Postcolonial Novel,.etc

Amitav Ghosh is one of the widely known and respected Indian writers today. Apart from realistic fiction, he has also written travelogues, political essays, and science fiction. In his writing, Ghosh demonstrates the mixture and interstitial nature of cultures through his language. *The Glass Palace* is a narrative of brilliant imperial illusions. Even in the moments of total collapse and utter surrender, it continues to haunt as a living presence. *The Glass Palace* much after the fall of the palace at Mandalay is a grim reminder of its presence in the psyche of the post-colonial subject. As a monument of oriental wealth, it ironically enough continues to attract even those who were exploited by its royal occupants. If in the pre-colonial period palaces symbolized autocracy and authority, in the colonial period the rubber and the tea estates represent sites of exploitation. Morningside Rubber Estate of Saya John with Rajkumar as a loyal partner could be seen as another imperial creation which too is eventually shattered by the bombs of Japanese forces.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* is concerned with the impact of the colonial encounter on the political, social, and cultural lives of now independent countries, like India, Bangladesh, and Burma. The narrative in this novel is extended up to three generations. Many stories have been woven together. There are many characters, with sagas of families, their lives and connections with, along with their family. Ghosh, a great humanist, raises his powerful voice against oppression and tyranny through this novel. He is against the domination of man by a man at all levels – political, military, and economic. *The Glass Palace* exposes how imperialism has done immense harm to the conquered nations. *The Glass Palace* is divided into seven parts and each section highlights the various important aspects of the novel. The novel opens with the Anglo- Burmese war of 1885. Two senior ministers of Burma, KinwunMingyiand Taingda, are very eager to keep the Royal family under guard because they expect rich rewards from the English for handling over the royal couple, King Thebawand QueenSupayalat, along with their family. This part is called "Mandalay". This section depicts how the British occupied Burma. As the royal family prepares to surrender, the looters – the Burmese public who had earlier stood far aloof in fear and awe- now quickly move into scavenging what they can find in the palace. Similarly, the British soldiers in charge of shifting the king's precious jewels and ornaments from the palace to the ship that is waiting to take the royal family into exile also pilfer the precious articles. Ghosh here strips veils off human nature to reveal the crude and brutal greed that drives people at various levels.

The second section is entitled "Ratnagiri", in which the calamitous effects of imperialism are shown. With the removal of King Thebaw, monarchy came to an abrupt end, and Burma became a part of the British Empire in India. Bound together in colonial subjugation the two countries and their peoples could never come together. The third section, "The Money Tree," shows how Rajkumar, an orphan, prospers through timber business. Rajkumar's son Neel marries Manju, and people like Arjun and Dinu show a fascination for the British. The fifth section "Morning Side" depicts the consequences of the second world war in Malaya. The

last section of the novel entitled "*The Glass Palace*", deals with the Indian National Movement at its peak and India's final achievement of independence. Three stories run concurrently in the novel. There are two stories of the first generation, that of Rajkumar and Dolly and of B.P. Dey and Uma. The story of the second generation revolves around Neel and Manju. The twists and turns in the lives of these characters are the main sources of interest in the novel. The address of the novel is evidently to certain specific historical circumstances- the colonial past – and it seeks to "interrogate our role" in looking at our colonial past. Thus it encompasses the colonial rule of nearly a whole century in Burma, Malay, and India, starting from the Anglo-Burmese War of 1885- in fact the "war" was no war at all as the Mandalay surrendered to the British almost without a fight- through the chaos of the two world wars right up to the age of e-mail and internet.

The present article attempts to bring about the diasporic predicaments as represented in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*. Etymologically the term 'Diaspora' coined from Greek verb 'Diaspeirein' that means 'dia'- Across- 'speirein' to sow to scatter. There are two words for diaspora: 'galut' meaning a state of more or less voluntary exile attendant on settlement outside the homeland, and 'golah' meaning the more or less violent expulsion from the homeland as a result of persecution or punishment. It was used by the ancient Greeks to refer to citizens of a dominant city-state who immigrated to a conquered land with the purpose of colonization, to assimilate the territory into the empire. They are not expelled from Indian. They are not fleeing from natural catastrophe. They are not expelled by a tyrannical leader or compelled to leave by force of arms, mass riots or the threat of ethnic cleansing. They were not forced to leave their homeland as a result of persecution or religious, ethnic, racial, or political turbulence in the homeland. They form a group who crossed the borders of homeland out of their dream of better life. The Indian leaving abroad belong to this group. Thus, the original term Diaspora is being deconstructed, pulling from it the elements of persecution complex, guilt and trauma and imparting a new name, the new Diaspora.

This article focuses on the fictional representation in Amitav Ghosh's novel. *The Glass Palace* is one of those rare texts which explore the interconnections between these two historic- cultural narratives.

In the fields of literature, sociology, and politics, this diaspora has become increasingly visible, especially in the wake of India's new strategic engagements with its diaspora through the Annual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas conference instituted since 2003, which has come out of the descendants of this indentured diaspora, grappling with issues of multiculturalism, hybridity and social identity within social frames which problematize these internet reconstructions of collective Indian identity is well known.

And indeed, we can see within the parameters of the novel one of the most thoroughly researched fictional publications which have come out of the new global voice of the Indian diaspora. Whether we call it the post Rushdie effect or not, it is clear that since the early 1990s a combination of factors due to the facilities of international publication, an

increasingly prolific Indian middle-class readership, both in India and among the migrant diasporas in the West, has helped uncover a host of new global Indian and among the migrant diasporas in the west, have helped uncover a host of new global Indian Fiction writers of the ilk of Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and others.

This diaspora is common to as the 'blue collar diaspora', which migrated for purposes of education and work in the middle of the late twentieth century. Side by side with this more visible and recognized group of diasporic writers exists another category of lesser-known writers of the Indian diaspora, namely those writers who emanate from the nineteenth-century indentured diaspora, the children or grandchildren of the impoverished who migrated from the Gangetic plains of North-eastern India to go and work on the sugar plantations of the British Empire

As a trained anthropologist, Amitav Ghosh has perpetually been preoccupied with the movement of people and with the movement of people and with the story of the subaltern (Gandhi 1998). In the novel under study here- *The Glass Palace*- the full extent of the exploration of multiplicity and change in the destinies of individuals transcends the demarcation or boundaries of the nation as Ghosh weaves a family narrative which goes beyond nations and continents and which in its very power comes to stand for the dramatic forces shaping the nation's history. This narrative refuses the piecemeal representation of colonial conflicts. It plays on multiplicity to showcase the complex international networks which helped changed the destiny not only of the country, nor of a continent, but of the world.

*The Glass Palace* has a complex narrative spanning nearly a century. It starts with the deposition, dethroning of king Thebaw of Burma who lived between 1885 and 1916 and ends with the historical events of the constitution of the Indian National Army by Subash Chandra Bose. It is a novel grounded in the real historical events chronicling the conquest of Burma by the British, the agitation and activism leading up to the struggle for Indian Independence, and the formation of a military junta in Burma. It ends with an elegy to the revolutionary potential of Aung Sansuu KYI'S POLITICAL Message.

In an appendix to the novel, Ghosh says that there are few real figures from history in the novel, "I can say without reservation that except for king Thebaw, Queen Supalayay, and their daughters, none of the principal characters bear any resemblance to real people, living or deceased" (471). For the most part real historical figures are juxtaposed and sometimes subordinated to the fictional characters in Ghosh's vast and ambitious narrative. One such instance is the figure of Madame Bhikajee Cama, who was a renewed prominent nationalist activist. Through her metonymic presence, the reality of the independence struggle enters the pages of narrative.

The great dates of the history of Indian independence are coeval with the struggle for independence by the other British Colonies like Trinidad (1962), Guyana (1966) Mauritius (1968) Malaysia (1957) and Burma (1948). However, very little scholarly criticism deals with the fiction from spaces of production; even less do writers of the NRI diaspora acknowledge the presence of that other diasporic subject within the framework of their fiction. It is in this

that Amitav Ghosh's work breaks with the NRI tradition and mixes two overarching diasporic narratives. On the one hand, through the figure of Uma Dey, the narrative of *The Glass Palace* deals with the awakening of conscience which leads to the freedom struggle. This coexists side by side with the story of Raj Kumar, the poor yard boy from Chittagong who by a series of extraordinary maneuvers ends up as one of the most prosperous Indian businessmen in mid-twentieth – century Rangoon. Raj Kumar is a representative of the old labor diaspora, reconnecting to India through exile and return. He is historically at the opposite social scale of Uma Dey within the Indian nation.

The widening awareness of this personal family history in both the army background and the Indo-Burmese origins of his twice-displaced parents (a note in *The Glass Palace* says that Ghosh was born in Calcutta, from Burmese parents, and in the essay "At large in Burma "he repeatedly refers to the family connections in Burma) ramifies to a desire to understand the historical and social forces shaping between India and South East Asia. History says that trade had long existed between these two regions of the world and the cultural imbrications of art forms, religious and linguistic usage already testify to hybridization of cultural forms. However, in the process of uncovering the history, Oral testimonies and narratives of the people there is another history, Oral testimonies and narratives of the people there is another objectification and oppression which emerges the history of the coolie lines and the massive displacement of Indian laborers from India to work on the rubber plantations in Malaya.

In *The Glass Palace* it is significant that the narrative of the coolie lines is introduced through the capitalistic ventures of a minority to Burmese society – the Christian Saya John and the erstwhile subaltern Raj Kumar who has become a new capitalist under the aegis of new opportunities for the Indo-Burmese. According to Gordon, from 1921 onward, rubber reigned supreme in the agricultural economy of Malaya. By 1921 plantation agriculture in Malaya was organized on the lines of a Western capitalist enterprise but it was an industry which depended extensively on immigrant labor from India, China, and Java. The industry was built along the lines of the indentured sugar diaspora. The harshness of the indentured sugar diaspora. The harshness of the Indentured labor system was twofold first, the worker is a poor migrant, had to borrow money to cover the journey, if not from the employer, from one associate with him. He was in debt- secondary were the severe conditions of the work contract itself, which bound the worker to remain on the plantation until the debt was paid. In the novel when the idea of rubber plantation is first introduced by Saya John is a realistic substitute for timber. The international scope of the plot reveals how Saya John's decisions have a domino effect in that it affects myriad things, finally making it possible for Mathew to make a fortune at a morning side estate. The passage below makes this apparent:

No more than anyone else in the world did either of them have any linking that the killing in Sarajevo would spark a world war. Nor did they know that rubber would be a vital strategic material in this conflict; that in Germany the discarding

of articles made of rubber would become an offense punishable by law; that submarines would be sent overseas to smuggle rubber that the commodity would come to be valued more than ever before, increasing their wealth beyond their most extravagant dreams (173)

Interesting, the complexity of Amitav Ghosh's treatment of the multiply layered narratives of the coolie experience encompasses the localized experience of the uprooting. This is when Rajkumar follows Baburao first to the village for recruiting a labor force. This segment allows the exploration of personal narratives of poverty, dispossession, and sorrow as well as the larger social and economic and political implications of the presence of this large labour force to a world being shaped by the other dual diaspora, the elite upper-middle-class educated Indian- Uma and her family as well as the interconnections with the new Indian capitalist of the region – Rajkumar. Uma is at first shattered and repelled by the near slave-like treatment inflicted upon the coolie by the Sirdar of Mathew when she first visits morning side Estate.

Mr. Trimble kept attentive watch as the conductors took attendance. His manner varies between that of a strict headmaster and a snappish sergeant. Occasionally He would dart into the ranks with his rattan cane tucked under his arm. " (200)

What Uma sees here is very close to official reports about the treatment of workers on plantation estates (Tinker). However, to her accusations, the well-meaning Mathew proposed the entrepreneurial argument about the need to control and regiment nature. He parallels the human being to the trees, which he says need to be kept from fighting back against the regimented system. His father, Rajkumar on the other hand despite the injuries of his impoverished childhood learns to enjoy the privileges of his status and maintains a year's long affair with the impoverished mother of Illongo.

Nonetheless, Uma's outraged reaction at the treatment of the coolies and Dolly's big-hearted understanding of Rajkumar's secret life, which leads here to secure Illongo's future (she asks Saya John to look after him), do not bring them any closer to the real experiences of the coolie lines. In a crucial twist to the narrative, it is the finally anguished Arjun who, in the isolation of his forest retreat with his disbanded soldiers, is brought to confront the emotional consequences of the agonized legacy of the coolie lines when he has to enroll soldiers from the cookie village. As the two experiences of the Indian population meet the elite and the subaltern, the realization of the unity and subsequent dispossession of the nation and the self-destructs Arjun.

In *The Glass Palace*, there is an attempt to encompass the meaning of this experience within the grand narrative of subject formation of the elite India migrant. It is a novel which shows great with the coolie's experience. Uma's earlier political outrage is presented from the

subjective position subaltern experience when Arjun engages Rajan in conversation about his motives, his idea of India and the experience of plantation life. It is here that the complex position of the writer vis-a`-vis this historical reality is made evident.

What was it to be a slave? When Arjun asked him the question, Rajan would always answer indirectly. He would begin to talk about the kind of work they have done on the plantation – every action constantly policed, watched, supervised; exactly so many ounces of fertilizer, pushed exactly so, in holes that were exactly so many inches wide. It was in that you were made into an animal, Rajan said- no  
 - For even animals had the autonomy of instincts. It was made into a machine: having your mind taken away and replaced by a clockwork mechanism. Anything was better than that (450).

There have been very few texts which have dealt with the experience of indenture in its human and affective dimensions. V.S Naipaul is the most well known in this category of writers. Naipaul has founded the fictional discourse of the diaspora. Some of the other recognized writers of the older diaspora have come from Fiji- Subramanian, Raymond Pillai, Sudesh Mishra, and from Malaysia K.S Maniam and Abhimanyu Unnuth and Deepchand Beeharry from Mauritius.

The old story of Indenture is hard to reproduce for many reasons – the first being its remoteness in time and the paucity of evidence apart from the bare facts of official documents, as mentioned earlier. However, it is also an experience of dispossession which is painful and prospectively derogatory in a popular sense because of the association with poverty and peripheral lives. By its very nature, it problematizes the nature of representation and the subject position within the discourse of narrative by offering the decentred, objective gaze of otherness through which to assess this historical experience. However, in *The Glass Palace*, the author circumvents this problematic decentring by juxtaposing the self-contained nature of the Old diaspora narrative, with its problematic ontology of beginnings, in parallel with other narratives, namely that of the more recent diasporic experience.

The admirable nature of Ghosh's text is that the diaspora not only connect but there is an honest attempt to understand the human implications of this coolie experience to those who live it. The complex relationship to India which Naipaul describes as great India symbolized by Gandhi and Nehru in his Nobel acceptance speech and Vijay Mushra (1978) as mythic fabulation, that is an India made of half shaped dreams of an E1 Dorado of the past, the golden land of plenty and fulfilment, the land of beginning which sanctifies the presence of the displaced, dispossessed subaltern indentured, this relationship is here presented in the reported words of Ranjan as Arjun speaks to him about India in the Jungles of Malaya:

And India- what was India to them? This land whose freedom they were fighting for, this land they had never seen but for which they willing to die? Did they Know of the poverty, of the hunger their parents and grandparents had left

behind ...?

redemption- a metaphor for freedom in the same way that slavery was a metaphor for the plantation (450).

In the great humanity of his narrative, Ghosh is one of the few prominent, internationally recognized Indian writers who challenge the division between Old and New diaspora in fiction. With his latest novel, *Sea of Poppies* and its promised trilogy it seems that that the commitment and presence of vision which informs both his research and his writing is about to give us the Grand Narrative of the Indian Diaspora.

He believes that, by becoming like the English, he is making himself a more ideal specimen of a man. In *The Glass Palace*, Rajkumar's journey in search of Dolly becomes a metaphor in his search for himself and his identity. In this novel, several layers of displacement are very much discernable. Here the British occupied Myanmar and sent the king of the land to exile in India and they suffer a lot for their dislocated position.

Tracing Indian lives in Burma, Amitav Ghosh's novel recalls Burma as apart of British India. Ghosh, who is from India, attempts to bring the suppressed history of the subaltern in this novel. *The Glass Palace* is therefore condemned to record in exit entail dilemma. Where in the subject is inevitably partitioned, a confused refugee never quite focus nor contained within the frame? That these soldiers as turn out more often than to be Indian Sepoys and sometimes even, Indian officers- compound the puzzling effect.

Amitav Ghosh shows a class of people having "black skin white masks"- that enabled the Empire to exploit countries like India and Burma. The postcolonial minds later realized this and have always tried to break the curse. Massing G Kadam in his essay, "Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* – A Postcolonial Novel in English as 'third world Novel'. *The Glass Palace* is engaged with this post-colonial consciousness. Ghosh is the spokesperson of the nation that was once dominated by the Empire of Britain. *The Glass Palace* treats various that affect a postcolonial nation, spanning three generations over a period of two centuries. The tyrannical rule by the Empire has been severely criticized in the novel. Ghosh is a writer who has always raised his powerful voice against all kinds of despotism and subjugation. The disastrous effects of Imperialism are visibly brought before the readers. *The Glass Palace* analyses and narrates the entangled histories of Burma, Malaysia, and India during the British regime.

#### References:

- "Amitav Ghosh and Dipesh Chakraborty Correspondence". [www.amitavghosh.com](http://www.amitavghosh.com). 15 May 2000. Web.15 March 2017.
- Dhavan, R.K. *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001.Print.
- *Ghosh, Amitav. The Glass Palace. Noida: HarperCollins, 2000. Print.*

- Ghosh, Amitav. "The System of Nation-States Under Strain: Interview with Amitav Ghosh". By Sheela Reddy. Outlook, 19 Aug.2002. Print.
- Naipaul, V.S. The Mimic Men. New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.
- Narrative and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction. Ed. Sankaran, Chitra. New York: State University of New York Press, 2012. Print.