

The Glass Palace: Colonialism and Personal Grit

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ABSTRACT

The present paper sweeps historical chronicles that the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty in Burma and spans a century of profound socio-political transformation across Burma, Malaya, and India. It also touches some of the historical rooted events of Indian sepoys in colonialism and brutal greed of the people. Rajkumar Raha, the protagonist of the novel is Indian background alongwith generations of two families in Burmese, India and Malaysia. His three generations lives are reflecting his own, his children, and his grandchildren. The story starts with the British assaults of Burma in 1885 and captures on a journey through history until the Second World War, when democracy and peace and order were restored. The narrative explores how the relentless machinery of British colonialism reshapes Southeast Asia, while highlighting the personal grit and resilience of ordinary individuals caught in the gears of empire.

Keywords: History, British Assaults, Brutal Greed, Colonialism, Second World War, Indian Sepoys

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh, an eminent author was born in Kolkata, India in 1956 but currently lives in New York. He was also internationally bestselling author of many works of fiction and nonfiction, including the recipient of numerous awards and prizes. His previous novels are *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1990), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *Dancing in Cambodia*, *At Large in Burma* (1998), *Countdown* (1999), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Imam and the Indian* (2002), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *The Ibis Trilogy* *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015), *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), *Gun Island* (2019), *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), *Wild Fictions: Essays* (2021), *Jungle Nama* (2021) / *The Living Mountain* (2022), *Smoke and Ashes: Opium's Hidden Histories* (2024), and *Ghost Eye* (2026). In all his novels Ghosh's fiction is characterised by strong themes that may be somewhat identified with postcolonialism but could be labelled as historical novels. His topics are unique and personal; some of his appeal lies in his ability to weave "Indo-nostalgic" elements into more serious themes.

The *Glass Palace* story begins in November 1885 during the British invasion of Mandalay, Burma. It spans a century, following historical shifts through Second World War and up to the late 20th century. Rajkumar is the protagonist when he was an 11-year-old Indian orphan who witnesses the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty and later builds a fortune in the timber and oil trades. He falls in love with Dolly a young attendant to the exiled Burmese Queen Supayalat. King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat lived as state prisoners in Ratnagiri, a remote coastal town in British India, for over 30 years following their deposition in 1885. After leaving Mandalay, the royal family briefly stayed in Madras (now Chennai) before the British authorities moved them permanently to Ratnagiri. They initially lived at Outram House. Later, the government built a grand two-story brick and laterite mansion known locally as "Thibaw's Palace".

King Thibaw became reclusive and rarely left the estate, while police officers heavily micromanaged their daily lives and movement. However, Thibaw engaged with the local community by sponsoring festivals, mainly for Diwali. As well as, Queen Supayalat spent her time for writing long letters to the viceroy in Calcutta, demanding a higher allowance, the recovery of her stolen jewels, and permission to go home. The

couple lived with their daughters, including additional daughters born during their exile in India. King Thibaw died at the age of 57 on December 15, 1916, and was buried in Ratnagiri. Following Thibaw's death, an elderly Queen Supayalat and her daughters were finally permitted to leave India in 1919 and return to Rangoon (now Yangon), where she passed away in 1925.

History

The major real historical and narrative incidents involving British forces sail up the Irrawaddy River, capturing Mandalay and ending the Konbaung Dynasty. King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat are forced out of the glittering central hall of crystal and gold known as The Glass Palace. As the royal family is paraded away on a bullock cart into exile in Ratnagiri, India, common citizens and looters breach the palace walls for the first time. Amidst the chaos of the empty, ransacked palace, the young orphan Rajkumar catches a glimpse of the queen's attendant, Dolly, sparking a lifelong pursuit.

The book is set against major real-world events. These include the British invasion of Burma in 1885, the exile of King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat, the teak and rubber industries, and the Japanese invasion during Second World War. The main character Rajkumar—such as the orphan-turned as a timber-magnate and his family is entirely fictional. Alongwith protagonist, ordinary people's personal lives, relationships, and struggles are invented to show how experienced these massive historical shifts.

Another historical incident is the British imperial fleet crosses the border on November 14, 1885, using advanced artillery that overwhelms Burmese defenses. Later the military campaign lasts just fourteen days because the Burmese army cannot match modern British weapons. Afterthat British troops march into the royal fort and take complete control of the capital. At the same time, Armed soldiers make King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat leave their mirrored halls and crystal walls. Too pathetic incident in this story is that the royal family was forced into carriages and sent away into exile in India. For that reason, deep confusion takes over as British soldiers and local townspeople plunder the palace. People smash patterned marble floors to dig out hidden gemstones and hack at gold-plated offering boxes. Though Rajkumar, a young boy and also an orphan stranded by the fighting, sneaks inside during the pillage. He also spots Dolly, a young maid in the Queen's court, starting a lifelong romance. Through all these incidents Ghosh explicits struggles that have made Burma, India, and Malaya the places the scratches of history.

Amitav Ghosh preference for a plain ungimmicky prose, and also he follows the example of V. S. Naipaul, although his instinct for storytelling on a grand scale owes much more to Gabriel Garcia Marquez. He renders the polite imprisonment of the Burmese royal family in India and the lush, dangerous atmosphere of teak camps in the Burmese forest with fine detail—a perfect balance for the broad strokes of romance and serendipity that drive the story forward.

The book's memorial power is so strong that, near the end, when Rajkumar, an old man, reflects, "Ah, Burma—now Burma was a golden land..." (The Glass Palace, P.366) the reader catches himself nodding in recognition of what was lost. Burma and Malaya over a span of 115 years is the kind of "sweep of history". Rajkumar carries the memory of their brief meeting through the years to come, while he rises to fame and riches in the teak trade and Dolly travels into exile to India with King Thebaw, Burma's last king; Queen Supayalat; and their three daughters.

British Assaults

British assaults and military violence are not just historical background of the story; they serve as structural pivots that disrupt the characters' lives across generations in The Glass Palace. British Empire as a massive "apparatus of violence," these assaults take many forms—ranging from swift imperial invasions to psychological warfare and brutal Second World War battlefronts.

The novel opens with the Third Anglo-Burmese War, where the British military launches a swift, 14-day assault on Burma to gain control of the lucrative teak trade. British cannons thunder over Mandalay, and

British soldiers—largely consisting of colonized Indian sepoys—force the surrender of the Burmese army. The military forces their way into the sacred Glass Palace, desecrating it. They forcefully depose and exile King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat. This initial act of colonial violence triggers a wave of chaotic local looting, symbolizing the instant shattering of Burmese sovereignty.

Following the fall of Mandalay, the British military carries out a prolonged campaign to pacify the rest of Burma. To squash guerrilla resistance from local factions and armed remnants of the Burmese royal army, the British use scorched-earth tactics. Villages are razed, and communities are displaced. Ghosh highlights how the British weaponize the environment itself, effectively conquering the deep forests and forcing indigenous populations into economic submission.

The entry of Japan into Second World War brings the ultimate explosion of British military failure and retaliatory violence. As the Japanese blitz through Malaya and Burma, the British army is routed. In their desperate retreat, British forces launch artillery bombardments and airstrikes. The assault destroys cities and plantations alike. The "Scorched Earth" policy implemented by the retreating British military leaves infrastructure in ruins, killing countless civilians and forcing millions—including Rajkumar's family—into a perilous, deadly trek back toward India.

Brutal Greed

Several major brutal incidents highlight the devastating human and environmental toll of colonialism, war, and political oppression across Burma, India, and Malaya in the novel. Before the main events of the novel, Queen Supayalat ruthlessly orchestrates the mass murder of nearly 80 royal relatives. This bloody purge ensures that her husband, King Thebaw, can ascend the throne without facing internal rivalries or coup attempts from within the Konbaung dynasty.

Driven by corporate and colonial greed over the lucrative teak trade, the British military launches an invasion of Burma. The fall of Mandalay features the humiliating deposition and forced exile of the royal family to Ratnagiri, India. During the immediate power vacuum, a chaotic and violent sacking occurs as local commoners and colonial forces strip the majestic Glass Palace of its treasures.

The book exposes the sadistic exploitation of human labor and the ecosystem in Teak Forests and Rubber Plantations. Local workers and indentured laborers endure harsh, grueling conditions under colonial masters in Malayan rubber estates and Burmese timber yards. This corporate expansion is marked by structural cruelty, corporal punishment, and extensive, violent deforestation. The Japanese invasion replaces British imperialism with a considerably more brutal military occupation. The devastating bombing of Rangoon in late 1941 obliterates communities, instantly destroying the economic empire Rajkumar built and triggering widespread civilian casualties. The entry of Japanese forces, hundreds of thousands of Indian immigrants are forced to flee Burma. This harrowing 1,000-mile forced migration toward India through unforgiving, disease-ridden jungles results in mass starvation, abandonment, and thousands of deaths along the paths.

The violence extends into the late 20th century under Burma's repressive military junta. In the final sections of the book, Ma Thin Thin Aye (the assistant and wife of Rajkumar's son, Dinu) is shot and killed during a peaceful political protest against the totalitarian regime. Additionally, the psychological brutality of colonial warfare drives characters like Arjun, a disillusioned soldier in the British Indian Army, to commit suicide enlightens the Post-Colonial Dictatorship and Protest Killings.

Grit is also measured through emotional endurance. Figures like Dolly, a former maid of the Burmese royal court and Uma, a political activist showcase a quiet, profound inner strength. They resist colonial assimilation and fight to maintain their dignity, personal autonomy, and cultural heritage. Ultimately, The Glass Palace contrasts the macro-history of imperial dominance with the micro-history of human perseverance, illustrating that while colonialism can dismantle nations and redraw borders, it cannot completely crush the human spirit or the individual will to endure.

Personal grit and resilience act as the driving forces allowing characters to survive systemic displacement, the horrors of Second World War, and the collapse of empires. Against this backdrop of displacement and systemic oppression, Ghosh places Rajkumar as an orphaned, penniless Indian boy who arrives in Mandalay with nothing. Rather than standard heroic actions, their grit manifests as raw commercial drive, quiet endurance, and profound political transformation. His journey embodies the theme of personal grit. Through sheer determination, sharp instinct, and relentless hard work, Rajkumar rises from a market assistant to a wealthy timber merchant. His trajectory represents the ultimate self-made survival story in a rapidly changing world. As the characters navigate historical convulsions—including Second World War and the Japanese invasion of Burma—their survival relies entirely on personal resilience. Empires collapse, fortunes are erased overnight, and families are scattered, yet the central characters continually rebuild their lives from the ashes. His entire life is defined by raw, unyielding perseverance. He possesses nothing but a fierce work ethic, starting as an assistant at a humble food stall run by Ma Cho. Later though his hard work and driven by his ambition, he braves the dangerous, unpredictable depths of the Upper Burmese teak forests. Through sheer street smarts, calculated risk-taking, and tireless labor under the guidance of Saya John, he rises to become an affluent timber merchant. When Second World War destroys his hard-earned empire and kills his son Neel, Rajkumar's commercial power is stripped away. Yet, he shows grit in his final years by adapting to a life of poverty once again, choosing survival and family over despair.

Another character is Dolly Sein. Dolly's resilience is internal, emotional, and profoundly steady, offering a sharp contrast to Rajkumar's aggressive ambition. Uprooted from her homeland as a child handmaiden to the Burmese Royal Family, Dolly is exiled to Ratnagiri, India. She endures years of isolation and the stifling atmosphere of the exiled court without losing her dignity. Over the course of her marriage to Rajkumar, Dolly survives profound personal tragedies, including agonizing miscarriages and depression. As Rangoon collapses under the weight of the Japanese invasion during Second World War, Dolly demonstrates absolute personal autonomy and grit. She walks away from material wealth, chooses not to flee to India with Rajkumar, and joins a Buddhist nunnery, finding ultimate peace and self-possession on her own terms.

Ghosh made the character Uma Dey is the Grit of Intellectual and Political Metamorphosis. Uma's grit is defined by her evolution from a sheltered, submissive wife into an international political activist. Initially trapped in a stifling, traditional marriage to the strict British-aligned District Collector, Beni Prasad Dey, Uma quietly preserves her sense of self. Following her husband's tragic suicide, she refuses to fade into the background as a traditional widow. She travels the world, educates herself, and transforms into a zealous freedom fighter for the Indian independence movement. She braves police crackdowns, political exile, and surveillance, displaying remarkable ideological grit.

Dinu Raha's character moves around the Grit of Artistic and Silent Protest. Rajkumar and Dolly's surviving son, Dinu, displays a quiet, unshakeable resilience rooted in his convictions. Dinu survives a brutal childhood bout of polio that leaves him physically altered, yet he never lets it restrict his agency. Rather than chasing his father's commercial fortunes, Dinu uses photography as a quiet tool of counter-hegemonic resistance. Decades later, while the rest of the family scatters across the globe, Dinu exhibits immense grit by staying behind in war-torn, politically repressed Rangoon. He maintains his studio as a beacon of artistic truth, silently enduring the oppressive weight of the military dictatorship.

Uma's nephew Arjun Dey represents the painful grit required to break away from psychological brainwashing. He begins as a fiercely proud officer in the British Indian Army, thoroughly Anglicized and loyal to the Empire. When deployed to Malaya during Second World War, he faces a massive crisis of conscience as he realizes he is merely a mercenary fighting for India's oppressors. Arjun displays ultimate psychological grit by turning his back on his prestigious career, his colonial identity, and his former allies to join the Indian National Army (INA) to fight for true independence, even though it ultimately leads to his death.

Colonialism

Colonialism in the novel is not just a political backdrop; it is an omnipresent force that dismantles kingdoms, exploits natural resources, and fractures identities. British invasion of Mandalay in 1885 and the sudden exile of King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat are the looted Burmese monarchy symbolizing the shattering of an entire culture. Ghosh vividly details the commercialization of the region through the teak logging industry and rubber plantations. Human labor and nature are systematically commodified to feed the British imperial machine. The novel deeply examines the psychological toll of empire, particularly through Indian soldiers in the British army. They face a devastating moral crisis: acting as the enforcing muscle of a colonial power to oppress other Asian nations while remaining colonized subjects themselves in their own homeland.

Second World War

Second World War ensues as the ultimate cataclysm that dismantles the fortunes, families, and empires built over the course of *The Glass Palace*. The war is primarily viewed through the lens of the Pacific Theater—specifically the collapse of British Malaya and Burma under the onslaught of the Japanese military.

The outbreak of the war hits home when the Japanese military launches a swift, devastating invasion of Malaya, pushing toward the British stronghold of Singapore (1941–1942). Characters like Arjun and Hardy, serving as officers in the British Indian Army, are deployed to the front lines to stop the Japanese advance. They witness the utter collapse of British military strategy, which had long been touted as invincible. It impacts the myth of European superiority which is completely shattered for the Indian soldiers as they watch their British commanders panic, mismanage the defense, and ultimately surrender en masse at Singapore.

The chaos of the British defeat creates a massive ideological turning point for the colonized soldiers. Captured by the Japanese or stranded in the Malayan jungle, thousands of Indian sepoys undergo a profound political awakening. Led by historical figures like Subhas Chandra Bose and embraced by characters like Arjun, they realize they have been fighting for their own oppressors. Arjun and many of his peers switch sides, joining the newly formed Indian National Army (INA). They turn their weapons against the British, transforming from colonial mercenaries into revolutionary nationalist fighters, which introduces a tragic brother-against-brother dynamic on the battlefield.

The war violently invades the civilian lives of the protagonists, destroying decades of hard-won economic progress. Rajkumar's son, Neel, manages the family's prosperous rubber plantation in Malaya. During the Japanese advance, the plantation is caught in the crossfire and bombed. Neel is tragically killed while trying to protect the plantation workers. This loss marks the beginning of the complete dissolution of Rajkumar's vast financial empire.

As the British army retreats from Burma ahead of the advancing Japanese, civilians are left to fend for themselves, sparking one of history's most harrowing forced migrations. Rajkumar, Dolly, and their surviving family are forced to abandon their lives and join the "Long Trek"—a desperate, foot-bound exodus of over half a million Indians fleeing Burma toward India through treacherous mountain passes and dense jungles. The trek is defined by starvation, cholera, and exhaustion. The family loses almost everything; Rajkumar's granddaughter, Jaya, is born on the road, and the harrowing journey permanently breaks the characters physically and emotionally, reducing the once-wealthy merchant family to penniless refugees in India.

Indian sepoys

Through these major milestones, Ghosh uses the sepoys to illustrate a cycle of political awakening. While not a physical assault against the protagonists, Ghosh frames the British military training of Indian soldiers as a profound psychological violence. Characters like Arjun and Hardy are drafted into the first generation of Indian officers for the British Indian Army. The British intentionally strip these men of their cultural

identities, attempting to “clone” them into loyal imperial tools who will blindly fire upon their fellow Asians. Arjun's subsequent mental crisis and trauma reveal the deep emotional toll of this systemic colonial manipulation.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the paper is that while colonialism can dismantle kingdoms and redraw borders, it cannot crush the human spirit. The political structures of the empire eventually collapse under their own weight, but the personal grit of the individuals allows them to rebuild their identities and survive amidst the ruins.

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