

“That which a man takes for himself no one can deny him”:
Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* and the Colonial Experience

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[The Empire is] a huge, indelible stain which has tainted all of us.
—Amitav Ghosh¹

Now that fifty years or so have passed since the colonies in Asia and Africa became free—with the strident anticolonial passion somewhat abated and the shrill rhetoric muted—it seems possible to take a dispassionate view of the significant social, political, economic, and cultural phenomenon known as colonialism. This is what Amitav Ghosh sets out to do in *The Glass Palace*. Ghosh’s earlier novels, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), firmly established him as a leading Indian English novelist. *The Glass Palace*, published in 2000, has a range and sweep not easily matched in Indian English fiction. A story of three generations, it is spread over three interlinked parts of the British Empire—Burma, Malaya, and India.

The Glass Palace is structured around the intermeshing relationships among four families: the Burmese King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat (deposed by the British in 1885 and exiled to Ratnagiri in India) and their entourage; Rajkumar Raha, a Bengali orphan emigrant to Burma, and his descendants; Saya John, a foundling brought up by Catholic priests, and his son Matthew and his family; and Uma, the wife (and later widow) of the Collector of Ratnagiri. Their fortunes are set against a backdrop of stirring historical events—the British conquest of Burma, the consolidation of the Empire in India and Malaya, the First and Second World Wars—conceived and executed on an epic scale, in a time frame ranging from 1885 to 1996.

As Dinu goes cycling on a morning in Malaya, he finds “a massive square stone, with a rectangular opening carved in the centre.” Whatever its original use, the opening was now “just a hole ... colonized by a family of tiny green frogs” (334–35). In contrast to this rather innocuous process of colonization in the natural world stands the human colonizing process, which is fueled not by a need for shelter or survival, but by greed and a desire for economic and political expansion.

¹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2000) 132. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited in the text in parentheses.

The initial impulse for a colonial enterprise, as is well known, is often commercial, leading to the establishment of a trading post or some such outfit. Thus, it is the Burmese teak and the Malayan rubber that spur the British colonial drive. With a prescience beyond his years, the seven-year-old Matthew reports to his unbelieving friend Rajkumar what his father, Saya John, has told him, namely, that the English “want all the teak in Burma. The King won’t let them have it so they’re going to do away with him” (15).

Once the colonial power is firmly established and has a clear military superiority over the hapless and unprepared native rulers, it looks for, and often fabricates, a dispute with an inconvenient native ruler so as to justify dethroning him, annexing his state, and sending him into exile. A dispute with a British timber company, in which the company was clearly in the wrong—it was “side-stepping the kingdom’s customs regulations ... to avoid paying duties” (21)—is used as an excuse for waging a war against King Thebaw in Mandalay. One of the king’s senior ministers “had suggested discreetly that it might be best to accept the terms: that the British might allow the Royal Family to remain in the palace in Mandalay, on terms similar to those of the Indian princes—like farmyard pigs in other words, to be fed and fattened by their masters; swine, housed in sties that had been tricked out with a few little bits of finery” (21–22). But the fiery queen contemptuously turns down the suggestion.

The colonial powers usually win not because their cause is just but because of superior power, manipulative skill, and weaponry. Ghosh carefully charts the progress of British invasion and wryly points out that it proceeds with a smoothness “to surprise even its planners” (25), the war (if such a one-sided affair could be called that) lasting only fourteen days. The British receive considerable help from the ineptitude of the native rulers, who, out of touch with reality, have delusions of grandeur, and the treachery of quislings among their people, who, in Mandalay, vie with one another to hand over the vanquished king to the British.

In Burma the consolidation of the Empire proceeds in the classical mode, with its standard procedures and paraphernalia, until, to use Edward Said’s words, “the business of empire, once an adventurous and often individualistic enterprise,” becomes “the empire of business.”² In an act of blatant symbolism, the king’s palace “had been refurbished to serve the conquerors’ recondite pleasures: the west wing had been converted into a British Club; the Queen’s Hall of Audience had now become a billiard room; the mirrored walls were lined with months-old copies of *Punch* and the *Illustrated London News*; the gardens had been dug up to make room for tennis courts and polo grounds; ... Mandalay, it was confidently predicted, would soon become the Chicago of Asia” (66).

² Edward Said, “Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*,” *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Philip Price and Patricia Waugh (London: Arnold, 1997) 352.

While the colonial masters seem to scrupulously observe external courtesies in their treatment of deposed rulers, they are not above administering spiteful little jabs at them. When King Thebaw is sent into exile, he is allowed no more than an hour to prepare for a journey from which he is never to return (40). The king's carriage is "fitted out with a ceremonial canopy" which, the king is quick to notice, "had seven tiers, the number allotted to a nobleman, not the nine due to a king." So "the well-spoken English colonels," the king speculates, "had had their revenge after all, given the knife of victory a final little twist. In his last encounter with his erstwhile subjects he was to be publicly demoted, like an errant schoolchild. Sladen had guessed right: this was, of all the affronts King Thebaw could have imagined, the most hurtful, the most egregious" (43–44). The pathos of his incarceration in faraway Ratnagiri in India is paralleled by that of the last Indian Mughal emperor, Bahadurshah Zafar—a poet of genius, ailing, nearly blind—held captive until death in Rangoon, and lamenting in a celebrated and poignant verse that he could not find even two yards of burial ground in his native land (49). The living conditions of the Burmese King in India were so revolting as to outrage the English governess hired to teach the princesses, who then had to be sent back to England.

Ghosh comes down heavily on the apathy, the inertia, and the escapism of native rulers, which made it possible for a relatively small number of men to overwhelm them. When the Burmese army surrenders before the British, King Thebaw is not even informed (26). Ghosh contrasts these weaknesses with the energy, the organizational skill, and the initiative of the colonizers. "It was the Europeans," Saya John tells Rajkumar, "who saw that tame elephants could be made to work for human profit. It was they who invented everything we see around us in this logging camp. This entire way of life is their creation" (74). But without denigrating British enterprise, and the fortitude of such officers as Buckland, the narrative makes it clear that the cause they served was morally dubious at best, downright evil at worst.

In pre-independence India it was customary in "Indian history" courses to ask the examinee to enumerate the "benefits" of British rule in India. The standard answer would laud the British for social reform, for improving health and sanitation, for establishing law and order, and for introducing modern transport and communication through the railway and the postal system. The British munificence was taken as axiomatic by teachers and students alike, and in a system not being designed to promote independent thinking it occurred to neither to take a critical look at what the British had actually done in, and to, India. In retrospect, this account of British rule in India seems grossly one-sided at best, blocking out as it did the more somber aspects of the rule: the humiliation of the colonized people through a variety of discriminatory practices. In smaller towns in Malaya, the clubs put up signs on their doors saying "No Asiatics allowed" (345), while at Sungei Pattani base the English CO had been known to call his Indian officers "coolies" and had on one occasion even kicked an officer

(353). And even during wartime, Dinu, Allison, and an ailing Saya John are not allowed to board an evacuation train at Butterworth because it is only for Europeans (424). The draconian laws lead to brutal repression in the massacre of a nonviolent crowd in Jallianwala Bagh at Amritsar, and to the execution of a young freedom-loving idealist, Bhagat Singh, after a summary trial. Edward Said rightly speaks of “the ravaged colonial peoples who for centuries endured summary justice, unending economic oppression, distortion of their social and intimate lives, and a recourseless submission that was the function of unchanging European superiority.”³ The evils of British colonialism in India were exposed as early as 1842 in *A Memoir of India and Avganistaun*, written by Dr. Josiah Harlan of Philadelphia, who had traveled extensively in these countries. In the words of Harlan’s biographer, Jean-Marie Lafont, Harlan effectively analyzes the “mechanisms and consequences of British colonialism in India: machiavellianism of the invaders, rapacity of the civil servants and the revenue collectors, a systematic looting of the country by a handful of colonizers, a general impoverishment of the population and a growing indebtedness of the people.”⁴ Lafont adds that Harlan not only gives inside information about the way the British army bought its way to Kabul in 1839 but also brings out “the vain glory of the British military units during this campaign, victories which were purchased and not won, decorations ... which did not recompense any military courage.”⁵ Although Harlan is referring to the Afghanistan campaign, the Indian and Burmese situation had been no different in substance.

Moreover, there seems to be no basis for equating modernization in the colonies with colonization, or for assuming that modernizing processes would not have occurred had the British not colonized Burma (or India, or Malaya, for that matter). To the extent that colonialism, through scientific education and democratic institutions, did exercise a liberating influence, the modernization thus initiated was by no means an unmixed blessing, being more or less elitist and exclusive in nature and designed to reach only a small and privileged segment of the native population. Many of the ideas and institutions introduced by the British in India, such as democracy, scientific education, rule of law, and secular politics, have, in the words of Kanchan Mahadevan, “for the most part catered to the elite sections of our society and have been beyond the reach of the masses. Moreover, they have shown their insensitivity to accommodate the underprivileged others in a substantive way: these ‘others’ are those marginalized by race, caste, class, gender and even the empire,”⁶ thereby turning the “promise of freedom” into “a nightmare for the most people.”⁷

³ Said, “Two Visions” 351.

⁴ Jean-Marie Lafont, “Dr. Josiah Harlan of Philadelphia: An American in Punjab and Afghanistan,” *Span* (American Center, New Delhi) 43.4 (2002): 3.

⁵ Lafont 10.

⁶ Kanchan Mahadevan, “Colonial Modernity: A Critique,” *Indian Literature* 46.3 (May-June 2002): 193.

⁷ Mahadevan 194.

In *The Glass Palace* it is Uma who best exposes the truth about colonialism as she tells Dinu: “we must *not be* deceived by the idea that imperialism is an enterprise of reform.... It is simply mistaken to imagine that colonialists sit down and ponder the rights and wrongs of the societies they want to conquer: that is not why empires are built” (294–95; original emphasis). Queen Supayalat thus visualizes the dreary future of Burma under colonial rule: “In a few decades the wealth will be gone—all the gems, the timber and the oil—and then they too will leave. In our golden Burma where no one ever went hungry and no one was too poor to write and read, all that will remain is destitution and ignorance, famine and despair” (88). In India the roots of exploitation ran so deep as to render future generations of Indians ill equipped for survival. The Indians who meet in Uma’s New York apartment realize “that the conditions being created in their homeland were such as to ensure that their descendants would enter the new epoch as cripples, lacking the most fundamental means of survival; that they would truly become in the future what they had never been in the past, a burden upon the world.” They are appalled “that a time was at hand, when even the fall of the Empire and the departure of their rulers would make little difference; that their homeland’s trajectory was being set on an unbudgeable path that would thrust it in the direction of future catastrophe” (222).

But beyond the insidious forms of discrimination, beyond economic exploitation, the pernicious and debilitating effects of colonization on the character of the colonized remain among the more painful facets of the process. Colonial rule degrades character among the colonized by promoting a culture of competitive sycophancy. In India, for example, there is pervasive loss of self-respect among the Indians who vie with one another to win British approbation and try to model their lives and conduct in “conformity with incomprehensible rules” (187) of the Empire. A noteworthy feature of colonial rule is “its policy of ensuring its necessity through the division of its subjects” (243), thus playing off one colonized people against another. Both in Burma and Malaya, laborers brought from India under false pretences sustain economic activity, so that “every rubber tree in Malaya was paid for with an Indian life” (233). Indian soldiers are used to vanquish Burma and to suppress any uprising that may occur. After all, out of “some ten thousand soldiers in the British invasion force ... the great majority—about two-thirds—were Indian sepoys” (26). And Indians are encouraged to claw their way up to important positions in trade and business in Burma, to the detriment of the Burmese.

The true nature of colonial rule is also seen in its culture of exclusivity, practiced and fostered as a matter of policy. Thus, while the Muslim invaders became more or less assimilated in Indian society, the British remained aloof and superior, as shown in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*. While setting up residence in the cantonment, they drove the Indians into inner city slums lacking

in basic civic amenities. They not only practiced what Said calls “monoculturalism,”⁸ but also tried to set up “little Englands” in the colonies. The plantation manager, Arjun, has a house in Malaya with a garden dotted with bursts of color, but “the flowers were mostly English varieties” (433). No wonder that T. B. Macaulay should seek to create “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect”⁹—in other words, “mimic” men, as Homi Bhabha calls them, using V. S. Naipaul’s term.¹⁰

Frantz Fanon speaks of the “state of absolute depersonalization”¹¹ experienced by Algerian Arabs under French rule. In *The Glass Palace*, Rajan talks about life as a plantation worker with “every action constantly policed, watched, supervised.” He tells Arjun that it amounted to “being made into a machine: having your mind taken away and replaced by a clockwork mechanism. Anything was better than that” (522). Especially poignant is the anguish and confusion of Indian military officers in British employ—young, idealistic, and keen to do what is right—in fighting a war to defend not their own country, but a foreign power that has enslaved it. “If my country really comes first,” Hardy asks Arjun, “why am I being sent abroad? There’s no threat to my country right now—and if there were, it would be my duty to stay here and defend it” (330). Sitting in the trenches, Hardy tells Arjun, he had “an eerie feeling. It was strange to be sitting on one side of a battle line, knowing ... that you’re risking everything to defend a way of life that pushes you to the sidelines. It’s almost as if you’re fighting against yourself” (406). To this Arjun can find no fitting response. He comes to wonder whether he was in effect no more than a “mercenary,” and to realize that “to kill without conviction violated some deep and unalterable human impulse” (347). He feels that “he and his peers had been singled out to pay the price of a monumental inwardness” (349). Allison sums up the plight of the Indian officers in the British army when she says: “Arjun—you’re not in charge of what you do; you’re a toy, a manufactured thing, a weapon in someone else’s hands. Your mind doesn’t inhabit your body” (376). Arjun, who comes to analyze critically, obsessively, his actions in relation to the colonial situation (cf. 428; 430; 437; 441), ultimately dies fighting for the Indian National Army in Burma.

The Glass Palace explodes the myths about the beneficent effects of colonialism on the colonized systematically and comprehensively. Buckland is sincere, but self-deluded in arguing that the British are staying in India “out of a sense of obligation” (417). Equally mythical is the notion of the white man’s “burden” of civilizing the “inferior” races of Asia and Africa. False is the belief

⁸ Cited in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 105.

⁹ T. B. Macaulay, “Minutes on Education,” *Sources of Indian Tradition*, ed. William Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958) 49.

¹⁰ Bhabha 87.

¹¹ Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1967) 63.

that the primary impulse behind colonization is the desire to improve the living conditions of the colonized. And it is delusional to think that at any rate the British have proved to be more humane colonial masters than the Germans or the Japanese (a kind of consolation prize!). A three-part report by ITV called "The British Empire in Colour" (producer Lucy Carter), which was shown on British TV in September 2002, shows India's last viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, in a new and critical light, and, according to *The Observer*, makes it "hard to defend the memory of colonial India as a caring, orderly place." This report includes a great deal of material never seen publicly before and gives "the most vivid visuals yet of the violence and atrocities that occurred during Partition."¹²

Building on Michel Foucault's study of the intimate relationship between forms of knowledge and power, Edward Said shows how colonial powers "constructed" an orient that allowed the deployment of specific forms of control over it.¹³ In the words of W. H. New, "the imperial enterprise ... turned 'other' places and 'other' peoples into commodities that would serve the needs of the imperial 'centre.'" New alludes to the revealing Spanish colonial practice of referring to transport of slaves in terms of "tonnage."¹⁴ In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh shows how such "constructions" are internalized by the colonized, creating radical fissures within colonized societies and at times within the consciousness of individuals. The British were not content with spontaneous expressions of the colonial mindset as visible as in Kipling's "The White Man's Burden." Instead, they promoted—with sensational success in both England and the United States—such biased and astigmatic reporting as Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*¹⁵ in order to reinforce negative stereotypes of Indian society and culture, and in an effort to legitimize colonial rule.

It is a tribute to Ghosh's even-handed approach that he presents with scrupulous realism how most of the colonized people have fared under native rulers after gaining independence from colonial masters. Said points out that that which Frantz Fanon calls the "rationalist bourgeoisie" often "ran the new countries with a callous, exploitative tyranny reminiscent of the departed masters."¹⁶ Ghosh brings out the painful realities of the colonies after independence—the oppressive regime in Burma and the exploitation of the masses in India. Arjun remarks that to those fighting for India's freedom, "India was the shining mountain beyond the horizon, a sacrament of redemption," but wonders "what would they find ... when they crossed the horizon?" (522). Dinu thus defines the post-independence situation in the colonies to Jaya: "while

¹² "Partition Horrors on British TV," *The Hindustan Times*, 3 September 2002: 13.

¹³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Routledge, 1978).

¹⁴ W. H. New, "Colonial Literature," *New National and Post-Colonial Literatures: An Introduction*, ed. Bruce King (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 106.

¹⁵ Gandhi called it "A Drain Inspector's Report," in *Young India*, 15 September 1927.

¹⁶ Said, "Two Visions" 349.

misrule and tyranny must be resisted, so too must politics itself ... it cannot be allowed to cannibalise all of life, all of existence. To me this is the most terrible indignity of our condition—not just in Burma, but in many other places too ... that politics has invaded everything, spared nothing ... religion, art, family ... it has taken over everything ... there is no escape from it ... and yet, what could be more trivial in the end?" (542). One of the most persistent literary themes in postcolonial India (and Nigeria, and Kenya) has been the pervasive corruption, often in high places, eating into the vitals of the society and breeding disillusionment and cynicism among the people.

Although *The Glass Palace* does privilege colonial experience, making it central to the lives of those involved in it, the novel presents situations and characters in a broadly complex framework that makes for depth and richness. Ghosh's superb observation and evocative descriptions of nature, the exquisite sense of topography, the feel for the landscape and the seascape are quite remarkable. Ghosh, in fact, shows a poet's sensitivity to nature and is fully alive to the riot of color and sound in natural phenomena. This, and a chastened but highly expressive style which lacks Rushdie's exuberance but is rich in felicitous turns of phrase, combine to give Ghosh's work the quality that Khushwant Singh calls its "unputdownability."¹⁷

While colonialism in its raw political form may have more or less disappeared, it continues to manifest itself in subtle disguises. Herein lies the enduring significance of a sensitive and perceptive study such as *The Glass Palace*. The colonial legacy can be seen, for example, in the mindset that refuses to face the truth about colonialism and seeks to gloss it over with comforting fictions. Thus Cambridge historian Andrew Roberts was upset with Aamir Khan's Hindi film *Lagaan* (one of the five films nominated for the 2001 Oscar in the Best Foreign Film category) for showing the British in India in an unfavorable light. "The British empire in India," he says, "brought peace and stability to the country for 200 years.... It is a sign of India's continuing inferiority complex that 50 years after independence they have to make this sort of drive." As a colleague of Roberts remarks, "he seems to have a very grand view of the Raj."¹⁸

The end of political hegemony of the Western powers in the colonies does not mean the end of colonialism all over the world. For colonialism is more than a physical fact. It is an attitude, a frame of mind, appearing in insidious, camouflaged forms and hence in constant need of being fought against. As economic and cultural domination, colonialism remains very much alive, although it has become more subtle in manipulative techniques through the use of new technological and media networks. As Said remarks, "the nations of contemporary Asia, Latin America, and Africa are politically independent but in

¹⁷ Khushwant Singh, "Mr Unputdownable," *The Hindustan Times*, 7 July 2002: 10.

¹⁸ Vijay Dutt, "Historian Upset at *Lagaan*'s Oscar Entry," *The Hindustan Times*, 27 November 2001: 12.

many ways are as dominated and dependent as they were when ruled directly by European powers."¹⁹ Said adds that Westerners have retained their old colonies "not only as markets but as locales on the ideological map over which they continued to rule morally and intellectually."²⁰ Although overstated, Said's position seems to me fundamentally sound.

The cultural encounter between the colonized and the colonizing powers has at times had a positive side, too, which, however, Ghosh does not touch upon. In the Indo-British context, for example, cultural interaction as seen in the works of such scholars as William Jones (who had genuine respect for Eastern culture) is as much a fact as Macaulay's much more widely publicized arrogance and ignorance. This seems to me a limitation of *The Glass Palace* as it is of many studies and analyses of the colonial experience. Moreover, Ghosh's approach seems somewhat totalizing as it does not satisfactorily provide for the broad range of historical and social differences among Burma, Malaya, and India. At times colonialism appears in the novel as a monolith, with complex and defining features of the different communities submerged, if not altogether lost, in the unifying, homogenizing process. Finally, although women play an important role in *The Glass Palace*, the novel does not really show how colonialism affected the lives of women at large, nor does it treat the plight of peasants and tribal peoples in the colonized societies. In fact, Ghosh seems all but impervious to the elitist nature of whatever modernization the colonial powers may be credited with bringing about in the colonies.

It may well be that these exclusions were deliberate and were necessitated by the dramatic requirements of theme and character as the author had conceived them. In any case, the truth of colonialism has seldom been brought out with such insight and objectivity as in *The Glass Palace*. Ghosh's tone remains cool and rational, does not become abrasive even when dealing with the more unpalatable aspects of colonialism. The novel remains free from the self-pity and sentimentality that at times intrude in works as fine as Forster's *A Passage to India*, whose major Indian characters essentially emerge as "constructs" of a liberal and sympathetic imagination. Ghosh's use of a multiplicity of spokespersons with diametrically conflicting views enables him to examine the colonial experience from a diversity of perspectives and makes the presentation more complex and nuanced. *The Glass Palace* is thus important not only as an outstanding work of fiction but also as a remarkably perspicacious cultural study.

¹⁹ Said, "Two Visions" 348.

²⁰ Said, "Two Visions" 354.