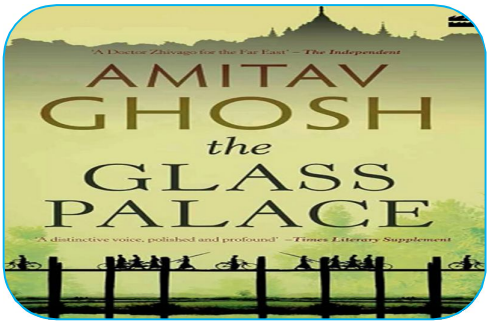
REVIEW OF RESEARCH
ISSN: 2249-894X
IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631(UIF)
VOLUME - 15 | ISSUE - 8 | MAY - 2026

HISTORY AND POSTCOLONIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE GLASS PALACE*

Ms. Venus Arora
UGC-NET, M.A.(English), Department of English,
Kurukshetra University (Haryana)

ABSTRACT



The present paper revolves around the theme of the re-presentation of history in Amitav Ghosh's novel titled The Glass Palace. The novel tells the tale of three generations of the two families in Burma, India and Malaya from 1885 to 1956. It is about Burma's colonisation by the British. Rajkumar, the protagonist, struggles in order to survive in the colonial turmoil. The paper is an attempt to show the portrayal of historical elements incorporated in The Glass Palace. The study explores how Ghosh reconstructs colonial and postcolonial history through the intertwined lives of both fictional and historical characters. It examines the British annexation of Burma, the migration of Indian labourers to Southeast Asia, and the impact of the Second World War as central historical forces shaping individual destinies. The novel also highlights the complexities of identity, displacement, and cultural hybridity that arise from migration and diaspora experiences. Through characters such as Rajkumar, Dolly, Dinu, Arjun, and King Thebaw, Ghosh presents history not as a distant record of events but as a lived experience that shapes and disrupts human lives. The paper further analyses Ghosh's narrative technique, which blends factual history with imaginative reconstruction, thereby questioning the rigid boundaries between history and fiction. It also reflects on the postcolonial concerns embedded in the novel, particularly the critique of colonial ideology and the emergence of new forms of power and exploitation in the post-independence period. Ultimately, The Glass Palace emerges as a historical narrative that emphasises the continuity of human struggle, the fluidity of identity, and the persistence of hope across generations.

KEYWORDS: *Re-Presentation, Generations, Turmoil, Portrayal, Survive, etc.*

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh has emerged as one of the leading Indian English novelists in the post-Rushdie literary landscape, which is marked by innovation and experimentation. As Ravi observes, "The novel of the Eighties has evolved from a new ethos, a transformed sensibility and startlingly original perspective" (7). With nine novels and several important works of non-fiction to his credit, Ghosh has earned both national and international recognition. His writings have received wide critical appreciation and brought him numerous prestigious awards. Ghosh began his literary career in the 1980s, a period that represents a significant turning point in the history of the Indian English novel. His

historical novel *The Glass Palace* (2002) reflects many of the important literary trends of its time. Before examining the novel in detail, it is necessary to trace the development of the historical novel as a subgenre of Indian English fiction to place the discussion in its proper context. Historical romance, a branch of historical fiction, appeared in Indian English literature during the late nineteenth century. Many early novels focused on the legends of Maharajas, the relationship between the British and the natives, and similar themes. Later, the political and historical events of the freedom struggle drew the attention of contemporary writers. They explored the nationalist movement from different perspectives. In the post-Independence period, events such as the Partition and its devastating consequences, the integration of princely states into the Indian Union, and the wars fought along the frontiers provided new themes and material for novelists.

In the novels of the late 1950s, the idealisation of Gandhi began to decline, and he was no longer portrayed as an unquestionable heroic figure. The emphasis gradually shifted from major historical events and public personalities to the exploration of social and psychological relationships. However, history returned to the centre of fiction in the novels of the 1980s, though in a new form. During this period, the boundaries between history and literature became increasingly blurred. Postmodern theory challenged the rigid separation of these two disciplines and emphasised: "what the two modes of writing share rather than on how they differ" (Hutcheon 105). In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai serves as a metaphor for India's history. His situation reflects the condition of the modern novelist, which is aptly expressed when he says that he is "handcuffed to history".

Ghosh's novels are remarkable for the way they repeatedly engage with and reinterpret history. He has always shown a deep interest in understanding events through a historical perspective. However, his primary concern is not the historical conditions themselves but the experiences of individuals living within them. In an interview with Hawley, Ghosh admits, "My fundamental interest is in people—in individuals and their specific predicaments. If history is of interest to me, it is because it provides instances of unusual and extraordinary predicaments ..." (Hawley 6). His third book, *In an Antique Land*, clearly reflects this approach. The work recounts the story of Bomma, an Indian slave from the twelfth century, whose life is reconstructed by the author-narrator during his research journey to Egypt in 1982. Ghosh's training and fieldwork in social anthropology inspired him to undertake this first major exploration of history through narrative. *In an Antique Land* is innovative in several respects, especially in its approach to historiography. Ghosh does not accept the strict distinction between fiction and non-fiction. As he states, "…I distrust also the lines that people draw between fiction and non-fiction. I think these lines are drawn to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded" (Hawley 9).

Interestingly, historiography and historical fiction share several similarities, as a closer examination of both reveals. Historiography refers to the writing of history through scholarly methods such as the collection, analysis, and evaluation of historical sources. However, it involves more than the simple presentation of facts. B.V. Rao, a Professor of History, comments on historiography in the preface to his well-known work *Concise Book of World History* (1991). He states, "As already mentioned, a historian will have to make use of his talents to present his matter creatively. A historian works with fascinating historical human circumstances, as opposed to a scientist who mostly works with dead materials. His historical account seems so fake if he can't give the dry facts of history, body, blood, and soul. He must thus utilise his imagination to give his readers a sense of reality and credibility about the past. This manner of presentation—a process known as historiography—is more likely to come under art than science. Therefore, history can be considered a science in so far as it uses the scientific method and an art for the manner of its treatment and composition..." (2). This explanation highlights the creative dimension of historiography. Linda Hutcheon makes a similar observation when she states that "both are linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality" (105). In the same way, a writer of historical fiction also performs the role of a historiographer. Such a writer carefully studies historical events and materials and then integrates them into the fictional narrative.

While doing so, the creative artist within the novelist often takes precedence over the historian. In constructing the plot and recreating the historical setting, the writer relies on imagination and insight, especially in areas where history remains silent or incomplete. If the novelist departs from established historical facts and exercises greater creative freedom, the result is often described as historical romance. Ghosh's historical novels, however, successfully combine artistic imagination with a strong sense of history. His creative interpretation of the past never distorts the essential historical facts. Instead, his novels maintain a careful balance between historical authenticity and literary creativity.

While *In an Antique Land* grew out of Ghosh's academic research, *The Glass Palace* emerged from his extensive study of Burma and India during the colonial period, the Second World War, and the years that followed. At the heart of the novel lies the theme of the individual's struggle and crisis within these turbulent historical circumstances. The novel reflects Ghosh's deep engagement with history and his commitment to historical accuracy. Speaking about the intensive research that shaped the novel, Ghosh remarks, "When an American writes a historical novel, he or she can generally rely on the historians to have done the research. I didn't have this luxury available to me. I had to do much of the primary research while also telling a story" (Hawley 12). This statement highlights the dual responsibility that Ghosh assumed as both a researcher and a novelist while creating *The Glass Palace*.
In the author's note attached to the novel, Ghosh explains how carefully he gathered the historical material required for its creation. He travelled to several places and met individuals who shared their memories and experiences of the events that form the central narrative of the novel. His research was thorough and involved both personal accounts and historical records. Ghosh also expresses his gratitude to the historian Walter A. Desai, whose work proved valuable in his effort to recover the traces of "the erased life of the deposed king Thebaw" (Ghosh 552). This acknowledgement reflects the seriousness with which Ghosh approached the historical foundations of *The Glass Palace*. *The Glass Palace* is a novel that uses important historical events from the Indian subcontinent as its backdrop. However, apart from King Thebaw, Queen Supayalat, and their daughters, the major characters in the novel are fictional and are not based on real individuals, living or dead. Despite this, the novel rests upon a strong historical foundation. During the five years he spent writing the book, Ghosh consulted hundreds of sources, including books, memoirs, travel accounts, gazetteers, articles, and notebooks, both published and unpublished. Alongside this extensive reading, he travelled widely to visit and revisit, as far as possible, all the places and locations that appear in the narrative. This combination of detailed research and firsthand observation enabled him to create a historically rich and convincing fictional world.

Most Indians know very little about the history of the founders of the Indian National Army and the experiences of the large Indian community that once lived in Burma. Since these subjects have received limited attention in historical writings, they remain unfamiliar to many readers. Ghosh states that this lack of awareness motivated him to explore these neglected chapters of history and bring them to light through his remarkable novel. In view of these facts, *The Glass Palace* can be regarded as a significant work of art that presents the history of an era through the lives and experiences of individuals. By linking personal stories with larger historical events, Ghosh offers a meaningful and authentic representation of the past. Contemporary fiction often makes use of temporal distortion as a narrative technique. Both modern and postmodern literature emphasise fragmentation and non-linear modes of storytelling. In postmodern writing, temporal distortion appears in various forms and is frequently employed to create irony or challenge conventional understandings of time and history. One important concept associated with postmodern fiction is historiographic metafiction. Linda Hutcheon coined this term to describe literary works that blend fiction with actual historical events or real historical figures. Such texts question the boundaries between history and fiction while drawing attention to the ways in which the past is represented and interpreted.

These characteristics are among the features that make Ghosh's novels, to some extent, postmodern in nature. However, in *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh largely adopts a linear mode of narration and uses temporal distortion only sparingly. This narrative choice may be explained by the vast scope of

the novel, which covers the history and geography of three nations across nearly two centuries and involves a large number of characters. As a result, the story unfolds in a largely chronological manner. Events are narrated retrospectively only on a few occasions, such as the account of King Thebaw's earlier years, Dinu's recollections of Arjun's final days, and references to events like the Indian Mutiny. These brief movements into the past enrich the narrative without disrupting its overall linear structure. In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh revisits the major events of the colonial period and the historical developments that shaped the destinies of the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Through his postcolonial and postmodern perspective, he explores the past in order to reveal histories that continue to influence the present. As Kadam observes, "Writing with a post-colonial consciousness, Ghosh is certain of his human and historical insights" (18). The British annexation of Burma provides Ghosh with an opportunity to examine a complex historical situation in which the colonised, namely the Indians, also assume the role of exploiters. When the British incorporated Burma into their Indian empire, large numbers of Indians migrated there and occupied influential economic positions. This development eventually led to resentment among the Burmese population and contributed to anti-Indian movements, which intensified during the years leading up to the Second World War. In what may be viewed as a form of neo-colonialism, characters such as Rajkumar take advantage of the opportunities created by colonial rule and participate in systems of economic exploitation. Through this portrayal, the novel presents a difficult and often neglected truth of history. As a novelist deeply concerned with recovering forgotten histories, Ghosh brings to light the obscure and neglected aspects of the colonial past.

Ghosh draws attention to the ironic transformation of the oppressed into oppressors in the context of British rule in Burma. Through this portrayal, he presents oppression as a recurring and universal phenomenon. Rajkumar, the novel's protagonist, is Indian by origin and recognises the opportunities created when Burma becomes a province of British India. Having arrived in Burma as a poor migrant boy, he later profits by bringing large numbers of Indian labourers into the country. His actions are criticised by his Burmese wife Dolly as well as by Uma, a character known for her progressive outlook despite her Indian background. Although Uma helps Rajkumar marry Dolly because of her affection for her friend, she does not hesitate to condemn his exploitative practices. When anti-Indian riots in Burma become increasingly violent, she openly blames him for contributing to the crisis. She tells him, "It's people like you who're responsible for this tragedy. Did you ever think of the consequences when you transported people here? What you and your kind have done is far worse than the worst deeds of the Europeans" (Ghosh 247). Rajkumar, however, remains convinced that he is helping the Burmese by providing employment and opportunities. His attitude reflects the same sense of superiority with which the British often justified their own colonial activities.

The British justification of empire through the theory of the "White Man's Burden" was accepted not only by the colonisers but also by many Indians who served under them. Uma is disturbed when she realises how effectively the British used this argument to legitimise their rule. They convinced Indian sepoys that their military campaigns were aimed at freeing people from cruel rulers, outdated traditions, and oppressive systems. Many soldiers accepted this explanation because the British themselves appeared to believe in it. Through this process, colonial domination was presented as an act of liberation rather than control. Reflecting on this mindset, a soldier whom Uma meets explains, "It took us a long time to understand that in their eyes freedom exists wherever they rule" (Ghosh 193). This statement exposes the contradiction at the heart of colonial ideology, where political domination is disguised as a mission of freedom and progress.

Rajkumar can see profit even in the possibility of war. However, he eventually becomes a victim of the very circumstances he seeks to exploit when he loses his young son Neel during the outbreak of the war. Meanwhile, Burma continues to suffer under military rule, with the junta governing the country with a severity that often surpasses that of the former British rulers. Another important character, Arjun, represents a different aspect of the colonial experience. As an officer in the British Indian Army, he is caught between conflicting loyalties and faces a deep personal crisis. Ghosh skillfully

portrays Arjun's inner struggle as he gradually shifts his allegiance towards the Indian freedom movement and comes to recognise the realities of British domination. Eventually, he joins the Indian National Army and turns his weapon against the very army in which he once served. Driven by the desire to help free his country from colonial rule, he fights for independence and ultimately dies a martyr's death on the battlefield.

Another important dimension of the novel is its portrayal of the largely forgotten history of King Thebaw and his life in exile in India with Queen Supayalat and their daughters. The title, *The Glass Palace,* is highly significant. In Burma, the Glass Palace was the magnificent royal residence of the Burmese king and a symbol of monarchical power and prestige. After King Thebaw was exiled by the British, he was forced to live in Outram House at Ratnagiri. This residence stands in sharp contrast to the splendour of the Glass Palace. The fall of the palace symbolises the collapse of the Burmese monarchy and the end of an era. The novel also presents vivid descriptions of war, political upheavals, and the far-reaching consequences of the Second World War on both nations and individuals. Ghosh's strength as a novelist lies in his ability to recreate historical personalities and the social and political atmosphere of the period by blending fact with fiction. Beginning in the turbulent year 1885, when Burma was annexed by the British, the narrative traces major historical developments, including resistance to colonial rule, conflicts involving Indian settlers, the outbreak of the Second World War, and the rise of destructive political forces such as imperialism and fascism. The novel eventually extends to the period of military dictatorship in Burma, highlighting the continued cycles of oppression and political turmoil in the region.

Uma's husband, Beni Prasad, who serves as the Collector of Ratnagiri, dies a disillusioned man after recognising the exploitative nature of British rule. Throughout much of her married life, Uma remains in his shadow. However, she gradually develops an independent political consciousness and becomes actively involved in the activities of the Indian League. In time, she embraces Gandhian principles after realising that non-violence offers the most effective means of resisting British power. Although Gandhi appears only indirectly in the novel, the Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi is presented more directly as a significant historical figure. Her struggle for democracy in Burma forms an important part of the later narrative. Dinu and Jaya attend one of her public speeches, delivered while she is under house arrest. Through this episode, Ghosh connects the anti-colonial struggles of the past with the continuing fight for democratic rights in Burma. Dinu, who holds left-leaning political views, strongly opposes British colonialism and believes that only Japanese militarism and European fascism were more destructive and oppressive.

Another major thematic concern in Ghosh's fiction is migration. In the modern world, migration has become such a significant phenomenon that many writers have made it a central subject of their works, and Ghosh is among them. Migration often leads to fluid identities and cultural displacement, themes that recur throughout his novels. Throughout history, people have moved from one region to another in search of safety and a better life because of political oppression, wars, famine, and other crises. In this context, Hugh Tinker rightly observes, "Twentieth century, even more than any age before, is the age of the refugee" (1). *The Glass Palace* vividly portrays this reality through the large-scale migration that occurs when Burma comes under attack from the Axis forces during the Second World War. Thousands of people, most of them Indians, are forced to leave their homes and undertake a difficult journey to India. Rajkumar, the protagonist, becomes part of this mass exodus. He abandons the life he has built over many years and leaves behind his wealth, possessions, and loved ones. Through this episode, Ghosh captures the pain, uncertainty, and emotional loss that accompany forced migration. In this regard, the observations made by Brinda Bose are particularly relevant:

> As the post-colonial-postmodern writer Ghosh is one who sees history as that trajectory of events that causes dislocations, disjunctions, movements and migrations, eventually replacing solid markers with shadow lines, destabilizing our notions of the past in the reverberations of the present. (16)

The term diaspora refers to the movement and settlement of people who share a common ethnic identity outside their homeland, often in regions far removed from their place of origin. Such communities maintain cultural and emotional connections with their ancestral land even while living abroad. Refugees, on the other hand, are individuals who are compelled to leave their countries because of war, political persecution, social unrest, or religious conflict. The distinction between the two lies in the nature and permanence of their displacement. While refugees are forced to migrate and may or may not settle permanently in a new country, diasporic communities generally establish long-term or permanent roots in their adopted homelands. Thus, although both involve movement across borders, diaspora is associated with sustained settlement and community formation, whereas refugee migration is primarily a response to crisis and displacement.

The Glass Palace portrays the extraordinary lives of individuals whose destinies are shaped by the unpredictable forces of history. Their personal experiences are closely connected with major historical events and political upheavals. Along with power politics and colonial history, the novel focuses on the Indian diasporic experience in Southeast Asia. Ghosh examines its historical significance and human consequences with great insight and sensitivity. Both historical and fictional characters are shown confronting the challenges created by changing political circumstances, while the novelist remains deeply concerned with their personal struggles. Throughout the novel, the question of loyalty to one's "true" identity repeatedly emerges. Ghosh also highlights the issue of cultural interaction and hybridity within the narrative. Rajkumar and Dolly belong to different ethnic backgrounds, yet they are united through marriage. As a result, their sons, Dinu and Neel, experience identity conflicts because they are not fully accepted by Burmese society. Dinu, a member of the second generation, falls in love with Alison, an American woman, and hopes to marry her. After her death during a wartime attack, he remains in Burma and eventually marries a Burmese woman named Maa Thin Aye. Similarly, King Thebaw's daughters, who are exiled to India along with their parents, marry Indian men. Ironically, these marriages offend the British authorities, who disapprove of such unions because they challenge colonial ideas about racial hierarchy and social status. Through these relationships, Ghosh exposes the artificial nature of racial and cultural boundaries.

With the passage of time, Rajkumar develops a deep sense of rootlessness and expresses the pain of belonging nowhere. Reflecting on the repeated displacements in his family's history, he says, "…my father was from Chittagong and he ended up in the Arakan; I ended up in Rangoon; you went from Mandalay to Ratnagiri and now you're here too. There are people who have the luck to end their lives where they began them ..." (Ghosh 310). Through these words, Rajkumar gives voice to the experiences of countless migrants whose lives are shaped by movement and displacement. His observation reflects the condition of many people in the modern world for whom migration has become a recurring reality. Both Rajkumar and Dolly are victims of this process. Historical events as well as personal choices force them to move repeatedly from one place to another. Over the course of their lives, they experience migration several times, and each displacement further intensifies their sense of uncertainty and loss.

Ghosh also explores another dimension of migration through his portrayal of the emotional attachment to the "motherland" among the second generation of the diaspora. Ironically, many of these individuals had never actually seen India. Their parents had migrated as indentured labourers, yet the idea of India continued to occupy an important place in their imagination. In Malaya, Arjun and Hardy encounter Indian plantation workers who live in extreme poverty despite the prosperity of the surrounding towns. Most of these workers are Tamils. When war reached Malaya, many of them joined the Indian National Army. One such recruit, Rajan, explains to Arjun that he was born and brought up in Malaya and knew India only through the stories told by his parents. This experience was common among many recruits from the plantations. As Ghosh notes, "They were fighting for a country they had never seen; a country that had extruded their parents and cut them off. This made their fervour all the more remarkable" (Ghosh 522). For these migrants and their descendants, "India was the shining mountain beyond the horizon, a sacrament of redemption-a metaphor for freedom" (Ghosh 522). Arjun,

however, wonders whether they truly understood the realities of India, including the poverty, hunger, and caste discrimination that had once forced their families to leave. Through this contrast, Ghosh illustrates how migrant communities often sustain idealised images of their ancestral homeland and continue to live within what may be called "imaginary homelands."

According to Ghosh, the writing of *The Glass Palace* brought a significant change in both his personal identity and his understanding of history (Kadam 20). His strong commitment to his role as a novelist and to his thematic concerns becomes evident in his controversial decision to withdraw the novel from nomination for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. He justified this decision by stating, "the issue of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of The Glass Palace, and I feel that I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialisation of Empire that passes under the rubric of the Commonwealth" (Hawley 114). This statement is significant because postcolonialism refers to the study of societies and literatures that were formerly colonised by European powers. Postcolonial theory aims to reveal the hidden colonial ideologies present in literary texts. One of its central concerns is the critique and deconstruction of nationalism. The term postcolonialism has gradually replaced earlier labels such as Commonwealth Literature and Third World Literature. Emerging in the mid-twentieth century, it is now widely known as postcolonial studies. However, Ghosh's primary focus remains on individuals and families affected by the forces of history. He highlights their struggles for survival as well as their moments of helplessness in the face of historical change. Unlike some postcolonial perspectives, he does not believe that one ideological framework should simply replace another form of dominant narrative.

Like a typical open-ended novel, Ghosh concludes *The Glass Palace* on an optimistic note. Dinu, the elder son of Rajkumar, appears to take responsibility for the consequences of his father's actions toward the Burmese people. In a gesture of moral redemption, he joins the ongoing freedom struggle in Burma to resist oppressive rule. Jaya, his niece from the third generation, also supports his cause. The struggle continues, and Ghosh suggests that for countries like Burma, the end of colonial rule does not automatically bring an end to exploitation. However, there remains a persistent hope among people who continue to fight for genuine freedom. History, in this sense, becomes an ongoing process rather than a closed chapter, and it bears witness to these continuing struggles, as Ghosh implies. This idea recalls Allan Nevins's view of history as a "bridge connecting the past with the present and pointing the road to the future" (Jayapalan 3).

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