

---

## Threads of the British Empire: A Postcolonial Reading of *The Glass Palace*

**Dr. Sudhir Kumar**

Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, M.D. University, Rohtak, Haryana, India.

### Abstract

Post-colonial literature has emerged as a powerful medium for interrogating and critiquing the historical injustices of the British Empire. The lingering effects of imperial domination continue to shape the consciousness of formerly colonised societies across Asia, Africa, and beyond. This paper examines both resistance to imperial power and the reclamation of indigenous histories. It also seeks to reinterpret colonial narratives by questioning dominant hegemonic structures. Many post-colonial writers attempt to counter colonial ideologies by presenting alternative perspectives rooted in native experiences.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Hegemony, Imperialism, Subaltern, Empire, Colonialism.

---

### Content:

Amitav Ghosh emerges as a significant voice in Indian English literature, particularly in the postcolonial tradition. His novel, *The Glass Palace*, explores overlooked aspects of colonial history through the lens of subaltern experiences. Spanning multiple generations and regions such as Burma, India, and Malaya, the novel portrays the expansion of the British Empire and the exile of Burma's last king, Thebaw. This paper analyses the novel using postcolonial theory to highlight themes of displacement, power, and resistance.

The legacy of imperialism continues to influence political, cultural, social, and religious structures in many postcolonial nations. Indigenous cultures were suppressed under colonial rule, often deliberately devalued to elevate the coloniser's culture. The term *postcolonial* refers not merely to a historical period but to all societies affected by colonial processes from the moment of colonisation to the present.

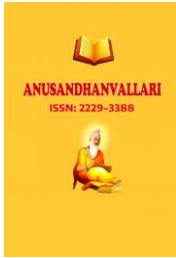
Postcolonialism also functions as a critical framework for examining how colonial power shaped the psychological and cultural identity of colonised peoples. Colonialism must be understood both as a system of exploitation and as a mechanism of control. Historically, imperialism evolved through various forms, including early empires such as the Roman and Ottoman, and later European expansion in the nineteenth century, which established a global system of domination.

In literary discourse, writers like Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, and Amitav Ghosh have revisited colonial history to expose its economic and human exploitation. Their works not only narrate colonial experiences but also explore the long-term psychological and political consequences of imperial rule:

Conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those with a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not pretty when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea, and an unselfish belief in the idea- something you can set up and blow down before and offer a sacrifice, too. (Conrad, 12)

Postcolonial theory encompasses various perspectives, including Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, which critiques Western representations of the East as inferior. Scholars such as Ania Loomba emphasise themes like hybridity, diaspora, and cultural intersections that emerged from colonial encounters. These theoretical frameworks help in understanding the complexities of postcolonial identity.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* provides a sweeping narrative covering over a century of Burmese history, from pre-colonial times to the modern era. The novel begins with the British invasion of Burma in 1885 and traces



the resulting political upheaval, including the exile of King Thebaw. Through multiple characters and generations, Ghosh depicts the far-reaching consequences of imperialism.

The novel illustrates how colonial power dismantled traditional structures. The British annexation of Burma led to the forced exile of the royal family, symbolising the collapse of indigenous authority. The invasion is portrayed not merely as a political event but as a cultural and psychological rupture. The British justified their actions under the guise of progress and governance, while simultaneously exploiting resources and people.

One of the striking aspects of colonial rule was its economic exploitation. British enterprises, such as timber companies, extracted natural resources while disregarding local laws and customs. Indigenous leaders were often coerced into submission, highlighting the imbalance of power. The use of Indian soldiers in British campaigns further complicates the narrative, as colonised subjects were employed to subjugate other colonised regions. The influence of colonial culture is evident in characters like Beni Prasad Dey, an Indian civil servant who adopts British manners, attire, and values. His admiration for the colonisers reflects the internalisation of colonial ideology. However, this imitation creates a sense of alienation, as he struggles to reconcile his identity:

Hindustan must be ruled by those who live on its side of the globe. Its people will prefer to be ruled according to our notions-kith and kin than to submit to the humiliation of being better governed by a succession of transient intruders from antipodes.... It is impossible that a person can permanently be used for their own apparent and conscious degradation. The entire scheme of our Indian rule is upon the assumption that the natives will be the willing instruments of their humiliation. (671-73)

Similarly, the character of Rajkumar represents the complexities of colonial ambition. Rising from poverty to become a successful businessman, he benefits from colonial systems while also perpetuating exploitation. His moral compromises, including the abuse of power, mirror the oppressive structures of imperialism. Despite his success, Rajkumar ultimately experiences loss and displacement, underscoring the emptiness of material gain within a colonial framework:

I am aware, Your Highness,' the Collector said evenly, 'that Japan's victory has resulted in widespread rejoicing among nationalists in India and Burma. But the Tsar's defeat comes as no surprise to anyone; it holds no comfort for the enemies of the British Empire. The Empire is today more robust than it has ever been. You only have to glance at a world map to see the truth. (107)

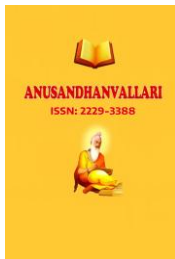
The novel also highlights the role of migration and displacement. Colonial expansion led to the large-scale movement of people, often under coercive conditions. Indian labourers and soldiers were relocated across the empire, contributing to economic development while enduring harsh exploitation. This displacement resulted in fractured identities and a sense of rootlessness.

Another significant theme is the manipulation of ideology. The British portrayed themselves as civilisers, claiming to bring progress and reform. However, this narrative masked their exploitative intentions. Initially, some natives believed in these promises, but gradually realised the oppressive reality of colonial rule:

The colonel told the assembled notables that the Royal Family was being exiled. They were to go to India, a location that had to be decided on. The British Government wished to provide them with an escort of attendants and advisors. The matter was to be settled by asking for volunteers. (41)

The experiences of characters like Arjun, an Indian soldier in the British army, illustrate the psychological impact of imperialism. Arjun takes pride in serving the empire, but later recognises the contradictions of fighting for a power that denies his identity. His realisation reflects the broader awakening among colonised individuals.

Racial discrimination is another critical aspect depicted in the novel. Despite their service, Indian soldiers and civilians faced humiliation and exclusion. Such experiences expose the inherent inequality within the colonial system, challenging the notion of imperial benevolence.



The novel also explores resistance, both overt and subtle. While some characters adapt to colonial systems, others question and resist them. The growing awareness of injustice eventually leads to nationalist movements and demands for independence:

Rajkumar is, then, a true multicultural, a reinvented migrant who left to himself, and by dint of his enterprise, has been able to find a place in the new society, under the assumption that he will soon be absorbed into and by the established cultural order and thus escapes ending up in the underclass or ethnic ghettos (148).

Through this scene, Amitav Ghosh exposes the people's unscrupulous greed. In this, the author reiterates that not only are the people of Burma greedy, but the hidden fact is that the colonial Empire itself is ambitious towards the rich natural resources of Burma. The novel *The Glass Palace* perfectly reflects the colonial power and its subjugation of the natives. The book reveals the tactfulness of the coloniser over the colonised subjects. They subjugated the whole population, sent the ruler into exile, changed the lifestyle of the people, and freely plundered the Burmese natural resources.

Amitav Ghosh effectively portrays the enduring impact of colonialism on subsequent generations. Even after the end of formal imperial rule, its effects persist in social structures, cultural practices, and individual consciousness. The trauma of displacement, loss, and exploitation continues to shape postcolonial societies.

#### Conclusion:

*The Glass Palace* offers a profound exploration of colonial history and its aftermath. Through its multi-layered narrative, the novel reveals how imperialism disrupted lives, dismantled traditional systems, and reshaped identities. It also highlights the complicity of certain individuals who benefited from colonial structures while contributing to the oppression of others. The study demonstrates that colonialism was not merely a political phenomenon but a comprehensive system that affected every aspect of life. Its legacy continues to influence contemporary societies, making postcolonial analysis essential for understanding present realities. Finally, the novel serves as a powerful critique of imperial power and a reminder of the resilience of those who endured it. It underscores the importance of revisiting history from marginalised perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the past.

#### References:

- [1] Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back*. Routledge, 1989.
- [2] ---. *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Routledge, 2007.
- [3] Bose, Brinda, editor. *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives*. Pencraft International, 2005.
- [4] Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Blackwood Magazine, 1899.
- [5] Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace*. Penguin, 2000.
- [6] Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. Routledge, 2015.
- [7] Morley, John. *The Life of Richard Cobden*. T. Fisher Unwin, 1893.
- [8] Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Penguin, 2003.
- [9] Young, Robert J. C. *Postcolonialism*. Blackwell, 2001.