

Character Dolly is a complex and fascinating character. At age ten, she becomes a maidservant to one of the high-ranking princesses in the Burmese royal family. She is extremely loyal to her mistress, to her family and to the whole family, effectively negating her own individuality in order to please them. She has no dreams, apart from those of her mistress. She is not a separate person, only an extension of others. She follows the royal family into exile and remains there with them, even though all the other servants leave one by one. Her liberation begins with the discovery of sex, but her adventures end in humiliation when she and her lover are caught in bed. Her renunciation and her lack of inner life means that she does not respond at first when Rajkumar comes a great distance to find her. Eventually she does give in, when someone else advises her to, and she finds happiness as a mother and wife, although her aloofness means that her husband never fully understands her.

Activities In both the glass palace in Mandalay and in exile in India, Dolly looks after a royal princess, arranging her clothes, her bath, her food and even her sleep. As a wife and mother, she also looks after others, with love and dedication. We rarely see Dolly on her own.

Illustrative moments

Loyal A touching example of Dolly's loyalty to the royal family occurs early on in the story when the glass palace is ravaged and burning. Although only 10 years old, Dolly attempts to carry a princess to safety but her young back will not bear the load. In pain, she leads the princess by the hand through the flames. 'Quickly, quickly,' she urged herself on. 'There was a soldier behind her; he was prodding her with the cold hilt of his sword. She felt her eyes brimming over, tears flooding down her face. Couldn't they see she would fall, that the Princess would tumble out of her grip? Why would no one help?'

Distant One of the paradoxes in Dolly is that although she is loyal and self-sacrificing, she is also withdrawn and distant. This may be the result of her renunciation, an inability to form an emotionally open relationship with someone. This quality is expressed in a long conversation with Rajkumar, when, after years of marriage, she considers going into a Buddhist monastery. This idea startles Rajkumar, who asks her if she really wants to leave him. 'Don't be silly,' she answers, 'Where would I go if I left you behind?' Then Rajkumar says that he feels she is hiding from him behind a wall, and she replies. 'What wall? What are you talking about?'

Lack of self Dolly's main problem is her lack of any selfhood, the result of her long years of serving others and ignoring her own needs. This is evident throughout the novel, but it is especially poignant in a scene when Dolly imagines that she is pregnant when, in fact, it is her princess who is. 'I feel the baby is mine,' she tells her friend Uma. 'I know it's not, but I feel it is.' In other words, she has identified with the princess to such an extent that she has become her.