

***The Glass Palace* (1999)**

Story This ambitious historical novel spans three generations in Burma and India from the late nineteenth century through the 1990s. Amitav Ghosh begins the story with a dramatic set piece. In 1885, British forces capture Mandalay and displace the Burmese king. At this moment, we meet Rajkumar, an eleven-year-old Indian orphan working in a tea-stall near the palace, who is the protagonist of this complex story. The precocious boy informs the large crowd that they noise they heard was a British canon. Through flashbacks we learn about the displaced and dysfunctional royal family of Burma, especially the cruel queen who ordered the execution of anyone in line for the throne, including 79 young princes. We are also told the back story of the glass palace of the title, a magnificent creation built in England, transported to Mandalay and erected for the queen. During the looting of the palace, Rajkumar meets Dolly, one of the queen's servants and falls in love with her. The next day, Rajkumar watches her and the rest of the royal family board a ship that will take them to exile in India.

Rajkumar now moves up in the world. Through a contractor for a timber merchant, his eventual mentor Saya John, he finds work and eventually success as a businessman. With his future secure, he sets out to find Dolly, who is living with the exiled royal family on the west coast of India. The persevering Rajkumar locates her and persuades her to return with him to Burma as his wife. Back in Rangoon, Rajkumar gets involved in the next 'boom' industry—rubber. Dolly gives birth to a son, Dinu, a photographer who becomes infatuated with a woman who is killed in the Japanese invasion of Burma in World War II. Other characters are also tragically caught up in the horror of war, posing the question of loyalty among Indians serving in the British Indian army. The novel concludes in the 1990s with Dinu, now an old, distinguished photographer, married to a Burmese writer, in his studio named 'The Glass Palace.' Young students and intellectuals gather inside to discuss politics and culture, fearful of the military dictatorship that controls their lives. The ending is serene, but we readers know the heartbreak and grief that lies in the past.

Characters

Rajkumar Rajkumar is the leading character in this excellent novel, although even he does not make it to the end. He is an orphan, who begins as a servant and rises to become a wealthy timber merchant. His early life of suffering teaches him to be practical, observant and to persevere in business and in love. However, he is also a romantic, who takes risks. He is a kind and loving person, although sometimes domineering with his wife and children.

Dolly Dolly is the handmaid of a princess in the royal family of Burma. She is the loyal servant, who follows the royal family into exile and later marries Rajkumar. She is attractive, sensitive and sincere, but the exile of the royal family and her lonely position as a servant cause Dolly to become unstable. She recovers and becomes a great support to her husband.

Saya John Saya John, a Burmese teak merchant, is the inspiration for Rajkumar's rise in fortune. He is a far-seeing businessman, shrewd but honest, who becomes Rajkumar's mentor and partner. He is also more cautious than Rajkumar and steers him through financial difficulties.

Uma Uma is an Indian woman married to high-ranking Indian official in the British Raj. She is lively, attractive and articulate, but she is worried about playing the right role in her position, following correct etiquette and living up to the high standards set by her cold husband. She finds rapport with Dolly and is 'liberated' when her husband commits suicide.

Dinu Dinu is the son of Rajkumar and Dolly. He is withdrawn, lives for photography and does not flinch from telling uncomfortable truths to others, if not to himself. He is attracted to Alison (Saya John's granddaughter) but does not know how to show it or commit to it. He is totally absorbed by his photographic work, which shuts out others emotionally.

Themes

Exile Exile and return lie at the heart of this wonderful novel. The most dramatic example is the defeat and expulsion of the Burmese royal family from Mandalay to India. Dolly follows in their wake and then returns to her native Burma. Rajkumar is also an exile: his Indian parents, now dead, migrated to Burma for work. Indeed, throughout the novel, Rajkumar is on the move, seeking a home for his family.

Memory The power of memory drives the life of Rajkumar through the novel. His brief encounter with Dolly, when they were children, stays in his mind, and twenty years later he travels a long way to find her again. Dolly, too, remembers him and, more importantly, her native land of Burma, where she was happy. While in exile in India, she, and the rest of the royal family, are sustained by their memories of the past.

Colonialism *The Glass Palace* is one of the most nuanced depictions of colonialism in English-language fiction. Colonialism is usually described in India, but here Ghosh focuses on Burma, where the British sucked up everything of economic value: teak, rubber, indigo, opium, minerals, gems and oil. At the same time, Burmese entrepreneurs and middle-men colluded with the exploitation and benefitted from it. For example, to Saya John the British represent modernity and efficiency. The mentality of the colonised is dramatised in the sections describing people's attitudes during World War II, when the British Indian army fought the Japanese in the jungles of Burma. At one point, an Indian officer asks, 'What are we? We've learned to dance the tango and we know how to eat roast beef with a knife and fork. The truth is that except for the color of our skin, most people in India wouldn't even recognize us as Indians.'