

THE GLASS PALACE

Amitav Ghosh

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.

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.'

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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

RAJKUMAR (Observant)

Character Rajkumar, the leading character of this long, complex novel, begins as an orphan but later becomes a wealthy timber merchant in Rangoon, married to Dolly. Although, or perhaps because, he was an orphan, Rajkumar possesses an acute mind. Above all, he is observant, learning and absorbing lessons from whomever he meets and wherever he lands up. He also has tremendous stamina and perseverance, which is displayed in his pursuit of his childhood love (Dolly) and in running his timber business. Another interesting dimension of his character is that, as an Indian orphan in Burma, he has no pre-existing loyalties or obligations to family or nation. He is thus free, able to move and progress according to his own lights. He is also a loving husband and father, although he does sometimes demand too much of his family.

Activities As a young boy, Rajkumar spends time working as a low-paid assistant in a tea-stall. Later, he learns the timber business and spends time investigating potential partners and potential deals, while putting in long hours in the office, checking accounts. One section details his study of how elephants and river rafts are used to transport the timber from the deep forests to his yard. He also spends time travelling, notably to the west coast of India, where he woos Dolly.

Illustrative moments

Observant Rajkumar learns from experience, from watching others and analysing the events that occur around him. This quality of perceptiveness is displayed early on in the novel, when he first sees Dolly, the maidservant to a princess. He gives her some sweets, which she then immediately shares with a British soldier. Instead of feeling ignored by her act, he learns a lesson: 'Dolly was doing exactly what had to be done. What purpose would it serve for these girls to make a futile show of resentment? How could they succeed in defiance when the very army of the realm had succumbed?'

Persevering Rajkumar, orphan and uneducated, perseveres. He does not give up, despite the financial or physical obstacles in his way. We appreciate his steadfastness when he decides to find Dolly. He is now a wealthy timber merchant in Rangoon, but lonely and unfulfilled. One evening, drinking whisky while checking accounts in his office, he has a flash of memory: the young Dolly,

twenty years earlier. At that moment, he decides he will turn over his business to his partner and pursue her, wherever she may be.

Incautious Although Rajkumar is pragmatic, he also takes risks, in business and in his personal life. The best example of this occurs when he accepts a loan from Saya John, his mentor. Saya John, the ultimate practical man, advises his friend against saddling himself with debt, but Rajkumar has a keen intelligence and believes that now is the time to make money in the timber business. Casting aside his mentor's caution, he declares, 'If I am ever going to make this business grow, I will have to take few risks.'

Romantic While Rajkumar is also something of a romantic, or a visionary, who takes risks and likes to explore. In the first few pages, he gazes in admiration at the wondrous glass palace from his dingy tea-stall. While studying the building, he notices a wide moat that surrounds it as protection from strangers and commoners, such as he. At that moment, he decides that he 'would cross the moat before he left Mandalay, he would find a way in.'

DOLLY (Loyal)

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 selfhood 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.

SAYA JOHN (Practical)

Character Saya John is a trader in teak and rubber who becomes Rajkumar's mentor, business partner and surrogate father. He is the protagonist's guide not only in business but also in the more difficult transaction of negotiating the cultural gap inherent in colonialism. When Saya John went to meet Europeans for business, he 'would always change into European clothes, a white shirt and duck

trousers.’ As a practical man, he is adept at hiding and changing his identity. That malleability is partly explained by the fact that he was an orphan, brought up by Catholic priests in Malacca, a trading post in old Malaya on the coast between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Here he imbibed a mixture of cultures and languages, including Portuguese, Hakka, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Arabic, Malay, French and English. As such, he is the embodiment of the ethnic diversity, linguistic cosmopolitanism and cultural hybridity that is at the core of this wide-ranging novel. As a businessman, he is shrewd and cautious but always honest. He is also generous, offering loans to Rajkumar, even when his friend’s ventures appear to have little chance of success. As an entrepreneur, he has no politics (or at least he never expresses any political opinion). He becomes wealthy from his contracting job with a British timber company and builds himself a large mansion in imitation of his British superiors. In this respect, he represents the complexity of the colonial system—many colonised people benefitted from it, at least in material terms. Saya John, kind and generous to a fault, is shot dead by Japanese soldiers fighting in the jungles of Malaya during the Second World War.

Activities Saya John is an entrepreneur who begins by ferrying provisions to timber camps deep in the Burmese jungles. We see him loading crates and sacks onto a paddle-wheeled steamer on the Irrawaddy River and then guiding it down the river to some small inlet where they would unload it. Sometimes, if the elephants he had hired did not arrive, he had to carry the provisions himself into the jungle and find the timber camps. He then progressed to become a timber merchant himself and finally the owner of rubber plantations on the Malay peninsula. He liked to smoke cheroots and have a few slugs of whisky. Later, when he had established his own trading company, he spent long hours in his office in Rangoon, going over accounts, writing letters and dealing with employees.

Illustrative moments

Hybrid The hybridity that defines Saya John is clear throughout the many pages of this novel, but it is nicely illustrated in a conversation that Saya John himself recalls while talking to Rajkumar. He is telling his friend about his experiences of working as an orderly at a military hospital. ‘The soldiers there were mainly Indians and they asked me this question: how is it that you, who look like a Chinese and carry a Christian name, can speak our language? When I told them how this had come about, they would laugh and say, “You are *dhobi ka kutta*—a washerman’s dog—you don’t belong anywhere, either by water or on land.” And then I’d say, “Yes, that is exactly what I am.”’ From one angle, his hybridity appears to be a sophisticated cosmopolitan perspective, as opposed to a provincial and limited outlook, but from another angle, it can be an emptiness. This other side of hybridity is expressed in the same scene when Saya John says to Rajkumar, ‘When I looked into the faces of those Indian soldiers, I asked myself: what would it be like if I had something to defend—a home, a country, a family?’

Practical Saya John is first and last a businessman, who has to adjust and accommodate himself to the realities of the colonial economic system. He is something of a chameleon, who changes his colours depending on the context, whether he is negotiating with an English, Indian or a Chinese man. And he suppresses any negative opinions he might have of the British people for whom, in the beginning, he works. A good illustration of this accommodating and pragmatic element of his personality occurs when he and Rajkumar are in a timber camp owned by an English company. Saya John leaves Rajkumar and climbs up a short ladder and into the bamboo hut that served as an office for the English camp supervisor. Suddenly, the English man berates Saya John for having forgotten something, using racist epithets and telling him that he will ‘see you in Hell, Johnny Chinaman.’ Rajkumar is incensed and is about to challenge the abusive man, but Saya John pulls him aside. ‘Don’t be a fool, Rajkumar,’ he says. ‘Find something useful to do.’ Later, he explains to Rajkumar that he should understand that these young men get irritated easily, so far from home, battling malaria and loneliness. ‘And yet,’ he continues, ‘these young men, not much older than you, Rajkumar, maybe eighteen or nineteen, they hold this camp together. And remember, it was the English who realised we could use elephants in the logging business—not the Burmese.’