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Transnational Families and Hybrid Identities: A Study of Diaspora in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* provides a multifaceted space in which to examine diaspora, transnational family and hybrid identity. Instead of exile as one fixed state, the novel traces the changing Indian Ocean world in which colonialism, war and economic migration reshape the lives of the Dey, Raha and Uma families. This essay interprets those movements as a sustained attack on fixed national borders and essentialized beliefs in belonging. It contends that Ghosh employs the multigenerational narrative to demonstrate how displacement generates new transnational family forms that operate as sites of identity construction. In these formations, homelands' memories continuously engage with hostlands' exigencies and realities, generating fluid and creative selves. In this regard, then, *The Glass Palace* does not merely retell a story of loss, but also highlights resilience, interconnectedness and the potential for creating belonging through dispersal and not rootedness.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace*, diaspora, transnationalism, hybrid identity, postcolonial literature, Indian diaspora, Burmese history, memory, colonialism, migration.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* is one of the most ambitious historical fictions in recent postcolonial literature. Covering over a century—between the British conquest of Mandalay in 1885 and the late twentieth-century political and cultural convulsions—the novel moves across the interwoven geographies of Burma, India, and Malaya. However, under its immense sweep of history is an intensely human narrative of individuals and families ensnared in the unstable crosscurrents of colonialism, displacement, and globalisation. Ghosh's story transcends great political histories to put the everyday lives of ordinary men and women—merchants, soldiers, servants, and royalty—at centre stage, whose lives are remade and remoulded by the vagaries of empire. Through these interlinked narratives, *The Glass Palace* explores belonging, identity, and the ephemeral nature of home.

The book masterfully charts the terrain of shifting diaspora and transnationalism, mapping how exile, migration, and the quest for stability yield novel kinship and hybrid identities. Ghosh's Indian, Burmese, and Sino-Indian characters live in between spaces that dissolve the lines between countries, cultures, and selves. This essay contends that in the transnational family, Ghosh sheds light on the way that identity is not fixed or essential, but a process of dynamic negotiation that occurs in the space between history and geography. The "glass palace" itself is a powerful metaphor for the fragility and porousness of identity—its ability to shatter under the stresses of empire, but refract light into many, simultaneous colours of belonging.

The diaspora, historically associated with the Jewish condition of exile, has been extended by theorists like Stuart Hall, James Clifford, and Avtar Brah to include a more general sense of displacement and cultural mixing. Diaspora, in this broader sense, is not merely dispersal from homeland but also the invention of new transnational forms of affiliation and

identity. As Clifford points out, life in diaspora is defined by "routes" as well as "roots," stressing ongoing travel, negotiation, and culture (Clifford 302). Similarly, Hall imagines cultural identity as a "production" rather than an essence—a continuous becoming created through difference and hybridity (Hall 225). Ghosh's novel illustrates this duality: its figures are not simply exiles, but makers of transnational belonging, themselves formed within what Steven Vertovec terms "transnational social fields," the lived realms linking origin and destination (Vertovec 447). *The Glass Palace* therefore moves beyond the classic tale of exile, substituting in its place a deeply nuanced examination of the ways memory, mobility, and kinship all come together to produce hybrid, adaptive selves within a globalized historical world.

The Political Economy of Diaspora: Trade, Labour, and the Foundations of Transnationalism

The central narrative driver of Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* is the coerced displacement of the Burmese royal family upon British annexation of Mandalay in 1885—a move that inaugurates a sweeping historical trajectory of colonial overlordship and transnational emigration. This banishment is the inaugural diasporic moment of the novel: the aggressive entry of empire that disrupts settled hierarchies and initiates the movement of individuals, capital, and ideas throughout South and Southeast Asia. However, the attention is soon diverted from the crumbled monarchy to the periphery of the empire—to the narrative of an Indian boy, Rajkumar, whose existence is a miniature representation of the larger economic and cultural changes that are constitutive of colonial modernity.

Rajkumar's trajectory of poverty to material success encapsulates Robin Cohen's definition of a "trade diaspora," a kind of migration defined by commercial mobility as opposed to exclusively political or religious exile (Global Diasporas 83–114). His transformation from

a destitute ghati (Indian worker) to a wealthy timber and rubber tycoon demonstrates how diasporic identity is necessarily bound up in the circuits of labour and capital that underpinned the colonial economy. Ghosh places Rajkumar's achievement in an exploitative system that is both empowering and alienating—ambivalence at the heart of the postcolonial diaspora. While on the one hand Rajkumar's work ethic and business skills allow him to overcome the constraints of race and class in colonial Burma, on the other his success is built upon entry into the very systems of empire that create displacement and inequality.

Rajkumar's identity is not based on any one national, cultural, or moral system. His "Indianness" is less an essence and more a trace of provenance. His sense of place develops relative to Burma's jungles, its labour market, and its inhabitants. Ghosh describes this entwinement in rich imagery of the teak trade: trees grown in Burmese soil are cut down by Indian workers, refined by Sino-Burmese businessmen, and resold to British companies that export to the world market. The economy is thus a metaphor for transnationalism itself—a network of flows that links several localities, languages, and histories. Rajkumar's identity, as much as the commodities he trades, travels along this imperial network. To this extent, he represents what James Clifford defines as the "travelling subject" of diaspora—a subject whose mobility and learning characterise selfhood over territorial stability ("Diasporas" 306).

The convergence of the economic and the intimate in Rajkumar's existence is also underscored by his marriage to Dolly, a past handmaiden of Queen Supayalat. This marriage unites two different but intersecting diasporic paths: the involuntary political exile of the Burmese monarchs and the voluntary, economically driven migration of Indian labourers and merchants. The marriage therefore materializes the convergence of two types of displacement—the pain of dispossession and the pragmatism of survival. Dolly, formerly in the palace, bears within herself the memory of a lost kingdom; Rajkumar, on the other hand, embodies the dynamic future of colonial business. Their affair between them is a symbol of

continuity as well as break—a cultural and emotional negotiation between two uprooted worlds.

In Rajkumar and Dolly's union, Ghosh stages the creation of what Avtar Brah describes as the "diaspora space," or "the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them' are contested" (*Cartographies of Diaspora* 208). Their home—neither entirely Burmese nor entirely Indian—lives in this space of liminality, indicative of identity's permeability in colonial society. The private sphere, once conceived as the arena of cultural purity, is instead a field of translation and hybridity. Their own children—Neel, Dinu, and their nameless daughter—are manifestations of this transnational legacy, each reacting to the conflict between memory and mobility in a different way.

Neel's schooling in India reveals the diasporic return's paradox: sent "home" to learn cultural roots, he finds that the home itself has been made strange. His yearning for Burma shows that diasporic consciousness's imagined home is more a site of memory than geography—a memory of belonging that cannot be regained. Dinu, who stays in Burma, comes close to having a spiritual closeness with the people and the land, but he is always branded a foreigner, an Indian in a country rapidly formed around ethnic closure. The divergent paths of the siblings highlight the fragmentation of diasporic identity over generations. Identity is not transmitted to them but is repeatedly negotiated—a perpetual back-and-forth between imagined homeland and lived hostland.

Marriage of the daughter into an Indian household brings the network even further, turning the Rajkumar-Dolly line into a thoroughly transnational family whose members are physically scattered but emotionally and historically tied. Their relationship is not based on co-residence or mutual citizenship but on memory, communication, and the exchange of stories. This way, Ghosh documents what Steven Vertovec describes as "transnational social fields"—

grounds of continuous interaction that connect migrants and their offspring across borders ("Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism" 447). The Rajkumar family is then a manifestation of transnational kinship, working within overlapping economies of affection, obligation, and exchange.

Uma Dey, yet another central character of *The Glass Palace*, carries Ghosh's reflection on hybridity and the spaces of intersection between gender, class, and diaspora. Uma, the wife of Beni Prasad Dey, an Indian Civil Service officer in Mandalay, presents herself first as a marginal colonial subject—a courtesan-like, obedient woman caged within the proprieties of imperial administration. However, her interaction with the Burmese ex-royals in their prison in Ratnagiri politicises her own consciousness and changes her outlook. Being close to Queen Supayalat and the princesses, Uma is a witness to the humiliation of colonial occupation and the common plight of colonised nations. It is a transformative experience: her fellow feeling for the Burmese exiles only increases her sense of India's own subjugation.

Uma's evolution from passive colonial wife to politicized nationalist demonstrates Ghosh's sophisticated comprehension of hybrid identity as translation, not assimilation. Her nationalism is not of the assertive, exclusionary variety that would come to characterize postcolonial politics; rather, it is an empathetic cosmopolitanism attuned to the interconnectivity of Asian struggles. Here, Uma foreshadows the transnational solidarities postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall understand to be constitutive of hybridity. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" is especially apt: Uma's identity is constructed in the space between colonial privilege and anti-colonial solidarity, between India and Burma, between tradition and modernity (*The Location of Culture* 56). Her later retreat into private life, lived in ascetic simplicity, is not retreat but reconciliation—a remaking of identity outside the polarities of colonizer and colonized, nationalist and foreigner.

In Rajkumar, Dolly, and Uma, Ghosh weaves a network of characters who live intersecting yet separate diasporic paths. Through their stories collectively, she shows that diaspora is as much a question of economic adaptation as emotional survival. The teak forests of Burma, the royal exile in Ratnagiri, and the nationalist fervour of colonial India all intersect in a complex political economy of migration and belonging. By foregrounding trade, labour, and kinship, Ghosh situates the origins of transnationalism not in abstract globalisation but in the lived experiences of ordinary people whose movements, alliances, and affections continually redraw the map of empire.

The Transnational Family as a Hybrid Network

It is in the family that Rajkumar constructs with Dolly that Amitav Ghosh most forcefully examines the idea of the transnational family as a hybridising crucible. It is not a family enclosed within one nation-state; its members are physically dispersed across colonial and postcolonial borders, yet held together by the unifying tissue of kinship, memory, and shared history. The identity of the family is its very transnationalism, its capacity to maintain emotional, cultural, and economic bonds across different geographies. In dramatizing this family, Ghosh enacts what Homi K. Bhabha terms the "Third Space"—that intermediate location where "cultural meanings and identities... have no primordial unity or fixity" but are constantly negotiated and hybridized (The Location of Culture 55).

Rajkumar and Dolly's union is, in essence, a marriage of histories—an economic migrant's drive combining with an exiled aristocrat's displacement. This combination results in a family whose social reality defies the triad of class, ethnicity, and geography. The family becomes, in Avtar Brah's words, a diaspora space—a place where differences between "us" and "them" are erased and identities are "contested and re-constituted" (Cartographies of Diaspora 208). The Rajkumar-Dolly clan, with its members spread over India, Burma, and then

Malaya, embodies James Clifford's "routes" of diasporic existence: a tendency toward movement and belonging based on both journeying and residence. They are a family not of roots, but of routes—their belonging articulated through motion, not place.

The intergenerational dynamic within the family intensifies the struggles of hybridity. Their sons, Neel and Dinu, reflect the contradictory paths open to second-generation diasporic subjects. Neel's return to India—envisioned by his parents as a return to cultural authenticity—discloses the contradiction of diasporic desire. The "home" to which he is sent is not inheritance but construction, a mythic homeland crafted from nostalgia and distance. Stuart Hall's observation that cultural identity is as much a matter of "becoming" as of "being" (Hall 225) is illustrated here: Neel's identity is formed less through origins than through the experience of exile. In India, he is a stranger, viewed from the position of his Burmese childhood. Alienation unmask the fantasy of a homeland without blemish, instead revealing that return to the diaspora is also displacement. Neel's self-arises out of in-between places—neither quite Indian nor Burmese but something other: a hybrid consciousness straddling multiplicity and not-belonging.

Dinu's is the other side of diaspora—attachment and not movement. Staying behind in Burma, Dinu becomes a photographer, trying to fix the textures of the country in his eye. His photography is a symbolic act of dwelling—an effort to inscribe himself onto the landscape, to convert his status as an outsider through artistic vision. Nonetheless, Dinu is "a local foreigner," and his belonging is always in doubt. When the Japanese invaded Burma during World War II, his vulnerability was brutally evident. Gazetted as an "enemy alien," Dinu is jailed not for what he did, but for who he was—a reminder that diasporic membership, however deeply affective, can be brutally denied by the state. His nationality is imposed from the outside, his hybridity made illegible in an era fixated on racial and political borders. Through Dinu, Ghosh highlights the vulnerability of hybrid identity during moments of crisis: cultural syncretism dissolves in

the face of war machinery, illustrating the continuance of exclusionary categories in an ostensibly globalized world.

Gender, Hybridity, and Political Consciousness

The figure of Uma Dey offers another deep aspect of Ghosh's consideration of hybridity—one tainted with gender and political awareness. A traditional colonial lady bound by decorum and domesticity in the beginning, Uma is transformed after meeting the exiled Burmese royalty in Ratnagiri. Her close friendship with Queen Supayalat and her maidservants, such as Dolly, makes for a rich process of effective translation. In their mutual experiences of constraint and loss, Uma inculcates a transnational empathy that goes beyond her immediate Indian context. This emotional cross-pollination is the genesis of her political consciousness.

Her experience of Burmese displacement rearranges her knowledge of India's own subordination. When she subsequently engages in the Indian independence movement, her nationalism is informed not by insularity but by solidarity—a sense that colonial domination is a transnational condition throughout Asia. As Elleke Boehmer points out, anti-colonial movements were frequently energised by "migrant metaphors," by solidarities that operated beyond the nation (Colonial and Postcolonial Literature 12). Uma's political awakening thereby illustrates the feminist and transnational turn of postcolonial discourse: she enunciates a mode of belonging based on empathy, mobility, and moral cosmopolitanism.

Uma's hybridity exists outside the colonial and nationalist dualities. In Bhabha's language, she exists in the "Third Space" between oppressor and the oppressed, between the privilege of the colonizer and the subaltern existence of the colonized woman. Her conversion—leading to a life of ascetic simplicity—is an overcoming of contradictions, a restoration to ethical universality. Ghosh employs Uma to propose that hybridity is not just cultural mixture but ethical extension, an imagination of community across borders and

hierarchies. Through her, the novel projects a cosmopolitan politics of care that transcends both imperial domination and postcolonial nationalism.

Catastrophe and Renewal: War as a Catalyst for Diasporic Reconfiguration

The Second World War's Japanese invasion of Burma is the novel's crucible of change—a historical catastrophe remapping the lines of family, nation, and identity. Under this collapse, Ghosh sheds his characters of their class trappings and reveals the naked exposure of the human condition. Rajkumar and Dolly's foot march back to India is an echo of the royal family's previous exile, repeating a cyclical pattern of displacement which characterizes the diasporic condition. The drama of millions of refugees trekking through jungles and mountains erases the lines between colonizer and colonized, elite and worker. Ghosh re-interprets the theoretical construct of diaspora as gut, flesh-and-blood experience in these scenes.

Identity here is translated into survival. The hybridity, education, and wealth of the family provide no immunity from hunger or loss. However, the journey also becomes a place of rebirth: through mutual suffering, a sense of kinship is formed—one not predicated on nationality, but on endurance. Ghosh's account thus conforms to Stuart Hall's notion of identity as a process of becoming, constantly reconstructed through trauma and adaptation. The refugees' procession is literal as well as symbolic—a journey toward a future where belonging will have to be reimagined.

While Dinu's incarceration and passion for Alison, a Japanese-American photographer, take the novel's geography from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Rim, Alison's own past of internment in the United States mirrors Dinu's imprisonment in Burma, tying their individual traumas together across continents. Their marriage constructs a microcosmic transnational family, conjoining histories of displacement across Asia and America. Their son—another Rajkumar—is Ghosh's ideal of a globalized world: a child of several parentages who bears

within him the entangled genealogies of empire, war, and migration. This "new" Rajkumar is not haunted by the loss of one homeland but rather by a global awareness in which hybridity ceases to be an oddity but becomes the norm. His identity is a palimpsest of intersecting histories, a celebration of what Hall refers to as "a matter of becoming" (225).

Memory in *The Glass Palace* operates as inheritance and invention—a bridge spanning separated generations in space and time. For the exiled Burmese monarchy in Ratnagiri, memory is a form of resistance. By upholding the myths, hierarchies, and rituals of a vanished kingdom, they establish what Hall terms a "practice of cultural identity" that "belongs to the future as much as to the past" (225). And so, too, for Dolly, remembrance of the Glass Palace and her time working for Queen Supayalat grounds her identity, even as she constructs a new life in colonial Burma.

But for the second and third generations—Neel, Dinu, and the younger Rajkumar—memory no longer is lived, but told. They inherit narratives instead of experience, making history myth. Homeland becomes, in Hall's words, "a place of imagination—a mythic place of desire" (224). This transgenerational narrative forms a diasporic continuity, an imagined community without geography. Memory is therefore a diasporic archive, preserving identity through narrative and not space. The Raha family's shared memory of exile, migration, and survival is its most lasting legacy.

Rebuking the Postcolonial Nation-State

Ghosh's handling of nationalism in *The Glass Palace* is strongly ambivalent. Although the novel recognizes the liberating potential of anti-colonial struggle, it also challenges the confining nature of the nation-state as a site for identification. -Arjun's tragic path as the idealistic Indian soldier enacts this critique. As a soldier in the British Indian Army, Arjun initially imagines nationalism as honour and moral obligation. But when he comes to

understand that he is fighting Asians to serve a European empire, it annihilates him. His disenchantment exposes the emptiness of nationalism based on imperial rationale.

Ghosh intimates that the contemporary nation, based on borders and exclusions, cannot hold the diasporic realities in fluidity. The transnational life of the family across India, Burma, Malaysia, and the United States is a counter-narrative to nationalist closure. The multiethnic parentage of the younger Rajkumar resists the passport, the census, and the law. In this regard, *The Glass Palace* is a precursor to the twenty-first-century state of deterritorialized identity, where belonging is mediated through networks and not nations.

Conclusion:

In the end, *The Glass Palace* presents a humanist redefinition of belonging in a globalized world. In its sprawling account of commerce, exile, war, and memory, the novel deconstructs home-exile and centre-periphery binaries. Its protagonists—Rajkumar, Dolly, Uma, Dinu, Arjun, and young Rajkumar—are themselves several kinds of hybrid: economic, cultural, and affective. They are not members of bounded nations but players in a nexus of relationality. Ghosh's vision confirms that identity is not one of purity or possession, but of relation—of being with and through difference.

The "glass palace" metaphor in the title makes clear that it is both transparent and fragile: it is something that refracts and reflects light, which is also how identity must be viewed through multiplicity. Ghosh's diasporic world is one of catastrophe and creation, of loss and renewal. It argues that the contemporary self is hybrid at essence, that geography is as much an imaginative act as home, and that human strength is best demonstrated by its ability to negotiate and communicate across the gleaming boundaries of history.

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