



# Reconstruction Of The Past In *The Glass Palace* By Amitav Ghosh Through The Stories Of Unnoticed Multitude

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*The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh reconstructs the past of the lesser-known and less-talked-of characters at historically critical junctures which include the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885, the industrialisation of Upper Burma following the collapse of the Konbaung dynasty, the Second World War and the formation of INA. *The Glass Palace* details, delays and meaningfully presents the stories of common but indispensable masses who witnessed and experienced these historical events through characters like immigrant labourer Rajkumar who migrated from Arakan to Mandalay for survival, Uma traversing the journey from a subservient wife of a Collector, Beni Prasad Dey to becoming a zealous freedom fighter and Arjun of the British army who faced the tremendous dilemma and self-doubt in quitting and joining INA. The novel brings these ordinary characters alive from oblivion and organically weaves their individual stories with the main events. Through the mundane lives of these characters, the book depicts how the political, social, and personal stories were entwined and were as critical as the politico-social incidents themselves. The individual stories unfold and reconstruct the following major historical aspects of the times through the lives of these ordinary beings :

In the novel, the life of an ordinary impoverished immigrant Rajkumar is brought to the fore and has been pitched against the backdrop of significant happenings of the past including the first wave of migration in the late 19th century from India to Burma, the rapid deforestation of Upper Burma, the commercialisation of teak wood

following the downfall of the Konbaung dynasty in 1885 and the exodus of Indians from Burma in 1942 following the communal clashes and war. The novel reconstructs the historical past through Rajkumar's journey of grit and perseverance to keep himself alive and thriving as an orphan and an immigrant of 11 years, striving for survival. It further highlights the role of an ordinary orphaned boy like Rajkumar in escalating the advent of Indian immigrants to Burma during the 1870s, as he used to travel down to Madras, India, and lured the poor farmers and labourers into making huge profits in the Golden land Burma. In his pursuit of buying a timberyard and becoming wealthy, he relentlessly transported Indian labourers to Burma to work in foreign oil companies where cheap labour was needed. The novel emphasises Rajkumar's ascent to becoming a wealthy and affluent person in Rangoon after he bags the tender for the supply of sleepers in Chota Nagpur Railway Company around the rapid commercialisation of timber taking place in Burma at the time.

Furthermore, during the hopeless times of war and communal disharmony, erupting intermittently in Burma in the late 1930s, Rajkumar's determination to continue living in Burma despite hostile conditions towards Indians brings into picture the difficulties the economically strong immigrants would have faced and the myriad ways they could have resisted the imminent threat of violence and destruction. By acquainting readers with the life of Rajkumar, the novel establishes the unnoticed yet vital characters like Indian immigrants settled in Burma, or ordinary men who had utilised the economic opportunities like the British-led commercialisation of timber and digging of oil fields in Burma to climb up the social ladder and those who actively participated with those past incidents, acted as catalysts and impacted the situation from their place and were not just passive recipients of the history.

Moving ahead with another character Uma, her life canvasses her journey as the wife of Collector Beni Prasad Dey who served under the British with extreme diligence and loyalty, then as a liberated widow exploring both international and national socio-political scenario of the times through her association with the Indian Independence League, Indian National Congress and then the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi (in the 1930s, after she witnessed the communal clashes in Burma). Her life brings to the surface the way human interactions can shape and impact each other's opinions and viewpoints towards life. In her interactions and relationship with her husband, she is shown to have learnt to live a disciplined and purposeful life, despite feeling agonised due to his

rigidness in observing etiquette, manners, and cultural norms. Through her friendship with Dolly, she discovered herself and learnt not to accept the status quo, the narratives passed on through the colonists like her perception of the Queen of England as a benevolent ruler. She gained courage and learnt about the sufferings of human beings in conditions like the way Dolly lived as a maid at Outram House in Ratnagiri with the exiled Burmese royal family. These deep and meaningful interactions influenced her outlook towards her own life and the British later. She realised that the British had been subjugating the people of India and exploiting the resources against the popular belief that they protected India, bringing social reforms and development to the country. These interactions helped her rise from being an obedient housewife to a woman who believed that she could contribute immensely to India's freedom struggle from overseas. She later became a key figure and proponent of the Independence movement.

The story of another crucial character Arjun depicted in the backdrop of INA's formation, the defection of Indian soldiers and officer rank army men in the British army and the the struggle and failure of INA in 1945. The facts about the formation of INA under the leadership of Mohan Singh in 1942, its revival under SC Bose, and the defection of Indian officer rank and soldiers to INA are quite well-known and documented in most official history books. However, there are diverse stories of the individuals who joined INA or quit the British Army, which are still hidden from the popular discourse but are equally worthy of being known and analysed.

Such a discrete story is depicted in the novel through the characters of Lieutenant Arjun, Batman Kishan Singh and Hardy of the British Indian army. The novel unravels the constant dilemma, self-doubt, tremendous agony and pain Arjun faced before deciding to quit the British Army and fight for India's independence. (social stigma and discrimination too). Arjun is the most critical character who seemingly appears like a regular educated easy-going, extremely dutiful and loyal Indian lieutenant recruited in the British army. But as the story unfolds, the ordinary boy from Calcutta extremely confident and assured of the British rule in India, starts questioning his opinions of the foreign rule, eventually defecting to the INA and fighting against the British army until his last breath.

On one hand, they faced persistent racial discrimination at restaurants, bars, railways, swimming pools and even in terms of payment and treatment. On the other hand, the disastrous defeat of the British army by the Japanese at various places in Malay like Jitra, at Batu Pahat had severely wounded their morale and shattered their faith in the British. Despite these setbacks, Arjun did not become disloyal to the British, or develop strong feelings of nationalism overnight. He felt the British had betrayed them by not arming them with the right artillery, weapons, tanks and jungle training to fight against the Japanese and acknowledged that they were not supreme power. The consequent incidents of attending propaganda sessions, and Colonel Buckland calling him out a traitor and turncoat and that he will be hunted and hanged gave him clarity and mental strength to identify reasons to desert the British army and fight for the independence cause. Through his recruitment in the INA, the rare facets of the sufferings of the soldiers are also revealed, like the contempt of Tamil labourers towards the Indian soldiers and the starvation, neglect of medical care and diseases that the INA recruits suffered towards the end of the Second World War, in the Battle of Imphal-Kohima at Burma border during 1944-1945.

### **Conclusion:**

The novel reconstructs the historically vital past by envisioning the times through the lives, trials, tribulations and perspectives of common masses/ordinary people, as the people who eventually determined and created the popular social and cultural norms and impacted the collective conscience. These stories of people's engagement and reaction to past incidents help us connect the missing dots between the politically and historically significant events represented hitherto only by the well-known historical personalities of the times. The mundane characters like Rajkumar, Uma, Dolly and Arjun yanked out of oblivion in this book are instrumental in envisioning the past in a more humane and individual-centric manner rather than passing them on as simply a collective and homogenous unit of chronological facts and events. The portrayal of these people's emotions and reactions to those situations helps one understand the way society and human lives are shaped in such times. It establishes the stories of high-spiritedness and resilience of poor immigrants, the wronged ones and the survivors who strived to live against all odds.

It also revives the innumerable moments of hope, triumph, struggle, survival for existence, sorrow and suffering that the masses of the time went through that determined their future collectively and individually.

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