



# AFTER EMPIRE: DISCIPLINE, AFFECT AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF LOYALTY IN THE GLASS PALACE

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**Abstract:** Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000), set in late colonial Burma during the upheavals of World War II, has frequently been viewed through the prism of nationalist awakening, with Arjun's trajectory interpreted as a move from imperial devotion to anti-colonial conscience. Such interpretations, however, tend to prioritise intellectual transition while ignoring the institutional and emotional roots of his previous loyalty. To fill this gap, the current study examines how Arjun's loyalty is fostered by military discipline and maintained by affective attachment. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies, the study contends that Arjun's affiliation with the British Empire is influenced by professional ethos, institutional regulation, and an emotional stake in honour and recognition. His wartime disillusionment is thus interpreted not as a sudden ideological conversion, but as the collapse of a disciplinary-affective framework that had organised his sense of self. This work contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship by focusing on the formation and destabilisation of colonial-military subjectivity, providing a more nuanced understanding of imperial devotion and its fragility.

**Keywords:** Imperial loyalty; Military discipline; Affective attachment; Colonial subjectivity; Nationalism

## INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* has been positioned amid larger discussions about postcolonial historiography and the narrative reconstruction of empire. By emphasising marginalised regions and dislocated lives, Elleke Boehmer interprets Ghosh's historical fiction as a component of a broader postcolonial endeavour to reorganise imperial archives. According to this viewpoint, *The Glass Palace* takes part in what Boehmer describes as a revisionist endeavour that undermines metropolitan authority by recounting colonial experience from peripheral perspectives. In a similar vein, Suvir Kaul's work on imperial modernity highlights the ways in which colonial frameworks generate forms of subjectivity, governance, and knowledge that endure outside of official governmental control. Kaul's focus on the institutional underpinnings of empire offers a helpful framework for comprehending how colonial power affects both human consciousness and regions.

Mobility and diasporic formation in Ghosh's literature have also drawn critical attention. His protagonists frequently inhabit precarious areas between belonging and displacement, according to Tabish Khair, who places Ghosh within a transnational literary tradition concerned with migration across imperial circuits. This particular text is commonly seen under this interpretive framework as a story of circulation of wealth, labour, and tea; in which migration and commercial entanglement shape identity. In her more general writings on Indian English historical fiction, Meenakshi Mukherjee highlights the conflict between national historiography and narrative memory, arguing that these works frequently balance individual experience with societal political change. Although these critical comments shed light on the novel's historical breadth, diasporic reach, and postcolonial revisionism, they frequently overlook

the micro-mechanisms that result in individual devotion in favour of major thematic issues like empire, displacement, and nationalism. Specifically, theories of colonial ambivalence or nationalist reorientation have frequently encompassed Arjun's journey, with a focus on his ultimate alienation from British authority. How his allegiance is formed through the disciplinary practices of military training and maintained through effective investments in professional honour, recognition, and institutional belonging is yet largely unexplored. By focusing on the creation and destabilisation of colonial-military subjectivity rather than ideological conversion, this paper addresses that gap. It proposes that Arjun's wartime disillusionment signifies not only a nationalist awakening but also the breakdown of a disciplinary-affective structure that had controlled both his behaviour and his emotional orientation toward empire, drawing on Michel Foucault's description of disciplinary power and Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies.

### **Colonial Military Discipline and the Making of Arjun**

In Part VI, "The Front," where the book clearly shifts to the Second World War theatrics, Arjun truly enters the story (Ghosh 327). This is an important structural placement. The reader has already seen the collapse of the Burmese monarchy, the growth of colonial trade, and the cementing of imperial networks throughout Southeast Asia by the time the story reaches the war. Arjun's story arrives at a time when imperial power seems to be universally established and administratively stable, rather than at the start of empire. As a result, his identity is constructed within an established imperial order that is upheld by institutions, protocols, and hierarchies rather than in the chaos of invasion. The importance of rank is highlighted when Arjun is inducted as an officer in the British Indian Army. He is part of an organised hierarchy that bestows prestige and recognition, thus he does more than just serve. He is given a professional identity by the army that seems modern, logical, and meritocratic. Arjun's environment is characterised by discipline, training, and institutional clarity, in contrast to Rajkumar's fluid commercial opportunism or the Burmese court's sentimental allegiance. The military assigns value based on rank and performance; it controls the body through drills and routines; and it arranges time, space, and behaviour. Obedience is a sign of expertise rather than humiliation in this setting. As the cornerstone of his self-respect, Arjun internalises this code.

Arjun's stance toward nationalism demonstrates the significance of discipline in his development. In his view, political agitation is unpredictable and emotive, but the army stands for order. His loyalty to the British command structure stems more from his professional ethos than from his ideological beliefs. Being a competent officer means putting institutional command ahead of personal impulse. This alignment between disciplined obedience and self-worth reflects exactly the type of subject formation described by Michel Foucault in his account of contemporary disciplinary power: institutions create subjects who regulate themselves in accordance with institutional norms rather than just externally constraining individuals. This internalisation is demonstrated by Arjun's delight in his uniform. The uniform is an embodied symbol of belonging rather than a surface-level indication. It sets him apart from civilians and places him within a worldwide imperial apparatus. In addition to being apparent to others, the authority he gains from it restructures his own self-perception. The military instills a sense of accuracy and moderation through drills, inspections, and codes of conduct. The body learns to react to commands automatically. Such training emphasises efficiency and lessens hesitancy. Discipline eventually stops feeling forced and instead comes to be associated with moral rectitude.

The affective component that goes along with this disciplinary formation is what sets Arjun's loyalty apart from just compliance. His emotional investments, pride in his abilities, contentment at being acknowledged, and faith in the coherence of the organization, maintain his loyalty to the British Army. In an otherwise unstable colonial environment, the army provides stability. While migrants and merchants have to deal with shifting allegiances and volatile markets, the officer's identity seems stable. This security is strengthened by recognition from superiors and camaraderie among fellow officers. Arjun is bound to the military institution by the emotional benefits of belonging, such as a sense of purpose, fraternity, and esteem.

In Arjun's situation, imperial devotion cannot be reduced to mimicry or false consciousness because of this affective commitment. He occupies a position that gives him structured dignity rather than merely mimicking British authority. He starts interpreting modernity primarily through the army. Rather than being particularly imperial constructions, professionalism, logical command, and bureaucratic efficiency seem to be universal values. Colonial power is depoliticised and naturalised as a result of this normalisation. Thus, rather than being rooted in national identity, Arjun's sense of self is rooted in institutional continuity. Additionally, the British Indian Army serves as a bridge between the

metropole and the colony. It upholds racial hierarchies while integrating Indian officers under colonial authority. A precisely calibrated sensation of inclusion is created by Arjun's place within this system. Despite being given responsibility, he nonetheless submits to British authority. Aspiration is reinforced by this partial inclusion: progress is contingent upon sustained performance and loyalty. As a result, the organization maintains both compliance and aspiration. Incremental acknowledgement is a reward for loyalty, and recognition strengthens attachment.

Arjun's early faith in imperial stability doesn't seem naive or coincidental in this context. It is the result of a system intended to produce officers who are dependable and disciplined. His confidence in the army's institutional cohesiveness is inextricably linked to his faith in British leadership. Loyalty seems reasonable and justifiable as long as that coherence is maintained. The ability of the disciplinary framework to make loyalty obvious is what makes it so successful. For Arjun, empire is the lived reality of organised authority rather than an abstract political structure. The story encourages a reevaluation of imperial loyalty as structurally generated rather than merely chosen by emphasising this disciplinary construction. At the beginning of the wartime portions, Arjun's identity serves as an example of how the empire rules through institutions that match duty with dignity and behaviour with passion.

### **Affective Attachment and the Emotional Infrastructure of Empire**

It is as important to look at how that commitment is maintained emotionally. The wartime chapters of the text demonstrate how Arjun's loyalty to the British Empire is maintained via a precisely calibrated emotional economy that balances affective reward with professional identity. Confidence in the moral consistency of imperial order characterises Arjun's early self-perception as an officer. The army gives him a sense of self-worth in addition to a job. His belief in hierarchy, efficiency, and leadership stems from the fact that these systems have given him recognition rather than from intellectual indoctrination. In a colonial system that was racially stratified, his status as an officer places him above the uncertainties of civilians and gives him distinction. This differentiation is important because it provides emotional fulfilment. He takes satisfaction in his ability as well as his involvement in what seems to be a stable, logical order. Here, Sara Ahmed's theory of "affective economies" is useful. Ahmed contends that emotions circulate between bodies and things, tying persons to institutions and social structures rather than existing privately within subjects. For Arjun, pride is associated with rank, the uniform, and professional discipline. These items; uniforms, insignia, and command structures, become emotionally charged. They create devotion to the imperial system that permits them, rather than just serving as a symbol of authority.

Arjun's faith in the British military establishment before its demise is emphasised several times in the book. His respect for the British command's professionalism is a sign of trust rather than imitation. In contrast to what he sees as the instability of civilian political movements, he feels that the army stands for discipline. Professionalism's rhetoric; efficiency, discipline, and reason, becomes emotionally comforting. In this way, his allegiance functions through a combination of sentiment and structure: the army feels orderly, which makes it seem ethically acceptable. This emotional harmony was disrupted by the Japanese invasion of Burma. The initial break is emotive rather than doctrinal as British forces start to withdraw and command structures break down. Confusion, retreat, and the abrupt loss of imperial assurance are all visible to him. The invincibility that supported his faith starts to erode. The breakdown of the emotional framework that supported his sense of identity is more shocking than just a military defeat.

The way embarrassment and shame start to spread instead of pride is what makes this moment noteworthy. According to Ahmed's concept, emotions can realign collective identity once they "stick" to signals and objects. This kind of reorientation is exactly what the retreat achieves. The same outfit that formerly stood for honour is today connected to weakness and desertion. The army's withdrawal from Burma indicates the weakness of imperial authority in addition to tactical realignment. Doubt replaces recognition. The reason this emotional collapse is so unstable is made clear by Foucault's explanation of discipline. Institutional breakdown results in both political catastrophe and psychic disorientation if disciplinary power operates by internalising norms within subjects. Expectations of coherence had governed Arjun's behaviour: hierarchy would uphold clarity, superiors would deliver commands, and instructions would be given. The internalised order that shaped Arjun's self-concept loses credibility when command seems unsure and British officers show reluctance. He faces a discrepancy between the seeming weakness of its representatives and the institutional ideal he had internalised.

The novel's wartime chapters highlight this break by depicting the retreat as chaotic and morally troubling. Rumours spread and strategic clarity fades, leaving Indian officers unsure of British objectives. As Arjun witnesses desertion and inconsistency, his faith in imperial rule wanes. The emotional connection that formerly connected pride to dominion starts to break. Crucially, this split does not result in a nationalist awakening right away. Rather, Arjun feels lost. The INA emerges as an alternative framework that can only be considered if imperial authority loses its emotive grip, rather than as an intellectual necessity. In the void left by the breakdown of disciplinary coherence, nationalism emerges as a possibility. Therefore, emotional instability takes precedence over the shift.

The order of transformation is what sets this perspective apart from traditional interpretations of ideological conversion. Political realignment comes after the effective rupture. Before any official reorientation takes place, Arjun's confidence starts to decline. The emotional fulfilment that had maintained devotion is undermined by the breakdown of recognition, his decreased faith in British leadership. Discipline becomes nothing without acknowledgement. Obedience is nothing without pride. Thus, the narrative implies that the empire rules by effective reward in addition to force. A type of emotional currency is the circulation of institutional recognition. The value of that currency is maintained while the British Army seems to be stable and effective. The emotional economy implodes when it fails. When the emotional circumstances that supported his loyalty disappear, it cannot last.

Arjun's predicament also highlights how vulnerable colonial-military subjectivity is in times of international conflict. He had been trained for battle, but not for the spectacle of an imperial retreat. His identity was shaped by a discipline that required continuity. Discontinuity is revealed by war. His emotional attachment was largely based on the army's coherence, which included its structure, predictability, and logical authority. The institutional object of attachment becomes unstable when coherence breaks down. By emphasising emotional infrastructure, *The Glass Palace* challenges nationalist awakening mythologies through this development. Arjun's metamorphosis is more a response to the breakdown of an emotional-institutional alignment than an embracing of anti-colonial ideology. His allegiance had been based on trust, rank, and acknowledgement. He faces the frailty of a self structure around imperial order when those anchoring come loose.

It is possible to view Arjun as a figure whose identity depends on the stability of institutional and emotional systems rather than just a passive victim of colonial ideology or as a sudden nationalist convert by combining Ahmed's description of affective circulation with Foucault's emphasis on disciplinary subject formation. The wartime rupture reveals how the empire maintains loyalty through coordinated control over behaviour and emotion, and how swiftly loyalty may break down when those systems fail. Thus, rather than being solely intellectual, the novel reframes imperial loyalty as emotionally mediated and structurally produced. Arjun's disenchantment signifies the breakdown of a disciplinary-affective framework that previously associated recognition with service and pride with compliance. Therefore, the following phase of study needs to take into account how this destabilisation creates room for reorientation and if that reorientation is recovery, substitution, or just another type of organised allegiance.

### **Rupture, Substitution, and Residual Instability**

The institutional unity that had supported Arjun's affiliation with the British Empire was severely disrupted by the Japanese invasion of Burma. The confidence that previously drove imperial duty starts to crumble when the story shifts to the battlefield. However, this disintegration goes beyond a straightforward ideological flip. Rather, his path passes through three interconnected phases: an initial lack of authority, a subsequent replacement of structure, and a persistent instability that defies full resolution. Rupture is the hallmark of the first stage. The British withdrawal from Burma upends the disciplinary system that had shaped Arjun's self-concept and reveals the weakness of imperial authority. The army, which once seemed like a logical and unbeatable organization, now appears erratic and reactionary. This moment causes confusion for an officer whose identity is rooted in hierarchical trust and procedural clarity. Both strategic confidence and the emotional legitimacy that was previously associated with imperial service are compromised by the breakdown of authority. Doubt replaces pride, and recognition becomes shaky. According to Foucault, the institutional framework that created a military subject capable of self-regulation breaks down. Arjun faces what could be called a transient void of power, a suspension when his identity's disciplinary coordinates are no longer in line with seeming authority.

It is argued that Arjun cannot stay in this vacuum for very long. Because of his training in military discipline, structural coherence is now required rather than desirable. His discomfort during retreat is more a result of the intolerable breakdown of institutions than of his anti-colonial beliefs. His professional identity becomes disoriented in the absence of structure and certain authority. Therefore, the crisis is structural before it is ideological. This is the context in which the Indian National Army emerged. The INA is portrayed as an organised military organization that promises new cohesion rather than as an ethereal nationalist ideal. It provides command, hierarchy, rank, and collective discipline, formal characteristics similar to those of the British Indian Army, but with a focus on nationalist goals. Arjun's use of this alternative shows the enduring nature of disciplined subjectivity rather than a sign of freedom from discipline. He is drawn to an organization that can bring order and dignity back into harmony because he was raised under a system that does just that.

This connection is made clear by Michel Foucault's study of disciplinary power. Subjects that are disciplined internalise rules and look for organised settings where standards are still understandable. The disciplined subject does not disintegrate when the imperial institution fails; instead, he looks for reattachment. This kind of reattachment is exactly what the INA offers. Its attraction stems not just from its anti-colonial rhetoric but also from its capacity to reconstruct a framework that allows professional identity to be stabilised and obedience to regain significance. This shift is further clarified by Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economics. Subjects are bound to institutional structures via the circulation of emotions around collective objects. During the early stages of Arjun's career, pride was attached to imperial symbols and hierarchies. That pride separates and is accessible for redistribution when British authority declines. A new location for affective investment is the INA. Acknowledgement, unity, and purpose are reattached to nationalist emblems and group goals. Once focused on the empire, the emotional energy shifts rather than vanishes. The target of attachment, not the attachment mechanism itself, is what shifts.

However, substitution does not result in smooth continuity. Arjun's loyalty is contingent, as evidenced by the fact that it can change. The nationalist framework is unable to completely eliminate the residual instability caused by the rupture that occurred during the retreat. Instead of victorious assurance, his reorientation is characterised by hesitancy and introspection. An awareness of historical fragility remains as a result of the fracture caused by imperial collapse. The legacy of institutional failure persists even in a reconstructed system. Any story of simple nationalist fulfilment is complicated by this lingering instability. Arjun's journey toward the INA is not portrayed in the book as a teleological arrival at true selfhood. Rather, it implies that disciplined subjectivity retains remnants of its imperial origins. Within nationalist alignment, the routines, expectations, and reflexes developed under British rule continue to exist. According to this theory, decolonisation reorganises disciplinary institutions rather than eliminating them.

The story thus undergoes a multi-layered change via Arjun's journey: rupture discloses the brittleness of imperial authority; substitution shows the resilience of disciplined subjectivity; and residual instability illustrates the boundaries of structural replacement. Loyalty has historically been dependent on institutional coherence and affective circulation rather than being natural or permanent. However, the disciplined self created by colonial modernity does not disappear with imperial retreat; rather, it looks for new frameworks that allow for the maintenance of dignity and order. Reductive explanations of ideological conversion are complicated by the novel's combination of vacuum, substitution, and persistent fracture. Arjun does not merely become aware of nationalist reality or be in a state of perpetual disillusionment. Rather, he turns into a character that the text uses to examine how people created within the empire deal with structural failure and reattachment. The novel's wider insight, that the mechanisms by which contemporary authority organises behaviour and emotion do not inevitably collapse with the end of imperial sovereignty, is highlighted by the discipline's persistence during political transition.

## Conclusion

This work re-examined Arjun's trajectory in *The Glass Palace* as a problem of organised subjectivity rather than political awakening by moving the focus from ideological conversion to institutional and emotional construction. His devotion to the British Empire comes from disciplinary training and an emotional commitment to institutional coherence and professional recognition rather than from an abstract conviction. These coordinates become unstable when British authority collapses during a conflict, creating a brief void that highlights the brittleness of imperial loyalty. However, the book avoids portraying this break as a release. Rather, Arjun's later support for nationalist forces demonstrates how disciplined subjectivity lives through political change: the grammar of discipline

remains constant, but the object of loyalty changes. The institutions that modern authority uses to organise behaviour and emotion are not destroyed by the loss of imperial rule; rather, they are reconfigured. Thus, Arjun's dilemma sheds light on the persistent nature and flexibility of colonial-military identity, implying that allegiance in modernity is maintained more by the institutional and emotive frameworks that give it coherence than by conviction.

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