



# Manifestation of Collective Memory in *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh

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## Abstract

*The collective memory of the past is a potent tool that goes beyond bringing conscious behavioural changes at an individual level, instead, it gradually consolidates into cultural and social conscience at a massive level. The Glass Palace by Amitav Ghosh lucidly portrays this enormity of collective memory of crucial past incidents starting from the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885 to the resurgence of democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi in 1996. These historical memories that collectively shape the political future of the citizens in Burma and India impact each individual differently by apparently benefiting some while adversely affecting others. For instance, Queen Supalayay embeds the memories of the deceit and conspiracy of Britishers to usurp King Thebaw's Glass Palace in Burma in 1885 while people like Rajkumar, elephant caretakers, and teakwood businessmen like Saya John who were involved in the British-led commercialisation of timber in Burma, remain less perturbed and see the event as a blessing in disguise that allowed them to mint unhindered profits in their businesses. Nevertheless, the memories of promises of progress and subjugation by colonisers in the Indian subcontinent become implicit collective memories of the masses that unravel in multiple ways in the novel as manifested by the distinct journeys of various characters. This research paper attempts to analyse and shed light on the cognition and assimilation of entangled shared collective memory among the 19th and 20th-century masses living in the Indian subcontinent through the journey of characters in this novel.*

**Keywords:** collective memory, glass palace, ghosh, characters

## Introduction

The collective memory of the past is a potent tool that goes beyond bringing conscious behavioural changes at an individual level, instead, it gradually consolidates into cultural and social conscience at a massive level. The *Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh lucidly portrays this enormity of collective memory of crucial past incidents starting from the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885 to the resurgence of democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi in 1996. These historical memories that collectively shape the political future of the citizens in Burma and India impact each individual differently by apparently benefiting some while adversely affecting others. For instance, Queen Supalayay embeds the memories of the deceit and conspiracy of Britishers to usurp King Thebaw's *Glass Palace* in Burma in 1885

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Nevertheless, the memories of promises of progress and subjugation by colonisers in the Indian subcontinent become implicit collective memories of the masses that unravel in multiple ways in the novel, as manifested by the distinct journeys of various characters. This research paper attempts to analyse and shed light on the cognition and assimilation of entangled shared collective memory among the 19th and 20th-century masses living in the Indian subcontinent through the journey of characters in this novel. What could result in an inchoate mass of entangled collective memory in



the conscience of the masses? It is when diverse backgrounds of people undergo similar experiences at the same point in history but recollect it through their respective position and vision. In the words of Israeli professor emeritus and philosopher Avishai Margalit, the shared collective memory brings together and calibrates the different perspectives of the individuals remembering a certain past incident into a single version 24.

### Literature Review

This study has been carried out by closely examining the manifestation of such memory patterns in the novel *The Glass Palace* in the occurrences of the lives of characters Rajkumar, Dolly, Uma and Arjun who respond to critical situations of migration in the dire conditions, exile after annexation of Burma, commercialisation in colonised countries, changing notions of nationalism based on their life's journeys only to converge at some point entangled by a collective knot of memory of certain remembrances about the past.

Besides, the manifestation of shared collective memory in the novel has been studied in the light of contemporary memory studies of American historian Michael Rothberg as discussed in his book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation* (2009). Kristina Norman, an Estonian filmmaker also vividly brings out the issues of human rights violation in her video art that looks for memories of violent past for potential for solidarity and justice. Eneken Laanes explains in *Entangled Memories In Video art:Space, Visual Frame, Politics of Art* about Norman's video art which shows how space can trigger a certain memory and role of discursive norms and visual frames in asymmetrical recognition of memories.

### Convergence of Memories in *The Glass Palace* at Historical Junctures

The novel *The Glass Palace*, a work of historical fiction, takes the readers through historical happenings as it unfolds in the everyday life of ordinary individuals and shapes them and an entire society in the due course towards transformations and changed perceptions. The web of entangled collective memory can be studied in this work of fiction through three important issues dealt with extensively in the novel, which are the following:

- Realisation and Understanding of allegiance and sovereignty among the masses
- Perception about colonisation and disillusionment
- Exile and migration

### Realisation and Understanding of Allegiance and Sovereignty among the Masses

The novel unravels the unsettling collective memory and underlying bitterness of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the subjugation of Britishers in the Indian Rebellion through the recollection and remembrance of the incident by characters like Batman Kishan Singh and Hardayal Singh or Hardy of North India<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, the novel lucidly narrates how the understanding of the evils of colonisation and allegiance was not uniform among the Indian soldiers serving the British Army. For instance, Hardy and Kishan Singh are shown to have inherited vague memories of the 1857 rebellion from the recount of their ancestors; others like Arjun of Kolkata have neither knowledge of any such incident nor agree to the ideology of the dissenters and the opinion of his aunt Uma against the colonisers<sup>3</sup>. Instead, Arjun is shown to be quite proud of serving the British army and looks upon them as the civilised, responsible and protective guardians of colonised Asian countries<sup>4</sup>. Surprisingly, the turn of events with the soldiers' posting in Malay and Singapore brings them all closer to their subdued collective memory and conscience that they had been passed down from earlier generations but never experienced themselves<sup>5</sup>.

The incidents of sheer discrimination and condescension towards the Indians and Indian soldiers in these countries jolted them up. Instances of being called mercenaries, coolies and restrictions to Indians at public places like restaurants, beaches and trains opened up their eyes and left them restless and perturbed about their status quo, and of being exploited and oppressed by Britishers for their expansion and conquest<sup>6</sup>. At this moment, the dormant and entangled memories of simmering displeasure against the Britishers learnt and passed down from the ordinary people and ancestors felt true to them and ignited a sense of dignity. However, the reaction to this situation manifests differently in Arjun, Kishan Singh and Hardy based on their perception of the 1857 rebellion and their



prior knowledge of it. Hardy, whose ancestors had served the British army for two generations, was more sensitive towards the discriminatory treatment and prejudice of the British against Indian soldiers, and thus he made up his mind to defect from the British promptly and firmly soon after the defeat at Malay<sup>7</sup>. Arjun, on the contrary, vaguely knows and remembers the 1857 rebellion from the accounts of Kishan Singh and Colonel Buckland and was the first in his family to join the British army, so it took him much contemplation and time to come to realise his true place in political scheme of things and defecting to INA<sup>8</sup>. This together with the fierce bombing by Japanese squads, ongoing army uprising of INA, recurring protests being raised for awakening and awareness of the people, and the ideological disagreements and conflicts happening in the British army triggered the soldiers to dissociate and detach themselves from the British power and understand their true allegiance and reject the sovereignty of Britishers as mere colonisers and oppressors, from whom they need to be freed<sup>9</sup>.

### **Perception about Colonisation and Disillusionment**

Just like the Indian soldiers' realisation of allegiance, the perception of colonisation among the general masses was not homogenous and some favoured and supported the colonisers while others protested against them, for different reasons and depending on their position in life. Like Queen Supalayath and the King of Burma, characters detested the colonisers for overthrowing them from their kingdoms and displacing them from their land <sup>10</sup>. Collector Beni Prasad Dey's wife, Uma, however, traverses a different journey to opposing British rule through her several encounters with Dolly and the Burmese King and Queen about the corruption of the colonisers and eventually becomes proactive and fully involved in working in Indian Independence League in the US and participating in protests and spreading awareness against the evils of British rule<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, the Collector serving the Indian Civil Service had an esteemed opinion about the colonisers, considered them as his teachers and believed that they were on a mission to reform the colonised countries<sup>12</sup>. At the same time, Rajkumar and Saya John viewed the coloniser's complete rule as a favourable opportunity to flourish their businesses and Rajkumar's son, Dinu fully understood and knew that the British were

imperialists oppressing people, but considered them lesser an evil than Germany, Japan and Italy which were more tyrannical and grotesque in his opinion<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, the majority of the characters do come to a common point of realisation through the entangled web of collective memories about the scourge of British rule and openly oppose the British rule as a result of the ravaging Second World War and the destruction caused due to the attack of Japan on Burma and Malay. Dinu and Rajkumar are left disillusioned, particularly about their opinions about colonisation, after witnessing unprecedented violence, loss of life and destruction of property in the war. The characters traverse their respective journeys with varied paths, with their diverse and entangled personal and collective memories about the political and social scenario, but at last, do converge to realise the common truth of subjugation and colonisation after undergoing suffering and losing much<sup>14</sup>.

### **Exile and Migration**

Even the concepts of migration are not alike for every migrant, as some migrated willingly while others due to war, riots and exile. However, the diverse memories from diverse experiences resulting from various modes of migration are all tied to a familiar and collective feeling of unease, losing one's roots and going through difficult conditions of adaptation. If Rajkumar's journey of migrating as a young orphaned boy from Arakan to Mandalay is full of hope and high-spiritedness, his struggle to become an affluent person in a foreign land is as inspiring<sup>15</sup>. Dolly's departure from her native land at the age of 6 or 7 appears despairing, and even the Burmese empire and her struggle to adapt to new ways and culture are depicted as forcefully imposed conditions, yet the exiled people got accustomed to instinctively sustaining life<sup>16</sup>. Standing out from these modes of migration is the exodus of Indians from Burma in the wake of Japanese attacks and local clashes in 1942, which is the most pitiful and distressing of all, with people being forced out of the country in the most deplorable way<sup>17</sup>. The painful memories of leaving one's country due to force or one's compulsion, however, resonates with all these characters who underwent a certain degree of pain, angst, difficulty in acceptance and adaptation in a foreign land that revive the collective memories,



that lay at the core of the existence of all the first generation immigrants living in Burma.

### **Insights Gained from the Study vis a vis Findings of Contemporary Memory Studies**

One can find the reverberation of the memory patterns of the novel in the modern-day study of memories as well. Michael Rothberg, an American historian and literature and memory studies scholar, elucidates in his book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation* (2009) about how Holocaust memory created consciousness and helped to articulate rhetoric about other violent historical incidents and happenings later. Rothberg emphasised that cultural memory is intrinsically linked with entangled memories. As Rothberg explains in his study, Holocaust memory emerged in an entangled form during the Algerian War of the 1960s and the genocide in Bosnia in the 1990s and helped articulate it better<sup>25</sup>. In a similar vein, *The Glass Palace*, the collective memories of the First War of Independence of 1857 remained etched in the psyche of the masses, including Uma, Hardy and Kishan Singh despite their distinct lives and perspectives. Each of them reminisced and recollected whatever they knew and carried in their collective conscience about the outbreak of the 1857 rebellion to find similarities in their respective situations and the pattern and consequences of the 1857. Just as Holocaust memory created public awareness and helped people gauge the enormity of the ongoing incident, the public persecution of the rebels of the 1857 rebellion remained ingrained in the subconscious memory of Indians and British alike as portrayed in the novel and triggered realisation and revolt among British army soldiers following series of protests and dissent. As is seen in the novel, Uma relates the pattern of local clashes in Burma in 1937-38 with that of the 1857 rebellion. She could see a correlation in the pattern of the spreading of rumours in Burma about the coronation of a new Burmese king and the distribution of chapatis in 1857 through various villages, which she considered a sign of an imminent outbreak<sup>18</sup>. In another incident in the novel, the British cautiously monitored the possibility of violent clashes with the locals while

evacuating the Burmese Konbaung dynasty from Mandalay after annexing their empire in 1885.

They feared opposition from the locals, as had happened in 1857, when a large crowd emerged and became unruly while Bahadur Shah Zafar was being escorted from Humayun's tomb to the city, and the emperor was publicly executed to dissipate and deter the mob from turning against the British<sup>16</sup>. Further, when Arjun witnessed the Indian soldiers of the British army revolting against the English after their massive defeat by the Japanese at Singapore and Malay, he pondered whether the 1857 mutiny also happened in the same way<sup>19</sup>. Colonel Buckland also closely held to the memories of the 1857 rebellion and remembered it during the simmering discontent among the various units of the army after the attack of the Japanese in Malay and reminded Arjun that the army had a long memory when it came to allegiance<sup>20</sup>.

Rothberg further explains that the public articulation of collective memory by marginalised and oppositional social groups provides resources for other groups to articulate their claims for recognition and justice <sup>26</sup>. So does one see in the novel, where the sensitisation about the oppression by the colonisers among the various ranks of Indian soldiers inspired the indentured Tamil labourers and plantation workers of Singapore to join the INA to unite against and uproot British rule and fight for their freedom and identity.

The common pattern of eruption and the manifestation of memories, in the characters' lives and the core emotions attached to the major incidents in *The Glass Palace*, can be further understood deeply through Talinn-based filmmaker and video artist Kristina Norman's video art where she juxtaposed different kinds of memories of refugees and migrants from Estonia, Russia and Finland to highlight human rights violations in all these cases. With her artwork, Norman aims to create awareness of human rights issues in the present and reflect on esthetic, ethical, and political problems related to entangled remembering. Similarly, in *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh brings to the fore different emotional associations and perceptions of the characters to their respective memories of migration and exile. However, all the characters, including Rajkumar, Dolly, and the



exiled Royal family, share in common the pain of losing one's roots and the struggle to adapt to new conditions and land. While Dolly wants to suppress her painful memories of being exiled from Burma by not trying to remember them after having lived for 20 years in Ratnagiri in India, Rajkumar also holds back the repressed pain of being orphaned at a young age and forced to migrate to Mandalay from Arakan for survival 21, 22.

In her first work, Norman juxtaposed memories of the violence of the Finnish war with those of contemporary political refugees from Yugoslavia and Northern Kurdistan in Turkey, who now live in Finland. Her second work is a juxtaposition of memories of Estonian refugees during and after World War II and the stories of contemporary asylum seekers in Estonia. The experience of Estonians who fled over the Baltic Sea during the World War is remembered as one of the most tragic events, while the asylum seekers were remembered as economic migrants who were trying to pass themselves off as refugees 27.

In all these works, Norman tried to mark the point that even though the experience of political migrants is different in every case, they have similar memories of imprisonment, refuge, or revolutionary violence in the past. Besides this, the filmmaker marks out the issue of asymmetry of public remembering, where one historical incident is remembered more than the others, and that it can help in creating solidarity between people with diverse historical legacies. This very asymmetry becomes the source of entangled remembering or memory, as Norman evinces in her work 27.

## Conclusion

The disparate journeys of the individuals portrayed in the novel through the characters in *The Glass Palace* leads them to envision the same thing through a different lens, however the singularity of core emotions and experiences associated with some fragments of the past brings them together as survivors of the sufferings. Such manifestations of

memory can be seen in other crucial moments of the past of migration, exile war and mass violence that united people across the world for the shared perceptions about those memories of the past.

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