

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture 18 : Crossing Borders (India-Myanmar)-III



Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on refugees, migration, and diaspora. So, we are discussing our module on historicizing South Asian migrations through case studies of select literary texts by authors from South Asia. So, the text that we are going to discuss today is Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, which came out in the year 2000. So, *The Glass Palace* was published in the year 2000 and it is one of Amitav Ghosh's most acclaimed works.

It is a historical novel which spans over a century and traverses multiple countries, including Myanmar, previously known as Burma, India, and Malaysia. So, Ghosh's novel begins with the fall of the Konbaung dynasty in Burma in 1885, and then it continues through the 20th century, weaving through the impacts of colonialism, war, migration, and identity formation in the context of South Asia. It explores how these larger political events impact human lives and the experience of migration for a particular couple.

So, the story centers on the protagonist named Rajkumar Raja, who is an orphan of Indian descent living in Burma, and who rises from poverty to become a wealthy teak merchant. His life intersects with a woman named Dolly, who is a Burmese maid. The plot revolves around this couple and their descendants as they navigate Burma, and the changes brought about by larger historical events such as British colonialism, war, and migration.

Migration and Displacement in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000)

- Published in the year 2000, *The Glass Palace* is one of Amitav Ghosh's most acclaimed works. It is a historical novel that spans over a century and traverses multiple countries—Myanmar (Burma), India, and Malaysia.
- The novel begins with the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty in Burma in 1885 and continues through the 20th century, weaving through the effects of colonialism, war, migration, and identity formation in the context of South Asia.
- The story centers on Rajkumar Raja, an orphan of Indian descent living in Burma, who rises from poverty to become a wealthy teak merchant. His life intersects with Dolly, a Burmese maid, and the plot revolves around their descendants, as they navigate the changes brought about by historical events such as British colonialism, World War II, and postcolonial independence movements.

So, World War II plays a very crucial role in defining the experiences of Rajkumar and Dolly as well as their descendants. And we also see these lives evolving against the backdrop of post-colonial independence movements. The novel's narrative spans four generations and multiple continents, portraying how historical forces shape the lives of ordinary individuals such as Rajkumar and Dolly in the case of this novel and how these factors actually define their personal experiences of migration, displacement, and a search for identity. So, migration is at the heart of this novel *The Glass Palace*, not only as a physical movement, but also as a metaphor for the fluidity of identity in a world that is shaped by colonialism and war.

So migration is not only in the sense of violence or tension, but Ghosh also explores the symbolic meaning of migration, you know, which is the fluidity of identity. Identity is not something constant, just like culture. You know, identity can also be something that acquires new elements depending on one's immediate experiences, depending on so many contingent factors, actually. So depending on the culture of the host land, for example, and the ongoing historical events.

So identity, like I said, is not something constant, just like culture. It acquires new things. It is cumulative in nature and it enables a person to grow, to evolve. And, you know, through interaction with one's immediate space, it could be the host society, right? So, identity becomes fluid when it is shaped by a world fraught by colonialism and war.

Migration and Displacement in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000)

- The novel's narrative spans four generations and multiple continents, portraying how historical forces shape the lives of ordinary individuals and their personal experiences of migration, displacement, and the search for identity.
- Migration is central to the novel, not only as a physical movement but also as a metaphor for the fluidity of identity in a world shaped by colonialism and war. The displacement of characters during the fall of the Burmese kingdom and the Japanese occupation underscores the broader theme of diaspora and exile.
- *The Glass Palace* highlights how major historical events like World War II and the Independence movements shape the personal lives of Ghosh's characters. The war disrupts families, drives people from their homes, and forces characters to confront their loyalty to empire and nation.



The displacement of characters during the fall of the Burmese kingdom and the Japanese occupation further underlines the broader theme of diaspora and exile. So, *The Glass Palace* highlights how major historical events such as World War II and the independence movements shaped the personal lives of Ghosh's characters. The war disrupts families, drives people from their homes, and forces characters to confront their loyalty to empire and nation. Amitav Ghosh portrays how migration becomes a necessary response, a strategy in response to war, poverty, as well as colonial oppression.

For the characters portrayed in *The Glass Palace*, migration offers escape and opportunity. But at the same time, it also brings about a profound sense of dislocation and identity crisis. Rajkumar, who is the novel's protagonist, begins his life as an 11-year-old orphan without a guardian in India, and then migrates to Burma in search of economic opportunities. His eventual success as a teak merchant is a direct consequence of his ability to migrate and adapt to new environments.

So, migration is not always akin to the fall of one's lifestyle or a breakaway from normalcy; it could also suggest breaking new ground, opening up new possibilities, and exploring new opportunities. As the novel progresses, several other characters are forced to migrate owing to political upheaval and war, particularly during the Japanese invasion of Burma in 1942. The migration of families across borders during this time, during the invasion of Burma by Japan, is depicted as a desperate yet necessary means of survival. So, Amitav Ghosh portrays migration as both a means of survival as well as a source of identity crisis.

It has both a positive and negative connotation. It means, like I was saying in my previous lectures, it means leaving behind a chunk of your identity and then it could also mean facing the future, facing and embracing the new life, opportunities that lie ahead.

So, while migration allows characters to escape immediate dangers such as poverty, war, persecution, it forces these same characters to confront questions of belonging in foreign lands. For characters like Rajkumar, migration offers a chance to escape his humble beginnings, but it also distances him from his own roots.

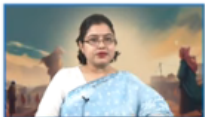
And there is this fractured sense of self that Rajkumar is carrying throughout the plotline that never leaves him, that sense of unbelonging, that fractured sense of self kind of never leaves him. So migration in the Glass Palace is often depicted as a last resort for those that are facing violence, economic ruin as well as political instability. This reflects the real world migrations that were actually taking place in the wake of British colonialism during the wars of the 20th century.

For the Burmese royal family, migration represents a loss of power and status as the entire family is exiled to India after the fall of the Konbaung dynasty. However, for ordinary people like Rajkumar and Dolly, migration represents hope and even opportunity, though it comes at the cost of cultural and personal identity being lost to a certain extent. So, to quote from the novel, *The Glass Palace*, he would always be an outsider no matter where he went or how much success he achieved, unquote. This statement itself highlights the alienation, the sense of alienation that often accompanies migration. Rajkumar may find economic success, but his sense of belonging is never fully restored once he has left his homeland.

So economically, he might prosper a lot in a new land, but the sense of identity, the sense of alienation that he feels at every moment can never go away. The sense of belonging can never be fully restored. So while migration offers safety, it also leads to a crisis of identity for so many of these characters. For Rajkumar, migration means that he is constantly living alone, the existence of an outsider who is unable to fully belong to either his native India or his adopted home in Burma.

Migration as Means of Survival in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000)

- For the Burmese royal family, migration represents a loss of power and status, as they are exiled to India after the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty. However, for Rajkumar and others, migration represents hope and opportunity, though it comes at the cost of cultural and personal identity.
- "He would always be an outsider, no matter where he went or how much success he achieved" (*The Glass Palace*, Ghosh, 2000). This quote highlights the alienation that often accompanies migration. Rajkumar may find economic success, but his sense of belonging is never fully restored after leaving his homeland.
- While migration offers safety, it also leads to a crisis of identity for many characters. For Rajkumar, migration means that he is constantly an outsider, unable to fully belong to either his native India or his adopted home of Burma.




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So, a migrant is always neither here nor there fully, right. The restoration of original culture can never happen. There is a kind of hybridity within which a migrant has to settle for a new existence, a surrogate experience of a culture, a homeland culture. It's a surrogate experience of one's native culture that one can kind of reproduce in the new land, but it will never be the authentic experience of one's homeland culture.

Similarly, we see that Dolly, who is a Burmese maid, who migrates to India, experiences profound feelings of displacement. Her migration, which is also tied to love and family, leads her to question her sense of self as her ethnic and cultural identity are challenged by life in a foreign land. So they had no homeland. The land they lived in was no longer theirs.

Migration as Means of Survival in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000)

- Dolly, a Burmese maid who migrates to India, experiences profound feelings of displacement. Her migration, although tied to love and family, leads her to question her sense of self, as her ethnic and cultural identity are challenged by life in a foreign land.
- "They had no homeland; the land they lived in was no longer theirs" (*The Glass Palace*, Ghosh, 2000). This quote underscores the loss of identity that often accompanies migration. For many of the novel's characters, leaving their homeland means abandoning not only their place of birth, but also their sense of belonging and cultural heritage.
- Migration in *The Glass Palace* is also tied to colonialism. The novel depicts how the British Empire created economic opportunities for some through forced migration, such as the indentured laborers brought to Burma from India.




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So, this statement underscores the loss of identity that often accompanies migration. For many of the novelist's characters, leaving their homeland means abandoning not only their place of birth but also everything that comes as a package, as baggage along with this place of birth: their sense of belonging, their cultural heritage, and many values that

they have inculcated here. Over time, one decision to migrate, you know, kind of annuls all these accumulated experiences over the years; so migration in *The Glass Palace* is also tied to colonialism. This is something I have stated right from the beginning of today's lecture. The novel depicts how the British Empire created economic crises as well as economic opportunities for a section of the Indian population through forced migration, such as the indentured laborers who were brought to Burma from India.

Migration as Means of Survival in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000)

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Amitav Ghosh portrays the complex relationship between colonialism and migration, showing how the structures of the British Empire forced people to move, often against their will. So, certain constraints you know, immediate constraints in life, force these people to move in search of work or a safer place, right? To quote Ghosh from the novel, 'It was the empire that moved them, uprooted them, and cast them across borders.' This quote captures the way in which colonialism was a driving force


how it acted as a propellant behind the migrations of the time, how the migrants during that time would be, in a way, deconstructed and reconstructed by the colonial apparatus, creating displacement and disrupting existing communities. It is a way of breaking and remaking existing communities, and the colonies' culture would thereby become more hybrid and less homogeneous. While migration in the novel is often shown as forced, it also serves as a means for characters to reclaim agency over their own lives. For example, Rajkumar uses migration to escape his impoverished background.

For people like Rajkumar, migration does not mean a fall because he has nothing to lose. He has no assets to leave behind in India. It's just an identity that is shaken. And later, he rises to wealth as a timber merchant. So he finds a new, better life in the newly migrated land,

whereas another character called Neil, who is a descendant of the Burmese royal family, migrates to Malaysia, where he finds a sense of purpose through photography. So all these different characters are seeking their own futures; they are aspiring for their own futures through migration. One person wants to seek the future as a merchant; another person wants to become a photographer and hence migrates to Malaysia, and so forth. So Ghosh illustrates that migration, although disorienting in nature—at least initially—can also lead to newer opportunities that enable growth and reinvention. So, to quote from *The Glass Palace*, in migration they found not just survival but new possibilities.

Migration as Means of Reclaiming Agency in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000)

- While migration in the novel is often forced, it also serves as a means for characters to reclaim agency over their lives.
- Rajkumar uses migration to escape his impoverished background and rise to wealth as a timber merchant, while Neel, a descendant of the Burmese royal family, migrates to Malaysia, where he finds a sense of purpose through photography.
- Ghosh illustrates that migration, while disorienting, can also lead to new opportunities for growth and reinvention.
- "In migration, they found not just survival but new possibilities" (*The Glass Palace*, Ghosh, 2000).



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Now, coming to the question of exile and displacement in *The Glass Palace*, exile becomes a recurring theme in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace*, representing both physical displacement from one's homeland as well as the emotional and cultural alienation that comes with it. The novel's characters, such as Rajkumar, Dolly, as well as the members of the exiled Burmese royal family, constantly grapple with the emotional consequences of exile. As I explained in my previous slide, for ordinary people, migration could be something very positive because people from impoverished backgrounds don't have much to lose, but for members of an exiled Burmese royal family, migration—flight from their own country in an extreme situation—is tantamount to a fall. It is embarrassing.

It is considered a defeat, you know, a defeat in terms of lineage, and it's a complete question mark on the prestige of a reputed family, right? So, the experience of exile also has its own class and economic dimensions. We should keep that in mind. It's not the same for people across different sections of class, across the spectrum of class. For poorer people, it could be an opportunity.

For someone from a wealthier section, it could be a fall. It could be a loss of prestige. Ghosh portrays exile as not merely a geographical separation but also a deeper, more profound loss of prestige, identity, community, and belonging. So, the novel is set against the historical backdrop of the British Empire's expansion into Burma in the late 19th century.

The forced exile of King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat to India after the fall of the Konbaung dynasty is a powerful representation of how colonialism displaced the existing rulers and the ordinary citizens alike. So, colonialism, in a way, is a very leveling apparatus. It levels the elites with the poorer sections in terms of the exile experience, in a way, although we see that the deeper consequences may not be all the same. But at the time of flight, at the time of emergency, the poor and the rich alike flee from a country.

So migration, while initially driven by necessity, can also become a means of reinvention for characters who are able to adapt to new environments and new circumstances. Ghosh's characters experience exile not only in terms of physical geography but also in terms of cultural and emotional displacement. So, we have this couple, Rajkumar and Dolly, for example, who navigate their lives in foreign lands, struggling to hold on to their cultural identities even as they adapt to new environments. So exile in *The Glass Palace* is portrayed as something that lingers in the lives of those who experience it.

Characters often feel that they are in a state of liminality. They are neither fully part of their new surroundings nor able to return to the world they once knew. So it's a kind of fragmented, a kind of cracked-up identity. It's not a whole, organic identity anymore.

It's an identity that needs to be understood in terms of hybridity. So exile was a constant companion, even in victory. This is what, you know, one of the lines states from *The Glass Palace*. Exile was a constant companion, even in victory. This sentence captures the persistent feeling of alienation experienced by the characters, even as they achieve material success, even as they become very rich in their new land or adapt to their new lives.

Exile and Displacement in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000)

- Ghosh's characters experience exile not only in terms of physical geography but also in terms of cultural and emotional displacement. Rajkumar and Dolly, for example, navigate their lives in foreign lands, struggling to hold on to their cultural identities even as they adapt to new environments.
- Exile in *The Glass Palace* is portrayed as something that lingers in the lives of those who experience it. Characters often feel they are in a state of liminality—neither fully part of their new surroundings nor able to return to the world they once knew.
- "Exile was a constant companion, even in victory" (Ghosh, 2000).
- It captures the persistent feeling of alienation experienced by characters, even when they achieve material success or adapt to their new lives. The shadow of exile is ever-present, shaping their experiences and relationships.



The sense of exile, the sense of leaving one's homeland never goes away, even in a situation of victory, even in a very positive situation. The shadow of exile is ever-present and it shapes their ongoing experiences and even the interpersonal relationships. So Ghosh portrays exile as a condition that causes a deep identity crisis for many of his characters. As they migrate to new lands or they are forcibly uprooted from their homes, they must have to come into grips with their cultural identity, their personal history as well as their relationship to their homeland. Rajkumar's children who are raised between cultures and nations are, you know, they represent a very interesting phenomenon.

They experience their own form of exile because the second generation in a new land is, they cannot be very sure where they belong in the world. Even as a second generation in Burma, Rajkumar's children can never be sure where they belong in the world. The sense of unbelonging kind of lingers down the generation. So Ghosh uses...

each of their stories, their own understandings of this life to explore the multi-generational impact of exile and displacement. To quote from the novel, they were children of the empire. Neither fully Indian nor Burmese, exiled from the history of both nations, unquote. So this is the doing of the colonial apparatus where in the face of emergency, ordinary people like Rajkumar and Dolly have very few choices actually. If they have to quit their homes and leave, then they have to leave.

They don't get to, you know, have autonomy or an essential position regarding whether they like the decision or not. He further portrays the confusion and alienation felt by the younger generation, who are born into a world shaped by their parents' experiences of exile. In *The Glass Palace*, exile is often depicted as a liminal state, a place between two worlds where characters are neither fully part of their new society nor readily able to return to the one they left behind. This in-between state creates a sense of rootlessness

and uncertainty for them. So Amitav Ghosh uses King Thibaw's case of exile to illustrate this idea,

as the king is shown as trapped in a foreign land, living out his days in a state of limbo, unable to return to Burma or reclaim his throne. So, to quote again from the novel, exile was not a destination; it was a state of being, one that followed them wherever they went. It underscores the idea that exile is not simply a temporary condition, but rather something that becomes intrinsic, a permanent part of a person's life and existence, affecting one's emotional and psychological state long after leaving their homeland. Ghosh portrays exile as a constant companion,

an experience or state that follows his characters throughout their lives, shaping their identity, destiny, and belonging in a world marked by colonialism, war, and migration. The author illustrates that migration is disorienting to begin with but can also lead to new opportunities, for growth and reinvention. So, while migration in the novel is often shown as forced, it also serves as a means for characters to reclaim agency over their lives. Further, we see that in situations of war, migration, and displacement, women and children are often the most vulnerable sections of society, prone to violence, exploitation, and hardship.

They face unique challenges due to their social status, gender roles, and physical vulnerability. So, even in normal circumstances, in a normal society which is heteronormative and heteropatriarchal in nature, women, children, and disabled people belong, you know, to the margins of mainstream discussions or mainstream discourse; they are treated as dependents of a paternalistic authoritarian structure. So the nation-state acts as a paternal figure, tending to protect and secure women and children. In normal times itself, women and children



are seen in a way as secondary subjects in their own land. So one could imagine what happens when the situation worsens. They become the worst victims because, although they never start the war, women and children are never responsible for any war or political turmoil; they face the brunt, the worst effects of these social upheavals, these politically disturbed situations. So in *The Glass Palace*, Amitav Ghosh portrays the struggles of refugee women and children

particularly through the character of Dolly and other female characters who face displacement as a result of war. Ghosh's portrayal of Dolly, who moves from Burma to India during a period of political upheaval, reflects the vulnerability of refugee women who have to adapt to new environments while also coping with, you know, loss and trauma. It's not—the woman's loss and trauma is not only, you know, social in nature; it is sometimes very deeply gendered in terms of what they undergo.

It is something very particular to their gender. It could be some kind of sexual assault that only women suffer during war. So Dolly's journey highlights the emotional toll of displacement, especially for women who must navigate new family dynamics and societal expectations. As a central character in *The Glass Palace*, Dolly is displaced first by the fall of the Burmese monarchy and later by the Japanese invasion of Burma.

Her experiences underscore the emotional and psychological struggles of women who are uprooted by war. Dolly's life in India represents the challenges that refugee women face, who are often caught between their cultural identity and the need to adapt to new circumstances. As a young woman, Dolly finds herself in a vulnerable situation, and she has to rely on her partner Rajkumar for support and care. She has to constantly grapple with the loss of her homeland, family, and social status. In many refugee contexts, women and young girls are at high risk of sexual exploitation, human trafficking, and domestic violence.

Displacement further weakens traditional family structures and social networks, leaving women without necessary protections that they might have enjoyed back in their home communities. So Ghosh, here in *The Glass Palace*, does not explicitly depict sexual violence as far as Dolly is concerned, but he does focus on the power imbalances that women like Dolly face. This is because Dolly's marriage to Rajkumar is based on his economic power, and her reliance on him as a protector reflects the limited choices that are available to a displaced woman. Rather than truly love him, she depends on Rajkumar in a situation where there are not many choices.

She is a refugee and, at the same time, she is a female refugee. So she finds Rajkumar's economic stability a good reason for choosing him as her partner. In a broader context, refugee women often lack the agency to make choices about their futures; their circumstances decide their future, basically. In many conflict zones, women and children bear the brunt of violence and displacement. They are often forced to flee their homes, leaving behind their communities and livelihoods.

And once a woman has left her home space, which is still considered the most natural place where a woman should belong. So there is still less acceptance of women, you know, belonging or working in the public domain. It is understood that women belong inside their homes. And once this home is lost, their community and natural livelihood are lost.

It increases their dependence and their vulnerability many times over and exposes them to abuse and exploitation. So, *The Glass Palace* portrays the struggles of refugee women and children through Dolly and other female characters who face the brunt of displacement as a result of the ongoing war. Amitav Ghosh has masterfully portrayed the profound impact of colonialism, war, and migration on individuals as well as on different communities, with a particular focus on the vulnerability of the refugee populace, especially women and children. Through the themes of exile, displacement, and struggles for survival, this novel highlights the emotional and cultural brunt—or the cultural impact—of being uprooted from one's own homeland.

With this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let's meet with another topic in our next lecture. Thank you.