

Unveiling Colonial Power Dynamics through the Indian Army in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract

The present paper delves into the intricate powers of colonial dynamics in the British Indian Army as portrayed through the lens of Amitav Ghosh's novel, The Glass Palace. Set against British imperialism in Burma and India during the late 19th and early 20th century, Ghosh explores the intricacies of colonial rule and its impact on both colonisers and the colonised. This study looks at how the British government used Indian soldiers as a weapon to further its goal of worldwide domination through a close examination of the narrative, historical context, and theoretical ramifications, it discloses the strategies used by the British to retain control over the Indian Army, an institution that was essential to the maintenance of colonial rule. The study also looks at the psychological and emotional effects of colonial oppression on Indian troops, emphasizing their battles for autonomy and identity in a system meant to maintain British dominance. The present research adds to a better understanding of the multifaceted subtleties of colonial supremacy and its effects on people and institutions by combining historical analysis and literary interpretation.

Keywords— Indian Army, Colonial Power, Colonial Oppression, British Dominance, The Glass Palace

I. INTRODUCTION

Colonialism had a lasting impact on communities all over the world and a profound influence on the modern world as a historical phenomenon. Colonialism created a complex web of power relations, economic exploitation, and cultural domination that allowed imperial powers to establish control over vast regions and diverse populations. In this context, the Indian subcontinent serves as a painful illustration of the far-reaching effects of colonial rule, as the domination of the British Empire over India and its neighbouring territories had a deep impact on the region's social, political, and economic fabric. Ghosh's novel, *The Glass Palace* (2000) transports readers to a beautifully detailed story that crosses decades and continents while providing a gripping examination of the difficulties of colonialism. It offers a comprehensive

perspective of the turbulent events that moulded the destiny of millions of people across South Asia, Burma, and India during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ghosh eloquently captures the tensions between colonial power, resistance, and resiliency that characterised this crucial era in history through the lives of a wide range of characters, from menial labourers to strong aristocrats. The Indian Army, a powerful emblem of British imperial power and a crucial tool of colonial rule plays a central role in Ghosh's story. Primarily composed of Indian soldiers under British occupation, the mission of the army is to suppress insurrection across the area and preserve colonial rule. While fighting in favour of imperial oppression, soldiers must deal with questions of loyalty, accountability, and identity.

This research study aims to analyse the complex dynamics of colonial power as they are shown in the novel with a particular focus on the Indian Army's function in maintaining, contesting, and negotiating colonial hegemony. By using a combination of literary analysis, historical research, and theoretical examination, the paper sheds light on the different ways that power operated under the colonial system. It also examines the inherent tensions, concessions, and contradictions of colonial governance by delving into the experiences of Indian sepoys, British colonial authorities, and indigenous communities.

***The Glass Palace* (2000)**

The Glass Palace by Ghosh is a testament to the transformative power of historical fiction. It skillfully interweaves the complex narratives of colonialism, displacement, and resistance across generations and continents. The story takes place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during the height of British colonial control in Southeast Asia, and it travels across the countries of Malaya, Burma (now known as Myanmar), and India. It takes readers on a personal and epic trip through its finely detailed historical events and well-drawn characters that depict human struggles and victories. As observed by Ranjita Basu, "History is a brooding presence in Ghosh's books, almost a living entity able to shape the lives of his characters" (1997, p160). Rajkumar, a young orphan from Mandalay who finds himself swept up in the turbulent currents of history, is the novel's protagonist. Rajkumar's journey, from his modest beginnings as a teak merchant in the Burmese forests to his ascent to prominence as a merchant in Mandalay's busy streets, serves as a microcosm of the more powerful forces influencing the fates of both nations and individuals. In addition to Rajkumar, we come across a diverse group of individuals whose lives unexpectedly collide. They showcase different facets of the human psyche of multiple nations, including King Thebaw and his Queen, Dolly, Beni Prasad Dey and Uma, Saya John, Arjun, Dinu, and numerous more colonised victims. The story commences with the deafening sound of the "English cannon" outside the "Glass Palace," a royal house in Mandalay where eleven-year-old Bengali orphan Rajkumar, dressed in coal black, waits tables for Ma Cho at her tea shop. Once King Thebaw's "Royal Proclamation" is announced, the royal prisoners- the pregnant Queen Supayalat and the Burmese King Thebaw are sent into exile to Ratnagiri, Maharashtra, and the palace itself is in danger of falling. After the Burmese army submitted to the British on November

14, 1885, the war started, and the King was taken prisoner and banished. As quoted by Adhau D.T., "After the victory of the British, the King, Thebaw and the queen, Supayalat were made powerless. The royal family along with an escort of attendants and advisors were sent into exile in India. It was a great defeat of Thebaw" (2023, p2). The former coloniser, now confined to Outram House in Ratnagiri, laments his demise as monarch. Dolly marries Rajkumar and comes to Burma. King Thebaw eventually passes away in exile from a heart attack, and as time goes on, the last Burmese king's legacy is lost. Edward Said in *Orientalism* elaborates such menace of colonial dominance. He states, "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1978, p3). Commenting on The Glass Palace Rajalakshmi remarks, "the ideology of the British Raj seeping through the lives of the colonized people takes life at varying points in the novel" (2016, p116).

Colonial Dominance over the Indian Army

Ghosh includes historical events in the novel's middle section, the most prominent of among is the British dominance of the Indian Army. In Southeast Asia, the Indian Army becomes a widely recognised representation of British colonial authority and dominance. It was primarily made up of Indian soldiers serving under British officers, is a symbol of the oppressive power of colonialism as well as the complicated relationships between resistance and allegiance inside its ranks. This glaring power disparity reflects colonialism's larger dynamics, in which indigenous peoples' lives and futures are subject to the authority of colonial rulers. The Indian Army serves as a potent instrument of colonial domination, enforcing British rule through military force and coercion. Ghosh portrays both the social milieu of the colonial era and the strategies of British dominance over the Indian army in the novel. He illustrates the role of the Indian Army in the Second World War, fighting the Japanese in Malaysia, and reflects on the conflict between allegiances through Arjun Roy, the nephew of Uma Dey, his batman Kishan, and Hardayal Singh of the 1/1 Jat Light Infantry. Colonialists are ensnared and forced to fight for Britain, a country for which they show contempt. Due to their desire to expand their empires globally, European powers clash and escalate the conflict to a global level. They enlist warriors in the areas they conquer for this reason. Indian soldiers are used by the British to fight with them to topple the monarch and colonise Burma. "There were some ten thousand soldiers in the British invasion force and of these the

great majority – about two-thirds- were Indian sepoys” (TGP, 2000, p26). Combating in the wars for their British overlords causes damage to the soldiers. “In Singapore, as a young man I worked for a time as a hospital orderly. The patients were mainly sepoys like these- Indians, back from fighting wars for their English masters” (p29).

Arjun, one of the central characters of the novel, sees enlistment as a social status symbol, and he is proud to be in the British Indian army. He writes to his twin sister Manju, “What makes me prouder still is the thought that Hardy and I are going to be the first Indian officers in the 1/1 Jats: it seems like such a huge responsibility- as though we are representing whole of the country” (TGP, p262). He thinks something is untrue regarding the British government’s assistance in defending Indian troops. He says, “for civilians always think that the regiment is the most important thing about the army. But in the Indian army, a regiment is just a collection of symbols- colours, flags, and so on” (TPA, p261). He sees himself as the first Indian of the present era to truly coexist with Westerners without being constrained by the past. Said mentions, “To colonize meant at first the identification- indeed, the creation- of interests; these could be commercial, communicational, religious, military, cultural” (*Orientalism*, 1978, p100). Arjun is being subjugated and dominated under the British administration. White people make racial remarks about him as well. Within the military hierarchy, he serves under British officers in a subordinate role. He has the ability and skills, but the pervasive system of colonial dominance prevents him from moving forward and from exercising his agency. Because of their colonial status, his superiors have privileges and power that frequently dictate his decisions and acts.

Arjun, when he awakens from his false consciousness, discovers that the fictitious ideological network of his colonial overlord governs and defines his existence. After being wounded in World War II, he feels surprisingly empty and thinks of himself as a mere player fighting for the British. According to Sharma Kant Dev and Thakur Santosh, “He comes to realize that the war he is fighting does not belong to him. The truth dawns upon him that he is not doing true service to his country and by serving the British administration, he is working against his own countrymen” (2016, p203). Arjun is caught between fear, repulsion, and sympathy. He experiences a moral dilemma and a failure. Ghosh writes:

His mind was inflamed with visions, queries.
Was it possible- even hypothetically- that his
life, his choices, had always been moulded by

fears of which he himself was unaware?... But if it were true that his life had somehow been moulded by acts of power of which he was unaware – then it would follow that he had never acted of his own violation; never had a moment of true self-consciousness. Everything he had ever assumed about himself was a lie, an illusion” (p431).

Resistance to British Rule

The Indian Army is used as an instrument of colonial dominance, but it also becomes a place of subversion and resistance. Members of the Indian Army like Hardy, subvert the authority of British rule and assert their agency in the fight for independence and justice by acts of desertion, sabotage, and covert connections with anti-colonial forces. Some students and the Congress leaders ask Arjun, “From whom are you defending us? From ourselves? It’s your masters from whom the country needs to be defended” (p288). Talking about their colonel Bucky whom Arjun thinks a good master, Hardy explains, “What are we? Dogs? Sheep? There are no good masters and bad masters, Arjun, - in a way the better the master, the worse of the condition of the slave, because it makes him forget what he is...” (p438). Eventually, Arjun joins Hardy in the Indian Independence League and raises his voice in opposition to the British Empire. According to Geeti Ara Jebun, “It was the most crucial moment in the novel when the army officers rebelled against the British Empire being hopeless in their attempts, who are thoroughly the Empire’s creature” (2021, p5).

By the time the novel ends, Arjun has resolved his dilemma over loyalty and is searching for his own identity in the historical signification process. Ghosh depicts the emergence of anti-colonial emotions and nationalist activities throughout the Indian populace. The book vividly depicts the zeal and resolve of those dedicated to resisting colonial oppression and regaining national sovereignty.

Historicity

During a significant portion of British colonial control over India, the Indian Army was tantamount to upholding British power and quelling Indian rebellion. The discrimination of the Indian Army under British rule is evident in various historical events and practices. One example is the recruitment structure of the Indian Army itself. Indian soldiers, known as sepoys, were recruited from different regions of the country and were under the command of British officers. While Indian soldiers made up the bulk of the army, ultimate

authority and decision-making power rested with the British officers, reflecting the hierarchical and discriminatory nature of colonial rule. Indian troops frequently served in inferior capacities, while British officers held important command positions in the British Indian Army. Shashi Tharoor in *An Era of Darkness* records, "There were significant disparities in the rank, pay, promotion, pensions, amenities and rations between European and Indian soldiers" (2016, p28).

The British had established the Indian Army as a crucial instrument of colonial control. They used the Indian soldiers to expand their domination across the globe. Indian sepoys fought with soldiers from other nations. The troops were members of the Jat and Punjab regiments, respectively. It is documented in *A History of India* by Burton Stein. He writes:

In addition, an increasingly central role was assigned to India in the expanding British empire, particularly in providing and paying for the soldiers needed to secure imperial objectives. British and Indian soldiers fought in many parts of Asia, Africa and even Europe for these ends, their costs borne for the most part by India's agricultural producers; and its sons, especially those of the Punjab, supplied most of the soldiery (1998, p230).

They played a central role in maintaining British authority, not only was it through military campaigns but also in policing and enforcing colonial laws. Furthermore, the Indian Army was often deployed to enforce British colonial policies and to quell any signs of resistance or rebellion among the Indian population. This included actions such as suppressing protests, maintaining law and order, and participating in military campaigns to expand and consolidate British control over Indian territories. Overall, the subjugation of the Indian Army under British rule was a key aspect of colonial governance in India. It reflected the unequal power dynamics inherent in colonialism and the extent to which the British relied on military force to assert and maintain their dominance over the Indian population.

On the contrary to this, Colonialism created opportunities that shaped the character of the British Indian Army and had a significant impact on the army's organisation and evolution. For the most part, the British Indian Army consisted of recruited Native Indian soldiers from various clans and locations. The army was able to make use of a wide range of aptitudes, skills, and capabilities due to its diversity. During the early

Company era, peasants from various regions and religions were recruited into the Indian army, and many prospered and rose to honourable levels. *A History of India* introduces: "These included major peasant groups like the Jats of the north, the Marathas of the west and the Reddis of the south; all had dominated their respective country sides, not so much as a result of formal political offices or of any high caste standing they possessed, but because from their humble ranks came the mass of small and some large landlords, and they were the sort who prospered under early Company rule" (1998, p220). With the British imposition of standard military discipline and training, the Indian Army became far more efficient and productive.

II. CONCLUSION

Taking a close look at both the good and bad, we can say that the British government made use of the Indian Army for their personal gain. By employing strategically and establishing a hierarchical command structure, the British were able to maintain tight control over the Indian military. An important factor in maintaining imperial rule was the discrimination in the selection process and the British Army's superiority over the Indian Army throughout the colonial era. The British used the Indian sepoys in the wars to expand their administration throughout the world. Through the Indian Army, Ghosh reveals the complex power dynamics of colonialism. By portraying characters like Arjun and Hardy, who find themselves entangled in the webs of imperial power, Ghosh paints a vivid picture of the Indian soldiers' struggles to reconcile their identities with their service under British command. The novel captures the inherent contradictions of colonialism, portraying how the Indian Army, while ostensibly serving the interests of the British Empire, also becomes a vehicle for the assertion of Indian agency and resistance against oppression. Through these richly drawn characters and their intertwining storylines, *The Glass Palace* offers a profound exploration of power, control, and resistance in the colonial context, inviting readers to confront the complexities of history and its enduring impact on individuals and societies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to the content of this manuscript. No financial, personal, or professional relationships influenced this work's research, analysis, or conclusions.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the conclusion is qualitative; the **text** (*The Glass Palace*) is used as the primary data for the present paper.

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