

Remembering Across Borders: Collective Memory and the Reconfiguration of National Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract

This article examines the role of collective memory in shaping and reconfiguring national identity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*. Set against the historical backdrop of British colonial expansion, the Burmese monarchy's exile, the Second World War, and the decolonization of South and Southeast Asia, the novel portrays the interconnected experiences of individuals and communities whose lives extend across political and geographical boundaries. Rather than representing nationhood as a stable or territorially fixed construct, Ghosh presents identity as a dynamic process formed through shared memories of migration, displacement, war, and cultural interaction. Drawing upon Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, Pierre Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire*, and Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial understanding of the nation, this study explores how the novel challenges conventional nationalist paradigms by foregrounding lived experiences that transcend state borders. Through a close textual analysis, the article argues that memory functions as a connective force that links diverse histories and cultures, enabling alternative forms of belonging beyond the framework of the nation-state. Ghosh's narrative demonstrates that colonial mobility and historical displacement produce identities that are relational, plural, and continuously negotiated rather than singular or territorially confined. By situating *The Glass Palace* within contemporary debates in memory studies and postcolonial theory, this article contributes to ongoing discussions on the intersections of memory, migration, and national identity, highlighting Ghosh's vision of belonging as an evolving cultural and historical process rather than a fixed political condition.

Keywords: Collective Memory; National Identity; Amitav Ghosh; *The Glass Palace*; Postcolonialism; Migration; Belonging.

Introduction

Memory and national identity have become central concerns in contemporary postcolonial literary studies because they provide a critical framework for understanding how societies preserve their past and negotiate cultural belonging. Maurice Halbwachs, whose theory laid the foundation for modern memory studies, argues that "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (Halbwachs 38). His formulation establishes memory as a fundamentally collective phenomenon, shaped by social interaction rather than individual recollection. Extending this understanding, Pierre Nora distinguishes memory from history by asserting that "Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name... History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" (Nora 8). Nora's distinction underscores that memory remains embedded in lived experience, whereas history seeks to reconstruct the past through critical inquiry. Similarly, Aleida Assmann emphasizes the intimate relationship between remembrance and identity, observing that "Memory is linked to body, to home, to language. It has become a major issue in the construction of identity" (Assmann 6). Together, these perspectives demonstrate that memory functions not merely as a record of the past but as a dynamic cultural process through which communities preserve continuity, transmit shared experiences, and continually reconstruct their sense of collective identity. Such theoretical insights provide an appropriate framework for examining Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, where memories of colonial conquest, exile, migration, and displacement become central to the reconfiguration of national identity across South and Southeast Asia.

Among contemporary Indian novelists, Amitav Ghosh occupies a distinctive position for his engagement with the intertwined histories of colonialism, migration, displacement, and nationhood. In *The Glass Palace* (2000), he reconstructs these historical processes through the lived experiences of ordinary people rather than through official political narratives. The novel opens on the eve of the British annexation of Upper Burma, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty before the colonial invasion becomes visible. Ghosh writes:

It was cold, the start of central Burma's brief but chilly winter, and the sun had not risen high enough yet to burn off the damp mist that had drifted in at dawn from the river. When the first booms reached the stall there was a silence, followed by

a flurry of questions and whispered answers. People looked around in bewilderment: What is it? Ba le? What can it be? And then Rajkumar's sharp, excited voice cut through the buzz of speculation. 'English cannon,' he said in his fluent but heavily accented Burmese. 'They're shooting somewhere up the river. Heading in this direction (Ghosh 10).

This opening scene immediately situates memory within a moment of historical rupture. The distant sound of the "English cannon" signifies more than the arrival of colonial military power; it marks the beginning of a profound transformation in the social and cultural life of Burma. By presenting the invasion through the confusion and apprehension of ordinary observers rather than through official historical discourse, Ghosh foregrounds lived experience as the primary medium through which colonial history enters collective memory. The event becomes the foundation of a shared historical consciousness that continues to shape the identities of individuals

Throughout *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh demonstrates that colonial conquest extends beyond political domination to reshape cultural memory and social belonging. The forced exile of King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat, the migration of Indian labourers and merchants, the dislocations produced by the Second World War, and the movements of successive generations across South and Southeast Asia reveal that identity cannot be understood within rigid territorial boundaries. This sense of fractured belonging is embodied in Saya John, who recalls being described as "*dhobi ka kutta*—a washerman's dog—*na ghar ka na ghat ka*—you don't belong anywhere, either by the water or on land," before affirming, "yes, that is exactly what I am" (Ghosh 22). Rather than presenting displacement solely as a condition of loss, Ghosh portrays it as a lived historical experience through which new forms of identity emerge. Belonging, therefore, is shaped not by fixed geographical boundaries but by shared experiences of migration, adaptation, and remembrance. The novel repeatedly suggests that communities remain connected not merely through territory but through memories that survive displacement and continue to inform cultural consciousness.

This emphasis on memory is evident in the experiences of characters such as Rajkumar, Dolly, Uma Dey, and Arjun, whose lives are shaped by inherited histories as much as by

immediate political realities. Their journeys illustrate that remembrance is transmitted across generations through family narratives, cultural practices, and lived experience, transforming personal recollections into collective historical consciousness. Maurice Halbwachs argues that memory is sustained within social frameworks, while Aleida Assmann observes that "Memory is linked to body, to home, to language. It has become a major issue in the construction of identity" (Assmann 6). Ghosh's characters repeatedly lose their homes and traverse shifting political frontiers, yet their memories preserve cultural continuity and emotional attachment. In this way, *The Glass Palace* demonstrates that national identity is not a fixed political inheritance but a dynamic cultural process continually reconstructed through collective remembrance.

Although *The Glass Palace* has received considerable scholarly attention for its representation of colonial history, diaspora, migration, and transnationalism, comparatively little research has examined the novel through the combined perspectives of collective memory and national identity. Existing criticism has generally analyzed these themes independently, without fully exploring how memory functions as the mechanism through which Ghosh reconstructs the meaning of nationhood. Addressing this gap, the present study argues that *The Glass Palace* reconceptualizes national identity by portraying collective memory as a dynamic force that connects individuals and communities across political, geographical, and cultural borders. Drawing upon the theories of Maurice Halbwachs, Benedict Anderson, Pierre Nora, and Homi K. Bhabha, this article demonstrates that Ghosh replaces territorially bounded notions of the nation with a more inclusive vision of belonging founded upon shared historical experience, cultural continuity, and collective remembrance.

Colonial Memory and Historical Consciousness in *The Glass Palace*

Amitav Ghosh situates *The Glass Palace* within a historical moment when colonial conquest transforms not only political authority but also the ways communities remember themselves. The British annexation of Upper Burma in 1885 is presented as more than a military victory; it inaugurates a process through which imperial power seeks to dismantle indigenous institutions while simultaneously reshaping collective historical consciousness. Rather than recounting this episode through the detached language of official history, Ghosh foregrounds the emotional responses of ordinary people and members of the royal household, revealing that

colonial domination produces enduring memories which continue to influence cultural identity long after the immediate event has passed.

The Burmese monarchy's response to the impending invasion reflects an attempt to preserve national consciousness through collective remembrance. As news of the British advance spreads across Mandalay, Saya John publicly reads the royal proclamation:

To all Royal subjects and inhabitants of the Royal Empire... To uphold the religion, to uphold the national honor, to uphold the country's interests will bring about threefold good—good of our religion, good of our master and good of ourselves... (Ghosh 29–30).

The proclamation is significant not merely because it calls for military resistance but because it invokes religion, honour, and the nation as shared cultural values requiring collective defence. The appeal transforms political conflict into a moral obligation, encouraging the population to perceive the protection of the kingdom as inseparable from the preservation of its historical identity. Maurice Halbwachs argues that collective memory is sustained through social frameworks that enable communities to interpret their past. The royal proclamation functions as one such framework, creating a shared narrative of resistance that survives beyond the military defeat itself. Although the Burmese kingdom ultimately falls, the ideals articulated in the proclamation remain embedded within communal memory, preserving an alternative historical perspective that challenges the triumphalist narrative of imperial conquest.

Ghosh further deepens this historical consciousness through Queen Supayalat, whose refusal to accept British demands reveals that colonialism threatens not only political sovereignty but also cultural continuity. Rejecting the suggestion that the monarchy should submit to British authority, she reflects upon the consequences of surrender:

The Kings of Burma were not princes... they were kings, sovereigns... And what if the child in her belly were a boy... how would she explain to him that she had surrendered his patrimony because of a quarrel over some logs of wood? (Ghosh 39–40).

The Queen's words expose the disproportion between the commercial interests motivating British expansion and the irreversible cultural consequences of colonial rule. The reference to "patrimony" extends the meaning of sovereignty beyond territorial control to encompass historical inheritance transmitted across generations. Her concern is not confined to the present political crisis but to the memory through which future generations will understand the loss of their kingdom. Jan Assmann's observation that cultural memory preserves a society's foundational experiences is particularly relevant here, for Supayalat's resistance seeks to safeguard not merely a dynasty but an entire historical tradition threatened by imperial domination.

The symbolic dismantling of Burmese sovereignty reaches its most powerful expression after the occupation of Mandalay, when ordinary citizens enter the abandoned palace. Amid the confusion, one palace servant explains: "The soldiers—they've been looting the palace. We're trying to save a few things for ourselves" (Ghosh 54).

This brief statement shifts attention away from military conquest toward cultural preservation. The attempt to rescue objects from the palace represents an effort to preserve fragments of a disappearing historical world. The Glass Palace ceases to function solely as the residence of the monarchy and becomes a symbolic repository of collective remembrance. Pierre Nora argues that memory survives through symbolic sites that acquire historical significance after the disappearance of the social worlds that created them. The palace exemplifies such a *lieu de mémoire*, where architecture, material culture, and lived experience converge to preserve the memory of a nation whose political sovereignty has been violently dismantled.

By representing the fall of the Burmese kingdom through royal proclamation, cultural resistance, and the transformation of the Glass Palace into a symbolic site of remembrance, Ghosh challenges colonial historiography that reduces conquest to a political event. Instead, he demonstrates that the most enduring legacy of empire lies in the memories it generates, memories that continue to shape historical consciousness long after imperial authority has collapsed. Colonial memory therefore becomes the foundation upon which *The Glass Palace* constructs an alternative understanding of identity, locating the continuity of the nation not in political institutions but in the shared remembrance of historical experience.

Migration, Exile, and the Politics of Belonging

Migration occupies a central place in *The Glass Palace*, where movement across borders is presented not as an exceptional historical occurrence but as a defining feature of colonial modernity. Ghosh demonstrates that the British Empire reorganized geographical space through networks of commerce, military expansion, and labour migration, compelling individuals and communities to negotiate identities beyond fixed territorial boundaries. As Anshuman A. Mondal observes, "the novel demonstrates how the economic and political were two sides of the same colonial coin and it explicitly figures economic exploitation of land, resources and people as a counterpart of political oppression" (66). Colonial mobility in the novel therefore emerges from structures of imperial domination rather than individual choice. Migration becomes a historical condition through which established notions of home, nation, and belonging are fundamentally reconfigured.

The earliest manifestation of this condition appears in the exile of King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat. Removed from Mandalay after the British annexation of Burma, the royal family experiences displacement not merely as geographical relocation but as the loss of an entire cultural world. Reflecting upon his own removal from Burma, King Thebaw is struck by the enormous machinery of imperial power:

What vast, what incomprehensible power, to move people in such huge numbers from one place to another—emperors, kings, farmers, dockworkers, soldiers, coolies, policemen... Yet here he was, on his way to India. (Ghosh 84).

The King's reflection transforms exile into a broader meditation on colonial mobility. The list of emperors, labourers, soldiers, and migrants reveals that imperial rule displaces people across every social category, collapsing distinctions between rulers and subjects within the larger machinery of empire. Exile thus becomes a shared historical experience rather than an isolated royal tragedy. Aleida Assmann argues that memory remains inseparable from home and cultural identity, and Ghosh similarly suggests that displacement intensifies rather than erases attachment to the homeland. Physical separation from Burma therefore reinforces its symbolic presence within collective memory.

Migration assumes a different form in the experiences of Rajkumar, whose movement from India to Burma is motivated by economic opportunity rather than political coercion. Yet Ghosh carefully avoids presenting colonial mobility as a narrative of unrestricted advancement. Rajkumar's commercial success remains inseparable from the imperial economy that simultaneously produces prosperity for some and displacement for many others. This contradiction is exposed most forcefully through Queen Supayalat's prophetic condemnation of colonial exploitation:

Yes, we who ruled the richest land in Asia are now reduced to this. This is what they have done to us; this is what they will do to all Burma... In a few decades the wealth will be gone—all the gems, the timber and the oil... and then they too will leave (Ghosh 141).

Supayalat's words anticipate the economic transformation of Burma under British rule and reveal that migration cannot be separated from colonial extraction. The movement of merchants, labourers, and entrepreneurs across imperial territories is sustained by the systematic exploitation of natural resources and local populations. Consequently, migration in *The Glass Palace* is not simply the movement of individuals but the visible consequence of larger colonial processes that reshape both landscapes and identities.

The Second World War intensifies these experiences of displacement by exposing the fragility of identities constructed within imperial structures. Wartime evacuations, military campaigns, and the collapse of colonial authority force thousands of civilians to abandon homes they had painstakingly established. Ghosh portrays displacement as a recurring historical condition rather than a single moment of exile, demonstrating that belonging remains vulnerable to political upheaval. Yet these repeated migrations also generate new forms of solidarity rooted in shared experience rather than common nationality. Communities fragmented by war preserve continuity through memory, family relationships, and cultural practices that travel with them across borders. Maurice Halbwachs' conception of collective memory helps explain this process, for memory survives within the social relationships that displaced communities recreate despite geographical dislocation.

The instability of colonial belonging receives its most explicit articulation through Hardayal's reflections on political allegiance: "What is it? Where is this country?... when we took our oath it wasn't to a country but to the King Emperor." (Ghosh 512).

Hardayal's questions expose the uncertainty surrounding national identity within colonial society. His inability to define the nation reveals that colonial subjects inhabit multiple and often contradictory systems of loyalty in which empire, homeland, and community overlap without fully coinciding. Ghosh thus dismantles the assumption that national belonging derives naturally from territorial citizenship. Instead, belonging emerges as a historically contingent process shaped by migration, political transformation, and collective remembrance.

By representing migration as the defining condition of colonial existence, *The Glass Palace* challenges nationalist narratives that equate identity with fixed geographical boundaries. The novel demonstrates that exile, mobility, and displacement are not interruptions of national history but central forces in its formation. Through journeys across Burma, India, Malaya, and Singapore, Ghosh reimagines belonging as a dynamic process sustained by memory rather than territory, suggesting that national identity is continually reconstructed through movement, historical experience, and the shared remembrance of displacement.

Reconfiguring National Identity through Collective Memory

The historical experiences of colonial conquest and migration culminate in *The Glass Palace* through a fundamental reconsideration of national identity. Rather than defining the nation through fixed territorial boundaries or homogeneous cultural traditions, Amitav Ghosh presents it as a dynamic historical formation sustained by collective memory. The novel suggests that political borders alone cannot account for the complex identities produced by empire because colonialism created interconnected histories that exceeded the geographical limits of individual nation-states. In this respect, Ghosh's narrative resonates with Homi K. Bhabha's assertion that the nation is continually produced through acts of cultural narration rather than existing as a stable political entity. National identity therefore emerges as an evolving historical consciousness shaped by remembrance, displacement, and shared experience.

This interrogation of nationhood is most powerfully articulated through Saya John, whose reflections on the British Indian Army expose the moral contradictions of colonial rule. Watching Indian soldiers participate in the conquest of Burma, he asks:

What would it be like if I had something to defend—a home, a country, a family—and I found myself attacked by these ghostly men, these trusting boys? How do you fight an enemy who fights from neither enmity nor anger but in submission to orders from superiors, without protest and without conscience?"(Ghosh 52).

This question reaches beyond the immediate military encounter to expose the fractured consciousness produced by imperialism. The invading sepoys are themselves colonial subjects, yet they become instruments of imperial expansion against another colonized people. Ghosh thus dismantles binary distinctions between colonizer and colonized, demonstrating that empire frequently transformed the oppressed into participants in its own machinery of domination. National identity consequently appears as a deeply contested category in which loyalty, belonging, and political obligation are shaped by colonial structures rather than by shared cultural heritage alone.

Saya John's reflections become even more significant when he describes these soldiers as possessing "a certain kind of innocence... An innocent evil. I could think of nothing more dangerous" (Ghosh 53). The apparent paradox of "innocent evil" captures the ethical ambiguity of colonial modernity. The soldiers are neither inherently violent nor consciously malicious; instead, their violence derives from unquestioning obedience to imperial authority. Ghosh thereby demonstrates that colonialism exercised power not merely through military force but through the reshaping of moral consciousness itself. Remembering such histories becomes essential because collective memory preserves these ethical complexities that official nationalist histories often simplify or erase.

The psychological consequences of this colonial inheritance are explored more explicitly through Arjun, whose service in the British Indian Army compels him to confront the enduring legacy of empire. Having internalized imperial ideals of discipline and loyalty, he gradually recognizes that colonial rule has shaped every aspect of his worldview. Reflecting upon this realization, Arjun confesses: "We rebelled against an Empire that has shaped everything in our

lives; coloured everything in the world as we know it. It is a huge, indelible stain which has tainted all of us" (Ghosh 792).

Arjun's confession represents one of the novel's clearest statements on postcolonial identity. The metaphor of the "indelible stain" suggests that political independence cannot erase the cultural, intellectual, and psychological effects of colonial rule. Empire survives within memory, institutions, education, and patterns of thought, making national identity inseparable from the historical experiences that produced it. Rather than imagining a pure postcolonial identity liberated from the past, Ghosh insists that remembrance is indispensable for understanding the continuing influence of colonial history upon the present.

The novel therefore shifts attention away from official narratives of state formation toward the everyday memories through which communities preserve their histories. Maurice Halbwachs argues that collective memory is sustained within social groups that continually reinterpret the past according to present circumstances. This insight is reflected throughout *The Glass Palace*, where memories of conquest, exile, migration, war, and survival circulate across generations through family relationships, personal testimonies, and shared cultural experiences. These memories connect Burmese, Indians, Chinese, British, and Malay communities within a common historical framework that transcends political boundaries. National identity is thus constructed not through isolated national histories but through an awareness of interconnected historical experiences.

Pierre Nora similarly observes that memory remains "in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting," continually reshaped by the communities that preserve it. This dynamic understanding of memory illuminates Ghosh's representation of nationhood as an ongoing historical process rather than a fixed political achievement. The novel refuses to treat independence or territorial sovereignty as the final resolution of colonial history. Instead, it demonstrates that communities continually renegotiate their identities through acts of remembrance that preserve both historical trauma and cultural continuity.

Eventually, *The Glass Palace* offers a profoundly postcolonial reimagining of national identity. By foregrounding collective memory rather than political geography as the basis of belonging, Ghosh challenges exclusionary forms of nationalism founded upon rigid borders, ethnic uniformity, or singular historical narratives. His characters inhabit overlapping cultural

worlds shaped by migration, empire, and war, revealing that identities are formed through shared historical experiences rather than inherited territorial certainties. National identity consequently emerges as a dynamic and inclusive process of historical negotiation, sustained by the memories that connect individuals and communities across generations and across borders. Through this vision, Ghosh transforms collective memory into the foundation of a more expansive and ethically grounded understanding of postcolonial nationhood.

Conclusion

The Glass Palace reimagines national identity by locating its foundations in collective memory rather than in fixed territorial boundaries or political institutions. Through its representations of colonial conquest, exile, migration, and war, Amitav Ghosh demonstrates that belonging emerges from shared historical experiences that continue to shape individual and collective consciousness across generations. Memory, therefore, functions not merely as a record of the past but as a dynamic process through which postcolonial identities are continually negotiated.

Drawing upon the theories of Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, Aleida Assmann, and Homi K. Bhabha, this article has argued that collective memory provides the framework through which *The Glass Palace* reconstructs nationhood beyond exclusionary nationalist paradigms. By foregrounding interconnected histories across Burma, India, Malaya, and Singapore, Ghosh challenges territorially bounded conceptions of the nation and presents identity as relational, transnational, and historically contingent.

Ultimately, *The Glass Palace* offers a postcolonial vision of belonging grounded in remembrance, cultural plurality, and historical interconnectedness. The novel demonstrates that nations are sustained not only by political structures but also by the shared memories through which communities interpret their past and imagine their collective future. In doing so, Ghosh contributes a significant literary intervention to contemporary debates on memory, migration, and national identity.

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