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Resistance and Collaboration: Indigenous Responses to Colonial Governance in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract:
Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* presents a complex and historically grounded portrayal of indigenous responses to British colonial rule in Burma. Rather than framing colonial encounter as a simple opposition between domination and defiance, the novel reveals a complex spectrum of resistance and collaboration shaped by political pressure, economic necessity, cultural survival, and moral negotiation. This paper examines how Ghosh represents resistance through political defiance, cultural preservation, and symbolic opposition, while also depicting collaboration as a pragmatic response to the structural realities of colonial governance. Drawing on postcolonial theory, particularly the ideas of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Antonio Gramsci, and Subaltern Studies scholars, the paper argues that colonial power in the novel operates through both coercion and consent. Indigenous responses emerge within this uneven framework, where resistance and collaboration frequently overlap rather than exist as opposites. Through an analysis of royal authority, monastic institutions, urban movements, economic actors, and domestic spaces, the study demonstrates how Ghosh offers a nuanced understanding of indigenous agency under empire. In doing so, the novel contributes significantly to postcolonial historical fiction by foregrounding the lived complexity of colonial experience.

Keywords: Resistance; Collaboration; Colonial Governance; Indigenous Agency; Postcolonial Theory; *The Glass Palace*

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Introduction

Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* is a historically expansive novel that traces the impact of British colonial rule across Burma, India, and Malaya from the late nineteenth century to the Second World War. Beginning with the British invasion of Mandalay in 1885, the novel follows the collapse of indigenous political authority and the gradual restructuring of social, economic, and cultural life under colonial governance. Ghosh does not present colonialism merely as an external force imposed upon a passive society. Instead, he foregrounds the varied and often contradictory ways in which indigenous communities responded to imperial domination. British colonial rule in Burma brought abrupt and far-reaching transformations. The removal of the Burmese monarchy dismantled traditional political legitimacy. Colonial administration replaced indigenous systems with bureaucratic governance, while the exploitation of natural resources reshaped economic life. These changes generated diverse responses among the colonised population. Some resisted colonial authority through political defiance, religious leadership, and cultural preservation. Others collaborated with colonial institutions in order to survive, adapt, or secure material stability. The novel combines historical events with fictional narratives to examine these responses in detail. Ghosh's approach reflects Edward Said's argument that empire governs not only through force but through knowledge, classification, and representation. Colonial authority reorganises how societies understand themselves and their past. At the same time, the novel illustrates Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, showing how colonial rule sustains itself by producing consent and embedding imperial power in everyday life. This paper examines how *The Glass Palace* represents resistance and collaboration as interconnected responses to colonial governance. Drawing on postcolonial theory and historical context, it argues that Ghosh challenges binary readings of colonial encounter. Resistance and collaboration emerge not as fixed moral positions but as situational strategies shaped by power, necessity, and survival.

Colonial Power and Theoretical Context

In the novel, colonial governance operates through both visible domination and subtle cultural regulation. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism helps explain how British rule in Burma is justified through representations that portray indigenous institutions as backward or inefficient. Colonial administration replaces traditional authority while presenting itself as rational and civilising. This discursive control allows empire to appear legitimate even as it dismantles indigenous systems.

Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony further clarifies why colonial rule persists beyond military conquest. Hegemony works by normalising power. Colonial authority reshapes law, economy, education, and labour in such a way that participation in imperial systems becomes necessary for survival. Consent is produced not through agreement alone but through dependency. Ghosh's characters live within this hegemonic structure, where collaboration often becomes unavoidable.

Homi Bhabha's ideas of mimicry and hybridity illuminate the instability of colonial power. The colonised are encouraged to imitate colonial norms, yet this imitation is always incomplete. The result is ambivalence, producing identities that are "almost the same, but not quite." Colonial society thus becomes hybrid rather than purely imperial.

Subaltern Studies provides a crucial perspective by shifting attention away from elite political narratives. It emphasises everyday resistance, cultural survival, and the agency of ordinary people. Ghosh's focus on monks, workers, women, traders, and migrants aligns closely with this approach, allowing resistance and collaboration to be understood as lived practices rather than abstract categories.

Resistance to Colonial Rule in *The Glass Palace*

Resistance appears in multiple forms, ranging from overt political defiance to subtle cultural endurance. Ghosh does not portray resistance as a unified nationalist movement. Instead, he presents it as fragmented, uneven, and shaped by historical constraint. This approach reflects the Subaltern Studies view that resistance does not always take organised or visible forms.

King Thibaw, the last monarch of Burma, stands as a powerful symbol of resistance in the novel. His refusal to submit to British authority represents political defiance at the level of sovereignty. However, Ghosh portrays this resistance as tragically limited. The king's removal and exile demonstrate the overwhelming power of colonial governance and the vulnerability of indigenous political institutions. From a Said-ian perspective, Thibaw's defeat reflects more than military loss. Colonial rule replaces indigenous authority with a new narrative of order and progress, portraying the Burmese monarchy as obsolete. Thibaw's resistance thus becomes symbolic rather than effective. Even in exile, he embodies a displaced political identity and a memory of lost sovereignty. Ghosh avoids romanticising royal power. Yet he presents the collapse of the monarchy as a moment of profound cultural rupture. The exile of Thibaw marks the beginning of a colonial order that redefines legitimacy and erases indigenous political memory. Resistance here survives as remembrance rather than victory.

Alongside political resistance, Gosh highlights the role of the Buddhist monastic order in preserving cultural autonomy. Monks traditionally held moral authority in Burmese society, and under colonial rule they became custodians of spiritual and cultural continuity. Their resistance is not expressed through rebellion but through refusal—refusal to internalise colonial values or surrender religious discipline. Gramsci's concept of hegemony helps explain the significance of this resistance. Colonial power seeks consent as well as obedience. The monastic order disrupts this process by maintaining alternative systems of belief and authority. By refusing cultural assimilation, monks deny the moral legitimacy of colonial rule. Subaltern Studies encourages us to recognise such resistance as historically meaningful. Cultural preservation, ritual continuity, and ethical leadership become forms of

opposition when political avenues are closed. Ghosh presents monastic resistance as quiet yet enduring, grounded in moral resilience rather than confrontation.

Urban spaces emerge as centres of collective awareness and dissent. Cities such as Rangoon become sites where intellectuals, workers, and activists respond to colonial policies through discussion, organisation, and protest. Ghosh portrays urban resistance as gradual rather than immediate, shaped by education and shared experience. Said's theory of colonial discourse helps illuminate this resistance. Urban movements challenge colonial representations of Burma as passive or inferior. By questioning colonial policy and authority, these groups undermine imperial legitimacy at the level of knowledge. Resistance thus operates through counter-discourse as much as action. Ghosh situates urban resistance within everyday life, showing how political consciousness develops under colonial pressure rather than emerging fully formed.

Collaboration under Colonial Governance

While resistance occupies a significant place in the novel, Gosh also examines collaboration as a common response to colonial rule. Ghosh presents collaboration not simply as betrayal but as a pragmatic strategy shaped by survival, ambition, and structural compulsion.

Rajkumar's rise illustrates how colonial capitalism creates new opportunities while reinforcing imperial control. His economic success depends on British commercial networks, particularly in the exploitation of teak forests. From a Gramscian perspective, Rajkumar operates within colonial hegemony, where participation in imperial systems becomes the primary route to advancement. Rajkumar does not openly endorse colonial ideology. His collaboration is driven by necessity and ambition rather than loyalty. Yet his success implicates him in systems that exploit land and labour. Ghosh presents this position as morally ambiguous. Rajkumar benefits from colonial structures even as those structures deepen inequality. This portrayal challenges simplistic moral judgments. Collaboration emerges not as ideological surrender but as adaptation within an unequal system.

Homi Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and hybridity help explain cultural collaboration in the novel. Many characters adopt colonial norms in dress, language, and social behaviour to function within colonial society. However, this imitation remains incomplete. It produces ambivalence rather than assimilation. Characters such as Ma Cho outwardly comply with colonial expectations while privately preserving indigenous identity. This form of adaptation becomes a performance that allows survival without full surrender. Mimicry destabilises colonial authority by revealing its dependence on imitation. Hybridity emerges as colonial society produces mixed cultural forms rather than clear domination. Ghosh shows that colonialism reshapes identity into unstable combinations, complicating both resistance and collaboration.

Women often experience colonialism within domestic and social spaces rather than public politics. Characters such as Dolly embody survival through emotional endurance and adaptation. Displaced from palace life and inserted into colonial domesticity, Dolly navigates power through silence, loyalty, and memory. Subaltern feminist perspectives help us read this endurance as agency rather than passivity. Under colonial and patriarchal constraint, survival itself becomes a form of resistance. Women preserve relationships, memory, and cultural continuity even as public authority collapses.

Resistance and Collaboration as a Continuum

One of the novel's most important achievements is its refusal to separate resistance and collaboration into rigid categories. Ghosh shows that individuals often shift between accommodation and defiance depending on circumstance. A character may resist colonial authority symbolically while collaborating economically. Subaltern Studies reminds us that agency under colonialism is uneven and constrained. Choices are shaped by power, necessity, and historical pressure. Ghosh presents colonial life as a field of negotiation rather than clear opposition. Resistance exists within collaboration, and collaboration contains moments of refusal. This approach challenges nationalist simplifications and foregrounds lived complexity.

Conclusion

The Glass Palace offers a skilful and humane portrayal of indigenous responses to colonial governance. Through its depiction of resistance and collaboration, the novel demonstrates that colonial encounter cannot be understood through rigid binaries. Drawing on the insights of Said, Bhabha, Gramsci, and Subaltern Studies, this paper has shown that colonial power operates through domination, consent, and cultural regulation. Indigenous responses emerge within this uneven structure, shaped by political loss, economic pressure, and cultural survival. The novel reveals that resistance may take political, cultural, or symbolic forms, while collaboration often arises from pragmatic adaptation rather than ideological allegiance. By foregrounding indigenous agency and moral ambiguity, it challenges simplified representations of colonial history. In doing so, the novel stands as a significant contribution to postcolonial literature. It reminds readers that colonial experience is shaped not only by rebellion and conquest but by negotiation, compromise, memory, and endurance. Ghosh's work restores complexity to colonial history and dignity to the lives shaped by empire.

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