

## The Role of Women in Amitav Ghosh's "The Glass Palace": An Exploration of Feminine Strength and Agency

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### ABSTRACT

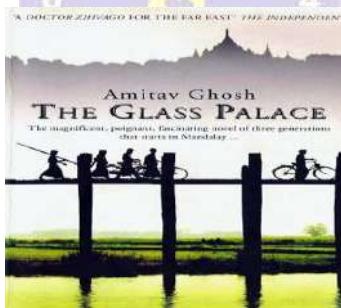
*This journal article explores the role of women in Amitav Ghosh's "The Glass Palace," a novel set in Burma, India, and Malaya that spans a century and encompasses several generations of characters. By examining the female characters and their relationships with the male characters, this article highlights the complexities of love, marriage, and family in the context of historical and political upheaval. The article also discusses the strength, independence, and determination of the female characters as they navigate the challenges of their time.*

**Keywords:** *The Glass Palace, Historical, Political upheaval*

### INTRODUCTION

"The Glass Palace" by Amitav Ghosh is a novel that explores themes of love, family, history, and politics. Central to the novel is the role of women, who are portrayed as complex and multifaceted characters. Through the female characters, Ghosh provides a nuanced and insightful exploration of the changing role of women in society during a time of great upheaval and change.

The Glass Palace, by Amitav Ghosh, is the author's finest effort at fusing fact and fiction. Ghosh describes the ways in which women throughout three generations stand out from the male population in this novel. Women like Ma Cho, Dolly, and Uma were pioneers in their own right. These women relied on men at first, but they learned to fend for themselves, eventually becoming stronger and more capable than the men in their lives. These ladies are examples of how far her community has come.



**Fig.1 : The Glass Palace by Amitav Ghosh**

In this work, Rajkumar Raha, Uma Dey, and Saya John tell their family's epic tale, spanning three generations. These three influential families, along with their extended kin, uproot and relocate in various parts of the world to forge their individual identities. The author has portrayed Rajkumar, a man fighting for his life in an unforgiving world, with a number of strong female protagonists. An eleven-year-old orphan named Rajkumar is the novel's protagonist. The Indian-Chinese businesswoman Ma Cho hires Rajkumar to clean the utensils at her food booth. All good," Ma Cho assures him. Remember that in exchange for your labor, you will be receiving little more than "three square meals and a place to sleep" (TGP p.6).

The Glass Palace spans three countries, including India, Burma, and Malaya, and an entire century of unrest. Like The Shadow Lines, it is a complex tale whose story spans three generations. The relationships between three families are explored in this story. Through the lens of family dynamics, he depicts female protagonists and the nuances of culture and femininity. The novel's heroines are shaped by an event that takes place early on. The protagonist, Raj Kumar, is an orphan who works as a helper for Ma Cho. He is eleven years old. She gives Rajkumar his first taste of bodily feelings, but Ma Cho holds back, saying, "I won't let you."

She pushed him away abruptly, aided by her contempt. I don't know what to do with this kid. He's a kaala. She pushed him aside, climbed the ladder, and was gone. On page 57 of The Glass Palace.

The sanity and resolve of the female characters save the day. In several of Ghosh's works, the lady plays a prominent role as a keeper of cultural and spiritual traditions.

Ma Cho's plight as a lone woman navigating the world of men is portrayed here. By virtue of her gender, Ma Cho's fight is portrayed as more heroic than that of men. She raised herself and her modest food stand on her own because she had none of either. Ma Cho serves as a guardian of the spiritual and cultural values of their people. Her leadership and philosophy are strengthened by the power of her character. She was superior to males because she was a woman. Her existence was completely self-sufficient.

Dolly and Uma Dey, both women, are portrayed as life-givers in this tale. The novel's main heroine, Dolly, and her family's history are not the only ones discussed. Dolly has twins, Dinu and Neel. Dolly, a nine-year-old girl, is responsible for the younger princess while they are in transit. She starts off as a child, but she matures into a kind and gorgeous teen over time. Both her head and her body grow. Dolly, who has been traumatized and left mentally befuddled, claims to be the first princess and is eagerly awaiting the birth of her baby through a process of psychological transference.

An additional player Uma, wife of District Collector Dey, becomes close, unexpected friends with Dolly. Uma is restless and clever. Uma, however, convinces Dolly to wed Rajkumar. Dolly gives in because she knows Rajkumar loves her and that, as a ritual in the Hindu context, marriage is the only viable professional option for a woman. She also thinks of it as a safety net for her otherwise precarious existence as an orphan.

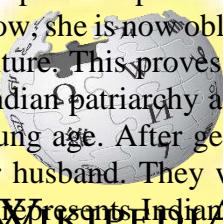
Dolly, valuing her job as a mother more than that of a wife, cares for Dinu, a sensitive photographer, when he requires assistance during his illness. However, after witnessing Dinu's pain, she began to feel differently.

As the author of The Glass Palace puts it, "I couldn't go back to the life I'd led before."

Dolly was a prototypical strong female character who embodied the qualities of perseverance and tolerance. Her vulnerability served as her greatest asset. She represents strength, dignity, honor, belief, compassion, and selflessness. The other women in the story are inspired by her determination. Some people believe that stories in which women are portrayed as having traditionally feminine traits like obedience, humility, and patience actually encourage female characters to submit to their oppressors.

Dolly demonstrates that a woman can find happiness when she has healthy relationships with both men and women. Uma Dey, the collector's Madame, is a stunning beauty who exudes confidence and charisma. Uma Dey is reduced to the role of a graceful hostess and auxiliary to the collector. To use a literary term, she is a "role filler" in the book.

The creative accomplishments and the sublime attitude toward the development of women in Indian society have earned Amitav Ghosh a place among India's most admired and revered writers. He's given female protagonists a newfound freedom to pursue fame and affirm their own identities. In The Glass Palace, Uma faces adversity at every turn as she tries to make it through the novel. She wed Beni Prasad Dey, a scholar from Kolkata, Bengal. In 1905, Beni Prasad Dey began working as the collector for the Indian state of Ratnagiri, and throughout his whole career, he never allowed his wife any independence in matters pertaining to women. Uma, who has an Indian appearance, is humble and passionate about helping women and the disadvantaged. Dolly and Rajkumar's marriage would not have been finalized without her help. We also learn that she has had a difficult life, but that she has used it to teach and help others. Uma has a rough time with her loved ones. Uma and her husband Beni Prasad Dey are both Indian, but they couldn't be more different from one another. Her husband, the collector, was a distinguished Bengali scholar who was trained abroad and whose eccentric tastes were

diametrically opposed to Uma's. There was a lack of communication and understanding in the household. Couples who have shared a home for years still have trouble communicating and understanding each other. She is a symbol of the traditional Indian woman: a pure, selfless, and devoted young lady who is always prepared to act as a revolutionary character, despite the fact that her husband wants nothing more than a cerebral relationship with her. Uma feels isolated and alone despite regularly attending the collector's group gatherings. Uma abandons her husband long before he dies. Because he was a narrow-minded man who liked just his selfish benefits, the collector is unable to accept her departure and kills himself by drowning in the sea. As is customary for an Indian widow, she is now obliged to dress in a white sari. Observing such duty was ingrained in Indian culture. This proves without a reasonable doubt that Uma was a victim. Uma falls prey to the Indian patriarchy and its exploitative conventional ways. She wed her collector spouse at a young age. After getting married, she experiences neither happiness nor the convenience of her husband. They were different because of the ways in which the cultures had evolved. Uma represents Indian culture and lifestyle, but her husband is attracted by colonial traditions.  The Free Encyclopedia

Uma is a decent social activist, revolutionary, and patriot, and she is the lens through which author Amitav Ghosh examines the sacrifices made by Indian freedom fighters. She was the epitome of the perfect freedom fighter from India, and she embodies every motivated patriot who made a significant contribution to India's fight for independence. Since she gained independence, Uma has traveled to several nations to raise gender equality awareness. In many European countries, Uma would have more leeway to live her life as she pleases. When she lost her husband, she vowed to devote the rest of her life to helping her country. As Shubha Tiwari puts it, After the Collector is killed, things start looking up for Uma. She starts traveling the world, fighting for her rights, and even becoming a minor celebrity. Aside from a brief mention that she wept for her spouse for half a century, we get very little of a sense of her loss. On page 99 of "A Critical Study of Amitav Ghosh")

The concepts of freedom, nationalism, and revolution for her country consume Uma's consciousness. What she said about white colonizers being exploiters and oppressors rather than builders is accurate. Amitav Ghosh has a crystal clear goal: to honor the forgotten and underappreciated people who made sacrifices for the Indian independence fight. Uma, a fictional character created by Ghosh, provides an explanation of Uma's marginalization.

This work is discussed by Anshuman A. Mondal, who says:

Ghosh's continued exploration of colonialism and its aftereffects in this work. It aims to show the human side of surviving the violent upheavals caused by the rise and collapse of the British Empire and to show how some of Burma's contemporary political difficulties may be traced back to that time of upheaval and defeat. (Page 16 of Mondal). Amitav Ghosh agrees that society must be reformed to eliminate harmful practices like the caste system, discrimination based on gender, poor treatment of women, child marriages, poverty, exploitations, devilish traditions, etc. Ghosh's works are notable for their humanistic perspective, which gives marginalized and modest female characters a platform. To him, barriers to human progress like caste, race, gender, religion, untouchability, and national borders ought to be eliminated worldwide. It also demonstrates how the contributions of minor and female individuals in history have been overlooked.

### FEMALE CHARACTERS AND THEIR ROLES:

One of the central female characters in the novel is Uma Dey, a progressive and independent woman who challenges traditional gender roles and norms. A quote that captures Uma's spirit and determination is:

*"I will not be a prisoner of the past; I am determined to break free" (Ghosh, p. 120)*

**Uma Dey** is an important character who is married to Arjun, an Indian Army officer. Uma's role in the novel is complex, as she represents the Indian upper-middle class's transition from

British colonialism to post-independence India. Throughout the novel, Uma is depicted as a woman who is caught between tradition and modernity, as she struggles to reconcile her own desires and ambitions with the expectations placed upon her by society and her family. Uma is a well-educated and independent-minded woman who desires to break free from the constraints of her traditional upbringing. However, she is also deeply committed to her family and her marriage, which creates internal conflict for her character. One of the key themes in the novel is the impact of historical events on individual lives, and Uma's character is a prime example of this theme. As the wife of an Indian Army officer, Uma is directly affected by the political and social changes that occur during the time period in which the novel is set. Her character serves as a lens through which the reader can explore the complexities of this time period, and the ways in which individuals were forced to navigate the shifting landscape of post-colonial India. Uma Dey is an Indian expatriate living in London during the time of the novel. She is an intellectual, political activist, and advocate for Indian independence. Through her character, Ghosh explores themes of colonialism, nationalism, and the struggle for independence in India. Uma's involvement in political activism and her commitment to the cause of Indian independence reflect the larger historical context of the Indian independence movement. In addition to her political activism, Uma is also depicted as a strong and determined individual who is not afraid to forge her own path and make her own choices. Her character challenges traditional expectations placed on women, particularly in terms of marriage and family. Uma's refusal to conform to societal norms and her determination to live life on her own terms make her a powerful and inspiring character in the novel. Overall, Uma Dey's role in "The Glass Palace" is multifaceted and complex. She represents the changing social and political landscape of India during the early 20th century and serves as a symbol of the strength, independence, and determination of women who fought against oppressive systems and sought to make their voices heard. Through her character, Ghosh provides a nuanced and insightful exploration of the role of women in Indian society during a time of great upheaval and change.

A quote that captures Uma's resilience is:

*"I have faced many challenges in my life, but I have always found a way to overcome them"* (Ghosh, p. 185).

**Shwe War, later known as Bela**, is an important character in "The Glass Palace" by Amitav Ghosh. She is an orphaned Burmese girl who is taken in by Uma's family and becomes a central figure in the novel's exploration of the impact of historical events on individual lives.

Bela's character serves to highlight the personal and emotional consequences of the political and social upheaval caused by British colonialism in Burma. Her story is one of displacement and loss, as she is forced to flee her home and seek refuge in India after the British invasion of Burma. Throughout the novel, Bela forms close relationships with several other characters, including Uma and her family. Her character provides a lens through which the reader can explore themes of family, belonging, and identity, as Bela grapples with her own sense of self and her place in the world.

Bela's story is also one of resilience and strength, as she overcomes the challenges and hardships she faces to build a new life for herself. Her character serves as a testament to the human capacity for survival and growth in the face of adversity.

Overall, Bela's role in "The Glass Palace" is an important one, as her character adds depth and complexity to the novel's exploration of the impact of colonialism and historical events on the lives of individuals.

Bela's role in "The Glass Palace" by Amitav Ghosh enhances the theme of female strength in several ways:

Resilience in the face of adversity: Bela's character is defined by her ability to overcome the significant challenges and hardships she faces throughout the novel. Despite being orphaned



and displaced by the British invasion of Burma, Bela remains strong and resilient. Her story is a testament to the strength and perseverance of women in the face of adversity.

**Growth and self-discovery:** Bela's journey is also one of growth and self-discovery, as she grapples with her own sense of identity and her place in the world. Through her relationships with other characters and her experiences in India, Bela comes to understand herself better and becomes more confident and self-assured. This highlights the capacity of women for personal growth and self-improvement.

**Nurturing and supportive relationships:** Bela forms close and nurturing relationships with several other female characters in the novel, including Uma and her family. These relationships serve to highlight the strength and resilience of women when they support and uplift one another. They also underscore the importance of female solidarity and community in overcoming challenges and hardships.

**Aunty Pishi, Uma's aunt, is a supporting character in "The Glass Palace" by Amitav Ghosh.** She plays a significant role in Uma's life and serves to highlight the theme of female strength and resilience in the novel. [WIKIPEDIA](#)

**Maternal Figure:** Aunty Pishi serves as a maternal figure for Uma. She provides support, guidance, and comfort to Uma during times of difficulty and uncertainty. Aunty Pishi's nurturing presence helps to strengthen Uma's character and provides her with the emotional support she needs to navigate the challenges of her life.

**Role Model:** Aunty Pishi also serves as a role model for Uma. Despite facing her own struggles and hardships, Aunty Pishi remains strong and resilient. Her strength and determination serve as an inspiration for Uma and help to instill in her a sense of strength and resilience.

**Support for Female Solidarity:** Aunty Pishi's relationship with Uma also highlights the importance of female solidarity and community in overcoming challenges and hardships. Through their relationship, the novel explores the ways in which women can support and uplift one another, and the strength that comes from female bonds.

**Advisor and Confidante:** Aunty Pishi acts as an advisor and confidante to Uma. She provides wise counsel and advice, helping Uma navigate difficult decisions and complex situations. This highlights the value of mentorship and guidance from experienced women.

**Cultural Preserver:** Aunty Pishi plays a key role in preserving and passing down cultural traditions and values. She represents the continuity of cultural heritage, which is an essential aspect of female strength and identity.

**Emotional Resilience:** Aunty Pishi's emotional resilience in the face of personal losses and challenges is a testament to her inner strength. She demonstrates that strength is not just about physical prowess, but also about the ability to endure emotional pain and adversity.

**Advocate for Women's Education:** Aunty Pishi encourages and supports Uma's education, highlighting the importance of female education and empowerment. Her advocacy for education underscores the role of education in strengthening women's positions in society.

**Compassion and Empathy:** Aunty Pishi's compassion and empathy towards others, including Bela, show her caring nature. This aspect of her character emphasizes the strength that comes from compassion and the ability to connect with others on a deep emotional level.

**Independence and Autonomy:** Aunty Pishi's independent and autonomous nature demonstrates that women can make their own decisions and lead their own lives. She serves as an example of female self-determination and independence.

Overall, Aunty Pishi's role in "The Glass Palace" is multifaceted and reinforces the theme of female strength by highlighting the importance of mentorship, cultural preservation, emotional resilience, education, compassion, and autonomy.

**Queen Supayalat is a significant character in "The Glass Palace" by Amitav Ghosh.** She was the wife of King Thibaw of Burma and plays a crucial role in the novel's exploration of

the impact of British colonialism on Burma and its royal family. Here are some ways in which Queen Supayalat's role enhances the theme of female strength in the novel:

**Resilience in Adversity:** Queen Supayalat demonstrates immense resilience in the face of the British invasion of Burma and the subsequent exile of her family. Despite losing her kingdom and being forced into exile, she remains strong and determined.

**Political Acumen:** Queen Supayalat is portrayed as a politically astute and savvy individual. She is aware of the complexities of the political landscape and plays an active role in the affairs of the kingdom. This highlights the capability of women to engage in political and strategic thinking.

**Strength in Leadership:** As the queen, Supayalat holds a position of leadership and authority. She is responsible for making decisions that affect the kingdom and its people. Her role as a leader underscores the strength and capability of women in positions of power.

**Preservation of Culture and Heritage:** Queen Supayalat plays a key role in preserving the culture and heritage of Burma during a time of great upheaval and change. This highlights the role of women as custodians of cultural identity and heritage.

**Unwavering Loyalty:** Queen Supayalat is unwaveringly loyal to her husband, King Thibaw, and her family. She stands by them through thick and thin, demonstrating the strength that comes from loyalty and commitment to loved ones.

**Adaptability:** Despite the significant changes in her life, Queen Supayalat adapts to her new circumstances and finds ways to navigate the challenges she faces. Her adaptability is a testament to her inner strength and resourcefulness.

Queen Supayalat's role as a mother to her children is an important aspect of her character. She nurtures and protects her children, demonstrating the strength that comes from maternal instincts and the desire to ensure the well-being of one's offspring. She is skilled in diplomacy and negotiation, which she uses to navigate the complex political landscape of Burma and protect her family's interests. Her ability to engage in diplomatic negotiations highlights the importance of these skills in strengthening women's positions in society. Queen Supayalat's opinions and decisions carry weight in the kingdom, and she influences the course of events. Her role as an influencer and decision-maker emphasizes the impact women can have on the trajectory of history. She faces significant personal losses, including the loss of her kingdom and her home. Despite these losses, she perseveres and continues to work towards the well-being of her family and the preservation of her culture and heritage. She represents women's agency and the ability to make choices and decisions that shape one's life. Her actions and choices throughout the novel underscore the importance of women's agency and autonomy. Queen Supayalat serves as a symbol of cultural pride for the people of Burma. Her strength and resilience in the face of adversity inspire others and help to maintain a sense of cultural identity and pride among the Burmese people.

**Mrs. Dey, Uma's mother:** is a character in "The Glass Palace" by Amitav Ghosh who embodies traditional values and expectations for women in Indian society. Her role in the novel serves to explore the complexities and challenges faced by women in balancing traditional expectations with their own desires and ambitions. Here are some ways in which Mrs. Dey's role enhances the theme of female strength in the novel:

**Advocate for Tradition and Values:** Mrs. Dey is a strong advocate for traditional values and cultural practices. She believes in the importance of upholding these values and instills them in her daughter, Uma. Her role emphasizes the role of women as preservers and transmitters of cultural heritage.

**Strength in Adherence to Principles:** Mrs. Dey adheres to her principles and values, even in the face of challenges and societal changes. Her unwavering commitment to her beliefs demonstrates the strength that comes from staying true to one's principles.

**Protector and Provider:** Mrs. Dey is a loving and caring mother who is deeply committed to the well-being of her family. She works hard to provide for her family and protect her daughter from harm. Her role as a protector and provider underscores the strength of maternal instincts.

**Role Model for Diligence and Discipline:** Mrs. Dey is a diligent and disciplined individual who manages her household with efficiency and care. Her work ethic and dedication serve as a role model for Uma and highlight the importance of these qualities in building a strong and resilient character.

**Balancing Traditional Expectations and Individual Desires:** Mrs. Dey's role in the novel serves to explore the complexities and challenges faced by women in balancing traditional expectations with their own desires and ambitions. Her character provides a lens through which the reader can examine the conflicting demands placed on women in traditional societies.

**Encouragement of Female Solidarity:** Mrs. Dey encourages Uma to form close relationships with other women, including Bela, which fosters a sense of female solidarity and community. Her role emphasizes the importance of supportive relationships among women in navigating life's challenges.

She provides emotional support to Uma and other members of the family. Her caring and compassionate nature helps to create a nurturing and supportive environment for her daughter, contributing to Uma's emotional resilience. As an elder in the family, Mrs. Dey is a source of wisdom and guidance for Uma and other family members. Her life experiences and insights provide valuable lessons for navigating the complexities of life. She plays a key role in preserving family unity and maintaining harmonious relationships within the family. Her commitment to family values underscores the strength that comes from a strong and supportive family structure. She plays a significant role in socializing Uma and preparing her for her role in society. Through her teachings and expectations, Mrs. Dey shapes Uma's understanding of her responsibilities and expectations as a woman in traditional Indian society. She encourages Uma to empathize with and understand the experiences of other women, fostering a sense of compassion and understanding among women. This helps to create a sense of solidarity and support among women in the novel. Mrs. Dey's character represents traditional womanhood and the challenges faced by women in navigating the expectations placed upon them by traditional societies. Her character serves as a reflection of the complex realities faced by women in traditional Indian society.

Overall, Mrs. Dey's role in "The Glass Palace" adds depth and complexity to the novel's exploration of female strength and resilience. Through her character, the novel explores the importance of family values, emotional support, wisdom, empathy, and the challenges and complexities faced by women in traditional societies.

### **THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS**

In "The Glass Palace" by Amitav Ghosh, the relationships between male and female characters are complex and multifaceted, reflecting the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which the novel is set. *Some of the key relationships between male and female characters in the novel include:*

**The relationship between Arjun and Uma:** This relationship is central to the novel and serves to explore themes of love, marriage, and family. Arjun and Uma have a complex and sometimes strained relationship, as they navigate the challenges and expectations placed upon them by society and their families. Despite their differences, they share a deep bond and commitment to each other.

**The relationship between Rajkumar and Dolly:** This is another central relationship in the novel, and it serves to explore themes of love, desire, and the impact of historical events on individual lives. Rajkumar and Dolly's relationship is complicated by the political and social upheaval caused by the British invasion of Burma, and their love story is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

The relationship between Arjun and Shwe War (Bela): This relationship serves to explore themes of family, belonging, and identity, as Arjun and Bela form a close bond and come to see each other as family. Arjun becomes a father figure to Bela, and their relationship highlights the importance of supportive and nurturing relationships in overcoming challenges and hardships.

The relationship between Uma and Bela: This relationship serves to highlight the theme of female solidarity and community, as Uma and Bela form a close and nurturing bond. Despite their differences, they come to see each other as sisters and support and uplift one another. A quote that captures the complexity of these relationships is:

*"Love is not just a feeling; it is a choice, a commitment, a bond that transcends time and space"* (Ghosh, p. 210).

The relationship between King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat: This relationship serves to explore themes of power, politics, and the impact of British colonialism on Burma. As the ruling couple of Burma, King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat are deeply affected by the British invasion and the subsequent loss of their kingdom. Their relationship is a reflection of the larger political and social dynamics at play in the novel.

The relationship between Uma's mother, Mrs. Dey, and Uma's father: This relationship serves to highlight the traditional expectations placed upon women and the role of women in society. Mrs. Dey is a traditional woman who is deeply committed to her family and her role as a wife and mother. Her relationship with her husband reflects the gender dynamics and expectations of the time period in which the novel is set.

The relationship between Uma and Arjun's family: This relationship serves to explore themes of family, belonging, and the expectations placed upon women in traditional Indian society. Uma, as Arjun's wife, is expected to fulfill certain roles and responsibilities within the family, and her relationship with Arjun's family reflects the challenges and conflicts that can arise in such situations.

The relationship between Rajkumar and his business associates and friends: This relationship serves to explore themes of ambition, power, and the impact of historical events on individual lives. As a self-made man, Rajkumar's relationships with his business associates and friends reflect his ambition and desire for success. These relationships also highlight the ways in which individuals were forced to navigate the shifting landscape of post-colonial Burma and India.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the role of women in "The Glass Palace" is integral to the novel's exploration of historical, social, and political themes. The female characters in the novel are complex and multifaceted, and their actions and decisions have a significant impact on the narrative and on the lives of the male characters. Through the portrayal of these characters, Ghosh provides a nuanced and insightful exploration of the changing role of women in society during a time of great upheaval and change.

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