

Imaginary Pasts: Colonisation, Migration and Loss in J.G. Farrell's *The Singapore Grip* and in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*
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A quotation from each of the two novels that form the background for this paper will immediately establish why these narratives are pertinent to the central theme of the 'Moving Cultures, Shifting Identities Conference' that took place at Flinders University in Adelaide early in December 2007. In both texts the theme of migration in the context of imperialism plays a central role and, moreover, both clearly spell out what tremendous impact moving between and across cultures has on the lives of people, who are thoroughly affected and marked by such encounters. Matthew Webb, one of the protagonists of J.G. Farrell's *The Singapore Grip* (1978), renders his perception of the phenomenon of migration in the wake of imperial expansion as follows: 'One of the most astounding things about our Empire ... is the way we've transported vast populations across the globe as cheap labour'.¹ Matthew, a critical observer of British imperialism but still a member of colonial society and a British citizen, thus provides the reader with an insight regarding the economic motivation behind such enforced movements of people.

In Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace* (2000), published twenty-two years later, it is King Thebaw of Burma who, on his way to exile in India, pursues a similar train of thought, and actually rephrases the same content from the perspective of the colonised while, at the same time, demanding an explanation:

What vast, what incomprehensible power, to move people in such huge numbers from one place to another – emperors, kings, farmers, dockworkers, soldiers, coolies, policemen. Why? Why this furious movement – people taken from one place to another, to pull rickshaws, to sit blind in exile?²

This article will first present some reflections on the theoretical background that forms the framework for the analysis of the two narratives before the focus will shift to some of the relevant features of *The Singapore Grip* and *The Glass Palace* that will highlight specific aspects of the processes of colonisation, migration and loss.³

Current critical thinking stresses the fact that 'home' and 'nation' are fictional constructs, which are based on mythic narratives whose purpose it is to forge relatively stable attachments to a locale by providing concepts of identity and

¹ J.G. Farrell, *The Singapore Grip* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978) 175.

² Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (London: HarperCollins, 2000) 50.

³ Regarding the theoretical background, cf. also previous discussions of the controversy between Aijaz Ahmad and Homi Bhabha in Michael C. Prusse, "'East is East" or Transcultural Cosmopolitanism? Positions on Cross-Cultural Encounters in Post-Colonial Theory and in a Series of "Passages to India,"" *Cultures in Contact*, eds. Balz Engler and Lucia Michalzak (Tübingen: Narr, 2007) 129-131 and in Michael C. Prusse, 'Towards a Cosmopolitan Readership: New Literatures in English in the Classroom,' *Transcultural English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities*, eds. Frank Schulze-Engler and Sissy Helff (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009) 379-380.

belonging. For instance, the roots of this familiar notion can be traced back to the Romans, for whom Virgil's *Aeneid* was the artistic product created in order to satisfy the need for a national foundation myth. The Australian novelist Christopher Koch supports this view when noting how 'a people needs a sense of origins and continuity as it needs dream and myth'.⁴ The telling of stories and, at the same time, the creation of new mythologies is closely intertwined with 'the forming of new communities' as Sara Ahmed observes.⁵ It is furthermore a fact that forced migration has reached truly global dimensions: the statistics from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) classifies 34.4 million people in various parts of the world as refugees.⁶ Despite these outrageous numbers and the host of negative experiences suffered by refugees, 'migration' is frequently perceived as a dynamic force that might be instrumental in overcoming static notions of the 'self' and of 'fitting in' that characterise the discourse of the nation state. However, as Aijaz Ahmad puts it, history 'does not consist of perpetual migration' and, as David Morley points out, the migrant's view must essentially be counterbalanced by the perspective of those who opt to stay, 'whether through choice or by force of circumstance'.⁷ Although Stuart Hall argues that even in these cases cultural 'identities come from somewhere, have histories,' it is nevertheless the figure of the migrant who has evolved into a symbol for the human condition in recent critical theory.⁸

Paul White remarks that the effects of migration can be observed in three locations, namely in the places of origin, of passage, and of destination, which are affected and altered by the movements of people.⁹ Homi Bhabha, focusing on origin and destination, asserts that 'the migrant is empowered to intervene *actively* in the transmission of cultural inheritance or "tradition" (of both the home and the host land) rather than *passively* accept its venerable customs and pedagogical wisdom', and thus stresses the progressive and innovative potential of migration.¹⁰ Ahmad, by contrast, counters Bhabha's argument when reasoning that the freedom to continually re-invent oneself or one's community 'is usually an illusion induced by availability of surpluses – of money capital or cultural capital, or both'.¹¹ Ahmad thus identifies one weakness in Bhabha's conceptualisation of enrichment by migration when he points out that this 'power' is only accessible to a fortunate few. Morley supports this last point when noting that borders 'have always been, and remain, far from absolute. They are

⁴ Christopher Koch, 'Crossing the Gap,' *Crossing the Gap: Memories and Reflections* (Sydney: Vintage, 2000) 15.

⁵ Sara Ahmed, 'Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement,' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2. 3 (1999): 343.

⁶ 'Figures at a Glance,' UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, 17 May 2009 <http://www.unhcr.org/basics.html>

Cf. also David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha* (London: Routledge, 2006) 84.

⁷ Aijaz Ahmad, 'The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality,' *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia (London: Arnold, 1996) 289; David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000) 14; see also Ahmed 338.

⁸ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. J. Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990) 222-37; repr. in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 394.

⁹ Paul White, 'Geography, Literature and Migration,' *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, eds. Russell King, John Connell and Paul White (London: Routledge, 1995) 1.

¹⁰ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 1.

¹¹ Ahmad 291.

permeable for those who possess the resources (financial or other) required to transcend them'.¹² In a certain sense Avtar Brah appears to suggest reconciliation between the two perspectives when she stresses the need to be specific and to ask who travels, when, how, and under what circumstances.¹³ While Ahmad's and Bhabha's positions are thus not mutually exclusive they clearly show that the assessment of the significance of migration remains a fiercely contested field.

Writers typically belong to the category of individuals endowed with what Ahmad calls a surplus of cultural capital. Those who may claim membership in the categories of exiles, emigrants or expatriates are, as Salman Rushdie states in his essay 'Imaginary Homelands', 'haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back'.¹⁴ Rushdie, of course, is talking about Indian writers of his generation in their English exile – and his statement echoes similar perceptions by migrant writers from other parts of the former British Empire (an example would be the Barbadian George Lamming).¹⁵

The two authors whose novels provide the sources for this paper, J. G. Farrell and Amitav Ghosh, are in a different position in so far as they write about the past. Migration, naturally, also involves times gone by and in migrant writing the 'juxtaposition of two worlds, the one left behind and the one of arrival and future residence' is a common theme.¹⁶ Accordingly, one central focus of interest is the question of how migrants deal with this transition and how they cope with the past and their memories. They may actively suppress their recollections or passively allow them to be submerged; some enshrine visions of the past while others keep up to date with reality by means of numerous and extended return visits to their country of origin. With regard to all these aspects the historical novel is a vehicle that permits exploring various avenues into the past of migrants – sometimes as a personal story, sometimes as a more general vision of past occurrences. Hence, when writing historical novels, Farrell and Ghosh could be said to create 'imaginary pasts' – in a comparable manner to the 'imaginary homelands' that Rushdie and his fellow exiles weave. However, unlike Rushdie's India, their creations concern past times that they have not or barely have experienced themselves. These pasts are, as David Huddart would argue, 'imaginary, which does not mean they are unreal.'¹⁷ The two authors look back intensely and their scrupulous examination of the past results in critical accounts of the imperial past of their home countries.

The reasons for their intense occupation with history and the forces by means of which it shapes people can be accounted for by certain events in the authors' lives: both writers were personally affected by migration. Farrell's parents moved to Ireland, his mother's country of origin, from his native Liverpool but continued to send their

¹² Morley 197.

¹³ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 182.

¹⁴ Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands,' *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991) 10.

¹⁵ Cf. for instance George Lamming, 'The Occasion for Speaking,' *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 2002) 12-17.

¹⁶ Sabina Hussain, 'Label and Literature: Borders and Spaces in Postcolonial Migrant Literature in Australia,' *JASAL* 3 (2004) 107.

¹⁷ Huddart 71.

son to an English boarding school. As a result Farrell experienced being an outsider both in Ireland ('British') and in England ('Irish'). Ghosh's father was a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Indian Army whose diplomatic assignments entailed regularly changing his residence. Ghosh's youth thus consisted of terms at boarding school in India and periods spent with his family in Sri Lanka, Iran and what was at that time East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). This made Farrell and Ghosh, in Rushdie's words, 'at one and the same time insiders and outsiders' in their respective environment, and may serve as an explanation as to why both authors opt for a focus on the past and on the movements of people.¹⁸ They can readily empathize with the sensations and feelings generated by such movements across borders.

There are further reasons for a writer to turn to the past, of course. According to Inga Clendinnen 'the best chance of explaining what humans do in any particular circumstance, and why' results from anthropologists and historians joining forces.¹⁹ While Ghosh is an anthropologist by training, he nevertheless opts for creative rather than academic writing. Farrell believed that the decline of the British Empire was 'the really interesting thing'²⁰ that happened during his lifetime and his main concern was to transmit a sense of how individuals 'undergo history'.²¹ Ghosh shares a comparable fascination with the past: his subversive history *In an Antique Land* (1992) poses in the guise of a traveller's tale and the author takes the role of a keen observer of how people react to history. In this book he notes, for example, how economic success leads to staking out claims for the future, 'in the best tradition of liberalism, by discovering a History to replace the past'.²² This is an evident statement in support of writing in order to uncover hidden histories and, what is possibly even more significant, an explanation of how palimpsests are created as an urgent response by the formerly suppressed with the intention of getting their voices heard by a global audience. Last but not least, Ghosh has pointed out in interviews that it is history that creates unique moments²³ and that, like Farrell, his 'real interest is in the predicament of individuals'.²⁴ It is this particular spotlight on individual lives, afforded by the novelist's freedom to mould his subject matter (unlike the historian he is not constrained by the documentary record), which distinguishes historical fiction from history. However, ever since the novels of Sir Walter Scott, there has been a constant struggle over the distinction between historical fiction and history. Some historians readily admit to being enticed by historical fiction: Iain McCalman expresses this neatly in 'Flirting with Fiction' when he confesses to being swayed towards history as

¹⁸ Rushdie 19.

¹⁹ Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers: Europeans and Australians at First Contact* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 3.

²⁰ George Brock, 'Epitaph for the Empire.' *Observer Magazine* 24 September 1978: 73; Michael C. Prusse, *Tomorrow is Another Day: The Fictions of James Gordon Farrell* (Tübingen: Francke, 1997) 84.

²¹ J.G. Farrell, 'J.G. Farrell Comments,' *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. James Vinson (London: St. James Press, 1972) 399.

²² Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (London: Granta, 1992) 273.

²³ Claire Chambers, 'The Absolute Essentialness of Conversations,' *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 41. 1 (2005): 30.

²⁴ Frederick Luis Aldama, 'An Interview with Amitav Ghosh,' *World Literature Today* 76. 2 (2002): 86.

a result of reading R.L. Stevenson's *Kidnapped* or Scott's *Ivanhoe*.²⁵ Historians also refer to fiction when crafting their studies and Hayden White has demonstrated in his *Metahistory* how historians rely on simple plot devices such as the 'fairy tale or detective story on the one hand, as Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, or Satire on the other'.²⁶ E.H. Carr is regularly cited when commenting on how a historian is like a fisherman who gathers his facts from 'a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean', his catches very much depending 'on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses – these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch'.²⁷ This perception of the historian's mode of research clearly invites comparisons to how historical novelists approach their subjects. Ann Curthoys and John Docker argue that history has a double nature: 'history as rigorous scrutiny of sources and history as part of the world of literary forms'.²⁸ Most likely it is this indistinct borderline between fiction and history, which causes the recurrent discussions and provokes the need in historians to draw a line. Farrell and Ghosh, however, consciously opt for fiction in order to rewrite history, and because they want to reach a wider audience.

The sheer size of the works under discussion necessitates concentrating on exemplary moments while relegating others to the sidelines. In J.G. Farrell's case the epic dimensions of *The Singapore Grip* have led critics to compare it to Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.²⁹ Similarly, in a review in *The Independent* Ghosh's narrative was linked to another great Russian novelist, namely to Boris Pasternak, and *The Glass Palace* was labelled, somewhat inaccurately in my opinion, as a '*Doctor Zhivago* for the Far East'.³⁰ In any case the dimensions of the two novels suggest that the central focus ought to be on those areas where their narrative strands appear to intermingle (Ghosh may actually have been influenced by Farrell), even though the two novelists clearly approach their themes from different angles; Farrell mostly casts a cold eye on the antics of the colonialists while Ghosh analyses the ambiguous role of Indians, who posed as a colonised people and yet aided and abetted the British colonial expansion, for instance by means of furnishing the colonisers with the necessary military personnel. The contrast between Farrell's and Ghosh's perspectives can be described in the words of Hall who notes that the colonising experience has resulted in 'transculturation', and while this effect works in both directions, the differences 'between colonising and colonised cultures remain profound'.³¹ These differences can also be observed in the two novels, one written by a critical descendant of the colonising Britons, and the other one by an at least equally astute representative of a former colony who is acutely aware of both Indian resistance against and collusion

²⁵ Iain McCalman, 'Flirting With Fiction,' *The Historian's Conscience: Australian Historians on the Ethics of History*, ed. Stuart Macintyre (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2004) 151.

²⁶ Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) 8.

²⁷ E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986) 18.

²⁸ Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction?* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press 2006) 11.

²⁹ Prusse, *Tomorrow* 156.

³⁰ James Urquhart, 'A "Doctor Zhivago" for the Far East,' *The Independent* (7 August 2000) <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/a-doctor-zhivago-for-the-far-east-625707.html>

³¹ Stuart Hall, 'When Was "The Post-Colonial"? Thinking at the Limit,' *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, eds. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London: Routledge, 1996) 246-247.

with the British Empire. The setting and action of the two narratives thus could be said to converge on what Mary Louise Pratt defines as ‘contact zones’, the ‘social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.’³² Farrell’s spotlight is on the follies of the colonisers while Ghosh assumes the rather challenging task of observing the colonised (who under certain circumstances, such as in the case of the Indian immigrants in Burma, become colonisers themselves in turn). It may well be argued that the startling image of the interlocked dentures of the two old lovers at the end of *The Glass Palace* could be read as Ghosh’s mischievous allusion to or even metaphor for the ‘contact zone’.

The Singapore Grip describes the pre-war wealth of a city that dominates trade in South East Asia and that permits its ruling classes to maintain a luxurious and comfortable lifestyle. In an involuntarily fitting metaphor, one of the protagonists, a rubber tycoon celebrating the anniversary of his business, casts Singapore as an octopus that holds its South East Asian trading partners in a ‘friendly’ grip. The novel portrays the British colonialists as a wealthy caste that is merely interested in acquiring more material goods while disregarding the plight of the native and immigrant populations or even actively exploiting them. The Second World War and the Japanese invasion take this society by surprise and Farrell carefully outlines how the various characters react to the impending disaster right up to the fall of the city to the attackers. While the narrative is set in the time preceding the Second World War and up to the capitulation of Singapore in the war, the reader learns a great deal about the economic history of the city by means of a series of flashbacks that relate a range of episodes in the history of the city’s expansion as a centre of trade.

The Glass Palace is a saga of three generations, relating the tangled relations and migrations of an extended family between India, Burma and Malaya, and the narrative also constitutes an attempt to subvert standard Western perspectives of historical events in South East Asia. In this respect Ghosh’s narrative could well be described as a palimpsest,³³ or, as Rushdie would put it, ‘it is clear that redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it’.³⁴ Sabina Hussain is outspoken in this respect when noting that postcolonial ‘migrant literature is always a political enterprise’.³⁵ *The Glass Palace* is particularly candid on what it means to have roots and loyalties in more than one home and culture; it also outlines the tension within the characters and the hostility they are met with by those who have an established sense of identity. These particular aims of the narrative also explain why Ghosh withdrew it from the Commonwealth Writers Prize; he specifically objected to the label of ‘Commonwealth Literature’, which, in a way, is a reminder of the colonial past and thus contrary to the political intentions of the novel.³⁶

³² Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992) 4, 7.

³³ Cf. also the extended discussion of this particular term in Melita Glasgow and Don Fletcher, ‘Palimpsest and Seduction: *The Glass Palace* and *White Teeth*,’ *Kunapipi: Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 27:1 (2005) 75-87.

³⁴ Rushdie 13-14.

³⁵ Hussain 106.

³⁶ Amitav Ghosh, ‘Letter to Sandra Vince, 18 March 2001,’ *Amitav Ghosh & the 2001 Commonwealth Writers Prize: Tracking the Controversy*, 16 May 2001 <http://www.amitavghosh.com/cwprize.html#letter>

The actual colonisation of Singapore and of Burma respectively is reported in both narratives in rather concise fashion. Singapore, according to Farrell, was simply called into existence by the economic and strategic foresight of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles:

Although people had once lived there, the island of Singapore, when he arrived, was largely deserted except for a prodigious quantity of rats and centipedes. Rather ominously, Raffles also noticed a great many human skulls and bones, the droppings of local pirates. He wasted no time, however, in negotiating for the island with an alarmed native and then proceeded, his biographer tells us, to set up a flag-pole thirty-six feet high.³⁷

Language and imagery here are highly symbolical and may remind readers of other iconic representations of taking possession of territory where 'alarmed natives' bow beneath the imperial flag set up by 'heroic' conquerors. An excellent example of this stance can be found in John Alexander Gilfillan's painting of 'Captain Cook taking possession of the Australian continent on behalf of the British Crown in 1770' which the artist donated to the Royal Society of Victoria in 1859. The Aborigines are cowering in fear in the foreground while Cook and his entourage proudly raise the British flag under majestic trees; at the same time the marines are firing a salute and the *Endeavour* proudly responds from the sea.³⁸ The skulls and bones in Farrell's novel do not only allude to the Malay pirates that may have used the island before the arrival of the British but foreshadow the imperial piracy to be committed by the merchants of Singapore.

Similarly, Ghosh describes the British occupation of Burma, a war of merely two weeks, by briefly summing up the salient details. He mentions the cause – a quarrel on the customs duty to be paid on teak exports – and then goes on to describe the campaign: 'The invasion proceeded so smoothly as to surprise even its planners'.³⁹ When the British troops reach Mandalay and cart the Burmese royals off into exile, this initial phase of colonisation – the conquest – is already over. However, both Farrell and Ghosh are much more interested in the ensuing processes of colonisation and what impact these actually had on the people involved. First and foremost, colonisation is very much about 'the struggles to possess' territory, as Edward Said writes, with the further intention 'to dispossess, ruin, maim and distort the lives of many, all in the cause of land'.⁴⁰ This view may be confirmed with reference to J.A. Hobson, an early liberal critic of imperialism, who offers the following observation on colonial expansion: 'Imperialism is a depraved choice of national life, imposed by self-seeking interests which appeal to the lusts of quantitative acquisitiveness and of forceful domination surviving in a nation from early centuries of animal struggle for existence'.⁴¹ The events following the British conquest of Burma accurately document Hobson's analysis of how imperialism functions: first there is an influx of people; yet, the history of British migration into the colonies remains largely untold here, basically

³⁷ Farrell, *Singapore* 8.

³⁸ An excerpt of this painting is reprinted in George Finkel, *New South Wales 1788-1900* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1974) 16.

³⁹ Ghosh, *Glass* 25.

⁴⁰ Edward W. Said, 'Narrative, Geography and Interpretation,' *New Left Review* 180 (1990) 82.

⁴¹ J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, Third Edition (London: Unwyn Hyman, 1988) 368.

because the two authors are not interested in reiterating stories of Westerners encountering South East Asia that have been told many times before. However, this does not mean that the courage and enterprising spirit of the colonisers is not acknowledged, albeit with grudging respect. Farrell expresses a somewhat outraged awe at the economic prowess of one of his chief protagonists, the rubber tycoon Walter Blackett in *The Singapore Grip*, and the admiration that one of Ghosh's characters, Saya John, expresses for the young Englishmen that went out to Burma to supervise the cutting of teak in the lonely logging camps in the jungle, is also palpable evidence in this regard.⁴² Taking the anthropological perspective that can be best observed in his *In an Antique Land*, Ghosh is also at pains to point out that Burma had already been a meeting place of cultures before the British set migration into motion after their conquest of this kingdom:

The number of foreigners living in Mandalay was not insubstantial – there were envoys and missionaries from Europe; traders and merchants of Greek, Armenian, Chinese and Indian origin; labourers and boatmen from Bengal, Malaya and the Coromandel coast; white-clothed astrologers from Manipur; businessmen from Gujarat – an assortment of people such as Rajkumar had never seen before he came here.⁴³

Ghosh thus succeeds in putting migration as a result of British imperialism into perspective: cross-cultural encounters and migration for all sorts of purposes and reasons (mostly economic ones) existed well before British and Indian troops invaded Burma.

In *The Singapore Grip* there are numerous migrants: these include all the colonising merchants such as Walter Blackett, Solomon Langfield or Matthew's father, Mr Webb, who at one time left the British Isles for South East Asia in order to find a job that would sustain the family. Farrell says surprisingly little about the motives and movements that took them there and instead focuses on the portrayal of this British caste that lives a secluded life among the local Malays and various Asian migrants that make up the majority of the population of Singapore. And yet Farrell is extremely outspoken in two instances: the first one concerns the history of how these European merchants succeeded in acquiring wealth by destroying the pre-colonial Burmese village culture. The second one is the fate of Vera Chiang, a Eurasian of White Russian and Chinese descent, who is presented as the prototype of the successful migrant.

Describing how Walter Blackett and his elderly partner, Mr Webb, became powerful in the process of colonisation, Farrell has his character narrate how the British traders intentionally destroyed the traditional Burmese village culture in order to gain profit. The first step involved transporting malleable coolies from India to Burma, 'usually as deck cargo', in order to have a surplus of labour on hand.⁴⁴ The next step was intended to make the Burmese farmers change their ways from self-reliant village communities (that exported surplus rice) into dependent consumers of imported produce: 'Chettyar money-lenders from India had penetrated the rice-

⁴² Ghosh, *Glass* 74-75.

⁴³ Ghosh, *Glass* 16.

⁴⁴ Farrell, *Singapore* 42.

growing delta, entangling the peasants in debt and bringing them to the point where they could no longer hold back their crops for higher prices even when there was a shortage on the market'.⁴⁵ The resulting impoverishment gradually transformed the formerly autonomous landowners into seasonal workers, 'from the producer's point of view a much more efficient and much cheaper system'.⁴⁶ Moreover, the established Burmese village communities were broken up and their male inhabitants had to leave and look for work elsewhere. While this 'success' story, boastfully related by Walter Blackett, depicts a staggering economic accomplishment and documents how British traders showed solidarity in manipulating and cheating the native populations, it reveals, at the same time, a shocking disregard for other cultures and human suffering. The tycoon's narrative divulges that migration under colonial rule within South East Asia was to a large extent the direct or indirect result of schemes designed to implement imperial exploitation.

Farrell's detailed account of the impact of colonialism on Burmese society (as related by his protagonist, Walter Blackett) describes exactly what the Burmese queen foretells concerning the fate of her kingdom in *The Glass Palace*. After taking careful note of how the British treat the members of the royal household in their exile in India, Queen Supayalat utters her very clear-sighted prediction regarding the effects of imperial conquest on Burma:

They took our kingdom, promising roads and railways and ports, but mark my words, this is how it will end. In a few decades the wealth will be gone – all the gems, timber and the oil – and then they too will leave. In our golden Burma where no one ever went hungry and no one was too poor to write and read, all that will remain is destitution and ignorance, famine and despair.⁴⁷

Interestingly enough, Ghosh's main protagonist, Rajkumar Raha, shares many traits with Farrell's Walter Blackett, and it is this protagonist who provides evidence for the manifest Indian contribution to the extension of the British Empire. Born in poverty on a boat and stranded in Mandalay, Rajkumar witnesses the British conquest of Burma at first hand. He works as a coolie in supplying teak camps in the Burmese rainforests and, as soon as he has acquired some capital, engages in the traffic of bringing migrant workers from India to Burma. Unlike Farrell, Ghosh also focuses on the nightmarish aspects of the voyage the migrants undertake on their way to a 'golden future' in Burma that they have been promised by entrepreneurs such as Rajkumar. The description of the transport across the sea itself is probably intentionally reminiscent of the 'Middle Passage' for African slaves:

The passage was rough and the floor of the holding area was soon covered with vomit and urine. This foul-smelling layer of slime welled back and forth with the rolling of the ship, rising inches high against the walls. The recruits sat huddled on their tin boxes and cloth bundles. At the first sight of land, off the Arakan coast, several men leapt off the ship. By the third day of the voyage the number of people in the hold had dwindled by a few dozen. The corpses of

⁴⁵ Farrell, *Singapore* 43.

⁴⁶ Farrell, *Singapore* 44.

⁴⁷ Ghosh, *Glass* 88.

those who had died on board were carried to the stern and dropped into the ship's churning wake.⁴⁸

Rajkumar next succeeds in securing a major contract to supply teak to a railway company and, in the eyes of Saya John, his mentor, the Indian businessman evolves into a new person, 'a reinvented being, formidably imposing and of a commanding presence'.⁴⁹ Ghosh thus exemplifies, as Rakhee Moral notes, how migration may transform a character, turning Rajkumar into a multicultural, 'reinvented migrant' who rises from coolie to timber tycoon.⁵⁰ Apart from his economic prowess Rajkumar also has a romantic streak – when he was present at the deportation of the Burmese Royal family, he fell in love with one of the Queen's attendants, Dolly Sein. He follows her to Ratnagiri in India, where the Burmese Royals live in squalid exile. Dolly is another involuntary migrant, a product of imperial expansion, and she feels torn between her attachments to more than one location:

If I went to Burma now, I would be a foreigner – they would call me a kalaa like they do Indians – a trespasser, an outsider from across the sea. I'd find that very hard, I think. I'd never be able to rid myself of the idea that I would have to leave again one day, just as I had to before.⁵¹

Since Rajkumar succeeds in his quest for Dolly, she returns to Burma, raises two half-caste sons, and gradually becomes aware of the results of the Indian immigration: 'Indian moneylenders have taken over all the farmland; Indians run most of the shops; people say that the rich Indians live like colonialists, lording it over the Burmese'.⁵² Far from functioning as intermediaries between two cultures, Rajkumar's sons are perceived as conspiring with the Empire and identified as intruders by Burmese nationalists.

Meanwhile Rajkumar's success as a businessman allows him to invest in a rubber plantation in Malaya. Hence he becomes a true transnational, moving freely between India, Burma and Malaya in the pursuit of business. But his career also demonstrates, as Melita Glasgow and Don Fletcher point out, that he has been successfully seduced by the lure of the Empire since he 'does not oppose but actively attempts to conform and participate'.⁵³ Therefore he can be rightfully classified in the category of what V.S. Naipaul called 'mimic men'.⁵⁴ As Ghosh himself admitted in an interview, one of the overarching themes of the novel is the 'complicity between Indians and the colonising power'.⁵⁵ The question as to why Indians collaborated to such an extent with the colonial power is also addressed by Goonetilleke who maintains that by contrast 'to the common view of colonialism as domination, I think that there was, and can be, no colonialism without collusion, at least in this part of the

⁴⁸ Ghosh, *Glass* 127.

⁴⁹ Ghosh, *Glass* 132.

⁵⁰ Rakhee Moral, "'In Time of the Breaking of Nations": *The Glass Palace* as Postcolonial Narrative,' *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Brinda Bose (Dehli: Pencraft International, 2003) 148.

⁵¹ Ghosh, *Glass* 113.

⁵² Ghosh, *Glass* 240.

⁵³ Glasgow and Fletcher 76.

⁵⁴ Glasgow and Fletcher 81.

⁵⁵ Johannes Kaiser, 'Amitav Ghosh: Einmal Indien und zurück,' *Schweizer Radio DRS 2* (8 June 2001).

world'.⁵⁶ He adds that Farrell had the originality to understand this; the statement may just as well be extended to Ghosh.

Walter Blackett and Rajkumar gamble in the months leading up to the war: they hoard rubber and timber respectively and both of them live to see their dreams go up in smoke after Japanese bombs drop on their stashes of commodities. However, it is not only such material values that are lost – others include houses and numerous possessions – but, far more importantly, people. Ghosh is actually much more rigorous in the dispatching of his characters than Farrell, and thus the author has one of Rajkumar's sons die in the flames. What is also lost is the notion of 'home', languages, livelihoods, cultures, and these have to be painfully and painstakingly rediscovered or even recreated by the surviving protagonists. While Walter Blackett, with his family safely evacuated to Australia, may or may not have succeeded in escaping from Singapore on the flotilla of small boats that left the city on the eve of the capitulation, Rajkumar and the surviving members of his family escape from Rangoon and undertake an unimaginable trek on foot from Burma across the mountain passes of Assam into India. Suffering numerous hardships and also losing his daughter-in-law, Rajkumar arrives in Calcutta as a destitute and, with his granddaughter, obtains shelter at a friend of Dolly's. He joins and finds comfort in a Burmese temple where he meets exiles like himself who share and understand his fate:

Not all the people who came to the temple were Buddhists by birth or conviction. They came because this was the one place where they could be sure of meeting others like themselves; people to whom they could say, 'Burma is a golden land,' knowing that their listeners would be able to filter these words through the sieve of exile, sifting through their very specific nuances.⁵⁷

Farrell and Ghosh thus use businessmen as protagonists to outline the process and impact of commercial exploitation.⁵⁸ These central figures in the narratives are migrants who can afford to move across borders (though sometimes they are also forced to do so by circumstances): for Rajkumar, migration is the initial instrument and opportunity to acquire wealth. In this respect Blackett and Rajkumar are privileged and not representative of what Ahmad rightly argues concerns the majority of people: 'Most migrants tend to be poor and experience displacement not as cultural plenitude but as torment; what they seek is not displacement but, precisely, a place from where they may begin anew, with some sense of a stable future'.⁵⁹ In a moving vignette Farrell focuses briefly on such a poor migrant, an elderly Chinese coolie living in a tiny cubicle in a tuberculosis infested tenement, and contemplates his fate as he dies, killed by a Japanese bomb:

⁵⁶ D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, 'J.G. Farrell's Indian Works: His Majesty's Subjects?' *Modern Asian Studies* 37:2 (2003) 416.

⁵⁷ Ghosh, *Glass* 495.

⁵⁸ R.K. Gupta, "'That Which a Man Takes for Himself No One Can Deny Him': Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* and the Colonial Experience,' *International Fiction Review* 33:1-2 (2006) 18-19.

⁵⁹ Ahmad 289.

Later, when official estimates are made of this first raid on Singapore (sixty-one killed, one hundred and thirty-three injured), there will be no mention of this old man for the simple reason that he, in common with many others, has left no trace of ever having existed in this part of the world or in any other.⁶⁰

By contrast to this anonymous victim of colonialism the figure of Vera Chiang highlights further aspects of the effects of colonial migration practices by shedding light on 'forced' migration and a series of losses of 'homes'. Vera recounts that she was born in Russia of a mixed marriage, between a Chinese father and White-Russian mother. Her parents migrated to China after the Russian Revolution, where she ended up in Shanghai, and eventually fled from the Japanese to Singapore. Vera is the model of a versatile migrant who succeeds in adapting to various settings, as she is resourceful and energetic. Despite a series of setbacks, she overcomes all obstacles and manages to survive under extremely difficult circumstances. She is contrasted with the figure of Walter Blackett's daughter, Joan, the 'ultimate memsahib', who completely ignores the reality around her and encapsulates British culture and values. Farrell thus portrays an interesting insight into female positions when confronted with moving across borders: women may traditionally play two (extreme) roles in migration. The first one is to act, like Joan, as if the exterior did not matter and to uphold the values of their own culture. The second one is to successfully surf the crests of various cultural waves like Vera who manages to 'acculture' herself to changing backgrounds when required. Towards the end of the novel Vera's fate suggests a further parallel between *The Singapore Grip* and *The Glass Palace*: fearing the wrath of the advancing Japanese, Matthew attempts to put the Eurasian refugee on the last ship to leave Singapore; however, she is denied boarding by a racist British official. In *The Glass Palace* it is Rajkumar's son Dinu, who in vain tries to provide a passage for the Eurasian refugees Alison and Saya John on the last train to Singapore from upstate Malaya. Ghosh accentuates the problem by having *Indian* soldiers forcefully deny them access to the train, which is reserved for white British (and other European) refugees only.

Migration in these books is a real experience: the protagonists, according to the roles assigned to them by their authors, suffer in varying degrees. Both novelists have a political agenda: Farrell wants to expose the imperial exploitation that the British Empire conducted and, apart from revealing the consequences for the native population in the colonies, specifically to describe the negative effects that the pursuit of taking advantage of the colonised had on the British themselves. Farrell, it must be remembered, was writing at a time when Empire nostalgia in Britain was surging in the late seventies and early eighties.⁶¹ In *The Singapore Grip* Farrell focuses on the economic aspects of Empire and emphasises the migratory movements that resulted from the Empire's expansion. Ghosh similarly analyses Indian involvement in imperialism and also takes in the economic perspective. Some Indians, in particular in

⁶⁰ Farrell, *Singapore* 212.

⁶¹ The crest of the wave of Empire nostalgia occurred after the 'Falklands War' (1982) and brought forth products such as David Lean's revisionist filming of E.M. Foster's *A Passage to India* in 1984 or the nostalgic television adaptations of Paul Scott's *Staying On* (1980) and, in particular, of his *Raj Quartet* (1984). For a more detailed discussion of the problematic aspects of Lean's *Passage to India* see Prusse, *East* 135-139.

the roles of businessmen and soldiers, were both accomplices and victims who helped the British to conquer and sustain their Empire while being exploited at the same time; other characters in the novel struggle for India's independence and a few even rise in arms against the British. Ghosh also warns of the pitfalls of reading just the official history of the Second World War and, since he has a political agenda, he wants to exercise 'choice, reflection and judgement' and relay aspects of history that seem to have been forgotten in the West.⁶² One instance of this kind is the fact that the Indian National Army (that fought with the Japanese against the British) met with a very different reception in India than the one reported in Britain (they were celebrated as heroes rather than abused as traitors). A further historical fact of little renown in the West is the 'Forgotten Long March', the Indian refugee trek, which led the Indian settlers in Burma back to India in the wake of the Japanese advance.⁶³ The inclusion of this particular historical event in Ghosh's narrative results in it being written back into the Western consciousness.

In the meantime some of the issues addressed by Ghosh have also been taken up by historians, such as Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper in their study of South East Asia in the Second World War, entitled *Forgotten Armies* (2005).⁶⁴ Benjamin Schwarz, who reviewed this book for *The New York Times*, writes that this study 'is the only history that matches the scope and nuance of novels like J.G. Farrell's *Singapore Grip*, Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet*, Anthony Burgess's *Enemy in the Blanket*, Orwell's *Burmese Days* and Amitav Ghosh's *Glass Palace*'.⁶⁵ It is notable, however, that both novels discussed above (as well as the additional ones listed by Schwarz) succeed in stirring the imagination far more than equivalent and objective accounts by historians or social scientists. Apart from the fact that historians sell fewer books than historical novelists and thus reach a smaller audience, the products of the latter can also claim to make a bigger impact on readers because they offer a means of identification by portraying realistic lives.⁶⁶ History books may give rise to the occasional protest: a fitting example is the periodic outrage among the Chinese and the Koreans regarding the omission of war crimes committed by Japanese troops in the Second World War from contemporary Japanese history books. However, history books have never succeeded in creating a comparable stir as some novels have: the best-known cases in this respect are certainly Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Moreover, history frequently lacks conviction, as Farrell writes, because it leaves out 'everything to do with the senses ... the detail of what being alive is like, though it tells you about Corn

⁶² Ghosh, Letter.

⁶³ Chambers, 27.

⁶⁴ Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: the Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 2005).

⁶⁵ Benjamin Schwarz, 'Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945,' *The New York Times* 20 April 2005 <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/19/arts/19iht-bookmer.html>

⁶⁶ Accurate numbers of sales figures for books are notoriously hard to come by and hardly ever reliable. Nevertheless, the sales figures provided by the online bookshop Amazon confirm that Bayly and Harper's *Forgotten Armies* is ranked as 155,843 in the US and as 54,246 in the UK. By comparison, the two novels discussed in this paper are rank at 66,420 in the US and 14,418 in the UK (*The Singapore Grip*), and at 22,106 in the US and at 5,704 in the UK (*The Glass Palace*). These figures, taken from the respective US and UK websites on 6 October 2009, certainly demonstrate that the novels are sold in much larger quantities.

laws and treaties and Shadow Cabinets'.⁶⁷ It is the inclusion of such sensory matter that gives the novel the edge over history since the fictional narrative 'can communicate this real appreciation of how the past looked, sounded, felt and smelt'.⁶⁸

In the light of migration as a global phenomenon it is indeed novels such as *The Singapore Grip* and *The Glass Palace* that manage to capture a sense of the past and what it must have meant to move to a foreign country, settle down there and then be expelled from it by war. They also convey an idea of what it feels like to be conquered and exploited – and the awful tension within those people who are part of more than one culture, an almost inevitable result of the movements of people that the British Empire set in motion. Inherently these narratives document Hall's statement on one of the most important effects of colonialism: 'Understood in its global and transcultural context, colonisation has made ethnic absolutism an increasingly untenable cultural strategy'.⁶⁹ While some of the characters in the novels (Dinu, Vera Chiang) are clearly aware of their transcultural heritage, the majority of the protagonists are still blissfully secure in their myths of home and nation. It is ultimately the story of individual fates as portrayed by Farrell and Ghosh, not the grand lines of history, that makes people connect and acknowledge in the fates of others, their own human nature. As a result of reading *The Singapore Grip* and *The Glass Palace* one cannot but agree with White in his assessment that in 'the analysis of identity shift through migration ... creative literature contains some of the most effective explorations of identity issues'.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Malcolm Dean, 'Insight Job,' *The Guardian* (13 September 1973) 11.

⁶⁸ Joan Aiken, 'Interpreting the Past: Reflections of an Historical Novelist,' *Encounter* 64:5 (1985) 39.

⁶⁹ Hall, *Post-Colonial* 250; cf. also Ania Loomba, *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998) 19.

⁷⁰ White 2.