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# Reconstructing masculinity in the fiction of amitav ghosh: Memory, displacement, and postcolonial identity

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**Abstract**
This paper examines how Amitav Ghosh's novels *The Glass Palace*, *Sea of Poppies*, and The Shadow Lines reconstruct masculine identity amid colonial and postcolonial upheaval. It argues that Ghosh's male characters negotiate new forms of masculinity through memory, displacement, and the trauma of empire. Drawing on Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity and postcolonial gender theory (e.g. Fanon, Stanovsky), the analysis shows that men in Ghosh's fiction are often passive or vulnerable rather than traditionally heroic. For example, The Shadow Lines portrays a male narrator and cousin (Tridib) whose identities are shaped by imagination and loss, while women (Ila, Tha'mma) actively define the family's future. In *the Glass Palace*, Rajkumar's rise and fall in colonial capitalism tie his self-worth to imperial power and war, and exile undermines traditional fatherhood and authority. *Sea of Poppies* presents indentured and diasporic men (Zachary, Neel, Kalua) whose racialized labor under the British Empire emasculates and fragments them, even as cross-cultural camaraderie offers limited resistance. Across these texts, masculinity emerges as fluid, performative, and historically contingent – shaped by collective memory and the negotiation of trauma. By placing these novels in dialogue, the paper shows how colonialism and migration disrupt fixed gender roles, supporting Stanovsky's claim that postcolonial contexts produce "hybrid masculinities" at the margins. This study thus contributes to postcolonial gender discourse by highlighting how Ghosh's works depict men negotiating identity through memory and crisis. Future research might extend this to eco-masculinity and non-binary resistance in Ghosh's later fiction.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial masculinity, memory and displacement, amitav ghosh, colonial trauma, male identity reconstruction

## Introduction

Amitav Ghosh (b. 1956) is a major postcolonial author whose novels span the late 19th and 20th centuries of South and Southeast Asian history. Born in post-Independence India and raised across Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran, and India, Ghosh often weaves partition, war, and colonial encounters into personal narratives. His sprawling family sagas and historical epics (including the *Ibis* trilogy) are celebrated for their political scope and detailed world-building. Yet the representation of masculinity in Ghosh's work remains underexplored. This paper investigates how *The Glass Palace* (2000) [2], *Sea of Poppies* (2008) [3], and *The Shadow Lines* (1988) reconstruct masculine identity under colonial and postcolonial pressures. In these novels, male subjectivity is often mediated by memory, displacement, and trauma; traditional "hegemonic" manhood is questioned. For instance, *The Shadow Lines* subverts the passive male narrator against more active women, critiquing nationalism from a gendered perspective. Similarly, *Sea of Poppies* shows how indentured labor and racial hierarchy under British imperialism degrade conventional male roles, forcing characters like Zachary and Neel to navigate fluid identities. The key research questions are: How do memory, borders, and colonial history shape masculinity in Ghosh's fiction? And In what ways do these texts suggest that masculinity is historically and culturally negotiated?

Methodologically, this study uses close textual analysis informed by postcolonial gender theory. The analysis will draw on Raewyn Connell's concept of multiple masculinities, Fanon's insights on decolonization and gender, and Derek Stanovsky's work on postcolonial masculinities, which emphasizes how colonial power distorts men on both sides of empire. We also consider the role of collective memory and trauma (inspired by LaCapra's work on history and memory) as shaping male subjectivity in literature. The paper is structured as follows: first, we outline a theoretical framework on postcolonial masculinity and identity; then we analyze masculinity in *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace*, and *Sea of Poppies* respectively; next, we offer a comparative discussion across the texts; and finally, we conclude with the major findings and their implications for gender studies in postcolonial literature.

## Conceptual Framework: Postcolonial Masculinity and Identity

In postcolonial studies, masculinity is understood not as a fixed trait of men, but as a *gender position* produced in specific cultural and historical contexts. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity notes that dominant ideals of "manhood" are socially constructed and vary across time and place, privileging some men while subordinating others. In a postcolonial context, these ideals are complicated by colonial histories. For example, Derek Stanovsky observes that Western discourses have long depicted Third World men as the "'other'" which serves to reinforce *Western norms of masculinity*. This "othering" can essentialize

colonized men as hypermasculine or effeminate in stereotype, justifying imperialism. Fanon similarly argues that decolonization is a violent process that replaces "a certain 'species of men by another 'species of men," indicating how colonial struggle *transforms* masculinities. Colonized men often internalize colonial racial and gender hierarchies, leading to fractured identities.

Moreover, postcolonial masculinity is influenced by memory, trauma, and diaspora. Scholarship on trauma (e.g. LaCapra) suggests that collective catastrophes (wars, partition) leave psychic scars that shape identity. In postcolonial fiction, male protagonists may be haunted by historical violence, which in turn affects their sense of self. The work of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* highlights how formerly colonized peoples must "write back" and re-memory history in their own terms. For our purposes, we see masculinity itself as a site where memory and history intervene. Adamant as Connell's framework is on power, scholars like Stanovsky note that in postcolonial contexts men create hybrid masculinities through diasporic and cross-cultural encounters.

Scholars (e.g. Morrell and Swart) point out that the "gender conditions" of the postcolonial world – poverty, migration, political upheaval – require flexible, syncretic understandings of masculinity. Traditional roles (warrior, patriarch, laborer) may be upended by displacement. Indentured labor systems, for example, imposed class and caste constraints that emasculated Indian men in the colonies (see discussion below). In all three novels studied here, memory of home and nationhood intersects with personal grief or nostalgia. Masculine identities are thus continually reconstructed: colonial men struggle with imperial expectations, and postcolonial men deal with the legacies of upheaval. We will use these theoretical anchors (Connell, Fanon, Stanovsky, Morrell & Swart, Ashcroft *et al*., etc.) to frame our analysis of Ghosh's texts.

**Masculinity and Displacement in *The Shadow Lines***

*The Shadow Lines* (1988) is a transnational novel about an Indian family's history across Kolkata, Dhaka, and London. Ghosh's unnamed male narrator and his cousin Tridib (two central male figures) negotiate identity through memory and imagination. From childhood, the narrator is fascinated by Tridib's stories of distant places. These imaginary geographies (for example, Tridib's embellished account of Dhaka and *Quadrant*, East Pakistan) become more vivid than the present. In this way, the male characters' sense of self is *shaped by memory*, not by action. As one critic observes, the narrator's identity becomes a "patch-work of different times and places crowded with ghosts from the past," coming "through the feminine others" (Ila, his mother, his grandmother). In effect, the male narrator is passive, absorbing memories and perspectives from those around him. His masculinity is not assertive; he even remains nameless. This passivity is reinforced by the women in his life who dominate events: Ila and Tha'mma embody strength and nationalism, whereas Tridib (male) is dreamlike and tragically vulnerable.

Indeed, Tridib represents a different masculine principle: imaginative, rebellious, and ultimately martyred by history. He privately rejects strict nationalism, but is killed in communal violence in Dhaka. His death highlights the fragility of masculine aspirations. The narrator, who idolized Tridib, is shattered. In sum, both male figures lack traditional power or aggression. As an analysis notes, *The Shadow Lines* "inverts" the convention of active male/ passive female by making its men largely inactive spectators, while its women (Ila, Tha'mma) drive the narrative. Ghosh thus critiques nationalist and patriarchal agendas: masculinity alone does not secure destiny.

Displacement and borders are central themes. Ghosh calls borders "shadow lines" and shows how memory blurs real boundaries. The narrator's upbringing (partly in London and Kolkata) embodies transnational identity. Yet when the India–Pakistan border is crossed—both literally during Partition and through psychological journeys—the men feel fragmented. For example, the narrator's flashbacks to Partition riots give him a sense of inherited trauma. Tridib's travels to Dhaka (to retrieve a book) end in death, suggesting that the male self cannot survive unchecked border violence. Thus, masculinity in *The Shadow Lines* is marked by vulnerability: men suffer dislocation, and their selfhood depends on memory rather than physical conquest.

Ultimately, *The Shadow Lines* illustrates masculine fragmentation. The novel's male protagonists lack coherent agency; they navigate history's chaos through stories and recollection. Memory (of family lore, colonial wars, Partition) constitutes their male subjectivity. This aligns with Stanovsky's view that postcolonial men's identities are often negotiated within "boundary" discourses of East/West and past/present. In Ghosh's novel, such discourses do not valorize "hegemonic masculinity" but expose its collapse. Instead, Tridib's and the narrator's masculinities emerge as *pluralistic* and dependent on others' voices. The imagined geography (past vs present) becomes their domain of power, suggesting a gendered inversion of boundaries – a masculinity that is internal and dreamlike.

**Colonial Masculinity in *The Glass Palace***

*The Glass Palace* (2000) is an epic spanning late-19th to mid-20th century Burma and India. Its protagonist, Rajkumar, is a poor Indian boy in Mandalay who seizes the opportunities of colonial capitalism. His masculinity is initially defined by ambition and success: under Saya John's tutelage, he amasses a teak fortune as British imperial projects plunder Burmese resources. In this context, masculinity equates with economic achievement and loyalty to Empire. Rajkumar's rise – marrying Dolly and raising a family – gives him authority. However, this power is precarious. When World War II and Japanese invasion loom, Rajkumar enlists in the British army, sacrificing family time. His martial role feels fulfilling of colonial duty, yet it also destabilizes his selfhood. Risking life on the front, he experiences masculinity through violence and loss; he must send his young son Arjun away for safety. The brutality of war (bombings of Rangoon, loss of homeland) shatters Rajkumar's image of himself as the stable provider.

Indeed, displacement is crucial to masculinity in this novel. From the start, colonialism has exiled Burma's monarchs: King Thibaw and Queen Supayalat are deposed and sent to India, where Thibaw clings to his bedroom as "the only homeland" he has. Their regal masculinity is thus stripped – Thibaw can only assert dignity through memory of Mandalay (famously insisting, "Don't you dare tell me to get over it."). Similarly, Rajkumar, a colonized laborer turned merchant, experiences exile. After the war, British policy forces Indians out of Burma, uprooting Rajkumar's family to India. This uprooting emasculates him: he no

longer controls the land or commerce that defined his identity. He becomes a refugee in Bengal, reduced from prosperous magnate to caretaker of Dolly and her (unbeknownst) sons. Colonial capitalism has thus built up his masculinity only to displace it, echoing Fanon's idea that colonial men are remade violently by history.

Fatherhood intersects complexly with masculinity here. Rajkumar's absence during war creates distance from Dolly; she finds a father figure in Bassin (Thibaw's son), who helps raise Arjun. Rajkumar's traditional patriarchal role falters when Bassin proves a more understanding male presence. After India's independence, Rajkumar's authority further crumbles: his son, educated in Britain, returns estranged and disillusioned. Even Rajkumar's own mentor, Saya John, never loses his colonial subservience. This web of male relationships under empire shows masculinity as relational and contested rather than innate. Race and class also matter: as Indians in Burma, Rajkumar and other brown men are never equal to the Europeans, though they try to appropriate colonial prestige through wealth. This attempt at mimicking imperial masculinity is unstable, highlighting how colonial power ultimately controls who can be a "man."

In sum, *The Glass Palace* dramatizes how colonial capitalism and war deconstruct masculine selfhood. Ambition and service to Empire initially confer power on Rajkumar, but exile and violence expose the limits of that power. His masculinity, once tied to material success, is repeatedly undermined by historical forces beyond his control. In postcolonial terms, this reflects a "dual allegiance" torn by colonialism: men like Rajkumar and Arjun pay duty to empire yet remain excluded subjects of it. As one analysis notes, for characters like Rajkumar, duty itself is "split, torn by colonialism into a dual, duplicitous, allegiance" (to family vs empire). Masculinity here is thus *split* too – Rajkumar must learn a kinder version of manhood (modelled by Bassin) to survive politically. The once-hegemonic figures (the king, Saya John, Saya's agent Bassin) are all shown to have compromised masculinities. The novel ultimately suggests that masculinity must be rebuilt amid exile: men preserve memory of home and tradition even as they adapt to new social orders.

**Masculinity, Labour, and Resistance in *Sea of Poppies***

In *Sea of Poppies* (2008), Ghosh examines masculinity at the dawn of empire-driven migration. The novel's Ibis crew includes Indian and Chinese indentured laborers (coolies) and sailors of mixed or minority backgrounds (e.g. the Indian-American Zachary Reid, the Eurasian ship-owner Neel Rattan, the Indian Hindu Kalua). Here masculinity is inextricable from class, race, and colonial labor. These men have *little* social power: Zachary is a free Black-American passing for white to advance, Neel is an outcast of mixed castes, and Kalua is a former untouchable. The British Empire's racial hierarchy systematically *emasculates* them. For instance, upon embarkation at the Ganges, the coolies have their heads shaved and names "Englishified," effectively erasing their prior identities and autonomy. Throughout the voyage, colonial authority (the ship's British officers) punishes any sign of disobedience. Even Zachary's stint as second mate is tenuous: as one scholar notes, Zachary's "freedom" aboard Ibis is ultimately hollow – he is merely "free to occupy a different position in the same capitalist system". In other words, race and class on the ship keep every man trapped under colonial structures, no matter his rank.

Nevertheless, Ghosh also shows resistance and solidarity among these displaced men. Onboard, the indentured laborers form a quasi-family ("jahaji-bhai," or ship-brothers) that transcends caste and nation. Kuldeep Mathur points out that Ghosh's coolies "seize a unique occasion to re-invent their identities as jahaji-bhai," developing plural, hybrid identities that resist the imposed divides. For example, Kalua, who began as a broken Hindu farmer, finds kinship among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs on the Ibis. Neel starts by clinging to his pride and grievance (his father Rattan was betrayed by the British), but gradually forges bonds with other men like the kindly sailor Hukum Singh. Zachary, though initially obsessed with his racial "performance" of whiteness, learns from Ali (the head lascar) and the cultural diversity that the rigid colonizer-colonized binary can be negotiated. Even though their "masculinities" are fractured by oppression, these characters assert agency by mutual support.

At the same time, the narrative exposes the cruelty of empire. Racial hierarchy works constantly to emasculate: for instance, coolies understand themselves as lowest in the ship's pecking order. Zachary's memory of slavery and the Middle Passage haunts him on Ibis, reminding readers that any "privileges" he obtains (even passing for white) are temporary and unstable. Neel Rattan's very conception of masculinity is crippled by diaspora: his father Rattan Pau was dishonored by the British, casting a long shadow over Neel's sense of manhood. The indenture system literally commodifies these men's bodies and wills. Yet Ghosh shows that such oppression does not completely annihilate masculine selfhood. Through camaraderie and cultural syncretism (shared meals, languages, prayers), the male characters carve out a space of resistance on the Ibis. They jockey for control of labor (as when Zachary and Ali negotiate rank) and even form conspiratorial bonds (Ali's foresight with Allen). By journey's end, although still bound for Mauritius as indentured laborers, these men have transformed each other's identities – suggesting that masculinity in the colonial era could become "syncretic" and resilient. The empire's weight remains heavy, but *Sea of Poppies* hints at the early stirrings of a collective masculine consciousness that transcends the racialized order imposed by empire.

**Reconstructing Masculinity: Cross-Textual Analysis**

Comparing across the three novels reveals shifts in masculine identity from colonial to postcolonial contexts. In *Sea of Poppies* (set just before the Opium Wars), masculinity is nascent and hybrid among colonized men. The men on Ibis adapt to forced displacement by forming new communal roles; their manhood is intertwined with labor and survival under Empire. By *the Glass Palace* era (late 19th–mid 20th c.), colonial masculinity is more established but strained – men like Rajkumar embrace Western education, commerce, and military duty, yet find these ideals hollow when war and independence arrive. In *the Shadow Lines* (post-Independence period, 1970s-80s), masculinity has become more introspective and fragmented. The narrator and Tridib define themselves not by empire or economics but by memory and imagination. This historical trajectory mirrors Stanovsky's observation that postcolonial masculinities often emerge through cultural "fusions" in the

diaspora: from diverse indentured communities to multiethnic expatriates, Ghosh's male characters reflect increasingly hybrid identities.

Across all texts, masculinity appears fluid and historically bound. No single ideal holds: Ghosh's men perform many roles (scholar, soldier, worker, dreamer), and even decline or reject them. For example, Tridib abandons strict nationalism in favor of personal liberty; Rajkumar juggles being a patriarch, a soldier, and a businessman; Neel shifts from proud survivor to compassionate companion. This plurality echoes Connell's multiple masculinities, and suggests a critique of the "hegemonic" model. As Derek Stanovsky warns, we must avoid essentializing "native" masculinities through Western narratives. Ghosh's novels resist that trap by showing how men internalize and contest colonial gender discourses. They also illustrate Fanon's insight that colonization *produces distortions* in men's gendered selves. The British and Japanese colonizers in the novels are also shaped by empire (Thebaw, Saya John), indicating that oppressive power warps masculinity on both sides.

Notably, memory and trauma run through each narrative as a masculine inheritance. In *the Shadow Lines*, male identities depend on personal and national history; in *The Glass Palace*, Rajkumar's masculinity is tied to past glory and betrayal; in *Sea of Poppies*, memories of slavery, caste, and lost homeland drive the men's actions. Writing and story-telling become tools by which the male characters (and narrators) reclaim agency. This aligns with postcolonial theory's emphasis on representation as resistance. By telling their stories – literally building the Ibis dictionary, preserving folk tales, or writing letters – Ghosh's men work through trauma. Thus, masculinity in Ghosh's fiction is neither monolithic nor fixed; it is a locus of negotiation shaped by colonial history, personal memory, and communal bonds.

## Conclusion

Across *the Glass Palace, Sea of Poppies*, and *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh portrays masculinity as deeply vulnerable and malleable. His male characters are not the archetypal patriarchs or warriors, but rather fractured individuals coping with trauma, loss, and change. Central findings include: men in these novels often lack autonomous power, and must redefine their identity through *memory and community* (for example, through reminiscence or the jahaji brotherhood). Mas masculinity emerges as a site of trauma and negotiation, reflecting personal and historical upheavals. This challenges the notion of stable "hegemonic" manhood; Ghosh shows that colonial and postcolonial contexts force new masculinities to take shape.

By analyzing the three novels together, we see a spectrum of colonial/postcolonial masculine experience: from the indentured laborer's struggle on the Ibis, to Rajkumar's flight from and to empire, to the memory-haunted narrator of *The Shadow Lines*. All reveal how borders (geographic or ideological) are "shadow lines" that men cross mentally and emotionally. In doing so, these stories contribute to postcolonial gender discourse by highlighting often-overlooked male subjectivities. Ghosh's approach underlines that gender cannot be separated from history: masculinity, like nationhood, must be continually reconstructed.

Future research might extend this analysis to Ghosh's later works. For example, the relationship of masculinity to ecology (as in *The Hungry Tide*, 2004) or non-binary gender roles (perhaps in the evolving Ibis trilogy) could enrich our understanding of how men navigate other crises. More broadly, Ghosh's fiction invites study of how *eco-masculinity* and postcolonial identities intersect, and of how queer or non-conforming masculinities appear amid imperial and environmental collapse. In sum, this study has shown that Ghosh's novels use memory and displacement to reconstruct masculinity, offering a nuanced view of male experience in the colonial and postcolonial Indian world.

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