

EMPIRE, ECOCIDE, AND RESOURCE EXTRACTION IN AMITAV GHOSH'S
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ABSTRACT

Environmental degradation has become one of the major concerns of the modern world. Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment and helps readers understand how human greed, colonial power, industrial growth, and commercial ambition damage the natural world. Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* presents the close connection between imperialism and ecological devastation in Burma, India, and Malaya. The novel shows how British colonial power exploits land, labour, forests, oil reserves, animals, and local communities for economic gain. Burma's teak forests and oil wells become objects of imperial desire, while native people and migrant labourers are drawn into dangerous work systems that serve colonial profit. Ghosh also shows how native collaborators, traders, and merchants participate in the destruction of the ecosystem. Through the history of Rajkumar, Saya John, Dolly, Uma, and other characters, the novel connects migration, war, human greed, cultural loss, and environmental damage. The teak camps, oil fields, elephants, rivers, forests, and war-torn landscapes reveal the violence caused by colonial capitalism. This paper examines *The Glass Palace* from an ecocritical perspective and studies how Ghosh exposes the ecological cost of empire. It argues that the novel presents colonialism as a force that destroys both nature and humanity.

KEYWORDS: Environmental degradation, ecocriticism, eco-imperialism, resource extraction, culture, nature.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* is a wide historical novel that moves across Burma, India, and Malaya over nearly a century. The novel begins with the British invasion of Burma and follows the lives of several families through colonial rule, migration, commerce, war, and displacement. Beneath this large historical frame, Ghosh presents a deep concern for the natural world. Forests, rivers, elephants, oil fields, rubber plantations, and war-damaged landscapes are closely linked with the lives of human beings in the novel.

The connection between ecological devastation and imperialism forms one of the major concerns of *The Glass Palace*. British colonial rule does not simply control territory. It also reorganizes land, labour, forests, and natural resources for commercial profit. Burma becomes valuable to the British because of its teak forests, oil reserves, and strategic position. The colonized land is treated as a storehouse of wealth. Its people are turned into labourers, assistants, soldiers, traders, and servants within an imperial system.

Ghosh shows that colonialism damages both culture and nature. The fall of the Burmese royal family is followed by the transformation of the country into a space of extraction. The forests are cut, the oil wells are controlled, elephants are used in dangerous timber work, and labourers risk their lives in harsh conditions. The novel reveals how imperial power changes landscapes and destroys older forms of life.

This paper studies *The Glass Palace* through an ecocritical perspective. It examines how Ghosh represents environmental degradation, colonial exploitation, commercialization, migration, war, and human greed. The study also considers how native merchants and local collaborators become part of the colonial economy. Ghosh's novel does not present ecological destruction as the work of foreign rulers alone. It also shows how ambition, profit, and ignorance among the colonized support the destruction of nature.

2. ECOCRITICISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Literature is one of the useful ways of creating awareness about environmental degradation. A literary text can show how human beings live with land, water, forest, animals, and climate. It can also show how social, economic, political, and cultural forces affect the natural world. Ecocriticism studies this relationship between literature and the environment.

Ecocriticism is concerned with the connection between human beings and their physical surroundings. It examines how literary works represent nature, ecological balance, environmental damage, and the social consequences of ecological loss. It also studies how human greed and power disturb the balance between the human and non-human worlds. The deterioration of ecology is often connected with the desire for profit, expansion, and control.

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism in the following words:

"Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies" (19).

This definition makes clear that ecocriticism brings an earth-centred approach to literature. It asks readers to think beyond human society alone. It gives importance to land, animals, forests, rivers, climate, and other forms of life. In *The Glass Palace*, this approach is useful because the novel repeatedly connects human suffering with the destruction of the natural world.

Environmental justice is also important in the study of the novel. Environmental damage does not affect all people equally. Poor people, indigenous communities, labourers, and those who depend on forests and land suffer more directly. In *The Glass Palace*, the British exploit both natural resources and the poor people who depend on the forest for survival. Labourers are brought from different regions for timber

work in Burma. They work in dangerous conditions with little protection. The exploitation of nature and the exploitation of labour occur together.

Ghosh also presents the suffering of animals. Elephants play a major role in the teak industry, yet their labour and vulnerability receive little human concern. They become part of the imperial machine of extraction. Their bodies, like those of human labourers, are used for profit. The novel therefore opens a space for reading environmental injustice in relation to both human and non-human life.

3. IMPERIALISM AND THE EXPLOITATION OF NATURE

Imperialism in *The Glass Palace* is closely connected with the deliberate exploitation of natural resources. The British Empire expands its power by taking control of land, forests, oil wells, and trade routes. Burma becomes important because of teak, oil, and other resources that can be converted into wealth for the colonial centre.

The British invasion of Burma changes the life of the country. The departure of the king and queen marks the fall of political sovereignty. It also marks the beginning of a new economic order. The land is no longer valued as a homeland with cultural and ecological meaning. It is valued according to the resources it can provide. Forests become timber. Oil wells become industrial assets. Elephants become labouring animals. Workers become disposable bodies.

The teak forests are among the most significant examples of colonial extraction in the novel. Teak is not treated as part of a living forest. It becomes a commercial product. The British want to convert the forests into timber yards for imperial profit. This desire leads to deforestation, labour exploitation, and disturbance of local ecological systems.

The work in the teak camps is harsh and dangerous. Native workers move logs through strong currents and hazardous forest conditions. They leap, swim, duck, and struggle between giant logs. They work for small wages and risk disease, injury, and death. Malaria, dengue fever, accidents, and lack of medical care make their lives insecure. The forest, which once supported life, becomes a site of labour, fear, and death under colonial capitalism.

Ghosh also shows how elephants suffer in the timber industry. The elephants are trained and used to move heavy logs. They work in dangerous conditions and may fall prey to disease such as anthrax. Their handlers also face danger, and many are trampled or injured. Through these details, Ghosh reveals a world where colonial profit depends on the suffering of humans, animals, and forests.

4. OIL, COMMERCE, AND COLONIAL GREED

The novel also presents the exploitation of oil reserves in Yenangyaung. These oil wells originally belonged to the twin-zaps, an old tribe that had claimed ownership of them for centuries. Oil naturally oozed to the surface of the earth. Before colonial extraction, the rocks exuded oil in such quantity that puddles, creeks, streams, and rivulets were formed.

The British recognized the commercial value of this natural resource. Petroleum, scarce in the West, drew the attention of colonial powers. What was once an indigenous industry became part of imperial extraction. The British took control of the wells and organized large-scale exploitation. The land was depleted, and the oil sank deeper into the earth.

This episode shows how colonialism changes the meaning of nature. A resource that belonged to a local community becomes property under imperial control. The British manage extraction, transportation, and profit. They impose control over both the land and the people. Natural wealth is separated from local life and transferred into the circuits of empire.

The exploitation of oil also reveals the larger logic of eco-imperialism. Colonial power does not merely rule people. It also reorganizes the natural world to serve distant economic interests. The land is drilled, cut, measured, and emptied. Local communities lose control over resources that once belonged to them. Ghosh presents this loss with historical depth and ecological sensitivity.

5. NATIVE COLLABORATION AND COMMERCIAL AMBITION

Ghosh does not present ecological destruction as the work of the British alone. He also shows how native ambition and greed help colonial power. Characters such as Saya John and Rajkumar become involved in the teak business. They participate in the world of commerce and gain profit from the destruction of the forest.

Rajkumar begins his life as a poor boy, but he later becomes a successful timber merchant. His rise is connected with colonial commerce. He learns how to use the opportunities created by empire. His success is therefore tied to the exploitation of natural resources. Ghosh presents his ambition with complexity. Rajkumar is not simply a villain. He is a product of the colonial economy, but he also becomes one of its agents.

Saya John also participates in the teak trade. His knowledge and experience help connect local business with imperial demand. Such characters show how colonialism creates a class of collaborators who benefit from resource extraction. The British government encourages some Indian and local traders by giving them profit and access to commerce. Through this process, the destruction of nature becomes a shared economic activity.

This aspect of the novel is important because it avoids a simple division between foreign oppressor and native victim. Ghosh shows that greed crosses national boundaries. The colonial system creates opportunities for some colonized subjects to rise, but this rise often depends on the exploitation of land, labour, and animals. The damage to the ecosystem is therefore connected with both imperial policy and human ambition.

The novel also warns against the materialistic mindset of lumber merchants. Trees are cut without concern for the future. Forests are treated as endless sources of wealth. Such callousness suggests a wider crisis. If this destructive practice continues, the world itself will face catastrophe. Ghosh's ecological warning becomes clear through the history of timber, trade, and war.

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The Glass Palace also connects environmental degradation with war. The novel covers major historical events, including the British colonization of Burma, the First World War, the Japanese invasion, and the changes caused by the Second World War. War turns landscapes into spaces of destruction. It damages homes, mills, railway stations, waterfronts, oil tanks, and forests.

The Japanese attack on Burma brings a new form of devastation. Bombers strike houses, railway stations, mills, waterfronts, and oil tanks. Smoke, fire, noise, and fear fill the landscape. The burning of oil tanks creates air pollution and visual darkness. The violent sounds of attack create noise pollution. War affects both human and non-human worlds.

Ghosh shows that industrialization, imperialism, and war work together. The same resources that attract colonial powers also become targets during war. Oil tanks, transport routes, and industrial sites become

military targets because they are part of imperial power. The land suffers because it has been transformed into a colonial resource base.

The novel also suggests that modern climate crisis and ecological vulnerability have historical roots. Former colonies are often among the most vulnerable regions today because their natural resources were overused by colonial powers. Forests were cut, oil was extracted, land was reorganized, and local communities were displaced. The ecological damage of the past continues to affect the present.

The Glass Palace tells a story that spans a century. It covers development, progress, destruction, exploitation, migration, and the suffering of people and nature. It shows that the history of empire is also a history of ecological disturbance. The destruction caused by war is not separate from the destruction caused by commerce. Both arise from the desire to control land, resources, and people.

7. CULTURE, NATURE, AND DISPLACEMENT

Ghosh's novel presents nature and culture as deeply connected. When colonial power destroys forests, exploits oil, and displaces people, it also damages cultural life. Land is not merely a physical space. It contains memory, livelihood, belief, and identity. The removal of people from their land becomes a cultural and emotional loss.

The fall of the Burmese monarchy creates a wound in the collective memory of the people. The transformation of the country under British rule takes away their political and cultural stability. Later, war and migration disturb life further. People who were once rooted in place are forced to move across borders. Burma, India, and Malaya become connected through empire, labour, trade, and displacement.

The novel also shows that colonialism affects women and nature in related ways. Women and the natural world are often treated as things to be possessed, used, and controlled. Dolly, Uma, and other women in the novel experience the pressures of history, family, and power. Their lives reveal how personal suffering is tied to political and ecological change.

Ghosh's fictional world therefore supports a nature-culture discourse. Nature cannot be separated from human history. Forests, oil wells, animals, rivers, and land are all part of cultural experience. When nature is damaged, culture also suffers. When culture is uprooted, the relationship with nature also changes.

This connection gives the novel its ecocritical force. Ghosh does not present the environment as a silent background. The natural world is part of the historical drama. It suffers, changes, and bears the marks of empire. Human beings, too, bear the marks of ecological destruction. Their migrations, losses, ambitions, and memories are linked with the fate of land and resources.

8. ECOCIDE AND GHOSH'S ECOLOGICAL WARNING

The word "ecocide" suggests the deliberate destruction of the natural world. In *The Glass Palace*, ecocide takes many forms. Forests are cut for teak. Oil wells are drained. Elephants are forced into labour. Rivers and landscapes are disturbed by trade and war. Smoke and fire from bombing poison the air. Human greed turns the living world into an object of profit.

Ghosh's novel warns that such destruction cannot continue without consequence. Nature may appear passive, but it has limits. When ecological balance is broken, human life also becomes unstable. The novel shows famine, epidemics, displacement, and war as part of the larger history of imperial violence. The abuse of nature returns as suffering for human beings.

At the same time, Ghosh's vision is not entirely hopeless. His writing often suggests the possibility of renewal and reconnection. The relationship between human and non-human life can be repaired only

when people recognize their dependence on nature. A more balanced world requires humility, care, and restraint. The novel asks readers to rethink the idea of progress. Progress cannot be measured only by profit, industry, and power. It must also be measured by ecological balance and human dignity.

In this sense, *The Glass Palace* criticizes globalization, imperialism, and Western scientific advancement when they become tools of exploitation. The novel expands the meaning of the world to include the entire ecosphere. It emphasizes the interdependence of natural and human-made systems. Ghosh shows that the reckless destruction of the human and non-human worlds leads ultimately to ecocide.

9. CONCLUSION

Ecocriticism is an important field of study because it examines the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. In *The Glass Palace*, Amitav Ghosh uses nature as a powerful means of showing the bond between the human and non-human worlds. The novel combines historical events with environmental suffering and reveals how colonialism damages both humanity and nature.

Ghosh shows how British imperial power breaks ecological balance through greed, commercial ambition, and the desire for control. The exploitation of teak forests, oil reserves, elephants, labourers, and local communities reveals the violence of empire. The novel also shows that native merchants and collaborators become part of this destructive system. Colonialism succeeds because it joins political power with commercial greed.

War further deepens ecological destruction. Bombings, smoke, fire, and attacks on oil tanks and transport systems turn the landscape into a site of ruin. The novel shows that imperial history is also environmental history. The suffering of people, animals, forests, and land belongs to the same pattern of exploitation.

The Glass Palace serves as a warning to humanity. When nature is abused for a long time, the consequences become unavoidable. Ghosh's novel asks readers to understand the fragile relationship between human beings and the natural world. It shows that environmental destruction is never separate from social injustice. Through its portrayal of empire, migration, labour, war, and ecological damage, the novel becomes a significant text for ecocritical study.

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