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An Eco-critical Study of *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh

Dr. Firoz Shaikh

Associate Professor,

Dept. of English,

BKNMU, Junagadh.



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Abstract

Nature has been centrally featured in many literary and other artistic works. In literature, both man and the physical condition he is surrounded by have been described in great length since times immemorial. The fashion in which the surroundings have been represented has evolved along with the evolution of human behaviour. The relationship between man and nature has been mostly depicted in writing in a very pleasant and delightful way. It is only recently that the threat on nature and the stress it is under has managed to grab the attention of writers. The blatant misuse of nature and its bounty for man's selfish gains has finally been getting the attention it deserves in media. It also gave birth to the novel concept of eco-criticism – the study of the relationship between literature and nature.

Eco-criticism is a section of research which is booming. It studies, collects and preserves hypotheses and opinions presented by many writers which are specifically concerning man and environment he lives in. In the past, literature used nature for symbolism. It was usually in the background while the centre-stage was taken by the complexity of human relationships and culture. The issues of the degrading natural environment had more severe implications than how innocuously they were portrayed in the writings. Though there are some literary works which concentrate solely on environmental impact, they are few and far in between. More often than it is used only as a setting to create a particular ambience in the minds of the readers.

“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 texts, eco-criticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.” Cheryll Glotfelty (xviii)

Expansion under the guise of ‘development’ has been a major reason for the global degradation of the condition of the environment. It has also been an influencer on the society created by man and the way nature has been portrayed by the people who experienced this period of imperialism. Indian origin writers such as Kiran Desai, V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth have through their writings broached the subject of eco-criticism under the effect of expansionism. However, there is one author who has dived deep into eco-criticism in his writings. Amitav Ghosh has presented the relationship between man and nature in many of his works. He expertly crafts tales of diaspora, journeys to one's homeland, ambiguity in social identity while maintaining a strong outlook on nature. In his writings, nature is in the foreground as much as his characters.

This research paper is dedicated to studying the delicate dance between man and nature in Amitav



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Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace* (2000). In the book, Ghosh discusses the catastrophic ecocultural effects of the British invasion of South Asia. It is a classic example of eco-criticism in the way it investigates and unfurls the brutalization of the landscape of the Indian subcontinent and the ramifications on the people and their habitat which changed permanently.

Keywords : Eco-criticism, Ecology, Colonialism, Relationship between human and non-human forms, Environmental Degradation

Ecology and Eco-criticism

Man is simply another part of the world like the plant and animal kingdom. However, man has become the most dominant member and has completely forgotten that he is just another piece of a complex puzzle. He conveniently forgets how he has used the crutch of nature to get where he is today. The existence of the entire human civilization depends on nature and the health of the physical environment. This bond between human and non-human entities has been intricately documented in various writings. Man and nature have been consistent elements in the practice of writing. They began diverging as the human personality became more complex and layered and took up most of the space in a literary piece.

To better understand the situation, certain terms such as 'Ecology' and 'Eco-criticism' were introduced in the context of art and literature. The environment is the science which studies the interdependent living conditions of all living creatures. The term Ecology is derived from the Greek words 'Okios' meaning earth and 'Logos' which means study. Thus, it is the study of how different materials and organisms in the world thrive together. William Rueckert in "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism" mentions the first law of ecology, "Everything is connected to everything else" (108).

Joseph W. Meeker presented the term 'artistic environment' in "The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology" (1972), which alludes to "the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works. It is simultaneously an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of the human species" (9). This investigation categorically influences how man interprets nature and chooses to represent it. As Glen A. Love in "Revaluing Nature" says, "The most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world"(237). It is only recently that the threat to nature after its incessant abuse has by man has managed to become a point of discussion among writers. It has found expression and representation in the form of eco-criticism which takes on the task on the unequivocal study of man, nature and their mutual impact. Eco-



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criticism focuses on the portrayal of nature in writing.

Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the harbingers of eco-criticism characterizes it as, “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). As indicated by Glotfelty, William Rueckert presents the term Eco-criticism in his exposition “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism” in 1978, where he implies by the expression “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (xx). Terms such as ecopoetics, ecological abstract analysis and green social examinations were also used in the academic and literary world. Cheryll Glotfelty states for eco-criticism, “As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as theoretical discourse, it negotiates between human and the non-human” (xix).

Eco-criticism is a section of research which is booming. It studies, collects and preserves hypotheses and opinions presented by many writers which are specifically concerning man and environment he lives in. Nature has a lot of impact on culture and human relationship than it has been given credit for in literature. Portrayed merely as a backdrop, it was never fully studied as an entity as important as the central characters. William Howarth in *Some Principles of Eco-criticism* observes, “Since ecology studies the relations between species and habitats, eco-criticism must see its complicity in what it attacks.....we cast nature and culture opposites, in fact they constantly mingle, like water and soil in a flowing water”(69). Eco-critical works aim to analyse and understand how mankind reached to this point of abusing nature for materialism and how the future generations can learn from the past and be more aware to make informed decisions before it is too late. Glen A. Love in *Practical Eco-criticism* says:

The disquieting fact is that we have grown inured to the bad news of human and natural disasters. . . .Actual instances of radiation poisoning, chemical or germ warfare, all rendered more threatening by the rise of terrorism. Industrial accidents like that in Bhopal, India, where the death toll lies between 20,000 and 30,000. Destruction of the planet’s protective ozone layer. The overcutting of the world’s remaining great forests. An accelerating rate of extinction of plants and animals, estimated at 74 species per day and 27,000 each year. The critical loss of arable land and groundwater through desertification, contamination, and the spread of human settlement. Overfishing and toxic poisoning of the world’s oceans. (14-15)



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The Glass of Palace as an Eco-critical Reading

Colonialism has been a major cause for the international degradation of the environment. It has also had an impact on the way people and cultures have evolved due to uprooting and imposition on land and lives. Out of the many Indian literary stalwarts, there is one author who has taken up the cause of eco-criticism in his works. Amitav Ghosh has explored the symbiotic relationship between man and nature in many instances. He weaves into the stories of human emotions and relationships another protagonist called nature who has a unique story of its own.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace* (2000) is a delicate rendering of the tumultuous times when the British invaded South Asia. It documents, in the garb of fiction, how the economic and physical landscape changed in the wake of modernity. Amitav Ghosh describes the practices employed by the colonialists to create a social and physical architecture which was chiselled to their needs and vision. The novel highlights how the rich and green culture and fauna of south Asia was uprooted and destroyed by the British.

Many aspects of lesser-known events such as the occupation of the then Burma (now Myanmar), the fall of the dynasty through the backdrop of the First and Second World War is explored in the novel. The story begins in the year 1885 and almost covers a century of history. The Britishers fortified with an influx of Indians in their army attack Mandalay. King Thebaw and his Queen are driven to live on the western coast of India. The protagonist is an orphan boy Rajkumar Raha, through whose eyes, the reader gets a glimpse of the ways of imperialism and other administrative issues.

The Glass Palace is a classic piece of work which captures the essence of eco-criticism through the focus and attention that the exploitation of the green culture receives. The harmful implications of the occupation of Mandalay on the environment are captured by Ghosh in a manner which has not been seen before. The British have their eyes set on the teak plantations which they want to convert into pliable logs for business. The same is the cause of the war and also result in deforestation. All the greenery was decimated to create timber production lines and enterprises. One of the significant characters of the novel, Dolly, captures the helplessness and apathy in the following excerpt:

They headed through the rubber trees. . . The ground underfoot had a soft, cushioned feel, because of the carpet of dead leaves shed by the trees. . . It was like being in wilderness, but not yet. . . But this was like neither city nor farm nor forest: there was something eerie about its uniformity; about the fact that such sameness could be imposed upon a landscape of such natural exuberance. . .



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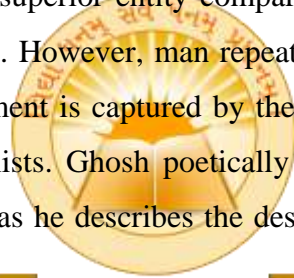
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‘It’s like stepping into a labyrinth,’ she said to Elsa. (*The Glass of Palace* 199)

Nature, as well as its disintegration, is described in the dialogues of the central characters as they witnessed it first-hand. As William Rueckert says, “Green plants, for example, are among the most creative organisms. They are nature’s poets” (111). Man is seen as a destroyer of nature and unknowingly of himself. The hostile and heart-breaking effects of colonialization on the environment and ecology are presented by Ghosh with aesthetic sensibilities. Lynn White, JR. portrays this image in his paper “Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” and notices that the Europeans turned out to be relentless before the finish of the fifteenth century, “By the end of the fifteenth century the technological superiority of Europe was such that its small, mutually hostile nations could spill out over all the rest of the world, conquering, looting, and colonizing” (7). *The Glass Palace* lays bare the raw and unpretty picture of the impact on nature due to the insatiable greed of the coloniser. Ghosh is brutally honest in the depiction of the truth. Christopher Manes in his paper “Nature and Silence” opines, “Nature is silent in our culture....” (15). This beautiful observation is the truth. Still man sees himself as a separate and superior entity compared to nature. Every stroke of the axe tells what is in store for the future generations. However, man repeatedly fails to see this correlation and keeps moving forward aggressively. This sentiment is captured by the author with the cruel way timber vendors suffered under the power of the colonialists. Ghosh poetically captures the death and destruction of the environment and thus, human structures, as he describes the decimation of timber in the heartlands of the forest.



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In the dry season, when the earth split and the timberlands shriveled . . . this was the season for the timbermen to look over the woodland for teak. The trees, once picked, must be slaughtered . . . the slaughtering was accomplished with a support of entry point, dainty cuts, cut profound into the wood at a tallness of four feet and six creeps off the ground (teak being ruled, regardless of the ferocity of its territory, by magnificent stricture in each minor detail).

Mircea Eliade states, “All over the world learning the language of animals, especially of birds, is equivalent to knowing the secrets of nature.....” (98). The human race needs to accept that they are part of a much bigger whole even if they believe that they are on top of the food chain. How the Britishers viewed elephants who were till then simply revered as mighty beasts by the locals is a case in point. The concept of utilisation of everything in nature for man’s benefit took effect. Ghosh states it eloquently as follows:

Yet until the Europeans came none of them had ever thought of using elephants for the purpose



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of logging . . . It was the Europeans who saw that tame elephants could be made to work for human profit . . . the entire way of life is their creation . . . this method of girdling trees, these ways of moving logs with elephants, this system of floating them downriver . . . (74, 75)

These expressions of Saya John to Rajkumar capture the slow yet forceful domination of the green lands. Displacement of thousands of people is another brutal facet of the colonization. This is expressed through King Thebaw as he makes his way to exile and en route sees hordes of Indians making their way into Burma on the orders of the British. He says:

Many Indians lived there. . .The British had brought them there, to work in the docks and the mills, to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines. . .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? (49-50)

Another natural resource which was capitalised were the oil wells of Yenangyaung on the Eastern banks at Irrawady. It was one of the few places on earth where the oil seeped to the surface. However, after its mindless exploitation, they turned into deep wells from where oil had to be dug out. The local specialists at this task were called Twin-zas. They played on their life to extract oil for their colonial masters. Ghosh illustrates the unforgiving nature of colonization which did not care for nature nor the well-being of fellow humans. This brutal image of the colonizers is created by Ghosh as follows:

Many of Yenangyaung's pools had been worked for so long that the level of oil had sunk beneath the surface, forcing their owners to dig down. In this way, some of the pools had gradually become wells, a hundred feet deep or even more- great oil- sodden pits, surrounded by excavated sand and earth. Some of these wells were so heavily worked that they looked like small volcanoes, with steep, conical slopes. At these depths the oil could no longer be collected simply by dipping a weighted bucket: twin-zas were lowered in, on ropes, holding their breath like pearl divers. (123)

The destruction of human life, as well as nature's bounty, is depicted poignantly in the novel. All aspects of destruction such as bombings, emission of poisonous gases, crushing of plant life and exploitation of animals have been unambiguously presented by Ghosh. The threat to the ecosystem from the perpetrators who demolished houses and oil wells as well as contaminated water without a second thought paints a dreadful picture of human greed. Harold Fromm in "From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map"



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uses a phrase for humans “man unconquerable mind” (21), which is really apparent in *The Glass of Palace*:

The first bombs fell several miles away, the explosions following in evenly spaced rhythmic succession. Suddenly there was booming sound, several times louder than all the proceeding blasts. From somewhere in the eastern reaches of the city, a huge cloud of black smoke mushroomed up towards the sky, almost engulfing the bombers . . . People had been crouching along the walls of the telegraph office when the water source was hit. Many had died. Dismembered limbs could be seen in the pool that spinning around the main: there was a child’s arm, a leg . . . (461-62)

This invincible power that man thinks he has over nature is the most dangerous weapon in the world which might someday very soon stab mankind itself. In such manner, Willian Rueckert appropriately says, “In ecology, man’s tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to bio centric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing” (112).

Conclusion

The Glass of Palace gives an account of the ecological impact of the British colonialism when they plundered Burma for its natural resources. The link between capitalism and the destruction of nature is evident. Ghosh tries to caution the world through his writing about the abuse of nature and its repercussions on humanity. He tries through his writing to warn the world about the irreversible damage that was and is being caused around the world. William Ruckert says, “We need to make some connections between literature and the sun, between teaching literature and the health of the biosphere” (109). Ghosh considers nature as an expression in his novel and explains the interrelation between the human and non-human world. His concerns for nature smoothly mingle with the storyline. The impact of colonization is seen not only on the environment but on the lives of people. Amitav Ghosh has documented the reasons for the delapidated state of the environment in *The Glass of Palace* which he hopes will serve as a forewarning for generations to come.



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