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Ecocidal Concerns in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract:

“Where there is no ecological vision, the people will perish”

(William Rueckert 114)

Amitav Ghosh is one of the few Indian writers in English in the Postcolonial era who constructs nature in his fictional works by using interviewing legends, experience, myth and history. His novel *The Glass Palace* gives us a glimpse of how Ecocide— a major concern of ecocriticism discusses the ecological destruction caused by the human world to nature and human beings alike. His sensitivity towards the monopolistic, ecocidal exploitation of nature is evident throughout the novel. Ecocriticism plays a prominent role in the study of human association with nature. *The Glass Palace* demonstrates the extent of environmental damage caused to earth on account of colonization and wars. Colonization and wars have a devastating effect not only on people but on the physical environment also. Ghosh has tried to prove that literature can make positive contributions towards increasing awareness about the environment.

Keywords: Ecocide, Ecocriticism, Nature, Environment, Exploitation, Imperialism, Anthropocentrism

Ecocide is the most predominant concern of ecocritics. It forms a major concern of ecocriticism that brings forth the ecological destruction caused by the human world to nature and human beings alike. Ecocriticism plays an important role in the study of human association with nature. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the pioneers of Ecocriticism defines Ecocriticism as, “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). Glen A. Love a major ecocritic identifies various modes of ecological disaster that take place in the physical environment. Love in *Practical Ecocriticism* maintains:

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)

The environmental devastation consequent upon the colonization involving social and cultural transformations has altered representations of nature in Postcolonial cultures and

literatures. In *The Glass Palace*, Amitav Ghosh, a leading Postcolonial writer demonstrates the extent of environmental damage caused to the earth on account of the colonialism and wars. Ghosh shows how colonialism and wars destroy not only people but also the physical environment. John McLeod in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism* very aptly quotes views of Elleke Boehmer, “The main intention of the colonizers was to exploit the natural resources and govern the indigenous inhabitants of the colonized land” (8). The novel shows the huge damage caused to nature and human beings alike. The novel reveals man’s place in biosphere and is clearly a passionate and an enraged thrust towards a biodiverse future. Weaving stories with deep ecological thinking beyond the limits of the anthropocene, Ghosh is trying to recall himself in a more than human world. In the recent decades, various scholars and environmental historians like Alfred Crosby, Ramachandra Guha, Richard Grove, David Arnold and others have pointed to the ecological damage done by the European intervention in various parts of the globe.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* looks back at the colonial period to show the socio-cultural- economic and ecological devastation done by European intervention in south Asia. The narrative wraps around historical events like Britain’s invasion of Burma, Japan’s victory over Russia and the start of Europe’s decline, the first World War, the National Independence movement of 1920’s and 30’s and the dramatic changes wrought by World War II. While connecting the lives of his characters to these historical events, he narrates the struggle of native people to assimilate with the culture imposed by an invading government.

The novel begins in the year 1885, when the British forces comprising mostly of Indians, invades Mandalay and the king, queen accompanied by a small entourage of attendants are forced to leave Mandalay and are forced to settle down in far flung area in India called Ratnagiri. The war starts over some logs of wood. A relatively unknown historical fact that teak provided the motive for British colonization is explicitly pointed out in *The Glass Palace*. In the novel, author depicts the same fact that the British intervention is followed by a bizarre flurry of deforestation. Forests the home land for a large species of flora and fauna are erased to make for commercially lucrative plantations, timber factories and industries. Burma’s teak forests are ruthlessly converted into timber yards. On a trip to Malaya, Dolly one of the major characters of the novel while visiting a rubber plantation, clearly notices the change in landscape. She is in a fix whether to call it forest, farm or anything else. She observes the change and infers:

The slope ahead was scored with the shadows of thousands of trunks, all exactly parallel, like scratches scored by a machine. It was like being in wilderness, but yet not. Dolly had visited Huay Zedi several times and had come to love the electric stillness of the jungle. 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. (199)

Harold Fromm in “From Transcendence to Obsolescence: a Route Map” very aptly maintains, “Today, man’s Faustian posturing take place against a background of arrogant, shocking, and suicidal disregard of his roots in the earth” (39). US environmental theorist and activist Patric Hossay argues that the human species is committing ecocide via industrial civilization’s effect on the global environment. Jonathan Bate in his book *The Song of the Earth*, argues that colonialism and deforestation have frequently gone together. He writes, “As Robert Pogue Harrison has demonstrated in his remarkable book *Forests: The shadow of Civilization*, imperialism has always brought with it deforestation and consuming of natural resources” (87).

Ecocide refers to any large scale destruction of the natural environment or over consumption of natural resources. It is a term for a substance that kills enough species in an ecosystem to disrupt its structure and function. William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" writes, "In ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing" (113). In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh brings forth the same callousness of timber merchants who are ruthless and unmindful towards earth's resources. His sensitivity toward the ecocidal exploitation of nature is evident in the following lines:

This was the season for the timber men to comb the forest for teak. The trees, once picked, had to be killed and left to dry, for the density of teak is such that it will not remain afloat while its heartwood is moist. The killing was achieved with a girdle of incisions, thin slits, carved deep into the wood at a height of four feet and six inches off the ground (teak being ruled, despite the wilderness of its terrain, by imperial stricture in every detail).

The assassinated trees were left to die where they stood, some-times for three years or even more. (69)

Ghosh's usage of words like 'killing' and 'assassination' depicts his deep ecological vision and sympathy for these innocent lives. He skillfully brings forth his revolt against ecocide. He makes his readers feel and hear the sounds of protests of these trees as they fell, unloosing thunderclap explosions that are heard miles away. Having a deep ecological vision, he focuses on the intrinsic values present not only in human but non human life forms. Rueckert very rightly suggests the idea, "that nature should also be protected by human laws, that trees (dolphins and whales, hawks and whooping cranes) should have lawyers to articulate and defend their rights" (108). Ghosh in the novel explicates the tortuous course the trees go through. The scene of brutal ecocide is further highlighted as:

That was when the axemen came, shouldering their weapons, squinting along the blades to judge their victims' angle of descent. Dead though they were, the trees would sound great tocsins of protest as they fell, unloosing thunderclap explosions that could be heard miles away, bringing down everything in their path, rafts of saplings, looped nets of rattan. Thick stands of bamboo were flattened in moments, thousands of jointed limbs exploding simultaneously in deadly splinter blasts, throwing up mushroom clouds of debris. (69)

The above scene of destruction reminds of a parallel study of a poem *Killing a Tree* by Gieve Patel in which the poet objectively enumerates the difficulties involved in killing a tree. According to him, a simple jab of knife is not sufficient to kill this life. The trees grow slowly consuming the earth and rising out of it. They absorb sunlight, air and water for years. In the same way, Ghosh makes readers watch the slaughter of trees and sight of ecocide in terror and fascination. The novel establishes how the colonization of people considered wild is accompanied by colonization and subsequent commercial exploitation of wilderness. It is a fact that colonization was a lucrative commercial operation bringing wealth and riches to the western nations through the economic exploitation of the colonized countries. Ghosh brings forth this fact by taking readers to a place Yenangyaung on the Eastern bank of the river Irrawaddy. This is one of the few places in the world where petroleum seeps naturally to the surface of earth.

Yenangyaung is traded by foreigners from France, England and America for sake of petrol. These foreigners imperialize the native people called twin-zas and their lands by gaining control on their pools and oil wells. The main intention of imperialism is robbing the other lands of its natural wealth and exploiting its people and resources. In the novel, the exploitation of the area is highlighted as:

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 above extract of the novel shows that technological progress and human greed have alarming implications not only on the environment but humans itself. Rajkumar the protagonist of the novel is haunted by such scenes of human exploitations associated with oil- soaked specters. He is awestruck to watch the twin-zas at work. The condition of the people working there is presented as pathetic:

Standing on the lip of a well he would look on as a man went down the shaft, rotating slowly on a sling. The rope would be attached, by way of a pulley, to his wife, family and livestock. They would lower him in by walking up the slope of the well, and when they felt his tug they would pull him out again by walking down. (123)

In the blind march of progress, humans not only neglect and kill their environment but ruthlessly pose threats to their own existence. Their anthropocentric worldview is the root cause of ecocide. William Rueckert aptly writes:

. . . we are in an environmental crisis because the means by which we use the ecosphere to produce wealth are destructive of the ecosystem itself. The present system of production is self destructive. The present course of human civilization is suicidal. In our unwitting march towards ecological suicide we have run out of options. Human beings have broken out of the circle of life, driven not by biological need, but by social organization which they have devised to conquer nature . . . (116)

Foreigners being engulfed by the devil of technology, attacks the earth of Yenangyaung mercilessly and brutally for its oil. Ghosh watches this desolation and laments, "wooden obelisks began to rise on the hillocks, cage-like pyramids inside which huge mechanical beaks hammered ceaselessly on the earth" (123). The incongruity against ecocide is stressed by author's use of metaphors— cage like pyramids and mechanical beaks which hammer earth ceaselessly. Ghosh's concern pertaining to human interface with the earth takes its readers back to *Arctic Dreams* by Barry Lopez published in 1986 in which Lopez takes up issues like oil exploration and drilling with its resultant ill effects on the land and native cultures. It is a bitter fact that man rifles the earth for metal, destroys the trees for his habitats and industrial set ups. He destroys the natural

beauty of landscapes with establishment of various factories and as such pollutes land, water and air. Rueckert calls it “the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude towards nature” (107).

Ghosh in the novel, further points to the environmental damage done by wars and the devastations and displacements caused by it. Human activity like war and the profligate use of our ecosystem’s resources is ecocidal. In the novel, Ghosh shows how the riots in Burma are followed by casualties numbered in hundreds. Business centers are attacked, many men are killed, railway stations, air planes are attacked with catapult and spears. This human violation is perceived as an act against nature. All this destruction is followed by war between England and Germany and then Japan’s attack over empire. Bombers attack Burma. Everything is shrouded in clouds of smoke:

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. Rajkumar averted his eyes and walked on. Approaching Pazundaung, he saw that both sides of the creek were blanketed in flames. While still a good distance away he spotted the perimeter walls of his yard. They were shrouded in clouds of smoke. (462)

Ghosh shows and highlights the destructions as a result of firings and bombardments. The attackers target city’s long water fronts, aiming for its mills, ware houses, oil tanks and railway lines. The blasts appear like moving wall of sounds. Author ventilates his agony and pain and presents the horror of destruction as:

The bombers changed formation as they approached the eastern peripheries of the city, dipping lower in the sky. Their fuselages opened and their cargo of bombs began to descend, trailing behind the craft like glinting, tinsel ribbons. It was as though an immense silver curtain had suddenly appeared over the eastern horizon. 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. (460-61)

This way, the steady destruction of human and natural world is emphasized by Ghosh in the novel. Besides the general destruction, the emission of toxic gases due to bombardments as illustrated in the above extract of the novel will have dangerous effects on environment and human health. Ghosh’s illustration of booming sounds and clouds of black smoke are indications of his sensibility about the air and noise pollution and thus a threat of ecocide. The destruction caused by bombs and bombardments is very huge. The combing of the trees continues without any interruption. Ruthless combing of trees highlights ecocidal concerns. Arjun the commanding officer of Battalion C of British Indian Army is presented by Ghosh as an eye witness of the destruction:

The first shell went skimming over the tops of the trees, sending down showers of leaves and small branches. But then, slowly, the explosions began to move in their direction. The earth shook so violently as to send the water at the bottom of the

trench shooting into their faces. Arjun saw a fifty-foot rubber tree rising gracefully from the earth and jumping several feet into the air before somersaulting towards them. (391)

Ghosh perceives human violence caused in mutual ill will between empires as an act against nature. The planet is suffering from human induced ecocide which is a global crisis threatening the existence of multiple life forms including human life. Life on earth is above all correlative. All is connected systematically by relationships of energy transfer and matter exchange and by solar processes that govern wind and water. His work seems in resonance with the great and thoughtful ecologist Aldo Leopold. Harold Fromm in his essay "Aldo Leopold: Aesthetic Anthropocentrist" writes that Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac* introduces the idea that, "The use of the Earth solely as an economic resource will eventually destroy both it and us. Ethics, therefore must be extended to include "soils, waters, plants, and animals," and humans must change their role from "conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (5).

In the light of the above study, I would like to bring forth the idea that literature can make positive contributions towards increasing awareness about the environment. The works of writers concerned about the environment can play important part in solving real and pressing ecological concerns. The alchemical mix of storytelling and ecological thinking as adopted by Ghosh can be part of remedy for humanity's adaptation to the ongoing crisis. Further his vision can act as a transformational mix to re-pattern the crisis into an opportunity and shift of anthropocentric structures towards networks of dynamic relationships. He is one of the writers in English in whose works one comes across the ecological interplay between man and earth, human and animal and living and nonliving. He interweaves nature with experience and history. Through this novel, he presents ecocide a platform for bringing green activists of every kind together to take action locally to get ecocide on the political agenda worldwide. His work in a sense puts forth his quest for eradicating ecocide.

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