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COMMODIFICATION AND ECOCIDAL EXPLOITATION OF NATURE: RE-CONFIGURING ECOLOGICAL IMPERIALISM AND ECO-CULTURAL IMBROGLIO IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE GLASS PALACE*

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Abstract

The present article quite emphatically maps out the discourse between culture and nature implying a penetrating view of cruel and inhuman interference of human being for their commercial profit into the world of nature and similarly of disastrous and revengeful approach of nature to the human world. In *The Glass Palace* Ghosh projects the despotic practices of colonizers over the colonised land, people and their culture through the process of commercialization and commodification of human and natural resources. Culture and nature are simultaneously are exploited by the westerners supported by the natives. By portraying such deranged and awful condition of the world, Ghosh has channelized an ecological concern to the readers, intellectual scholars and thinkers to make them aware about the ecocidal exploitation and to bring back the ecological balance with cultural codification of human world.

Keywords:

Commodification,
Commercialization, Culture,
Discourse, Ecocidal
Exploitation

In the present context of writing literature, 'green study' or eco-critical approach becomes the crucial issue showing forth the evil colonial impact of exploiting the native natural resources by enhancing the native human culture in crisis and conflict and the consummation of culture and variable disastrous effects on the unprivileged. The constant increasing and ever inciting concern towards the environmental degeneration and devastation engages the scholars and intellectual writers to expose the injustice and ecocidal damage in their writing to bring forth the real relationship between humans and nature in the strand of post-colonialism displaying the socio-political, cultural and economic discourse of imperialism, colonialism and modern post-colonial dilemma to the

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environmental and ecological concerns. In post-colonial cultural field, the intellectuals raise their voice in demand for justice and preservation of nature to create a balanced world where nature and culture will be well nourished to make environmental integrity. Upamanyu Mukherjee, being critical towards the human cultural politics and power that creates the devastating and disastrous condition in environment, in *Post-colonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*, rightly points out that-

Surely, any field purporting to theorize the global conditions of colonialism and imperialism... cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories such as the state, society, conflict, literature, theatre, visual arts. (144)

The very concept Ecocriticism illuminates the interdisciplinary and interwoven relationship between human culture and nature on the ground of non-dualistic construct. Regarding this view, Pramod Nayar, an Indian popular theorist in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* remarks that –

Ecocriticism is a critical mode that looks at the representation

of nature and landscape in cultural texts, paying particular attention to attitudes towards ‘nature’ and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. It aligns itself with ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment, while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches. (242)

The study of nature or the eco-critics in the field of interpretation poses a critique towards the dualistic and destructive nature of humans by exhibiting the imperial practices, started by the European colonialism, of human beings in the field of cultural and economic globalization. The motif of eco-critics is to expound the role of nature in the cultural texts and the role of human culture in treatment of natural world in a positivistic approach to create a materialistically balanced world. Cheryll Glotfelty, a professor of literature and environment at the university of Nevada, Reno, quite brilliantly asserts the very inter-connection between human culture and nature as both are by each other. He argues in his book *The Ecocriticism Reader*, thus:

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Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, an ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture. Understanding how nature and culture constantly influence and construct each other is essential to an informed ecocriticism. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land. As a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. (xix)

In the present context, the intellectual environmentalists such as Ramachandra Guha, David Arnold and Alfred Crosby and other scholars try to envisage in their nature writing the ecological exploitation along with the human culture by the European imperialistic practices. Several attempts made by several nature writers try to explore the value and truth between self and society through inextricability of nature-culture discourse.

Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* quite emphatically upholds the colonial world

where Western colonialists exploited the social, cultural, natural and economic fields of many parts in South Asia. The novel also demonstrates on the policies and strategies of colonizers who not only damages the lives of common people through the entire world, but also leaves an evil influence on the environment world by controlling and exploiting the natural resources for the sake of their own benefit in the global market. The novel focuses one of crucial concerns of ecocritics by displaying devastation and deterioration of nature and damage caused by human and natural forces which is called 'ecocide'.

The novel starts with the very crucial year 1885, when the British invaded Burma, dethroned the King Thebaw and send the King and the Queen along with a group of attendance to Ratnagiri. The novel well emphasises on the battle between the British and the King of Burma, which was happen over wood, element of nature. The British tried their best to seize all teak in Burma and control entire natural resources. The fighting between the British and the Royal authority issuing nature and the British's intentional imperialistic approach for teak are well captured by Ghosh in the novel as Young Mathew, Saya John's son informs Rajkumar:

The English are preparing to send a flee up the Irrawaddy. There's going to be a war.

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Father says they want all the teak in Burma, The King won't let them have it so they're going to do away with him

Rajkumar gave laughter. A war over wood? Who's ever heard of such things? (15)

The King protested against the illegal demand of the British timber companies. After getting complains, the British government decided to send the battalions to Burma and declared war against the Royal authority. Ghosh has presented such war in an ecological set-up in the novel *The Glass Palace* in the following-

People were running in every direction, slamming against each other and pushing blindly at anything that came their way. Rajkumar was swept along in the direction of the river. As he ran, he became aware of a ripple in the ground beneath him, a kind of drumbeat in the earth, a rhythmic tremor that travelled up his spine through the soles of his feet. (27)

In the novel, the King's experience about the colonial power of the British is documented in the following-

What vast, what incomprehensible power, to move people in such huge

numbers from one place to the 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? (50)

War as a crucial instrument destroying human and environmental world is a stark instance of crime against nature. Ghosh in his present novel gives a detailed account on the instruments which are used by the British to destroy Burma and make it under control. The weapons such as breech-loading rifles and rapid firing machine guns used by the English have not been used before on Asian continent. Ghosh quite critically accounts the detailed description of the instruments in the following way-

They are bringing the biggest fleet that's ever sailed on a river. They have cannon that can blow away the stone wall of a fort; they have boats so fast that they can outrun a tidal bore; their guns can shoot quicker than you can talk. They are coming like the tide: nothing can stand in their way. (17)

The novel *The Glass Palace* captures the glimpse of parallel devastation, domination

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and destruction of human culture and nature by the English colonizers. The ecological world takes the course of alteration through the process of commodification and exploitation of nature at the hand of the British colonizers. The impact of the British colonialism and imperialism is not only obvious on the socio-cultural ground of human world, but also on the entire environment of possessed bio-regions. In the novel, Burma including people and their culture and the bioregions has been metamorphosed into the material and commercial hub according to the designs of British policies. Ghosh remarks that-

Courtly Mandalay was now a bustling commercial hub; resources were being exploited with an energy and efficiency hitherto undreamt of. The Mandalay palace had been refurbished to serve the conquerors' recondite pleasures: the west wing had been converted into a British club; the Queen's Hall of Audience had now become a billiard room; the mirrored walls were lined with months-old copies of Punch and the Illustrated London News; the gardens had been dug up to make room for tennis courts and polo grounds; the exquisite little monastery in which

Thebaw had spend his novitiate had become a chapel where Anglican priests administered the sacrament to British troops. (66)

Settling their colony, the British employed tight control not only on the action, behaviour and migrancy of the people but also on the natural resources and managed to design the proper management of the transporting such natural resources for their commercial purposes. The British government entraps some Indian people in engaging them in teak business by giving them enough profit. In the novel, Saya John and Rajkumar are portrayed as teak merchants who helped the government and become the participants in the commercial world and in the process of environmental destruction. Ghosh obliquely underscores the ambitious nature and greediness of Saya John and Rajkumar who for the sake of money and commercial prosperity destroys natural resources. Ghosh's critique towards Eurocentric interference in the environmental world is reflected thus:

Yet until the Europeans came none of them had ever thought of using elephants for the purposes of logging. Their elephants were used only in pagodas and palaces, for war and ceremonies. It was the Europeans who saw that tame

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elephants could be made to work for human profit. It was they who invented everything we see around us in this logging camp. This entire way of life is their creation. It was they who thought of these methods of girdling trees, these ways of moving logs with elephants, this system of floating them downriver. (74)

The British colonialism over environment is evident in their endeavour for lucrative plantation with commercial profit through the process of deforestation and destruction of big trees with their wilderness. The charm and spontaneity of nature are suppressed and lost due to the economic and commercial mentality of human beings who are culturally well identified with the spirit and freshness of nature. The change in natural equipoise and landscape is conspicuous in the novel when Dolly, wife of Rajkumar, made a trip to Huay Zedi where she found rubber plantation in spite of deep forest and was in doubt whether to identify this rubber plantation as forest, farm or anything else. She felt bored when she visited the symmetry of the rows of rubber plantation which is observed commercially lacking the wilderness of the forest in the true sense of the term. In *The Glass Palace*, this change is reflected through Ghosh's eco-critical concern in the following –

The ground underfoot had a soft, cushioned feel, because of the carpet of dead leaves shed by the trees. 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 a 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. She remembered how startled she'd been when the car crossed from the heady profusion of the jungle into the ordered geometry of the plantation. (199)

The novel well concentrates on the present condition of the world which suffers from the global crisis, caused by the human instigated destruction of nature. The very concept 'ecocide' implies the destruction of natural environmental world by human cruel and deliberate interference. The novel shows the callousness, ruthlessness and materialistic approach of the timber merchants who recklessly cut

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down the trees involving with whimsical play of deforestation, which causes a great loss of beauty and naturalness and creates a great vacuum and damage in the natural environmental world. Ghosh's concern of such ecocidal exploitation is manifested in a minute and pathetic description in *The Glass Palace* thus:

This was the season for the timbermen to comb the forest for teak, the trees, once picked, had to be killed and left to dry, for the density of the teak is such that it will not remain afloat while its heartwood is moist. The killing was achieved with a girdle of incision, thin silts, carved deep into the wood at a height of four feet and six inches of the ground (teak being ruled, despite the wildness of its terrain, by imperial stricture in every tiny detail). The assassinated trees were left to die where they stood, sometimes for three years or even more. (69)

Being very much concerned with the balance of ecosystem, Ghosh sarcastically presents the British as well as the people who are associated with them for the common purpose of timber business. He is afraid of the huge destruction of forest and natural resources. He indirectly wants to

convey the message that if such process of destruction is continued, very soon the world will face a great crisis that can extinguish the entire mankind. Ghosh's deep concern of the nature's revenge in the form of ecological disaster due to such devastation of nature and natural resource is beautifully attuned to the thought of Glen A. Love, an ecocritic who observes in *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and Environment* thus:

The disquieting fact is that we have grown inured to the bad news of human and natural disasters. The catalog of actual and potential environmental crises is by now familiar to us all, so familiar as to have become dismissible. Ten, twenty, or thirty years ago we were regularly warned of spectres on the horizon: An unchecked growth of world population, tripling from 2 to 6 billion in the twentieth century and on its way to perhaps 10 billion in the next few decades, accelerating beyond the present rate of 247 new Earthlings every minute, nearly 250,000 every day, and 130 million per year. Indications of global climate warming of potentially enormous effects. The muted but still real threat of nuclear

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warfare. Actual instances of radiations 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)

Ghosh being a representative writer of contemporary modern world, he places the crucial and very deranged situation of the universe where we are living by making our livelihood insecure through ever involvement of destroying natural and environmental elements. He by making the readers aware of the lust for wealth, brutality and recklessness of human beings continues the description of killing trees in the novel in the following-

That was when the axemen came, shouldering their weapons, squinting along the blades to judge their victims' angles of descent. Dead though they are, the tree 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)

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh has criticised the nature of the timber-merchants who exploit nature and use nature as medium for their commercial greed. The river Irrawaddy is presented by Ghosh in this novel as a natural medium that transporting without any cost the long wood-logs from one place to another, takes part in the process of destruction of natural environment. Ghosh describes –

When the timber-heavy streams of the monsoons debouched into the Irrawaddy the impact was of colliding trains. The difference was that this was an

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accident continuously in the making, a crash that carried on uninterrupted night and day, for weeks on end. The river was by now a swollen, angry torrent, racked by clashing currents and pock-marked with whirlpools. When the feeder streams slammed head-on into the river, two ton logs were thrown cartwheeling into the air; fifty foot tree trunks were sent shooting across the water like flat-bottomed pebbles. The nose was that of an artillery barrage, with the sound of the detonations carrying for miles into the hinterland. (120)

Ghosh in this novel has brought the economic exploitation along with natural resources by the Westerners into the light to show profit-seeking nature of the British. Ghosh expounds the environmental devastation by introducing a place called Yenangyaung, a great source of petrol, where the foreigners from England, France and America come to explore the land for the sake of petrol to extend their business in the global market. The foreigners first control the native people, their culture and their economy along with the natural resources of the land. Such process of controlling and exploiting the natural resources with the natives can be treated as 'ecological imperialism'. The exploration

and exploitation of Yenangyaung is described in The Glass Palace thus:

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 as were lowered in, on ropes, holding their breath like pearl divers. (123).

Ghosh in The Glass Palace, presenting the violence and devastation of riots in Burma captures the constant destruction of natural environment. Such destruction is caused by the war between England and Germany and Japan's attack on England. Bombers directly attacked Burma targeting water front, mills, oil tanks, houses and railway station. The novel reveals the excavation of emotional rage, pain and suppressed misery of Ghosh

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towards such blasting and decays in the following-

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 a bombing sound, several times louder than all the preceding 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. (460-461)

In such violent situation, the combing of plantation and destruction of natural world along with human world also continue uninterrupted. The entire ecocidal concerns are witnessed by Arjun, the military officer of Battallion C of British Indian Army in the following-

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)

The novel *The Glass Palace* exhibits the plight of the colonised people on the movement from one place to another for the sake of the British commercial profit. Presenting the process of commodification of both nature and human, Ghosh presents a discourse of power game in background of colonial and post-colonial study. Ecocritical study along with nature explores the condition of the displaced and migrated people who are involved with new environment showing the actions and reactions between human beings and nature. Ghosh in his present novel reflects the environmental racism showing impositions of injustice by the colonizers over the colonised and disempowered. He, in presenting the King's voice of protest reveals the English despotism on the disempowered by attributing heavy

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pressure to be colonised to act according to their order, thus:

The British has brought them there, to work in the docks and mills, to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines. Apparently they couldn't find local people to do these jobs. And indeed, why should the Burmese do that kind of work? In Burma no one ever starved, everyone knew how to read and write, and land was to be had for the asking: why should they pull rickshaws and carry night soil? ... 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, to sit blind in exile? (50)

Through portrayal of the principal character Rajkumar with his unfixed and moving life, Ghosh has shown the deplorable condition of the displaced and migrated people who are bound to adjust themselves with the present environment. Rajkumar experiencing such tumultuous life, and ultimately attaining success as a teak businessman, is very much inclined psychologically to his native place Burma where he spent much of his life with

beautiful experiences. Though there is deadly riot in Burma, Rajkumar was reluctant to leave the place as he knows that where ever he will go, he will never get back such comforts like Burma. Rajkumar's presumption is well presented thus:

It is hard to think of leaving: Burma has given me everything I have. The boys have grown up here: they've never known any other home. When I first came to Mandalay the nakhoda of my boat said: this is a golden land- no one ever starves here. That proved true for me and despite everything that is happened recently, I don't think I could ever love another place in the same way. (310)

Human beings are well habituated with the change of place and environment. The change of dwelling and the process of migration always create a mess and turmoil in the natural world. Nature and landscape are always in a deranged condition by the excessive migration and change of human dwelling. In movement, human beings are always in quest of something absolute taking part into different cultures and people in different places. In such circumstances, all geographical frontiers are wiped out and erased and nature is reciprocally interlinked with human culture and comes out as a cultural construct.

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Ghosh in *The Glass Palace* stresses on the revengeful nature of Nature, if there is any imbalance in natural environment. Nature bring treated as oppressed and enslaved by the human beings, will never summon herself at the hand of destructor; rather she is ready with bloody teeth to engulf human beings. In the novel Mathew indicating rubber plantation in Malaya, remarks in the following-

This is my little empire, Uma. I made it. I took it from the jungle and moulded it into what I wanted it to be. Now that it's mine I take good care of it. There's law, there's order, everything is well run. Looking at it, you would think everything here is tame, domesticated, that all the parts have been fitted carefully together. But it's when you try to make the whole machine work that you discover that every bit of it is fighting back. It has nothing to do with me or with rights and wrongs: I could make this the best- run little kingdom in the world and it would still fight back ... It's nature: the nature that made these trees and the nature that made us. (233)

Ghosh in *The Glass Palace* installing a symbiotic relationship between human and nature, places a critique against imperialism, globalisation and western pattern of scientific practice and progress that cause huge damage and devastation of natural environment. Ecocritical studies in a broad manner expand the notion of the world to include the entire ecosphere implying interconnectedness worldly and natural elements. Regarding this symmetrical and symbiotic relation between human beings and nature, Ghosh asserts in the following way-

Jaya was fascinated by the oil palms: clusters of yellowish-orange fruit hung from the stub-like trunks, each as big as a lamb. The air was very still and it seemed to have the texture of grease. Between the palms there were bird-houses elevated on poles. These were for owls, Ilongo explained: the oil rich fruit attracted great quantities of rodents; the bird helped keep their numbers under control. (500)

Thus, Amitav Ghosh in *The Glass Palace* upholds the reckless destruction of human and non-human world by colonial practices and war and also by the heart-core commercialists and materialists leading ultimately to ecocide through the whole

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devastation of nature. But Ghosh had developed a sense of high ecocritical and optimistic sensibility by expecting the resurrection of nature after its upheaval and by expositing the unity between nature and human in the midst of ecocidal turmoil. In *The Glass Palace* Ghosh proposes that the discourse on nature always projects cultural implication which enhancing the symbiotic and reciprocal relationship between human and non-human world (mostly natural world) conveys a constructive and re-configuring accessibility of 'nature-culture' discourse.

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