

## Human Supremacy Over Nature: An Ecocritical Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the interplay of human supremacy, deep ecology, and colonialism as portrayed in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*. The narrative intricately explores how imperialistic pursuits and anthropocentric ideologies reshape natural landscapes and disrupt ecological harmony. Ghosh deftly portrays the exploitation of nature under colonial rule, where forests and resources are commodified to fuel imperialistic ambitions, reflecting a stark disregard for the intrinsic value of the environment. Through an ecocritical lens, the article delves into how human domination over nature manifests in the systematic transformation of ecosystems, juxtaposed with deep ecological principles advocating for coexistence and respect for all life forms.

The text further highlights the consequences of this imbalance, demonstrating nature's resilience and subtle rebellion against human control. By intertwining ecological ethics with the themes of colonialism and imperialism, Ghosh's narrative compels readers to question humanity's role as stewards of the environment. This study underscores the urgent need to dismantle anthropocentric worldviews and foster an egalitarian relationship between humans and nature. Through *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh not only critiques the colonial exploitation of both human and natural resources but also offers profound insights into the possibility of a more harmonious coexistence.

**Keywords:** Human supremacy, nature, deep ecology, colonialism, imperialism, environmental ethics, *The Glass Palace*, Amitav Ghosh, ecocriticism, anthropocentrism.

Stretching back from the dawn of civilization, the humanities superiority over nature is on loom. In recent decades there has been a huge decline in the population of animals, plants as well as the destruction of wholesale ecologies is occurring across the globe. Human supremacy is the collective, lived belief system that humans are superior to all other life forms and entitled to use them and their place. Eileen Crist in *Abundant Earth: Toward an Ecological Civilization* rightly states,

“In a world dominated by western civilization, industrialization and domestic animals, human supremacy has come to manifest as three invisible beliefs: that earth belongs to humanity; that the planet consists of resources for the betterment of people; and that human beings are of distinguished stature by comparison to all other species”. (Crist 51)

Years ago, when civilization emerged, the first large-scale “geo-engineering” projects were introduced. Forest, grasslands and other natural vegetation were destroyed to make way for crop agriculture, as well as the diversion of rivers into canals and impoundments for irrigation. Wild animals were systematically killed or driven into remote areas to protect the flocks. This triggered a widening wave of ecological losses and extirpations of wild plants and animals. Over time, the environment became more and more human-dominated and nature was pushed beyond the pale of encounters “With the transition to settled agriculture the relationship to the natural world and wilderness changed dramatically” writes ecological economist Lisi Krall.

With the conquest of landscapes and sea routes geographical conquest has empowered these developments enterprises the human across the world to grow, to invade and assimilate, to convert and develop, to convert and consume. So, when the British conquered India, the pattern of usage of land within the country had been organized in a way to maximize the revenue it yielded to the British crown and the commodities it could produce to feed the British economy. Villagers were forced to pay taxes, and the land either became private property or was taken over by the authority. The peasants were forced to cultivate cash crops, which led to the environmental declension. The men presiding over the British Empire perched on chairs of Burma teak at tables of African mahogany, consuming Australian beef washed down with French and Italian wines. Therefore, the inhabitants were affected by the economic greed of Britain and ecological imperialism destroyed the environment. In the words of William Rueckert “Where there is no ecological vision, the people will perish”. (Rueckert, 114) understanding the impacts on the environment many writers lend their hands to environmental issues. Nayar explains “Ecocriticism comes into the role to see how the theoretically informed readings of cultural texts can contribute not only in consciousness-raising but also looks into the politics of development and construction of nature... Ecocriticism focuses on material contexts of industrialization development and ecocide” (Nayar 241-42). Every species on this earth is connected in the cosmic chain and has the right to exist on the earth. The disruption of this chain adversely affects the symbiotic relationship between man and nature. Biodiversity is essential for the survival of every species, as each living creature is connected to a fragile web called the web of life. If any link is broken it causes severe destruction that causes the collapse of the ecosystem.

Glen A Love in his book ‘Practical Ecocriticism’ explains the calamity caused by humans to non-humans or the surroundings,

“The disquieting fact is that we had grown inured to the bad news of human and natural disaster... actual instances of radiation poisoning, chemical or germ warfare, all rendered more threatening by the rise of terrorism. 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 (love, p 14-15)

The fact is that the human world exploited it as well as exploited it. Hence, these are reviewed in the novel *The Glass Palace* of Amitav Ghosh. This paper highlights human Supremacy over nature by analyzing *The Glass Palace* of Amitav Ghosh under the theme of Deep ecology. Pramod K. Nayar, in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, writes.

Deep ecology believes in the fundamental interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features. It believes that anthropocentric thinking has alienated humans from their natural environment and caused them to exploit it. (Nayar, 246).

As to these words, Deep ecologists believe that humans should give equal rights and moral values to nature by changing the view from anthropocentric to eco-centric. The most important principle of deep ecology is, that all the human and non-human life on this earth have their intrinsic value. Non-human life has its value as humans

have. Equal importance should be given to the non-human world to avoid chaos. Ghosh in his novels gave importance to the non-human life by keeping history as a backdrop.

Amitav Ghosh's "*The Glass Palace*" vividly chronicles the colonial period of Burma. It elaborates on the relationship between the colonial power with the indigenous people for the sake of the natural wealth of the region. They imposed policies to draw wealth from the region, and it led to environmental exploitation. One of the central motifs of the novel is the exploitation of the teak forests of Burma by the British colonial powers with the help of local people. Teak is one of the most valuable woods for its durability and aesthetic appeal. It is widely used in shipbuilding, furniture, and other sectors. The sustained cutting down of the teak forests denuded the region's rich biodiversity and also altered the fragile ecology of the region, making soil erosion and deforestation worse. exploitation of these woods for timber reflects the negligence of the intrinsic value of nature, focusing only on its use for human economic gain. "Under British rule, the forests of Burma had been thrown open to the teak companies and, in the space of a few years, a landscape that had remained unchanged for millennia was utterly transformed" (Ghosh, 98). It states the destructive impact of colonial exploitation on the environment. The need to recognize and respect the intrinsic value of ecosystems is essential. "For the people who lived in the forests, the trees were not just a resource; they were an integral part of their lives, their culture, their history." (Ghosh, 101)

Ghosh highlights the environmental destruction by portraying war as a backdrop. Through two historical events that serve as a backdrop for the plot the third Anglo-Burmese war in 1885 and the Second World War with the invasion of the Japanese into Burma and Malaya in 1942, the novel depicts the destruction of the environment and natural resources as a result of war. Moreover, Ghosh's illicit human activity throughout the colonial era has harmed the ecosystem. The novelist pens down the interior landscape of the place its jungle, villagers, and lifestyle, especially the morning side estate. The novel often emphasizes the inherent beauty and importance of the natural world which is the principle of deep ecology. An example of this is the detailed and beautiful renderings of the Burmese landscape, which highlight its intrinsic value beyond being used for exploitation by humans.

This rapid alteration of the landscape was characterized by pollution, habitat destruction, and the displacement of indigenous communities, which further aggravated the environmental degradation brought about by colonial exploitation. The attitude of human supremacy over nature was observed by the character of the Britishers in the novel, which reflects the colonial mindset of superiority and entitlement. The British colonial authorities regarded the natural resources of Burma as commodities to be exploited for profit and were not much concerned about long-term consequences on the environment or the indigenous communities. The British saw the forests as nothing more than a source of timber, ignoring the complex web of life they supported. Entire landscapes were altered, with little regard for the long-term consequences

Indeed, the British colonial project in Burma was only to extract natural resources. With rich storytelling and vivid characterization, Ghosh brings home the environmental havoc wrought by the colonial exploitation of nature and reflects upon the long legacies of human exploitation of nature. In describing the teak forests, Ghosh writes: "The forest was vast, dense, teeming with life. Every tree, every shrub, every blade of grass seemed to possess a will of its own, a right to its existence that was independent of human desires". The novel is divided into seven parts the first part opens in Mandalay with the Anglo-Burmese war. The Britishers refused to follow the regulations of the king so the royal customs officers imposed fine on the timber company. This act of the royal family makes the Britishers fight against the king. King Thebaw and Queen Supalayay as well as the royal

family were taken under control by the Britishers since they had neglected the trade of natural resources such as teak, oil, and rubber. Burma was taken under the control of the Britishers. This is evident in the words of Mathew to the protagonist of the novel Rajkumar. He says,

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 a shout of laughter. A war over wood? Who's ever heard of such a thing? (Ghosh, 15).

Within a few hours, the beauty of Burma is filled with the trumpet of war and pollution. This act of the colonizers showed the avarice of mankind and the extent they go for the sake of money. Hogan in his words says,

"War has existed since the dawn of man. Nobody likes war; however, it is part of human nature to wage war. What causes war can be a very fickle subject matter. Two very popular causes of war are religious differences and greed" (p 1).

Burma was called the golden land the novelist says "world's richest gem mine lay in Burma" (Ghosh, 59) this is the real reason behind the war. By the voice of Rajkumar, Ghosh explains.

"If the British were willing to go to war over a stand of trees, it could only be because they knew of some hidden wealth secreted within the forest" (Ghosh, 9).

Deep ecology emphasizes the interdependence of all living beings. Ghosh demonstrates this concept by portraying how the characters interact with their surroundings. For instance,

Rajkumar's strong bond with the teak forests is demonstrated as he develops his business based on them, while also acknowledging the forests as a living being. Rajkumar felt a profound respect for the forest; he says, "It was a living, breathing world unto itself, not merely a resource to be exploited".

In the later part of the novel, Rajkumar sought fortune built a good relationship with the Britishers and started a timber business along with his guardian Saya John. This shows their arrogant character towards nature. Saya John describes the cutting process as,

"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 marks in every detail)...The assassinated trees were left to die where they stood, sometimes for three years or even more" (Ghosh, 69).

The cruelty of the man is understood by the word 'assassination', as some think the non-humans cannot voice out but they have a voice through the deep ecologist. They believe that there is an equal right for every organism to live and flourish and it is one of the principles of deep ecology. The *Vedas* and *Upanishads* explicitly say: "Do Not Cut Trees, because they Remove Pollution and Do Not Disturb the Sky and Do Not pollute the Atmosphere" (Kumar, 198).

To the British, the forests were nothing more than an immense repository of timber, a limitless supply to be harvested and sold. Nature acts primarily as a resource to be exploited for human benefit.

That was when the axe men 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 (Ghosh, 69).

This passage criticizes the anthropocentric attitude that prioritizes the economic interests of humans over the natural world, a stance that deep ecology vehemently opposes. Here the tree acts as a victim of the colonizers. Some characters, including environmental activists, conservationists, and leaders of indigenous communities, are really on the need for sustainable practices and stewardship of the environment. They are strongly committed to the conservation of natural resources, and biodiversity, and agitate for the rights of indigenous peoples. For this Ghosh introduces Uma, who says "We must learn to live with nature, not against it. Our survival depends on the survival of the forests, the rivers, and the wildlife". This sentiment echoes deep ecology's call for an ethical relationship with the natural world. Burmese Queen Supayalat comments that: In a few decades the wealth will be gone-all the gems, the timber and oil- and then they too will leave. In our golden Burma where no one ever went hungry and no one was too poor to write and read, all that will remain is destitution and ignorance, famine and despair. We were the first to be imprisoned in the name of their progress; millions will follow (Ghosh, 88).

As Neil Evernden in his essay *Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy* states: The perception of a single organism controlled by a single set of genes is the outcome of understanding the very dependent kind of symbiosis, a mutualism which means the fate of two (or more) organisms are intertwined and inseparable(Neil, p 94).

Considering this, chopping down trees impacts not only trees but the entire biosphere. It directly contributes to climate change by increasing land dryness, as it retains the moisture of the soil. Deforestation also leads to species loss and migration due to the destruction of their habitats, ultimately exacerbating global warming.

Apart from deforestation, Ghosh focuses on the taming of elephants for logging purposes. Elephants hold significant importance like trees in our country's mythology, religion, history and culture. Burma is considered to be home to the second-largest population of Asian elephants. But here to carry timber from the yards, the timber merchants use it as a slave and it leads to the extinction of the species.

"The infected elephant was quieter now than before, dazed by pain and weakened by its struggle with the disease. The swellings had grown pineapple size and the elephant's hide had begun to crack and break apart... within a short while the animal's hide was wet with discharge. The stricken elephant died in the afternoon" (Ghosh, 95)

These lines state the suffering of the non-voice creature. It is not even taken into consideration by the owners. Many herds lost their lives in the working process. If this situation persists, in the next few years it will be extinct. As an ecologist describe

Despite having the largest forest tracts of all, deforestation is taking place at an alarming rate. Although in theory, Burma follows a policy of selective logging, evidence suggests that large areas are being cleared, much of which may be the result of illegal activity. The shrinking and fragmentation of elephant habitat is placing increased pressure on the remaining elephant population.

Through the experiences of the characters and the detailed portrayal of the Burmese landscape, Ghosh highlights the principles of deep ecology, urging a shift towards a more respectful and sustainable relationship with the environment.

Ghosh speaks against the narrow thinking of the human heart. Moreover, the world is compared to a melting pot or a salad bowl on account of the simultaneous presence of countless communities and groups belonging to different religions, castes, and nationalities. But in the present situation, the contemporary man, with this apathetic approach towards the significant other, has made the world a sterile wasteland.

Arrhenius in his essay *Deep Ecology* observes the struggle of life and the survival of the fittest should be

interpreted in the sense of the ability to coexist and cooperate in complex relationships rather than an ability to kill, exploit and suppress, live and let live is the most powerful ecological principle than either you or me. (Leena 82.) All the laws in the world could not stop the wildlife trade and it is a major concern of the people who have a deep affinity for the natural world.

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