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Eco-Historical Perspectives on Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract

The story of two families which revolve in Burma, India, and Malaya are the subject of this book. The British colonization of Burma is the subject of this historical fiction. Ghosh exposes people's vicious greed on a number of levels in this book. The opening scene's looting demonstrates the colonizer's avarice. Amitav Ghosh's fourth book begins during the war in Mandalay, where the British are getting ready to seize the Burmese kingdom. Rajkumar, an 11 years old Indian orphan, tells a group of people at a food stand that the loud noise they hear is British artillery. In 1885, a disagreement between King Thebaw of Burma and a British timber business resulted in combat. British and Indian soldiers beat the Burmese army in under fourteen days, and the army surrendered without telling their ruler. It is also an eco-historical story that shows how colonial power, environmental damage, and people being forced to move are all connected. The narrative shows how changes in the environment and colonial history are linked. Ghosh sees the environment not as a passive background but as an active historical force shaped by, and shaping, human existence.

Keywords: *colonization, war, culture, rubber plantations, migration, ethnicity, environment*

The Glass Palace, a comprehensive historical book by Amitav Ghosh that spans over a century, follows the intertwined lives of several families in Burma (Myanmar), India, and Malaya. Themes of colonialism, displacement, identity, war, class, diaspora, and memory are all explored in the book.

Following the British invasion of Burma in 1885, the royal family was banished from the Glass Palace, the royal residence in Mandalay. Rajkumar, a young Indian orphan who works as a teak worker in Burma, observes this event. His destiny is shaped by his encounter with Dolly, a young maid of the queen, during the commotion.

Rajkumar begins life with nothing, but he rises to prominence in the thriving rubber and timber sectors during British control thanks to perseverance and commercial alliances, particularly with Saya John, a Malaysian of Portuguese ancestry. He finds Dolly years later in Ratnagiri, India, the home of the exiled royal family. After courting her and being married, they return to Burma, where they lead wealthy lives until political turmoil threatens them once more.

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Colonial expansion, Indian migration to Southeast Asia, the establishment of rubber plantations, nationalist movements, the Japanese invasion of Burma during World War II, and postwar independence efforts are all covered in the book as it follows the subsequent generations. Rajkumar and Dolly's lives cross paths with those of other families, such as:

1. Uma Dey, a British officer's widowed wife who becomes into a global traveler and political activist.
2. Dinu, the son of Rajkumar and Dolly, develops into a calm, contemplative photographer who looks for purpose beyond worldly prosperity.
3. Arjun, an Indian Army commander whose allegiance is called into question upon realizing the paradoxes of serving the British Empire.

The Second World War turns become a significant event. Families are forced to escape due to the Japanese invasion. Many characters experience identity issues and cultural relocation, and Rajkumar loses a large portion of his empire. In a world that is changing and colonial rule is crumbling, some characters join independence movements, while others suffer with pain, loss, or a sense of belonging.

The surviving generation considers the past in the book's last section, including exile, cross-border travel, and the changes brought about by capitalism and empire. Dinu's quiet life as a photographer and environmentalist serves as a metaphor for how memory endures through pictures and narrative, even while voices are erased by history. The novel concludes with a contemplative tone: although power, conflict, migration, and love have transformed individuals, the remnants of these pasts still exist.

Ghosh's main preoccupation is the volatile cultural crossovers, wars and histories. Rajkumar, represents the lost, banished, and homeless native whose family is further dispersed in different regions of Asia throughout the book. When 11-year-old Rajkumar sees the British assault of the Palace in Mandalay and the booming of English guns, the spectacular blending of cultures and ethnicities is immediately apparent.

The majority of them was done by Indian soldiers, which is a startling presence in the book, in addition to the marches and the terrified masses. This is further confirmed by the royal declaration made prior to the unexpected invasion of Burma.

The Glass Palace features a wide range of people, both rich and underprivileged, in keeping with an Amitav Ghosh novel. Ironically, the gales of colonial displacement link commoners like Dolly, Rajkumar, Saya John, and Uma with the royal family. As the novel's start illustrates, these heroes are driven from Burma to India, Malaya, Singapore, every time involving a pattern of fear, mobs, and military marching.

Rajkumar, who was once a subaltern, emerges as post-colonial subject in two ways: first, by being a Kalaa, a foreigner in a foreign land; second, by being subjected to more severe colonization; and third, by yet another experience in India and his venture into Malayan forest area. Across the boundaries of race, class, and country in which his life is entwined, he lives in a really borderless post-colonial space. His apprenticeship under Saya John, Rajkumar transforms from a petty immigrant boy into a merchant who is revealed in Burma's timber trading circles, illustrating the hybrid nature of the colonized subaltern who grows into a rich businessman and begins to be like the colonizers. His guru, Saya

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John, is another transnational from China who adopts European attire and mannerisms. Rajkumar learns from Saya John about the lives of the young Europeans who educated them.

Saya John's idea that the entire process of harvesting timber from the forests would not have been feasible without the inventiveness of Europeans; Saya's awareness of this and his imitation of the white Sahib's way of life entails a trade-off between total independence from the empire and total reliance on it for survival. Another distinctive characteristic of the postcolonial protagonist is imitation of the colonizer's language, mannerisms, and also their attire. The author's account of Beni Prasad Dey, the ICS officer assigned to Ratnagiri, where the Burmese royals are being held hostage, and Saya John's conscious attempt at anglicizing through his attire are noteworthy.

Ghosh's reference to Dey's actions, his defense of imperial authority in front of the Burmese King, and his lighthearted description of the British as amader gurujon all contribute to our understanding of the compromise that such acts of mimicry and collaboration are associated with in the colonized space. Rajkumar's expression of amazement at his own participation in the widespread grieving following the abrupt occupation of Burma and the death of the king demonstrates the colonized subjects' empathy for their fellow colonists, despite their different nationality.

The thinking of a king Dolly would tell Rajkumar about her situation. She shares the same inexplicable devotion to the royal family's treatment of India. She started to notice strange subtle changes in her surroundings, such as the servant's impudence, their unwillingness to shiko, and her own conflicted feelings. Although she was informed she was free since she was a slave and not a prisoner, she felt deep down that she was obligated to care for the princesses. Dolly stands in for the sufferer of a nation's breakup after being colonized twice. She is the embodiment of dislocated subjects' subdued and silent aggression. The fact that she would never be able to return to Burma, where she was born, is Dolly's most persistent worry.

Padmini Mongia quotes Gayatri Spivak's explanation of such dilemma: "For the post colonial the idea of a nationhood is a metaphor constantly being 'reclaimed' as the post-colonial space cannot advance referents that are 'historically adequate' in the case of the colonial subject nationhood is perhaps the only real and historically immediate concern." (5)

Due to having to spend the most of their life in relocated areas, people suffer from a sense of illusory homeland. Ironically, both Dolly and Rajkumar are loyal to the country they have taken over as their home after being exiled or displaced. Surprisingly, Dolly is the most outspoken person in her exile because she only knows life at Outram's home. She asks Uma, "Where would I go, this is home" (119). Dolly and Uma are both victims of the same colonial force, and they have a great deal of empathy and respect for one another's situation. However, Dolly is also subjected to slavery by Burmese royalty. Both, however, are ready to admit whatever colonial prejudices they may have as well as their respective statuses.

Dolly's quick response demonstrates her emotional attachment to the only house and family she knew and loved before to getting married. Before departing with Rajkumar, demonstrating her devotion for the royal family.

These deported victims of nation-building have a unique experience in that they blend in with foreign cultures with ease while simultaneously igniting feelings of alienation, longing for their home

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countries, and transnationalism in their split identities. The issue of settling and resettling communities and individuals amid the confluences of cultures and nationalities is voiced by Ghosh's portrayal of Rajkumar. He is a genuinely cosmopolitan and reimagined immigrant who, thanks to his initiative, makes a name for himself and flees, ending himself in impoverished ethnic ghettos. Like the majority of Ghosh's characters, Uma is a global citizen who disregards national boundaries. Following her husband's death, she traveled to Europe and America, where she became involved in the Indian Nationalist movement. She then brought her fight to the subcontinent. Characters like Rajkumar and Uma's hybridism and adaptability greatly soften the colonized colonizer binary and deprive exile of its negative implications, such as oppression.

The opposition to and fight against imperialism is another subject that is an integral aspect of a post-colonial story. In addition to Uma's portrayal of nationalism, another more challenging and significant battle of Indian officers and soldiers in the British army is vividly presented. Arjun, Uma's nephew, is incredibly happy to be one of the fortunate few who can join the ruling elite. Arjun is made aware of the prejudice, mistrust, and suspicion of Indian commanders and troops by Hardayal Singh, a third-generation army officer and his peer. Hardayal expressed cynicism about the concept of 'country' and recalled the inscription in Chetwode Hall at the Military Academy in Dehradun when their eagerly anticipated mobilization orders arrived.

After a few defeats, Arjun is stunned into acknowledging this ironic circumstance, even though Hardayal had recognized it pretty early in life. Arjun experiences what one of his fellow officers had predicted as his battalion lands in Singapore while traveling across the Malaya Peninsula. All of a sudden, they are admitting that the British have never treated them as equals. Amreek Singh of the Indian National Army airdrops leaflets to raise soldiers' awareness of the national cause during the Battle of Jitra.

The protagonists' other personal issues are closely linked to the broader, growing anxiety among the Indians serving under the imperial army. The only enduring connection in the otherwise soulless mercenary exercise of war is Arjun's emotional tie with his subordinate Kishan Singh. Despite their different racial and geographic backgrounds, Dinu and Alison—both of mixed ancestry—fall in love. This relationship of love that is destined to blossom between Rajkumar's son and Saya John's granddaughter is oddly symbolic of a shared compulsion across disagreement and disillusionment, and it appears to reaffirm the quiet and unquestioned faith that only such love and desire can sustain. Dinu's repressed protest against imperialism contrasts with the violent uprising of Uma and Hardayal. Dinu lives a quiet life in post-coup Rangoon under the harsh shadow of the junta, and his caring care for Burma is not sparked by revolt. However, Arjun emerges as an emotionally troubled, bewildered person who is torn between two worlds that neither belong to, whereas the other characters have discovered and pursued their calling, either violently or obediently.

In order to highlight the alienation and loss of a sense of belonging of the locals, Ghosh discusses the yearning for identity and origin, a situation unique to colonized people. In Uma's Calcutta home, Rajkumar has an almost impoverished existence and, despite his travels, passes away believing that the 'Ganges could never be the same as the Irrawaddy.' The author appears to collapse these limits and is figuratively at home everywhere, even while barriers and boundaries appear to define the psyches that

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accompany the formation of nations and ethnicities in the Glass Place. Menakshi Mukherjee, in her essay on *The Anxiety of Indians*, comments: "For Ghosh as in some of the best Indian language writers, words like 'Marginality' and 'hybridity' seem quite irrelevant and segmenting the words into third and first regions is a rather absurd activity."

The post-colonial is free from gender, class, and political ties due to his displaced and mobile location, which allows him to travel freely across worlds and cultures. Despite his extensive travels, Ghosh writes with a feeling of intimate connection to India's colonial past. Autobiographical elements such as his involvement in General Slim's Burmese missions and his class familial ties to the Indian freedom fight greatly enhance the text. Even his made-up characters exhibit a keen understanding of colonial ancestry and history.

One of the fundamental eco-historical issues of The Glass Palace is the colonial exploitation of natural resources, particularly the teak forests of Burma. British imperialism is demonstrated to function through the methodical capture of land, forests, and rivers, turning ecological wealth into economic capital. The teak trade, illustrated through personalities like Saya John and later Rajkumar, depicts how colonial economies were established on environmental loss. Forests are identified, fenced, and logged, signifying a change from indigenous guardianship to imperial extraction. This transition represents what environmental historians characterize as colonial ecological imperialism, as nature becomes a commodity rather than a communal resource. Through this lens, the novel depicts a historical moment when ecological balance was broken by profit-driven imperial policies.

Ghosh's eco-historical vision is fundamentally human-centered, highlighting how environmental change directly affects everyday lives. Laborers, migrants, and indigenous groups are displaced as forests are removed and plantations expand. Environmental exploitation consequently leads to social and cultural displacement, a constant subject throughout the narrative.

Rajkumar's own journey—from orphaned immigrant to teak merchant—mirrors the greater ecological history of the region. His success is inseparable from the colonial economy that devastates landscapes and livelihoods. Ghosh does not romanticize this progress; instead, he reveals its moral and environmental implications. In this way, The Glass Palace shows environmental history as lived experience rather than abstract data.

The Second World War marks a significant eco-historical rupture in the novel. Forests become battlefields, and landscapes are damaged by military movement and violence. The Japanese invasion and British withdrawal across Burma demonstrate how combat accelerates environmental degradation while exacerbating human misery. Ghosh presents nature during conflict as wounded and unstable, representing the disintegration of political and ecological order. The battle affects more than just countries; it also affects ecosystems. This reminds readers that environmental devastation is a hidden cost of imperial wars.

An important eco-historical aspect of The Glass Palace is its focus on native ecological knowledge. Characters like as Saya John display a respectful relationship with the forest, centred in recognising seasonal rhythms, sustainability, and coexistence. This contrasts dramatically with colonial methods that prioritize extraction over preservation. Ghosh thus retrieves suppressed ecological histories that

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challenge Western theories of development. The novel implies that colonisation stifled other ways of interacting to nature—options that might have spared ecological disaster.

By intertwining ecological detail into historical events, Ghosh transforms The Glass Palace into a type of eco-historical research. The novel explores whose histories are preserved and whose landscapes are sacrificed in the writing of empire. Through narrative, Ghosh fills the gaps left by colonial archives, reconstructing natural and human history erased by government records. Fiction here becomes a potent vehicle for environmental history, capable of conveying emotional, ethical, and cultural qualities frequently omitted from standard historiography.

Viewed via an eco-historical lens, *The Glass Palace* emerges as a novel that recounts the environmental effects of colonialism alongside its political and social impacts. Amitav Ghosh reveals that history cannot be understood without acknowledging its ecological foundations. The novel ultimately calls for a more responsible historical consciousness—one that recognizes the intertwined fates of humans, nature, and empire.

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