

# Eco Imperialism in Glass Palace

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## Abstract

The process of colonization brought along with it the exploitation of all kind of resources. The process of colonization was all a business deal. The main purpose was to earn money and Industrialization paved a cleared way for that. It awakened the greed in human and the whole world suffered the consequences. Colonizers never gave any thought, before digging any country for money. Natural resources were exploited along as was the case with human beings. The whole atmosphere was disturbed, and the consequences were never thought of. And all this was a part of the process of imperialism, a process which gravely disturbed ecology. The term ecological imperialism was coined by the great historian Alfred Crosby. This ecological imperialism can be witnessed practically in the novel *The Glass Palace* written by the famous Indian writer in English, Amitav Ghosh. The aim of present paper is to explore the abuse of natural resources and disrespect towards environment by colonial powers in the country Burma. The paper will do so through the reading and analysis of the well-known novel *Glass Palace*, which fabricate an interesting story around the history of colonial hegemony over Burma. In the year 1885 the King and the Queen of Burma were disposed by British colonizers merely for the sake of business, just because they were not ready to give permission for the blindfolded exploitation of Burmese jungles. After gaining the hold of Burma, British sucked the whole country. Burma was distraught culturally, economically, socially and ecologically. Largely Burma was exploited ecologically. The peaceful and serene Burma was changed into a commercial country, and people there were now living a disturbed life. This was the result of ecological imperialism; disturbance and destruction in the name of progress. Present paper will scrutinize this injustice to our own mother nature and its consequences on human beings.

**Keywords:** ecological imperialism, colonization, exploitation, industrialization, destruction.

## INTRODUCTION

Industrialisation and imperialism worked together for greed and resulted in the loss to environment. The pressing issue of climate change is the direct reaction to the actions of the colonizers in the past. The former colonies are in the most vulnerable situation today, which is the outcome of the overuse of natural resources of those countries by colonial powers. *Glass Palace* is a novel which tells a story spanning a whole century, covering the

whole development, progress along with the destruction and exploitation, migration and predicament of people and Mother Nature. This novel makes reader see the pain a colonised country goes through. The author of *Glass Palace*, Amitav Ghosh is a leading Indian writer in English contemporary times. His works have been recognised and appreciated worldwide for not one but various reasons. His writing style, narrative techniques and out of the box thinking catches the attention of any reader. His way of storytelling bounds the

reader. One feels unable to get his characters out of the mind. Right from the very first novel of his, Amitav Ghosh rose to the surface of literary globe. His celebrated novel *The Glass Palace* vastly got the attention of literati. It was published in the year 2000 and spans a whole century in the story. With the help of bundle of characters he has raised bundle of issues and have dealt with them in a unique way.

### Historical Background

Famous German theologian Albert Schweitzer in 1950 said that man has lost the capacity to foresee and forestall. And he says that man will reach to end by destroying the earth. This tendency of man to try and destroy nature can be witnessed in *The Glass Palace*. The novel proceeds on the theme of the War. Ghosh has efficiently crafted a story around the theme of war and destruction of nature. Ghosh has always been concerned for the prevention of natural environment, but his love and concern towards nature came to a brighter light for the first time through the novel *The Glass Palace*. This was his first work that presented his courage to write in a diverse style.

Nature has always been a part of literature from the beginning of it. But still somehow it never really got its deserved place in any work of fiction. Ghosh could be regarded as the first Indian writer who not only presented nature with all its power but also made nature the true protagonist of the story -the entity which possesses the power to lead the story to the direction it wants. *The Glass Palace* is one such novel that gave nature its due honour.

The story of *The Glass Palace* (GP) begins in 1885; When British colonisers had a dispute with the King of Burma regarding the teak wood of the jungles of that area. The King did not give them complete access to the jungles of Burma, which became a hurdle in the way of colonisers to exploit the natural resources. Hence they set a war against him. The first bit of information of British interference and war is conveyed through Rajkumar when he was told;

The English are preparing to send a fleet up the Irrawaddy. There's going to be a war. Father says that 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 things? (GP, 15) Both the Queen Supayalat and the King Thebaw were thrown out of their kingdom and sent to Ratnagiri in India. The King and the Queen now were living on the mercy of colonial power and meanwhile in Burma the whole jungle was being dug by them. English along with the natives were ruthlessly cutting jungles and making the use of animals for the transportation as it was quite difficult and expensive to use mechanical transportation in deep jungles. This change in the transporting system is conveyed taking a critical approach:

Yet until the Europeans came none of them had ever thought of using elephants for the purpose of logging. Their elephants were used only in the pagodas and palaces, for war and ceremonies. It was the Europeans who saw that tame 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. (GP, 74)

Obviously this shows author's dissatisfaction to the exploitation of animals and trees and concern for them. As the author says that before this "Their elephants were used only in the pagodas and palaces, for war and ceremonies." Elephants were highly esteemed animal of kingdom but after winning, colonisers started to use them as common labourers. People of Burma were pained to see the fallen dignity of their honoured animals.

In this novel Ghosh does not use only anti colonial voice. He has shown how greed and ignorance of natives made it easier for the colonial power to suck all the natural resources. People were working insensitively for their own benefits but never foresaw the outcome of

these actions. Rajkumar, the protagonist of the novel is being shown as a money minded man, who works for only himself. He never gave it a thought that all these actions might be a crime against the Mother Nature. The result was that, the once peaceful country became raged and distraught. Mental peace of the people was lost in this process. Burma was made a country with rush all around, which was once a beautiful and peaceful place. Ghosh has put it forward through the character of Uma

The anger that Uma had held contained since Morningside Came welling up. 'Rajkumar, you're in no position to offer opinions. It's people like you who're responsible for this tragedy. Did you ever think of the consequences when you were transporting people here? What you and your kind have done is far worse than the worst deeds of the Europeans. (GP, 247)

Imperial power could not have misused the land, its people and its resources without the help of natives. People like Rajkumar Saya John and the collector (husband of Uma) supported and helped the outsider to bring them in power. Some out of necessity, some out of greed and some under the awe of the colonial power supported them. Their action benefitted a few and damaged a lot.

Ghosh has aptly portrayed the destruction imperialism brought along, in a manner that attracts the attention to the things, which are ignored otherwise. He pulls the attention to the changes in surroundings. Even the rubber plantations are portrayed as an artificial beauty. Though they are also trees but they never felt natural.

The grounds underfoot had a soft, cushioned feel, because of the carpet of dead leaves shed by the trees. The slope ahead was scored with the shadow 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 remembers how startled she'd been when the car crossed from the heavy profusion of the jungle into the ordered geometry of the plantation. (GP, 199)

First the departure of the King and Queen then the whole transformation of the country, it all snatched the mental peace of its people. And then as if it was not enough, the Japanese attacked on Burma during the Second World War. It all enraged the public who was once a contented and innocent people. "As the weeks passed, there was a deepening of the sense of unease that had settled on the city. There were more strange events....In the city gaol a mutiny erupted among the prisoners and was suppressed at the cost of many lives. There was whisper of an even a greater upheaval in the office." (GP, 246) There was violence and disturbance all around, which is captured by the writer adequately.

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh pertinently shows the beauty of nature and the peace that it brings along with it and then the ruthless destruction of it.

This was when the axmen came, shouldering their weapons, squinting along the blades to judge their victims' angle of descent. Dead though they are, 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 strands of bamboo were flattened in moments, thousands of jointed limbs exploding simultaneously in deadly splinter blasts, throwing up mushroom clouds of debris. (GP, 69)

This kind of description of the cutting of tree was not very common at that time. The beauty of the lines that shows the power and grandeur of a huge tree awakens empathy for trees in the hearts of the readers.

## Conclusion

The great historian and writer Alfred W. Crosby gave a detailed account of colonial

imperialism which caused disturbance and brought destruction of biological world. He described how Europeans in the greed and chase for power destroyed the ecological harmony. Wherever they settle their colonies, they brought along with them famine and epidemics. It was not only economical and cultural tyranny that they havocked, but it was ecological too. “Whenever and wherever Europeans crossed the oceans and settled, the pathogens, they carried created prodigious epidemics of small pox, measles, tuberculosis, influenza and a number of other diseases. It was this factor more than any other that Darwin had in mind as he wrote of the Europeans deadly tread.” (Alfred Crosby, 111). The same thing is evident in the novel *The Glass Palace*. Through an interesting and page turner story Ghosh has put forth the plight of Burmese and Indians and the tyranny of Europeans which brought destruction at each aspect of life. Ghosh is trying to attract the attention to the loss of human harmony with nature and making an attempt to awaken the sensibility towards environment in the hearts of readers.

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