



Ecocritical Vista of Home and Displacements in *The Glass Palace*

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ABSTRACT

*In Indian panorama, nature is considered as an inevitable part of human life and custom but it is not been considered as a valued term in its textual form. However, various poets and authors present the peerless and perennial Indian landscape through their visual imagery and metaphorical language. Amitav Ghosh is one of the few writers in English who constructs nature in his fictional works. He undertakes a variety of themes; his literary mission with two significant commitments—fictionalization of historical facts and figures, and expression of a concern over physical environment. The paper presents Ghosh's ecocritical view of the concept of home and displacements in *The Glass Palace*.*

Key word: *Ecocriticism, Environment, Displacements, Place, Imperialism, colonialism*

Amitav Ghosh flourishes as an important personality in the domain of Indian writings in English. The novel, *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh published in 2000, spans over three generations spread over three interlinked parts of the British Empire; Burma, Malaya and India. It is structured around the intermeshing relationships among four families: The Burmese king Thebaw and Queen Supayalata (deposed by the British in 1885 and exiled to Ratnagiri in India) and their entourage; Rajkumar Raha, a Bengali orphan emigrant to Burma and his descendants, Neel and Dinu; Saya John, a teak merchant, a foundling brought up by catholic priests and his son, Mathew and his family; Uma, the wife of the collector of Ratnagiri and Uma's nephew, Arjun. Their fortunes are set against a back drop of stirring historical events— The British conquest of Burma, the consolidation of the empire in India and Malaya, the first and second world wars – conceived and executed on an epic scale in a time frame ranging from 1885 to 1996. The novel describes the ecological devastation done by European intervention in South Asia. It highlights the extent of environmental damage caused to the earth on account of colonialism. Ghosh states that the impelling policies of colonial powers alter the landscapes of annexed bio-regions and economically plunder the communities, forcing people to relinquish their home lands. These people are degraded and moved from one region to another as mere portable possessions.

The idea of home and displacement has always been important for postcolonial writers. These challenges are explored through alternative modalities of belonging, as well as ecological understandings of the relationship among human beings, the environment that surrounds them, and the other creatures with which they share their world. In *The Glass Palace* Ghosh shows how colonizers force their control on other lands and their people. The annexed people are displaced and moved from one place to another. Ghosh calls these movements furious and beyond comprehension. In the novel, the King on his way to exile, near Rangoon river while crossing the town which is already seized by the British along its coastal provinces, notices many Indian faces. Ghosh presents the plight of the displaced Indians, who are forced to work as slaves for British colonizers. The imperialism of



people leads to displacements on a large scale. The exiled king, Thebaw ponders on the force and nature of power of British Empire that is changing fates of thousands across the subcontinent.

Ghosh tackles the issues of inequality imposed on poor, colonized and disempowered people. He does not skip the fact that Indians are transported and as such are environmentally displaced to other lands by colonizers to serve them. They are made to clean their toilets, fight for them, and are thrust upon with other slavery and life risking jobs. By tackling such grave issues in the novel, Ghosh highlights, how environmental racism is imposed on poor human beings. Environmental racism is a result of the injustices imposed on disempowered and minority communities. Ghosh uses King's voice to apprise the readers of how the invading government has stepped up pressure on disempowered communities. He writes:

The British had 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 – people taken from one place to another, to pull rickshaws, to sit blind in exile? (50)

In the novel, the displaced King, Queen and their family along with their entourage who are exiled to Outram House at Ratnagiri in India live as if buried in dung heaps. The house they are made to live in is a run-down and squalid residence. It has become the nucleus of a shantytown because of the enveloping "basti" (locality) of servants, smell of waste and excrement. Ghosh states that the place smells rotten with the stench of the pall of wood smoke that hangs thick in the air. Nevertheless, he is equally distressed to see that the decomposed waste, night soil of toilets, lack of water pollutes the environment. He pictures a loss of ecological balance and the environmental injustice thrust upon them.

Ecocriticism or environmental criticism focuses on displaced people and environmental racism, which briefly as defined by Buell in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, refers to the "toxification of local environments and setting of waste dumps and polluting industries that discriminate against poor and otherwise disempowered communities particularly minorities" (141-42). Ghosh highlights the revolt of human beings and nature against the imperialist venture of the British. *The Glass Palace* remarks the tale of subjugation, resilience and resistance of humans and nature against British colonialism. Neil Evernden, a great ecologist in his essay "Beyond Ecology" writes:

There appears to be a human phenomenon, similar in some ways to the experience of territoriality, that is described as aesthetic and which is, in effect, a "sense of place", a sense of knowing and of being a part of a particular place. There's nothing very mysterious about this- it is just what it feels like to be home, to experience a sense of light or of smell that is inexplicably "right". (100)

From an eco-critical perspective dwelling places are environments to which human values have been assigned, and are, therefore, strongly associated and defined by their connection to human culture. A place with extensible borders and lack of locked doors provide all beings a safe and hidden refuge and results in a sense of intimacy called place-connectedness with their dwelling place.



In the novel, the last king of Burma is left homeless and thus worthless by imperialists. The forced displacement has produced pathological effects and many harmful disorders to him. Exposing the ill desires of imperialists, Ghosh writes, “They don’t want any martyrs; all they want is that the king should be lost to memory- like an old umbrella in a dusty cupboard” (136). The use of the phrase “dusty cupboard” by Ghosh means a worst possible dwelling place offered to a human being. Ghosh shows how the King is confined to four walls forever. The residence and the surrounding thrust upon to the king and his family is never accepted by them as their home. They feel homeless all the time and lack connection to the place. Their roots to their ancestral land always haunt them.

Decay has become the Queen’s badge of defiance. She holds the selfish motives of colonizers responsible for their homelessness. Lack of connection to the place leads her to worsen the condition of the place where they live. She plays an active role in deteriorating the environment of Outram House. The tiles of the house are blown away, plaster is crumbled and through the broken walls, the fatal weeds are coming out everyday. Amidst these sort of polluting surroundings, she murmurs, “The responsibility for the upkeep of this house is not ours,’ she said. ‘They chose this to be our gaol, let them look after it’(87). Ghosh describes homelessness as a sort of defeat that can only be corrected, when the displaced people are comfortably rehabilitated. The displaced masses, like home pigeons, feel out of context, unless they reach their roost. They are carried by a swirling vortex unless they find the place where they fit and feel comfortable. Depicting the defiance shown by the Queen, Ghosh clarifies the fact that it is impossible for any creature in a state of sensory deprivation to form genuine attachments to a place. Buell in *Writing for an Endangered World* voices his apprehensions, “whether there might in fact be some widespread if not universal compulsion for humans to seek to connect themselves with specific places of settlement” (74). He argues that lack of connection to a place might, “produce in many a pathological effect equivalent to (say) insomnia or seasonal affective disorder” (74).

Ghosh in the novel thus makes it clear that from an eco-critical perspective dwelling places are environments to which human values have been assigned, and are, therefore, strongly associated and defined by their connection to human culture. A place with extensible borders and lack of locked doors provide all creatures a safe and hidden refuge and results in a sense of intimacy called place-connectedness with their dwelling place.

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