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## **ECOLOGICAL OUTCRY-DIALOGUES OF PERSEVERANCE AGAINST EXPLOITATION FROM THE SELECT NOVELS OF AMITAV GHOSH**

*N. Karpagavalli<sup>1</sup>*

*Assistant Professor of English, & Ph.D. Research Scholar (Part- Time), Alagappa Govt. Arts  
College, Affiliated to Alagappa University, Karaikudi, TamilNadu, India*

*&*

*Dr. N. Kavidha<sup>2</sup>*

*Associate Professor of English, Alagappa Govt. Arts College, Affiliated to Alagappa University,  
Karaikudi, TamilNadu, India*

### **Abstract**

*This paper examines Amitav Ghosh's literary endeavour with the embroiled forces of colonialism, capitalism and environmental exploitation in his major works like Sea of Poppies, The Glass Palace and River of Smoke. This study investigates Ghosh's major eco narratives, which unveil the long-lasting historical trend of continuous land grabbing, forced migration, and appropriation of resources as tools of imperial control and growth of capitalism. His works are the real testimonies that talk about commodification of the elements of nature, ecological imperialism, diminution of natural resources, sufferings of the poor indigenous communities, the unpredicted natural catastrophes that threaten the world today. Ghosh has portrayed the impact of the imperial policies that have revised the geopolitics of the third world countries by manipulation of natural resources with the assistance of global trade route. Ghosh not only documents the power of the imperial capitalist's strategy of appropriating land, labour and looting the natural resources but also the painful cruel sufferings of the marginalized through his powerful narrations. Therefore his fictions stand as an archive of resistance, questioning against environmental exploitation, highlighting the perseverance of the earth with eco friendliness for ecological justice.*

### **Keywords**

*Environmental Degradation, Ecological Imperialism, Sufferings of Marginalized and Animals, Exploitation of Nature, and Extinction of Habitats, etc.*

### **Full Article**

#### **Introduction:**

Post Colonial Literature examines the interface between man and nature, the prioritisation of man over other species of the earth, imposing the ideologies of imperialism towards all species of earth on a planetary scale. It also studies how the European conquest and domination, force its western views by invasion, penetrating the administrative structures of the developing countries, causing worst environmental impacts in the colonized territories. They transport people, animals, plant specimens, herds, altering the local ecosystem causing great havoc to the colonies of Europe. The indigenous, local, natural ecosystem were cleared for farming, grabbing the land and monetization nature for making money to suffice the hunger of the west at the cost of poor marginalized of the east. The colonisers seeing the abundance resources of the colonies, apparently tamed nature into products and profit. It is clear that the harsh reality is that the impact of colonialism has caused series of disasters that led to the depletion of natural resources, loss of habitat to both men and animals, and extinction of rare species of flora and fauna.



The anthropocentric attitude ignited with human supremacy discards the inclusion of all forms of nature including humans, it also supports the spirit of utilitarianism, confirming that nature is just a resource to be exploited and can be bent to any extreme for want of money and comfort. At this juncture in the late twentieth century, ecocriticism emerged as a critical movement, questioning the imperial perspective of the European colonisers, advocating an eco centric view for the harmonious existence of the biotic community. It also tries to interpret the connection between imperialism and ecological degradation in order to shape new attitudes of human perception and eco consciousness towards the environment through green literature.

Today, in the face of global challenges ecocriticism as a discipline address, certain environmental issues like climate emergency, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, pollution and environmental degradation that continue to have an equal pace with the growth of technology, worsening the situation to encounter unpredictable limitless ecological crisis. It also challenges the impact of post colonial issues caused by the colonial regimes through empire, industrial expansion, resource extraction, human dependence on fossil fuels, displacement of the indigenous community, and environmental injustice, devoid of ecological limits, causing great havoc to the planet.

This paper studies the works of Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, *The Glass Palace*, and *The River of Smoke* to examine certain ecological issues-pollution, climate crisis, depletion of resources, deforestation, man's relationship with nature, inclusion of non-human, suffering of the marginalized, resilience of nature, environmental justice and the moral responsibility of man to conserve nature. This study is done with the aid of literary theories like ecocriticism and postcolonial theory. Ecocriticism is a study of the relationship between man and environment. Postcolonial theory examines the cultural, political and economic impacts of colonialism and imperialism analyzing the power dynamics, legacies and resistance formerly colonized societies. It talks about resource exploitation, land grabbing and environmental violence, which are forcefully thrust upon the territories of the colonies.

Amitav Ghosh is a well known writer of India, who blends ecological and postcolonial issues in his writings. His works interrogate issues such as colonial history, socio-cultural ideology, migration, power structures, role of state, sufferings of the poor marginalized, and its negative impact which results in planetary crisis. He also demonstrates the colonial resource depletion, resilience of nature, and the ethical responsibility of the humans to rethink and reconsider the relationship of humans with nature, for environmental justice through his narratives.

Ghosh's works have extended across diversified geographies and conglomerated the colonial histories of countries like India, Bangladesh, Burma, Egypt, Algeria, and various Gulf countries. He is responsible for giving new life to the colonized nations by rewriting the ecological history, full of sufferings of man and nature, shape by colonial policies. The narrator travels from India – the Gangetic deltas- the opium fields of Bihar, the mangroves of the Sundarbans, the trade routes of the Indian Ocean, the teak forests of Burma, the Irrawaddy river, the Bay of Bengal, to the Pearl river of China, inclusive of all the major sea ports of the world in his literary landscape. Nature is his setting, where humans combat and coexist with the nonhumans converging with all the five elements of nature. The characters of his books are from both urban and rural mostly the voiceless marginalized, who live in conflict with the perilous environment. His works create a long lasting effect on the impact of the empire towards environmental degradation, resource depletion, global inequality and life threatening climate catastrophe.

### **Exploitation of Nature - Sea of Poppies:**



*Sea of Poppies* is not just the story of the ocean of poppies, but a powerful demo of the nineteenth century opium trade and its effects on the lives of the indigenous community. It displays the merciless, imperial grabbing of the native terrains from the poor farmers, forcing them for poppy cultivation, causing great human devastation. The natives are forced to labor in the opium factory. The agricultural lands once provided sustenance with food crops is changed into opium cultivation and it ruins the lives of Indian farmers. The miserable plight of the natives can be put as “Many of the people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside: lands that had been provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offering were made at temples” (Ghosh, SOP, 202). This is a merciless act deliberately imposed, by the colonial power towards Indian soil.

In the book *Ecocriticism Reader*, Christopher Manes, shares “it is as if we had compressed the entire buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of epistemology (Manes,15). He interprets that is because of man’s anthropocentric dominance of nature including non-human life forms like animals, birds, plants and even inert entities such as stones and rivers are left mute. Here in the *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh deliberately pictures the horrible change in the landscape as:

The sun was past its zenith and a haze was dancing over the flowers, in the warmth of the afternoon . . . As her steps lengthened, she saw that on some nearby fields, the crop was well in advance of her own: some of her neighbors had already nicked the pods and the white ooze of the sap could be seen congealing around the parallel incisions of the nukha. The sweet, heady odour of the bleeding pods had drawn swarms of insects, and the air was buzzing with bees, grasshoppers and wasps; many would get stuck in the ooze and tomorrow, when the sap turned colour, their bodies would merge into the black gum . . . The sap seemed to have a pacifying effect even on the butterflies, which flapped their wings in oddly erratic patterns, as though they could not remember how to fly (Ghosh, SOP, 28).

The above passage clearly indicates the pollution of opium and its effect upon insects like bees, grasshoppers, wasps and butterflies. The monoculture of poppies, lead to exploitation of the greenery and loss of biodiversity. Many farmers die out of poverty and hunger and are forced to become indentured labourers to join the ship *Ibis*. The migrants, as a sign of resistance against the imperialists, are ready to cross the black waters, forming a new community erasing their past, caste, creed, religion, and community with new hope for their future.

Ghosh portrays *Ibis* as a Mother taking care of its siblings, from various roots, who are socially reborn, underneath its warmth with joy and hope. The migrants belong to different background. Deeti an upper caste Hindu widow and her lower caste lover Kalua are in the ship to escape self – immolation. Neel Rattan a raja and a land lord accused falsely of forgery by the British and his companion Ahfatt, an opium addict from China. The poor marginalized Sarju, Dookhane, and Paulette Lambert break their racial, cultural and social barrier and form a new ‘abode of love and harmony’. They “will all be ship- siblings- *jahaz-bhais* and *jahaz-bahens*- to each other. There’ll be no differences between us” (Ghosh, SOP, 356). The migrants have recreated *Ibis* into a habitat of transformation. They evolve themselves as a new family with love, friendship and the *Ibis* becomes a heaven to them. As a new society they work together with commitment for a better life. In this context Greg Garrard says “A fundamental unit will be the



commune, a closely knit, small community pasted on love, friendship, shared values and commitment to a common life (Garrad,33). Hence Ghosh has created an ecological society with no hierarchy, no power, no centre and no politics.

The heart of the *Ibis* becomes a hearth holding different cultures. The journey helps the migrants to develop a new bonding and communication with the vocabulary of love and faith. They remove all disparities and accept each other with no difference. They have a cordial relationship among fellow beings between human and non human in the *Ibis*. Ghosh's creation of *Ibis* negotiates the possibility of co-existence of man and nature and man with his fellow beings without any disparity.

#### The Glass Palace

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* gives a brief account of the 300 years of colonial experience of the common people of India, Burma and Bangladesh, and also the devastating effect on the lives of the people as well as the irreparable environmental damages to the colonized terrains by the Europeans. The novel begins in the year 1885, when the British forces invade Mandalay to grab the teak forests of Burma. The king of Burma did not agree to the demands of the British timber companies. Soon war is proclaimed and King Thebaw with Queen Supayalatare evicted from Burma to Ratnagiri in India. "A war over wood? Who's ever heard of such a thing?" (Ghosh, GP, 15). Teak is the cause of the British intervention in Burma. The war lasted for fourteen days causing massive loss of life and imbalance to the environment.

The novel gives a brief account of the environmental damages caused to the colonized terrains by the British in Burma. Environmental degradation is the result of the imperialistic attitude of man to curb nature and the marginalized of the society. Capitalism crushes the people, land, air and water resources of its colonies and reshapes the crisis into opportunity to mine money. Ghosh in *The Glass Palace*, delegates the destruction caused by the imperials, in the name of development, science and technology. The narration shows the real concern of Amitav Ghosh, who probes the ecological challenges faced by man in the age of Anthropocene. So he tries to shift the anthropocentric attitude towards ecocentrism for a better relationship with the environment.

William Rueckert in his essay "*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment on Ecocriticism*" comments "In ecology man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric vision and his compulsion to conquer humanize, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing" (Rueckert,113). Nature provides everything to man without any expectation but he destroys it. In the novel one can witness the horrible signs of colonization in all its cruel forms. Deforestation is one such environmental degradation that demolishes and erases the natural resources causing imbalance in the ecosystem. The British ruthlessly looted the green landscape of Burma.

The exploitation and killing of the teak trees kindles Ghosh's ecological vision and concern for them in the pages of the novel. He painfully writes:

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.... The killing was achieved with a girdle of incisions, thin slits, carved deep in to the wood at a height of four feet and six inches off the ground .... The assassinated trees were left to die where they stood, some-times for three years or even more (Ghosh, GP, 73).

The cry of the trees, as sounds of explosion can be heard from miles away. The British hunt the trees without any concern for want of money. To them all the life forms are conceived as commodities. William Reuckert rightly says "that nature should also be protected by human laws, that trees, dolphins, whales, hawks and whooping cranes) should have lawyers to articulate and



defend their rights” (Reuckert, 108). So it is the moral duty of the human beings to value all forms of life in the ecosystem.

In the novel elephants are trained and killed by the British for their thirst of hoarding the greenery of Burma. Elephants are handled by owners called *oo-si*. In the teak camps, elephants and the *oo-sis* suffer a lot in the hands of the British managers. The elephant handlers are constantly in the fear of being killed by elephants. Their life is always threatened to death. In the forest elephants and the *oo-sis* work together, where anthrax is common and its epidemic is hard to prevent. An anthrax stricken elephant is always very dangerous for it can cause any amount of damage to the environment. “It will uproot trees and batter down walls. The tamest cows will become maddened killers; the gentlest calves will turn upon their mothers (Ghosh, GP, 99). Here both the elephants and the *oo-sis* suffer a lot. Money does everything, that is beyond human consciousness and the colonizers readily broke the ethics of humanity. This is one of the greatest injustices done by man to nature. This act of cruelty proves the fact that human beings fail to remember that he is one among the life forms in the earth, and his disregard for the non human forms in the planet.

The oil tanks at Yenangyaung on the Eastern banks at Irrawady is one of the few places in the world where petroleum seeps naturally to the surface of earth. The foreigners from France, England and America gain control over these oil pools and rob the land of its oil and exploit its people and resources. Ghosh highlights the never ending human greed which not only kills the environment by also the planet.

The Morning Side Rubber Estate on Penang Island in Northern Malaya is once a home, to dozens of small spice gardens, is completely erased and transformed into a rubber plantation by Mathew. Technology has changed, the wilderness - a place once been an abode for birds and insects into a farm. “The ground underfoot had a soft, cushioned feel, because of the carpet of dead leaves ... was scored with the shadows of thousands of trunks, all exactly parallel, like scratches scored by a machine” (Ghosh, GP, 212). The wilderness is made habitable because of man’s uncontrollable hunger for money. Dolly on a visit to HuayZedi infers with shock and says “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” (Ghosh, GP, 212). Humans with the support of technology destroy nature beyond limits. So our earth is forced to suffer from limitless human induced ecocide which causes global crisis and threatens the existence of all forms of life.

War causes great damages and sufferings to the natives of Burma. The effect of war is ecocidal and it damages the entire planet. In Burma the bomb-blasts create overall destruction of nature and the environment. The war between England and Germany has collapsed the country. “Burma, the golden became synonymous with poverty, tyranny and misgovernment” (Ghosh, GP, 486). The everyday life of the people has changed into a miserable nightmare. They starve for food and survival remains highly challenging. The business man Rajkumar has lost everything in ashes, including his son Neel in the bomb blast at the timber yard of Pazundaung. “Approaching Pazundaung, he saw that both sides of the creek were blanketed in flames ... They were shrouded in clouds of smoke . . . and now the bombs had claimed it all” (Ghosh, GP, 495). The disaster of the bomb blasts and the series of crisis are indications to ecocide. War destroys and engulfs everything. Therefore it is high time that man should try to change his ways and should re-new his relationship with nature.

*The Glass Palace* gives a brief account of the environmental damages caused to the terrains of Burma. War causes great disaster to the people and promotes imbalance to the physical environment. The complete domination of man through war has destroyed the entire planet and its consequences are witnessed by people even today. The term Ecocide defines the damages and



destruction caused by human and natural forces to nature. The International Ecocidal law prohibits mass damage and destruction of the Earth and insists, the legal duty to prevent, prohibit both human-caused ecocide and natural catastrophes. Hence the green literature of today tries to redirect human consciousness towards the existing climatic crises that threaten the world.

Barry Commoner's first law of ecology insists that, everything is connected to everything else. In this novel, Ghosh has beautifully shares the symbiotic relationship of man with nature as "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 texture of grease. Between the palms there were bird – houses elevated on poles. These were for owls, Ilango explained: the oil-rich fruit attracted great quantities of rodents; the birds helped their numbers under control" (Ghosh, GP, 536). Hence it is proved that only by trust and mutual understanding man can be harmony with nature.

The River of Smoke

*The River of Smoke* being the second part of the *Ibis* trilogy portrays the opium trade in China and demonstrates the worst impact of ecological imperialism on the flora and fauna of three countries India, China and Mauritius. The novel is a best example for the ecological hegemony and ecological injustice done by the British imperialists to China. The British manufacture opium in India and expands its empire for trade to China, and in the name of free trade the British exploits the natural resource of China.

Ghosh's *River of Smoke* is a brief study of the coloniser's exploitation of China through opium regime. Opium trade cause traffic in the colonial harbours, as new artificial islands are created against the orders of nature. The coastal areas are expanded by constructing shipyards, due to enforcement of opium cultivation and trade. The colonial transformations in the infrastructure cause heavy river traffic, rising tides, floods and typhoons threatening the cities. In describing the geographical location of the sea port cities, Ghosh delineates the socio- ecological weakness of the colonial port cities, as they are built on the opium economy. The trade depends upon the carbon-intensive steam technologies. The construction of unsecured unsustainable construction sites due to coastal deforestation causes precarious, intensive fragility to the environment causing vulnerable changes in the sea level and climate changes. Thus the British port cities stand as an epitome of cultural interconnectedness, and cultural interventions in shaping the colonial past at the cost of endangered ecological future.

This novel gives us a better understanding of the impact of opium trade on the local economy and international trade, politics, the deadly consequences of consumption of opium by common people, the diplomacy of china, the game of the British imperialists, the conditions of the shipping industry, floating townships on the pearl river, landscape of china, the floral paintings, horticulture, the exile of Napoleon and many more varieties of subjects. This novel includes happenings from the eighteenth century till the middle of the twentieth century, and has knit together with the development of the trade, and industry by the empire builders. At the cost of the poor Indian farmers, opium is cultivated and the cunning dumping of opium in China involves thousands of slaves and labour in the process. Thus opium filled the treasuries of the British Empire and local Chinese and Indian mediators.

In this novel Ghosh depicts the beautiful landscape of China with its mountains, hills, lakes, ponds, including different varieties of flora and fauna. The country is also noted for its old buildings and structures. Ghosh portrays the city Canton as an abode of fascinating plants and flowers. The city is completely covered with flowers on roof tops, old walls, and even on moving carts in the streets. During the spring season the sweet smell of the flowers gets mixed with the breeze. It is a heaven on earth and such is the beauty of the landscape which is filled with mirth and happiness. Robin Chinnery describes Canton's Punhyqua's garden as "No where on earth I suspect is the importance of portals . . . I was visited by the feeling that I was stepping into realm



that existed on some plane other than the ordinary. . . landscape of streams, and bridges, lakes and hills ” (Ghosh, RS, 442-443). The Honamisland which is just opposite to Canton is noted for its parks, streams, monasteries, pagodas, and nurseries with its pine trees. Such is the beauty of the landscape an ‘Eden garden’ of China.

China is bestowed with botanical riches like medicinal plants and flowers of beauty. The horticulturalists and gardeners of the country cannot be easily bribed for their nation’s wealth. The British imperialists apply all types of tricks to exploit the natural resources, native plants, indigenous culture and people of China. It is highly disgusting to note that, the heartless British plundered and hunted the green vegetation, landscapes, botanical gardens and rich landforms of china.

Fitcher stands as an epitome of exploitative hunter who is obsessed by the exotic plants of China. He takes risks to hunt any number of plants from any part of the world, for he is so strong in his passion. In the island Hong Kong he climbs thousand feet on a horse to collect the pale rose named, *Arundinachinensis* from the bamboo orchids. This is conveyed by Paulette who works with him and she says, “I would call it *Diploprora Penrosii*’ (Ghosh, RS, 275). Fitcher kills birds, and uses its carcass, and bones of fish to make compost manure for plants in his ship. His hunger for money makes him so selfish to torture small living beings. Seeing the mobile plants growing in the ship, Robin Chinnery disapproves the act of Fitcher. Robin shares his voice for the freedom of the imprisoned plants in the ship *Redruth* as “it makes perfect sense that you poor plants should be given a holiday from their life abroad the Redruth. After all, plants were not meant to grow on ships, were they . . . it does seem cruel to deprive them of their natural element when it lies so close at hand” (Ghosh, RS, 438). Such is the imperialistic attitude of the British botanist towards nature.

The novel *River of Smoke* aims to project other issues like extinction of endangered species like plants, birds, the eating habits of Chinese and the use of animal parts in producing things, which is unknown to the world. In the beginning of the novel after the escape from the storm, five passengers have reached the great Nicobar island. Sarang Ali, Neel, Ah Fatt and others for want of food wander the slopes of mountains and jungles. In a nearby village Serang Ali, seeing flocks of birds, says :

See those birds, he said, the islanders call them *hinlene*; they revere them because they are the source of wealth. Those creatures look insignificant but they make something that is of immense value. What? Nests. People pay a lot of money for their nests..... where in the world would people pay to buy bird’s nests? We said. China, he said. In China they boil and eat them (Ghosh, GP, 23).

The nests of these birds cost eight troy pounds of gold in china. So the villagers destroy the birds nest, for their livelihood. To take the nests the villagers climb thousands of kilometres height of steep cliffs risking their lives. So the destruction and sale of bird’s nest, promotes endanger of bird species and extinction of the swift birds. Commissioner Lin in order to destroy opium from the ship flushed it in the river Pearl causing horrible ecocide, killing all forms of life in China. The river is full of smoke and many die of choking. The British want to take revenge on Lin and Canton is reduced to ashes. The novel also records the atrocities of military in land and sea. Hence the British bend nature for material benefit, causing series of environmental disaster to the colonized lands.

Conclusion

This study is significant because it connects literary critical analysis with global development, where it examines ecological collapse, climate crisis and death bell to mankind, which demands urgent action. Through an ecocritical approach this paper tries to demonstrate global ecological crisis and proves how literature can promote better understanding of ecological issues that shapes people's ecoconsciousness towards sustainability. Ghosh through story telling in his narratives has dealt with the negative impact of technology, sufferings of the poor marginalized, exploitation of nature, emphasizing the need for sustainability, inclusiveness of non human, indigenous knowledge and environmental justice to promote sustainability. Ghosh also insists that man bends nature in accord to his wish and also commodifies all forms of nature, in a selfish manner. Hence the novelist highlights certain threatening ecological issues in his work and tries for a solution, by creating a path towards ecological vision, highlighting a democratic, cultural and inclusive way of life, for the betterment of the planet. Hence Ghosh's novels expand the scope for new thinking in the environmental discourse and contribute to environmental thought.

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