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Ecological Issues in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Glass Palace* is about three generations and three countries history as India, Malaysia and Burma. It is also traces Britisher's greed over the rich ecological resources of Burma's teak and Malaysia's rubber trees and how Indian labors work on these countries plantations. How Britisher's had known to tamed nature according to their will and the story of teak, rubber and elephant is more beautiful and fascinating. Teak and rubber very useful and precious trees are cut down very easily for human profits and people of India works on those plantations as labors. Burma, Malaysia countries are their largest producers and England is their largest processors.

Ecology is the scientific study of natural interdependencies of life forms as they relate to each other and their shared environment. Creatures produce and shape their environment, as their environment produces and shapes them. Ecology developed in reaction against the practice of isolating creatures for study in laboratories, is based in field-work and draws on a range of specialist disciplines including Zoology, Botany, and Geology climate studies. Concepts that illustrate ecologies work are eco-system, ecological niche (space), and food chain.

Amitav Ghosh's fourth novel *The Glass Palace* is a monumental work written in 2000. Ghosh says that although the (colonial) past cannot be changed, it is our duty to examine it and to interrogate our role in it; and this is exactly what he has done in *The Glass Palace*. Only occasionally does Ghosh allow himself to make analytical comments across the decades and such comments are usually placed in the mouths of his characters, as when the deposed Burmese Queen Supayalat, in exile in India, predicts that her family's fate foreshadows that of "golden Burma," saying that "A hundred years hence you will read the indictment of Europe's greed in the difference between the kingdom of Siam and the state of our own enslaved realm" (Piciucco 269).

In *The Glass Palace* we find the story of three generation including three countries Burma, Malaysia and India. In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh shows familiarity with teak logging, elephant lore, rubber plantation and jungle welfare of Burma and Malaysia. Through the story of Saya John and Rajkumar, Ghosh also highlights on the teak timber business in Burma. Saya John was a timber businessman and he narrates the story of teak - it's felling, death, revenge and finally its subjugation has been dramatized and romanticized described as if it were a story of people, how teak caused invasions is very fascinating. Saya john told to Rajkumar that in the teak forest there are several leeches. "The thickest clusters of leeches were gathered always along the fissures of the body, where cloth chafed on skin: the folds and creases would guide the creatures to their favorite destinations- armpits, the groin, the cracks between legs and buttocks" (*The Glass Palace* 67-68). They made scores in the body of the teak traders mostly on the toes - to a leech the most prized of the human bodies offerings. There were always some that had burst under the pressure of the boot, leaving their suckers embedded in the flesh. These were the sites that were most likely to attract fresh attacks from insects as well as leeches; left unattended they

would fester, turn into foul-smelling, deep-rooted jungle sores. To these spots Saya John would apply “kow-yok” (*The Glass Palace* 68) a tar-like touch of red tobacco, smeared on paper or cloth. The poultice would fasten itself so tightly to the skin as to stay attached even when immersed in water, drawing out the infection and protecting the wound.

In the teak forest Saya John and Rajkumar would find themselves following the course of a chaung, a rushing mountain stream. Every few minutes a log would come hurtling through the water on its way down to the plain. To be caught in midstream by one of these hurtling two-ton projectiles was to be crippled or killed. When the path switched from one bank of the chaung to the other, a lookout would be posted to call out the intervals between logs so that the porters would know when it was safe to cross. Often the logs came not singly but in groups, dozens of tons of hardwood caroming down the stream together: when they hit each other, the impact would be felt all the way up the banks. At times a log would snag, in rapids or on the shore, and within minutes a tangled dam would rise out of the water, plugging the stream. One after another logs would go cannoning into one another, adding to the weight of the accumulated hardwood. The weight of the mass would mount until it became an irresistible force. Then at last something would give; a log, nine feet in girth, would snap like a matchstick. With a great detonation the dam would capsize and a tidal wave of wood and water would wash down the slopes of the mountain. Saya John told to Rajkumar that Chaungs are the trade winds of teak. In the dry season, when the earth cracked and the forests wilted, the streams would dwindle into dribbles upon the slope, barely able to shoulder the weight of a handful of leaves, mere trickles of mud between strings of cloudy riverbed pools. This was the season for the timber men to comb the forest for teak. The trees, once picked, had to be killed and left to dry, for the density of teak is such that it will not remain afloat while its heartwood is moist. 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. The assassinated trees were left to die where they stood, sometimes for three years or even more. It was only after they had been judged dry enough to float that they were marked for felling. Then the axe men came, shouldering their weapons, squinting along the blades to judge their victims’ angles 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. (*The Glass Palace* 69)

Then teams of elephants would go to work, guided by their handlers, their oo-sis and pe-sis, butting, prodding, levering with their trunks. Belts of wooden rollers would be laid on the ground, and quick-fingered pa-kyeiks, specialized in the tying of chains, would dart between the elephant’s legs, fastening steel harnesses. When finally the logs began to move, such was the friction of their passage that water-carriers would have to run beside them, dousing the smoking rollers with tilted buckets. Dragged to the banks of chaungs, the logs were piled into stacks and left to await the day when the chaungs would awaken from the hibernation of the hot season. With the first rains, the puddles along the streams beds would stir and stretch and join hands, rising slowly to the task of clearing away the debris accumulated over the long months of

desiccation. Then in a matter of days with the rains pouring down they would rear up in their beds growing hundreds-fold in height: where a week before they had wilted under the weight of twigs and leaves, they would now throw two-ton logs downstream like feathered darts.

Thus would begin the logs journey to the timber yards of Rangoon: with elephants nudging them over the slopes into the frothing waters of the chaungs below. Following the lie of the land they would make their way from feeder-streams to tributaries, until they debouched finally into the engorged rivers of the plains. In years of bad rain when the chaungs were too feeble to heft these great weights the timber company's profits plummeted. But even in good years they were jealous, punishing taskmasters - these mountain streams. At the height of the season a single snagged tree could result in a pile-up of five thousand logs or even more. The servicing of these white waters was a science unto itself, with its own cadre of adepts, special teams of oo-sis and elephants who spent the monsoon months ceaselessly patrolling the forest: these were the famed aunging herds, skilled in the difficult and dangerous art of clearing chaungs. Sheltering beside a dying and girdled trunk of teak, Saya John gave Rajkumar a mint leaf to hold in one hand and a fallen leaf from the tree in the other. He said to Rajkumar feel them and rubs them between your fingers. Saya John said to Rajkumar:

Teak is a relative of mint, *Tectona grandis*, born of the same genus of flowering plant but of a distaff branch, presided over by that most soothing of herbs, verbena. It counts among its close kin many other fragrant and familiar herbs-sage, savory, thyme, lavender, rosemary and most remarkably holy basil, with its many descendants, green and purple, smooth-leaved and coarse, pungent and fragrant, bitter and sweet. (*The Glass Palace* 70)

The mint leaf was the size of Rajkumar's thumb while the other would have covered an Elephant's footprint; one was a weed that served to flavor soup, while the other came from a tree that had felled dynasties, caused invasions, created fortunes, brought a new way of life into being. Ghosh also focuses on Europeans role in the teak business and how they had made teak useful for the human beings. Saya John told to Rajkumar that Europeans had suffered much in this teak forest camp. When they came they were only seventeen or eighteen and after four-five years they became old in the early age of twenty, twenty-one because in the forest they had dengue or malaria and they are far from hospital and this fever also weaker their body and they are not much strength in the age of twenty two and they have sent to city for official work. Saya John said that oo-sis and hsin-ouq had a false pride that they are the trainers of these elephants because their father's and their families have all worked with elephants, that no one knows their animals as they do but the Europeans are the first who had thought of using elephants for the purposes of logging. In ancient times their elephants were used only in pagodas and palaces for wars 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. Even such details as the structure and

placement of these huts, the plan of the tai, the use of bamboo thatch and rattan. (*The Glass Palace* 74-75)

These Europeans know how these teak trees are beneficial for human beings. Saya John said to Rajkumar: "That is someone you can learn from. To bend the work of nature to your will; to make the trees of the earth useful to human beings - what could be more admirable, more exciting than this?" (*The Glass Palace* 75). In her visiting place in Ratangiri queen of Burma Supayalat said to the visitors that Europeans greed causes the invasion of Burma.

We who ruled the richest land in Asia are now reduced to this. This is what they have done to us; this is what they will do to all of Burma. They took our kingdom, promising roads and railways and ports, but mark my words, this is how it will end. In a few decades the wealth will be gone - all the gems, the timber and the oil - and then they too will leave. (*The Glass Palace* 88)

Ghosh also deals with the larger question of European greed. Everything becomes a resource to be exploited - woods, water and mines people. Forests are cut on a very mass scale without giving any thought to the hazards of environment that such an unthinking act would cause. Burma becomes the mine of wealth for the British. Through Saya John, a teak contractor Ghosh also highlights the history of rubber plant. Saya John told to Rajkumar that Malacca which was his hometown had been a town that was slowly dying, with its port silted up and its traders moving away, either Northwards to Penang, or southwards to Singapore. But now, suddenly, Malacca was a changed place; there was a palpable quickening in the muddied veins of the sleepy old city. His old friend took him to the outskirts of the town, he remembered from his childhood, an area that had once been home to dozens of small spice gardens where pepper plants grew on vines. But the vines were all gone now, and in their place there were long straight rows of graceful, slender trunked saplings. His friend told him that they are Rubber trees. Some nine years before Mr. Tan Chay Yan, scion of a well-known Peranakan Chinese family of Malacca, had converted his pepper garden into a rubber plantation. In 1897 this had seemed like a mad thing to do. Everyone had advised against it: rubber was known to be a risk. Mr. Ridley, the curator of the Singapore Botanical Gardens had been trying for years to interest British planters in giving rubber a try. The imperial authorities in London had spent a fortune in arranging to have seed stocks stolen from Brazil. But Mr. Ridley was himself the first to admit that it might take as many as ten years for a rubber plantation to become productive. Malaya's European planters had backed away on learning this. But Mr. Tan Chay Yan persevering undeterred had succeeded in milking rubber from his trees in three short years.

Now everyone even the most timid British corporation was following his lead, planting rubber; money had been pouring into the city. The B. F. Goodrich Company had sent representatives all the way from Akron, Ohio, urging the planters of Malaya to plant this new crop. This was the material of the coming age; the next generation of machines could not be made to work without this indispensable absorber of friction. The newest motorcars had dozens of rubber parts; the markets were potentially bottomless, the profits beyond imagining. Saya John had made inquiries, asking a few knowledgeable people about what was involved in planting rubber. The answers were always short: land and labor were what a planter needed most; seed and saplings were easily to be had. And of the two principal necessities, land was the

easier to come by: of labor there was already a shortage. The British Colonial Government was looking to India to supply coolies and workers for the plantations. Seeing the profit in rubber Saya John had bought some land for Matthew (his son) in Malacca and he wanted Rajkumar will be his partner in rubber business. He said to Rajkumar;

Saya John: We'll be partners, the three of us: you, me, Matthew.

Rajkumar: Rajkumar shrugged. Saya, I know even less about this than Matthew does. My business is timber.

Saya John: Timber is a thing of the past, Rajkumar: you have to look to the future - and if there's any tree on which money could be said to grow, then this is it - rubber. (*The Glass Palace* 184)

Saya John's son Matthew named the rubber plantation Morningside Rubber Estate. Once when Rajkumar and his wife Dolly have come to visit the plantation Matthew's wife Elsa took Dolly for a walk through the rubber trees. Each tree had a diagonal slash across its trunk, with a halved coconut shell cupped underneath. Elsa swirled her forefinger through one of these cups and dug out a hardened crescent of latex. Elsa said to Dolly handing the latex "They call these cup-lumps" (*The Glass Palace* 198). Dolly raised the spongy gray lump to her nose: the smell was sour and faintly rancid. She dropped it back into the coconut-shell cup. Elsa said, Tappers will come by to collect the lumps in the morning. Not a drop of this stuff can be wasted. They headed through the rubber trees, walking uphill, facing the cloud-capped peak of Gunung Jerai. The ground underfoot had a soft, cushioned feel because of the carpet of dead leaves shed by the trees. The slope ahead was scored with the shadows 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 remembered how startled she'd been when the car crossed from the heady profusion of the jungle into the ordered geometry of the plantation. She said to Elsa, It's like stepping into a labyrinth.

When Dolly appreciates the forests beauty Elsa had reminds the place before the plantation. The place was beautiful beyond imagining but it was a dense jungle, towering, tangled, impassable jungle. Matthew had led Elsa a little way in on foot and it was like walking up a carpeted nave with the tops of the trees meeting far above forming an endless fan-vaulted ceiling. It was hard almost impossible to imagine that these slopes could be laid bare made habitable. Once the clearing of the forest started Matthew had moved out to the land and built himself a small cabin, where the estate office now stood. She had lived away from him in a rented house in Penang. He told to Elsa that was too dangerous like a battle-field with the jungle fighting back every inch of the way.

The hill side looked as though it had been racked by a series of disasters: huge stretches of land were covered with ashes and blackened stumps. Matthew was thin and coughed incessantly. She caught a glimpse of the workers shacks - tiny hovels with roofs made of branches and leaves. They were all Indians from the south: Matthew had learnt to speak their language - Tamil, but she couldn't understand a word they said. She'd looked into the mud-walled hut where they went

to be treated when they fell ill: the squalor was unimaginable, the floors covered with filth. She'd wanted to stay and work as a nurse but Matthew had refused to let her remain and she'd to go back to Penang. Before she had felt as though she were entering a plague site; now the sensation was of walking into a freshly laid garden. The ashes had been washed away by the rain, the blackened tree-stumps had been removed and the first saplings of rubber had begun to grow.

When Elsa showed Dolly her sketches for Morningside house, they were interrupted by Saya John (Elsa's father-in-law) folding the paper in half, showed Matthew (Saya John's son) and Rajkumar a report about the assassination of the Grand Duke Ferdinand in Sarajevo. Rajkumar and Matthew read through the first couple of paragraphs and then looked at each other and shrugged.

Rajkumar said, where's that "Sarajevo"? Matthew laughed, a long way away. No more than anyone else in the world did either of them have any inkling that the killing in Sarajevo would spark a world war. Nor did they know that rubber would be a vital strategic material in this conflict; that in Germany the discarding of articles made of rubber would become an offense punishable by law; that submarines would be sent overseas to smuggle rubber; that the commodity would come to be valued more than ever before, increasing their wealth beyond their most extravagant dreams. (*The Glass Palace* 201)

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh while narrating the story of rubber also focuses on the condition of Indian laborers or coolies in the rubber plantation of Malaysia. One day when Uma Dey was in plantation she expressed her great desire to Matthew to walk in the plantation. She was intrigued by Matthew's words like the jargon: muster, contractors, tappers. Uma reached in the plantation with Matthew and saw that scores of tappers were converging in front of the plantation's tin-roofed offices by the light of blazing kerosene lamps: they were all Indians, mainly Tamils; the women were dressed in saris and the men in sarongs. Mr. Trimble was the estates manager, a portly Eurasian. Mr. Trimble hoisted the Union Jack and then stood at attention beneath the flagpole, saluting stiffly, with two rows of Indian overseers lining up behind him - these were the conductors. For some of the tappers he had a smile and a quick word of encouragement; with others, he made a great show of losing his temper, gesticulating and pouring out obscenities in Tamil and English, singling out the object of his wrath with the tip of his pointing cane. He said: "You dog of a coolie, keep your black face up and look at me when I'm talking to you..." (*The Glass Palace* 231). Seeing this condition Uma said to Matthew that the tappers are like slaves. Matthew interrupted Uma and said that they are not slaves they are in better condition than they would be if they were back where they come from. He said that the manager is just doing his job:

It's a very hard job and he does it very well. It's no easy thing to run a plantation, you know. To look at, it's all very green and beautiful - sort of like a forest. But actually it's a vast machine, made of wood and flesh. And at every turn, every little piece of this machine is resisting you, fighting you, waiting for you to give in. (*The Glass Palace* 232)

Matthew leant against a tree trunk and said to Uma that all rubber trees are looking same. Under the rubber trees, there was a slow dripping of dew. Uma nodded: yes it struck me the other day, even their limbs branch off at the same height, and in exactly the same way. Matthew said to Uma that an enormous amount of human ingenuity has been invested in making these trees exactly similar. They're called clones; scientists have been working on them for years. Most of our trees are of a clonal variety called Avros - developed by the Dutch in Sumatra in the twenties. We pay a lot of money to make sure that we get reliable clonal seed. Matthew pointed into a coconut-shell cup that was fastened in the tree's trunk, beneath along spiral slash in the bark. He said that this tree has produced much latex overnight. The cup which was set in the right direction was half full. There were so many cups in the row; one cup was empty in one of them.

“Uma asked to Matthew is something wrong with this tree then? Matthew said not that I can tell, it looks all right - no different from the others. Think of all the human effort that has gone into making it the same as the rest. And yet...He pointed into the almost - empty cup...There you are” (*The Glass Palace* 233).

Matthew said to Uma that there are different views of Botanists, Geologists and Soil specialist about these trees. But the truth is quite simple that it (rubber) is fighting back. Uma laughed at this point and then Matthew said that he planted this tree, he has heard what all the experts say but the tappers know better. They have a saying you know - every rubber tree in Malaya was paid for with an Indian life. They know that there are trees that won't do what the others do, and that's what they say - this one is fighting back. Matthew told to Uma that:

This is my little empire. I made it. I took it from the jungle and molded it into what I wanted it to be. Now that it's mine I take good care of it. There's law, there's order, and everything is well run. Looking at it, you would think everything here is tame, domesticated, that all the parts have been fitted carefully together. But it's when you try to make the whole machine work that you discover that every bit of it is fighting back. It has nothing to do with me or with rights and wrongs: I could make this the best-run little kingdom in the world and it would still fight back...its nature: the nature that made these trees and the nature that made us. (*The Glass Palace* 233)

Ghosh also explains some other useful plants in *The Glass Palace* through his characters. Illango introduced Rajkumar's granddaughter Jaya the oil palms: 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 the texture of grease. Between the palms there were bird-houses elevated on poles. Illango explained these were for owls, the oil-rich fruit attracted great quantities of rodents; the birds helped keep their numbers under control. Thus through the story of teak and rubber in *The Glass Palace* we are familiar with these plants and the ecology of the area in which they are produced. Forests are cut without giving any attention to the agricultural problems. Britisher's greed over these resources is clear in the novel. Teak and rubber very useful and precious trees are cut down very easily for human profits and people of India works on those plantations as laborers. Burma, Malaysia countries are their largest producers and England is their largest processors.

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