

A Decay Of Palace: Imperialism And Eco-Feminism In Amitav Ghosh'S The Glass Palace

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Abstract

Postcolonial writers have made significant literary contributions by addressing pressing issues related to socio-economic and environmental development, disasters, and discourse in both today's world and many formerly colonised regions. This article presents an analysis of amitav ghosh's novel, the glass palace, exploring the complex themes of imperialism and colonialism's gradual disintegration within the narrative. This critical examination offers insights into the historical context, character development, and the enduring legacy of these systems in southeast asia. It is a narrative tapestry that explores the profound impact of imperialism on individuals, societies, and nations. Through a diverse cast of characters, ghosh offers a multi-faceted examination of imperialism and its eventual decay. His works always highlight women's characters while describing how they perceive themselves. The author used folklore and strong female characters to explore the philosophical core of eco-feminism. It creates a balanced attitude in humanity.

Keywords: Imperialism, Colonialism, Socio-Economic, Legacy, Cultural Revolution.

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Introduction

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, British imperialism was at its zenith, and Southeast Asia, particularly Burma, found itself under the dominion of the British Empire. Ghosh masterfully captures the grandeur and opulence of this imperial era through vivid descriptions of the Mandalay Palace, the teak forests of Upper Burma, and the bustling streets of Rangoon. It is a seminal work that provides a lens through which we can critically examine the decay of imperialism and colonialism during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Southeast Asia. This article seeks to delve into the multifaceted dimensions of the novel, dissecting its historical context, character development, and the lasting impact of imperialistic and colonial rule in the region.

The title itself, *The Glass Palace*, serves as a metaphor for the fragility and transience of power, wealth, and imperialism. Glass, beautiful and delicate, is easily shattered. Throughout the novel, this motif recurs, underscoring the vulnerability inherent in imperial systems. The palace, though splendid, represents a

fragile empire built on unequal power dynamics and exploitation.

The novel's opening scenes in Mandalay set the stage for the overarching theme of imperialism. As the British Empire colonized Burma, King Thebaw is exiled, and the teak industry becomes a symbol of British economic exploitation. Rajkumar, the central character, escapes to the teak forests, signaling the displacement and upheaval that often accompanies imperial rule.

Amitav Ghosh excels in crafting characters who grapple with the complexities of imperialism. Rajkumar, a young Indian orphan, evolves into a successful teak merchant and embodies the theme of adaptation in the face of imperialism. His journey is one of ambition and resilience as he navigates the changing economic and political landscapes. Dolly, Rajkumar's wife, is a character whose identity straddles the Indian and Burmese worlds. Her story illustrates the challenges individuals face when their identities are shaped by imperialism. Dolly's dual heritage and cultural clash are emblematic of the broader struggle to define one's identity in a colonized environment.

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Literature Review

A number of scholarly studies have examined the impact of the British imperial system within *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh and the eventual breakdown of that system. Authors such as Sarathamani (2022) have investigated how the British imperial system forced the colonized to feel inferior to the dominant imperial system. Suganthi et al. (2024), Solanki (2021), and Amalan (2024) have employed concepts connected with the study of colonialism, such as hegemony, hybridity, exile, diaspora, and the fragility of the imperial system within general literature to indicate the ways in which the British empire diminished throughout the period of its existence, especially in relation to the colonies of Burma, India, and Malaya. Furthermore, Vincent (2022) investigated the ecological destruction that occurred during the rule of the British Empire and its impact on the environment. However, most of these studies have examined each of these concepts separately. While ecofeminist theory, as discussed by authors such as Vandana Shiva, proposes correlations between the destruction of the environment and the oppression of certain groups according to their gender, few scholars have investigated how these concepts relate to *The Glass Palace* by Ghosh. Therefore, the article's combined analysis of imperialism and ecofeminism within the innovation helps to reveal the relationship between the destruction of the environment and the oppression of the female characters within the novel. Both themes are intrinsically related to the eventual collapse of the British imperial system.

Imperialism and Its Impact

The exploitation of a native people's culture and economy through colonial conquest and modernization is known as colonialism. Occasionally, colonialism is referred to as imperialism as well. Imperialism is the practice of ruling over other countries without settling there. In his article "Culture and Imperialism," Edward Said defines imperialism as, "The practice, theory, and attitude of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant. (Said:1994, p.9) *The Glass Palace* is a novel about migration and displacement. Therefore, it is clear that the novel's central theme is the clash of cultures. During the king's exile at Ratnagiri, the king's family experiences cultural friction. The native's customs and the environment are completely dissimilar from those of the royal family. At

Ratnagiri, it gets increasingly difficult for them to maintain their culture. All three of the princesses eventually blend in with the community. Their everyday routine demonstrates how they have adapted to a new society. By forgetting the previous culture, the princesses adopt the new one and adapt to it.

"In their early years in India, the Princesses usually dressed in Burmese clothes—aingyis and htameins. But as the years passed their garments changed. One day, no one quite remembered when, they appeared in saris—not expensive or sumptuous saris but the simple green and red cottons of the district. They began to wear their hair braided and oiled like Ratnagiri school girls" (*The Glass Palace*, 76-77)

In the modern era, researchers like Richard Grove, Ramchandra Guha, David Arnold, and Alfred Crosby have recently revealed how European invasions and interventions have harmed the local environment everywhere they have gone. Since the fifteenth century, Europeans have been using colonialism to imperialize people and places. Culture and nature are inextricably linked. Eco-criticism connects these two topics in the modern era. Ecocriticism is the study of culture and nature as a whole, rather than as distinct subjects of inquiry. It examines the problems as links between culture and environment. Glotfelty is quoted by Sumathy in "Ecocriticism in Practice." As given below: 'Nature and culture do not exclude each other but be tangled with each other in multiple ways.' (Sumathy: 2009, P.56)

Understanding the relationship between nature and culture, every discussion of nature will therefore be interpreted with cultural overtones. *The Glass Palace* is a realistic depiction of environmental harm caused by colonialism and war, which destroys individuals, society, and the natural world. Another name for this harm is ecological imperialism.

The Glass Palace does not limit its exploration of imperialism to individual experiences. It paints a vivid picture of how imperial rule affects entire nations. The shift from Burmese monarchy to British colonialism marks a pivotal moment in the narrative. It symbolizes the erosion of Burmese sovereignty and cultural identity, and the subsequent emergence of resistance movements. Migration is both a blessing and a curse for different people. Rajkumar benefits from his move in this way. After arriving in Mandalay, *The Glass Palace*

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starts to look for a home and an identity. When he first encounters Ma' Cho in the new land's food stall, he discovers who he is. Rajkumar's arrival in the new country already suggests that he intends to work at a food stand and live a humble existence. Ghosh depicts it as,

“It was Rajkumar’s job to carry bowls of soup and noodles to the customers. In his spare moments he cleared away the utensils, tended the fire and shredded vegetables for the soup pot.....

In the evenings he did the washing up, carrying bucketfuls of utensils over Tofort’s moat”. (*The Glass Palace* 6)

As the novel unfolds, signs of declining state of imperialism were witnessed. Ghosh subtly portrays the flaws and vulnerabilities within the imperial system. The resistance movements that emerged in Burma, the changing political landscape, and the challenges faced by characters like U Saw, a Burmese politician, all hint at the fragility of imperial rule. The outbreak of World War II and the Japanese occupation of Burma further highlight the instability of imperialism. Jong Ah Thaik, a Japanese soldier, introduces an element of wartime intrigue and conflict. The novel illustrates how imperial powers can be weakened and disrupted by global events.

Cross Cultural Conflicts

Conflict is caused by a multitude of reasons, including but not limited to gender, self-perception, expectations, circumstances, roles, authority, communications practices, experiences in life, values, and the society in which we are raised. Under extreme circumstances, a fight may arise not just to ensure one's own life and existence but also to eradicate the existence of any other individuals or organization that the opposing party regards as their enemy. The Oxford Dictionary characterizes a conflict as “a situation in which people, groups or countries are involved in a serious disagreement or argument”. As stated by Max Weber in 1968, social conflict is defined as,

“A social relationship will be referred to as conflict insofar as action within it is oriented intentional to carrying out the actor’s own will against the resistance of the other party or parties”.

I would like to depict the cultural exchange and clash that occur within imperial contexts. The diverse cast of characters from different ethnic backgrounds and

regions reflects the rich tapestry of cultures in Burma and Southeast Asia. These interactions add depth and nuance to the narrative, emphasizing the complexity of imperialism's impact on diverse societies. The narrator described the condition of people from many nations and their civilizations who have strange relationships. Political, cultural, social, and ethical topics are discussed by the author typically in the novel. All of this is presented using the author's in-depth research and expert craftsmanship. He reports everything with intelligence and accuracy. Every aspect reveals the author's presence, including military maneuvers, car and airplane models, oil drilling, lumber commerce, cuisine, attire, and language. The ubiquitous narrator provides all of these details while providing historical documentation and doing so through the perspective of numerous characters.

The story describes the fall of the Burmese empire. It demonstrates how a thriving civilization is on the edge of extinction and it follows the exiled Burmese king, queen, and their entourage as they lived in India. How do they preserve their culture and identity in another country? How do they live out the years of their lives that are left? It presents non-British viewpoints on the voices of silenced people and their traditions. The Burmese king spent the rest of his life in India, Ratnagiri his home along with his family and personnel. It was exceedingly challenging for him to uphold the royal code and culture in the bungalow-style home in the small town of Outram. The royal family had to adjust to the ecological and cultural ties in the area. They were required to associate themselves with ordinary citizens. The older princess developed feelings for Sawant, a servant. The only choice the monarch and queen had was to formally recognize their union. As a result, two extremes of several civilizations are interwoven as necessary by the situation. The monarch and queen treated the servant like a son. He maintained order in the home and attended to the royal family's daily requirements. Everything moves in circles in this universe. The forces of nature can be counterbalanced. Before the British invasion, an impoverished Indian man named Rajkumar Raha works as an orphan laborer in Burma. He is a prime example of an opportunistic, marginalized person in the colonial society. When they overcame the Burmese royal forces, British troops ensured Burma's status as a British colony. They

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invaded the pagoda country to seize control of the teak woods and other natural resources.

Rajkumar's success in the teak industry and the economic changes in Burma and India provide a backdrop for the narrative. The novel examines how economic shifts influence the lives of its characters. Economic factors often drive imperial expansion, and Ghosh's portrayal of this transformation adds depth to the exploration of imperialism's consequences. His entry into the tea shop and the growth of his rubber and timber business in the other country serve as a comparison to show the identity of the migrants who can be a blessing to the locals. When diasporic individuals move to a new country, they first experience difficulties similar to those Rajkumar does. Even when they make an effort to adapt to the new surroundings, language, culture, and society, they will nevertheless experience psychological issues. When Rajkumar inquires as to how the immigrant, Saya John, learned to speak an Indian language, I have focused on the impending, psychological emotion of the character. The importance of a Diasporic mindset when learning a language is crucial. The two migrants' chat highlights the difficulties and hardships associated with language acquisition. Rajkumar stated his desire to go home in *The Glass Palace*. He had one or the other desire throughout his life. And when he was forced to reside in India, he worked to return to Burma, which he regarded as his native country. When Jaya reminded her, she said, "I remembered how he'd always said that for him, the Ganges could never be the same as Irrawaddy." (*The Glass Palace* 544)

Amitav Ghosh employs a multi-layered narrative structure that enhances the storytelling. The story unfolds through multiple perspectives, offering insights into the thoughts and experiences of various characters. This technique allows readers to gain a holistic understanding of the events and the interconnected lives of the characters. Ghosh has skillfully illustrated the adverse effects that imperialism brought about, bringing attention to issues that are typically disregarded. He draws attention to the environment's changes. Even rubber plantations are presented as having an unnatural beauty. Despite being trees, they didn't feel organically. Without the assistance of the indigenous population, imperial power could not have abused the territory, its inhabitants, and its riches. Rajkumar, Saya John and the collector (Uma's husband)

have been supported and assisted foreigners to gain power. Some people supported them out of necessity, others out of greed, and still others did so out of respect for the colonial power. They harmed many while helping a select few.

The peace of mind of the population was ripped away by the departure of the King and Queen first, followed by the country's complete transmutation. During the Second World War, the Japanese launched an attack on Burma as if that were not enough. The population, who had previously been content and naive, was incensed by it all.

"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." (*The Glass Palace*, 246)

The novel also moves fluidly across time, shifting between different historical periods. This temporal flexibility is a hallmark of Ghosh's storytelling, allowing him to explore the long-reaching consequences of historical events. Alfred W. Crosby, a renowned historian and author, provided a thorough analysis of how colonial imperialism disrupted societies and destroyed the natural environment. He explained how Europeans wrecked the ecological balance in their quest for power and wealth. Famine and pestilence followed them everywhere they established their colonies. They caused ecological destruction in addition to economic and cultural despotism. The infections that Europeans brought with them caused massive outbreaks of smallpox, measles, tuberculosis, influenza, and several other diseases "everywhere and whenever Europeans crossed the oceans and settled." In the *Glass Palace*, Ghosh has presented the plight of Burmese and Indians as well as the oppression of Europeans who brought damage to every part of existence through an engaging and page-turning novel. Ghosh is attempting to draw attention to the loss of human peace with nature and to arouse in readers a sense of environmental awareness.

Throughout the novel, Ghosh uses rich symbolism and imagery to enhance the storytelling. The "glass palace" itself serves as a symbol of fragility, opulence, and impermanence. The image of glass represents the transient nature of power and wealth, emphasizing that imperial dominance is not eternal.

Eco-Feminist Approach and Analysis

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In the early 1970s, there was an emergence of a literary movement known as ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is the study of the relationship between how women are treated and treated by nature. Ecofeminism also appears in classic literature, such as the epic Ramayana from Indian Mythology, which dates back hundreds of years. Prof Nandini Sahu, poet-thinker-ecofeminist says, "Sita was a woman closest to Nature- she was the original ecofeminist- deserted twice, abducted once, she never spent her life brooding over a decipherable destiny, rather she took charge of the flora and fauna and then her own children Lava-Kush, as a single parent till they were twelve years old. She was like Mother Earth. She was the embodiment of patience, endurance, optimism, love and motherhood." (Sita – Poem 15)

Women, according to Amitabh Ghosh, are the primarily great spirit. Through his female characters, who aid readers in understanding feminist sensibility and psychology, he attempts to grasp the sensitivity of women. Because they are not considered "stereotypes," female personalities in the world are distinct. The female characters in *The Glass Palace* are those who directly and unmistakably illustrate the distinction between the ruling class and the underclass for the reader. Even among the princesses, a woman is more dependent on a man, and her marriage is no less a matter of personal choice, according to an analysis of the feminist language in the novel on the dignity of women in the royal family. In India, getting married is a political event. Ma Cho, a single woman with dignity, represents the struggles of women in society. Just the opening chapter of *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh discusses Ma Cho. She was a semi Indian and Burmese descent. She lives alone because she doesn't have family to associate with. She was in her thirties; her ethnicity was more Burmese than Indian. Ma Cho lives a very independent life and doesn't rely on anyone.

When she responds to Saya John, Ma Cho stands as a defender of cultural and spiritual core. Her persona exudes vigor and leadership. Despite being a woman, she was superior to men. Dolly and Uma Dei are described as vibrant women in the novel. Evolution is connected to feminist consciousness in the milieu of Amitav Ghosh's female novels, which is challenged by

the social issues and masculine hegemony women experience. They behave as distinct individuals, mature and develop by their interests, seek social approval, choose their careers and lives, engage in constant combat, take pleasure in winning battles, and are never afraid to experience the sting of loss. In this novel, I have found the two opposite views of women: those who live sustainable, competitive lives and those who do the reverse. Ghosh is aware of this humanistic perspective, and the modest female characters speak out against racism, gender inequality, women's oppression, child marriage, poverty, exploitation, and abortion. He seeks to eliminate barriers to human progress such as race, color, gender, religion, and untouchability. Additionally, it demonstrates how marginal and female characters are vanished from the story's pages without being noticed.

The names of the characters in the book *The Glass Palace* serve as a primary indicator of who they are; consequently, the characters' actions closely mirror their names. "Dolly" is the name of a doll. Dolly and doll share many similarities, including their shy nature and constant willingness to put others' happiness ahead of their own. She never complains about the misfortunes that come her way. She must leave with the royal family and go into exile. The older princess snatches her first love. She takes care of her husband and kids in Burma like any other traditional wife would. She never thought about her life or expressed her desires while completing all of these tasks. Thus, it is appropriate to recognize her character from her name, "Dolly." Her identity is in her name.

Uma Dey is a victim of the customary practice of arranged marriages. Her inability to find happiness in her married life is a domestic dilemma. Uma's marriage to her husband was merely a ceremonial union, hence their tie is weak. Shubha Tiwari exposed the attitude of Uma's husband as,

"He'd be working with Europeans: it wouldn't do go have a conservative, house bond wife. He needed a girl who would be willing to step out into society; someone young, who wouldn't be resistant to learning modern ways." (Tiwari, Shubha: 2008 p.98)

Uma symbolized the hardships of Hindu widowhood in Indian culture after her husband's passing because "her hair was shaved off; she could eat neither meat nor fish; and she was allowed to wear nothing but white." (*The Glass Palace*, 184) She was required to adhere to

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the social norms and behaviors set forth for women by patriarchal society. She would endure suffering for the rest of her days with no possibility of being saved. She turns into a machine that only shows up to the collector's parties. Her husband never gives her any space in his life. She really doesn't love her consort. Uma does not feel sad for her husband because of this, despite his passing. Uma is a sophisticated, self-assured woman. She is the epitome of what it means to empower women. She forges her own social identity and defines her own womanly individuality. She did, however, make it to Europe, where she saw "women traveling alone, unmolested, and attracting no more than the occasional strange eye. Even now, in India, this level of autonomy cannot be enjoyed without abduction dread. Women's security in modern Indian society is a crucial subject to consider and resolve. When Uma visited New York, she thought it was "a kind of haven for someone." Marriage is one of the most revered unions in every culture. As Uma reflected, "It was a way of shaping the future to the past, of cementing one's ties to one's memories and to one's friends" (*The Glass Palace*, 230). Arranged marriages are prevalent in a heterogeneous country like India. To strengthen cultural ties, the ceremony gathers members of the society in one location. It inspires community members to lend a hand to those in need, exchange ideas for the advancement of their culture, and face challenges together.

Conclusion:

A Decay of Palace: Imperialism and Eco-Feminism Approach in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* is a title that encapsulates the essence of the novel and the depth of its exploration. Ghosh's portrayal of imperialism's impact, its vulnerabilities, and its eventual decay offers readers a profound insight into the complexities of colonial rule. Through a combination of rich characters, evocative settings, and masterful narrative techniques, Ghosh weaves a narrative that is both historically grounded and thematically resonant. Burma had been transformed into a commercial nation, and its citizens were now leading unsettled lives. Ecological imperialism, which involves causing disruption and ruin in the name of progress, is to blame for this. The title suggests that within the pages of *The Glass Palace*

readers will find not only a compelling story but also a critical examination of the imperial era, its consequences, and the ultimate fragility of power. As we delve into this critical analysis, we unveil the layers of a narrative that continues to resonate in a world shaped by the legacies of imperialism.

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