

Examining The Prominent Environmental Themes In Select Fiction Of Amitav Ghosh: An Eco-Critical Analysis

Dr. J. Alangara Ashok¹, Dr. T.Karpagavalli¹

¹*Assistant Professor of English,
PG & Research Department of English,
Kamaraj College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi - 628 003
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu)
alangaraashok1616@gmail.com*
²*Assistant Professor of English,
PG & Research Department of English,
Kamaraj College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi - 628 003
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu)
Karpaga_hari@yahoo.com*

This research article is an attempt to explore the ecological themes in Amitav Ghosh's select fiction. Amitav Ghosh's novels, *The Glass Palace* and *Sea of Poppies*, explore environmentalism and its preservation. *The Glass Palace* focuses on the colonisation of Southeast Asia during the mid-nineteenth century, highlighting the impact of Western economic forces and exploitative agriculture. *Sea of Poppies* critiques the British agricultural practices and the technology-driven lifestyle of the modern era. *The Hungry Tide* is his most ecology-centric novel, revealing a human civilisation struggling for survival in the presence of wild creatures. *River of Smoke* explores the complex relationship between humans and the environment, highlighting the enduring hardships faced by nature and the city of Canton.

Keywords: Eco-Criticism, Environment, Nature, Preservation.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh garnered attention in 2004 following the release of his sixth novel, *The Hungry Tide*, in a manner distinct from typical authors, being perceived as prophetic in the high-tech twenty-first century. Individuals perceived the depiction of the tsunami-like storm in this novel as "a warning" (Let's Be 2) to the world. This study examines Amitav Ghosh's propensity towards environmentalism and its preservation, as evidenced both deliberately and unconsciously in the majority of his works. It succinctly examines Ghosh's principal novels from an eco-critical perspective, particularly focussing on *The Glass Palace* (2002), although this theme does not play a prominent role in his subsequent works. *The Glass Palace* extensively addresses the colonisation of India and Burma. This study will examine the

colonisation of the forests, jungles, and wilderness of Southeast Asia during the mid-nineteenth century. This era is characterised by “the penetration of Western economic forces facilitated the colonial annexation” (Grove) led to fast ecological modification due to “the Europeans’ ‘imperialist’ attitude towards the environment” (Worster 29) and the subsequent “exploitative agricultural and hunting ethos” (Mackenzie 5) they pursued. When King Thebaw of Burma declined the British merchants and colonisers’ suggestion to forgo payment for several tonnes of timber purchased, they initiated hostilities - ‘a war for wood!’ It was an inconceivable event, even for the astute kid character Matthew John, an immigrant Chinese youngster in the story; that a mere few logs of wood could result in the entire royal family of Burma being exiled to a distant and obscure village in India in the memorable year of 1885.

Amitav Ghosh depicts the same youngster, Matthew, as an adult educated in America who, with the assistance of another pivotal character, Raj Kumar Raha, establishes the Morningside Rubber Estate, colonising the extensive and dense territories of Eastern Burma. They essentially cultivate ‘the money tree’ (TGP, 177) in the guise of rubber. This estate functions as an empire, with Matthew John governing like a contemporary Robinson Crusoe, overseeing not only the Malay and Tamil enslaved servants but also the land and its magnificent, bounteous potential to yield.

Ghosh prompts Matthew to state, “Visually, it appears exceedingly verdant and picturesque - reminiscent of a forest.” However, it is really an extensive apparatus composed of wood and flesh. (TGP, 232). It was constructed from wood and ‘flesh’ due to the assertion that “every rubber tree was compensated with an Indian life...” (TGP, 233). The author recounts the substantial investment of human creativity and work in creating such ‘trees exactly similar, like clones’ (TGP, 232) for a specific purpose.

Matthew John, embodying a Frantz Fanon archetype of the colonized-colonizer, personally supervised and monitored the labourers’ rubber collection duties each morning. Here, Ghosh illustrates how Uma Dey and he observe nature’s capacity for resistance, manifesting as deliberate unyieldingness and barrenness, indicating that trees too revolt and retaliate. (TGP, 233). Certain rubber trees, robust and thriving, failed to react to the manure. And fertilisers he lavished upon them - “every fragment of this (mechanically altered jungle) is opposing you, contesting you, anticipating your capitulation” (TGP, 233). For generations, Burmese land was suited for timber, then suddenly, these “enlightened” and educated individuals proposed the concept of generating profit by “manicuring” nature and transforming it into gardens in an innovative manner. This vegetarian revolt serves as a reminder to the self-assured individual that one is not, after all, ‘the sovereign of all one surveys’ and possesses. That is one of the messages embedded within the text and the vegetation enveloping this particular ‘green book.’

Amitav Ghosh expresses his ecological concerns in his latest novel, *Sea of Poppies*. It thoroughly addresses the adverse consequences of colonialism, commencing with the British’s exploitative approach to agriculture and harvesting. Their insatiable greed for poppy seed silver intensified daily, resembling a predatory beast, casting the entirety of North India into a desolate and joyless expanse. Essential crops such as wheat, lentils, and vegetables progressively diminished in acreage. Consequently, the agrarian population experienced significant impoverishment, leading many to sell their land, homes, and even their children. Consequently, they were compelled to sign a contract as *Girmit* (indentured)

labourers. It was driven by the exclusive ambition and imperative of British merchants, their directive to plant exclusively cash crops of poppy: to amass wealth at any expense. They permitted minimal alternative cultivation; their representatives traversed residences coercing monetary advances from the farmers, compelling them to endorse contracts or even falsifying their thumbprints. No one could comply with this enforced commitment. Ghosh illustrates the outcome by stating, "...ultimately, your earnings would amount to no more than three and a half sicca rupees, barely sufficient to settle your advance" (SOP, 30). However, the highly technical colonialists overlooked the challenge posed to the natural and traditional crop rotation, or they simply did not care. The outcome was "a snow... of white poppies" (SOP, 03) throughout this area along the Ganges, submerging individuals in a sea of destitution and lethargy of despair. Consequently, the normal cycle of dawn following dusk, spring succeeding autumn, and joys interspersed with sadness ceased for Diti and Kabutari, the principal protagonists of this segment. The fertile ground did not provide them with sustenance and essential need. The twelve-year-old daughter was left behind by her loving mother to seek a better future as a labourer across the seven seas in Mareech.

The *Hungry Tide* is Ghosh's most ecology-centric novel and arguably the most vociferous critique of the technology-driven lifestyle of the modern era. The novel commences by introducing Piyali Roy, an Indian American scientist conducting research on cetacean dolphins in the Sundarbans. However, what transpires around her is unimaginable for us, the anthropocentric populace. The Sunderban islands are renowned for their unique mangroves, serving as a habitat for numerous distinctive species, including the Royal Bengal tiger. However, Ghosh reveals an entire human 'civilisation' (THT, 172) thriving amidst these constantly moving, perpetually submerged islands; struggling for survival in the presence of wild creatures every moment of their daily existence. They are the unlucky 'no lands' children who were left homeless during the partition of India in 1947 and again in 1971. They selected Mother Nature above the governments of the three newly established nations after consuming seers of their families' blood. Consequently, Piyali and Kanai Dutta, the two emblematic characters from the contemporary and progressive realm, observe a conflict between humanity and the untamed wilderness in this survival of the fittest context. It is a 'you-kill-me or I-kill-you' play enacted in the most rudimentary fashion daily throughout their existence. The genocidal crimes in this mangrove went unrecorded because the victims were deemed "too poor to matter" (THT, 300) by India and global elites. They could only empathise with the animals, which they sought to protect by relegating the refugee population out of view.

Amitav Ghosh's profound concern for the environment and humanity is well articulated through Piyali Roy's comments, expressed in utter sorrow as she observes yet another tiger death, necessitated for the protection of a conspicuous and human society, a society of voiceless impoverished individuals. For the affluent individuals globally, they were seen as 'no less than dirt' (THT, 262), who allocated resources and finances to safeguard tigers, even at the expense of human lives. However, Piya's perception of reason did not justify allowing them to endure massacre. She recognised the natural cycle of life and the unique position and role of each species on planet Earth. The sustainability of the world relies significantly on the equilibrium between humans and animals. She stated, "Imagine if we transcended the arbitrary boundary that leads us to conclude that no other species holds significance apart from our own." What will remain then? Aren't we sufficient in our solitude?

Once we determine to eradicate other species, it will inevitably be the impoverished and overlooked individuals next. Ghosh, thus, exerts a considerable influence by clarifying the situation. He heightens our awareness of the intricate issue, compelling us to examine our surroundings and gain a new perspective on our daily patterns. We are not the sole possessors of the right to exist and relish the gift of life. Every organism occupies a niche in the ecosystem; we must use caution to avoid infringing upon their existence. Consequently, Ghosh promotes a balanced environment that may be adequately supported by technology resources. Let us refrain from utilising our advanced scientific innovations solely for environmental harm. We can consistently find a constructive solution.

The Glass Palace is notably ecology-focused as it engages in an intimate study of elephants. The author's affection for this quintessential Indian animal is evident as he elaborates on the science of taming, rearing, and training these massive creatures by delicate individuals such as Doh Say and Neel Rattan. Raj Kumar possesses an entire farmyard of elephants for his expanding wood enterprise. However, these mute creatures also experience their moments of notoriety—one of them unexpectedly murders Raj Kumar's own son, the attractive spouse of ManjuDey, Neel Raha, in a most horrific manner. As if the lambs are ultimately shattered by the resounding calls of these pachyderms! This occurrence serves as a forerunner to a succession of bad events that sequentially highlight the significant characters in the narrative.

Prior to this, only nature and the environment were enduring hardship, if you recall. Matthew and his cherished wife Elsa perished in a vehicle accident, which is particularly ironic given that Matthew's image has been developed as a wealthy American elite. He had a profound affection for automobiles; each significant event in his life was marked by the acquisition of a new car model. He could describe the latest designs with the same affection and erudition that the Romantic poets extolled the features and splendours of nature "One shade the more, one ray the less/ Had half impair'd the nameless grace."

The 'car-code' signifies that automobiles have long represented success and a prosperous lifestyle, becoming a vital element of a thriving society even in contemporary times. This can be interpreted as a synecdoche for capitalist culture, which is often antithetical to 'natural' in various respects. Consequently, environmentalism provides a critique of economic growth, particularly in its most detrimental manifestations. This incident may therefore appear "hostile to pleasure and the wealthy middle classes" (Kerridge 534). The rise of capital and consumerism in the novel is significantly linked to the Second World War, comprising a substantial portion of The Glass Palace storyline. Alison Matthew and Saya John ultimately engage in combat with the Japanese soldiers after abandoning their opulent home, which was encircled by expansive lawns in a central location in Burma.

Amitav Ghosh considers it peculiar that the city of Canton, which has "absorbed so much of the world's evil, has given in return so much beauty" (ROS, 536). China has introduced numerous natural wonders, starting with tea: one of humanity's finest beverages, serving as the most organic drink to calm individuals. It established a novel and sophisticated cultural event known as 'tea time' globally, particularly in Europe. Literature attests to this esteemed beverage, lauded by authors such as Henry Fielding as 'the remedy for all ailments, from fatigue to a cold to even murder.' Fifteen Henry James considers the 'ceremonious tea-hour' to be one of the most pleasurable moments in life. In his book on opium consumption,

Thomas de Quincey also extolled tea as the preferred beverage of intellectuals. The chinaware, tiny paintings, and crafts that have embellished households around for ages are exceptional. Ghosh, however, focusses on the offering: the blooms that our nation has presented to the globe over time. He endeavours to absorb many names such as hydrangea, chrysanthemum, peonies, crested irises, gardenias, primroses, lilies, asters, azaleas, and several more exquisite flowers. The adjacent Japanese practice of 'ikebana' likely originated from the same sources and pathways. Identical. Consequently, Ghosh remains confident that despite the devastation wrought by the opium wars and the passage of centuries since the era of floral tributes and seed theft (a historical aspect briefly referenced in *The Glass Palace*), the "flowers of Canton are immortal and will bloom forever." (ROS,

It is as peculiar as divine providence that while China suffered from the opium crisis instigated by European traders and colonisers, its blossoms delighted the very officials and soldiers advancing towards devastation. Although China may have endured setbacks against the formidable British military strategies, it undeniably contributed significantly to the advancement of human civilisation through its gifts and blessings. *River of Smoke* illuminates the manipulative and exploitative colonial practices of the West towards the East, while also heightening our awareness of our inherent goodness and the enduring fragrance of mankind that we will disseminate via our care for nature. Ghosh, in numerous respects, expands the function of nature beyond merely serving as a 'moral barometer'; he instead heightens our awareness of our actions. He prompts us to consider the implications of coexisting with the earth rather than merely existing upon it.

Works Cited:

1. Grove, Richard. *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*. Cambridge England ; New York, Ny, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
2. Worster, Donald. *Nature's Economy : A History of Ecological Ideas*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.
3. Mackenzie, John M. *The Empire of Nature : Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism*. Manchester, Uk, Manchester University Press, 2008.
4. Amitav Ghosh. *Glass Palace*. 2017.
5. Amitav Ghosh. *Sea of Poppies*. London, John Murray, 2009.
6. Amitav Ghosh. *Hungry Tide*. Harper Collins, 2017.
7. Byron, Lord, "She walks in Beauty. ." *The Golden Treasury* , F.T Palgrave, Calcutta: Oxford U. Press, 1994, p.177
8. Waugh, Patricia. *Literary Theory and Criticism : An Oxford Guide*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.
9. Kerridge, Richard, "Environmentalism and Eco-criticism," *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, (ed) Patricia Waugh, Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2006, p.534.