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ECO-MARXISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE GLASS PALACE*

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at applying Eco-Marxism ideology to *The Glass Palace* to study the extent of environmental damage and plundering of human resources during the Imperialistic regime of the British in Burma. The novel discusses the large scale lumbering of forests the highly prized timber Burma teak. The novel also highlights the plight of the indentured labourers brought from South India by labour contractors to be employed in petroleum wells and in rubber plantations. The Imperialist created capitalist system to empower their economic status which resulted in social exclusion, poverty, war and environmental degradation.

KEYWORDS - Eco-Marxism, Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace*

Eco-socialists have revisited Marx's writings and believe that he was the main originator of the ecological world view. William Morris, the English novelist and poet is credited for developing key principles of Eco-socialism. Metabolic Rift is a recent ideology introduced by John Bellamy Foster. This is an extension of Marx's view on ecological crisis that occur under capitalism. The concept of the Metabolic Rift is the dynamic interchange between human beings and nature, resulting from human labour. John Bellamy Foster is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Oregon. He writes about political economy of capitalism and economic crisis, and Marxist theory. Social ecology, green socialism and metabolic rift are the ideologies that merge with the aspects of eco-marxism. These ideologies share not only the environmental damage but also the scarcity of the natural resources created by capitalistic forms of production that depend on the manipulation of the dynamic of supply and demand.

The Glass Palace discusses the extent of environmental damage caused on earth on account of colonization and wars. Ghosh has tried to prove that literature can make positive contribution towards increasing awareness about the environment. *The Glass Palace* gives us a glimpse of how British caused ecological crisis during capitalism by conquering and plundering the Burmese natural resources such as teak, rubber and petroleum. The British has sent troops and conquered Burma over a trivial quarrel about tax levied for logs on the British timber companies.

Ghosh deals with the larger question of the imperialist's greed; everything becomes a resource to be exploited. "Resources were being exploited with an energy and efficiency hitherto undreamed of" (66). Many labourers were employed to cut trees on a very mass scale without giving any thought to the environmental hazards and the loss of habitat for numerous organisms and creatures. Though the labourers risk their life they were paid very little and were kept as indentured labourers. Capitalism plays a vital role in the destruction of forests. Burma becomes the mine of wealth for the British. Queen Supayalat, after exile, states clearly about the motive of the British, "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 they too will leave” (88).

The novel reveals that the capitalists namely the Indian and Malaysian merchants benefit with the expanding economy of teak and rubber. Saya John becomes an agent who supplies teak for British. Rajkumar joins Saya John for earning his daily bread. For Saya John and Rajkumar the busy time is when the river rises. Every few weeks they load cargo of sacks, crates and boxes on to one of the Irrawady Steamship Flotilla’s riverboats. When everything goes as planned, these journeys end at some tiny inland hamlet, with a team of elephants waiting to relieve them of their cargo, leaving them free to turn back. If the camp ahead can spare no elephants they have to find their own porters to carry their cargo onto the mountains. Then Rajkumar too has to yoke a basket to his back. They set off at daybreak with Saya John leading a long line of porters and Rajkumar bringing up the rear. They climb sideways like mules, along the rain-sodden paths, digging the edges of their feet into the red, soggy mud. No matter how much care they take, leeches unfurl like tendrils as they awake to the warmth of the passing bodies.

Almost invariably they find themselves following the course of a rushing mountain stream. Every few minutes a log comes hurtling through the water, on its way down to the plain. It is very dangerous to cross the stream while the log is falling down the stream. So they switch the path of the falling logs so that the porters cross the stream safely. Often the logs not come singly but in groups. Dozens of hardwood cramming down the stream together cause flooding. “At times a log would snag, in rapids or on the shore, and within minutes a tangled dam would rise out of the water” (68). Stream serves for the timber merchants as a mode of transporting logs from the forest to the city.

In the dry season trees to be felled were selected and left to dry. It is done so because if the trees are moist, they cannot be left afloat. The killing is 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. Ghosh tries to bring into light that the Europeans have committed ecocide by sweeping away all the timbers from Burma. William Rueckert says, “In ecology, man’s tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing” (113). In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh’s sensitivity towards the exploitation of nature is evident in the following passage:

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. That was when the axemen 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. (69)

The British not only exploited the natural resource but also utilized the elephants to carry logs from the mountains. The handlers make their elephants carry tons of logs and put them on the flowing stream. Even during the years of bad rain special teams of elephants are sent to clear up the piled logs on the mountains. These are the famed herds, skilled in the difficult and dangerous arts of clearing the logs. Before colonization, elephants are used only in pagodas and palaces, for wars and ceremonial procession but during imperialism elephants are exploited like labourers.

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. (74)

The initial felling of the forest is done by elephants with the result that the clearings are invariably scarred with upturned trees and ragged pits leaving no trace of a forest which was once richly governed by teak trees. A wooden house stands at the centre of each campsite and it is always occupied by the forest assistant, the company officer in charge of the camp. Saya John explains the terrible situation of the young British Forest Assistant in the teak camp.

Think the kind of life they lead here, these young Europeans. They have at best two or three years in the jungle before malaria or dengue fever weaken them to the point where they cannot afford to be far from doctors and hospitals. The company knows this very well; it knows that within a few years these men will be prematurely aged, old at twenty-one; and that they will have to be posted off to city offices. It is only when they are freshly arrived, seventeen or eighteen, that they can lead this life, and during those few years the company must derive such profit from them as it can. So they send them from camp to camp for months on end with scarcely a break in between. (74)

Europeans skillfully conducted a lucrative commercial operation of bringing wealth and riches to the western nations. Yenangyaung on the eastern bank of the river Irrawady is one of the few places in the world where petroleum seeps naturally to the surface of the earth. These hillocks are covered in thick ooze, a substance that sometimes ignites spontaneously in the heat of the sun, sending streams of fires into the river. To the people of the area this ooze is known as earth-oil. It is dark shimmering green, the colour of bluebottles' wings. It seeps from the rocks like sweat, gathering in shiny green-filmed pools.

There was already good market for this oil before the discovery of the internal- combustion engine. This oil is widely used as an ointment for the treatment of certain skin conditions. Merchants come to Yenangyaung from as far away as China to avail themselves of this substance. The gathering of the oil is done by the group of people known as Twin-zas. Over generations Twin-za families have attached themselves to individual springs and pools, gathering the oils in buckets and basins and ferrying it to nearby towns. Ghosh displays how the technical progress and human greed have alarming implications not only on the environment but humans themselves.

Many of Yenangyaung's pools had been working for so long that the level of oil had sunk beneath the surface, forcing their owners to dig down. In this way, some of the pools had gradually become wells, a hundred feet deep or even more – great oil-sodden pits, surrounded by excavated sand and earth. Some of these wells were so heavily worked that they looked like small volcanoes, with steep, conical slopes. At these depths the oil could no longer be collected simply by dipping a weighted bucket: twin-zas were lowered in, on ropes, holding their breath like pearl divers. (123)

Yenangyaung is a walking distance from the place where Rajkumar stays. So he often visits the place to watch the Twin-zas at their work. Standing on the lip of the well, he looks on as a man goes down the shaft, rotating slowly on a sling. A rope is attached, by a way of a pulley and the family members lower him in by walking up the slope of the well and when they feel his tug, they pull him out again by walking down. The lips of the wells are slippery from spills and it is not uncommon for unwary workers and children to tumble in, often these falls go unnoticed. In the blind march of progress, people not only neglect and kill their environment but ruthlessly cause threats to their own existence. William Rueckert aptly says,

We are in an environmental crisis because the means by which we use the ecosphere to produce wealth are destructive of the ecosystem itself. The present system of production is self destructive. The present course of human civilization is suicidal. In our unwitting march towards ecological suicide we have run out of options. Human beings have broken out of the circle of life, driven not by biological need, but by social organization which they have devised to conquer nature. (116)

When Rajkumar is about eighteen, he comes upon an unfamiliar sight at Yenangyaung. He notices a couple of foreigners, white men, who eventually take control over Twin-zas's pools and wells. Rajkumar meets Baburao a labour contractor. He has transported forty-eight Cooringhees from eastern India to Yenangyaung. Many foreign companies are busy digging for oil and they are desperate for labour. They need workers and are willing to pay handsomely. Baburao gives Rajkumar hope to become rich, "It was hard to find workers in Burma. Few Burmese are so poor as to put up with conditions like those of Yenangyaung. But back at home in India, there were uncountable thousands of people who were so desperate to leave that they would sign over many years' earnings" (TGP 124). Baburao assures that a young man like Rajkumar can grow rich quickly in this trade.

Baburao recruits thirty-eight men from India who are sent below, to a holding space at the rear of the ship. Some two thousand other immigrants are there already. At the back, jutting out over the ship's wake, there is a narrow wooden platform with four holes to serve as toilets. The passage is rough and the floor of the

holding area is soon covered with vomit and urine. The recruits sit huddled on their tin boxes and cloth bundles. By the third day of the voyage, the numbers of people decrease by a few dozen. The corpses of those who died on board are carried to the stern and dropped into the ship's churning wake.

Rajkumar boards a ship as a labour contractor. Rajkumar goes to the same district that he had visited with Baburao. He hires an ox-cart at the same market and employs the same stick wielders. He succeeds in indenturing fifty-five men and three women. He succeeds in bringing the whole group intact to Yenangyaung and he sells them to a local boss. Rajkumar's rigorous effort to expand the scope of business by utilizing natural resources transforms him into a capitalist. His professional rise is impressive. He secures a big railway contract, a name then unknown in the world of teak business succeeded in underbidding all the major companies. On that contract alone Rajkumar makes a profit of eight lakh rupees.

Rajkumar considers that rubber contains future possibilities of successful business in his coming years. "Timber is the thing of the past ... you have to look to the future and if there is any tree on which money could be said to grow then this is rubber" (184). Matthew, Saya John's son takes great interest in rubber plantation. Forests, the homeland for a large species of flora and fauna are completely erased by the plantation owners like Matthew for lucrative plantations. When clearing started, the hillside looks as though it has been racked by a series of disaster. The huge stretches of land are covered with ashes and blackened stumps. Many indentured labourers are brought from South India and they are ordered to work rigorously. As Marx defines,

Labour is a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-action between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of his own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. (197-198)

Dolly is invited to Matthew's Morningside Rubber Estate. Dolly clearly notices the changes in landscape. The place is beyond imagination. As far as her eyes can see, there are orderly rows of saplings, all of them exactly alike and spaced with geometrical regularity. She is in a fix whether to call it forest, farm or anything else. She is completely startled by the very look

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 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. (199)

One fine morning, Uma accompanies Matthew to his plantation. On their way, they see scores of tappers are converging in front of the plantation's tin-roofed offices by the light of blazing kerosene lamps. They are all Indians, mainly Tamils. The ceremony that followed is part military parade and part school assembly. It is presided over by the estate's manager, Mr Trimble, a portly Eurasian. The tappers fall into straight lines, facing a tall flagpole that stood at the far corner of the assembly ground. Mr Trimble keeps attentive watch as the conductors take attendance. Occasionally he darts into the ranks, with his rattan cane tucked under his arm, he makes a great show of losing his temper, "You dog of a coolie, keep your black face up and look at me when I'm talking to you..." (231). Uma is disturbed by this spectacle. She has the feeling of watching something archaic, a manner of life she has believed to be fortunately extinct. She says to Matthew, "It was watching something that no longer existed: I was put in mind of the American South before the Civil War, of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (231). Matthew as a capitalist is proud that he is able to destroy nature and recreate an artificial one by using human force.

Ghosh wants to create awareness of the fact that Europeans exploited nature and paved way for other people to continue the exploitation till date. In *The Glass Palace*, capitalism is like chain of hierarchies which start from the British Government who proposes order to their officers being employed all over Southeast Asia. Then these officers get their work done through the agents like Saya John and Rajkumar. Finally people like Saya John and Rajkumar bring slaves from many place especially India to do tedious and risky jobs. Capitalists continue their work of exploitation of nature and human beings without regret for the sake of profit.

Eco-socialists believe that the expansion of the capitalist system is the cause of social exclusion, poverty, war and environmental degradation through globalization and imperialism. Metabolic rift is a representation of the scientific and Marxist materialist analysis of the split between the human use and demand for energy under capitalism and how such demand and use destroys and create imbalances in nature. Likewise in the novel *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh portrays how capitalists make use of their labourers' energy and create imbalances in nature for the sake of developing their economic status.

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