

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE GLASS PALACE* AND *SEA OF POPPIES*

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“When Native Americans freely inhabited North America, there was a great respect for the land and its non-human inhabitants. This has been lost since the European invasion. Not long after the Europeans arrived here with their indentured servants, slaves and their aristocracy, land became nothing more than real estate to be taken from tribal communities and divided up by white Europeans into private parcels and exploited for profit within an ever expanding market. Wilderness, like the Indians, stood in the way of the exploitation of the New World. They both had to be destroyed.”

-Jim Haughton, ‘Racism and the Future of the Movement’ (87)

Postcolonial Indian writers have made valuable contributions in the literary field by addressing burning issues related to cultural, social, economic and environmental developments, disasters and debates in the present world and in many regions of the formerly colonized world. A critical stance that draws connection between literature and the physical environment is ecocriticism. Cheryl Godfelty states that ‘as a theoretical discourse it negotiates between the human and the non-human world.’(xix) Ecocriticism is not just a call to care for the world, but is inclusive of issues like race, gender, and environment as well. Many environmentalists, sociologists and writers, especially from the postcolonial world, often explore historical links between the issue of environmental degradation and the hegemonic structures of race, class and gender. Amitav Ghosh; one of the most acclaimed contemporary Indian writers in English whose writings span a variety of genres. His works have several thematic concerns ranging from science fiction, creation of nation-state to that of postcolonial ecology. He blends postcolonial and ecological issues together in his novels and writes the wrongs of the colonial era. His fourth novel is *The Glass Palace* (2001), and the first of the Ibis trilogy *Sea of Poppies* (2008) was shortlisted for Man Booker Prize. Due to the impelling policies of the colonial power structure and its racist attitude towards the colonized, the lives of millions in the colonized regions of the Raj were affected and completely devastated. Both the novels explore the agricultural scandal that leads to deplorable conditions in which the subaltern world exists.

Imperialism not only concerns the devastating effects on the colonized community but includes its adverse effect on the colonized ecology as well. Alfred Crosby and Richard Grove, the British environmental historians coined the term ‘ecological imperialism’ that refers to ‘the violent appropriation of indigenous land to ill-considered introduction of cash crops in colonized terrain.’(Haggan and Tiffin 2010:3) Colonialism that claims to civilise and provide sustainable development among the colonized has succeeded in ‘pauperising millions of people in the agrarian sector and diminishing the stock of plant, water and soil resources at a terrifying rate.’(Guha, quoted in Haggan and Tiffin 2010:1) Crosby in his historical studies *The Colombian*

Exchange and Ecological Imperialism reflects on ways in which both material and ideas were exchanged between the colonizing and the colonized worlds. The settlers imported and introduced cash crops and cattle in the colonized terrain thereby exterminating local ecosystems and marginalizing the down trodden. A form of ecological imperialism is ‘environmental racism’. Dean Curtin, the American environmental philosopher defines it as ‘the connection in theory and practice, of race and the environment so that the oppression of one is connected to, and supported by, the oppression of the other.’ (Curtin, quoted in Haggan and Tiffin 2010:4) Environmental racism draws a parallel between the exploitation of indigenous ecology to the oppression of the colonized community. In the present day context, Environmental racism is defined to be the placement of low income or minority communities in proximity of environmentally hazardous or degraded environments, such as toxic waste, pollution and urban decay.

Environmental racism is a sociological phenomenon demonstrated in the “environmentally discriminatory treatment of socially marginalized or economically disadvantaged people.”(Haggan and Tiffin 2010:4) Amitav Ghosh throws light on the imperialist modes of social, cultural and ecological dominance in his novels *The Glass Palace* and *Sea of Poppies*. He documents not only the ecological exploitation and the pauperizing of the indigenous agrarian population forcing them to relinquish their land and take up the exodus as ‘girmityas’ but highlights the poor working conditions of the poor in factories, plantations and oil wells. He focuses both on environmental degradation as well subjugation of the underprivileged. In the article “Racism and Ecology” it is stated that race and ethnicity are more reliable predictors of environmental pollution than class and income. The well renowned social ecologist Murray Bookchin is of the view that, the domination of humans over other humans preceded and sanctioned human beings’ domination of the natural world. Hierarchical social structure and developmental desire of the nation state not only threaten human dignity and social justice but seek to exploit the natural world as well. The devastating effects of environmental crisis in turn affect the poor and marginalized,

In the novel *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh brings alive the rich and varied natural resources of land prior to colonization and proceeds to highlight the damage caused by imperialism both to land and its people. Young Matthew innocently tells Rajkumar,

The English are preparing to send a fleet up the Irrawaddy. There’s going to be a war. Father says they want all the teak in Burma. The King won’t let them have it so they’re going to do away with him.’ Rajkumar gave a shout of laughter. ‘A war over wood? Who’s ever heard of such a thing?’(15)

Very soon the British army captured Mandalay and the royal family was sent to India in exile. The soldiers of the British army were all Indian mercenaries. Ghosh describes the transformation of ordinary peasants into soldiers through the words of Saya John:

Their clothes and turbans still smelt of woodsmoke and dung fires. “What makes you fight,” I would ask them,” when you should be planting your fields at home?” “Money,” they’d say, and yet all they earned was a few annas a day, not much more than a dockyard coolie. (29)

Burma was captured primarily because the “world’s richest gem mines lay in Burma”(43) and the main reason for the dethronement of King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat was that, “ a few months ago there’d been a dispute with a British timber company- a technical matter concerning some logs of teak.”(21) Burma thus becomes a colony of England, and transforms from a serene and tranquil nation into “a bustling commercial hub; resources were being

exploited with an energy and efficiency hitherto undreamt of.”(66) Teak wood forests were destroyed and the timber yards in Rangoon expanded. Saya John explains to Rajkumar

It was the Europeans who saw that tame elephants could be made to work for human profit.(74)... To bend the work of nature to your will; to make the trees of the earth useful to human beings.(75)

The words of Saya John clearly echo the views of green imperialism “that the world was to be used and its products could be exploited, sold, and traded.”(Richard Grove quoted in DeLoughrey,101) Rajkumar an orphan of Indian origin becomes a business tycoon in Burma following the mantra of Saya John. The lives of the oosis, that is, the mahouts in the timber yards are deplorable. They are constantly in the fear of being trampled by the elephants. When an oosi was run down by his elephant, he was not even given a decent burial. They had to wait for the white overseer’s permission to retrieve the corpse. The pathetic conditions in which they live is vividly portrayed by Ghosh.

The exploitation of the oil wells on the eastern banks of Irrawaddy finds a graphic description in *The Glass Palace*. The ‘earth-oil’ oozed from foul smelling mounds.

This was one of the few places in the world where petroleum seeped naturally to the surface of the earth... ..The gathering of the oil was the work of a community endemic to those burning hills, a group of people known as *twin-zas*, (122)... some of the pools had gradually become wells... They were from France, England and America.... buying up their pools and wells.(123)

Rajkumar notices immigrants from neighbouring places working in those oilfields. The living conditions for those people clearly throw light on the concept of ecological racism. The racial hegemony tries to change the life ways of the colonized people, drastically altering their landscape and economically plundering the community. Rajkumar too, in order to earn money to buy a timber yard, goes to South India to bring labourers to work in the petrol mines. He becomes an agent to imperialism initiating men to leave their poverty stricken land to ‘a land of gold, Burma.’ Able bodied men just had ‘to put his thumbprint on this paper.’(126) Thus thousands of Indians were employed in Burma.

Ghosh describes the lives of many Indians who lived in Rangoon. The British had brought them there, “to work in the docks and mills, to pull rickshaws and empty the latrines.” (49)

Exploitation just continues in various forms bringing in new forms of ecological imperialism resulting in environmental racism. Saya John very soon observes the changing pattern of ecological imperialism in the introduction of cash crops like rubber. He foresees the demand for rubber in an expanding colonial power structure. He says to Rajkumar to go in for rubber cultivation:

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 it- rubber.(184)

Matthew, the son of Saya John becomes a rubber plantation owner. The process of deforesting the wild forests is vividly described by Ghosh. Lives of indentured labourers in the rubber plantations of Malaya are very appalling. They are housed in congested shelters and their living conditions are in complete contrast to the palatial bungalows of the white plantations owners. The very wilderness of the region is modified to accommodate the newly introduced cash crop. The symmetrical rows and rows of rubber trees gives a feeling of monotony rather than the awe inspired from the wilderness. Elsa notices:

The hillside looked as though it had been racked by a series of disasters: huge stretches of land were covered with ashes and blackened stumps...She caught a glimpse of the worker’s shacks-tiny hovels, with roofs made of branches and leaves.they were all

Indians, from the south...She'd looked into the mud-walled hut where they went to be treated when they fell ill: the squalor was unimaginable, the floor covered with filth.(200)

Environmental racism is therefore an expression of repression and exploitation of not just the colonized people but their land, culture and traditions as well. Environmental racism results in environmental injustice caused to land and people.

In the novel *Sea of Poppies*, Poppy cultivation drastically reduced the cultivation of indigenous food crops. Though opium was cultivated in India since the Vedic period, it became a principal cash crop that influenced Indian economy during the British regime. The great demand for opium especially in China and the consequent financial gain made the Britishers convert their colonies into opium fields. The Indo Gangetic plains were best suited for poppy cultivation. The novel opens with a striking description of endless stretches of poppy fields 'mile after mile' in the Gangetic plains. Vandhana Shiva, a pioneering ecofeminist, uses the term "maldevelopment," to describe the introduction of Western, intensive agriculture to the "Third World." The story begins at Ghazipur, where India's best of poppies was produced during the British regime. Ghosh describes the ecologically imperialized landscape: "the Ganga seemed to be flowing between twin glaciers, both its banks being blanketed by thick drifts of white-petalled flowers.(1)

Poppy rules the lives of the agrarian community. It has altered the very livelihood and lifestyle of the people who were otherwise content and self sufficient with the traditional modes of agricultural practices. Deeti, a young child-mother and agriculturist lives in a village on the out skirts of the town of Ghazipur, near Benares. Deeti was preoccupied with the lateness of her poppy crops. Poppy cultivation was strenuous: 'fifteen ploughings of the land and every remaining clod to be broken by hand; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering...each bulb having to be individually nicked, drained and scraped.' (29) It involved a lot of work and exact timing because 'the priceless sap flowed only for a brief period in the plant's span of life' and if not properly tapped 'the pods were of no more value than the blossoms of a weed.'(5) Deeti could see, smell, taste, feel and think only of poppies. The poppy petals were collected and made into small 'rotis' used to line the earthenware containers in which opium was packed. The staple food of the poppy cultivating community was alu-posth, potatoes cooked in poppy-seed paste. They used only poppy-seed oil to massage their hair. So poppy governed the life, senses and thoughts of Deeti, just as it did to the entire community that was forced to cultivate poppy.

Deeti, 'a child herself' is the mother of the six year old Kabutri whose biological father is Deeti's brother-in-law Chandan Singh. Kabutri was conceived by an opium induced rape, and the domestic violence is condoned by her husband Hukam Singh, an opium addict who is dying. Deeti perceives her home town as an 'island of innocence' in a 'sea of corruption'. Just as the rich and fertile Gangetic plains were ecologically imperialized, the poor agriculturalists felt oppressed and colonised. Deeti notices that there are no vegetables or grains on the Gangetic plains but only 'glaciers' of 'white-petalled' poppies. The local agrarian community suffered severely owing to global ecological imperialism. Deeti longed for the lost, rich and varied landscape with different seasonal crops that were useful to them in many ways. She realizes that it has been seven years since her roof was last thatched. Her tattered and worn out hut looked like a 'tiny raft, floating upon a river of poppies.' She recollects,

The old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare (29)...the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted. ...forcing cash advances on the farmers,

making them sign *asami* contracts. ...And, at the end of it, your earnings would be ...enough to pay off your advance.(30)

Impoverishment of landscape results in the impoverishment of people. Deeti yearns for useful crops like wheat, dal and vegetables. She observes ‘those thoothsome winter crops were steadily shrinking in acreage; now the factory’s appetite for opium seemed never to be stated.’ (29). With every farmer forced to cultivate poppy, production increases and the price of poppy declines thereby making them insolvent. Signing the ‘girmits’ is the only escape from their continuing poverty and social discrimination. Eventually the ecologically and socially oppressed colonized are forced to leave their country as bonded labourers who would toil in yet another ecologically imperialized plantation elsewhere in the world.

Ghosh vividly portrays the impelling factors that resulted in the formation of a diasporic community that was forced to sign up as indentured labourers because of the introduction of poppy cultivation as a cash crop. Once when Deeti and her daughter were travelling on Kalua’s cart, they came across a multitude of people marching. They saw that:

The road was filled with people, a hundred strong or more; hemmed in by the ring of stick bearing guards, this crowd was trudging wearily in the direction of the river. Bundles of belongings sat balanced on their heads and shoulders, and brass pots hung suspended from their elbows. ... The sight of the marchers evoked both pity and fear in the local people.”(70 &71)

Deeti plucked up the courage to ask who those people were, and the reply was that they were ‘girmitiyas’, and “at the sound of that word Deeti uttered an audible gasp- for suddenly she understood.” Ghosh goes on to explain the origin of the word :

They were so called because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on ‘girmits’- agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld.(72)

A boat would take them to Patna and then to Calcutta and from there they would go to a place called ‘Mareech’, an island in the sea- like Lanka, but farther away. She was overwhelmed by the series of questions that came to her mind:

How was it possible that the marchers could stay on their feet, knowing what lay ahead? ... to know that you were forever an outcaste; to know that you would never again enter your father’s house; that you would never throw your arms around your mother;... never feel the cleansing touch of the Ganga. And to know also that for the rest of your days you would eke your living on some wild, demon-plagued island? (72)

Deeti was told that a ‘jahaz’ would take them to the island. Apart from these ‘girmitiyas’ other socially marginalized and economically disadvantaged characters too seek refuge in the *Ibis*.

Sujatha rightly points out to Ronald Sandler and Phaera Pezzullo who outline the principles of environmental justice as ‘the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment, without being forced to choose between livelihood and unemployment.’(122) When Hakum Singh is reported to have collapsed in the Opium factory, Deeti and Kabutri go to the factory and are taken aback by the poor working conditions and the inhumane treatment meted out to the factory workers. The fine poppy dust makes them sneeze incessantly. The environmental racism is clearly brought in the description of the Opium factory where the colonized Indians are made to work in environmentally hazardous conditions. Deeti witnesses the horrors of working in a opium factory :

The air inside was hot and fetid, like that of a closed kitchen, except that the smell was not of spices and oil, but of liquid opium, mixed with the dull stench of sweat- a reek so powerful...her eyes were met by a startling sight-a host of dark, legless torsos was

circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons...they were bare-bodied men, sunk waist –deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge.(94-95)

The opium factory workers were made to toil for hours together without any rest, and they were subject to the most inhumane treatment. They had to work in the most unhealthy and unhygienic environment. The workers were whipped or caned for trivial mistakes.

The horrors of opium addiction too find detailed description in the novel. The Britishers encouraged the use of opium among the common masses so that demand for opium could be increased and more number of agriculturists could be forced to cultivate poppy. Their principal target group was the Chinese. Hakum Singh and Aafat are victims of opium addiction. When Hakum Singh is bed-ridden, Deeti refuses to give him opium, hoping his condition would improve, but

instead of initiating an improvement, deprivation provoked a dramatic turn for the worse: he could neither eat nor sleep and he soiled himself so often...Drifting in and out of consciousness, he would scowl and mutter in incoherent rage.(153)

Aafat's condition is even more worse when compared to that of Hakum Singh's. Aafat is half Indian and half Chinese and is imprisoned in the Alipore jail where Neel Ratan Halder finds him in the most disgusting and pathetic condition. He is described as a "living nightmare" when he experiences the pain of drug addiction. Ghosh describes his paroxysms of shivering that would begin with a mild trembling that "would mount in intensity till become so violent as to tip him off his charpoy, depositing his convulsing body on the ground."(321) When opium is withdrawn abruptly, it had adverse effects on the addict. It affects the digestive system, "sending the bladder and sphincter into uncontrollable spasms, so that neither food nor water could be retained."(322) The novel throws light on the impact of opium in the lives of those who consumed it and also those who cultivated it.

Mr. Benjamin Burnham, the owner of Burnham Bros, is one of the major exporters of opium to China and the new owner of the 'tall masted' *Ibis*, formerly a 'blackbirder' that is a slave carrier, currently meant to transport indentured labourers from India to Mauritius. The treatment of the indentured labourers and the coloured crew members by the whites is yet another classic illustration of the racial injustice met out to the colonized communities. Zachary Reid, a mulatto from Boston, enrolls himself as a carpenter in the crew of *Ibis* and is elevated to the position of the second mate. Zachary who is enlisted as a 'black' experiences discrimination, and fears loss of livelihood in the midst of white racists. Serang Ali, the Arakan leader of the lascars, is forced to leave the ship because he happens to be the father-in-law of a notorious pirate Adam T Danby. Neel Ratan Halder, the Raja of Raskhali, an influential person and a close ally of Mr. Benjamin Burnham, is no exception to colonial racism. Burnham puts to use the predatory colonial power to confiscate all the property of Neel and reduce him to penury. He is charged of forgery and sentenced to transportation beyond the seas to the penal settlement in Mauritius islands. After being condemned Neel is moved to Alipore jail, where he shares room with Aafat.

All the colonized people have a tale of exploitation, torment and deprivation. Each one's story narrates the wrongs done to them by the tyranny of the ruling class. The place of their origin was civilized, thriving with its own indigenous practices and was indeed self-sufficient, but was exploited and transformed into a poor, impoverished and starving state. Ghosh succeeds in bringing to life an earlier era of imperialism focusing on a period of ecological racism, when people came into contact and collision, one colonizing the other, thereby reshaping the history of a nation, its people and its land. Haggan and Tiffin are of the view that the primary function of

imaginative literature ‘has been that of global consciousness raising in a wide variety of colonial contexts in which the twin demands of social and environmental justice are conspicuously displayed.’ (33) Public accountability is a mark of postcolonial ecocriticism. One of the axioms of environmental imperialism is that, there is no social justice without ecological justice. Ronald Sandler and Phaedra Pezzullo point that “environmental justice opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and culture, and other forms of life.”(Quoted from Sujatha, 122) This is clearly illustrated in the novels of Amitav Ghosh. *The Glass Palace* and *Sea of Poppies* portray the ecological imperialism that turns out to be environmental racism that crushes the northern states of India. The colonial rulers brought about social and ecological ruination to nations whose natural resources were drastically exploited. Needs of the power hungry colonists altered not only geographical regions but its inhabitants and above made the poor to live and work amidst environmentally hazardous conditions. Both the novels throw light on the colonial past of colonized nations, and the oppression of its ecology and community. Bringing together fact and fiction, Ghosh’s captivating narrative unfolds how nations were robbed of its natural resources and witnessed huge squandering of human and ecological resources. Such fictions call for a deepening of our understanding of racism in relation to ecology.

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