



Conversation with Nature: An Eonian Escalier towards Conservation of Nature

Dr. Rabia Mukhtar

School Education (Kashmir) India

ABSTRACT

Conservation of nature and resolving the environmental issues are the burning topics that levitate the world nowadays irrespective of any discipline. Ecological criticism or Ecocriticism is a recent interdisciplinary field in literary and cultural studies associated with a desire to investigate and remedy the current environmental problems. Ecocritics believe that in order to ensure a healthy environment for future generations, human beings need to change their relationship with nature. They need to regard nature as alive and articulate. Amitav Ghosh is one of the few Indian writers in English who constructs nature in his works. The Glass Palace, published in 2000 is the fourth novel of Amitav Ghosh. The novel gives a flash back of the colonial period to show the social, cultural, economic and ecological devastation done by European intervention in south Asia. The paper focuses on the animistic reflexes adopted by Ghosh in his description of nature in the novel. He portrays nature as living entity that binds human beings to the non-human world with words of understanding, respect, admiration, love, wonder and awe.

Keywords: *Ecology, Ecocriticism, Nature, Animism, Conservation*

The Glass Palace published in 2000 is the fourth novel of Amitav Ghosh. The novel, spans over three generations spread over three interlinked parts of the British Empire; Burma, Malaya and India. It is structured around the intermeshing relationships among four families: The Burmese King Thebaw and Queen Supayalata (deposed by the British in 1885 and exiled to Ratnagiri in India) and their entourage; Rajkumar Raha, a Bengali orphan emigrant to Burma and his descendants, Neel and Dinu; Saya John, a teak merchant, a foundling brought up by catholic priests and his son, Mathew and his family; Uma, the wife of the collector of Ratnagiri in India and Uma's nephew, Arjun and her niece Manju. The novel begins in the year 1885, when the British forces invade Mandalay and the King, with his queen, accompanied by a small entourage of attendants are forced to leave Burma and settle down in a far flung area in India called Ratnagiri. Ghosh in the novel points to the commodification and chattel of nature at the hands of British colonialists. The socio- cultural fabric of the colonized societies is changed drastically. These changes in turn results in a cascading effect on the whole environment.



In the novel Ghosh shows that the British invasion on Burma leads to movements, drastic changes in administration, large scale transfer of goods and services and reconfiguration of political boundaries. Burma is changed from a serene and tranquil nation into a bustling commercial hub. Imperialism has always brought with it deforestation and the consuming of natural resources. In the novel, the British intervention is followed by a bizarre flurry of deforestation. The forests of Burma are all over encumbered with teak camps and timber yards. The animistic view of nature is traced when Ghosh describes the scene of brutal assassination of trees in these forests. Trees like human beings protests when attacked with axes and machines. Ghosh makes readers feel and hear the sounds of protest of these trees as they fall:

That was when the axemen came, shouldering their weapons, squinting along the blades to judge their victims' angle 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)

In the above passage, Ghosh explicates the fact that these trees, when cut down, do not behave like silent victims, but retaliate, yell, cry and make sounds as if they raise slogans. Ghosh asserts that the assassinated trees from forests are left to dry for many years and then the logs from these trees are thrown downstream into rivers of the plains. He is very much conscious of the heaviness of the river Irrawady when the heavy logs of timber are made to debouch into it. He presents Irrawady river as furious, seething, gloomy and inflamed as it is made to participate in the process of ecological destruction by facilitating economic greed of timber merchants. He writes:

. . . the impact was that of colliding trains. The difference was that this was an accident continuously in the making, a crash that carried on uninterrupted night and day, for weeks on end. The river was by now a swollen, angry torrent, racked by clashing currents and pock- marked with whirlpools. When the feeder streams slammed head-on into the river, two-ton logs were thrown cartwheeling into the air; fifty foot tree trunks were sent shooting across the water like flat bottomed pebbles. The noise was that of an artillery barrage, with the sound of the detonations carrying for miles into the hinterland. (120)

Ghosh's ecological vision makes him see the natural world as inspirited. He exudes a keen understanding that it is not just humans who possess intelligence but this faculty is also found in animals, plants and even in inert entities like stones and rivers. He perceives them as being capable to communicate and interact with humans for good or ill. His thoughts resonate with a great environmental writer, Christopher Manes who in his essay "Nature and Silence" maintains that, "we require the language of ecological humility" (17).



Rajkumar and Saya John's son Mathew, establish rubber plantation and a rubber estate, Morningside, on Penang Island in Huay- Zedi in Northern Malaya. The already existing plantations there are erased ruthlessly for timber and this new cash crop. Ghosh describes this island as a changed place now, which otherwise was an area that had once been home to dozens of small spice gardens, where pepper plants grew on vines. Great demand of cash crop like rubber changes the pattern of forests completely. Huge stretches of land is cleared and is left engulfed with ashes and blackened stumps. He presents the landscape as if being oppressed and racked by series of disasters. It is really quite hard to imagine the force that is required to uproot the already dwelling plantation that has stood for aeons calm and deeply embedded in the soil. The forceful introduction of a new single crop irrespective of its suitability to the local environment poses great threats to local ecosystems as it disturbs the age-old crop cycles. An ecosystem contains numerous different species, each with unique adaptations to its environment and distinct strengths and weaknesses in response to changing conditions. Similarly, the natural population of plant or animal species has genetic variability and each individual plant or animal has slightly different traits. Furthermore, each population and the ecosystem as a whole is constantly changing, adapting to the changing environmental conditions and the conditions imposed by the other populations and species in the ecosystem. Introduction of a single crop destroys the diversity and replaces it with single species and single rows of genetically identical crops. These crops are not able to adapt easily because they have no genetic variability and as such do not reproduce naturally. Pointing towards the rubber plantation in Malaya, Mathew makes a sweeping gesture with his hand:

This is my little empire, Uma. I made it. I took it from the jungle and moulded 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, 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... It's nature: the nature that made these trees and the nature that made us. (233)

Ghosh here depicts the rebellious nature of trees. Nature is resisting, fighting back because it has to rid itself of all the human bacteria and parasites who plunder and destroy it simply to fuel their selfishness and greed. If humans pollute the environment and damage or remould the ecosystem, nature will resist and fight back. Ghosh in the novel emphasizes that nature is not a docile creature with a single characteristic. It is dynamic like human species and it changes in order to protect itself. Nature simply does what its own laws dictate it. The same fact is depicted in the novel when, Mathew points towards an empty coconut cup in the plantation and says:

Botanists will tell you one thing and geologists will tell you another and soil specialists will tell you something else again. But if you ask me, the truth is quite simple...It's fighting back... 'you can't really believe that.' 'I planted this tree, Uma. I've 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. (233)

The above passage establishes the fact that nature does not passively accept abuse, but retaliate to remind its inhabitants that it has a sense willing to strike back when struck. Mathew is presented as a character who is adept at mediating between the human and the natural world. Ghosh makes us feel the trauma and grief of that forsaken coconut cup in the plantation. He presents nature’s grief as a tangible and palpable thing. Portrayal of such episodes of conversation with nature opens ways through which humans might enter into a more sacred relationship with it.

This place (Huay-Zedi) has become a hub of timber yards where people as well as animals are busy with extraction and transportation of teak logs. In an another episode of the novel at this place, McKay- thakin, a young officer in charge orders to send an *oo-si* (handler of elephants) along with his elephant down the slope to butt free an obstinate log. This is a difficult task as the slope is very steep and after months of pounding from enormous logs, its surface is crumbled into powder. A young *oo-si* along with his elephant is summoned and engaged for this task. The inevitable happens and the *oo-si* is crushed. He is very much loved by his mount, a gentle and good natured cow, ShweDoke. She is utterly disconsolate at the loss of her handler. She gets restless and nervous, frequently flapping her ears and clawing the air with the tip of her trunk. Ghosh here throws light at the sensitive side of the elephant behaviour by stating that elephants are creatures of habit and routine, so this behaviour is neither uncommon nor unexpected as the absence of a long familiar handler can put even the gentlest of elephants out of temper, often dangerous. Getting a chance, ShweDoke attacks McKay- thakin and crashes him down. She rolls over him in a circular motion as if in a technically perfect execution. He is crushed and mangled almost beyond recognition. A deep study of the episode reveals the revolt of an elephant against the injustice imposed upon it and its human handler. Through this episode, Ghosh portrays and introduces alternative ways of being in and knowing the non-human world. He stresses that animals should not be seen as subordinate or inferior to humans, but instead be regarded like humans, with intelligence, sensitivities and passions. Remarkably this idea is enunciated by a great philosopher and deep ecologist, Warwick Fox and his concept is called “transpersonal ecology”. His basic premise is that a greater respect of nature will necessarily result from a cosmological or transpersonal identification with nature. Ghosh’s deep ecological concerns resonate with deep ecologist George Sessions who in “Introduction” to *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-first Century* views, “To be fully human we must protect and nurture our wildness, which involves bioregional living, intimate contact with wild animals and plants in ecosystems, animistic perceptions, and primal nature rituals” (6). Having a deep ecological vision, Ghosh as such focuses on the intrinsic and inherent values present not only in human but non-human life forms. Through the animistic description of nature, Ghosh proposes that humanity should establish and maintain balance with nature. Humans should start learning how nature works and seek to fit in as a part of a balanced whole, reverencing nature’s innate intelligence and perfection rather than



bulldozing in it at their own will. He characterizes nature in clearer and more defined ways, thus leading human beings to believe that earth is more alive.

Conclusion

Ghosh's animistic depiction of nature makes us feel that it is possible for each of us to enter into a state of inter being with nature and conserve it with honour and dignity. We definitely need to stop viewing ourselves out side nature and separate from it. In order to conserve the nature, we need to interact with it; observe it, listen to it, learn from it, give and receive from it in a friendly manner. This does not require a cerebral transmission of knowledge, but demands feeling through our senses, emotions and intuitions. For this to happen, we need to be open to suspend the logic of the mind for a logic that resides deep in our hearts.

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