NEW LITERARIA-
An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities
Volume 8, No. 1, April, 2026, PP. 122-128
ISSN: 2582-7375
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2026.v08i1.015
www.newliteraria.com

Environment, Empire, and Resource Extraction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

T. Sobika[1] & Dr. S. Ganesan[2]
1. Full-time Ph.D. Scholar in English, H. H. The Rajah's College (Autonomous), Pudukkottai - Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, India
2. Associate Professor & Research Supervisor, Department of English, H. H. The Rajah's College (Autonomous), Pudukkottai - Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, India

Abstract
This paper examines the connection between environment, the empire, and resource extraction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*. The novel connects the British conquest of Burma with the commercial use of teak forests, oil fields, rubber plantations, animals, rivers, and migrant labor. Through a postcolonial ecocritical approach this study analyses how colonial power converts natural wealth into imperial profit. The paper also examines the teak camps, elephant labor, oil extraction at Yenangyaung, and the plantation economy connected with rubber. These environmental concerns are read along with displacement, exile, migration, and family loss. In *The Glass Palace*, environmental damage and human suffering belong to the same imperial system. Due to the imperial rule, forests are cleared, animals are turned into labor, land is reorganized for profit, and people are moved across Burma, India, and Malaya. The novel portrays how the empire changes both ecological relations and human lives. It also gives historical value to spaces often ignored in official colonial history, such as forests, timber routes, oil fields, plantations, and refugee paths. *The Glass Palace* is a powerful literary account of environmental violence under colonial capitalism.

Keywords: Environment, Empire, Resource Extraction, Postcolonial Ecocriticism.

Introduction:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* portrays colonial history across Burma, India, and Malaya. The novel covers a long period - from the British invasion of Burma in 1885 to the violence and displacement of the Second World War and its aftermath. It recounts royal exile, family separation, migrant labor, military conflict, trade, and memory. Simultaneously, the novel focuses on forests, rivers, oil fields, plantations, elephants, and the material wealth that attracted imperial power. Thus the novel offers a rich field for a study of environment, empire, and resource extraction.

Article History: Received: 12 January 2026. Revised: 15 February 2026. Accepted: 17 February 2026. First published: 15 April, 2026.

Published by: Adrija Press, India.
Citation: Sobika, T. & Dr. S. Ganesan. (2026). Environment, Empire, and Resource Extraction in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*. Newliteraria Journal 8:1, 122-128. https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2026.v08i1.015

The British conquest of Burma is closely linked with natural wealth. Teak, gems, oil, rubber, and fertile land are objects of imperial desire. The resources of Burma entangle the country with global networks of trade, military power, and industrial expansion. King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat are removed from power after the invasion of Mandalay. The seizure of political authority also brings control over forests, labor, and trade routes. The fall of the monarchy and the exploitation of the environment are part of the same historical process. Gosh's attention to the timber economy makes this relation especially clear. Teak becomes a material sign of conquest, profit, and ecological damage.

Ecocritical discussions of the novel have focused on its treatment of teak forests, rubber trade, animals, birds, and land. Fulsawange and Noorani (2019) connect environmental degradation in the novel with human greed, colonial exploitation, war, migration, and exile. Their study analyses ecological damage besides human suffering. The destruction of the forest results in the destruction of the soil, animals, local communities, and workers. And, it also displaces families. The environment is connected to labor, memory, and survival. Noormohamed and Sathikulameen (2025) studied the novel using the concepts of postcolonial ecocriticism and environmental violence. Their discussion shows the workings of resource extraction across time. The environmental harm is gradual and closely connected with imperial profit.

Postcolonial criticism also helps in explaining the environmental concerns of *The Glass Palace*. The colonial rule is dependent on the military force, trade control, legal authority, and the movement of people across the areas under their control. Srinivasulu (2017) connects the novel with colonial oppression, displacement, immigration, subjugation, and the search for home. The exploitation of land also changes human lives. The teak industry, plantation economy, oil extraction, and wartime destruction mainly rely on mobile labor and displaced populations. Nithyasekar and Rajesh (2021) state that the key elements in the historical movement of the novel are British colonization of Burma and the dispute over timber. This stresses the view that environmental wealth is one of the main forces behind colonial expansion.

In this paper we aim to examine how *The Glass Palace* connects and portrays environmental damage and imperial power by focusing on teak forests, logging camps, elephant labor, oil extraction at Yenangyaung, rubber plantations, migration, and displacement. Using postcolonial ecocriticism, it studies the relation between ecological loss and colonial capitalism. Colonialism has damaged both the natural world and human communities. A close study of the novel shows how the empire makes the land, animal life, and human labor into instruments of profit, while leaving behind ecological ruin and fractured histories.

1. Teak and the Environmental Logic of Empire

The British conquest of Burma is linked directly with the desire to control natural wealth. The novel begins in Mandalay in 1885, at the moment when British cannon fire reaches the city. We can consider this military sound as an environmental sign because the impending invasion is connected with teak. Matthew explains to Rajkumar that the English want "all the teak in Burma," and Rajkumar responds with disbelief: "A war over wood?" (Ghosh, 2000, p. 27). This conversation clearly shows that the war is caused by the desire for forest wealth. The political conquest and environmental plunder are placed side by side.

The empire highly valued teak because it is durable, profitable, and useful for ships, buildings, and colonial trade. The British interest in Burma is due to this commercial value of teak. The forest is treated as wealth waiting to be taken. The trees become imperial material and lose their place within a living ecology. Their desire for teak also shows how colonialism changes the meaning of nature. A forest is no longer a habitat, a cultural space, or a living world; but, it becomes timber, revenue, and military advantage.

Ghosh shows that teak has the power to alter history. Saya John's lesson to Rajkumar represents the tree as a historical force. John's describes teak as a tree that "had felled dynasties,

caused invasions, created fortunes, brought a new way of life into being" (Ghosh, 2000, p. 62). This shows the political and economic significance of teak. The tree is linked with royal collapse, colonial war, and private wealth. Ghosh treats environmental matter as an active background. The teak tree is part of the historical field. It affects kings, merchants, soldiers, laborers, and migrants.

Rajkumar's life reflects the moral strain of this resource extraction. He starts out as a poor orphan and progresses to great heights in the teak trade. His success is based on the same colonial economy that destroys forests and displaces people. This is a case of the colonized subject being pulled into the colonial capitalism's search for profit. Rajkumar learns the trade, becomes rich and part of a system based on environment damage. His growth shows the link between survival and exploitation. For him the forest is an opportunity to make a better life and that opportunity is born out of destruction.

The teak trade also changes how characters value the natural world. Saya John's knowledge of trees is detailed and almost affectionate. Yet his world is commercial. He admires teak, understands its qualities, and teaches its botanical kinship with mint and other plants to Rajkumar. At the same time, this knowledge is used for extraction. The beauty and uniqueness of the tree make it more valuable to the timber economy. The knowledge about the tree is linked with profit. This can be considered as one of the key environmental insights of the novel – that the colonial extraction depends on knowledge as much as violence. The trees must be named/identified, measured, killed, dried, moved, counted, and sold.

2. Forests, Chaungs, and Ecological Violence

Ghosh describes the process of teak extraction in a detailed manner, giving attention to the method, season, labor, and danger. The process begins before the tree is felled. The selected tree is girdled, left to dry, and only later cut down. This delay is very important. A tree is killed long before it falls. The forest is damaged according to a planned commercial timetable. Gosh uses striking language to describe the process:

> In the dry season … the timbermen to comb the forest for teak. The trees, once picked, had to be killed and left to dry … The killing was 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 (teak being ruled, despite the wildness of its terrain, by imperial stricture in every tiny detail). The assassinated trees were left to die where they stood … That was when the axe men 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 (73).

Gosh's depiction gives a kind of living presence to the trees. The forest is not silent in this scene. It reacts with sound, force, and destruction. The falling tree brings down saplings, rattan, and bamboo. One cut tree damages many other forms of plant life. This shows that logging tears into a whole ecology, and is never limited to a single tree.

The chaungs, or mountain streams, are equally important. Saya John calls them "the tradewinds of teak" (73). This expression connects the forest economy with movement and trade. The streams are made into routes of timber transport. During the dry season, they shrink into mud and pools. With rain, they rise suddenly and push huge logs down the slopes. Ghosh's description shows how the timber industry makes seasonal cycle into commercial service. The stream becomes a carrier of timber, a force used by companies to move profit from forest to market. But, there is also danger involved in the process. The logs crash, jam, break, and rush down with destructive force. The workers have to cross these streams with care. Otherwise, they may become crippled, or even killed by the force. The movement of timber creates risk

for human bodies and damage to the landscape. The environmental exploitation and labor exploitation intersect at this point. The same system that kills trees also endangers porters, handlers, and raftsmen. As nature is forced into the timber economy, the laborers must survive within that violent arrangement.

3. Elephants, Oil, and Plantation Economy

The teak economy relies on the work of elephants. Ghosh shows how elephants were used in the colonial timber industry. Their bells are the sign of a nearby teak camp, and their bodies are strong enough to pull heavy logs. They are valued for their power, training and skill. But the timber system regards this power largely as labor. In this world an elephant is prized for its ability to move wood.

Ghosh shows that this use of elephants belongs to a specifically colonial change in the treatment of animal life. In the past, elephants had ceremonial, military, and royal functions. They were associated with pagodas, palaces, wars, and public display. The timber economy has changed this relationship. Now the elephants have become instruments of extraction. John gives a detailed account of this: "… elephants were used only in pagodas and palaces, for wars and ceremonies. 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." (65) Noormohamed and Sathikulameen (2025) consider elephants as victims of imperial extraction. The stress that the elephants are witnesses to the ecological damage. The forest economy harms trees, but it also alters nonhuman life under the demands of profit.

The teak camp is also a scene of environmental disruption. Rajkumar sees camps made in forest clearings, where the first clearing work has already been done by elephants. The land is left with upturned trees and ragged pits. This description gives the camp a temporary but damaging presence. It is built for work, movement, and profit. It uses the forest without belonging to it. When the timber workers move on, the ground keeps the signs of violence. Ghosh's description suggests that resource extraction leaves traces even after the company, camp, and labor force have gone.

The novel also moves from forest wealth to underground wealth. Yenangyaung oil offers another example of environmental exploitation. At first, oil is linked with a local community. Ghosh describes the twin-zas, families who have worked individual springs and pools for generations. They gather oil in buckets and basins and carry it to nearby towns. This local economy is difficult and dangerous, yet it is tied to specific communities, places, and practices. The wells are deep, slippery, and often deadly. Workers and children may fall in, and the oil leaves few visible signs of death. Foreign entry changes the scale and meaning of oil extraction. When he was about eighteen, Rajkumar saw an unfamiliar sight at Yenangyaung. He noticed a couple of foreigners, white men, walking from well to well. They offered money to the twin-zas and buy pools and wells. Soon "there were more and more of these men around the slopes, armed with instruments and surveyors' tripods. They were from France, England and America … Wooden obelisks began to rise on the hillocks, cagelike pyramids inside which huge mechanical beaks hammered ceaselessly on the earth". (106).

The image is harsh and mechanical. The land is no longer worked by local hands alone. It is measured, purchased, drilled, and reorganized by foreign capital. This shift from local extraction to industrial drilling shows the changes in the relation between people and land. The twin-zas lose control over wells that had been linked with their families for generations. Foreign firms gain access to underground wealth. The labor contractors bring workers from India because local Burmese workers are less willing to accept the dangerous conditions of Yenangyaung. Baburao's account of labor recruitment shows that poverty elsewhere feeds the oil economy. Hired workers enter hazardous industrial labor because debt and desperation leave them with little choice. Oil extraction is therefore part of a single system with ecology, labor, migration and profit.

Rubber extends the same pattern into plantation space. Rubber replaces earlier forms

of cultivation and changes the look of the land. Saya John remembers an area once filled with spice gardens and pepper vines. Later, the vines have disappeared, and long straight rows of rubber saplings stand in their place. (157-158) The change is simple but powerful. A mixed cultivated landscape gives way to plantation order. The land is reorganized for a global commodity. The plantation produces profit, but it also reduces diversity and brings the land under a stricter commercial rhythm.

The rubber estates and teak camps share a common feature. The teak business depletes forests and moves timber toward ports and markets. The rubber business changes the land into rows of trees, labor schedules, tapping cycles, and export demands. Like teak, rubber turns the environment into commercial output. Both resources depend on labor, change the use of land, and place nature within an imperial economy. In this sense, teak and rubber are closely connected. They differ in form, but both shows how empire turns nature into wealth.

Fulsawange and Noorani (2019) connect *The Glass Palace* with the destruction of forests for rubber estates and with a wider pattern of exploitation involving both human and nonhuman life. Their ecocritical shows that Ghosh's environmental concerns move beyond teak. The novel connects multiple forms of extraction: timber in the forest, oil beneath the earth, and rubber in plantation fields. Together, these resources show the economic reach of colonial modernity.

4. Labor, Migration, and Environmental Loss

The environmental damage depicted in this novel is closely connected with labor and migration. Ghosh's narration moves from forests to oil fields, from plantations to refugee routes, and from royal exile to the lives of migrant workers. Each movement shows how empire extracts wealth from both land and people. The forests give timber, the oil fields give fuel, the plantations provide rubber, and the migrant labor provides the human force to keep these systems active. Environmental loss and human uprooting belong to the same colonial economy. Rajkumar's career shows this connection very clearly. He begins life as an orphan and later becomes a timber merchant. His growth depends on the colonial teak trade. The forest gives him wealth, but that wealth comes from the cutting of trees, the use of elephants, and the movement of laborers across difficult terrain. His life shows how colonized subjects can also become participants in resource extraction. Ghosh avoids a simple moral division between colonizers and the colonized. Rajkumar gains power inside a system already built by imperial trade. His personal ambition grows within a damaged environment.

Ghosh connects labor with force, poverty, and limited choice. In the teak camps, workers live with constant danger. They face falling trees, moving logs, flooded *chaungs*, and difficult terrain. In the oil fields, Indian workers accept risky jobs because poverty leaves them with few options. In the plantations, labor becomes part of a strict colonial economy. The workers are made to follow a fixed order, much like the rubber trees planted in neat rows. Srinivasulu (2017) reads the novel in relation to colonial oppression, immigration, displacement, and the exploitation of Burma's natural wealth. His study draws attention to Indian immigrants who worked in plantations during colonial rule and later had to leave Burma in search of safety and home. This movement of labor is closely connected to environmental change. The timber trade, the oil extraction and the rubber plantations need a systematic setup involving labor. Ghosh shows that colonial damage to nature depends on the movement and suffering of human bodies. The empire depends on land, but land alone cannot produce profit. The human bodies must be moved, disciplined, and placed in dangerous work zones. Ghosh's environmental imagination includes these bodies. The damaged forest and the exhausted workers are part of the same history.

Swati (2021) reads *The Glass Palace* in relation to globalization, multiculturalism, displacement, exile, and rootlessness. The setting ranges across Burma, Bengal, Malaya, Britain, America, China, and Singapore. The characters belong to different cultures and move across several countries because of political and social disruption. Rajkumar builds a teak

business in Burma, while the Burmese royal family is forced into exile in Ratnagiri after the British invasion of 1885. This gives the novel its historical scale and also helps connect environment with migration. The teak forest, the plantation, the port, and the refugee road all become spaces molded by colonial movement.

The exile of King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat shows political dispossession. Their removal from Mandalay is also connected with the transfer of Burmese wealth into British control. The royal family loses its palace, authority, and cultural significance. This loss foreshadows the larger pattern of the novel. Colonized people are moved away from their homes, while resources are moved toward imperial markets.

The later history of Indians in Burma extends this pattern. Dolly's fear for her sons shows the tensions produced by colonial migration. She speaks of anger against Indians in Burma and connects it with shops, farmland, money, politics, and unequal power. Her fear shows the aftermath of colonial arrangements. The empire moves people for labor, trade, administration, and profit. Later, these communities become vulnerable during political crisis. Environmental extraction, moneylending, land control, and migration are linked in public resentment. The family drama becomes part of a larger social history.

Later, war too intensifies this connection between the environment and displacement. The Second World War turns Burma into a place of hunger, scarcity, flight, and fear. Fulsawange and Noorani (2019) state that British and Japanese interventions change Burma from a land of natural abundance into a land of poverty and destruction. They also highlight on the war, hunger, and the collapse of monetary value. This shows how war changes the value of material resources. In crisis, survival depends on immediate access to food, fuel, shelter, and transport.

The refugee route also gives a bodily form to the environmental history. The roads, forests, hills, rains, rivers, and borders become part of human suffering. People move across landscapes altered by war and the empire. The movement is physical, ecological, and political at once. Ghosh presents this displacement as a loss of security, land, livelihood, language, and memory. The natural world is never outside this process. It is the ground across which people flee, the source of food and danger, and the space where colonial history leaves its scars.

Conclusion

Thus, *The Glass Palace* presents environment and the empire within the same history of power. It shows how colonial rule in Burma, India, and Malaya depends on the extraction of natural wealth and the movement of human labor. Teak forests, oil fields, rubber plantations, elephants, rivers, roads, and refugee routes form the material world of the novel. These spaces show that the empire operates by controlling land, resources, animals, and people. The British desire for Burmese teak is linked with invasion and fortune. The forest becomes a field of imperial profit. Oil and rubber business extend the same pattern beyond the forest. These show that resource extraction in the novel takes several forms: it cuts trees, drills the earth, clears land, disciplines labor, and binds local ecologies to imperial markets.

The novel also connects environmental damage with displacement. King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat lose Mandalay. Migrant laborers move across colonial spaces in search of work. Indian communities in Burma face insecurity during political crisis. War turns roads, forests, rivers, and borders into routes of hunger and flight. Ghosh connects damaged landscapes with uprooted lives. The environment is a record of conquest and memory. Forests remember the violence of logging. Oil fields remember the shift from local use to foreign capital. Plantations remember land converted to profit. Refugee routes remember bodies forced across difficult terrain by war and the empire. Ghosh gives historical and ecological force to these spaces. He makes us view the empire in material terms: cut forests, drilled earth, plantation rows, exhausted workers, displaced families, and landscapes that still carry the pressure of history.

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Bio-note

T. Sobika is a full-time Ph.D. Scholar in English at H. H. The Rajah's College (Autonomous), Pudukkottai, affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli. Her academic work is connected with English literary studies and research in higher education.

Email Id: sobikat05@gmail.com

Dr. S. Ganesan is an Associate Professor of English at H. H. The Rajah's College, Pudukkottai. He has long teaching experience at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. His areas of specialization include Canadian Literature, Indian Literature, British Literature, American Literature, Commonwealth Literature, and Comparative Studies. He has supervised research scholars, published widely in national and international journals, and presented papers in national and international conferences. He has also served as Controller of Examinations, IQAC Coordinator, NSS Officer, and member of various institutional committees. His recognitions include the Best Teacher Award from Kavirasan Arakkattalai, Pudukkottai.

Email Id: lecganesan@yahoo.co.in