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Ecological Imperialism and Rubber Capitalism: Plantation Environments, Labour, and War in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) has drawn readers toward exile, diaspora, identity. Its rubber plantations have drawn far less notice. This article turns there. It reads Malaya's rubber frontier through a dual sense of ecological imperialism. The first comes from Alfred Crosby's account of biological conquest. The second, sharpened by Jason W. Moore's world-ecology, is borrowed from Paul Driessen's polemical *Eco-Imperialism*. Driessen's politics are indefensible. His vocabulary, appropriated against him, still names something real. Colonial extraction and present-day environmental governance both impose asymmetrical power on Southern ecologies, however differently justified. Four movements structure the argument. Malacca's spice gardens give way to monoculture rows, biopiracy folded into ordinary economic calculation. Racialised labour regimes bind land to bondage. One tree, the novel says, was paid for with an Indian life. War exposes plantations as militarised terrain, canopy and mud deciding battles firepower alone could not. Morningside's post-war workers' co-operative, finally, answers Driessen on his own terms. Autonomous Southern control, bent toward sustainability rather than extraction. Ghosh's saga, read this way, anticipates his explicit climate writing. Rubber, not opium, is this novel's deepest ecological plot.

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Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) spans three generations, three countries: Burma, Malaya, India. Its arc runs from Mandalay's 1885 annexation to the late twentieth century. Most readers have gone looking for exile here, for displacement, for identity. Priyanka Singla traces the novel's quest for identity across diasporic geographies. Counter-narrative approaches recover subaltern voices the imperial record erased. What these readings pass over is the novel's environmental transformation. This article stays with what they leave out: rubber.

Ghosh's Malayan sections turn tropical forest into monoculture, row upon row. Imperial botany, seed biopiracy, indentured labour: all three receive sustained narrative attention. War sequences later show plantations shaping military logistics and resistance alike. Postcolonial ecocriticism opens space for such readings. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin supply the field's key terms. Amjad and Baharvand take up poppy monoculture in *Sea of Poppies*. Eswaraiah and Ravi Kumar pursue a related ecocritical line. Both studies stay with Ghosh's opium novel. Rubber, meanwhile, goes largely unread. This article moves the conversation from climate fiction back into historical saga.

The article works with two senses of ecological imperialism, not one. The first comes from Alfred Crosby's 1986 study of biological expansion. He treats biota, disease, livestock, weeds, as constitutive of conquest. Jason W. Moore's world-ecology extends this into political economy. He reads capitalism as a "way of organizing nature" (2). His Four Cheaps, labour, food, energy, raw materials, explain rubber's centrality directly. Rubber was cheap nature, extracted for metropolitan industry. The second sense is borrowed, deliberately, from Paul Driessen's polemic *Eco-Imperialism* (2003). It attacks Northern environmental regimes as neo-colonial impositions. This article rejects Driessen's conservative politics outright. It keeps his vocabulary anyway, because both imperialisms turn on asymmetrical power over Southern ecologies. Rob Nixon's slow violence sharpens the plantation analysis.

Ghosh's novel allows a triangulation across historical periods. Colonial rubber capitalism extracted Southern resources for Northern industry. Contemporary environmental governance constrains Southern development by other, subtler means. Both exert asymmetricahowever, over ecological decisions, however differently dressed. Morningside's co-operative, late in the novel, stages

an alternative to both. Driessen's vocabulary, critically appropriately exposes exactly this continuity.

What follows moves through four movements and a conclusion. Section I lays out the theoretical and historical frame together, since neither makes full sense alone. Section II follows rubber into Malacca, tracking imperial botany's transformation of the land. War intervenes in Section III: militarised ecologies, plantations turned battleground. The co-operative that emerges afterward, at Morningside, gets Section IV to itself. A conclusion then draws the threads together and points past them. Close reading, theory, and history run together throughout, rather than in turns.

Postcolonial ecocriticism reads colonial and environmental histories together. Huggan and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010) consolidates the field. Both fields, they argue, interrogate power through representations of nature. Both challenge Western epistemologies that claim universal validity. Environmental violence against colonised peoples sits at the field's centre. Colonial regimes degraded environments while dispossessing communities. Environmental change doubled, in effect, as a technology of imperial control. The field also recovers indigenous knowledge that colonial science suppressed. Crucially, it separates Southern environmental justice from Northern preservation aesthetics. Southern movements address survival, not wilderness sentiment. That distinction shapes everything that follows in reading Ghosh's plantation labour.

Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence* (2011) names a further analytic. Slow violence, he writes, is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). The poor are its "principal casualties" (4). Plantation monocultures exemplify it: depletion, exposure, poverty. *The Glass Palace* depicts exactly this violence, across coolie generations.

Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* supplies the historiographical base here. He credits European success less to arms than to biology. Colonisers carried portmanteau biota: disease, livestock, crops, and weeds. Empire, in his memorable phrase, was "a biota with sails and wheels" (293). His focus, admittedly, falls on temperate settler colonies like Australia. The framework still

reaches tropical plantation colonies, though by extraction rather than settlement. Seeds taken from Brazil via Kew transformed Malayan rainforest. Henry Wickham collected *Hevea* seeds there in 1876. Henry Ridley's Singapore experiments then turned them into viable plantation methods. Indigenous Brazilian tappers lost their advantage to Asian estates almost overnight. Plantation colonialism extracted labour and commodity, never settlement land. That distinction is why Crosby needs supplementing with political economy.

Moore's world-ecology conceives capitalism as humanity-in-nature, not humanity against it. He rejects the Cartesian split of Society and Nature outright. Capitalism, on this account, organises human and extra-human natures together. The Four Cheaps: labour, food, energy, raw materials, form its ecological condition of possibility. When cheap nature grows expensive, frontiers shift and crises follow. Commodity frontiers are zones of cheap-nature appropriation: sugar, silver, cotton. Each was exhausted in turn; each drove capital onward. Rubber is the twentieth century's commodity frontier. It succeeded teak forestry in Burma.

Colonial Malaya became capitalism's premier rubber frontier. Automobile demand for tyres drove expansion after 1900, and British capital cleared rainforest at unprecedented scale. Indian Tamil labourers came under indenture-like conditions — Beinart and Hughes document this in *Environment and Empire*. By the 1930s rubber supplied most of Malaya's export income. Corey Ross's *Ecology and Power* details the conversion. European estates pursued intensive monoculture for short-term yield. Smallholders, meanwhile, practised diverse methods, integrating rubber with food. Colonial ideology favoured estates regardless, despite smallholder efficiency. *The Glass Palace* represents both forms through Morningside.

The Glass Palace narrativises this frontier formation directly. Saya John guides Rajkumar through Malaya's possibilities, tree by tree. His dictum lands hard: "timber is a thing of the past" (Ghosh, ch. 15). Rubber signifies futurity; teak, only decline. The novel condenses ecological time into a single biography.

Driessen's *Eco-Imperialism* articulates a polemical counter-discourse. Eco-imperialism, in his usage, means imposing Western standards on the South. Green regimes, he claims, deny developing nations technology and energy. They

work, on his account, much like colonial control once did. This article endorses none of it. His denial of climate science remains indefensible. Yet the vocabulary survives its author. Appropriated, it serves postcolonial critique rather well. Colonial extraction and contemporary conservation both dispossess Southern communities, whatever their stated aims. Postcolonial scholarship on conservation's displaced confirms as much. Ghosh's novel allows a triangulation across all three formations. The asymmetry of power has run in more than one direction historically.

Ghosh's Malacca episodes stage plantation establishment as ecological transformation. Traditional spice gardens vanish before rubber's advance; diversified agriculture yields to regimented monoculture rows. Tan Chay Yan's plantation marks a moment of Chinese entrepreneurial adaptation. Goodrich emissaries, meanwhile, seek rubber for American tyre manufacture. Rubber becomes, in the novel's own words, "the material of the coming age" (Ghosh, ch. 15). Saya John frames this transition for young Rajkumar in a scene worth quoting. The British occupation had changed everything: Burma had been quickly integrated into the Empire, forcibly converted into a province of British India. Courtly Mandalay was now a bustling commercial hub; resources were being exploited with an energy and efficiency hitherto un-dreamt of. (Ghosh 42)

The speech condenses a world-ecological shift into casual counsel. Futurity attaches to rubber as teak's profitability declines, and the scene naturalises extraction within economic calculation. Rainforest clearance destroyed ecosystems built over millennia. Elsa likens it, later, to "a battlefield, with the jungle fighting back" (Ghosh 172). Monoculture replaced biodiversity with disease-prone single species, and soil depletion followed intensive cultivation without regeneration. Postcolonial scholarship on colonial ecological narratives names this pattern precisely. Deforestation and extraction enact violence dressed as development. Monoculture displaces complex ecosystems to serve metropolitan markets instead. Such transformations exemplify slow violence across plantation generations. Improvement, as discourse, did the work of masking destruction as progress.

The Malacca scenes establish, in effect, a proto eco-imperialism. Biopiracy moved genetic resources from South America to Asia; experimental

agronomy served metropolitan industry throughout. New monoculture ecologies answered Northern automotive needs, nothing more. Contemporary patent regimes extend the same biopiracy logic today. Colonial ecology, in short, served precisely the development Driessen now defends.

Colonial rubber depended on racialised labour recruitment throughout. Planters judged Malay peasants insufficiently disciplined, or so they claimed. They recruited Tamil workers instead, through kangani contractors. Workers endured indenture-like conditions well after indenture's formal abolition. Labour codes governed movement, residence, family; criminal penalties enforced contract compliance regardless. Death rates stayed high, from disease and overwork both.

The Glass Palace renders these conditions with restraint, never raising its voice. Workers inhabit coolie lines below the managers' bungalows, tapping latex predawn through regimented rows. Debt binds them, and children inherit that same bondage. Matthew describes the estate to Uma in terms that say more than he intends:

This is my little empire, Uma. I made it. I took it from the jungle and molded 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: and it would still fight back. (Ghosh 121)

The tappers put it plainly: each tree was "paid for with an Indian life" (Ghosh 201). Labour exploitation and ecological extraction prove inseparable here. Ghosh's restraint, if anything, heightens the violence rather than softening it.

Driessen's critique offers unexpected purchase here, oddly enough. He attacks regulations constraining energy and technology; imperial states constrained land and labour by analogous means. Plantation regimes denied independent cultivation and free movement alike. Both cases impose external control over Southern livelihoods. Rachel Leow documents Chinese indenture continuing well into the 1930s. Kelantan's estates enforced year-long contracts

through administrators. Escapees faced criminal conviction and imprisonment. Ghosh's restraint leaves room, quietly, for such documented detail.

Scholarship on conservation's displaced sharpens this continuity further. Conservation today often displaces communities in the name of protection. Colonial improvement justified dispossession by strikingly similar logic. Both invoke ecological reasons to restrict local access. Whatever the justification, the dispossessionary effect persists. Rajkumar's career narrativises frontier succession directly. He begins in teak, the dominant Burmese forest commodity, extracted by elephant and river. Saya John redirects him towards rubber instead. His logging creed had been to "bend the work of nature to your will" (Ghosh 65). Rubber, in its own way, only intensifies that creed. The shift exceeds mere fortune-seeking; it condenses world-ecological transformation into a single biography. Teak forestry had exhausted its accessible stands. The exiled Queen warns that "the wealth will be gone" (Ghosh 76). Gone too, she says, are "all the gems, the timber and the oil" (Ghosh 76). Rubber offered new cheap nature just as teak grew dear.

The transition registers two quite different ecological temporalities. Teak regenerates slowly, over decades; trees need sixty years to reach maturity. Forest management adopted correspondingly long horizons. Rubber compresses that rhythm to the annual, even the daily. Latex must be tapped and processed within hours. Plantation discipline organises time entirely around rubber's demands. Industrial capitalism, in short, accelerates the plantation day. These rhythms sit in sharp contrast with older forest extraction.

The resource logic linking teak and rubber anticipates today's climate concerns. Both served metropolitan industry through colonial extraction. Teak supplied shipbuilding and railway expansion; rubber, automobiles and petroleum-based transport. Plantation monoculture foreshadowed later agricultural intensification more broadly. Ghosh's saga, in this sense, prefigures his own explicit climate writing.

The war sequences reveal plantations as militarised terrain outright. Japan invaded Malaya in December 1941, straight through rubber country. British defences centred on plantation roads and buildings throughout. Jitra exposes the environmental dimension of British failure with particular clarity. British forces had prepared for desert war, in jungle terrain. Their desert tyres could not grip

monsoon mud. Plantation roads became impassable quagmires under rain. Japanese forces adapted to the same terrain far better. Ghosh's narrative grants terrain decisive agency. The novel's own account of clonal rubber makes the point directly. Matthew explains the plantation's engineered uniformity to Uma:

And so they should. An enormous amount of human ingenuity has been invested in making these trees exactly similar. They're called clones, you know, and scientists have been working on them for years. Most of our trees are of a clonal variety called Avros—developed by the Dutch in Sumatra in the twenties. We pay a lot of money to make sure that we get reliable clonal seed. But let me show you something. (Ghosh, ch. 18)

The rubber canopy narrows sightlines into something like a maze. Regimented rows channel movement along ambush-prone axes. Japanese bicycle infantry exploits roads the lorries cannot. Terrain, here, proves as decisive as firepower. The Sungei Pattani retreat extends this same war ecology. Arjun registers rain, mud, and rubber amid the chaos. Plantation roads and bridges channel the retreat itself. Abandoned workers, meanwhile, face the invasion without any escape.

British failure followed environmental misreading, and no small arrogance. Administrators had dismissed the jungle without reconnaissance. Japanese training in China had already taught jungle mobility. Metropolitan assumptions, in other words, overrode local environmental knowledge. The novel critiques exactly this colonial epistemology. Terrain agency, on Ghosh's account, exceeds colonial comprehension entirely. His multiple perspectives capture differentiated war ecologies: soldiers, workers, refugees each experience terrain differently. Their war ecology centres on survival in ground they actually knew. Environmental violence registers unevenly, across unequal positions. Colonial hierarchies persist even amid military collapse.

Plantation worker spaces become, almost overnight, nodes of anti-colonial organisation. Coolie lines shift from sites of discipline to emergent resistance. Independence League activists circulate pamphlets among workers; tricolour flags appear on plantation buildings. Meetings discuss freedom, and Indian National Army recruitment, in the same breath. Labour spaces become zones of anti-colonial consciousness this way. Environmental control and political resistance

intertwine, dialectically, throughout. Coolie lines also shelter retreating soldiers and refugees. Workers share scarce resources with fleeing personnel. Estate buildings give cover from aerial attack. The Indian National Army recruits directly from estate populations. Exploitation itself motivates nationalist commitment, and willingness to fight. Political consciousness, in short, emerges from everyday environmental violence. Fiona Williamson documents the 1947 Kedah strikes. The Thondar Padai movement joined labour militancy with reform. These movements built on wartime politicisation. Plantation environments, throughout, were contested political ground.

The concluding sections transform Morningside into a workers' co-operative outright. After decolonisation, and after a period of corporate ownership, workers finally acquire the estate themselves. The shift breaks decisively from imperial and corporate rubber regimes alike. Workers now control ecologies that once exploited them. Dinu and his companions manage through collective decision. Healthcare, education, and pensions replace colonial paternalism entirely. Ghosh records the co-operative's altered ecology directly, in Elsa's own words:

It's beautiful, isn't it?" Elsa said. "But you should have seen what it looked like before it was cleared." She'd been horrified, she said, when she first came out to Gunung Jerai. The place was beautiful beyond imagining, but it was jungle—dense, towering, tangled, impassable jungle. (Ghosh 72)

Mixed cropping replaces colonial monoculture. Ecological pest control displaces chemical inputs. Soil conservation addresses degradation accumulated over decades. Workers apply knowledge gathered across generations. Co-operative organisation, crucially, enables long-term planning that estates never could. Ecological rationality displaces extraction rationality here. Morningside answers Driessen's critique with some irony. He demands autonomous Southern control over development. Morningside enacts exactly such governance, only bent toward sustainability rather than extraction. Southern environmental agency, it turns out, can produce ecological responsibility. Guha and Martinez-Alier's environmentalism of the poor names this precisely. Poor communities manage

environments that sustain their own livelihoods. Workers tend rubber sustainably, for long-term yield. Ecological and economic rationality converge, finally, here. Within Ghosh's imaginary, Morningside sketches a "post-imperial, post-CSR" alternative. Neither imperial extraction nor corporate greenwashing governs it; management serves, instead, the worker-owners' long-term livelihood. The model remains fictional, and small in scale. Its force is critical, not programmatic.

Driessen borrows Hernando de Soto's property theory wholesale. De Soto ties formal title to capital formation; Driessen turns this against environmental regulation instead. Morningside offers a collective variant of ownership. Workers own previously corporate land in common, and collective title enables shared processing and research. Individual smallholders would simply lack such resources. The co-operative, in this way, challenges both estate and smallholding at once. Dinu's photography threads representation through the novel throughout. His images document decline, war, and recovery in turn. The Glass Palace studio becomes, quite literally, a site of memory. Photography preserves what extraction would otherwise erase. Representation itself becomes an ecological act here. Jaya later views Morningside through its web presence, decades on. Digital media carry the co-operative's story outward, well beyond the plantation gate. These circuits complicate Driessen's "Northern greens versus Southern poor" binary considerably. Global publics, after all, include Southern diasporas and allies too. Environmental narratives enable solidarity across distance this way. Ghosh's novel, fittingly, joins this same circulation.

The Glass Palace constructs rubber plantations as ecological imperial infrastructures, full stop. The novel links biopiracy, monoculture, coolie labour, and war into a single fabric. Together, these reveal rubber as imperial modernity's substrate. The reading complicates contemporary eco-imperialism rhetoric considerably. Historical imperialism and present governance, after all, share real structural features. Both exert asymmetrical power over Southern ecologies, however each dresses it up. The analysis extends Huggan and Tiffin into plantation contexts specifically. It juxtaposes Crosby's history with Driessen's polemic, deliberately. Moore's world-ecology and Nixon's slow violence add further purchase. Ghosh's fiction tests, throughout, what these concepts reveal — and what they obscure.

The critical appropriation of Driessen opens genuinely productive tensions. His critique chimes, oddly, with postcolonial concerns about Northern power. His politics, though, differ sharply from environmental justice. Postcolonial ecocriticism repurposes his vocabulary against his own intent, quite deliberately. Colonial violence preceded, and enabled, present governance in turn. Ghosh's fiction holds these complexities with restraint throughout. The novel's plantation ecologies anticipate Ghosh's later climate writing directly. Rubber marks an early phase of fossil-fuelled capitalism, in this sense. *Gun Island* (2019) makes the climate concern fully explicit. *The Great Derangement* (2016) names the same provocation in essay form. Historical saga and climate novel, taken together, form one single critique. The Morningside co-operative imagines a post-imperial alternative, however fictional. Workers control ecologies once held by empire and corporation both. The novel offers no programmatic solution here. It dramatises contradictions that require political negotiation instead. Future work might compare other plantation fictions. Caribbean sugar and Indonesian estate writing both invite the comparison. Closer dialogue with environmental policy merits pursuit too. Literary analysis, finally, clarifies what policy discourse so often obscures.

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About the Author

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