The Unyielding Earth: Ecological Subjugation and Resistance in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*

Parushi Ruhil Angra[1]
Indian Institute of Technology Jammu, India
Suman Sigroha[2]
Indian Institute of Technology Mandi, India

Abstract
This paper examines the ecological dynamics in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000), focusing on the subjugation of nature under imperial control and the subsequent resistance by nature. Michael Foucault's concepts of "conduct" and "counter-conduct," and Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life" has been used to explore how colonial powers systematically transformed natural landscapes, such as forests and rivers, into industrialised zones and monoculture plantations. This led to subjugation of the environment to serve the imperial economic interests. It also unveils the ways in which nature, though colonised and conducted, strikes back using ecological disruption, disease, decay, and environmental instability, which led to undermining the governing systems that attempted to subjugate and dominate it.

Keywords
Biopolitics and bare life, conduct and counter-conduct, *homo sacer*, unconquerable ecology, ecocritical resistance

Introduction

In many literary texts, nature is nudged to the margins where it functions as a passive backdrop against which human action unfolds. However, in *The Glass Palace* (2000), Amitav Ghosh resists this marginalisation by writing the environment as a vital and active presence. This paper examines how the natural

[1] **Parushi Ruhil Angra** is a PhD candidate at the Indian Institute of Technology Jammu, India. Her area of interest is ecocriticism, environmental humanities, non- human agency. Email: 2020rhu1024@iitjammu.ac.in

[2] **Suman Sigroha** is Associate Professor at the Indian Institute of Technology Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, India. She engages with texts through psycho-social concepts like stereotyping, implicit bias, memory, trauma, and representation. Her work has appeared in publications by Taylor and Francis, University of Edinburgh Press, Oxford University Press, and other presses. She has co-edited and contributed to *Translational Research and Applied Psychology in India* (SAGE, 2019) and has co-authored *Narratives for Young Readers on West Asia: War, Trauma and Resilience* (Routledge, 2025). Email: suman.sigroha@iitmandi.ac.in

world functions in the novel, its importance, its exploitation, and the ways in which it pushes back against human control. The environment does not remain in the margins; it emerges as a dynamic force that shapes events, influences human lives, and participates in the unfolding of the narrative. Tied to histories of colonial expansion, nature is subjected to regulation, and control which brings to attention the broader structures of imperial domination. At the same time, the text presents moments in which the natural world asserts its agency consequently unsettling human attempts at mastery. The environment registers forms of resistance that disrupt colonial ambitions and expose the limits of control over ecological systems. It is through these tensions that the narrative presents the natural world as a central force that operates alongside human characters.

The reason for focusing on a work of fiction like *The Glass Palace* to explore environmental themes, especially given the wealth of real-world cases available for analysis, is inspired by two key insights on novels as a genre. First, Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), emphasises that "stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about the strange regions of the world; they also become the means by which colonised peoples assert their own identity and the existence of their history" (xii). Second, Michel Foucault's reflections on the objective of the text are equally relevant. In his lectures on *Security, Territory, Population*, he asserts, "I think we could reconstruct the function of the text, not according to the rules of formation of its concepts, but according to its objectives, the strategies that govern it, and the program of political action it proposes" (Foucault 36). In a similar vein, our aim is to read *The Glass Palace* through its objectives, strategies, and, most importantly, the political action it proposes, namely, problematizing colonial rule from the perspective of ecology and environment.

An important moment in the life of the novel and the novelist transpired in March 2001, when Ghosh rejected the Commonwealth Writers' Prize after *The Glass Palace* was named the Eurasia regional winner and an overall finalist. Ghosh expressed strong objections to his work being classified under Commonwealth Literature, a term he believed anchored contemporary writing to a colonial past. The act of rejection gives voice to Ghosh's general unease about being positioned within a narrative that is still firmly anchored in colonial history despite attempts to change it. The term "Commonwealth" remains important in this study, despite Ghosh's rejection, for its inherent paradox and irony. The exploitation of imperial Britain's colonies, many of which are now part of the Commonwealth, was a major source of its wealth. This phrase signals shared prosperity, but this "common wealth" was created at the expense of these very colonies, whose people and resources were routinely taken advantage of in order to benefit the

British Empire. The term, therefore, holds tension between its implied meaning and the historical reality it obscures.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said observes that by 1878, Europe held roughly 85 per cent of the earth, and its economies were "hungry for overseas markets, raw material, cheap labour, and hugely profitable land" (8). *The Glass Palace* is the story of this hunger and exploitation. It delves into the intertwined lives of individuals caught up in the larger currents of colonialism, nationalism, and war across Burma, India, and Malaya. Beginning with the British invasion of Burma in 1885 and ending in the late 20th century with the emergence of contemporary technologies and political figures such as Aung San Suu Kyi, the novel covers more than a century. The last Burmese king, King Thebaw, is overthrown by British forces in Mandalay at the beginning of the book. Dolly, a servant girl who eventually marries Rajkumar, an ambitious and resourceful orphan who rises from poverty to become a wealthy timber merchant, travels with the royal family when they are banished to Ratnagiri, India. One of the story's main emotional strands is their relationship.

Characters in *The Glass Palace* come from diverse backgrounds. They are linked together through intricate family and social connections. For example, Uma, the wife of an Indian civil services officer, acts as an intermediary for Dolly and Rajkumar facilitating their marriage, whereas Arjun, Uma's nephew, joins British Indian Army. The twin sister of Arjun, Manju marries Neel, son of Rajkumar and Dolly. Saya John who is Rajkumar's mentor, plays an important role in his achievement in teak and rubber business, and their future generations forge connections across borders. These links extend the focus to encompass India, Malaya, and Burma while retaining the character's development and hardships at the centre.

The novel brings to the focus the exploitation of Burma's natural wealth, especially through Rajkumar who is engaged in the logging of teak, timber, and rubber trees. Ghosh describes in detail how Rajkumar becomes and subsequently unbecomes through these resources themselves. The vivid description of the Burmese forests, the elephants, and the landscapes under British rule depicts how British colonialism affected the environment as well as the Burmese people. There are continuous instances throughout the novel wherein the conflicts between the colonizers and the colonized people are explored, whether it is through the forests converted into plantations or the aristocrats who have been forced to migrate due to the destruction caused by British imperialism. World War II plays an important role in the novel, as its characters are scattered throughout the region. The Japanese invasion of Malaya and Burma leaves families helpless; their businesses are destroyed, and characters such as Rajkumar

and Dolly become refugees in their own country, running away from home through the same jungles that a few years back they saw from an airplane, from a position of privilege.

Theorizing resistance

This paper uses a dual theoretical framework that combines Michel Foucault's concepts of *conduct* and *counter-conduct* with Giorgio Agamben's theorisation of *zoe*, *bios*, and *bare life*. These concepts allow analysis of how sovereign and governmental powers act upon nonhuman bodies and how subsequently resistance emerges from the very conditions of dispossession. The analysis centres on the ecopolitical textures of Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, where nature, empire, and vulnerability come together.

Foucault identifies two distinct dimensions of conduct. The first is active, referring to the act of conducting or leading others. The second is reflexive, concerning the manner in which one conducts oneself, allows oneself to be conducted, and ultimately behaves (193). Therefore, as one can see, *conduct* becomes an internalisation of norms and expectations through which the subject becomes complicit in their own regulation. This double axis of external governance and internal self-regulation is important for examining how environmental and imperial logics shape behaviour in the text.

Foucault's idea of *counter-conduct* helps us to see modes of refusal and disruption. Though often bound to be understood as reactions to repression, they are in fact productive strategies that generate new forms of subjectivity. As he explains, counter-conducts are those movements which aim to "be conducted differently, by other leaders (conducteurs) and other shepherds, towards other objectives and forms of salvation," or to "escape direction by others and to define the way for each to conduct himself" (Foucault 194–95). Foucault identifies various historical forms of counter-conduct, namely, asceticism, mysticism, communal withdrawal, and eschatological belief. These are specific modes through which governed subjects subvert and reappropriate techniques of control (204–14). These models offer a generative basis for reading environmental and ecological resistance in literature, where characters and landscapes refuse to be conducted, regulated, or extracted. Arnold I. Davidson further elaborates the ethical and political potency of counter-conduct. He emphasises that Foucault's idea bridges the political and the ethical. Counter-conduct "concerns both the way in which one conducts oneself and the collective struggle against modes of governance" (Davidson 26). Therefore, resistance becomes an active form of life-making, "as inventive, as mobile, as productive" as power itself (Davidson 31). This understanding allows the paper to approach

resistance in *The Glass Palace* as micro-movements of agency that emerge even from zones of dispossession.

The paper provides depth to this perspective by integrating the biopolitical categories of Giorgio Agamben: *zoe*, *bios*, and *bare life*, which provide a philosophical scaffold for understanding how conduct operates through the depoliticisation of life. The Greeks, as Agamben explains, used *zoe* to denote "the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)," and *bios* to refer to "the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group" (*Homo Sacer* 1). Agamben argues that Western politics rests on the inclusive exclusion of *zoe*, a foundational gesture whereby life is included in the political order only through its abandonment. This is epitomised in the figure of *homo sacer*, a person "excluded from the religious community and from all political life," who may be killed but not sacrificed (Agamben 83). The life of *homo sacer* is bare life, life stripped of rights, subject to sovereign decision, yet paradoxically central to political power. In modernity, this condition is no longer exceptional. Rather, "the exception everywhere becomes the rule," and bare life "gradually begins to coincide with the political realm" (Agamben 9). The state of exception becomes the hidden foundation of sovereignty which is a zone in which law is suspended yet applies, and in which life is inside and outside the juridico-political order (Agamben 12). Thus, the biopolitical production of bare life is the original operation of sovereign power. Power no longer governs from outside and it produces subjects by capturing their biological existence, transforming it into a political object. This dynamic is not only theoretical but acutely visible in *The Glass Palace*, where forests are rendered intelligible only through their use-value, and paradoxically, often emerge as sites of resistance as discussed in later sections of the paper.

Here, Agamben complements Foucault. While Foucault develops an analytics of governance that focuses on the formation of docile bodies and subjectivities, Agamben reveals the ontological violence that underlies such formations, that is, the reduction of life to a condition that is politically intelligible only through its abandonment. As he writes, "Bare life remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion" (Agamben 11). The person governed is no longer simply a subject but becomes a life "that may be killed but not sacrificed," a phrase that captures the asymmetrical and often unseen violence of both empire and modernity (Agamben 8). Similarly, as environments are reduced to life without political or ethical recognition, that is *zoe*, they are subjected to processes of extraction, neglect, and abandonment. However, Agamben also insists that within the biopolitical condition lies the potential for transformation. He gestures

towards a *form-of-life*, a bios that is entirely its own zoe, a mode of existence in which "the biopolitical body that is bare life must itself instead be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life" (Agamben 188). This idea connects with Foucault's counter-conducts: the emergence of new modes of existence that challenge the separation of bare life and qualified life, of governed and autonomous being.

Foucault and Agamben enable a methodology that recognises how power disciplines and conducts life, and also how that power originates in the ability to strip life bare. We posit that in *The Glass Palace*, imperial conduct operates by rendering nonhuman nature into bare life, which makes it manageable, measurable, and expendable. However, the novel also presents how this very reduction becomes the ground for counter-conduct: communities, ecologies, and individuals reassert themselves as more-than-bare, more-than-expendable. The logic of conduct makes life bare and the logic of counter-conduct is life's retaliation against this bareness.

The analysis is presented in three sections. First, it interrogates the contested definitions of nature, ecology, and environment, establishing a conceptual framework for analysis. Second, it examines how colonial forces conduct and subjugate nature, turning it into bare life through regimes of extraction and biopolitical control. Third, it presents nature's counter-conduct as its insurgent agency through decay, disease, and ecological resistance, disrupting the illusion of imperial mastery and subsequently asserting its own generative power.

Defining nature: Contested meanings and shifting boundaries

Ecocriticism is often defined as the "study of the relationship between literature and physical environment" (Buell 88). However, as Nirmal Selvamony notes, ecocritics disagree on what constitutes its basic principle: bios, nature, environment, place, earth, or land (Buell 89). Buell terms this as "the problem of the unstable signifier" (88), while Estok calls it "ambivalent openness" (2009), pointing to the uncertainty about what ecocriticism does or seeks to do. This section of the paper similarly grapples with defining nature, ecology, and environment.

Ecology, according to Ernst Haeckel, concerns "relation of the animal both to its organic as well as its inorganic environment" (Britannica). Kate Soper, in *What is Nature?*, outlines three dimensions: metaphysically, it signifies the non-human against which we define ourselves; realistically, it represents immutable natural laws; and practically, it denotes observable phenomena such as landscapes and wildlife, valued and protected from industrial encroachment (156). Bill

McKibben, however, argues in *The End of Nature* that the Anthropocene has ended "nature" as an autonomous category, since human activity has altered all environments (50).

Traditionally, nature, ecology, and environment represented a space independent of human influence. But in the Anthropocene, humans have become not only "biological agents" but also "geological agents" (Mossner 2). This shift transforms the "nature of nature." Human-managed spaces, agricultural fields, plantations, botanical gardens, zoos, blur boundaries between natural and artificial. Defining nature, therefore, becomes increasingly complex.

Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign clarifies why "nature" is unstable. "The bond between signifier and signified is arbitrary" (67), so "nature" can signify wilderness, resources, or hybrid landscapes depending on context. The mutability of signs ("time changes all things" [77]) mirrors how "nature" has shifted from pre-industrial divine order to Anthropocene hybridity. Meaning also emerges through oppositions (115), the nature/culture binary collapses when cities are described as ecosystems. Since linguistic signs are "social institutions" (68), definition of nature are never ideologically neutral, rather, they reflect competing interests, with corporations tending to frame nature as a resource to be exploited, while conservationists insist on its value as wilderness to be protected.

For this paper, we adopt a broader definition of nature. It encompasses environments both untouched and shaped by humans. Altered environments like managed forests, cultivated fields, domesticated animals, and plantations remain part of the natural world. This expanded and broadened view reflects the realities of the Anthropocene, where human and non-human agencies intertwine.

"To Bend the Work of Nature to Your Will"[3]**: Colonial extraction and ecological transformation**

The Glass Palace opens with the British Empire's invasion of Burma through a military campaign which was justified by disputes over teak logging rights (Ghosh 23). This invasion initiated the collapse of the Burmese monarchy, which culminated in the forced exile of King Thebaw and his court to Ratnagiri (in present day state of Maharashtra) in India, while Burma itself is annexed as a province of British India (70). The exploitation of the land intensified after colonial rule was established in Burma. Resources were extracted "with an energy and efficiency hitherto undreamt of" (70), which transformed Burma into an

[3] The phrase is borrowed from *The Glass Palace, pg 80.*

engine of imperial profit. This systemic plunder shapes the lives of the novel's central characters and provides the economic backdrop of the novel. Saya John, a shrewd businessman of mixed heritage, and Rajkumar, a resourceful orphan turned timber trader, navigate this world where opportunity and oppression are inevitably linked. Their stories become entangled in the machinery of empire, mirroring Burma's story.

Ghosh's details of the British exploitation of teak are a deliberate commentary on the rigid control of colonial extraction. He paints an almost cinematic scene of the *chaungs*, the rushing mountain streams (72), transformed into instruments of imperial logistics. The spectacle is visceral: "with a great detonation the dam would capsize, and a tidal wave of wood and water would wash down the slopes of the mountains" (73). This imagery captures two things: the violence and the orchestrated efficiency of resource plunder. In the dry season, when the *chaungs* shrank, "it was the season for the timbermen to comb the forest for teak" (73). It's important to focus on the metaphors used, forests are "combed" like a body searched for valuables, and teak trees are "killed" with surgical precision. Ghosh focuses on the destruction with specificity, "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" (73). This methodical butchery is also the empire's broader ethos where nature is disciplined into productivity, leading to life being reduced to measurable profit.

Ghosh is not subtle in his explanations and descriptions. In a parenthetical aside, he interrupts his own description to declare: "(*teak being ruled, despite the wildness of its terrain, by imperial stricture in every tiny detail*)" (73). He moves from the subtext to direct indictment. The aside functions as a metatextual nudge which makes sure that the reader grasps his point, even in the untamed forests, no aspect of life (or death) escapes imperial regulation. This explicit framing denies readers the luxury of romanticising the process or misreading its brutality as mere industry. Ghosh insists that colonialism is a system that dictates even the angle of a blade's cut. This careful regulation of nature mirrors the broader mechanisms of power that Foucault theorises in his work as *conduct,* a term that bridges the duality of domination and submission.

According to Foucault, conduct refers both to the act of directing or guiding and to the way in which one allows oneself to be directed or guided. It includes both the action of leading and the manner in which individuals behave under external guidance. As Foucault explains:

> Beginning from the Greek expression oikonomia psuchon and the Latin expression regimen animarum,… 'conduct' can refer to two things: Conduct is the activity of conducting (conduire), of conduction (la

> conduction) if you like, but it is equally the way in which one conducts oneself (se conduit), lets oneself be conducted (se laisse conduire), and finally in which one behaves (se comporter) under the influence of a conduct as the action of conducting or of conduction (conduction). (1977-78, xix)

In the colonial context as portrayed in the novel, this notion of conduct is applied to both nature and native populations, which were conducted or managed for the purposes of resource extraction and profit. The exploitation of nature was a deliberate act of industrial extraction, essential to the machinery of colonial expansion and industrialisation, for which the Empire colonised the land at full throttle. As already mentioned, the vast scale and ambition of colonial domination (Said 8) indicate how deeply rooted the economic motives were in shaping global landscapes and societies. What they did in these colonies is something that Saya John embodies. In one of the incidents, Saya John is berated by a British forest assistant, something that Rajkumar does not like. When they discuss the incident later, Saya John gives a perspective which encompasses the entire colonial saviour logic. He says,

> …left to ourselves none of us would have been here, harvesting the bounty of this forest … until the Europeans came none of them (the natives) had ever thought of using elephants for the purposes of logging…It was the Europeans who saw that tame elephants could be made to work for human profit…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…it was not the oo-sis with their hoary wisdom who thought of these things. (Ghosh 80)

Here, Saya John unveils a critical perspective on how indigenous people, particularly the oo-sis, or elephant handlers, are subjected to colonial judgment for failing to exploit the jungle and the elephants for profit. This is also a comment on the different purposes of life – East in harmony with nature; West/Britishers harnessing nature for profit. Saya John personifies this indoctrination into the colonial worldview, where reverence for European enterprise and extraction is paramount. As a mentor to Rajkumar, Saya John's own admiration for the colonial system is clarified when he says, "You see that man, Rajkumar?" he said. "That is someone you can learn from. *To bend the work of nature to your will*; to make the trees of the earth useful to human beings—what could be more admirable, more exciting than this? That is what I would say to any boy who has his life before him" (Ghosh 80 [emphasis added]).

The exploitation of nature in Ghosh's narrative is reflected in the theoretical framework of Giorgio Agamben's idea of "bare life," which he describes as "life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed" (Agamben 82). In the colonial context that Ghosh depicts in *The Glass Palace*, nature itself is turned into such a state, *zoē* stripped of its political or sacred value, and subjected wholly to imperial utility. This transformation is foundational to sovereignty, for as Agamben writes, "the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power" (6). Nature in the novel such as river, forest, like the *homo sacer*, is included only through exclusion, governed, regulated, and used, but denied any form of subjecthood or intrinsic worth. The jungle, once a living entity with its own rhythms, is instead "captured within the political order" (9), its rivers, trees, and animals manipulated under "a state of exception" where domination is naturalised. In this light, the "meticulous regulation of nature" that Ghosh details is reflective of colonial control but also extends to exemplifying what Agamben identifies as modernity's biopolitical project, one in which life, including nonhuman life, is "exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable" (28). Thus, to bend nature to one's will, as Saya John admires, is precisely to render it *bare*, life subjected to sovereign force without recourse to protection or reverence.

Yet another example of turning nature bare is when diverse spice gardens are cleared to establish rubber monocultures, spice gardens typically maintain higher biodiversity, are less extractive of soil and resources, and support local livelihoods whereas rubber plantations, particularly monocultures, significantly diminish ecological diversity, degrade soils, and rely on external inputs. Ghosh's depiction of the colonial transformation of biodiverse spice gardens into regimented monocultures is an example of what Michel Foucault terms the "conduct of conduct," the strategic shaping of behaviour, spaces, and life itself through regimes of control. As Foucault suggests, conduct involves both the guidance of others and the ways in which individuals or entities are led to govern themselves; it marks the intersection of domination and self-direction (Foucault 193). The colonial project as presented in the novel, then, conducted nature by erasing its irregularities and scripting it into uniformity, as seen in the replacement of rich spice gardens with "long straight rows" of saplings (Ghosh 194). This ecological streamlining anticipates the larger capitalist plantocratic logic evident in the rubber boom, where environmental and human variables were standardised into productive assets. From Giorgio Agamben's perspective, this transformation shows how nature was *abandoned* to power and rendered as *bare life which is a* life reduced to functionality within the imperial economy, stripped

of its intrinsic relationality and made killable though not mournable (Agamben 82). Ghosh potently picturizes that in conducting both ecosystems and labour into forms legible to empire, colonial governance extended its sovereign reach into the very material of life, choreographing a world where diversity is dissolved into order, and life into logistics.

Saya John's and Rajkumar's association is strengthened further by this very rubber; when they become partners in a rubber plantation in Malaya. The plantation is created by clearing a forest, after which the "mountain seemed to have come alive" (209). It is in this plantation that Ghosh starts giving foreshadowing to something countering the conduct of the British Empire. This plantation, though named Morningside, gives instances of an eerie presence amongst the uncannily same rubber saplings. Take for instance phrases like "there were orderly rows of saplings, all of them alike, all of them spaced with precise, geometric regularity", "the slope ahead was scored with the shadows of thousands of trunks, all exactly parallel", "it's like stepping into a labyrinth," "(Dolly) would not want to stay there, under the scowling gaze of the mountain, in a house that was marooned in a tree filled maze" (172). The repetition of "all of them alike," "all exactly parallel" signals a mechanistic, almost dehumanizing order, where nature is forced into conformity.

Matthew, Saya John's son, who now is the part owner of the plantation and the one who lives there and runs the plantation, reflects on the deceptive appearance of the plantation, noting that while it may seem lush and forest-like, it is in reality a massive apparatus, constructed from both timber and human labour, "a vast machine, made of wood and flesh" (248). He explains, "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" (249). This patronizing logic can be explained through Agamben's concept in *Homo* Sacer: the *vitae necisque potestas*, or the unconditional authority of father over his sons (87). This was the ancient Roman right of the *pater familias* to decide the fate of his dependents. Agamben uses this concept to highlight how the sovereign similarly holds the power to include or exclude life from the legal and social order. Similarly, it is visible that in Matthew's imagination, he wields dominion over the Morningside plantation by considering it a resource to be engineered and exploited. In his vision, the plantation is a mechanised system which reduces both trees and workers to interchangeable, controllable units. His declaration that Morningside is "a monument of wood" (Ghosh, 35) reflects his belief in his own sovereign right to reshape the environment. By doing this, he reduces the complexity of ecosystems to homogenized and subservient apparatus.

Matthew exercises a biopolitical control by imposing cloned uniformity on the plantation, depriving nature of its agency and reducing it to a regime of efficiency and extraction. The plantation, although seeming lush and natural, is in reality "a vast machine, made of wood and flesh" (Ghosh, 248), a system in which both human labor and organic life are reduced to submission. Agamben's paradigm is useful for understanding Matthew's control over the land as an exercise of sovereignty over *zoe* (bare life), in which nature, like the subjects of a tyrannical pater, is made passive and pliable. His boasting about the "human ingenuity" (Ghosh 249) that went into the cloned trees again presents a colonialist logic in which nature is a thing to be conquered, rather than an active agent with its own agency and resistances. The plantation operates as a microcosm of the broader colonialist project, a space where power is exercised through decisions over life and death, always in the service of accumulation and control. The plantation becomes symbolic of how nature, like bare life under sovereignty, is conducted and subjected to the same biopolitical mechanisms that decide which forms of life are valued and which are expendable.

But this illusion of total control is unstable. Even as Matthew reduces the plantation to a "monument of wood," nature disrupts, decays, and defies, revealing the limits of colonial conduct and the inevitability of its undoing as the following section illustrates.

Ecological resistance to the colonial enterprise

This section argues that nature, despite being colonised and manipulated by colonial forces, also has its own agency, which works to disrupt the colonial endeavour and make human survival even more difficult, as the environment becomes as destructive as it is controlled. It is through this lens that we argue that the colonial endeavour to control nature ultimately led to its resistance, and that this cycle of violence and existence continues for humanity in these environments. The jungle, for instance, is an example of this resistance in the form of disease and decay.

Foucault proposes the term "counter-conduct" which means a "sense of struggle against the procedures implemented for conducting others" (201, 204). This is in relation to the aforementioned conduct. In the context of pastoral power, Foucault recognises five forms of counter-conduct, "all of which tend to redistribute, reverse, nullify, and partially or totally discredit pastoral power" (182). *The Glass Palace* similarly illustrates acts of counter-conduct in response to the authority of the British Empire. As was stated before, the story begins with the invasion of Burma by the British, which is an exercise in ruthlessness and greed, prompted by the British love of teak and a dispute over it once again. Once

the occupation is secured, the teak industry roars into motion, stripping the land with mechanical efficiency. The forests are methodically "combed" for their prized timber, and the once-wild monsoon streams, *chaungs*, are repurposed into a conveyor belt for transportation (72-73). Yet, even as the colonial machinery seeks to dominate the landscape, the forest resists in ways both subtle and spectacular.

Amidst this plunder, whispers of defiance emerge from the land itself. Saya John, making his way across the forests for teak, becomes an unwitting testament to nature's quiet insurgency. The leeches, sensing the intruders, launch their own silent counterattack: "the undergrowth would come alive as they passed by, leeches unfurling like tendrils as they awoke to the warmth of the passing bodies" (Ghosh 71). The densest gatherings of leeches are always found in the body's creases, places where clothing rubs against the skin. These natural folds, such as the armpits, groin, and spaces between the legs and buttocks, act like a guide for the leeches to their favourite feeding sites. Saya John commonly finds several leeches inside his shoes, most of them attached to the thin, webbed skin between his toes-the area of the body particularly inviting to them. Some leeches would be crushed underfoot, leaving their mouthparts embedded in his skin. These spots, if not properly treated, would become targets for further infestations and easily develop into infected, foul-smelling sores that burrow deep into the flesh (71- 72). In these moments, Ghosh grants the non-human world an agency, framing the forest as a sentient force, recoiling against its violation.

The trees, too, refuse to die quietly. Their slaughter is an act of "assassination," each felled giant unleashing a deafening cry of protest: "great tocsins of protest as they fell, unloosing thunderclap explosions that could be heard miles away, and bringing down everything in their path" (73). These can be interpreted as declarations of resistance, a thunderous refusal to submit without defiance. In the novel, nature's resistance mirrors Foucault's assertion that defiance comes from everywhere, even from the seemingly inert world of plants and creatures, whose silent rebellions undermine the empire's illusion of total control.

As the novel progresses from Burma to Malaya, the background of World War II is amplified, a background into which Arjun, nephew of Rajkumar and Dolly's friend Uma, is propelled as a soldier in the British Indian Army. Deployed to a plantation in Malaya, he finds himself involved in an ancient and fundamental conflict, namely the jungle and its relentless non-human forces, which rival even the Japanese as adversaries. The soldiers' quarters, consisting of attap huts mounted on pilings designed to keep out termites and damp, offer little protection against the environment's persistent encroachment. As Ghosh

describes, beds are overrun by swarms of ants, mosquitoes multiply so densely after nightfall that leaving one's net for even a moment requires restringing it entirely, and the palm-thatched roofs come alive at night with the rustling of rats and snakes (379). The jungle, in other words, refuses to be garrisoned. Thus, from the very beginning the reader is made aware of the non-human agency of the tiniest constituent of the fauna as a counter to the conduct of British imperialism. Yet counter-conduct manifests in the text through more dramatic interventions as well. These fatal encounters show how nature, often romanticised as passive and picturesque, can assert itself as a formidable force that demands respect and distance. Such moments systematically destabilise notions of human exceptionalism and demonstrate that what appears as docile can swiftly become deadly. For instance, Uma's husband, a collector in Ratnagiri, where the Burmese king and queen along with their family is exiled in India, decides to take a ride to the sea in the "double-oared racing scull" (185) that once belonged to Mr. Gibbs who was a rowing legend. To him the "the sea seemed warm and inviting," (186) but that is a deception of the waters. The rowing trip cost him his life as "suddenly the boat buckled and its nose shot out of the water. The oarsman flung up an arm, and then the undertow took hold of him and sucked him down, beneath the surface" (187). The collector is drowned in the Arabian Sea.

The water's deadly agency repeats its fatal call through Manju's tragic demise. Manju, Rajkumar's and Dolly's daughter-in-law, too drowns herself in the water while the family is fleeing the war time Burma:

> She let her hand fall over the raft's edge and thrilled to the water's touch. It seemed to be pulling at her, urging her to come in…'Manju, Manju stop—be careful…' and she knew the time had come….The water was fast, dark and numbingly cold. (507)

Another example is found in the volatile power of the jungle river, with logs "hurtling down the stream together" and colliding with such force that they form dams, only to explode in a "great detonation"that releases a "idal wave of wood and water" (Ghosh 72). This scene illustrates how nature resists control and turns colonial resource extraction into a dangerous, uncontrollable force. Foucault notes that "the notion of counter-conduct emphasises the refusal to be conducted in a specific manner and the demand to be conducted differently, asserting one's autonomy" (Foucault 197).

Here, the jungle resists colonial industrial exploitation, pushing back against human designs and turning the extraction of resources into an act of resistance. While the colonial enterprise initially exploits waterways as passive conduits for resource extraction, mere extensions of imperial infrastructure, Ghosh gradually reveals water's insurgent agency. Here it is important to

understand the conduct which the humans are constantly fighting. Foucault, while deciding the term counter-conduct considered other vocabulary terms. He finds the term "revolt," "too precise and too strong" (200), disobedience, on the other hand, was considered "too weak," insubordination perhaps too localised and "attached to military insubordination" (200). He finalises on counter-conduct as "struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others" (201). Thus, nature's counter-conduct operates on multiple registers, from the microscopic resistance of leeches to the catastrophic reclamations of drowning waters, all constituting what Foucault would recognise as an ecosystem of defiance that persistently undermines colonial attempts at total environmental mastery. Ghosh's narrative unfolds how imperial conduct, in its very act of discipline and exploitation, generates forms of organic resistance. These are an emergent and distributed struggle against the processes of domination itself. This struggle is captured in the text's recurring dialectic between control and its unraveling: the water that transports imperial lumber also swallows the imperial officer; the rivers that facilitate colonial trade routes also claim colonial subjects on their own terms.

Arnold I. Davidson's introduction to *Security, Territory, and Population* crystallises Foucault's insight about resistance: '[I]f resistance were nothing more than the reverse image of power, it would not resist; in order to resist one must activate something "as inventive, as mobile, as productive" as power itself' (xxi). This idea presents nature's counter-conduct in *The Glass Palace* where two objectives are getting fulfilled, first, resistance negates colonial power (drownings, infestations) and second, it actively generates alternative systems.

The novel's post-war trajectory presents this productive dimension through Ilongo, Rajkumar's illegitimate son with a Morningside plantation worker. Ilongo emerges from the margins of both familial and colonial histories, who begins his life as a plantation labourer but soon becomes a key player in the wave of postwar political activism sweeping through Malaya. He quickly rises to prominence as one of the country's most influential trade-unionists in the wake of labour unrest and the formation of trade unions. In a bold move of reclamation, he goes on to found a co-operative and buy the Morningside plantation in the midst of an economic crisis marked by a slump in the prices of rubber, which leads to widespread layoffs. He does not reproduce the exploitative logic of colonial plantation. He radically reimagines plantation's function. Under his leadership, Morningside is renewed as a model of cooperative labour, "one of the flagships of the co-operative movement" (428), complete with health care systems, pensions, educational programs, and retraining opportunities for its workers. What one witnesses here is the rethinking and refabricating of a colonial

economic form as a space of empowerment. The ecological and political dimensions intersect here, just as the forest resists imperial containment, Ilongo's cooperative dismantles and rebuilds the plantation system from within. His story realises Foucault's notion of resistance as inherently inventive, which is a form of power that generates new modes of life rather than merely opposing domination.

Conclusion: The unconquerable ecology of resistance

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, the colonial notion of dominance over the environment is destroyed to reveal the undomesticated nature of nature itself. Using the Foucauldian model of conduct and counter-conduct, and the Agambian model, the colonial endeavour to subjugate nature to the status of a mere "bare life" or a resource to be managed ends up instigating rebelliousness in it. Through Foucault's lens of conduct and counter-conduct, and Agamben's framework, the novel exposes how such imperial attempts to reduce nature to "bare life," a resource to be extracted and regulated, necessarily provoke defiance. From the leeches that penetrate Saya John's bodies to the water that drowns colonial lives, Ghosh's narrative portrays an ecosystem of resistance not through grand revolutions but through what Foucault terms "inventive, mobile, productive" forms of challenge (Davidson, xxi). These resistances are not only negative counter-challenges to power but also active modes of struggle that fundamentally shift the very terms of existence.

Aided by the above discussions on the dual nature of ecological resistance, it can now be underscored that the two aforementioned strands through which it manifests will be in its destructive and creative forms. The destructive may be seen in nature's reclamation of land, diseases, infestations, and drownings, while the creative forms may be seen in Ilongo's cooperative engaged in activities of healing and care (Ghosh, 534). Together, they show Foucault's assertion that resistance must be as dynamic as power itself, capable of both dismantling and rebuilding. Thus, Ghosh's ecological idea matches with the idea presented by Edward Said, when he said it is "in stories that the battlegrounds of history and identity are staged" (Said xii). The voices carried by the whispers of the forest and the undertows of the rivers narrate another history of empire, one in which agency is not only possessed by the human subject but also by the land. This is because the very definition of the term 'Commonwealth' implies a mutual prosperity derived from colonialist exploitation, is subverted by the ecological and human counter-approaches demonstrated by the novel.

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Buell, Lawrence. "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends." *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 19, no. 2 (2011): 87-115. Accessed December 14, 2023. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/430997.

Davidson, Arnold I. "In Praise of Counter-Conduct." History of the Human Sciences, vol. 24, no. 4, 2011, pp. 25–41. SAGE Publications, https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695111411625.

"Ecology." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Last modified December 13, 2023. https://www.britannica.com/science/ecology.

Estok, Simon C. "Theorising in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16, no. 2 (2009): 203-25. Accessed December 14, 2023. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44733418.

Foucault, Michel. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1977–1978*. New York: Picador, 2007.

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2011. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203806838.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2000.

Lorimer, Jamie. "The Anthropo-Scene: A Guide for the Perplexed." *Social Studies of Science* 47, no. 1 (2017): 117–42. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26107049.

McKibben, Bill. *The End of Nature*. New York: Random House. 1989.

Rangaranjan, Swarnlatha. *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*. Edited by Scott Slovic. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2018.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, translated by Wade Baskin, Philosophical Library, 1959.

Soper, Kate. *What is Nature?* Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1995.

Times of India. "Commonwealth: Misnomer, Not an Award." *Times of India*, 2001. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/commonwealth-misnomer-not-an-award/articleshow/34944899.cms.

Weik von Mossner, Alexa. "Imagining Geological Agency: Storytelling in the Anthropocene." In *Whose Anthropocene? Revisiting Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'Four Theses'*, edited by Robert Emmett and Thomas Lekan, 83-88. RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society, no. 2, 2016.