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Social Model of Disability under the Prevalence of Ecocriticism in Southeast Asian Cultural Perspectives: Investigating the Relevance of *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh

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This study explores the intricate interplay of environmental themes and disability within the narrative of *The Glass Palace*, catalyzing a reevaluation of Southeast Asian perspectives on social disability. The paper recognizes the diverse cultural perspectives on disability in Southeast Asia and unveils a complex landscape of societal attitudes. The novel, by Amitav Ghosh, aims to heighten awareness of ecological preservation by aligning with regional viewpoints that recognize the profound influence of nature on identity, historical experiences, and ongoing environmental challenges. Amitav Ghosh's exploration of the relationship between human beings and nature, as depicted in *The Glass Palace*, takes center stage. Ghosh's narratives delve into the interdependence of fundamental human and nonhuman life for coexistence, challenging conventional perspectives and prompting thought-provoking reflections on biodiversity conservation. Through ecocritical narratives, the novel intertwines disability with the environment, illustrating the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and emphasizing the delicate balance between human existence and nature. The research highlights the novel's role in fostering inclusivity in environmental efforts, advocating for policy reforms, inspiring collaborative initiatives, and contributing to interdisciplinary research that enriches understanding of the intersections between environment and disability.

Keywords: *The Glass Palace*, Amitav Ghosh, Southeast Asia, Social Disability, Ecological Preservation.



Introduction: Reports from Lewis (2013) to OHCHR (2023) established that climate change and consistent ecological disruptions are creating the most significant impact on the world's 20% of the total population with disabilities, and the impact has been marked as 'doubly disadvantaged.' According to Cella (2017), an ecocritic approach toward social disability is marked towards "*cultivating a sense of locale*" for establishing a profound intertwining of the natural and cultural dimensions inherent to a place. In the context of Southeast Asia, the report from Ethics and Climate Change in Asia and the Pacific (ECCAP) declared that the localities of Southeast Asia are anthropocentric, which stands for being human-centered (Chaipraditkul, 2021). However, when the Southeast Asian perspectives under the Social Model of Disability (see

Figure 1) are investigated, it is found that there exists a belief that disability stems from karma or is perceived as a curse linked to past misdeeds (Kemirembe, 2023).

Figure 1 'Barriers-Approach' as in the Social Model of Disability



Source: Nurse Next Door (2023)

This outlook aligns with the moral model of disability, which posits that disability signifies moral frailty (Kemirembe, 2023). In this context, the role of generating awareness of ecocriticism by Amitav Ghosh through *The Glass Palace* holds excellent relevance.



Study Relevance

In Southeast Asia, cultural perspectives on disability vary across different domains. Regarding developmental disabilities, some argue that challenges in this realm stem from parental or ancestral mistakes (Chand et al., 2023). Unfortunately, individuals with disabilities in Southeast Asia face significant marginalization, encountering obstacles in accessing crucial services, employment opportunities, and rehabilitative assistance. Such marginalization, obstacles, and restrictions to rehabilitative services get more critical when the disabled individual faces hindrances caused by climate change. In terms of connecting the relevance of ecocriticism to social disability, Gibbons (2017) marked the connection between the environmental importance of biodiversity and the idea of neurodiversity. They established the gap between the responsibility of the environmentalists towards the diagnoses of autism and equal rights for disabled individuals. Senier (2017) expressly referred to "*blind Indians*" and identified that environmental humanities, disability studies, and indigenous studies are meant to interrelate sustainability science and indigenous ecological knowledge. The objective of this approach, as marked by Seiner (2017), is to emphasize deep Indigenous knowledge concerning environmental studies and disability studies in an epistemological manner and derive reformative proceedings from the socio-political standpoint. These research-based initiatives established that individuals with disabilities face heightened vulnerabilities during emergencies and climate change (OHCHR, 2023).

In this matter, Ghosh has always explored new ways of looking at the relationship between human beings and nature. In *The Glass Palace*, Amitav Ghosh intricately navigates the challenges linked to biodiversity conservation, demonstrating a discerning skepticism toward materialistic forces that exploit the Earth's resources. Ghosh's narrative embodies postcolonial eco-criticism, with instances of aligning with the concept of "*material eco-criticism*" (Vincent, 2018). An intersectional study of Ghosh's narrative challenges conventional perspectives in a thought-provoking manner for the humanitarian welfare of the disabled. While trying to understand the attitudes towards ecocriticism under the influence of Southeast Asian culture towards disability under the social model, this research paper emphasizes investigating the relevance of ecocriticism in *The Glass Palace*. This effort of intersectional understanding gets marked as very intriguing and thus the subject for critical evaluation.

The Glass Palace: The Plot

In the narrative of *The Glass Palace*, the plot develops alongside the resilient 11-year-old Rajkumar, the sole survivor of his family. Rajkumar embarks on an odyssey from India to Burma with grand ambitions. Initially working on Ma Cho's food stall near Mandalay's Glass Palace, Rajkumar's fate becomes intricately entwined with the Burmese Royal Family just as the Third Anglo-Burmese War erupts, leading to their exile to Ratnagiri, India. As the plot grows, Ratnagiri unveils the challenges and triumphs of King Thibaw's family in their new life, paralleled by Rajkumar's burgeoning career under the guidance of Saya John. As



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Rajkumar delves into the teak trade, his journey propels him into the timber and oil industries, fulfilling his entrepreneurial aspirations. "The Money Tree" introduces Rajkumar and Dolly to the rubber trade in Rangoon, while "The Wedding" unites multi-ethnic families in Calcutta. "Morningside" unfolds on a pre-World War II rubber plantation in Malaya, managed by Rajkumar and Saya John, setting the stage for "The Front," which recounts the family's losses during the Japanese invasion of Malaya and Burma. Culminating in *The Glass Palace*, the novel explores the post-World War II lives of dispersed families, seamlessly weaving historical, sociopolitical, and ecocentric themes, providing profound insights into Southeast Asian perspectives on nature, exploitation, and the enduring connections between human societies and the environment.

Ecocriticism Towards Social Disability

Within the social model of disability, the concept of "social disability" identifies the limitations faced by individuals with impairments as rooted in societal factors (Goering, 2015). As these factors are created by the misbalanced status of the ecosystem, it is critical to resolve the matter at the macro level. The exploration of ecocriticism thus becomes crucial for comprehending the intricate relationship between individuals with disabilities and their scope to cope with their conditions. Moreover, the perspectives of Southeast Asian culture on disability under the social model are significant as it stands as one of the major hindrances. Such complications can be managed as the matter is investigated on humanitarian grounds and awareness is initiated to prevent the causes of environmental challenges. The detection of such challenges in *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh adds relevance to the provisions of reforming South Asian perspectives towards disability and adds scopes for restructuring developmental scopes under the light of the social model of disability. This further paves the way for formulating effective responses that connect the importance of ecocriticism to eradicating social disability. The approach encompasses dominant social, political, and economic ideologies, cultural and religious perceptions, paternalism in social welfare systems, societal discrimination, environmental and informational inaccessibility, and the absence of suitable institutional and social arrangements.

Southeast Asian Perspectives on Ecocentricism

In the report on *disability in India of 2011*, the Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, the government of India, referred to the definition of social disability as stated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPWD). According to UNCRPWD, social disability is the '*limitations faced by individuals with impairments being rooted in societal factors that encompass dominant social, political, and economic ideologies, cultural and religious perceptions, paternalism in social welfare systems, societal discrimination, environmental and informational inaccessibility, and the absence of suitable institutional and social arrangements*' (United Nations, 2006; MOSPI, 2011). As declared by this definition, the construct of disability is not inherent in individuals but arises from the interactions between individuals and society



(MOSPI, 2011). Further, according to *Tidy's Physiotherapy* (edt. Porter, 2013), the social model of disability, sometimes called the 'barriers approach,' provides a "route map" to identify the barriers and the ways these barriers can be removed. It looks at disability not as a problem with a person's abilities but as challenges from things around them. This happens because the society, Southeast Asians often don't think about or consider people with physical impairments, which can leave them out of many social activities (edt. Porter, 2013).

On a specific note, McIntyre-Mills et al. (2023, pp. 275) referred to the cultural inclination of Asian perspectives in getting extensively involved in '*protecting and re-generating of living systems to support social and environmental justice.*' According to these researchers, Asian cultures are very closely knitted to environmental conservation practices and are much engaged in understanding the relevance of ecological balance for humanitarian existence (McIntyre-Mills et al., 2023, pp. 230–32). On the contrary, Kanwal (2023) referred to the anthropocentric way of understanding disruption in the internal cohesion of the natural world, leading to environmental devastation. Kanwal specified that climate change stands as a formidable threat to humanity and embodies the essence of this crisis. It is at this point that the need to awaken the South Asian perspectives towards the transition to ecocentric thought processes gets relevant. In the context of the perceptions held against social disability, it is significant for the Asian culture to emphasise a holistic perspective on nature and acknowledge the intrinsic value and rights of all-natural elements (Huang and Westman, 2021; An and Liu, 2023). While referring to the Asian cultural take on maintaining the ecosystem, and China in particular, Huang and Westman (2021) stated that the realm of Science, Technology, and Society (STS) advocates for increased geographical diversity, emphasising the importance of exploring the diverse tapestry of non-Western cultures, leading to Asia as an ecological civilization. Further, An and Liu (2023) noted that contemporary environmental philosophy concentrates on evaluating the existence of humans by connecting humanity and nature and adding significant guidance toward the development of modern environmental law.

It is this inclination of the Southeast Asian perspective towards ecocriticism that stands as the only way to reform the discriminatory attitude of the people towards the social model of disability and thus the narrative of *The Glass Palace* for this research paper.

Ecocriticism in *The Glass Palace*

Amitav Ghosh aimed to convey through *The Glass Palace* that literature possesses the potential to foster heightened environmental awareness. The novel exemplifies ecocriticism by vividly portraying various environmental issues. It illustrates the severe repercussions of colonization and warfare on the environment, emphasising the profound environmental damage inflicted by historical events (Divya, 2019, p. 9). Furthermore, as identified by Mukhtar (2015, p. 120-21), Ghosh delineates the exploitation of natural resources by the British, revealing the ruthless extraction of teak, rubber, and oil. The narrative also delves into the human exploitation accompanying resource extraction, shedding



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light on the harsh treatment of the workforce (Mukhtar, 2015). Additionally, the novel graphically depicts the consequences of deforestation, vividly describing the destruction of natural habitats and the resulting harm to animals and birds. It depicts the broader theme of landscape deformation, portraying the altering and diminishing of biodiversity as a consequence of human actions (Divya, 2019, p. 11). Ghosh employs the novel as a medium to powerfully convey the interconnectedness between human activities and the environment, illustrating the far-reaching impact of historical events on nature.

Ghosh's "Route Map" to Reform the Southeast Asian Perspectives Towards Disability

From an ecocritical perspective, as developed by Lyotard (1991) and Comer and Junker (2020), the development of consciousness towards ecology is significant in developing a humanitarian sensibility towards disability. These scholars also established that the relation between the psychologies of taking care of the environment is closely related to the ways to care about the physical existence of human beings (Lyotard, 1991; Comer and Junker, 2020). It is this interrelation between the need to get conscious about the environment that becomes a conscientious process. This interrelation is identified by Papadopoulos as the onto-ecological human identity, which comprises the deliberate presentation to others and the underlying mosaic, rendering the uniqueness of the individual. The alignment of these two elements imparts a sense of familiarity and stability, contributing to a continuous understanding of human identity (130) in this research, the way to recognize this interdependence with the world and embracing onto-eco spacing, transcending conventional boundaries for demarcating the disabled from the general population remain predominant.

The "Route Map"

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh's ecocritical narrative centers on British imperialism, involving deforestation and afforestation for commercial gain. Ghosh threads ecological concerns by acknowledging historical factors shaping the social constructs of India, Burma, and Malaya: ". . . came from a tree that had felled dynasties, caused invasions, created fortunes, brought a new way of life into being." (*The Glass Palace*, p. 71)

In this narrative, on the one hand, the colonial expansion for imperial dominance is identified, and on the other hand, the need to be conscious of global ecological deterioration is at the center stage. In a very sensitive manner, Ghosh weaves fears, joys, sorrows, and ambitions, creating awareness of instances connected to escalating environmental issues. As an 'environmental historiographer,' Ghosh adeptly captures ecological mismanagement, illustrating repercussions and sufferings against the backdrop of British imperialism. While developing this school of thought, Ghosh's narrative creates the route map for generating humanitarian sensitiveness towards the act of taking care of ecology, which stands as the most supportive way to pave the way for transforming the superstitious perspectives of Southeast Asians towards disability.



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Reformation of Southeast Perspectives towards Social Disability

Ghosh makes a very ironic reference to the destruction of ecology and refers to the justifications led by Rajkumar-*This is my little empire, Uma. I made it. I took it from the jungle and moulded it into what I wanted it to be. Now that it's mine, I take good care of it. There's law, there's order, everything is well run. Looking at it, you would think everything here is tame and domesticated, that all the parts have been fitted carefully together. It's nature: the nature that made these trees and the nature that made us.* (*The Glass Palace*, p. 202)

This is a kind of mindset that adds the elements of transformation to the Southeast Asian ways of looking at the ecosystem as a personal possession and the demand to create preservation of nature for the greater well-being of mankind. *The Glass Palace* intricately weaves environmental themes, prompting a revaluation of Southeast Asian perspectives on social disability. It aims to heighten awareness of ecological preservation, aligning with regional viewpoints that recognise nature's profound impact on identity, historical experiences, and ongoing environmental challenges. Ghosh's narrative seamlessly integrates the natural environment with cultural elements, emphasising the interconnectedness of nature, culture, and society, shaping characters with disabilities. The novel illustrates ecocritical narratives by intertwining disability with the environment, shedding light on challenges faced by individuals with disabilities, as exemplified in the jungles of Burma, where disability becomes entwined with the ecosystem, showcasing the delicate balance between human existence and nature. Diverse voices express a Southeast Asian sentiment, challenging stereotypes and emphasising the unique thread of disability within the diverse tapestry of existence.

Eventually, it can be noted that inclusive practices in environmental efforts depict every voice, including those of individuals with disabilities, contributing to the symphony of environmental protection. The narrative plays a vital role in awareness programs challenging stigmas associated with disabilities, acting as a catalyst for dismantling misconceptions and shedding light on societal constructs hindering true inclusivity.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be marked that as this research paper delves into the intersectional understanding of disability perspectives within Southeast Asian culture, influenced by ecocriticism under the social model, it emphasises the relevance of ecocriticism in *The Glass Palace*. The intertwining of perspectives on disability and environmental considerations in the concept of "social disability" within this cultural context emerges as a particularly intriguing subject, warranting critical evaluation and deeper exploration.

Inspired by the novel, collaboration between environmental and disability advocacy groups exemplifies united efforts to create a world where both the environment and



individuals with disabilities thrive. The novel's interdisciplinary research enriches collective understanding, contributing to a reformed, inclusive, and environmentally conscious perspective on disability in Southeast Asia, echoing sentiments found within the text.

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