

AMITAV GHOSH'S SEA OF POPPIES: AN ANALYSIS FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

The *Ibis* trilogy is a work of historical fiction by Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, consisting of the novels *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015). A work of postcolonial literature, the story is set across the Indian Ocean region during the 1830s in the lead-up to the First Opium War. It particularly focuses on the trade of opium between India and China and the trafficking of girmityas to Mauritius. The series has received critical acclaim and academic attention for its historical research, themes and ambition. A television series adaptation was announced to be in development in 2019. The trilogy gets its name from the *Ibis*, a schooner slave ship that is repurposed to transport opium and girmityas. Most of the main characters meet for the first time on the ship. The series is set during the 1830s across the Indian Ocean region amid the build-up to the First Opium War. The series follows a nonlinear narrative.

Keywords: Ibis trilogy, historical research, Girmityas, Transport, Opium

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Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies is a remarkable novel which weaves colonial history and its impact on the people. This is his first book of Ibis Trilogy in which he meticulously describes some important historical events and how they influence the lives of people. He describes the opium trade and demonstrates how it is used as a powerful tool to colonise Indians. The writer shows how this ugly trade binds them and the inmates boarded on Ibis discover their history and identity. They invent who governs them and how they are enslaved in the world. The novel is divided into three parts: land, river and sea. The inmates of the ship are victims of situations and they attempt to settle and forget their past. The novelist weaves everyone's stories in the manner that their stories are interconnected with the historical events that occurred during colonial times. The present article deals with the issue of history and how it is woven in the novel.

The novelist describes how Opium Trade helped the colonisers to colonise and enslave people. The poppy seed, the nucleus of the narrative, signifies the colonial practices of exploitation, oppression and enslavement using barbaric and violent methods. The ship which is primarily engaged in Opium trade has been described as a centre to learn about the forces of power and colonial practices. It was under the pretext of transporting labourers to Mauritius. The major characters such as Deeti, Kalua, Zachary, Neel, Paulette, Jodu, Lei Long Fatt, Serang Ali and Baboo Nob Kissin are directly or indirectly engaged with the opium trade. Deeti's husband is an opium addict. Zachary is the captain of Ibis, a ship used to transport opium. With a purpose to escape, Kalua boards the ship. Fatt is "an afeemkhor who has no opium"¹ Paulette wishes to know more about the plants and therefore he joins the ship. Baboo Nob Kissin can access every part of the ship and therefore he is well-known to everyone on the ship.

Historically, the writer fictionalizes the forgotten and unwritten stories of the indentured labourers who were enslaved and shifted forcefully to the plantations of the British Empire to increase the workforce and earn lots of money. Some forceful migrations to Mauritius, South Africa and Fiji are not mentioned in the historical and literary writing during and after colonial times because they were the darkest chapters in the history of Indian migration. In addition, some historiographers, politicians, biographers, economists, literary writers and diplomats focused more on the migration to developed lands such as the USA and Britain just to show how massive remittance has been received by the country from these modern and post-modern migrants. Some painful stories of poor migrants from the country to the lands of British plantations of sugar and opium are forgotten. Ghosh revives the issue of the opium trade during the colonial regime and how it controlled human life in his *Sea of Poppies*. Their tragic stories reflect the forces of British global capitalist expansion and its impact.

The writer meticulously describes how the colonial places had become the producers of raw materials for the British factories. The forests of the colonised countries were destroyed to fulfil the need for timber. The traditional agriculture system underwent drastic changes due to colonial strategies to loot India and other countries economically and culturally. The colonisers influenced the farmers to accept the style of monoculture agriculture system in which poppies and sugar were considered to be cash crops. Later on, these crops were useful for the British masters to colonise the natives economically and made them financially weak and deprived.

The novel, *Sea of Poppies* reflects the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century in which the writer shows how the British Masters managed the cultivation, marketing and selling of

Opium and how this trade impacted the socio-cultural dynamics of the time. He not only demonstrates the impacts of historical events on the lives of people from diverse cultures but successfully demonstrates how these persons are interconnected with each other because they are victims of the historical realities of their time. By describing the impacts of the Opium War between the Chinese and British for dominance in the trade, the novelist shows it as a significant historical event which changed the coloniser-colonised relationship in India. The writer also implies how capitalism was the key source for the colonial regime in the country. The colonial enterprise mainly worked for the economic development and expansion of Britain with a purpose to rule globally. To get economic advantages from the colonised natives of India, they forced the Indian farmers to grow cash crops including opium. They were compelled to give up growing wheat and other food crops which would help them to survive. They were forced to plant poppy in their farms which resulted in poverty and hunger. This also changed the destiny of the country as it became economically desperate and deprived. In the novel, Ghosh describes that “fields that had once given food were now flooded with the growing wave of poppies.”² These poor farmers were compelled to become coolies and they were sent to Mauritius and other colonies as labour force. These *Girmitiyas* were the new forms of slavery after slavery was declared illegal in many European countries. In addition to this, the socio-economic compulsions of the natives also compelled them to join the colonial labour force which was transported to the alien world of plantations. Due to caste-system and other superstitions, the Indians leave their native lands to be colonial subjects which are destined to cruelty and oppression of their masters. Mathur notes:

Ghosh records the political and socio-economic conditions that led to the mass migration of impoverished Indian peasants as indentured labourers to the Mauritius islands. Indentured immigration created a *Diaspora of Indians that is spread all over the world*.³

In the novel, Ghosh fictionalises the characters who are the victims of Colonisers. He displays how colonial history was not only one bad chapter in the overall history of the country but it was very powerful to change the shape of economy, history, culture and sociology of India. The impacts of the colonisation of India, the writer implies, are not over. He shows how The East Indian Company controlled the opium trade in India by forcing the farmers to change their cultivation process and grow cash crops. In addition, the British also made exploitive policies to make the landowners lose their lands. They strategically worked to make the peasantry powerless. The novelist draws the character of a British capitalist merchant Benjamin Brightwell Burnham, and how he took advantage of acquiring lands in India. The writer demonstrates how the colonisers tapped the advantages of the global demand for opium and made the trade wider and more profitable during colonial times.

In the novel, the writer shows how the demand for cheap labour was fulfilled by making the Indians labourers in British plantations of rubber, sugar and poppies. This condition after the end of the slave trade in Europe was not good news for the British masters as they could not have labourers. The planter *Monsieur d'Epinau's* letter mentions their troubles: Tell Mr. Burnham that I need men. Now that we may no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed”⁴ The writer carefully described the anguish and tragic condition of the Indian labours who became the victims of historical events during the colonial period.

Ghosh fictionalises historical events in which his characters exclaim with pain their stories of displacement and hopes for a settlement in some new land forgetting their past. He demonstrates how the colonial expansion of the British Empire during the nineteenth century

victimised human beings to be coolies and cheap labourers and enslaved them financially and economically. He shows how their terrible strategies compelled people to migrate or move to survive economically. Slavery, the expansion of plantation colonies, the transportation of slaves and the voluntary movements of people are realities of the colonial regime which exploited and oppressed the natives.

Ghosh re-visits the historical data of the transatlantic slave trade during the colonial period in which the British colonisers were involved and they changed the destinies of the lots of colonised natives to boost their economic outcomes from various plantations in the colonies of the world. The transported labourers lost not only their identity and culture but their essential attachment to the places where they were born. Their ties with other natives in their home countries were broken and they lived isolated life at various plantations and they were compelled to help the colonial enterprise economically by their hard work. The novelist, by showing their journey which will remove their engagement from their native culture, mentions how the ship has been a diasporic site for re-imagining the future in an alien land. It played a significant role in shaping their resistance against the colonial powers which were oppressive and cruel. The ship depicted in the novel reflects a historical journey in which the native culture and economy were destroyed. It also showed the possibility of dissemination of people from various places which created some new forms of hybrid culture. Through the historical movement of Ibis in the novel, the writer expresses how cultures were destroyed and recreated through colonial enterprise in the world during the nineteenth century. In the novel, Ghosh describes that the Ibis “had been built to serve as a “blackbirder”, for transporting slaves. This, indeed, was the reason why she had changed hands: in the years since the formal abolition of the slave trade, British and American naval vessels had taken to patrolling the West African coast in growing numbers, and the Ibis was not swift enough to be confident of outrunning them.”

In the novel, the novelist draws characters from heterogeneous societies who are compelled to carry on their historical movement from their native land to the land of their dreams, aspirations and visions with the sheer knowledge about their compulsions as slaves to the British masters. The ship shows their historical movement as indentured labourers moving away from their native lands to the capitalist site where their hard work will magnify the financial profits of their colonial master and it will increase and expand their political power. Their memory of their native land helps their unreal connection with their homelands. Their memories traumatise them but they must face real conditions and therefore Deeti must emerge as Aditi, the mythical woman of Indian culture who was given the boon of living her life again. She regains her life back as a Girmitya though she realises that she will not see the growth of her daughter. She accepts her new life on the ship. She accepts her new identity which saves her from the hegemonic and exploitive Indian caste system on the one hand and engages her in the oppressive colonial system of indentured labour force which works for the economic and political development of the colonisers on the other. To sum up, it can be stated that Ghosh has remarkably contributed to the discourse of postcolonialism which examines how the native cultures were socio-economically and psychologically devastated by the colonial enterprises. Leela Gandhi comments:

Post-colonialism pursues a postnational reading of the colonial encounter by focusing on the global amalgam of cultures and identities consolidated by imperialism.⁶

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