

In The Shadow Of Opium: Amitav Ghosh Sea Of Poppies

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Abstract:

Historical fiction is a recherché thing that is arduous to research, tough to put into fiction and difficult to make it gripping. Amitav Ghosh has prospered in doing all these in his novel the 'Sea of Poppies'. The novel set in the first half of 19th century opium wars, it portrays the British India Company's imperial designs. The intention of the British India Company was not restricted to trade and commerce instead, it expands the Empire's monopoly on the economic policies and begin themselves as the sovereign. This research paper examines the sufferings of protagonist Deeti and aims to trace the cultivation of opium and opium trade of 18th century, from its roots in India to its existing destination of China along the way inquiring the migratory history of the people across the Indian Ocean.

Keywords: Historical fiction, Opium trade, Sufferings, Cultivation, Monopoly.

I. Introduction:

Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy consists of three novels they are Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke and Flood of Fire. These novels are phenomenally posturized some historical events like opium war and trade. The novel Sea of Poppies is based on the historical setting of colonial rule in India and to fulfil its need a supply of opium to China. The story begins with the arrival of a slave ship Ibis at Ganga-Sagar Island. The novel is divided into three parts namely land, river and sea. The first part gives clear narration how the circumstances that bring the characters to the ship. The second part presents how these characters get into the ship. The final part gives the details of how they get to sail the Ibis to a new life that awaits them in Mauritius. The ship Ibis is principally engaged in Opium trade but it moves under the pretext of transporting labourers to Mauritius. Primarily there are nine characters in the novel namely Deeti, Kalua, Zachary Reid, Serang Ali, Neel Rattan Haldar, Lei Long Fatt, Jodu, Paulette and Baboo Nob Kissin. Directly or indirectly these nine of the characters associated with the poppy seed.

II. Sea of Poppies an overview:

Sea of Poppies is a story sets prior to Opium Wars, on the banks of holy river Ganges and Calcutta. The characters in the novels are like poppy seeds that outgrow the field as if they form a sea.

Deeti, the main protagonist is introduced at the beginning of the novel. She is a responsible mother and a house maker. She is given opium drug at the time of her marriage so that her brother-in-law could consummate the marriage in place of her infertile husband. She begets a

daughter, Kabutri, not by her husband but by her brother in law Chandan Singh. Her husband Hukum Singh is a crippled man who works in the opium factory. He had wounded while working as a sepoy in the British regiment, to relieve from the pain that was caused by the battle wounds he started consuming opium and slowly addicted to the drug.

Opium addiction killed Hukum Singh and Deeti is forced by the social custom to immolate herself in her husband's funeral pyre for a sati. She is rescued and eloped with Kalua, her well-wisher, ox-cart driver of a low caste who takes her husband every day to the Opium factory. Deeti's mother in law and her relatives were in search of Deeti and Kalua who had brought disgrace to the family. The couple had no other option except escapes from her relatives so they flee to the country and they boarded in Ibis which is on its way to Mauritius.

Zachary Reid is a mulatto American ride on the ship looking for adventure and wants to live in Ibis for his lifetime. Reid becomes the command of the ship with the help of Serang Ali, who is the head of the Lascars. Neel Rattan Halder is another character a wealthy Raja whose ancestry has been ruling Rakshali for decades. Burnham bothers him. He wants to sell out the property but Zachary refuses to do so as the Rakshali is his family's ancestral property and selling it meant his deflate away from his responsibility. He is tried for forgery but it is a part of plotting of Burnham. Consequently, he is sentenced to work as an indentured labourer for seven years in Mauritius. There he meets Ah Fatt, an opium addict and his only companion in prison.

On the other side Ghosh has introduced a new character called Azad Naskar, nicknamed as Jodu. Jodu was a boatman's son. His mother was the 133 ayah of Lambert-sahib's daughter Miss Paulette. Mr Pierre Lambert came to serve as the assistant curator of Calcutta's Botanical Gardens. He was a Frenchman. It was in the search of Miss Paulette that Jodu loaded his boat with his few remaining possessions and was ready to leave for Calcutta after her mother's burial. Miss Paulette was born in Jodu's fathers' boat. It was Jodu's mother who helped in her birth and was her wet-nurse after her mother's death. Jodu's mother nurtured both the child as if she had not one child but two: Jodu her son and Putli-'Doll'- her daughter. The two children spent their infancy lying head-to-head in her arms. The French woman Paulette, who brought in India, also boarded the ship. Mr Burnham a botanist takes Paulette into their home after her father's death. As Mr. and Mrs. Burnham try to misbehave with her, she determines to escape from them. These and many other characters come to share the Ibis.

The journey of these characters is engrossed with pain and pleasure and they do not merely coincide but relate to each other symbolically. Fate has thrown together these characters from among the crew there are sailors, collies, and convicts and the protagonist of the novel are misfits among the boarders. Their old families' ties are washed away. Like this historical counterparts, they view themselves as 'Jahaj-Bhais'. Very strangely enough the unlikely dynasty becomes part of the fate of Ibis. The diaspora of these characters 'Encapsulates the colonial history of the East'.

III. Cultivation of Opium:

The novel *Sea of Poppies* deals with the cultivation of opium and its harmful effect on the people and the environment. The importance of seeds of plants in the life of human beings is stressed in the novel.

Opium is a sedative drug that is acquired from the unripe seeds of opium poppy plant. The principal importance of opium is to relieve from tension and pain, which means it slows down the messages travelling between brain and body.



Figure .1

Opium poppy flower



Figure. 2

Poppy seed

Poppy was an ingredient yield not to be consumed but to be sold. It slowly and steadily incorporates colonial consciousness, transforming the farmer into a worker and eventually into a slave. In the banks of the Ganga River, the fertile lands have been turned into poppy fields grown to expand the demand of the drug in China. The flowering plants of poppy in the field give us an idea that opium will play an important role in the lives of the characters of the novel.

In the earlier days, the fields especially in the winter would be massive with Wheat and Masoor dal. Edible crops were grown earlier and they not only gave them food but material for making the roof. Ghosh has tried to lay stress that the material which was freely available to the people earlier has now become expensive due to the change in cultivation from food crop to cash crop.

The East India Company doesn't have anything to interchange for the immense quantities of tea that they import from China. The agents of East India Company went house to house and forcefully given the cash in advance to the formers and force them to take the contract to plant poppy seeds. It is unfeasible and no use to say no to the white magistrates. Even they don't accept the money the agents forcefully take the thumbprints from the formers. Thus, the Cultivation of opium poppies foisted on Indians by the British Company and forcing everyone to grow poppy. The poppy fields helped not the natives but the British rulers to sustain the rule of the market. The assortment of the edible crops is lost due to the cultivation of opium and whoever refuses to growing opium is impelled and finally, it results in debt and migration.

IV. Effects of Cultivation of Opium:

The degrading effect of the cultivation of opium is that it has ceased the cultivation of edible food crops as Deeti remembers how edible crops were grown earlier and they not only gave them food but material for making roof. It was a perfect life but due to the cultivation of opium they have to die from hunger or migrate to Mauritius. As she says:

In the old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare- it had to be bought at the market, from people lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could (29).

Deeti compares the change in their lives brought due to the change in the cropping pattern. She remembers when she was a child, opium was grown between the main crops of wheat, masoor dal and vegetables and her mother would send some of the poppy seeds to the oil press, and the rest she would keep for the house, some for replanting, and some to cook with meat and vegetables.

In the novel, it is not only human beings who become an addict to opium but all living beings in the environment are affected by it. As Kalua gives opium to his ox to eat so that it may relax. The insects that suck the nectar of the poppy flower also become drunk and behave unusually in the novel as Ghosh says that sweet odour of the poppy pod attracts the insects like bees, grasshoppers and wasps and in a few days, they get struck in the liquid flowing out of the pod. He says when the sap turns black their dead bodies merge with the sap and become a part of the opium sold in the market.

The pollution of water of the river Ganga is shown through the flow of sewage of the opium factory in the Ganga. The river is worshipped by the people of India and its water is used for drinking by all living beings but due to release of sewage it becomes unfit for drinking. Ghosh compares it with the river Nile, the life line of the Egyptian civilization.

V. Opium Trade:

Ghosh masterly sets the story of the novel on the trade of opium with China prior to the Opium Wars and India as the land of its production. Ibis is directly related to Opium trade as it was used to carry the Opium products. Opium was first initiated to China by Arab and Turkish traders in the late sixth or early seventh century. Historically this trade was opted by Britishers to strengthen their economy which was down due to fall in spice trade. On the other hand they needed commodity exchange with china which they earned through Opium trade illegally.

The opium drug was used in minimal quantities until the seventeenth century, the exercise of smoking tobacco spread from North America to China and smoking of opium soon became vogue throughout China, opium addiction multiplied and opium importations grew expeditiously. It had become such a problem by 1729 that emperor of China Yong-Zheng (ruled 1722-35) forbidden the sale and smoking of opium, this act failed to hamper the trade.

In 1796 the Qianlong emperor banned opium importation and cultivation. In spite of such order, however, the opium trade continued to burgeon.

Early in the 18th century, the Portuguese found that they could import opium from India and sell it in China at a sizable profit. In 1773 that East India Company had discovered the trade, and the same year they became the leading suppliers in the Chinese market. The British East India Company established a monopoly of opium cultivation in the Indian province of Bengal, where they developed a method of growing opium poppies cheaply and abundantly and sell to Chinese markets at immense profits.

VI. Conclusion:

The cultivation of opium demolished the ecological balance of nature; it terminated the cultivation of food crop. It evolved in hunger, migration and degradation of environment. Ghosh has tried to show that every crop has its own significance and when it is grown in overabundance it creates a disparity in the ecology. All in all, the Sea of Poppies makes for a gripping read and beautifully pictures the cultivation of opium and opium trade.

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