

**History of Colonial and Opium Trade in
Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies**

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Abstract:

Sea of Poppies (2008) by Ghosh short listed for the year's **Man Booker Prize** and received favorably by the Booker Jury for its compelling story told against an epical historical canvas. It is the first volume in the projected Ibis Trilogy and considered as "one of the masterpieces of the twenty-first century fiction. The setting of the novel is the colonial period of **1838** when the economy of **Bengal and Bihar** was dominated by East India Company's monopoly of opium trade in India. The events and the incidents of the novel throw light on the social, political and economic history of colonial India. Ghosh's draws his material from history and anthropology to weave the story. It is the story of the girmitiyas- the indentured labourers, the poppy growing **Peasants, Lascars, Migrants**, exiled and displaced peoples whose story has been intertwined with the aspect of imperial trade and commerce in British history.

Keywords:- *Anthropology, Subalternity, Marginality, Migrants, Colonialism, Imperialism.*

Introduction

Sea of Poppies is a stunning and vibrant novel that confirms the reputation of Ghosh as a master storyteller. The Ibis, a former slave ship has been refitted to make a voyage from Calcutta, across Indian Ocean to Mauritius. As for the people on board are a motley array of sailors, stowaways, girmitiyas, lascars, coolies and convicts. It is a historical novel that owes to the distinctiveness of characters. The novel reveals the social anthropological concerns of Ghosh in presenting the issues such as Subalternity, Marginality in association with class, caste, race and gender.

Sea of Poppies is an amalgamation of **Anthropology, History and Fiction**. It is an authentic record on how colonialism and opium trade damaged and divided Indian Society. The setting of the novel in Bihar and Bengal of 1838, when British East India Company had the complete hold on the trade and commerce under purview of the company Bahadur's rule. The policies of British East India Company enforce the opium cultivation on the part of rural folk and destroy the indigenous agriculture and trade. The rule of Company Bahadur spells havoc in India's villages and towns. This sets the background of the novel.

Discussion and Interpretation:

The consequent of **Christopher Columbus in 1492** is often cited as the starting point of the process of colonization. Colonialism and Imperialism are often used interchangeably. The word colonialism comes from the Roman. 'Colonic' which meant 'farm' or 'settlement'. Colonialism can be defined as "the conquest and control of other people's land and goods."¹ Colonialism in this sense is not merely the expansion of various European powers of India and elsewhere from the sixteenth century onwards but it has become a recurrent feature of human history. In India, colonialism extracted goods and wealth by conquering the local Rajas and landlords. It restructured the economies of the conquered nations, drawing them into a complex relationship with their own, so there was the flow of human beings and natural resources available to the colonizers. This flow of human beings worked for them like the slaves, the girmitiyas, the indentured labourers for the plantations of agricultural crops in metropolitan cities, meant for the consumption, for the European countries. So the human beings and the material travelled for the profits of the colonizers.

Sea of Poppies encircles the theme of **colonial India, colonial violence, and opium trade and opium war**. Ghosh reveals the process of colonialism in which the flow of profits, people involved settlement and migrations are concerned. The Opium trade in India involved enormous global shifts of population. Both the colonizer and the colonized moved the former as masters and the later as Girmitiyas, the indentured laborers, servants and coolies. The European colonialism involved a variety of techniques and patterns of domination with help of the weapons, the colonial law, the free trade policy and the Company Bahadur's rule. Therefore, the colonialism paved the path for the European capitalism. India is the integral part of that movement.

In this novel **Ghosh** talks about the lesser known history of opium trade, opium war and its effects on the Indian peasants. He also highlights upon an interesting area that “has remained under served, the economic history of India.” The British officials had extracted significant wealth from the treasury of the Royal families by exiling them. The other economic events involve the poppy cultivation as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese market, and the transportation of the indentured labourers for the plantations and cutting of sugar canes on the islands of Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad.

Ghosh mingles history of fiction in such a way that both the disciplines appear to be inseparable and serve as complimentary to each other. He attempts to reconstruct the history of opium trade and colonial India in terms of memory, interpretations, analysis, expression and research. With the help of deep and delving research, **Ghosh explores** those regions where even history cannot access. **O.P. Dwivedi** observes that the novel “uncovers the inhuman brutalities and flagrant violence which the Indians confronted during the blood thirsty period of colonialism in the nineteenth-century.”² Ghosh takes the readers back to colonial India of 1838 and to the scene of opium agriculture where the poor peasants are forced to, give up the edible crops like wheat, rice, vegetables and cereals, and to take up poppy crop. It is the story of those peasants whose life is fated by poppy flowers. The forced poppy cultivation on the part of the peasants caused opium addiction, hunger and poverty. On the other hand, the East India Company generated revenue, the unimaginable wealth by growing opium and exporting illegally to China. The fields which were full of edible crop once, now swamped with the rising of poppies. The poppy cultivation ruins the lives of the rural folk and enforces them to sign the agreement of indentured laborers, a life of slavery.

The novel describes the utter helplessness of Indian rural folk, and peasants as the hunger of British of revenue in opium trade increased. They are crippled, exploited and poisoned. The shrewd, crafty and cunning trade of British snatched everything from the Indians including richness, liberty, freedom and peace, and from the Chinese, their prudence and wisdom by poisoning them with opium. Regarding the opium history in the novel, Ghosh elaborates:

“It is so strange, the history of opium – now that
I’m deeply inside it, it strikes me as such an
Amazing thing that it’s so little known. It
profoundly shaped world history, well into the

20th century. It's a history that has been absolutely silenced, that's all one can say about it. What was done to China, in particular, is one of the great historical crimes. No one discusses it in the West today."

History is an object of research for Ghosh. He weaves history into story. The novel opens in a remote village haunted by these circumstances. Deeti lives on the outskirts of Gazipur, Fifty miles away from Banaras. She worries about the lateness of her poppy crop. Her husband, Hukum Singh works in Gazipur Opium Factory, and addicted to opium. She prepares rotis for him. Here the rotis refer not only to round wheat-flour rotis but also to the 'roti' made up from "poppy petal wrapper" (SOP,6) for the purpose of selling to the sudder opium factory in the Gazipur. Deeti represents the peasants who suffer due to the poppy crop. No peasants dared to plant anything rather than poppy. The agents of the English sahibs go home to home and offer cash advances to the farmers and enforce them to sign the agreements for poppy fields. "It was impossible to say no to them: if you refused they would leave their silver hidden in your house or throw it through a window." (SOP, 30) The poor Indian farmers suffered the burnt of poppy crop. They were forced to turn their fields to poppy cultivation that caused hunger, poverty and slavery. The poppy crop fulfilled the profitable demands of the colonizers on the other hand it caused the starvation in the subaltern world of the farmers.

In the Gazipur opium factory the poppies were converted into balls of opium which were transported to China. The scene of the opium factory where the dark men move slowly and look like ghouls, in a trance, knee deep in a pile of opium reminds – "an image straight out of **Dante;s Inferno.**" The records of history reveal that the Gazipur opium factory happens to be world's largest opium production factory.

The opium trade had far-reaching consequences on China, millions of people got addicted to opium smoking. The Chinese economy was rapidly undermined due to opium trade. Therefore, the Chinese stood up against the opium trade of East India Company and banned the opium import to China. On the other hand, the East India Company took the unprecedented steps to raise the war against China under the name of free trade and freedom. Ghosh exposes the diplomatic policy of British government and their determination to trade opium with China.

History is the favorite subject of the Anthropologists. Ghosh is interested in writing the past in terms of present which is full of freshness and devoid of dullness of historical details. In his interview with Tony Thakaran Ghosh asserts that,

“I don’t think I’ll be a novelist if I wasn’t
Interested in History and Anthropology. Those
Things inform the other aspects of (my) work. I
Think of I hadn’t had an interest in history, I
Wouldn’t be writing today.”

Ghosh revives the past mixing it with imagination of fiction. He has portrayed the character of Raja Neel Ratan on the historical figure Raja Nand Kumar of Bengal in the eighteenth century. Raja Nand Kumar failed to win the favour of the East India Company’s governor, Warren Hastings. So Raja Nand Kumar was charged of forgery and was kept in prison under pitiable condition. In the novel Ghosh has depicted the character of Raja Neel Ratan in relation to the opium trade. Raja Neel, his father and the Zemindars of Raskhali were permitted and sought by the Company officials to obtain the finances for the opium trade with China. Due to the ban and prohibition on opium by China Raja Neel faces the financial ruin, the Company officials bring the charge of forgery against him. His property gets confiscated, while he is deported to Mauritius. **Ravi Bhussan and Daisy** rightly contends:

“**Amitav Ghosh** has a distinctive style of writing that synthesizes the imagination of a writer with the insightful detaining of an anthropologist. He takes up the obscured events in history and transcends the boundaries of fiction / nonfiction by sprinkling over them the colors of his imagination.”³

So in this novel there is the blending of fact and fiction or a coalescing of different areas of human knowledge, the mingling of history, voyage, opium trade, memory and multiple points of view of the novelist.

Ghosh exposes the colonial law, colonial prisons and their way of exploitations. The zemindars, the landlords and the rajas become the victims of imperial law. When Raja Neel’s fortunes started sagging, the English officials had no difficulty in leading the charge of forgery against him and subsequently imprisoning him. In the course of his trial, Raja Neel found that in the system of justice “it was the English themselves Mr Burnham and his ilk – who were exempt from the law as it applied to others.” (SOP, 239) Burnham, who had the eye on the estate of Raja

Neel, had been exempted from the law on the issue of forgery. His property was seized and sold for the benefits of Burnham. This example of the colonial law in India suggests that many land lords, zemindars and rajas became the victims to it. Salil Tripathi observes about the significance of history in the novel and further adds that Ghosh digs, “deep into quirky in the novel and further adds that Ghosh digs, “deep into quirky footnotes of history, he likes to unravel sprawling sagas brimming with social, political, anthropological and indeed, environmental significance.

V.S. Naipaul is regarded as a founder of the giritiyas discourse. In his early novels like **A House of Mr Biswas** and in a Free State he gives a form and language to the giriti ideology. The giriti psychology is governed by the fragments of thoughts. **Naipaul** deals with the predicament of the Trinidad Indians who define themselves in relation to an absent centre, the homeland they were forced to leave. On the other hand, **Ghosh** points out the causes and the circumstances responsible for the rural folk to turn out to be giritiyas. In the novels of Naipaul, the diasporic consciousness of giritiyas and the place of origin becomes a subject of investigation. Ghosh points out that the giritiyas will create the diasporic dynasty. Naipaul points out the giriti ideology with a profound sense of cultural loss. *Sea of Poppies* also highlights the loss of home and nation on the part giritiyas like Naipaul’s fiction.

Ghosh explains the reasons behind the giriti and the process that is responsible for taking so many Indians away from their homeland to the newer part of the world. Ghosh has spent a month in Guangzhou that is Canton, researching the nineteenth century opium trade. He found many shocking things in his research which he has explained in this novel. In this interview he admitted that he “did a lot of research in libraries and archives,” and further added that he wanted to approach the issue of “migrations out of India in the early **19th century** and then it became clear that the cultivation of opium was very much a part of the background.” Migration is the result of poverty, draught, hunger and lack of employment. Ghosh suggests that the opium cultivation and migration of indentured labour, the giriti have close relations, they are the two sides of a coin.

In the nineteenth century, there was the complete hold of the East India Company over India. The eastern provinces like Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh were also under the purview of the Company Bahadur’s rule. The Company Bahadur’s rule and policies enforced the rural folk for opium cultivation and destroyed the indigenous agriculture and trade, this rule created

havoc in Indian villages and towns. It is the great socio economic tide that sweeps the rural folk away from their village and out to sea. So poppy cultivation is the factor, which is responsible for the migration of the girmit.

Ghosh reveals that the voyage of the girmit and the treatment given to them by the colonial officials is none better than the African slaves. The voyage of the girmit from India to Mauritius reminds the voyage of the African slaves to America. The girmit are exposed to all kinds of rumours and temptations. The stories are told by the troublemakers regarding the migration of the girmit; many of them run away to their villages and many find other work. Therefore, the duffadars try to keep the girmit indoors by locking them. The unhealthy atmosphere creates many problems; number of them possesses communicable diseases. Many of them think that they are being feed up so that they will be fattened for the slaughter, like goats before Id. Some of them are told that they will be hanged upside down and the way from their brain will take out for making the candles or the oil that to be found in human brain “the coveted mimiai-ka-tel.” (SOP, 247) The rumours and the troublemaker’s stories create the panic among the girmit.

Multilingual and Multicultural Lascars: The term lascar is derived from the Persian Lashkar which refers to an army, a camp or a band of followers. In the fifteenth century the Portuguese used the term ‘Lascars’ to describe the sailors from India, Burma, Malaysia, China, Thailand and Africa. The British employed the lascars on their merchant ships due to the expansion of Empire and trading routes. The lascars were known for their work and discipline and were available in the form of cheap labour. They were also known for their art of communication in trade and commerce. The lascar system proved to be very popular since the seventeenth century up to the mid twentieth. There were two acts that meant for the sailors, the Navigation Acts and the Lascar Act of 1802. The lascars proved to be beneficial to the Europeans in the trade and commerce and also at the time of wars.

Ghosh also points out that the Indian ship – building industry was absolutely excellent as compared to the western industry right up to 1820s. In this period the large numbers of ships were built in Bombay and Calcutta. But in the colonial regime the British with their financial strength and laws destroyed the Indian shipbuilding industry since that period the Indian shipbuilding industry has shrunk and been ignored. Ghosh wants to suggest that the Indian shipbuilding industry should be renovated for the progress of the nation.

Subaltern Societies: Ghosh uses the specific method of ‘writing’ of colonial history, subaltern history, and marginal, feminine and migration history. The novel contains the different marginalized communities including women and lower caste communities. The marginality can be analyzed on the basis of race, caste, gender, culture, religion, politics and language. Ghosh is the social anthropologist, historian, journalist, pragmatic, researcher and novelist who is influenced by the subaltern studies project and embarks his journey as a postcolonial writer. In this case **Robert Dixon** remarks that,

“Ghosh’s training in historical and Anthropological research, his eschewing of grand theorist gestures and his links with the subaltern studies project makes his work an interesting site around which current arguments in post-colonial theory can be conducted.”⁴

The novel is a criticism directed against the colonialism, it delineates how the colonialism damaged and divided the Indian society. The British for the sake of profit converted the fertile land at the bank of Ganges into Sea of Poppies. It affected the life of the peasants adversely and brought them to serve poverty and starvation. The subaltern section of the society suffered due to the attitude of the British rulers.

Ghosh presents the picture of ancient and colonial India with its patriarchal culture and the subaltern, the marginal or the subject position of women.

Ghosh concerns with the subaltern studies and his social anthropologist research recover the characters, which remain marginal in the hegemonic power section of the society. The hegemonic power represented by the British Empire and the caste hierarchy while the marginality represented by the weaker section of the society and the lower caste people. The binaries in the colonial regime are the masters and slaves, elite and subaltern, occidental and oriental and colonizer and colonized. In this novel there are number of subaltern, marginal characters who groan under the British rule like Kalua, Deeti, Raja Neel, Ah Fatt, Zachary, Jodu and the people in the form of indentured laborers.

Conclusion:

In *Sea Poppies* Ghosh explores a period of imperial history in Asia, starting from the late nineteenth century and keeps his trained social anthropological eye on the cross section of the society involved in the opium trade. The novel exhibits the social anthropological imagination of Ghosh in delineating the issues like subalternity, marginality in relation to class, caste, race and gender. The novel reveals the East India Company's policy forcing the rural folk for poppy cultivation. Ghosh also exposes the hypocrisy, diplomacy and politics of Britain behind the opium trade, opium production in India, transportation of opium to China under free trade policy and raising the opium war with China.

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