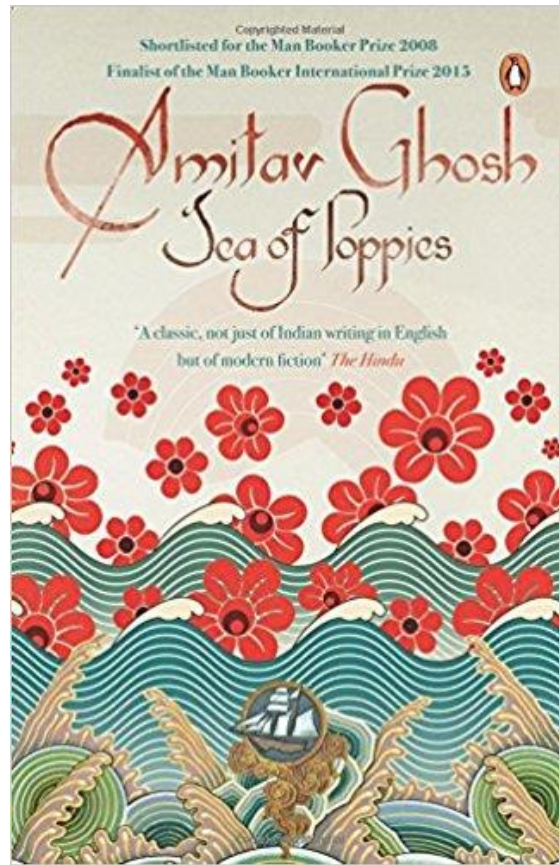


**Sailing through the Environmental Warfare –
An Ecological Journey towards the Heart of Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy**

Aliya Shahnoor Ameen, M.Phil., Ph.D. Researcher



Courtesy:

https://www.google.com/search?q=Sea+of+Poppies+cover+images&rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS794US795&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=6OZ9vJQGPkc-bM%253A%252CmjTU-ZeRwHEYLM%252C&usq=z99Mi7J_iM8CUukXFHN2fOwpYUw%3D&sa=X&ved=0ahUK_Ewi_8pui4o_bAhVCjVQKHZYTBRQ9QEILTAC#imgrc=6OZ9vJQGPkc-bM:

Abstract

Ecology gets relatively a strong voice in the *Ibis* trilogy of Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh's concern for environment can easily be traceable in almost all his literary works particularly in his last three novels popularly known as Ibis trilogy. These are *Sea of Poppies* (2009), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015). Of many aspects of ecocriticism, the issues that become very prominent in these novels are Ecological Imperialism and Ecocide. Under these broader terms Ghosh enjoys the freedom of portraying very realistically the grand scale of the opium war. Opium war is one of the massive incidents of the colonial history of India. One of the unique styles of Amitav Ghosh is his blending of fiction with history. This paper will investigate how the catastrophic opium war is fictionalized to serve the purpose of depicting the ecological disaster during the colonial period.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, *Flood of Fire*, ecocriticism, environmental degradation, Opium War, free trade.

Ibis Trilogy

The Ibis trilogy of Amitav Ghosh very aptly demonstrates his great concern for ecology. Through this historical fiction Ghosh tries to prove that man's petty greed and self-interest are responsible for the degradation of nature. Man has been exploiting nature in the name of civilization from time immemorial. The European colonial power, especially the British East India Company came to Southeast Asia to do trade and commerce. But, underneath their trade, lay the greed for gaining unlawful profit and usurping political power. This article will try to find out how the imperial power sowed the seeds of ecological disaster in the entire region and how Amitav Ghosh very diligently captures environmental turmoil in his trilogy. This article will analyse the issue of environmental degradation in the Ibis trilogy in the light of ecocriticism.

Emergence of Ecocriticism

Today the global environmental crisis has led ecocriticism to emerge as one of the leading disciplines. A noticeable gain has been achieved by the practitioners of the environmental sciences in the past few decades. As for the humanities such as literary study, time has come to be concerned about to play a vital role in the common challenge of shaping an environmentally sustainable world. Ken Hiltner in the General Introduction to *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* noted "Environmental critics explore how nature and the natural world are imagined through literary texts" (Hiltner xiii). Hiltner also observes that the function of the ecocritics is to "look to a range of texts in order to understand how we have traditionally understood our relationship to the planet" (Hiltner xiv).

According to Cheryll Glotfelty, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty 122). She further opines that eco-criticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (Glotfelty122). The term ecocriticism was possibly first coined in 1978 by

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:5 May 2018

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William Rueckert in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. By ecocriticism Rueckert meant “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Glotfelty 123).

Background of the Trilogy

This paper will try to explore how opium trade leading to opium wars brought havoc to the ecosystem of the region. The Ibis trilogy of Amitav Ghosh is a testimony of this environmental degradation affecting the lives of the millions of this vast region of Asia. The trilogy is based upon the trade of opium between India and China run by the East India Company which involved massive trafficking of indentured workers and convicts. Ghosh therefore considers the problem global rather than postcolonial.

The trilogy is named after the ship Ibis destined to sail towards Mauritius with the indentured servants and convicts from Calcutta. The ship is caught in a storm and faces a mutiny. The other ships run into the same storm- the Anihita, vessel carrying opium to Canton and the Redruth, which is on a botanical excursion heading towards Canton. While some passengers of the Ibis manage to reach Mauritius, others find themselves in Hong Kong and Canton and get caught up in the events leading to opium war.

Over the past centuries Europeans conquered different areas of the South Asian and Far Eastern region not by war but by trade. Their growing greed turned their trading relationship into political lust for power. The worst victim was the environment and the living organism inside. Amitav Ghosh through his magnificent storytelling captures these historical events on his colossal canvas of fiction.

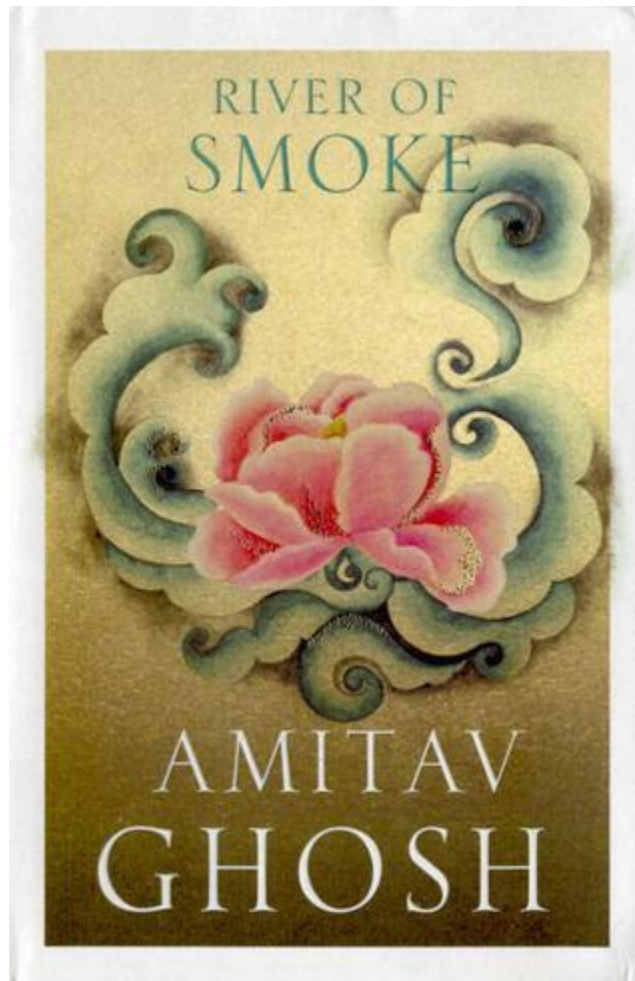
Globalization or Free Trade and Opium War

It all started with Globalization or Free Trade. This paper will show how globalisation as reflected in the Ibis trilogy for opium trade, is dangerously anti-environmental. Opium trade began back in the 19th century to give way to free trade, a favourable term used by the British to reduce the trade deficit with China. China was shut to the outside world for a long time. China exported silk, porcelain and tea but did not allow any goods to enter the Chinese territory. Chinese emperor could manage to warn the foreign traders by saying that China was self-sufficient. It did not require anything from outside world. But British used to understand only trade and business. British developed a craving for tea which was satisfied with the tea grown in China and bought with the silver coin from Peru or Mexico. British coffer was running out of silver because of the tea imported from China. British became anxious to overcome the deficit and ingeniously invented the trick of trade with trade-tea with opium. Limited access was given to the foreign traders by the Chinese emperor by restricting their business within Canton which is today known as Ghuang Jhou.

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Courtesy: <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2012/january/river-smoke-amitav-ghosh>

In *River of Smoke*, Canton was a popular business hub known as Fanqui town or foreigners' town. British used to grow the opium at a colossal rate in India. Then they shipped it to Canton. Within a short spell of time, Chinese has become a drug addict nation. Chinese government started to assume that it is a lethal poison destroying the minds and morals of the country. So, they banned the products.

But, again opium was infiltrated as a smuggled good. Then there was a massive crackdown upon the smuggled opium which led the British to go on war with the Chinese. Globalisation was criticised not only as 'market liberalisation for promoting the interests of the rich and powerful by lowering the trade barriers and at the expense of the poor but also for dominating the local laws and customs which safeguarded the right of ecosystems. Vandana Shiva, director of the Research Foundation for Science and Ecology, New Delhi attacked World Trade Organisation which is the chief advocate of globalisation or free trade, by saying "The WTO has earned itself names such as World Tyranny Organisation because it

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enforces anti-people, anti-nature decisions, to enable corporations to steal the world's harvests through secretive, undemocratic structures and processes. It institutionalises forced trade, not free trade... The rules set by the secretive WTO violate principles of human rights and ecological survival. They violate rules of justice and sustainability. They are rules of warfare against the people and the planet" (Shiva 4).

So, the free trade or free market which the British originated in this part of the region was definitely anti-people, anti-nature drive to satisfy their greed to make profit.

Opium Journey

Against the backdrop of opium cultivation, opium trade, and opium war the Ibis trilogy of Amitav Ghosh has taken shape where Ghosh very dexterously points out the worst atrocity against the ecology. In *Sea of Poppies* we have been taken to the land of poppies along the river Ganges and to Calcutta, where poppies are grown, and opium processed. In *River of Smoke*, the journey continues to Canton in China where the processed opium is sold as drugs. But there is an outbreak of the opium addiction among the Chinese population which has a negative impact on the economy of China as well as the physical and moral condition of the entire Chinese population. On the other hand, the opium traders mostly the British are making empire-sized fortunes by selling the drugs and forcing the Chinese to inhale it. Facing this horrific consequence, the Chinese authorities are trying to impose restriction on the illegal impacts of the drug. In the novel it is shown that the Canton opium traders, not allowed to unload their cargo, await developments in the stalemate between the Chinese authorities and the forces of Free Trade. In the First Opium War, British gunboats enforced a treaty opening Chinese five ports to international trade. The war comes shortly after the ending of this novel.

Sea of Poppies

In the first novel of the Ibis trilogy, the title *Sea of Poppies* itself amply suggests how on a large scale the poppy was cultivated during the British rule. The British forced the Indian peasants to grow opium in the vast arable land where the regular food grains were usually produced. Ghosh captures a magnificent image of the massive farming of opium at the last leg of winter 'in a year when the poppies were strangely slow to shed their petals' Ganga then took a different look as if it was 'flowing between twin glaciers' because the two banks of this holy river were shrouded with white poppies in such a manner that they looked like 'the snows of high Himalayas descended on the plains' ushering the advent of the colourful month spring (Ghosh 3).

But the splendour of this imagery contains within it the bleak side of the aftereffect. The cultivation of opium brings a havoc to the production of food crops which are major lifelines for the people of that locality. So the harvest time was once the time of merriment ensuring food security as well as materials for repairing their dwelling places. To these people, now, the opium cultivation is a shattering blow:

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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 (Ghosh 29).

So, there is a major shift in the cultivation process - shift from food crop to cash crop. As a result, the basic needs are getting rarer day by day which affected the environment and the lives of the people of that locality.

Affected Community in India

Deeti, the protagonist, is one of the hard-hit victims of this sudden transformation. She, in fact, is the representative of the entire vulnerable community. In her wistful reminiscence she is trying to contemplate on her past when 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. As for the sap, it was sieved of impurities and left to dry, until the sun turned it into *akbari afeem*; at that time, no one thought of producing the wet, treacly chandu opium that was made and packaged in the English factory, to be sent across the sea in boats (Ghosh 29).

Poppy cultivation, therefore, becomes compulsory for the native farmers. So that the land is losing its fertility. As a result, these people have to undergo the hardship leading to debt and migration.

Nevertheless, opium regulates the lives of these people of Ghazipur. Kalua feeds his ox opium so that it will get relaxation after the day's hard labour. Deeti cannot pay Kalua because she does not have money. So, she gives opium to Kalua in exchange.

The insects also get attracted towards the poppy pod because of its nectar flowing out of it and start behaving in an abnormal way. The sweet smell of the poppy pod attracts bees, grasshopper, wasp and they get easily struck in the liquid coming out of the pod. As the sap turns black their dead bodies get dissolved and become part of opium which is sold in the market.

Even the monkeys who live near the Sundur Opium Factory are behaving in a weird manner. They are not agile and spontaneous. They seem to be lethargic and are not willing to move. Ghosh describes:

When they came down from the trees it was to lap at the sewers that drained the factory's effluents; after having satiated their cravings, they would climb back into the branches to resume their scrutiny of the Ganga and its currents (Ghosh 91).

Even the dust coming out of the opium factory causes health hazard. People living nearby sneeze. The animals are also caught by the same problem. The ox of Kalua begins to sniff as it comes close to the factory with Deeti and her daughter.

Fishermen, however, find an innovative technique of catching large number of fishes. The river close to the opium factory is filled with broken earthenware *gharas* used for bringing opium to the factory. Then these *gharas* are discarded and trashed near the river. Fishes could easily be caught because of the opium found in the earthenware:

This stretch of river bank was unlike any other, for the ghats around the Carcanna were shored up with thousands of broken earthenware *gharas*-the round-bottomed vessels in which raw opium was brought to the factory. The belief was widespread that fish were more easily caught after they had nibbled at the shards, and as a result the bank was always crowded with fishermen (Ghosh 92).

The bad effect of the opium is widespread. It gets messed up with the water of the river making the water unfit for drinking both by humans and animals. It so happens that the river Ganga which ran beside an opium factory carried with it the sewage of the factory. Ganga water is not only worshipped by the Indians as holy water but also drunk by them to get rid of unholy things. Ghosh compares Ganga with Nile considering its vast impact on human and nonhuman lives.

Destroyer of Good Deed, Generating Wealth

The opium cultivation left a marked ravage at the confluence of Ganga and Karamnasa. Karamnasa, in other words, means the destroyer of good deed:

The landscape on the rivers' shores had changed a great deal since Deeti's childhood and looking around now, it seemed to her that Karamnasa's influence had spilled over its banks, spreading its blight far beyond the lands that drew upon its waters: the opium harvest having been recently completed, the plants had been left to wither in the fields, so that the countryside was blanketed with the parched remnants. Except for the foliage of a few mango and jackfruit trees, nowhere was there anything green to relieve the eye (Ghosh192).

However, the innate value of poppy seeds is revealed by Sarju before her death. She says to Deeti while handing over the seeds of poppy "there is wealth beyond imagination, guard it like your life" (450). She further adds "they are worth more than any treasure" (Ghosh 450).

So there is no doubt that poppy seeds are precious. But East India Company exploited it to satisfy their insatiable thirst for making fortune out of it and thus caused the entire ecosystem of this region to face environmental catastrophe of the highest magnitude.

In *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh shows the poppy cultivation and its effect on biosphere. In *River of Smoke* Ghosh continues the story adding the illegal opium trade with China and the casualty faced by the wider

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region of both India and China. Ghosh interestingly shows a fascinating facade of this opium trade. The legacy of the opium trade is that the opium weaves a thread of bonding between India and China and entails a shared history of ups and downs for both countries.

River of Smoke

In *River of Smoke* Burnham, the Indian opium trader, shows his concern over the excerpts from a memorial written by a high-ranking Chinese official to the Chinese Emperor. The excerpts go:

Opium is a poisonous drug, brought from foreign countries. To the question, what are its virtues, the answer is: It raises the animal spirits and prevents lassitude. Hence the Chinese continually run into its toils. At first, they merely strive to follow the fashion of the day; but in the sequel the poison takes effect, the habit becomes fixed, and the sleeping smokers are like corpses-lean and haggard as demons. Such are the injuries which it does to life. Moreover, the drug maintains an exorbitant price and cannot be obtained except with the pure metal. Smoking opium, in its first stages, impedes business; and when the practice continued for any considerable length of time, it throws whole families into ruin, dissipates every kind of property, and destroys man himself. There cannot be a greater evil than this. In comparison with arsenic I pronounce it tenfold the greater poison. A man swallows arsenic because he has lost his reputation and is so involved that he cannot extricate himself. Thus, driven to desperation, he takes the dose and is destroyed at once. But those who smoke the drug are injured in many different ways. (Ghosh 132)

With the mounting pressure from the Chinese side on the illegal import of opium from British governed India, Britain waged war on China which is known as opium war. Burnham Modi, who invested everything as a British dealer of the opium trade, was incurring huge loss and eventually commits suicide not only that he becomes a bankrupt but, with the fact that that his son becomes the victim of this destructive drug.

The last instalment of the Ibis trilogy *Flood of Fire* witnesses the first Opium War where many characters from the Indian side join to fight for the British and ultimately defeat the Chinese force.

To Conclude

The Ibis trilogy is a testimony of the widespread cruelty against nature for the petty self-interest of the colonial powers. This trilogy is, as if, an untold story of history based on an important event of a massive scale known as Opium War. This fictionalised documentary unravels the gruesome effect of environmental degradation leading to a cataclysmic apocalypse.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **18:5 May 2018**

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