

From Rooted to Uprooted: An Environmental Apocalypse in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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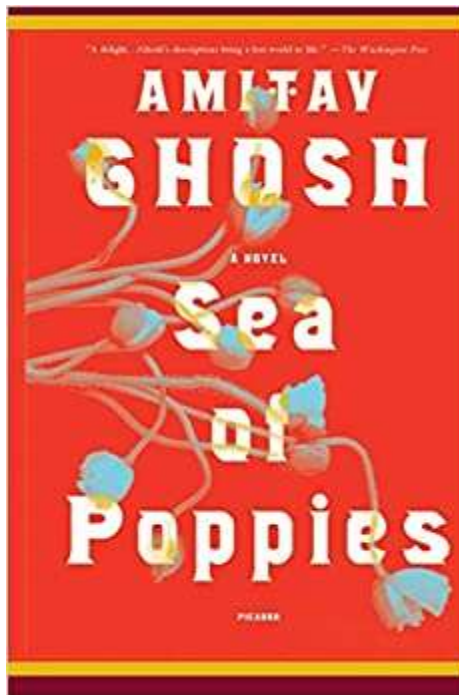
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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* entails the issue of displacement to the level of environmental degradation. Any dislocation or displacement involves vulnerability of ecosystem. This paper will try to show how the British settlement in *Sea of Poppies*, by causing the rooted native uprooted from their own place, gives way to environmental disaster. Ghosh shows in *Sea of Poppies* how the pre-colonial pristine pastoral remains untainted for a long time until the occupation of the British settlers. This settlement destroys natural vegetation of the place to such an extent that the lives of the farmers become unbearable. The land is losing its fertility. The indigenous crops are uprooted only to produce non-native

products. The local people are forced to become displaced. The capitalist mentality induces the non-native to drive away the native from their rooted place. More importantly, Ghosh also shows that British exploitation has resulted in the crime against humanity, forced displacement, impoverishment of people, animals and their environment. It has also created 'either/or' situations in contexts of land and resource shortage or degradation. The women, in particular, are shown as the most vulnerable. Even the colonizers are uprooted in order to be settled in an alien land. So are their animals and crops only to be acclimatized in a foreign land. So this paper will try to focus on the adverse effects of displacement on the ecosystem in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, migration, displacement, dislocation, imperial rulers, capitalism.

Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* introduces us to a wide variety of displacement and dislocation. If it is observed broadly, first the migration of colonial masters takes place to the colonized areas and then the natives are evicted to migrate to other colonized areas to promote capitalism and new form of slavery. It is a two-way traffic. This paper will demonstrate how degradation of environment, caused by human activity, is responsible for migration. There are socio political and socio economic reasons behind displacement and migration. So, the paper will look into whether the environment is affected by migration/settlement and also whether the environmental problems are responsible for migration. Therefore, the hypothesis of the paper is that the environment is affected by migration and environmental problems are responsible for migration. Precisely, opium cultivation and consumption caused the environment and the people to face long term catastrophe.

According to UN Migration Agency, a migrant is a person 'who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is' (United Nations, Migration). It also states:

Since the earliest times, humanity has been on the move. Some people move in search of work or economic opportunities, to join family, or to study. Others move to escape conflict, persecution, terrorism, or human rights violations. Still others move in response to the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters, or other environmental factors. (United Nations, Migration).

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2000), define colonialism as "a radically diasporic movement" which involved "dispersion and settlement of millions of Europeans" throughout the world. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2000, p.56). Discussing the common features of movement of the

oppressed diasporic people they show that they were “moved against their will from their homelands to serve the economic needs of the empire in the societies that evolved from the wave of European expansion from the sixteenth century onwards”(Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2000, p.5). So, colonialism is one of the reasons of mass migration. The geographical location of Europe was considered to be ‘centre’ not only in terms of physical but also metaphysical. Hence, places lay outside this centre was defined as margin and periphery. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin argue, “The colonial mission, to bring the margin into the sphere of influence of enlightened centre, became the principal justification for the economic and political exploitation of colonialism, especially after the middle of the nineteenth century” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2000, p.30) Ghosh sheds light through this novel on the lives and sufferings of the migrant labourers whose stories have been suppressed by the colonizers.

Amitav Ghosh, in *Sea of Poppies*, brings into light what remains unnoticed or untrodden for a long time. Opium trade and war, as a historical saga, got little or no attention in literature. Ghosh makes this neglected incident a wondrous fictional reality. This mega event caused settlement and resettlement in the Indian subcontinent during the colonial period.

As far as the methodology is concerned, a qualitative method is applied under the theoretical framework of postcolonial ecocriticism. Under the jurisdiction of this theory, it is shown how imperialist capitalism causes disaster to both human and nonhuman settlement resulting in widespread displacement and dislocation. The transatlantic human movement was the consequence of the colonial repression and hegemony continued to endorse capitalism and globalization. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in *Post-Colonial Ecocriticism* opines:

Once invasion and settlement had been accomplished, or at least once administrative structures had been set up, the environmental impacts of western attitudes to human being- in-the -world were facilitated or reinforced by the deliberate (or accidental) transport of animals, plants and peoples throughout the European empires, instigating widespread ecosystem change under conspicuously unequal power regimes. (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015, p.6)

The West also tried to prove that the plan behind the massive human transference was to accelerate development which according to Huggan and Tiffin is a “little more than a disguised form of neocolonialism, a vast technocratic apparatus designed primarily to serve the economic and political interests of the west.” (Huggan and Tiffin, 2015, p.29) The immigrants lost their identity not only in their native areas but also in the migrated land. Their treatment as lesser human is equal to slavery.

Ghosh's narrative has witnessed the mass migration from South Asia during the colonial period. A large group of Indians have been scattered because of this system. This human trafficking causes geographical and cultural displacement, indentured, and forced labour, fraudulency, familial disconnection, resistance. (Ramos, 2016, 86) However, breaking the taboo of crossing 'Kalapani', some take the challenges in order to embrace a new life. History shows that the movement of people is quite common among the Indians. However, their settlement mostly took place within their vast country. They never sailed across the Indian Ocean which was considered to be forbidden.

The social, environmental, and economic costs of imperial rule on the place and people of the colonies are unimaginable. The colonies played the pivotal role to establish capitalist hegemony. The basic crops that satisfied the regular need of the common people were no longer cultivated in order to give way to the production of new cash crops like sugar, opium, indigo, tea to boost the British coffer. The economic and social impacts of the production, distribution and transshipment of these crops destabilized the traditional living standard. Life was easy and comfortable before the arrival of the British. Deeti, one of the central characters gives a vivid account of her childhood memories. According to her, the people of her locality used to grow the winter crops like wheat, pulse and vegetables in the fields leaving a small space for the production of poppies which was nothing but 'luxury' (Ghosh, 2008, p. 29) item, because it was grown as spice or for medicinal purpose.

Those days have now become good old memories for Deeti:

"In the old days, farmers would keep a little of their home-made opium for their families, to be used during illnesses, or at harvests and weddings; the rest they would sell to the local nobility, or to pykari merchants from Patna. Back then, a few clumps of poppy were enough to provide for a household's needs, leaving a little over, to be sold." (Ghosh, 2008, p. 29)

So, the production of poppy was not important at all since it was not an essential crop. Farmers showed their disinterest to grow poppy because they had to pay a lot for cultivating the crop -

"no one was inclined to plant more because of all the work it took to grow poppies- fifteen ploughings of the land and every remaining clod to be broken by hand, with a dantoli; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering; and after all that, the frenzy of the harvest, each bulb having to be individually nicked, drained and scraped" (Ghosh, 2008, p. 29).

Therefore, in terms of cultivation and production, poppy is not a staple crop. Rather it is considered to be oppression and therefore, meaningless, sparing time, effort and money for producing poppy -

“Such punishment was bearable when you had a patch or two of poppies- but what sane person would want to multiply these labors when there were better, more useful crops to grow, like wheat, dal, vegetables?” (Ghosh, 2008, p.29)

However, the local people were disenfranchised of cultivating the basic food grains in order to produce the cash crop like opium by the imperial rulers and their agents. The production of winter crops was steadily going down because of the increasing demand of opium by the British traders to be transported to China. To do so colonial oppression took a distinct shape –

“Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign *asami* contracts. 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. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you had not accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off. And at the end of it, your earnings would come to no more than three-and-a-half sicca rupees, just about enough to pay off your advance” (Ghosh, 2008, p. 30).

The benefit of poppy cultivation was not only limited within the employees of the East India Company but also the British traders with the assistance of their local employee started taking the advantage of opium production and trading. This local employee in order to safeguard his interest provoked his employer to usurp the property of the local feudal leaders causing bankruptcy to the owner of the estate and miseries to the farmers. Baboo Nob Kissin, the employee of the British trader Benjamin Burnham, instigates him to acquire the Raskhali estate in order to grow poppy since the East India Company is rumoured to give up the production of poppy in Eastern India “Were that to happen, poppies might well become a plantation crop, like indigo or sugarcane: with the demand rising annually in China, merchants who controlled their own production, rather than depending on small farmers, would stand to multiply their already astronomical profits” (Ghosh, 2008, p. 215). To achieve this objective, Burnham, with the assistance of Baboo Nob Kissin, filed fake accusation against Raja Neel Ratan Halder, owner of Raskhali estate and in a farcical trial convicted him and it ended up confiscating his large estate and deporting him as indentured labourer to Mauritius.

Deeti’s husband became physically ill working in the opium factory. Later he died and Deeti was forced to die on the funeral pyre with her dead husband Hukum Singh which was widely known as ‘Sati’. She was given an alternative choice to marry his brother-in-law, a depraver, against her will. She dared to escape from the funeral pyre and decided to marry Kalua, a lower caste, disregarding the entire social stigma. However, this undertaking led her

and her newlywed husband to sign the contract of ‘girmitya’ or indentured labourer since the social class and caste system of India would never allow her to live with a husband belonging to lower caste. So, Ghosh very aptly portrays how the Indians became migrant labourers either by choice or by force.

Profit of any sort is given the highest priority by the British merchants. Their Indian employees also act promptly to provide them with necessary information and ideas to strengthen their positions. Baboo Nob Kissin, the gomusta of Mr. Burnham, persuaded his employer to transport the migrant workers when Burnham’s main concentration is in opium trade- “The gomusta was well aware that Mr. Burnham considered the transportation of migrants an unimportant and somewhat annoying part of his shipping enterprise, since the margins of profit were negligible in comparison to the enormous gains offered by opium” (Ghosh, 2008, p. 213). But the gomusta could influence his employer in taking an alternative course of making profit by transporting the migrant workers to Mauritius when a possible threat of opium war with China is looming large. In addition, the gomusta himself is willing to board the migrant ship as an overseer of the migrant labourers because that would enable him to make profit. In fact, the gomusta plays the role of a middleman in human trafficking, so he does not even hesitate to cross the Black Water which was a stark infringement of religious dogma.

In Ibis Trilogy Ghosh brought together a diverse set of characters ranging from a bankrupt king, a widow, an opium trader, a mulatto American and so on. Their old family ties are no longer existent, so they become a global family involving various continents, races and generations. Ghosh said, “The characters of my new book may be different, the setting is different and the time period different, but it is not unlike my other books because it also focuses on migration. I have been writing about migration and exodus long before globalisation. It is the reality of my times- the Asian times.”

So, these men and women willingly or unwillingly left their rooted land due to famine, poverty or transformation of the cultivable land. This dislocation from their rooted homeland to the colonies turned them into migrants. Regiane Correa de Oliveira Ramos in his PhD dissertation titled ‘Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (2008): A Web of Gender, Cultural and Mythic Relations in the Nineteenth Century Colonial India’ says “the act of leaving the land transforms them temporarily into migrants” (Ramos, 2008, p.108). These people then moved from villages to port cities. Ramos also shows how the recruiter of the labourers plays a double role of illusion and disillusion in the mind of the migrants. The recruiter sometimes betrayed the migrants by promising alluring opportunities and profit which they did not fulfil afterwards. Crispin Bates and Marina Carter in *Enslaved Lives, Enslaving Labels A New Approach to the Colonial Indian Labor Diaspora* shows the role played by the middleman:

“Recruiting sirdars, men and sometimes women who had been overseas and could speak with first-hand experience of conditions in the colonies, emerged- - both formally and informally (they did not always bear the title of sirdar)-as

a "middleman" network between the subaltern and employer. This undoubtedly typified the involvement of sirdars in recruitment for industrial labor within India as much as abroad." (Bates and Carter, 2012, pp.67-92)

In "The Sea is History": Opium, Colonialism, and Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, Anupama Arora says, "Through following the "routes" of people, commerce and capital, Ghosh investigates the "roots" of the strength of imperial Europe and the "roots" of diasporas in the Caribbean—and emphasizes these intimate ties." Ghosh, in fact, captures true historical events to transform it into the fictional reality. In Ibis Trilogy he shows how Indian Ocean bursts into sudden life with the exodus of vessels moving at different directions across the sea. These vessels are employed to transfer human or non-human from one part of the globe to another. The ecological impact of this mass migration is immense. In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh vividly illustrates the plight of the farmers deeply rooted with the soil. Later, these people either chose or were forced to migrate overseas in quest of new life. The fertile land is used for producing opium, the cash crop that changed the fortune of the company but brought havoc for the natives. The East India Company and those associated with it were also dislocated and displaced only to get the benefit of capitalism and globalisation from the colony they brought under their control. The petty self-interest of these settlers cum colonizers changed the environmental landscape of the entire region.

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