

REVIEW ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

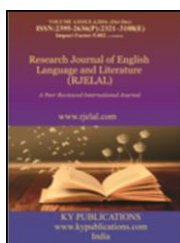
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

Review of Ecological Imperialism in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

Dr RABIA MUKHTAR

Teacher (School Education Kashmir) J&K

rabiawani@yahoo.co.in



ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* published in 2008 looks back at the colonial period to show the social, cultural, economic and ecological devastation done by European intervention in South Asia. Ghosh states that the impelling policies of colonial powers alter the landscapes of the annexed bioregions and economically plunder the communities. The research paper focuses on Ghosh's concern over the commodification of nature at the hands of British colonialists. *Sea of Poppies* is an account of the imposed opium monoculture in Bihar and Calcutta for the Chinese market responsible for the enormous wealth of Britain. As such it is made clear in the paper that colonizers have always imported and introduced cash crops in the annexed terrains by exterminating local ecosystems and marginalizing the down trodden. So it is the ecological diversity which is being disrupted and disturbed by colonizers and its impact is still being felt on the land of India.

Keywords: Ecological Imperialism, Nature, Postcolonialism, Ecology, Ecosystem

Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh published in 2008 is set prior to the opium wars and details the nineteenth century opium trade and its effect on the lives of a group of ordinary people: a young widow, Deeti; an American sailor, Zachery Reid; a heroic untouchable, Kalua; a Chinese convict, Ah Fatt; a *raja* (landlord), Neel Rattan Halder; bilked by a ruthless British opium businessman, Mr. Burnham; Paulette, an orphan, daughter of a French botanist Pierre Lambert and others. *Sea of Poppies* is an account of the imposed opium monoculture in Bihar and Calcutta for the Chinese market responsible for the enormous wealth of Britain. It highlights how the fate of the human beings in this hinterland is written by poppy flowers and its entire ecosystem is entrapped by ecological imperialism. Imperialism not only concerns the devastating effects on colonized community but includes its adverse effect on the ecology of colonized lands. Alfred Crosby and Richard Grove—the British environmental historians

coined the term 'Ecological Imperialism', in the wake of such issues. The term refers to "the violent appropriation of indigenous land to ill-considered introduction of non-domestic livestock and European agricultural practices" (Huggan and Tiffan 3). Ecological imperialism is defined as the intentional destruction through exploitation, extraction and transfer of natural resources of the colonized lands in the interest of scientific and economic progress. It is therefore a manifestation of anthropocentric thought of British Empire to exploit and re-shape the ecosystem of colonized bio-regions for their own economic welfare. Ecological degradation due to excessive exploitation of nature is underscored by Ghosh in the novel, when he refers to the deceptive ways in which Britishers make money through illegal production of opium.

In *Sea of Poppies* the British merchants are shown to be pathologically addicted to the growing and selling of opium, abusing natives to grow opium

to meet their insatiable greed for it. The novel shows how this forced monoculture of poppies leads to the physical subjugations and ruins lives of farmers and local poor factory workers. Ghosh draws upon a gamut of torture and punishment devices used by the Britishers on Indian peasants to facilitate their interests. Ramachandra Guha very aptly maintains that the colonialism that claims to civilize and provide sustainable development among the colonized has succeeded in "pauperising millions of people in the agrarian sector and diminishing the stock of plant, water and soil resources at a terrifying rate" (qtd. in Huggan and Tiffan1).

The novel shows that the fertile land of the Gangetic plains blooms only with poppies that are beautiful but deadly which deny the farmers the right to grow the traditional crops to sustain themselves. As such, in the novel, Ghosh clearly highlights environmental racism imposed by Britishers on poor colonized people. Environmental racism is a form of ecological imperialism that draws a parallel between the exploitation of indigenous ecologies to the oppression of the colonized community. Ghosh in the novel presents many such accounts showing how the peasant farmers are obliged to turn over their fields to opium production that causes widespread poverty and hunger. They are unable to feed their families. They often go without food and as such are undernourished or malnourished as human physiology needs multi-nutrients to carry on their life processes. The lack of food resources has an adverse effect on their health in general. This is how they suffer because of the cultivation of a single crop. The lack of different varieties of food in the region leaves the locals poor and ravenous:

The town was thronged with hundreds of other impoverished transients, many of whom were willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice. Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside: lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at temples or sip the

starchy water from a pot in which rice had been boiled. (202)

The above extract of the novel depicts the miserable human condition. It shows oppression of environment by humans and oppression of humans by humans. As such, Ghosh points towards the environmental injustice and environmental racism imposed upon collective bodies of life that entails both human and non-human existence.

Ghosh introduces the character of Deeti as a victim of the opium. Deeti is married to an opium-seduced, impotent and handicapped man, Hukum Singh. From the first day of her marriage, her life is dictated and cursed by opium. Due to inability of her husband, destiny forces her to take up entire responsibility of her household. She loses her land—which is her only hope of sustenance to opium. In spite of toiling hard, her harvest of poppy is not sufficient to meet her family's day-to-day basic necessities. Managing the household responsibilities and caught up in poverty and hunger, she gets badly trapped in debts. Portraying her as a victim of the curse of opium, Ghosh writes:

She gave in and agreed to place the impression of her thumb on the Seth's account book in exchange for six month's worth of wheat, oil and gurrh. Only as she was leaving did it occur to her to ask how much she owed and what the interest was. The Seth's answers took her breath away: his rates were such that her debt would double every six months; in a few years, all the land would be forfeit. (156)

Sea of Poppies clarifies that with the arrival of imperialists, there is a shift towards the concept of working to survive. It throws light on the status quo of agriculture in India and emphasizes the environmental injustice caused to the land and to the people. Though unwilling, people are forced to adapt this new crop culture as Britishers would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers and their forged thumbprint. The farmers are unwilling but bound to such contracts because if they refuse, the British soldiers would hide the silver in their houses to prove them culprits and make them convicts to be transported beyond the seas as indentured servants. In addition, their refusal to

oblige leads to forfeiture of their properties. The novel provides a vivid picture of the exploited farming class. Deeti maintains that earlier they lived in harmony with nature. She yearns for useful crops like wheat, *dal* and vegetables. These gestures of Deeti show a happy and symbiotic environment of the earlier times. She is aware of the curse posed by monoculture. According to her, during winters, fields used to be covered with wheat and after the spring harvest; the straw would be used for different purposes like fixing the hut roofs. She realizes that it has been seven years since roof of her hut was last hatched. She does not have money to buy a handful of straw. The Britishers have left the natives handicapped by raising the price of small accessories like straw. Being helpless to fix the roof of her hut because of the unavailability of thatch, she murmurs:

. . . in this age of flowers, thatch was not easy to come by in the olden 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. (29)

Ghosh explains that as compared to useful crops like wheat, *dal*, and other vegetables, the cultivation of opium demands extra care and labour which proves to be an extra burden to the native farmers especially, when the farmers are not getting much profit from opium cultivation. As a result of this cultivation, natives are facing shortage of toothsome winter crops and on top of that are facing difficulties at the hands of gluttonous and covetous factory owners. The peasants are forced to sell the harvest to the East India Company which not only rules the country but has a monopoly in this forced trade. Ghosh avers the fact that opium is the exclusive monopoly of the British that is produced and packaged entirely under the supervision of the East India Company. These poor peasants have no control even over their own produce as opium is bought by the company run factories at arbitrary prices. Alfred Crosby in *The Columbian Exchange* and *Ecological Imperialism* reflects on ways in which both material and ideas are exchanged between

colonizing and colonized worlds. Colonizers have always imported and introduced cash crops in the annexed terrains by exterminating local ecosystems and marginalizing the down trodden.

The British establish Sudder Opium Factory in Ghazipur where the life of factory workers is being risked by the agents of factory for their own profit. Environmental injustice is portrayed at its best in Ghosh's description of the opium factory. The inhumane working condition of the employees in the factory is witnessed by Deeti, who goes there to take her sick opium addict husband home from work. She goes there with her six year old daughter, Kabutri in Kalua's cart. Kalua is an outcaste driver of the ox-cart, who usually drives Hukum Singh from his house to factory. Deeti notices that the workers inside are subjected to the most deplorable working conditions. Environmental injustice imposed on the poor employers of the opium factory is brought forth by Ghosh when Deeti approaches the factory:

. . . her eyes were met by a startling sight- a host of dark, legless torsos was circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons. This vision- along with the overpowering fumes- made her groggy, and to keep herself from fainting she began to move slowly ahead. When her eyes had grown more accustomed to the gloom, she discovered the secret of those circling torsos: they were bare bodied men, sunk waist- deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge. (94)

In the above passage, Ghosh narrates the whole trauma that Deeti goes through in an ecological metaphor. She identifies the victims in the factory as slow moving ants having looks of ghouls. In the opium factory, there is an opium filled environment and poor workers are compelled to work under such hazardous conditions. The workers are made to sink in deep in the opium filled tanks. They are made to trudge and rove like animals to soften the sludge. Deeti finds these workers naked and they appear like circling torsos. The scene leaves her bewildered and confound. These workers are made to work for long hours without any rest and are subjected to most inhumane treatment. They are even caned and punished for trivial mistakes. The factory is full of hazardous, unhealthy and unhygienic atmosphere.

The novel confronts the readers with the appalling working conditions in the opium factory. As per Hukum Singh's earlier statement, about two hundred and fifty men are made to work in every single concentrated room. The scene at factory invokes horror and pity.

Sea of Poppies is imbued by a deep commitment to human values. The novel traverses the least treaded path of Indian colonial history by exposing the crafty business acumen of British, who scrapes India of its riches and leaves its people exploited and defenseless. For these helpless people, migration to other countries seems the only available course with a dream of a harmonious life. Migration in a way is an escape from the extreme physical and psychological hardships. People are ready for taking the drastic risk of crossing the Andaman sea or black waters. When Deeti's husband dies, she chooses to go with *sati* ritual (immolation on husband's funeral pyre). Kalua rescues Deeti from her husband's funeral pyre and in order to escape persecution, the two sign a document on *Ibis* so that they would be transported to Mauritius as indentured labourers. *Ibis* is a schooner that was formerly a slave carrier between Africa and America. After the abolition of slavery, the schooner is sold to British shipping company, Burnham Bros, in Calcutta to transport indentured labourers from colonized countries to new colonies like Mauritius in the Caribbean islands.

Ghosh creates a vivid world, peopled by characters of different cultural backgrounds on *Ibis*. He has skillfully taken different characters from multiple backgrounds aboard. Deeti, the high caste widow and her low caste lover, Kalua come on the ship to escape persecution; a young French woman born and brought up in Calcutta comes aboard dressed as a Brahmin woman; a land lord and *raja*, Neel Rattan, falsely accused of forgery finds a friend in a recovering opium addict, Ah Fatt from China; a hill man, Ecka Nack from Sahibganj finds his life partner in a woman, Heeru from plains. Old identities begin to dissolve on the ship, *Ibis*.

All characters aboard have a tale of exploitation, torment and deprivation. Each one's past narrates the wrongs done to them by the tyranny of the ruling class. Kalua is a socially low

class untouchable, who is unfit in his own habitat. He is treated inhumanly by the village landlords. Being led like a horse, some drunken high caste *zemindars* (landlords) perpetuates a forced act of his bestiality with a mare. This act of humiliation, destruction and human exploitation leaves him a complete non-human. This act exemplifies both human abuse and animal abuse. At this juncture, there is a reference to the violation of Deeti's body as she is rendered unconscious by opium at the hands of her in-laws on her wedding night so that her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh can consummate the marriage in place of her impotent husband.

Zachery Reid, the *Ibis*'s foreman, conceals his mixed race status from his British employers fearing discrimination and loss of livelihood. He runs away from the American racial discrimination as he is born to a slave mother and a white father. He is aboard with a new identification hoping for a better place in the world.

Paulette, an orphan French girl escapes from her foster home because of a proposed marriage with an old British judge, Justice Kendalbushe. Moreover, she is sexually abused by Mr Burnham. She gains access to *Ibis* by disguising herself as a Brahmin's daughter.

Sarju has been a midwife, left homeless because of her mistake in delivery of a *thakur's* son. Two sisters, married to a pair of brothers whose lands are contracted to the opium factory are left with no sources to survive. They decide to indenture themselves to remote place across black waters in order to find a sustainable dwelling. *Ibis* gives them refuge. Another married woman Dookhane along with her husband escapes long endured oppression of a violently abusive mother-in-law.

On the board *Ibis*, old identities begin to dissolve. The barriers of caste, class, and religion are all eventually broken down. This new established family, at a new place begins to identify themselves as *jahaz- bhais* and *jahaz- behnes*, "On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and every one is the same: it's like taking a boat to the temple of jagannath, in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be shipsiblings- jahaz- bhais and jahaz- bahens- to each other. There'll be no differences between us" (356). There develops a

new kind of intimacy among the new members of a new society in a new environment. They call themselves as children of the ship. Ghosh is adopting social ecological wisdom in the novel. He creates *Ibis* as such sort of social platform which brings new spirits for the migrants. The ship becomes a new home for them wherein they creatively reclaim new familial relations that give them strength to survive and tie them to each other. Ghosh tries to create an ecological society as suggested by Murray Bookchin. Bookchin in *The Ecology of Freedom* argues that in an ecological society:

Hierarchy, in effect, will be replaced by interdependence, and consociation would imply the existence of an organic core that meets the deeply felt biological needs for care, cooperation, security, and love. Freedom would no longer be placed in opposition to nature, individuality to society, choice to necessity, or personality to the needs of social coherence. (318)

In a way, Ghosh wishes to create an ecological society of non-hierarchical affiliation exactly as promoted by social ecologists. Social ecology promotes a decentralized society of non-hierarchical affiliations avowedly derived from an anarchistic political tradition, "A fundamental unit will be the commune, a closely knit, small community based on love, friendship, shared values, and commitment to a common life" (qtd. in Greg Garrard 33). The *Ibis* gets invested with new symbolic meaning by the migrants and is remade into a habitat of transformation from which new selves and identities emerge. The new setting gradually blurs the thick borderline between the characters. Deeti who leaves behind everything of her life's past- caste, village, daughter, finds this new conceptualization of siblingship empowering. On a proposal of marriage of a hillsman, Ecka Nack with a plainswoman, Heeru, Deeti ponders that the marriage of people from different castes or regions would have never been feasible or accepted if they were on land. She regards the fate of Heeru same as her own fate. She is grateful to the ship, as it provides them a new environment that is heaven for all the migrants aboard. The water of the sea washes away their acidic past.

The journey develops a kind of human bonding and communication in every member of *Ibis* society. This is the evidence of transformation from self absorbed humans into humans who develop in themselves the mental strength to accept others. Ghosh tries to remove the boundaries that divide human being from each other and from other creatures of the ecosphere. He actually wishes to create a complete parity or equality between all the individuals. He tries to assure that the hierarchical level man himself has set up with other human beings or with nature are worthless and transitory. He brings forth the reality that new generations cannot resist exploitations of either human beings or their surrounding nature. The idea put forth is that each individual being on this planet whether human or non-human deserves respect, right treatment, due consideration; should not be made slave, and should not be exploited.

Works Cited

- Bookchin, Murray. *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Calif: Cheshire Books, 1982. Print.
- Crosby, Alfred W. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986. Print.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2012. Print.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies*. India: Penguin Books India, 2008. Print.
- Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. London: Routledge, 2010. Print.