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History of Colonial Opium Trade and Oceanic Imagination: Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

Dr. Vrushali V. Bhosale Kaneri
Associate Professor & Head, Dept of English
R. A. Podar College of Commerce and Economics (Autonomous), Mumbai
Email: vrushali.kaneri@rapodar.ac.in
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Abstract
In recent decades, Blue Humanities and Postcolonial Studies have mobilised the tools and tenets of Thalassology, Oceanography and Geocriticism to reexamine received colonial maritime histories and to locate native agencies within the grand narratives of trade history. There have been a few postcolonial novelists who have constructed counter-narratives of colonial trade by using many historiographic details that celebrate the agencies of colonised subjects. Colonial history of the opium trade is a contested domain which has invited the attention of historically-inclined postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Kunal Basu. Their narratives, especially those set in oceans and islands, have proposed alternatives to master narratives by exploiting the indeterminacy of water. Using the tidalectics of oceanic discourse, these novels rewrite many histories of trade and enterprise.

This paper is a scrutiny of Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies to show how the novelist constructs pieces of history, using the fluidity of oceanic imagination, to interrogate the received history of the opium trade. Ghosh's novel generates a patchwork of history with many marginalised natives and colonial dropouts setting out on a liberating journey. This paper mobilises the methods of Blue Humanities and Postcolonial Studies to show how Ghosh helps readers to reimagine the history of the opium trade. It also discusses how Ghosh proves the point that the history of trade and migration is not a monolithic construct.
Keywords: *Postcolonialism, Historiography, Blue Humanities, Opium Trade*

Introduction

The first work of Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*, is a historical novel set against the backdrop of the First Opium War between Britain and China. In the sixteenth century, the competition between Portugal, Great Britain and Spain was fierce. They were searching for new land to conquer and colonise. Portuguese and Spanish had already reached China and established their trade centres in Macau and the Philippines, respectively. The first attempt by the British was made in 1553, during the reign of King Edward VI. In 1577, interest in China was rekindled after the Spanish work 'Certyne Reportes of the Province China, learned through the Portugalles...' was translated by Richard Willes and published in England. England tried to reach China by sea after the Cape of Good Hope port proved useful to traders.

Tea was introduced in Europe in the 1550s. Tea gained popularity in England when Catherine of Braganza, the Portuguese Princess, married King Charles II in 1662. It caused a fashion in the English court. Tea drinking became an important ritual that helped build status and relationships. The social significance of tea drinking increased, and the tea gardens also became popular venues for social interactions. By the mid-18th century, Tea had become an important source of revenue for the British government through heavy taxation. However, this widespread addiction to tea across all classes in Britain led to a major trade problem. Britain was importing tea from China. Along with tea, the British were importing silk, porcelain and other luxury goods. Britain had wool and clocks to export to China, but China refused to accept them.

China had a clear trade policy. China had a trade system in which foreign traders were restricted to a single city, Canton (now

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Guangzhou). Foreign traders were not allowed to enter their cities or deal directly with government officials. They had to follow the strict rules and regulations set by the Chinese authorities. They traded tea with Britain only for pure silver. Every year, the silver was exported to China. Britain's silver reserve was declining, damaging its economy. This tea trade led to many complexities, such as domestic tensions and the First Opium War, because Britain started trading opium for tea with China. Also, this led to the beginnings of tea cultivation in colonised India and Ceylon (now known as Sri Lanka). To save its economy, Britain had to do something. Britishers knew that some people in China smoked opium. Also, they were aware that opium is illegal in China. One of the officials of the East India Company, which was ruling India, had an idea. The idea was to grow opium in India and smuggle it to China. The eastern part of India, such as Bengal and Bihar, had favourable climatic conditions for poppy seed cultivation. Britishers auctioned opium to the private traders in Calcutta. Through the network of corrupt officials, these traders smuggled opium into China. Chinese people traded silver for opium and Britain got the silver back. The British East India Company's domination of the opium trade, particularly its export from India to China, represents a crucial episode in the commercial history of colonialism. The consequences of this trade—addiction, war and social upheaval —made a lasting impact globally, culminating in the Opium Wars and the reordering of Asian societies.

A massive amount of opium was smuggled to China, leading to mass addiction. People were selling everything they had for opium. The government officials, soldiers and common people were addicted, leading to loss of human capital and a drop in production. Families were destroyed and the military was falling apart. Silver was going out of China. The trade deficit flipped from Britain to China. By 1839, China was in crisis. The silver required to make currency was becoming scarce. The Qing emperor, Daoguang emperor, decided to take action. He appointed his minister, Lin Zexu, to end the opium trade. Lin Zexu wrote a letter to Queen Victoria to stop the opium trade. He then visited Canton and threatened the Britishers to handover the opium. After seizing the opium, he destroyed it. Lin's act had an impact. The British government called for a war. They framed it as a war for free trade, but later it was known as the First Opium War. The British defeated China. China signed the Treaty of Nanjing and the next hundred years are known as the Century of Humiliation. The significance of the poppy and the opium trade grew over time, shaping the destinies of empires and peoples.

With this background, the author Amitav Ghosh has penned the Ibis trilogy of historical fiction. His *Sea of Poppies* situates its narrative at the height of this historical moment. The novel follows a cast of diverse characters whose lives intersect aboard the Ibis, a ship transporting indentured labourers, convicts and colonial officials from India to Mauritius. Through their journeys, Ghosh interrogates the histories of trade, migration and identity shaped by the colonial opium economy. The narration under scrutiny has a vivid description of the opium trade between colonial India and China by the Britishers. The novel also has numerous instances in which the sea plays a major role in this trade. Oceanic imagination depicts how the ocean shapes human history, culture and environmental responsibilities. In this novel, the opium smuggling between India and China was taking place by sea. This opium trade had a devastating impact on the people of China. The economic, social and cultural growth of China was paused for a hundred years.

The novel, set in the nineteenth century, begins in a village, where the protagonist, Deeti, dreams of a ship sailing on the ocean. Her husband owns a field where she grows poppy seeds. During the colonial period, Britishers forced Indian farmers to grow cash crops. In Bengal and Bihar, it was mandatory for the farmers to grow poppy. They obtained opium from the poppy seeds. Poppy seeds play an important role in these farmers' lives. It not only supports them financially but also meets their daily needs:

> Deeti gave her daughter the job of sweeping the poppy petals into a heap while she busied herself in stocking the fire and heating a heavy iron tawa. Once this griddle was heated through, she sprinkled a handful

> of petals on it and pressed them down with a bundled-up rag. Darkening as they toasted, the petals began to cling together so that in a minute or two they looked exactly like the round wheat-flour rotis Deeti had packed for her husband's midday meal. And 'roti' was indeed the name by which these poppy-petal wrappers were known although their purpose was entirely different from that of their namesake: they were to be sold to the Sudder Opium Factory, in Ghazipur, where they would be used to line the earthenware containers in which opium was packed.
>
> Kabutari, in the meanwhile, had kneaded some atta and rolled out a few real rotis, Deeti cooked them quickly, before poking out the fire; the rotis were put aside, to be eaten later with yesterday's leftovers – a dish of stale alu-posth, potatoes cooked in poppy-seed paste. Now, her mind turned to her shrine room again: with the hour of the noontime puja drawing close, it was time to go down to the river for a bath. After massaging poppy-seed oil into Kabutari's hair and her own, Deeti draped her sari over her shoulder and led her daughter towards the water, across the field. (Ghosh 2008: 6-7)

In earlier times, farmers grew grains that they could eat at home and also sell, earning some money. Poppy seeds were grown, but only in limited quantities. The Britishers compelled farmers in colonial India to grow poppy primarily through the Opium Monopoly System, as concretised by Regulation VI of 1799 and later constrained by the Opium Act of 1857. Using these policies, the Britishers prohibited Indian farmers from opting for private trade of opium. They were also compelled to take out loans to cultivate poppies. They trapped the illiterate and poor farmers in debt and forced them to utilise their land and men for the poppy crop. They had fixed low prices and demanded high quality and quantity in turn. Farmers were threatened with dire consequences, including jail or the destruction of their other crops. This policy was made basically to strengthen the opium trade, mainly to finance their tea trade with China:

> When Deeti was her daughter's age, things were different: poppies had been a luxury then, grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops– wheat, masoor dal and vegetables. Her mother would send some of her 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 hard 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 2008: 29)

Ghosh also describes the condition of farmers of that time very aptly:

> But those toothsome winter crops were steadily shrinking in acreage: now the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated. 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 asámi 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 the window. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you hadn't 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: 30)

Deeti marries Hukam Singh, an ex-soldier in the British Army. In one of the wars, Hukam Singh got injured, so he was given a job in the opium factory in Ghazipur. On the first night of her wedding, Hukam Singh introduces her to the product of his factory and how it is exported to China:

> Look! He pointed to the interior of the box, which was divided into several compartments: See–do you know what's in here?

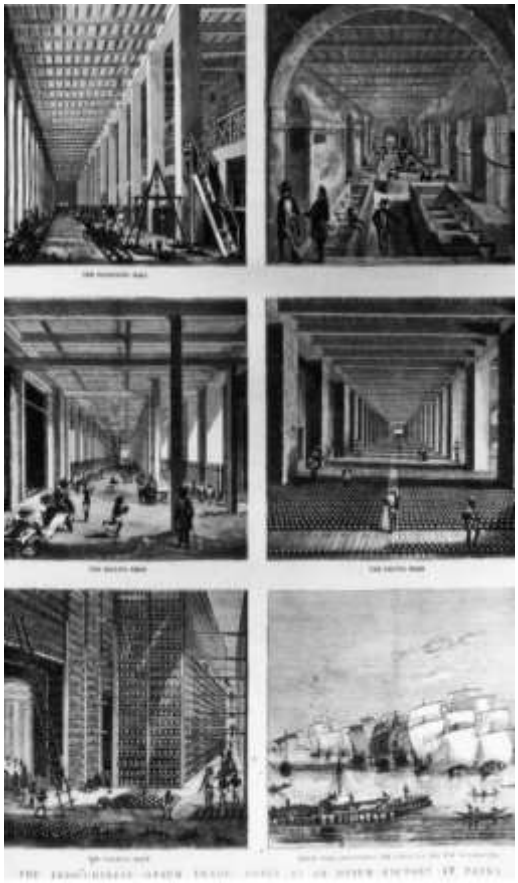
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> Afeem naikhé? she said. Isn't it opium?
> Yes, but of different kinds. Look. His forefinger pointed first to a lump of common akbari, black in colour and hard in texture; then it passed on to a ball of madak, a gluey mixture of opium and tobacco: See, this is the cheap stuff that people smoke in chillums. Next, using both hands, he took out a small lump, still in its poppy-petal wrapper, and touched it to her palm, to show her how soft it was: This is what we make in the factory: chandu. You won't see it here, the sahibs send it across the sea, to Maha-Chin. It can't be eaten like akbari and it can't be smoked like madak. (Ghosh 2008: 33)

Ghosh calls opium an important jewel in the Queen's crown. This shows the importance of opium trading for the East India Company: "Although the Sudder Opium Factory was indisputably large and well-guarded, there was nothing about its exterior to suggest to an onlooker that it was nothing about it was among the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria's crown" (Ghosh 2008: 91).

Deeti sees a ship in the river. She remembers the ship she saw in the dream. This, she feels, is a sign of some calamity. After a few days, she learns from the factory where her husband works that he is not feeling well. She visits the factory. The factory is a large setup with different departments. The description of the mixing room of the factory depicts the horrifying conditions of the workers in the opium factory:

> …it was like a dim tunnel, lit only by a few small holes in the wall. The air inside was hot and fetid, like that of a closed kitchen, except that the smell was not of spices and oil, but of liquid opium, mixed with the dull stench of sweat–a reek so powerful that she had to pinch her nose to keep herself from gagging. No sooner had she steadied herself, than 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. Their eyes were vacant, glazed, and yet somehow, they managed to keep moving, as slow as ants in honey, tramping, trending. When they could move no more, they sat on the edges of the tanks, stirring the dark ooze only with their feet…. Almost as frightening were the white overseers who were patrolling the walkways–for not only were they coatless and hatless, with their sleeves rolled, but they were also armed with fearsome instruments: metal scoops, glass ladles and long handled rakes. (Ghosh 2008: 94-95)



(Image courtesy: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india49404024)

The connection between London, India and China is very clearly described by Ghosh. While searching, her husband Deeti reaches the assembly room. From the work the employees are doing, she understands that it is the department where her

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husband works, as he had described the nature of his work in the factory to her. Even the labourers are aware that officials of the East India Company export this opium from Bihar to Calcutta and from there to China via the sea route. The trade routes and trading policies of the East India Company are quite evident in the writings of Ghosh:

> The assemblers' hands moved with dizzying speed as they lined hemispherical moulds with poppy-leaf rotis, moistening the wrappers with lewah, a light solution of liquid opium. Hukam Singh had told Deeti that the measure for every ingredient was precisely laid down by the Company's directors in faraway London: each package of opium was to consist of exactly one seer and seven-and-a-half chittacks of the drug, the ball being wrapped in five chittacks of poppy-leaf rotis, half of fine grade and half coarse, the whole being moistened with no more and no less than five chittacks of lewah. So finely honed was the system, with relays of runners carrying precise, measures of each ingredient to each seat, that the assemblers' hands never had cause to falter: they lined the moulds in such a way as to leave half the moistened rotis hanging over the edge. Then, dropping in the balls of opium, they covered them with the overhanging wrappers, and coated them with poppy-trash before tapping them out again. It remained only for runners to arrive with the outer casing for each ball–two halves of an earthenware sphere. The ball being dropped inside, the halves were fitted into a neat little cannonshot, to hold safe this most lucrative of the British Empire's products: thus would the drug travel the seas, until the casing was split open by a blow from a cleaver, in distant Maha-Chin. (Ghosh 2008: 97)

During the trip, the shipmates discuss many aspects of trade policy. Burnham is a ruthless businessman who, under the guise of free trade, supports the smuggling of opium. While arguing with Neel Ratan Halder (Raja of Raskhali) about the usefulness of opium, it is stated that modern medicine will not be able to function in the absence of opium:

> 'So you would do well to bear in mind that it would be well high impossible to practice modern medicine or surgery without such chemicals as morphine, codeine and narcotine–and these are but a few of the blessings derived from opium. In the absence of gripe water our children would not sleep. And what would our ladies–why our beloved Queen herself? –do without laudanum? Why, one might even say that it is opium that has made the age of progress and industry possible: without it, the streets of London would be thronged with coughing, sleepless, incontinent multitudes. …' (Ghosh 2008: 116)

Neel Ratan Halder is a zamindar who has lost his ancestral estate and social status due to colonial rule. He has been framed by Burnham and taken to Mauritius by Ibis as a convict. When he contradicts Burnham about the opium trade, stating that these deeds are against the will of their creator. "'But Mr Burnham,' Neel persisted, 'is it not true that there is a great deal of addiction and intoxication in China? Surely such afflictions are not pleasing to our Creator?'" (Ghosh 2008: 116). Burnham gives a reality check to Neel, arguing that all the wealth, mansions and servants which he had were paid for because of opium.

Ghosh's narration follows a diverse group of characters like Deeti – the protagonist and widow of opium addicted Hukam Singh, Kalua – the ox cart driver and an untouchable who saves Deeti from burning in the funeral of her husband, Zachary Reid – a mixed-race sailor, Neel Halder, Kabutri, Chandan Singh, Benjamin Burnham and Paulette Lambourn. Ghosh skilfully exposes the social, economic, political and human cost of the opium trade. It also exposes British Colonialism and global trade. Ghosh's narration interweaves multiple characters and their lives, balancing their personal struggles with social struggles. They all become Jahajbhai during their journey on the sea. As the novel progresses, Deeti and Kalua decide to become labourers in Mauritius. While saving Deeti, who in turn was saving a lady on the ship, Kalua kills the attacker and is sentenced to jail. He

conspires with Neel, Ah Fatt, Jodu, and Serang Ali, his jailmates, and escapes, beginning their journey towards Singapore. Deeti, Pauletter and Zachery sail towards Mauritius.

To conclude, Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* masterfully reimagines the history of the colonial opium trade, positioning the ocean as both a concrete and symbolic space of transformation. Through his detailed narrative and graphic portrayal of marginalised voices, Ghosh challenges the dominant colonial accounts and foregrounds the lived experiences of those rendered invisible by history. By interweaving the destinies of indentured labourers, convicts and colonial agents aboard the Ibis, Ghosh exposes the deep entanglements of commerce, coercion and migration that shaped the era. The novel's oceanic imagination is not simply a backdrop but an active force, highlighting the fluidity of identities and the uncertainties of imperial enterprise. Sea of Poppies ultimately demonstrates that the history of the opium trade—and by extension, the histories of trade, migration and colonialism—is not monolithic or unidirectional. Instead, they are complex, contested, and formed by a multiplicity of human perspectives.

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