

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)

## The Circle of Opium Trade, Indentured Labour, and Imperialism in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*: A Study

**Pragnya Parimita Chayani**

Ph. D. Scholar,

IIT Dharwad, India

**DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2019.3.6.05**

### Abstract

Postcolonial scholars have always tried to rewrite history to reclaim the lost space. Though Amitav Ghosh has never clearly endorsed himself as a postcolonial scholar, the traits he shows in his writing fall under it. His *Ibis Trilogy* has talked about the lost history of the *girmityas*, the Parsi opium trade and the Indians as soldiers in the First Opium War, where memory, interior monologue, and the stream of consciousness have played major role focusing on the opium as a major link that bridges the gap between three things like the indentured labour, Parsis' opium trade, and British monopoly. Present paper aims to explore the same, where it will concentrate on a little background information about the pre-war Indo-China relationship and then will move to Amitav Ghosh's trilogy which consists of *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire* to support the argument in showing opium as a link connecting History's three dark phenomena.

**Keywords-** Indenture, Opium, Migration, Parsis, British monopolization

### Introduction

Contemporary research is trying to shed light on the aspects of Sino-Indian relationships and tracing the history related to throw light on the tensed cord between the two anti-colonial nations. Restoring the agency of those Indians, who went to China during the First Opium war, Parsis as the trade diaspora and the situation in which they were instrumentalised is something that should be thoroughly inspected because that links India with British on one hand, with China on the other during the colonial period. Amitav Ghosh is the novelist, who always throws light on the lost past, brings to light that area which has remained in dark either as a result of negligence or as an impact of colonial whims and compels his readers question their already gained knowledge. His *Ibis trilogy* sings the saga of Parsi trade diaspora, indentured labour, and the imperial control. Opium serves to bridge the gap between three different yet interlinked categories.

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)

## Background Information:

Madhavi Thampi says, “The Histories of both the former Han and later Han Dynasties enumerates a number of products from different parts of India, including precious stones, pearls, perfumes, spices, fine linen, copper, tin, and exotic animals such as the rhinoceros and peacock” (2005:40). Age old trade relationship with China was always there for the better economy. Nevertheless, during the colonialism, the traders were bound by the monopoly of East India Company than sheer expanding their trade. Trade-diaspora’ also went through the pain of missing home, missing the food and missing family. However, whatever a little profit they earned, at the end of the day, the colonial hold used to gulp every drop of it. The Parsis were the trade diaspora, who carried opium from India to China and the Parsis for that matter, themselves are diasporas, who are Zoroastrians and in India are known as Parsis. Though they started as an ethnic minority, “By the nineteenth century, the Parsis were influential and important community determined to promote cooperation, with the other Indian communities of Bombay, including the British...” (Palsetia 2001:19).

During the pre-opium war, it was not only the trade diaspora but also another group of men crossed the geopolitical border of India, stayed for years, fought, got wounded and died. Some came back with a confused and scarred mind. These soldiers are mostly an understudied group being away from the light. Their story remained in dark. They left their village and joined the British soldiers’ camp to undergo the training. The metamorphosis they went through had an impact on them. When they wanted to go back home in the middle of the training, the flow of money and comfort forced their family to send them back to the camps, “Soldiers, policemen and watchmen formed a large and highly visible segment of the Indian population in China between the 1840s and 1940s.” (Thampi 2005:140)

The torture of the soldiers’ training-camp is reflected in *Flood of Fire* (2015). Bhyro Singh’s monopoly and Kesri Singh (Deeti’s brother) being attacked as he did not obey the order of washing “his nephew’s (Hukham Singh who afterwards becomes Deeti’s husband), underclothing” (60).

It’s time for you to learn that the first rule of soldiering is obedience... his big toe dug right into the crack of Kesri’s buttocks, tearing through the thin folds of his dhoti and langot... Yaad rakhika and remember, this is just your first dose of this medicine. If it doesn’t cure you then there’ll be a lot more... (Flood of Fire 2015:60)

## Spotlighting the Novels:

The *Ibis Trilogy* is a collection of three historical fictions, where it deals with the pre-Opium War situation, the indenture, history of colonialism, migration, and the opium trade. The plot-line goes back to pre- First Opium War India around 1838. The story starts in the first novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008) with complex characters who went on Indenture, the socio-economic

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)

condition that forced them and their development as characters. One storm and shipwreck impact the ships, one with labourers, one with a botanical expedition and others with the Malwa opium. The storyline of the second book *River of Smoke* (2011) focuses on the Parsi traders who went to China for opium trade and faced opium restriction. The narrative also records their use of pidginized language, affair with Chinese boat girls and the pre-war tension that mars the trade. Third novel *Flood of Fire* (2015) comes back to the plot of the first novel completing the peculiar strategy of forming a trilogy, a circle. It explores pre-war and during war Indian soldiers; the story of characters from the first novel ends with the rock inscription of their tales and a vivid picture of destruction caused by the war. The trilogy is multi-thematic, which bears Ghosh's creative genius, proper research, passion for history and a deep historical insight.

By following historical reports of Commissioner Lin and referring to painter George Chinnery, Amitav Ghosh has proved that his trilogy is not completely fictional. It can fall under the Victorian canon as politically the opium war, which forms the backdrop of the trilogy, happened during Queen Victoria's reign and literally also, that was the period of Victorian literature. Migration and the indentured experience have attracted him and Ghosh has given voice to the 'coolies', a term used for indentured labourers. He has used the 'opium war' as a connecting cord in his three novels of *Ibis Trilogy*. Ghosh describes opium as "among the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria's crown" (*Sea of Poppies* 61) in his novel and opium was "major source of Government revenue" (Arora 25). Hence, the Chinese restrictions for the opium tread led this dissatisfaction to war.

The Opium War indirectly affected the lives of many, who were even far away from the war ground. Contemporary research hardly talks about it and as a result, it's getting faded from memory and with it, the pain of many Indians, who were directly or indirectly connected to it, is on erasure. No doubt, forgetting events in history is forgetting the sacrifice and the pain of many. How was the life of a soldier away from home to kill innocent people? The struggle between him and his conscience because of the sight of bloodshed, death and being in the area, where anytime there would be firing cannot be easy to imagine. Undoubtedly, the duty of a soldier is to fight the enemy and to be proud of it but here, it was a shame, a shock, and a scar.

Being a postcolonial writer, Amitav Ghosh has claimed the space for the lost history and re-invented multiracialism. The metanarrative 'opium trade' has combined the novels. Postcolonial hybridization and 'the empire writes back to the centre' flavours are present in the novels with the opium trade, globalisation, and the opium war. *Sea of Poppies* shows the forced opium trade and British imperialism. While opium was carried to China in the ship called Anahita, the storm made Bahram Modi face a huge loss and the same storm helped to set five inmates of *Ibis* (as captives) free. Victorian India and its imperialism got heightened with colonial India's narrow-mindedness, superstition, gender violence, poverty, untouchability and

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)

above all, losing caste in kala-pani (crossing black waters) considering the scenes described in the ships. In the quest of better prospects, Indians went as *grimityas*<sup>1</sup>, people who went as indentured labourers from “Gangetic plains of Eastern U.P. and Northern Bihar” (Rai and Pinkney 68) especially from the area of Bhojpuri speaking people.

Opium is shown as the backdrop of the novels. More than the war, which has created ‘trade diaspora’ and *girmitya*, it is the opium, which is eventually, the reason behind the opium war and connects the three novels of the Trilogy under discussion. Amitav Ghosh has shown how the forced opium cultivation has made farmers go without food after the British took complete possession of the harvest. Once traded to China, opium intoxication has forced Chinese authorities to take strong actions against the traders which not only disrupted flow of silver coins but also marred the business of the Parsis. As a result, this dissatisfaction with Chinese authorities led to the war and finally, it is also the opium that strained India’s relationship with China forever.

In this context, the ocean holds an important place. It is the medium, the witness of labourer-shifting, the opium trade, and the opium war. Ocean has become the archive that holds in his bosom the long-forgotten stories, the stories which are not simply historical facts, rather tales of power, imperialism, violence, marginalisation, trauma, resistance, optimism, and survival and the stories of unquestioned hegemony. Historians have always focused on the role of Opium wars in colonial expansion. Clare Anderson’s “convicts and coolies”, Curtis Mariz’s *Drug Wars* fall under this category. Ghosh seems inspired by their study and felt the diasporic sentiment being the diaspora and imagined the life of Indians who went to fight in Opium War and who remained home but got affected by the war. Opium has profited Britishers like anything that they did not hesitate to disrupt the lives of the Indians. Ghosh’s Trilogy is somehow synonymous with Empire Writes Back when it portrays the torture, trauma, and helplessness of Indians who were affected worst by the trade. The story of those Indian lives, which was buried deep, making ‘Indian Ocean’ as the witness of the pain, is now reclaimed by the trilogy.

Amitav Ghosh has reflected how the tales of opium are no way tales of heroism. Opium trade was a smuggling trade having no glory involved. Moreover, he has shown how the cultivation impacted the ordinary lives and how it invited a war where Indian soldiers played a big part to gain nothing in return. The Parsis, who were profited because of the trade also suffered the anger of Chinese authority. But the question is why no one responds to that and why a bigger part of the History is omitted if not fully and especially, why the part containing the pain of soldiers, drummers or fifers who suffered in First Opium War is still masked. Is not forgetting a big part of the history is forgetting our own men? How they struggled to negotiate being in between the sense of self and rapid metamorphosis of socio-cultural values that they have been holding all their lives.

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)

Ghosh has treated the pain of the indentured labourers with utter sympathy. The plight of the lead woman *Deeti* is before us whose dreams are shattered and whose life is devastated by her husband, mother-in-law, brother-in-law and the society, where the opium played a vital role. Facing severe poverty, “she had no grain or fruit to spare, and as for money, there was not a dam's worth of cowrie-shells in the house” (*Sea of Poppies*19). The character portrayal of *Deeti*, one of the leading characters in the novel is the important link. *Deeti* is an upper caste village woman, whose impotent, handicapped and opium addict husband, *Hukam Singh* works in an opium factory of Ghazipur after being injured while working in the British army. *Deeti* also loses him to opium addiction. On the marriage night, *Chandan Singh*, the younger brother of *Hukam Singh* consummates the marriage with the help of his mother and uncle when *Deeti* was under the spell of opium and she bears a daughter. The drugged lady neither knows nor does remember. Her mother-in-law calls her *Draupadi* for bearing similarity with the *Mahabharat*'s *Draupadi*, someone who bears children of brothers (in an inebriated state here). *Deeti* has to drug old mother-in-law to know the truth. *Chandan Singh*'s sexual advances let *Deeti* choose to be a 'sati' (widow immolation-a barbaric Hindu Brahmin rite to get burnt on the pyre of the husband to attain a place in the heaven), rather than encouraging him. However, she gets rescued by *Kalua*, a lower caste cart-driver and ends up in Ibis with him and his child in her womb as a *girmitya*. Her journey starts from there. The opium that has forced people to migrate, to sail in the ship, and also is the reason behind a deep connection and the formation of a universal brotherhood among the labourers, undermining the hierarchy of class and caste. The ship journey has an important role in the lives of *girmityas*.

On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone 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 ship-siblings – jahāzbhais and jahāzbahens – to each other. There'll be no differences between us... Yes, said *Deeti*, from now on, there are no differences between us; we are jahaz-bhai and jahazbahen to each other; all of us children of the ship. (*Sea of Poppies* 2008:242)

Similar narratives can be noticed in Kunal Basu's novel *Opium Clerk* (2001), where the opium trade is narrated from the point of view of a clerk. Similarly, cultural critic Curtis Marez's *Drug Wars* (2004), though not a novel, explores two hundred years of writings, graphic works, films, and music which are woven around the trade of cocaine. Amitav Ghosh, with the lost history of Opium trade and war, has portrayed the diasporic sentiment. History is the witness that British imperialism, which has once enforced opium cultivation, also disturbed common lives and made people cross the geographical and cultural boundary in search of a living. This state initiated migration to far off Mauritius. *Robin Chinnery* has a premonition seventeen years earlier of the destruction of this incredible place, depicted it in an 1839 engraving (*River of Smoke* 980).

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)

In fact, while describing canton, Achha Hong, pre opium war incidents, Chinnery brought two cultures together, in his paintings and in his letters, “Paulette’s friend Robin Chinnery – has put down the date as July 1839. But the destruction of the Thirteen Factories did not happen until seventeen years later. But it seems that Robin saw it in a dream” (*River of Smoke* 2011:980).

The *Ibis trilogy* deals with politics, history, and trade via sea route. With the backdrop of opium war, there are the stories of power, exploitation, dominion, violence, pain, resistance, movement, struggle, survival- the Indian diaspora. By opium trade, Ghosh has dealt with overseas trade, merchant diaspora, counter-culture, the pain of soldiers and hybridised outcome. He has treated the Indian Ocean as “palimpsest<sup>2</sup>” (Arora 22). Just like the trace of previous writing on the skin, the lost history is always there even if there are the colonial deletion, imperialism, and reconstruction. Ghosh has focused on the long-forgotten history of lascars and migrant labour, which is connected to the opium trade and emphasised on their marginal place in the main canon. Colonisation, which is synonymous with politics of power, conquering, exploiting, manipulating, and hegemony, has tried its best to reconstruct the history of the people they once colonised. However, novelists like Amitav Ghosh have always tried to read the trace of lost past from the palimpsest of archives to unveil the “Eurocentric history” (Arora 24) and to reclaim it.

Ghosh has shown that opium was the major commodity to smuggle to China. It is a known fact that things of utmost value are always safeguarded, which is why scenes of opium factory as portrayed in the trilogy clarify the importance of opium for the British. Describing the strict surveillance of opium factories he says, “The fortifications here were formidable, and the guards particularly sharp-eyed—and well they might be, for the contents of those few sheds, or so it was said, were worth several million pounds sterling and could buy a good part of the City of London” (*Sea Of Poppies* 2008:61).

*Deeti* goes inside to bring her sick husband and her confrontation with the factory’s worker units make us see the picture of a gigantic mouth of capitalism and its exploitive power. The British imperial power has not only exercised power over cultivation but also on peasants and on trade. Indians are shown giving their land, their labour, migrated as sailors, and become ‘grimitiyas’, but profit is controlled by the British. In addition, opium cultivation, factories, and even opium addiction have destroyed families and lives. In the trilogy, *Muharrir* in citified Hindi says to *Deeti*, “sell your sons. Send them off to Mareech. It’s not as if you don’t have any choices” (*Sea of Poppies* 105). It is evident that the novels are “writing back” (Arora 25) to the covered and somewhat lost history.

Ghosh is successful in drawing the “historical links” (Arora 26) between the opium cultivation and trade, colonial imperialism and hegemony, and the indentured labour - and a close relationship between land, river, and sea. Imperialism of British rule has broken the



# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)

backbone of Indian farmers and their forced shifting looks like a voluntary one. Amitav Ghosh has pictured the impact of forced cultivation of poppies in *Chhapra*. The picture has made us imagine how painful life became that people were forced to lose their caste, society, home, soil and above all, their very self and were ready to go for an unknown voyage which was scary. Ghosh writes,

The town was thronged with hundreds of...impoverished transients...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. (*Sea of Poppies* 2008:135).

Ghosh has represented families, which sailed as lascars. Moreover, their indispensability to join British navy, hopping from sea to ocean, and their pain as lascars, as soldiers-both skilled and unskilled migrants are vividly pictured in the novels. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, the conquering of Spanish Armada made her built the strongest navy. History is overloaded with the heroic tales of their exploration and discoveries, however, the South Asian lascars are also heroic enough to write their own tale, make their own history and in starting the first phase of Indian diaspora. Talking about non-European sea-men, David Chappell says that the lascars “constitute the unsung working class of Western trading ships” (77). He further argues pointing at the heroic role of lascars and their presence on European ships, “challenges the triumphant tale of European seafarers heroically globalising the world and offers us instead an image of interdependency with alien ‘others,’ whose skills made voyaging so far from home possible” (75–76).

Focusing on the way Amitav Ghosh writes, John Hawley says that “He is obviously clearing a space in his definition of his writing so that the term for what he does will happily include anthropology, historical research, fiction, social commentary, and – in a word – freedom to invent new forms” (2005:166).

Everywhere it is the opium that has constantly been the connecting link in the trilogy. Forced opium cultivation in India can be seen from the perspective of ecological imperialism which has forced the characters in the trilogy migrate as the indentured labourers. Opium trading has also made the Parsis become the trade diaspora and write another saga of history. Moreover, the opium trade has acted as a catalytic agent in initiating the Opium War, a black chapter in the history of China. Hence, it can be said that the ‘opium’ that has helped Amitav Ghosh in weaving three novels into a circle, touching history, anthropology, and human emotion - all into one.<sup>3</sup>

# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)

## Endnote

- 1 “Agreement”—vernacularized in North Indian languages as *girit*—and were thereafter known as “*giritiyas*” who were transported to British colonies like Mauritius and Fiji to East Africa and the Caribbean (e.g., Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica)” (see Rai and Pinkney 66 and Mishra 122).
2. Palimpsest was the book made from animal skin to be used to write in ancient times by Greco-Roman culture. Once there was the necessity to write again, the letters were scratched to be used for writing but the trace of previous writing always remained.
3. The paper is a part of my M.Phil dissertation, Migration and Formation of Diaspora In Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis Trilogy* submitted to the University of Hyderabad under the supervision of Dr. Ajaya Kumar Sahoo on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2017.

## References

- Anderson, Clare. “Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century”. Slavery and Abolition. Web University of Warwick institutional repository (March 2009):1-24. Web. 20 Jan. 2018.  
[http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/463/1/WRAP\\_Anderson\\_Penal\\_Roots\\_of\\_Indenture\\_POST-REFeree\\_FINAL\\_SUBMISSION.pdf](http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/463/1/WRAP_Anderson_Penal_Roots_of_Indenture_POST-REFeree_FINAL_SUBMISSION.pdf)
- Arora, Anupama. “The Sea is History: Opium, Colonialism, and Migration in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*”. *ariel: a review of international English literature* 42.3-4(2012):21-42. Web. 20 Jan. 2018.. <file:///C:/Users/JULU/Downloads/35321-89130-1-PB.pdf>
- Chappell, David A. “Ahab’s Boat: Non-European Seamen in Western Ships of Exploration and Commerce.” *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean*. Klein, Bernhard. Gesa Mackenthun, eds. New York: Routledge, 2004:75–89. Web. 20 Jan. 2018.  
[https://books.google.co.in/books?id=PEug7zqej1wC&pg=PA75&lpg=PA75&dq=Ahab%E2%80%99s+Boat:+Non%20European+Seamen+in+Western+Ships+of+Exploration+and+Commerce&source=bl&ots=s6brWgeYXP&sig=VJIP\\_ceOrYmhn3WsAWU3OAWiea4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjFufuCVfbQAhURTY8KHdTWCChcQ6AEIGjAA#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.in/books?id=PEug7zqej1wC&pg=PA75&lpg=PA75&dq=Ahab%E2%80%99s+Boat:+Non%20European+Seamen+in+Western+Ships+of+Exploration+and+Commerce&source=bl&ots=s6brWgeYXP&sig=VJIP_ceOrYmhn3WsAWU3OAWiea4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjFufuCVfbQAhURTY8KHdTWCChcQ6AEIGjAA#v=onepage&q&f=false)
- Ghosh, Amitav. “The Diaspora in Indian Culture”. *Public Culture* 2.1(Fall 1989):73-78.PDF.  
---. *Flood of Fire*. Haryana: Penguin Books, 2015.PDF.  
---. *River of Smoke*. Haryana: Penguin Books, 2011.PDF.  
---. *Sea of Poppies*. Haryana: Penguin Books, 2008.PDF
- Hawley, John C. “Beyond the Commonwealth: Amitav Ghosh and Indian Writing in



# The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Vol. III & Issue VI (February- 2019)

English”. *Amitav Ghosh: An Introduction*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2005:165-177.Print.

Palsetia, Jesse S. *The Parsis of India*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2001. Print.

Rai, Rajesh and Andrea Marion Pinkney. “The Girmitiyas’ Journey in Amitav Ghosh’s Sea of Poppies”. *History, Narrative, and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh’s Fiction*. Sankaran, Chitra, ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012:65-78.PDF.

Thampi, Madhavi. *Indians in China 1800-1949*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2005.Print.