

Portrayal of Opium Wars and Imperialism in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy

Khan Sheehan Shahab¹

Dr. Shruti Rawal²

Research Scholar, Assistant Professor

Department of English

IIS (deemed to be University), Jaipur, India.

Abstract: The paper is concerned with the role played by Opium Wars fought under the imperial reign of Britain as portrayed in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy, set in the backdrop of the years preceding the First Opium War. Ghosh portrays the fading world of myriad of aspects left in the dark such as the Opium Wars *girmitya* (indentured labourers), the taboos associated with the act of crossing Black Water. In the Trilogy, Ghosh deftly sheds light on the part of history which had almost vanished in the annals of past events. The Opium Wars, in a manner could be considered as marginalized event of history as it was overshadowed by other events which garnered attention and pushed the Opium Wars to the periphery, fought Free Trade rights and extraterritoriality.

Keywords: British imperialism; Opium Wars; Marginalization; *Girmitya* (indentured labourers); Free Trade rights; Extraterritoriality.

Amitav Ghosh in the Trilogy, consisting of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015), delineates on the capitalist imperial rule of Britain. It was through Imperialism that Britain had become a purveyor of commodities to other nations. Nations which were known to manufacture goods and were workshop for other countries were transformed into producers of raw materials. England adopted the policy of laissez faire to gain trading monopoly of various goods and became the "workshop of the world" (Lenin 15).

The motto of Free Trade rights had become the driving force which aided Britain in becoming a colonizing capitalist empire by mid – nineteenth century. The Empire mastered the mechanism of adapting from a purveyor to a manufacturer of goods in India. Looting capital from a nation to gain revenue was a policy employed to plunder into China as well because of the trade deficit caused by the large amount of tea it imported from China.

It was through the trade of Indian opium in exchange of tea that Britain endeavoured to tip the imbalanced trade in its favour. Within two decades Britain had managed to cover over times of the amount it owed to China. Commissioner Lin's appointment was China's attempt to put a stoppage to the inflow of opium in the nation and the drain of silver it caused simultaneously. The methods employed by Lin to attain this goal were considered radical by the Company and countered with "barbaric and decisive force" and resulted in Opium Wars (Mishra 10).

Amitav Ghosh translates raw experiences on to the page by observing what he saw, by making extensive notes about his conversations with the people he met, when he spent a year living in an Egyptian village during his training as an anthropologist, which extensively helped the creative writer in him. His interest in people, their lives, histories, and predicaments can easily be traced through his corpus of writing.

The Trilogy reflects the author's ubiquitous concern of enlightening the part of history which had almost vanished in the annals of past events. Ghosh deftly explores marginalized event of history, namely the Opium Wars. The occurrence of events like the spread of European imperialism and colonialism, the decline of various Empires in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, eclipsed the Opium Wars (1839 – 42, 1856 – 60). Along with the attainment of Free Trade rights, the Empire also received "extraterritoriality" which granted the Britishers residing in China being exempted from the Chinese laws and were subjects of British empire and its laws alone (Hayes11).

Ghosh depicts the angst of those directly and indirectly associated with the Opium Wars, Like other post colonial writers Ghosh, too, attempts to shed light on the fading and suppressed incidents of the former colonies and its subjects by rewriting history in order to fill the void created by the forgotten memories considered insignificant in Eurocentric texts, "restoring facts that suffered erasure in public memory" is the aimed objective of postcolonial writings (Sundararaghavan 1). He focuses on the life of *girmityas* (indentured labourers) who migrated from India to various British colonies, Mauritius or "Mareech", being one of the plantations where over a million of Indians and characters of the Trilogy, in particular, had migrated to (*Sea of Poppies* 155).

Britain was one of the major producers of opium, Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), and North India were the shipping and cultivating grounds of opium and indigo respectively. The British forced the reluctant natives to plant and produce goods which amplified their monetary income. Products which gave them vantage to reverse the balance of Tea trade with the Qing Dynasty of China in their favour, through the import and export of various commodities viz., tea, silk, porcelain, cotton, opium and indigo to name a few. This advantage gave the British an upper hand as the production of cotton, poppy and indigo, among various other goods, over the natives as well. The outcome of this vantage for the British resulted in the hardships of the natives associated with the plantation of these goods, especially with the cultivation of poppy and indigo. The colonized natives were made to feel caged in the jargon of taxes and laws of the British judiciary. Dinbandhu Mitra's *Nil Darpan; Or, The Indigo Planting Mirror, A Drama* (1861), too, explores the privation and sufferings of the unwilling native planters.

One of the marginalized sections depicted in the Trilogy is also known as *girmitya*, the indentured labourers who were addressed as such because they were sent away as labourers in exchange for some silver, to vanish forever. The silver was handed to the families for the barter trade which was a boon for many families in times of need. The system of indenture was seen as evil as that of slavery, according to Charles Freer Andrews, an Anglican priest, educator and social reformer, the system of indenture is just as humiliating, savage, and merciless as slavery, if not more. And it was a connection acknowledged by Ghosh as well when he

paints a jaded history of the schooner *Ibis*, he states that prior to becoming a means of transporting indentured labourers the *Ibis* was built to be a “blackbirder” it was referred as such because it was a ship built to convey the slaves (*Sea of Poppies* 11). Due to the similarities established between the two systems, it can be said that system of indentured labourers was a sophisticated and a modern version of slavery, as both carried “human cargo” but under the garb of varied names and people of different origins (*Sea of Poppies* 12); and were made to benefit Britain. Because slaves were captive Africans and the indentured labourers were more often than not of Indian origin, as offenders of the British law irrespective of their citizenship were also sent as coolies, off to various sugarcane plantations of the British Empire.

Migration was considered as a taboo for various religious reasons for many members of Hindu communities, especially for the higher caste. It resulted in the migrating individuals being ostracised from their caste and community as crossing the ocean is a taboo. Major McNair in *Prisoners their own Warders* (2008), states that the Company was aware of the taboo associated with the act of crossing the ocean also known as “kala pani” (Black Water) (*Sea of Poppies* 3). McNair shares his perspective on the matter:

To the native of India it meant even a severer punishment ... to be sent across the ... "black water," ... especially to a man of high caste... He could never be received in intercourse again with his own people ... he was in point of fact excommunicated and avoided (9).

Neel was framed and convicted for forging Mr Burnham’s signatures on the promissory notes used in estate matters. At the demise of his father Neel was advised to carry on with the tradition of writing write Mr Burnham’s name. But when in 1837 the Burnham Bros., (brothers) had failed in generating profits for their clients, and in order to recover the funds Mr Burnham decided to go back on his word and ask Neel to repay the debt of one hundred thousand rupees that the Old King had insisted on borrowing as a loan, but Mr Burnham had loaned the amount as a gift instead of a loan. And on learning that the new King of Rakshali (Neel) did not have enough funds to repay the Debt Mr Burnham, with the help of his gomusta Nobb Kissin, devised a plan on getting a fake affidavit from Neel’s mistress Elokeshi, which proves to be the last nail in Neel’s coffin when it is presented in Justice Kendalbushe’s court as the major evidence which turns the tables on Neel.

Justice Kendalbushe’s preconceived notion of the native Indian being the culprit when pitted against an Englishman like Mr Benjamin Burnham, had indirectly determined that Malati (Neel’s wife) and Raj Rattan (Neel’s son), too would have to pay and suffer for the crime they had never committed, that alongside Neel his family, too, will not only lose their wealth, and respect in the society, but they will also have to lead their lives as outcasts. It not only resulted in the seizure of Neel’s properties to pay all of his and his father’s loans, but it also condemned Neel off to the islands of Mauritius for seven long years, by boarding a convict ship named *Ibis*, formerly known for carrying slaves, his fate was sealed, alongside *girmityas* (indentured labourers) on the twentieth of July, 1838.

Ghosh portrays the ocean as a link between convicts, *girmityas* (indentured labourers) and refugees belonging to varied castes, races and nations and the novels of the Trilogy together. Ghosh describes the beauty of ocean as “chasm of darkness where the holy Ganga disappeared into the Kala – Pani, ‘the Black Water’” which then changes with the perception of the characters of the Trilogy (*Sea of Poppies* 3). Because characters like Deeti, Kesri and Neel, until then, had known the ocean alone, because of the convergence of the Ganges with the ocean, the unknown phenomenon, for beyond the existence of the holy river they believed that the land accompanying the Black Water was “inhabited by demons ... pishaches ... unnameable beasts” (*Sea of Poppies* 205). The superstitious beliefs prevalent in the nineteenth century India aided the colonial reign of the Company. Fear of the unknown was a tool often used by employees of the Company to their advantage, irrespective of the manner and context of fear, whether it was the fear of side stepping the wrath and legal jargon of an Englishman or law of the Company.

Another reason for the natives of the Trilogy being afraid of the Black Water before boarding the *Ibis* was because of the rumours that added to their fear. As they consisted of the horror tales of the depot they were accommodated in prior to their journey aboard the ship of Burnhams, “the depot was just a kind of jail where they had been sent to die; that their corpses would be turned into skulls and skeletons” (*Sea of Poppies* 339).

In fact, *girmityas* (indentured labourers) had become a spectacle which piqued curiosity among the watching natives as “they would stand around for hours, watching, pointing, staring, as if at animals in a cage” (*Sea of Poppies* 339), especially the vendors and vain rogues, who spread rumours of horror tales among people. These rumours were responsible for the fright among the labourers.

Idle minds of some natives led them away with their imaginations, because they had tried their hands on getting the labourers to answer and open up to their queries by engaging, baiting and provoking the labourers. They would go as far as treating the labourers as caged animals, as though they were a part of “human zoos” which displayed breathing ethnological exhibitions; which became prevalent in the latter half of the nineteenth century till early twentieth century in Europe where people of various ethnicities were put on display for the Europeans to observe and enjoy the various exhibits of gestures and bodies of those considered “primitive in Eurocentric perspective (Sánchez – Gómez 1).

On reaching Mauritius, Deeti, like her fellow coolies had gone in search for food for herself and her infant baby (Kalua’s son), found a cavern where she found signs of existence of life. She was afraid that she might encounter skulls or ghosts but on coming across “a scattering of ossified human dung, rendered odourless by age” reassured her that the cavern once housed humans “not ghosts or pishaches or demons” (*River of Smoke* 12).

Ocean is not only portrayed as the point of confluence for various water bodies where marks of demarcation are cleaned and washed away with the waves, but it also proves to be a point where discrimination in the name of caste, class, race and gender are nonexistent. Ocean is depicted as a place of repose where world began afresh for characters of the Trilogy.

Division in the prevalent social structure of the society had fragmented all the more because of Opium trade conducted by the British Empire, which stopped at nothing to gain monetary benefits. One such advent at getting monetary benefits had linked Deeti, Neel, and Kesri. All of these characters had used the womb of *Ibis* to get away from their hardships induced either by opium or by a British citizen of the Company working with imperialistic motives.

Ghosh does not overlook the connection between the deteriorating condition of the peasants and the Imperial policy “The town was thronged with hundreds of ... impoverished transients... willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice” (*Sea of Poppies* 202). The hardships faced by Indian peasants who were forced to cultivate indigo and poppy on their fertile and agricultural lands included not only the scarcity of food but the addiction of opium procured by poppy was also an added curse to their lives. It was also evident in Deeti’s struggle to secure some staple food grains for her six year old daughter, Kabutri. On her

way back from the Opium factory in Ghazipur, Deeti, finds it difficult to buy wheat and rice from the amount remnant from the sale of poppy procured from her agrarian fields because she had to pay off Hukam Singh's (Deeti's husband) debts of opium addiction. The helplessness of the peasants is depicted through the dilemma of Deeti where in order to feed her family, the *muharir* from the Opium factory in Ghazipur had bluntly suggested her to either sell the land she had or to send her son off to "Mareech", or to go to the moneylender as many people were doing the same (*Sea of Poppies* 155). The difficulties of once land owning and food cultivating farmers who were forced to become penury ridden transients depicted by Ghosh is as follows:

Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of ... poppies; ... 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* 202).

Prior to boarding the *Ibis* this was how Deeti and Kalua survived Moreover, the deteriorating effect of the forced plantation of Poppy and Indigo over the reluctant peasants had destroyed providence and fortunes of many farmers, Mitra in *Nil Darpan; Or, The Indigo Planting Mirror, A Drama* (1861) portrayed this plight of such farmers through the laments of Nobin Madhab, son of a rich farmer:

Is this my family, reduced to this state! What was I, and what am I now become!... Being so rich, now I am obliged to take away the ornaments of my wife, and the wife of my young brother. What affliction? (703).

The rich farmers, once owners of their will, had to live at the mercy of some law enforcing officers of the East India Company, who liked to play masters to their destinies.

British imperialism and trade of opium had affected Kesri Singh's life as well. Kesri Singh is Deeti's brother who worked as a Havildar in the army of East India Company. Kesri's character is embodiment of the direct effect of colonial imperialism of Britain, as he was not only a part of the First Opium War bearing the direct effect of Britain's opium trade with China, working in the British army, but his life was also affected by the trade indirectly because his sister Deeti's life was ruined with the rushed proposal of Bhyro Singh's nephew Hukam Singh. Both Bhyro and Hukam Singh were employed in the British army at the posts of Subedar and Sepoy respectively.

The uncle – nephew duo had left no stone unturned and made every possible effort to make Kesri Singh's life miserable while on duty, away from home on their way to the military cantonment at Barrackpore, presently a part of West Bengal. The power hungry natives themselves had become lords of the native sepoys to be trained in their supervision. The training soldiers were bullied and abused both, verbally and physically. And Kesri bore the brunt of all because he and Hukam Singh were both of the same built, it was Hukam Singh's size which intimidated soldiers of lesser bulk and muscle. And Kesri's indifference towards Hukam Singh's size made him the target for both the Subedar as well as the Sepoy.

Though, both Kesri and Hukam Singh were of the same age but the latter had joined the British army six years prior to Kesri and had served the "Pacheesi" which resulted in him becoming the in charge of looking over the training of six trainees (*Flood of Fire* 93). His relation with the Subedar was a detail that helped Hukam Singh in sailing on the boat of lordship, a position he had taken up over the other soldiers of the cantonment. When Hukam Singh noticed that Kesri was affected neither by his bulky appearance nor by his connection with Bhyro Singh, he then decided to break his confidence and his morale by throwing unwashed piece of clothing at Kesri demanding him to launder it. Kesri's refusal on abiding the demand resulted in him being slapped across his face by Bhyro Singh as Hukam Singh had carried tales of Kesri's refusal at doing his bidding. The effect of being harshly beaten made Kesri sprawl on the deck of the ship they were travelling in, it was then that Kesri realized that it was not his refusal that bore such humiliation, but the fact that Bhyro Singh gained a sadistic and "a kind of animal pleasure" by inflicting pain on the recruits. (*Flood of Fire* 95). It was by using a hard hand that Bhyro preferred to teach the lesson of obedience to the recruits.

Treating the unwilling natives in a degrading manner was not an uncommon method employed not only by the foreign colonial masters but also by the self claimed native colonial masters, who later came to be known as neo – colonial masters in the post independence era independence of the nation, to break the determined wills of the subjects under their rule. As the same method is employed by the native land measurer also known as the Amin in Dinbandhu Mitra's *Nil Darpan; Or, The Indigo Planting Mirror, A Drama* (1861) used to bring the rebelling indigo peasants to their heels by using his "Shamchand" (the leather strap) by hurling humiliating insults and by addressing them with derogatory terms as "bloody nigger" (Mitra 244).

The trade of Opium under British imperialism did not bear benefits for India and China, especially the agrarian section of the populace and the Indian soldiers employed in the army of the British East India Company or for the subjects of the Chinese Qing Dynasty. Albeit, the silver earned through the cultivation and trade of Opium secured tea for the markets of England, paid for it, and made profit for the British government. As the tea – opium trade ensured that the monetary gain would cover the importation taxes of tea many times over the original price. A part of the profit earned from the opium trade was used to cover the expense of the Royal Navy of the Crown through the nineteenth century, which consequently kept the British Empire waterborne. The trade of "opium financed British rule in India" and the end of trade proved to be dusk the Empire known for its ceaseless dawn (Ghosh BBC).

The Opium War, today is referred to as the "traumatic inauguration" of the Modern History of China (Lovell 9). It was China's "century of humiliation," referred to as such because of the events that took place between 1842 and 1949 (Lovell 9). It was a humiliation caused by the waves of influence brought on by the European, Japanese and American colonizer's as well the merchants of these nations. For up till the eighteenth century, China was considered as one of the wealthiest and strongest civilizations in the world, yet the foreign influences had left the nation weak, assailable and susceptible with the introduction of opium in the systems of their citizens. Open wounds and sore points such as these aggravated the desire to develop and become independent for its survival in China for even today, when asked about the Opium War, people state that if one is not progressive and is vulnerable, they will, then have to suffer for their backwardness.

In the perspective of the people of China the Gunboat diplomacy of Britain, bullied millions of dollars worth silver out of China, in return it addicted China with slow poison, opium, which threatened to ruin and waste many generations of China, in a manner it forced the Chinese to undergo grave sufferings.

The differences between the technological and military progress made by the two empires and the gap resulting from the differences was evident in the First Opium War (1839 – 42) where the Chinese empire had about two hundred thousand of troops, had a large man power at its will, where as the British empire had only nineteen thousand soldiers at their disposal, but it was the technological advances that they had achieved by employing better weaponry and warships such as the *Nemesis*, frigates, rigs along with the improved rifles which could fire across long ranges, accompanied with the experience and wisdom the British had

gained in the Napoleonic Wars (1799 – 1815) that made the difference, that fortified and ensured their victory over the heavily guarded empire of China.

The Opium Wars fuelled with Imperialistic motives of Britain is one of the major reasons responsible for the strained relations shared between Britain, China and India, as it dwindled and deteriorated the producing and the consuming nations (India and China respectively) than it did to Britain – a nation who gained monetary benefits from both the aforementioned nations in the name of land revenues, taxes, Free Trade rights and “extraterritoriality” (Hayes 11).

Ghosh represents British imperialism through the foreign and native characters of Mr Burnham, Justice Kendalbushe, Nobb Kissin, Hukam Singh and Bhyro Singh; and portrays the repercussion of Britain’s imperial advent of Opium Wars through Deeti, Neel and Kesri. Britain’s capitalist ideology resulted in Opium Wars and the system of *girmitya* (indentured labourers); Ghosh through the Trilogy succeeds in bringing the forgotten pathos of people and nations affected by Britain’s imperialism to the fore.

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