

Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy: A Study of History and Culture

Sanjeev Khanna

Associate Professor

Madhav institute of Technology & Science

Gwalior

Abstract: Amitav Ghosh as a fictionist presents a truthful (history) account (fiction) of the people [largely destitute] who for some or the other reason have been uprooted from their own roots/culture. The most noteworthy factor about *Sea of Poppies* is the setting of the novel in the British Indian background. *Sea of poppies* is the first of the trilogy on the opium farming and its aftermath. John C. Hawley in his book on Amitav Ghosh remarks:

Amitav Ghosh's novels brim with interesting themes set against fascinating historical backdrops. His roots are in ... the Dickensian proliferation of characters whose lives engage us and who take us to some richly imagined places and times. (Hawley, 1)

Ghosh evokes a picture of India of 1830s with its rituals, customs, society, hardships, British misrule, and a horde of men and women indecisive of what is going to be their future and where they are heading for. Amitav Ghosh's novels have a historical setting where the writer in a magical realistic mode portrays the continuing cultural confluence in India under the British rule. Being a trained anthropologist Ghosh studies the tides society and culture undergoes in its paths of progress. John Thieme is on a firmer ground to assert that Ghosh blurs "the boundaries between anthropology and fiction." (Thieme, 178-79)

Keywords: Culture, History, Realism, Magic Realism, Anthropology.

Sea of Poppies

Sea of Poppies employs diverse tongues and a memorable cast of characters that find their semblances in history. The sea of the title is symbolic of a man-made disaster where the East India Company is forcing the farmers of the Gangetic plains for the cultivation of opium. Which, when ready has to be smuggled into china in a times where might settled the question of legalities and moralities of trade and trade-relations. This forceful trading is in disguise of not merely the British balance of payments but also to turn the tables bearing financial dealings so as to ensure the return of money seemingly to England and secretly to Europe without the possibilities of the least investment by the Europeans in the East. This was the Objective of the setting up of the East India Company. (Robbins, 7)

The story glosses over a time when India was the world's biggest opium producer. Two centuries ago British turned the banks of the Ganges into a sea of poppies and forcibly marketing the refined drug in China in a great political and military desperation to establish their control/hegemony over China in which they succeeded financially and not militarily as they did in India. Things worsened as the Chinese emperor banned the drug that dulled his subjects and addled his empire. British openly defied the orders and retorted to the use of force forcing the emperor and even more shamefully propelled London—which then sought pride in the events—to wage the opium wars. At

one instance the Opium was poisoning the Chinese at the other it was also doing the same to the Indian counterparts. While Chinese were being poisoned by the use of opium in the mid-19th century, the poor Indian peasant actually suffered the brunt of this poisoning. The English 'sahibs' forced farmers to grow poppy instead of useful crops like wheat, cereals, vegetable etc.

Amitav Ghosh aptly captures the sheer helplessness of Indian labourers and peasants as the factory's growing appetite for revenue and influence exploited the defenceless farmers. *Sea of Poppies* traverses the least treaded path of Indian colonial history by exposing the shrewd business acumen of British, who scrapped India of its riches and Chinese of their discretion by poisoning [both of] them with opium. Painted against this background is a poignant picture of the human devastation. The fertile farms of the Ganges plain are blooming with poppies—beautiful and deadly, denying peasants the crops to sustain them and thus indebting them to moneylenders and landowners, who themselves are indebted to the British. Skilfully Ghosh assembles those who will set sail in his narrative of the *Ibis*, an old slaving ship that is taking indentured labourers to Mauritius. It accounts for the story how on board the ship *Ibis*—headed to Caribbean sugar plantations—small new worlds are forged, bringing together north Indian women, Bengali *Zamindars*, black men, rural labourers and Chinese seamen. It is the story of people whose fate is written in poppy flowers. (Bhushan, 135) British forced opium cultivation ruining lives of farmers. Not merely the peasants but the commoners as well were addicted having been forced to live on the drug and thus indirectly surrendering to a political conspiracy lead by a nation in the guise of trade.

A large cast of characters in *Sea of Poppies* assembles in Calcutta, teeming city in which numerous races and people of differing faiths and creeds live together. The *Ibis*, a former slave ship, is being refitted to take a large group of *girmityas* or indentured migrants to Mauritius (Islands of Mareech):

They were so called because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on 'girmits'—agreements written on piece of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld. (Sea, 72)

If Rushdie can be said to have revitalized the Indian novel in English with the 1981 publication of *Midnight's Children*, Amitav Ghosh's fiction has over the years, probed its unlit corners, and brought it into powerful dialogue with other places, people and times. R. K. Dhawan concludes that "Ghosh is perhaps the finest writer among those who were born out of the post-*Midnight's Children* revolution in Indian English Fiction." (Dhawan: 11) Ghosh has chosen to set new literary challenges for himself, constantly transforming his work over the years. Amit Chaudhuri sees Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines* as "a response to his readings of [García] Márquez and Rushdie." (Chaudhuri: 538) Brinda Bose pertinently remarking over the political, social, and cultural nuances of Ghosh's subject says it is this "sensibility that sets him apart from the clutch of Indian novelists in English that are springing from the woodwork ever since Rushdie immortalised the genre." (Bose, 18-19)

Ghosh continues building his oeuvre with *Sea of Poppies*, a tale of mass migration and displacement of Indians with the rise of British power. Set in 1830s, this is the story of the people on the *Ibis*, a ship that will sail from the Bay of Bengal to Mauritius. Originally a slave ship, the *Ibis* has undergone a bit of a transformation after the abolition of slavery. When the story begins, a refurbished *Ibis*—minus the earlier shackles and chains—is ready to transport indentured labour to British colonies, its cargo men and women from agrarian Eastern India and Bengal who will sail to Mauritius to work as labour on plantations. Called *girmityas* (a corrupted derivative of the English "agreement" that they have signed to work as labour), these people will by sailing the Black Waters

(*Kaala Pani*) loosing not just their hearth and home forever, but also what is most precious to the Hindus is their caste, which they are going to shed by sailing across Waters. (Sea, 1: 356)

This is India in the 19th century—the East India Company's hold on Bengal is complete, and the eastern provinces beyond Bengal having been under the purview of the Company Bahadur's rule. This rule spells havoc for villages and towns treading upon the policies that enforce opium cultivation destroying indigenous agriculture and trade. A testimony to this is the motley crowd on the ship, all products of the disaster brought by opium.

There are four lots of characters in the *Sea of Poppies*. They come from different cultures having one undeniable commonality between them—they are all victim of exploitation.

First, is the young mother Deeti married to a hopeless opium addict, drugged and violated on her wedding night by his brother, bullied into the ritual practice of suttee, and rescued from the flames of self-immolation by the loyal, massive Kalua, whose cross-caste elopement starts a manhunt along the length of the Ganges. Having lost her husband and her fields to opium, she is now on the ship to escape her fate. Forced to cultivate opium as a part of the Company's colonial policy, Deeti and other rural folk have abandoned centuries-old agricultural traditions. Their land yields no grains or fruit, and they have no control over their opium produce either, as it is procured by factories at arbitrary prices. One of the accomplishments of this Deeti's character and indeed a major highlight of this book is Amitav Ghosh's detailed description of the Ghazipur Opium factory through Deeti's eyes, based on an account by one J.W.S. McArthur, a superintendent of the Ghazipur Opium factory in the 19th century. The narrative sees Deeti on an errand to the factory where "a small troop of uniformed *burkundazes* was on duty at the gate" (92) and "bare-bodied boys carrying improbably tall stacks of poppy-flower wrappers. (92)" We see, through her eyes, the huge sheds with lofty ceilings, gigantic scales to weigh the raw opium, (93) and a circling torso of:

... 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, treading. When they could move no more they sat on the edges of the tanks, stirring the dark ooze only with their feet... (94-95)

Further ahead, Deeti crosses into the most sacred sanctum assembly room, where her husband Hukam Singh works and opium is readied for markets as per the regulations laid by the East India Company:

... each package of opium was to consist of exactly one seer and six-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 on less than five chittacks of lewah. (97)

Second on the ship is Raja Neel Rattan Halder—the *Zamindar* of Raskhali. In their heydays, the Raskhali rajas were sought and courted by company officials to obtain finances for opium trade with China. His money being accepted by British was Raja's "singular fortune." (85) But as it has been wisely said, "money, if not mastered, can bring ruin as well as riches, but for Halders the new stream of wealth was to prove more of a curse than a blessing." (85) As Neel faces financial ruin, the Company's officials bring charges of forgery against him, leading to deportation to Mauritius. If the Raja's fall from grace and the deplorable treatment as a common criminal seem too far-fetched, we need only to look into the history of colonial Bengal. Readers with any interest in the history of the time will recall Raja Nand Kumar's treatment at the hands of the British. In the late 18th century, Raja Nand Kumar fell out of favour with the East India Company's governor Warren Hastings; Nand Kumar was charged with forgery and kept in jail under pitiable conditions. It is said that Hastings'

closeness to Sir Elijah Impey, then Chief Justice, saw Nand Kumar to the gallows at a time when forgery was not awarded capital punishment. (Mehta, 525-528; Roberts P.E. 180)

Third is Paulette, a French orphan—a maladroit missy-mem—who has grown up in India. (127-28) Her father was an eccentric but kind botanist, and her mother died in childbirth. Mr. and Mrs. Burnham take Paulette into their home after her father's death. She is determined to run away because of Mr. Burnham's disapproving behaviour and attempting to get her married to his friend, the stern elderly Justice Kendalbushe. Paulette had met Zachary Reid, the American sailor, at a dinner at the Burnhams'; she was instantly drawn to him, and he to her. She has resolved to travel to Mauritius, as her great-aunt did, in the hope of finding a better future. Along with Jodu, her childhood friend (or brother, as both Jodu and Paulette are brought up under the care of Jodu's mother following the death of Paulette's mother at childbirth), she boards the Ibis, unaware of her destiny. Paulette easily disguises herself as an Indian woman, using her fluent Bengali, which she learned in childhood growing up in close proximity with Jodu and his mother. Paulette's upbringing in India has also made her feel more at ease with Indian manners, food, and clothing than with Western ones.

Fourth there are the Englishmen, who seem quite tame in comparison and who are happily conversing in a Hobson-Jobson kind of language. This language is a proof of the fact that these people have been uprooted from their own cultures and are finding themselves in an unacceptable situation which may lead to the absorption or to the formation of a new culture that is essentially not their own. The journey to Mareech is an attempt of these men to rediscover their identity in a new world.

There is a coterie of other characters too. Leading among them is Zachary, a mulatto freedman from Baltimore who guards his emotions with the secret of his birth; Baboo Nob Kissin, the superstitious and bowel-obsessed East India Company bureaucrat; Serang Ali, a wily leader of the itinerant deckhands known as lascars; and Neel, a dreamy, cultured Bengali raja whose honour, extravagance and financial naivety lead him to bankruptcy, trial, shame and sentence of deportation, as the British who dined at his table seek to grab his lands.

We follow them, through clashes of caste and custom, ruled and rulers, generous sentiment and avaricious deceit, to the fateful ship. The smells, rituals, squalor, and above all the language, brings home the exotic: thug, pukka, sahib, serang, mali, lathi, dekkko, and punkah-wallah still retain, to English ears, echoes of the Raj. In Mrs Burnham's manner of talking, we get the full measure of how deeply the local language has altered the speech patterns of the Europeans who have been living here for years or decades. She says things like—Don't you samjo, Paulette? And—“Where have you been chupowing yourself? I've been looking everywhere for you.” (249) On one occasion she asks Paulette if—little chinties had got into her clothes. (127) The character whose language is least adulterated is Raja Neel Rattan Halder, but that's only an aspect of his weak grip on reality. Drawn into bad times he gets lured into the opium business by the hope of huge profits and when there's a downturn in the trade (a crackdown by the impertinent Chinese), he becomes insolvent. Even so, he imagines he can ride out the crisis until he's accused of forgery and transported for hard labour.

Ghosh with the incorporation of colloquial language usage, attempts to portray another aspect of that time when major socio-cultural change were taking place in the eastern part of India. (Chakravarty, 59) “Ghosh” remarks Mehrotra, “is obviously a novelist given to generic inventiveness and he has been taken by some critics to be a champion of post-modern cultural weightlessness, but his writing is as interested in the ties that bind as in the transitory nature of global culture. (Mehrotra, 325) Ghosh has portrayed a band of refugees who can more properly be termed as cultural refugees. Adrian Holiday in the section on cultural refugees in his book *Intercultural Communication* remarks

that they are important because refugee predicament “as cultural traveller with problematic status serves to teach us a lot about the nature of culture and cultural representations.” (Holliday, 36) Ghosh here seems to instruct us the cultural convergence that was taking place in the early 19th century and the one that was going to shape the future culture of the country.

The Ibis—a slave ship; has a British captain, an American, second mate, Indian troops to maintain order, and a crew of lascars. Among its passengers are people of all nationalities, backgrounds and beliefs, some crossing the seas to escape difficulties at home, some being transported as convicts. They belong to different strata of society ranging from a widowed village woman Deeti, a low caste giant of a man *Kalua* (4), the gomusta Baboo Nob Kissin Pander, a mulatto American freedman Zachery, an orphaned French girl, Paulette, her play mate Jodu and the bankrupt Raja Neel Rattan of Raskhali.

As they sail down the Hooghly and into the Indian Ocean, their old familial ties are washed away and they begin their lives afresh. The sea becomes their new nation as the shipmates form new bonds of empathy. They leave behind the strictures of caste, community and religion; rename themselves as *jaház-bháis* and *jaház-bahens*:

On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same: it is like taking a boat to the temple of Jagganath, in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship siblings—*jaháj-bháis* and *jaház-bahens*—to each other. There’ll be no difference between us. (356)

Even amidst such sufferings, Ghosh sounds a positive note as he shows how despite all odds, life somehow finds a way. Singing and ritualistic performances become their sole refuse from the colonial reality and the uncertainties awaiting them in the remote islands of Mareech. As the stories merge, each carrying its share of joys and sorrows, the Ibis becomes a shelter to those in destitution. After much strife and bloodshed on board the vessel, Neel, Ah Fatt, Jodu, Serang Ali and Kalua manage to escape, unaware of the destination the sea waves will carry them to.

Sea of Poppies dramatizes two great economic themes of the 19th century: the cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese market; and, the transport of Indian indentured workers to cut sugar canes for the British on such islands as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad. Caught up in this war of opium is the central character Deeti, who discovers the power of opium when she begins to use it to sedate her troublesome mother-in-law:

The more she ministered the drug, the more she came to respect its potency: how frail a creature was a human being, to be tamed by such tiny doses of this substance! She saw now why the factory in Ghazipur was so diligently patrolled by the sahibs and their sepoys—for if a little bit of this gum could give her such power over the life, the character, the very soul of this elderly woman, then with more of it at her disposal, why should she not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes? (38)

The episodes recorded here by Amitav Ghosh are strikingly similar to one experienced by the farmers of exactly the same time and the same region when British forced the farmers to cultivate Indigo, which was then dear and was in high demand in the west. The episode here was different and clad in violence.

The exploitation of British colonialism was borne by the Indian peasants adversely. However the peasants fought against the British at every single step. There was a change in the resistance behaviour of the peasants after 1858. They started fighting for their demands and the injustice met to them. One of the most popular events of peasant revolt were the indigo cultivation rebellions in Bengal in 1859-60 where the peasants were forced to cultivate indigo and sell them at cheaper rates

to the British. The cultivation of indigo would make their lands infertile and bare forever. If the peasants refused to cultivate indigo they would be beaten illegally, ruthlessly and brutally so as to compel them to cultivate indigo. This oppression was portrayed very well by famous Bengali writer Dinbandu Mitra in his play *Neel Darpan* in 1860. 1861 saw the Blue Mutiny in Bengal, when the farmers rose against the forcible cultivation of un-remunerative indigo crop.

After this, the peasants got frustrated and burst out into anger and refrained from cultivating indigo. The intelligentsia of Bengal rose and organized a powerful campaign for the support of peasants. The government was compelled to appoint a commission for investigation and mitigation of the system. But still the battle could not be solved and the oppression of British and resistance of peasants continued. The peasants of Bihar revolted in large scale in Darbhanga and Champaran in 1866-68 against forceful farming of indigo. The powerful zamindars and the British freely took recourse to ejection, harassment, illegal seizure of property, including crops and chattels and extortions, and large-scale use of force to increase rents and to prevent the peasants from acquiring occupancy rights. The Bengal peasants also had a long tradition of resistance stretching back to 1782, when the peasants of North Bengal had rebelled against the East India Company's revenue farmer, Debi Singh. From 1872 to 1876 the peasants came together united in the form of No-rent union and fought against the zamindars and their agents. It was stopped only when the government suppressed the peasants' acts of violence.

Set in India in 1838, at the outset of the three-year Opium War between the British and the Chinese, this epic novel follows several characters from different levels of society, who are united through their personal lives aboard the ship and, more generally, through their connections to the opium and slave trades. Deeti Singh married as a young teenager to a man whose dependence on opium makes him an inadequate husband and provider, is forced to work on the family's opium field outside Ghazipur by herself, though she fears her sadistic brother-in-law. When she has no options left that make sense to her, she escapes, eventually joining the migrants aboard the *Ibis*.

The *Ibis*, owned by Burnham Brothers, carries as one of its mates a young sailor from Baltimore, Zachary Reid, who has left America because his status as an octoroon has led to constant harassment by other American sailors. These two characters, Deeti and Reid, see life as it is, recognizing all its cruelty but also seeing its potential, and their clear-eyed observations of life around them vividly convey their cultures. At the opposite end is Benjamin Burnham, who owns the *Ibis* and engages in the opium trade, which his family controls in Ghazipur. Since the slave trade has been officially ended, Burnham has kept the *Ibis* intact and simply switched to the transport of exiled prisoners and coolies.

Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the Zemindar of Raskali, whose life epitomizes the unimaginable opulence that upper caste Brahmins assume, as their right by birth is on his way to a new land and fortune as a result of the dwindling resources in his native land, which has accumulated him into debts. The local colouring and the setting of the novels is so powerful that they matter to the novelist and they matter in the novel also. Their style is plain, their method is realistic, and their aim is truth. They on one hand carry the fictional element of the novel and on the other hand the work of the historians. Thus, in the *Sea of Poppies* we find history so close to fiction that it often merges in it and/or is presented in the novel in the colour painted by the author.

River of Smoke

The *River of Smoke* opens on the island in Mauritius where Deeti had settled, as a sequel of *Sea of Poppies*. It is flanked by people of different regions forming a hybrid society speaking Creole.

Parallel to this setting is the Fanqui town of Canton in China. Robin, a painter, writes in his letter to Paulette:

Everywhere you look there are khidmatgars, daftardars, khansamas, chuprassies, peons, durwans, khajanadars, khalasis and lascars. And this, my Puggly dear, is one the greatest of the many surprises of Fanqui-town – a *great number* of its denizens are from India! They come from Sindh and Goa, Bombay and Malabar, Madras and the Coringa hills, Calcutta and Sylhet – but these differences mean nothing to the gamins who swarm around the Maidan. They have their own names for every variety of foreign devil: the British are ‘I-says’ and the French are ‘Merdes’. The Hindusthanis are by same token, ‘Achhas’. (RS 185)

The coterie in *Sea of Poppies* is from different regions. There are English sailors Mr Crowle and Mr Doughty, the American Zachary Reid, the Indian lascars like Serang Ali and Subedar Bhyro Singh, and the pawn brokers like Baboo Nob Kissin to the indentured labourers, common village people, English merchants, Indian and Bengali lascars, zemindars, prisoners, policemen, and many more. They are all united by a common objective, escaping from their own fate in search of a better future. Ibis in *Sea of Poppies* and Fanqui town in *River of Smoke* constitute a “gathering of people in diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned.” (Bhabha 200)

Ghosh has introduced a wide range of compelling characters in the *River of Smoke*. Seth Bahram Modi is one who has built a fortune selling opium to China. Bahram is fiercely competitive and involves in all politics so as preserve his business interests. He is actively involved in, “Free Trade, Universal Free Trade” (406) a revolt against the Chinese Government. He confesses:

Democracy is a wonderful thing Mr. Burnham ... It is a marvellous tamasha that keeps the common people busy so that men like ourselves can take care of all matters of importance. I hope one day India will also be able to enjoy these advantages – and China too, of course. (404)

Through Bahram Modi Ghosh beautifully narrates the struggles of an individual whose business interests clash with the historical, economic, and political events. Ghosh also features in Bombay Ship building industry the owner of which is one Seth Rustamjee Pestonjee Mistris father-in-law of Bahram, whose, “export division was Bahram’s personal creation and it was he who had built this small unit into a worthy rival of the famous shipyard” (45). This Parsee family also has business interests in the textile industry in India in which Bahram’s family had prospered; “his grandfather had been a well-known textile dealer, with important court connections in princely capitals like Baroda, Indore and Gwalior” (46). These industries have faced a tough time in India owing to British policy of taxation, yet have found a place in global market, indirectly contributing to the stronghold of East India Company’s trade. Canton, on the other hand, has both small scale and large scale industry and represents cosmopolitanism; and we observe that the setting is, “a cosmopolitanism of relative prosperity and privilege founded on ideas of progress that are complicit with neo-liberal forms of governance, and free-market forces of competition.” (Bhabha xiv)

The River of Smoke, set in the backdrop of Canton and the Opium Wars, furthers the study of a cosmopolitan culture in the early nineteenth century. Canton, on the banks of Pearl River, stands as a representative of cosmopolitan and multicultural society. Ghosh draws a parallel between Calcutta and Canton in terms of buzzing trade and traders drawn from different corners of the world.

The two cities are twined by the Opium trade bringing together the British and the Indian traders. Bahram Modi and Neel Ratan and Al Fatt get involved in Opium deals. Bahram Modi also comes across Paulette who has come in her botanical explorations. Canton has attracted many visitors from different parts of the world who scour for their individual appetites.

Amitav Ghosh's use of language is also worth mentioning as he employs a mixture of Indian, French, English, and Chinese making it look like global. Salman Rushdie wrote, "as far as English Literature ... is concerned, I think that if all English literatures could be studied together, a shape would emerge which would truly reflect the new shape of the language in the world" (Rushdie 74).

The multicultural world Ghosh portrays goes in agreement with the language he employs to represent a society that is still going through the stages of formation. Language here plays a fine role in the development of the novel and the story at the same time delineating the history and culture of a cosmopolitan world. This use of language was initiated by Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* as a result of merging of people of different types speaking varied languages. Ghosh frequently uses translations of Hindi phrases as well Hindi phrases itself. We find phrases as: "Arré sunn! Listen there" (33). And at the same time Hindi words, such as 'sheeshmahal', 'budgerow', 'halders', 'piyadas', 'nalki', 'paiks', 'chowkidars', 'afeemkhor'. There are mixed words turning into a hybrid language, example, 'jillmilled', 'punditry', and 'calputtee'. The blending of language too is employed with finesse, "The disturbance had caught Bhyro Singh's attention and he began to advance upon Kalua, lathi in hand" (365); and, descriptions such as:

In this floating bazaar there was everything a ship or a lascar might need: canvas by the gudge, spare jugboolaks and zambooras, coils of istingis and rup-yan, stacks of seetulpatty mats, tobacco of the batti, rolls of neem-twigs for the teeth, martabans of isabgol for constipation, and jars of colomboroot for dysentery: one ungainly gordower even had a choola going with a halwai frying up fresh jalebis. (400-01)

Further, the *River of Smoke* continues this marked change in language to retain the hybridity of cultures and we are told the place where Deeti has settled people have given rise to their own "Kreol" (12). An example of which lies in Deeti's words, "Levé té! We're not here to goggle at the zoli-vi and spend the day doing patati-patata! Chal!" (5). The multilingual society portrayed here used a mixture of languages which is more of a creole in comparison to the pidgin spoken in Canton. Ghosh surfaces this multiculturalism finely by his use of English variants spoken in Mauritius and Canton. The former is more of a creole where the language has merged with the language of indigenous people and shaped itself anew, whereas in Canton a mixture of Chinese with English is more in fashion and is almost a pidgin form. Neel Ratan has finely understood the form of the language and has planned to collect the same in for of a book titled: *The Celestial Chrestomathy, Comprising A Complete Guide To And Glossary Of The Language Of Commerce In Southern China*. (272)

This language is what gives life to the cosmopolitan characters of the city shaping the social and cultural norms. The language used is in Canton is,

... sometimes in Gujarati (*Sahib kem chho?*), sometimes in Cantonese (*Neih hou ma Ng sin-saang? Hou-noih-mouh-gin!*); sometimes in pidgin ('Chin-chin, Attock; long-tim-no see!'); and sometimes in English ('Good morning, Charles! Are you well?'). (222)

Thus we observe that in both, *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*, globalisation is a major theme of the novel, and this has been achieved primarily through trade which has brought people from far off places together either as indentured labourers or as traders and to a smaller extent as travellers. We come across this society first on *Ibis* and later in the Fanqui town in *River of Smoke*. Ghosh narrates this multiculturalism of a cosmopolitan nature through his use of language and the Opium trade which impacted both India and China in the nineteenth century. It can also be said that 'travel' is one of the major concern of Amitav Ghosh's writing, whether it be through trade and commerce, colonialism and imperialism, and migration. The direct result of this movement is the formation of a hybrid culture owing to displacement and this is what a write is more interested to

examine the social and cultural norms take shape. Ghosh himself is of the opinion:

The modern Indian diaspora – the huge migration from the subcontinent that began in the mid-nineteenth century – is not merely one of the most important demographic dislocations of modern times: it now represents an important force in world culture. (*The Imam and the Indians*, 243)

The *Sea of Poppies* initiates this study of mass migration of indentured labourers and *River of Smoke* analyses their assimilation in a new social group forming their own creole and pidgin as well as traditions. Deeti, Kalua, Paulette escaped to Mauritius as indentured labourers, they mix up with people on board and after reaching Mauritius with people from different groups and ethnicity forming their own society, which is an epitome of diaspora and displacement. The same condition is re-examined in *River of Smoke* where we witness the formation of another social group with its own pidgin and ethos. Additionally he uses the backdrop of Opium trade and Wars which has resulted in the formations of new cultures and societies. More than fate opium trade draws people of different countries are drawn together dragging them beyond their hereditary places and compels them to dwell in a *nether* world, like Mauritius and Canton allowing them time and place to form a new society—one including Indian, Chinese, British, French, and of course half-castes and exiled. This new hybridity visible in the characters like, Ah Fatt, Bahram Modi, Zachary Reeds, Paulette, Deeti and many others is the subject of examination the *Ibis* trilogy. Ghosh portrays the diaspora through these characters and himself said that his writings are, “about people’s life; it’s about people’s history; it’s about people’s destiny” (84-90).

Flood of Fire

Flood of Fire Ghosh transports the tale to Deeti’s brother Kesri Singh, who has joined British service as a sepoy—soldier. He reached this state rebelling against his father who wanted him to fight for the Mughal forces in Delhi. The colonial India revered greatly an Indian man who is a part of British imperial forces. We are told that British army has no equal in the world and is matchless in terms of strength and morale. Bhyro Singh defended Kesari’s decision and tells his father: “The boy is young and you are his father. You should explain to him that Delhi is not what it used to be; a soldier who wants to rise in the World needs to go to the East India Company’s capital—Calcutta. There is no army in Hindus than that can match the terms offered by the British. (FF 67)

The drama in the *Flood of Fire* epitomises the opium trade in the times of First Opium War of 1839-42 between British India and China. It continues the episodes built in the *River of Smoke* where Zachary Reid as an amoral seaman after being acquitted of murdering the first mate of the schooner *Ibis* takes up a job to pay off his debts. Here he establishes ties with the wealthy Anglo-Indian Burnham family. Mr. Burnham instils Reid to join the Opium trade at the encouragement of Mr. Burnham with the vision of becoming a wealthy entrepreneur. Burnham prophesies, “A new age is dawning, you know – the age of Free Trade – and its men like you and I, self-made Free-Traders, who will be its heroes. If ever there’s been an exciting time for a venturesome white youth to seek his destiny in the East, then this is it.” Reid on the other hand carries a vision of becoming rich and is more interested in earning money at the least possible risk. He says, “I don’t want to be one of the deserving poor anymore, I want to be rich, Baboo; I want to have silk sheets and soft pillows and fine food... I want to own ships and not work on them...” he is more crooked than Burnham has conceived. He enters into an intense physical affair with Mrs. Burnham and exploits her threatening to ruin her married life.

At the same time another Indian business woman Shireen Modi, initiates her new venture of

trade in China with a vision to regain her lost wealth which her husband has consumed. She is involved with an Armenian man, which her family disapproves off and she is forced to find a new recluse. Weaved with these central stories is also the sub-plot of another deposed king Neel Rattan Halder who has escaped from British imprisonment and is on run. At the same time Havildar Kesri Singh accompanies Captain Neville Mee to China as part of British mission to force Chinese to meet the British government's demands. Just as British declare war on China we observe the dreams of Reid, Shireen, Halder, Singh, and the Burnhams fleeing into astray and Ghosh seemingly state that despite all happenings history continues.

This episode establishes the extent to which British have monopolised and controlled the state of affairs in India and are in total domination over political and social affairs. They are cleverly trapping the young men from these colonies and using them to fight for their empire without knowing the aftermath of their actions. These people neither possess any knowledge about the working of British imperial thought nor of the military services that they are being made to join. Like many others Kesari too experience a sense of isolation after joining British army where he is 'other' to the white officers who are his counterparts.

It is said that the true assessment of history is the assessment of fiction. Writers like Amitav Ghosh writing in the ink of magic realism bring to light a great question that was never asked by the writers and people of the painful times. Through their fiction they seek to present the exploitation of the poor and destitute at the hands of ruling classes which were somewhere British, somewhere natives but everywhere it was the commoners who suffered. They relive the history in their fiction giving more pertinently the air their novels/stories breathe. Yet, there is little worth behind portraying such events that took place generations back and centuries ago. These portrayals are mere tools by authors to decorate their stories in colour, which is breath-taking. These writing tend to present a fictionalised form of history and presents a picture that though being true appears to be hazy. Thus we find history very close so fiction that it often merges in it and/or being presented in the novel in the colour painted by the author. Further, it is to be remembered that Ghosh records events during 1830s by when British East India Company was losing its monopoly over the opium trade. (Robbins, 152-53)

Ghosh's Ibis trilogy as a work entails the life and stories of subaltern elements hitherto created out of imperial thought. The story takes place on ships namely *Ibis*—on a journey from Calcutta ferrying indentured labourers and convicts to Mauritius; *Anahita*—a vessel transporting opium to Canton: and, *Redruth* which is on botanical expedition, also to Canton. Ghosh voices his concerns for the marginalised, the subaltern and women through the characterisation of Deeti and Paulette Lombart creating a sense of identity.

First of all the writers pick up only the sentiment that appeal to their story overlooking the complete facts. Like Amitav Ghosh here talks about the havocs opium cultivation has inflicted upon the poor farmers of the plains of Ganges often contributed by the Grand British Misrule of India, in the 19th Century but he is silent event hint at the rebellion perpetuated in the same region and the same time aired by the resentment of farmers being forced to grow indigo in their fields in line with the Indigo Cultivations practises pursued by the East India Company.

Second, Amitav Ghosh does not talk of the greatest question of the decade (1830)—the implementation of English by the British in India, which they did as a tool for stamping their feet deep into the Indian soils.

Finally, writing living in an age which is having a government worse than the British; ruled

under a constitution that is British—a constitution intended to rule over slaves; a state of affairs that is no worse than the former Lords (Nabobs); writing in an attempt to evade the greater questions of the day the writer lives in; and, seemingly to present a truthful picture of history in an attempt to deny the one of their times; looks more like beating about the bush in disguise that there are diamonds studded somewhere in it.

Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi K. “Dissemination: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation”. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Bhabha, Homi. K. *Nation and Narration and The location of culture*. New York: Routledge. 1990, 1994.
- Bose, Brinda. (ed.) *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2003.
- Chakravarty, Urjani. Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri. “Intercultural Communication in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*: A Relevance Theoretic Study. *Journal of the School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*. New Delhi, Autumn 2010.
- Chaudhuri, Amit (ed.). *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*. London: Picador, 2001.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Dhawan, R.K. *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh*. New Delhi: Prestige, 1999.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Circle of Reason*. 1986. London: Granta Books, 1998.
- _____. *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1998.
- _____. *In An Antique Land*. 1992. New York: Vintage, 1994.
- _____. *The Calcutta Chromosome*. 1996. London: Picador, 1997.
- _____. *The Glass Palace*. London: Harper Collins, 2000.
- _____. *The Hungry Tide*. London: Harper Collins, 2004.
- _____. *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002.
- _____. *The Sea of Poppies*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008.
- _____. *The Shadow Lines*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2001.
- _____. *Flood of Fire*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2016.
- Hawley, John C. *Amitav Ghosh*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press (Foundation Books), 2005.
- Holliday, Adrian. *Intercultural Communication*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press (Foundation Books Imprint), 2004.
- Mehrotra, A.K. ed. *An illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2008.
- Mehta, Jaswant Lal. *Advanced Study in the History of Modern India 1707-1813*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 2005.

- Robbins, Nick. *The Corporation That Changed the World*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009.
- Robert, P.E. *A History of British India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Rushdie, Salman. "‘Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist" (Pg. 61-70). *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Vintage Books, 2010.
- Rushdie, Salman. "Imaginary Homelands" (Pg. 9-21). *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Vintage Books, 2010.
- Thieme, John. "The Discoverer Discovered: Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*." In Rajeshwar Mittapalli and Pier Paolo Piciucco, eds. *Studies in Indian Writing in English*, Vol. 2. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001.