

**Colonial History of Oppression and Immigration: A study of  
Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies***

**Dr. Chanchal Kumar**

**Assistant Professor (English)**

**MG Govt. Engineering College, Kotla (Shimla)**

**(Camp at JN Govt. Engineering College**

**Sundernagar**

**Distt. Mandi (H.P)**

**India**

**Abstract**

The present study is an endeavor to explore the unrevealed colonial history of oppression and immigration in nineteenth century India, presented in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, the first volume of Ibis trilogy. Colonization, a system of political, economic, psychological and cultural domination, always gives birth to a pattern of cultural and political marginalization of the colonized country. Colonial or imperial rule is a situation which in terms of the relationship between indigenous peoples and the colonizers means a consistently maintained distance and difference. Colonialism attains a historical specificity, noting particularly the impact it had and continues to have on all societies across the world. Amitav Ghosh is a novelist with an extraordinary sense of history and place. He is a contemporary Indian-English novelist like Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Seth, Mukul Kessavan, Gita Mehta, Allen Sealy etc., who combines his professional skills as social historian with literary flair to create works of art, concerned with civilization and history. Ghosh's novels probe the ideology of colonialism in its various shades. The heroes and heroines of Ghosh's novels are the native of India, Burma, Malaya, South Africa and Ghosh narrates the tragedy and triumph of these people against the backdrop of colonial history. His novels are considered 'meditation on colonialism' concentrating unexplored underbelly of the British Empire. This statement is applicable to all his works including *Sea of Poppies* where hitherto unrevealed aspects of colonial oppression are exposed through the illegal business of opium and

indentured labourers. *Sea of Poppies* delineates how present is shaped by imperial India. The novel is Ghosh's response to the collective past of Asia, and he takes a colonial as well as a post-colonial stance. He presents human condition, at the levels of individuals and of the nations in the international arena. The novel presents two basic forms of colonial suppression and deprivation: The illegal plantation of poppy crop and the opium trade between British authorities and China in 1830s. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is one of the best narratives of colonialism, post-colonialism, and migration where a transnational diaspora mobilizes a collective identity of people dissolving their inessential ethos and milieus.

**Key Words:** Colonialism, Colonization, Cultural and Political Marginalization, History, Civilization, Indentured Migration, Immigration, Oppression, Opium trade.

Colonization is a system of political, economic, psychological and cultural domination of one country over the other. It always gives birth to a pattern of cultural and political marginalization of the colonized country. Colonial or imperial rule is a situation which in terms of the relationship between indigenous peoples and the colonizers means a consistently maintained distance and difference. Colonialism attains a historical specificity, noting particularly the impact it had and continues to have on all societies across the world. There are many writers who write about colonial era like- Rudyard Kipling (India), Anthony Burgess (Malaysia), E.M. Forster (India), Graham Greene (America), Joseph Conrad (Africa), Orwell (Burma), Salman Rushdie (India), Arundhati Roy (India), Michael Ondaatje (Sri Lanka and Canada), V.S. Naipaul (Trinidad), Derek Walcott (St. Lucia), Wole Soyinka (Nigeria), Nadine Gordimer (S. Africa), J. M. Coetzee (S. Africa and Australia), Margaret Atwood (Canada), Alice Munro (Canada), Patrick White (Australia), Peter Carey (Australia), David Malouf (Australia), Brian Castro or Tim Winton (Australia) etc. These writers have depicted many aspects of colonialism in their literary works. Indian subcontinent is the integral part of this movement and most of the literary works are based on the theme of colonial history of oppression and immigration in the Indian subcontinent and its aftereffects. There are many Indian authors like- R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Arun Joshi, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh etc. who infer their theme of fiction from the colonial history of Indian subcontinent with an eye on colonial oppression and immigration. Colonial and Post-colonial literature scrutinizes various aspects: power strategies, hegemonistic approaches and relentless oppression which have been the ruthless tools in the hands of the colonizer. It also interprets

the reaction or resistance of the oppressed. “Oppression exists when any entity (society, organization, group or individual) intentionally or unintentionally distribute resources inequitably, refuses to share power imposes ethnocentric culture and maintains unresponsive and inflexible institutions toward another entity for its supposed benefit and rationalizes its action by blaming or ignoring the victim. Oppression also means the unjust and cruel exercise of authority or power”. (Martin Web)

Amitav Ghosh is a novelist with an extraordinary sense of history and place. He is a contemporary Indian-English novelist like Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Seth, Mukul Kessavan, Gita Mehta, Allen Sealy etc., who combines his professional skills as social historian with literary flair to create works of art, concerned with civilization and history. Ghosh’s novels probe the ideology of colonialism in its various shades. He deftly includes India and its integrity or identity as a nation in his fiction. As a writer, Ghosh has been immensely influenced by the political and social milieu of the country; especially the image of changing India, politically and socially casts a deep shadow on Ghosh’s mind. “Ghosh’s narrative traverses different locations of the world and in doing so, present varieties of cultural practice in fictional frame” (Choudhary 8). The heroes and heroines of Ghosh’s novels are the native of India, Burma, Malaya, South Africa and Ghosh narrates the tragedy and triumph of these people against the backdrop of colonial history. The perspective of colonialism is always there as a guiding principle. His novels are considered ‘meditation on colonialism’ concentrating unexplored underbelly of the British Empire. This statement is applicable to all his works including *Sea of Poppies* where hitherto unrevealed aspects of colonial oppression are exposed through the illegal business of opium and indentured labourers. *Sea of Poppies* delineates how present is shaped by imperial India. The novel is Ghosh’s response to the collective past of Asia, and he takes a colonial as well as a post-colonial stance. He presents human condition, at the levels of individuals and of the nations in the international arena.

Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* is one of the best narratives of colonialism, post-colonialism, and migration where a transnational diaspora mobilizes a collective identity of people dissolving their inessential ethos and milieus. The first kind of Indian diaspora during early nineteenth century sets forth seeking new routes, leaving behind their historical roots, towards their assumed bright future. The novel truly represents the helpless people of India in the nineteenth century when people were forcibly compelled to turn over their fields to opium production. The novel opens with two indelible visions of Deeti, the protagonist of the novel:

the vision of Ibis and voluptuous agricultural crop- opium poppies. The colonial history of the East is depicted through the different characters in the novel. Here, Ghosh also mentions the life in mid-nineteenth century India and its rural hinterland and a detailed description of the life of passengers on the Ibis, a ship. Both the places represent the colonial deprivation and suppression. The story in the novel runs under three symbolic sections: 'Land', 'River', and 'Sea'. Satwana Halder is in the view that, "the sea forms the background of the novel and the ship the Ibis, which had earlier been used for transporting slaves and was now remodeled for, the new transport, is at the centre" (342). *Sea of Poppies* points a moving picture of the human devastation by British colonial rule and its lopsided policies. The story is told in an appealing somewhat modified, lingo of the period, when British English mingled with Indian English, and dallied with dozens of other dialects, from ships lore to pirate talk of the lascars to the pidgin of the Chinese and all the other verbal music of the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea.

#### **The Illegal Plantation of Poppy and the Opium Trade:**

The novel presents two basic forms of colonial suppression and deprivation: The illegal plantation of poppy crop and the opium trade between British authorities and China in 1830s. The politics of opium trade had roots since trading began with China in the sixteenth century. There was a high demand for tea, silk and porcelain in Britain. But due to the low demand for European commodities in the East, Britain had a large trade deficit with China and had to pay for its imported goods with silver. The British fortune seekers in India massed fabulous wealth that sustained the colonial rule by turning the banks of the Ganga into a sea of poppies to grow opium and export it illegal to China. The East India Company was piling unpredictable wealth. Britain engaged in drug-trafficking and became the world's biggest opium producer and supplier. Peasants of Bihar, U.P. and Bengal were forced to turn over their fertile agricultural lands to the Company's agents for opium production. This caused widespread poverty and hunger because lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped with the rising tide of poppies. The opium trade took off rapidly, and the flow of silver began to reverse from China to Britain. On the other side, the Chinese society was crippled and the whole economy disrupted. Despite the emperor's decrees that banned the trade, British Merchants went on shipping out barrels of refined opium, produced in the company run factory at 'Ghaziabad, to canton, relying on the growing number of addicts to defy his order. As the Chinese stood up in their defense and banned the import of opium, the

company took its revenge by declaring war on China under the rhetoric of freedom. This is what Mr. Burnham, an Englishman informs to Raja Neel Rattan:

The war, when it comes, will not be for opium. It will be for principle: for freedom- for the freedom of trade and the freedom of Chinese people. Free trade is a right conferred on Man by God, and its principles apply as much to opium as to any other article of trade. More so perhaps, since in its absence many millions of natives would be denied the lasting advantage of British influence. (*SP* 115)

The British used force and Opium War was fought between British East India Company and a weakened China under the Qing Dynasty, its ostensible purpose was 'free trade', i.e. access to China's huge market for British merchants. China's defeat forced the government to tolerate the opium trade, opening up several ports to foreign commerce and yielding Hong Kong to Britain. This humiliation at the hand of foreign powers contributed to the downfall of the Qing Dynasty. The export of opium to China was the brain child of the British and the American businessmen. In the novel Mr. Doughty proudly proclaims: "The yen for opium would still be limited to their twice born if not for the perseverance of English and American merchants. It's happened almost within living memory for which we owe a sincere vote of thanks to the likes of Mr. Burnham" (*SP* 112). It is disclosed by Mr. Burnham that they were very much worried as the officials in Canton started to end the inflow of opium in to China. He said, "It is unanimous opinion of all of us who do business there...to end the trade would be ruinous- for firms like mine... and indeed for all of India...if not for opium, the drain of silver from Britain and her colonies would be too great to sustain" (*SP* 111-12). Mr. Doughty commented at this point: "Johny Chinaman thinks he can return to the good old days, before he got his taste for opium. But there is no going back" (*SP* 112). Neel Rattan had little idea that the traffic in opium had no official approval in China. He had seen that in Bengal the trade was not merely sanctioned but monopolized by the British authorities. Mr. Burnham shattered Neel's idealistic views formed on the study of British literature; it is revealed that the business had already been running in an illegal way. "Trafficking in opium has been illegal there for some time. But they've never made a tumasher about it in the past.... The only reason they're making a fuss now is that they want a bigger share of the profits" (*SP* 113). Mr. Burnham further explains to Zachary about the sustenance of British rule in India:

...British rule in India could not be sustained without opium- that is all there is to it, and let us not pretend otherwise...in some years, the company's annual gains from opium are almost equal to the entire revenue of your own country...British rule would be possible in the impoverished land if it were not for this source of wealth? And if we reflect on the benefits that British rule has conferred upon India, does it not follow that opium is this land's greatest blessing? (*SP* 115)

When Neel Rattan asked him politely if he was not troubled to invoke God in the service of opium, Mr. Burnham promptly answered, "Jesus Christ is free trade and free trade is Jesus Christ" and explained, "If it is God's will that opium be used as an instrument to open China to his teachings, then so be it...I can see no reason why any Englishman should abet the Manchu tyrant in depriving the people of China of this miraculous substance" (*SP* 116). Mr. Burnham brings out the use of opium for Medical treatment and argues that to deny the Chinese people of the opportunities of modern medical treatment is a crime which the British would not tolerate. "It would be well-nigh impossible to practice modern medicine or surgery without such chemicals as morphine, codeine and nicotine and these are but a few of the blessings derived from opium. And if we consider all this, is it not apposite to ask if the Manchu tyrant has any right to deprive his helpless subjects of the advantages of progress?" (*SP* 116) The novelist perfectly exposes the dual face of the colonizers- their greed for money as well as passion for spreading Christianity and their lip service to remove the sufferings caused by the tyrants. Talking about addiction and intoxication caused by opium, Mr. Burnham further states, "the antidote for addiction lies not in bans enacted by parliaments and emperors, but in the individual conscience- in everyman's awareness of his personal responsibility and his fear of God. As a Christian nation this is the single most important lesson that we can offer to China and I have no doubt that the message would be welcomed by the people of that unfortunate country...it is tyranny alone that is to blame for China's degeneracy, sir. Merchants like me are but the servants of Free Trade, which is as immutable as God's Commandant" (*SP* 117). Burnham laughs at Neel Rattan when the later says that he is aware of the function of the parliament and said, "Parliament? ...Parliament will not know of the war until it is over...if such matters were left to parliament there would be no Empire" (*SP* 117-118).

After a period of time when it was learnt that the Chinese ruler shed beheaded some half-dozen opium sellers and their bodies had been strung up for full public view, Burnham and Doughty expressed their opinion that war with China was inevitable. The hypocrisy in their attitude is once again exposed in their remarks. Burnham said that he disliked war more than anybody else, but “there are times when war is not merely just and necessary, but also human. That time had come to China”, Mr. Doughty supported him emphatically with the remark, “Indeed, humanity demand it. We need only think of the poor Indian peasant- what will become of him if his opium can’t be sold in China?” (*SP* 260). These boastful remarks of the British Businessmen expose, ironically, the hollow colonial demand that colonial rule was necessary for the total development of the natives. Captain Chillingworth, an Englishman, confesses the pretension of the colonial rulers:

The truth is... that men do what their power permits them to do.  
We are no different from the Pharaohs or the Mongols. The  
difference is only that when we kill people, we feel compelled  
to pretend that it is for some higher cause. It is the pretense of  
virtue...that will never be forgiven by history. (*SP* 262)

The novel also investigates the silence around Britain’s role in the “drug trade” of the nineteenth century. Opium is also referred as “among the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria’s crown” (*SP* 91). “Without the drug, there probably would have been no British Empire” since “the economic foundation of the imperial economy lay on opium” (Trocki XIII). At the same time British were also managing the ocean trade routes since opium is transported through ships to China. The poor Indian peasants also suffered because of the illegal trade of opium in the mid-nineteenth century. Before the start of opium cultivation in India, the East India Company had accumulated a lot of wealth in converting India’s raw material into end product in English factories. R. Choudhary highlights: “Within fifty years of their control, and about £100 million was drained in Britain from India between 1757 and 1815” (68). After ruining the industries, they turned towards agriculture. At the same time the Indian economy was totally destroyed by the British. In India, Bihar, U.P., Orissa and West Bengal etc. were worst hit by the creation of a political vacuum and absence of any administrative system. Less employment opportunities for the skilled labourers in various industries resulted in a vicious circle of poverty and hunger. Ghosh’s setting allows him to depict the workings of the colonial masters and their far-reaching consequences. Indians were

physically subjugated and these physical subjugations formed a major part of the colonial machinery. The colonial masters forced them to grow poppy in their fields.

The company rendered Indian peasants crippled, marooned, exploited and oppressed. Moreover, the subtle crop cycle that had developed through ages was broken. The company had enforced opium cultivation and had taken away the means of subsistence from the cultivator whose holding was typically small or marginal. The above activities supported company's overall policy of the exploitation of their colonies. These farmers disenfranchised by the practices of Empire would now be offered 'freedom' and escape from their debt or lost farms by being shipped off to plantations in other British colonies that were feeling the neglect after the legal abolition of slavery. Deeti is the typical example of oppressed farmers. When Deeti was her daughter's age, the things were different: "Poppies had been a luxury then, grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crop-wheat, *masoordal* and vegetables...to cook with meat and vegetables...at that time no one thought of producing the wet, treacle Chandu opium that was made and packaged in the English factory, to be sent across the sea in boats" (SP 29).

The East India Company ruled the country and held a monopoly in the opium trade. "...opium was the exclusive monopoly of the British, produced and packaged entirely under the supervision of the East India Company..." (SP 85). Because of the Company's suppressive policies, the farmers have no control over their opium produce. "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 *asami* contracts. It was impossible to say no to them" (SP 29-30). Satwana Halder in her article "Exposing the Ugly Face of Colonialism: A Study of *Sea of Poppies*" describes Ghosh's use of colonial oppression:

Amitav Ghosh reveals areas of colonial oppression that were not much highlighted earlier along with the much talked about topics of the oppression of the poor by local moneylenders. The British businessmen wanted to earn easy money from cash crops and to meet their greed the Indian farmers were compelled to produce crops according to the likings of the colonials, depriving themselves of wheat and paddy that they needed most of support themselves. (342)

Halder further remarks that “Ghosh sincerely reveals the plight of the farmers who fell in the clutches of the English businessmen. Before poppy plantation was introduced, the fields were heavy with wheat in winter and after the spring harvest, the straw could be used to repair the hut’s roof” (342). The protagonist of the novel Deeti and her opium addicted husband Hukam Singh also represent the economic form of colonial oppression which is mainly imposed upon them by the British trading company. Deeti and her fellow farmers have now become a symbol of the laborer caught up, as Karl Marx puts it, in the “transformation of feudal exploitation into capitalist exploitation” (787). Deeti’s hut’s roof was urgently in need of repairs, but thatch was not easy to come by because “now with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare...” (SP 29). Moreover, the farmers were facing loss in their produce. “...no one was inclined to plant more because of all the work it took to grow poppies ... at the end of it ... earnings would come to no more than three and-a-half sicca rupees, just about enough to pay off your advance” (SP 29-30). Shalini Jain is in the opinion that “the poppy functions as a metaphor at many opposing levels: as the creator and palliative agent of physical misery, as the cause of agricultural collapse, but also the sole means of eking out a livelihood under the British rule, and as the incentive for trade and war” (69). The Indian farmers were totally in the clutches of their colonial masters.

The Opium Factory at Gazipur is the symbol of colonial greed, horror, domination, oppression, hypocrisy and inhumanity. On the way to factory, Deeti and Kalua watch the march of a large group of *girmitiyas* “a hundred strong or more; hemmed in by a ring of stick-bearing guards...trudging wearily in the direction of the river” (SP 70) from where they will be ferried in a boat to Calcutta. A short while later they passed a still greater wonder, a structure of Grecian inspiration, with fluted columns and a roaring dome; this was the Mausoleum of Lord Cornwallis, of York town fame, who had died in Ghazipur thirty three years before...(SP 70). The description of the conditions prevalent in the Ghazipur Opium factory reveals the inhuman working conditions of its employees, as witnessed by Deeti:

... 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 ... these seated men had more the look of ghouls than any living thing she had ever seen: their eyes glowed in the dark, and they appeared completely naked. (SP 95)

The white officers were there to watch the workers and to maintain the discipline, “armed with fearsome instruments: metal scoops, glass ladles and long handled rakes” (SP 95). Even children were not spared from working in this opium-filled environment, and their punishments were as harsh as those for adults: “suddenly one of them indeed dropped their ball [of opium] sending it crashing to the floor, where it burst open, splattering its gummy contents everywhere. Instantly, the offender was set upon by cane-wielding overseers and his howls and shrieks went echoing through the vast, chilly chamber” (SP 96). Through Deeti’s journey, “the insides of the opium factory expose the truth of the “work” of Empire, with the factory serving as a symbol of its giant exploitative economic system” (Arora 27). The factory still exists as world’s largest legal opium manufacturer for pharmaceutical industry.

The novel also exposes the role of native rajas and zamindars, enjoying the physical and financial assistance and rewards for the participation or associations in a wrongful act. Raja Neel Rattan and his late father’s business dealt with the colonizers. Raja Neel Rattan, the hereditary zamindar or head of the vast Rashkali estate, occupies the middle tier of profits, which are reaped most of all by the British merchant, Mr. Burnham. Raja Neel Rattan represents the rich Indians, rajas, nawabs and the landlords in particular, who had been exploited by the colonial rulers, although, they had unshakable faith in the company’s policy and a high regard for the Queen’s rule. It was due to their ignorance of reality that the well-off persons were trapped by the British businessmen and got ruined. Neel Rattan was accused of forgery in the trial and as a punishment he had to go across the black water. The judge found his crime as a crime of utmost gravity. Following lines present the colonial pride through the judicial subjugation:

Forgery was a hanging offence- a measure which played no small part in ensuring Britain’s present prosperity and in conferring upon her the stewardship of the world’s commerce. And if this crime proved difficult to deter in a country such as England, then it is only to be expected that it will be very much more so in a land such as this which has only recently been opened to the benefits of civilization.... How is society to judge a forger who is also a man of education, enjoying all the comforts that affluence can bestow, whose property is so extensive as to exalt him greatly above his compatriots, who is considered a superior being, almost a deity, among his own

kind?... would it not be the duty of this court to deal with such a man in exemplary fashion, not just in strict observance of the law, but also to discharge that sacred trust that charges us to instruct the natives of this land in the laws and usages that govern the conduct of civilized nations?" (SP 235-37)

It was the colonial suppression and hypocrisy that Neel Rattan was ordered to go across the black water. In the ship, the *Ibis* where he had to suffer such humiliation related to his accommodation and workings. Neel's deep plight also represents the economic subjugations by the British. The economic suppression of the natives in the hands of British results somehow in the collapse of Indian Economy. Thus, the novel exposes various forms of colonial subjugations like- physical, economic, political, religious, judicial and social. The characters of the novel represent allegorical or symbolic identities i.e. the protagonist of the novel, Deeti is a victim of physical, economic and social subjugations. She is also driven to attempt *sati* by the Indian orthodox society. Neel Rattan, a wealthy raja and landlord is a pleasure-loving native, is destroyed for power and profit by the Englishmen is a victim of physical, economic and judicial subjugations. Kalua is the example of social subjugation. More importantly, "although the characters initially appear as prototypes of the victimized natives, as the plot advances, they each individually show a tremendous sense of individuality, resource and resilience in the face of personal adversity, the dangers of stereotypy" (Jain 68-69). The novelist crafts each of his character with detail and a unique personality. The ugly face of the colonizers and the oppression of the poor by local moneylenders is highlighted in a clear and vigorous manner.

The present novel delineates the Indian colonial history by exposing the hypocrisy of British in opium trade and the history of oppression of Indian farmers. The British were equipped with colonial pride and were able to suppress Indians physically, economically and socially and there was no option for the natives to attempt any resistance- physical or judicial. As a result the natives got interested in migration to other places and induced to take the drastic risk of crossing the Andaman Sea, or Black Waters in the tall-mastered ship-Ibis. The peoples who decided to stay in their native land had to undergo with the extreme physical hardships of working in opium factories, where their senses were slowly eroded of their powers under the soporific influence of the drug. The poor economic situation of the natives forced them to work under British hostilities. With the help of colonized people like Baboo Nob Kissin, Raja Neel Rattan and his father, the colonial rulers got more powerful and

succeeded to suppress Indians in many ways. The novel highlights that the colonial history affects the lives today and the present is shaped by that era. *Sea of Poppies* glorifies the linked histories of the colonial era- the opium trade, forced plantation of opium, indentured migration, nineteenth century Indian society, life on the Ibis, lascars etc. and contests their marginal place in the colonial archives. In doing so, Ghosh also investigates the multidimensionality of colonial and post-colonial history and experience.

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