

AN ECO-CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PESSIMISTIC COLLISION OF OPIUM PASTORALISM ON PREMORDIAL ENTITIES IN SEA OF POPPIES OF AMITAV GHOSH

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Abstract

"Man is a part of nature, but he has taken advantage of it for his benefit. Previously, man had been a part of nature; today, he was the exploiter of nature... Man and nature are two things, and man is the master." (White 8)

As a result of environmental degradation and its negative influence on animals, plants, and humans, environmental studies began in 1960 and are now widely discussed in all corners of the globe. Ecocriticism is an essential topic in all fields of study, including philosophy, literature, science, and the arts. The book chosen for this article emphasizes environmental deterioration and shows human intervention, technological advancement, and conflict as causes of environmental damage. Ecological imperialism is backed by the British, who believe in anthropocentric thinking, described as the deliberate abuse and modification of nature for business purposes. In his novel, *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh emphasizes how environmental degradation has occurred due to excessive exploitation of nature by the British, who profit from the illegal cultivation of opium. Economic, social, physical, political, and environmental changes occurred among the aboriginal inhabitants throughout imperial control, resulting in changes in their traditional occupation and habitat. Under British rule, wheat, beans, and other food supplies were utilised for opium cultivation. It swept through large regions of India, causing crop cycles to be disrupted. This hurts natural land use and life. In *Sea of Poppies*, a study has been proposed to sketch the crash of imperialism on both the people and the atmosphere, looking at the negative consequences of imperialism on indigenous people, flora, and wildlife. In addition, the nexus of ecocriticism and postcolonial theory in *Sea of Poppies* is addressed, with a focus on Huggan and Tiffin's theoretical frameworks to emphasize that colonialism in India not only impoverished the original people but also adversely devastated the ecology.

Keywords: Poppy, Ecology, Fauna, Imperialism, Post-Colonial Approach.

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh emphasises the mercantile exchange of poppies between China and the British East India Company (BEIC) during the nineteenth century. As a reasonable and politically powerful organization, the BEIC exacerbated the poverty of colonial natives by enacting draconian regulations that enslaved indigenous people and decimated India's

agriculture business. Indian farmers were exploited by British conquerors, who forced them to abandon their barley, wheat, and other food crops to plant poppies. The colonisers were able to purchase exquisite Chinese products such as porcelain and silk in great quantities thanks to the significant earnings made by the opium trade, which allowed them to meet the enormous demand for these commodities on the market. Due to the massive rise of opium in

India, the East India Company developed an opium trade monopoly in China, a country with a growing demand for narcotics.

Amitav Ghosh, a well-known Indian novelist, focuses on the various aspects of colonial exploitation in his work *Sea of Poppies*, which leads to the misery of native people. After a brief survey of scholarly works on the *Sea of Poppies*, the study looks at how colonialism is shown in Ghosh's novel, including indigenous subjects, plants, and animals. The sections "ecological imbalance" and "animals' disorders" detail the adverse effects of poppy monoculture, which was the most common British colonial economic policy, on established ecosystems and animals living near opium factories, respectively.

Ecocriticism is a relatively new branch of literary criticism that examines how environmental challenges are depicted in fiction. It is an interdisciplinary method that looks at how humans control the environment as depicted in literature by combining ecological, sociological, and literary concerns. Since the 1970s, ecocriticism thinkers and many authors have been dedicated to depicting man's detrimental interference in nature. As a result, large-scale deforestation, ozone layer thinning, commercial animal exploitation, and air and water pollution, as reflected in numerous literary works, became subjects to be studied using ecocriticism principles. Glotfelty and Fromm, the founders of ecocriticism, define it as "the study of the link between literature and the physical environment" (18). The study of "how we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all fields of cultural output, from Wordsworth and Thoreau to Disney and BBC nature shows," is referred to as ecocriticism (Garrard).

Lawrence Buell segregated ecocriticism into two waves. The first wave is concerned with ecological problems and emphasizes the negative implications of man's intrusion into the environment. The first wave's main priority is the preservation of flora and fauna. Environment essentially meant natural environment" for first-wave ecocriticism. As Buell says, "the first wave was initially regarded to be synchronized with the goals of Earthcare" (Buell 21). As a result, this wave looks into the impact of culture on the environment.

On the other hand, the second wave is concerned with urban and suburban settings. The second wave, which emphasizes contaminated urban areas, does not romanticize nature. As a result, second-wave ecocritics broadened the definition of the environment to include both wilderness and urban regions.

Tiffin and Huggan are regarding the unjust exploitation of colonized countries via European colonizers who destroyed the whole lot they stumbled upon their outposts: "Under European colonial rule, the assets of invaded, conquered, and settled territories have been exploited for regal income, and money cropping and other European farming practises usually changed survival farming and hunting, destroying hooked up ecosystems and decreasing the fertility of the soil." (1) Tiffin and Huggan contend that, unlike indigenous people who depended on nature for subsistence, European conquerors exploited the natural environment while neglecting their disruptive behaviour's detrimental effects on conquered countries' ecosystems.

Since its publication in 2008, *Sea of Poppies* has been the subject of numerous scholarly papers and books from various angles. The novel was read from a feminist perspective by Saeed Abdoli and Leila BaradaranJamili. They argue that colonialism aggravated indigenous women's already precarious position in colonized nations. As per the authors, Deeti is a dreadful Indian lady who has been marginalized in numerous ways due to racial discrimination and patriarchal tyranny. She must accept the sati ceremony, in which a widow is burned alive on her husband's burial pyre.

Priyanka Maral, likewise, calls attention to indigenous women's struggle. Maral argues that indigenous women's marginalisation has nothing to do with their literacy in *Sea of Poppies*. In truth, no woman, regardless of her level of education, is immune to victimization. Native women named Sarju, Heero, and Munniah work as forced labourers on the schooner *Ibis*, which delivers opium from India to China. Priyanka focuses on the hardship of aboriginal females in *Ibis*, whereas Pinkney and Rai hub on the status of bonded workers of India. They claim that British conquerors mistreated enslaved Indians to carry opium from India to China. The authors draw attention to

British colonizers and their agents' abuse and torture of indigenous workers. (Maral 46-48)

By emphasizing "subaltern," Santosh Kumar and Sreehas investigate the marginalization of marginal subjects, notably native females, in their book. They contend that India's indigenous people are outside the hegemonic power framework as a British colony. They allege that 'wretched' residents like Deeti have no voice and are destitute. Deeti's predicament is the worst, according to Sreehas and Kumar, because she has been colonized twice. Deeti is subjected to colonial oppression on the one hand, and she must accept patriarchal tyranny that affects all indigenous women, regardless of their educational standing, on the other. (Kumar and Sreehas 398-403)

According to Gopal Vankar, colonizers grew from poppies because it was a good policy. Many indigenous people, notably rebels, were forced to labour on opium-transporting schooners as indentured servants. Neel Rattan Halder, according to Vankar, is a staunch zemindar whose country is invaded by colonists. Neel is forced to work as a labourer for robbers and coolies on Ibis. Meanwhile, he is brutally assaulted by British invaders' agents. Vankar asserts that Gosh suggests violent European usurpers reign over indigenous people by enslaving them on cargo ships. (Vankar 120-124)

Ghosh is an archaeologist who researches the plight of oppressed indigenous people. As per Sowmiyalatha and Kalaiarasan, for greedy colonizers, Deeti represents disempowered native people who have been stripped of their lands to cultivate poppies. They feel Ghosh holds not only colonisers responsible but also inhabitant agents like BhyroShing, who deceive their land by cooperating with usurpers in the subjugation of indigenous people. Sowmiyalatha and Kalaiarasan depict BhyroShing as a figure of traitors hired by colonizers to terrorize their poor compatriots.

In *Sea of Poppies*, most of the indigenous characters' lives have been wrecked by the British occupiers' repressive practices. Deeti is caring for her crippled husband, Hukam Singh, wrecked by opium addiction. His drug addiction has worsened his situation more. Singh represents many Indian workers at the Ghazipour Opium Factory who became addicted

to opium. The following is how Ghosh describes the factory's appalling and disgusting working conditions for poor indigenous workers:

"Deeti was again taken aback by the area ahead, but this time not because of its grandeur but because of its dimness, which was only illuminated by a few small holes in the wall. The air inside was hot and fetid, like a closed kitchen, but the scent was of liquid opium mixed with the dull stench of sweat — a stench so pungent that she had to clutch her nose to keep from choking." (63) (Ghosh 63)

The dominance of European conquerors over eastern areas, which began in the sixteenth century, resulted in indigenous people being marginalized and displaced. In numerous colonies, including India, they stole indigenous people's earnings and forced destitute natives to toil for them for meagre or free. Similarly, the narrative portrays British invaders as brutal usurpers who have taken over fertile territory to plant poppies. This profitable economic approach is enforced at the expense of indigenous' poverty. They are forced to work in opium factories for poor wages or abandon their traditional agricultural practices to satisfy the conquerors' unquenchable need for wealth acquisition. The harsh edict requiring opium cultivation only adds to the anguish and poverty of colonised people whose nation has been stripped of its natural wealth ever since the commencement of imperialism,

Deeti, the protagonist, seems to be a symbol for disadvantaged natives whom western colonisers have unfairly exploited. Her husband passed away, leaving Deeti impoverished and homeless. After her husband's death, Deeti finds herself impoverished and facing harmful consequences. While her modest farm is "in hock" to the British conquerors, she wonders what she will eat in a month. Farmers cannot cultivate anything other than poppies due to colonizers' agents travelling from farm to farm to check for possible violations. Deeti cannot grow food crops such as vegetables and grains since she must cultivate poppies on her land. As a result, she would become increasingly impoverished.

Tiffin and Huggan believe colonial people are monetarily subjugated for colonial gain. They argue that "land acquisition is just one facet of this exploitation." (1). To put it another way,

invaders' economic policies harm urban natives. As a result, not just peasants but also city dwellers are characterised as poor. Thousands of poor labourers populate cities, "many of whom are willing to sweat themselves half to death for a handful of rice" (Ghosh 135). Following the mandatory cultivation of poppy, which became a devastating phenomenon across the country, many of these destitute indigenous people were compelled to abandon rural areas. According to the narrator, indifference and food scarcity may be seen in India because colonists now hold farmlands that were formerly a basis of revenue for local farmers.

Ghosh shows how over-exploitation of nature has wreaked havoc on the ecology. He portrays the invaders' destructive approach to wealth accumulation through ecological imperialism. The British invaders' anthropocentric mindset resulted in a change in India's environment. As a result of the harmful expansion of opium, native people suffer, which leads to severe alterations in Indian ecosystems and agriculture. When British colonists drove Indian farmers to abandon cultivating important and edible crops, they impoverished the environment and the farmers. To supplement their diet, they raised potatoes, tomatoes, and wheat. Wheat production was crucial to most farmers' livelihoods since it was both a source of cash and bread.

Furthermore, farmers would use the wheat straw to repair their buildings' roofs. Deeti, who is overwhelmed by poverty, recalls the good old days before poppy cultivation became compulsory when Indian lands were unaffected by colonizers:

"She came to a halt to look in the direction of their hut, which was barely visible in the distance and resembled a tiny raft drifting down a river of poppies. The roof of the hut was in desperate need of repair, but thatch was hard to come by in this age of flowers; in the old days, the fields would be loaded with wheat in the winter, and the straw from the spring crop would be used to repair the damage from the previous year." (19)

As a result of colonialism, Deeti describes the predicament of farmers in India. Edible crops were farmed on vast scales to suit the needs of farmers before the impending arrival of colonists. Opium was a high-value crop planted

in small plots among prominent barley and wheat fields. Opium seeds can be traded to oil firms and used for cooking at home. As Deeti's mother points out, no one would produce opium on a vast scale for financial gain. Farmers would also preserve a small amount of opium for use by their families for specific ailments.

A family's needs could be met with just a few clusters of poppies. Nonetheless, the East India Company disrupted traditional farming patterns in a large portion of India by enforcing poppy planting. "The (Ghazipur) factory's opiate hunger seemed never to be satisfied," Deeti says (20). Mr Burnham, a well-known British opium dealer in India, discusses the importance of opium to Indian colonisers with an American colleague:

Mr Burnham observed, "For the simple reason, Reid, that British control in India could not be sustained without opium- that is all there is to it, and let us not pretend otherwise. You're probably aware that the Company's annual opium profits in some years are nearly equal to the overall revenue of your own country, the United States? Do you believe British domination in this impoverished region would be conceivable if this source of wealth were not available?" (77)

Mr. Burnham openly acknowledges the Europeans' business advantages imposed on indigenous producers in poppy growing. They blatantly ignored the damaging policy's economic and environmental consequences to safeguard their financial advantage. Apart from peasants and minor landowners, major landowners were also obliged to adapt their farming methods. Neel Rattan Halder is the only powerful landowner who seeks to defy colonial control. Mr Burnham uses coercion to weaken Neel because he sees him as a defiant and courageous native. "You must not believe that I am an uninformed native, to be treated like a child." (79). Mr. Burnham is reminded of his distinctiveness from most natives by Neel, who continues his argument.

Nonetheless, the British colonisers stripped him of his land and arrested him as they did not tolerate dissent. Neel is forced to work aboard the Ibis schooner because he refuses to give up his struggle even in prison. Agents of the colonists violently beat him, and he is infuriated

by any humiliation. Similarly, Ah Fatt, a duped native, pees at Neel.

In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh effectively illustrates conquerors' insatiable need for land. Neel's cropland represents the novel's seized lands. From the work's opening, he is fascinated with the British colonisers' manipulation of farming patterns, which disrupted India's natural equilibrium during colonial control. Similarly, the novel's omniscient narrator observes that "the poppies were strangely slow to shed their petals: for mile after mile, from Benares onwards, the Ganga seemed to be flowing between twin glaciers, both its banks being blanketed by thick drifts of white – petalled flowers" as he contemplates the vast poppy farms (2). Mega-scale production of poppy seeds is a sort of soil exploitation because there is rarely any other crop grown. As a result, ecological collapse is a significant theme in the storey and the fact that a scarcity of edible crops caused a sharp price increase, further impoverishing the already impoverished farmers who could no longer feed their families.

Under colonial control, lucrative economic practices enforced on colonised subjects irreversible damage to established ecosystems. Desertification, water scarcity, and soil fertility reduction were among the damages, but they were not the only ones. Postcolonial ecocriticism emphasises the adverse effects of colonisation on nature in conquered countries by construing literary efforts using a combined postcolonial and ecocritical perception. In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh accurately depicts British settlers' harmful misuse of nature. Deeti remembers her happy early days, when simply gazing out the window at the scenery along the Ganges River's coast was a soothing experience, despite the drab surroundings damaged by colonists.

"She can no longer see the variegated flora of her childhood when the earth was covered in rich foliage. I regret that "Where were the vegetables, the grains?" Deeti wonders, "apart from the foliage of a few mangoes and jackfruit trees, there was nothing green to relieve the eye? All she had to do was look around to see that the opium factory's personnel had encumbered everyone's land." (129)

Deeti's experience working on poppy farms provides her with a unique insight into the

effects of poppy production. The overabundance of opium altered the environment and resulted in a reduction in plant diversity in nature. Because of the widespread unfavourable planting of poppies, India's environment has become unbalanced. The assortment of flora and fauna defines ecosystems. An ecological unit is destroyed when it loses a diverse range of species, contributing to the wild environment's survival. Ghosh appears to be a voice for the natural world, which British conquerors and their agents have suffocated.

In *Sea of Poppies*, the horrible pollution of the Ganges, which Ghosh refers to as "the holy Ganga," is the initial ecological apprehension. The opium poppy monoculture has harmed the Ganges and humans, animals, and plants. The Ganga, home to a diversity of fish species, is contaminated by opium manufacturers' excrement. Furthermore, because all of the animals in the area drink from the river, sewage entry deprives them of water. The outflow of opium production effluents degrades the Ganges' beauty, and the water is unsafe to drink. As a result, the commercial exploitation of people and the exploitation of nature are inextricably linked.

For the followers of ecocriticism, animal persecution in colonial provinces has been a crucial topic—overhunting of wildlife was typical for fur, skin, and meat in colonies. Hunting was even a popular pastime among white colonists. These ruthless hunters slaughtered many animals, utterly ignorant of the horrors of their acts. On the other hand, the *Sea of Poppies* is a better place for animals. Although colonists do not kill murder animals, animals suffer in various ways due to the British colonizers' insistence on opium growing.

Opium has a negative influence on both animals and the environment. Deeti comes across various creatures harmed by poppy planting while travelling to an opium factory to see her husband. Opium and its odour soothe animals and insects, depleting their energy and making them sleepy and lethargic. Poppy production's direct and indirect effects intoxicate and perhaps kill cows, monkeys, wasps, butterflies, and bees. Many pests are trapped by the sticky substance of opium pods when they try to drink the sap of poppy blooms. Their bodies dissolve in the fluid and are lost in the poppy flower. In addition, butterflies appear to have forgotten how to fly,

chaotically flapping their wings. Opium also harms monkeys:

“A haze of drowsiness seemed to envelop the factory's environs at all times. For example, as the ox-cart trudged towards the fortifications, Deeti pointed out a few of these to Kabutri... When they came down from the trees, it was to lap at the open sewers that drained the factory's effluents; once satisfied, they would climb back into the branches to resume their stupefied study of the Ganga and its currents” (16).

Monkeys scream, fight, climb trees, jump, and move in chaotic ways. Deeti, on the other hand, finds dull and torpid monkeys near the opium factory. They descend into the woods only to get food before ascending back to see the Ganges, constantly sneezing due to a cloud of unclean and foul-smelling air. Passers-by rarely have the opportunity to take a deep breath. As she approaches the factory, Deeti starts to sneeze. She approaches an assemblage of indigenous employees who are discarding the opium mill's heady waste, dubbed "poppy garbage." According to Deeti, these dirty residues form "a fine dust that hung in the air like a snuff fog" (ibid. 61).

Conclusion

This study has examined the novel *Sea of Poppies* through postcolonial ecocriticism, looking for intersections between postcolonial and eco-criticism. The term "ecocriticism" plays an innovative approach in the novel *Sea of Poppies* to literary studies that examine how the environment is depicted in literature to draw attention to the negative implications of human actions in nature throughout history. The novel explored how colonial activities affect and reconstruct natural landscapes and ecosystems, in addition to indigenous peoples' plights. Natives must abandon food crops to plant poppies due to the British colonial need for wealth. In the interim, due to a shortage of food crops, which have become more expensive due to the shortage, the financial condition of primordial colonial subjects has deteriorated.

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