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## COLONIALISM AND IMPERIALISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *Sea of Poppies*

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### **Abstract:**

*Amitav Ghosh's novel Sea of Poppies, released in 2008, chronicles interconnecting experiences of many individuals who find themselves onboard Ibis, previously a slave ship, into early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Main characters remain onboard ship under changing and more unfavorable situations, adopting varied degrees of deceit. The novel takes place shortly before the First Opium War, and its major themes are of imperialism and colonialism under a backdrop of drug smuggling and human trafficking by the hands of the British in India and (though largely unseen) China. It is the first in the Ibis trilogy of novels, including Flood of Fire (2015) and River of Smoke (2011). The Man Booker Prize shortlist included Sea of Poppies in 2008.*

**Keywords:** Imperialism, Colonialism, Novel, Sea of Poppies

### **Introduction:**

Sea of Poppies, first book in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy, bears all the hallmarks of a classic literary accomplishment. It's a historical tale in which a varied ensemble of individuals, caste, confined by class, religion, ethnicity, addiction, gender, or sexuality, change, battle for opportunity to escape and discover freedom. Sea of Poppies, even though it looks complicated and is based on a lot of research, is very easy to read but has every single page-turning quality of wonderful story.

Sea of Poppies is a tale that takes place in India in 1838. Considering British Crown's refusal to reign in its excesses, East India Company continues collecting inconceivable riches through the clandestine cultivation and exportation of opium to China. As areas that formerly offered subsistence are now overwhelmed by an increasing wave of poppies, forcible converting of peasant farmers' lands into opium cultivation have culminated into severe famine and poverty. As a result of this

trade, millions of Chinese have been addicted to drugs, and the Chinese government is determined to stop it. To counter Chinese restriction on opium imports, Company declared attack against China under pretext of liberty. In the middle of nineteenth century, Chinese were poisoned under the pretence of opium addiction, but the poor Indian farmer was really scorched by this poisoning.

The English 'sahibs' compelled everyone to plant poppy rather than dal, wheat and other food staples like these. Indian workers and peasants were exploited and defenceless as the factory's rising need for income left them impotent and Amitav Ghosh's depiction of this is appropriate. *Sea of Poppies* explores lesser-known aspect of Indian colonial history by revealing the British's astute business acumen in stripping India of its richness as well as Chinese of their discernment through poisoning them using opium

With premonition, *Sea of Poppies* starts its story. Indian poppy farmer Deeti sees a ship even though she has never been to ocean before. Several characters in narrative accompany Deeti on their endeavor to join the *Ibis*, a formerly slave ship now transporter of migrants, and make the long trip through ocean towards Mauritius, former British penitentiary and plantation colony. A British-owned company, The Burnham Bros., purchased the *Ibis* hoping to refit her for the opium trade. The novel unfolds with the threat of war with China over opium in the backdrop and amid the changing relationship Indians have with their land because of poppy farming. The narrative follows individual voyage of a multi-racial, multi-ethnic array of protagonists, demonstrating how magnanimous poppy affects all of their lives.

It is over span of narrative that life of Deeti in India comes crashing down and she sets off for Mauritius like an enslaved servant for her employer. Her husband, a opium addict, dies and since Deeti has no male children to inherit her land she must either marry her brother-in-law or lose her land. She contemplates ritual suicide, but Kalua, a lower-caste ox cart driver, rescues her and they escape, eventually boarding the *Ibis* together. A second narrative stream follows Zachary Reid, a half black American sailor who sails on the *Ibis* from Baltimore and then disguises himself as a gentleman after most of the crew dies or deserts and he hires lascars to replace them. Zachary has a budding romantic interest in Paulette, an orphaned French girl. Nearly forced into an arrange marriage with an older English judge, Paulette escapes Calcutta by disguising herself as an old Indian woman and boards the *Ibis* as a migrant worker. Still another narrative stream follows Raja Neel Halder, a high-caste Indian, who lives in lavishness until he's found guilty of forgery and send to Alipore Prison. In prison he happens to meet Ah Fatt, an Chinese convict and addicted to opium, and the two board the *Ibis* together headed for the English penal colony at Mauritius. Baboo Nob Kissin, an Indian agent who handles indentured workers, transforms into a spiritual leader and boards the *Ibis* hoping to build a shrine. Near the end of the novel, when all of the characters and their fates have converged on the *Ibis*, Kalua accidentally knocks a guard overboard while others are trying to

rape Deeti, his wife. Then the guards aboard the ship tie Kalua to the mast and begin whipping him. In the novel's climatic scene Kalua bites through his fetters while he's being lashed and then grabs the whip, killing the man who was whipping him. The journey on the Ibis transforms characters, helping them leave behind former identities, and it unifies them. *Sea of Poppies* is the first book in a three-book series and so ends in a cliff hanger, with several characters escaping the Ibis in a longboat.

### **COLONIALISM AND IMPERIALISM:**

As one would expect from a novel about opium trade and British dominance in India shortly prior to First Opium War, colonialism and imperialism also play a significant role into narrative. It is important to note that these are two separate concepts, and that we see both at work here, even if the terms are often used interchangeably. The best way to think about how they differ is to consider imperialism to be an ideology of control, while colonialism is the way that ideology manifests.

British rule in India is an example of colonialism—Indians are subjects of the British Empire, and much of the first two parts of the novel deals with the effect of that control within Indian borders. For example, Neel discovers just how flimsy his believed power is in Calcutta as soon as he crosses the English, and while we don't fully see the fallout of that, it's understood that the sale of his estates will devastate the many who depend on those estates remaining within the family. Likewise, villagers of Deeti's community suffer week after week during British rule because they are forced to plant poppy for opium production instead of other crops that would allow them to survive. In ways that are vividly and eloquently aware of its characters' old class disparities, "*Sea of Poppies*" ends up bringing together Deeti and her daughter, identities altered, escaping through their former lives; French orphaned girl called Paulette who climbs onboard the Ibis then eventually dressed like a man for helping them break free; Paulette's lover, because this novel has a genuinely romantic heart; as well as a man occupied by spirit of his late mother, as this book's heart is fully enjoyable. The mind-altering characteristics of British East India Company's valuable goods are never far from the mind throughout the novel, as butterflies float dazedly amid poppies while confused factory employees stumble through their labour.

"*Sea of Poppies*" stands well on its own as a stand-alone novel. In addition, this book sets framework for Mr. Ghosh's greater mission. By conclusion of this novel, reader is already enthralled in a Dickensian narrative, the Ibis has been prepared for whatever mission it might have, and the characters have been fully encased in fresh, self-created identity.

Strict dividing lines between classes and race in the British colonial world in *Sea of Poppies* lend themselves to manipulation of identities and disguise. Ghosh depicts several characters who disguise themselves or pass between race and class lines because others mistake their identity.

Disguise starts in the novel with Zachary Reid, a half black sailor from Baltimore. The

lascars aboard the Ibis dress him up as a gentleman. Reid can pass as white. Later, at a dinner party, Reid embodies this new identity so well that Raja Neel Halder believes he must be humbly hiding his royal origins. Reid's closeness with the lascars is reminiscent of another white man of humble origins who disguised himself as a gentleman, but was really a pirate working with lascars.

### **Conclusion:**

Amitav Ghosh's work, as that of several prominent sub continental authors like Premchand, Tagore, Chughtai and Senapati has been distinguished with profound dedication to humanitarian principles. This literature is unquestionably not a luxury into a world so perceptibly emaciated with intolerance and greed, but rather a necessary reclamation of all that is valuable, possible, and, ultimately, utterly indispensable in our diverse culture. Ghosh leaves numerous doors wide open as *Sea of Poppies* reaches to a pleasant end, signaling the route he would follow with sequel that will certainly proceed in *Opium War* ultimately involving several of same characters. This complex and fascinating historical epic, which is on short list for 2008 Man Booker Prize, offers something to everybody.

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