



Cultural colonial space in the sea of poppies

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Abstract: this paper narrates Cultural colonial space in the sea of poppies. After the empire, there was felt a need to cancel the colonial stereotypes as part of the decolonization process. The writers searched for evidence in the rich and varied pre-colonial existence. The urge to rewrite the past grew as it offered a base- ideological and narration on which they attempted to 'see' the past-present sequential in a new order from a perspective each has to invent for him/ herself. The Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh is a re-telling of the present through the eyes of the past.

Key words: human utterances, Historicism, Sea of Poppies

Narration

Literary texts are increasingly read as constructs of specific historical conditions and circumstances. New Historicism views history as a narrative construction involving a relationship of past and present concerns. It involves Gadamer's hermeneutic understanding of the past as constructed in relation to a present which is also a development out of that past, Hyden White's view of history as narrative construction or 'stories', and Bakhtin's articulation of all human utterances (including literary texts) as social acts which are multi-accental and available for divergent uses (Rice 253)¹ The new historicist focuses on the multiple contradictory material practices which embed each historical event or expressive act as contexts of production and reception. White says, "... historiography aspires to the condition of science by presenting a third-person narrative which appears to be the reflection of events as they are inherently structured by the process of history. Historiography gathers its authority by seeming to dispense with authorial voice, by simulating scientific discourse which appears to reflect the way the world simply is" (255). He observes that 'real' events, however, never tell their stories

and that history is always a process of making the real into an object of desire through manipulations of voice and temporality.

After the empire, there was felt a need to cancel the colonial stereotypes as part of the decolonization process. The writers searched for evidence in the rich and varied pre-colonial existence. The urge to rewrite the past grew as it offered a base- ideological and narration on which they attempted to 'see' the past-present sequential in a new order from a perspective each has to invent for him/herself. *The Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh is a re-telling of the present through the eyes of the past. Ghosh emphasizes the enormous importance of history by situating every work in a distinct time and place, dealing with issues confronted by man in India, situated in the global context. He believes history to be central to the art of fiction and interprets it both at personal and social levels. "Where and when" of a text and "its connectivity to the world around" become very important in his case.

The Sea of Poppies is a book that begins in the 19th century, and records history over a period of time. The



backdrop reminds one of the forgotten history. Narrativity having to do with 'real' events signals objectivity and seriousness. The discourse brings forth the memories of South Asia as a great nautical region and the shipping that suffered terribly since Independence. India flourished through the ages with its thriving coastal trade, and travel was possible all the way on water which now remains as a mere tourist luxury. Delhi, which has become the pivot of the country in a way, killed the coastal shipping. Ghosh feels sorry for the Indians and their loss. In an interview with *Star Weekend Magazine*, he says,

Ghosh's first novel of his planned trilogy, *The Sea of Poppies* is set in North India and the Bay of Bengal in 1838 on the eve of the British attack on the Chinese ports popularly known as the First Opium War- the most important historical event of the nineteenth century. China's vicious nineteenth century Opium wars act as a backdrop for the entire setting. The Opium Wars and the free trade strengthened the claws of the British. The novel reflects the enormity of the damage caused by the European trade market with its thrust for wealth on the Indian economy. The novel explores the exposure of Indian people to the capitalist demands mediated through the accumulative logic of the British. It encompasses the great economic themes of the nineteenth century like the cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese market, transportation of Indians to work on sugarcane plantations for the British in islands like Mauritius, Fiji and Caribbean islands. The lives of ordinary men and women framed against the grand narratives of history give scope to re-present the past.

The origin of capitalism runs parallel to the colonial history as Indians were still trying to emerge out of the anxieties of feudalism during that period. Capitalism and opium trade developed roots quickly in the Indian soil. The European appetite for money paralyzed the Indian minds. For the British, India can be the only place for opium cultivation with its cheap labour. The British dreaded to think that there would be an end to the flow of opium into china. As they understood, they can sell only opium to China in return for importing tea and silk. They felt that "to end the trade would be ruinous... for all of India." Thus opium became an unavoidable compulsion in the lives of all strata of people.

The estate of Raskhali during the reign of Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the Zamindar, truly reflects the Indian feudal system and the orthodoxy of the times. Lost in luxury the elder Zamindar's entire concentration was on getting money and enjoying life. He regarded with aristocratic contempt the determination of the white mercantile community, and its private accounting of profit and opportunity. Opium was the monopoly of the British in eastern Indian and their partnership with the local Zamindars encouraged a number of friends, relatives and creditors of the latter to beg for a share in the investment. Unmanageable inflow of money attracted dependents in large numbers. The old Raja knew nothing about Mr. Burnham except that he was a ship owner and played a pivotal role in the trade. Each year "he got back a much larger sum" referred to as his tribute from the "Faghfoor of Maha-Chin," the Emperor of Great China. All that mattered was money making and profit.



"Little did they know of the perils of the consignment trade and how the risks were borne by those who provided the capital" (Ghosh 85). Being dutiful by nature Raja Neel Rattan, his son, stayed away from financial dealings. After his father's death, the weight and vacuum in the system disgusted him. The year 1837 is significant since it marked the decline in the value of American bills of exchange. Raja Neel Rattan is startled to note that his debts to Burnham Brothers far exceeded the value of the entire Zamindari. But very late in life he realizes that the very system he was upholding pushed him into the harsh realities of life. Their status-conscious orientation and feudal lifestyle led to their downfall.

Ghosh's representation of the history is intricately interlaced with geographical locations and dialects, economies and politics of the times. Against this backdrop, a multidimensional picture of 19th century Indian life emerges, filled with the life style of different classes of people with all their emotions, sentiments, habits including food, medicines, luxuries, marriage practices, funeral rites, male-female relationships, trade, cultivation etc. Such a representation of history reveals the significance of poppy cultivation, its production, distribution and the resultant alienation. The "profit motive" drives the mass cultivation of poppy in the place of staple food like wheat.

Poppy was an item produced not to be consumed but to be sold. It slowly included a colonial consciousness, transforming the farmer into a worker and subsequently into a slave. Distribution helped not the natives but the colonial rulers to perpetuate the rule

of the market. Ultimately poppy led to the natives' alienation and escape from life. "Drug abuse" left deep anguish in the lives of masses and the nation at larger. Ghosh presents this history through the lives and emotions of his characters. The protagonist of the novel stands as an example. Poppies were a luxury in Deeti's days of childhood. No one thought of producing "the wet, treachly chandu opium" that was made and packaged in the English factory, to be sent across the sea in the boats the hard toil needed to grow the crop was not encouraging. They felt that it was a horrid exercise for the sane. But this reality of their lives changes when the English forced them into a "world of no stability."

Deeti, an illiterate, innocent village woman finds it difficult to grasp the swift changes that engulf the villagers' lives. Their alienation becomes unavoidable with the destruction of relationships and the strands of livelihood that had shaped their lives. The idea of not cultivating what one needs was beyond her comprehension. Initially she could not understand how "money is no longer treated as money." But later she understands that money has become capital to earn more money. The same concept of using money to earn more money is outside the experience of the feudal lords like Raja Neel Rattan because as a family, their experience lay in the managing of kings and courts... and the property they disdained to handle themselves, preferring to entrust it to a legion of agents, gomustas and poor relatives... with new properties there came a great number of dependents.... The Raja would not suffer them to be rented (85-86).



The horrid place and the entire process of extraction of opium at Ghaziapur factory terrifies Deeti's village eyes. As she rushes in terror through the factory in search of her dying husband, she slowly understands the potency of opium and what the English were doing. She realizes the importance of the trade and its secret strength. For a moment she feels liberated.

The factory in Ghaziapur was so diligently patrolled by the sahibs and their sepoy-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)

Meanwhile, Raja Neel's arrest comes as a thunderbolt. He understands that his sinking has already started and the inconceivable sure to happen. As he is put in prison he feels that he would be acquitted but bemoans that his family's reputation would never be what it was. When all his people come to see him, he only wishes to turn back to see and "make sure that his wife, Malati was not among the women: even in the confusion of that moment, it was a great relief to know that she had not stepped out of the zenana – he was spared at least, the humiliation of having the veil of her seclusion torn away" (173).

In places like India and Indonesia, Europeans ruled indirectly through their domination of the local aristocracy. Ideologies of moral, cultural and racial supremacy backed its various ventures. Similarly, Zachary could not permit Paulette, a white woman to travel on board. For he feels that *ibis* will be sailing with all lascars which implies that

the only European will be its 'officer'. The behavior of the Captain on the ship reflects the way the English ruled indirectly. As he dictates the 'Laws of the Sea' he conveys a menacing colonial note in a veiled fashion. There is no better keeper of the law than submission and obedience. In that respect this ship is no different from your own homes and villages. While you are on it, you must obey Subedar Bhyro Singh as you would your own zamindars, and as he obeys me (404).

Nineteenth-century era was enveloped by the empire. European Nation states became powerful as their organizational efficiency led to territorial expansion and symbolic investment in the colonies on a massive scale. The business of colonization gambled and experimented not only with funds but also lives. The destruction of Raja Neel Rattan, who lost his Zamindari estate, power and status or an illiterate village woman like Deeti whose ambition was to cultivate grains are very much a part of history. The pervasive historicity is the impressive feature of the book. It reflects not only the political history but also an understanding of culture, religion, diversity, trade and much more.

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is a unique fictional creation based on a wide research not only on various aspects of the colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent but also the sea-routes of the time, the technical know-how of piloting ships and the typical language of the 'laskars' in a ship. In an interview given in 2002, Ghosh said, "I don't think there's a big difference between writing fiction and writing non-fiction. When you're writing non-fiction there's real world out there that has to be taken seriously which means that you have to



take a step outside the confines of what happens in your head and engage with the real world. But my fiction is also founded on very extensive research. The world interests me. Sometimes the world interests me as fiction and sometimes it interests me as non-fiction and I don't see a distinction."¹ The statement is applicable to all his works including *Sea of Poppies* where hitherto unrevealed aspects of colonial oppression, inflicted by a section of white men who were desperate to make up the loss caused by the abolition of slavery, are exposed through the rendering of how the business of carrying slaves in ships were replaced with the business of opium and of indentured labourers.

She had never seen the sea, never left the district, never spoken any language but her native Bhojpuri, yet not for a moment did she doubt that the ship existed somewhere and was heading in her direction. The knowledge of this terrified her, for she had never set eyes on anything that remotely resembled this apparition, and had no idea what it might portend. (8)

That she was fated to be in that ship is suggested through her premonition, and surprisingly, the picture of the ship that she drew to clarify her vision to her daughter, "was an uncannily evocative rendition of its subject" (10). Later, it was accepted by the seasoned sailors that the vision of the ship was granted to Deeti by the sacred river Ganga. "In time among the legions who came to regard the Ibis as their ancestor, it was accepted that it was the river itself that had granted Deeti the vision: that the image of the Ibis had been transported upstream, like an electric current, the moment the vessel made contact with the sacred waters.

This would mean that it happened in the second week of March 1838, for that was when the Ibis dropped anchor, off Ganga-Sagar island, where the holy river debouches into the Bay of Bengal." (10)² The real ship is described as it was perceived by Zachary Reid, the American who joined as a carpenter but soon became the second mate of the ship on its way from Baltimore to Calcutta.

After Zachary met Mr. Burnham, the owner of the Ibis in Calcutta, the latter confirmed him that the vessel was going to do just the kind of work she was intended for. When Zachary reminded him that English laws had outlawed the trade in slaves, he justified the system of slavery with a typical colonial logic.

Africa trade was the greatest exercise in freedom since God led the children of Israel out of Egypt. Consider . . . the situation of a so-called slave in the Carolinas—is he not more free than his brethren in Africa, groaning under the rule of some dark tyrant?" (79). He was happy because a good ship was available in Baltimore, and because a hold that was designed to carry slaves would serve just as well to carry coolies and convicts.

Sea of Poppies depicts how the small farmers and agricultural labourers in colonial India were forced by circumstances to be coolies and deported in Mauritius and other places. The portrait of the Bhojpuri woman Deeti who had the vision of the Ibis in the very beginning of the novel is a typical example of such oppressed farmers. The novel shows how after losing her husband, who served in the opium factory and whose land had been forcibly used for opium plantation, Deeti is ready to die in her husband's pyre only to save herself from the lust of her brother-in-law, but is



rescued by a lower class man Kalua, who marries her in secret and then takes her to the ship to be coolies in some other land.

Amitav Ghosh reveals areas of colonial oppression that were not much highlighted earlier along with the much talked-about topic of the oppression of the poor by local moneylenders.³ 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 liking of the colonials, depriving themselves of wheat and paddy that they needed most to support themselves. The cultivation of Indigo ('neel') that was thrust upon the farmers in Bengal was highlighted in Bengali writings of the period⁴ and was included later in the agenda of National movements, but the cultivation of opium was little focussed. Ghosh sincerely reveals the plight of the farmers who fell in the clutches of the English businessmen and began poppy plantation. 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.

But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare—it had to be bought at the market, from people who lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could" (29).

Earlier poppies were grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops such as wheat and the farmers liked to use poppy seeds as luxury items. As for the sap, it was left to dry to get hard 'akbari afeem' which could sell to local nobility and were also

free to keep some amount for personal use during illness. But now the 'chandu' opium was made and packaged in the English factory for business and the farmers who supplied the poppies were ill paid and were not even allowed to keep some parts of the harvest with them for free selling or for personal use. Having done a lot of research on poppy plantation, Ghosh shows how the unwilling farmers were forced to plant poppy and face loss.

This is a detailed description of colonial oppression by compelling the Indian farmers, poor and illiterate, to harvest crops in their own land for the benefit of the British businessmen who had the support of judiciary with them. After Deeti came in contact with other indentured labourers she came to know that everyone's land was in hock to the agents of the opium factory, and that every farmer had been served with a contract, the fulfilling of which left them with no option but to strew their land with poppies. And when the harvest was over the farmers found that the little amount of grains they could bring home would not be able to feed their families and that they were destined to plunge deeper into debt (91).

The plight of the workers inside the Opium factory—the hazards faced by them and the insecurity of their dangerous job—is also revealed through Deeti's first-hand knowledge of the interior of the factory when she entered there after her husband's illness. Deeti saw that troops of boys were climbing as nimbly as acrobats at a fair to the shelves joined by struts and ladders, and were hopping from shelf to shelf to examine the balls of opium. Every now and again, an English overseer would call out an



order and the boys would begin to toss spheres of opium to each other.

Deeti wondered, "How could they throw so accurately with one hand, while holding on with the other—and that too at a height where the slightest slip would mean certain death" (96). In front of Deeti one boy indeed dropped a ball, 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" (96).

For the profit of the British businessmen the Indian farmers had to produce poppy in their fields denying themselves of bread and other necessities, the poor boys had to be engaged in the factory at the risk of their lives, and there was above all the inhuman torture of the white supervisors inside the factory. *Sea of Poppies* also reveals that export of opium to China was the brain child of the British and the American businessmen, and thus the myth of China's hunger for opium since antiquity is broken. Neel Ratan 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, under the seal of the East India Company and it was beyond his imagination that the Company could run a business in China without the official approval of that country.

The colonial policy of putting on camouflage the ugly face of colonialism is revealed in Mr. Burnham's arguments in favour of free trade, which, he said, was likely to be the professed cause behind the impending war against the Chinese.

He said to Zachary who was also present in the party, The war, when it comes, will not be for opium. It will be for a principle: for freedom—for the freedom of trade and for the freedom of the 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 advantages of British influence.

Though outwardly gentle, the Captain followed the unspoken rules of the colonizer, the rules that helped to keep the colony in control. Persons like the Captain did not appear rude and rough as did the first mate of the ship. They only put on facades of civilization when they spoke of civilizing others; but they sincerely believed in the basic differences among the races and their success as colonizers depended on aggravating the differences among persons; Ghosh has analyzed this mindset of the colonizers and has also exposed the various ways of exploiting the natives to enrich their coffer.

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