

FREE TRADE AND DRUG TRAFFICKING BETWEEN BRITAIN AND CHINA: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*

JEBUN GEETI

Introduction

AS AN INDIAN AUTHOR writing in English, Amitav Ghosh holds an extraordinary sense of history and place. His work investigates the multidimensionality of the postcolonial past, present, and future. Ghosh's 1988 novel *Sea of Poppies* illuminates the politics of the nineteenth-century opium trade, an industry in which British colonisers compelled Indian farmers to produce opium in fertile croplands and thereby destroy their harvests permanently. As part of a predesigned policy in India, British traders turned the banks of the river Ganga into opium factories, exporting drugs to China openly and unlawfully. In the name of Christianity and moral duty, these traders engaged in drug trafficking and amassed huge amounts of wealth by exploiting poor workers in opium factories, spreading mass addiction to both India and China.

As postcolonial history tells us, there was high demand for tea, silk, and porcelain in Britain in the nineteenth century. There was, however, little demand for European commodities in the East. As a result, Britain had a large trade deficit with China and had to pay for its imported goods with silver—the Chinese currency at the time. Opium production in India was a premeditated venture that the British thought would compensate them for their lopsided trade deficit.¹ In examining *Sea of Poppies* in light of this history, this article charts ways in which these British merchants justified their devastating drug business—a business whose sole purpose was to gain access to China’s huge market for enormous profit, and whose result was the inhuman oppression and the exploitation of both men and nature, all under the mantra of free trade.

It should be noted that the issues Ghosh brings to light in his novels are framed through the perspectives of displaced peoples; indeed, the histories of these peoples often take place at the margins of Eurocentric narratives of history.² Besides *Sea of Poppies*, several of Ghosh’s significant novels can be understood to trace the history of displaced or marginalised peoples in the wake of colonisation. For instance, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) can be read as one of the most important narratives of the diaspora and dislocation of India and East Pakistan after partition in 1947.³ The novel questions both the legacies of partition in the Indian subcontinent and the role of persistent riots in the nationalist histories of India and East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. A preeminent example of Ghosh’s production of historical narratives in the guise of travelogue is *In an Antique Land* (1992).⁴ This narrative explores the role of European and non-European colonisers in building relations between Asian and African countries. Similarly, *The Glass Palace* (2000) outlines the detrimental impact of British rule and portrays the predicament

1. Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839–1952* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 7.

2. Anshuman A. Mondal, *Amitav Ghosh* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 2.

3. Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (London: John Murray, 2011).

4. Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publishers, 1992).

of displaced people in Burma and India.⁵ The novel also depicts the history of the displaced Royal family in Burma, which was forced to move to India in the wake of World War II. Ghosh's much-acclaimed novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) also focuses on the history of displaced people of the islands of Sundarbans through its portrayal of the dreadful plight of refugees and indigenous people.⁶ *The Hungry Tide* interrogates the notion of progress through its depiction of the traumatic experience of dislocated people.

In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh reexamines his principal themes and concerns, presenting a historical novel of great depth. The novel spans different continents, each with their own entangled, complex, and self-contradictory interests. The narrative brings into view the violence of colonial oppression as it was enacted through the illegal opium business and the transportation of indentured labourers. In addition to identifying the impact of the opium trade as it is brought into relief in *Sea of Poppies*, this article will also uncover some elapsed stories of diaspora and plantation workers arising from the British drug business. To do so, this article contends that *Sea of Poppies* describes two basic forms of colonial suppression and deprivation. The first concerns the forced plantation of poppy seeds instead of edible crops in the fertile lands of India, a practice that caused widespread hunger and poverty. The second is Britain's illegal export of drugs to China, with the aim of maximising profit from those exports.

Through *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh emphasises the collective identity of the early nineteenth-century transnational diaspora who boarded the *Ibis*, a former slave ship, and sailed toward new roots and new aspirations, leaving behind their agonising past for an unknown future. Ghosh stated his reason for writing about this subject in an interview with the BBC:

5. Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publishers, 2000).

6. Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

What basically interested me when I started this book were the lives of the Indian indentured workers, especially those who left India from

Bihar region... Also all the indentured workers at that time came from all the opium growing regions in the Benares and Ghazipur areas.⁷

The setting of the novel is North India and Bengal in the 1930s. The oldest of the two opium plants in India was located in Ghazipur, and established by the British East India Company in around 1820; the newer plant was in Neemuch, Madhya Pradesh, and had been established in 1935.⁸ Ghosh refers to the silent role of Britain's drug trade in many of his interviews and opines that opium was the most lucrative business among other projects under Queen Victoria's reign.⁹ Ghosh's view is also similar to the contention of the economist Carl Trocki who states that "without the drug, there probably would have been no British Empire." Indeed, as Trocki asserts, "the economic foundation of the imperial economy lay on opium."¹⁰ Trocki also observes that, by the middle of the nineteenth century, opium was a major source of government revenue in British India and a major export. This is reflected in the narrative of *Sea of Poppies* in that the British merchants are depicted as exploiting the immense value of opium production in India and its huge demand in China.

The novel primarily covers the histories of the slave trade, diaspora, the opium trade, the British Empire, and the beginning of forced migration of indentured labourers to the Caribbean. It also illustrates the intimate relationship between history and politics and studies the oceanic networks of the Indian Ocean—networks through which ideas, commodities, and people would flow from India to a variety of places, including China, Mauritius, England, and the United States.¹¹ Clare Chambers has observed Ghosh's preoccupation with oceanic networks and his representations of the Indian Ocean in many of his novels. As she writes,

7. Amitav Ghosh, "Opium Financed British Rule in India" (Interview) *BBC News* (June 23, 2008), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7460682.stm.

8. See Benjamin Siegel, "Beneficent Destinations: Global Pharmaceuticals and The Consolidation Of The Modern Indian Opium Regime, 1907–2002," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 57, no. 3 (2020): 343.

9. See, for example, Amitav Ghosh, "Interview" *The Daily Star* 7, no. 9 (February 29, 2008), <http://archive.thedailystar.net/magazine/2008/02/05/interview.htm>.

10. Carl Trocki, *Opium, Empire, and the Global Political Economy: A Study of the Asian Opium Trade, 1750–1950* (London: Routledge, 1999), 85.

11. Anupama Arora, "The Sea is History: Opium, Colonialism, and Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 42, nos. 3–4 (eds. Faye Halpern, Michael T. Clark (2012): 23.

Ghosh suggests that people need a model of belonging that moves away from national lines. The Ocean provides a forum for erasing the divisive 'shadow lines' he problematises in many of his novels.¹²

However, *Sea of Poppies* uses the Indian Ocean to exceed the material geography—something that highlights Ghosh's preoccupation with seas and oceanic networks. Travel and migration are also noteworthy themes in Ghosh's work; however, Ghosh depicts these themes not only as recent phenomena but places them in the context of their enduring historical continuity. As Chambers points out, Ghosh "frequently makes plain that travel, migration, and cultural interaction are not recent byproducts of globalization" but "endeavours that societies have always undertaken for economic, religious, ideological, strategic, or personal reasons."¹³ For Ghosh, these activities speak less to the age in which they take place than to the character of the peoples who engage in them.

The body of the *Ibis*, the ship with which the novel is concerned, carries messages from different histories of non-Western sailors, the slave trade, and bonded labourers. In depicting these messages, the novel deals with cross-culturalism, multilingualism, and class and caste systems. In his review of *Sea of Poppies*, Michel Binyon has captured the extent to which the novel depicts the remarkable diversity of peoples who travelled on board the *Ibis*:

Coarseness and violence, cruelties and fatalism are relieved with flashes of emotion and kindness. This is no anti-colonial rant or didactic tableau but the story of men and women of all races and castes, cooped up on a voyage across the 'Black water' that strips them of dignity and ends in storm, neither in despair nor resolution. It is profoundly moving.¹⁴

What makes *Sea of Poppies* a landmark work of literature is that its author has successfully blended history with fiction. One of the reasons Ghosh has had to undertake such a blended project is

12. Claire Chambers, (Review) "The Indian Ocean in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh" *Wasafiri* 26, no. 2 (2011): 87.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Michel Binyon, "Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh," *The Times Review* (June 6, 2008), <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sea-of-poppies-by-amitav-ghosh-qwlff32nzrb>.

that the regions Ghosh explores are not easily accessed or located in colonial or postcolonial histories. As is well known, history is often shaped by the sociopolitical perspectives of the colonisers. Therefore, the narratives generated by postcolonial historical fictions must utilize both the author's imagination and empirical or factual research into various historical topics and works to create a broader view of historical reality.

The central character of *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti, is situated on the outskirts of the town of Ghazipur in North Calcutta, India. She belongs to a family of farmers who supply poppies to a British-run opium factory at Ghazipur in colonised India. The factory was also overseen by the Central Bureau of Narcotics, housed in the Department of Revenue of the Government of India.¹⁵ Indeed, a government website for these factories remains active today.¹⁶ As Bibhash Choudhury comments, "most of the people of this novel embody cultural legacies, which, in spite of being accretions of varying densities, inform and bracket their identities throughout the novel."¹⁷ For the villagers in the novel, poppy cultivation is considered legitimate agricultural work, even as the British force these farmers into poppy cultivation in their own corn fields. The villagers mainly speak in a colloquial form of the Bhojpuri language, which bestows a strong sense of locality on the novel's descriptions of their lives and work. However, it must be acknowledged that the novel leaves a deeper impact on readers through its presentation of multiple languages. Shirley Chew has commented on this "clash and mingling of language":

Bhojpuri, Bengali, Laskari, Hindustani, Anglo-Indian words and phrases and a fantastic spectrum of English including the malapropisms of Baboo Nob Kissin, Burnham's accountant, create a vivid sense of living voices as well as the linguistic resourcefulness of people in diaspora.¹⁸

15. Siegel, "Beneficent Destinations," 343.

16. See Government of India, Central Bureau of Narcotics, "Government Opium and Alkaloid Factories: At Glance" (Web page), <http://cbn.nic.in/html/ccf.htm>.

17. Bibhash Choudhury, "Fraught with a Background: Identity and Cultural Legacy in *Sea of Poppies*," *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Essays*, ed. Bibhash Choudhury (Delhi: PHI Learning, 2016), 164.

18. Shirley Chew, "Review of *Sea of Poppies*," *The Independent* (May 16, 2008), <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/sea-of-poppies-by-amitav-ghosh-5481895.html>.

The story of the former slave ship *Ibis* extends to various parts of Bengal, including off the coast of Ganga Sagar Island, where the ship drops its anchor at one point. The narrator mentions the ironic history of the *Ibis*: although it was once used by British and American naval officers to patrol West African coasts, the vessel was sold because it was not swift enough to serve the previous owner's purpose and was finally handed to its present owner, Benjamin Burnham. The ironic twist is that Burnham now uses the ship for exporting opium and transporting bonded workers.¹⁹

Burnham's first successful project was the transportation of convicts: that is, the shipping of Indian prisoners to the British Empire's network of island prisons. These islands included Penang, Bencoolen, Port Blair, and Mauritius. At the time these transportations occurred, in the mid-nineteenth century, Calcutta was the principal site to which thousands of thugs, dacoits, rebels, head-hunters, and hooligans were moved. There they were kept in island jails: these were the places in which the British kept their enemies, imprisoned. In this lucrative venture, Burnham's shipmate was Captain Chillingworth, the ship's master. As we learn, not a single slave, convict, or coolie has ever escaped Chillingworth's tyranny. As the narrator observes,

With Chillingworth's help, Benjamin Burnham sieved a fortune from the tide of transportees that was flowing out of Calcutta, and this inflow of capital allowed him to enter the China trade on an even bigger scale than he had envisaged: soon he was running a sizable fleet of his own ships. By his early thirties, he had formed a partnership with two of his brothers, and the firm had become a leading trading house, with agents and dufters in such cities as Bombay, Singapore, Aden, Canton, Macao, London and Boston.²⁰

19. For a critical discussion of this section of the novel, see Prasenjit Das, "Sea of Poppies: The Myriad Shifts of Colonialism in Transit," *Amitav Ghosh: Critical Essays*, 180.

20. Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (London: John Murray Publishers, 2008), 80. All subsequent page references to this novel shall be given in the parentheses in the article.

One point should be noted here concerning slavery. In 1807, the British Parliament had abolished the slave trade, which caused enormous financial losses. At that time, a group of British officers were desperate to make up the loss caused by the abolition of the

slave market. They devised a plan to introduce a trade of carrying opium and bonded workers across the seas, hoping to make a significant return from it. The novel deals with this plan and its implementation.

At one point, the novel introduces these bonded workers, which the narrator calls “girmits” or “giritiya”:

They are so called because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on ‘girmits’—agreements written on 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. (72)

When Kalua, a “giant of a man” (4) who drives an ox-cart asks a guard about where the grimitiya are going, the guard explains as follows:

A boat will take them to Patna and then to Calcutta... and from there they will go to a place called Mareech. (71–72)

The novel’s preoccupation with history is exhibited throughout its pages. These forgotten histories incorporate the movement of people and bonded workers from one place to another, but they also record the crossing of geographical boundaries, the transportation of poor Indians as plantation workers to British occupied islands, and the impacts of economic pressure on the common people. The novel incisively employs history to bring silenced and marginalised voices out of the colonial archive and into our postcolonial present.

Closed Economy, Free trade, and the Politics of Opium in *Sea of Poppies*

The opium trade has its roots in the preexisting sixteenth-century trade relations between Britain and China. Commodities like tea, silk, and porcelain were in high demand in Europe, but European commodities failed to attract the East in return. This created a large trade imbalance and

Britain was required to pay for its imported goods with silver.²¹ Ghosh explores in his novel how British colonial rule in India was sustained and extended, chiefly by the profit made from illegally exporting opium to China. They created widespread poverty and hunger, leaving poor farmers poorer, by making drugs available to the vulnerable, poverty-stricken, dislocated, destitute, or culturally marginalised.²²

In the novel, Ghosh depicts the history of the Opium War through the portrayal of invented characters from the East India Company, who represent the stance of the British merchants. In order to grasp the motivation behind the Opium War and the repercussions of the drug business in China, we need to look into China's past to get a clear picture of their closed economy. A closed economy is one that has no trading activity with outside economies. It is therefore an entirely self-sufficient economy where there is no option for import or export with the rest of the world.²³ A closed economy was adopted in China with the goal of providing domestic consumers with everything they would need, within the country's border. Although China had not adopted an open economy at the time of the Opium War, its vast economy was open to the West up until 1978 — a year that marked the beginning of a series of radical economic reforms for the country.²⁴

Under a closed economy, China did not interact much with the economy of other nations. However, the incident that initiated the opening of the Chinese economy dates back as far as the Opium Wars, which were fought between China and the Western powers in the nineteenth century. The period that started with these wars, and which provided the basis for China's economic transformation, is called the Century of Humiliation in Chinese history.²⁵

21. Angus Maddison, "The Historical Origins of Indian Poverty," *PSL Quarterly Review* 23, no. 92 (2014): 35.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Jiancai Pi, "A Political Economy Pattern of China's History: On Revolution, Reform, and Involution under Dictatorship," *Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems* 6, no. 1 (2008): 21.

24. Phil C. W. Chan, "China's Approaches to International Law since the Opium War," *Leiden Journal of International Law* 27, no. 4 (2014): 859–892.

25. Alison Adcock Kaufman, "The 'Century of Humiliation,' Then and Now: Chinese Perceptions of the International Order," *Pacific Focus* 25, no. 1 (2010): 1–33.

The Opium War that took place between China and Britain brought the Qing dynasty to an end.²⁶ With one of the world's largest economies, China was the most developed and influential empire of the world until the fifteenth century, when Westerners arrived in China by sea. Initially it was the Portuguese and the Dutch who carried their homes to Canton for trade opportunities. Then followed the British, the French, and the Americans in the pursuit of commercial gain. The opening of China to modern markets was partially founded on the tea trade: in the nineteenth century, Britain, as the world's largest colonial empire, wanted to enter China, a major market. The Chinese empire was paid a large amount every year for tea.²⁷ In addition, the British also bought large amounts of silk and porcelain from China.²⁸ As previously stated, Britain wanted free trade with China so that it could find a source of mercantile turnover to close the import–export gap. The British considered opium to be a profitable resource, and it would later become the most lucrative business between Britain and China, which would easily balance the trade deficit.

In the novel, the character of Bengali zemidar, Raja Neel Ratan Halder, stands for the contemporary Indian kings or landlords. These figures had little idea that drug-trafficking had no official approval in China. The British merchants could export drugs to China quite openly and illegally due to some Indian Raja or kings' reluctance to prosecute, obsession with lavishness, and immersion in their amorous relationships. Due to the recklessness and neglect of many of the Indian rulers, it became relatively easy for the British to compel the peasants of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Bengal in India to grow poppies in their fertile agricultural lands, causing economic breakdowns and widespread hunger.²⁹ It is arguable that the novel portrays a realistic representation of Indian kings through its creation of

26. *Ibid.*, 895.

27. Gary Sigley, "Tea and China's Rise: Tea, Nationalism, and Culture in the 21st Century," *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 2, no. 1 (2015): 319–341.

28. Anne Gerritsen and Stephen McDowall, "Material Culture and the Other: European Encounters with Chinese Porcelain, ca. 1650–1800," *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 87–113.

29. Choudhury, "Fraught with a Background," 166.

Raja Neel Ratan Halder and his father, the old Raja of Raskhali, the latter of whom had initially built his fortune by allowing Mr Burnham into his estate to make unrestricted profit through his investment into the opium business. Old Raja did not know Burnham, nor did he intend to investigate his practices. When it became known to others that the Halder of Raskhali had entered into a partnership with an English trader, many of his friends and relatives started begging for shares in that fortune, knowing little about the business. Old Raja was influenced by his mistresses whose demands became insatiable. At one point of the novel, the narrator describes the situation:

Learning of the zeminder's new source of wealth, his mistresses—of whom he had exactly as many as there were days in the week, so as to be able to spend each night in a different bed—grew more exigent, vying with each other in asking for gifts, baubles, houses, and jobs for their relatives. Always a doting lover, the old zemindar gave in to most of their demands, with the result that his debts increased until all the silver Mr Burnham earned for him was being channelled directly to his creditors. (89)

Subsequently, Raja Neel Ratan, the reckless son of the old Raja, becomes obsessed with one these mistresses, a “once-famous” dancer, known to the world by her stage-name, “Elokeshi” (39). Known throughout the novel as “Neel,” the old Raja’s son is indifferent to and ignorant of the British mercantile strategy. Perhaps inevitably, then, Neel gradually becomes a victim of this strategy. At a late point in the novel, Neel is transported to an island and imprisoned there, having been accused of forgery by the British—specifically by Mr Burnham. Although his incarceration is made more comfortable by virtue of his formerly amicable association with his accuser, the prosecution ultimately transforms Neel into a penniless beggar (199).

In the novel, the lands that once provided sustenance to India are reduced to cash crops to satiate the naked greed of the British. When the Chinese stand up against the illegal export of drugs to China and ban its importation, despite what Mr Burnham describes as their intention only to claim “a bigger share of the profits” (113), the East India Company declares war with China under the assertion of their right to free trade. In what follows, Burnham tries to justify the Opium War:

The war, when it comes, will not be for opium. It will be for 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, in its absence many millions of natives would be denied the lasting advantages of British influence. (115)

Both the hypocrisy and economic interests of the British merchants become clearer in the novel as it progresses. For instance, in a conversation between Burnham and another merchant, Mr Doughty, Mr Burnham says that no one dislikes war more than him; however, he admits that “there are times when war is not merely just and necessary, but also humane.” (260) He continues, “In China, that time has come: nothing else will do” (260). Mr Doughty supports Mr Burnham in his justification for the war, claiming he is “quite right” (260). As he then postulates, “Indeed, humanity demands it. We need only think of the poor Indian peasant—what will become of him if his opium can’t be sold in China? Bloody hurremzads can hardly eat now: they’ll perish by the crore.” (260)

Earlier in the novel, when Neel Ratan is assured that exporting drugs to China is illegal, he records, piously, his concern that God has been invoked wrongly in the “service of opium” (116) and its unlawful sale. Responding to this concern, Mr Burnham provides a summary of his own theological reasoning:

Jesus Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ. Truer words, I believe, were never spoken. If it is God's will that opium be used as an instrument to open China to his teaching, then so it be it. For myself, I confess I can see no reason why any Englishman should abet the Manchu tyrant in depriving the people of China of this miraculous substance. (116)

But Mr Burnham's arguments are directed not only to God and theology. Mr Burnham also emphasises the use of opium for medical treatment, lecturing Neel on the time before this substance "when men had to have their teeth pulled out and their limbs sawn off without benefit of any palliative" (116). As he says to Neel, in a chastising mode,

So you would do well to bear in mind that it would be well nigh impossible to practise modern medicine or surgery without such chemicals as morphine, codeine and narcotine—and these are but a few of the blessings derived from opium. (121)

In his further conversation with Mr Burnham, Neel insists that addiction and intoxication have become an alarming problem in China. Not only does he imply these "afflictions" might be ruinous for that country; he notes they are "surely" not "pleasing to our Creator" (116). However, Burnham, though "nettled" by these suggestions (116), resists Neel's moralising with an ethical argument of his own:

The antidote for addiction lies not in bans enacted by Parliaments or emperors, but in the individual conscience—in every man's awareness of his personal responsibility and his fear of God. As a Christian nation this is the single most important lesson we can offer to China—and I have no doubt that the message would be welcomed by the people of that unfortunate country, were they not prevented from hearing it by the cruel despot who holds sway over them. (117)

According to the British merchants, China's strict ban on importing opium is a form of tyranny, while the British merchants are "but the servants of free trade" (122). Thus, the

conversations depicted in *Sea of Poppies* clearly portray the colonial demand for wealth. Mr Burnham's arguments demonstrate the way in which colonial rule was justified, as well as how colonial rules were used to make money from the subjugated nations under the mantra of free trade and beneficence.

Impacts of Opium Cultivation in India

The foremost focuses of the novel are indisputably the illegal plantation of the poppy crop, the opium trade between British and China, and the devastating impact of the opium trade on working- and lower middle-class sections of India. The history of the Opium War in the late nineteenth century reveals that initially Afghanistan was the main producer and supplier of opium in Europe.³⁰ However, the British East India Company found that its fortune lay in the drug business and converted the fertile banks of the river Ganga into a poppy growing region in which to run their factories.³¹

Despite China's official restrictions on importing drugs, the British continued their drug trade, denouncing Chinese prohibition completely, and finally waging a war against China.³² In *Sea of Poppies*, this historical background helps to reveal the devastating impacts of the drug trade on India, particularly on the socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and ecological setting of the colonised country.

The most demeaning result of opium production in colonial India is that it ceases the cultivation of edible food crops. At the very beginning of the novel, the narrator describes the situation as it was in Deeti's youth, when edible crops were grown alongside poppies:

When Deeti was her daughter's age, things were different: poppies had been a luxury then, grown in small

30. Das, "Sea of Poppies: The Myriad Shifts of Colonialism in Transit," 181.

31. Murari Kumar Jha, "Migration, Settlement, and State Formation in the Ganga Plain: A Historical Geographic Perspective," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 57, no. 1 (2014): 587-627.

32. Jon Miller and Gregory Stanczak, "Re-deeming, Ruling, and Reaping: British Missionary Societies, the East India Company, and the India-to-China Opium Trade," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 2 (2009): 332-352.

clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops—wheat, masoor dal and vegetables. (29)

Of course, even then, poppies were used for medical and other purposes, including to be sold to merchants. As the narrator continues,

In the old days, farmers would keep a little of their homemade opium for their families, to be used during illness, or at harvest and weddings; the rest they would sell to the local nobility, or to the small merchants from Patna. (29)

Deeti is the wife of Hukum Singh, a man who works in an opium packing factory and whose life is destroyed by opium addiction. Upon marrying Hukum Singh, Deeti discovers that he has already lost his virility due to his addiction to opium—he is unable to engage in matrimonial sex with her as she (and others) expects he will. Reflecting after discovering her new husband's addiction, Deeti realises that she can still remember her childhood days when “the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter” and, after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to “repair the damage of the year before” (30). However, after the establishment of British rule, and as farmers were forced to grow poppy, Deeti realises that things changed. As the narrator observes, the English “sahibs” had changed the entire economic system of the region:

But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare—it has 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. (30)

Opium generates a disastrous influence on Deeti's life. She realises that she has been raped by her husband's own brother on her wedding night, an act that was predesigned by her mother-in-law, whose ravings while under the influence of datura—a deliriant hallucinogen—reveals the deception and the assault. Her mother-in-law had given Deeti drugs to consume on her wedding

night so that she was too drowsy to identify the difference between her new husband—a man who had himself become addicted to opium—and his brother. Subsequently, Deeti gives birth to her husband's brother's child, a fact that renders her marriage to Hukum Singh a personal humiliation.

For his part, Hukum Singh is severely victimised by opium. In order to help his family to survive, Singh is forced to spend his life working in the opium factory, where he inevitably becomes addicted to the substance and finally collapses while at work (27). In narrating these scenes of distress and trauma, the novel emphasises another oppressive aspect of the opium trade: the pitiable situation of the workers who must work in the opium factories—and the effects this has on their lives, families, and communities. When Deeti is informed that her husband has collapsed, she is not surprised. However, she realises it will be necessary to attend to him. But for Deeti to collect her unwell husband from the factory, she must provide some payment to Kalua, the driver of the ox-cart with whom she will travel to Ghazipur. As the narrator notes, “Having run through the alternatives,” Deeti soon realises she has “no option but to delve into the carved wooden chest in which her husband kept his supply of opium” (28) to provide the sum of payment to Kalua. Thus, the novel shows how opium has become not just a substance from which various ailments flow but the currency through which acts to repair the damage must be transacted.

In the novel and in history, we witness the factories open up a hazardous, insecure, traumatic, and polluted journey of underprivileged workers. These people lose their ability to think of a life outside the opium industry, becoming mere instruments of the British drug business and network. In her essay “Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking

Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century,” Clare Anderson explains the situation of confined migrants:

The practices and experiences of indenture are best understood primarily in relation to the institutions and imaginative discourses that framed the well-established contemporary colonial practice of penal transportation as a process of social dislocation and rupture.³³

In fact, through the practices of empire-building, native peoples and native producers are treated as commodities and free labour; these indentured peoples remain constantly under the scrutiny of the colonisers and the local kings or landlords. In her book chapter on trade and the origins of modern Europe, Lisa Lowe notes that, out of the “global intimacies” of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas, there “emerged a modern racialised division of labor.”³⁴ Lowe points out that the exploitation of the Chinese labourers in particular, at a time when British political discourse announced a decision to move from “primitive slavery” to “free labor,” was achieved by deceptive means. By representing the Chinese as “freely contracted,” the British political system “buttressed liberal promises of freedom for former slaves while enabling planters to derive benefits.”³⁵ As Lowe continues,

33. Clare Anderson, “Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century,” *Slavery and Abolition* 30, no. 1 (2009): 93–109.

34. Lisa Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents” in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 192–212.

35. *Ibid.*, 194.

36. *Ibid.*

The Chinese were used instrumentally in this political discourse as a collective *figure*, a fantasy of ‘free’ yet racialized indentured labor, at a time when the possession of body, work, life, and death was foreclosed to the enslaved and indentured alike.³⁶

Neel and the old Raja’s transactions with Mr Burnham engender no challenges to their standing. Nevertheless, their position makes it evident that, due to private profit-seeking and opportunism, the indentured peoples in India are abused freely as instruments in the hands of the white mercantile community. This becomes most apparent when Mr Burnham is invited to dine at Neel’s palace and the moral questions relating to opium arise

in conversation. When Mr Burnham suggests it is not apt for “a Raja of Raskhali to moralize on the subject of opium” (123), Neel, evidently defensive and yet ready for “the affront that was sure to follow” (123), asks Mr Burnham why that is so. In response, Mr Burnham is condescending:

Well, for the very good reason that everything you possess is paid for by opium—this budgerow, your houses, this food. Do you think you could afford any of this on the revenues of your estate and your half-starved coolie farmers? No, sir: it's opium that's given you all of this (123).

The novel depicts the moral arguments made by each side of the debate, and through Mr Burnham crystallises the rationalisations expressed by the British discourse of the time about the opium trade and the sale of labourers during the period.

Another feature of *Sea of Poppies* worth examining is the character of Paulette Lambert. Paulette is the daughter of a French botanist who joins the lowest track of the professional and social group on the *Ibis*. Her position conceals her status as a non-native woman and one of those who is cut off from their roots on board the ship. Paulette was brought up by her adoptive Bengali mother but was left an orphan under the care of Mr Burnham, the British merchant, and his wife. Despite being a European, Paulette's father genuinely abhors the ecological devastation brought to India by the British traders. The novel's reference to Paulette's father's concern for nature is somewhat ironic considering the mass destruction of plants, animals, and environment under the British regime. Nevertheless, Paulette's father sincerely thinks that the effects of colonial rule on his daughter will be degrading, since the colonies hide their greed:

She has not known anything but Love, Equality and Freedom: I have raised her to revel in that state of liberty that is Nature

itself. If she remains here, in the colonies, most particularly in a city like this, where Europe hides its shame and its greed, all that awaits her is degradation: the whites of this town will tear her apart, like vultures and foxes, fighting over a corpse. She will be an innocent thrown before the money-changers who pass themselves off as men of God... (136)

The novel explores the sufferings of not only the farmers and commoners who were dying of hunger and migrating to Mauritius but all living beings on earth who have been made the victims of opium production. A key ecological impact of the excessive production of opium in the nineteenth century was that it caused insects to behave unusually. As the novel recounts, the sweet odour of the poppy pod attracted insects like bees, grasshoppers, butterflies, and wasps. Some insects became easily stuck in the liquid of the poppy pod, their bodies merging “into the black gum, becoming a welcome addition to the weight of the harvest” (28). Of course, when this opium was sold into the market, it was contaminated by these insects. Additionally, butterflies, lethargic under the influence of the sap, were pacified by the substance, so that they “flapped their wings in erratic patterns, as though they could not remember how to fly” (28).

Another impact of opium production at this time was to be found in the deplorable state of the monkey populations that lived near opium factories. As a result of opium consumption from the sewers that drained from the factories, these animals became sluggish, gloomy, and unresponsive, never stealing from passers-by (91). However, possibly the most detrimental environmental effect was the dust that was emitted from the factories, which caused people to sneeze and sniff, sometimes causing permanent respiratory problems. As the narrator observes,

Rare was the passerby who could brave this mist without exploding into a paroxysm of sneezes and sniffles – and yet it was a miracle, plain to behold, that the coolies pounding the trash were no more affected by the dust than were their young English overseers. (91)

Ghosh's novel also emphasises the way in which the Ganga—the sacred river that was the object of worship by the Hindus and whose water was used for bathing and drinking—became polluted and grimy from the dirt of the opium factory. The novel makes particular note of the landscape around the river, which had changed a great deal since Deeti's childhood, after opium production had begun to blacken the countryside (192). *Sea of Poppies* is clearly interested in highlighting how the cultivation of opium destroyed the ecological balance of this region of India in such a way that the city of Calcutta became congested and the atmosphere toxic, especially with no foliage to support oxygen production.

Conclusion

Besides outlining the saga of the Opium War and its damaging impacts on man and nature, the novel uncovers many related stories of colonial India. In doing so, *Sea of Poppies* reveals various features of the political, historical, and social realities of pre- and postcolonial India and China. While the Opium War is central to the novel, it is but one of the themes suffusing the text. Indeed, in the words of reviewer David Robson,

If opium were the dominant theme of *Sea of Poppies*, it would probably be a less interesting book. Instead, Ghosh has used the voyage of the *Ibis* as the centerpiece of a much broader canvas, a seething human diaspora in which every character has a story to tell and every passenger is on the run from someone or something.³⁷

37. David Robson, "Into the Opium War," Review of *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh, *The Telegraph*, (June 20, 2008), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/fiction-reviews/3554925/Into-the-Opium-Wars.html>.

The novel's multifaceted characters, each with their own diverse background and dialect, provide readers with a strong sense of the diaspora of the indentured peoples. It should be noted that the characters on board the *Ibis* choose their fates to explore new

homes but remain ceaselessly haunted by their harrowing pasts. But if the homesickness typically associated with human diaspora is absent in the case of the *Ibis* crew, it is because these crew members have suffered such traumatic experience in their places of origin. In parallel with the story of opium trade between India and China, the story of the *Ibis* takes as its subject a trans- or intercontinental form of Indian diaspora, and thus provides an unsettling picture of the oppressed crews and labourers under the British regime.

