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Repercussions of Hallucinogens in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies

Abstract: This article explores the aspects of the opium trade and its after effects on all the living organisms and the environment. In order to amass profit the East India Company went to the extent that they ignored the life of the people in the villages. The easy availability of opium caused to affect all the areas of the life of the people. Poppies dominated the lives of the agrarian people and it changed the lifestyle and livelihood of the agrarian people who were satisfied with the traditional agricultural products. This article makes an attempt to unravel the motives behind the opium trade and the effects of opium on human beings, environment and on other living organisms.

Keywords: Opium, Free trade, asami contracts, Staple crops

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is a writer with historical sense. In his novels he combines both fiction and history. His novels make an attempt to explore the unexplored, neglected and hidden aspects of history. Through his writings he exposes certain unexplored and unexposed aspects of the history. *Sea of Poppies* is the first book in the Ibis Trilogy of Amitav Ghosh. It provides a panoramic view of the people compelled to turn their fields to opium cultivation and the after effects of it upon the people and the environment.

Sea of Poppies presents the plantation of poppy on the agricultural field in India and the opium trade between British authorities and China in 1830s. Opium trade had its beginning since trading began with China in the sixteenth century. There was a high demand for tea, silk and porcelain in Britain. Since the Chinese were self-sufficient and never wanted any European products, Britain had a huge trade deficit with China and therefore had to pay for Chinese imported goods with silver. Anita Sharma in her article *Skepticism and Historicism in Amitav Ghosh's 'Sea of Poppies'* points out; "In 1773, the governor-general of India, Warren Hastings, decided to establish East India company opium monopoly in Bengal, encouraging Indian peasants to plant huge swathes of poppies and then illegally exporting the exceptionally high quality opium to China to counter Britain's deficit" (600).

Farmers of UP, Bihar, and Bengal were compelled to convert their agricultural fields for opium production. In turn, it resulted in "widespread poverty and hunger because lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped with the rising tide of poppies" (326); observes Chanchal Kumar in his article "Colonial History of Oppression and Immigration: A study of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*". As the result of opium trade; the Chinese society was crippled and the whole economy disrupted. Sensing the dangerous effect of opium, the Chinese king banned opium but the imperialists were reluctant to accept it. The novel presents the argument of the imperialists in the following way:

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... British rule in India could not be sustained without opium—that is all there is to it, and let us not pretend otherwise... the Company's annual gains from opium are almost equal to the entire revenue of your own country, the United States. (115)

In *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti represents a colonial victim. When she was young, things were quite different: “Poppies had been a luxury then, grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops—wheat, masoor dal and vegetables...at that time, no one thought of producing the wet, treachery chandu opium that was made and packaged in the English factory, to be sent across the sea in boats” (29). The opening of the East India Company resulted in widespread opium cultivation. As the result of the company's excessive profit motive the farmers had no freedom to cultivate the staple crops in their fields. The novel presents this idea in the following lines:

Come the cold weather, the English Sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign asami contracts. It was impossible to say no to them: if you refused they would leave their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window. (29-30)

Ghosh reveals the plight of the farmers who fell in the traps of the English businessmen and started poppy cultivation. Since poppies were cultivated widely, the production was huge and so the price went down as a result “the earnings would come to no more than three and a half sicca rupees, just about enough to pay off your advances”(30). The farmers were also not allowed to keep some parts of the production with them for free selling

or for personal use. As a result the Indian farmers were totally in the clutches of their colonial masters.

Opium cultivation demanded enormous preparation on land “fifteen ploughings of the land and every remaining clod to be broken by hand; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering; and after all that, the frenzy of the harvest, each bulb having to be individually nicked, drained and scraped”(29). Poppy cultivation required hard work and timing “for a brief period in the plant’s span of life: a day or two, this way or that, and the pods were of no more value than the blossoms of a weed” (5). Life of the people reached to such a stage that Deeti could see, smell, taste, feel and think only of poppies. The poppy petals were collected and made into small roties used to line the earth ware containers in which opium was packed. The routine food habits of the people were affected by poppy. Potatoes cooked in poppy-seed paste became part of their daily food. S. Aarthi in her article “Environmental racism in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* and *Sea of Poppies*” mentions; “They used only poppy-seed oil to massage their hair. So poppy governed the life, senses and thoughts of Deeti, just as it did to entire community that was forced to cultivate poppy” (523). Before the cultivation of poppy, their fields were rich with variety of seasonal crops that were useful to them in a number of ways. It had been seven years since her roof was last thatched. In the forgone days in the winter season their fields were heavy with wheat and after the harvest they used the straw to repair the damage of the roofs. The Sahibs were forcing the farmers to grow poppies and no one had the straw to thatch their houses. They never allowed the farmers to plant anything else in their fields.

Changes in the pattern of cultivation resulted in the impoverishment of the people. Staple crops were replaced by opium and the company’s desire for opium seemed never to be satisfied. Signing for the indentured labour was the only way out from their permanent poverty and social discrimination. Aarthi once again observes; “Eventually the ecologically

and socially oppressed and colonized are forced to leave their country as bonded labourers who would toil in yet another ecologically imperialized plantation elsewhere in the world” (524). Deeti is the victim of opium. In her teenage she is married to Hukam Singh who is much above her age. At the first day of her marriage itself she is given opium and in an opium induced stage her brother-in-law with the support of mother-in-law impregnates her. As the days go on, she realizes that her husband Hukam Singh is an addict to opium. Regularly he takes opium and encourages Deeti to taste it; to which Deeti never succumbs. Previously her husband was working in Company’s army, and since he had been severely wounded he resigned from the post. From that time onwards in order to forget the pain, he regularly administered the opium and thus became an addict. When Hukam Singh is bed-ridden, Deeti refuses to give him opium, hoping his condition would improve, but; “Instead of initiating an improvement, deprivation provoked a dramatic turn for the worse: he could neither eat nor sleep and he soiled himself so often... Drifting in and out of consciousness, he would scowl and mutter in incoherent rage” (153).

Another opium addict is Ah Fatt. His condition is much worse than that of Hukam Singh. He is a half Indian and half Chinese and is imprisoned in the Alipore Jail. Neel Ratan Haldar finds him in the most disgusting and pathetic condition. When he experiences the pain of drug addiction his trembling would begin with a mild trembling that “would mount in intensity till become as violent as to tip him off his charpoy, depositing his convulsing body on the ground” (321). If opium is withdrawn suddenly, it had adverse effects upon him. It affects his digestive system, “it had the effect of sending the bladder and sphincter into uncontrollable spasms, so that neither food nor water could be retained” (322). One day Deeti receives a message that her husband has collapsed at the opium-packing factory. She hires the cart of Kalua and goes to the factory. While hiring the cart of Kalua instead of paying the

money Deeti hands over opium to Kalua and he gives the opium to the ox. Even these animals too were exposed to the taste of opium.

The Ghazipur opium factory is a typical symbol of colonial greed, oppression, horror, domination and inhumanity. On the way to factory along with Kalua; Deeti watches the march of a large group of girmitiyas “a hundred strong or more; hemmed in by a ring of stick-bearing guards, this crowd was trudging wearily in the direction of the river. Bundles of belongings sat balanced on their heads and shoulders, and brass pots hung suspended from their elbows” (69-70). The imperialists encouraged the workers to use opium. The descriptions of the conditions prevalent in the Ghazipur opium factory expose the horrific working condition of the labours.

Their eyes were vacant, gazed, and yet somehow they managed to keep moving, as slow as aunts in honey, tramping, treading. When they could move no more, they sat on the edges of the tanks, stirring the dark ooze only with their feet...their eyes glowed red in the dark and they appeared completely naked, their loincloths—if indeed they had any—being so steeped in the drug as to be indistinguishable from their skin.(95)

As Deeti enters inside the factory the whole process of extraction of opium at Ghazipur factory terrifies her. While she walks into the factory in search of her sick husband, she realizes the power of opium and what the East India Company is doing. She realizes the strength and importance of this trade. White officers were deployed in the factory to maintain discipline. Even children were not spared from working in the opium-filled environment, and the punishments inflicted on them were as harsh as those on adults. “Suddenly one of them did indeed drop 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). The situation

inside the factory truly exposes the truth of the works of the Empire. The factory exists as a legal opium manufacturer for pharmaceutical industry. The central character of *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti discovers the power of opium when she begins to use it to sedate her mother-in-law.

The more she administered it on her mother-in-law she came to respect its potency: how frail a creature was a human being, to be tamed by such tiny doses of this substance! She saw now why the factory in Ghazipur 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)

The use of broom by sweepers to clean commodes and lavatories is a perfect example of material obtained from nature for cleaning. It is manufactured from the spines of palm fronds at home by the people and is not available in the market. In the novel not only human beings become addicted to opium but all living beings in the environment are badly affected by it. The insects that sip the fluid of the poppy flower too turn to be intoxicated and behave unusually. And the sweet smell of the poppy pod attracts the insects like bees, grasshoppers and wasps and in a few days, they get struck in the liquid flowing out of the shell. When the sap turns black their dead bodies merge with the sap and become a part of the opium sold in the market. The effect of opium on butterflies is described in the following manner: “The sap seemed to have a pacifying effect on the butterflies, which flapped their wings in oddly erratic patterns, as though they could not remember how to fly. One of these land on the back of Kaburti’s hand and would not take wing until it was thrown up in the air” (28). The dust of opium in the opium factory causes distraction to the people and even the animals too are affected by it. The ox of Kaula starts sniffing when it gets inside the factory with Deeti and

her daughter. Like other monkeys, the monkeys near the Sundar opium factory never fight among themselves or steal food from anybody, they come down only to eat. “When they came down from the trees it was to lap at the open sewers that drained the factory’s effluents; after having sated their cravings, they would climb back into the branches to resume their stupefied scrutiny of the Ganga and its currents” (91). Fishermen used opium as an agent to catch fish. The novel narrates;

The stretch of river bank was unlike any other, for the ghats around the Carcanna were shored up with thousands of broken earthenware gharas—the round—bottomed vessels in which raw opium was brought to the factory. The belief was widespread that fish were more easily caught after they had nibbled at the shards, and as a result the bank was always crowded with fishermen. (92)

The sewages from the opium factory polluted the river Ganga. Priyanka Maral in her article “Ecocriticism in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*” remarks; “The river is worshipped by the people of India and its water is used for drinking by all living beings but due to release of sewage it becomes unfit for drinking”(368). Ghosh compares the Ganga with the Nile, the life line of the Egyptian civilization. In the novel opium is seen as an easy medium to generate wealth. The possibility of immense wealth in the opium is revealed through Sarju who gives a seed of poppy to Deeti. While giving the seeds of poppy to Deeti she says; “there is wealth beyond imagination, guard it like your life—it contains seeds of the best Benares poppy” (450). Her words indicate how much poppy seeds became an integral part of the main source of the income of the people. Their concern for it shows how much they value and like to hand over it to their dear ones.

2. Conclusion

In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh makes an exploration into the opium trade in our country during the colonial rule. The extensive cultivation of opium changed the whole life style of the people. Indirect encouragement of the East India Company for the use of opium among the people deteriorated the life of the people. Opium influenced the people to an extent in which the thinking pattern of the people was based on the availability and utility of opium. A change in the pattern of cultivation from staple crops to cash crops forced some to go in search of other destinations. The title of the novel *Sea of Poppies* is realized in the poppy plantations in Ghazipur for the entire area was surrounded with opium. Constant influence of opium contaminated all the living organisms and the environment.

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