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Environmental Histories Of Empire: An Eco-Critical Study Of Sea Of Poppies

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* offers a compelling ecocritical perspective on colonialism and its environmental repercussions in nineteenth-century India. The novel centers on the British-imposed opium cultivation, which not only devastates human lives—as seen in Hukum Singh's death from addiction—but also disrupts ecological balance. Forced monoculture replaces food crops, leading to famine and biodiversity loss. Ghosh symbolically shows how opium alters animal behavior, highlighting its broader environmental impact. The narrative critiques colonial scientific institutions through the limited role of a French botanist, whose work contrasts with the deep ecological respect embodied by Paulette, a “child of nature.” Women like Deeti and Sarju preserve seeds, symbolizing resistance, continuity, and ecological hope. The Ganga River stands as a spiritual and ecological force, offering sustenance and prophetic vision. Through these elements, Ghosh underscores the deep environmental degradation, loss of indigenous knowledge, and spiritual disconnection wrought by colonial exploitation.

Keywords: Colonialism, Opium, Environment, Ecological degradation, Spirituality

Amitav Ghosh, born in Calcutta in 1956, is recognized as one of India's foremost authors writing in English. His literary work is notable for blending themes of nature, personal experience, and historical context. Ghosh often explores the dynamic relationship between the natural world and human life. His major publications include *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In an Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2005), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), and *River of Smoke* (2011). In 2008, *Sea of Poppies* was shortlisted for the prestigious Man Booker Prize. This novel marks the beginning of the Ibis Trilogy, with *River of Smoke* serving as its second installment.

Eco criticism is a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape in cultural texts, paying particular attention to attitudes towards 'nature' and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. It aligns itself with ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflects and informs material practices towards the environment, while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches (Nayar 242).

A basic definition of eco criticism was provided by an early anthology, *The Eco criticism Reader* which calls it "the study of the relationship between literature and environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm ix).

The novel explores the impact of British colonial rule in nineteenth-century India, focusing particularly on the opium trade with China in the period leading up to the Opium Wars. Ghosh effectively situates India as the primary site of opium cultivation, revealing the ecological imbalance and the harmful consequences this industry has on both humans and animals. From the very beginning, the vivid imagery of blooming poppy fields signals the central role that opium will play in shaping the lives and destinies of the novel's characters. As he says,

It happened at the end of winter, in a year when 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 – petaled flowers. It was as if the snows of the high Himalayas had descended on the plains to await the arrival of Holi and its springtime profusion of color. (3)

One of the most damaging effects of opium cultivation depicted in the novel is the decline of food crop production. Deeti recalls a time when edible crops were widely grown, providing not only nourishment but also resources like straw for constructing roofs—supporting a balanced and sustainable way of life. However, the forced shift to opium cultivation under colonial pressure disrupted this harmony. As a result, people were left with no food to survive on, forcing them to either face starvation or migrate to distant places like Mauritius in search of a better life. As she says:

In the old days, 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. 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 lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could (29).

Ghosh emphasizes how resources that were once easily accessible to the local people have become costly and scarce due to the shift from food crop cultivation to cash crops like opium. Through the character of Deeti, the novel highlights the drastic transformation in rural life brought about by this change in agricultural practices. Deeti reflects on her childhood, recalling a time when opium was grown only in small amounts, interspersed between essential food crops like wheat, lentils (masoor dal), and vegetables. Her mother's way of farming reflected a balanced, self-sustaining lifestyle that has since been lost.

Would send some of the poppy seeds to the oil press, and the rest she would keep for the house, some for replanting, and some to cook with meat and vegetables. As for the sap, it was sieved of impurities and left to dry, until the sun turned it into had akbari afeem; at that time, no one thought of producing the wet, treacly chandu opium that was made and packaged in the English factory, to be sent across the sea in boats (29).

The cultivation of opium leads to the loss of agricultural biodiversity, as farmers are forced to abandon the growth of a variety of food crops. Those who resist growing opium face coercion, ultimately falling into debt and often being driven to migrate. Ghosh also highlights how traditional, nature-based materials were once used in everyday life—such as brooms made at home from the spines of palm fronds, used by sweepers to clean lavatories. These items, crafted from natural resources, were not commercially available but commonly used by local communities.

In the novel, it is not just humans who suffer the consequences of opium addiction; the entire environment is affected. Kalua feeds opium to his ox to calm it, while Deeti offers opium to Kalua as payment, since she has no money. Even insects are shown to be impacted—bees, wasps, grasshoppers, and other nectar-feeding creatures are drawn to the sweet scent of the poppy pods. They become intoxicated and eventually get trapped in the sap, their dead bodies absorbed into the opium that is later processed and sold. Ghosh also describes the harmful effects of opium on butterflies, further emphasizing the widespread ecological damage caused by its cultivation.

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 landed on the back of Kabutari's hand and would not take wing until it was thrown up in the air. (28)

The impact of opium on the monkeys living near the Ghazipur Opium Factory is significant. Unlike typical monkey behavior—chattering, fighting, stealing food, or interacting with humans—these monkeys display an unusual passivity. They descend from the trees only to eat and then quietly return. Ghosh notes that their behavior is subdued and unnatural, suggesting that even wildlife in the vicinity of the opium factory is affected by its presence. When they came down from the trees it was to lap at the sewers that drained the factory's effluents; after having sated their cravings, they would climb back into the branches to resume their scrutiny of the Ganga and its currents (91).

The novel illustrates how the pervasive presence of opium even affects the physical environment within and around the opium factory. The fine dust of processed opium causes people to sneeze, and even animals are not spared—Kalua's ox begins to sniff uncontrollably when it enters the factory with Deeti and her daughter. Ghosh also highlights the environmental contamination through a disturbing example involving local fishermen. It is shown that opium-laced water, polluted by discarded earthenware pots (gharas) used to transport raw opium, makes it easier to catch fish, as the drug sedates them. The banks of the river near the factory are littered with these broken pots, reflecting the widespread environmental damage and unnatural dependence created by the opium trade. As Ghosh says:

This 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).

In this narrative, the higher class of society commits an act of cruelty against animals and the marginalized group when Kalua is forced to execute a bestial act with a mare as a form of punishment by the three inebriated zamindars of the hamlet. In the novel, Paulette, the French botanist's daughter, is a natural child. The author justifies it by pointing out that the name she was given was derived from an epiphytic orchid that her father had found three years prior and named *Dendrobium pauletii*. She only ever adored nature, never any gods. Her father served as her teacher, but nature served as her textbook. He expresses his worry that colonial control will have a negative effect on her because Europe conceals its greed in these territories. As his father says in the novel:

... a child of Nature that is what she is, my daughter Paulette. As you know I have educated her myself, in the innocent tranquility of the Botanical Gardens. She has had no teacher other than myself, and has never worshipped at any altar except that of Nature; the trees have been her Scripture and the Earth her Revelation. 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).

Paulette's character can be likened to Lucy from Wordsworth's poem "Three Years She Grew," where nature serves as Lucy's mother, teacher, and guide. Similarly, Paulette demonstrates extensive knowledge of various plants, answering all of Munia's questions during their journey on the Ibis. The power of nature as soothing to the mind of Deeti: It rained hard that night and the whole house was filled with the smell of wet thatch. The grassy fragrance cleared Deeti's mind: think, she had to think, it was no use to weep and bemoan the influence of the planets (37).

Due to this, she is able to recall her trauma involving her brother-in-law. Nature serves as a witness to the marriage between Deeti and Kalua, with the ceremony symbolically represented by two garlands made of wildflowers, reflecting their genuine union. The time Deeti and Kalua spend by the riverbank in Chhapra highlights nature as their sole companion after their ostracism from society. Their experience parallels that of Velutha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, who finds comfort in nature after being wrongfully accused.

The pollution of the Ganga River is illustrated by the flow of sewage from the opium factory into its waters. Revered by the people of India, the river's water is essential for drinking by all living beings, but the sewage contamination renders it unfit for consumption. Ghosh draws a comparison to the Nile, the lifeline of Egyptian civilization. The impact of opium cultivation and the destruction of trees and plants is evident when Deeti describes the confluence of the Ganga and Karamnasa, the "destroyer of karma," suggesting that a mere touch of its water could wipe away a lifetime of hard-earned merit.

The landscape on the rivers' shores had changed a great deal since Deeti's childhood and looking around now, it seemed to her that Karamnasa's influence had spilled over its banks, spreading its blight far beyond the lands that drew upon its waters: the opium harvest having been recently completed, the plants had been left to wither in the fields, so that the countryside was blanketed with the parched remnants. Except for the foliage of a few mango and jackfruit trees, nowhere was there anything green to relieve the eye. (192)

When the Ibis passed through the Sundarbans, the change in environment is described as:

The flat, fertile, populous plains yielded to swamps and marshes: the river turned brackish, so that its water could no longer be drunk; every day the water rose and fell, covering and uncovering vast banks of mud; the shores were blanketed in dense, tangled greenery, of a kind that was neither shrub nor tree, but seemed to grow out of the river's bed, on roots that were like stilts: of a night, they would hear tigers roaring in the forest, and feel the pulwar shudder, as crocodiles lashed it with their tails (246).

In the novel, the city of Calcutta is depicted as overcrowded, filthy, and lacking in greenery. This congestion is attributed to Calcutta's status as one of the Presidencies of the British Empire. Through this portrayal, the author critiques the state of modern Indian cities, where trees and natural spaces are scarce.

The novel also highlights the significance of seeds in human life, particularly through the character of Sarju, who entrusts Deeti with seeds of poppy, bhang, dhatura, and various spices before her death, symbolizing hope and continuity. She says to Deeti while giving the seeds of poppy “there is wealth beyond imagination, guard it like your life” (450), they are the seeds of best Benares poppy. She instructs Deeti to distribute only the seeds of some spices and dies saying: “they are worth more than any treasure” (450). The saying of the captain of the ship that “Nature gives us fire, water and the rest- it demands to be used with the greatest, care and caution” (436) is the voice of the writer to the readers of the novel to be a part of nature and should not try to control it.

Ghosh aims to illustrate the destructive impact of colonial rule in nineteenth-century India. The forced cultivation of opium disrupted the natural ecological balance by replacing essential food crops, leading to widespread hunger, migration, and environmental degradation. He emphasizes that while each crop has its own value, excessive cultivation of any single crop—such as opium—can upset the delicate equilibrium of the ecosystem.

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