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Ecocriticism in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* is a description of colonialism and its effect on the environment. The novel deals with the cultivation of opium and its harmful effect on the life of the people and the environment. In my paper, I will be dealing with the changes that occur due to the cultivation of opium and how its addiction leads to the death of Hukum Singh. People are compelled by the British to grow opium in their fields. Opium affects the normal behavior of birds, animals and insects in the novel.

The novel gives us a glimpse how in the nineteenth century colonialism destroyed the ecosystem of the country. The description of a French Botanist as assistant curator of Calcutta's Botanical Garden does little for the conservation of native plants in comparison to the destruction caused by the colonial rule. But the character of Paulette is an example of a child of nature in the novel.

The importance of seeds of plants in the life of human beings is stressed in the novel. They are regarded as assets by the women characters like Deeti and Sarju for their future. The river Ganga is shown as the life line of the people from Bihar to Calcutta, it is considered as sacred by the people. In the novel, it is the spiritual power of the river which gives Deeti a vision of her future. Ghosh has tried to show the loss of natural habitat during the colonial rule in India.

Keywords: *Ecology, Ganga, Opium, Nature, Seeds.*

About the Author:

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956. He is one of the leading Indian writers in English who interweaves nature with experience and history. His works show an interaction between nature and human. He has published many fictions such as *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *In Antique Land* (1992), *The Calcutta Chromosomes* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2005), *Sea Of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011). He was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for his novel the *Sea of Poppies* in 2008. His novel *Sea of Poppies* is the first part of the *Ibis trilogy* and the second part is *River of Smoke*.

Eco criticism:

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).

This novel deals with the colonial rule in India during the nineteenth century. He skillfully sets the story of the novel on the trade of opium with China prior to the Opium Wars and India as the land of its production. The imbalance in the ecology due to the cultivation of opium and its effect on human beings and animals is shown in the novel.

In the beginning of the novel the flowering plants of poppy in the field gives us an idea that opium will play an important role in the lives of the characters of the novel. 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 – petalled 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 colour. (3)

The degrading effect of the cultivation of opium is that it has ceased the cultivation of edible food crops as Deeti remembers how edible crops were grown earlier and they not only gave them food but material for making roof. It was a perfect life but due to the cultivation of opium they have to die from hunger or migrate to Mauritius. 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 has tried to lay stress that the material which was freely available to the people earlier has now become expensive due to the change in cultivation from food crop to cash crop.

In the novel Deeti compares the change in their lives brought due to the change in the cropping pattern. She remembers when she was a child, opium was grown between the main crops of wheat, masoor dal and vegetables and her mother :

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, treacherous chandu opium that was made and packaged in the English factory, to be sent across the sea in boats (29).

The diversity of the crops is lost due to the cultivation of opium and whoever denies growing opium is compelled and finally it results in debt and migration.

The use of broom by sweepers to clean commodes and lavatories is a perfect example of material obtained from nature for cleaning. It is made from the spines of palm fronds at home by the people and is not available in the market. The local people use it for cleaning their home.

In the novel, it is not only human beings who become an addict to opium but all living beings in the environment are affected by it. As Kalua gives opium to his ox to eat so that it may relax. Deeti uses opium as to pay in kind to Kalua because she has no money to give to him.

The insects that suck the nectar of the poppy flower also become drunk and behave unusually in the novel as Ghosh says that sweet odour 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 pod. He says 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 as

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 effect of opium on the behavior of the monkeys living near the Sundur Opium Factory is that like other monkeys they never chattered, fought among themselves, stolen things or food from anyone or came down, they came down only to eat and climbed again. As Ghosh says:

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 dust of opium in the Opium Factory causes people to sneeze as even animals cannot escape and the ox of Kalua starts sniffing when it went to the factory with Deeti and her daughter.

In the novel, it is shown how fishermen use opium to catch fish. The bank of the river was filled with broken earthen ware *gharas* which were brought to the factory with raw opium, due to the presence of opium in the water fishes could be caught very easily. 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).

An incident of cruelty towards animals and the marginalized section of the society by the upper class of the society occurs in the novel, when a forced act of bestiality by Kalua with a mare as punishment given by the three drunken zamindars of the village is performed. It shows exploitation of an animal by human beings.

Paulette, the daughter of the French Botanist is a child of nature in the novel. It is justified by the writer because the name given to her was an *epiphylic* orchid discovered by her father three years ago and her father named it *Dendruim pauletii*. Her father calls her a child of nature because she never worshipped any God but only Nature. Her teacher was her father but nature was her book. He shows his concern for the effect of colonial rule on her will be degrading because in these colonies Europe hides its greed. 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).

Here Paulette's character can be compared with Lucy of Wordsworth's poem "Three Years She Grew" where nature acts as the mother, teacher and guide of Lucy. She has knowledge of every variety of plants as she answers all the question of Munia while travelling 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 which she is able recall about her rape by her brother in law.

Nature is the witness of the marriage of Deeti and Kalua, the marriage ceremony is symbolic as it is performed with two garlands made of wild flowers, it reflects true union. The days spent by Deeti and Kalua near the bank of the river in Chhapra shows nature as their only companion after their outcaste from the society. Their situation is similar to Velutha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* who seeks solace in the lap of nature after being convicted in a false case.

The pollution of water of the river Ganga is shown through the flow of sewage of the opium factory in the Ganga. 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. Ghosh compares it with the river Nile, the life line of the Egyptian civilization.

The effect of opium cultivation and devastation of trees and plants is seen, when Deeti describes the meeting of Ganga and Karamnasa “destroyer of karma” it means the touch of water could erase a life time 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).

The city of Calcutta is shown as congested, filled with filth and with no greenery in the novel. The reason of this congestion that Calcutta was one of the Presidency of the British Empire, through the description of Calcutta the writer comments on the modern cities of India where very few trees are present.

The importance of seeds in the life of human beings is emphasized in the novel through the character of Sarju who gives seeds of poppy, *bhang*, *dhatuira* and some spices to Deeti before her death. 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 has tried to depict the harmful effect of colonial rule in India during the nineteenth century. The cultivation of opium destroyed the ecological balance of nature; it ceased the

cultivation of food crop. It resulted in hunger, migration and degradation of environment. He has tried to show that every crop has its own importance and when it is grown in excess it creates imbalance in the ecology.

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