

ISSN: 0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

BI-MONTHLY REFEREED AND INDEXED, OPEN ACCESS E-JOURNAL

*The Criterion*



October 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-5

*5th Year of Open Access*



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## Ecocritical Readings and Descriptions of Landscape in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*

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### Abstract:

The central concern of this research paper is to highlight the emergence of ecocriticism in the contemporary Indian English Fiction. Lawrence Buell in his essay, *Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends* directs the future of ecocriticism to the ecocritical scope in the Third World Countries. It is in this context that Indian ecocriticism should analyze its history and movements. In the present context each literature is highly concerned with its own literature and brings out the best possible solutions for the existing problems, however, now interdisciplinary fields are merging into the domain of literature which give ample opportunities to students to understand their own literature. History is a reservoir of past events and incidents. One of those historical incidents is the Opium War (1839-42), which has been dealt extensively by Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011) in sequential manner. This paper will also underscore the thematic of ecocriticism and the attempt has been made to examine the ecocentric dimensions in the works of Ghosh.

**Keywords:** River; Smoke; Botanical Garden; Opium; Redruth; Anahita; Sea; Poppies.

Amitav Ghosh is a contemporary Indian Writer, most of his works deal with historical narratives mingling with geography, voyages, trade adventures, magic, memory and multiple points of view in the context of Indian Ocean World. As I look at these novels (*Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*) in ecological perspectives, I have come across innumerable instances where Ghosh has beautifully delineated the ecological concerns as well as portrayed human predicaments in the midst of ominous nature. As the novel starts in the background of the Opium War, Ghosh recounts the tale of past events, he returns us to the time in which he personally enters the historical chain of events where he displays historical and cultural displacement and dislocation of people over the time.

*Sea of poppies* (2008) is the first volume in Amitav Ghosh's proposed 'Ibis Trilogy'. It narrates the historical incidents that took place in the mid of 19<sup>th</sup> century in Asia. He also describes human beings as the scapegoats in the midst of nature and they migrate from their native land leaving behind their kith and kin to alien land in a ship called *Ibis*, where their future is unsecured. In this novel Ghosh draws attention to the historical consequences of imperialism leading to migration and displacement of people by deconstructing their identities and how the characters try to escape their native land in pursuit of livelihood. Cut off from the older personal, familiar and national ties these migrants forge new identity and adopt the *Ibis* as new cultural community. *Ibis* is a slave ship that has been refitted to transport coolies from Calcutta to the sugar estates of Mauritius. But a majority onboard is Indian peasants from the opium-producing countryside, forced by famine or scandal to seek a new life elsewhere. Devoted to reinvention,

Ghosh's plot focuses on one of these villagers: Deeti, a widow who assumes another name and the (lower) caste of a new love as they escape together on the *Ibis*. As the ship was travelling Zachary Reid was awestruck and taken aback when he had a first vision of India in Sunderbans "dense thickest of mangroves and mudbank that appeared to be uninhabited until it disgorged its bumboats" (SP 10). The main point of discussion here is, Poppy seeds and flowers were considered crops of production and everyone in the village would sow Poppy seeds and then earn their livelihood and that too keeps the surroundings beautiful as if they are decorated with flowers of varied colors and mesmerize the onlookers and keep them standstill and spellbound and merged in the sea of oblivion, as Deeti says "poppies had been a luxury then, grow and small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops" (SP 29). They were the seeds for sale and were used for opium and in the olden days farmers would keep a little their home and used during illness, every flower has its own significance and healing touch, in this very context Poppy works not only as a medicinal plant to heal the sick but also as edible oil and its leaves to cover the opium for trading. It would enough to provide household's needs. But the author laments over the growing production of poppies plants used for only opium making and sold out to meet their personal needs because it restricts farmers to plant wheat in winter and later the spring time harvest decrease the harvest of straw which is used for repairing the damaged houses, as the narrative says "huts' roof was urgently in need of repairs but in the age of flowers that was not easy" (SP 29). it was shown as a green revolution. And due to excess production of poppies, leading to the constructions of factories is essential and that would cause greater health and environmental damages of rural rustic life of people of which they had been priding over for centuries. Opium is injurious to health and physical environment by the emission the powerful magical smoke, which has hypnotized Deeti in her wedding night. As she felt "slipping away from this world into another that was brighter, better, more fulfilling" (*Sea of Poppies* 35). Therefore Chinese government is trying to shut the door for opium trade from British to China.

*Sea of Poppies* deals with the study of nature writing as Amitav Ghosh gives a pen picture of physical environment and human interactions with it. He displays country side panoramic beauty of nature and landscape. This novel is suggestive of Kalua's upbringing who lives in Chamar-basti, a luster of huts inhabited only people of his caste and his house was not a hut but like cattle-pen and he too had two white oxen that pulled his cart for his daily wages. There will be tiny things which are not considered for a penny but at times they value a lot. Poppy flowers played an important role in saving Deeti when she was alone she hid in no time among the multitude of flowers and saved her from the thieves. Sea is a home for the homeless coolies, lascars, prisoners, cutthroats and thieves for settlers here, is extremely precarious. Attacks are occurred quite often by cutthroats and thieves. After arriving at the village which was some fifteen miles from Calcutta, in a fearless stretch of mud and mangrove, on the edge of Sundarnans. It was little more than a huddle of huts, clustered around the tomb of Sufi 'Fakir' a forest guide for the hunters and woodcutters (Hungry Tide) who had converted the inhabitants to Islam a generation or two before (SP 61). Settlers of Sundarbans earn their livelihood by wondering in the forest collecting food grains and fishing in the sea as boatmen. Jodu on the other hand is left alone and felt completely neglected because of his mother's poor health and his family circumstances, for he too wanted to join the expedition of landscape and enlisting himself as a lascar for deep-water ships. After the death of his mother he left in search of Paulette to carry out his mother words to search for his sister, who was very keen in searching for specimen that is found in China. In this novel varied characters of every walk of life are well attuned with nature and the physical environment, they are on their way to explore the unexplored lands of the

earth. The social and environmental interaction between Man and nature has been described beautifully by Ghosh. This intimate association of man in the sea is a matter of great pride in the early period of human civilization when the Europeans had come to India and China for trade; sea works as a medium of connecting people and nation.

Jodu's father, a boatman had borne up all the responsibility to keep his family in good stead. There were series of difficulties that came on his way but he has accomplished them at ease. Jodu is well aware of his family story, when he was a little child his father went to dinghy to fetch mother and the baby, they were on the Hooghly River when the wind started blowing terribly they thought that "it is safer to spend the night on the River bank" (SP 64), than going back to village with strong wind, but nothing could halt them in their stay, nature is a home for homeless and food for hungry, it has in fact paid a lot to Jodu's life. The sojourn of the *Ibis* is like the Israelites' journey as Mr. Burnham asks Zachary Reid "Didn't the Israelites suffer in the desert?" (SP 81) Their life is under threat, in any time they might be killed and disappear from the *Ibis*. In spite of these trajectories of life, it has to move. Life in the sea is wonderful and "on a boat of pilgrimage, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same: it's like making a boat to the temple of Jagannath, in Puri. From now on and forever afterwards, we will be shipsiblings-jahaz-bhais and jahaz-bahens-to each other. There is no difference between us" (SP 356).

When Kalua arrived at Ghazipur in afternoon he could realize his surroundings that the opium factories are immense and coming up like mushrooms near the bank of the Holy River Ganga to have easy access to river to let the waste material out, thus, the river is polluted. Deeti and Kabutri have witnessed the dirty smell that has gone beyond boundaries of the factory and "drained the factory's effluents" (SP 91) in the river. There were some forts like Chunar and Buxar have been abandoned and exist there but a picaresque. Poppy leaves were used in the packaging of the drug and the surroundings were "ground up for storage, these remains produced a fine dust that hung in the air like a fog of snuff. Rare was the passer-by who could brave this mist without exploding into a paroxysm of sneezes and sniffles" (SP 91). Again the author exhorts us to examine the holy River Ganga, how it diminishes its holiness gradually by the effluents and waste materials that are let into it. As Ghosh says, "riverbank unlike any other, for the ghats around the Carcanna was shored up with thousands of broken earthenware gharas-the round-bottomed vessels in which raw opium was brought to the factory. And again as it was happening time again the fish in the river would be caught easily because after they would be nibbled at the shards. And as a result the bank was always crowded with fishermen" (SP 92). Fitcher Penrose a French Botanist who has come to China to collect the rare specimen, speaks highly about his daughter Paulette Lambert, that "she is the child of Nature, and has never worshiped at any altar except that of nature; the tree have been her Scripture and the earth her Revelation". Nature is unique and blameless in its existence. It's a religion for the Pantheists because they visualize God in Nature, through its unraveling of powerful forces that swipes away at times goes unnoticed. There is no wrong in preaching volumes of lecture on Nature. Once some has high respect on it, it can be in a safer side from manly powers. She has not known anything but Love, Equality and Freedom" (SP 137). She has acquired the unique qualities of nature that is love, equality and freedom, Nature is loving entity when we look at nature its beauty we forget our present and transported in to the world of idealness and mesmerized by the beauty of the world and it has the principle of equality, it doesn't show any partiality or soft-corner towards any other phenomena, it treats everyone equally and welcomes everyone to its bosom. "I have raised her to revel in that state of liberty that is Nature itself" (SP 137). It is apparent that Paulette is an embodiment of Nature, in her attitudes and actions mirrors

everything that is in nature, her work is to collect the rare species of nature especially Chameleon, which is also a medicinal plant found in China, she travels to that extend only because she has a love for nature and feels that she is doing what her father's last wish was.

Since this voyage begins in Indian Ocean, there is a frequent reference to Ganga the holy river and Hooghly River, Ghosh mourns over the present condition of the River Ganga, because on the bank of the Ganga is used for cremation of dead bodies and repository of different chemical effluents which all the more make polluted. It was surrounded by a "profusion of offerings and objects, as if it were being readied for some larger purpose" (SP 176). In a larger scale rivers and seas work as the passages to connect different nations; as we find in *Sea of Poppies* River Ganga and Hooghly, but through this passage they have been polluted in quick succession.

When Paulette reached Mauritius she was astonished to hear the name of the place where she thought her mother was born and seemed familiar to be in it and she can "cope up with the joys and agonies of life" ( SP 137). It's quite natural that once we arrive at a certain place that has been around the ears and for time, and all fears and uncertainties might vanish and can easily be dealt with.

Ghosh has described landscape very fascinating way, which can help the man to relieve himself of his tension, pressures and those creature those who are part of nature possess an innate wisdom of their own. As Ghosh says:

The landscape on the rivers' shores had changed a great deal since Deeti's childhood and looking around now, it seemed to her that the 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. This, she knew, was what her own fields looked like, and were she at home today, she would have been asking herself what she would eat in the months ahead; where were the vegetables, the grains? She had only to look around to know that here, as in the village she had left, everyone's land was in hock to the agents of the opium factory: every farmer had been served with a contract, the fulfilling of which left them with no option but to strew their land with poppies" (SP 192-193).

The novel tries to narrate the historical events and commercial activities at the backdrop of colonial India and how the lands have been used for construction of factories to increase production of opium and export to different countries. This novel also imposes each reader to read in terms of pre-colonial ecocriticism, how the Britishers used natural forests for their own comforts and cut down any number of trees for building of bridges houses and making of trains.

The second novel is *River of Smoke* the second volume of proposed *Ibis* trilogy of Amitav Ghosh begins with Deeti a simple village woman, who is accidentally married to man who had no aesthetic knowledge and feelings, which she had in abundance. And again for the second time she married to Kalua and with him she had a child named Girin. She was working in a newly cleared plantation field on the other side of Baie du Morne in Mauritius, in those days it wasn't so easy to climb up the mountains, as the novel narrates "for the mountain was a place of sinister reputation, where hundreds, perhaps thousands of people were known to have died" (RS 10). It was those days where the slaves and fugitives used to stay there to evade from the clutches of local high commissioners, that has made all the more dangerous. In the *Ibis* there

were five passengers two lascars, two convicts and a passenger. As they were travelling from India to Mauritius, they were assailed by the tempest and storm, which scattered them and thrown them ashore and deposited on the ground. There they could see nothing but “a single enormous mountain, it rose out of the sea... But everything else was forest- a dense jungle it should have been, but now with the greenery having been stripped clearly by the storm, it was just an endless succession of naked trunks and branches” (RS 22). It suggests of the outcome of the aftermath of a storm or the natural calamities which keep the place around desolate and completely disorder. Later found that the island was completely new but Serang Ali one of the victims could make out that this place was once upon a time had visited by him called Greater Nicobar, moreover it not only a wilderness but there lies surprisingly rich villages, they are rich because of flocks of swift-flying birds “see those birds, the islanders call them *hinlence*; they revere them because they are the source of their wealth. Those creatures look insignificant but they make something that is of immense value” (RS 23). The biggest contribution from the part of the birds is their nests, which would cost eight troy pounds of gold in Canton. For the villagers it was an asset, they use them to earn their daily livelihood and income. Serang Ali told that “it we walked in and helped ourselves we would never leave the island alive” (RS 23). It clearly speaks of the destruction of the endangered birds and species from the natural environment. For, they are just intruders to gain as much profit as possible through evil means. It implies that they might make an island a dead island or deserted wilderness where human life becomes futile.

Seth Bahramji (Rustamjee Mistrrie) a Parsi from Mumbai had owned a ship named *Anahita*, which sailed from Mumbai to Canton port (China) carrying opium for trade but unfortunately it had upended by the same storm which *Ibis* had once befallen. Later it had been owned by Bahram, Sethji's Son-in-law. Who had acquired tremendous amount of desire and willingness to sail up to Canton for the opium business. There is another ship named *Redruth* deeply engaged in transporting rare plants to Britain, and again the same fate had befallen on it at Port Louis two days after the *Ibis*. Fitcher Pentose is on his expedition to China to collect rare plants; he was accompanied by Paulette Lambert and Puggly. On their journey Fitcher was greatly hurt by the storm and he had to be taken ashore for his recovery but still he wanted to visit the Botanical Garden at Pamplemousses, which is four hours journey from Port Louis. Once Fitcher had visited when he had one to china for the first time it was not difficult to find road that leads to the village. There he could notice some fine specimens of a shrub known as ‘Fire in the Bush’, a handsome convolvulus that produced a great mass of flaming red lowers” (RS 36) this has exhilarated him and taken special interest in observing closely at the plants, but he has to move, on his way. He was also taken aback by the panoramic view of Pamplemousses, thus he says “Pamplemousses was upon him before he was aware of it. The village was one of the prettiest on the island, with brightly painted bungalows, whitewashed churches, and cobbled lanes that tinkled musically under a horse's hooves” (RS 36). But he was in the direction of the Botanical Garden; he was shocked to see the mountain with desolate look as he says “where once there had been orderly, well-spaced trees and broad picturesque vistas, there was now a wild and tangled muddle of greenery”. For it was merely jungle a jungle that lacks beauty in it and shortage of plants which make it all the more a desert. As he was on his way he appealed to an elderly passer: Madam! The garden? Do you know the way? The woman pursed her lips and shook her head: ‘Ah, msieu... le garden is no more... depwi twenty years... abandoned by I' Anglais...’ (37) Fitcher with heavy heart and saddened by the woman's reply thought the decline of garden lies only on his friend due to the death of last Curator of Kew Garden Sir Joseph Banks. The specialty of the garden was that “this was no primeval jungle, for no ordinary

wilderness would contain such a proliferation of species from different continents. In nature there existed no forest where African creepers were at war with Chinese trees, not one where Indian shrubs and Brazilian vines were locked in a mortal embrace. This was a work of man, a botanical Babel” (RS 36) that brings changes in the forest. Fitcher was deeply disturbed by the sudden demise of Garden but he thought that even though it is abandoned it is sure enough to contain rare species, As he was on his way in the middle of the jungle he noticed a man as if hiding and digging a grave; it was a garden trowel and from the depth of his experience Fitcher could tell that the man’s hand was well-accustomed to his tool. “The ultimate concern about species is that they may become extinct due to human activities” (*Ecocriticism* 176). Soon he realized that he was a transplanter a professional gardener taking plants from one place to other. “It was not a cactus but a spurge. The very one that prompted Linnaeus to give this race the name Euphorbia. It is king Juba’s spurge-a fine specimen it must once have been, but I fear it has not much longer to live (42). This plant the young boy was planting to increase in number as he was pretty sure that like golden Camellia that once upon a time existed now we can see only the pictures and through imagination. “The death of an individual is also the death of its kind” (*Ecocriticism* 177). Pierre Paulette had been taught the importance of botany by her father:

The love of nature had been a kind of religion, a form of spiritual striving he had believed that in trying to comprehend the inner vitality of each species, and human beings could transcend the mundane world and its artificial divisions. If botany was the scripture of this religion, then horticulture was its form of worship: tending a garden was, for Pierre Lambert, no mere matter of planting seeds and pruning branches-it was a spiritual discipline, a means of communicating with forms of life that were necessarily mute and could be understood only through a careful study of their own modes of expression-the languages of efflorescence, growth and decay; only thus, he had taught Paulette, could human beings apprehend the vital energies that constitute the Spirit of the Earth”( RS 78-79).

This is a well defined description of nature and how it works in the life of human beings, a naturalist is well tuned with nature, has no hindrance to accept nature as his/ her god, as pantheism believes god in nature or universe. Baruch Benedict Spinoza one of the modern Western Philosophers had propagated that god is identified with Nature. In his philosophy thought and extension are the main concepts, for him thought is God and extension is nature or the universe. The same ideology has been applied here in Paulette’s understanding of nature and god. Paulette as a botanist and naturalist has grown attached to various plants “especially to the Oregon grape which had proved exceptionally vigor. It pained her to see them being removed to the Redruth’s gig to be transferred to Baburao’s junk, like a parent at the time of parting, she doubted that her children would be properly looked after” (RS 471)

China has been blessed with different plants and flowers that have attracted people of different regions and countries to collect sizable collection of plants from the remotest corners of the earth and this land is China, with its varieties of botanical riches. Among them Camellia sinensis is the one. Golden Camellia has been hunted by every one because the effect it provides is known to all, but now this species of the plant has been found nowhere else, so every botanist takes the picture of this plant and search for its existence. By now we can imagine how the plants are disappearing and the time will prove we can see only pictures and say that once it had existed on the earth. It’s a really a disgusting to see things happening in our eyes and surroundings, we are destroying the plants and trees and for our daily use, it’s a land massacre, happening our day today life. The similar instance is found in the novel when the General came to take a halt under

a tree strange hairy leaves plucking two of them he handed one each to Bahram and Zadig. “You will no doubt be interested, he said, to learn that this tree is called the ‘She-Cabbage Tree’ and exists nowhere else on the earth. You may keep these leaves as souvenirs of this land” (RS 174).

Bahram an opium business man of Mumbai had a desolate look at the Pearl River where they used to travelled once upon a time, it is now polluted because of the Creek Factory, it established near the river and tide had been so strong that “it would often deposit the carcasses of dongs and piglets in the refuse-clogged mud and there they would lie, buzzing with flies and creating a vomit-inducing stench until they swelled up and exploded” (RS 318). Every factory becomes of the depositors of decomposed and diluted materials which has direct access to river and thus the river is polluted and people around it will have a tremendous effect of their health and sanitations. In cities like China where the uses of technological advancements and communication are very rampant is a clear evident that emission of different gases greatly affects the natural environment. Bahram had a glanced from the window “on the other side of White Swan Lake a village was celebrating with a wedding with a display of fireworks; rockets were arcing upwards, each seeming to travel on two planes simultaneously through the sky, and over the misted mirror of the lake’s surface” (RS 363). When we look at the ecocritical perspective we are sure that this emissions of gases will have dangerous effect on the environment therefore, Bahram has a business man too had the sense of air pollution that would cause the different problems to entire human race.

*Rive of Smoke* entirely deals with Opium War (1839-42). *Anahita* one of the ships had been carrying opium owned by Bahram and it was sailing from Mumbai to China, initially there were many number of ships serious engaged in opium transportation to china and government of china found it ominous in it and has stopped opium trade importing from other neighboring countries, very soon China realized that it’s a “deadly poison” (RS 432) killing enumerable people and it makes the land poorer and poorer. Therefore china hasn’t legalized this trade. Mr. Wetmore reads the letter sent by the commissioner of China that:

the original Co-Hong merchants were men of property and family wand would never have descend to this stage of degradation, yet all now are equally involved in the stench of it. Truly I burn with shame for you, the present incumbents of the C-Hong: with you there seems to be no other consideration than that of growing rich, the utter annihilation of the opium trade is now my first object” (RS 462).

In the river, smoke emanates from the ship and there would be sudden storm and wind which tossed ships down and sometimes there would be thick smoke invisible what lie before, Ghosh paradoxically narrates “The soldiers are all lost in smoke, and their officers too. This is a plague from which no one can escape” (RS 476). Bahram also had the equal vision “from the top I looked down and saw a line flames leaping above the river; the factories were on fire and they burned through the night. In the morning when the sun rose, I saw that Fanquin-town had been reduced to ashes, it was gone, and everything had disappeared. Markwick’s Hotel had all been wiped way and their place there were only ashes” (RS 551). This vision had been hunting him every night.

*River of Smoke* is rich in historical detail and spoken with Bengali, Hindi and pidgin dialogue, in order to make it more indianized and homely, so that it’s setting may be justified. Paulette's quest for a mysterious camellia plant captures a theme of the novel, now the era of global modernity is about connections and discoveries of new technologies the flow of information between people paves the world history in very anonymous manner. As Indira Bhatt says “the Industrial revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is considered to be the root of modern

alienation. During this time men began to migrate from rural areas, in search of work, to the factories in the urban areas” (*The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh* 125). People in the *Ibis* had the same story to narrate, they had to spend their lives years and months and unaware of what the future holds for them. “The act of re-memembering, piecing history back together from its disjointed pieces, is intended in Ghosh’s works to move readers beyond the aesthetic indifference that might content a lesser novelist who sets out simply to entertain and divert his or her audience from the world’s enduring problems” (*Amitav Ghosh: Ann Introduction* 165).

Ecocriticism is a fairly recent entry into the peak of critical theorizing in Indian academic circles. However, ecological concerns and ecological wisdom might not be alien to this antique land, where civilization had sprouted so many years ago. Now it has become one of the emerging fields of study in India and world at large. Things are changing past, the new trends unfold the new areas and contest the present existing problems and try to solve them in due time. We have been witnessing the powerful interaction with nature and human beings throughout the novels. The unbreakable bond has been initiated from the beginning of the human civilization and continues till now. But this mutual bond is let loose gradually; in this contemporary society human being is placed in the centre of the ecosystem for the degradation of nature and landscape. To Murali Sivaramakrishnan, “this grave environmental crisis, no doubt, posing a threat to human existence and the need for creating a sustainable and balanced relationship between man and the natural world is one of the urgent social and environmental issues being felt by men across the globe in this millennium” (*Ecological Criticism for our Times* 256). No doubt people have alerted on environmental threats and the awareness programmes have been occurring everywhere, but real fact is it’s taken for granted and paid a lip service. As we have seen throughout the novels the characters are well-adjusted with the adverse circumstances and still trying to give new meanings to their lives. Life in the sea is unpredictable and unreliable, but despite all these unfavorable conditions. In this way I think we can approach Amitav Ghosh novels to find out his usage of ecocriticism and description of landscape as reflected in his novels in general and the above novels in particular.

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#### Abbreviations:

- SP: *Sea of Poppies*  
RS: *River of Smoke*