

Ecology, Economy, and Empire: Reading Amitav Ghosh's Novel *Sea of Poppies* as Allegory of the Anthropocene

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Abstract

This paper examines Amitav Ghosh's historical novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008) as a prescient allegory of the Anthropocene. It shows how the nineteenth-century colonial drug economy anticipated today's ecological crises. Using close textual analysis grounded in ecocritical theory and postcolonial studies, the paper reveals how Ghosh exposes the ecological violence inherent in imperial economic systems, illustrating how the forced cultivation of opium poppies in colonial India and the unsustainable character of maritime trade foreshadow contemporary patterns of environmental degradation, resource extraction, and climate injustice. The novel's narrative structure—emphasizing the interconnectedness of dispossessed peasants, enslaved labour, and marine ecosystems—embodies a critical genealogy of the Anthropocene. The paper is divided into two parts: the first part introduces concepts in postcolonial environmental thought, and the second offers a close reading of Ghosh's novel to argue that the modern capitalist world-system is a legacy of empires whose riches were built on the catastrophic destruction of natural environments. This study contributes to the expanding field of climate fiction and postcolonial ecocriticism by engaging with debates about ecological catastrophe, historical accountability, and cultural narratives that reframe environmental justice.

Keywords: *Anthropocene, postcolonial ecocriticism, climate fiction, drug economy, environmental history, opium trade*

The Postcolonial Turn: Reimagining Ecocriticism in the Global South

The early developments in the environmental approach to literature provided momentum for the formulation of ecocriticism as a critical discourse primarily concerned with the “study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” that “takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies.” (Glotfelty xviii) Cheryll Glotfelty (1996), a pioneer in the field, further elucidates the objective of ecocriticism by stating, “As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” (xiv). She distinguishes contemporary literary theory from ecocriticism in their understanding of “the world,” arguing that for literary theory, “the world” primarily refers to ‘the social sphere.’ In contrast, ecocriticism perceives the world as encompassing “the entire ecosphere” (xix). The ecocritics of the first wave primarily focused on British Romantic poetry and American non-fiction nature writing. They explored the images of nature and expressions of eco-sensibility in the major poems of the Romantic era – as an attempt at ‘greening of Romanticism’ (Huggan “Postcolonial ecocriticism and the limits of Green Romanticism” 4), which is usually associated with the works of Jonathan Bate (1991) and Karl Kroeber (1994) – and in American nature writing of Henry Thoreau as an articulation of deep ecological thought. The literary texts that early ecocriticism engages with implicate techno-economic growth, patterns of high consumption, and cultural transformation, particularly the concept of “machine culture” in relation to multiscale ecological disruptions. The nature writers and poets also highlighted in their social criticism the role of culture in the environmental crisis. They insisted on reimagining the modes of ‘being’ and ‘living’ for humans in a world that had been effectively alienated from the natural environment and nonhuman existence, which the naturist writers found to be one of the crucial steps towards ecological reintegration.

The first wave of ecocriticism was restricted in its (a) focus on Euro-American literary representations of the natural environment and the relationship between humans, more-than-human, and nature, (b) exploration of ‘pastoral cultures’ and portrayals of the wilderness, (c) conception of nature or environment as wild landscape, (d) advocacy for preservation of natural landscape and nonhuman life, (e) retrieval of humanity’s premodern relationship to local natures, (f) emphasis on strengthening of the communities’ bioregional ties, (g) uncritical endorsement of biocentric and/or ecocentric worldviews and actions at the exclusion of the social rights of the marginalized and the underprivileged poor. Whereas the second wave of ecocriticism, by contrast, in the last couple of decades has come out of the closets of Euro-American nature writing to include literary works from the metropolitan locales, has taken up non-Western literatures for ecocritical analysis, has been cross-fertilized with concerns of environmental justice movement and methodologies of postcolonial studies; has focused on colonialism and neocolonialism apart from capitalism for the anthropogenic destructions of our planet.

The postcolonial turn in ecocritical studies revisits the colonial histories of environmental violence, while questioning and contesting the false promises of nature

conservation and environmental equality in a postcolonial world. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin authored the first monograph on ‘postcolonial ecocriticism’, which was published by Routledge in 2010. That year also saw the publication of Pablo Mukherjee’s *Postcolonial Environments*, Laura Wright’s *Wilderness into Civilized Shapes*, and Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt’s *Postcolonial Green*; whereas 2011 would see Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers’ *Environment at the Margins*, and Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley’s *Postcolonial Ecologies*—all accomplished additions to a list that has grown larger, and more internally differentiated, with each passing year. The postcolonial turn to ecocriticism led to a reddening of ecocritical studies, whereas the ecocritical turn to postcolonialism led to a greening of postcolonial studies. Huggan and Tiffin (2007) argue,

Under European colonial rule, the resources of the invaded, conquered and settled territories were exploited for imperial profit; and cash cropping and other European agricultural practices usually replaced hunting and subsistence farming, thereby damaging established ecosystems, reducing soil fertility, or even, as in the case of the Sahara, resulting in desertification. Whatever the extent of the change, the dispossessed frequently faced poverty and starvation, and the original accommodated relations between environment, humans and animals were fractured, sometimes beyond repair (1).

In many works on postcolonial literatures in English, nature has long been a paramount issue: the environmental devastation brought about by colonial regimes has often continued or even intensified in postcolonial times, and global ecological hazards have particularly disastrous consequences for the most vulnerable parts of the world’s population. At the same time, far-reaching social and cultural transformations have led to changed perceptions and representations of nature in postcolonial cultures and literatures. As Anthony Carrigan (2015), a leading ecocritic of our time, puts it, “One of the most compelling developments in postcolonial studies over the last decade has been the explosion of interest in literature and the environment” (81). Therefore, it is not difficult to see why ecological concerns should be central to postcolonial thought: as Edward Said famously asserted, imperialism is predicated on “an act of geographical violence” (77) and therefore, regaining sovereignty over land and natural resources has been vital to decolonization movements worldwide. Experiences of environmental conflict and recuperation are similarly core concerns for postcolonial writers, who have engaged with highly charged subjects such as resource wars, land and animal rights, development and urbanization, conservation, food security, tourism, militarism, and waste. If the environment has been somewhat understated in the development of postcolonial literary studies, the recent emergence of postcolonial ecocriticism has brought ecological issues to the forefront, presenting renewed possibilities for ecocritical analysis within and beyond the postcolonial field.

In this paper, I explore a set of concerns and new imaginaries that Ghosh’s novel, *Sea of Poppies* (hereafter *SOP*), highlights, which, although little examined in recent scholarship on the novel, have been prevalent in postcolonial ecocriticism related to climate change and the

Anthropocene. Specifically, I assert that the novel demonstrates both the political and ethical significance of postcolonial allegory in highlighting the persistent legacies of colonialism and capitalism in today's planetary crisis. Although *Sea of Poppies* does not explicitly mention climate change or the Anthropocene, the image of extensive poppy cultivation, the Sudder Opium Factory, drugged human and non-human bodies, polluted air and river, and impoverished local communities of peasants and farm tenants all serve as signs that Ghosh's reimagining of the opium trade functions as an allegory of the Anthropocene, a term introduced and popularised in 2000 by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and marine ecologist Eugene Stoermer. Crutzen and Stoermer introduce the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch in which humans have become 'a major geological force' (485), transforming the dynamics of entire Earth systems.

Exploring the Interlocking of Ecology, Economy, and Empire through Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

It is undeniable that we occupy a sphere where environmental deterioration is intensifying in both scope and severity. Even incremental attempts at mitigation, such as "sustainable development" and "ecological modernization" have been largely neutralized by aggressive free-market ideologies, neo-imperialism, and concerns over national security. Consequently, radical environmentalism has become a cornerstone of the broader resistance against capitalism and military aggression. By highlighting the spectrum of grievances—ranging from corporatization of water and food insecurity to the ethical implications of biopiracy and genetic modification—these coalitions expose the inherent inequity and unsustainability of the current geopolitical landscape.

Amitav Ghosh's writing implicates both "Empire and Capitalism" as the main collective factors of anthropogenic destruction of postcolonial and/or indigenous environments. The formerly colonized nations of Asia, Africa and the Americas encountered colonial exploitation of nature on an unprecedented scale, which ironically has been continuing under the regimes of 'neo-Empire' and 'global capitalism'. In his nonfiction *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), Amitav Ghosh brings attention to the strategic concealment, in the Western dialogues over climate change, of the central role of "geopolitics, empire and the question of power" (116) for the advent of the 'Anthropocene'. He contends that most of the international discussions about the climate crisis seem "to be dominated by the question of capitalism and other economic issues" since "our very ways of thinking about the world" (116) are 'unconsciously' determined by the economic systems. In defense of his argument, Ghosh cites scores of historical incidents which ascertain the truth "that the era of Western military conquests predates the emergence of capitalism by centuries. Indeed, it was these conquests and the imperial systems that arose in their wake, that fostered and made possible the rise to dominance of what we now call capitalism" (116).

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, the first novel of the *Ibis* trilogy, is a postcolonial retelling of one of the darkest yet underrepresented colonial histories of the British Empire –

the opium trade. *Sea of Poppies* presents the historicity of the colonial past in the first half of the 19th century. The novel chronicles the colonial history of opium production across the Gangetic plains of Bihar and Bengal, its maritime trade to the Chinese port city of Canton, and the lived experiences of indentured labourers. The production and sale of opium was a monopoly of the British East India Company in the Victorian age. Unlike earlier accounts of British opium history, Ghosh's postcolonial historiography of the opium trade takes into account the socio-environmental impact of poppy cultivation in the interregional parts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal of what is known as the Gangetic belt. The novel documents how the colonial trade in narcotics and commercial farming led to environmental degradation, resulting in cultural and social disruptions. Millions of rural peasants and workers were impoverished and forced to sail across the Black Water (*kala pani*) as girmitiyas to labour at sugar plantations.

Colonial government imposed a system of monocultural farming of the cash crops, which destroyed local food systems and biodiversity. The colonial administration, in collusion with the landlords and the opium merchants, forced the local farmers into cultivating poppies at the expense of traditional food crops such as wheat, pulses and oilseeds over large tracts of land stretching over an area of some eight hundred miles. The East India Company gradually monopolized opium cultivation and trade in Bengal and Bihar after winning the battles of Plassey and Buxar. The Company's forcible integration of the local peasants into contract farming resulted in the loss of sovereignty over agricultural lands, culminating in a food crisis which destroyed the rural ecologies and the local cultural practices to the extent that millions of starving villagers had the compulsion to sell themselves as indentured labourers to work across the black waters on far-flung sugar colonies of the British Empire. The colonial agricultural system entailed an appropriation of native land resources to make huge profits from the opium export while leaving thousands of families displaced and impoverished. The disenfranchised local population suffered from food precarity and an unhealthy environment, whereas they held and farmed the most fertile lands of the Gangetic plains. Ghosh writes in *Sea of Poppies*,

Both Deeti and Kalua had tried to find work, but employment was hard to come by in Chhapra. The town was thronged with hundreds of other impoverished transients, many of whom were willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice. Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside: lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at temples or sip the starchy water from a pot in which rice had been boiled (202).

Amitav Ghosh depicts in this novel how the ecological imperialism of the opium economy is exemplified in "the violent appropriation of indigenous land" (Huggan & Tiffin 2015, 3). When placed in an ecocritical context, *Sea of Poppies* emerges as a literary mediation of an ecological imagination which helps both conceptualise and initiate mitigatory actions against our deepening ecological crises. In this regard, the novel educates the reader to resist

neocolonial powers and capitalization of nature, which regulate and appropriate natural resources and environments in peripheral locations of the Global South. In the Ibis trilogy, Ghosh attempts to synchronise the history of nature with the history of capital. He examines the relationship between colonial capitalism and environmental violence. The contemporary global measures to neoliberalise the Third World's environments are rooted in the policies and politics of European colonization and colonialist capitalism; therefore, historicising the opium trade is an attempt at exposing the linkages between the 'postcolonial' Anthropocene and the colonial history of extraction, environmental transformation and genocide of indigenous populations. In other words, Ghosh's rendition of opium's colonial history educates us about capitalism's historical relationship to imperialism on one side and the imperialist underpinning of our climate crisis on the other. Lance Newman (2002) has argued for the need to raise "historical consciousness" of the ecological disruptions as an essential feature of teaching about "ecocentric consciousness." He writes,

If, then, we are going to teach ecocentric consciousness, along with the vast extension of those values it entails, an indispensable part of it must be historical consciousness, must be detailed consciousness of the coevolution of material social and natural systems that has produced the present crisis, and of the long history of creative struggle to overturn an ecosocial order founded on the oppression and exploitation of people and nature (21).

In *Sea of Poppies*, the connection between opium and ecology is best exemplified in the colonial imposition of poppy cultivation over thousands of acres of arable lands in the Gangetic region, which caused 'disabled ecologies and bodies' by the process of toxification of soil, water, and air. In this novel, Ghosh attempts to measure the ecological cost of the British "poppy culture." In her book, *Ecology and Power in the Age of Empire* (2017), Corey Ross presents a historical analysis of modern imperialism's destructive transformations of tropical and subtropical environments in former colonies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Exploring the relationship between ecology and imperial power, she argues that European imperial powers, "spawned a range of different methods for extracting wealth from nature, from plantations and mining complexes to new forms of agriculture and 'rational' land management systems. It stimulated a huge increase in the traffic of living organisms in the world around. At the heart of European imperialism was an attempt to transform forests, savannahs, rivers, coastal plains, and deserts into productive and legible spaces, all of which brought hefty environmental consequences: deforestation, erosion, siltation, pollution, disease, and habitat destruction" (3). In light of the above arguments and research studies, it seems urgent to examine Ghosh's historical critique of imperialism and ecological degradation. Such an analysis is vital for uncovering the structural continuities that drive contemporary and future socio-environmental injustices. The novel argues that an understanding and recuperation of postcolonial ecology requires in-depth knowledge and recovery of the socio-environmental history of colonialism, economy and ecology. Caitlin Vandertop brings into focus the

ecological dimensions of the novel's representation of the historicity of the global and Indo-Chinese opium trade. Vandertop observes,

Ghosh's project is at once a global economic history – recording the experiences of opium producers, traders and consumers as well as the commodity's role in the consolidation of transnational financial systems – and an ecological one, which documents colonial regimes of extraction and exhaustion as they disrupt local environmental and agricultural practices. Insofar as Ghosh's approach to the opium trade operates at the intersection of the social and the environmental (or the "socio-ecological"), it anticipates recent "world-ecological" attempts to build on world-systems theory by understanding nature and society as mutually constitutive within a web of human–capital–nature relations (4).

The *Ibis* trilogy draws attention to the relationship between ecological degradation and the imperial drug economy underlying the opium trade. Postcolonial writers and environmental historians have paid significant attention to colonial conquests and the subsequent looting of natural resources of the conquered territories. They argue that unprecedented growth in wildlife hunting, deforestation, plantation economies, oil extraction, and the ivory trade, combined with 'the inter-continental transfer of plants, animals, and microbes' (Ross 5), wreaked havoc on colonial ecosystems for centuries. Significantly, as Vandertop (2019) argues, before Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy, little attention had been paid to the ecology of the British opium trade "despite its almost paradigmatic ability to fuse finance and nature" (5). Since Ghosh's novel portrays the interconnectedness of empire, ecology and capitalism, postcolonial ecocriticism appears to be the most suitable methodology for an ecocritical enquiry into the unsustainable use of land and the subaltern displacement in *Sea of Poppies*. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) link the global scenario of unrestrained development with the 'ecocatastrophes' and argue, "that global warming requires not just new ways of thinking beyond the human, but also a renewed attention to the long histories of slavery and colonialism, which need to be re-thought in ecological terms." (20) Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2014), an acclaimed postcolonial ecocritic, maintains, "Postcolonial ecocriticism has brought forward critiques of capitalism, consumption, technology, neoliberalism, modernization and biopiracy in the former British colonies and beyond" (325).

Carl A. Trocki's seminal study of the British opium trade, *Opium, Empire and Global Political Economy* (1999), provides a critical history of the link between opium, imperialism and capitalism in Asia. His book analyses the economic and administrative impact of the opium trade. Trocki builds upon the previous study of David Edward Owen, who, in his book *British Opium Policy in China and India* (1934), focused entirely on the commercial side of the Anglo-Chinese opium trade, leaving out a detailed analysis of how opium profits enabled the British Empire to consolidate its political control over the existing colonies and expand into new territories. Trocki reveals the fact that previous studies have failed to question and implicate the British Empire on moral and ethical grounds for the accumulation of a vast amount of capital by enforcing mass production, transportation and consumption of opium in the 19th century. Most studies, Trocki argues, if at all touched the opium subject, it was to project it as an "oriental vice" (xiii). To fill this gap, Trocki's book turns out to be a timely intervention for reflecting upon the sinister role of the British Empire in "creating a true 'drug epidemic'" (xii)

in South, East and South-East Asia. After checking the financial records or balance sheets of opium income and profits, Carl A. Trocki finds the opium trade so integral to the Empire's existence that he remarks in the introduction that "without the drug, there probably would have been no British Empire" (xiii).

Trocki argues that the British monopoly over opium production and trade resulted in "super profits" for the Empire, meeting the budgetary demands of British colonies to support and ensure the systematic functioning of administrative and military establishments in the new and expanding old colonies. According to him, the non-British European powers, namely the Portuguese, the Spanish and the Dutch, lost control over their holdings in India and other parts of Asia because they eventually failed to sustain the high administrative and military costs of governance (9). However, Trocki's extensive study of the opium trade leaves out the cultivation and production history of opium in Bengal and Bihar residencies. His book fails to put adequate focus on the social, cultural and environmental impacts of opium production on Indian peasants and tenants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and on how the opium monopoly severely affected India's existing political economy. The book's main objective is to portray a broad picture of how the "opium empire" played a crucial role in sustaining the political structures of the British Empire on one hand and ensured "the growth of colonial regimes and fiscal systems" (xiv) by creating a "global capitalist economy" (8) on the other. In the early nineteenth century, opium emerged as a critical commodity for offsetting Britain's long-standing trade deficit, which had accumulated over many years due to the continuous growth of tea imports from China (Trocki "Introduction" 1999).

Sea of Poppies appears as an environmental text when approached through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism. Ghosh's representation of nature/environment is integrated with concerns of racial and social injustices. For him, our environmental crises are enmeshed with issues of toxicity, poverty, violence, hunger, crime, globalization and the legacies of colonial capitalism. Mita Banerjee (2016) notes, "As an emerging new field, 'postcolonial ecocriticism' combines postcolonialism's critique of colonial regimes and the workings of transnational capitalism with ecocriticism's attention to the land which has been the gist of such exploitation." (194) Ghosh demonstrates that the English East India Company, a subsidiary of the British Crown, had converted the arable lands of the Gangetic belt into a "sea of poppies" by the 1830s. The EIC (English East India Company) appropriated agricultural lands to impose poppy cultivation. The Company identified the regions of Oudh, Bihar and Bengal on the banks of the river Ganga as most viable and productive for growing opium poppy because the naturally damp soil bypassed the need to invest in irrigation projects. The novel reconstructs images of poppy fields on the banks of the river Ganga. The fields saturated with white poppy flowers resemble snow-capped mountains of the Himalayas: "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" (SOP 3). Ghosh attempts to show that the land is fraught with traumas of violence, coercion, hunger and conquest. Besides deforestation, commercial tree plantations

and wildlife depletion, the concentration of poppies as cash crops under monocultural farming is one of the most socially and environmentally disastrous historical events of the British rule in India. The female protagonist, Deeti, is a poppy peasant whose husband works at the Ghazipur opium factory. The introduction of cash crops and a wage economy required men to work as labourers in factories, and women had to bear more pressure to work in the fields to provide food for their families. The monocultural farming of opium poppy made the lives of women like Deeti miserable. Opium harvesting required intensive labour, and Deeti had to do it all alone. The novel shows that poppy cultivation oppressed women in different ways, as Deeti was raped by her brother-in-law under the intoxicating effect of opium.

Sea of Poppies conflates the abuse of land by the monopolized production of opium with the abuse of the female body. Moreover, the novel persistently reflects upon the social and environmental effects of the colonial drug economy. The imposition of poppy cultivation on all arable lands through economic and political coercion seriously reduced the production of pulses, lentils, oilseeds, wheat and vegetables in the region. Deeti recounts,

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 *asámi* 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. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you hadn't accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off. And, at the end of it, your earnings would come to no more than three-and-a-half sicca rupees, just about enough to pay off your advance" (*SOP* 30).

The peasants were forcefully drawn into debt bondage, and those who resisted were jailed for violating penal laws. Additionally, the Company recruited the locals to oversee the cultivation and collection of poppy sap in their designated areas. The shift towards monocultural farming of opium as a cash crop produced repressive conditions for peasants and farm labourers. Deeti has not been able to get her hut's roof repaired because, "but in this age of flowers, thatch was not easy to come by: 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 who lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could" (*SOP* 29).

Deeti recalls the days when the land "bore the main winter crops—wheat, masoor dal and vegetables" and when "poppies had been a luxury," used solely for medicinal and ritual purposes. The colonial drug economy replaced the traditional agricultural system. The destruction of rural ecology led to a livelihood crisis, where the imposition of a new system degraded both human and non-human bodies. Deeti explains that people grew poppy on a small patch of land alongside their main food crops, as it required "fifteen ploughings of the land and every remaining clod to be broken by hand, with a dantoli; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering; and after all that, the frenzy of the harvest, each

bulb had to be individually nicked, drained and scraped. Such punishment was bearable when you had a patch or two of poppies – but what sane person would want to multiply these labours when there were better, more useful crops to grow, like wheat, dal, vegetables? But those tasty winter crops were steadily shrinking in acreage: now the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated" (SOP 29). Stacey Balkan (2019) affirms that the Ibis trilogy establishes a link between the late colonial economic origins of ecological imperialism, exemplified by poppy cultivation, and the "contemporary forms of ecological imperialism like Monsanto's cotton trade. The trilogy offers a commentary on the establishment of free trade in the region, the enclosure of peasant land, and acts of epistemological violence such as the cooptation of local language systems" (48).

Land and agrarian policies remain flashpoints of contention among local peasantry, multinational corporations, and resource-extractive states. In response, prominent socio-environmental advocates—such as Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, Sunderlal Bahuguna, and Arundhati Roy—have led resistance to ecologically destructive threats, such as large dams, deforestation, biopiracy, and monocultural farming. The 'land grabbing' in the name of sustainable economic development and environmental conservation has resulted in the dispossession of millions of people and also in ecocultural disruption in the Global South. Postcolonial governments tend to justify acts of human dislocation and forced land acquisition by referring to the rhetoric of wildlife protection and nature conservation in the Anthropocene. In their "Introduction" to *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (2011), DeLoughrey and Handley argue that retrieval of colonial histories of nature becomes "vital to understanding" current trends of "radically changing postcolonial ecologies" which are "particularly evident in the recent "African land grab" by countries seeking to fuel the expanding ethanol industry and to replace territory that may be lost through global climate change" (13). John Vidal (2008) renames such acts of land-grabbing "green grabbing," which refers to the appropriation of land and natural resources for "environmental ends" in our neoliberal age (Fairhead et al.; Wieckardt et al.). Huggan and Tiffin (2007) have argued, "Just as colonies once provided the raw materials for European industrialization, post-independence states now frequently find themselves exploited by multinational companies (sometimes in league with corrupt post-independence politicians). The poorer majority are cut off from traditional forms of subsistence while still being denied access to the profits of their own resources" (2).

Ghosh's retelling of the history of opium-poppy cultivation in the Bihar region challenges the official colonial history, which links poppy cultivation with the growth of the peasant economy. *Sea of Poppies* asserts that opium cultivation and production in Bihar impoverished local peasants and workers, turning them into indentured labourers. The novel's opening seeks to illustrate connections between the imposition of the opium economy and the migration of thousands of people from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh as indentured labour to British colonial plantations across the Indian Ocean. This relationship between the two colonial events is reflected through the journey of the protagonist, Deeti. Poppy peasants were denied the profits

gained from exporting opium to China and South-East Asia. The British Empire amassed capital by dispossessing and impoverishing Indian peasants. Deeti is destitute; she cannot afford to pay Kalua to hire her oxen-cart to bring the unwell Hukum Singh back from the opium factory. Instead, she pays with lumps of opium. Her saree, frayed and ragged from overuse, allows her to see through the ghungta. Poppy has become their main source of sustenance; she relies on poppy seed oil for cooking and hair care. She prepares dishes such as “alu-posth, potatoes cooked in poppy-seed paste” (SOP 7). Excessive use of poppy seeds and oil likely had degrading effects on their health. Large-scale poppy harvesting over vast land areas contaminated the environment and affected peasants and factory workers’ communities. Recent studies reveal that extensive poppy farming has caused health problems for the cultivators and endangered ecosystems, with serious issues like soil erosion, drought, and the toxification of air and water in regions with widespread poppy fields. (Singh “How poppy cultivation is threatening the environment” 2022) Deeti highlights the socio-ecological costs of large-scale poppy cultivation across the land. The novel also draws attention to the toxic effects of poppy crops on non-human lives in the following excerpts:

The sweet, heady odour of the bleeding pods had drawn swarms of Insects, and the air was buzzing with bees, grasshoppers and wasps; many would get stuck in the ooze and tomorrow, when the sap turned colour, their bodies would merge into the black gum, becoming a welcome addition to the weight of the harvest. The sap seemed to have a pacifying effect even on the butterflies, which flapped their wings in oddly erratic patterns, as though they could not remember how to fly (SOP 28).

The imagery of “bleeding pods,” which attract insects and flies, is ironically used to illustrate the disastrous impact of the poppy harvest on local ecosystems, including non-human life forms. Deeti witnesses the process of ‘denaturalisation’ of nature and the repercussions of the collapse of local ecological balance, which she has observed in this year’s poppy crop.

The novel points to the process of “slow violence” inflicted on local ecologies. The harmful effects of an opiated environment are highlighted through the lived experiences and observations of the female poppy peasant, Deeti. Deeti becomes a key witness, helping us to register and imaginatively reconstruct the geographical violence of commodified nature, since the EIC’s colonisation of arable lands to force the cultivation of poppy for profit led to irreversible environmental costs. Ghosh’s depiction of the opium’s impact on land, rivers, animals, and people underscores the need to integrate environmental justice with social justice. Deeti’s arrival at the Ghazipur opium factory is used as an opportunity to describe its opium-affected surroundings. She notes,

The monkeys that lived around It, for Instance: Deeti pointed a few of these out to Kabutri as the ox-cart trundled towards the walls. Unlike others of their kind they never chattered or fought or stole from passers-by; 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” (SOP 91).

Ghosh's depiction of the Ghazipur Opium Factory draws upon J.W.S. MacArthur's book *Notes on an Opium Factory* (1865), which contains a detailed personal account of the factory and the etchings and lithographs of the Patna opium factory produced by Colonel Walter Sherwill. The vivid portrayal of the factory's "synthetic environment" (Herber 1962) demonstrates the interlocking of colonial politics, environment and bodies (both human and non-human). The factory resembles a modern-day fertiliser and chemical production unit in which the whole atmosphere turns toxic, and the workers (especially the poor, including minor boys) who come in close contact with opium toxins become degraded bodies. Having crossed the weighing shed of the factory, Deeti enters the mixing section, which "was like a dim tunnel" (SOP 94) filled with the stench of liquid opium, where "a host of dark, legless torsos was circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons" (94). Her eyes fall upon "bare-bodied men, sunk waist-deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge" who possessed, "the look of ghouls than any living thing" (95). The description of poor workers foregrounds the issue of environmental injustice. The factory, as an asset of the British Empire, becomes symbolic of a toxified ecology; the colonizers transformed the "ecology of labour" by forcing local peasants and workers into an unsustainable, ecologically destructive industrial modernity. The Sudder Opium Factory is one such product of colonialist capitalism whose successful operation and expansion depend upon colonizing structures of political dominance and military occupation.

The spectacle of extensive poppy cultivation, the Sudder Opium Factory, drugged human and non-human bodies, toxic air and river, and impoverished local populations of peasants and farm tenants, alongside images of the Royal Botanical Gardens of Calcutta and aesthetically designed landscapes of Garden Reach, all signify that Ghosh's rewriting of the opium trade "operates at the intersection of the social and the environmental" (Vandertop 530). Vandertop claims that Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy "is at once a global economic history – recording the experiences of opium producers, traders, and consumers, as well as the role of the commodity in the consolidation of transnational financial systems – and an ecological one, which documents colonial regimes of extraction and exhaustion as they disrupt local environmental and agricultural practices" (530). What troubles Ghosh is the persistent legacy of colonial settlement patterns in the coastal cities of New York and the Nicobar Islands, which, he notes, are becoming sites for new military bases, townships, and real estate developments along the seafronts. The port cities, which once stood as barriers against seaborne storms and cyclones, have now become the most vulnerable locations to cyclonic and oceanic disturbances, as was the case when a tsunami struck these areas in 2004. Ghosh delves into the colonial political and environmental history to interpret the catastrophic impact of the Tsunami on the coastal cities of postcolonial states. Amitav Ghosh reflects in his non-fiction *The Great Derangement*:

... the location of that [*military*] base in the Nicobars was by no means anomalous; the builders had not in any sense departed from accepted global norms. To the contrary, they had merely followed the example of the European colonists who had founded cities like Bombay (Mumbai), Madras (Chennai), New York, Singapore and Hong Kong, all of

which are sited directly on the ocean. I understood also that what I had seen in the Nicobars was but a microcosmic expression of a pattern of settlement that is now dominant around the world: proximity to the water is a sign of affluence and education; a seafront location is a status symbol; an ocean view greatly increases the value of real estate. A colonial vision of the world, in which proximity to the water represents power and security, mastery and conquest, has now been incorporated into the very foundations of middle-class patterns of living across the globe. (48-49)

Conclusion

Significantly, in the context of Ghosh's Ibis novels, the historicization of the colonial pasts of the opium trade, indentureship and plant transfers can be argued to carry symbolic significance for our contemporary age of climate crisis, in which the imperial modes of unwarranted extraction of natural resources, as well as intensified maritime militarisation, appear as legacies of European expansionism and capitalism. Ghosh narrativizes the colonial past of the Indian Ocean to highlight and interpret the current state of endangered oceanic ecologies. Moreover, Ghosh's oceanic imaginary articulates our planetary futures in the wake of what DeLoughrey calls "anthropogenic climate change and sea-level rise" ("Submarine Futures" 32).

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