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Eco-Critical and Cultural Perspectives as Reflected in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*: A Brief Appraisal

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Abstract

This paper clearly presents the eco-critical and cultural perspectives as projected in the novel *Sea of Poppies* where Amitav Ghosh neatly reflects the description of colonialism and its effect on the environment and shows how he has tried to depict the harmful effect of the colonial rule in India. Truly speaking, the diversity of the crops is lost due to the cultivation of opium and whereas denies growing opium is compelled and finally it results in debt and migration. This shows Ghosh's power in showing the loss of natural habitat during the colonial rule in India. *Sea of Poppies* paints a poignant picture of the human devastation caused by Imperialism. The fertile farms of the Gangetic plain are blooming only with poppies beautiful, deadly. They deny the peasants the crops to sustain them and make them indebted to money lenders and landowners, who are in turn indebted to the buccaneers of the East India Company themselves. Ghosh assembles those who will set sail in his narrative of the Ibis, an old slaving ship that takes indentured labourers to Mauritius skillfully.

Keywords

Regionalism, Pastoralism, Human Ecology, Imperialism, Opium, Self Destructive.

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ECO-CRITICAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES AS REFLECTED IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES: A BRIEF APPRAISAL*

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Novel reading is generally dubbed as something of time-washing activity but by strict terms, literature will be extremely poorer in taste and analysis, if it is bereft of fiction writing or reading. It is quite true that a novel is a world peopled with characters of different hues, facing different problems and suffering from different complexes. Naturally the readers are tempted to get a bird's eye view of life to act with the guidelines and approaches they get out of novel reading. Literature in general does not only preserve human consciousness but also refine sensibilities providing both entertainment and relaxation. The remarkable growth and rise of Indian English fiction reflects, above everything else, the ethos of a people and a period of time. All sorts of people and their lives have found a place in Indian English Fiction. The maid servant, the pan shopkeeper, the middle class teacher, and the whole brand of typical Indian characters have filled the pages of novels making the realities of life through portrayal of varied attitudes and approaches of characters in both sensitive and sensible standpoints.

What is to be understood in general is that a writer gives herself/himself to the world. No secretive person can be a writer. The very purging effect of literature lies in freeing the readers of their pain and tensions so as to relive their joys and pleasantries. Objective observation, impartial judgement, detached analysis, solidity and validity, genuineness in expression and explanation, typical characterization, logic and rational thinking, practical orientation and diplomatic vision, professional ethics and remarkable sincerity are those fanciful phrases with which any writer/author tries to positively influence her/his readers. Amitav Ghosh is one such writer who is endowed with above such traits so as to become open in all respects to rebuke, appreciation, evaluation and analysis.

Amitav Ghosh is both talented and innovative. He is an appreciable experimentalists experimenting extensively with the form of his books. As ideas are said to be the driving force of

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his books, such ideas richly run his literary works. He is endowed with the power of conveying thoughts and feelings through remarkable depiction of incidents, characters and places all of which effect good analysis and merit attention from all literary circles. Such a reputed writer Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta on July 11, 1956, in a Bengali family to Lieutenant Colonel Shailesh Chandra Ghosh, a retired officer of the Pre-independence Indian Army. He was educated at the all boys Doon School where he edited 'The Doon School Weekly'. After school education from Doon, he obtained college education and degrees from St. Stephen's College (University of Delhi) Delhi School of Economics. He then won the Inlaks Foundation Scholarship to complete a D.Phil. in Social Anthropology at St. Edmund Hall, Oxford under the supervision of Peter Lienhardt. History was his prime obsession and his fiction is imbued with both political and historical consciousness. He has to his credit publication of such notable works as 1. *The Circle of Reason* (1986), 2. *The Shadow Lines* (1988), 3. *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), 4. *The Glass Palace* (2000), 5. *The Hungry Tide* (2004), 6. *Sea of Poppies* (2008), 7. *River of Smoke* (2011) and 8. *Flood of Fire* (2015). Almost all works of Ghosh "draw heavily upon the character, traditions and dichotomies of his native land, yet his protagonists and themes often extend beyond India's actual boundaries, most notably toward the Middle East and Great Britain" says Shakti Batra (P 3).

Truly speaking, man's observation of physical environment and his impression about it is expressed, both in art and literature and has been an age old practice. The mode of depiction of natural phenomena passes through several changes in style of exposure with the shifting perceptions of the human mind. However, this perception of nature or wilderness was not earlier viewed and examined with any recognized critical, interdisciplinary lances till 1970's. After the 90's, writings on nature were viewed in accordance with a number of sprinkled critical frameworks such as American Studies, pastoralism, regionalism, human ecology etc. However, these studies did seriously incorporate deep investigation in literature towards the author's representation of environmental decline or calamity of the day-to-day world. Eco-criticism began in the mind-1990's as the study of the relationship between literature and the natural environment. No doubt, eco-criticism has taken an earth-centered approach to literary studies. Even though the word 'eco-criticism' was coined by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism", the famous two historic seminal publications namely *The Eco-criticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and 'The Environmental Imagination' by Lawrence Buell significantly marked the authorized recognition of the concept of eco-criticism. The very common view is that Eco-criticism does discuss nothing but the interconnections between nature and culture especially the cultural artifacts in language and literature. Critically, it has one foot in literature and the other foot on landscape and as a critical theory, it negotiates between the human and the non-human nature. Literature of environment is a sub-canon in literature that highlights the natural environment.

Eco-criticism is a rapidly expanding area of research that covers a wide range of texts and theories, thereby exploring the relationship of man and nature imagery, gender construct, feminism, man-woman relationship, tourism and cultural ties. Nature has been a rich source of inspiration for many writers. Oft-appearing themes in the works of many writers are the lyrics on the beauty of nature and its remedial quality. Wordsworth goes a step ahead as a pantheist, a

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worshipper of nature and considers nature as his friend, philosopher, guide and nurse. Many Indian writers have explored environmental issues in many ways. The transformation in the social and cultural environments of the world has entirely modified the representations of man's attitude towards nature in literary expressions. Among the Indian English novelists, by Commitment and quality, Amitav Ghosh has earned a specific name and fame through his novels which are all concerning ecological aspects. His novels *Sea of Poppies* and *The Hungry Tide* discuss rather beautifully the relationship between literature and nature.

Sea of Poppies (2008) which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008, is the first volume of the Ibis Trilogy in which the main characters include Deeti, an ordinary village woman, a mulatto American sailor by name Zachery Reid, an Indian rajah/zamindar called Neel Rattan Holder and Benjamin Burnham, an evangelist opium trader. The story is set prior to the opium wars, on the banks of the holy river Ganges and in Calcutta. The author compares the Ganges to the Nile, the lifetime of the Egyptian civilization, attributing the provenance and growth of these civilizations to these selfless, ever flowing bodies. The poppy seeds become characters emanating in large numbers from the field to form a sea and every single seed is uncertain about its future. *Sea of Poppies* is set in India in 1838. The East India Company yet to be curbed of its wilder excesses by British Brown is amassing unimaginable wealth by growing opium and illegally exploring it to China. Peasant farmers have lost their income as they are forced to grow only Poppies and there is a lot of poverty. Furthermore, the Chinese are determined to cease a trade that was gradually undermining the economy by turning millions of Chinese into addicts. Amitav Ghosh's novels are the fruits of meticulous research done and *Sea of Poppies* is no exception. With the opium trade and the opium war as a background, the book explores in detail the East India Company-run opium factory at Ghazipur and the workers whose lives depended on it and its yield.

Sea of Poppies paints a poignant picture of the human devastation caused by Imperialism. The fertile farms of the Gangetic plain are blooming only with poppies beautiful, deadly. They deny the peasants the crops to sustain them and make them indebted to money lenders and landowners, who are in turn indebted to the buccaneers of the East India Company themselves. Ghosh assembles those who will set sail in his narrative of the Ibis, an old slaving ship that takes indentured labourers to Mauritius skillfully. At the heart of this epic is a vast ship, the Ibis. The author portrays the various characters in this tumultuous saga as poppy seeds emanating in large numbers from the field to form a sea, where every single seed is uncertain about its future. A number of stories involving a vast array of characters, each carrying its share of joys and sorrows, merge and the Ibis, the slave ship carrying them to the Mauritius Islands, becomes a shelter to those in destination. Fate throws together a truly diverse cast of Indians and Westerners, from a bankrupt raja to a widowed village-woman, from a mulatto American freed man to a free-spirited European orphan. As they sail down the Hoogly and into the sea, their old family ties are washed away and they view themselves as Jahah-bhais, or ship-brothers, who will build a whole new life for themselves in the remote islands where they are being taken.

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Among the array of characters that converge on board the slave ship Ibis in Deeti, a simple, unlettered house wife from a village in eastern Bihar. In course of time, she becomes the leader and spokesman of the migrants on board and everyone calls her Bhanji (sister-in-law). She is also the picture of endurance, perseverance and courage in the face of all odds, never giving up in the face of adversity. As a result, she wins everyone's admiration. Raja Neel Rattan Holder's family had held the Zamindari of Rashkhali for ages and he has been brought up and educated as a true blue aristocrat in Bengali, Persian and Urdu. He spouts English verses and rhetoric at the drop of a hat though this wins him ridicule from people like Doughty and a tight slap from the sergeant under duress. Zachary Reid is the mulatto freedman son of an American slave owner whose colour doesn't overtly reveal his black heritage. Hired on the schooner as a master carpenter for its rebuilding at Baltimore, he has been on board since she started her arduous journey and hopes to die with it.

Man's intrusion upon the pristine wilderness in the name of civilization in addition to modernization has led to environmental crisis ultimately challenging life on earth. In modern times, the main subject of literature lays focus on the vulnerable and endangered relationship with the environment. A long line of distinguished historians have technically chronicled the environmental and social costs of the rivalry between agrarian and industrial modes. The rise of industrial capitalism radically altered the relations not only on hand and workplace, but also on the utilization of nature. Such an ecological conflict employs human transformation of nature with regard to exploitation of the land, through destruction, wastage and manipulation. William Rueckert calls this behaviour as a self-destructive or suicidal motive" (Glotfelty 107), which is inherently prevalent in humans and a paradoxical attitude towards nature.

The novel *Sea of Poppies* primarily deals with opium war which is a crucial event in world history. The novel is also set in an era of agricultural scandal. There is a western demand for profitable but inedible crops like poppy that have caused starvation in the subaltern world. It is a novel where the novelist projects his knowledge in various fields both directly and indirectly. According to Deepak Thakur:

"*Sea of Poppies* is divided into three parts Land, River and Sea. The three parts are parts of nature. The movement of the novel is from Land to sea. Dissolution of the sense of place is gradual and purposeful. Land is Bihar; dialect is Bhojpuri; opium factory at Ghazipur; rigid caste system where Kalua, low caste ox-cart driver is looked down by Hukam Singh who believed that the sight of Kalua's face would bode ill for the day ahead. In other part of land, Calcutta, Raja of Raskhali, Neel has his axe to pound in inviting Mr. Burnham to dinner but his deeply inbuilt caste reservation would not allow him to share table with the English. Land is a place of homogeneity and exclusivity. River is a transition into Sea" (PP 54-55).

In this novel *Sea of Poppies*, each and every character is personified as a poppy seed. All the characters are united in the third part of the novel. All the seeds exist in the ship. Their journey in the sea is symbolically represented by the title *Sea of Poppies*. Though it is a post-colonial novel, the author has given importance to the natural elements also. The very essence of the novel is 'eco-criticism'. The novel describes the various aspects of nature flowers, river and sea. Amitav Ghosh unfolds the truths of nature using nature to symbolize the life of human beings. There are

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many characters in this novel who have been exploited by superior authorities. All those characters are compared to the flower poppies. Poppies are dried up in order to make opium. Likewise, the characters are portrayed as crushed and exploited in order to satisfy their perverted desires. The author has focused more on the atmosphere than on the characters because the atmosphere decides the mentality of a character. In picturizing both the atmosphere and characters, "Ghosh" has shown remarkable sincerity" (Tiwari 3).

Culture includes the customs and habits of the people with regard to food, occupation, clothing, shelter and attitude towards life. Culture and nature have always been interrelated and will remain so in the future. While dealing with cultural issues in societies, Amitav Ghosh gives prominence to women's sufferings in Indian society. He gives two dimensions of women-women who accept the sufferings in their life and the second who boldly protest the male dominated society. Amitav Ghosh shows the women characters to be courageous and lovable, helping them to empower themselves through bold characters in this novel. Ghosh's aim is to show how women are suppressed by society through Deeti in *Sea of Poppies*, who is the best example for giving prominence to traditional values of compassion and correct living. Ghosh also reveals the other side of Indian culture that demands a wife to commit Sati after her husband's death. Some accept 'Sati' voluntarily while they are forced. Deeti also meets such a situation in her life after her husband's death. Thinking of the future of her daughter she refuses to commit 'Sati'. The struggle and suffering that she encounters makes her a new Deeti. Nature is very close to women. So human beings worship nature as 'female'. Names of the rivers in India are feminine; they call the earth as 'Mother Earth'. They simply indicate the nativity that people have towards their land. The Ganges is the most celebrated river in India. People of India have a kind of emotional attachment towards the river. Deeti is a woman, who has lived in the river bank, where the river Ganges mingles with Kalapani, which means 'Black Water'. The black water turns the water of Ganges rather impure. It symbolizes the life of Deeti. The relationship between nature and human being indicates the relationship between mother and child. When a child disrespects its mother, it is bound to disrespect nature too.

Nature is shown also as a phenomenon showing its danger through waves and thunder. Neel, Jodu, Serang Ali and Kalna are the few characters who manage the escape. When the tortures become unbearable, when they come to know that they are moving closer to death, they devote themselves to nature. They begin to think that it is better to face the wild nature than to bear all tortures in life. Any journey becomes meaningful only if there is a destination. When they surrender themselves to nature, they become one with nature. No doubt, Nature plays a vital role in elevating man from the status of an animal to human being by giving his culture. Hence, one may conclude that though man may feel superior to nature, he really cannot exist without nature as he has to depend entirely on nature for his survival. Ghosh points out that the exploitation of animals and birds in the name of modernization and civilization is something dangerous. In the past, people regarded the Ganges and the Sundarbans as the paradise on earth. While in the present the minds of the people being filled with self-pride underestimate the power of nature. This has to be altered for better progress in the relationship between man and nature.

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