

ECOMARXISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S IBIS TRILOGY

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Abstract: The paper aims at analyzing the novels of Ibis trilogy *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* from the point of view of Ecomarxist ideology. Ecomarxism deals with the tendency of the capitalist to destroy nature and exploit the marginalized section of society in the process of increasing their profit. *Sea of Poppies* explains the British government forcing the farmers throughout north India to cultivate poppy which makes the staple food costly and results in turning the farmers into indentured labourers. *River of Smoke* explains the commercial exploration of acquiring Chinese plants for European trade through the character of Fitcher Penrose. *Flood of Fire* explains the plight of poor Indian soldiers who are recruited to fight for the British in China. These poor soldiers had to pledge their life so that the British could yield more profit by indulging in Opium trade. Chinese economy was destroyed by the British government through the opium trade. The import of tea from China was stopped by establishing tea plantations in India. Colonial rulers in their need to expand their trade economy had exploited human rights and denied relationship between people and their land.

Keywords: Ecomarxism, Amitav Ghosh, Ibis Trilogy

Introduction

Ecocriticism opens up new dimensions to redefine our interdependence and connectivity to nature. According to ecomarxists, fundamental flaw of the capitalist system is the process of under-production, which means that capitalists treat nature as if it were a free commodity. There is a tendency inherent to capitalism to undervalue, and thus under-produce the conditions of production. Ecomarxism is an anthropocentric view which sharply criticizes capitalism; ecomarxist claim that capitalist system negatively influences the relation of human beings and nature. Marxism plays a major role in developing green critical approaches by connecting it to political economy and to environmental crisis.

According to Marx, the only way to solve the problem of environmental degradation, and the dreadful conditions of the worker, is through liberation from the capitalist system; Marx's notion of human emancipation was linked to his vision of overcoming human beings isolated from nature through the development of a socialist society. For humanity to progress beyond alienation, it is necessary to govern human development on par with nature in a rational way, a goal only obtainable with the elimination of capitalism.

The first novel of the trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* is set in the 19th Century. The story opens with the central character Deeti, who is married to Hukhum Singh, an opium addict who is employed in Ghaziapur Opium Factory. After the death of her husband she is forced to perform Sati while Kaula, an untouchable rescues her and they join the ship Ibis as indentured labourers. Neel Ratan Halder, a wealthy landlord loses all his wealth and joins Ibis as a convict. Paulette, a French orphan joins the Ibis in order to explore her future. The second novel, *River of Smoke* opens with the storm in Canton coast in 1838. The ship Ibis which carries indentured labourers, Anihata owned by Bahram Moddie and Rudruth owned by Fitcher Penrose are hit by storm. Bahram Moddie, plans to ship large consignment of opium to earn the export division in spite of the opium ban in China. Fitcher Penrose along with Paulette is on an expedition to China to collect rare plants. The final novel, *Flood of Fire* is set during the opium war in 1839 while Britain and China are preparing for war. The war breaks out and the British win. The opium flows into market like a monsoon flood.

Amitav Ghosh speaks about the unwanted gift of colonialism, starting with the British attitude towards agriculture and harvesting. Their need for the poppy seeds grew day by day like a haunting beast, turning whole of North India into a colourless and joyless region. The useful crops like wheat, dhal, vegetables gradually stopped shrinking in acreage. The peasants became poor debtors and they had gone to the extent of selling their lands. They had no choice but to sign the indentured labour contract. They were forced by the Britishers to cultivate only poppy to produce opium which would be exported at a huge profit. The British agents of Ghaziapur Opium Factory went from home to home asking for cash in advance, making them sign contracts by forging their

imprints. Ghosh brings out the sufferings of the farmers thus: "...at the end of it, your earnings would come to no more than three and half sicca rupees just above enough to pay off your advance" (SOP 30). Staple food become costlier and poppy was procured at very low cost from the farmers. Because of this there was huge crash in poppy price which made the farmers poor debtors and people moved to and other regions as indentured labourers. The colonists did not bother about the plight of the farmers but kept exploiting them. The result was, "a snow... of white poppies" (SOP 13) all over the area starting along the Ganges, drowning people in the sea of poverty and drowsiness of despair. The natural cycle of crop rotation from spring to autumn was done away with and people were left to starve. The farmers were forced into poppy cultivation and harvest brought no happiness. Deeti, who is involved in agriculture, is very upset on seeing the condition of the fields and the farmers.

... 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 stew their land with poppies. And now, with the harvest over and little grain at home, they would have to plunge still deeper into debt to feed their families. (SOP 193)

In the regions of Malwa, Bihar wheat was the major cultivation but owing to the great demand for opium in China, the farmers were forced to cultivate poppy. Farmers were not ready to grow poppy because of the difficult work it took at the time of the harvest. Many people felt growing poppy was punishment and they wanted to grow wheat and other vegetables.

But those toothsome winter crops were steadily shrinking in acreage: now the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated. 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 asami 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 had not accepted money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off. At the end of it, your earnings would come to know more than three-and-a-half sicca rupees, just about enough to pay of your advance. (SOP 29)

Deeti was forced to hire workers for poppy harvest. She was happily pondering about the money that she is going to get. But the poppy harvest fetches her very little money she is very upset and worries about how to run the family. She looked disbelievingly at the discoloured coins that were laid before her: "Just six dams for the whole harvest? It's not enough to feed a child, let alone a family"(SOP 155). When Deeti was dumpstruck thinking about it, she was snapped telling "Go to the money lender. Sell your sons. Send them off to Mareech. It's not as if you don't have any choices"(SOP 155).

Deeti and Kaula fled from the village in search of work, they found people like themselves; farmers turned to paupers. "Land 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 the pot in which the rice had been boiled"(SOP 202). The Britishers forced the farmers to cultivate poppy to produce opium which led to the fall in price and the farmers quit their villages and set off to far off countries as bonded labourers. "They are girmitiyas ..., they were called so because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on 'girmts'- agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld" (SOP 72). The farmers who became bonded labourers worked in sugarcane plantations in Fiji, Mauritius and other parts of the world. A landlord of Mauritius Mr. M. d' Epinay urges Mr Burnam an opium trader turned labour contactor based in Calutta to send him indentured labourers. "My canes are rotting in the field, Mr Reid, said the planter. Tell Mr. Burnham that I need men" (SOP 21). There has been a great demand for indentured labourers in Mauritius as slave trade was abolished.

Dispossession is a part of accumulation process which shapes the modern social world especially green political theory. Social inequality which results in dispossession has deep environmental implications thus separating people from land and natural resources. Thomson says, "Marxism sees history as a class struggle, a struggle for control and socialization of production and resources" (Qtd in Layfield 5).

Ghosh in his trilogy does not directly speak about environmental crisis instead he juxtaposes economy and environmental condition through opium trade and Fitcher's commercial exploration in acquiring Chinese plants for European trade. The British botanist James Cuninghame went to China and discovered that Chinese were skilled in realistic portrayal of plants, flowers and trees. In those days it was difficult to bring live specimens from China to Europe by sea, so they collected seeds and assembled dried gardens. "To Cunningham it was added another kind of collection, the painted garden" (ROS 122).

Fredrick Fitcher Penrose a man of considerable wealth, a noted nursery man and a plant-hunter, "he had made a great deal of money through marketing of seeds, sapling, cutting and horticultural implements" (ROS 35). He owned a nursery called Penrose & Sons, "which imported especially the varieties of Plumbago flowering quince and wintersweet" (ROS 35). They were plant hunters, "marketing seeds, saplings, cuttings, horticultural implements" (ROS 35). The lands of Asia, Africa, and Europe are strewn with flowers, seeds, herbs, shrubs which tried to pass across borders and continents.

Ghosh minutely brings out the details of moving delicate plants from one place to another on ships travelling thousands of miles bearing the scorching sun, rain lashes, storms and the vagaries of unending journey carrying Antirrhinums, Lobelias and Georgians. The shipmen and horticulturalist protect the plants and they are called as the green ships. The “wardian cases” were used on the Redruth ship as “miniature green houses” (ROS 76).

The plant collectors in the novel accessed the whole world in collecting plants and to exploit them for economic benefit. Although it is done under the lucrative trade mode, it is because of the Britishers that the gardens are made across the empire. “It was well known said Sir Joseph that the gardens at Kew possessed sizable collections of plants from some of the remotest corners of the earth. But there was one region which was but poorly represented there, and this was China” (qtd in C. Lee 135).

The biologist at Kew gardens were called as plant imperialist or nature’s government. The Kew garden and Canton nurseries had rare species which were a part of foreign trade. Ah Fey pictures Kew garden as “pots, pots, pots- that is all you see at the outset. But then as your eyes grow accustomed to the surroundings, you notice that the containers have been skillfully grouped to create an impression of a landscape, complete with winding paths, grassy meadows, wooded hills and dense forests” (ROS 287).

Richard Drayton states, “The future of Kew in the age of Sir Joseph Banks rested on his faith that empires might purchase their right to rule with plants and gardens” (Drayton 44). This statement becomes real for opium is priced high reversing the economic flow of profit by the purchase of tea from the Chinese by the British. He also states that Sir Joseph Banks, encouraged stealing plants from China mainly after the opium wars. This happened because of the opening of the ports and transfer of plants was organized by British East India Company. Robert Fortune, a famous plant collector, brought 2000 tea plants and 17000 tea seeds from China to India. Fitcher is in search of golden camellia and this directly related to the search of tea plants in the later part of the century.

Joseph Dalton Hooker states that Calcutta’s Botanical garden as “amongst its greatest triumphs may be considered the introduction of the tea-plant from China” (qtd in C. Lee 138). He also stated that “the establishment of tea trade in the Himalaya and Assam is almost entirely the work of the superintendents of the gardens of Calcutta” (qtd in C. Lee 138). Chinese economy was destroyed by the British government’s opium trade and on the other hand, Assam became the largest tea exporter to Britain. All this happened because, “it was free market capitalism at the barrel of a gun and through the hypnotic smoke of the opium pipe” (qtd in C. Lee 139). To stop this flow of opium trade is really hard in China because the hunger for it grew high in demand. Nothing would stop the flow because it’s like holding back the tides. “It was like a natural phenomenon – a flood. Its flow was governed by abstract laws like those that Mr Newton had applied to the movements of the planets” (FOF 375). “Socialism itself must develop to its logical end: that is, it must move beyond its present homocentrism, . . . to a new awareness: that of a solidarity with other living beings; what Marxists advocate with regard to social systems we must extend to ecosystems . . .” (D. Lee 15).

Both the Chinese and the Britishers were preparing for war. There had been great changes in the camp and the riverside areas, where the troops and the soldiers had started camping. A large fort was raised extending like a gigantic raft and it stretched around the corners and the building looked like a dam. “Hundreds of acres of forest had been cut down from the construction of the raft, the coast had been borne by the merchants of the Co-Hong: they were rumoured to spend thousands of silver teals on the timber alone” (FOF 494). Ghosh beautifully brings out that in the name of fighting and winning, man destroys nature brutally.

Gosh throws light on the soldiers who suffered under the hands of the Britishers. Kesri Singh belonged to the landowning family of the Benaras region, due to the failure of the agricultural crops, they were forced to cultivate poppy by the colonizers. This made them to join in the army. In the East India Company army, the Indian soldiers were treated low. They are provided with inferior weapons, “They send us to fight with old equipment and then they complain us to fight with old equipment and then they complain that sepoy’s don’t match up to white troops ” (FOF 280). They are also made to starve “to eat potatoes and other stuffs or they are left to die of starvation and disease” (FOF 287). The Indian soldiers went on a expedition to China, they suffered much after months long journey and it is mainly because of the Indian soldiers, the Britishers were able to open ports to expand their opium trade. These scenes vividly portrays the power, position and the injustice metted out to the Indian soldiers by the British colonizers.

Marx states, “all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the most long-lasting source of that fertility”(qtd in Layfield 638). Marx theory of rift represents, “the material estrangement of human beings within capitalist society from the natural conditions which formed, the basis for the existence – what he called ‘the everlasting nature – imposed conditions of human existence’” (qtd in Layfield 163). Bellamy Foster connects Marxism to that of environmental stability, “to insist that large scale capitalist production created such a metabolic rift between human beings and the soil was to argue that the nature-imposed conditions of sustainability have been violated” (qtd in Layfield163).

Ghosh points out that the capitalist’s materialistic outlook of profit alone havocked the lives of those who were living directly off the environment. Using market disciple, military force and political power the world muddles through ecological catastrophe. Ghosh does not let go the traces of the dust laden path of history, the violent ways of colonialism or imperialism, political policies which are the anthropological evidence for devastation of natural resources and exploitation of the marginalized. Ghosh as a

prolific writer always has concerns for the voiceless and protection of human rights and conservation of nature creeps throughout his work.

Abbreviation

SOP - Sea of Poppies

ROS - River of Smoke

FOF - Flood of Fire

References

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