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Planetary Crisis: A Postcolonial Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*

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Abstract

This study sets out to analyse Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) from postcolonial ecocritical perspectives. The focus of the study is to represent the agrarian experiences of a range of inlanders' subjectivities spanning the socio-ontological spectrum of caste, class, gender, ethnicity, human and non-human species and how the colonised subjects showcase their resistance to be erased from a prevalent literary imagination. The novel posits the increasing imbrications of local ecologies within global networks along with a strong sensitivity to social and environmental justice concerns through the novelist's critical or creative re-imaginings of place.

Key words: planetary crisis, ecological victims, Eco literature

Introduction

A growing concern of post colonialism is postcolonial ecocriticism in relation to the ecological and environmental problems encountered by the present day world due to different forms of imperialism. As post colonialism dismantles the ideologies of colonial past, postcolonial ecocriticism goes beyond the 'relationship between literature and the physical environment' to focus on the human lives displaced and affected by the political and ecological imperialism of the Western world. Imperialism not only concerns the distressing effects of the colonisers on the colonised community and its ecology, but includes the present day 'eco-imperialists' who thrust their 'Green' agenda on developing countries that were once their colonies, hampering them from enjoying the benefits of economic, social and cultural growth and development. Many

environmentalists, sociologists and literary writers, especially from the postcolonial world, explore historical links between the issue of environmental degradation and the hegemonic structures of race, class and gender. Postcolonial ecocriticism unfolds the precarious condition of the planet and at the same time implicates the historical and political issues. It broods over the clamorous cry-destruction of the planet. Exploitation of the developing world makes one think of the oppressive dualism by which one is led to perceive that how 'native' and 'nature' are subordinated. Ecologists speak about the threats that endanger the earth. The exploited poor and politically less powerful groups have started to raise their voice to move towards environmental justice at different spheres of the globe.

Background

Indian writers have made valuable contributions in the literary field by addressing vital issues relating to cultural, social, economic and environmental developments, disasters and debates in many forms and forums. Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, Anees Jung, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kamala Markandaya, Meera Mehadeva, Rohinton Mistry, R. K. Narayan, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, and Nayantara Sahgal are the notable Indian writers whose works shaped and revolutionized the Indian sensibility in the postcolonial setting. Amitav Ghosh is also one such well-established contemporary Indian writers whose works draw wide readership and critical acclaim. He responds to global phenomenon such as, postcolonialism and ecological concerns. His novels are replete with socio-ecological themes set against colonial historical backdrops. He has authored nine novels and three non-fictions. His writings span a variety of genres blurring the difference between fiction and non-fiction, bringing together history and creativity. His first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986), a combination of a detective story and a travelogue, is about a young weaver who flees to the Middle East, eventually traveling to North Africa. *The Shadow Lines* (1988), is a story of multifarious maze of memories, experiences, relationships and images that the nameless narrator recollects as he sits to pen down his thoughts. His third book, *In an Antique Land* (1992) is both a travel-memoir and historical study of a twelfth Century Indian Slave in Egypt. *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) is a science-fiction thriller about research for a cure for malaria. *The Glass Palace* (2001) concerns the degeneration of Asian countries like Burma and Malaya into British colonies. *The Hungry Tide* (2004) highlights the divide between human-animal priorities set in the islands of the world's largest mangrove forests of Sunderbans. *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015) form the *Ibis* trilogy. The narrative archives the happening, events and facts from the year 1838 to 1841, a time when the

East India Company promoted large scale poppy cultivation in India, and exported it chiefly to China culminating in the Opium Wars. Most of his works deal with the impelling policies of colonial power structure and its hegemonic racist attitude.

Research Argument

The intent of the essay is to analyse Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective to establish that European expansion has drastically changed and influenced not only the culture, religion and language, but also the ecology of the Indian colonized territory. It also attempts to trace the ecocritical history of the colonized area and the native use of land before the massive environmental disruption of land during the British colonial era, to examine the literary construction of nature in the novel, and to explore the novelist's language of ecology and his art of seeing beyond and through nature.

Methodology: Theoretical Framework

This essay draws on 'Postcolonial Ecocriticism' as a theoretical framework to seek to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis. Ecocriticism is a critical stance that draws connection between literature and the physical environment. Cheryll Godfelty states that 'as a theoretical discourse it negotiates between the human and the non-human world (nature).'

(xix) The emergence of Ecocriticism or Green Cultural Studies demonstrates the centrality of environmental concerns and their profound connection with literature, simultaneously functioning as a manifesto to create environmental consciousness in human beings. Ecocriticism principally attempts to "realize" nature which is mediated through literature. It employs a counter-hegemonic politics to protect and preserve the tactile, physical nature that is at one side of this mediation; and to forge a reorientation beyond the linguistic turn, towards a green turn in human discourse. It aims "at de-centering the human subject of the dominant anthropocentric Enlightenment discourse to fashion a habitual environmental sensitivity in human beings" (Anand, 96). Ecocritics emphasize, as Eckersley does, that 'the world is an intrinsically dynamic, interconnected web of relations' with 'no absolute dividing lines between the living and the nonliving, the animate and the inanimate' (quoted in Buell, 137). Ecology has gained much significance in literature and public life as an activist-champion of the neglected aspects of ecology and is keen on inculcating ecological conscience amidst people; so that ecology could be preserved. Lawrence Buell offers analyses of the European, British, US-American, Japanese, Chinese, and Indian schools of ecocriticism to invite ecocritics' attention to the ecocritical scope in so-called "third world" countries (Alex). The common underlying factor

is that nature both animate and inanimate is required to maintain ecological sustainability. Besides, the living and the non-living carry an intrinsic value, which had been sadly neglected and man had looked upon everything for its instrumental value.

Biocentric ethics denote that human beings are at the heart of a great web of space and time. Lawrence Buell defines biocentrism as “all organisms including humans are part of a larger biotic web or network or community whose interests must constrain or direct or govern the human interest” (Buell, 25). Nature’s role in one’s formation and growth cannot be denied or erased, if acknowledged after looking deep into the self. Biocentrism does not advocate one above the other but as organisms living together. Anthropocentrism views the world in relation to the human, occupying the centre position. Environmental destruction is human-centred. Human beings in an unabated manner continue with destruction of the terrestrial environment through deforestation, soil erosion, extinguishing of species, depletion of resources and various other destructive activities. Every part of the ecosystem is affected by human activity. Human flourishing is at the cost of Nature. Human’s hierarchical structure unfolds the fact that the flourishing humans deprive fellow beings and organisms of their rights and their life sources.

Patrick D. Murphy posits ‘ecology as a discipline means, fundamentally, the study of environment in its inter-animating relationships, its change and conservation, with humanity recognized as a part of the planetary ecosystem’. Human beings are part of the system. Therefore, they cannot exercise control over it. He continues that the ecosystem can be a means for ‘learning how to live appropriately in a particular place and time, so as to preserve, contribute to, and recycle the ecosystem’ (194). Distinguishing things-in-themselves and things-for-us, he says that the corollary of us-as things-for-other leads directly into feminism. Ecofeminism shares the view that the ‘twin dominations of women and nature’ are artefacts of patriarchal culture. Ecofeminists value that there is indeed a ‘peculiar and inherent bond between women and nature’ (Roszak, 238). The parallel is as the Mother earth is devastated and exploited so also the female; the mother is inhumanly treated and the urge to exploit her seems to be operative. Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood speaks of a “hyper-separation of humans from nature and other animals... a polarized understanding in which the human and the non-human spheres correspond to two quite different substances or orders of being in the world” (quoted in Huggan and Tiffin, 209). What she advocates is that women are closer to nature than men, through their connection with motherhood and nurturing.

Social Ecology is a term associated with Murray Bookchin, who posits that, the oppressive systems of hierarchy makes man cause violence to the natural world. As people are mere instruments of production for those in power, nature is just a resource. An organic community is one that is in harmony with nature. He also argues that loss of organic communities which did not practise hierarchies of power led to treating people as commodities. The autonomous ego of the developed society needs to be replaced by a natural one whose completeness arises out of being rooted in a fairly rounded and complete community. Bookchin holds that 'unaltered ecosystem is of unity in diversity, spontaneity, and complementary relationships, free of all hierarchy and dominion' (89). He opines that man depends on Nature and it will be a space of symbiosis and mutualism. Paul Lindoldt states that 'the bioregional agenda does not insist that environment activism is more worthy in itself than activism for human rights, but it insists that the subjugation of nature always involves domination of people, and the subjugation of peoples involves the domination of nature' (Clark, 220). One can blame it on the government along with the ruling class which allows bioregions and life ways of local people to be drastically altered and economically plundered.

Eco-imperialism is a term coined by Paul Driessen to refer to the forceful imposition of Western environmentalist views on developing countries. In his book *Eco-Imperialism: Green Power, Black Death* (2005), Paul Driessen argues that like the European imperialists of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, today's eco-imperialists keep developing countries destitute for the benefit of the developed world. The British environmental historians Alfred Crosby and Richard Grove reveal the historical embeddedness of ecology in the European imperial enterprise. Alfred Crosby's term 'ecological imperialism' refers to the 'ranges in implication and intensity from the violent appropriation of indigenous land to the ill-considered introduction of non-domestic livestock and European agricultural practices' (Haggan and Tiffin 2010:3). Haggan and Tiffin refer to the Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood's understanding of ecological imperialism that 'reason-centred culture' which enabled the European dominance continues to structure the human attitude towards nature and thereby nature and animal are considered as the other as 'being either external to human needs, and thus effectively dispensable, or as being in permanent service to them, and thus an endlessly replenishable resource'(4).

‘Biocolonisation’ is another form of ecological imperialism, which covers the biopolitical implications of current Western technological experiments and trends. It is a biopiracy of indigenous ‘natural-cultural property and embodied knowledge – to Western – patented genetic modification’ and other instances of ‘biotechnological suprematism and ‘planetary management. Once again these methods have become instrumental for serving their needs and political ends. Another form of ecological imperialism, is ‘environmental racism’ defined by the American environmental philosopher Deane Curtin as ‘the connection, in theory and practice, of race and the environment, so that the oppression of one is connected to, and supported by, the oppression of the Other’. Plumwood calls it ‘hegemonic centrism.’ The economically disadvantaged or the marginalized face the ‘environmentally discriminatory treatment.’ Cary Wolfe argues that humans can engage in ‘non-criminal putting to death’ in Derrida’s phrase, not only of animals but of humans as well by marking them as animal. He explains further ‘in assuming a natural prioritisation of humans and human interests over those other species on earth’, it paves way to generate and repeat the racist ideologies of imperialism on earth.

Pablo Mukherjee views that any postcolonial studies cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories such as state, society, conflict, literature, theatre, visual arts. Equally any critical study that attempts to give importance to environment will have to trace ‘the social, historical and material co-ordinates of categories such as forests, rivers, bio-regions and species’ (quoted in Haggan and Tiffin 2010:2). Adamson argues that literary and ecocritical discussion of “ancestral indigenous knowledge must begin by moving away from clichéd notions of “authentic” indigenous peoples living in a non-exploitative relationship to the land and toward more socio-political perspectives that account for large-scale cultural, economic, political, and ecological processes that make modern indigenous groups and ecosystems more vulnerable to social and environmental injustices” (Adamson, 150).

Handley and others in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (2011) begins with Franz Fanon’s quote bringing out the significance of land to the native people, “For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity” (Handley, 3 quoting *The Wretched of the Earth*, 9). A generation later the

Palestinian thinker Edward Said argued that the imagination was vital to liberating land from the restrictions of colonialism and, we might add, from neocolonial forms of globalization. He writes,

If there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical in it. Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss of locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored . . . Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through imagination. (Said,77)

Poddar, in his article, "Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Island Tourism and a Geopoetics of the Beach" posits the importance of land. He quotes that DeLoughrey and Handley's anthology *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* begins with Frantz Fanon's vision of land as 'a primary site of postcolonial recuperation, sustainability, and dignity'. The anthology's introduction repeatedly asserts the "geographical imperative" of a postcolonial poetics where imagination becomes 'vital to liberating land from the restrictions of colonialism, and [...] neocolonial forms of globalization" (Poddar, 53).

Literary Analysis

Eco-imperialism looms largely and leaves its permanent shadow in the Indian land for having manipulated and exploited the mass of land and people for more than three hundred years. The colonizer and the colonized duality has pervaded and interjected in every sinew of Indian life. On the ground of governing force, the colonizer occupied territories of rich soil and extensive areas for his economical gain. This has resulted in the indigenous crop getting replaced by cash crop and in turn eradicated the indigenous crop forever. It creates a bipolar effect of gain and deprivation. Setting against this backdrop, Amitav Ghosh throws light on the imperialist modes of social, cultural and ecological dominance in his novel *Sea of Poppies*.

The novel is set in the colonial India of 1838. The story begins at Ghazipur, where India's best of poppies was produced during the British Raj. Though opium was cultivated in India since the Vedic period, it became a principal cash crop only during the British regime. The great demand for opium in China and the consequent financial gain propelled the Britishers to convert the colony into opium field. The colonisers found out that the Indo Gangetic plains were best suited for poppy cultivation. The novel opens with a striking description of endless stretches of poppy fields 'mile after mile' in the Gangetic plains. The ecologically imperialized landscape is described as if "the Ganga seemed to be flowing between twin glaciers, both its banks being blanketed by thick drifts of white-petalled flowers" (Ghosh, 1). Poppy cultivation drastically reduced the cultivation of indigenous food crops ruing the lives of the agrarian community. It has altered the

very livelihood and lifestyle of the people who were otherwise content and self sufficient with the traditional modes of agricultural practices. The story begins with Deeti, a simple, pious woman, caring mother and an efficient housewife married to Hukam Singh, a crippled worker in the Ghazipur Opium Factory. They live in a village on the out skirts of the town of Ghazipur, near Benares. She recollects how poppy had been rare when she was young, 'grown in small clusters between the fields' that bore wheat, masoor dal and vegetables. Nobody then had thought that there would be a great demand for it. Poppy cultivation was strenuous: "fifteen ploughings of the land and every remaining clod to be broken by hand; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering...each bulb having to be individually nicked, drained and scraped" (29). It involved a lot of work and enormous time because 'the priceless sap flowed only for a brief period in the plant's span of life' and if not properly tapped 'the pods were of no more value than the blossoms of a weed.'(5)The indigenous community was forced to cultivate poppy. The poppy petals were collected and made into small 'rotis' used to line the earthenware containers in which opium was packed. The staple food of the poppy cultivating community was alu-posth, potatoes cooked in poppy-seed paste. They used only poppy-seed oil to massage their hair. So poppy governed the life, senses and thoughts of the entire community.

India was known for its natural resources in those times. These natural resources had been usurped and exploited for years together. The novel depicts how the vast land was appropriated for the purpose of growing poppy, the resources exhausted and the web of traders and countries implicated in the export business over a long span of time. Recalling the Indian historian Ramachandra Guha's cryptic words is adequate: 'pauperizing millions of people in the agrarian sector and diminishing the stock of plant, water and soil resources at a terrifying rate' (quoted in Haggan and Tiffin 2010: 1-2) is the predicament of then India. Industrialization and business have bolstered the structure of the rich becoming richer and the poor poorer. Paradoxically the European ecosystem did not suffer any havoc neither were they pauperized. One can analyse that environmental issues are not only central to the projects of European conquest and global domination but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism. Europeans colonizing the land has caused widespread ecosystem change, created unequal power regimes, established a kind of biopiracy and exploited the natural resources. Deeti, 'a child herself' was the mother of six year old Kabutri whose biological father was Deeti's brother-in-law Chandan Singh. Kabutri was conceived by an opium induced rape, and the domestic violence was condoned by her dying-husband Hukam Singh, an opium addict. Deeti perceived her home town as an 'island of innocence' in a 'sea of corruption'. Just as the rich and fertile Gangetic plains

were ecologically imperialized, the poor agricultural community felt oppressed and colonised. Deeti noticed that there were no vegetables or grains on the Gangetic plains but only ‘glaciers’ of ‘white-petalled’ poppies. The local agrarian community suffered severely owing to Western ecological imperialism. Deeti longed for the lost, rich and varied landscape with different seasonal crops that were useful to them in many ways. She realized that it had been seven years since her roof was last thatched. Her tattered and worn out hut looked like a ‘tiny raft, floating upon a river of poppies.’ She recollected,

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 (29)...the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted. ...forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign *asami* contracts. ...And, at the end of it, your earnings would be ...enough to pay off your advance. (30)

Impoverishment of landscape results in the impoverishment of people. Deeti yearned for useful crops like wheat, dal and vegetables. She observed ‘those toothsome winter crops were steadily shrinking in acreage; now the factory’s appetite for opium seemed never to be stated.’ (29). With every farmer forced to cultivate poppy, production increased and the price of poppy declined thereby making them insolvent.

Exploitation of the natural resources especially land plays a vital role in any imperial project. In the introduction to *Postcolonial Ecologies* Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley are of the view that “place has infinite meanings and morphologies: it might be defined geographically, in terms of the expansion of the empire; environmentally, in terms of wilderness or urban settings; genealogically, connecting communal ancestry to land; as well as phenomenologically, connecting body to place (4). Land creates a sense of place and belonging to the people who inhabit it. A person or a community is identified by the land, and when the land is exploited; so does the community. Deeti’s ancestral home overlooked the holy river Ganga joined by a tributary named, the Karamnasa which means ‘destroyer of Karma.’ Deeti noticed that the landscape on the river banks had changed a great deal since her childhood, it seemed that “the Karamnasa’s influence had spilled over its banks,” spreading its blight far beyond the lands that drew upon its waters. After the opium harvests, the land was barren, except for a few mango and jackfruit trees, “nowhere was there anything green.” She wondered what they would eat in the months to come, for nobody grew vegetables or grains. She noticed that “everyone’s land was in hock to the agents of the opium factory: every farmer had been served with a contract... which left them with no option but to strew their land with poppies” (193). The vulnerability of farmers was beautifully illustrated when Deeti pondered: “with the harvest over and little

grain at home, they would have to plunge deeper into debt to feed their families” (193). ‘Land’ is thus appropriated by ravenous imperialists and the helpless Indians become victims, dispensable animals for them to be commodified.

Ecological imperialism spearheaded ecological racism eventually leading to migration of the marginalised. Transformation of land results in transportation of people. Colonised people are made ‘homeless’ and ‘landless’. The characters in the novel witnessed the loss of their native landscapes and experience the pangs of displacement, alienation and discrimination. Signing the ‘girmits’ (agreement) was the only escape for the poor farmers from continuing poverty and social discrimination. The ecologically and socially oppressed colonised were forced to leave their country as bonded labourers who would toil in yet another ecologically imperialized plantation elsewhere in the world. Ghosh vividly portrays the impelling factors that resulted in the formation of a diasporic community that was forced to sign up as indentured labourers because of the introduction of poppy cultivation as a cash crop. Once when Deeti and her daughter were travelling on Kalua’s cart, they came across a multitude of people marching. They saw that:

The road was filled with people, a hundred strong or more; hemmed in by the ring of stick bearing guards, this crowd was trudging wearily in the direction of the river. Bundles of belongings sat balanced on their heads and shoulders, and brass pots hung suspended from their elbows. ... The sight of the marchers evoked both pity and fear in the local people. (70 &71)

Deeti gathered courage to ask who those people were, and the reply was that they were ‘girmitiyas’, and “at the sound of that word Deeti uttered an audible gasp- for suddenly she understood.” Ghosh explains the origin of the word:

They were so called because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on ‘girmits’- 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...(72)

A boat would take them to Patna and then to Calcutta and from there they would go to a place called ‘Mareech’, an island in the sea- like Lanka, but farther away. While Deeti was overwhelmed by the plight of girmitiyas leaving their people and land for ever, little did she realize that very soon she too would be one among them. Deeti was forced to hire a half- dozen hands to harvest her poppy and had abandoned the thought of paying for a new roof with the proceeds of her poppies. All that she could get was six dams for the whole harvest. She had no choice but to take a loan from a seth. Further, when asked about the word ‘girmits’ during

one of his readings of *Sea of Poppies* in a book store, he said, that the labourers picked up the last syllables, added another, ignoring the first syllable resulting in the reduction 'grimits'. He also affirmed that he was able to trace a few 'grimits' preserved by the government of Mauritius.

Colonial capitalism pits itself directly against traditional use of land, thereby affecting the immediate environment, modes of life, human identity and social justice. Social ecologists raise questions of inter-relatedness of social and environmental dominance and justice. Ecological racism is reflected in Ghosh's description of the British opium factory. When Hakum Singh was reported to have collapsed in the opium factory, Deeti and Kabutri went there and were taken aback by the poor working conditions and inhumane treatment meted out to the workers. The fine poppy dust made them sneeze incessantly. She observed that:

The air inside was hot and fetid, like that of a closed kitchen, except that the smell was not of spices and oil, but of liquid opium, mixed with the dull stench of sweat- a reek so powerful...her eyes were met by a startling sight-a host of dark, legless torsos was circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons...they were bare-bodied men, sunk waist-deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge.(94-95)

The workers toiled for hours together without any rest, and were subject to the most inhumane treatment by the White Supervisors. They had to work in the most unhealthy and unhygienic environment. The workers being whipped or caned for trivial mistakes had been the plight of working class during the British Capitalists' regime in India.

In contrast, Mr. Benjamin Burnham, the owner of Burnham Bros, was one of the major exporters of opium to China and the new owner of the 'tall masted' *Ibis*, formerly a slave carrier, meant to transport indentured labourers from India to Mauritius. It underscores the indispensability of opium to the British East India Company. It was revealing when Burnham explained to Neel Ratan Halder, the Raja of Raskhali, that to end the opium trade would be ruinous, and continues that there was nothing the Chinese want from the Europeans, but "we, on the other hand, can't do without their tea and their silks... If not for opium, the drain of silver from Britain and her colonies would be too great to sustain."(112) When questioned about the need to force opium on China, Mr. Burnham tactfully replied:

"The war when it comes...will be for the freedom of trade and for the freedom of Chinese people. Free trade is a right conferred on Man by God, and its principles apply as much to opium as to any other article of trade...that opium is this land's greatest blessing...Does it not follow that it is our God-given duty to confer these benefits upon others?(115)

This is how the exploiting-imperialists propagated opium addiction among the Asian masses. The words of Burnham clearly echo the views of green imperialism “that the world was to be used and its products could be exploited, sold, and traded” (Richard Grove quoted in DeLoughrey,101). Burnham further proceeded to elaborate on the benefits of opium and justified the invocation of God in the service of opium. He quoted one of his country men who stated “Jesus Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ.”(116) He believed that it was God’s Will that opium was used as an instrument to open China to Christian teachings.

The Britishers encouraged the use of opium among the common masses so that demand for opium could be increased and more number of agriculturists could be forced to cultivate poppy. Their principal target group was the Chinese. One could see the ill-effects of opium addiction in the novel. Hakum Singh and Aafat were victims of opium addiction. When Hakum Singh was bed-ridden, Deeti refused to give him opium, hoping that his condition would improve, “but instead of initiating an improvement, deprivation provoked a dramatic turn for the worse: he could neither eat nor sleep and he soiled himself so often...Drifting in and out of consciousness, he would scowl and mutter in incoherent rage”(153). Aafat’s condition was worse than that of Hakum Singh’s. Aafat was half Indian and half Chinese and was imprisoned in the Alipore jail where Neel Ratan Haldar found him in the most disgusting and pathetic condition. He was described as a “living nightmare” when he experienced the pain of drug addiction. Ghosh describes his paroxysms of shivering that begins with a mild trembling and “would mount in intensity till become so violent as to tip him off his charpoy, depositing his convulsing body on the ground.”(321) When opium is withdrawn abruptly, it has adverse effects on the addict. It affects the digestive system, “sending the bladder and sphincter into uncontrollable spasms, so that neither food nor water could be retained.”(322) The novel throws light on the depressing impact of opium cultivation and the horrors of opium addiction.

Deeti who stands to symbolise ‘land’ or ‘earth’ has been described as the most exploited ‘soil.’ Ecofeminism points out that as long as dualisms exist as a fundamental component of society, they will serve as openings to defend patriarchy. Vandhana Shiva and Maria Mies connect the capitalist-patriarchal economic system with the oppression of women. Vandhana Shiva attaches the “death of the feminine principle” with “maldevelopment,” a term she uses to describe the introduction of Western, intensive agriculture to the “Third World.” Deeti felt oppressed and colonized by her high caste male family members. When Hukam Singh died, the family decided to perform ‘sati’ and burnt her along with her deceased husband. Kalua, the driver of the

ox-cart used by Hukam Singh, an untouchable from the 'leather worker's caste'. Kalua being an outcaste was subject to ill-treatment and humiliation by the Thakur Sahibs. Deeti saved him from their brutality one night. So Kalua repays his gratitude by saving Deeti from the consuming fires of her husband's funeral pyre jumping into the Ganga. When Deeti came to her senses, she realised that she was in the company of Kalua, on the Ganga. She recognized that "she was free to create a new destiny as she willed." (178) Fearing the wrath of the high caste family, the couple married on the banks of Ganga. She experienced rebirth and deliverance. Later they signed up as 'girmitiyas' and boarded the *Ibis* bound for Mauritius.

The novel gives a detailed account of how women interact with Nature. Miss. Paulette Lambert, an orphaned French girl grew up in the Calcutta Royal Botanical Gardens. Her father Mr. Pierre Lambert was the assistant curator of the Calcutta's Botanical Gardens. After Mr. Lambert's death Paulette came under the 'spiritual' care and 'dominating' custody of Mr. Benjamin Burnham. Paulette fled from her domineering Christian foster parents and found a place in the *Ibis*. Paulette described as 'a child of Nature,' 'has never worshipped at any altar except that of Nature; the trees have been her scripture and the earth her Revelation' (137). As the earth self evolves, the women evolve into new selves: bold and beautiful as they take up their journey. The oppressed women transform into women of hope and sustenance, thereby bringing out a change in their immediate environment. According to Maria Mies and Vandhana Shiva the earth is seen as a sacred being known as the Goddess or Gaia. For the Third World, the earth is a living being which guarantees their own and all their fellow creatures' survival. When Deeti and Kabutri went to the Ganga to bathe, they worshiped the river chanting "Jai Ganga Mayya Ki..." While Deeti was standing half immersed in the Ganga, she got the vision of the *Ibis*, 'the river itself that had granted Deeti the vision.' When all shelters fail, the river and its surrounding forests are sought as the last refuge of those in need. After attaining the new life, the newly married couple Kalua and Deeti came to the waterfront to begin afresh a life and experienced peace and safety that passes all human understanding. Deeti could hear the "new whispering of the earth and the river, and they were saying to her that she was alive; ..., flowing like the river's waves, and as open and fecund as the reed-covered bank" (178).

The treatment of the indentured labourers and the coloured crew members by the Whites is yet another classic illustration of the racial injustice met out to the colonized communities. Apart from 'girmitiyas' other socially marginalized and economically disadvantaged characters too seek refuge in the *Ibis*. Zachary Reid, a mulatto from Boston, enrolled himself as a carpenter in the crew of *Ibis* and was elevated to the position of

the second mate. Zachary enlisted as 'black' experiences discrimination and feared loss of livelihood in the midst of white racists. Serang Ali, the Arakan leader of the lascars, was forced to leave the ship because he happened to be the father-in-law of a notorious pirate Adam T Danby. Neel Ratan Halder, the Raja of Raskhali, an influential person and a close ally of Mr. Benjamin Burnham, was no exception to colonial racism. Burnham put to use the predatory colonial power to confiscate all the property of Neel and reduced him to penury. After being condemned Neel was moved to Alipore jail, where he shared room with Aafat. He was charged of forgery and sentenced to transportation beyond the seas to the penal settlement in Mauritius islands. The novel ends where the journey of *Ibis* carrying the bonded labourers was caught in a fearsome storm with five members escaping in a long boat. It suggests that the future of the colonised people was at stake each moment.

All the colonized people have a tale of exploitation, torment and deprivation. Each story narrates the wrongs done to them by the tyranny of the ruling class. The place of their origin though civilized, thriving with its own indigenous practices and self-sufficient, was exploited and transformed into a poor, impoverished and exploited state. Ghosh succeeds in bringing to life an earlier era of imperialism focusing on a period of ecological racism, when people came into contact and collision, one colonizing the other, thereby reshaping the history of a nation, its people and its land. One of the axioms of environmental imperialism is that, there is no social justice without ecological justice. Ronald Sandler and Phaedra Pezzullo point that "environmental justice opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and culture, and other forms of life" (quoted from Sujatha, 122) The colonial rulers brought about social and ecological ruination to nations whose natural resources were drastically exploited. *Sea of Poppies* one of the literary texts which portrays how needs of the power hungry colonists altered not only geographical regions but its inhabitants and made them poor to work amidst environmentally hazardous conditions.

Conclusions

Sea of Poppies captures the ecological imperialism that turns out to be environmental racism that crushes the Northern states of India. It unravels how colonial history of India has been shaped by its ecology and environmental disruption. It also deftly captures not only the changing landscape, but the changes that occur due to ecological tampering in the immediate ecosystem and the world at large. The land that once produced rich and varied crops is swamped with the rising tide of poppies, thereby transforming the self-sustained peasants into willing migrants, consequently forming a diasporic community. Hierarchical social

structure and developmental desire of the nation state not only threaten human dignity and social justice but seek to exploit the natural world as well.

It is a fictional narrative of a history of a brewing war, dispossession and colonial exploitation that has its roots in land. It explores the cultivation of poppy as a cash crop (a Capitalist product) in the Indian subcontinent to meet the growing demand for opium in the Chinese market, and the transportation of Indian indentured labourers to British colonies. It is the anthropocentric attitude that encourages human beings to 'Other' nature, eventually leading to exploitation. Bringing together fact and fiction, Ghosh's captivating narrative unfolds how a nation was robbed of its natural resources and witnessed huge squandering of human and ecological resources. His narrative fulfils the expectation that that the primary function of imaginative literature has been to raise global consciousness in a wide variety of colonial contexts in which the twin demands of social and environmental justice are conspicuously displayed. Such fictions call for a deepening of our understanding of imperialism in relation to ecology. The narrative proves that Imperialism stampedes across the eco-socio-system and history, politics and individual lives are smeared with blood. Human solidarity and ecological balance is thwarted to meet the special needs of the dominant ruling class resulting in commodification of 'native' people and appropriation of local (land) resources. Roos and Hunt state that "what role ecocriticism plays in the future of literary studies depends on how successfully we practice criticism for social and environmental justice in awareness of a daunting tangle of interrelations" (188). The narrative therefore brings to light the connections and complexities between ecological practices and colonial projects from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective. By dislodging the empty signifier of the 'land' in favour of multiple narratives, perspectives and ontologies of place, narrative of Amitav Ghosh nudges us yet surely towards pathways and paradigm shifts in anticipating our more sustainable agricultural and ecological future.

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