



ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S SEA OF POPPIES (2008)

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Abstract

The primary aim of this research paper is to draw attention to the environmental issues raised by Amitav Ghosh in his first novel of Ibis trilogy i.e. *Sea of Poppies* (2008). The word "ecocriticism" is gaining broad recognition in modern literature, as the destruction of environment is becoming a global issue. Ghosh is amongst the most renowned and brilliant authors in the genre of ecocriticism who writes with a profound environmental consciousness. The topics Ghosh addresses in *Sea of Poppies* include social, cultural, and natural supremacy throughout the novel. The current research paper examines Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* with ecocritical viewpoint and draws attention to environmental problems and the consequences of imbalance as well. Additionally, it demonstrates the connection between humankind and environment through flora, fauna, waterways, mountains, and wildlife. Ghosh emphasizes environmental destruction caused by uncontrolled exploitation of natural world as he describes the dishonest methods in which Britishers used to earn money via the unlawful export of opium to Chinese market.

Keywords: Environmental consciousness, Ecocriticism, Exploitation of Nature, Wildlife, Adverse effect of Opium production on flora and fauna



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Introduction

Humans are intimately connected to the natural world. People rely on it consistently and utilize it for their various needs. Not only is mankind dependent on Nature for existence, but it has transformed Nature for its own purposes as well. The interrelationship between men and environment, the problem of environmental imbalance, is a worldwide concern. One of the

main focuses of literature has been to capture current events. Yet, the environmental and ecological disaster have only lately energized authors to begin writing about these topics.

Environment is an extremely essential factor in this unique study of literature, and it is addressed in great detail within Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism stresses the ecological study, especially the connection between literature and the environment. Indeed, environment is the central theme of ecocriticism, serving as a new interpretive factor alongside culture. In any work of art, environment is the most important element to consider while evaluating it. Environment plays an important part in the analysis and interpretation of literary works.

Authors have an essential role to play in drawing attention to ecological issues. Human activities are concerned with the social fabric of the society which is directly connected to the human existence on the planet. An ecocritical text shows how society, economy, nature and culture are intertwined with literature in various ways.

Ecocriticism: A literary theory

The concept of Ecocriticism was first developed in the late 1970s. The phrase was coined by William Rueckert in his 1978 article "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." For a long time, the term had been inactive until Cheryll Glotfelty urged its revival. Known as "Green studies" in the United Kingdom, Ecocriticism is a theory which emerged in the United States of America in the late 1980s. Cheryll Glotfelty, the leading proponent of this emerging theory, defined 'ecocriticism' as follows:

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist critique brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty xviii)

When applied to any work of art, Ecocriticism enables the critic to investigate and conduct an environmental study of the text. Ecocriticism concentrates on the textual techniques of literary works in order to create an environmentally oriented discourse about how man interacts with other organisms. However, global environmental issues must be explored in literature too. Adding Ecocritical approach is really a step forward in the development of a wider complete view on literary works in the area of literature. Ecological problems are now on the increase, and they are being evaluated by theorists all over the globe. Literature with nature depicted in it reflects human attitude. Many terms have been used to describe this kind

of writing. These include words like Green Studies as well as Ecocriticism. The study stresses on how human activities affect the ecology. Ecological decline takes place in various ways. The ecosystem suffers when forests are damaged or resources are exploited by mankind.

Astrid Bracke states in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (2014) that:

Contemporary ecocriticism is characterized by a paradox that is rarely remarked on: despite its insistence that human-nature relations and environmental crisis are important, pervasive and worthy of critical study, the majority of ecocritical scholarship has historically been concerned with a limited set of nature-oriented or environmentally inflected texts. (Bracke 423)

Eco-consciousness in *Sea of Poppies*

Nature plays a significant role in the trilogy Amitav Ghosh has written under the Ibis title. His care for environment can be seen in nearly all of his writings, but it is especially evident in the three books collectively described as the Ibis trilogy. Ecological issue is a kind of sociological issue that may have an impact on one's ability to live in a healthier environment. The topics Ghosh addresses in *Sea of Poppies* include social, cultural, and natural supremacy throughout the novel. The current research paper examines Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* with an ecocritical viewpoint and draws attention to environmental problems and the consequences of imbalance as well. Additionally, it demonstrates the connection between humankind and environment through flora, fauna, waterways, mountains, and wildlife. The present research paper tries to combine the many environmental problems presented in Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. Without a doubt, literature needs to make its way into our minds and influence our lives. The present research paper concentrates on the author's concern for environment and the danger posed by humanity's abuse of nature, which inspired the author to deliver a strong lesson to humankind by Nature, who acted as a stern educator to the characters.

The novel *Sea of Poppies* is a depiction of the illegal opium drug trade in British-ruled India for the Chinese market and which served to increase Britain's enormous riches. Rajesh Rai and Andrea Marion Pinkney states in *History, Narrative, and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction* (2012): "In *Sea of Poppies*, his most current work to date, Ghosh trains his attention on North Indian indentured laborers, the *girmityas*, and chronicles their experiences of indenture as the phenomenon began to crest in the late 1830s." (Ghosh 65) The novel *Sea of Poppies* addresses the British Raj's dishonest method of generating revenue by

manufacturing Opium illegally. In order to accurately describe the results of British control on the local people, the author encourages the reader to discover this influence and mark it on the text. The establishment of an Opium factory has resulted in a significant disruption of the ecosystem on a huge scale. Ghosh emphasizes the environmental destruction caused by uncontrolled exploitation of natural world as he describes the dishonest methods in which Britishers used to earn money via the unlawful export of Opium to Chinese market.

The novel's environmental significance is determined by its sense of location. The idea of location has long been a focal point for literary studies from an Ecocritical view point. The relationship between human beings and natural surroundings has been widely discussed in literature. The novel contains several moments that demonstrate a wonderful sense of location and the strong and integral interaction of mankind and environment in a harmonious and beautiful cohabitation.

The damaging consequence of growing Opium is that nutritious food crops have stopped to be cultivated, causing Deeti to recall that these foods not only provided nutrition but also helped make roofs. However, as a result of the illegal drug trade, many of them have starved to death or migrated.

Deeti analyses the changes in their lives that have occurred as a result of the shift in the crop production and cultivation method in the novel. Due to the production of Opium, the variety of crops is eliminated and anybody who refuses to cultivate Opium is forced to do so, leading ultimately to indebtedness and migration. She is aware that Opium was cultivated among the major grain crops, dal and vegetable crops, she recalls this when she was a kid. Due to Opium production, the variety of crops is lost, which leads to an increase in debt and migration. Cleaners generally use brooms to clean toilets, which is an excellent example of a cleaning material gained from environment. It is developed by humans from the palm trees and cannot be found in the marketplace. The locals utilize it for regular house cleanup.

When Deeti was her daughter's age, things were different: poppies had been a luxury then, grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops – wheat, masoor dal and vegetables. Her mother would send some of her poppy seeds to the oil-press, and the rest she would keep for the house, some for replanting, and some to cook with meat and vegetables.
(Ghosh 29)

Humans as well as other creatures who live in the surroundings get addicted to Opium. The author describes that the insects who drink the nectar of the poppy also get inebriated and behave strangely. Due to the delicious smell of the poppy, insects such as honeybees, beetles, and wasps are attracted towards it.

Moreover, the novel also depicts the effects of opium on creatures such as monkeys that resided in the neighborhood of the Opium factory. After taking opium for an extended period of time, individuals develop an addiction to or dependence on it. Also, creatures can't avoid the opium powder at the Opium factory, which makes humans to sneeze, and even Kalua's ox began sniffing when it travelled to the Opium factory. In another case, when Deeti doesn't have any money, she utilizes opium as payment in kind to her husband Kalua.

As Kalua's cart rolled on, towards the factory's main compound, Deeti and Kabutri began to sneeze; soon, Kalua and the oxen were sniffing too, for they had now drawn abreast of the godowns where farmers came to dispose of their 'poppy trash' – leaves, stalks and roots, all of which were used in the packaging of the drug. (Ghosh)

In the same way, the monkeys have become gloomy and dependent on this toxin called Opium, They acted in an odd manner and were unable to go from one spot to the next on their own as expected. A significant amount of ill-health amongst people and creatures may be linked to the garbage produced by the opium industry.

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. (Ghosh 91)

A pottery like earthen ware containing Opium may be used to catch fish with relative ease. The Opium production factory was located next to the Ganga River, and eventually the fish became hooked to the drug. Fishermen employ Opium-laced Gharas as a technique to capture fish quickly and effortlessly.

...a few steps from the Ganga. This stretch of riverbank was unlike any other, for the ghats around the Carcanna were shored up with thousands of broken

earthenware gharas – the round-bottomed vessels in which raw opium was brought to the factory. The belief was widespread that fish were more easily caught after they had nibbled at the shards, and as a result the bank was always crowded with fishermen. (Ghosh 92)

Through Deeti's visit to an Opium factory, the author describes the plight of the working conditions of opium factory workers. In India, polluted air is one of the largest causes of mortality than most other diseases. Air pollution is causing enormous public health problems. Opium has a variety of detrimental impacts on employees in the workplace, including dulling all of their senses. The author makes a comparison between the Opium factory and a kitchen.

Kalua is compelled to perform bestiality on a mare as punishment by the three alcoholic zamindars of the village, which is depicted as an example of brutality towards living creatures and the marginalized part of social system. This event is depicted as a representation of upper-class brutality to animals and the underrepresented category of society in the novel. It also depicts animal abuse by humans.

In the novel, Paulette, who is a daughter of a French botanist, is presented as a child of nature. The author justifies it by pointing out that the name she was granted was inspired by an epiphytic orchid that her father found three years ago. She is called nature's child as her father calls her so, since she has never worshipped any deity other than Mother Nature. Although her father was her educator, she enjoyed learning from nature.

But now, even as the gomusta continued, in the same sonorous tones, Paulette heard his words as though they were being spoken by her father, in French: . . . a child of Nature, that is what she is, my daughter Paulette. As you know I have educated her myself, in the innocent tranquility of the Botanical Gardens. She has had no teacher other than myself, and has never worshipped at any altar except that of Nature. (Ghosh 136)

The discharge of waste from the Opium plant into the Ganga demonstrates the degradation of the river's water. In India, the river is widely respected, and the water is utilized for drinking by everyone; nevertheless, the discharge of human and animal waste pollutes the water and makes it unsuitable for consumption. The Nile River, which serves as the life stream of the Egyptian civilization, is mentioned in this novel. One can observe the damage caused by Opium production as well as the destruction of trees and flora, when Deeti depicts the union

of Ganga and Karamnasa as the "destroyer of karma," she is saying that the touch of water may destroy years of well acquired virtue.

Her vantage point commanded a good view of both rivers, and her long vigil afforded her plenty of time to reflect on the stories that were told of the Karamnasa and of the taint it could cast upon the souls of the dead. The landscape on the rivers' shores had changed a great deal since Deeti's childhood and looking around now, it seemed to her that the Karamnasa's influence had spilled over its banks, spreading its blight far beyond the lands that drew upon its waters.(Ghosh 192)

One of the main causes of the environmental issue that is endangering Deeti's family and her village is the Opium cultivation. Opium production needs extra attention and work which, particularly when farmers don't benefit much from Opium growing, is additional strain on the indigenous farmers. The author thinks that with regard to human actions that are detrimental to environment, the rate of growth is quickening. The inappropriate use of land results in a variety of issues such as soil degradation, habitat destruction, etc.

The author has attempted to show how the whole ecosystem is damaged by Opium. The colonial authorities enacted Opium cultivation to gain own profit, but the results impact everything from the soil, to the atmosphere, to the wildlife, to the creatures, and even to the people. This fictional piece of work is a real-life record of environmental deterioration. In addition to these aspects of our ecosystem, such things as the soil on which we construct our homes, the oxygen we inhale, and the water bodies which supply us with drinking purposes and agriculture are all components of our physical world. The minute man first arrived on Earth, humans began interacting with their surroundings. Man was terrified of lightning, thunder, thick woods, and darkness because he had a basic understanding of nature and sought comfort and reassurance from its elements.

Conclusion

Ghosh's profound ecological vision is complemented by his socioecological knowledge, which shows that ecological issues are created not just by anthropological views, but also by other humans' dominance or oppression of people. It is also emphasized that the current generation needs to recognize the fundamental reason of nature's dominance. The concept is that every human and non-human creature on this earth needs compassion, dignity, and attention; they should not be oppressed or exploited.

In addition, Ghosh argues that if we are unwilling to treat our fellow humans with dignity and respect, then we cannot treat nature with proper care. He incorporates social ecological knowledge in his novel, thereby making a genuine contribution to society. He establishes that humanity is an integral component of environment. One of the most essential steps in solving the ecological problem is increasing awareness and understanding of human beings. He has set out on a mission to liberate all creatures from unwarranted forms of domination, oppression and exploitation, which he believes are needless. Ghosh thinks that the removal of authoritarian and hierarchical structures would end and solve the ecological problem.

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