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The Spirit of exploration and new ways of perceiving reality in *The Sea Of Poppies* of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract:

Literary texts are increasingly read as constructs of specific historical conditions and circumstances. New Historicism views history as a narrative construction involving a relationship of past and present concerns. It involves Gadamer's hermeneutic understanding of the past as constructed in relation to a present which is also a development out of that past, Hyden White's view of history as narrative construction or 'stories', and Bakhtin's articulation of all human utterances (including literary texts) as social acts which are multi-accentual and available for divergent uses . The new historicist focuses on the multiple contradictory material practices which embed each historical event or expressive act as contexts of production and reception. White says, "… historiography aspires to the condition of science by presenting a third-person narrative which appears to be the reflection of events as they are inherently structured by the process of history. Historiography gathers its authority by seeming to dispense with authorial voice, by simulating scientific discourse which appears to reflect the way the world simply is". He observes that 'real' events, however, never tell their own stories and that history is always a process of making the real into an object of desire through manipulations of voice and temporality.

After the empire, there was felt a need to cancel the colonial stereotypes as part of the decolonization process. The writers searched for evidence in the rich and varied pre-colonial existence. The urge to rewrite the past grew as it offered a base- ideological and narration on which they attempted to 'see' the past-present sequential in a new order from a perspective each has to invent for him / herself. The Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh is a re-telling of the present through the eyes of the past. Ghosh emphasizes the *enormous importance of history by situating every work in a distinct time and place, dealing with issues confronted by man in India, situated in the global context. He believes history to be central to the art of fiction and interprets it both at personal and social levels. "Where and when" of a text and "its connectivity to the world around" become very important in his case.*

Keywords: colonization, poppies, Zamindary, Deeti, ghaziapur, opium, Torture.

Introduction:

The Sea of Poppies is a book that begins in the 19th century, and records history over a period of time. The backdrop reminds one of the forgotten history. Narrativity having to do with 'real' events signals objectivity and seriousness. The discourse brings forth the memories of South Asia as a great nautical region and the shipping that suffered terribly since independence. India flourished through the ages with its thriving coastal trade, and travel was possible all the way on water- which now remains as a mere tourist luxury. Delhi, which has become the pivot of the country in a way, killed the coastal shipping. Ghosh feels sorry for the Indians and their loss. In an interview with *Star Weekend Magazine,* he says,

> … because of colonization we have to, say, Royal Albert Museum or the British Museum to know about ourselves. Our history is, in a way, lost, forgotten… I think the history of the last 200 years has been defaced largely, because of it we have to reclaim a lot of it from the colonial archive.

Ghosh's first novel of his planned triology, *The Sea of Poppies* is set in North India and the Bay of Bengal in 1838 on the eve of the British attack on the Chinese ports popularly known as the First Opium War- the most important historical event of the nineteenth century. China's vicious nineteenth century Opium wars act as a backdrop for the entire setting. The Opium Wars and the free trade strengthened the claws of the British. The novel reflects the enormity of the damage caused by the European trade market with its thrust for wealth on the Indian economy. The novel explores the exposure of Indian people to the capitalist demands mediated through the accumulative logic of the British. It encompasses the great economic themes of the nineteenth century like the cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese market, transportation of Indians to work on sugarcane plantations for the British in islands like Mauritius, Fiji and Caribbean islands. The lives of ordinary men and women framed against the grand narratives of history give scope to re-present the past.

The origin of capitalism runs parallel to the colonial history as Indians were still trying to emerge out of the anxieties of feudalism during that period. Capitalism and opium trade developed roots quickly in the Indian soil. The European appetite for money paralyzed the indian minds. For the British, India can be the only place for opium cultivation with its cheap labor. The British dreaded to think that there would be an end to the flow of opium into china. As they understood, they can sell only opium to China in return for importing tea and silk. They felt that "to end the trade would be ruinous… for all of India." Thus opium became an unavoidable compulsion in the lives of all strata of people.

The estate of Raskhali during the reign of Rajaa Neel Rattan Halder, the Zamindar, truly reflects the Indian feudal system and the orthodoxy of the times. Lost in luxury the elder Zamindar's entire concentration was on getting money and enjoying life. He regarded with aristocratic contempt the determination of the white mercantile community, and its private accounting of profit and opportunity. Opium was the monopoly of the British in eastern Indian and their partnership with the local Zamindars encouraged a number of friends, relatives and creditors of the latter to beg for a share in the investment. Unmanageable inflow of money attracted dependents in large numbers. The old Raja knew nothing about Mr.Burnham except that he was a ship owner and played a pivotal role in the trade. Each year "he got back a much larger sum" referred to as his tribute from the "Faghfoor of Maha-Chin,“ the Emperor of Great China. All that mattered was money making and profit. "Little did they know of the perils of the consignment trade and how the risks were borne by those who provided the capital" (Ghosh 85). Being dutiful by nature Raja neel Rattan, his son, stayed away from financial dealings. After his father's death, the weight and vacuum in the system disgusted him. The year 1837 is significant since it marked the decline in the value of American bills of exchange. Raja Neel Rattan is startled to note that his debts to Burnham Brothers far exceeded the value of the entire "Zamindary. "But very late in life he realizes that the very system he was upholding pushed him into the harsh realities of life. Their status-conscious orientation and feudal lifestyle led to their downfall.

Ghosh's representation of the history is intricately interlaced with geographical locations and dialects, economies and politics of the times. Against this backdrop, a multidimensional picture of 19th century Indian life emerges, filled with the life style of different classes of people with all their emotions, sentiments, habits including food, medicines, luxuries, marriage practices, funeral rites, male-female relationships, trade, cultivation etc. Such a representation of history reveals the significance of poppy cultivation, its production, distribution and the resultant alienation. The "profit motive" drives the mass cultivation of poppy in the place of staple food like wheat.

Poppy was an item produced not to be consumed but to be sold. It slowly included a colonial consciousness, transforming the farmer into a worker and subsequently into a slave. Distribution helped not the natives but the colonial rulers to perpetuate the rule of the market. Ultimately poppy led to the natives' alienation and escape from life. "Drug abuse" left deep anguish in the lives of masses and the nation at larger. Ghosh presents this history through the lives and emotions of his characters. The protagonist of the novel stands as an example. Poppies were a luxury in Deeti's days of childhood. No one thought of producing "the wet, treacly chandu opium“ that was made and packaged in the English factory, to be sent across the sea in the boats the hard toil needed to grow the crop was not encouraging. They felt that it was a horrid exercise for the sane. But this reality of their lives changes when the English forced them into a "world of no stability."

But what sane person would want to multiply these labours when there were better, more useful crops to grow, like wheat, dal, vegetables? But those 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 home, or throw it through a window… and, at the end of it, your earnings would come to no more than three-and-a-half sicca rupees, just to pay off your advance.

Deeti, an illiterate, innocent village woman finds it difficult to grasp the swift changes that engulf the villagers' lives. Their alienation becomes unavoidable with the destruction of relationships and the strands of livelihood that had shaped their lives. The idea of not cultivating what one needs was beyond her comprehension. Initially she could not understand how "money is no longer treated as money." But later she understands that money has become capital to earn more money. The same concept of using money to earn more money is outside the experience of the feudal lords like Raja Neel Rattan .

> As a family, their experience lay in the managing of kings and courts… and the property they disdained to handle themselves, preferring to entrust it to a legion of agents, gomustas and poor relatives… with new properties there came a great number of dependents…. The Raja would not suffer them to be rented (85-86).

The horrid place and the entire process of extraction of opium at Ghaziapur factory terrifies Deeti's village eyes. As she rushes in terror through the factory in search of her dying husband, she slowly understands the potency of opium and what the English were doing. She realizes the importance of the trade and its secret strength. For a moment she feels liberated.

The factory in Ghaziapur was so diligently patrolled by the sahibs and their sepoys-for if a little bit of this gum could give her such power over the life, the character, the very soul of this elderly woman, then with more of it at her disposal, why should she not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes?

Meanwhile, Raja Neel's arrest comes as a thunderbolt. He understands that his sinking has already started and the inconceivable sure to happen. As he is put in prison he feels that he would be acquitted but bemoans that his family's reputation would never be what it was. When all his people come to see him, he only wishes to turn back to see and "make sure that his wife, Malati was not among the women: even in the confusion of that moment, it was a great relief to know that she had not stepped out of the zenana – he was spared at least, the humiliation of having the veil of her seclusion torn away" .

In places like India and Indonesia, Europeans ruled indirectly through their domination of the local aristocracy. Ideologies of moral, cultural and racial supremacy backed its various ventures. Similarly, Zachary could not permit Paulette, a white woman to travel on board. For he feels that *ibis* will be sailing with all lascars which implies that the only European will be its 'officer'. The behavior of the Captain on the ship reflects the way the English ruled indirectly. As he dictates the 'Laws of the sea' he conveys a menacing colonial note in a veiled fashion:

> There is no better keeper of the law than submission and obedience. In that respect this ship is no different from your own homes and villages. While you are on it, you must obey Subedar Bhyro Singh as you would your own zamindars, and as he obeys me (404).

Nineteenth- century era was enveloped by the empire. European Nation states became powerful as their organizational efficiency led to territorial expansion and symbolic investment in the colonies on a massive scale. The business of colonization gambled and experimented not only with funds but also lives. The destruction of Raja Neel Rattan, who lost his Zamindari estate, power and status or an illiterate village woman like Deeti whose ambition was to cultivate grains are very much a part of history. The pervasive historicity is the impressive feature of the book. It reflects not only the political history but also an understanding of culture, religion, diversity, trade and much more.

Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies is a unique fictional creation based on a wide research not only on various aspects of the colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent but also the sea-routes of the time, the technical know-how of piloting ships and the typical language of the 'laskars' in a ship. In an interview given in 2002, Ghosh said, "I don't think there's a big difference between writing fiction and writing non-fiction. When you're writing non-fiction there's real world out there that has to be taken seriously which means that you have to take step outside the confines of what happens in your head and engage with the real world. But my fiction is also founded on very extensive research. The world interests me. Sometimes the world interests me as fiction and sometimes it interests me as non-fiction and I don't see a distinction."[1] The statement is applicable to all his works including Sea of Poppies where hitherto unrevealed aspects of colonial oppression, inflicted by a section of white men who were desperate to make up the loss caused by the abolition of slavery, are exposed through the rendering of how the business of carrying slaves in ships were replaced with the business of opium and of indentured labourers.

The sea forms the background of the novel and the ship the Ibis, which had earlier been used for transporting slaves and was now remodeled for the new transport, is at the centre. The novel is divided into three parts: 'Land,' 'River' and 'Sea.' In the first section 'Land,' the characters who were somehow .related to the ship are introduced along with the ship. The second part 'River' centers on the activities of the owner of the Ibis in Calcutta and also some of his friends. The third part 'Sea' is concerned with the inmates of the ship as it leaves Calcutta and moves on towards its destination. Even before the actual ship is described, it is visualized in the very beginning of the novel by a Bhojpuri woman Deeti, the wife of a worker in Ghazipur's Opium Factory, a poor, illiterate woman who did not have the chance of witnessing a ship when she visualized one.

She had never seen the sea, never left the district, never spoken any language but her native Bhojpuri, yet not for a moment did she doubt that the ship existed somewhere and was heading in her direction. The knowledge of this terrified her, for she had never set eyes on anything that remotely resembled this apparition, and had no idea what it might portend. (8)

That she was fated to be in that ship is suggested through her premonition, and surprisingly, the picture of the ship that she drew to clarify her vision to her daughter, "was an uncannily evocative rendition of its subject" (10). Later, it was accepted by the seasoned sailors that the vision of the ship was granted to Deeti by the sacred river Ganga. "In time among the legions who came to regard the Ibis as their ancestor, it was accepted that it was the river itself that had granted Deeti the vision: that the image of the Ibis had been transported upstream, like an electric current, the moment the vessel made contact with the sacred waters. This would mean that it happened in the second week of March 1838, for that was when the Ibis dropped anchor off Ganga-Sagar island, where the holy river debouches into the Bay of Bengal." (10)[2] The real ship is described as it was perceived by Zachary Reid, the American who joined as a carpenter but soon became the second mate of the ship on its way from Baltimore to Calcutta.

The Ibis was a schooner of old-fashioned appearance, neither lean, nor flush-decked like the clippers for which Baltimore was famous. She had a short quarter-deck, a risen fo'c'sle, with a fo'c'sle-deck between the bows, and a deckhouse amidships, that served as a galley and cabin for the bo'suns and stewards. . . . One thing Zachary did know about the Ibis was that she had been built to serve as a 'blackbirder,' for transporting slaves. This, indeed, was the reason why she had changed hands: in the years since the formal abolition of the slave trade, British and American naval vessels had taken to patrolling the West African coast in growing numbers, and the Ibis was not swift enough to be confident of outrunning them. As with many another slave-ships, the schooner's new owner had acquired her with an eye to fitting her for a different trade: the export of opium. In this instance the purchases were a firm called Burnham Bros., a shipping company and trading house that had extensive interests in India and China. (11)

While refitting the ship Zachary discovered that "the 'tween-deck, where the schooner's human cargo had been accommodated, was riddled with peepholes and air ducts, bored by generations of captive Africans" (12). Zachary's conversation with Monsieur d'Epinay, who handed him a letter that was to be delivered to the owner of the ship in Calcutta, throws more light on the new trade of indentured labour. He told Zachary, "My canes are rotting in the field Tell Mr. Burnham that I need men. Now that we may no longer have slaves in Mauritius, I must have coolies, or I am doomed" (21).

After Zachary met Mr. Burnham, the owner of the Ibis in Calcutta, the latter confirmed him that the vessel was going to do just the kind of work she was intended for. When Zachary reminded him that English laws had outlawed the trade in slaves, he justified the system of slavery with a typical colonial logic: "the Africa trade was the greatest exercise in freedom since God led the children of Israel out of Egypt. Consider . . . the situation of a so-called slave in the Carolinas—is he not more free than his brethren in Africa, groaning under the rule of some dark tyrant?" (79). Finally, Burnham made it clear that it was not 'slaves' but 'coolies' that was to be transported this time. He said, "Have you not heard it said that when God closes one door he opens another? When the doors of freedom were closed to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful of it—the Asiatic" (79). He was happy because a good ship was available in Baltimore, and because a hold that was designed to carry slaves would serve just as well to carry coolies and convicts.

Sea of Poppies depicts how the small farmers and agricultural labourers in colonial India were forced by circumstances to be coolies and deported in Mauritius and other places. The portrait of the Bhojpuri woman Deeti who had the vision of the Ibis in the very beginning of the novel is a typical example of such oppressed farmers. The novel shows how after losing her husband, who served in the opium factory and whose land had been forcibly used for opium plantation, Deeti is ready to die in her husband's pyre only to save herself from the lust of her brother-in-law, but is rescued by a lower class man Kalua, who marries her in secret and then takes her to the ship to be coolies in some other land.

Amitav Ghosh reveals areas of colonial oppression that were not much highlighted earlier along with the much talked-about topic of the oppression of the poor by local moneylenders.[4] The British businessmen wanted to earn easy money from cash crops and to meet their greed the Indian farmers were compelled to produce crops according to the liking of the colonials, depriving themselves of wheat and paddy that they needed most to support themselves. The cultivation of Indigo ('neel') that was thrust upon the farmers in Bengal was highlighted in Bengali writings of the period[3] and was included later in the agenda of National movements, but the cultivation of opium was little focussed. Ghosh sincerely reveals the plight of the farmers who fell in the clutches of the English businessmen and began poppy plantation. Before poppy plantation was introduced, the fields were heavy with wheat in winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw could be used to repair the hut's roof. "But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare—it had to be bought at the market, from people who lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could" (29). Earlier poppies were grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops such as wheat and the farmers liked to use poppy seeds as luxury items. As for the sap, it was left to dry to get hard 'akbari afeem' which the fanners could sell to local nobility and were also free to keep some amount for personal use during illness. But now the 'chandu' opium was made and packaged in the English factory for business and the farmers who supplied the poppies were ill paid and were not even allowed to keep some parts of the harvest with them for free selling or for personal use. Having done a lot of research on poppy plantation, Ghosh shows how the unwilling farmers were forced to plant poppy and face loss: 'no one was inclined to plant more because of all the work it took to grow poppies—fifteen ploughings of the land and every remaining clod to be broken by hand, with a dantoli; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering; and after all that, the frenzy of the harvest, each bulb having to be individually nicked, drained and scraped. Such punishment was bearable when you had a patch or two of poppies—but what sane person would want to multiply these labours when there were better, more useful crops to grow, like wheat, dal, vegetables? . . . 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 assami contracts, it was impossible to say no to them: if you refuse they would have their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you hadn't accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off. And, at the end of it, your earnings would come to no more than three-and-a-half sicca rupees, just about enough to pay off your advance. (29-30)

This is a detailed description of colonial oppression by compelling the Indian farmers, poor and illiterate, to harvest crops in their own land for the benefit of the British businessmen who had the support of judiciary with them. After Deeti came in contact with other indentured labourers she came to know that everyone's land was in hock to the agents of the opium factory, and that every farmer had been served with a contract, the fulfilling of which left them with no option but to strew their land with poppies. And when the harvest was over the farmers found that the little amount of grains they could bring home would not be able to feed their families and that they were destined to plunge deeper into debt (91).

The plight of the workers inside the Opium factory—the hazards faced by them and the insecurity of their dangerous job—is also revealed through Deeti's first-hand knowledge of the interior of the factory when she entered there after her husband's illness. Deeti saw that troops of boys were climbing as nimbly as acrobats at a fair to the shelves joined by struts and ladders, and were hopping from shelf to shelf to examine the balls of opium. Every now and again, an English overseer would call out an order and the boys would begin to toss spheres of opium to each other. Deeti wondered, "How could they throw so accurately with one hand, while holding on with the other—and that too at a height where the slightest slip would mean certain death" (96). In front of Deeti one boy indeed dropped a ball, sending it crashing to the floor, where it burst open, splattering its gummy contents everywhere. "Instantly the offender was set upon by cane-wielding overseers and his howls and shrieks went echoing through the vast, chilly chamber" (96). For the profit of the British businessmen the Indian farmers had to produce poppy in their fields denying themselves of bread and other necessities, the poor boys had to be engaged in the factory at the risk of their lives, and there was above all the inhuman torture of the white supervisors inside the factory.

Sea of Poppies also reveals that export of opium to China was the brain child of the British and the American businessmen, and thus the myth of China's hunger for opium since antiquity is broken. In the dinner party offered by the landlord Neel Ratan Mr. Doughty proudly proclaims: "the yen for opium would still be limited to their twice-born if not for the perseverance of English and American merchants. It's happened almost within living memory—for which we owe a sincere vote of thanks to the likes of Mr. Burnham" (112). It is disclosed by Mr. Burnham that they were very much worried as the officials in Canton started to end the inflow of opium into China. He said, "It is the unanimous opinion of all of us who do business there that the mandarins cannot be allowed to have their way. To end the trade would be ruinous—for firms like mine, but also ... for all of India" (111). He further clarified: "If not for opium, the drain of silver from Britain and her colonies would be too great to sustain" (112). Mr. Doughty commented at this point: "Johnny Chinaman thinks he can return to the good old days, before he got his taste for opium. But there's no going back." (112).

Neel Ratan had little idea that the traffic in opium had no official approval in China. He had seen that in Bengal the trade was not merely sanctioned but monopolized by the British authorities, under the seal of the East India Company and it was beyond his imagination that the Company could run a business in China without the official approval of that country. Mr. Burnham shattered-Ugly Face of Colonialism.

Neel's idealistic views formed on the study of British literature; it is revealed that the business had already been running in an illegal way: "Trafficking in opium has been illegal there for some time. But they've never made a tumasher about it in the past: their mandarins and chuntocks always got their ten-per-cent desturees and were glad to shut their eyes to it. The only reason they're making a fuss now is that they want a bigger share of the profits" (113).

The colonial policy of putting on fade to camouflage the ugly face of colonialism is revealed in Mr. Burnham's arguments in favour of free trade, which, he said, was likely to be the professed cause behind the impending war against the Chinese. He said to Zachary who was also present in the party, The war, when it comes, will not be for opium. It will be for a principle: for freedom—for the freedom of trade and for the freedom of the 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. More so perhaps, since in its absence many millions of natives would be denied the lasting advantages of British influence. . . . British rule in India could not be sustained without opium—that is all there is to it, and let us not pretend otherwise. ... the Company's annual gains from opium are almost equal to the entire revenue of your own country, the United States? Do you think that British rule would be possible in this impoverished land if it were not for this source of wealth? And if we reflect on the benefits that British rule has conferred upon India, does it not follow 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)

When Neel Ratan asked him politely if he was not troubled to invoke God in the service of opium, Mr. Burnham promptly answered with a remark of his friend, "Jesus Christ is Free Trade and Free Trade is Jesus Christ" and explained, "If it is God's will that opium be used as an instrument to open China to his teachings, then so be it. ... I can see no reason why any Englishman should abet the Manchu tyrant in depriving the people of China of this miraculous substance."[5] (116)

Introducing the conversation of the British and American characters on the topic of their illegal business, Ghosh discloses the shameless colonial policy of making money as well as spreading Christianity through illegal and immoral ways.[6] Ghosh's own ironic comment on the function of the Parliament in England is also provided through Burnham's proud remarks. As Neel Ratan said that he was aware of the function of the parliament in England, Burnham laughed and said, "Parliament? . . . Parliament will not know of the war until it is over. Be assured, sir, that if such matters were left to Parliament there would be no Empire" (117-18).

After a period of time when it was learnt that the Chinese rulers had beheaded some half-dozen opium-sellers and their bodies had been strung up for full public view, Burnham and Doughty expressed their opinion that war with China was inevitable. The hypocrisy in their attitude is once again exposed in their remarks. Burnham said that he disliked war more than anybody else, but "there are times when war is not merely just and necessary, but also humane." That time had come to China, he said. Mr. Doughty supported him emphatically with the remark, "Indeed, humanity demands it. We need only think of the poor Indian peasant—what will become of him if his opium can't be sold in China?" (260). After an objective display of the plight of the Indian farmers because of the plantation of poppies, the boastful remarks of the British businessmen expose, ironically, the hollow colonial demand that colonial rule was necessary for the total development of the natives. Ghosh makes Captain Chillingworth, an Englishman, confess the pretension of the colonial rulers: "The truth is . . . that men do what their power permits them to do. We are no different from the Pharaohs or the Mongols: the difference is only that when we kill people we feel compelled to pretend that it is for some higher cause. It is this pretence of virtue . . . that will never be forgiven by history" (262).

The colonial rulers exploited not only the subaltern class but also the well-off Indians, the landlords in particular, who had unshakable faith in the Company's policy and a high regard for the Queen's rule. It was due to their ignorance of reality that the well-off persons like the landlord of Rashkhali, Neel Ratan Haider, were trapped by the British businessmen and got ruined. Neel Ratan was financially exploited by Burnham and being accused of forgery, he was sent to a jail across the black water, as a part of capital punishment. That the British judiciary system was far from impartial is once again proved in his case. When Neel Ratan saw that Mr. Justice Kendulbushe was going to preside over the trial, he doubted his impartiality as he was well aware of the judge's friendship with Mr. Burnham. And the result was according to his anticipation. The judge passed upon him the sentence of the law of forgery and explained to him that it was a crime of the utmost gravity. The colonial pride is expressed in every word uttered by the judge: forgery was a hanging offence—a measure which played no small part in ensuring Britain's present prosperity and in conferring upon her the stewardship of the world's commerce. And if this crime proved difficult to deter in a country such as England, then it is only to be expected that it will be very much more so in a land such as this, which has only recently been opened to the benefits of civilization. . . . How is society to judge a forger who is also a man of education, enjoying all the comforts that affluence can bestow, whose property is so extensive as to exalt him greatly above his compatriots, who is considered a superior being, almost a deity, among his own kind? ... Would it not be the duty of this court to deal with such a man in exemplary fashion, not just in strict observance of the law, but also to discharge that sacred trust that charges us to instruct the natives of this land in the laws and usages that govern the conduct of civilized nations?" (235-37)

Neel Ratan was taken across the black water in the ship the Ibis where he had to suffer such humiliation as could never be dreamt of by a man of his status. He was to stay with a man who lay unconscious, making the place full of shit and urine and Neel had to cleanse the place as sweepers do. Gradually, however, he developed a sort of friendship with his cell-mate, Ah Fatt, who had been addicted to opium during his first meeting with Neel Ratan that he was almost senseless at the time. Both Neel Ratan and Ah Fatt were harassed by the first mate who took sadistic pleasure in inflicting torture on them in unthinkable ways and towards the end of the novel both of them are seen escaping in a boat along with Serang Ali, Jadu and Kalia. Before the escape Kalua had killed Subedar Bhyro Singh—the man, engaged for looking after the indentured labourers, happened to be a relative of Deeti's in-laws and he whipped Kalua in public apparently to punish him for escaping with a woman of upper class, but actually for taking revenge on him after his failure to have perverted sex relationship with Deeti—and Ah Fatt had killed the first mate. The grudge of the oppressed and the tortured against the agents of colonial rulers is evident in these two murders. The severest criticism of colonial rule is however found in the speech of a French man Mr. Lambert, the director of the Botanical garden in Shibpur, whose daughter Paulette is an important character in the novel— the only white woman in disguise in the Ibis. Baboo Nobo Krishna Pander, an employee of Mr. Burnham and also a local moneylender, who had been asked by Mr. Lamburt to arrange money by selling a golden chain and could not contact him because of his untimely death, told Paulette what her father had said in fluent Bengali: "I have raised her (Paulette) to revel in that state of liberty that is Nature itself. If she remains here, in the colonies, most particularly in a city like this, where Europe hides its shame and its greed, all that awaits her is degradation: the whites of this town will tear her apart, like vultures and foxes, fighting over a corpse. She will be an innocent thrown before the money-changers who pass themselves off as men of God" (117). Mr. Lamburt was devoted to the cause of the Garden and the poor people, and had little savings when he approached death. He desperately wanted an amount for the passage money of his daughter who must leave India after his death, he felt. His comment on the British rule in India exposes the rotten condition of colonialism.

A vivid picture of racial conflict is found in the description of the foul weather that the ship faced while heading for Calcutta; it was becalmed a fortnight in the doldrums and the crew became the victims of racism. "With the crew on half-rations, eating maggoty hardtack and rotten beef, there was an outbreak of dysentery: before the wind picked up again, three men were dead and two of the black crewmen were in chains, for refusing the food that was put before them" (12-13). With hands running short, Zachary put aside his carpenter's tools and became a full-fledged foretop man. After the second mate fell overboard and got drowned—he was suspected to be murdered by the black men in the crew who hated him—Zachary was to shoulder the duty of the second mate. Though he had no knowledge of sea and ship, he was chosen as the second mate, thanks to his white complexion. The third part of the novel exposes the grim picture of the physical torture inflicted on the natives in the ship both by the white men and the agents of the white men. Even the Captain of the Ibis who appeared a bit liberal, approved of Bhyro Singh's beating Kalua who, he said, had run off with a woman of high caste and deserved punishment. When Zachary appealed to him on behalf of Kalua, arguing that the choice of one's wife might not be the concern of the authority, the Captain reminded him of the practice in America where a Negro was never spared in case he dared to marry a white woman. He also clarified the British policy of 'divide and rule' according to which the class of Indian people that helped the British to continue colonial rule in their country must be supported by the British. He said, "I will not deny these men, who have served us faithfully, the justice they seek. For this you should know, gentleman, that there is an unspoken pact between the white man and the natives who sustain his power in Hindoosthan—it is that in matters of marriage and procreation, like must be with like,, and each must keep to their own. The day the natives lose faith in us, as the guarantors of the order of castes—that will be the day, gentlemen, that will doom our rule. This the inviolable principle on which our authority is based—it is what makes our rule different from that of such degenerate and decayed peoples as the Spanish and Portuguese-" (482). Though outwardly gentle, the Captain followed the unspoken rules of the colonizer, the rules that helped to keep the colony in control. Persons like the Captain did not appear rude and rough as did the first mate of the ship. They only put on facades of civilization when they spoke of civilizing others; but they sincerely believed in the basic differences among the races and their success as colonizers depended on aggravating the differences among persons; Ghosh has analyzed this mindset of the colonizers and has also exposed the various ways of exploiting the natives to enrich their coffer.

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3. *Star Weekend Magazine,* www.thedailystar.net
4. The Sunday Statesman, Literary, Kolkata; p.3, Aug.25, 2002.
5. This presentation of the ship through a character's vision before it is actually described and the link between the character's intuition and the fact that follows adds an uncanny charm to the novel. Reference to the actual date of the ship's dropping anchor off the Ganga-Sagar island along with the uncanny charm of Deeti's vision is suggestive of a blending of reality and fancy.
6. Amitav Ghosh has shown how the subaltern issues and the feminist issues were merged with the colonial misrule. When Deeti's husband Hukum Singh was on the verge of death, Deeti went to the opium factory to sell the product of her year long labour and got a couple of silver rupees. She was shown the account book and she learnt that at the start of the season her husband had taken a much larger advance than she had thought. She cried in despair at the thought of the utter impossibility of running her family with such meagre amount. The clerk (muharir) behind the counter told her to do what others were doing: "Go to the moneylender. Sell your sons. Send them off to Mareech. It's not as if you don't have any choices" (155). On hearing that Deeti had no son, he said, "Then sell your land . . . you people always come here and talk about being hungry, but tell me, who's ever seen a peasant starve? You just like to complain, all the time" (155). On her way home, she entered a shop to purchase the bare necessities and was trapped by the shopkeeper. "Her frugality was not lost on the shopkeeper who happened to be also a prominent seth and moneylender. What's happened-ji, O my sister-in-law? Lie said, with a show of concern. Do you need a few nice bright Bena- rasi rupees to see you through till the shravan harvest? Deeti resisted the offer till the thought of Kabutri. . . . She gave in and agreed to place the impression of her thumb on the Seth's account book in exchange for six months' worth of wheat, oil and gurh. Only when she was leaving did it occur to her to ask how much she owed and what the interest was. The Seth's answer took her breath away: his rates were such that her debt would double every six months. . . . She tried to return goods but it was too late" (156). The conversation between Deeti and the clerk and that between Deeti and the moneylender-cum-shopkeeper reveal the cruelty of the well-off persons; the poor and the under-privileged had always been exploited by their countrymen and the colonial rule aggravated the situation. It was worse when the oppressed was a female.
7. Deenabandhu Mitra's Bengali play Neel Darpan written on the indigo plantation in the soil of Bengal raised commotion in Bengal and aggravated the conflicts between the British rulers and the local re-bels. The drama enacted on the stage revealed the torture inflicted on the Bengali farmers who were compelled to produce indigo instead of rice and faced irreparable loss.
8. Mr. Burnham brings out the use of opium for medical treatment and argues that to deny the Chinese people of the opportunities of modem medical treatment is a crime which the British would not tolerate. He says, "it would be well nigh impossible to practise modern medicine or surgery without such chemicals as morphine, codeine and narcotine—and these are but a few of the blessings derived from opium. And if we consider all this, is it not apposite to ask if the Manchu tyrant has any right to deprive his helpless subjects of the advantages of progress?"

(116). When asked by Neel what he would say on the addiction and intoxication caused by opium, Mr. Burnham poses to be a religious teacher and argues that these ills are merely aspects of the fallen nature of man. He continues, "the antidote for addiction lies not in bans enacted by parliaments and emperors, but in the individual conscience—in every man's awareness of his personal responsibility and his fear of God. As a Christian nation this is the single most important lesson we can offer to China—and I have no doubt that the message would be welcomed by the people of that unfortunate country. ... It is tyranny alone that is to blame for China's degeneracy, sir. Merchants like myself are but the servants of Free Trade, which is as immutable as God's commandment" (117). The double face of the colonizers—their greed for money as well as passion for spreading Christianity and their lip service to remove the sufferings caused by the tyrants—is perfectly exposed by Ghosh. That the agents of the East India Company had little ideas about the philosophical thoughts and political theories of Great Britain is humorously exposed in the novel through the revelation of their utter ignorance. When Neel Ratan humbly said that he had read the writings of Hume, Hobbes and Locke, Burnham and Doughty reveal •their ignorance in regard to these great thinkers in a way that provokes laughter. "'Please do not speak to me, sir,' said Mr. Burnham, in the chilly tone of a man who wishes to snub a name-dropper, 'of Mr. Hume and Mr. Locke. For I would have you know that I have been acquainted with them since they served on the Bengal Board of Revenue. I too have read every word they've written—even their report of sanitation. And as for Mr. Hobbes, why 1 do believe I dined with him at my club just the other day.' 'Fine fellow, Hobbes,' Mr. Doughty broke in suddenly. 'Got a sit on the Municipal Council now, if I'm not mistaken. Went pig-sticking with me once. The shikarees scare up an old sow and a brood of piglets. Came charging at us! Scared tdhe Nick's knackers out of the horses. Old Hobbes was tossed—right on a little suckling. Dead on the spot. The piglet I mean Hobbes was unscathed. Damnedest thing I ever saw. Made a fine roast too. Piglet I mean'" (118-19).