

POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*

J. Vency Jasmine, Research Scholar, Department of English,
St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli, TN

Dr. Cheryl Davis, Assistant professor, Research Supervisor and Guide, Department of English,
St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli-620 002

Abstract:

Sea of poppies (2008), the first volume in Amitav Ghosh's proposed 'Ibis Trilogy' narrates a period namely earlier nineteenth- century colonial history in Asia. The characters in Ghosh's novel have chosen to travel across the Indian Ocean to an unfamiliar island where they must reconstruct new identities. Ghosh portrays graphically the experiences of the Indians who suffered from the results of the socio-political, environmental, cultural and economic changes in colonial India. As a postcolonial ecocritical novel, *Sea of Poppies* has projected the appalling environmental degradation caused by cultivation of Poppy and opium trade, colonialism, displacement, migration, quest for identity, and the forgotten stories of India's indentured workers who take Ibis as their new home, thus projecting a postcolonial eco critical perceptions of place. The aim of this paper is to analyse these traits of postcolonial ecology on environment.

Keywords: Postcolonial ecocriticism, displacement, diasporic identity.

Introduction

Ecocriticism is a new perspective of literary criticism. It analyses in an interdisciplinary level how the depiction of nature, human culture and the political agenda that shape the literary texts can be moulded to find a relevant solution to the emerging environmental catastrophe. The term 'ecocriticism' was coined by William Ruekert in 1978 to address issues related to landscape and environment, which were seldom concerns of literary critics earlier. Greg Garrard, in his book 'Ecocriticism', quotes Cheryl Glotfelty's definition of this new idiom:

[It 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 criticism brings an awareness of the modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies." (Garrard, 2004: 13)

Ecocritic Donelle Dreese mentions a few issues that are part of the usual concerns of ecocriticism:

. . . how nature is presented, when it is represented, how the environmental crisis has influenced literature, and how the concepts of the environment have evolved through the centuries. (Dreese, 2002: 1)

Ecocriticism and Culture

The culture nature dichotomy and the interaction between the two are the two major concerns of ecocriticism. Greg Garrard quotes the views of Richard Kerridge from his book, *Writing the Environment*, which emphasizes the potential of ecocriticism to explore the cultural implications of any analysis of the literature about environment:

The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part concealed in a great

many cultural places. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as a response to environmental crisis” (Garrard, 2004: 4).

One of the most important functions of ecocriticism is to project literature as an ecological principle or an ecological energy within the larger system to cultural discourses (Zapf, 2006: 55). Hence ecocriticism has moved beyond biological deterministic views of nature culture relationships and forges towards acknowledging the aspect of difference and independent dynamics of cultural and intellectual phenomena (ibid, 2006: 51).

Postcolonialism

Post-colonial theories, because of their anthropocentric nature, study only human behaviors and their condition as a significant subject over non-human entities. Post-colonialism examines and responds to the cultural and ideological legacy of colonialism. It attacks the centuries of slavery and economic and physical exploitation of native people and their lands and resources. It dismantles the social hierarchical structure, which is based on western thought and epistemology and provides an agency to the colonized and the marginalized people to speak for themselves.

Postcolonialism is not unaware of environmental changes and recurring problems because of people's neglectful and oblivious attitude towards the environment. When any region is colonized, it means the whole environment is colonized. The environment begins to be manipulated by the dominant power. Besides, land provides an identity to people who belong to the place. Hence, any kind of intrusion in terms of power politics harms integrity of the culture and the environment. The environment is inseminated with history; every trait (land, animals, plants, animals, etc.)

IBIS TRILOGY

Ecology gets relatively a strong voice in the *Ibis* trilogy of Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh's concern for environment can easily be traceable in almost all his literary works particularly in his last three novels popularly known as *Ibis* trilogy. These are *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015). Among several issues of ecocriticism, the key ones that become very prominent in these novels are Ecological Imperialism and Ecocide and others such as migration, border crossing, hybridity of culture, sense of place, sense of diasporic displacement and identity, subversion of colonial injustices, history of marginalized in and the contexts of nationalism, internationalism, violence and communalism etc. This article will read Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* along the above themes and also as “histories from below” (Antoinette Burton, 2012) and position the writing of alternative histories of the colonial times within an ecocritical context. While such rewritings have always been a central preoccupation of postcolonial literature, the recent tendency has been to look at history from increasingly local, individualised perspectives.

Sea of Poppies

The first novel of the *Ibis* trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* suggests how on a large scale the poppy was cultivated during the British rule. The British forced the Indian peasants to grow opium in the vast arable land where the regular food grains were usually produced. Ghosh captures a magnificent image of the massive farming of opium at the last leg of winter 'in a year when the poppies were strangely slow to shed their petals' Ganga then took a different look as if it was 'flowing between twin glaciers' because the two banks of this holy river were shrouded with white poppies in such a manner that they looked like 'the snows of high Himalayas descended on the plains' ushering the advent of the colourful month spring (Ghosh 3). But the splendour of this imagery contains within it the bleak side of the aftereffect. The cultivation of opium brings havoc to the production of food crops which are major lifelines for the people of that locality.

From a socio-environmental perspective the novel is a telling narrative of a man-made disaster that disrupted the economic, domestic and cultural stability of life in northern India in the 19th century. Against this background, 'Sea of Poppies' paints a poignant picture of the human devastation caused by

imperialism. A large cast of characters assembles in Calcutta. The *Ibis*, a former slave ship, is being refitted to take a large group of indentured coolies to Mauritius. As to the people on board they are a motley array of sailors and stowaways, coolies and convicts, thrown together by fate. From a bankrupt Raja to a widowed village-woman, from a mulatto American freedman to a free-spirited European orphan the *Ibis* had a truly diverse cast of Indians and Westerners. As they sail down the Hooghly and into the sea, their old family ties are washed away, and they view themselves as jahaj-bhais, or ship-brothers, who will build whole new lives for themselves in the remote islands where they are being taken.

Environmental degradation as depicted in the Novel

At the intra-textual level the point of relevance in this novel, from the environment aspect, is the sense of place. Boel has observed that 'the concept of place has always been of central interest to literature-environment studies'. (Buell, 2011:420) The interconnectedness between human life/history and physical environments have been common in literature. There are passages in the novel which show the remarkable sense of attachment to place and the intense and inextricable mix of a human element in a symbiotic and sublime coexistence with nature.

It happened at the end of winter, in a year when the poppies were strangely slow to shed their petals: for mile after mile, from Benares onwards, the Ganga seemed to be flowing between twin glaciers, both its banks being blanketed by thick drifts of white petalled flowers. It was as if the snows of the high Himalayas had descended on the plains to await the arrival of Holi and its springtime profusion of colour. (Ghosh, 2008:3)

The degrading effect of the cultivation of opium is that it has ceased the cultivation of edible food crops as Deeti remembers how edible crops were grown earlier and they not only gave them food but material for making roof. It was a perfect life but due to the cultivation of opium they have to die from hunger or migrate to Mauritius. As she says:

In 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- it had to be bought at the market, from people lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could (Ghosh, 2008, 29).

In the novel Deeti compares the change in their lives brought due to the change in the cropping pattern. The diversity of the crops is lost due to the cultivation of opium and whoever denies growing opium is compelled and finally it results in debt and migration. It is not only human beings who become an addict to opium but all living beings in the environment are also affected by it. The insects that suck the nectar of the poppy flower also become drunk and behave unusually in the novel as Ghosh says that sweet odour of the poppy pod attracts the insects like bees, grasshoppers and wasps and in a few days, they get struck in the liquid flowing out of the pod. The effect of opium on the behavior of the monkeys living near the Sundur Opium Factory is that like other monkeys they never chattered, fought among themselves, stolen things or food from anyone or came down, they came down only to eat and climbed again. As Ghosh says:

When they came down from the trees it was to lap at the sewers that drained the factory's effluents; after having sated their cravings, they would climb back into the branches to resume their scrutiny of the Ganga and its currents (Ghosh 2008, 91).

The serene sense of place prevalent earlier is ruptured when dislocation takes place. The social, economic and political compulsions that snap the intimate bond between man and place results in an irreparable discord that leaves a subtle trauma behind. The many stories recounted by the characters in the

novel in the memories of this sense of place and dislocation. For Amitav Ghosh and other postcolonial writers, the theme of colonial domination and ecological degradation is getting priority in fiction too because it is through storytelling that a successful and emotive communication is better facilitated than through nonfiction.

Writing of alternative histories

Alexandru (2017) views Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* as an account of “world histories from below” (Antoinette Burton, 2012) and positions the writing of alternative histories of the colonial times within an ecocritical context. While such rewritings have always been a central preoccupation of postcolonial literature, the trend today is to look at history from increasingly local, individualised perspectives. Ghosh uses nature as a background, but also as a partner in the dialogue through which history is written. He thus rewrites history “from the bottom” rather than from the centre of power, choosing the perspective of disadvantaged individuals, and so performs a similar gesture of celebrating life across artificially set boundaries.

In *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh retells the official history of colonial India from the perspective of a diverse group of marginalised characters, while various binding, culturally constructed categories, such as caste, marriage and gender, are deconstructed. The ecocritic Antoinette Burton, also concurs with this concept of world histories from below – the writing of the grand narrative of history by bringing together a diversity of local personal narratives and considers them as characteristic of Ghosh's writing. Ghosh thus shifts the emphasis onto the local dimension of history and the ways in which we can follow its traces to this day. According to Alexandru (2017), in this process of localised, detail-sensitive history rewriting, the acute presence of the environment and of ecology plays a very important part, as they change the whole perspective in which inter-human relations are situated and thus seriously challenges the status quo in both Indian society and the British colonial rule of the time.

In *Sea of Poppies* a group of protagonists are brought together by chance. They share stories of traumatic displacement that are in some ways similar. They leave behind their current positions and migrate down the Ganges, and further across the Indian Ocean towards Mauritius. Most of them have contracts as indentured labourers, others are mere adventurers, but all of them share a desire to change location to escape some form of oppression, or are simply in search of a better life. Under the pressure of extreme circumstances, they are united by their understanding of the fact that in extreme situations all prejudice becomes futile and spontaneous, unconditional human bonds are all that matter. In this aspect, they think ahead of their time, like contemporary-minded characters, whom Ghosh uses to dismantle the world of rigid conventionalism in which his novel is set. The novel uses individual cases constructed as extraordinary instances of revolt against the social status quo to challenge, in the spirit of a genuine postcolonial literary ecology, not only the rigid constrictions of society, but also certain assumptions about how history is written. By exploring the individual psychologies of his rule challenging characters, Ghosh also proposes a variety of history that does justice to those who are on the margin, but who actually represent the force of change. From this perspective, he challenges virtually immutable social categories. On board the schooner *Ibis*, people come together who would never have been able to in terms of the conventions governing society on land. Untouchability no longer matters. Marriage, described as an equally rigid arranged institution in both Hindu society and the British one, relaxes its constrictions when counterpoised to the individual force of feelings, entirely neglected by both traditions, but which Ghosh boldly upholds. Gender assumptions are also questioned as male and female characters equally claim their right to living free and happy lives.

Ghosh portrays characters from all strata of society and all parts of the world and so is the language used by them. Such homogenous amalgamation and confluence of the elite and the subaltern, the centre and margin, the occidental and the oriental, the master and the slave influence the readers of all persuasions. The author focuses on almost every character belonging to different levels of society. They

are as various persons of marginalised subjection mainly physical, economic, political, religious, judicial, and social. Ghosh's choice of characters is almost pointedly allegorised or symbolic. Deepti a victims of sexual, economic, and social marginalisation, driven to attempt sati; Neel, the pleasure loving native raja; Burnham and Doughtly the British with a streak for power and profit and so are the others characters. They appear as prototypes of the victimised natives. They each individually show a tremendous sense of individuality, resource, subversion, resilience in the face of personal adversity and overcome the dangers of stereotype. Thus migration, dislocation of deterritorialization of culture and diaspora are also major issues of postcolonialism. Ghosh employs deliberately, effectively and meaningfully the postcolonial narrative devices such as magic-realism, meta-fiction, mixed genres, subversion, chutnifiction, deconstruction and story within the story as modes of resisting Western hegemony, thereby rebuilding and reinstating non-west.

Quest for Identity

In this novel, it is discernible to note an inquisitive concern for identity. The identity relates to the various arenas of an individual in the form of race, culture, class, gender or origin. Ghosh has projected his characters who are searching for their identity. Their concern for identity is allied to diasporic identity, cultural identity, national identity and subaltern identity, alienation, struggle for existence, dilemma of dual identity, sense of belonging and nostalgia are several constraints that have been exemplified through the well-defined characters of his novels (Pooja Narain 2016).

Diasporic identity

Diasporic identity is mutable and adapting depending upon the circumstances and the situation an individual is facing while displaced from his native land. The main theme of Ghosh's novels are concerned with the displacement, be it diaspora, migration or exile. The different issues and problems associated with the displacement also occupy the center stage. Ghosh focuses on the diasporic experiences of alien land where they are coping with the new circumstance and involve in a sincere quest for identity (*Ibid*, 2016).

Cultural identity

Cultural identity is dynamic, receptive, questioned and arbitrated as it is expressed and enunciated in relation to power, through regular practices and involvements. Thus perceived, cultural identity is not something that already exists, transcending place, history and culture but the concept which is taking shape as per the time and place. For Ghosh, whose life has been marked by multiple movements across geographic, linguistic, national and cultural boundaries, diaspora offers a valuable 'transnational' perspective from cultural boundaries; diaspora offers a valuable 'transnational' perspective from which to destabilize homogeneous conceptions of culture and identity.

Subaltern identity:

The other form of identity that is related with subaltern also has a prominent place in this novel. Ghosh strongly believes that the grand canvass of any incident most of the time overlook individualistic experience during the colossal sweeps of historical, social or political turmoil. Therefore Ghosh in his novels deals with the characters taken from lower strata of society forming subaltern fit them into the historical events and express their sufferings and fight for the survival in respect to that event. Ghosh projects the concept that the subaltern can speak, if given a proper opportunity and with an opposite engagement of the discourse. He purposefully brings subaltern characters into stories and focuses on personal histories of these individuals. The marginalized characters help us perceive life, events and issues from their point of view.

To sum up, his portrayal of the notion subaltern generates following points: the enquiry of and conception of foundation, to trace their societies and identities to their innate position, an engrossing conformation of center and margins, involving of cultural identities, intricacy of the nucleus shift, a belief of the fact that the subaltern can speak for themselves or their position can be illustrated either through making them speak their stories or by creating stories on and around them in his writings (Alexandru,

2017).

Displacement

The representation of place in literature is the main concern of ecocritics. Cheryll Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm, xviii). Glotfelty states that [ecocriticism] has one foot in literature and the other on land” (Glotfelty and Fromm, xix). The notion of place functions as a critical study area in addition to race, class, and gender. As well as being a physical entity, like gender, race, and class, it is a social difference and subject to the hegemonic power systems as it is socially constructed so it has multiple meanings and perceptions. It takes its meaning accordingly to the narratives of different study areas.

While ecocriticism stressing the importance of local place, postcolonial ecocriticism goes beyond developing personal identification, fixity, rootedness, and attachment to a local place within a national border. “From a postcolonial perspective, a bioregional ethic poses certain problems, for the concentric rings of the bioregionalists more often out into transdandalism than into transnationalism” (Nixon, 238). Before colonization, the place was the integral part of the personal, communal, and national identities in the colonies, that's why the loss of place or displacement due to imperialism was an assault on place-based identities of the colonized people. These aspects of postcolonial ecocriticism provide a useful exploration of *Sea of Poppies* which has not been bound by the conceptions of fixity to local or national place, which portrays the bound of social and environmental issues that “there is no social justice without ecological justice” (Huggan and Tiffin, 35).

Ghosh unearths the spatial amnesia how the nineteenth century British global capitalist expansion has threatened people and places in particular places of the world with violence, exploitation, and displacement. Postcolonial ecocriticism favours postcolonial preoccupation with the histories of the experiences of displacements. Ghosh recreates the experience of detachment from the place that was shaped by the process of global colonial expansion of British Empire. Instead of being part of a specific place, origins, community and nation, the characters negotiated several degrees of places, locations, cultures, regions, nations, and continents by crossing across the Black Water. They lost their boundaries and construct their new identities in their new place. The postcolonial ecocritical aspect deals with the movement from local belonging that was a form of colonialist essentialism to international areas to focus on the global social and environmental concerns and in/justices. It engages with postcolonial border crossing, hybridization, replacement in connection with the idea of the place. Rob Nixon (2011) compares postcolonial concern and ecocritical concerns related to the notion of place.

After exploring the economic and social realities of migration, Ghosh collects his heterogeneous characters upon a ship as indentured labourers whose migration created South Asian diaspora. Diaspora has a displacement factor in its roots, “diaspora as dislocation” (Mullaney, 2010, 9). In addition, Diaspora recalls the meeting of the diverse people, hybridity, replacement, and recovering a sense of place attachment. It is closely related to the redevelopment of individual, communal, and national forms of identities. Place functions as a significant element in understanding these identities. “[I]t was the uprooting of slavery and transportation and the insertion into the plantation economy (as well as the symbolic economy) of the Western world that 'unified' these peoples across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to their past” (Hall, 227). In the midst of trial and trauma of displacement, the characters in the novel never lose hope, but breathe an air of optimism.

Conclusion

The Sea of Poppies embodies significant themes of postcolonialism and environment. The novel deftly delineates the colonial period- migration, multiculturalism, displacement, diasporic and subaltern identity. The characters narrate and create an alternate mode of history-history from below. The novel is densely populated with a variety of characters drawn from different parts of the world. They are like tellers narrating their tales, wanderers on a perpetual journey in search of meaning and self-actualisation with the

longing for home to return. In this process, they take another journey and establish the wisdom of the east on the hegemony of the West. The novel bears the print of master craftsman to quote Ghosh “an arabesque in the pattern of a carpet”.

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