

Oceanic Crossings, Migration and Fluid Identities: Navigating History and Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy

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Oceanic space has played a pivotal role in maritime travel, exploration, migration, trade and commerce right from the ancient days. This in-between space has led to cultural intermixing and exchanges, sowing the seeds of globalization. The discovery of new routes became an impetus to empire expansion, and thereby the expansion of colonial power. The Indian Ocean became the seat of Opium business and Opium War. The history of Opium trade, its impact on the Chinese society and the resultant ban, and the outbreak of Opium War form the backdrop of Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy. Maritime literature opens up new avenues for interracial and intercultural relationship. The trilogy examines how maritime travel moulds and recreates the identity of individuals.

In *Ibis* trilogy which comprises *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015), Ghosh foregrounds the fluid boundaries of nation, race, culture, and identity and intertwines facts with fiction. He weaves the tapestry of *Ibis* trilogy using varied characters belonging to different class, race, gender, religion, and nation who transcend the rigid borders of these in the oceanic space. This space becomes a liberatory space where the land-bound discriminations related to class, caste and race are transgressed to form an altogether new identity. This paper attempts to look at Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy from a transoceanic perspective, and the role played by the Indian ocean in the Opium War.

Key words: oceanic space, fluid identity, migration, cultural intermixing, Opium War.

Introduction

Oceanic space has played a pivotal role in maritime travel, exploration, migration, trade and commerce right from the ancient days. This in-between space has led to cultural intermixing and exchanges, sowing the seeds of globalization. The discovery of new routes became an impetus to empire expansion, and thereby the expansion of colonial power. A diachronic study of the history of the trade of China, India and Britain exposes the crucial role played by this oceanic space in the trade of various goods like tea, silk, cotton, spices, opium and the like. The Indian Ocean became the seat of Opium business, transporting opium from the colonized countries especially from India to the Southeast Asian and the

East Asian countries like China. Amitav Ghosh, the recipient of Jnanpith award, brilliantly mixes facts with fiction in his seminal work, the *Ibis* trilogy and opens up the world of one of the busiest trade routes of the world, the Indian ocean and widens the scope of maritime literature. The history of Opium trade, its impact on the Chinese society and the resultant ban, and the two Opium Wars fought between Britain and China during 1839-1842 and 1856-1860 form the backdrop of Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy. Ghosh gives a detailed description of the indentured labourers and the migration of the indigenous Indians crossing the *kaalapani* *to various plantations all over the world to aid British colonialism. "From a very early date, the Indian Ocean was traversed by ships, and over the centuries, the exchanges transformed this ocean into a unified and hierarchized space" (Pearson 15). The ship *Ibis* is at the epicentre of the trilogy connecting all the three novels. It was once a 'blackbirder,' initially used for transporting slaves. Later it was converted to a ship that transported indentured labourers. The image of the ship pictured by Ghosh in the trilogy gives a glimpse of how ships acted as spaces that aided transformation as well as how ships were transformed according to the needs of the time.

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Review of Literature

Oceanic theme in maritime literature has been explored in fictional works by many writers like Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway and Joseph Conrad. Melville in his epic novel, *Moby Dick* (1851) journeys through the life of Ahab and the several encounters that arose as a result of taking vengeance against Moby Dick, a white sperm whale in the oceanic space. Hemingway in his classic novel, *Old Man and the Sea* explores the life and the indefatigable spirit of the old man, Santiago. After 84 days of relentless efforts, he captures the greatest catch of his life, a huge marlin, but returns home with a mere skeleton of the fish, as many voracious sharks attacked it and ate its delicious meat. In his acclaimed novella, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Joseph Conrad examines the theme of colonialism, the horrors of imperialism and its evil effects upon the life of the colonised. Marlow, the narrator's journey

* Black water

through the Congo River in search of Kurtz and his final disillusionment is underscored in this work. Oceanic space is at the centre of all these works.

Ghosh in *Ibis* trilogy captures the important role played by the Indian ocean in world trade and attempts to rewrite the Eurocentric history. He gives emphasis to the crossing of borders, cultures and races that occurred in the oceanic space. The intermixing led to the formation of hybrid identities in foreign lands. A process of assimilation and reconfiguration takes place in these spaces underscoring the fluid nature of identity. Homi K. Bhabha, a renowned postcolonial critic observes, “The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Rutherford 211). A renewed identity quite different from the previous one is created in the new-found space. Ghosh explores the multiple dimensions of hybridity and identity of various characters by using Indian ocean as a backdrop in the trilogy.

In his book, *Imperial Connections*, Metcalf observes:

With the coming of the colonial era, the historiography of the Indian Ocean fades away to almost nothing. It is as if a bustling sea full of vessels and people had suddenly been emptied, its waters drained away. As a mere “British lake,” the Indian Ocean no longer commanded the attention of historians. . . . The “British lake” of the nineteenth century was, however, far from empty. Flows of people, ideas, and institutions, not to mention a vigorous trade, traversed its waters throughout the century (9).

The opium trade from the colonised countries like India speaks volumes about the colonial rule and the process of colonisation. Britain exhibited her power all over the world by monopolising trade and thereby the markets. Hanes and Sanello in *Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another* give a vivid picture of how Britain tactfully turns the plate to manage the imbalance in trade that occurred as a result of the addiction to the tea leaves brought from China. In order to alleviate the great economic dependence and to prevent the draining of silver which was the only form of payment accepted by China, Britain found an alternative in Opium. Britain executed her plan through the East India Company and took great leaps in the opium trade which was already started by the Arab merchants as well as the French and the Dutch.

Opium addiction devastated the Chinese people and it crept into every corners of the society. Martin Booth observes, “Britain earned vast revenues from the opium trade by poisoning a substantial portion of the Chinese population” (Hanes and Sanello 1). Initially it

was mainly used by the rich, but it “gradually made its way down the socioeconomic ladder. Shopkeepers, servants, soldiers, and even Taoist priests were loading opium pipes and drifting off into weeklong escapes from productivity, responsibility, and consciousness. . . . The economy, government services, and standard of living all declined because of substance abuse” (Hanes and Sanello 25). Chinese government banned the opium trade due to the addiction and indolence it caused to the people of China. Even though Britain refrained from directly taking part in the trade, it continued through independent British and Indian merchants. They smuggled and illegally sold opium to China.

In November 1836, the Daoguang Emperor issued an edict banning both the importation and use of opium throughout China. In December 1836, the new Governor (or Viceroy) of Canton’s province, a venerable scholar of sixty named Deng Tingzhen proclaimed, ‘The smoke of opium is a deadly poison. Opium is nothing else but a flowing poison; that it leads to extravagant expenditure is a small evil, but as it utterly ruins the mind and morals of the people, it is a dreadful calamity.’ (Hanes and Sanello 33)

Opium was confiscated from those who broke the ban and resumed the trade, and this led to a clash of interests. The first Opium War fought between Britain and China was largely propelled by this ‘flowing poison’. The growth of capitalism and the greed to amass more and more wealth on the part of Indo-British businessmen were the fundamental reasons for the outbreak of the Opium War. Even though China offered very strong resistance, they couldn’t withstand the unbeatable naval power of the British, and the British force aided by the Indian sepoys could easily win over the Chinese force. China was forced to compensate the losses of the opium merchants and many British and Indian traders became instantly rich. Greater profit was earned by Mr Burnham, a British opium trader and Zachary Reid became his business partner along with a reputed Chinese opium trader.

Methodology and Discussion

A method of textual analysis is used to probe into the various relevant aspects of the trilogy. The paper discusses significant aspects related to opium trade, the outbreak of opium war, the role of Britain, China and India in the trade and the eventual war. The paper also focuses on some of the major characters in the trilogy that aids the arguments raised here. The fluidity of identity and how their identities get transformed are also dealt with in the course of the paper.

Ghosh in *Ibis* trilogy gives a distinct picture of the cultivation of opium, its processing in the opium factories, outbreak of the opium war and the factors that led to the

war. In the first book of the trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh throws light on the inhuman working conditions in opium factories. Indian farmers were trapped and forced into opium cultivation, thereby torpedoing the indigenous systems of cultivation. The cultivation of food crops gave way to the cultivation of opium, which added to poverty and hunger among Indians. The factories were strictly monitored by the white overseers and the workers were brutally punished for even the minutest mistakes. The opium factories were well guarded, “the fortifications here were formidable, and the guards particularly sharp-eyed-and well they might be, for the contents of those few sheds, or so it was said, were worth several million pounds sterling and could buy a good part of the City of London” (Ghosh, *Sea* 91). The insides of the factories show the suffocating atmosphere in which the workers were forced to work day in and out. “The earthy, sickly odour of raw opium-sap hung close to the ground” (Ghosh, *Sea* 93) and made the workers’ movements slow, which accelerated the deterioration of their health. Deeti, the wife of Hukam Singh observes:

Their eyes were vacant, glazed, and yet somehow they managed to keep moving, as slow as ants in honey, tramping, treading. When they could move no more, they sat on the edges of the tanks, stirring the dark ooze only with their feet. These seated men had more the look of ghouls than any living thing she had ever seen: their eyes glowed red in the dark. (Ghosh, *Sea* 95)

Ghosh uses the character of Hukam Singh, an impotent afeemkhor[†] to showcase how opium destroyed marriages and thereby the lives of many women. Deeti becomes the victim of a failed marriage because of this evil, her marital life was filled with terror and loathe. Ghosh addresses the injustice meted out to women in the patriarchal system. In the intricately woven plot of the trilogy, Ghosh also discusses the ills of a caste ridden country like India and how lower caste people are considered as inferiors. Through the character of Kalua, a chamar who belongs to the leather worker’s caste who eventually rescues Deeti, an upper caste woman from the injustice done to her by the fellow caste mates, Ghosh subverts the caste hierarchy prevalent in the society wherein, the upper caste people have supremacy and power. Deeti transcends her identity as the widow of an afeemkhor to a matriarch in the ship *Ibis*. She was rescued by Kalua from performing *sati*[‡] at the funeral pyre of Hukam Singh. Ghosh underscores the superstitious and inhuman beliefs prevalent among caste-Hindus. The ship *Ibis* provides a ‘home’ to a number of characters in the trilogy. The fluidity of identity

[†] Opium addict

[‡] Sati is a form of widow sacrifice in which “the Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it” (Spivak 297)

is underscored when the characters transcend their identities during their passage from land to ocean in the ship *Ibis*. Deeti and Kalua accept new names and roles just like many others in the ship and all of them form a fraternity. They consider themselves as *jahaz-bhais* and *jahaz-behens*[§].

Through Zachary Reid and Bahram Modi who transcend the boundaries of nation, race and class, Ghosh picturises various aspects of opium trade through the Indian Ocean. Zachary Reid, born a metif, a man of mixed identity of an African-American Maryland freedwoman and a Caucasian-American father (Ghosh, *Sea* 507) began his sea voyage in *Sea of Poppies* as an ordinary young carpenter of a ship who had an intense desire to grab success and escape his identity as that of a marginalised person. In *Flood of Fire* he fulfils his desire and gets transformed into a business tycoon at the top of one of the reputed opium business firms. Zachary Reid's transformation from a marginalised person of mixed identity to a successful businessman is aided by opium. He becomes the tool of the British colonialists and continues the opium trade, despite the ban imposed by the Chinese government. He was lured into the world of luxury and sophistication by Mrs. Burnham, the wife of Mr. Burnham. His contact with her instils in him the desire to be rich and reach his dream destination of a "man of the times". Zachary joins hands with Mr. Burnham to take part in the opium trade which had become risky after the Chinese government's ban. But Burnham was delighted to include Zachary in the business and comments, "A new age is dawning, you know-the age of Free Trade-and it's men like you and I, self-made Free-Traders, who will be its heroes. If ever there's been an exciting time for a venturesome white youth to seek his destiny in the East, then this is it" (Ghosh, *Flood* 281). Zachary's identity is transformed to a great extent throughout the trilogy. He is one of the central characters who appear in all the three novels. His ivory complexion, together with a change in appearance into a gentleman helps him to easily pass off as a white man. Here, Ghosh subverts the racial identity of Zachary and positions him on the pedestal of supremacy towards the climax of the story by providing him with the power of a business partner in Burnham Bros Company.

Bahram Modi, a representative of the Indian merchants who engage in opium trade for the East India Company, gives a vivid picture of the overseas opium trade just before the outbreak of the First Opium war. Ghosh delineates the trade relations in Fanqui-town, China through Bahram Modi, hailing from a poor family background. He gets introduced into the

[§] Ship siblings

world of business with the help of his father-in-law. Bahram Modi grows tremendously through his rigorous effort. In him, we see a self-made man who moves forward in life against all odds. Ah Fatt, his son rightly describes “Bahram as a man who was widely liked, even loved. From his employees he commanded an almost fanatical loyalty, not only because he was a generous paymaster and fair in his dealings, but also because there was something in his manner that conveyed to them that he did not consider himself to be above, or better, than anyone of his staff” (Ghosh, River 224). His wife Shireen Modi too rises from the image of a timid wife to an empowered woman after Bahram’s unfortunate death in China. She metamorphoses into a liberated woman after the much-feared crossing of the *kaala pani*. It was believed that crossing the *kaala pani* would make oneself impure and thus, a person would lose his/her caste. However, this bold act allows Shireen Modi to come out of the cocoon of a docile wife. When the British compensated the loss of opium, she becomes the owner of the whole wealth accrued by Bahram Modi through Opium business. She reclaims her identity and builds up her own empire in *Flood of Fire*.

Bahram Modi, who remained marginalised in India because of his low economic and social status leads a dual life. He feels more passionately involved during his times in China. His relationship with Chi-mei, a boat woman, and the birth of their child Ah Fatt enables him to understand his true self. He feels that Fanqui-town, China has been more of a ‘home’ to him than India.

In Canton, stripped of the multiple wrappings of home, family, community, obligation and decorum, Bahram had experienced the emergence of a new persona, one that had been previously dormant within him: he had become Barry Moddie, a man who was confident, forceful, gregarious, hospitable, boisterous and enormously successful. (Ghosh, River 52)

Ghosh vividly describes Fanqui-town in China, where all the exchanges of trade happened. The foreigners were not allowed to enter Canton. This exclusive area set apart for trade is located on the banks of the Pearl river. Robin Chinnery through his letters to Puggly gives a clear picture of the Fanqui-town. He describes, “In a way Fanqui-town is like a ship at sea, with hundreds-no, thousands-of men living crammed together in a little sliver of space. I do believe there is no place like it on earth, so small and yet so varied, where people from the far corners of the earth must live, elbow to elbow, for six months of the year” (Ghosh, River 185). The Thirteen Hongs and the factories are set up in this area in a peculiar manner, they are “so narrow-fronted that to look at them you would think they could scarcely accommodate a dozen people. But behind each façade lies a warren of houses, courtyards,

godowns, and khazanas; a long, arched corridor runs the length of each compound, linking the houses and courtyards” (Ghosh, River 183). Opium trade took place in this town and played a great role in linking the world with China. Bahram, a Parsi merchant resided in a Fungtai, a miscellaneous factory which was later renamed as “Acha Hong” (Ghosh, River 187). However, the rules and regulations changed drastically after the opium ban and made situations tough for the merchants. Some of them withdrew from the trade and were forced to return to their native countries, whereas others like Bahram continued the trade with the help of certain locals and British merchants. Bahram received many setbacks from business as well as from his family, but he remained in the opium trade with a strong head. The fear of losing the empire of opium business that he has built was so strong that he falls a prey to the strangleholds of opium and succumbs to a very sorry death. His attempt to establish an identity for himself beyond nations, cultures and languages becomes futile when he meets his untimely death.

Ah Fatt, Bahram’s son, born to a Chinese Danish washer-woman too struggles to create an identity for himself. Ghosh delineates the character of Ah Fatt in such a way as to underscore the identity crisis experienced by the boat children who are in plenty along the shores of the Pearl River, where men can buy women. He can neither belong with the boat children nor with the land children and remains in an interstitial space throughout his life. He enters the world of opium business to earn his livelihood but is always hunted down by his superiors and is forced to lead a life in the hidings. Just like his father Bahram, Ah Fatt too meets his doom through opium.

Kesri Singh, an Indian sepoy represents the machineries of the British empire who were manipulated by the British to expand and spread their wings across the world. The loss of identity experienced by the Indian soldiers as soon as they become part of the British battalion is highlighted when Kesri Singh realises that “he had become a kind of pariah as well as a prisoner. Only now did Kesri grasp that in choosing to run away from home, with Bhyro Singh, he had abandoned not just his family and his village, but also himself-or rather the person he had once been, with certain ideas about dignity, self-containment and morality” (Ghosh, Flood 112). The helplessness of the Indian sepoys once they enrol into the British army is also emphasised here. They are treated in the most inhuman manner and they abruptly lose all agency upon their own selves. A tornado of emotions goes through Kesri’s mind as he takes part in the Opium War fought between Britain and China. Patriotism wells up in him when he watches the Chinese people fighting for their native land. He interrogates himself for being a mercenary of the British empire and resolves to escape secretly from the

clutches of the British colonisers. Though late, he realises his true self and identity. Thus, all the characters focussed in this study have passed through a stage of transformation to establish their identity.

Conclusion

In *Ibis* trilogy with the ship *Ibis* at the center of the plot, Ghosh skillfully combines the historical aspects of the Opium War and the fictional world of inter-cultural relationship. Names of real-life characters are also employed in the trilogy to show how they accelerated the outbreak of the Opium War. The war devastated the Chinese empire and paved the way for the establishment of the British empire. It also gave rise to new trading patterns opening up the possibilities for Free Trade.

Ghosh with the skill of a master craftsman has included a large number of characters in the trilogy, proficiently attributing different shades to each character. In this paper, I have selected only the major characters who are evidently involved in the Opium trade and the Opium War.

Scope of Further Research

The paper is limited to the discussions on the oceanic space that acted as a link connecting various countries like Britain and China, a space that aided maritime travel, exploration, migration and trade. It also focuses upon the strategies used by Britain to expand their empire, the impact of opium trade upon the Chinese economy and society, and the reasons for the outbreak of Opium War.

The study can be expanded by focusing upon the concept of hybridity exhibited by various characters like Zachary Reid, Paulette and Ah Fatt. Variety of languages which are brilliantly incorporated by Ghosh in the trilogy can also be extensively studied. The trilogy opens up numerous possibilities for extensive research as it covers some of the major postcolonial concepts which are very relevant in the present scenario.

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