

Colonial Diaspora in the Ibis Trilogy of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract— The Ibis trilogy of Amitav Ghosh, which comprises three historical fictions, *Sea of Poppies*(2008), *River of Smoke*(2011), and *Flood of Fire*(2015), is a documentary of the opium trade between India and China and the trafficking of people as indentured labors by the East India Company during mid nineteenth century. Diaspora and enigma of crossing the ‘shadow lines’, the geographical boundaries between countries and continents, find room in the trilogy which is a common feature of Ghosh. The merchants, the sailors, or the trading company agents, who crosses the ‘black water’ out of their own interests, share some common experiences of homesickness, anxiety, anguish and adversity with those of the unwilling overseas transporters like the coolies and convicts. Along with these effects, they also share some common grounds, an influential concern, the British colonization as well as the role of East India Company. Almost all the characters of the trilogy are diasporic, who undertake voluntary or forcible movement from their homelands into new regions, are revealed to be somehow connected with the colonization. This paper intends to trace out those functions of the British colonization, specially the opium trade run by the East India Company that constructed the socio-economic life of India and Canton, and how they are responsible for all these enigma of border crossings found in Ibis trilogy.

Keywords— *Diaspora, Indentured Labor, Adversity, Anguish, Colonization.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies defines ‘diaspora’ as “the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions, is a central historical fact of colonization.” (Ashcroft et al, 68). On the other hand, Amitav Ghosh under his restricted mingling of imagination ultimately has rewritten the history of colonization in the Ibis trilogy which consists of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015). The fictions deal with the policies of trading and ruling of the British empirical government and depict their influence on the socio-economic life of India and China during the mid-nineteenth century. Mainly the trade of opium, run by the East India Company and the trafficking of coolies to Mauritius is in the center of focus that directly or indirectly designed the destiny of a great number of people of these countries. Many of them undertake overseas transportation as a consequence of these opium trading and human trafficking system while they were accompanied with some convicts who are exiled for various reasons by the British government. To be mentioned:

Colonialism itself is a radically diasporic movement, involving the temporary and permanent dispersion and settlement of millions

of European over the entire world. The widespread effects of these migrations continue on a global scale. [Ashcroft, et al, 69]

The paper intends to identify the reasons behind the diaspora, through overseas transportations of the major characters of the trilogy, as indentured labors, convicts and merchants, from a post-colonial point of view. It will attempt to reveal the connection of colonization, particularly the role of the British East India Company behind their distressful diasporic experience of anguish, adversity, separation and fretfulness.

The trilogy is a work of historical fiction, set in the first half of the 19th century. Ghosh collects his characters from diverse roots and cultures like farmers of Bihar, landlord of Bengal, an octoroon American sailor, Parsi business merchant, British traders and Company agents, merchants of India and China, a Cornish Botanist, some laskars from different origins, Cantonese boat people and many others, connected to each other during or after their journey by the ship named Ibis and two other ships named Anahita and Redruth that were caught in the same storm. The wonderful story telling excellence of Amitav Ghosh enables us to figure out the backgrounds and the breath-taking circumstances that turn the characters into convicts or indentured servants. The melancholic experience of

fright and uncertainty creates different bonds among the characters and a number of them are somehow destined towards Chinese port city Canton and ultimately the first opium war. The history is retold by painstaking research of Ghosh focusing the violence inflicted upon the colonized people, especially that of their overseas transportation often as a result of the colonial ruling and trading policies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The trilogy has been well-received by the critics and readers. *Sea of Poppies* was shortlisted for the 2008 Booker Prize, while *River of Smoke* made it to the long list of the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2011. The Guardians, The Times of India, Quartz, The New York Times, The Independent, Financial Times and many other newspapers and magazines had published several reviews on the trilogy. Many of Amitav Ghosh's interviews have presented the author's own comments on his work. Even the first of the trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* is ready for film adaptation. Thus, the trilogy seems to be in focus from the beginning for its post-colonial point of view to reveal the past and the stories to be retold how the diasporic movements took place during the colonial period and the people of China and India made their journey towards the unknown lands. Mark R. Frost examines the scholarly merits of these novels as works of 'microhistory', in which the author's devotion to what we might term "thick description". Ghosh has been widely praised as a historian and anthropologist by the critics for his detailed description of the contemporary life with his restricted mingling of imagination with the facts. Gaurav Desai's article contextualizes Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy as part of a growing scholarly interest in oceanic narratives of the colonial encounter. Clare Anderson in American historical review explores the relationship between "history" and "fiction" in the trilogy. He mentions that the novels constitute a means of exploring the relationship between the local and the global in the making of the modern world, in particular by focusing on ordinary people's experiences of empire. Shao Pin Luo describes Ghosh's way of presentation as 'the way of words' and defined the style as ways of imagining and practicing resistance by way of the concept of "vernacular cosmopolitanism". Thus, various reviews and scholarly articles focus on the trilogy for its presentation of facts in a highest acceptable way in fictions.

III. EFFECTS OF COLONIZATION ON INDIVIDUALS

The effect of colonialism in this paper will concentrate only on the diasporic movements of almost all the

characters which are directly or indirectly carried overseas by the British colonization through their transportation of indentured labor and opium trade. The First major character to appear in the first novel is Deeti, got married at too young an age with an opium addict man, Hukkam Sing. He was too unnerved by the drug that his mother managed to consummate the marriage with help of his younger brother. When Hukkam Sing died Deeti was about to be sacrificed as a 'saati' in her husband's pyre unless rescued by a muscular untouchable carter, Kalua, with whom she elopes. To survive from famine and scandal they become indentured servants on Ibis. Deeti's sufferings begin with her marriage with Hukkam Sing, the victim of opium addiction. To investigate his addiction his past reveals that he had got himself crippled in the war that he fought for the British government, his aching injury compelled him to take opium as a remedy. On the other hand, his continuation with opium and becoming an 'afimkhor' even after healing was due to the availability of it. The peasants of Bihar were not unfamiliar with the cultivation of opium as they used to grow them just for the seeds that they use to cook some traditional meals called 'posto' and the little amount of opium for remedy of pain. The cultivation of opium needs great labor as each pod of poppy flower has to be scratched for the secretion of sap. The sap that is to be collected in that same process from each pod takes a lot of time. All these laborious works are to be done very skillfully, a little late or advance approach may ruin the whole cultivation. Thus, opium cultivation was occasional for the peasants in a very small piece of land or in the yard. But the very famous, historical opium factory in Ghazipur, owned by British East India Company depended on the supply of the peasants of Bihar and Bengal. And they compelled the peasants to supply the opium to the Ghazipur factory. The role of the company in this case will be discussed later. Over here Hukkam Sing's damnation is more linked with this factory as he got a job in factory as a compensation of the British government after his injury in the war. His supply of opium and as well as his ruin was thus secured though it was not a legal procedure. The following impotency and ultimate death of Hukkam Sing destined Deeti's border crossing to save herself from the lustful attack of her brother in law and his vengeance in setting her for the ritual of 'Satih', the burning of a widow along with her dead husband. Another leading role, Zachary Reid, a son of an American slave has learnt to camouflage himself among the whites due to his almost white, Octoroon complexion, gradually turns from an ordinary sailor to a profit monger opium trader like any other trader supported by East India Company to trade opium with China. His mournful

history also related to the history of slavery in colonial United States (1600-1776).

At first, indentured servants were used as the needed labor. ... However, colonists began to see indentured servants as too costly, and in 1619, Dutch traders brought the first African slaves to Jamestown, who nonetheless were in North America at first generally treated as indentured servants. (<http://en.wikipedia.org>)

Zachary's mother was a born slave in such plantation who was a quadroon, fifty percent white, because of her biological father, who was a white colonizer and fortunately she was freed before she gave birth to the octroon by a white father. His depression due to the concealing identity may be turned him to a profit monger opium trader to reestablish his free identity as a rich merchant.

A Bangalee Zaminder, Neel Rattan Halder was sentenced for seven years of exile as an indentured labor because he failed to pay his debt after a great loss in opium trade. He refused to sell his estate for his responsibilities to the people associated with his estate. Neel was an Anglophile, inherited fondness towards the empirical government and family business related to the export of opium, trafficking of coolies and other trades of the company. Neel was provoked to multiply the profit by investing more in the business and engaged many others with the business providing shares of profit. Investors were very much interested to continue as they found the business lucrative. Thus, the unskilled businessman who never tried to be involved before and the death of his father kept him signing all the papers without much idea about consequences. Later it was found that he put his signature in some documents where it seemed he forged the papers by giving consent on behalf of the East India Company. Mr. Benjamin Burnham, a company agent wanted to buy all his properties putting him in trap. Finally, the great humanistic landlord, dedicated towards his subject refused to sell his estates and was sentenced to seven years of exile. The systematic takeover of estates like Raskhali and the misery of feudal lords like Neel depict another side of British rule through his summing up the whole thing saying, "...in this system of justice it was the English themselves (...) who were exempt from the law as it applied to others: it was they who had become the world's new Brahmins." (*Sea of Poppies*, 239)

A strange convict Ah Fatt, accompanying Neel, who comes out to be an illegitimate son of a Parsi trader, Bahram Moddie, one of the main protagonists of the trilogy. He was in Alipore jail and described as "He was an afeemkhor who has no opium" (315) He was exiled to

Mauritius with Neel as a convict. Bahram Moddie came out of a good business background as his father was a rich merchant but unfortunately lost everything and finally commits suicide in dilemma of his personal urge of surviving in business and the impact of opium trade on the Chinese youth, including his own son, Ah Fatt. Bahram Moddie will be introduced later in this paper as an opium trader. His wife Shireen also attempts an overseas journey to see the grave of her husband and to meet her husband's son with a Chinese Mistress, Ah Fatt. Her transformation by adapting Western attire and rediscovering her own self is a massive transgression of her part.

The colonizers themselves were transported over the seas for the job of supplying labors. This group is represented by Benjamin Burnham, his employees, English captain of the ship, and local agents of the company, Bhyiro Sing. Along with this the opium produced in a cheapest bloodthirsty way was a lucratively beneficial business for the British East India Company. They ensured the supply of silver for their government by selling opium in Chinese coasts through the dealers. In spite of being an apparently religious man, his maltreatment towards his foster daughter Paulette, portray his way of actions towards the colonized natives. Paulette also escapes undertaking a journey by Zachary's ship, Ibis to save herself from Burnham.

Another major character named Kesri Sing, a 'sepo officer', who is serving as a soldier for British East India Company, reached an epiphany failing to point out the reason behind his fighting against Chinese people who neither attacked nor hurt his own land rather was intent on engulfing them. He seems to regret for never fighting for something of his own.

Thus, the trilogy depicts diaspora, especially the overseas transportations of almost all the major characters due to their various situations of life that made them undertake the migration or journeys regardless to their denial or inclination.

IV. THE ROLE OF EAST INDIA COMPANY

Two utmost important economic themes of the 19th century are dramatized in the trilogy: the cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese market, and the transportation of Indian indentured workers to cut sugarcane for the British on such islands as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad. Ibis was carrying its passengers to Mauritius and accidentally carried some of them to Canton, China, just before the first opium war. The political and social torment of the contemporary era is delineated through the involvement as well as sufferings of the major characters. This study will bring to light the

circumstances and sufferings of people of different cultures and history due to their diasporic movement across the border mainly caused by the empirical policies of British colonization.

The Company imported tea, silk and porcelain from China for silver. Over the next 100 years the popularity of tea increased to the highest degree in England and the draining of silver reached to the alarming amount. To tackle the situation Company started a triangular trade by smuggling opium from India to China. They compelled the cultivation of opium in India as a part of colonization and it was the alternative the Chinese would accept instead of silver. Opium had high demand in China as a medicine but it was highly addictive and illegal and millions of Chinese fall the victim of this devastating drug and the social order was endangered. The Europeans persuaded the Chinese to use the drug but the smoking was not appreciated and the selling was prohibited in England.

The cost of balancing the trade was paid by the poor peasants of India. The company enforced the peasants to cultivate opium instead of usual crops and vegetables causing great scarcity of food. The cultivation was more laborious and the harvest could hardly bear the expense of their families throughout the year. On the other hand, there was no demand in the local market for this product and the harvest was sold in the factory established by the Company. The peasants had no control over their fixing of price, sometimes the profit was even split by the middlemen.

The first of the trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* gives a detailed description of cultivating opium in the village of Deeti. She herself, her brother in law or the unknown field by the river where she was hiding on the night, she first saw Kalua, everywhere the crop was opium. It is mentioned several times that the family of her husband could not repair their hay roof for seven years since her father gave the money as dowry during her marriage. The family hardly had enough to eat throughout the year though her husband had a job in the opium factory. The year Hukkam Singh could not go for work, Deeti sold all her harvest of opium and could buy only some groceries that was hardly enough for few months. The description of the hardship by Amitav Ghosh's excellent story telling ability informs us how much anxious was the first character who appeared in the novel that her family is in desperate need of repairing the roof but neither they had the hays that they used to get after cultivating paddy nor they had the money to buy it from a far away markets with the money they had after selling opium.

The peasants of Deeti's village were compelled to cultivate opium as it was mentioned that they had to sign

agreements with the company representatives that they will grow and sell opium for the company otherwise they will be in trouble. The peyadas may find illegal things in their house that they have thrown themselves and will be arrested for the theft. No one will be able to tell anything to the magistrate who was a part of this plot. Thus the scenario was clear why all the fields of the village of Deeti was full of opium and the title of the book indicated the abundance of poppy flowers made the village look like a 'sea of poppies'.

The circumstances were the same for every family that were gradually becoming poorer and had nothing to do except for surrendering to their destiny defined by the company. The poverty overwhelmed over all other factors of life that made people think of shifting their source of earning from peasantry to some other job which was almost impossible for those uneducated wretched fellows. Some tried to find ways in getting a job of a labor for the opium factory; some got involved with the buying and selling of opium as a middleman. For some worst cases the family signed as indentured labors for the company and decided to get ready for the overseas journey which was almost like committing suicide, as they were totally ignorant about their job over there, had no hope of coming back nor had the hope even of surviving and last but not least to lose their caste like anyone who crosses the 'kalapani'.

V. THE OPIUM TRADERS

As the story involves people onboard of three ships, we will find people engaged directly or indirectly to the opium trading. Especially the second of the trilogy provides a detailed description of the Cantonese market setting Bahram Moddie, a Parsi merchant in the spot, who was one of the major characters. There were thirteen factories, called 'hong' which were not factories but like the embassies, even more like huge trading corporations. The Chinese government strictly maintained the entry and movements of the foreigners where the place of their living was out of the great wall that encircled the main city. All the activities used to keep the port and the 'maydan' in the center.

By 1838, the British were selling roughly 1,400 tons of opium per year to China. Legalization of the opium trade was the subject of ongoing debate within the Chinese administration, but it was repeatedly rejected, and in 1838 the government began to actively sentence native drug traffickers to death. (<http://en.wikipedia.org>)

The contemporary Chinese Daoguang Emperor tried his best to control the situation and stop opium trading by

appointing scholar-official Lin Zexu to the post of Special Imperial Commissioner in 1839. He rejected the proposal to legalize and tax opium trade and banned the trade and confiscated around 1210 tons of opium without offering compensation. He also ordered a blockade of foreign trade in Canton. The British government launched military attack objecting the unexpected seizure though they did not deny the right of China to control the drug trade in their land. The British Navy used their gunnery power against the brave but poorly equipped Chinese protest and defeated them, which is called the gunboat diplomacy in history.

In Ibis trilogy, the same history is retold through the merchant Bahram Moddie who invests all his belongings in a slot of opium export. While he was waiting in the nearby port of Canton to sell his cargo full of opium, it was confiscated after a small dealing was caught with a bold dealer of opium in cooperation with the local dealers. This shipment was his greatest effort to establish his own trading for the first time without the support of his in laws and he invested the money selling almost all his properties and borrowed large amount of money from any source available. He even sold the gold jewelry of his wife Shireen to collect the money. He committed suicide in grief when his cargo was seized. It was not the only issue, that he will not only be able to pay back his loans, but he also found his own son Ah Fatt was amongst the victims of the devastating drug. Bahram Moddie represents all the foreign Opium dealers of that time who lost almost everything that they invested in the trade. Bahram Moddie is an imaginary character he represents all the foreigner opium traders who settled in Fanqi Town in Cantone during the early nineteenth century taking the opportunity of dealership of opium trading of British East India Company.

VI. CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh with minimal alteration has provided the history of colonization where the people all over the world became part of their policies of trading and ruling. The ordinary poor natives suffered and were victimized at a grass root level. A great number of people and their dependents were found to be affected by the colonial trading. In the trilogy there are also the depiction of those who are not part of the trade but being transported overseas directly by the order of the empirical government as convicts. A few by themselves gambled the only valuable thing they had, their own life, to escape from their motherland. Poverty seems to be the cause of the flight of this great number of passengers of Ibis but the colonial ruling hardly defends its contribution for their destiny.

That time slavery was banned and the British government paid attention to the exporting of cheap labors from the Asiatic continents by the name of indentured labor. This agreement of semi enslaving employment was the only chance left for the wretched. The famous trading companies of that period, their agents, merchants, some sailors, profit monger middlemen and some laskars also involve themselves with the trading and cross the seas. Finally the opium war also carries thousands of military officials from England and the Sepoys paid by the British government from the Asiatic continents. Thus, the trilogy depicts diasporas, especially the overseas transportations of almost all the characters due to their various situations of life that made them undertake the migration or journeys regardless to their denial or inclination, being transported or the transporters of the British colonizing government.

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